

Why our bias against oral cultures insults India's rich linguistic heritage

Author - Rajaraman Sundaresan, Published on - 4.9.2017

As a nation, we must focus more on language diversity rather than obsessing over language divides. In 1980s, at an international survival gathering on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a member of the Ogalala Lakota tribe, Russell Means – probably the most outspoken leader amongst the American native tribes – famously proclaimed: “For the world to live, Europe must die”. Russell detested writing. He felt, writing epitomised the Europeans concept of legitimate thinking. In many ways, he was one of those leaders of an era who went beyond the McLuhanesque of “the medium is the message” to “I speak, therefore I am”. Text, he believed, was more or less like a trap within which modes of thought gets restricted. He felt the textual way of representation lacked poetry and the capacity to retain the memories of centuries old wisdom. He took immense pride in his own culture of orality, which he felt was a different way of thinking and imagining the world. Today, we have many advanced computer technologies and mobile language designs, but many don't realise that the origins of texts began with technologising the spoken words as written scripts. This is not to undermine textual cultures and the vastness of the rich literature they have captured over centuries; rather a questioning of sort of the hegemonisation of textual cultures as a mode of thought in the modern world which has subverted oral cultures as inferior and underdeveloped. In fact, to a great extent, we treat imparting literacy as the first step to modernisation within schools. Educational institutions rather than being a gateway of accessing knowledge have become centres of immunising literacy as a vaccine. Schools across the world are great examples of this model. It is as if, injecting the literacy vaccine is part of the ritual, of the rites to passage from the so-called primitive to a civilised world. In fact, to a certain extent, one feels that all that the human development indices worry about is the percentage of literate population within a certain geographical location. One of the greatest examples of this is how illiterates, time and again, are portrayed as people who have no prior knowledge, and it's only when they get literacy or are schooled, they can be deemed as educated. This, in fact, makes educational institutions a symbol, of the new kind of cultural racism that they are propagating. Schools and universities as institutions, of official knowledge generation, have historically discriminated against oral knowledge systems and further have created an intergenerational gap within communities whose children largely feel displaced from



their own cultural roots.

One of the most affected and victimised communities due to this institutional cultural racism are the indigenous peoples. There are more than 370 million indigenous people living across 90 countries in the world. The situation of these people is very critical because they face systemic discrimination and are primarily excluded from the socio-political and economic decision-making process of the country. In India, development as a process alone has displaced more than one million people in the country, among which 70 per cent are adivasis. The representation of these people as poor, destitute, illiterate, savage and underdeveloped has in itself become a way of mainstream identifying these people who carry highly rich knowledge in terms of their understanding of life worlds. The bias one feels is very much rooted in the ideology of modern science and scientific thinking. In fact, it's time we start working towards a composite culture of sciences which takes the ideas of oral science, textual science and digital science seriously. The historical injustices on these people need rethinking and a self-conscious policy making that not only protects their constitutional rights but also goes beyond in democratising knowledge as a part of their fundamental right. A knowledge democracy can only be functional if we create spaces of dialogues, where various epistemologies converse together. Schools and universities rather than being facilitators of the process have become double-edged swords. India, which is celebrated for its diversity, is home to around 780 spoken languages. One of the greatest threats that remain in their survival is a government policy on language itself, which does not acknowledge languages which are spoken by people less than 10,000 in number. Ganesh Devy, India's foremost literary critic, puts it brilliantly when he says, “Each language is a unique world view. It captures the imagination and the memory transactions of its speakers. So, you have over 130 words for snow in the Himalayan languages, for example.” As a nation we need to focus more on language diversity than playing importance to the ongoing debate on language divide. We need to understand that language diversity will help us in bridging the gaps present in the knowledge sustainability discourse. The language of inclusion has to go beyond access to education, rights and justice to plurality, co-existence and justice. First published by [Daily O](#)