Multilinguality in Classrooms: Looking at Primary Education in West Bengal

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Multiplicity of forms is inherent to human language and culture. The world has witnessed an unequal distribution of power, especially in connection to language. Education is one such crucial domain in which the effect of this unequal distribution of power as a result of language can be seen. This linguistic imbalance in the field of education has caused much anxiety and tension. However, human societies have always been multilingual and multicultural, and education systems of different ages have always accommodated these differences. In the 21st century, there has been a renewed vigour and interest in educational alternatives that create space for multilinguality in schools. Mother tongue based multilingual education has become the main model of education to ensure equal access of education to all and quality education for all. But can we really hope to implement practically what we talk about in theory∫

In this paper, our main objective is to look at primary education in West Bengal and to examine how existing educational practices are incorporating or creating space for multilingual education. We will try to look at the problems faced by primary school teachers, the central educational surveys, and finally, the language of the textbooks. In our argument, we will take the cue from three main resources: 1) The 7th and 8th All India School Education Survey (AISES) Report, 2) Eighty-eight short articles written by primary school teachers on the linguistic problems faced by them in their classrooms and published by Pratichi Institute (2012), and 3) A brief critical analysis of a chapter from a Class III first language textbook, *Patabahar*; this book is used in the primary schools under the West Bengal Board of Primary Education.

Since an educational system is likely to be shaped by socio-political intentions, any type of analysis presupposes a basic understanding of the ground itself. The geopolitical area we have concentrated upon is West Bengal, where the majority of the primary schools are Bengali medium schools, with a few Hindi, Urdu, Santhali and Nepali medium primary schools. In urban and sub-urban localities, there are many expensive private English medium primary schools. However in the rural areas, government schools are often the sole place for primary schooling. The rural population of West Bengal includes 38 notified ST communities. Out of this only Santhali speakers have a provision for mother tongue education. The other communities have no choice but to enter into a non-mother-tongue educational system which comprises mostly Bengali or Hindi medium schools. However, other than Kolkata and its surroundings, especially in many rural belts, the regional varieties of Bangla are so different from the standard variety that for many learners, "mother-tongue education" is just an official declaration, not a real one. As a consequence,

the performance in the educational sector is extremely poor. The Educational Development Index (EDI), NUEPA (2012-13) gave West Bengal an EDI score of 0.527, ranking it at number 31 out of a total of 35 states and union territories. The dropout rates among the social groups in West Bengal are: SC – Primary: 15.1%; Upper-Primary: 32.4%; ST– Primary: 20.7%; Upper-Primary: 38.3% (NUEPA, 2013).

It can be assumed that mother tongue education and multilingual education protect the linguistic human rights of a child, but often inter-language discrimination is given more importance. In fact, very little attention has been paid to intra-language discrimination, popularly known as "language-dialect" discrimination (Blommaert, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 2001) and its impact on education. Not only has this discrimination had a long drawn impact on the educational system, but it has also raised some very fundamental questions about linguistic human rights, such as whether textbook language and classroom interaction in a particular standard variety of a language provide "vernacular education" or "mother tongue education" to a child from a remote rural place. A look at the educational scenario of West Bengal confirms the validity of the question. The regional varieties of Bangla are often very different from Standard Colloquial Bengali (SCB). For the speakers of these regional varieties, being "Bangali" (Bengali speaker) is just a political identity. The long history of the demand for a separate linguistic identity by the Rajbanshi people (Rajbanshi language is often identified as a dialect of Bengali) is perhaps the most politically prominent example of the standard language-dialect conflict in the context of West Bengal. However, as primary level classrooms are not open to multilingual practice in the teaching-

learning process, neither any minor language, nor any regional variety of Bangla finds a place in education.

With this understanding, let us now move on to see how multilinguality is actually finding its place in the primary classrooms across the state.

Data I: Official Accounts of Multilingual Practice in Primary Schools
a)   The following pie chart shows the numbers of schools of West Bengal that use one, two and three or more languages as the medium of instruction as per the 7th AISES report. It is clear that there is an unequal distribution of monolingual vs. multilingual schools in this state.
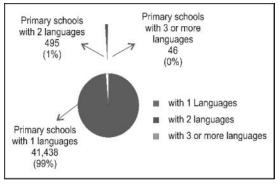

Figure 1. Schools using one, two or three or more languages as the medium of instruction (Adapted from the 7th AISES report).

b)   As per the 8th AISES report, versus the 7th survey, there is a 5.42 per cent reduction in the number of primary schools across India that use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Though there is an increase of 1.37 per cent in the number of schools with multiple mediums of instruction (13.51 per cent in the 8th survey versus 12.14 per cent in the 7th survey), these figures still show disparity between monolingual and

multilingual schools, as is seen in the 7th AISES report.

Data II: Teachers' Perception on the Language Issue

In 2012, Pratichi Institute, the research wing of Pratichi (India) Trust, conducted ten workshops involving 348 teachers from 8 districts of West Bengal. In these workshops, there was no specific module or list of variables on which the teachers were expected to comment; instead they were asked to share their personal experiences. All of them accounted in writing the problems they faced every day while teaching—the challenges faced by the students of rural and sub-urban schools as they had noticed, the lack of resources and funding, the effect of poverty and illiteracy of the parents, administrative problems, and problems regarding teaching-learning materials. From these accounts, Pratichi selected 88 writings and published *Kalamchari.* Despite being quite predictable, the outcome was linguistically intriguing. In 54 out of the 88 writings, language was identified as the zone of discomfort for both students and teachers. It was also one of the major reasons behind the academic failure of rural, especially tribal students.
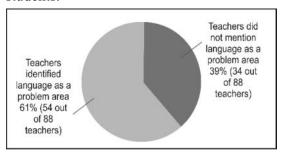

Figure 2. As per *Kalamchari* report, the percentage of teachers who identified language as a problem area of learning.

However, the problem of language is not restricted to students belonging to tribal groups with no infrastructure of mother tongue education. The report also indicates that it is also faced by Bengali speaking students, both rural and urban.

Data III: Language Preference of Textbook and Exercise

In the present mainstream educational practice of our country, textbooks are the most crucial tools in the teaching-learning process. They are often also the only tangible educational device that students can carry home and in which they can search for prescribed knowledge beyond the domain of school. However, textbooks continue to be standard language-centric and monolingual in spite of their drawbacks as pointed out by the teachers, and continue to contribute to academic failure and dropping out of school among rural and economically challenged first generation learners. To support this point, we would like to present a brief linguistic analysis of a chapter from a Class III language textbook *Patabahar.* The text "*Nijer Hate Nijer Kaj*" serves as an example where, apart from being a strictly monolingual text, the vocabulary has a high occurrence of less frequently used sanskritised words. These words are known as *tatsama* or *sadhu* words in Bangla. The word *tatsama* is composed of two units, *tat-*, meaning "his" and *sama* meaning "same as". Hence, *tatsama* refers to the words that are the "same as his", i.e. the words of the Sanskrit language. The word *sadhu* means 'pure or sacred'. Both words actually refer to the sacred position of Sanskrit. Many *tatsama* or *sadhu* words have more frequently used alternatives in colloquial Bangla. But in praxis, textbooks do not often

opt for such commonly used words. In the text from *Patabahar*, 13 per cent of the total words are from less frequently used sanskritised vocabulary (Figure 3), which can be easily substituted. This point can be elucidated with an example from the text. Let us look at the following sentence from page 14, line 3:

tāi tini kulike ʃeke tār hāte paysā dite gelen pāriśramik hisabe.

[tai tini kulike ʃeke tar hate pʃeʃa dite gelen parisromik hisabe]

"Hence he called the porter and offered him money as his compensation."

In this sentence, the word *pāriśramik* [parisromik] "compensation or fee" which is a *tatsama* word can be replaced with *majuri* [mojuri], its colloquial counterpart as both words indicate the same meaning.
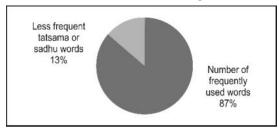

Figure 3. Percentage of less frequent *tatsama* or *sadhu* words in the text.

A look at the exercise reveals that 40 per cent of the questions are related to the 13 per cent sanskritised words (Figure 4).
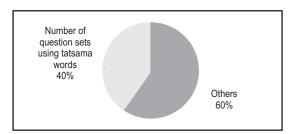

Figure 4. Percentage of drills based on *tatsama* or *sadhu* words in comparison to others.

The over fascination for sanskritised words increases gradually in the following chapters. This unequal distribution of interest in the sanskritised versus non-sanskritised division may be seen as a search for the sacred genealogical past of Bangla that binds it with Sanskrit.

What do we get from the Data?

The accounts of the teachers, given in Data II place the learners in different zones of linguistic discomfort that affects their academic performance. This discomfort is caused by a lack of understanding of the textbook language and the language of classroom interaction. The reasons for this have been theoretically addressed from various angles:

1) Inter-language discrimination faced by students from different minority language groups and migrant communities.

2) Intra-language discrimination, an issue often less discussed also has an impact on the learning process.

3) The difference between restricted and elaborated code (Bernstein, 1971) that plays a major role in academic achievement.

A close observation reveals a common thread in all the approaches—possession of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) in one group over others. These "others" are different in nature and hence their heterogeneity has provided them with different kinds of access to "the language" required for academic achievement. The linguistic challenges faced by them cannot be defined solely on the basis of language; socio-economic factors become crucial here. To understand these factors, we will

try to present a broad categorisation of these students based on their socio-economic, regional and linguistic backgrounds that can be co-related with linguistic understanding of the learning materials.

1.	Urban and suburban, upper middle class and upper class, third or at least second generation learners from families where adult members have a good understanding of written and spoken SCB.
2.	Urban and suburban, lower middle and lower economic class, first and often second generation learners from families where adult members have an understanding of spoken SCB but minimal exposure to written texts.
3.	Rural, middle and lower economic class, mostly first generation learners from families where adult members have a minimal understanding of SCB.
4.	Rural, first generation learners belonging to various scheduled tribes.

The distance between 1 and the rest is deliberate, as it symbolically represents the distance between the academic achievements among these students. The children belonging to the first group mainly go to English medium schools. Very few of them, if any study in government or government aided schools. These children have a very poor understanding of written Bengali; but the reasons for this lie in the anglophile attitude that our country has inherited from its colonial past. However, our present paper is mainly concerned with the students of government and government aided primary schools of West Bengal. For them, the language of the textbook and classroom interaction becomes a challenge in different degrees. If we compare the above categorisation of students with the level of difficulty in understanding the language of textbook and classroom interaction, we will get the following levels:

i. Students belonging to the first group, who chose to opt for English medium primary schools, have good to fair understanding of sentence construction and vocabulary.

ii. Students belonging to the second group have a fair to moderate understanding of sentence construction. They can also understand classroom interaction better than the other two groups (group 3 and 4). But they face problems in the vocabulary level, especially in *tatsama* and semi-*tatsama* words. Lack of comprehension often results in a lower standard of writing than expected in their answer scripts.

iii. From the third group onwards, academic failure becomes alarmingly severe. With special guidance from the teachers most of these students are reported to have moderate to minimal understanding of sentence construction and vocabulary, but production skills (speaking and writing) are a real challenge for them. The lack of ability seen in their language production often points towards a lack of comprehension. For these students, "mother-tongue education" is merely a declaration. Prolonged experience of academic failure due to the inability to understand textbook content and classroom interactions often breaks the confidence of these students, pushing them further into the culture of silence.

iv. We can clearly predict the level of understanding with regard to textbooks and classroom interaction of the students belonging to the fourth group; and it is virtually "no understanding at all". This is because in the primary schools of West

Bengal, there is no provision for bi/multilingual educational practice. As a result, students belonging to language groups other than those in the primary schools do not have the linguistic support required to bridge the gap between the first language and the language in educational practice for non-mother tongue speakers. While linguists talk about the practice of coordinating bi/multilingualism in primary level education to protect the linguistic rights of students, there is no provision even for transitional bi/multilingualism to facilitate the learning process of these students.

The statistics given in Data I reveal that here is a preference for monolingual practice in the educational domain over multilinguality. Hence, for most of the students, monolingual schools are the only places for formal schooling. From Data III we can conclude that these "mono" or "lone" language textbooks written in SCB, along with the frequent use of uncommon sanskritised words, only cater to the students belonging to group 1. For the rest (who are actually the majority), the level of understanding continues to decrease. The myth of a homogenous "mother tongue" for all learners residing in a geo-politically defined area squeezes them under the umbrella of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) on the basis of language. In spite of an increasing number of talks on the positive impact of multilingual education, its theory and practice is marked with considerable differences. Moreover, educational practice shows a decreasing space for multilinguality. This assumption is reaffirmed by data from the 5th, 6th and 7th AISES reports (see *Table 1* below), which show a decline in the number of languages in the list of "the medium of instruction in schools".

Stages	Fifth Survey	Sixth Survey	Seventh Survey
Primary	43	33	26
Upper Primary	31	25	23
Secondary	22	21	20
Senior Secondary	20	18	18

Table 1: Medium of Instruction (number of languages), Adapted from 7th AISES

The above data sets off alarm bells. A decrease in the number of Indian languages used in the classroom has a direct impact on the individuals' right and is a gross violation of the constitutional provisions proposed to secure the rights of individuals. However, the issue is not restricted only to the teaching of Indian languages in schools; it also involves the effective use of Indian languages in dispersing knowledge in Indian classrooms. There should be enough provision to teach and learn topics of different disciplines in all Indian languages. Therefore, an effective policy should pay attention to the considerable increase of the functional load of Indian language. Indian languages restricted only to the domain of literary studies cannot help us to secure the goal we are looking for in this highly technocratic world. For the part of the learners, being unable to study a subject in one's own language creates severe problems of incomprehensiveness, resulting either in poor academic performance or in the increasing rate of dropouts from schools.

The central problem in this issue is the lack of text book materials in local languages. Those

who are interested in solving the problem express their frustration at not having enough teaching learning materials (TLM) in local languages. Others, who are interested in an English-only-model, express their blind faith in the inability of the "vernaculars" to express modern knowledge. In one way or the other, both groups agree on the point that Indian languages are of hardly any use in teaching and learning due to the lack of TLMs. However, this is not a new or recent view. In 1915, Tagore also spoke of this issue in his work on education. What seems to be of interest is Tagore's response where he clearly argues that TLM will never develop in Indian languages until and unless teachers show creative capacity in delivering the content in local languages. To us, this creative act is not merely an act of translation; it also includes a process of situating the global appeal of knowledge in a local context.

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