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BILINGUALISM AND CENSUS OF INDIA 2001

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1. AMAZING BILINGUAL STRUCTURE OF INDIA

For ages India has been a bilingual mosaic. It has been so built that every language or dialect under the Indian sun always had some role to play. No doubt that many languages and dialects were despised and looked down upon, and some were even banned and banished, but somehow bilingualism survived. People always had some pride in their own languages and dialects, and were ready to show their loyalty by assigning some roles or the other to their languages and dialects.

2. BILINGUALISM: A LINGUISTIC IDEA

In my earlier article on mother tongue and census of India 2001 (*Language in India*, 1:2, <http://www.languageinindia.com>), I suggested that "mother tongue" has both a political dimension as well as a linguistic dimension. Bilingualism also has both a linguistic dimension as well as a political dimension. The status of Hindi as the official language of India sometimes rests on the claim that it is used and understood more widely than any other Indian language. That Kannada is more widely used than any other language in Karnataka is claimed as one of the reasons for its status as the chief official language of the state of Karnataka. Similar claims are made in relation to other regional languages in India. A political claim is made based on a linguistic fact. However, the quality of bilingualism or the level of bilingualism often remains unspecified in linguistic terms in these claims.

For more than one hundred years, the Census of India reports have been taking notice of the bilingual situation in India. Bilingualism is often taken as a given fact. Bilingualism is also used as a denominator of the movement of various populations from one region or province to another. Bilingualism figures are often used to make political claims and seek privileges in administration, education, mass communication, and other departments of public life in general. Educational policies of the states are guided by these figures.

3. CENSUS OF INDIA STRATEGY TO ELICIT BILINGUALISM DATA

The Census of India 2001 asks its enumerators to record the facts of bilingualism in this manner: 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.

The political postures based on the bilingualism data of the census sometimes vitiate the political and social atmosphere of the country. What is needed is a more indepth linguistic study of bilingualism as a linguistic idea. While figures are very important, qualitative features of bilingualism as a linguistic idea need to be studied. Ranjit Singh Rangila's study of Panjabi loyalties, M. V. Sreedhar's study of Nagamese, and Rajathi's work on Konkani bilingualism broke new grounds, but these were not followed by more studies.

I'd like to present some qualitative aspects of bilingualism in the Indian mosaic. My intention in presenting these aspects is to show the complexity of Indian bilingualism which could not be elicited by the census questions on mother tongue and bilingualism.

4. HISTORICAL MOVEMENTS OF PEOPLE AND BILINGUALISM

People have moved from region to region along with the expansion of the kingdoms. In south India, for example, people of Telugu and Kannada origin have moved in large numbers to Tamilnadu in the past along with the expansion of the Vijayanagar empire and other kingdoms. Tamil populations have moved from Tamilnadu for trade and commerce, and also because of religious persecution. Once settled, these groups showed great interest in acquiring the language of wider communication in the respective regions. They did not give up their caste and linguistic identity, but, a few generations after, they assumed greater loyalty and attachment to the language of wider communication. In retaining their original language and thus contributing to the growth of bilingualism, caste seems to have played a very important role. Since marriage was usually endogamous and within one's own caste, the retention of the original language was ensured to some extent.

The attitude of the recent migrants stand in contrast to that of the earlier migrants. The recent migrations take place under a different canvas. These migrants arrive as individuals or families, not as whole communities. These are more often job seekers, and perhaps would go back or would like to go back to where they came from. They are aware of their linguistic rights enshrined in the Indian constitution. If they are not aware of these rights, the political groups make them aware of these rights and goad them into action to achieve what they should lawfully get. Means of communication between the migrant families or individuals and their original linguistic group are easily available. Reading materials are easy to get. Radio and TV programs are easy to access. Continuity is somehow ensured. With continuity comes the linguistic and social identities. When some families settle down and take roots in a different linguistic environment, they still continue their language loyalties. Moreover, with modern education at hand, every one

wants to adopt English rather than the local language for their functional needs. The strong loyalty transfer that we notice in the populations that migrated a few centuries ago is conspicuous by its absence in the recent migrants. A potential tension creating situation prevails. Bilingualism takes the role of a political idea more often.

5. AGE OF LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES

We are in an age of linguistic identities. Our politics in all spheres revolves around linguistic identities and loyalties. While caste identity plays a very crucial role within one's own linguistic group, linguistic identity plays a greater role when people of different linguistic origins come into contact. Linguistic identity was rather accentuated with the advent of the British rule. It is not the British who introduced it, though. We ourselves have evolved this trend to seek privileges and friendship. When people moved from one region to another for jobs, they moved as individuals but got united under linguistic identities in places far away from their native region. Government institutions, private corporations, judicial services, educational institutions, service organizations, political parties, and even religious outfits all have imbibed this spirit of bilingualism. Personal names often reveal one's linguistic identity, and use of a phrase or a sentence here and there evokes the spirit of recognition and patronage. So, bilingualism plays a very crucial role in every walk of our life in "cosmopolitan" cities.

6. BILINGUALISM IN AID OF LINGUISTIC BATTLES

Thirty years ago, we noticed a very interesting battle: Is Konkani a dialect of Marathi or even Kannada? Should Goa be a part of Maharashtra or Karnataka? Claims were made that if Konkani is a dialect of Marathi, then Goa should be lawfully merged with Maharashtra since Marathi is the language of wider communication or state language of Maharashtra. Some linguists even published very interesting articles and monographs supporting this position. Others, naturally, wrote against such a position. Although the battle is now rather forgotten, questions of language versus dialect are often raised in order to claim political and educational privileges. With more states carved out of larger states in the country, it will be interesting to watch the unfolding drama as to language use in these states. In addition, issues relating to the linguistic re-organization are far from being settled in various parts of the country. In all these issues, hardened positions are being taken and these positions will be a great hindrance to develop bilingualism. The traditional bilingualism will be considered a hindrance to develop one's own linguistic identity. Consolidation of single language identity is taking place in several parts of the country where issues relating to linguistic re-organization half a century ago are not yet settled.

7. MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY AND MUTUAL UNINTELLIGIBILITY

As I briefly mentioned above, questions of language versus dialect are often raised in order to claim political and educational privileges. Insistence upon distinct ethnic identity is followed by a desire to call a "dialect" an independent language. Since the official agencies often recognize a group as a distinct ethnic group only if the group has a distinct

"language," groups of people belonging to smaller communities speaking mutually intelligible dialects often claim that their "dialect" is indeed an independent language. Neither the official agencies nor the people themselves come to their conclusion based on linguistic facts. A desire to be separate and distinct often over-rides linguistic facts. Once the distinct identity is recognized, then it is not very difficult to slowly design linguistic or non-linguistic features that would further support the identity.

The languages of Nagaland and Manipur Hills offer a very interesting insight into how languages play a crucial part in the emergence of distinct ethnic identities. Mutual intelligibility characterizes the Kuki-Chin languages or dialects of Manipur Hills. Even though the people recognize such intelligibility, their desire to be distinct from one another or their desire to have their speech recognized as an independent language is very strong. On the other hand, mutual unintelligibility characterizes the situation among the "Naga" languages of Nagaland. However, the strong desire to be seen as a single ethnic or national group has led to the evolution of a common name for all the diverse people groups, namely, Naga. Whereas mutual intelligibility did not result in any political unity among the Kuki-Chin peoples in Manipur Hills, lack of mutual intelligibility has not functioned as a barrier to develop political unity among the peoples in Nagaland.

The Nilgiris in south India presents a very interesting bilingual situation. More often than not, it is assumed that Tamil or Kannada is quite known to the tribal population in the interior as well. A visit to the interior reveals that there is much greater monolingualism than bilingualism among these people groups. There is also functional mutual intelligibility among the tribal populations. They may not understand each other's language or dialect fully, but they are able to carry out their transactions using their own language or dialect to some extent. The over-arching Tamil and Kannada, representing more materially advanced communities, perhaps come to stand in the way of developing this inter-tribal bilingualism.

8. GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED BILINGUALISM

Wherever bilingualism has evolved in India, because of given socio-political and demographic reasons, it always has remained vibrant. People acquire bilingualism in these contexts from their early childhood. They do not have to go to school to learn to use two or more languages. However, bilingualism relating to English is a different category altogether. It is a government-sponsored, institutional arrangement. It is driven by formal necessities, not an acquisition in early childhood. Perhaps this explains the ambivalent attitude of Indians in general to English. They seem to like it; they seem to want it as a part of their life and career, even as they declare it to be a "foreign" language. Many families in urban areas, however, want their children to acquire English as their "first" language. This trend is getting popular even in rural areas. If this continues, say, for the next fifty years, we may see a different kind of bilingualism emerging in the country, one in which ethnic and religious identity may not play a crucial part.

Yet another government-sponsored bilingualism in the making relates to Hindi. There is bound to be some competition between Hindi and English to occupy the Indian bilingual

space. It is hard to visualize the contours of this competition right now. But, if we go by the historically proven Indian mindset, Indian socio-political conditions will evolve some functional separation between the two and keep both the languages within the bilingual space.