

## COMMENTS ON PEGGY MOHAN'S ARTICLE

### 'Is English the Language of India's Future?'

#### T. Vijayendra

The underlying assumption of Peggy's article is that India is a nation and it has one 'National' language. The project of making Hindi as a 'National' language has failed and that English is replacing it.

There are several problems with this assumption. As Laltu has pointed out, even in 1947 it was not clear what parts of the sub continent would be included in India. India as a nation was a construct of some sections of the 'nationalist' movement. One aspect of this construct was that the Indian bourgeoisie, which visualized itself as the new ruling class in India, thought of this as 'unified protected' market for them. In fact one main reason for the formation of Pakistan was their insistence of a federal structure for the country which was not acceptable to the Indian bourgeoisie.

The reality of South Asia is 'federal'. It is a set of nations, more like Europe. Several strong nations exist within it with their fairly well developed languages. They are not going to die! The polity of India is dominated with this tension between federal forces and unitary forces. For instance the chamber of commerce had opposed linguistic states. They said we should just draw lines as it was done in the U. S.! Whereas we all know that the movement for language autonomy is one of the strongest political movements in India. At any time there are about 10 regions demanding a separate state on the basis of language!

Most Indians are bilingual if not multilinguals. All Tribals are bilinguals. A Tribal intellectual like Pandit Raghunath Murmu, in Southern Jharkhand, easily knew seven languages – Ho, Santhali, Mundari, Nagpuria, Oriya, Bengali and Hindi! As a rule the less powerful speech community learns the language of the more powerful speech community. Thus Oriyas learn Bengali; Malayalees learn Tamil and Kannadigas learn Marathi! In a city like Bengaluru, most auto drivers have functional access to 4 to 6 languages including English!

There is no doubt that English is the language of power in India. Access to English opens many doors for 'advancement' in today's India. But it is wrong to assume that everyone in India has such aspirations. Even those who have such aspirations are not willing to give up their access to their own languages. Even in the Metros, most verbal transactions are in Indian languages – local and some variants of Hindi (which include Urdu, Calcutta Hindi, Bombay Hindi and Dakhni). Many

languages in India are also flourishing even in the market economy – books, music, films, TV, social media and so on. Many Indian scripts are available in e-formats of computers and smart phones. These include tribal scripts like Santhali and Ho and may be many other scripts. There is no way Indian languages are going to die in the foreseeable future!

Languages do die. Peggy Mohan is a scholar of birth (Creole) and death (Bhojpuri in Trinidad) of languages. Some Indian languages with very small speech communities have died and will die. A Language dies when the speech community is under great stress. Such is not the case in India.

Language has many uses as Laltu correctly describes. It is not just business transactions or science and technology. People need one or more languages for many transactions in daily life including cultural and emotional needs. In a multilingual country like India bilingualism and multilingualism is common. People learn according to what they need. And society adjusts to that and new institutions keep on coming e.g. Rapidex series of books for learning English and many other Indian languages, spoken English classes and so on.

Innovative programmes in school education are also quite common. The school I went to in Indore way back in the 50s, was a Hindi medium school with some add ons. English was taught as a subject from class I. Then English medium was introduced to science subjects for class IX and X. Major Indian school publishing houses like MacMillan, Oxford and Oriental Black Swan have a good range of publications in English for each class.

Yes English is important but so are other Indian languages. We will all survive, thank you very much Peggy!

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