Why we must preserve language diversity in the era of cultural homogeneity

Preserving and promoting all of India's languages must be the priority. Credit: YouTube

By Chitresh Kumar

As India observes the annual Hindi Fortnight, from September 4-15 this year, it is imperative to deliberate upon the idea of modern democratic states and identity creation through languages in the 21st century. As a symbol of culture, languages influence and are influenced by the contemporary socio-economic and political decree. Their significance as the largest monolithic demagogue of society is not something one needs to debate upon.

Historically, though mostly forced upon, languages evolved, flourished and were enriched by adapting to the vernacular environment, and in the process, distinguished themselves from other regional languages. The spread and expansion of societies and ideologies have been possible through language. Take for instance, the adoption of Pali by Gautam Buddha for Buddhism, or for Dhamma by Emperor Ashoka. Even Latin, the propagation of which
followed the ascent of the Roman Empire, transitioned to crude Latin and then eventually into the Romance languages, which are currently spoken in many European countries. And once assimilation became the priority of the Mughal Empire, Persian gave birth to the poetic Urdu. The informality of relatively peaceful times allowed these languages to assimilate experiences in terms of words, phrases, idioms and similes, and branch out into numerous dialects (Lucknowi Urdu or Hyderabadi Urdu, for instance). But a failure to achieve this meant languages like Pali and Sanskrit would slowly become extinct.

However, European enlightenment and colonialism saw language as a visceral force for cultural propagation and wrongful proliferation. Through the structured modus operandi of mass killings, followed by the systematic induction of the foreign language in the name of educating the ‘uncivilised’, the post-Magna Carta states proliferated the idea of homogenous empire languages, be it Spanish or Portuguese in South America, French in North Africa and parts of Canada, or English in the Indian Subcontinent and North America. Such an artificial introduction of a language or the Roman script in some cases led to the loss of phonetics and vocabulary, like in the case of Swahili in Kenya or Khasi in Meghalaya. This process is often irreversible and can simply go undocumented.

**Language and identity**

As countries were created a new norm came into force, one where language was treated as an important variable in defining the nation states, their physical boundaries and their political influence. For instance, the dropping of ‘o’ or replacing ‘s’ with ‘z’ in American English was less about the ease of language and more about the US wanting to create an identity beyond that of another English-speaking post-colonial nation.

Besides ethnicity and religion, language-based identity has also played a part in conflict and the resultant casualties, for instance during the Bangladesh Liberation War and the Sri Lankan civil war.

Partition proved a major setback for the Nastalik script in India and Gurumukhi in Pakistan. Although India intended to adopt the ‘one nation, one language’ doctrine of ‘Rajbhasha Hindi,’ this plan was discarded and soon states were created based on language. Today the constitution has 22 officially recognised languages and no official national language.

Contemporary India is now seeing the creation of a unique socio-political and regional identity. For instance, Bhojpuri, a dialect of Hindi, is seen as a representation of corruption and caste politics or the dialect of immigrant daily wages labourers, while Bengali has transitioned from the language of intellectuals and mass movements to a representative of unwanted debate and slow growth in West Bengal. A host of cities and other places are being renamed in the local language, often adversely affecting their much-needed global appeal. Amidst all this, the spread of technology has forced the market and the consumer
to use the Roman script for vernacular languages. We are yet to understand the toll this will have on our local languages and society.

An evolving idea

While the rise of right-wing politics in India has seen a fundamentalist turn in the language debate through the focus on Hindi, or by the mandate of differentiation through the inculcation of additional rigidity in regional languages, the idea of language itself appears to be evolving. Note this comes at a time when we take pride in Punjabi becoming the second official language of Canada, while domestically we breed a silent malice amongst each other through language barriers.

Amidst this, the great Indian middle class has aligned itself towards the European concept of peaceful demarcation, and languages and polyglots are revered in their respective circles. On the other hand, politics has become more divided on the lines of regional languages, be it the Bhojpuri-speaking migrant workers in Delhi or Mumbai, Hindi-speaking North Indians in South India, or Bengalis in the North-eastern states.

Languages are evolutionary in nature; we can document them but can’t control them. But to document, we must understand that languages are ever evolving. Using regionalism and language as tools to obstruct the cultural assimilative process will not work for any of us in the long run.

We need to understand that it should be no longer be about ‘Hindi’ or ‘Hindi Fortnight,’ but that the evolutionary processes of all our languages need to be preserved and documented. The first wave of cultural and geographical restructuring has turned Urdu into a novelty. We should not let this happen to our other languages. Else what remains is a lingering homogeneity and the loss of the coveted ‘Indian multilingual cultural diversity.’

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*Chitresh Kumar is Assistant Professor at the O. P. Jindal Global University.*