Educational Challenges of Indian Children from Marginalized Linguistic Groups

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Abstract

This paper provides background information on linguistic profile of India. India is a multilingual country and multilingualism is not a rare phenomenon but a reality world across. India is rich in linguistic diversity and it is an asset rather liability. Unfortunately many Indian languages are on the verge of extinction due to dominance of main stream languages. The paper presents an overview of different language policies and their impact on Indian school education system. Even though it is constitutional obligation of India that every state must impart primary education in mother tongue (MT) and also provide for the appointment of a 'Special Officer' for linguistic minorities (Article 350 B), still this dream is yet to be realised. The recent National Education Policy (NEP 2020) similar to the earlier ones has also emphasised upon mother tongue, local language or regional language as the medium of instruction at least till Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond. As per the policy document a regional language or mother-tongue, English and/or Hindi and another Indian language are to be used for educational purpose. In the present scenario MT education is being imparted only through a limited number of major standardized languages. Children of marginalised languages are being deprived because of the dominance of main stream languages. This paper deliberates upon challenges and opportunities in Indian school education system from multilingual perspective. Exploration is based on the case studies from schools and analysis of factual data on children education in India.

Key Words: *multilinguality, Endangered Languages, Language Planning*

Verbal Repertoire and Multilinguality

It would be important to analyse the spoken languages world across and see whether they are spoken as X1, X2, X3……languages in discrete units. Do they really exist in compartments or in isolation or in the form of Geographical boundaries. According to Agnihotri (2020), "…. multilingualism which now subsumes bilingualism looks at language as an addition of L1, L2, L 3, etc.; in Multilinguality there is no discrete concept of L1, L2, etc.; there is only a verbal repertoire of Multilinguality with relative fluidity of what are construed as different

languages…..within the constraints imposed by the Universal Grammar, languages are essentially fluid in nature; sounds, words, and sentence patterns do not need passports to travel across languages….". Hence languages are fluid and cut across boundaries. They are in the head of people. It is the verbal repertoire of the people, which consists of linguistic components of different languages or language varieties and are used with natural ease in regular conversation.This fluidity has acquired several new names including hyperglossia, translanguaging, hyperlingualism, code-mixing, and multilinguality, Agnihotri *(2020).*The debate of multilingual societies of east versus monolingual societies west may be put to rest if we look languages in broader perspective of multilinguality. We have countries in west like, UK, Germany, France, etc. where many languages are spoken. Even if we have countries where one language is spoken, the said language varies within those countries. The same language spoken at one end is very different as compared to the other end. There is a phenomenon of fluidity and continuum and that particular language varieties do not exist as a discrete units. Throughout the world we observe a phenomenon of marginalization of the languages of powerless by the dominant main stream languages spoken by elites and powerful. This may be categorized in terms of binary i.e. dominant versus dominating multilinguality.

Linguistic Profile of India

The first official survey of language diversity in the India was carried out by Sir George Abraham Grierson from 1898 to 1928. Said survey was titled the *Linguistic Survey of India* in which it was reported that Indian subcontinent had total of 179 languages and 544 dialects. According to 1961 census it had 1652 mother tongues. Since the 1971 Census the languages spoken by less than 10,000 people had been labeled as "others". The 1991 census of India listed 1,576 "mother tongues" with separate grammatical structures and 1,796 languages as "other mother tongues". The language data of 2011 Census is still not on public domain.

According to Ganesh Davi, "Thanks to lack of public information over the last 40 years (1971-2011), it is impossible for any agency other that the census office to figure out the range of languages expected in India".

According to recent *People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI)* India comprises of 780 languages out of which 480 are spoken by tribal and nomadic tribes, while about 80 are coastal languages.

According to Ethnologue, India is having 780 languages, out of which 2 are principal languages, 12 immigrant languages, 56 languages in trouble and 13 are dying languages.

As per *8th Schedule to the Indian Constitution* the listed languages are 22 in numbers.

According to the '*UNESCO's Atlas of World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing'* around 2,500 of the world's 6000 languages are to some extent endangered; 538 critically endangered, 502 severely endangered, 632 definitely endangered and 607 unsafe. Regarding India it lists, 172 languages in danger, out of which 101 are classified as severely, critically or definitely endangered and 71 'vulnerable'.

Multilingual India and Marginalisation Process

From Linguistic Profile of India it is amply clear that many languages are spoken in Indian subcontinent. This is because of the fact that many civilisations came, settled and subsumed to constitute a pan Indian civilisation. It may be Aryans, Portuguese, Dutch, Mughals, Britishers, etc. Dravadians, various tribes aboriginals etc. were already there as original residents. The multicultural and multilingual ethos of India never got shaken due to the advent of the different civilisations from outside in the Indian subcontinent. In fact their languages, cultures, customs etc. got subsumed in the broader domain of Indian civilisation. Their languages mingled and became part of verbal repertoire of Indian people. Thus India is rich in multilinguality and it must be considered as an asset rather liability. Thus Indians are by default multilingual having ability to speak more than one language and their verbal repertoire constitutes components from different languages.

In contrary if we carefully analyse the patterns of linguistic profiling since 1928 we will observe that the number of languages spoken in India are shrinking day by day. It is said that marginalisation process of languages started in 1926. In the same year the idea of organising and structuring India was explored on the basis of linguistic states, which further got reinforced after independence. Unfortunately the languages of marginalised people or dominated are labelled as dialect. Linguistically speaking there is no difference between "a language" and "a dialect". It is the power game that play an important role in marginalising the languages of dominated or marginalised linguistic groups by the dominating or elite linguistic groups and labelling them in the category of dialect of their language. A famous saying credited to the Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich (1894–1969) says "language is a dialect with an army and a navy" is credited to the Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich (1894–1969). That means a dialect becomes language if it is spoken by dominating or elite linguistic groups. The inception of the idea of marginalisation of languages can be traced back since 1926 colonial period. The concept of organising India on the basis of linguistic states was floated. This was further reinforced after independence.Since the 1971 Census the languages spoken by less than 10,000 people had been labeled as "others". Gradually there is marked decline in number of languages listing since 1961 census. According this census it had 1652

mother tongues whereas the latest PLSI survey states that India comprises of 780 languages; of these 480 are spoken by tribal and nomadic tribes, while about 80 are coastal languages. The 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India lists only 22 languages. There powerful forces of dominating or elite linguistics groups to subsume the languages of dominated or marginalised groups within their languages. This manipulation enhances the numerical value of people speaking the languages of dominating groups. For example, Hindi encompasses Bhojhpuri, Magdhi, Angika, Khota, etc. within itself as its dialects. Census groups distinct languages as "dialects", such as Bhojpuri under Hindi, Badaga under Kannada, and Saurashtra under Gujarati. Dominant languages get state patronage and financial assistance to strengthen their literary richness. In recent years we have seen movements and pressure groups mushrooming to include their dominant languages in 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This also leads to gaining political mileage at the cost marginalising the languages of dominated or powerless linguistic groups.

Politics of Script

Languages with scripts play an important role in getting space in Indian Education
System. Linguistically speaking script of any language may be used in other language with some modifications. New script of any language may be used in other language with some modifications. New script may also be developed for any language with some modifications. But the languages, which are having no script is devoid of getting space in Education System and get maginalised to the verge of endangered languages.

"*Languages without scripts had no place in the education system. The result: Gondi, Bhili and Santhali became minority languages because their population was divided among several states". "Bhili is a minority language in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh while together it has its own majority. Bhili did not have a script and so nobody proposed a state for them," Devy, (Hindustan Times Sep.18, 2017).*

State financial patronage is enjoyed by the languages listed in 8th Schedule which are dominant languages of different states. The education is mostly imparted in these languages resulting into marginalisation of representation of dominated languages in education system. Recent focus of state is on reinforcing classical languages. The Union Ministry of Culture released data on Central Government funding, from 2017 to 2020, for the six languages deemed "classical languages" by the Government – Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Odia. As per the Ministry's own data, the bulk of this funding, to the tune of Rs. 643.84 crores since 2017, went to Sanskrit. In comparison, during

the same period, Tamil was allotted Rs. 22.94 crores only, which is 22 times less in comparison. Telugu and Kannada received a minimal Rs. 3.06 crores each. Malayalam and Odia was left starving with no funds at all.

There seems to be need of justified and equitable distribution of budget for these languages. Secondly already dominant languages of states for example Tamil language of Tamil Nadu got Rs. 22.94 crores and Kannada language of Karnataka got Rs. 3.06 crores. These languages are already funded by their respective states and in addition to this they got financial support from centre in the name of classical language. This has resulted into maginalisation of minority or dominated languages of such states, like Tulu or Gondi.

Languages of Dominated Marginalised Linguistic Groups in Indian Education System

Indian Constitution, many educational researches and educational policies have advocated the use or mother tongue of child in their early stages of schooling. We are familiar with the fact that mother tongue shapes a child's personal, social and cultural identity. Using mother tongue helps a child to develop her cognition and linguistic repertoire. This further augments her critical thinking and literacy skills. Researches show that children learning in their mother tongue adopt a better understanding of the curriculum in general and concept in particular. It shall be the endeavour of every state and of every local authority within the state to provide advocate facilities for instructions in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to the children belonging to linguistic minority groups. Learning through a foreign or alien medium compels the children to concentrate on cramming or rote memory instead of comprehending the basic concepts. If the education system persistently ignores the languages of marginalised people, it would simply add to higher levels of silence in the classroom and a higher dropout rate at the early stage of schooling. Any classroom is characterised by a multiplicity of linguistic and cultural practices and may be considered as mutilingual in nature. Any educational endeavour that ignores this richness of multilingual resources is on one hand is ignorant of minimal educational understanding and on the other hand violating basic principles of justice and equity. One therefore should not be surprised that government policies and school practises almost across the world is in conflict with the natural characteristic of human language. At home and in the street and playground, children constantly borrow, mix, and experiment with language forms and meanings, exactly the things that are forbidden in education in general and the language education classroom in particular.

Three Language Formula and National Policies on Education

The National Policy on Education, 1986 has reiterated in respect of languages the policy elaborated in the National Policy on Education,

1968. Briefly, the policy emphasises the adoption of regional languages as the medium of instruction at the university stage; vigorous effort at implementation of the three language- formula; improvement in the linguistic competencies of students at different stages of education; provision of facilities for the study of English and other foreign languages; development of Hindi as the link language, as provided for in Article 351 of the Constitution; teaching of Sanskrit at the university stage as part of certain courses like Indology, Indian History, Archaeology etc.; serious effort at translation of books from one language to the other; and the preparation of bilingual and multilingual dictionaries.

The emphasis in the Policy is on the adoption of modern Indian languages as the medium of instruction at the university stage. However, the need to provide education through the mother tongue, which may be different from a modern Indian language included in the VIII Schedule, is recognised on academic grounds. The Constitution of India recognises, in respect of linguistic minorities, the desirability of providing instruction through the mother tongue for the first five years of education (Article 350-A). Every effort is, therefore, required to implement this constitutional obligation, although a number of difficulties are likely to be encountered: administrative and financial feasibility of providing instructional facilities through a variety of mother tongues, difficulty to use some tribal languages as medium of education etc. In the context of these difficulties switching over to a modern Indian/regional language has to be ensured as early as possible. The Safeguards for Linguistic Minorities, recognising the difficulties, recommended that for the purpose of providing instruction in the mother tongue of the linguistic minorities at the secondary stage of education, the modern Indian languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution as well as English, should be used as a medium.

The National Education Policy (NEP) similar to the earlier ones, approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, says that wherever possible the medium of instruction in schools until Grade V -- preferably until Grade VIII -- should be the mother tongue or the local or regional language. “All efforts will be made early on to ensure that any gaps that exist between the language spoken by the child and the medium of teaching are bridged,” the NEP says. Same things are mentioned in the earlier NPEs also which are not yet implemented and have failed, like three language formula, then bigger question lies here how these provisions will be implemented now? It seems not to be child centric approach when NPE, 2020 states that curricular and pedagogical framework for early childhood education for children up to the age of 8 will be developed by NCERT, in two parts, namely, a sub-framework for 0-3 year olds, and a sub-framework for 3-8 year olds. This may compel the Children of age group 0 to 3 to be alienated from their primary

socialization i.e. home and family warmth. This may impede their natural way of learning language (MT), cognitive development, physical development, socio-emotional development. Unfortunately all of them will get affected. It is high time for policy writers to review this idea of framing a centralised structured curricular and pedagogical framework for the early childhood education. Let it be kept within the paradigm of Balwadi and Aanganwadi. Almost in all part of the world such structured pedagogical and curricular framework has not been adopted. Children are left with family members to acquire linguistic, cognitive and motor skills in natural surrounding and family tutelage. Schooling starts at later stage, which is after 5years or so.

A report from my friend (Case Study)

One of my friends, Maryse Heylen lives in Belgium. She has reported me that education of children at an earlier stage in their country is in their mother tongue. In Wallonia, the French-speaking region of southern Belgium, children start learning a second language only in their high schooling. European schools are also there in which teachers mostly teach children in English or in their own mother tongue if they are migrated, which shows that even the mother tongues of migrants are respected and used in early school teaching. Children get formal schooling at a later stage which is contrary to provisions made in recent NPE 2020 of India.

NCF, 2005 states that Primary school education must be covered through the home language(s). It is imperative that we honour the child's home language(s). According to **Article 350A of our Constitution, 'It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups."** In the non-Hindi speaking states, children learn Hindi. In the case of Hindi speaking states, children learn a language not spoken in their area. Sanskrit may also be studied as a modern Indian language in addition to these languages.

Care must be taken to honour and respect the child's home languages / mother tongues. At the primary stage, child's language(s) must be accepted as they are, with no attempt to correct them. It is known that errors are a necessary part of the process of learning and those children will correct themselves only when they are ready to. We have to spend time by providing children comprehensible, interesting and challenging inputs. While children come to school equipped with basic interpersonal communicative skills, they need to acquire cognitively advanced levels of language proficiency. In addition, higher-level proficiency skills easily transfer from one language to another. It is thus imperative that we do everything we can to strengthen the sustained learning of Indian languages at school. It is important to view language education as

everybody's concern at school and not as a responsibility of the language teacher alone.

The National Commission on Education known as the Kothari commission examined and recommended a graduated formula which was recommended by the 1968 policy. The three language formula as stated in the 1968 policy is-

First language: It will be the mother tongue or regional language.

Second language: In Hindi speaking states, it will be other modern Indian languages or English. In non-Hindi speaking states, it will be Hindi or English.

Third Language: In Hindi speaking states, it will be English or a modern Indian language. In the non-Hindi speaking state, it will be English or a modern Indian language.

The three language formula is not implemented effectively all over the country. Different States interpreted this formula in different ways. And, as a result its implementation has been uneven. In many cases, the formula has become 3 +/-1 formula. For the speaker of (linguistic) minority languages the three language formula became four language formula as they have to learn their mother tongue, the dominant regional language, English and Hindi. In north India Hindi speaking belt Sanskrit has been adopted as third language in education, which has become tool for marks gaining purpose in examinations. Emphasis is on rote learning rather building a linguistic understanding of Sanskrit. Similarly in South India there was movement against Hindi and it was rejected.

The educational dropout rate is 40–50% after primary school. It is argued that the use of three languages in primary schooling places too great a cognitive burden on children. Language policy in education needs to be revised on pedagogical and scientific rationale rather than on political mileage grounds.

Case Study

Jampa Paldon (changed name), who basically belongs to Tibet, is mother of a 5 years old girl named Dechen (changed name). Her daughter studies in a school of Delhi, India. Jampa tells that their Mother Tongue is Tibetan and before her daughter Dechen started going to school, they used to talk to her in their mother tongue and sometimes in English too. When she started going to school, she tries to talk with her friends in English and sometimes she uses actions also because her peer group talks in Hindi mostly. She is passive recipient of Hindi. She understands Hindi and find it difficult to read and write in Hindi. They rarely talk in Hindi at their home. Since Hindi is a compulsory subject in her school, so she struggles to learn it and face difficulties reading comprehension. Her mother says if her education had been done in her mother tongue, it

would have been easier for her to comprehend the concepts in a better way and she could avoid cramming rote learning. Jampa tells that though her daughter knows 3 different languages, but she feels difficulty in communicating with her grandparents and friends. However it is great to see her ability of mixing verbal repertoire of these 3 languages with ease while talking. Dechen knows three different languages at such a small age of 5 years. Now, even her peers know some words of Tibetan Language as Dechen use to play and talk with them.

Language of Marginalised Differently Abled Linguistic Group

Language teaching needs to be multilingual not only in terms of the number of languages offered to children but also in terms of evolving strategies that would use the multilingual classroom as a resource. Languages would ideally build on this resource, and would strive it through the development of literacy scripts including Braille for the acquisition of academic knowledge. Children with language-related impairments might be introduced to standard sign languages, which can support their continued growth and development to the fullest. Studying sign language and Braille could be included as options for learners without disabilities. (NCF, 2005). Similarly there is a need to train the teachers in the use of sign language and appoint special teachers who may address the learning and emotional needs of this category of children. At the same time use of assistive technology should done at extensive level to make their life easy and in tune with inclusive education.

Conclusion

Hence we find that multilinguality is reality and languages are by nature fluid in their characteristic. The binary between languages of dominating elite linguistic groups and dominated marginalised linguistic groups needs to be diluted. The mother tongue of a child should be used in her early stage of education. Her verbal repertoire of multilinguality should be respected and used as a resource in teaching-learning process. The NEP 2020 needs to demystify the ambiguity in language policies and review the idea of structured pedagogical and curricular framework for the children of age group 0-3 years, which is proposed to be designed centrally by the NCERT. This may be done away with and leave this age group of children to develop their linguistic cognitive and motor skills in natural setting family and societal warmth.

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