Three Language Education Formula in Multilingual India: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The language debate in education in the formative years of India's independence not only brought in awareness among the stakeholders of education, it also enabled the policy makers to fully attempt to realize the Constitutional vision of equality of opportunity, linguistic rights of every linguistic and ethnic community and moving towards the goal of achieving universal access to education. The paper explains the multilingual culture of Indian society in brief. The main objective of the paper is to examine the Three Language Formula in education. Study found out that some states implementing the three language formula while others openly denying it. Paper concludes that multilingual nature of Indian society is going to become bilingual. Only Hindi and English languages are becoming widely speaking languages than others.

Keywords: Multilingualism, mother tongue, language education, minority language, language policy

1. Introduction

India houses about 1.1 billion people with a population growth rate of 1.6 per cent a year. As per Census 2001, India is administratively organized into 35 entities, each as big as many independent nations. There are 28 States and seven Union Territories, broadly set up on the linguistic principle. Currently, India has 51 Cities, 384 Urban Agglomerates and 5161 Towns (2843 in 1951) in India. However, most Indians still live in rural areas and in small towns with different linguistic, religious and cultural practices.

India is home to two major linguistic families: Indo-Aryan (spoken by about 74 per cent of the population) and Dravidian (spoken by about 24 per cent in the four southern states). Other languages spoken in India come from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman linguistic families. The Indian constitution recognizes twenty two official languages. Hindi and English are used by the Union Government of India for official purposes. Tamil and Sanskrit were designated "classical languages" by the Indian government in 2004 and 2005. The number of dialects in India is as high as 1,652.

India does not have a mother tongue, it has mother tongues. Does India have a national language? Presumably, it does, and it is Hindi. How it came to become a national language is described by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee when the Draft Constitution of India was being considered, on the issue of adopting Hindi as the National language:

"...There was no article which proved more controversial than Article 115 which deals with the question. No article produced more opposition. No article more heat. After a prolonged discussion when the question was put, the vote was 78 against 78. The tie could not be resolved. After a long time when the question was put to the party meeting the result was 77 against 78 for Hindi. Hindi won its place as a national language by one vote. I am stating these facts from my personal knowledge. ..."
Each Indian state also happens to be multi-cultural, besides showing a great degree of multilingualism as the following table would show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set</th>
<th>States, Major Language</th>
<th>Other Languages with Significant Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Kerala, Malayalam (96.6%)</td>
<td>Kannada, Tamil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punjab, Punjabi (92.2%)</td>
<td>Hindi, Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gujarat, Gujarati (91.5%)</td>
<td>Hindi, Sindhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haryana, Hindi (91.0%)</td>
<td>Punjabi, Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.P., Hindi (90.1%)</td>
<td>Urdu, Punjabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rajasthan, Hindi (89.6%)</td>
<td>Bhili, Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H.P., Hindi (88.9%)</td>
<td>Punjabi, Kinnauri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tamil Nadu, Tamil (86.7%)</td>
<td>Telugu, Kannada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Bengal, Bangla (86.0%)</td>
<td>Hindi, Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A.P., Telugu (84.8%)</td>
<td>Urdu, Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>M.P., Hindi (85.6%)</td>
<td>Bhili, Gondi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bihar, Hindi (80.9%)</td>
<td>Urdu, Santali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orissa, Oriya (82.8%)</td>
<td>Hindi, Telugu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mizoram, Lushai (75.1%)</td>
<td>Bangla, Lakher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maharashtra, Marathi (73.3%)</td>
<td>Hindi, Urdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>Goa, Konkani (51.5%)</td>
<td>Marathi, Kannada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meghalaya, Khali (49.5%)</td>
<td>Garo, Bangla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tripura, Bangla (68.9%)</td>
<td>Tripuri, Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karnataka, Kannada (66.2%)</td>
<td>Urdu, Telugu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Sikkim, Nepali (63.1%)</td>
<td>DBhotia, Lepcha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manipur, Manipuri (60.4%)</td>
<td>Thadou, Tangkhul</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assam, Assamese (57.8%)</td>
<td>Bangla, Boro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Arunachal, Nissi (19.9%)</td>
<td>Nepali, Bangla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nagaland, Ao (14.0%)</td>
<td>Sema, Konyak</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As of today, the Indian constitution recognizes 22 major languages of India in what is known as “the 8th Schedule” of the Constitution. They also happen to be the major literary languages in India, with a considerable volume of writing in them. They include, besides Sanskrit, the following 21 modern Indian languages: Assamese, Bangla, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, Kannada, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Santali, Sindhi, and Urdu. Originally, only 14 languages were included in the 8th Schedule of the Indian constitution. Bodo, Dogri, Konkani, Maithili, Nepali, Santali and Sindhi were recognized later. The first Prime Minister of India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru had made this comment about the recognition of languages: “The makers of our Constitution were wise in lying down that all the 13 or 14 languages’ were to be national languages. There is no question of anyone language being more a national language than the others. The languages listed in this Schedule had acquired different names at different stages. They are better known as the Scheduled languages now”.

2. Multilingualism in India

Besides 22 Scheduled languages, the Indian Census recorded 1576 rationalized languages as well as 1796 other mother-tongues. The highest literary awards in the country are given in 24 literary languages in India by the National Academy of Letters, called the ‘Saitya Akademi’, but newspapers and periodicals – 3592 in number, are published in 35 Indian languages every year. There are only 69 to 72 languages that are taught in schools in India in some capacity, but again the radio network beams programmes in 146 languages and dialects. By 1960s, 87.13 per cent of Indians spoke languages already included in the
8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Having recognized the importance of English as an instrument of knowledge dissemination as well as commerce as well as maintenance of international relations, a provision was left to extend the use of English language in the Article 343 on ‘Official language of the Union’ - “for all the official purposes of the Union’ even after “a period of fifteen years,” with a proviso that “the President may, during the said period, by order authorize the use of the Hindi language in addition to the English language and of the Devanagari form of numerals for any of the official purposes of the Union”.

The language debate in education in the formative years of India’s independence not only brought in awareness among the stakeholders of education, it also enabled the policy makers to fully attempt to realize the Constitutional vision of equality of opportunity, linguistic rights of every linguistic and ethnic community and moving towards the goal of achieving universal access to education. India today has 92.07 per cent schools at the primary stage teaching through mother tongue, and the rural and urban comparison shows 92.39 per cent schools in rural areas and 90.39 per cent school in urban areas teach through mother tongue. At the Upper Primary stage 91.34 per cent teach through mother tongue which consists of 92.71 per cent in rural areas and 87.37 per cent in urban areas. 12.14% at the primary stage, 14.47% schools at upper primary and 18.53% at the secondary stage have two or more media of instruction.

It is also interesting to note that 91.95% of schools in the country at the primary stage teach two or more languages. With regard to number of languages taught 90.61% of schools at the upper primary stage follow three language formula (i.e. at least three languages are taught), 84.86% of schools follow the formula at the secondary stage (7th AISSES, NCERT 2007). Forty seven languages are used as media of instruction in schools and forty one languages are taught or used in schools (Srinivasa Rao 2008).

Multilingualism is constitutive of Indian diversity. Our educational system should make every conceivable effort to sustain multilingualism (Crawhall 1992; Heugh et al. 1995 among others) rather than suppress it (NCERT 2005). Pattanayak (1981) argues how our educational system has consistently weakened the advantages of grass-root multilingualism that characterizes our society. As Illich (1981) suggests, we need to make every possible effort to empower the languages of the underprivileged and tribal and endangered languages. Affirmative action is called for in this domain (NCERT 2005). To quote Pattanayak (1981), “if participatory democracy has to survive, we need to give a voice to the language of every child.” The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) – 2005 strongly advocates multilingualism in school education. Multilingualism in education refers to the use of two or more languages as medium of instruction (UNESCO-2003). This confers definite cognitive advantages. Researches have shown that there is a highly positive relationship between bilingualism / multilingualism, cognitive flexibility, and scholastic achievement (Peal and Lambert 1962; Gardner and Lambert 1972; Cummins and Swain 1986). Bilingual children not only have control over several different languages but they are also academically more creative and socially more tolerant (NCERT 2005).

Language teaching needs to be multilingual not only in terms of the number of languages offered to children but also in terms of evolving strategies that would use the multilingual classroom as a resource. Children will receive multilingual education from the outset. In the non-Hindi speaking states, children learn Hindi. In the case of Hindi speaking states, children learn a language not spoken in their area. Sanskrit may also be studied as Modern Indian Language in addition to these languages. At later stages, study of classical and foreign languages may be introduced (NCF 2005).

The number of languages taught or used in Indian schools had been reduced during the period between 1973 and 1993. The number of languages used in schools in 1973 (Third All India Educational Survey, NCERT 1975) was 67; the number came down to 41 in 1993 (Srinivasa Rao 2008). While the promise of education through / in the mother tongue of the child is made time and again, we notice that with in a
period of twenty years at least 25 languages were thrown out of the school system. This means children whose mother tongues are these languages would have to undergo the burden of studying in a language which is not theirs. This only contributes to what Amartya Sen calls compounded disadvantage of those who are already disadvantaged.

Language policy planning in India presents both collaborative or additive and competitive bi-multilingualism. While the policy statements and implementation strategies inform us that the collaborative bilingualism or multilingualism is advocated, the choice of people and demands indicate there is competitive bilingualism or multilingualism, i.e. individuals using the language of their choice. There is more tilt towards the competitive bilingualism or multilingualism as felt by the some recent developments. First is the Madras High Court judgement in the year 2000 on choosing the medium of instruction against the order of the Tamil Nadu government ‘Tamil as a compulsory medium at the primary school stage’.

One of the arguments in favour of nullifying the government order was that it was against the fundamental right recognised by the Union Nations that the parents have about the choice of education they would like to have their children exposed to (Ramasamy 2001). Second is the increasing demand for conversion to English medium education, irrespective of the quality. It was reported recently that a large number of state run schools in the state of Andhra Pradesh wanting to shift their affiliation to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in order to become English medium schools. The clear picture which emerges is English Vs all Indian languages. English, as some argue, taking the ‘killer’ role.

The Three Language Formula

India is a country of many languages. Therefore, one needs to know more than one language if he/she wants to interact with people from different parts of the country. If one knows only his/her mother tongue he/she will only be able to communicate with people within one’s own state. This means one is completely isolating oneself from other regions and other languages. A student who has learnt only his/her mother tongue can not acquire knowledge regarding the other regions and languages unless it is translated into his/her own language. His/her education thus becomes very limited.

The Three Language Formula (TFL) which emerged as a political consensus on languages in school education was a strategy (not a policy) to accommodate at least three languages within the ten years of schooling (Pattanayak, D.P. 1986). The All India Council for Education recommended the adoption of the Three Language Formula in Sept. 1956 (Mallikarjun, 2002). According to this formula, every child has to learn the following:

1. The mother tongue or the regional language;
2. The official language of the union or the associate official language of the Union so long as it exists (official language of the union is Hindi and its associate official language is English);
3. Modern Indian language or a foreign language, not covered under (1) & (2) above and other than that used as the medium of instruction.

The First Language (L1):

The language that we learn from our childhood is usually spoken by our parents, family members and the other people around us. This is known as our first language or L1. Since this is the language we know best and use commonly, the government decided that the medium of instruction at primary stage should be one’s own regional language. Being a teacher you might have experienced that at the primary stage most of the instruction takes place only through the regional language or through the children’s mother tongue. First language is acquired naturally, through interacting with family members and friends without much formal instruction. But even though, we may communicate effectively in our first language, many of us do not have a complete knowledge of all the sounds and letters of the language or its grammar. This is because we acquire it informally. Therefore formal instruction in the first languages is provided in the School.
**The Second Language (L2):**
One of the aims of education is to expose the learner to various situations and develop such ability which enables him/her to gain knowledge from every possible source and share the same with others. Therefore, the learner needs to learn the second language (L2) which in our country usually is either Hindi or English. The second language is learn consciously and deliberately for a specific purpose i.e., to gather information and acquire knowledge. The sounds, letters and grammar of the second language can be learn properly only when they are deliberately taught by the teachers and consciously learn by the students. Under the three language formula, second language (L2) is taught at a later stage in the primary school curriculum, after the child has already learn one language well i.e. his/her (L1). We use first language to communicate and to express our feelings and thoughts in our day-to-day life situations. On the other hand, second language is used in situation other than personal.

**The Third Language (L3):**
You might ask what happens in a case where the learner’s first language is Hindi and second language is English and neither of this can help him/her in certain situations. For instance, child’s mother tongue is Khasi and he/she learns English as his/her second language. When he/she goes to a village in Bihar he/she may not be in a position to speak to people either in his/her first language (Khasi) or second language (English). Because people of that village in Bihar may not be knowing either Khasi or English. In such cases, communications or interaction with other people becomes difficult, and may even be impossible at times. This is where third language (L3) has a significant role to play.

The spirit of the three-language formula thus provides Hindi, English, and Indian languages, preferably a south Indian language for the Hindi-speaking States, and a regional language, Hindi, and English for the non-Hindi-speaking States. The underline merit of this formula in the promotion of multilingualism is hardly questionable and best represents the multilingual character of the nation (Kachru 1997; Krshnamurti 1998; Schiffman 1999; Sridhar 1996). But this formula has been observed more in the breach than in the observance. The Hindi-speaking States operate largely with Hindi, English, and Sanskrit, whereas the non-Hindi-speaking States, particularly Tamil Nadu, operate through a two-language formula, that is, Tamil and English. Still, many States such as Orissa, West Bengal, and Maharashtra among others implemented the formula.

### 3. Multilingualism in Education

The Indian education system is truly multilingual in its character. The Bombay Municipal Corporation runs primary schools in nine languages. The Karnataka State runs primary schools in eight languages. The secondary schools in West Bengal give their students the option to choose from 14 languages. The three-language formula widely in the country aims at developing and strengthening the multilingual character of our educational system.

There are many problems in implementing the three-language formula. For example, there is no reference to the mother tongue or home language in the formula. There is no reference to the classical languages and foreign languages. Tamilnadu teaches only Tamil and English, and Gujarat follows it with Gujarati and Hindi. Many Hindi states substitute Sanskrit, a classical language for a modern Indian language. With the expanded version of the eighth schedule of the constitution, more languages are added to the mix, but there is hardly any improvement in the situation.

There are 500 Central Schools with the bilingual medium consisting of English and Hindi. There is also a compulsory language, Sanskrit, in addition. There are 500 Navodaya Vidyalayas where some competence is English and Hindi is imparted simultaneously. But the students who graduate from these schools go to the English medium colleges, because there is no college in the country that offers a bilingual medium of instruction. The Indian education system blocks multilingualism as one moves into higher education.
Srivastava (1994) writes about the Hindi region in India. This region attests two types of bilingualism, where literacy and fluency in both languages are aimed at, but wherein first language is restricted to the topics related to the social sciences and the second language to the science subjects. … (Mono-literate form of bilingualism) is confined primarily to the preschool children of village school. The picture given in the above statement is true for all Indian languages, with some small changes here and there.

**Minority Languages**

The constitutional provisions have helped the maintenance of the minority languages (ML) in the country. But this is true only to a certain extent. Some damaging pictures have begun to emerge in recent years, especially with regard to the use of the ML in the school system. There is not a single state that does not have linguistic minorities, but not all the minority languages are offered in schools as media of instruction or as first language. Minority languages are denied in the name of dialect and there is no text book available in these languages. When we compare the findings of the educational surveys conducted by the NCERT and other agencies with the number of speakers of the ML in various states, it becomes obvious that there are many minority languages with considerable populations that are not made available as the medium of instruction or as first language. For example, in Delhi, only English, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, and Gujarati were taught as first language as per the Third Educational Survey, but some of these are not taught as first language according to the Sixth Educational Survey. There are several languages in Delhi with large population that do not find any place at all in the school system. The situation in the other states is not encouraging either.

In the states like Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim, mother tongue is the medium of instruction in less than 50% of the schools. Consider these figures: Sikkim 1.95%, Arunachal Pradesh 2.89%, Goa 14%, Jammu and Kashmir 19.45%, Meghalaya 42.03%, and Nagaland 43% used mother tongue as media of instruction at the upper primary stage. Major languages such as English and Hindi and the other Scheduled 8th languages occupy a place of importance even in the states where the speakers of the non-scheduled language are in a majority.

Tamils and fellow Dravidian language speakers viewed the imposition of the mother tongue of a particular region in India, as the official language of a whole country, as tyranny.

In an address in 1962, former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C N Annadurai made the following statements opposing Hindi imposition: “It is claimed that Hindi should be common language because it is spoken by the majority. Why should we then claim the tiger as our national animal instead of the rat which is so much more numerous? Or the peacock as our national bird when the crow is ubiquitous?"

**Problem with the formula**

As the report of the Education Commission (1964-66) rightly describes it, “the impelling considerations were more political and social, than educational. In effect the formula established equality between the Hindi and the non-Hindi areas...”

By adopting the three-language formula (TLF) as a strategy, space was created for the study of proximate languages, classical languages, and foreign languages. Space was also made for the study of the mother tongue. The States were free to adopt languages in education outside the TLF. Sanskrit could be introduced as a classical language. It could also be adopted as a Modern Indian language (MIL) without violating the spirit of the TLF. Since 1953, with the declaration of UNESCO that the mother tongue is the best medium for a child’s education, pressure groups worked for the recognition of their languages and their incorporation in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. As long as the basic spirit of the TLF is maintained, there is no restriction on studying new languages.

Generally, the States offer, in L1, L2 and L3 more optional than stipulated in the three language formula (TLF). Even though the number of languages taught is three, the languages are not those in the TLF. The
preferred third language in the Hindi States is often Sanskrit and not a modern Indian language (a southern language) though classical languages like Sanskrit do not find place in the TLF. Controversies, subsequently, arise in favour or against accommodating such classical languages within the formula.

Differences are also there in the motivation for learning of the third language. While there is economic motivation for learning Hindi in non-Hindi States, the motivation for learning southern languages in Hindi States is basically cultural. This results in lack of equality in learning objectives and competence levels in the third language.

The demand from linguistic minorities and tribal to fulfil the commitment for facilities to learn in the mother tongue in schools at the primary level is often not complied with. The problem concerning the place of minority/tribal language in the TLF gets puzzled on account of the fact that every State is multilingual with two or more minority languages.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document released on January 1, 2000, while reviewing the Three Language Formula, states:

“In a number of states/organizations/ boards, however, the spirit of the formula has not been followed and the mother tongue of the people has been denied the status of the first language ... because of the changed socio-economic scenario, the difference between the second and the third languages has dwindled”. Thus, in reality, there may be two-second languages for all purposes and functions. Some states follow only a two-language formula whereas in some others classical languages like Sanskrit and Arabic are being studied in lieu of a modern Indian language. Some boards/institutions permit even European languages like French and German in place of Hindi. In this scenario, the three-language formula exists only in our curriculum documents and other policy statements.

The students come across several difficulties belonging to pedagogic, curricular and environmental areas due to TLF. The most important ones, among them in order of descending difficulty, are, ‘confusing to learn grammars of different languages’ (pedagogic) ‘no occasion to use the language for practice’ (environmental), ‘no extra coaching at home’ (environmental), and ‘many other subject to learn’ (curricular).

The teachers and the parents are fully approving of the problems faced by the students in the task of learning a number of languages. Moreover, the teachers emphasize most the environment and the curricular problems, and the least the problems related to pedagogy of language teaching, which the students consider to be the most important. The curricular difficulties are least emphasized by them. The parents are in agreement with their children about the curricular handicaps, but not to the same extent about the academic difficulty, ‘confusing to learn different grammars’ and the environmental one, ‘no extra coaching at home’.

The students do face problems in acquiring the four skills of language namely, understanding, speaking, reading and writing. This difficulty is most severely felt for the third language and the least for the first language.

The teachers also face many difficulties in their task of language teaching. The most important are lack of modern teaching aids and training in the new techniques of language teaching. There is also a problem of the presence of the mixed mother-tongue groups in the language class.

It is sad to note that tribal children’s mother tongue is not used in school; in some cases, the school language is a “completely strange language.” Most teachers in rural areas do not speak or understand the children’s language so there is no communication between teachers and children. Even when the teachers come from the children’s home community, they often do not use the local language in teaching the curriculum as the textbooks are in the state language.
**Home language(s) of children should be the medium of learning in schools.**
If a school does not have provision for teaching in the children home languages(s) at the higher levels, primary school education must still be covered through the home language(s). It is imperative that we honour the child’s home language(s). According to Article 350A of Indian Constitution, ‘it shall be the endeavour of every state and of every local authority with in the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups’.

4. **Conclusion**

Several studies have convincingly shown that there is a highly positive relationship between bilingualism/multilingualism, cognitive flexibility, and scholastic achievement. Multilingual children not only have control over several different languages but they are also academically more creative and socially more tolerant. The wide range of linguistic collection that they control equips them to negotiate different social situations more efficiently. Multilingualism in India is widely praised by the scholars. Bhatia and Ritchie (2006) have stated that language rivalry and conflict in India often does not lead to linguistic and national disintegration.

It should be obvious from the discussion of multilingualism that Govt. or educational system of India should make every conceivable effort to sustain multilingualism rather than suppress it. Our educational system has constantly weakened the advantages of grass-roots multilingualism that characterises our society. Education planners and policy maker of the country should pay immediate attention to the centrality of language in education before it is too late. We need to make every possible effort to empower the languages of the underprivileged, dalit and tribal and endangered languages. One cannot keep waiting for people to ask for their language rights. If participatory democracy has to survive, we need to give a voice to the language of every child rather than a strict implementation of the three-language formula, it is the survival and preservation of multilingualism that should be at the heart of language planning in this country.

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