

VANISHING DIVERSITIES AND SUBMERGING IDENTITIES AN INDIAN CASE

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Independent India can boast of ever expanding diversity – cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic and now political. The issue to be thought of is how we have survived as a nation with such heterogeneous elements. Paradoxically, the answer lies in this very heterogeneity and diversity. These two factors have been the essence of sustenance – as time and again it has been proved that any coercive method of homogenization under the popular banner of “national integration” or “assimilation of cultures” have given rise to agitation and revolt. Our existence and survival has not been in accordance with the ‘one nation-state’ theory but has been engraved in diversity and multiplicity.

India represents five distinct language families [map1] and 1652 languages (1961), spoken by more than one billion of population. When India gained independence our Constitution maker and planners had a tough challenge to meet, i.e. how to devise a communicative network in India which threads together the large Indian population. Our planners were not only aware of the existence of the multiplicity of languages in this subcontinent but also of the omnipresent multi-lingualism of Indian population. Yet when they sat down to meet this challenge in 1956 they gave us two magic wands. One was the constitution of the Eighth Schedule [ES] and second was the reorganization of Indian states on the basis of dominant regional languages. Map 2

The makers of our Constitution, in their wisdom, devoted four chapters under part XVII of this document (articles 343 to 351) to spell out the official language at the level of the Union (i.e. the Central Government and the national polity as a whole), the level of the states and at the level of the judiciary. The original ES contained 14 languages but today it includes as many as 22. [Table1and 2] The inclusion, or for that matter, exclusion from the ES is not based on any ideology. The ES was not based on

the ideology of fundamental rights or on the principle of equality of opportunity. Nor was it based on the ideology of national integration or invasive assimilation.

The Reductionist Policy: The Genesis of ‘Minor Languages’

The policy of listing a select few languages as scheduled and embracing a large number of languages under the umbrella of one of the Scheduled languages created an arbitrary cleavage between major and minor languages. The reductionist policy of the Government of India to enlist fewer and fewer languages in the Census, e.g. 1652 languages reported in 1961 were reduced to 114 languages in census report of 1991, has left a large number of communities speaking unlisted languages as those belonging to minority communities. The so called “assimilationist goal” while laudable from the ‘national’ and administrative point of view, is a device to swallow the small fish — the languages not included in the Eighth Schedule. This in turn has led to the loss of identities for many languages and their speakers as language is one of the biggest factors to define an identity issue of an individual.

Consider the case of Hindi language which subsumes more than 47 languages under its fold. [Map 3 Hindi speaking states] The very practice of herding these 47 languages under one banner enforces labels such as ‘dialects’ or ‘minor languages’, ‘secondary languages’ etc. Sometimes two languages sharing very little in common and mutually non-intelligible are grouped as one language. The case in point is Khasi/Jaintia. A recent visit to Jaintia hills revealed that the speakers consider themselves inferior to Khasi speakers as their independent identity is not granted in the government documents. Some were seen hiding their Jaintia identity while others were rebuked and humiliated by the dominant Khasi speakers as the latter spoke a “dialect” of Khasi.

Languages in India fall into seven broad categories with varying degrees of socio economic prestige. Their individual status in the society can be represented in a pyramid figure [Fig.1] The most important language from the socio-economic and educational point of view is English, which ironically, is not listed in the Eighth Schedule. The second language in prestige is Sanskrit, the classical IA language which

was dead long ago as a spoken language but is used in rituals by a majority of the Hindu community of the country. Then comes in the list the rest of the 20 scheduled languages and their 65 dialects. The next in the order of hierarchy are the 94 non Scheduled languages followed by their large number of varieties, about 149. The lowest in the hierarchy are those whose speakers are less than 10,000 [hence are omitted from being reported by the government]. These are the languages on the verge of being lost either demographically [i.e. Andamanese] or linguistically as participants in a major language shift movement.

The Education Policy

Though the ES is discriminatory in nature the educational policy of the government of India is laudable on paper. It gives enough ways and means to adopt minor languages for various educational purposes. Various Articles listed below are note worthy.

- Article 350 *Language of grievances could be any.*
- Article 350A *Use of Mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to “ linguistic minority” groups.*
- Article 350B *Appointment of a special officer for linguistic minorities. Commissioner for linguistic minorities submit annual report to the President*

Ample opportunities of exercising linguistic rights such as elicited in the following articles rarely get implemented by the community.

• Linguistic Rights

Article 347 *A substantial proportion of the population of a State and not only a part thereof, desires the use of any language spoken by them to be recognized by that State.*

Article 345 State can adopt any or more of the languages in use¹ in a State for all or any of the purpose

• ¹ Note: language in use = not less than 15% of population speaking that language in the state.

Ironically, these articles are merely statements on paper as the speakers of the so-called minor languages themselves do not wish to educate their children in their respective mother tongues. Nor the language of grievance, such as a petition in the court is ever filed in the minor language for the fear of being not understood by the decision makers.

Similarly, the three language formula, that the government of India adopted for imparting education succeeded to some extent but failed in the Hindi belt [regions exemplified by the use of Hindi as a State language] as it was not administered with strict rule. Consider the ‘**three language formula**’ [TLF for short].

•**In Non-Hindi states**

- Study of Hindi
- Study of a language listed in the Eighth Schedule
- Study of English or any Modern European language

•**In Hindi states**

- Study of Hindi
- Study of Modern Indian language especially from South India
- Study of English or any Modern European language

Though the TLF is laudable in its own right as it takes into account the language diversity and pluri-linguistic and pluri-cultural society that India represents, yet it fails to take cognizance of various minor languages and their learning either as a subject or as a medium of instruction. The TLF gives an option or choice only from among the languages of the ES. There is no motivation to learn or sustain various mother tongues outside the home domains. The latter factor contributes in unlearning these languages at home domain too. Our experience of working with various tribal languages speakers of India reveals that tribals in general and those of central India in specific, take pride in forgetting their native languages. While the importance of education cannot be denied and in fact it is the birth right of every citizen, it does come with a price. It motivates

people to learn the language of education and forget the other languages not used in education.

The Dilemma

We are standing at a threshold. The threshold, to be or not to be. Should we be competing with the rest of the world and try to educate our masses and in turn face the inevitable death of linguistic diversity? Or should we leave our brethren alone and have them use and function in multiple dialects and languages? Should we ignore the long cherished tradition of orality in the process of imparting literacy? The Indian people who enjoyed the diversity and multiplicity of languages/dialects all along their lives never faced this dilemma of choosing only one, two or three languages for escalating the social ladder. It may appear odd and incomprehensible to the western world but the difficult choice of selecting a maximum number of only three languages will ensure gradual decrease in Indian linguistic diversity. Minority communities, represented by the last three boxes of the pyramid, i.e., the Non Scheduled languages, dialects of Non Scheduled languages, and of those who are represented by less than 10000 number, whose languages are neither included in the ES nor are considered as medium of instruction, nor are recognized as a subject to be taught will be forced either to forget their mother tongues or to retain/maintain their respective mother tongues only at the home domain with increasing pressures from the peer group as well as from the seniors of the community to move over to the dominant regional language for intra-community communication. This process of self-proclaimed **linguistic suicide** has already been witnessed in many tribal communities of central India. Most disturbing fact is the incidence of **mass hara-kiri** of mother tongues in this belt. Kurux, the Dravidian language and other Munda language barring Santhali are cases in point. These tribes, as well as the forty seven varieties of Hindi speakers, falsely claim Hindi as their mother tongue. What is claimed then is not the reality. *The sense of pride in associating with the dominant regional language is considered as a step towards merging with the mainstream.* This implies a direct correlation between the process of submerging identities and the reduction of linguistic diversity. While

tribals encourage their children to forget their mother tongues, speakers of other non-tribal minor languages do not do so. At best these languages are retained at the home domain.

We witness then, two kinds of submerging identities, one at the State level when speakers of a language, in the absence of their language being recognized for education purpose, try to identify themselves with the dominant regional language speakers and at best retain their respective tongues only at the home domain. The second type of submerging identity is more serious than the previous one as it exists at the level of home domain where children are discouraged and at times punished for using their mother tongues.

How do we stop this erosion? These are the tribal languages, most ancient of all and represent a valuable heritage of the Indian past. The answers to this question are not easy.

The administration of education and literacy programs for one billion population, which is multilingual, multidialectal and pluricultural is a daunting task. It is obvious that all languages cannot be incorporated in our education programs. Somewhere the line of demarcation has to be drawn as to the choice of language used for literacy or educational programme. Linked to this, then, is the issue of standardization that is decided only after the decision as to the choice of language is taken.

We saw that the three language formula, although framed to promote regional languages, does not take into account the non-dominant minor languages of the region. These are the languages whose speakers are willing to do hara-kiri. To arrest this, one has to provide dignity and honour as well as meaningful functionality to these languages. Among various suggestions that one could put forward, immediate action may be taken in the following areas:

- The three-language formula may be modified as the four-language formula [FLF].

- Vitalization and Revitalization of dying languages by holding night classes by the community elders
- Incorporation of a language in the Scheduled category may be decided by the quantum of speakers

The Four-Language formula

As Hindi is spoken and understood in its various forms, though sometimes far removed from the standard version (Abbi et al 2000), across the cities and towns of the nation, the study of Hindi, as already included in the TLF is justified. Considering the impact of the pressures of English in globalization and uplifting the community, its inclusion is also justified. We propose the following formula at education level.

For Hindi Belt

1. Hindi
2. English
3. Dominant regional language [= Minor language according to the Schedule. This can be either SL or NSL.]
4. One language from the South of India [mainly Dravidian]

For Non Hindi Belt

1. Hindi
2. English
3. Dominant regional language [= major SL]
4. Minor language [of the region, preferably the MT of the large base]

Standardization of languages

The clamour for inclusion in the ES and various language movements in the country have forced the government to increase the number of languages in the ES

from time to time. The present 22 languages listed in the ES are drawn from all four language families, some very new introduction which face the decision making choice of identifying only one out of many scripts available for written purpose. At present Indian languages are written in more than 15 distinct scripts. **slide** When Manipuri was included in the Schedule it had to choose between the old traditional Meithei script, which was no longer used by the society, and the current Bangali script. *The decision of standardization of an Indian language is a multifaceted decision as it involves narrowing down the diversity at various levels; grammar, pronunciation and script.* Any two varieties of a language may vary at all these levels.

Let me concentrate only on the issue of the script for the current discussion. Take the case of Santhali, a Munda language incorporated in the ES recently. Santhali is a tribal language that is spoken in four adjacent states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Bengal. A line of continuity can be visualised geographically, linguistically and culturally in the area which was initially to be carved out from four different states in the name of Jharkhand [Map 4 Proposed]. Santhali thus, is written in multiple scripts at present. It is written in Devanagari in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, the two Hindi belt states, in Oriya script in Orissa and in Bangla script in Bengal. Moreover, Santhali activists had always promoted Ol Chiki script that was designed to write Santhali. Interestingly, the language is also written in Roman as majority of the Santhals are educated by Christian missionaries.

After the formation of ***Jharkhand*** State dominated by the Santhals and other tribes [see map 3 again], in 2002, which was carved out of the Southern Bihar, administration is faced with the dilemma of choosing one script out of six being used currently. While activists want to promote the Ol Chiki script, majority want the Devanagari [the script that is used for writing Sanskrit, Hindi and Marathi] as educated and literate masses are already familiar with it. The old argument of Devanagari not suited for representing typical Santhali sounds such as vowel length and glottal stop can be overcome by the introduction of specific diacritic marks. Moreover, despite the fact that Jharkhand was separated from Bihar state to give an identity to a large number of the tribal population residing in that part of the state,

leaders, administrators and bureaucrats have not come up with Santhali as the State language nor have decided upon the standard script to be used. At present Hindi is being used for all official, judicial and administrative purposes. It is an irony that once the wishes of a separate State and the recognition of the language in the ES is granted, the community at large and activists in particular, fail to implement all the necessary changes and inclusion of the language in various realms. They face the opposition within where masses want to do nothing with the home language being used at official level. They want to operate in Hindi [or the dominant regional language] and English. *The inevitable fears of the tribes about being pushed back in the society, desires to rise up to the elite and superior languages and amalgamate with the mainstream are the factors discouraging the lower rung language speakers to exercise their linguistic rights.* If this situation persists for another fifty years, a major part of the world's linguistic diversity will be lost.

Revitalization of Vanishing languages and identities

What is the solution? How can we arrest the increasingly diminishing linguistic diversity? How can we imbibe in the community the sense of pride in the use of their native languages? The answer to these questions are far from simple, however, revitalization process among the dying languages may be started by the language activists, linguists and language users. Revitalization is the only hope for survival of identities and maintaining the diversities Revitalization finds its existence at two levels [1] at home domain and [2] at the official level. The former is related to the psychological and emotional issues, whether the community realizes the importance of the language to be retained at the home domain or not; whether it satisfies the emotional need of the people who can speak it or not; whether the community finds it essential to retain the language as a heritage of the past or not. If the answer is yes to all these options then there is a will for retention/maintenance of the language at the home domains that results more often than not in teaching the children the language of the community. Some of the tribal languages of the Tibeto-Burman group are such examples. The phenomenon of 'night school' is very common where elders teach the children of the village the conversational language, the folk

songs, and the folk dances. The participatory involvement of the elders helps in revitalizing the language at the community level. Motivation to learn language may be provided in the forms of instituting awards and introducing the information about the language in the history books in school.

The next step is to locate the existence of the language at the official level. This comes after the establishment of the first step, i.e. revitalizing it at the home domain. It may be introduced at official level for conducting judicial, legislative and simple official work, or may be introduced in schools as a subject if not the medium of instruction. Revitalization of any language at this level depends upon the dynamics of political power and social awareness.

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