Evolution of Languages & Dialects in India Over the Ages: A Perspective

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Abstract

"Kos kos par pani badle, char kos par vani" the taste of water changes with every passing mile and dialect every four mile. Although the Indian subcontinent has been a home to hundreds of languages, dialects and sub-dialects, the existence of language continuum has kept the communication system intact. Having been subjected to innumerable annexations, India has witnessed myriads of geo-political, socio-cultural, and linguistic assimilations, amalgamations and vanishings take place within her fold. The imperialistic British rule sounded death knell for many indigenous traditional systems by hegemonizing the language. The 1835 Macaulay's speech on Indian Education system, wherein he loftily stated, ".......a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia......" bears testimony to a deeply colonial mindset. The regional languages and literatures have their own distinguished identities that contribute to the national repository. Since languages, cultures, traditions are all inextricably linked together, it is imperative that they get imbibed into the mainstream society through amendments and policy decisions and reinstated to its past glory. In this paper I would touch upon the linguistic diversity of India, the setbacks due to the colonial encounters, imposition of English language and the resultant far-reaching consequences that accompanied it. Shall deliberate upon the multiple changes in the Indian education system and the recently introduced National Education Policy 2020 which lays more emphasis on blended and experiential learning, that has attracted wide speculation and discussion in various academic forums at both national and international level. Shall also deliberate upon the way language has made a complete 360-degree shift in the way it is being used today.

10

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1. Multilingualism

The multilingual, multicultural country like India that takes pride in its heterogeneity is quite at variance with other world countries that emerged post the World Wars believing majorly in the power of one territorial space, one language, one script, one tradition, one culture, one religion. But somewhere an important aspect of life was missed out wherein being human entailed embracing various cultures, traditions, languages, religions, voices, knowledge systems, so on and so forth. The journey from the Indus Valley script and Brahmi script of the BC era to the present writing systems has been an incredible one.

The movement and migration of people from the north brought their own culture, language, and ethnicity to India. One such language Sanskrit, in which were composed *The Vedas*, belonging to the Indo-European language family, was spoken by the Indo-Aryan people. It is to Panini, the renowned philologist and grammarian of the 5th century BCE, that the codification of Sanskrit language is ascribed. His grammar is regarded normative and has been in use uninterruptedly ever since. He had considerable influence on later linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield and Edward Sapir. Sanskrit flowered in the classical period from the 1st to the 7th centuries AD. but since it was the language of the elite and scholarly and it was closely associated with the Brahminical religion, it gradually faded away and paved way for Prakrit, Apbransh and Khadi Boli which were more attuned to the common masses. The amalgamation of natural languages, dialects gave rise to modern Indo-Aryan languages of northern India - Hindi, Rajasthani, Gujrati, Punjabi, Marathi, Sindhi, Oriya, Assamese, Kashmiri, Dogri etc. Their names derived from the region where they were spoken. Since these regions did not have water-tight borders, languages merged on the margins retaining their individualistic distinctness and gave rise to newer dialects altogether, thereby embracing multilingualism in its fold. This is an essential fact of the multilingual, multicultural literary traditions of the Indian subcontinent. It is difficult to pinpoint

where one language stops and the other begins. Their amalgamation has been seamless. According to the Ministry of Education, Government of India official website, today India is home to *"1,652 mother tongues including 103 foreign mother tongues"* (Census 1961 & Nigam 1972: p. xv).

2. Consequences of Multiple Annexations on India's linguistic Heritage

Having been subjected to innumerable annexations, India has witnessed myriads of geo-political, socio-cultural, and linguistic amalgamations and vanishings take place within her fold since time immemorial. Each new and subsequent invasion transformed the language, culture, literature, social, personal life of the people. In these cultural assimilations, the local indigenous languages and dialects got subsumed into the more dominant ones of the ruling powers and a hybrid language emerged. These creoles were a mixture of elements from multiple languages and often served as a means of communication between diverse communities. Annexations also paved way for language shifts wherein the language of the ruling elite became the language of administration and culture. Some indigenous languages received state patronage and some wilted away under the impact. During the British colonial rule, English was widely promoted as the language of education and governance in India. It led to greater linguistic pluralism and cultural syncretism within the nation state. Its effect can be seen in literature, art, music, and religious traditions that draw from multiple linguistic and cultural sources. India's linguistic landscape is a testament to the country's ability to absorb and adapt to diverse influences while still maintaining its rich heritage. The British rule introduced the Indians to the Western-style of education that widened their mind-space on one hand and on the other, paved way for the marginalization of indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

For a land as culturally and linguistically robust as India, the imposition of English over other Indian languages did more harm than good. The political, cultural, and linguistic imperialism of Britishers sounded the death knell for many indigenous traditional systems. The 1835 Macaulay's speech on Indian Education system, wherein he loftily stated, *"......a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia......"*. bears testimony to a deeply colonial mindset. For personal aggrandize-

ment, they razed the entire edifice of a country which was already on its knees. Since English was the language of the elite, the dominant, and the master class, it soon became a language of aspiration and upward mobility for natives, weaning them away from their roots and culture. The English educated youth began to look down upon the regional culture, and preferred using English over their native tongue, paving way for their gradual decline.

3. Fading of Regional Languages

Languages are dynamic, the more one uses them, the more they flower and flourish, embracing the differences within its fold. The flipside is also equally true. A continued disuse by the native speakers over a long period of time paves way for its disappearance. The disowning or abandoning a language leads to it becoming moribund as the native speakers make a conscious language shift to a more advantageous linguistic system for their communication needs. The elders stop speaking that language and the youngsters stop learning it. The powerful and dominant languages continue to wield their power and presence. They continue to occupy the mind-space of speakers, luring them to prioritize their languages in a way that it leads to the disuse of the other. The death of a language is the death of a community's link with its historical past. Regional/tribal/heritage languages face the threat of becoming moribund unless steps are taken towards their patronage, preservation, and promotion. Adrija Roychowdhury, in her 3rd May 2020 article in The Indian Express, titled, 'Cultural invisibility - India's 600 potentially endangered languages' quotes G.N. Devy, who opined that *"as per the survey conducted by People's Linguistic Survey of India in 2010, there are 600 potentially endangered languages in India… each dead language takes away a culture system"*.

4. Causes of Moribundity

Some probable reasons behind the disuse and disappearance of regional languages in India could be enumerated as:

⇢ **Colonisation & Imperialization:** As the colonizer gains control over a territory, the native ingenuity of the colonized people gets compromised as he gets enticed to imbibe their culture and the language, considering it as the status symbol. The inherent need for social acceptance, personal aspirations, career opportunities lure him away from his regionalities.

➤ **Economic and Social Gains:** Economic and social advantage incentivizes people to adapt to the language and cultures of the dominant class. Initially they face multiple roadblocks and challenges in embracing the foreign culture, but gradually tide over them. With subsequent generations, the gap between the two collapses and the change-over is complete.

➤ **Social Mobility:** Urbanisation, migration and mass movements motivate people to absorb the language and culture of their work-region to ensure smoother and hassle-free communication, which in turn disrupts their own rootedness.

➤ **Globalisation:** The easy transcending of geographical boundaries, interconnectedness and communication has led the world to become one big global village. A continued interface between various languages and cultures, may bring about enrichment of cultures and cultural markers, it also leads to hybridity, homogenisation and decline of linguistic diversity. With an increase in interconnectedness, communication has become relatively smoother and hassle-free, and consequently, the regional languages that are more vulnerable, get dominated by the dominant global languages

➤ **Ethnic Cleansing:** The term has been often used as a synonym of genocide, a practice to wipe out the very existence of a particular indigenous community, their distinctive culture, tradition, and language for some politico-religious gain. The promotion of singular national language, culture and identity or expansionism, colonialism or political repressionism often leads to extermination of the native cultures of indigenous minorities. History is replete with such instances. The most prominent example of the Holocaust is the one that was carried out by Nazi Germany against the Jewish population from 1938 - 1945 wherein an estimated 6 million Jews were killed inside Germany and German occupied territories. Similarly, the persecution of the Uighurs, an ethnic minority community in China is believed to be orchestrated by the Chinese Government.

➤ **Languages, Cultures, and Ethnicity:** Languages, cultures, and ethnicity also get hugely impacted by wars, violence, natural as well as manmade disasters.

➤ **Intermarriages:** Intermarriages can smother the language of less dominant partner, paving way for its decline.

- **Cultural and Linguistic Imperialism:** Cultural and linguistic imperialism can also sound a death knell for less dominant languages. There were widespread protests and agitation when there was a move to declare Hindi as the official language of post independent India. Even today, when India has implemented the three-language formula under NEP 2020, there is a trust deficit between the northern Hindi speaking belt and the southern parts with different Dravidian languages.

- **Advancement in Technology:** This is one of the major reasons behind the fading away of local/regional languages as newer linguistic systems emerge and take over the mind-space of people. A detailed discussion on this is followed under "Technology & Language".

5. Preservation of the Indigenous/Regional Languages

In a multilingual country like India, there is a glaring need for a proactive, concerted, and multi-faceted effort to save regional languages from fading away into extinction. Some of them are enumerated as:

- **Introduction of Language Immersion Programmes:** It has become imperative to introduce them from the grassroot level of education. Here two languages (L1 & L2) are used for the purpose of providing instruction to the young learners. L1 is the child's native language and L2 is the second language that is taught. This would help in fostering bilingualism and biculturalism.

- **Community-based Initiatives:** Several community-based initiatives like language-speaking courses and cultural revitalization activities could be introduced which would provide greater impetus to indigenous languages.

- **Specialized Training:** Intergenerational learning could be facilitated wherein experience sharing activities, story-telling sessions, mentorship programmes and workshops could be held. The teachers and instructors could be provided specialized training with appropriate pedagogical methods to teach indigenous languages through celebrating festivals and cultural programmes.

- **Technology:** Technology such as online language learning apps like Duolingo, Hello Talk, Babbel etc. could be promoted

and popularized to facilitate learning, understanding, and communicating in other languages. Online dictionaries, and digital archives could be made user friendly. Indigenous programmes could also be created through radio, television, online videos, social media handles to expose audience to language nuances.

» **Promoting Language Diversity:** The government should ensure that lesser known and minority languages are not discriminated against and work towards promoting language diversity. It could provide Funds, Grants and scholarships for linguistic projects and schemes in different languages, and provide patronage and protection to Language Schools and Labs. Additional languages could be introduced at school levels.

6. Dynamic Education Policy

The rich, cultural, linguistic heritage of a nation could be kept alive through dynamic education policy as education plays a key role in building great society, it helps bridge gender inequalities, financial disparities, and social dissimilarities. Indian Education system has witnessed multiple changes over the years. It has come a long way from the traditional Gurukul system where gurus imparted indigenous knowledge, moral values, and life lessons to their students through self-learning exercises. The shishyas were encouraged to be self-dependent, master of every field, well versed in all art form, be it sport or warfare or administration. They were taught calmness, positivity and self-control, self-discipline, mindfulness through meditation and yoga. They were initiated into mental, spiritual, and physical well-being and fitness of the self and of others so that they face the world with equanimity. The journey from then to the present has been a dynamic one.

Education today, as per the United Nations guidelines, has been accorded the fourth and important SDG as it is also a potential weapon of dominance for the mighty, which if used indiscriminately might lead to far reaching consequences. It has the wherewithal to make or break societies, give them a twisted slant for their own nefarious goals. The lowering of educational standards of a country may produce average citizens with substandard value systems. It therefore, becomes imperative to keep a close eye on the wholesome upbringing of its people. Both the government and the people need

to be vigilant as they play an important role in its sustenance. Keeping in mind, the overall wellbeing of its people, the government of India has introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

7. National Education Policy 2020

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, unveiled by the Government of India, is a landmark reform that envisions a transformative and inclusive education system. Introduced in the year 2020, it calls for a complete overhaul of the Indian education system, bringing it at par with the global standards. The prime focus is making quality education accessible, available, and flexible for everyone, ensuring 100% literacy rate in India. It is a self-paced learning system that has components of internships, blended, and experiential learning.

7·1 Focus on Mother Tongue and Regional Languages

NEP stipulates that primary education should be provided in the child's mother tongue/ home language/ regional language till at least 5th standard. All institutions of Higher education (HEI), technical institutions should ensure bilingual medium of imparting instruction and make books and other study material available. This would help in fostering all-round growth and development of young learners, providing a more holistic approach in addressing their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs. Guidelines have been issued by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to all the educational institutions to ensure that they offer courses in regional languages also. It has developed automated artificial intelligence tools for translating English courses into various Indian languages. SWAYAM MOOCS portal has made available the translation of reference study material for some courses. DIKSHA, the government portal has made the school text books available in all regional languages and sign language too. In fact, now JEE and NEET exams are also conducted in various Indian languages. As per the official website of the Government of India, (https://www.education.gov.in/language-education), the Language Bureau under the Ministry of Education, with the help of various autonomous institutions and organizations work toward the promotion and development of various Indian languages that are enlisted in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Indian Language policy is pluralistic in its nature and scope and ensures survival, development, and promotion

of all Indian languages, irrespective of their nature and status of being a major, minor, tribal, or regional language.

Presently, India has six Central Universities for the promotion of languages, out of which three are for the promotion of Sanskrit language and one each for English and Foreign Languages, one for Hindi and one for Urdu, funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC). (https://www.education.gov.in/language-education).

7·2 Technology & Language

The advancement in technology has hugely impacted the linguistic patterns both positively and otherwise too. Apps like Duolingo, Babbel, Hello Talk, Drops, Mondly, Memrise etc. have made learning, understanding and communication in other languages simple, fun, and conversational since the learner is not bound by the harsh class timing or fixed schedules. They have eased international travels as it is now easier to communicate with others who follow different linguistic system.

AI tools, ChatGPT and other such bots have added a newer dimension to language by changing how people learn, read, write, and express themselves. The flip side is that they have also led the written expressions to become largely homogenized - making everything sound mundane and monotonous, thereby taking away the uniquely individualistic styles and mannerisms. It has led users to imitate the style of their icons and make it their own, thus compromising on the originality of expression. The use of AI also reinforces the existing hierarchies by giving greater precedence to the already dominant language system of SAE - Standard American English and the Queen's English over others. Since there are many varieties of English that exist, any deviation from it is not treated kindly. Since tools like these operate on large language models (LLM), they respond to human commands by delving into the massive archives without understanding the finer nuances of the words used. Its responses are heavily based on the oft repeated stylistic patterns, structures, and forms, which itself leads to sidestepping the lesser dominant ones. The perpetuation of the dominant modes of writing and expressions is a proof enough that it is under the patronage of more assertive powers. Its default setting is configured in such a way that certain linguistic systems are regarded as normative. The fact that the non-normative ones require a special command, suggests that the

euro-centric ones still wield power, as the rest get pushed to the margins. Schools and Universities expect standardized responses in discipline centric languages for its students to clear the examinations. Those who fail, are regarded as lacking the competence and capacity to communicate properly. Popular perception and acceptance of what is normative is likely to give rise to certain types of behaviour in non-performing students. It may lead to lack of interest and absenteeism, anxiety, low self-esteem, inferiority complex, disengagement, decreased commitment in them.

To overcome these challenges, it becomes imperative for all to invest more time and money to develop the required competence for better communications, making it a level playing field for people with diverse backgrounds. The teachers, educators, and instructors should be sensitive to the need of the hour and desist from taking the language related assumptions for granted and redesign courses so as to accommodate students from different background.

7·3 Language Today

Since language helps in expressing and communicating with others, and is closely associated with cultural, social, and psychological phenomenon, the way words and phrases are being used, also provide a peep into people's mindset. Language today has undergone a considerable change. It has not only become short and crisp but more conversational and colloquial, reflecting the highly advanced, technologically savvy users who aren't averse to endless experimentations with words, symbols and pictures. They use the highly jargonized language of SMS's, abbreviations, acronyms, and emojis. The casual and contemporary style of expression is completely geared to suit the online digital culture wherein are present plethora of social media platforms, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc. and the reliance is more on slangs and peer-lingo of the specific group. There is a noticeable change that can be seen in the way that the young use language to express themselves while communicating with each other. Expressions like "TTL" (talk to you later), "LOL" (laugh out aloud), "BRB" (be right back) or "PAW" (parents are watching), "GOAT" (greatest of all times) so on and so forth. The list is endless and it does not really make much sense for the older generation. It is like some shorthand secret code that conveys messages effectively through instant messaging services like Snapchat, Messenger, Facetime, WhatsApp, Telegram

etc. Phrases like, therefore, or nevertheless or in fact, notwithstanding, Oh my God, etc. probably require too many taps to type for the impatient youth. As a result, a whole new set of vocabulary has come into vogue with terms like, "viral", "friendzone", "selfie", "tweet", "retweet", "staycation", "ghosting" etc. that bear testimony to the fact that languages are constantly changing. "Memes" is another popular online digital dialect that very aptly creates and expresses meaning using wordplay, pictures, images, videos, GIFs etc.

The trends and pop culture give less emphasis on grammatical rules, spellings etc. keeping the communication instant, informal and short. There are some arguments too that youngsters nowadays have been adversely affected by technology as they rely heavily on tools like Grammarly, Spellcheck, Auto-correct etc. to aid them in their work. *"Adolescents are the linguistic movers and shakers, at least in western industrialized societies, and as such, a prime source of information about linguistic change and the role of language in social practice"* (Eckert, 1997: 1). The world over, linguists and researchers are trying to carve out relationship between language and adolescents. The younger generation are keen to embrace various social and linguistic changes brought in by technology. So, to understand the changing linguistic patterns, what need to be studied is how languages are being used by the young.

Describing how and why it is socially important for teenagers to play with language, Mary Kohn, Assistant professor at Kansas State University, in her article titled, "Teenagers' role in language change is overstated, linguistics research finds" published on Jan.14, 2016, in K-State News, writes, *"All languages, throughout history, change as generations grow up and move through life,"* Kohn said, *"As long as there are people who are living and breathing and speaking, we're going to invent new words. We're going to invent new ways of speaking"*. https://www.k-state.edu/media/newsreleases/jan16/ kohn11416.html

8. Conclusion

Language, like human society, is a dynamic entity, it is always in a flux, it lives, breathes, adapts, and evolves itself constantly by embracing newer words and vocabulary in its fold. Language transforms itself by imbibing phonetic, syntactic, and semantic changes within itself. The world has become one big global village with blurred boundaries, encouraging amalgamation of cultures and

languages which has led to the creation of an entirely new linguistic system with words and grammatical structures borrowed and absorbed from different languages. Hinglish, a mix of Hindi and English (code-switching and code-mixing) is an apt example of this. As technology advances, the language also evolves further inventing newer ways to convey and communicate complex ideas efficiently with least ambiguity. The present populace with smart phones and technology at their fingertips, are creating tech-jargon that is adding newer dimensions to the present lingo. Siri, Alexa, Google, the virtual assistants have earned their place in dictionaries. Meaning of the words also are no longer static, their nuances change with changing times. "Nerd" for example had a negative connotation earlier but today it is used as a corollary for a person who is a reliable and expert. The young users are rewriting dictionaries and thesauruses with their ever-increasing innovative use of language, which though might be a trifle complicated for old-schooled generation to decipher but it is a sure sign of language transformation.

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