

# 34 Multilingual Education in South Asia

## *The Burden of the Double Divide*

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### Introduction

With over 660 languages, South Asia has nearly 10% of the world's languages. Linguistic diversity in the region is quite high. But, at the same time, the region also has a large number of endangered languages. The *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (UNESCO, 2009) lists 337 languages in different degrees of endangerment in South Asia. This paradox of diversity and endangerment arises due to simultaneous presence of spontaneous societal multilingualism at the grassroots level and different forms of inequitable and discriminatory "ideologies, structures and practices" or *linguicism* which "legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources" between languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 30) at a broader level. Despite the widespread multilingualism, languages are treated unequally in most societies due to various modes of discrimination in state policies as well as societal practices. Languages are associated with unjust and inequitable distribution of power with some languages enabling their users to exercise greater control over socioeconomic resources compared to the others. The hierarchical positioning of languages in the South Asian multilingual societies leads to language shift, marginalization and loss of less powerful or weakened languages and capability deprivation and poverty of the language communities (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013; Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty, 2009). The indigenous tribal minority (ITM) languages, in particular, are placed in positions of neglect, deprivation, and disadvantage. At one level, the policy ideologies proclaim egalitarian positioning and promotion of all the languages whereas, at the level of actual practices, the odds are clearly stacked against these languages, which are deprived of opportunities in significant domains of use such as education, trade and commerce, law, and official communications. Prolonged

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neglect of the ITM languages leads to loss of their instrumental vitality and cumulative impoverishment. There is a vicious circle of language disadvantage (Mohanty, 2013) in which these languages are weakened by educational and social neglect and this neglect is further justified on grounds of their weakness and inadequacy; the victims of linguistic discrimination or linguisticism are held responsible for their neglected status.

The hierarchy of languages in South Asian societies involves a dominant presence of English as an elitist language of power at the top, a few major national or regional languages of national identity in the middle level, and many ITM languages at the bottom. Typically, this hierarchy of languages shows two conspicuous power gaps—one between English as the most privileged language of power and the major national or regional languages; the other between the major languages and the most disadvantaged ITM languages—and, of course, many invisible power gaps that marginalize the local languages relegating most of them to the status of dialects or tongues. Mohanty (2010) views the dual-level power cleavage as a linguistic double divide with wide ranging implications for education and development of linguistic minorities and maintenance of linguistic diversity.

## Languages in South Asia: The double divide

The linguistic double divide in South Asia is reflected in the role of English in fostering a hierarchical pecking order of languages, in pushing the major regional languages out of significant domains of use and cumulatively marginalizing other ITM languages. In India and all other South Asian countries, English is the most sought-after language which empowers its users with privileged access to socio-economic resources. During the struggle for Indian independence, English was never perceived as a language of Indian nationalism and was rejected as a symbol of subjugation. But the Constitution of independent India promulgated in the year 1950, in its Article 342 (2) recognized English as an associate official language for a period of 15 years during which, it was envisaged, other Indian languages including Hindi would develop to replace English. However, with its growing power and also as a result of conflict of interests between Hindi and languages of South India such as Tamil, this constitutional status of English was extended for an indefinite period. With globalization, English is now so well entrenched in India as a language of power, economy, and privileges that any reversal of this position seems very unlikely.

The power of English in Indian society has created the first divide, between English and the dominant Indian languages. It has been called the English–Vernacular divide (Ramanathan, 2005). The second divide, the Vernacular–Other (ITM language) divide (Mohanty, 2010), is between the major Indian languages and the ITM languages, and it is evident in policy- and practice-level discriminations between the languages on either side of it. Recognition of 22 major Indian languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Bengali, and other dominant languages at the state and regional levels as languages for official use and governance as well as for

specific public purposes and their use in education and other socioeconomic domains, keeps the other Indian languages deprived. We will briefly discuss the nature of the double divide in other South Asian countries before turning to its implications for languages-in-education policy and practice in India and other South Asian societies.

As pointed out earlier, common to the nature and pattern of the double divide in South Asian countries is the presence of English as the most dominant language of power and popular aspirations. Pakistan has nearly 77 languages of which three—English, Urdu and Sindhi—are recognized as official languages. English is the language of power whereas Urdu is promoted as the language of nationalistic identity. There is one power divide between English and the other two official languages as well as Punjabi (as a dominant regional language) and the second divide between the major languages (Urdu, Sindhi, and Punjabi) and 73 other minor languages that are clearly marginalized struggling for a place in the hierarchy (Tariq Rahman, 1998).<sup>1</sup> In Nepal, all the languages (nearly 122) are recognized as national languages. But, English is the most dominant language of power and popular aspirations, and Nepali is viewed as the major national-level language. All other regional- and community-level languages remained marginalized and now vie for a place in the new democratic setup in the country awaiting promulgation of a new constitution. The nationalist movement in Bangladesh for separation from Pakistan was based on Bengali nationalism and rejection of Urdu dominance. Following independence, Bangladesh declared Bengali as the only official language. But English remains the most powerful elitist language, while over 39 other languages (mostly ITM languages) are marginalized without any official status or power.

In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil are the major languages which have some official status. In 1956, the Official Language Act sought to introduce a policy of Sinhala as the only official language. Later Tamil was given a limited role as an official language particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces. While the official role of Sinhala and Tamil and their use in administration continues to be debated, English has become a language of choice in government policy and practices, gaining acceptance as a link language. Following the Tamil movement and the war, a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was set up and in the year 2011, it recommended a trilingual policy of Sinhala, Tamil, and English as official languages as well as languages of education in Sri Lanka. But, despite the changing official positions of the three languages, English has continued to be a preferred and elitist language considered more prestigious than the two major national languages. Other minor languages in Sri Lanka have remained marginalized and neglected amid all the conflicts over the relative dominance of the major languages. Bhutan has 30 languages out of which Dzongkha is the major state language and also the main language of instruction. The language policy in education in Bhutan shows a clear preference for English as the most dominant international language and language of global economy. The place of the other 29 languages of Bhutan in its national framework for education is being debated and remains doubtful (Mohanty, 2013).

Thus, with growing influence of English due to the impact of a globalized economy and also the promotion of English as an important international language, the major regional languages in South Asia have been relegated to a dominated status even if they are languages of identity for their speakers. These major languages, in turn, have pushed the ITM languages towards a cumulative loss of domains of use, marginalization, and language shift. This double divide has affected the language policy and practice in South Asia, particularly in respect of languages in education.

## Language-in-education policy and practice in South Asia

The linguistic double divide in the hierarchical structure of languages in South Asia is reflected in a progressive invisibilization of ITM languages, particularly in education. Out of the nearly 660 languages in the South Asian countries not more than 50 are used as languages of teaching or mediums of instruction (MoI) in schools. While English-medium schools are considered most prestigious, barring some recent experimental initiatives for teaching in a few selected minority mother tongues, the remaining schools are primarily in the dominant languages of each country. India has regular school programs in 33 languages besides English, of which 22 are official languages as recognized in the constitution; only 11 other languages are used as MoI, mostly in the northeastern regions and in some special-purpose or experimental school programs; only three to five tribal languages are used in regular school programs in Indian states (Mohanty, 2013; see also Panda & Mohanty, 2014, for an exhaustive analysis of India's language-in-education policy). All private schools in Pakistan are English-medium schools whereas education in government schools is in Urdu with English taught as a school subject from Grade 1 (see Coleman, 2010 for details). Some other regional languages such as Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashto are used as MoI in provincial schools and taught as school subjects in primary grades.

Pakistan's National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2009) proposes wider use of English in government Urdu-medium schools. The policy recommends that English be taught as a school subject from Class I and used as a language of teaching sciences and mathematics. In addition to English, Urdu and one regional language are also to be taught as school subjects. A similar pattern of English-dominated system of education is also evident in Nepal, where private English-medium schools are most sought after. Medium of teaching in all Government schools is Nepali, regardless of the mother tongue of the pupils. All other languages in Nepal are deprived of a place in education except in some recent experimental schools for mother tongue based education (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty, 2009 for a detailed analysis). In the new democratic setup of the country, it is proposed that all mother tongues will be given equal status as languages of teaching in the early years of school education. The Interim Constitution of Nepal and the National Curriculum Framework of 2007

acknowledge children's right to education in their mother tongue in their early grades (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

In Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, English and major national languages—Bengali and Urdu in Bangladesh, Dzongkha in Bhutan, and Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka—are used in early education, but English has a more prominent place while ITM languages are conspicuously absent. To sum up, English is clearly placed in a dominant position in education in South Asia with almost total neglect of ITM languages; the major regional- or national-level languages are used as MoI in the public or Government schools only. However, starting from the primary to high school levels of education, the major languages have some presence and use of ITM languages as MoI or as academic subjects becomes rare and, in higher and university-level education, the language of teaching is almost exclusively English.

Clearly, then, languages-in-education policy in South Asian countries reflects the sociolinguistic double divide with English as the most significant and sought-after language in education and the ITM languages generally neglected. Education in these countries, both in number of pupils and languages, is organized in a pyramidal structure in which early school education has the largest coverage and occasionally includes some ITM languages along with the major presence of English and the national- or regional-level languages. At the higher or secondary levels, the number of institutions and pupils declines and there is an almost complete absence of ITM languages. In higher and university education, the number of students further declines quite sharply, and English is almost exclusively used as MoI with minimal presence of less preferred national languages. The languages-in-education policy and practice in South Asian countries forces the ITM language communities into submersion forms of education in a dominant language leading to large scale "push out," school failure, capability deprivation, and poverty (Mohanty, 2008; Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

## **Consequences of submersion education for minority children in South Asia**

The imposition of the dominant languages as MoI and neglect of ITM languages in education create a language barrier for millions of children in South Asia with a subtractive effect on their mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Forced submersion education has been shown to be leading to educational failure, high "push out" rates, capability deprivation, and poverty (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). Using several indices of educational development, Mohanty (2008) shows how the tribal communities in India are pushed to educational failure and poverty due to the neglect of their mother tongues in education. Several other Indian studies document the language barrier (Mohanty, 2000), cumulative effects of non-MT education (Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy, & Ramesh, 2009), and poor educational achievement (Singh, Jain, Gautam, & Kumar, 2004) in the case of the tribal children in India. Mohanty and Skutnabb-Kangas (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013; Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty, 2009)

have also discussed the adverse effects of dominant language instruction on education and identity development of the ITM children in India and Nepal. Studies in Nepal document the negative consequences of Nepali-medium schooling on non-Nepali-speaking children's school performance and self-esteem (Awasthi, 2004; EDSC, 1997; Hough, Thapa Magar, & Yonjan-Tamang, 2009). Coleman (2010) reports large-scale school failure and poor academic achievement among children in Pakistan which is attributed to the language barrier that many children face in non-mother-tongue schools. Analyses by other researchers (e.g., Tariq Rahman, 2008; Shamim, 2008) also show that neglect of mother tongues in education has adverse effects on educational development in Pakistan. It is quite evident that the language disadvantage of the ITM children in forced submersion schools in the dominant languages is a major factor in perpetuating inequalities linked to large scale school failure and poverty.

Realization of the crucial links between non-mother-tongue education and poor educational outcomes for the ITM and other disadvantaged children, has led to several initiatives in South Asian countries to deal with the problems of forced submersion education. Programs of mother-tongue-based multilingual education are some of such recent initiatives in South Asian countries.

## Programs of multilingual education in South Asia

The language disadvantage of linguistic minority children in dominant-language schools in South Asia as in rest of the world has led to various experimental programs of mother-tongue-based education for these children. In India there were some early experimental attempts by the Central Institute of Indian Languages in 1980s to provide mother-tongue-based early education called *bilingual transfer* programs for smooth transition from a tribal mother tongue to the dominant state language of schooling. Children started Grade 1 in the mother tongue and progressively switched to the dominant language by the end of Grade 2 (see Mohanty, 1989). These programs had little success and were dropped.

In the year 2004, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India started an experimental program of multilingual education (MLE) in 240 primary schools in 8 tribal languages. A similar program began in Odisha two years later in 195 schools and 10 tribal languages. In these programs, children's home language is used as the language of teaching and literacy development. Teachers are from the respective language communities. The textbooks prepared in this language follow the common state curriculum, while the content makes use of the indigenous cultural knowledge system and community's routine life experiences. The state majority language, Odia in Odisha and Telugu in Andhra Pradesh, is introduced in the second year (Grade 2) for development of oral communication skills in the language, and for reading and writing from Grade 3 onwards. In Grades 4 and 5, the majority language of the state is used as a language of teaching along with children's mother tongue. English is taught as a school subject from Grade 3 in Odisha and Grade 1 in Andhra Pradesh. From Grade 6 onwards, the state majority

language becomes the sole medium of teaching except for the language subjects such as English and Hindi. The Odisha MLE program is now extended to 19 tribal languages in more than 1,000 schools and the Andhra Pradesh program is extended to over 3,000 schools.

Evaluations of these MLE programs in India have shown positive effects on classroom achievement, school attendance and participation, teacher and community attitude (Panda, Mohanty, Nag, & Biswabandan, 2011). A separate evaluation of MLE in Odisha, undertaken by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2011), also corroborates the positive findings in respect of its effects. A special intervention program called *MLE Plus* (MLE+) was designed and implemented by the present authors along with the Odisha MLE program for a period of 5 years from 2007 in 8 of the Government MLE schools in two tribal languages—Saora and Kui. This intervention followed a cultural psychological approach using cultural practices to develop classroom activities and promoting literacy engagement through several community-based activities (see Panda & Mohanty, 2011, 2014 for details). Several internal and external evaluations of MLE+ show significant gains compared to MLE and non-MLE schools (Panda & Mohanty, 2011).

Some other states in India with large populations of different tribal language communities have various programs to support children's learning in the dominant-language schools through mother-tongue-based materials and activities. Though these are not MLE programs as such, they seek to use children's mother tongue to facilitate learning of and in the dominant language. The model of MLE in Odisha, India was followed in Nepal in a small-scale pilot MLE program in eight ITM languages as MoI in Grades 1 to 3 in seven schools (out of a national total of 32,000 schools). The textbooks, children's story books and other teaching-learning materials in the MLE program (see Hough, Thapa Magar, & Yonjan-Tamang, 2009; Yonjan-Tamang, Hough, & Nurmela, 2009 for details) in Nepal were indigenously developed with active community involvement.

Recent National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2009) in Pakistan, despite its heavy emphasis on English, suggests use of local mother tongue for early education and literacy along with the national language, Urdu, for national identity. To the extent that in some areas of the country, education begins with the mother tongue as the MoI along with the language subjects, English and Urdu, which are targeted to become major languages of teaching by Grade 4, one can speak of some emerging trends in Pakistan towards mother tongue based MLE (Shamim, 2011) at least in a weak and early-transition form.

Bangladesh also has started some experimental programs of MLE for indigenous minorities (see Tania Rahman, 2010). Sri Lanka has officially declared a trilingual policy and is planning to use an MLE model to promote multilingual competence in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Thus, barring a few schools with experimental programs involving mother-tongue-based MLE, all the state-run schools in South Asia are in the dominant national or regional languages and the private schools use English as the MoI.

Ofelia García (2009) speaks of monoglossic and heteroglossic types of bilingual education and discusses policies of some Asian countries, including India, as expansions of bilingual education into forms of “multiple multilingual education” which “use more than two languages in education and often have movable parts—that is, languages are weaved in and out of the curriculum as needed” (p. 283). She seems to be taking a positive view of the declared MLE policy, which “acknowledges the linguistic and cultural multiplicity” and views multilingualism “as a resource” (p. 283). If one looks into the declared state policies, most of the South Asian countries seem to be taking an egalitarian and progressive view of languages and ostensibly treating all languages as resources. But, there are differences between declared and de facto language policies (Shohamy, 2010) which need to be considered to understand the gap between ideologies and the real ground-level practices.

The de facto language-in-education policies in South Asia are clearly shaped by the double divide and the hegemonic position of English in society. Lava Deo Awasthi, the Director General of Nepal Government’s Department of Education and the father of the Nepali MLE Program, captures the conflicting policy positions in his apprehensions about the future of MLE in Nepal: “MLE classrooms are priorities in the policy documents but English has been overemphasized in public debates and forums. Even the research reports appear to glorify English and English only school practices” (Lava Deo Awasthi, personal communication, April 15, 2013). As Panda and Mohanty (2014, p. 122) observe, “the burden of the linguistic double divide weighs heavily” on the nature of MLE programs in India as in other South Asian countries which are under pressure to target development of English and major state languages using the mother tongue only as a step towards the target languages; there is always heavy emphasis on English and a sense of urgency to move quickly to this goals and, hence, what appears to be “weaving (languages) in and out” (García, 2009), is in reality a compromise of sequencing of the languages in the “early-exit” model, reflecting their hierarchical position in the society (Panda, 2012). The MLE programs in South Asia may have shown some short-term success in improving the quality of education for the marginalized and grossly disadvantaged ITM children, but they remain trapped in the double divide, unable to subvert the societal language hierarchy and the discrimination inherent therein.

## Conclusion

The employment of the concept “double divide” in this chapter has worked in two ways. It has helped in showing historically how these divides are created and used as tools to structure education in a way that privileges more advantaged communities. Language divides have been legitimized by organizing school and higher education in specific ways, as discussed above, in all the South Asian countries irrespective of their status as erstwhile British colonies. Privileging of English over the vernaculars and the vernaculars over local languages drew its grammar from



the British colonies and grew with support from the local elites. Such arrangements and positioning of languages in school curriculums in these countries were in tandem with the power hierarchy within their societies. Optimization of the economic value of the privileged languages in the new economies and its rationalized existence in the global (neoliberal) economies created aspirations among the indigenous linguistic minority communities which almost naturalized this unequal treatment of languages (and their speech communities) in the school curriculum.

In the global economy, possession of the English language is considered to be a vital cultural capital and, as a result, the divide between English and all other languages looks natural and not anti-child or anti-community. Consequently, any attempt to subvert this hierarchy, even anything that implicitly questions this hierarchy, appears to be an economic and social conspiracy against the linguistic-minority communities. This is the reason why the early-exit bridge model is so readily accepted and preferred over the late-exit programs. In a way, the former reinforces the double divide in the society by institutionalizing it under the guise of a progressive equity measure in the school education curriculum and pedagogy, while the later has the potential to disturb economic and social hierarchy of these societies.

However, Canagarajah (2005) looks at these phenomena differently from the perspective of his native country, Sri Lanka. According to him, the debate over the relative status of the vernaculars and a dominant language often boils down to “mother tongue versus English” debate, as in Sri Lanka. This debate is propelled by the decolonization project on the one hand, resisting English as a colonial language, and by the globalization project on the other, favoring openness to the impact of worldwide communities, multinational work culture, and technological changes which make English important. The proponents of minority linguistic rights, advocating planned language shift in favor of a vernacular language like Tamil in Sri Lanka, are “motivated by the preservationist interests, collective rights and sentimental associations of an ethnic group” (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 420). However, individual needs for economic and social mobility may work against any attempt to essentialize minority linguistic identity and to establish the primacy of the vernaculars over English. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka, being on the lower rung of the economy, may benefit economically from exposure to English language more than from having proficiency in Tamil and Sinhala only. Canagarajah (2005), therefore, argues against any imposed language planning at the state level and suggests that minority linguistic communities need to struggle to protect their own interests and evolve their own agenda and concludes that “policy makers should recognize the agency of subaltern communities to negotiate language politics in creative and critical ways that transcend the limited constructs scholars formulate to either cynically sweep aside or unduly romanticize fundamental human rights” (p. 442–443).

In other words, “one size fits all” solutions to the linguistic and educational issues in the South Asian countries will not work. South Asia may be seen as a cultural–linguistic area; but, the ground-level realities and societal power structures are divergent. Every society has to negotiate its own language policies within

the local, national, and global contexts. The recent evidence shows a uniform and uncritical acceptance of an early bridge model of multilingual education for experimentation primarily in schools located in ITM areas in almost all the South Asian countries. These experimental programs also show some success compared to forced submersion education in the dominant languages. Despite such initial positive signs of the accommodation of ITM languages in education, it is premature to assume that the current model of multilingual education in South Asia is a panacea for the discriminatory practices against these languages since they have not shown any departure from the hierarchical positioning of languages in society. At best, one can characterize the model as an imposed compromise in the face of the low levels of school achievement in ITM linguistic communities and hope that the local communities will continue with their struggle for equity, balanced development, and assertion of their rights for progressive evolution of language-in-education policies in South Asian societies.

## NOTE

- 1 The status of Sindhi as a major language in Pakistan is also contested by some linguists (e.g., Daswani, 2013) who argue that Sindhi is also marginalized.

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