A provocation to write

In June 2019, the BJP-led Govt of India formulated the draft National Educational Policy (NEP), which made Hindi mandatory in schools in non-Hindi speaking states. Following a backlash, especially from Tamil Nadu and other southern states, the draft was quickly withdrawn and altered, and so we now have the continuation of the three-language formula.

The matter seems to have been laid to rest, as if all parties concerned have understood that we now have the perfect solution. Anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu have a long history. There have been riots against the possible imposition of Hindi as the (sole) official language since 1937; this was followed by violent protests when the matter came up again in 1965, and smaller agitations in 1968 and 1986.

Since 1967, the Congress government led by Mrs Gandhi assured that there will be an indefinite policy of both Hindi and English for the Indian Republic. The draft NEP in its present form seems to accept English grudgingly. The NEP reads “.... English has no advantage over other languages in expressing thoughts; on the contrary, Indian languages have been specifically developed over centuries and generations to express thoughts in the Indian scenario, climate, and culture.”

Later, the Policy refers to the “apnaapan” quality of the Indian languages that makes them easier to relate, to learn and speak in the Indian context. Though the Policy now grants the possibility that all Indian languages have this “homely feel”, it still chose Hindi as the mandatory medium of education.

As expected, some politicians without a clue about what language is, made their thoughts vocal. The Union Minister, DV Sadananada Gowda, said, There will be no imposition of any kind and regional issues will be taken care of by the central government. The Bengaluru South BJP MP, Tejasvi Surya, said that the opposition to Hindi was an act of ‘Breaking India forces’. Through Twitter, he conveyed that, As a Kannadiga who is proud of my mother tongue, its beauty, history & contribution to Bharat’s rich culture, I feel a few aspects of the National Education Policy 2019 Draft have been twisted, misinterpreted & misunderstood to say govt is trying to impose Hindi. It is anybody’s guess what he means. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK chief, Stalin, called the imposition of Hindi a ‘big shocker’, and that such a decision would divide the country. The Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) quoted Anil Shidore and said that Hindi is not their ‘mother tongue’ and did not want it imposed. It is unfortunate that decisions about such a matter as language, and its enormous diversity, are left to our politicians. Seldom has any one of them recommended the learning of many languages, or suggested that new languages could broaden perspectives and improve relations between peoples.

A little background

Before going into the danger and the bias of imposing Hindi (or any language) as an official and national language of the country, it would help if we lay out the wonderful linguistic diversity of India. In the Descent of Man, Darwin had observed that “the formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that they have both been developed through a gradual process, are curiously parallel” [Darwin, 1871: 450]. Biodiversity and species loss have been much in the news and, thanks to conservationists, most people have some inkling about what their extinction means. Language loss, on the other hand, is a far more subtle process, and when a language disappears, very few people are aware of the gravity of what that entails. Each of the world’s languages – and dialects – could be seen as a specific way of experiencing the universe and expressing it. Over thousands of years, our ancestors have spread and discovered and inhabited much of the liveable niches on earth, where each niche is a base as well as a vantage point from which to observe the rest of the world and to put them all into words!

Whether or not it is true that the Inuit language has a hundred words for snow, most human cultures have evolved in specific environments and their languages are rich with words and metaphors that describe the natural world, or aspects of it. Collective observation and internalization of natural phenomena over many generations have led to an understanding of how nature works, or doesn’t work, as well as a means to describe this through different languages. Each language may be seen as a particular window to the world, allowing a unique view of grasping and expressing the material and non-material circumstances in our lives. Not unlike the threat to various biological species, many of which are now extinct, languages too have become threatened and some are eventually no longer spoken, though this fact and its consequences are less commonly known. For instance, before contact with the Americas was made, there were about 300 Native American languages spoken in that continent; today only about 175 of these are spoken to some extent, with only 8 of them having at least 10,000 speakers, and 142 of them spoken only by some elderly people, with less than 1000 speakers, and practically on their way out. Today, it is English and Spanish that are spoken widely (and Portuguese in Brazil) and known as the languages of the Americas, with Chinese and Khmer catching up through the presence of immigrants.
The number of mother tongues reported during the Language Census of India in 2011 – a recording based on respondents' answers to a direct question, without any alteration or suggestion by the questioner – was 19,569. This large number was then grouped into 1,369 rationalized mother tongues and 1,474 names, through the use of the ‘unclassified’ category and relegation to ‘other mother tongue’ category. After applying linguistic methods to classify these results, a total of 121 languages were arrived at. These languages are the 22 languages that are included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, and the other 99 languages which are not included in the Eighth Schedule; the latter category includes a further set of languages and mother tongues whose speakers number < 10,000.

In India there are more than 270 mother tongues that have more than 10,000 speakers – 123 of which are Scheduled Languages – of which only 22 are in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The other 147 mother tongues are grouped within the Non-Scheduled languages. Hindi is listed as having 528.35 million speakers, and so this is often used to justify it as a natural contender to be a national language. But this figure is completely misleading, as it includes speakers of more than 55 other mother tongues; their elimination from the larger figure leaves only 322.23 million speakers. The percentage of total population who are Hindi speakers is given as 43.63, using the former figure; however, after subtracting the number of speakers of the 55 distinct mother tongues that are not Hindi, we get a percentage of 27.51, which, although significant, is much lower than what is claimed. The languages that follow Hindi, in terms of the numbers of speakers, are Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Kannada, Odia, Malayalam, Punjabi, Assamese and Maithili, in that order. The Census shows that the scheduled languages (and the mother tongues grouped under these) are spoken by 96.71 % of the population; the other languages are spoken by the remaining 3.29% of the people. However, these figures hide the myriad tongues allied but not the same as the listed Scheduled languages, and the number of people who speak them. These languages include Awadh, Bhojpuri, Chhattisgarhi, Kumauni, Laria, Mewari, Surgujia, Badaga, Kishthwari, Nawat, Koli, Bhatri, Parja, Desia, Bagri, Kachchhi, Irula, Yerukula, Vadari, Bhansari, etc., all of which are as valid a means of communication as any Scheduled or Non-Scheduled language. But very few people outside of the states where these languages are spoken would have even heard of them.

English, our other official language, which is widely seen as an elite language, is listed as a Scheduled language with, 259,679 speakers, and afforded official status. It is noteworthy that 41% of English speakers reside in Maharashtras; other states having a sizable number of English speakers are Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and West Bengal. The draft NEP asks, with an undisguised tinge of envy:

“Whatever is the reason that English is being pursued by so many in India as a medium of instruction and of conversation, when most other technologically advanced countries of the world have naturally kept their own native languages for these purposes? The answer, of course, is that, since Independence, the economic elite of India have adopted English as their language; only about 15% of the country speaks English, and this population almost entirely coincides with the economic elite (compared with, e.g. 54% of Indians who speak Hindi).”

It is significant that 75-90% of scientific journals are entirely in English and even non-English speaking countries communicate – at least about their subjects – in English. The dominance of English in India merely follows this pattern of pragmatism, and the need to reach out internationally, even though there is an elitist attached to the language; but this factor is fading away in contemporary times. One does not (normally) choose to speak a language after checking out whether it is phonetic or has a certain number of retroflex consonants. On the contrary, it is languages that usually confront and choose us, and if they offer advantages by knowing them, we try and learn them. Any language (or at least several words and concepts) of people with new technologies or ideas – such as the plough and farming in historical times, or a Windows Operating System in ours – tend to be adopted by whoever encounters them. The choices are very limited.

Conclusion

When two languages are spoken in the same region or area, the encounter is between a privileged group (sometimes the conquerors) and a less dominant, subject people, with each group having its own language. It has been noted that in all cases it is the lower (or less privileged language) that borrows from the upper. “…. If the upper language survives, it remains as it was except for a few cultural loans, such as might take from any neighbour…. If the lower language survives, it bears the marks of the struggle in the shape of copious borrowings. English, with its loan words from Norman-French and its enormous layer of semi-learned (Latin-French) vocabulary is the classical instance of this [Renfrew, 1987: 112].”

Despite India’s Austroasiatic-Dravidian past [Schulman, 2016: 16-17], it is the Indo-European languages that dominate in India; there is no real need to impose a further official justification for their spread, as it seems to be happening anyway. The 21 Indo-European languages of India are spoken by 78% of the people, whereas the 17 Dravidian languages are spoken by 19. 64% of the population. Other language families in India, such as the Austroasiatic and the Tibe-Burmanese, are spoken by only 1.11 and 1.01 percent of the population respectively, though there exist 80 languages between these two families.

It is curious that there has been a drive to push Hindi at the cost of other languages in the country even though Hindi shows a consistent decadal percentage increase over the years, averaging more than 25% each decade; the only language that shows a larger increase (75%) is Sanskrit, which is also a Scheduled language, although with only 24,821 speakers. Even if this is inevitable, given the political reality of the country, what remains hidden is the decline in the number of speakers of the lesser known languages, which succumb to competing languages in their area (following the dominant-privilege dynamics outlined above), or give way to the state language in which school education and all official business is carried on, despite political promises and the wishes about primary education in the mother tongue. To elucidate, we can see how the number of Halbi speakers has increased over the decades from 346,000 in 1971 to 766,000 in 2011, a decadal increase of 29.13%. Simultaneously, the number of Parji 1 speakers in the area has declined from 7.39 million to 5.24 million in the same period, a decadal decrease of 29.13%.

What is eventually lost is not just a language but a cultural perception of the world grounded in a particular history and experience. Alarming decadal percentage declines have been registered in Bhumij, Korwa, Ladhaki, Lahauli, Monpa, Phom and Sema, amongst others; the first two are Austroasiatic and the rest are Tibe-Burmanese languages. Some of the reasons that Anderson (2012: 46-48) mentions for the conservation of languages spoken by indigenous peoples are:- (a) the unique knowledge about the natural world and the flora and fauna that many isolated and scarcely populated societies preserve, which are impossible to translate into modern languages like English and Spanish; many works about the ethno-botany of the Santhals, Maya or other indigenous peoples may be of value to future generations; (b) most of the world’s languages have no written form but are the mainstays of cultural identity; language is the essential link to the peoples’ history and cultural patrimony, and we are ethically bound to help preserve this aspect of humanity; and (c) scientific reasons as in the understanding of the nature of language itself. Languages have been discovered that ‘make use of sounds involving the articulation of the tongue against the upper lip’, something not considered possible by linguists [Anderson, 2012: 47-48]; there are languages where the verb of a sentence agrees...
not with the subject but with the possessor of the subject [Anderson, 2012: 47-48]; or, where nouns, and not verbs, mark the tense [Anderson, 2012: 48]. Many of the lesser known languages, spoken only by a few people in the remoter parts of the world, succumb to the dominant languages that surround them, even before they are understood fully and lead to the discovery of the full range of human potential, not only in phonetics and phonology, but in the perception of the world. The opposition to the government’s intention to make Hindi mandatory in schools would have been an ideal moment for India to introspect on what it means to be such a language-rich country. It would have been an opportunity to take stock of the languages we have and those that are threatened, of those that require support in terms of documentation before they disappear, and how to honestly – and not just on paper – promote education in mother tongues. But none of this happened. The moment the “Hindi” issue cropped up, it became a political stand-off, instead of leading to a fruitful debate about what languages and linguistic diversity indicate about our sub-continent, and how such richness can be conserved. And so, once again the issue has been brushed under the carpet, and our ever-present notion of the vote-bank and other populist ideals have taken precedence. The present calm has lulled us to believe that nothing is the matter. The storm of linguistic decline is yet to unfold.

References
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