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Managing Multilingual India

In October 2006, linguists and language experts from Universities across India, in collaboration with the Central Institute for Indian Languages, Mysore (CIIL), submitted a proposal for a *New Linguistic Survey of India* to the government. Conceived of as much more than a mere sequel to the first and only *Linguistic Survey of India* (1894-1927) by Sir George Abraham Grierson, the proposal was widely endorsed by politicians, administrators, and language communities. Eighteen months on however, and despite several commitments to Parliament¹, the survey has yet to commence. In this article, we examine why the survey is necessary for both governance and the safeguarding of democratic rights, particularly in the context of the threats posed by globalisation.

INDIA'S LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: THE OFFICIAL VIEW

Although it is commonplace to remark on the astounding linguistic diversity of India, one fact is less known – the Indian state has no reliable figures about how many languages are spoken in the country, *by whom, to whom, and where*. In independent India, information about languages is collected by the decennial Census, but this data quite often obfuscates more than it reveals. As Table 1 shows, the 1991 Census concludes that the “Languages” spoken in India number 114, even though the raw data of language names collected by its enumerators totalled 10,400. The 2001 Census, on the other hand, from the much smaller set of 6661 raw language names returned, arrives at a figure of 122.

Table 1: From Raw Language Returns to Languages

Census	Languages returned	Languages after rationalisation	Mother tongues after classification	Languages
2001	6,661	1635	234	122
1991	10,400	1576	216	114

Not only is this apparent increase in eight languages in a mere decade misleading, the figures of 114 and 112 are also only partially correct. Both figures are artefacts of the procedures that the Census employs to determine what a “Language” is. First, the raw data is “rationalised” – where language names returned are reduced to names of ‘probable languages’, using Grierson’s LSI and linguistic descriptions and surveys by linguists and other organisations, as well as the experiences of earlier Censuses. After this, the resultant set is “classified” – using the same resources as for rationalisation – with the result that ‘dialects’ and other mother tongues are grouped under larger Languages. Finally, only those classified languages that have more than 10,000 speakers are reported as Languages.

While these procedures may well be necessary for an exercise of the nature of a Census, they also undoubtedly *mask* the true extent of linguistic diversity in India. Although rationalisation yields about 54% of the original returns as “probable languages”, the procedure of classification

whittles down this set so drastically that the final number of officially recognised Languages plummets to a mere 1.8% of the language names returned by the people of India!

As a consequence of the decision to include only those languages that have more than 10,000 claimants, many tribal languages simply vanish, given that Adivasi and North-East tribal communities are small (together they constitute a mere 2.1% of India's population). Moreover, disparate languages end up as grouped under one Language. For example, more than 50 languages, including Chattisgarhi, Bhojpuri, and Garhwali, are grouped under the Language Hindi, even though 33,099,497 Bhojpuri speakers, 13,260,186 Chhattisgarhi speakers, and 2,267,314 Garhwali speakers told the Census enumerators that they speak they do *not* speak Hindi. Maithili speakers, however, strike it rich: the 2001 Census lists it as a Language for the first time in three decades – but this is only because their language was included in the Eighth Schedule2 of the Constitution in 2003.

The Indian Constitution provides many guarantees and safeguards for linguistic and religious minorities, besides overall promoting a multilingual India:

- Contrary to popular perception, the Indian Constitution does *not* designate Hindi as the “national Language”. Rather, it is the “official” language of the Union (and English is the associate official language until Parliament rules otherwise). Even the Eighth Schedule merely lists (currently) twenty-two languages, without the attribute ‘national’ or ‘regional’.
- Article 29 enshrines a commitment to the maintenance of India's linguistic diversity: “Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same”.
- Article 30 guarantees minorities the right to develop and propagate these languages (and their speakers) through education: “All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.”
- Article 350A provides for instruction in their own mother tongues at the primary stage of education to children belonging to the linguistic minorities: “It shall be the endeavour of every State, and of every local authority within 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; and the President may issue such directions to any State as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision of such facilities.”
- Article 345 and 120 seek to promote governance that is multilingual. Article 345, leaves a State free, through its legislature, adopt Hindi or any language used in its territory as its official language(s). Article 120 concerned permits member(s) to use his/her mother tongue w in the Indian Parliament.

It is in the context of these provisions that the under-represent-ation of India's linguistic diversity becomes relevant. The ‘lumping together’ approach to India's linguistic diversity is tantamount to a virtual denial of cultural and social value to the bulk of Indian languages, and therefore to the speakers that speak them. This has very serious consequences in education, as the smaller a language, the more likely it is to be dismissed as “primitive”, and incapable of further development so that it may come to bear the weight of modern human knowledge and intellectual discourse. Responding to this implicit classification, speakers therefore ‘choose’ *not* to access education in their mother tongue(s), because that choice will disadvantage them in the not-so-long run.

This, in turn, ensures that a small language remains, at best, a small language; at worst, it shrinks by the day, as its speakers shift to the more dominant languages of the region for communication with, and about, the world outside their home (language). Such an attrition of domains of use can well prove to be a precursor of language *death*, as the life force of languages lies in the extension of its domains of use.

Importantly, this loss is not just a cultural one, as contemporary research has effectively shown the highly positive correlation between multilingualism on the one hand, and educational achievement, cognitive growth and social tolerance on the other. Frequently, accompanying this loss of culture and self-worth is a deep sense of political alienation that limits both human potential as well as the space for mobilisation for political and citizenship rights. This disaffection is often exploited by various forces to foster exclusionary and divisive right-wing nationalisms.

Finally, and in very real terms, the attrition of a language is the loss of knowledge. All languages, and particularly those of small /tribal populations, are the vehicles by which knowledge of a pre-scientific sort has been accumulated over centuries. Each language death represents a significant erosion of human knowledge about, for example, local plant and animal life — biologists like E.O. Wilson have argued that while modern science has been able to as yet classify only 20% of the world's plant and animal life; much of the remaining 80% is known, he believes, in the taxonomies of individual languages.

FEATURES OF THE INDIAN LINGUISTIC SCENARIO

Linguists estimate that over 3000 languages are spoken in the South Asian region. These belong to at least four major language families: Indo-Aryan (IA) with 574 languages, Tibeto-Burman (TB) with 226 languages, Dravidian (D) with 153 languages, and Austro-Asiatic (AA), with 65 languages. In terms of population strength, using the data from the 2001 Census – which reports population by language family but does not name all its languages — Indo-Aryan speakers comprise 76.87%, Dravidian speakers, 20.82%, *Austro-Asiatic* speakers, 1.1%, and Tibeto-Burman speakers just 1%, of the total population.

Numerical strength in terms of population is not, however, indicative of the vibrancy of a language, and its classification as a 'Language', 'mother tongue', or 'dialect'. Linguists have long argued that these terms are loaded ones, because they differentiate speech varieties not in terms of their *linguistic* properties, but in terms of the political power and prestige the *speakers* of individual language command. Groups that command greater socio-political power speak "Languages" (*bhasha*), those that do not, speak "dialects" (*boli*) – or as the linguist Uriel Weinrich famously remarked in 1945, "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy."

The 2001 Census confirms the truth of this. Although the returns for both Bodo and Maithili have remained roughly the same for the last thirty years – 0.1% and 1.1% of the total population respectively — it is the might they have gained by inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution in 2003 that has led them to be identified as Languages. In fact, distinctions like Scheduled versus non-Scheduled languages, and the inflation of figures for languages like Hindi are crucial tools by which power and prestige are conferred on, and maintained for, certain speech varieties.

Wherever such a prestige hierarchy of language exists, speakers know that claiming a particular language as a mother tongue is therefore not simply a factual identification of the speech variety he/she uses for daily transactions. Rather, it also marks the social value the individual ascribes to her/his language and the community she/he identifies with it. The data that is reported in the Census is therefore involves political choices by speakers.

Three aspects of the politics of language claims and use are therefore worth remarking on. First, speakers of a mother tongue low on the prestige hierarchy typically hesitate to assert that they speak a language distinct from a more prestigious one. For example, speakers of two mother tongues classified as 'dialects' of Hindi from Bihar — Angika and Bajjika – when asked to name their mother tongues, would, in nine cases out of ten, assert it to be Hindi. It is only when there are strong socio-political reasons motivating such an assertion of distinctness becomes possible. Karbi (TB) and Sanskrit (IA) are good examples of this (see Table 2), where both languages

registered improbable spikes of growth in speakers between 1981-1991, in direct connection to the ascendancy of political movements demanding an autonomous State for the Karbis and Hindutva communal mobilisation.

Table 2: Growth of Select Languages - 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001

Language	Persons who returned the language as mother tongue				Decadal percentage increase		
	1971	1981	1991	2001	1971- 1981	1981- 1991	1991- 2001
Gadaba (D)	20,420	28,027	28,158	26,262	37.25	0.47	-6.73
Hindi (IA)	202,767,971	257,749,009	329,518,087	422,048,642	27.12	27.84	28.08
Karbi/Mikir (TB)	199,121	12,600	366,229	419,534	-93.67	2806.58	14.56
Kharia(AA)	191,421	212,605	225,556	239,608	11.07	6.09	6.23
Khond/Kondh(D)	196,316	195,793	220,783	118,597	-0.27	12.76	-46.28
Maithili (IA)	6,130,026	7,522,265	7,766,921	12,179,122	22.71	3.25	56.81
Sanskrit(IA)	2,212	6,106	49,736	14,135	176.04	714.54	-71.58
Santali(AA)	3,786,899	4,332,511	5,216,325	6,469,600	14.41	20.40	24.03
Savara (AA)	222,018	209,092	273,168	252,519	-5.82	30.64	-7.56

The second feature is a national trend in which speakers of low prestige languages begin to give up using them on a daily basis, and to shift to the use of more dominant languages for even in-group communication. It is rare for this trend to show up in quantitatively in Census reports for two reasons: Firstly, as it is the ‘smaller’ languages, with speakers below 10,000, that are most vulnerable to this pressure, information about them does not make it to the Census reports. Secondly, there is usually a significant time lag between the quantitative reflection of shift and the actual event of shift that precedes it, as language and community loyalty encourage speakers to continue to report the language long after they have ceased to use it. The languages Kondh and Gadaba (both D), and Savara (AA), in Table 2, are obvious exemplars of this phenomenon. However, large-scale shift is also believed to be happening amongst Santali and Kharia speakers in some regions.

The third feature is a more cheerful one, as it serves to mitigate the effects of the first two trends – the existence of a persistent and pervasive bi-/multilingualism, by which not only are all States plurilingual units, a large majority of individuals are as well. Indian linguists have long rued the fact that the Indian Union does not acknowledge the extremely important role this feature plays in maintaining equilibrium between majority and minority languages, as the Census does not elicit or record information about bi/multi-lingualism systematically.

In concrete terms, multilingualism effects three important things that undermine hegemony. First, it ensures that the face-off with a hegemonic language is not a struggle of a lone David against Goliath, but rather of many Davids. This ensures that no powerful language aims for the kind of hegemony that will lead to an assured defeat, therefore restricting its ambitions to control over domains like education and administration. Although even so limited a sphere of control has the disastrous consequences for smaller languages mentioned earlier, multilingualism enables smaller languages to survive in the home domain for hundreds of years. Consequently, there is always hope for positive democratic change, by which smaller languages can be revitalised, so that they may develop to a position of equality with the prestigious/powerful languages.

The status of Sanskrit is an instance of this – for close to a thousand years, this prestigious language was the chief vehicle of the (exclusionary and undemocratic) transmission of knowledge; however, today it is this language, rather than the less prestigious Prakrits, that is dead. As Sanskrit-speaking ruling classes could only capture the public domain, the centuries of its dominance had no permanently crippling effect on the less prestigious Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian languages that flourished alongside it.

Multilingualism also engenders a positive attitude towards using and learning new language(s), without prejudice to whether they are 'native' to the community a speaker belongs. As a multilingual speaker knows that she does not use all her languages in identical domains or for identical purposes, she does perceive herself as a locus of language conflict. Thus, for most Bengalis born and brought up in Delhi, Bangla and Hindi are both languages they speak natively, even though there is an asymmetry of use inherent in this bilingualism: while Bangla and Hindi may be spoken at home, only Hindi can be spoken on the bus. Moreover, functionally specialised multilingualism also allows new languages can simply be added on for specialised domains – such as communication for the purposes of work. This is the case with most migrant labour to cities, where new language(s) of the area must be added on if work is to be had.

Finally, multilingualism also dynamically changes the linguistic scenario, by effecting contact and convergence between languages. In such situations, language names in themselves do not always signify the same instrument of communication. The referent of the language name Tamil has changed irrevocably – where once the classical form (*centami*;) of the language was the only form of the language accepted in literature and public events, today, the colloquial (*komuntami*;) form is widely used. Neither is the referent of the name 'Hindi' uniform – the Hindi spoken as a link language in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya (mainly Shillong and other urban areas) has little relation to the Hindi spoken in Uttar Pradesh.

In other cases, new 'mother tongues' like Sadari and Nagamese, have emerged. These languages were once mainly languages of the bazaar and for communication with others outside one's speech community, but today, are also languages of in-group communication. The case of Chattisgarhi, the official language of the newer State of Chattisgarh, is indicative of the affinity that speakers have for such contact languages, and the political value they ascribe to them. In a majority Gond tribal State, which also has large minorities of Kurux/Oraon, Korwa, Munda, and Kharia tribes, it is politically expedient to adopt as an official language one that no-one claims exclusive ownership of.

In another part of India, State-fostered multilingualism has created a complex language situation. In Tripura, the Left Front government's decision to adopt Kokborok as an associate official language of the State (along with the majority language Bangla), and this has seen mother tongue claims for Kokborok rise from only 3 (female) speakers in the 1961 census, to 761,964 in the 2001 Census. ³ In the subsequent laudable efforts to further the use of Kokborok in education and other institutions, a standard form of the language is being developed, using the language of the Debbarma tribe. This has not – as far as one can rely on reports – aroused much opposition, because of a widespread agreement on the need for the development of a written standard (and script) for the Tripuri tribal communities. The Tripura experiment thus suggests that as long as the agenda of language standardisation can be kept distinct from a project of cultural homogenisation, it will receive support from the people.

THE PROPOSAL FOR A NEW LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA

From the discussion, thus far it is clear that serious changes in the government's perspective on India's linguistic diversity are needed. However, before changes in institutionalised procedures such as the Census can be effected, the complexities of the language situation, from the very local to the national need to be understood more clearly. The proposal for a new Linguistic Survey of India (NLSI) by University linguists and the CIIL was guided by this understanding, as well as the belief that the future of Indian languages should not be determined by a hundred year-old survey dating from colonial times

In content, methodology, and outcomes, the NLSI will be as distinct as possible from "an exercise carried out by administrative and political agencies". The survey proposes to harness the

“creative and intellectual energies of the Indian people” through the participation of individuals/communities that speak these languages, in the gathering of the data and the creation of resources that ... [it] will generate.”⁴ It aims to train native speakers as linguists – already two large training camps with over a thousand people from diverse communities have been organised by the CIIL — so that the expertise necessary for sustained language vitalisation is available within language communities.

Although reasons of space prevent further elaboration of the proposed outcomes, broadly, the outcomes of the NLSI can be categorised into three:

- *A Profile of the Indian Linguistic Space* in terms of the structure of its speech varieties (based on structure, socio-cultural role, demography, and location), their distribution, and the bi/multilingual repertoires.
- *A Catalogue of the Expression of Indian Linguistic Diversity* for each speech variety, for both oral and written language/literary artefacts.
- *A Knowledge Base* for each speech variety, which will set the initial conditions under which the potential of the diverse Indian languages to interface with education, language technology and other technological advancements may be realised.

The NLSI is not only an essential initial step for ensuring the vibrancy of India’s languages, it is also necessary if the threats posed by globalisation to the Indian people. In the last decade or so, however, linguists worldwide have sounded the alarm that globalisation pose a very grave danger to the world’s smaller languages. Current estimates by linguists like David Crystal⁵ suggest that only 600 of the world’s currently estimated 6,000 or so languages are “safe” from the threat of extinction. Romaine and Nettle (2000) claim that about half of its languages will die by 2050.⁶

Although this literature tends to focus too much on the role of prestige languages, and too little on the resistance afforded by multilingualism, the displacement and the impoverishment that globalisation entails, sharpens inequalities between peoples and their languages, and encourages language shift. But that is not all.

Global capital also does something else – and this is less often remarked upon it seeks to exploit the anger and anguish of people speaking vanishing languages in its scramble for resources. Since the mid-1990s, a number of international institutions funding endangered language/community documentation have gained considerable influence in linguistics and anthropology. In recent times, state-funded agencies of European and North American countries, as well as privately funded foundations such as the Chirac Foundation⁷ have made an entry into the area, and in many of these new players’ statements of intent is embedded reference of the sort that one finds on the Chirac Foundation’s website:

“Global society, if it is to have a future, must be founded upon the recognition of the great variety of resources and ways of life existing across the planet, thereby acknowledging the urgency of protecting bio-cultural diversity. Globalisation offers a historic opportunity to humanity owing to its ability to create networks and linkages and to the cultural and scientific resources it makes available to us to meet these challenges that will determine the future of our species.”

Across the board, it is rare for endangered language document-ation projects to actually link up to national projects of democratisation. Even though there are spiels of community ‘ownership’ and ‘empowerment’, they are always offset by the ruling dictum – language is an “international resource”, just as the Amazonian rainforests are, whose riches must be laid open for exploitation by the ‘international community’.

At the same time, even as we dismiss this spurious commitment to linguistic diversity as a mere reprise of imperialism’s initial forays into the New World —where the grammarian and the

lexicographer hurry in, in the wake of the *conquistador* and the missionary, to mop up the last crumbs of knowledge left on the plate of the last native speaker — we must also recognise that India has to become more responsive and responsible to the multilingual nature of its people and their languages, large or small, if we are to succeed in thwarting these designs.

THE ROLE OF THE LEFT

Historically the Left the world over, and particularly in India has refused the comfort of averting its gaze from the difficulties posed by linguistic diversity for nations and nationhood. In the Soviet Union, it argued that: “equal rights of nations in all forms (language, schools, etc.) is an essential element in the solution of the national question. Consequently, a state law based on complete democratisation of the country is required, prohibiting all national privileges without exception and every kind of disability or restriction on the rights of national minorities. That, and that alone, is the real, not a paper, guarantee of the rights of a minority.”⁸

In India, the Communist Party it led powerful struggles for the linguistic reorganisation of States in Kerala, Andhra, Maharashtra, when the Indian National Congress retreated from its earlier commitment to a dissolution of princely states and the provincial division of the country on a linguistic basis. These struggles resulted in the appointment of the State Reorganisation Commission in 1954. A different kind of struggle is now required to take that agenda of democratisation forward – one that demands both a full accounting of the linguistic diversity of India as well as a new set of measures to preserve and foster this wealth.

NOTES

- 1 The proposed NLSI has been reported to Parliament on a number of occasions, most notably by the MoS of State, MHRD in the Rajya Sabha (18 December 2006), and in the Lok Sabha (5 December 2006 and 13 March 2007). The MoS, Ministry of Home Affairs also reported the same in the Rajya Sabha (29 August 2007).
- 2 The Eighth Schedule to the Indian Constitution contains a list of 22 scheduled languages. Inclusion in this list is of great importance, as it obligates the Government of India to take measures for the development of these languages, such that “they grow rapidly in richness and become effective means of communicating modern knowledge (*Official Languages Resolution*, 1968, para. 4). In addition, a candidate appearing in an examination conducted for public service at a higher level is entitled to use any of the scheduled languages as the medium in which she answers the paper.
- 3 This is not to imply that there is no dissent with regards the acceptance of Kokborok. Sections of the Reang tribe have objected to the “imposition” of Kokborok, and this can clearly be seen from Census 2001, where mother tongue claims for a Reang language (also named Kaibru or Bru) number 76,450. Just as is true for the rest of India, there is an obvious connection here – Reang mother tongue claims are explicable in the larger context of the secessionist and terrorist movements of the NLFT and the BNLF.
- 4 Mission Statement of the NLSI Proposal Document.
- 5 6 Crystal, D. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 7 Nettle, D. and S. Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- 8 Funders include the pharmaceutical giant Sanofi-Aventis, Schneider Electric, Gaz de France. Members of the board include Kofi Annan, top officials of investment banks, fruit trading companies, and former heads of funding agencies like the French Development Agency and the IMF. There is not one linguist on the board – the only sop to academia is the membership of one Professor emeritus in history of Islamic thought.
- 9 J. V. Stalin. 1913. *Marxism and the National Question*.