Learning Deficit, Shift of Identity and Visual Ethnography

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Key Words: Learning deficit, Identity shift, Visual ethnography, Bharat Bhasha Mandakini, Utopian ideas

Abstract

The landmark article discusses a visual ethnography programme called *Bharat Bhasha Mandakini*, a project that talks of language against the backdrop of ecology. Such an approach consists of creating films, tied not to language teaching initiatives, but focussing on language in its eco system—covering the land and its people, culture and performance, literature. and language and language teaching. The planning and process of the program is discussed. The approach adopted in this program makes language teaching enjoyable, helps to deal with the problems of learning deficits by focussing on linguistic diversities in classrooms and contributes to the preservation of languages. This 'utopian' idea provides space for two opposing views to dialogue to create a synthetic construction on the linguistic landscape.

The Ground Reality: Challenges and Consequences

Periodic assessment surveys such as *the Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) or *the National Achievement Survey by* National Council of Educational Research and Training (2017) gives us the following information about India's learning deficits. About one-fourth of children in the 14-18 years age group are unable to either count currency or add weights (ASER 2014); one out of every seven children cannot recognize a map of India, and over one-third of children cannot name the capital cities of India. About 79 per cent cannot name the state they live in and 58 per cent are unable to locate it on a map (Banerjee &Duflo, 2015). We have somewhere stepped off the path of the 'learning ladder' (Govinda, 2020) and landed ourselves in the quagmire of un-education, where schooling and education have ceased to be effective. We wrongly believed that the languages of the colonial masters could be adapted as a quick fix for all our divergences. For this situation to change, one must give positive encouragement to the plural ethos in planning for languages, culture and education through a set of organized State interventions.

The first challenge for lifting those at the bottom of the learning pyramid to higher levels of attainment comes from diverse, multilingual classrooms found in both State-run and private schools of India and other developing nations (Singh, Singh & Banerjee 2020). The 'public schools' impose a monolingual regime from the top, branding the students from different ethnicities as aberrant or 'deviant', without attempting to equip them with a metalinguistic knowledge base. Some schools use 'translingual' practices (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018), and follow an 'additive' bilingualism method, in which the first language continues to be developed (and the first culture valued) (Sridhar, 1994). However, many others use a 'subtractive' bilingualism method, where the second language (English or Hindi) is added at the expense of the first language and culture (Mohanty, 2008), thereby diminishing one's base language. Then, there is the linguistic distance between the 'standard' variety of our school languages (*Maanak Hindi* or standard colloquial Bengali or *shista-vyaavaharika Telugu*) and the dialectal or mother-tongue background of students, especially those from rural backgrounds. Underlying the imposition of the standard language is the belief that by imposing certain performance norms, 'civilisation' is taught. Here language is a means to indoctrinate children into a certain way of life. It is not easy to get out of this mentality. Such a practice has implications for the identity of the children.

Shifts of Identity

A consequence of this dismal situation is that our linguistic landscape shows a significant degree of change over the last many decades. Several people, for various reasons, shift their linguistic identity from a smaller mother-tongue to a bigger and better-known label. This shift has been talked about by many (Dasgupta, 1970). Haugen (1974), reminds us that literary and linguistic scholars should pay attention to all smaller speech forms of an area, rather than devote energy to discover grammatical patterns of only well-known major languages. Since the UNESCO began ringing alarm bells about vanishing mother-tongues, many activists and scholars devoted to the preservation of literature and language are engaged in writing grammars and dictionaries of these varieties. However, unlike preservation of species by biologists, languages cannot be preserved by putting them into artificial environments such as grammars and dictionaries or high literature (Mühlhäusler, 1992). Nor can

they be isolated, because human beings are 'interacting species' (Morgan, 1969, p. 34). These measures do not yield any success 'unless the question of language ecology is seriously asked' (Mühlhäusler, 1992, p. 164). These ideas justify the reason for embarking on a project of visual ethnography of languages, about which not much is written. Some of us at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, believed that this move might give impetus to language survival and revival, by focusing on all its functional aspects, literary function as well as the function of learning or gathering knowledge.

The Emergence of the Bhasha Mandakini Project

In 2003, during the premiership of Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, *Gyan Darshan*, a TV program was launched by IGNOU, under which various organizations were expected to create and feed-in interesting teaching-learning programmes. Under the direction of the Language Bureau, Ministry of Human Resource Development, and with the active encouragement of the then HRD Minister Professor Murali Manohar Joshi, language organizations were asked to create televisable teaching materials. The Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan came up with a programme titled *Bhasha Mandakini* to teach the *Shastras* and science concepts in Sanskrit. Later, they decided to concentrate on the teaching of spoken Sanskrit through this project.

Developments in tele-education facilitated the *Bhasha Mandakini* programme. The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), designed jointly by NASA and ISRO in 1975 began a large sociological experiment of beaming programmes on health, hygiene and family planning to 2400 Indian villages spread over six states. With the commissioning of Indian National Satellite System (INSAT) in 1983, these programmes became more robust. In 1990, Jhabua Developmental Communications Project (JDCP) and Training and Developmental Communication Channel (TDCC) demonstrated the efficacy of tele-education in response to criticism against tele-education. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) set up a dedicated educational service under EDUSAT in October 2002, later launched by GSLV in September 2004. The ISRO embarked on a major media and education initiative through EDUSAT. Several conferences of vice-chancellors and institutional heads were organized to appraise the educationists on the capabilities of EDUSAT (operationalized in 2004) and how they could utilize this facility. The pivotal role of education as an instrument of social change and universalization of education was top priority at the time.

In 2003-2005, CIIL began the *Bharat Bhasha Mandakini* programme along with other programmes such as Bangla Online (http://www.bangla-online.info/PromotionalSite/PromotionalSite_Index.htm), Learn Kannada Programme (http://www.ciil-learnkannada.net/) and Tamil Online (http://www.tamil-online.org/login/signup/login.asp? language=Tamil). These were aired on the mainstream media and online portals. In many ways, these language programmes were to complement the new initiative. The idea was to ensure that the *Bharat Bhasha Mandakini* programme was created and developed without being tied up to purely language teaching initiatives.

In February 2004, the MHRD held a meeting at IGNOU to explore the possibility of CIIL creating a more professional set of films. CIIL, among the MHRD Institutions, housed one of the finest film studios, with many documentaries on Indian scripts and

languages made during the tenure of its first director, Professor D.P. Pattanayak. CIIL was well-known for its over 50 episodes on Hindi Language Teaching created for All India Radio, beamed in Karnataka many times.

CIIL's *Bharat Bhasha Mandakini* project thus emerged in 2004 and over the next six years, produced over 600 memorable documentaries of 22-23 minutes each, covering the universe of language, literature, culture and society of at least four speech communities—Bangla, Tamil, Kannada and Marathi. In all, about 230 film directors have worked on CIIL's *Bharat Bhasha Mandakini* project since 2004.

Bhasha Mandakini Project: The Process

The first workshop for the preparation of the television script for the *Bhasha Mandakini* project was held at Mysore from 29th March to 7th April 2004. In August 2004, a detailed meeting on *Bangla Bhasha Mandakini* workshop was held at the initiative of the Departments of Comparative Literature and Film Studies, Jadavpur University. About 44 film specialists, film directors and producers, poets and fiction writers, linguists, scholars in literature and social science, language teachers, scriptwriters and anchors as well as representatives from AIR and other media participated in the workshop. The details of the project were finalized in the workshop; it was decided to involve film and documentary specialists, anchors, actors, recitation specialists as well as linguists and culture specialists for the proposed *Visual/Virtual Encyclopedia of Indian Languages*. About 560 episodes on four major languages and 49 more episodes on eight smaller languages of Sikkim were created. The best possible anchors, actors, voice-over specialists, camera and other technical crew, editors and experts were involved to retain audience interest in the program.

Getting Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Dhritiman, Goutam Ghosh, Shriram Lagoo, Amol Palekar or Sabyasachi among others to anchor these productions enhanced their quality.

Initially, the narration and the sub-titles were in English, irrespective of the language being taught. Later, the programme was modified such that the background narration and subtitle language could be changed in the program if one wished to. An agency was engaged to create Hindi or Tamil versions of these documentary films. So, the same episode could be used in many different languages. Along with being educative, the programmes were entertaining, as they combined multimedia lessons, classroom interaction, demonstrations, narrations, drama and a tour of the actual locations. In the next section, I will elaborate on the structure of *Bhasha Mandakini* series meant for teaching about language and culture to the uninitiated.

Language Teaching through Television

In the *Bhasha Mandakini* films, all the language skills (speaking, writing or script, reading and recitation, and listening or conversational strategies) were covered, with an emphasis on communication (pragmatic aspect). Target learners were assumed to be speakers of Indian languages with proficiency in English, but speakers of other languages could also use them. All the episodes had four focal points, and this remained the defining feature of this experiment. These points were: (i) Land and people, (ii) Culture and performances, (iii) Literature, (iv) About language and language teaching.

Starting and sustaining a television series devoted to Indian languages required complex programming. For this purpose, a

multi-pronged approach was thought necessary. These episodes focusing on teaching a particular language were produced by the CIIL in-house, as well as through outsourcing and with the help of academic and technical resource persons. Talented filmmakers, NGOs, and voluntary organizations were identified under each language group, allotted topics and asked to come up with a script idea for 22-26-minute episodes. The PoC (Proof of Concept) was created which included background research, a detailed script, details of production, etc. Each such proposal was vetted carefully by the experts under the direction of the director of CIIL. Each proposal and script had to pass through various layers before an agreement was executed between the Institution and the filmmaker. CIIL also engaged subject scholars who would prepare a detailed academic script based on background research. In many instances, these scripts came up through script-writing workshops. The English narrations were appropriately dubbed and subtitled by Lingadevaru Halemane in 2009. This work, unfortunately, could not be continued, due to his demise in 2011.

There is no doubt that an ambitious plan or a massive project of this size was nothing short of a utopian idea—to prepare a visual encyclopaedia of Indian languages that would remove the drudgery from language teaching activities and make them more attractive. Of course, much more could have been done if time permitted, and some work in that direction had started.

Concluding Remarks

We believed that our programme of language and educational development could be based on utopian ideas to create a speculative landscape which escapes from "time, death and judgement", but "the society it outlines is not the crystallisation of a personal vision but a provisional and synthetic construction" (Parrinder, 1985, p. 116). 'Utopography' is not an individual dream, but a collective project. This collective project of utopography would have to reconcile two opposite views—one emanating from the heterogeneous space dotted by linguistic and cultural majorities and the other from minorities that have been living together for a long time. Each one has its way of looking at life; one is viewed from above, and the other has to do with the view from below. As we progress with our plans to bring in more equity, these two views could be problematized to see how or whether things have changed for the 'other India' (Singh & Singh, forthcoming) after 1947, and if so, what drove the forces of change.

Economists tell us that the 'impressive aggregate growth' across developing nations has only but trickled down to the poor (Ahluwalia, Carter & Chenery, 2009). The disparity between growth and social development, we are told, is directly linked to the lopsided distribution of wealth and opportunities. While growth is usually managed and viewed with a top-down perspective, social development takes place from the bottom-up, and we speculate that the disconnect between these two viewpoints is partly the reason for our not fulfilling our commitment to the poorer sections of society—the BoP (Bottom of the Pyramid) (Wagner & Castillo, 2014). It is now becoming increasingly evident that for the effective and successful implementation of social engineering policies in India, what we require is an inclusive dialogue. Furthermore, this dialogue must consider the voices of diverse cultural and ethnic groups and an amalgamation of the top-down and bottom-up perspectives, bringing us to the critical question of finding the space for such a confluence.

In planning for the preservation of languages and culture, or in our efforts to ensure appropriate learning methods for young adults and children, we may

therefore have to think collectively and debate as to what kind of change we would like to have. The question is, what kind of a landscape would we like to create? Whether our wish-list or plan would be fulfilled or not is for the future to tell, but there does not seem to be any substitute for utopia. We hope CIIL or some other organization will eventually take up the cause of language teaching through television on a larger scale now that online teaching-learning has made so much headway in India. As of now, that is only a utopia.

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