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Language policy and practice in education: negotiating the double divide in multilingual societies

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5.1. INTRODUCTION

Questions of maintenance of diversity—biological as well as cultural—are often met with gross ideological rhetoric in the modern world. In most cases, the state commitments are seldom translated into reality; the gaps between ideology, policies, plans and ground level implementation are quite appalling. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) shows how the state policies and actual practices in respect of languages lead to loss of linguistic diversity by denial of linguistic human rights in education and various forms of neglect of minority mother tongues. The world's linguistic diversity is threatened as never before; ninety per cent of the existing languages are predicted to disappear by the end of the current century. While maintenance of linguistic diversity depends on a host of complex factors, use of languages in education is seen as a powerful force in survival and development of languages (Fishman 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Thus, language policies and practices in education throughout the world need to be examined and assessed both for their immediate consequences for quality of education and their long term impact on maintenance or loss of linguistic diversity. The Ethiopian study of language in education issues (Heugh, Benson, Bogale and Gebre Yohannes 2007) is a positive example of such an exercise with significant implications and lessons far beyond the immediate context of Ethiopian education. This chapter seeks to examine aspects of the Indian language policy and practice in education in light of this insightful study of the role of languages in education in Ethiopia. In this comparative reflection, we focus on two broad themes: the language in education policy and the challenges for multilingual education (MLE). It is shown that multilingualism in India as well as other South Asian

countries is characterised by a hierarchical relationship among languages with some languages giving their speakers greater power and access to resources compared with other languages. At a macro level, this hierarchical multilingualism is broadly structured as a double divide—one between English, the elite language of power, and the major regional languages; and, the other, between the regional languages and the dominated languages of the indigenous and tribal¹ minorities. In the absence of a clear language policy in education, the complex processes of negotiating the linguistic double divide are reflected in the positioning of English, Hindi, regional majority languages and other indigenous/minority languages in education; and educational practices in respect of these languages in the multilingual hierarchy. The marginalisation and educational neglect of indigenous, tribal and minority (ITM) languages lead to educational failure, capability deprivation and poverty of the minority linguistic groups, particularly the tribal mother tongue speakers (Mohanty 2008a). Some recent attempts to deal with language disadvantage of tribal children in India, through experimental programmes of multilingual education are briefly analysed in view of the Ethiopian findings.

5.2. THE DOUBLE DIVIDE AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN EDUCATION

Multilingual societies are generally characterised by hierarchical power relationships among languages and their speakers. Some languages empower their speakers giving them privileged access to resources whereas others contribute to marginalisation and disadvantage for the community of their users. Large-scale social neglect and discrimination have led to impoverishment of languages and loss of linguistic diversity all over the world. Chances of survival and development of many languages are severely restricted due to their exclusion from significant domains of power, official recognition, legal and statutory use, trade, commerce and education. Such neglect and prolonged deprivation strip languages of their instrumental vitality and contribute to their cumulative weakness which is often used to justify further neglect that continues to make them weaker in a vicious circle of language disadvantage (Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy and Ramesh 2009: 278–291). Thus, in most of the multilingual societies, only a few are languages of power and privilege; the rest are marginalised and weakened in the hierarchical power relationship among languages. With English as the dominant language in post-colonial India, as in South Asia and other parts of the world, the linguistic hierarchy has created major power gaps in society which can be seen as a double divide between English and major languages and between major languages and the indigenous and tribal minority (ITM) languages.

In Pakistan, of the three official languages—English, Urdu and Sindhi—English is the language of power and Urdu is promoted as the language of nationalism and identity whereas nearly 72 other languages are struggling for a place in the hierarchy (Rahman 1998). Thus, there is a clear divide between English and Urdu (as well as other major languages including Sindhi and Punjabi), on one hand, and another

divide between the major languages and minor ones, on the other. Nepal has over 100 languages out of which Nepali is promoted as the major national language (Nurmela, Awasthi and Skutnabb-Kangas in this volume). Nevertheless, English is the language of the elite, popular aspirations and power. This has created a three-tiered hierarchy with English at the top, Nepali in the middle and other languages at the bottom. Bengali nationalism and rejection of Urdu dominance were major forces leading to the creation of Bangladesh as a separate nation with Bengali as the only official language. However, English is clearly the elite language with greater power compared to Bengali. There are over 39 other languages in Bangladesh, which remain neglected and marginalised (Mohanty 2007). In Bhutan, the major state language is Dzongkha, with English occupying a major and preferred place in the language-in-education policy of the country. In the current debate over the national educational framework of Bhutan, the primacy of English remains unquestioned and the dominant place of Dzongkha is assured whereas the role of nearly 29 other languages in education remains uncertain (Royal Education Council, Bhutan and iDiscovery Education 2009).

The linguistic double divide in South Asian countries shows two typically common characteristics: a. English is the major language of power, and b. one or few national level languages have a dominant status, symbolically supported as the language(s) of national identity. In India, Hindi and other official languages are viewed as major 'Indian' languages whereas English is the most sought after language of power. Rahman (1998) describes Urdu as the language of Pakistani nationalism and English as the real language of power. This is also true of Bangladesh, which replaced Urdu by Bengali as the symbol of national unity and identity. Thus, English is the most sought after language in South Asia but, oddly enough, it is never viewed as a language of national identity (Dasgupta 1993). In fact, in these South Asian countries, English has established itself as the most powerful language often benefiting from competing linguistic identities and assertions. The conflicts between Hindi and Tamil (as well as other Indian languages) in India, between Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, between Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi and major languages of other communities in Pakistan, and between Urdu and Bengali in Bangladesh have helped English to the position of power.

While English has dominated the major languages of national and regional communication in South Asia, the influence of these languages themselves have remained limited to their dominance over ITM languages. They have failed to counter the growing dominance of English partly because of conflicting interests and identities. For example, Hindi has not been able to rise to the status of a national link language in India because of resistance from other language communities. Thus, while the major languages in India have dominated over the ITM languages of their respective regions, pushing them out of significant domains of use and marginalising them, they themselves have remained in positions of lesser power

and privilege compared to English. In this process, there is a divide between English and major/dominant national languages, which Ramanathan (2005a) calls the English-Vernacular divide. The other linguistic divide is between the dominant national languages and the ITM languages and it is characterised as the Vernacular-Other divide (Mohanty in press). Mohanty (in press) has analysed the nature and implications of the double divide - the English-Vernacular Divide and the Vernacular-Other Divide—in Indian society.

Like India (and the other South Asian countries), Ethiopia can also be seen as having a double divide situation with a chasm between English, which is evidently the most sought after language, and Amharic and another between Amharic and the other mother tongues. In both countries, the dilemma of choice of language in education centres on the need to balance between English and the languages of national and regional identities. In both India and Ethiopia, there is a popular demand for English. The number of English medium private schools in India is rapidly increasing. Government-run schools teach English only as a language subject unlike Ethiopia where English is also used as a medium of instruction (MoI) with popular demand to bring English MoI to earlier grades. The popular demand in both the countries for English is related to its instrumental value in the globalising world and to what Heugh et al. (2007) call the ‘washback’ effect of promoting English in education. Higher and technical education in India (as also in Ethiopia) is almost exclusively in English as the MoI and this strengthens the popular view that competence in English is essential for educational success.

The dominant role of English and popular aspirations to acquire the language cannot be ignored and, at the same time, language policy and practice in education must accommodate the nationalistic and regional identities emotionally associated with mother tongues. In India, the regional languages as well as Hindi serve the need to assert nationalism for the majority and they take over the role of mother tongues in the conflict between indigenous and exogenous languages. Hence, as is evident from the various modifications to the Three Language Formula² (TLF) of the Government of India (see Mohanty 2008b, for discussion), the rhetoric of mother tongue in the policy debate is hijacked by the dominant regional languages and, in the process, the claims of the ITM languages are easily neglected without much concern. As Panda (2009: 121) notes, official languages of the states in India are treated as ‘default mother tongue of all children’ and ITM languages are often stigmatised as dialects. Lack of clarity in the distinction between regional language and mother tongue, as in the TLF, reinforces the Vernacular-Other language divide. It formalises the imposition of the regional or state languages, including Hindi and other major languages (such as Oriya, Telugu, Tamil, etc.) as the teaching language or MoI on minority and tribal language children, whose MT is not the regional language. The subsequent modifications of the TLF sought to address this anomaly, by suggesting the use of tribal languages as languages of early schooling

for tribal children. However, this provision in the TLF as well as other policy documents ‘mostly remained untranslated into practice’ (Mohanty 2006: 247) and ITM languages have remained neglected and marginalised, caught in the underside of the Vernacular-Other language divide. Thus, in both India and Ethiopia, the gaps between language policy and practice in education arise out of the compulsion to assert national and indigenous identities without sacrificing the aspirations for better English. The Ethiopian study belies this compulsion to prioritise competence in English as a major indicator of quality education. It is true that the broader objectives of education and classroom achievement are also taken as indicators of quality education but the acquired competence in English remains the major benchmark. This compulsion also guides how the linguistic double divide in India is negotiated; achievement in English in school, even in regional language medium government schools, is a major factor guiding policy. Recent policy decisions in most of the states in India show the national obsession to strengthen the presence of English in school practices. Some states like Andhra Pradesh have decided to start English medium sections in the government-run schools. The National Knowledge Commission of India (2009) has recommended that teaching of English needs to move down to the first year of schooling in all government schools in order to ‘democratise’ English. English is now taught in grade 1 in the government schools, at least as a second language, in a majority of the states in India. As in Ethiopia, practices in Indian states tend to bring English to earlier grades and, in some cases like the *Kendriya Vidyalaya* (Central School) system, English is used to teach ‘prestigious subjects’ like mathematics and science whereas Hindi or other languages are used to teach the ‘less prestigious’ subjects like history and social sciences. Hindi used to be the second language subject in most non-Hindi states in India. Now it has been replaced by English and it is relegated to the position of a third language subject in most states. The National Curricular Framework (NCERT 2005) recommends teaching through mother tongue but does not see any problem with early teaching of English. This is where the language policy and practice in education needs to be informed by the findings of the Ethiopian study to realise that quality teaching of English is not achieved at the cost of mother tongues; rather, strengthening of mother tongues must be viewed as a necessary condition for quality teaching of English.

The Vernacular-Other language divide impacts on Indian education by disadvantaging ITM language communities, pushing them into submersion education in the dominant languages and progressively invisibilising these languages in schools. School programmes deny children’s rights to use their mother tongues and have a clear subtractive effect on them. At the national level, while all of the 22 languages, listed in the Constitution of India as official languages, are used as languages of teaching or MoI and as school subjects, the use of other languages in schools has declined over the years (Mohanty 2008b). In 1970, the number of languages taught as subjects in schools was 81 and, by 1998, it declined to 41. In the primary grades (grades 1 to 5,), the actual number of languages used as MoI declined from 43 in

1990 to 33 in 1998. Thus, only 11 of the languages not listed as official languages of India are used as MoI in primary grades. Mother tongues get only rhetorical support in policy documents in India, including the Constitution of India (http://www.india.gov.in/govt/constitutions_of_india.php; see Mohanty 2006, 2008b for discussion). The Constitution of India (Article 350A) calls for ‘adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at primary stage of education to children belonging to minority groups.’ However, unlike Ethiopia, the Indian federal policy in respect of languages in education was never categorically stated and, as indicated earlier, the TLF remained just an unsure formula falling well short of a clear policy document. In fact, the TLF, initially intended to deal with the divergent language-in-education practices in different regions in India by suggesting a uniform pattern of three languages in school education, opened up many more issues than it solved. The built-in ambiguities in respect of mother tongues and regional languages and lack of a clear stand in respect of Hindi and English contributed to the chaos in the application of the formula across the states in India. Further, education is a concurrent topic in India, which means that the central and the state governments have joint jurisdiction over education. This has led to divergent state practices (and varying interpretations of federal recommendations such as the TLF), as in case of Ethiopia. The recent Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (<http://education.nic.in/Elementary/free%20and%20compulsory.pdf>) passed by the Indian Parliament provides for education for 6 to 14 year olds as a right but it fails to guarantee education in mother tongues; Article 29 (2) (f) of the Act says, ‘medium of instruction shall, *as far as practicable*, be in child’s mother tongue’ (emphasis added).³ This has led to a lot of protests from language rights activists in India. For example, Panda (2009: 122) states that ‘the right to education needs to be linked to the right to receive education in one’s preferred language.’

The increasing dominance of English in education in India and Ethiopia (and many other countries in the world) raises some issues in respect of language policy and practice in education, which continue to be in a flux, seeking to accommodate to divergent linguistic interests. The trilingual or multilingual policy in Ethiopia regulates the use of the mother tongue as medium of instruction, particularly at the primary level, learning of the national language Amharic as a subject, and transition to English as an international language at grade 9 (and also 7 and 5, in reality). It seems the distinction between teaching of a language as a school subject and using it as the medium of teaching is clearly maintained in the Ethiopian policy. The Indian policy formulations, such as the TLF, lack clarity in this respect. The Ethiopian policy is trilingual based on the mother tongue, Amharic and English except for Amharic mother tongue students for whom it is bilingual. The three-language formula in India, besides failing to differentiate between language as a school subject and as a medium of teaching, also resulted in anomalies in respect of the number of languages for students in school education. By suggesting teaching in tribal languages, the TLF virtually becomes a four-language formula for tribal children—tribal mother tongue,

major state language, English and Hindi. For the Hindi mother tongue students, learning of another Indian language was suggested but never implemented, reducing the TLF to a bilingual formula for these children. Turning back to the question of English in education, it remains a foreign language both in India and in Ethiopia; it is neither a mother tongue (except for a small community of Anglo-Indian speakers in India) nor a widely used second language for most people. In terms of language education policy, schools in Ethiopia are required to switch to English medium by grade 9, although in practice this occurs earlier in some regions. In India, the issue of English as an Indian language or a foreign language continues to be debated (Dasgupta 1993) mostly from urban upper and middle class perspectives. In reality, however, English has a very limited presence in rural and tribal areas, and culturally it is an alien language for most people in India. This makes the pedagogy of English a formidable challenge to which Indian responses are grossly inadequate.

Our analysis of classroom practices in teaching English in different parts of India (Mohanty, Panda and Pal 2010) shows that English medium schools for the upper and lower social class children espouse very different strategies to negotiate the English-Vernacular divide. Ramanathan (2005a, b) also observed that schools in India socialise students to divergent models of English literacy. Our study (Mohanty et al. in press) shows that pupils from the lower social strata are actually taught English in Hindi (or in other mother tongues).⁴ Further, the schools make various adjustments in choice of textbooks and evaluation procedures to accommodate to the ground reality that there is no home support for English for the children from the lower social strata. The situation in government schools in the tribal areas is even more difficult as teachers have a very low level of competence in English. For tribal mother tongue pupils, who may have some exposure to the regional major language (e.g. Oriya) but almost no exposure to English, it is twice removed from their reality. Mohanty et al. (in press) show that classroom teaching of English remains marginal in the tribal areas of Orissa, although English is prescribed in the curriculum for all schools in the state. This is a strategy seeking to negotiate the formidable double divide—the English-Vernacular (Oriya) and Vernacular (Oriya)-Tribal language divide. Thus, it is necessary to rethink English teaching practices in India, perhaps taking some cues from the Ethiopian practices and their evaluation. The analysis of the Ethiopian situation (Benson et al., this volume) does show how best this can be done through late-exit multilingual education. Problems and prospects of multilingual education in India will be discussed next in light of the Ethiopian findings.

5.3. MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

The language policy and practice in education in India have not responded to its multilingual ethos (Mohanty 2008b). Promotion of high levels of academic achievement is a major objective of education and, as Heugh et al. (2007) suggest, language policy and practice in education must support this objective while, at the same time, seeking to develop high levels of academic literacy and communicative

skills in languages, which pupils in a multilingual society need. As in the Ethiopian context, education of students in India must necessarily foster proficiency in languages of functional significance—MT, languages for regional and national level communication and an international language for wider communication. For the dominant language communities, this involves development of competence in two to three languages including English. Education of tribal mother tongue children, on the other hand, must target development of at least four languages—MT, a major regional language (such as Oriya or Telugu) and a national level language (Hindi) and English. School educational practices in India do involve multiple languages but they can be characterised only as nominal forms of multilingual education (Mohanty 2006, 2008b). Multilingual education (MLE) involves two or more languages of teaching or MoI in subjects other than the languages themselves (Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty 2008) and it seeks to develop high levels of multilingualism and multiliteracy (Mohanty et al. 2009). International research evidence and the Ethiopian study show that effective MLE starts with development of MT proficiency, through teaching in the MT as the medium of instruction for at least six to eight years of initial schooling and gradually develops proficiency and literacy skills in other languages used systematically as languages of teaching at some point in school education (Skutnabb-Kangas and Mohanty 2009).

In the absence of any clear policy of mother tongue and multilingual education in India, tribal mother tongue children are forced into submersion education in the major regional/official language of the state, which has a subtractive effect on their mother tongues (Mohanty 2006). As pointed out, neglect of tribal languages in education, the mismatch between home language and school language and the language barrier in schools perpetuate inequalities leading to capability deprivation and poverty (Mohanty 2008a). The language disadvantage of tribal children, facing the formidable double divide in dominant language schools, is a major factor in their school failure. This problem in tribal education in India led to various short-term attempts at mother tongue based education including some transitional programmes to facilitate smooth transition from mother tongue to school language (Mohanty 1989, 2006). Recently, some states with large tribal populations have launched mother tongue-based MLE for tribal children. Similar programmes of MT-based MLE were launched in Andhra Pradesh in the year 2004 in eight tribal languages and, two years later, in Orissa in ten tribal languages (see Mohanty et al. 2009, for details). The mother tongues of the tribal children, written in the script⁵ of the major state language, are used in these MLE programmes as languages of teaching and literacy instruction for three to five years of primary education. The state majority language (L2)—Telugu in Andhra Pradesh and Oriya in Orissa—is introduced as a language subject for development of oral communication skills in the second year and for reading and writing skills from the third year onwards. These programmes envisage use of L2 as a language of teaching (along with L1) from the fourth year of primary schools, with L1 (MT) continuing as a language subject. The teachers in

the MLE programme are from the tribal language community and speak the tribal mother tongue (L1) and the state majority language (L2). The MLE programmes follow the common school curriculum of the state but make efforts to integrate the indigenous cultural knowledge systems in developing the textbooks and curricular materials. An intervention programme in Orissa, called *MLE Plus* (MLE+), uses cultural pedagogy emphasising culture-and community-based approaches to MLE to foster collaborative classroom learning and cultural identity (Panda and Mohanty 2009). The MLE+ programme is implemented as special intervention in eight of the government MLE schools in Saora and Kui tribal languages.

The MLE and MLE+ programmes in India have been evaluated, and they show positive effects on children's classroom achievement, school attendance and participation, parental and community attitudes and involvement (see Mohanty et al. 2009; Panda and Mohanty 2009). A National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium (NMRC) has also been set up in India (see NMRC website www.nmrc-jnu.org for details) to facilitate and augment MLE activities and to take up formative evaluation of the programmes. The reports of NMRC on the MLE programmes in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa (Manoharan and Nag 2009; Nag and Manoharan 2009) point to some problems in transition from L1 (mother tongue) to L2 (state language) and in the introduction of English and Hindi in the existing programmes. The NMRC reports on the MLE programmes in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh raise some questions about the early-exit nature of MLE in India. It may be noted that the children in the MLE schools are scheduled to join the regular majority language (Telugu/Oriya) medium school programmes in the states from the sixth year of schooling onwards. Thus, the initial experimental programmes of MLE in India can be seen as early-exit programmes in which MT is used as a language of teaching for three to four years and as a language subject up to the fifth year of primary level education. It is evident from the various evaluations of these programmes that they provide better quality education for tribal children, compared to the common programmes of submersion education. However, the Ethiopian findings suggest that early transition from MT to L2 and English may be somewhat better than the forced submersion in a second language, but late-exit programmes of MLE, which use MT as a language of teaching for six to eight years, are more effective than the early-exit programmes. Thus, the Ethiopian report has far-reaching implications for MLE programmes in India and it calls for reappraisal of their transition plans. It also shows that the burden of the linguistic double divide remains a potential problem for MLE programmes in India, which are under pressure to accommodate the major state language, English and Hindi within the primary level programme of education. Negotiating the Vernacular-Other language (MT) divide and English-Vernacular divide is a formidable challenge for MLE in India. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian findings show that it can be done effectively. The MLE programmes in India are experimental programmes implemented in about 500 schools in the two states. While both states have plans to extend the programme to several new schools

and to other tribal languages in their attempts at better education for tribal children, there seems to be no change in the state policy in this respect nor in the long term plans, which are conspicuous by their absence. Ethiopia's language-in-education policy shows the way, and the study by Heugh et al. (2007) has recommendations for a road map for effective MLE programmes under very difficult and challenging conditions. The Ethiopian findings carry some hope for a better future of the MLE programmes in India and elsewhere in the world.

NOTES

1. Indigenous or aboriginal communities in India are officially called 'tribes' (ādivāsi) and are listed as 'scheduled tribes' which are identified on the basis of 'distinct culture and language', 'geographical isolation', 'primitive traits', 'economic backwardness', and 'limited contact with the out groups' and also, sometimes, on political considerations. The Anthropological Survey of India, in its People of India project, has identified 635 tribal communities of which 573 are so far officially notified as Scheduled Tribes. Here the term 'tribe' (rather than 'Indigenous peoples') is used specifically in the Indian context in its formal/official and neutral sense.
2. In 1957, the government of India proclaimed the Three Language Formula (TLF) as a framework for languages in education. Initially it recommended use of three languages in school level education: 1. Regional language or mother tongue as the language of teaching, 2. Hindi or an Indian language (for Hindi mother tongue children), and 3) English as a third language. Subsequently, the TLF was severally modified by the government of India and variously interpreted by the state governments.
3. See Giridhar Rao's blog 'MTM education in RtE Bill' at <http://bolii.blogspot.com/2009/01/mtm-education-in-rte-bill.html>; see also 'Education Bill-three critiques' by Anil Sadgopal at <http://bolii.blogspot.com/2009/01/education-bill-three-critiques-by-anil.html>.
4. It should be noted that use of students' L1 to promote L2 proficiency can be an effective strategy and it facilitates cross-linguistic transfer in respect of conceptual, pragmatic, metacognitive and metalinguistic understanding (Cummins 2007). Systematic and skillful application of bilingual or multilingual instructional strategies for teaching of L2 is supported by research evidence. However, in schools in India, teaching English in Hindi or students' L1 is neither systematic nor purposeful; it is rather used to compensate for lack of support for the English language in that particular milieu and also for the poor proficiency among the teachers and students in the language.
5. Tribal languages in India do not have any exclusive writing system; they are usually written in the script of either the dominant regional language or another major language. However, in recent years, some tribal languages, such as Santali, have developed their own writing system.

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