The Politics of English Language in India

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Language is intrinsic to our existence. The role of language in politics can be only understood, if we realize what language means for an individual at a personal level, as only then can we perhaps appreciate its role in collective forums where politics gets manifested.

According to Sapir (1933), language may not only refer to experience or even interpret experience, but that it also substitutes for it in the sense that in those sequences of interpersonal behavior which form the greater part of our daily lives speech and action supplement each other. Language and experience are closely intertwined and this is an important reason of symbolism in language.

In a society, we live together expressing our thoughts and feelings and understand the thoughts and feelings of those around us. We pursue common ends, and engage with the people around us for working and living together. There is an innate need to make ourselves understood and to understand what others are saying around us, about things happening around us, about possibilities for the future, and about solutions to problems around us. How can that need be met but through the use of language?

According to Britton (1971), "We become experienced people in the light of other people's experiences as well as our own". We learn through others' experience largely through language. We can see how important language is in making us who we are. It is to be noted that all this is possible because there is a community of people that is able to comprehend and communicate in that language. The more the number of speakers of a given language, the higher the repertoire of experience that the language carries with it. Hence over time, this leads to a self-reinforcing mechanism of strengthening that language further.

The other question to be looked at is: what makes language such an important marker of identity?

There are several markers of identity of an individual. But in a society, some identities play a more dominant role than others. Things such as one's food habits, or the sports one likes, or the kind of movies, are apolitical markers of identity. However, language essentially allows us to relate to the world around us, and predominantly if not completely, determines our social presence. The second aspect that gives language such a significant position is that as human beings, we essentially grow into a language and also through it much before we actually start looking at some other language speaker as different from us. For example a 3-4 year old child cannot have any political inclination. However, by the time the child becomes capable enough to start seeing how language is used as an instrument to shape societies, the language/ languages in which he can express himself best, become his own. Thus he /she interprets the larger world through that lens. Therefore, unless a person does not adopt an objective view to the linguistic issue, that person is highly susceptible to the political rhetoric of a language. An example of this is

the connotation around the phrase *'Marathi Manoos'* in the state of Maharashtra. The two words collectively refer to one singular identity; that of a person who speaks Marathi or considers it as his own language.

In a multilingual country like India, children are exposed to a few languages. Our capacity to orient ourselves for any given political issue is the highest when we relate to people who share the same situation as ours. Language is one of our main identity markers. Thus even though one may not be talking about linguistic politics, whenever people have to collectively voice their opinion on any matter that is of a larger interest, it is more than likely that they would approach people who they can understand and who can understand them linguistically. Language plays an important role in politics. This is commonly witnessed during mass mobilizations by groups, where one sees a very strong unity of language or the presence of a language community.

Impact of English on the Indian Democracy

It is interesting to note how English is perceived in India, even though it does not have the privilege of a state being carved from its essential speakers. Although the use of English in India is actually a colonial legacy, the fact that colonialists spoke this language is not the key reason why many families teach their children this language today. In a way, it carries the stamp of the past but with the weight of the present day socio-economic realities.

English has assumed a position of authority in today's globalized world. According to a recent article by Mohanty (2012)

> English is used by about 750 million people, only half of whom speak it as a mother tongue. More than half the world's technical and scientific periodicals are in English; English is the medium for 80 per cent of the information stored in the world's computers. Three quarters of the world's mail, telexes and cables are in English. (The Hindu, 2012)

This has led to a widening and deepening of the digital divide, thereby exacerbating the power relations based on access to information.

Thus access to English can also be seen as a proxy of access to major sources of knowledge relevant for work in the modern day economy. In today's global economy, the demand for skills in English language would naturally be high. Along with that, since command over English is still the privilege of a few who have access to this language at school or at home, the people who can speak this language for communication and access to knowledge, run parallel to the socio-economic structure in the country. Like two parallel lines, their lives are disjointed from the concerns of the larger society and perhaps inadvertently they end up in maintaining a constant distance in terms of access to resources, sources of knowledge and opportunities at work. Rural India, where agriculture remains the mainstay economic activity, still remains alienated from English, as it is not used in the transactions in rural lives. It is not surprising then that private schools in rural India are mushrooming in the name of providing 'English medium education' to children. The fact that English is construed as a vehicle for upward social mobility is a clear indicator of the status that it enjoys amongst the majority of the nation.

The flip side of this situation is that along with other social divides, language has become another tool for creating a hierarchy, as people who are not able to communicate in English are considered inferior by those who are fluent in it. In fact one of the regional political parties of India—the Samajwadi Party—in its election manifesto prior to the general elections of 2009 in India, took an anti-English and anti-computers stand which did not go very well with the electorate. (The Times of India, 2009)

This ability of English to further stratify society has not been examined well enough in our schools, and perhaps at some level, it threatens the very foundations of our democracy. When language, which plays such a fundamental role in uniting people, is itself the reason for social division, the distance between social groups will only increase. According to Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2003),

The peculiar characteristics that accompany competition for status often impede effective collective action. In a sociological sense, this is true: states where there is a greater social distance and inequality between citizens often find collective action in politics more difficult. (p.94)

In bigger cities, English conversation and private sector employment mostly go hand in hand. In fact people working in private sector extend the boundaries from their work place to their lives, as they donot depend on public services for their education, healthcare, etc. They turn to the government only when they have no choice, e.g., for payment of tax, police service, compliance to regulatory norms, getting licenses, etc. The experience of dealing with a private service provider is mostly so different from that of the Government in terms of convenience. In a way they end up leading 'privatized' public lives. This is evident when we see how many such people come out and vote during an election. In the 2009 elections, for example, the voting from a prosperous and educated community in Mumbai (referred to by its geographical location—South Mumbai) was less than forty per cent while the city average was around 41.4 per cent. by Mukherjee (2014) This particular community within Mumbai comprises of mostly well-off people who mainly communicate in English.

Implications for School Education

For children who lead lives surrounded by English, there is a risk of elitism and alienation, and this risk can have immense repercussions for our democracy. The ability to relate to the lives of the vast milieu of people with varied degrees of access to resources and opportunities should be a fundamental prerequisite to the idea of democracy in a complex nation such as ours. This idea has to be defended from any parochial attitude in the name of language, social status, caste or religion. Children should not construe competence in English language as a marker of privilege that they have over others- as is commonly seen when students from some international boards leading completely diametrically opposite lives, visit impoverished communities for teaching kids, as part of their 'social responsibility' sessions. They believe that not knowing English itself is actually a sign of poverty. This feeling of me vs them as against 'us' is a distance that children need to cover and schools can facilitate this journey. The school has a pre-eminent role in ensuring that language does not make the task of attaining social equality even more distant in an already highly unequal society such as India. A key feature of democracy is for people to relate to each other's issues and search for space for change which should be beneficial for a large section of people. And language plays a fundamental role in bringing people together. We can ill afford to subsidize an increase in opportunities leading to greater economic progress at the cost of weakening our democratic framework. In unequal societies, getting people to stand up for a common cause is difficult. More so if certain sections are wary of others on account of factors such as language, religion or caste. An essential part of democracy is not just understanding how the triad of judiciary, executive and legislative works (as is taught at a basic level in senior secondary), but relating to the problems that are part of our everyday existence and not allowing language to become an impediment.

For teachers particularly, who work with children from families who live insulated lives in the bigger cities of the country, there is a need to consciously work towards eliminating the psychological attitude that such children develop towards people who donot speak English. This is particularly important since, it is precisely around that attitude that our capacity to relate to people from other socio-economic background develops.

Finally, this is not an argument against English, but an appeal to examine the sociological forces that accompany the growing popularity of English, and the caution that needs to be exercised by its practitioners. In the process of strengthening the country on the global map, we must not get weakened in our own backyard.

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