

The relevance of regional language in teaching

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Episodes of unmasking those trying to hide their identities are found across storytelling cultures. From the Jataka and Arabian Nights to the grey leCarrein world of spies. The gotcha moment is often when the man is startled, sometimes in his sleep, to reflexively exclaim in his native tongue. This is a dramatic exposition of the deep truth that language is an integral part of identity. While language is at the core of individual identity, it is even more so the life blood of collective identity.

I have often wondered what language I will exclaim in, in my gotcha moment. Will it be Chhattisgarhi that I grew up speaking at home or Hindustani, which we spoke in Bhopal, or will it be English, which for a large part of my adult life has become my first language? But if you ask me, when I am awake, what is your “mother tongue”, I will unhesitatingly say Chhattisgarhi. Because it is.

So I was very disappointed, though not surprised, when Chhattisgarh became a state in 2001, and chose Hindi as the medium of instruction (MoI) in its schools. This was surrender to two ideas that I had thought Chhattisgarhis must not concede to.

First was the muddled notion that Chhattisgarhi is not a language but a dialect of Hindi. This false language and dialect dichotomy is much written about. In brief: the powerful claim the status of language for their tongue, relegating other tongues of the same linguistic family to the status of dialect. The test of mutual intelligibility will tell you in 5 minutes that Chhattisgarhi is no more a dialect of Hindi, than is Marathi, Odia or Bengali.

Second was the abandonment of their own language by the Chhattisgarhi elite. Seduced by the language of power, and almost ashamed of their own language which they saw as marker of belonging to one of the most backward regions of the country, the elite and those aspiring to that status, virtually stopped speaking Chhattisgarhi amongst themselves and in their homes.

There is no linguistic imperialism here, it is just the weakness from within. Romantic and cultural commitment to the language aside, this phenomenon creates another chasm in society. The common woman speaks Chhattisgarhi, but the medium of power is Hindi. Chhattisgarh has struggled and become a state. That makes this matter more politically graspable.

But many languages are going through similar travails. Maithili, Braj Bhasha and Awadhi, just to name a few. Languages of the court and learning being different from the language of the masses is not a phenomenon of this century. The Sanskrit-Prakrit and the Persian-Hindavi divide is well known.

The Linguistic Survey of India completed by the government in 1928 identified 364 languages in India. The People's Linguistic Survey of India, a commendable effort by civil society and research organizations, identified and documented 780 languages in 2012. Languages are not static, but dynamic. They grow, diminish, change, merge, form, and sadly, die. Our bewildering linguistic diversity has often animated our politics. This is unsurprising, since language is one of the most emotive dimensions of collective identity. Both to assert and usurp identity, languages have been powerful tools.

Given my own personal history, I resonate with the situation of Chhattisgarhi and the MoI issue in Chhattisgarh. Similar situations exist in many other linguistic regions. So what is the right thing to do educationally?

First, the default MoI should be the large regional language. This is a practical issue: that of development of texts and other curricular material, which cannot be done in too many languages. Beyond class VIII, multiple non-regional MoIs can be offered.

Second, let the curriculum have a flexible approach to MoI in early grades. While there would be a MoI, the teacher should (and many already do) use the child's own language extensively. This would also help the child learn the language that is used as the MoI. Young children learn best in their own language and this must be used as a resource. Teachers will have to develop the capacity to do this, not necessarily learn all such languages.

Third, English should be taught as a language from class I. This is a core social aspiration today. Denying this is only leading to greater inequity, with the disadvantaged aspiring for but not having access.

Fourth, a third language aside from MoI and English, should not be taught up to class VIII. The third language ends up occupying invaluable curricular time and energy. Other languages can be offered for learning from class VIII onwards.

Fifth, schools and parents should be allowed to choose the MoI they wish to use. This means that so long as a school is willing to invest in an MoI, seeing enough children wanting it, it must be allowed.

The matter of the MoI is an educational issue. But language is deeply tied to our experience and identity. To complicate matters even more, our nation made language the central organizing principle when states were reorganised. Inevitably, this particular educational issue is deeply and inextricably political. So if you see politics in my proposals, you know why it is so.

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