

Interview with Professor Ramakant Agnihotri

Language, Exclusion, and Multilinguality: A Dialogue with Professor Ramakant Agnihotri on Marginalization and Policy Impairment in School Education in India

Rajesh Kumar

Rajesh Kumar is an Associate Professor and teaches linguistics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai. He graduated with the PhD in linguistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. He has taught in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin in the USA and IIT Kanpur, IIT Patna, Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai in India. His book on Syntax of Negation and Licensing of Negative Polarity Items was published by Routledge in their prestigious series Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics.

Email: thisisraj कुमार@gmail.com

Rama Kant Agnihotri defines and conceptualises language as multilinguality. He advocates that it is constitutive of being human and is a potential site for negotiating conflict and exploring paths of harmony in education. In various domains of activity, most people would rather see ‘a language’ as a homogeneous, pure and standard pairing of a lexicon and syntax. However Agnihotri substantiates with evidence and shows throughout his writings that human linguistic behaviour is marked by fluidity rather than rigid compartmentalisation. More and more scholars working on the interface between language, education and social justice have started looking at the fluid nature of language. Influenced by his work, several proposals have also been made for pedagogies rooted in multilinguality. He has immensely contributed to the discourse of conceptualising ‘language’ and ‘multilingualism’ in alternative ways. He believes this alternative conceptualisation can become a resource in education. Rama Kant Agnihotri is working as an emeritus professor at the educational resource centre at Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He retired from the University of Delhi where he taught linguistics for more than three decades.

RK: Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon. It has deep impact on both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. How do we understand the idea of exclusion in society?

RKA: Exclusion needs to be understood in a socio-historical and political perspective. The first step members of the elite and the powerful take, howsoever unwittingly, is to define what they would call the 'normal'. Let's assume the 'normal' is defined in terms of a person who is 'well-built, strong and having enough money to afford a kind of life style that a middle or lower middle class person can', you immediately notice that how many social groups are instantly excluded from the societal horizon. And this is convenient. Those who live on the margins of society, persons with any kind of disability, old people and in many cases even children and women get excluded. Historically, we have been consistently doing it across centuries, excluding more and more groups from the 'normal' society. Persons with disability have no access either to places or sources of knowledge. Nor can they reach any place that would assure them of any help. This is so because we conceptualize our universe minus persons with disability. Women are often denied access to education or places of worship. For the mentally challenged and the 'deranged' and old, our 'kindness' results in the establishment of old age homes, mental asylums and sanatoria of all kinds. We do need to re-examine our philosophical and conceptual positions as to what a society should look like.

RK: What factors play role if any in exclusion through education?

RKA: As I said above, one of the most potent ways of excluding people from the social ambit is to deny them access to education. For a long time, even a university as progressive as the Oxford University, UK, denied access to women. Even today women in many places are paid much less than men for the same kind of work. The recent struggles of women to gain access to places of worship are well-known and are still going on. This is shocking. Even when you take the most progressive step of assuring equal access to all in the domain of education, you do not ensure that the infrastructure is compatible with the needs of the hearing, visually or orthopedically impaired. Do we provide a Signer in all classrooms? The usual argument given is that since we do not have any hearing impaired child in the school/ class, why should we think about a Signer? What we don't understand is that we do not have hearing impaired children in the school because schools have no facilities for them. People also believe that they can be taken care of with a set of gestures without realizing that Sign Language is as systematic and rich a system of communication and construction of knowledge as say French, English or Hindi. Similarly, books in Braille are always finite and few computers will have programmes like Jaws. No architect thinks that all paths and toilets should be disabled friendly. Dalits, tribal children, women, persons with disability along with other marginalized sections of society are in no way a part of our

philosophical underpinnings, curriculum design, materials or classroom transaction in our education system.

RK: How does linguistic exclusion in our school system become an impediment in the processes of learning?

RKA: As I have said at so many places language conceptualized as multilinguality is constitutive of our being. Way back in 1953, UNESCO recommended that all our education should be conducted through our vernaculars because it is through them that we acquire all concepts with maximal clarity and are able to apply them in all possible situations. But our education system leaves no spaces for the voices of the marginalized we talked about above. It is now eminently possible to adopt pedagogical practices where every child will have a voice. We do need to recognize that children come to school with an enormous amount of linguistic and knowledge potential. If this potential is recognized and the multilingual resources available in the classroom adequately resourced, there is no reason to believe that all children will start getting interested in education and our push-out rates will not be so high. Contemporary research has shown that there is strong positive correlation between multilingualism on the one hand and cognitive growth, scholastic achievement and social tolerance on the other.

RK: How do you see language being instrumental in supporting the act of Exclusion in education?

RKA: As sections of human society are isolated and excluded from the so-called 'mainstream', their languages are also excluded as 'non-standard, dialect, pidgin, creole, rural etc.' Their languages are, in fact, as rule-governed and elegantly organized as any other human language. Since their speech is stigmatised, their voices do not find any space in our educational processes. We don't even try to examine that what we dismiss as dialects may often have literary and cultural traditions far richer than what are celebrated as 'standard languages'. Linguistic exclusion is really disastrous as along with the language it also negates all the knowledge systems that may be encoded in that variety/ language.

RK: How do we conceptualize the idea of inclusive education?

RKA: As I said above, we need to reconceptualise education in terms of the social groups which are constantly being pushed even beyond the horizons of margins. As Dr Tanmoy Bhattacharya says, our education system must travel beyond the 'normate'. He shows how in the case of education for the marginalised groups, 'normativity' conspires to create a bias in the mind of the learner. Inclusive education should not be located in the ideas of pity, sympathy, reform or medical help but in a complete restructuring of our education system and the social space.

RK: Do you find any gap in our existing language policy in education vis-à-vis dominant practices across the country?

RKA: As Prof. Pattanayak has often reminded us, we don't really have any language policy. What we have is just a formula, a Three Language Formula, arrived at through a forced consensus of politicians, bureaucrats and some educationists. Even that formula is followed largely in its violation as you know. The basic idea was **not** that education should have spaces for the voices of the marginalised but to maintain national peace and harmony by trying to satisfy all political players. So the plan was that all South Indians would learn a North Indian language and all North Indians would learn a South Indian language in addition to learning their own regional language and English (obviously assuming that the North-East or the West or the Tribal belt had no significance). What happened at the end of the day is that though many South Indians learnt Hindi (they would admit it only to get a job), it was rarely if ever, recognised in many parts of the South. North Indians were cleverer; they paid a lip-service to Sanskrit. In any case, why should any child learn a language in which she has no interest (and is never taught properly) or which may not assure her of some benefit.

RK: How can we utilize our rich multilingual linguistic resources in achieving larger objectives in our education system?

RKA: As I said above, language seen as multilingualism (no choice there really) is constitutive of being human and must inform all our educational planning and implementation. Languages available in the classroom can easily be used as resources for introducing children to methods of scientific enquiry. Systematic data can be collected from children and they engage in collaborative efforts in groups to analyze the data to arrive at reliable rules and reasonable hypotheses which can then be verified on further data. Teacher in this case is as much of a learner as the students themselves. It is as I have shown at several places an empowering process. It provides an agency to the learners, a kind of agency that our education system has never experienced before. The spell of the Three Language Formula is such that in spite of several suggestions to the contrary, seen even in NCF 2005, it looks imperative to restate and embrace it as done in NCF 2005 also. We look for easy solutions. Acceptance and implementation of multilinguality would inevitably involve inclusive education and that, to those in power, is a frightening prospect.

RK: What interventions you foresee in making an inclusive education framework in Indian context?

RKA: There have been some marginal interventions as you know. However, I think the moment is now ripe in the sense that more and more people are talking of inclusion and multilingualism. Young people need to come forward and accept what seems rational to them rather replicating complacently what is being already done. That takes a lot of courage. It takes courage to tell teachers and children that the standard rule that 'the plural in English is made by adding 's' or 'es' is patently wrong. Making plural is a matter of sounds and not of spellings unless

you actually believe that the rural 'illiterate' cannot make plurals. You will make education inclusive if you have the courage to challenge the 'normate'; you will make education multilingual if you have the courage and understanding to challenge the 'standard'.

RK: English is undoubtedly one of the dominant languages in India. What role does it play in education with respect to exclusion?

RKA: I have as you know always had serious problems with this 'undoubtedly' claim about English. How many people use English in India or for that matter in the whole world? Other than your academic life what else even you people conduct in English? How much of English informs rural India or our religious, cultural or entertainment world. Yes, it is indeed an important language of social mobility. But the way we have gone about handling this issue has only resulted in excluding more and more people on the margins of society from the social mobility avenues. Most states in India have now introduced English from Class 1. But there are no teachers of English. There is of course no English in the home or social environment. All this only leads to frustration. We must first ensure high levels of proficiency in the languages of children. We may start English simultaneously but not without adequate teachers and materials. High level cognitive abilities in language tend to get transferred from the first languages of children to other languages learnt later.

RK: English in India is the only medium for classroom transactions in higher education. However, it is not the language of education in elementary and secondary schools in large part of the country. This causes several issues in transition. At the same time language, the way people speak in general and language of the underprivileged in particular has never been norm in education. What are the solutions?

RKA: Once again I think you have got your facts wrong. Are you saying that in Kerala or Tamil Nadu or West Bengal no higher education is available in Malayalam, Tamil or Bangla? Investigate this and you will find several students writing their doctoral dissertations in these languages. And why not? Also, as I said above, English is now increasingly a part of the school curriculum. You are right in that students coming from rural areas with insufficient proficiency in English face problems in elite universities. I think it should be the business of the universities to arrange for programmes that would enhance proficiency levels in English. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that multilingualism cannot also find a space in higher education. Why can't teachers use the multilingualism available in the classroom for the benefit of those who may not understand certain complex conceptual issues in English at the first instance?