

Multilingual Education in India

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Introduction

Synthesis of diverse cultural influences and religious traditions and coexistence of many languages complementing different spheres of public activity have remained distinctive features of Indian society. The 2001 Census Survey of India listed over 6,600 mother tongue (MT) declarations, which were rationalized into 3,592 MTs. The Census grouped the MTs into 122 major languages each of which includes several others with distinctive regional identities as well as linguistic features. The MTs in India are linguistically classified into 300–400 languages; India ranks fourth in the world in terms of its linguistic diversity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Despite the diversity, 196 languages in India are in the endangered category (UNESCO, 2009), the highest for any country. This paradox of diversity and endangerment can be understood in the context of India's weak and somewhat inconsistent language policy in education, and its failure to translate its statutory commitments into practice. This discussion seeks to show that languages-in-education policy in India has succumbed to the dynamics of the hierarchical power relationship between languages and their speakers, privileging some and disadvantaging many. Current language education policy and practices are examined to show that they fail to support its multilingual ethos and to meet the challenges for egalitarian development of minor, minority, and dominated languages. Indian schools generally offer some teaching of multiple languages, but most of the school programs are only nominally multilingual. Some current programs of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE) for tribal children are discussed.

Despite many positive features of its multilingualism, many languages in India, particularly the indigenous, tribal, and minority (ITM) languages, are subjected to social neglect and discrimination leading to their impoverishment and endangerment and loss of linguistic diversity. Such exclusion of languages is a part of the vicious circle of language disadvantage (Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy, & Ramesh, 2009) in which languages are weakened due to their limited use and the resultant weakness is cited as an excuse to justify further neglect. Institutionalized linguistic discrimination in education is particularly important since it has serious implications for language maintenance (Fishman, 1991). Apart from English and 22 official languages, few other languages find a place in school and higher education in India. In 1970, schools in India used 81 languages as medium of instruction (MI) and school subjects. This number declined to 41 in 1998. Currently, 31 languages are used as MI in primary (1 to 5), 21 in secondary (7 and 9) and 18 in higher secondary (11 and 12) grades. English has a dominant presence in all levels of education and is almost exclusively used as MI in university and technical education in India. ITM languages have a negligible presence in education. Only three to four out of over 150 tribal languages are used as MI in primary grades and none at all in higher education.

The position of languages in education reflects the structural inequalities in India's hierarchical multilingualism. In all spheres of language use, English has an exclusive position of power followed by dominant regional languages including Hindi and state majority languages. The state majority languages or vernaculars, in turn, dominate over ITM languages in all domains of social, political, economic, and educational activities.

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Thus there is a double divide (Mohanty, 2010) in the linguistic hierarchy of Indian multilingualism—one between English as the elitist language of power and the dominant regional languages or vernaculars, and the other between the vernaculars and the dominated ITM languages. The two divides can be characterized as the *English–Vernacular Divide* (between the elitist and dominant languages) and the *Vernacular–Other Language Divide* (between the dominant and dominated languages). The nature and implications of the double divide have been discussed elsewhere (Mohanty, 2010; Mohanty, Panda, & Pal, 2010). It should be pointed out that such a double divide has been characteristic of Indian multilingualism at different points in history (Mohanty, 2008a) and has remained central to India's language-in-education policy as it has evolved, particularly since British rule.

Prior to British rule, education in India started with the majority language mother tongues as MI. Formal education had little impact on the indigenous tribal minorities, whose mother tongues had no writing system and no presence in education. Higher levels of education usually involved learning one of the more prestigious languages of the elites such as Sanskrit and Persian, which were also the medium of instruction (MI) in religious texts. Thus, there was no distinction between language as a subject and as MI. The distinction started with the attempt during British rule to bring English into modern education; languages in education were marked as Vernaculars (the regional majority languages), Classical languages (Sanskrit or Persian), and English. These languages were variously used with one language as MI and multiple languages as school subjects at different levels of education. Choice of languages in education was always contested at various levels, voicing the ongoing tension between the dominant and regional languages. The dominance hierarchy of languages in India continues to be treated with ambivalence, simultaneous resistance and accommodation influencing the policy and practice of languages in education in India.

Languages-in-Education Policy and Practice in India

The place of languages in Indian polity and governance became a major issue following independence and it was hotly debated in the constituent assembly. While nationalistic (and anti-imperialistic) sentiments were high, the process of making of the Indian constitution was dominated by English-educated elites. There were many claims for languages such as Sanskrit, Hindustani, Hindi, and Bengali to be recognized as national languages—and, at the same time, English could not be rejected. The Indian constitution, which came into force in 1950, resolved the issue by incorporating a schedule of 14 official languages (which has since been severally amended to include 22 languages) instead of having any one language recognized as a national language, and by keeping English as an associate official language. The constituent assembly also failed to enforce a common school system, paving the way for continuation (and, later, proliferation) of English-medium private schools. The government schools, on the other hand, continued to be regional language (or vernacular) medium schools. Although the constitution of India made no specific provision for tribal MTs in education, the distinction was made between dominant regional languages and mother tongues of the minorities. Article 351A of the constitution called for the state and local authorities to provide “adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to minority groups.” This provision recognizes the presence of linguistic minorities, such as the tribal communities and their mother tongues. However, the constitutional promises for MT education remain to be implemented. The distinction between regional languages and minority MTs continued to be ignored in subsequent attempts to spell out languages in education. The Three Language Formula was a major initiative on this issue.

In 1957, a Three Language Formula (TLF) was announced by the government of India to deal with the uncertainties and heterogeneous practices in respect of languages in

education. It recommended use of regional language or MT as the first teaching language for five years, Hindi (in non-Hindi areas) or any other Indian language (in Hindi areas) as the second language from Grade 6 to 8, and English as the third language from Grade 3. The TLF did not distinguish between the regional language and MT and, thus, the dominant regional language was imposed on the ITM groups in a form of subtractive bilingual/multilingual education. Further, TLF was applicable only for government-sponsored schools; the private English-medium schools were free to impose their own choice and combination of languages. The TLF was modified from time to time to clarify anomalies. A major modification in 1964 mandated three languages as school subjects (regardless of the MI): (a) MT or regional language, (b) Hindi or English, and (c) one modern Indian language (including Sanskrit) or a foreign language. The third language had to be other than the ones covered under (a) and (b). A transitional bilingual/multilingual program, beginning with tribal MT as the language of teaching for the first two years and switching to regional language MI from the third year onwards, was recommended for tribal MT children. This was tried as a *bilingual transfer model* in some experimental programs initiated by the Central Institute of Indian Languages and subsequently discontinued without much evaluation (see Mohanty, 1989, for discussion). The 1964 modification of the TLF sought to deal with resistance to the imposition of Hindi in non-Hindi areas and paved the way for English to replace Hindi as the second language subject. The TLF was modified several times and interpreted variously in different states. Gradually the dominant majority language of each state came to be used as MI in government schools for all children regardless of their MT, and English replaced Hindi as the second language subject.

The TLF was not advanced as a policy framework; it was a formula to balance between pressures for and against the relative dominance of Hindi and English and the role of the state majority languages and MTs. English was treated with ambivalence following the end of British rule and, at the same time, dominance of Hindi could not be accepted in the South Indian states. The dominance of state majority languages was accepted partly because the marginalized tribal and minority MT users remained powerless and voiceless—with some exceptions, as in case of Bodo and Santali, two tribal languages whose speakers asserted their linguistic rights by engaging in prolonged language movements to have the languages recognized as official languages. In general, the TLF with all its modifications and interpretations did not have much impact apart from contributing to widening the English–Vernacular and Vernacular–Other language divides. In this situation of such ambiguities and uncertainties, state-sponsored public education remains chaotic and multilingual only in a nominal sense.

Multilingual Education in India: Nominal and Experimental Programs

The state majority languages remain the language of teaching or MI in the school programs whereas English is widely used as MI for university-level education. English as a language subject has a dominant presence in the school curriculum. In most cases, at least one other language is taught as a school subject. Schools generally reflect the grassroots-level linguistic diversity with children of different language backgrounds in the same classroom. Thus, education in India is multilingual in a weak sense: multiple languages are used as MI in different stages of education, languages form a part of the school curriculum, and within-classroom diversity often necessitates informal use of multiple languages for communication. Thus, one can point to three patterns of education somewhat responsive to India's multilingual diversity: Informal Multilingual Education, Formal Multilingual Education with a Single MI, and Formal Multilingual Education with Multiple MI.

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Informal multilingual classrooms seek to support different MT children with inadequate proficiency in the MI. In the *support bilingual classrooms*, teachers use children's MT along with the formal MI to enhance their comprehension. For example, teachers in some English-medium schools, particularly those for the lower economic strata, use a vernacular MT (such as Hindi or Oriya) as a scaffolding device (Mohanty et al., 2010); English texts are read and then explained in the children's MT. In *partial bilingual type of informal multilingual classrooms*, children generally use their MT (such as a tribal language) whereas teachers primarily use the MI, which is the majority state language, often utilizing a simplified register of MI since they do not know the MT of the children.

Formal multilingual education programs with single MI usually have one dominant language as the language of teaching (except for language subjects). These include *majority-language MT programs* in which a regional or state majority language is used as the MI and other languages are taught as school subjects. These are MT-medium programs for the majority children and forced submersion programs in a non-MT medium for ITM children with subtractive effect on their MT. These programs lead to poor educational performance, capability deprivation, and poverty for the ITM communities (Mohanty, 2008b). The private English-medium schools offer *non-MT-medium programs* in a single language, English, which is not the MT for the children.

Formal multilingual education programs in multiple MI mostly use two languages for teaching. *Simultaneous dual-language MI programs*, such as the government Kendriya Vidyalaya or Central Schools, use English and Hindi simultaneously as teaching languages—English for mathematics, science, and English subjects, and Hindi for social studies and Hindi subjects. The two languages are used as MI regardless of children's MT. *Successive dual-language MI programs* combine education in different levels each with a different language as MI. Primary to university-level public education in India taken together can be described as a *successive dual-language MI program*—majority regional-language MI at school levels and English (occasionally Hindi) MI at university level. A third subtype of formal multilingual education with multiple languages as MI is the *transitional bilingual education programs for minority children*, which begin with the use of a minority (tribal) MT as MI for about two to four years, during which oral communicative competence is sought to be developed in the regional majority language. There is a progressive decline in the use of MT as MI and by the fourth year the regional language become the sole MI. One such program, called bilingual transfer model, was discussed earlier. Its objective was smooth transition of ITM children into the mainstream majority-language MI programs, leading to soft assimilation and weakening of the minority MTs (Mohanty, 1989).

Clearly, the above programs in Indian education fail to meet the requirements of multilingual education; there is no systematic use of multiple languages as MI, nor do they target development of high levels of multilingual proficiency. These programs hardly offer any support to the weaker languages. Imposition of the majority language as MI on ITM children and English MI for all children in private English-medium schools have a common subtractive impact on children's MT. Thus, educational programs in India offer only weak and surface forms of multilingual education. The constitutional commitments are not honored and the attempted policy formulations including the TLF have failed to address the basic issues in India's hierarchical multilingualism, characterized by the double divide. The English–Vernacular divide is politically negotiated through simultaneous preference for and rejection of English as well as Hindi (and other regional majority languages), effectively leading to supremacy of English in education and other domains. The Vernacular–Other language divide, on the other hand, has led to progressive marginalization of ITM languages and their exclusion from education. Some recent developments in education, however, have begun to address the issue of marginalization and poor educational achievement of the ITM children, recognizing the need for MT-based multilingual education (MLE).

MT-Based MLE in India

As has been noted, the nominal forms of multilingual education in India hardly meet the requirements of developing proficiency in multiple languages—MT, languages for regional- and national-level communication, and international language for wider communication. This requirement means development of multilingual proficiency in two or three languages in the case of majority-language speakers. Education of ITM children, on the other hand, needs to develop proficiency in tribal/minority MT, state majority language, Hindi (in non-Hindi states), and English. Experimental programs of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE) have started for tribal MT children in two states in India, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, with effect from 2004 and 2006, respectively. Andhra Pradesh started MLE in 240 schools for eight tribal MTs and Orissa in 195 schools for ten tribal MTs (see Mohanty et al., 2009 for details). These programs involve use of MT as MI as well as for literacy development from Grade 1. The state majority language, Telugu in Andhra Pradesh and Oriya in Orissa, is used from Grade 2 for development of oral communicative proficiency, from Grade 3 for development of reading and writing skills, and from Grade 4 as a partial MI along with the MT. The MLE programs follow the common state curriculum with emphasis on culture-specific content. English language as a subject is introduced in the program as per state practices—from Grade 2 in Andhra Pradesh and Grade 3 in Orissa. The MLE programs envisage tribal children joining the mainstream schools in the state majority-language MI from Grade 6 onwards. The MLE programs in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are being extended to at least 3,000 schools and some other states such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are planning similar programs for tribal MT children. Besides, a special MLE program, called MLE Plus (MLE+), is in operation in eight of the MLE schools for Saora and Kui languages in Orissa. MLE+ program (Panda & Mohanty, 2009) has a special focus on cultural pedagogy with an emphasis on community participation in literacy activities and children’s collaborative learning practices. Several evaluations of the MLE and MLE+ programs in India (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010) show their positive effects on children’s classroom achievement, attendance, and participation as well as community involvement in children’s education. Despite such positive consequences, MLE programs in India are affected by “the burden of the linguistic double divide” (Mohanty, 2010). This creates pressure for accommodation of the dominant languages too early in the program instead of allowing sufficient time for adequate development of MT. This also means early transition into the dominant-language MI, ignoring the overwhelming research evidence in support of late-exit type MLE programs (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010).

The Indian constitutional provisions and significant policy pronouncements including the TLF are pluralistic, emphasizing MT-based education and supporting the spirit of MLE. The National Curricular Framework (NCF) (NCERT, 2005) does recommend use of MT as the language of teaching. The recent Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RTE) passed by the Indian parliament lays down quality parameters for education of 6- to 14-year-olds as a right and mentions education in MT. However, there are contradictions and lapses in the policy documents. The NCF fails to push an agenda for MLE. It does not find any problem in continuation of English-medium schools and early teaching of English even if it recognizes the research evidence and theoretical support to the contrary. The RTE does not dispense with the dual system of private English-medium and public regional language/MT-medium schools. Further, RTE fails to guarantee MT education since Article 29(2)(f) has a weak provision that “medium of instruction shall, *as far as practicable*, be in child’s mother tongue” (emphasis added). Thus, while policy provisions in respect of languages in education are rhetorical and remain far removed from actual practices, classrooms, as discussed earlier, are superficially multilingual, mostly promoting monolingual proficiency.

The gap between policy and practice in respect of languages in education raises several issues. First, the question of the language of teaching or MI remains unresolved. English MI schools are popular. English as a school subject is gaining in significance and is taught from very early grades. Most of the states in India have now brought English down to Grade 1 despite clear evidence supporting its late introduction founded on a strong development of MT proficiency. Some states like Andhra Pradesh are planning to have English-medium sections in government schools. While there is concern over providing quality education in English and bringing the power of English to the masses, good quality mother-tongue education is the missing link. Further, the dominance of English over other languages in education has subtractive effects on all other MTs.

Education of the ITMs is another pressing issue, linked to mother-tongue-based MLE. The current forms of subtractive education in a dominant language lead to school failure and high “push out” rates. The success of the current experimental programs of MLE raises some hopes. However, as pointed out, the pressure to accommodate the dominant languages early in the MT-based program raises some concerns. Further, the usual models of MLE are challenged by linguistic diversity within the classrooms with children from many MTs. It is necessary to evolve innovative models of MLE for such diverse multiple-language classrooms. More importantly, the policy and practice of multilingual education in India needs to close the gap between imposed homogenization through unregulated school practices and real-life multilingualism, which mandates a system of education that promotes multilingualism for all.

SEE ALSO: Central Institute of Indian Languages; Curriculum Development in Multilingual Schools; Mother-Tongue-Medium Education; Multilingualism and Minority Languages; National Language and English in India

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