On Linguistic Diversity in India

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So much has been written on linguistic diversity in India from the point of view of its implications for language planning and language education in this country that one might wonder whether there is something really significant about the subject that still remains to be explored. It may be useful now to take stock of the ideas that have emerged in the scholarly work by the linguists and the language teachers and the initiatives that have been taken by the people in power during the last fifty years, and draw whatever lessons one can for future course of action. This is what this paper attempts to do.

The relevant literature shows that there have broadly been three distinct attitudes towards the linguistic diversity in India which in all probability is without a parallel anywhere in the world: (a) it is a great national treasure, something to be proud of, rather than get concerned about, (b) it is a problem, and can hinder our efforts towards progress and emotional integration, and (c) it can be our strength in many ways or our problem depending on how we choose to deal with it. The tapestry of languages in our country – about two hundred languages and a number of potential languages, belonging to a number of language families - is also the tapestry of cultures, and this tapestry would appear to be invaluable, at least when it is looked at in dissociation from a context. What can this resource then be if not a source of strength, those who hold (a) tend to think. They are the champions of multilingualism in education in a manner of speaking; they often advance the view that the number of languages that should be taught as part of formal education in our country need not be restricted to three, as is stipulated in the three language formula. Those who hold (b) consider linguistic diversity of our country as a potential source of conflict, and a possible serious threat to the unity of the country. They do not of course explicitly advocate any remedial measure to alter the multilingual reality it would be politically grossly incorrect in the contemporary political milieu. As far as language pedagogy is concerned, they think that inclusion of many languages in the curriculum amounts to taking time off from sciences and social sciences. Those who hold the view (c) treat linguistic diversity in India as an objective reality, and would expect language planners and decision makers to deal imaginatively with it, so that it becomes an asset, rather than a problem, for the country. To some at least this position would appear quite reasonable on account of its refusal to treat the multilingual reality as an advantage or a hindrance inherently. Such a view allows wider scope for responsible language planning.

Before proceeding any further, we should like to draw attention what Mahatma Gandhi once wrote on the question of multilingualism in India. He saw in the situation a potential problem for the country and offered a suggestion as to how to deal with it. Never a leader who would compromise with telling the truth as he saw it, he wrote that “a spirit so
exclusive and narrow as to want every form of speech to be perpetuated and developed, is anti-national and anti-universal. All underdeveloped and unwritten dialects should... be sacrificed and merged in the great Hindustani stream. It would be a sacrifice..., not a suicide (Young India, 7 August 1925)”. Gandhiji was a pluralist. There can be no question about it. He was also a pragmatist. Thus how much diversity and in which domains – culture, religion, language, etc. - would be sustainable in a country with so much diversity seems to have been his concern. He realized that not all speeches (bolis) could be developed, and foresaw that their uneven development would pose a serious threat to the emotional unity of the people in the country. He anticipated the problems inherent in “one language, one political and administrative entity” formula for such a multilingual entity as India, yet to emerge as the country it is today. At the same time, it must be stressed that he found no role for state intervention in the matter. He wanted people themselves to recognize the problem and work for a solution. He knew how complex and how emotionally charged the language problem was, and how very difficult it was to solve it at the rational level. So he called for a sacrifice, drawing attention to the fact that suicide and sacrifice, how very similar they might look, are fundamentally different.

Our concern here is with (c), partly because it indirectly includes (a) and (b), and partly because (a) and (b) are fairly straightforward, and intellectually rather uninteresting. In contrast, (c) appears interesting, as it shifts the focus from the reality itself to the decisions people take to deal with it. Now one fairly obvious way to begin considering (c) is to consider the way decision makers have dealt with the multilingual reality, and to what effect. And sixty years is sufficient time to take stock of how multilingualism has been dealt with in our country in terms of language planning and language education.

It would not be inaccurate to say that our language policy has been based on three languages primarily: English, Hindi and the mother tongue, which has practically boiled down to the regional language. Right from the beginning, English has remained a challenge for our country in many ways. It is important to note that language planning in multilingual India has not excluded English at any point of time, despite some fairly strong negative opinions of some leaders of the freedom movement about it. Speaking at the All India Script and Common Language Conference in Lucknow in 1916, Gandhiji had gone to the extent of saying the following: “…even if I speak a little of English, I have the feeling that I am committing a sin.” It is well known that he advocated Hindi, but it is perhaps not so well known that Tagore rejected it; he considered it to be a language incapable of expressing thoughts, ideas and experiences beyond the ordinary in some sense. He observed that Hindustani could be used as a language for “communication”, not “expression”. In any case, for Nehru it was a language of importance for India, although it was not an Indian language, which may still be the most acceptable view of this language, although quite a few would now not hesitate to regard it as an Indian language, a language that came to India from elsewhere but developed in this country to an extent, although only in its fringes, and as a consequence, acquired a distinct Indian flavour. It was assigned a place in the educational system, and in the governance of the country. When attempt was made in the mid nineteen sixties to implement the original Constitutional provision with regard to English, namely that it
would cease to be an official language of the Union, it led to violent protests and bloodshed in parts of the country, in particular, in Tamil Nadu. The Hindi-English question not only resulted in bloodshed, but also attitudinally, even to a certain extent, emotionally, divided the country.

The main response of the Union government’s response to this language agitation was to amend the Constitution in order to allow English to continue as the associate official language essentially indefinitely. No funds, however, were allocated for its spread; it is another matter that it didn’t need any. If anything, some care seems to have been taken to discourage the natural development of English in a specific non-native environment. When Central Institute of English was set up to contribute to the teaching of English in the country, it seems to have been suggested by no less a person than Nehru himself that British English (as against, implicitly, American English or Indian English, which perhaps was still being viewed as “Matthew Arnold in a sari”) should be taught at the Institute. Even now, many in our country refuse to distinguish between Indian English and incorrect English in English language pedagogy.

Owing to a host of factors which we do not wish to catalogue and discuss here (many of which in any case are obvious), in many parts of the country today demand is being made to introduce English in the curriculum as early as possible: even at class I. It is very important to note that it is mostly the disadvantaged sections of the society that are making this demand. Mostly in response to this demand, many states are introducing English really early, at the level of class I-III. There is however a serious practical problem for the successful implementation of this policy, namely, lack of adequate number of even minimally competent teachers of English, and it is unclear that the states are showing a sense of urgency to address this difficult problem with the thoughtfulness that it deserves, and to rethink the English language pedagogy policy. Failure to learn English fairly well would not bring the people the benefits learning of English is supposed to do, and this situation, one is afraid, might lead to widespread frustration and social unrest in not-too-distant a future.

Then with the increasing awareness by the people of the benefits of Internet, and the wide use in the society of such communication technologies as the mobile phone, IT divide has emerged as yet another “divide” in the country, and one must not fail to realize that part of technology divide is indeed the English-divide, English being the language of the Internet accessible to people in India. English language pedagogy and Indian language technology, in different ways, have to respond to this divide effectively.

Since English, not long ago, was a language that about just one percent of the population knew, it simply could not be the only or the most preferred language of governance in the early years of independent India. There were other considerations too, including those of the spirit of the freedom movement and the prevailing national sentiments soon after independence. Therefore one or more Indian languages had to be chosen for the purposes of governance at the Union level. Only one of the Indian languages was chosen: Hindi. Incidentally, whatever justified the choice of this single language, it cannot be said to have responded to the multilingual nature of the Indian
polity. In any case, this choice displeased many; one perhaps would not be too much off the mark to say that it pleased only the north – the so-called Hindi belt. Substantial resources were provided, and are still being provided, for the development of this language so that it is enabled to perform the function assigned to it in the constitution. Hindi has indeed developed to a considerable extent, and although it has not been able to function as the main language of governance, it has become, more than any other language, the link language of the country in day-to-day life. The resources available to it are much more than what is available to the other Indian languages. Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that Hindi has been able to develop to the extent it has, not so much by expansion of its lexicon by using resources available in Sanskrit and hardly, if at all, in other Indian languages (as suggested in the Constitution), as by borrowing from English, nativizing the borrowed words from this language, by borrowing discourse forms from it, and by using the language in increasingly more and new domains.

As for the mother tongue, it entered the discourse on language planning in India through the discussion on language education. Rightly, there was no debate about its importance and no scepticism about the desirability of early education in the medium of the mother tongue. And rightly too, the question of feasibility was raised. It was argued that at that point of time all the Indian languages were not developed enough to be used for education beyond the basic level. And ensuring even development of all the bolis spoken was not seen as a practical idea. This is where the so-called regional languages assumed importance in the discourse under reference.

Making a list of languages and including it in the Constitution – the Eighth Schedule – was an important initiative on the part of the makers of the Constitution. There were originally fourteen languages in the list, and these were viewed as major languages, in some sense, a matter that need not detain us here. Most of these languages were (and still are) the language of the majority in their respective states, and were thus official language of the concerned states and the main language of school education in the respective states as well. As such, resources had to be provided and efforts made for their growth and development. These languages came to be looked upon by speakers of the languages outside the list as privileged languages. In other words, Eighth Schedule gave rise to yet another divide among the Indian languages: the privileged few, and the unprivileged many. The central government also set up Sahitya Akademi for the promotion of the literature produced in a select group of languages, and more languages were included in this list than in the Eighth Schedule. English was the most notable of the languages in this list that were not there in the Eighth Schedule. Whatever good work the Akademi might have done for the promotion of literatures (it indeed has), its contribution for the development and modernization of the languages in the Akademi list seems to be very little. The argument in support of Sahitya Akademi would be that this activity lies well outside its purview, but then the acceptability of this argument would depend, in part at least, on how literature is defined; in particular, whether knowledge-based literature counts as literature or not.

It wasn’t very long indeed before some languages demanded that they be included in the Eighth Schedule. Thereby they would receive both recognition and resources for their
development in order that they are enabled to be used in the educational domain. Echoing the spirit of “a language is a dialect with a navy and an army”, one could say that inclusion of a certain language in the Eighth Schedule has become a matter of the political power of the speakers of that language. The list is not closed, and it looks like it cannot be closed; so demands would be made from time to time for the inclusion of this language or that in the Eighth Schedule. In other words, this created yet another hierarchy and another divide among the Indian languages: to repeat, there are the privileged few, and the unprivileged many.

The so-called privileged languages are not without problems really, at least not all of them, a fact not always appreciated on account of the perception that these languages are privileged. One of the languages I have in mind is Odia (spelt as “Oriya” earlier), but clearly it does not constitute an isolated case. The scheduled languages have to face the “challenge”, preferring to use this word instead of “threat”, from English and Hindi both. If English is the language of opportunity, Hindi is the language which makes mobility in India relatively easy, and which is the main language of the Indian entertainment industry, and which is again one of the two main languages of the influential print and electronic media at the national level (the other being English). Like television, Internet too threatens to wean people, especially the young people - the high school and the college goers - away from books. With the exception of some newspapers, the readership of the material published in a regional / scheduled language (for example, creative literature) is really small. In many of these languages there is lack of adequate “knowledge (-based) literature”, and the newly established “National Translation Mission” with funding from of the central government is given the task of overcoming it. There have been efforts to modernize the scheduled languages in terms of the preparation of dictionaries including bilingual dictionaries, grammars, glossaries and similar other reference material, but since the domain of use of the languages concerned has not appreciably increased (with the exception of Hindi and possibly two or three more languages), modernization of the Indian languages has remained only an academic exercise. Market forces today, probably more than ever before, determine which academic stream the students should choose to join. Today in our county, it is technical education, followed by science education, and the language of both these is English. Under these circumstances, there is a genuine apprehension that in a few decades, some of these so-called privileged languages would become “limited domain” languages. This would create a context for language shift. It is not inconceivable that in three or four generations, a noticeable number of the educated speakers of these languages would have shifted to other languages. The Central Government set up a committee about two years ago in connection with the modernization and related matters concerning the scheduled languages, but one does not know what affirmative steps have been taken so far. It also set up a similar committee for the development of the tribal languages. However available resources would require the prioritization of some languages over others for their best utilization, but such a plan of action is not without cost, since the prioritized languages are likely to be perceived as privileged by the communities whose languages do not figure in the priority list.
More recently, following global concern about the endangerment of languages, the government of India allocated some resources to deal with this problem in India where many languages are on the list of endangered languages. It is felt that the best way to help the languages under threat is to encourage and ensure the learning of these languages. Various language related activities such as preparation of dictionaries and grammars of the endangered languages, preparation of reading material, documentation of their folksongs, tales, and other cultural expressions, and their knowledge systems etc. follow from this perspective. This again is what can really be done for an endangered language. As for learning the language concerned, efforts such as those mentioned above at best provide resources for language learning, but availability of language learning material would not necessarily lead to the learning of the language concerned. It needs no arguing that language learning, maintenance and shift are societal matters, and market demands often play an important, in fact almost a decisive, role in these.

The following may still be instructive in this context. Some time back, the government of Odisha (earlier spelling: “Orissa”) decided to dispense with Odia (as well as a few other subjects) as an optional subject at the undergraduate (BA) level because of lack of adequate student enrolment in the subject. This was seen as an anti-Odia and anti-mother tongue step by the government and there was protest against it in which academicians and intellectuals of the state participated. The government had to change its decision. It is interesting and instructive to note that the enrolment in the Odia class did not increase, since job prospects significantly govern the students’ choice about what to study and what not to. One can hardly say that the cause of the language was well-served by the protest.

A few years ago, the central government decided to accord the status of classical language to some of our languages. First Tamil, then Sanskrit, and on November 1, 2008, Kannada and Telugu were accorded this status. Soon after Tamil was accorded the status, there were demands for the same status for Kannada and Telugu, supported by the governments of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh respectively. There were demonstrations in these states too, which went on for about four years. Just as there have been demands from time to time for the inclusion of some language or the other in the Eighth Schedule, similar demands cannot be ruled out in the case of classical languages as well. In fact, barely a week after Kannada and Telugu were declared classical languages, there was a demand for the same status for Malayalam, with some support from the government of Kerala. It is another matter that some intellectuals from that state criticized the central government’s decision to classify some languages as classical languages in the first place, thereby introducing an “unhealthy” hierarchy (yet another hierarchy in fact) among languages. The classical language designation is popularly viewed, quite understandably, in terms of higher status and more resources for its study. As for those already declared as classical languages, some resources would be allocated for the study of the classical stage of those languages, resources having already been provided for Sanskrit studies and research through some other initiatives, including establishment of many Sanskrit universities. The classical language programme of the government would hopefully lead to research on the classical languages, but it would not enable them to meet the challenges of English and Hindi. In any case, expanding the functional domain of a
classical language is not among the objectives of the classical language scheme of the government. In this regard one is reminded of the encouragement that Sanskrit receives from the government in various forms. It received support even before it was accorded the classical language status. State support for classical languages, Sanskrit and even Urdu can be said to have a cultural rather than a functional purpose.

Recently there was an attempt by the Human Rights Commission of India to find out if speakers of minor languages and linguistic minorities have suffered on account of the language they spoke. To the best of our knowledge the findings and the recommendations of the Commission are not yet available to the people at large.

In sum, from time to time during the last five decades, efforts have been made to deal with the multilingual reality of our country. The ones mentioned above constitute a few but major initiatives. Among the results are the following: the development of Hindi as the link language in the country, access to English by a much higher percentage of people than fifty years ago, modernization, although noticeably uneven, of some languages in the Eighth Schedule, and in the case of a few languages, the domain of use has expanded. However, there is genuine concern that the domain of use of even some major languages might shrink in not too distant a future because of the market and the other pressures of the globalizing world. Thus only a few languages have benefited from the various language-oriented initiatives during the last six decades, and this has given rise to the perception that the policies concerned with language development have created a “have and have not” situation in the domain of language. And not surprisingly, during the last fifty years there have been considerable language-related tension and violence in the country.

The above is an outline of how the multilingual situation in the country has been dealt with in post-independence India, and in our view, the policies were not cynically politically motivated, neither was the thinking behind the same unarguably unreasonable. Post-independence, as structures were being created for the governance of the country, languages had to be chosen for the purpose, and the selected languages had to be supported for their development. There was of course no way the country could do without English, despite some strong objection from certain influential political quarters. But there was the general agreement in the political class that sooner than later, the selected, indigenous languages must take over the role English has been playing in the fields of governance and higher education. Later, attention was paid to languages outside of the Eighth Schedule and the Sahitya Akademi list. Support for the development of the tribal languages (though in effect only some of them) and the concern for the languages under “threat” are justified. If it was considered impossible to provide support to every single language at the same time, the decision was not at all unjustified. But then, if there has been the perception in the relevant quarters that the claim of a certain language was being overlooked, and in consonance with this, there was demand for corrective action (e.g., inclusion of a certain language in the Eighth Schedule), it is quite understandable. The situation has become more complex owing to the demands of the market in India, which is not unconnected with the global market. In other words, for the kind of multilingual situation there exists in India, it is difficult to believe that any other model of
language planning would have yielded significantly better results; there would have been some privileged, real or perceived, languages and there would have been the rest many, and there of course would have been the attendant social tensions of such a situation.

This is not to fall into the trap of “multilingualism is a blessing / bane” kind of attitude. Multilingualism is a part of the reality in India. It cannot be wished away, nor can any initiative result in eliminating the inequality (in the intended sense) among languages and equally importantly, the perception of such inequality on the part of the people. Social tensions could be viewed as a natural consequence of living together – languages living as neighbours with other languages, and have to be dealt with in a healthy manner, in terms of transparency, understanding and good will.

It might appear to some that our language planning has basically been language centric, rather than people centric, i.e., not based on the paramountcy of people’s interest, as they perceive it. The planners might disagree with this observation, maintaining that sometimes people might not know how their interests could be best served, which is the situation that requires intervention, and the like. They indeed have worked under these assumptions. The three-language-formula is a consequence of this way of thinking. It embodies a very persuasive idea, but its implementation has been far from successful mainly because of lack of popular support. People centric approach would lead to making available to the people the necessary facilities in order that they learn whatever languages they want to learn, and respecting their decision not to learn a certain language. But in the present-day scenario, this might adversely affect the linguistic diversity of our country – we must not forget that language death is a phenomenon in a multilingual society (quite obviously) and that more often than not, language shift, leading to language death eventually, is a voluntary act by the relevant speakers, rather than an involuntary one under conditions of direct coercion. The real challenge today is to find an optimal solution to this situation in terms of working out a reasonable and realistic framework for language planning and language education that preserves the essence of the linguistic diversity in the county, and obtain people’s acceptance in its favour. And this is not at all an inconsiderable challenge.

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