Multilingual and Multicultural India

Dr Debiprasanna Pattanayak

In the context of Indian diversity consisting 3000 mother tongues, 4600 castes and communities, 4000 faiths and beliefs, 45000 plant/biological species, 65000 animal varieties, one would expect that the Indian Development Planning would be based on multiplicity of approaches and practices. One would expect that Indian celebrates its diversity, diversity of its languages, cultures, world views and creativity. But unfortunately the reverse is the case.

Indian education is pyramidal in structure. But the large language base at the bottom falls for short of the mother tongues required to be taught. We are paying lip service to education for all and mother tongue as the medium of early education. In practice education for all remains an adjunct of education for some. Mother tongues are pushed out in devices ways and minority English education is promoted. Today 3-4 per cent of English educated rule 96-97 per cent of the population. Unless Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan becomes Sarva Bhasha Abhiyan, education for all remains a dream. Unless we understand that language is bound to be medium.

Multilingual education is a social capital and not a parameter of poverty and discrimination. Three Language Formula is not a substitute for multilingual education. The first language Policy and Programme (1970) categorically monitors that the Three Language Formula is a programme and not a policy. The NCERT Report on Language (1986) points at deficiencies in the formula. And yet the NEP (1986) and it revised version (1992) got stuck in the Three Language Formula. This formula has no reference to mother tongues, to proximate languages, to classical languages, to foreign languages, to minority and minor languages, to dialects and socialists, and to pidgins and crabs, forfeits all claims to be being a policy.

The formula also forfeits all claims to multilingual education. As speaking many languages does not make one linguistic, teaching three of more languages do not make a curriculum multilingual. Existence of many languages, use of many languages makes a
country multilingual in the popular sense of the term. The world with 6000 languages is multilingual in this sense of the term.

Multilingual education is such a curriculum and such a method, which builds bridges among languages. It is not a one way bridge having one language behind and moving into another, thus promoting virtual monolingualism. This is to create competence in the local, regional, national and international languages through building two way bridges, thus ensuring and promoting sustainable multilingualism.

Multilingual education creates its own identity. This is layered identity. This recognizes diversity and respects difference. This recognizes that languages are not rich-poor, high-low, powerful-powerless and resourceful-resource less. Such thinking offends human rights and militates against education with quality and equity.

Multilingual education is not meant for tribals. It is education for all. Treating tribals as poor-low caste and inferior is imported by the non-tribal teacher to the classroom. To think that they do not have languages and speak only in dialects undermines their self-confidence. If multilingual education is based on the language which the child knows, speak and understands, while moving into reading and writing she comes to know the rule governed character of the language. She comes to understand the difference between the spoken and written styles of a language and also between one language and another. His imagination is stirred, creatively challenged and knowledge is enhanced.

The time to build bridges is determined by the distance and closeness of languages. It takes greater time and preparation to move from Oriya to Tamil or English rather than from Oriya to Bengali or Hindi. Scripts become another problem because of the prevalence of multiple scripts. However, one of the advantages is that all Indian scripts other than Roman, Persian, Arabic and newly invented tribal scripts have emanated from a single source, Brahmi. In the 1970s, I advised the South State that the tribal languages which have no scripts should adopt the state language scripts. Most accepted the suggestion.

Multilingual education involves cooperative learning. Teacher and students work together and seek the cooperation of the community. The teacher learns the languages and cultures from the students and the community, and the students learn subjects from the teacher. The teacher often does not know the number of languages spoken by
students in a classroom. The teachers even do not know the necessity of knowing the students languages. In fact, one teacher argued that if he had to tech Oriya and English, what is the need of knowing the languages of students. Such mind set is one of the reasons of one way communication in the classroom from the teacher to the student.

Time management in a major step towards bridge building. The first step is to build bridge between the Home language (Mother Tongue) and the School language. 80% of the school time should be spent on reading writing the Mother Tongue; 20% for the spoken school language. Thereafter more and more time should be given to reading and writing of the school language. This time is to be so adjusted that by the end of the primary stage (Fifth Standard), the time should be revised, 80% for the school language and 20% for the Mother Tongue. This time is not sacrosanct. This can be adjusted according to the need of the children.

Instructional material is the next important factor in bridge building. Instructional material of two or more languages should be so pleated that they should make the languages reflect the socio-cultural reality and build a culture area. This cannot be done by accepting a foreign model mindlessly. In a reading programme in Hindi for classes-I & II in an apex institution in Delhi, I was told that they have accepted the Cambridge series as the model. Nobody had an answer as to why they chose it as a model. There is also no answer as to why a subject is taught. In a school Dharawi School in Bombay and a tribal school in Orissa the teachers were teaching lessons on Birthday. There was a difference of nearly 30 years. In the Dharawi school, the teacher asked those who celebrate their birthdays and those who attend the celebration of birthday of their friends to raise their hand. Not a single hand was raised. In Orissa school the teacher read a line from the Textbook, which in translation is, Anuradha gave a gift to her friend on her birthday. One student asked, what is a birthday? What is a gift? Why did the child give something to the friend on that day? This shows that on the imposition of middle class values there is no change in the mindset of teachers, textbook writers and curriculum makers.

Grammar is another important factor in cooperative multilingual learning. Psychological research in dominant monolingual western countries says that a child has acquired the grammar of his mother tongue by the age of four. But in a multilingual country, where a child has more than one mother tongue, by the age of four the child
has acquired three fourths plus of grammar of one of the grammar of one mother tongue
and partial grammars of the rest. If a language has two genders, another three, another
five and another language have no grammatical gender. This could be a source of fun
and delight and the children can discover this by working together. If a language has
seven cases and another two, if a language has three tenses and another two, the
children and the teacher together work out playfully these differences and learn to
respect one another. They learn that each language has a different grammar. They also
learn that there is no language without a grammar.

The relationship between the language and mathematics is yet to be properly
understood in many parts of the world. Even in India, which has a glorious tradition of
mathematical research and which has contributed the concept of zero to the world? The
gap between the two is visible. Different languages gave different counting systems,
expressions of shapes and sizes, measures and notations. Different cultures have
different expressions for long and short, tall and dwarf, far and near, height and depth.
All these may be seen comparatively and used in the teaching of mathematics.

Research has established that those who are good at language are good at
mathematics; those who are poor at language are poor at mathematics. Natural
languages are ambiguous. Words and sentences occur with multiple meanings. Unless
they are disambiguated it is difficult to teach mathematics. A fifth standard teacher
where asked given thirteen red and blue balls how he would teach the concept of sat,
burst into laughter. He said separate the reds from the blues, you have your sets. When
he was told that if all the thirteen are partially red and partially blue. There is only one
set. If all the thirteen some are red, some are blue and some are partially red and
partially blue, then there are three sets. There is no wonder that as early as 1961 the
American Mathematical society incorporated Linguistics.

Teaching research and evaluation go hand in hand. In multilingual education
research is essential as there is no model to copy form. If there is no teaching because
there is no teacher (in Orissa, out of 1,30,000 sanctioned elementary teacher posts,
75,000 are vacant, because the teachers have to teach multiple classes and multiple
subjects), because the teachers do not know the subjects they teach, then quality
education and education is bound to remain a day dream.
When we speak of multilingual education two things stand out, cooperative learning in the classroom and community participation in school activities. In the classroom, teacher and student work together and home children and parents work together. They learn from each other. The community members can teach songs, tell stories, and talk about their values and cultures. In the process, a network of relations is developed which binds the school and the community, school drop out and school failure becomes the concern of the community and is reduced. Community knowledge supplements school knowledge.

1. One example of teacher student working together and bridge building is cooperative reading. The first step of the four step reading is the teacher reading a piece loudly to the class. The second step is the teacher and the students reading the some piece loudly together. The third step is silent reading by the students. The fourth step is evaluation of silent reading in order to ascertain the level of understanding as well as speed of reading. The community participation is reading Ramayan and Mahabharata to the children is another achievement.

Another example of teachers and students working together and learning from one another is language. Let us assume that the teacher does not know the languages the children speak. Many students do not know the teachers language. Taking objects in the environment or body parts, the teacher elicits the words in the languages in the classroom. They are written in the blackboard. This is the beginning of a multilingual dictionary jointly prepared by the teacher and the students.

An interesting aspect of cooperative learning is the discovery of different counting systems. The units of counting are different in different cultures. Some count by units of four, some by five, some by ten, some by twelve and some by units of twenty. Each has its riddles, songs and games. The discovery of these units and linking them with counting from one to hundred rather than imposing one to hundred could be a delightful experience.

The four factors of multilingual education are Time Management, Grammar Management, Instructional Material Management and Research Management, Allotting time for bridge building and for skills in two languages in such a manner that 80 per cent of school time is devoted for Reading and Writing of the Mother Tongue and 20 per cent
is for speaking and understanding of the school language. The Time is so adjusted that by the end of the primary standard, the allotment is reversed, 80 per cent of the school time is devoted to the speaking, reading and writing of the school language, 20 per cent of the time is for the Mother Tongue. The child is ready to study through the medium of the school language from the post primary stage. It must, however, be understood that there is nothing sacrosanct regarding the allocation of quantum of time. This can be changed according to need.

Grammar is the thread which binds language sounds with meaning. Grammar is the rule which governs grammar. These rules are different for different languages. These differences need to be discovered. Grammatical rules follow usage and not the reverse. In Sanskrit there is a saying, ‘the grammarians follow usage. These differences are so pleated that transition from one language to another becomes smooth.

Instructional materials bring cultures together or fear them apart. The scheduled tribe population of Orissa is 24 per cent of the population of the State. Yet there is very little textual material which introduces the tribal and their cultures to the non-tribal. The upper middle class culture is the model for all instructional materials.

Multilingual education is restoration of human rights. It is an acknowledgment of the snatching of language rights of children, minority and minor language speakers, pidgin and creates speakers, dialect and socialect speakers. It is recognition of the fact that the physically and mentally deficient are derived language rights. Since multilingual education is built upon mother tongue foundation, this is also restoration of value education. Multilingual education is not tribal education, nor is it education for linguistic minorities. Multilingual Education is education for all.

......

B- 188
Baramunda Housing Board
Bubaneswar, Orissa, India