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Situating the Universe of Discourse in a Global Context: Issues Relating to the Status and Development of the Urdu Language in and for School Education in India

> There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. Basic English skills are at the very core of what these public schools teach. Imposition of a requirement that, before a child can effectively participate in the educational program, he must have already acquired those basic skills is to make a mockery of public education. We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful.

THE above pronouncement could easily be misread as a comment on the issue of the language used as a medium of instruction, which has been dogging the school-education scenario in India since Independence. By 1971 India had over 3000 mother tongues belonging to four language families, and written in ten major scripts and a host of minor ones.[1] The stern observation above, however, came from the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1974 Lau versus Nichols case whereby the Court found that the public authorities in San Francisco, California had, by pursuing monolingual

[1]D.P. Pattanayak, "The Languages: A Multicultural Plurilingual Country," *Independent India: The First Fifty Years*, ed. Hiranmay Karlekar (Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations/Oxford University Press, 1998); Government of India, *Census of India 1971* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, 1971).

educational programs, denied 1800 Chinese students equal opportunities.[2] I have chosen to begin this short paper by citing this apparently out-of-place example to dislodge the myth that India is *the* unique case of handling linguistic diversity in the world. Ignoring diversities, a "monolingual ideology," is still evident in education systems in many, if not most, parts of the world. School systems everywhere still seem to be so designed as to produce among their students a now dysfunctional monolingualism and monoculturalism. Teachers and curriculum planners must, therefore, initiate changes in the mainstream curriculum, particularly the language curriculum. This is especially true because schools everywhere are likely to play increasingly important roles in shaping the new citizens of a much more integrated global economy—with a higher mobility of "knowledge workers" within countries and across the globe.[3] Children now, and adults in the future, will therefore need to develop and use linguistic and other international skills in their daily lives within their home cities as well as in their larger communities. Many smaller countries have recognized this within their educational systems, but larger countries do not find it easy to accept this and to change their school systems and practices accordingly. The issue of school education through the "mother tongue" has thus come to center stage, particularly with reference to the education of minority communities—immigrant, religious, ethnic, and so on. Two such large countries are China and India.[4]

In China the encouragement of bilingual and trilingual teaching in minority areas is one of the national policies for the development of minority education.[5] In the 1950s, at the First National Conference for Minority Education, it was decided that minority ethnic peoples who had their own languages, such as Mongolian, Korean, Tibetan, and Uighur, should use their own language as the medium of instruction at the pri-

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[2]William B. Thomas and Kevin J. Moran, "Struggling for Continuity: Ethnic Identities and Language in the United States," *World Yearbook of Education 1997: Intercultural Education*, eds. David Coulby, Jagdish Gundara and Crispin Jones (London: Kogan Page, 1997), p. 192.

[3]Binod Khadria, *The Migration of Knowledge Workers: Second-Generation Effects of India's Brain Drain* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999).

[4]Tapas Majumdar, "Intercultural Education in India," *World Yearbook of Education 1997*, pp. 112–20.

[5]Jianhong Dong, "Minority Education in the People's Republic of China," *World Yearbook of Education 1997*, pp. 162–8.

mary and secondary levels of schooling. Those ethnic groups which had independent languages that had no written form, or only an incomplete written form, were encouraged to create or revise their own written forms or adopt Mandarin as the means of instruction on a voluntary or temporary basis. This policy has been reaffirmed in the Constitution (1982) and the Education Law (1995). Among the 55 minority groups only Muslims and Manchus have adopted Mandarin in their daily lives as well as for education. The other 53 minority groups speak more than 80 languages—24 of the 53 groups have more than 30 written forms and 20 groups share oral and written languages with people from the same ethnic groups abroad. At present 11 minority groups, such as Tibetan, Mongolian, Uighurian, and Korean, have adopted their own language as the medium of instruction. Ten further minority written languages are being used for instruction on a trial basis.

India is a case of mixed contrast. In India the Constitution came into force in 1950. Apart from the six Fundamental Rights which are legally binding, the Constitution of India also lays down a set of Directive Principles of State Policy which are, unlike the Fundamental Rights, not justiciable. One Directive Principle, which is provided by the celebrated Article 45, says that "the State shall strive to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 years." It had for long been generally understood that Article 45 actually provided an escape clause to the State by only enjoining that it shall "strive." To this extent, therefore, the right to a kind of education that would be in accord with one's culture, language (and script) seemed obviously circumscribed by Article 45. In a landmark judgment, however, delivered by the Supreme Court in 1992 on a writ petition against the state of Andhra Pradesh, it was decided that the right to education flowed from the Fundamental Rights. The Supreme Court also decided that, although this right appeared circumscribed by Article 45, it was open to the Judiciary to accept or reject the contention that the State could be truthfully described as "striving," but conspicuously failing, even after four decades of such compulsory education to all children up to 14 years of age.[6]

What is less known than the Directive Principles is Chapter IV of the Constitution which contains Special Directives. Section 21 of Article 350A of these Special Directives, inserted by the Constitution Act 1956 (Seventh

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[6]Tapas Majumdar, "Education: Uneven Progress, Difficult Choices," *Independent India*, pp. 293–313.

Amendment), has, for some reason or other, a similar escape route to the "striving" in the Directive Principle in the word "endeavour":

> **Facilities for instruction in mother tongue at primary stage:** It shall be the endeavour of every state and of every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups; and the President may issue such directions to any state as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision of such facilities.[7]

One likely follow-up of the Indian Supreme Court's ruling on the Directive Principle relating to universalization of free primary education is that the Judiciary's intervention will be sought for supplementing the universalization clause with the mother-tongue education clause of the Special Directives. The implication of this is that greater emphasis of policy will now be placed on multilingual education of more than a quarter of a billion children in the age group of 5–14 years. Since such education has to be both free and *compulsory*, the cost implication of delivering it through the medium of at least the 18 major languages so far given recognition in Schedule Eight of the Constitution would clearly be enormous.[8]

Apart from considerations of cost and of the ethnic identity and cultural aspirations of adults, what is important from now on is that emphasis has to be very much on what concerns the educational needs of children themselves, particularly the ones belonging to minority groups—whether linguistic or otherwise. It is here that the plight of the Urdu language as a medium of instruction and/or in terms of a subject taught as a second or third language is of relevance. The state or society may have the requisite statute in the Special Directives of the Constitution to provide safeguards against the marginalization of a language like Urdu, and perhaps it will also find the finances to meet the enormous task of preparing the study materials and training teachers for the purpose, but these can only satisfy the "necessary" conditions. The "sufficient" conditions will not be met unless and until the stakeholders choose to choose Urdu over other languages for themselves. No amount or kinds of statutes will succeed in preserving the language against the odds of

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[7] *Constitution of India*, Chapter IV—Special Directives.

[8] See Tapas Majumdar, *Committee Report on Cost of Universalisation of Primary Education* (New Delhi: MHRD-Government of India, n.d.).

marginalization and extinction. To create instead a superstructure of higher education, e.g., a university exclusively dwelling on Urdu as a medium of instruction, without enabling the masses (mostly belonging to the artisan class below the poverty line) to have "effective access" to it in terms of the prerequisites of primary and secondary education in the Urdu medium, will amount to putting the cart before the horse. This is not necessarily peculiar to the case of Urdu but is relevant for all other languages which are on the margin and the periphery, and even for those facing threats from more dominant languages in neighboring states. This is because, as Victor Stevenson states:

> A language shares many characteristics with all living things. It evolves from a parent stock and, in favourable conditions, will spread from its native soil, generating, as the Latin of Rome did, a family of distinguished offsprings.... It is also prone to corruption, decay and extinction. Like animals and plants, it has to face competition and undergo changing conditions. If it fails to adapt, it is reduced to insignificance, is given up by those who use it and perishes, for unlike the tangible forms of nature, a language has no life of its own. It exists solely on the lips of its speakers, and its fate is bound up ultimately with the fortunes of those who use it.[9] ❐

[9]Victor Stevenson, ed. *Words: An Illustrated History of Western Languages* (London: Macdonald, 1983).