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LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO CENSUS OF INDIA 2001

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1. CENSUS OF INDIA 2001

The Indian Census 2001 is marketed as 'people-oriented'. The official publications call census data "a major planning tool in the hands of the policy maker and the development planner, making it all the more necessary that the data collected is accurate and authentic". It is claimed that the data collected by the Census of India Organization "will be of immense use to plan the socio-economic development of the country". This people- and goal-oriented Census commenced on Feb 9, 2001 and ended on March 5, 2001.

2. MOTHER TONGUE OR NOBODY'S TONGUE?

On March 7, 2001, H.Y.Sharada Prasad, Press Advisor to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, wrote in his column, 'All in All,' in *The Asian Age* about a Census enumerator who visited his house. His wife "told him that her mother tongue was Telugu and mine was Kannada but that our children had only a mother but no mother-tongue, having been born in Delhi and gone to school here without any opportunities to study either of the parents' language. His (the census enumerator's) response was that since they must be speaking Hindi, that would be deemed to be their mother tongue". This story is not new. Most Indians who earn their livelihood outside their own linguistic province face this problem every ten years.

3. MOTHER TONGUE, A CATCH-ALL PHRASE?

The census officials for over hundred years and more have faced this problem heroically. Enumerating and recording faithfully and correctly the language information from Indian citizens is a great challenge. Caste names, names of clans, names of professions, names of religious sects, names of speech or language not currently in use, names of villages, regions or provinces, names of animals and birds, and a host of other names may be offered as the name of the language of the individual being counted under the census! Only the so-called educated persons, living in their own world of knowledge, wisdom and cynicism, think that every individual in India knows the name of the language he or she speaks.

With almost every major Indian language having its own quota of "dialects," it is often difficult for the common people in many states to be really sure as to the correct name of the speech they speak.

While the official intention is to faithfully record what the citizen says, and for this adequate and explicit instructions and training are imparted meticulously to the field enumerators, yet some enumerators interpret the data given by the citizen as they see fit!

Fortunately for us the Census of India, over the decades, has built a professional team of language experts who could see through the data and make some really significant findings out of the data collected. The linguistic demography brought out by the 1961 Census of India is still a monumental research work. This Census listed 1652 mother tongues, and a few hundred languages (around 400 languages or so), all neatly classified under the four major language families of India (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austric, and Tibeto-Burman). Over the decades, however, there appears to be some attempt at rationalization of the names of the mother tongues recorded in the census. There is also some complacency, and an unwillingness to recognize the possibility of the diversity of responses.

4. "MOTHER TONGUE" IN CENSUS 2001

In the 2001 Census, while eliciting socio-cultural information, two types of language-related information are sought to be collected from the respondents. They are:

1. The name of the mother tongue, and
2. The names of other languages known to the respondent.

Enumerators are to record up to two languages in order of proficiency, self-assessed by the respondent.

5. MOTHER TONGUE

The Census 2001 also defines mother tongue as the language in which the mother was talking to the person in his/her childhood. In case the mother of the child had died, the enumerator should find out the language being spoken in the household; in the case of small children and the dumb (physically challenged), the language spoken by the mother is to be recorded as the mother tongue. If any doubt arises, the language mainly used in the family is recorded as the mother tongue. Thus, this Census also focuses more on the language of early childhood experience and calls it the mother tongue.

The Census recognizes also the possibility that the members of the same family may have different mother tongues. For example, there are many families in which the husband may be from a different ethnic group than the wife, and both may have different, not identical, mother tongues. So, the enumerator is asked to record the mother tongue of each individual in the family

The name of the mother tongue is recorded as given by the respondent. Abbreviated forms of names are not to be used. The response as given should be recorded authentically. Even in the context of any organized movement in a particular place (such movements to assert or claim recognition of distinct identity for a language or mother

tongue are not unusual), and even if the enumerator doubts that the mother tongue detail is not being reported honestly, he is required to record the exact statement of the respondent. The enumerator may, however, refer the matter to his Supervisor for further scrutiny. Also, the enumerator is asked to record the name of the mother tongue as stated by the respondent and not to enter into any dialogue with the respondent regarding this. The enumerator should not exercise his discretion or knowledge to correct the responses and record on his own the name of any other language which he considers to be the mother tongue of the respondent. It is further emphasized that it is not necessary that a language should have a script for it to be recorded as mother tongue.

The enumerator is not supposed to decide about the language-dialect status of the mother tongue reported. He is not asked to seek and find any connection between religion and mother tongue.

6. BILINGUALISM

In the order of proficiency, names of two other languages known to the respondent are recorded. Here, the names of languages other than the one recorded as mother tongue are to be elicited by asking the respondent about other languages known to him. These may be Indian or foreign languages. If the respondent knows only one language, the name of that one language only is recorded. If the respondent has knowledge of more than one language, the names of two languages in the order of proficiency self-assessed by the respondent are recorded. These two languages are to be recorded one after the other. Between these two languages, whichever language the respondent knows to speak, comprehend, and communicate is recorded first, and the other language second. The individual need not know reading and writing these languages. It is enough if he speaks and communicates in these two languages. However, the number of languages thus recorded will not exceed two.

7. MOTHER TONGUE, A FUZZY CONCEPT

"Mother tongue" is a concept that we all appear to understand very well and take for granted. "Mother tongue" is a very important concept or construct within the Constitution of India. Several important provisions within the Indian Constitution revolve around this concept or construct. Decisions regarding the medium of instruction and other official language policies depend on the interpretation of this concept or construct.

More often than not, mother tongue becomes more a political idea than a linguistic construct or concept. Mother tongues are elevated to some superhuman and divine status, and are worshipped literally. For example, students in all the schools run with government aid in Tamilnadu usually sing in praise of Mother Tamil in their school activities. Similar activities are noticed in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, to mention only a few states. Just like we personify the nation as Bharata Mata, provinces and mother tongues are also personified and adored. Mother tongue becomes a rallying point for groups of people to unite and express their solidarity more as a political entity.

Yet, as Thirumalai (1979) points out, this concept gets very fuzzy, when we try to define it. "The concept of mother tongue," according to him, "is, indeed, difficult to define with exactitude." He identifies eight complex scenarios in which the definition of the concept becomes rather difficult and tricky:

- i. Father and mother speak Tamil among themselves but they speak in English to their child. What is the mother tongue of the child?
- ii. Though father and mother are native speakers of a variety of Tamil, they prefer to talk to each other using Kannada. But they speak to their child in that variety of Tamil sometimes, and speak in Kannada at other times. What is the mother tongue of the child?
- iii. Father speaks Bengali. Mother speaks Tamil. Parents use their respective languages to speak to the child. The child picks up both the languages simultaneously. Can there be more than one mother tongue for an individual.
- iv. Father and mother are of Tamil origin. But they do not know Tamil. They use the language of the area to speak to the child and the child acquires that language only. And yet the child claims Tamil as his mother tongue for reasons of maintaining his identity, etc. Can one have a mother tongue which is not known to him at all?
- v. Father and mother speak Telugu at home, but Tamil outside. Both speak to the child in Telugu and the child acquires also the language of the environment, namely, Tamil. Can there be more than one mother tongue?
- vi. The child acquires Tamil at home but soon its use is so restricted that his competence in another language is greater than the competence in Tamil. Can one have different mother tongues for different stages of his age and/or career?
- vii. Some living persons claim a classical language, which is not widely used currently at the spoken level, as their mother tongue. Should a language be spoken necessarily for it to be claimed as a mother tongue by individuals?
- viii. Several Muslim families with Tamil or Malayalam background may claim Urdu as their mother tongue because of religious considerations. Can mother tongue be decided or chosen for nonlinguistic reasons, such as caste, religion, region, profession and so on?

In spite of the difficulties we face in narrowly defining what mother tongue is, most of us, even in India, appear to have only one mother tongue. It appears that no definition of mother tongue is going to cover all aspects of the use of the concept. The linguistic and political aspects of the concept will continue to engage our attention for a long time to come.
