

Research Article

Language and Exclusion: Some Observations

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how language planning and language education policy can cause social exclusion in a multilingual country and discusses this matter in the Indian context. In a multilingual country, a hierarchy among languages inevitably gets formed, the basis of which is the nature of language use. Language planning and language education relate to it. The paper shows how through language education the problem of exclusion has been addressed in post-independence India. It focuses on the problem of regional language / mother tongue teaching, brings out certain problems in this regard which do not seem to have received attention and suggests ways of dealing with the same so as to empower the excluded. The paper attempts to show that in a multilingual country like ours any language policy would lead to social exclusion. Perhaps the most important affirmative action that a welfare state like ours can take in order to deal with this problem would constitute proper education (which has to mean “quality” education) of which learning languages is a vital part – after all, it is through language that education is imparted. The paper is organized in three parts. The first deals with the language policy of the Central and the State governments, the second with the policy regarding language in the school curriculum and the third discusses mainly some issues of implementation of these policies and the problems that have arisen at this stage and pays special attention to mother tongue education.

Keywords: Exclusion, Language Policy, Language Education

I

In the Indian context, the narrative of language policy formulation and its implementation can be viewed as a narrative of exclusion. For the first twenty

years, post-Independence, the focus of language planning in multilingual India was mainly on the following: (a) to identify languages for use in administration, which would receive state support for their modernization and (b) to select languages to be used in education. Hindi was chosen by the political leadership at the national level as the official language of the union and the states were to choose their respective official languages. English would continue to be used as an additional official language for fifteen years to make transition to Hindi smooth. In the early years after independence, English was viewed by the political leadership, especially of the Northern states, as the colonizer's language, to be shunned after independence. Besides, since only a very small percentage of people knew English, it just couldn't be used as the language of governance in the country since a staggeringly vast majority of the population would be excluded. On the other hand, Hindi was viewed in the non-Hindi speaking states, especially in the Southern states as the language of the North Indians and when Hindi became the official language of the country, there was the apprehension that it would become the instrument of North Indian hegemony. English was viewed by the non-Hindi speaking states as the solution to the problem because being a foreign language it would not be advantageous to everyone. It would of course mean hegemony of the English knowing elite, but that was considered more tolerable because they did not belong to any particular region but were distributed all over the country. As the time for Hindi becoming the sole official language of the Union was approaching, there were violent protest in Tamil Nadu against Hindi or putting it in a different language, against the Centre's hidden agenda, in their perception, of imposing Hindi on the non-Hindi states. The government of Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri assuaged the fear of exclusion on the part of the non-Hindi states by assuring them that English would continue to be used as an official language of the Union as long as they wanted. Soon the government of Shrimati Indira Gandhi solved this matter by making both Hindi and English the official languages of the Union through a constitutional amendment.

English became virtually the sole link language of the microscopic Indian elite in the nineteenth century, not merely the language of governance and of western education that was viewed as empowering. As a consequence, a disturbingly vast majority of the people of India stood excluded. Now, post-independence, when Hindi was chosen to function as the link language of the country as early as possible, a significantly sizable chunk of the people of India were rendered excluded. This excluded population constituted not just the people belonging to the non-Hindi speaking states but those who spoke the so-called major varieties of Hindi as well, which had a much richer literary tradition than Hindi. When the Indian Constitution created the Eighth Schedule and included fourteen languages in it, which would receive state support for their development and modernization, the large majority of the people speaking languages other than these got excluded from the benefits that speakers of these language would enjoy.

As for the official language of a state, the language of the majority in that state was accorded that status - for instance, Odia in Odisha, Bengali in West Bengal, Hindi in UP, etc. Some states have additional official languages. This provision is intended to reflect the concerned state's recognition of the aspiration for inclusion of the linguistic minorities belonging to that state. In Bihar, Urdu is the second official language. West Bengal has six secondary official languages, including Odia, Hindi and Nepali. There have been language movements in some states for official recognition of some languages in the form of inclusion in the Eighth schedule of the Constitution of India. It can be said that these language movements had their genesis in their speakers' feeling of being neglected and excluded. Consider the case of Kosali. For those who do not speak Kosali, it is Sambalpuri Odia, the variety of Odia spoken in western Odisha. For the speakers of Kosali, it is a language mutually intelligible with Odia but is different from it. For them Kosali is the marker of their linguistic identity. In 2014, responding to the demand of the Kosali speakers, the government of Odisha recommended to the Central government that Kosali be included in the 8th Schedule. This recommendation amounts to an official recognition of Kosali's status as a language by the state of Odisha. In sum, language movement in the states has sometimes been about inclusion of given language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and has often been about the recognition of a dialect as a language. These can be viewed as the voices of the excluded for inclusion.

Odia was declared as the official language of Odisha by the government of Odisha ("Orissa", as spelt those days) in 1954 but this decision was weakly implemented. English continued to be the main official language for all practical purposes. During the last three years, Odia language activists have tried to put pressure on the government to make Odia the sole official language of Odisha. On August 15, 2016, the state government made Odia the official language of the state through a fresh legislation but many Odia language activists are unhappy because there is no provision in it to punish those who fail to use Odia for the necessary purposes. The government has not agreed to the demand for a penal provision.

Now suppose the government accepts this demand. The Kosali speakers would justifiably feel excluded, and sooner or later will demand that Kosali be made the state language of Odisha alongside Odia. Since the government has tacitly recognized that Kosali is a separate language and not a variety of Odia, it will not have much justification to ignore the claim of Kosali to be another official language of Odisha. This should be unproblematic, but the speakers of the Adivasi - tribal - languages would stay excluded. The choice of official language, be it at the level of the Centre or the states is thus about the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion.

II

Now, one obvious affirmative action that the government can take to deal with this problem of language-based exclusion at various levels is to design and implement a well-thought-out policy of language education and this the Union government in consultation with the state governments did. In 1968, within the framework of a mother language medium educational system, it announced a language policy known as the “three-language formula”, which is essentially the following: Hindi, English and a regional language must form part of the school curriculum. Since Hindi and English were chosen to be the official languages of the Union government and English, in addition, was the language of communication at the international level, despite the entirely expected anti-English rhetoric of the early post-independence years, these two languages had to be part of the curriculum. At least to accommodate the justified expectations of the non-Hindi speaking states, the regional languages of the states, many of which had a much richer literary tradition than Hindi, had become part of the curriculum. Besides, because of the wide acceptability of the idea that education is best imparted in the mother tongue, especially in the early stages, inclusion of the regional language of the state in the curriculum became inevitable. For the Hindi-speaking states, the regional language would be a South Indian language. It would not be incorrect to say that this formula has been generally accepted in principle and at the same time it would be equally correct to claim that it has been rejected in practice. The Hindi-speaking states would not learn a South Indian language because it was redundant. Since everyone was learning Hindi in the country, as per the provisions in the three-language formula, one could manage with Hindi anywhere. For this reason, learning it amounted to taking time off from some useful content subject. And Tamil Nadu would not have a three-language formula when the Hindi speaking states had reduced it to a two-language formula; there must be no asymmetry with regard to language load. Why need Hindi since everyone was studying English as part of the three-language formula anyway, and if English was good enough for communication at the international level, then it would not be inadequate at the national level too. Logic, thus, was on both sides. The three-language formula was modified later but not in essential respects. The disappointment with this policy remains.

For reasons too well known to recount here, resistance to Hindi has weakened considerably in the non-Hindi speaking states and it is emerging as a link language in the country. As for English, going by the findings of the last Census, it has more users (as first, second, third language) today than many modern Indian languages, which shows that it is becoming the link language of the educated in the country and not just of the economically or educationally upper class population. Already one of the official languages in Kerala, Goa, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and West Bengal, it is waiting for consideration for inclusion

in the 8th Schedule. At the same time, there is the perception that English and to some extent Hindi pose threat to even our major languages in different degrees. The latter are not endangered on their account, but since the domain of their use does not increase, there is justifiable apprehension that they may eventually be reduced to limited use languages. There is a feeling among some Odia language activists in Odisha, for instance, that the threat from English is real and that it is a strong hindrance for the growth of the language. Occasionally it has got translated into an anti-English attitude in this state.

In the Indian context, English is, and has been for years, the language of opportunity. So even during the early years after independence, when hostility towards English was strongly articulated in the public, many affluent parents would send their children to schools where they could learn the language well. English medium schools have proliferated during the last thirty years or so because the poor and the traditionally marginalized have realized that if their children would have a better life than theirs, they must know English well. This can be viewed as their attempt to fight inequality and exclusion. Denying them this would amount to an attempt to perpetuate their exclusion.

At the same time providing them the opportunity they want in a rather perfunctory manner can be worse than not providing it to them at all. As of now, most of the English-medium schools are privately funded. Because of the demand and of the cost involved, English-medium schools is a lucrative business. There is no public or private body that reviews or monitors their work. What is worrying is that in many of these schools, especially those in the semi-urban areas (by and large, there aren't English medium schools in the rural areas) the pupils do not get proper exposure to English and the language is taught poorly by teachers who are untrained and whose own proficiency in English is questionable. The low-income people spend their hard-earned savings in sending their children to these schools hoping that they learn English well and live a better life than theirs. The challenge before the government and in fact, the society is to make available proper facilities to everyone for the learning of English. The government of Odisha has taken an affirmative step in this direction by opening a hundred English medium- "*Adarsha Vidyalayas*" (model schools) in the rural areas of the state which would provide quality education to those who belong to the low-income group. The government has been criticized for this by the Odia language activists; according to them, this would be detrimental to the cause of Odia language. They would have supported the government, they said, had it opened quality Odia-medium schools instead. Their concern may be legitimate, but what the marginalized people want for their betterment in terms of quality of life cannot be set aside by a welfare state when their demand is part of their effort to fight their exclusion.

III

We now turn to the implementation of the language policies and begin with mother tongue education. As things stand today, it is in reality education in the regional language – the standard variety of the regional language, sometimes, of the main official language of the concerned state. This actually excludes the majority of the population of the state and most of them, as expected, are poor and vulnerable. A tribal child and even a child who speaks a non-standard dialect of the regional language concerned, the former in particular, feels handicapped at school where he is taught, not in his mother tongue, but in the main language of the state. It is well known that he often ends up as a school discard for reasons of language, not cognitive ability. For him, the three-language formula becomes in effect the four-language formula. But this is not the end of the story. For an Odia speaker studying in an Odia medium school, the transition from Odia to a second/foreign language takes place quite late, roughly speaking – to English, at the college level, where the language of instruction is generally English. In contrast, the tribal child undergoes this experience twice: for the first time – very early, which can be distressing – at school (to the regional language) and then at college (to English). The first transition happens because the language of instruction at his school is Odia, not his mother tongue. He is thus seriously handicapped from the very start. Denial of opportunity to the poor and the disadvantaged is perpetuated if mother tongue education is implemented in such a situation without a thought for those whose mother tongue is not the main language of the state and therefore is not the medium of instruction at school.

Consider the case of the children of the unskilled workers in the unorganized sector. There is a considerable number of such workers from Odisha, Assam and Bengal, for instance, in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Delhi, etc. where their children have no opportunity to be educated in their mother tongue. The case of the children of the minority language speakers in different states is not substantially different. There are the children of the speakers of minority languages who do not get the opportunity to receive even primary school education in their mother language, even when their language is assigned the status of an official language of that state. For instance, Odia-speaking people constitute a linguistic minority in the neighboring states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, but there are hardly Odia medium schools there.

Incidentally this situation is often the cause of language endangerment. Speakers of such languages and dialects often choose to shift to the main official language of the state for reasons of inclusion. The shift might take place over a few generations, but eventually it happens and during the intervening period the languages and dialects concerned remain restricted to the home domain. Incidentally, the government of India is concerned with this problem of language

endangerment, but the plan of action for a language already dead or close to death should be in terms of its documentation rather than its revitalization. A dead language cannot be revitalized in any meaningful sense unless it emerges as a language of knowledge and opportunity. It is extremely unrealistic to think that such languages would somehow emerge that way. Therefore, the best to do is not to allow the shift to take place. This can, hopefully, happen if they are used as language of instruction at the primary school level as early as possible.

One might think that the official language policies and language education policy in post-independence India have added new language-divides such as the Hindi-divide and the regional language-divide to the existing one from the pre-independence days, namely, the English-divide. As we have suggested here, each of these divides have given rise to social exclusion and together they have led to the exclusion of the tribal language speakers. Having said this, we wish to suggest that this was not due to some unscrupulous policy makers' hidden agendas. Unfortunately, the formation of a language hierarchy cannot be successfully resisted in a country like India, where around two hundred languages and many dialects of these languages are spoken and where there are languages spoken which have less than ten thousand speakers each. This hierarchy is based on the communicative range of a language; the wider the range, the greater are the chances for it to be the language of opportunity.

Two hundred languages cannot be the official languages of a country in order to not exclude the speech community of any language. A dozen or more languages cannot be the official languages of a state in order not to exclude any group of speakers: linguistic minorities, dialect speakers, etc. Not all these languages are equally developed at a given point of time – say, post-independence in India, in the context of the present discussion. A language cannot obviously be the language of instruction if it has no script; neither can a language which is not developed enough to perform a wide range of communication functions or a language with only a relatively small number of speakers. So, exclusion is unavoidable in this situation.

Suppose instead of Hindi and English, any two of the remaining languages had been chosen as the official languages of the Union, and instead of the language of the majority some other language been chosen as the official language of a state. To set aside every other consideration, would it have solved the problem of exclusion? Obviously not, it would only have substituted the population X by the population Y; instead of those excluded, some others would have been excluded. Would it have been a feasible plan of action to invest on the modernization of every language spoken in India? Surely not, an answer that would justify the making of a list of languages on whose growth and modernization to invest – that is, the Eighth Schedule. Whether language A should have been in the list rather than language B one could argue about. But that's a different matter; it doesn't

address the problem of exclusion. Language education is a good solution to the problem of language-related exclusion. To be maximally effective, the language education programme must be properly thought-out and implementable. However, its implementation need not be restricted to only the formal education system. The possibilities of the non-formal educational sector must be explored.

In the context of language education, one would wonder if the best solution to the problem of learning English well is for a child to go to an English medium school. Arguably, the English medium schools have had a mushroom growth in our country on account of this assumption that it indeed is. The parents make too much investment in terms of money and their child's time, if their main goal in sending the child to the English medium school is to learn English. What has complicated the situation considerably is that by and large the regional language medium schools have failed to impart quality education; this is much more serious than the fact that they have not taught languages, including English, well. Under the circumstances parents have tended to think of English medium schools as a good alternative to the regional language medium schools. Now, consider that if an Odia speaker wants to learn Telugu or Tamil, he does not enroll himself or herself in a Telugu or a Tamil medium school as the case may be. He would look for a good Telugu or Tamil language teaching centre. In principle, the same approach can fruitfully apply to English. Intensive short term English language courses can supplement the teaching of English at a good regional language medium school. It would be cost effective in terms of time and money and on this account, would be really useful to the excluded population. A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

To return to the case of the children of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers who work outside their state. It may be rather unrealistic to expect the formal education system of the host state to provide education to them in their own language. Affirmative action in this case may mean taking steps to ensure that the children of the floating population are able to attain at least functional literacy in their own language. This important and empowering effort would need imaginative collaboration among the relevant states, the NGOs and the corporate sector. The matter cannot simply be left to the parents alone.

As for education in the mother tongue, this has been probably the messiest matter in language education. Mother tongue medium education has in effect become the regional language medium education, resulting in the creation of the illusion that the desirable goal of mother tongue education has been achieved. But the truth is different; the two are not the same. The real challenge is to ensure that the mother tongue education is available to all children.

For this to happen, one of the first steps to take is design a script for a language which has no script. There are tribal languages which are written in more than

one script – Santali is a case in point - because the language users live in two or more states and for their language they use the script of the main language of the state where they live. There is no issue if the same script is used by more than one language, but there clearly is, if the same language uses more than one script because the language users of one state would have no direct access to the writing in their own language in another state. For that they have to learn another script. The best solution may be for each language to have its script, which need not however be specific to it. And the best writing system for a language that has none is the one in which the correspondence between sound and spelling is close. There would ordinarily be no problem of acceptance of a script by the users of such a language because they would have no emotional connect with any particular script. Script seems to be a manageable issue in this case. Many pedagogists and language activists in India have demanded education in the mother tongue but unless the facility of mother tongue education is provided to all, it will empower some but marginalize many, among whom would be the very poor and the very marginalized.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that some tribal thinkers are of the opinion that the interests of the tribal children would be best served if they get the opportunity to study in good English language medium schools right from the beginning. They do not see much point in their children having their early schooling in the regional language of the state which is not their mother tongue. They point out that the tribal child does not get the benefits of mother language education. Even when he does have the opportunity to do his primary level schooling in his mother language – that is, he speaks, say, Santali, a language which has a script and has texts written in it – he has to learn four languages instead of three because he can hardly afford to dispense with the regional language if by choice or by situational compulsion he decides to find a future for himself in the relevant state. He has thus to bear an unequal language load vis-a vis the children whose mother tongue is the regional language. An additional language may or may not be a load from the point of view of language learning at an early age, but it is undoubtedly one when one takes into consideration the fact that the time given to the additional language is time taken from mathematics, computer, social studies and games. The minimum that the state must do is ensure that mother language education up to a certain level is made available to every child. We should like to conclude by stressing that this would at least encourage the most excluded to think that the state is sincerely concerned about their fight against their exclusion.

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