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LANGUAGE(S) IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENIUM

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I'd like to present a discussion on the National Curriculum Framework for School Education in relation to the teaching of languages in Indian schools. My thrust in this paper is to ask for a new language formula since the cliché-ridden THREE LANGUAGE FORMULA has neither been implemented in letter and spirit nor has it led to the effects its proponents thought that it would.

The National Council for Educational Research and Training had released a **National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document 1999** for public debate all over the country. The debate centered largely around the "hidden political agenda" of the curriculum, such as those relating to the teaching of history, teaching of Sanskrit, and teaching certain religious aspects, etc. The language-related issues did not attract much attention for various reasons to be elucidated in the later part of my paper.

The National Council for Educational Research and Training revised this document based on the discussion the original document generated. A revised document called the **National Curriculum Framework for School Education** was released in December 2000. This provides a framework and sets the path for school education of children in the next decade. The implementation of the principles and guidelines elucidated in this policy document is in the hands of the State governments and the governments of the Union Territories. So, some variations may be possible in the application of the guidelines given in the document. However, the educational institutions under the control of the Central government follow the guidelines as laid down in the document.

2. THE PROPOSALS

The proposals in the **National Curriculum Framework for School Education: 2000** relating to language are as follows:

The document states that the Three Language formula given below is still relevant and efforts should be made to implement it more vigorously.

- The First language to be studied must be the mother tongue or the regional language.
- The Second language

- In Hindi speaking states the second language will be some other modern Indian language or English, and
- In non-Hindi speaking states the second language will be Hindi or English.
- The Third language
 - In Hindi speaking states the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language, and
 - In non-Hindi speaking states the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language.

3. DISTRIBUTION OF LANGUAGES IN THE CURRICULUM

The proposed distribution of these languages for study in the school curriculum is given below.

Early Childhood Education

Teaching formally the reading, writing, and subjects is not allowed. Opportunities to listen and speak are to be provided. With out adopting any formal approach 'essential skills of identification, comparison, matching, naming, drawing and counting' are to be imparted.

Elementary Education

- § Primary- 1 to 5 standards.
 - § I and II - One language: the mother tongue/the regional language.
 - § III-V - the mother tongue/the regional language.
- § Upper primary - 6 to 8 standards
 - § VI - VIII. Three languages: the mother tongue/the regional language, modern Indian language and English.
- § Secondary Education
 - § Secondary - 9 and 10 standards: Three languages
 - § Three languages: the mother tongue/the regional language, modern Indian language and English
- § Higher Secondary - 11 and 12 standards

This system of the distribution of languages is not really new from the recommendations that have been offered in the past.

4. EMPHASIS ON SANSKRIT

Sanskrit: Opportunities and encouragement must be provided for the study of Sanskrit. 'It may be introduced as part of a composite course of Hindi and the regional languages as mother tongue at a suitable point of the primary or the upper primary stage'. 'At the

secondary stage Samskrit may be made available as an additional option and at the higher secondary stage, suitable elective courses in Samskrit may be made available to all the students who wish to study it'.

5. STUDY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Foreign languages: Depending on the demand and the availability of infrastructure languages like Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French, German, Arabic, Persian, and Spanish can be offered as additional options at the secondary stage.

6. MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

The medium of instruction ideally, ought to be the mother tongue at all the stages of school education. In case where mother tongue and the regional language are one and the same for the learners it should be the medium at all the levels or up to the end of the elementary stage. And in case of the learners whose mother tongue and the regional languages are different, the regional language may be adopted as the medium of instruction from the third standard.

7. DISCUSSION

The National Policy on Education 1968, the Education Policy 1986, and the adoption of the Programme of Action by the Parliament on Education in 1992 reiterate commitment for the implementation of the Three Language Formula. All efforts should be made to implement it in letter and spirit. Means to effectively implement the same have to be identified. And at least in the primary stage, mother tongue of the student should be the medium of instruction.

Learning more languages in the process of schooling may not be a load or a burden, given the right attitude. Linguists, educationists, and politicians often claim that mother tongue is the right medium for children's education. However, unfortunately, wherever English is not a medium of instruction, and is taught only as a language, the students have failed to acquire adequate competence in it. It only shows that, in the Indian school context, English can be learnt more effectively only when it is also used as a medium of instruction. Not only that, even in other contexts, if a language has to be learnt properly and fully, it has to be learnt not only as a language, it should be the medium of instruction also. Continued exposure under a variety of contexts is ensured when a language is used as a medium of instruction for the subjects taught in the school.

What is the legal implication of the guidelines offered? How many languages can be asked to be taught? For example, Karnataka State Government can introduce Kannada (the Regional Language) as one of the two languages to be taught at the upper primary school level. In that level the guidelines suggest that three languages, namely, the mother tongue/regional language, a modern Indian language, and English be taught. Note that teaching three languages is made obligatory as part of the general pattern of primary education. If the students have opted for their mother tongue which is not the same as the

regional language, the state government may insist on learning the dominant language of the state as a modern Indian language in this slot. This provides an opportunity to the states to enable all its citizens to have some acquaintance with the dominant language of the state. This would ultimately help the state to implement vigorously their own official language policy as regards administration.

The Karnataka state government can also make the study of Kannada (the Regional Language of the state) compulsory as one of the three languages for study at the secondary education level, by issuing an appropriate order or Rules, and make it applicable to all those whose mother tongue is Kannada (Regional Language) and also to linguistic minorities who are and who may become permanent residents of this State. This can be enforced in all upper primary and secondary schools, whether they are Government or Government recognized schools, including those established by any of the linguistic minorities.(Karnataka High Court has issued such a directive.)

Medium of Instruction

The Right to Education is a Fundamental Right which includes the Right to choose the medium of instruction as well and it could be exercised by the parents on behalf of the children. (April 20, 2000 : Madras High Court)

Parent's Perception

Some are concerned about the number of languages being taught and the stage at which they are introduced in the school. Some others question why children should learn more languages. They feel strongly that learning one or two languages is more than enough. They feel that in their effort to learn more languages, the students are not learning any language properly since they have to concentrate on several languages and many subjects at the same time.

English was the language of industrialization and modernization, and now it is the language of globalization. Mother tongues or regional languages have failed to create market value for themselves and only English sells. English has acquired social value. Knowledge of English is seen to be the key to economic prosperity. Parents, especially those belonging to the middle and upper classes, expect that their children should get the best type of education and they conclude that it is possible only through English medium. People from the lower classes emulate the model-setting behavior of the middle and upper classes. So, we find that the English medium schools are opened everywhere in the country side!

The perception of the policy makers, the recommendations and guidelines of the educationists, and the legal implications of the official guidelines as regards language choice and medium do not jibe well with the perception of the parents. India has the largest middle class and this middle class has demonstrated its desire to go in for English as the medium of instruction. This has led to an incompatibility between the policy and

its effective implementation. Like in many spheres of national life, the policy is kept as an ideal, but its implementation is always half-hearted.

The best course is to draw a policy that reflects the aspirations of the people rather than the aspirations of the ideologues and politicians, and strike a balance between the demands of national and regional identities and goals of education. Most people would like to see that English has an active role in the education of their children. They want their children to acquire effective skills in English, even as they have some competence in the Indian language of their choice. The problem is compounded by the fact that more and more students prefer to take Hindi or an European language, in lieu of their mother tongues or the dominant language of the state. Thousands of students come out of schools without knowing how to read and write in their own mother tongue. This is perfectly legal, although it is a tragedy. This worries the state governments who see in it a threat to the identity of the dominant language of the state. The Indian worldview looks at getting jobs abroad as the most important goal of school education. This has added to the complexity of the situation.

8. REALITY

The **National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document**, released on Jan 1, 2000 states that "In a number of states/organizations/boards, however, the spirit of the formula has not been followed and the mother tongue of the people has been denied the status of the first language because of the changed socio-economic scenario, the difference between the second and the third languages has dwindled. Thus in reality there may be two second languages for all purposes and functions. Some states follow only a two-language formula whereas in some others classical languages like Sanskrit and Arabic are being studied in lieu of a modern Indian language. Some boards/institutions permit even European languages like French and German in place of Hindi. In this scenario, the three language formula exists only in our curriculum documents and other policy statements. From this it is evident that for school education the Three Language Formula is the strategy and goal for Indian multilingual situation but not practicable. It may recalled that Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry are following the two language formula of teaching Tamil and English."

The bilingual educational model devised for the education of tribal children has hardly evoked any meaningful response from the users. The District Primary Education Programme of Karnataka prepared a primer for use by the children from the Soliga tribe. The primer was to be introduced in the BR Hills region where Soliga dialect is spoken. The first standard Soliga dialect primer was in Kannada script, so that the Soliga children would learn their dialect using the script of the dominant language of the state. And it was presumed that such an introduction would greatly facilitate the reading and writing skills in Kannada as well. But it was reported that '...the community leaders and the State Project Officer have expressed reservations about the need for text books in Soliga language ...' Not only in formal education of tribal children but also in nonformal education in a minority languages (Tulu), the primers were prepared in Tulu using the Kannada script. The adult learners were not that much enthusiastic about this experiment.

The reality is that over the period, the number of Indian languages used in the schools has decreased. As per the Fifth Educational Survey conducted by the NCERT, the year and the number of languages used in the schools are as follows - 1970: 81, 1976: 67, 1978: 58 and 1990:44. According to the same survey the number of languages used as the medium of instruction also has decreased. They are: Primary education- 1978: 47, 1990: 24. Secondary education - 1978: 43, 1990: 22.

There is an interesting parallel in the Bilingualism statistics of the 1991 Census of India. The number of bilinguals in the country has grown from 9.70% in 1961 to 19.44% in 1991. That is, bilingualism has almost doubled during 30 years. But more bilinguals come from the speakers of mother tongues like Kodagu(86.46%), Tulu (68.89%), Konkani (74.20%), Sindhi (63.45%), Nepali (39.83%), Urdu (38.00%), Punjabi (37.69%), and Manipuri (33.08%). The speakers of these languages have faced greater social, economic and geographic pulls than the speakers of other languages. The National average of bilinguals is 18.72%. This being the case, Hindi mother tongue speakers are least bilinguals (11.01%). It may be noted that the Three Language Formula intends the spread of a Modern Indian Language in Hindi-speaking states. Even the state of Tamil Nadu which officially practices two language formula has more bilinguals (18.74%), which is above the national average of bilinguals, but the Hindi states have a percentage of bilinguals much lower than the national average. A Tamil enthusiast can now claim that the two language formula is no hindrance to the growth of bilingualism!

9. NEED OF THE DAY

Instead of glamorizing a formula that eludes effective implementation, a formula that has proven to be non-practicable, a viable alternative to the three language formula for language education in the school curriculum should be worked out.

Regarding the medium of instruction, we have done little more than parroting the statement that mother tongue medium is the best medium. Is it a correct statement and understanding in all the social and linguistic contexts? Even in cases where there are competing tongues and the contexts in which mother tongue is an un-definable concept?

What strategies can be devised in our Indian contexts to switch over from the mother tongue medium to the English medium in the subsequent stages, since the same medium of instruction is not available at higher levels of education?