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MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

Multilingualism is a social reality in India. Oral and literacy skills in multiple languages are necessary for meaningful participation in the larger democratic sociopolitical and economic system of the country. Starting with the mother tongue (MT) for family and community level communication, people need languages for regional communication, national level communication and wider communication. Thus, promotion of multilingual competence is widely accepted as one of the goals of Indian education. In a very broad sense, reflecting the fundamentally multilingual character of the society, education in India has been multilingual at different points in history continuing into the present times. But, at the same time, the relationships between different languages and their roles in education have continuously evolved both with micro-level socio-historical processes and also with the dynamics of power structures at the macro-level. These processes have continuously affected the positioning and repositioning of languages in the power hierarchy often leading to marginalization and endangerment of languages. One can perhaps use Hornberger's (2002) 'ecology metaphor' to appreciate how different Indian and Indianized languages and their places in society and education have been constantly negotiated through complex socio-historical processes of *language evolution* in changing *language environments* leading to *endangerment of languages*. The purpose of this chapter is to show that education in India has actively contributed to perpetuation of social and linguistic inequalities in seeking to accommodate to the dynamics of power relationships between languages and the social groups who speak these languages. At different points in history, it can be shown that language education policy has been implemented without any critical engagement with the social history of languages and education. Current educational policy and practices are examined to show that education in modern and post-independence India has reflected the uncertainties arising out of the underlying tensions and ambiguities in respect of sociopolitical and economic positioning of languages and their role in the larger multilingual mosaic. Such uncertainties and tentativeness, it will be argued, have contributed to the failure of language education policy to move from a language-as-problem to language-as-resource orientation (Ruiz, 1984).

From a historical perspective, it is useful to note a recurrent pattern of relationships in India between the role of languages in the broader society and their position in education. At different points in history, despite its widespread and grassroots level multilingualism, Indian society has been characterized by a double divide between the language of the dominant power structure and elites and the languages of the masses, on one hand, and between the languages of the masses and those of the marginalized, on the other. This has resulted in a recurrent pattern of a three-tiered hierarchy of languages. At the top of this hierarchy, at different points in history, Sanskrit, Persian and English have exerted significant, stable, long-term and enduring impact on the languages of the masses in addition to playing a dominant role in education, which during major periods of history was multilingual in a loose sense since knowledge and scholarship in languages was always considered distinctive. These languages derived their power and dominance from the patronage of the rulers—the Hindu kings, the Persian invaders and Moguls, and the British—whose powers were reflected in the preeminence and influences of Sanskrit, Persian and English languages, respectively. The privileged elites not only actively learned, cultivated and propagated these languages but also derived their power and privileges from them. The languages of the majority of the population were influenced by these dominant and powerful languages through several processes of linguistic convergence, borrowing and change. These languages of the majority existed in the middle rungs of the multilingual hierarchy. Lowest in the three-tiered hierarchy were the minority, low-caste, indigenous or folk varieties or dialects of the disadvantaged groups, which had little or no presence in education and scholarship. With very little access or claims to education, most of these languages did not develop a writing system or orthography.

Before British rule, education in India was loosely multilingual, as has been indicated earlier. Early education of children started in the mother tongues, which were the majority languages of the masses. Higher levels of scholarship usually involved learning the more powerful ruling language such as Sanskrit or Persian, which were also the medium of instruction (MI) in religious texts and philosophical discourses. The distinction between language as a medium of teaching and as a school subject started during the British period with the promotion of English in Indian education along with the need to balance learning of the mother tongues (called vernaculars) as well as classical languages like Sanskrit. Multilingual education in pre-independence India involved use of one language as MI and two to three languages as school subjects. The choice of these languages in education was often influenced by the dominant power structure and the elites. At the same time, the majority languages exercised their regional or local

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primacy although the tension between the dominant and the regional languages continues till today. The folk and indigenous languages in the lowest strata of the society were generally kept out of education and other domains of economy and power. They survived through some form of social segregation in earlier periods of history and do so now through marginalization, if not active segregation. Thus, as a common and recurrent pattern, languages in India and their place in education continue to be characterized by the great divides between the elite languages of the dominant, the vernacular languages of the majority and the marginalized languages of the disadvantaged minority groups. The hierarchical relationships between languages and their respective places in Indian education have always been fraught with ambiguities and ambivalence of resistance and accommodation, as has been said of the “English-vernacular divide” (Ramanathan, 2005a, b). In fact, it can be argued that the current uncertainties and confusion in educational policies and practices can be attributed to simultaneous forces of dominance, resistance and accommodation at various levels and dimensions of educational practices in India. It is necessary to briefly look at the nature of multilingualism in India before examining its role in education.

India has 22 constitutionally recognized official languages (*Constitution of India*, VIII schedule, after the 100th constitutional amendment, December 2003). English is an associate official language. Actual mother tongue (MT) returns in the Census surveys are much larger. In the 1991 Census of India more than 10,000 MTs were named by the people. The MT returns were rationalized and categorized into 3372 MTs out of which 1,576 were listed and the remaining 1,796 were categorized under the ‘other’ MT category. These MTs are variously classified into 300–400 languages belonging to five language families. Indian society uses a large number of languages in different domains of activities. For example, 104 languages are used for radio broadcasting as well as adult literacy programmes, 87 for print media and 67 in primary education. Widespread use of two or more languages in different domains of daily life makes it possible for individuals and communities at the grass-root levels to communicate among themselves and with members of different speech communities.

MULTILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION IN INDIA: POLICY AND PRACTICE

After independence, the principle of MT education was enshrined in the Indian Constitution (Article 350A), which calls for provision of “adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to minority groups”. This

constitutional provision still remains to be implemented in practice. Issues relating to the use of languages as MI and as subjects of study in different levels of education continue to be debated.

THE THREE-LANGUAGE FORMULA

In 1957, the government of India proclaimed an official policy regarding the role of languages in education. This is popularly known as the three-language formula, which recommended use of

1. Regional language or mother tongue as the first teaching language for 5 years
2. Hindi in non-Hindi areas and any other Indian language in Hindi areas as the second language for 3 years (i.e. from the sixth to eighth years in school)
3. English as third language from the third year onwards

This policy envisaged a regional language or mother tongue being used as a medium of instruction in school. Evidently, the distinction between regional languages and mother tongues was not clear. This led to forced imposition of the majority regional languages on the minority and indigenous (tribal) language groups in a subtractive form of bilingual/multilingual education. Further, while the three-language formula is applicable only for the Government sponsored education, the private educational institutions (called Public Schools, as in UK) are free to introduce their own system in respect of languages.

The three-language formula was modified in 1964. This modified formula specified the following three languages to be studied as school subjects (regardless of the MI): (1) mother tongue or regional language, (2) Hindi or English and (3) one Modern Indian language or foreign language not covered under (1) and (2) and not used as medium of instruction. Hindi was no longer compulsory for schools in non-Hindi areas and English could replace Hindi or be taught as a foreign language. Besides, for tribal (indigenous) children, the 1964 modification proposed transitional bilingual/multilingual education—use of tribal language as medium for first 2 years and oral instruction in regional language and use of regional language as medium of instruction from third year onwards.

The three-language formula has evolved through several modifications and interpretations in various states and school systems. Gradually, through divergent applications of the formula, the majority language of each state has become the first language (and the MI) in the state-sponsored schools with English as the most common second language subject followed by either Hindi or Sanskrit as a third language subject. The three language formula was never intended to be

a language-in-education policy and it did not provide any such framework. Different interpretations and applications of this formula in different states and union territories in India were the result of pressure and negotiation between the forces in support of the dominant language of power, English, and the majority regional languages, on the one hand, and between the different regional languages, on the other. While Hindi was acceptable to states with the dominant presence of the fluid Hindi–Urdu–Punjabi languages, the states in the South India rejected Hindi in favour of English. This resulted in strengthening the position of English in India. This process of dominance and resistance resulted in several anomalous situations in respect of the three-language formula and its application. For Hindi states, it meant presence of two languages—Hindi and English—in schools with Sanskrit as a third language subject. In South Indian states, this resulted in relegation of Hindi to a peripheral role and a more prominent place for English. More importantly, for the linguistic minorities, such as the tribal children, the language formula and subsequent emphasis on mother tongue education were rejected or treated with indifference since it meant the use of four languages in education—MT, state majority language, Hindi and English.

In respect of minority languages, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (1990), Government of India, recommended setting up minority language MI primary schools in areas with at least 10% minority language speakers and dual medium instruction in the same schools to avoid segregation of minority children. Further, appointment of minority language teachers was recommended for teaching the minority children in the areas with less than 10% minority language speakers. These recommendations, however, have mostly remained unimplemented.

MULTILINGUAL PRACTICES IN INDIAN EDUCATION

The *Sixth All India Educational Survey* (NCERT, 1999) shows that only 41 languages are now used in schools (either as MI or as a school subject) and, out of these, 33 languages are used as MI in primary school (years 1–5) 25 in upper primary (years 6–7), 21 in secondary (years 8–10) and 18 in higher secondary (years 11–12) levels, respectively. The number of languages in school education in India has been declining over the last three decades (Mohanty, 2006).

Most forms of education in India seek to develop multilingual competence by having multiple languages as part of the curriculum but they do not formally use multiple languages for teaching school subjects

other than the languages themselves. However, since most classrooms have pupils from diverse linguistic backgrounds, multiple languages are informally used for interaction. Different patterns of educational use of multiple languages for teaching are described below.

1. *Informal Forms of Multilingual Education*

- 1a. *Support bilingual education:* In some schools, the MI is supplemented or supported by another language. Lessons may be read in the MI and explained in another language particularly when the MI is not the MT of some or all of the students.
- 1b. *Partial Bilingual Education:* Students use their MT for their classroom responses but interaction between the teacher and the students is conducted in a majority local language MI. Sometimes, when the teacher is not familiar with the students' MT (as when tribal children are taught by a non-tribal teacher who does not know the tribal language), a simplified register may be informally used for classroom communication and the majority language is used as formal MI.

2. *Formal Multilingual Education with a single MI*

- 2a. *Majority Language Mother Tongue Programmes:* A majority language MT is the MI and other languages are taught as school subjects. These programmes usually follow the three-language policy. But, their implementation differs particularly across Hindi and non-Hindi states. These programmes can be characterized as forced submersion programmes for minority and indigenous language children whose MT is not the MI.
- 2b. *Non-MT medium programme:* These programmes use a second language as MI with other languages taught as school subjects. All English medium schools (sometimes also Hindi medium schools) teach children whose MT is not English (or Hindi).

3. *Formal Multilingual Education with Multiple Languages as MI*
In these programmes usually two languages are used as MI either simultaneously or successively.

- 3a. *Simultaneous Dual Language MI Programmes:* In some Government sponsored schools (e.g. *Kendriya Vidyalaya* or Central Schools) two languages are used simultaneously as MI. In these schools, English is used as MI for mathematics, science and English subjects and Hindi for teaching social studies and Hindi. The *Kendriya Vidyalaya* programmes, however, do not take children's MT into consideration.
- 3b. *Successive Dual Language MI Programmes:* Up to a certain level of education these programmes use a majority language

MT as the MI and other languages are taught as school subjects (as in *2a* above). At a higher level of education, the students are taught in a second language MI. Sometimes primary and/or secondary level education are in MT medium with English and/or Hindi and other languages taught as subjects. At a higher level, that is, secondary education or university level, the students switch to English (or Hindi) as the MI.

- 3c. *Transitional Programmes for Language Minority Children:* These programmes begin with use of a minority MT (usually a tribal language) as MI in the initial year(s) of schooling along with oral communication in the regional language. Instructional time for the regional language is progressively increased while instructional time for the minority MT is reduced so that by the beginning of the fourth year of schooling, the child is ready for instruction in regional language MI only. Usually, the tribal languages do not have a writing system. In such cases, the script of the regional language is modified and adapted for the tribal language for the special transfer text and for early reading instruction. There are several variations of these programmes, called bilingual transfer models, being implemented on an experimental basis in several tribal areas.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The core of Indian multilingualism lies in the relationship among the different languages and the need to reconcile the interests of the minority and tribal languages, the regional and state level languages, and the languages of wider communication—Hindi and English. Multilingual education is central to language planning for a resourceful and equitable multilingualism. It seems the Indian educational system has not responded adequately to the challenges of its multilingual ethos. The existing educational programmes mentioned above hardly meet the criteria of multilingual education. The simultaneous dual language programmes, such as the *Kendriya Vidyalaya* or the Central Schools, use two languages for teaching of different school subjects and appear to be bilingual at the surface level only. As mentioned earlier, the students in these schools, regardless of their linguistic background, are forced to the two languages—English and Hindi—as instructional media. Further, use of English in teaching school subjects like Mathematics and Science reinforces the popular belief regarding English as the language of science and technology. The transitional programmes of bilingual transfer for tribal children discussed earlier offer weak

forms of bilingual education, which lead to soft assimilation, subtractive language learning and eventual loss of mother tongues (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984). In the context of Indian society, it is necessary to assess the extent to which the existing educational systems really support multilingualism. Unfortunately, the existing programmes do not support the weaker languages, nor do they promote a high level of multilingual proficiency. They are more focused on languages being used as subjects rather than as media of instruction. More significantly, even when two or more languages are used as media of instruction, the programmes clearly lack any systematic theoretical framework. Use of languages, in most cases, is incidental to the nature of the programmes and, as such, programme outcomes cannot be linked to bilingual or multilingual education.

On the whole, education in India is multilingual only in a surface form. The relationship between societal multilingualism and the communicative objectives of education has not been seriously attended to. The official three-language formula is not only erratic in its various applications but also has failed to address the basic issues of multilingual education. The prevailing policy formulations in India are not well informed by research and theory and, as a result, education has failed to respond coherently to the demands of societal multilingualism and sociopolitical and economic processes underlying use of languages in a multilingual society.

Two issues that are currently getting substantial attention from policy makers and actively debated in public spheres are the questions of medium of instruction and education for the minority linguistic groups. The debate over English is related to its status as a colonial language and its role in pushing other languages like Hindi and regional majority languages out of use. In view of the wider acceptance of English as a language of power and global economy and also, considering that English is also being recognized as an Indian language, it is difficult to refute its claim for a prominent place in Indian multilingualism and multilingual education. As Vaidehi Ramanathan (2005a) shows, Indian English is not only hybridized and nativized; it is also decolonized in many respects—in the way it is transacted, negotiated and transmitted both for English medium (EM) and Vernacular medium (VM) students. Thus, as the place of English is resisted and contested, there are also various processes through which its prominent role is being negotiated and accepted. What is, however, alarming is the manner in which English has played a subtractive or limiting role for other languages in Indian education. In a majority of the states in India, English is now taught as a second language in grade 1 in Government schools where the state majority language is used as the medium of

instruction. This is a result of the fact that English is seen as the language of access to power and dominance. Unfortunately, two basic principles of multilingual education are ignored in this process. The mother tongues are not allowed to develop sufficiently before introducing a second language like English which is quite likely to have a subtractive effect on the first language. Further, such early introduction of English without adequate development of the first language also does not lead to proficient development of English. The basic differences between private English-medium schools for the middle class and upper class children taught in English from grade 1 for the whole of the school day and teaching of English as a language subject from grade 1 to children who mostly come from the lower social strata are ignored. Thus, education in India has not been able to harness the place of English in a true multilingual education framework.

A second issue which is now being taken up with some concern, particularly with the objective of providing education for all, is education of the tribal and linguistic minority children. With the realization that the forced submersion of children of the linguistic minorities in majority language medium schools results in subtractive learning outcomes as well as high 'push out' and failure rates, there are now several efforts to introduce multilingual and multiliteracy education for tribal children. The Multilingual Education (MLE) programmes are now being tried or initiated as experimental programmes in several states with a high percentage of tribal language children such as Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and several states in the northeast regions of India. These MLE programmes seek to promote and develop the mother tongues for early literacy and classroom education and gradually introduce education in the regional majority language after 2–3 years of instruction in the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. While the goal is to develop oral language proficiency in the second language by grade 2, second language literacy instruction does not begin at least until grade 3. Even after the introduction of literacy instruction in the second language, students' mother tongue continues to be taught and used as the medium of instruction. Gradually, both languages come to be used as the languages of instruction and a third language is introduced by grade 5. Thus, the MLE programmes for the tribal children are designed to promote high levels of multilingual and multiliteracy skills in a strong form of multilingual education focused on mother tongue maintenance. These are, however, early phases of development of MLE programmes for tribal children, which are still in the experimental stage and, in the absence of systematic evaluation of these programmes, it is difficult to make any definite statement on their success. But through these efforts, the system of

education in India has shown positive indications of seriously launching theoretically sound multilingual education with the objective of promoting high levels of multilingual proficiency and multiliteracy skills. These new MLE initiatives, it is hoped, will lead to quality education for the linguistic minorities and, in the process, inform and improve the general system of education with the goal of multilingual education for ALL.

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