

Indian Languages in Indian Higher Education

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A report of a consultation on the key issues in strengthening the presence of Indian languages in higher education, formulating initiatives for innovative curriculum design, production of raw materials, teacher training and resource aggregation.

On 27-28 July 2012, a gathering of social sciences and humanities teachers and researchers, librarians and digital technology experts met in Mumbai to discuss the feasibility and modalities of a multi-institutional project that would engage with Indian languages in the higher education space. Some of them had been part of a group that prepared a policy note for the Planning Commission for integration into the 12th Plan document, suggesting measures to strengthen the presence of Indian languages in higher education, including the setting up of a National Mission on Quality Education in the Indian Languages.¹ The consultation was aimed at arriving at a consensus on the key issues to be addressed, and formulating initiatives for innovative curriculum design, production of new materials, teacher training, and resource aggregation.

Background

About six million students (40% of all enrolled students) from non-metropolitan India enter the system every year and fail to achieve their educational goals because they are unable to cope with English. Public elementary education in India has been largely moving towards Indian language instruction, but in higher education globalisation has only reinforced the position of English as the single-most important language for teaching and research. Caught in this tug-of-war, the higher education student from a non-metropolitan context finds it impossible to survive. Less than 15% of the relevant age group enters higher education, of which only 17% goes on to obtain a postgraduate (PG) degree. One of the significant reasons is the enormous *linguistic divide* within Indian higher education, a divide that has severe consequences for occupational, economic and social mobility, and the quality of life, of non-metropolitan students. It is a

familiar fact of Indian higher education that while the mandated medium of instruction is English, the default language of the classroom is the local one. Thus any intervention that does not strengthen the local language as a knowledge language cannot succeed. Merely improving English skills has no effect on higher education when attention is not paid to the relevance of the curriculum to contemporary knowledge needs. Similarly, translating large amounts of material into Indian languages has little effect because of their lack of local relevance.

There is a widening gap between the growing knowledge resources in the world and the conceptual universe of the students. The gap can be bridged not through marginalising local languages in favour of English but by *strengthening Indian language resources*. Such strengthening would have a dual purpose: it would help the student enter new domains of knowledge through a familiar medium, and it would eventually lead to the domains themselves becoming more context-sensitive.

Earlier interventions in relation to promoting Indian languages have often focused solely on translation *into* those languages to the detriment of generation of new materials. Also, such interventions have been located in stand-alone institutions and have not entered higher education spaces, thus failing to have an impact on teaching-learning in colleges and universities. A *multi-pronged and multi-institutional* project could make a serious and lasting contribution to knowledge generation and deployment drawing on Indian languages. The overall long-term objective of our interventions ought to be bilingual – and even multilingual – proficiency for teacher and student, a proficiency that would bridge the different knowledge worlds that converge in Indian higher education. Access, equity and social diversity issues which are central to the exponential growth of higher education in India can be addressed through a focus on Indian language materials and their deployment in the classroom.

A significant recommendation of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC)

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in its report of 2009 was to encourage multilinguality in primary and secondary education, but not in higher education. It is as though the major goals of tertiary education are to be achieved primarily through learning English. Even the very idea of a knowledge society stands instrumentalised in this understanding. The NKC also recommended the setting up of a National Translation Mission (NTM), currently housed at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, to translate “knowledge texts” into Indian languages. The NTM appears to have begun the process of selecting these texts by starting with the top 47 books prescribed in Indian universities. The design of the process also indicates the unidirectionality of the envisaged translation, from English and other European languages, into the local languages, which we have already argued does not take into account the modalities of curriculum framing and the relevance of selected texts for the Indian context.

In the space of higher education, major issues regarding the success of cognition and knowledge production hang on the language question. What happens when in India today we have to engage with different conceptual universes that also suggest different ways of speaking and writing? An effort like the NTM needs to take this problem on board, and coordinate with curriculum development efforts that prioritise Indian language materials as providing ways of seeing and knowing which should also enter the mainstream monolingual post-graduate curriculum.

Apart from the standard lack-gap argument used in identifying what needs to be done, one could also argue for support to Indian languages from the point of view of the sustainability of higher education in India. Sustainability can be guaranteed through Indian language materials for and in teaching-learning and research, which would reach the majority of students in higher education, not to mention the students from diverse social groups who are entering college for the first time. Such materials would not only be cost-effective, they would also provide very quick “returns on investment”.

The Problems

Key problems identified were non-availability of quality Indian language resources and training for education and pedagogy; lack of programmes that can effectively translate knowledge resources into teachable curricular content; and lack of teacher-training for employing innovative pedagogic approaches using Indian language materials.

Sample data from a baseline study conducted by the Kannada University (“Survey and Analysis of Social Science Materials in Kannada, 1873 to the present”) indicates that out of the 5,000 or so texts (majority of them translations) reviewed and categorised by origin language, discipline, and publisher, History and Religion dominate the non-literary category, while Literature accounts for 57% of all books published. Ninety-six per cent of the local language books used in higher education in Karnataka are translations of textbooks or stand-alone classics, and only 4% are original resources. Per capita book production in Kannada at 5% (as against English in India – which is 23%) is not only low but indicative of the general lack of resources in Indian languages.² Satish Deshpande and his colleagues conducted an inventory and analysis of BA and MA textbooks in Hindi in History, Sociology and Political Science, in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan. The study, which examined about 70 books from each discipline, testifies to the absence of good quality and effective teaching resources and underscores the need to intervene at that level to strengthen quality of access to higher education.³ A study of the publications of ICSSR-funded institutions has shown that only 89 out of the 1,098 books published by these institutions are in Indian languages, while the Indian Social Science Academy’s 38 publications since 1974 include just three in Indian languages.⁴

To target the problem of resource material and to ensure its circulation within the university, it would be necessary to generate *new materials* in regional languages and mainstream them for curricular use. This could be done by creating *new model curricula and courseware*

in select disciplines and field-testing them in classroom situations. We would have to formulate *new teaching methods* (build bilingual pedagogies) to train non-metro students, and work towards aggregating existing *digital resources* and dovetailing them with curricular experiments using Indian languages. The generation of new materials in Indian languages and their mainstreaming would necessarily involve not just textbooks but also interdisciplinary readers, translations from other Indian languages, mediated translations from English, bridge materials for existing curricula, and non-print materials including audio and video. Building digital resources would be a complementary task.

Key Conceptual Issues

While the road map appeared rather obvious, the participants brought up a number of significant conceptual issues that would have to be addressed as institutions embark on strengthening Indian languages in higher education. Eight language-specific sessions (Malayalam, Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Assamese, Bangla) provided brief overviews of existing initiatives and of the quality of Indian-language educational resources, addressing context-level challenges in relation to curriculum and pedagogy, research and knowledge production. J Devika and Ratheesh Radhakrishnan discussed the Malayalam context, in which there appeared to be new challenges for knowledge production when a lot of the new research on Kerala was being done in English. Plagiarism and homolinguality (assuming that high Malayalam was understood by everyone when it could be as unintelligible as English) were also issues.

Both Yogendra Yadav and Ashwin Kumar A P commented on the epistemic problem of thinking knowledge afresh versus the issue of canonical and disciplinary knowledge. How do we mediate the conflict between local languages and canonical knowledge, or between social sciences and the regional languages? What do we do with materials that do not “look like social science”? How do we mediate between the world of experience embodied by the local

language and the world of higher education which appears through English? V B Tharakeshwar said that this separation of spheres exists not just in education but also in the world and in ourselves. He added that there were very few instances of context modifying the theory. What was required – when we had for example knowledge of social movements and knowledge coming from academia – was mutual engagement and the transformation of both. Yogendra Yadav said this sort of “bridging” activity was central to what we were attempting, in an educational context in which the “cognitive design of disciplines” had disempowered Indian languages. Uma Bhrugubanda added that in newer disciplinary formations such as women’s studies and cultural studies which have already problematised the subject of knowledge and knowledge production, the bridging could become an intrinsic part of what was done pedagogically.

While the lack of quality materials for higher education was a problem most languages faced, Bangla had a different kind of problem, according to Amlan Dasgupta. He pointed to the long list of high quality pedagogic materials – nearly 1,000 titles of importance – in science and technology in particular, which featured more prominently in Bangla than did the humanities and social sciences. Medical education in the 1880s, for example, was available in Bangla. However, the present-day pedagogic and curricular framework does not allow students to access the Bangla materials that are already available, although nearly 90% of BA students write their examinations in that language. To redress this issue, Dasgupta emphasised the need for interventions in curriculum design, pedagogic practice, and even preparation of guidebooks. Padma Sarangapani pointed out that a large number of teachers across disciplines prepared courseware and bridge materials that tended to remain in the “grey” zone, and it would be useful to focus attention on working out how these materials could be converted into more formal genres and linked to publication and distribution networks so that they could enter the mainstream of higher education.

Suneetha A and Uma Bhrugubanda drew attention to the rich materials in Telugu generated by the women’s movement, the dalit movement, and more recently the Telangana movement, as also to the fact that the older Left traditions were well-represented through Telugu translations. Translations of movement materials into English with critical mediations would make them an important resource for social science. Mapping the field of available resources and consolidating them was an urgent task. Rajan Krishnan, speaking about Tamil, added that archiving of available materials should receive priority, just as creating original resource material in the form of introductory books on a variety of topics could also be undertaken. Speaking about Hindi, Apoorvanand referred to the energetic inputs in writing and publishing from the early 20th century that lasted until the 1940s. Government support in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, and the socialist movement of the 1960s, supported the production of social science writing in little magazines as also in departments of literature. The little magazines in particular have produced a large corpus of social science writing. Yogendra Yadav added that in spite of Hindi being the “*rashtabhasha*”, state patronage is irrelevant to the revitalisation of Hindi, which is happening through social movements on the one hand and the market on the other. Education organisations like Eklavya, as Madhav Kelkar pointed out, have a wealth of resources in Hindi that could be archived, as well as help in translation and annotation efforts.

Teaching Practice

Paying renewed attention to teaching practice as a way of strengthening Indian language use was once again stressed, this time in the Marathi context, by Wandana Sonalkar and Shruti Tambe. They also emphasised the importance of workshops for students that would validate the use of Indian language materials for research, while Rahul Sarwate spoke about using diverse genres of material in the classroom. Wandana Sonalkar further stressed the need to conduct research training and research writing workshops

for Indian language use. Shruti Tambe contended that interdisciplinary *paribhasha* workshops were required for the standardisation of terminology, since this would be a prerequisite for the creation of analytical skills. Dulumoni Goswami, speaking about Assamese, said that although 70% of students in higher education were from rural Assam and were not proficient in English, there was very little material available for them to use. Scholars were unwilling to write in Assamese because they received no academic weightage or incentives. More crucially, there was no precise terminology in Assamese that could be used in social science texts.

In a session on *bilingual pedagogy* Anjali Monteiro raised the possibility of bringing into the classroom materials created by students as well as materials they enjoyed, such as games, videos and so on, which could make the classroom less monolingual. Sharmila Sreekumar discussed the use of YouTube and social media as pedagogic tools. In a multilingual situation, the proficiency of students’ use of technology could well point to different literacies, she said. A panel on the possibilities opened up by *digital technology* had Navijyoti Singh speaking about crowdsourcing knowledge from predominantly orally-connected communities, and gesturing towards an educational future that could include oral journals and oral classrooms. Amlan Dasgupta discussed the making of the short-title catalogue at Jadavpur University which identified about 5,000 texts in Bangla from 1778 on. These texts could form the foundation of a digital archive and creation of electronic resources for teaching and learning. Such an archive could also include poems, film scripts, political ephemera, religious and even pornographic texts sold in village fairs and trains. These materials would enrich the domain of inquiry of social analysts.

Taking up the idea of research training skills for Indian languages, Shiju Alex of the Wikimedia Foundation said that getting students to edit and produce Wiki articles would be one way of teaching such research skills. Yatrik Patel, representing INFLIBNET, with Muttayya Koganuramath and Mallikarjun Angadi

representing the Sir Dorabji Tata Memorial Library at TISS, presented ideas for the formation of institutional repositories and the requirements for large-scale digital archiving. C S Yogananda joined in, giving examples of optical character recognition for Indian languages. The need for standardised metadata formats across languages was stressed. The panellists were of the opinion that the potential of digital technologies for furthering the integration of Indian language materials into higher education teaching-learning and research could be immense.

Road Map

The kinds of programmes and activities to be taken up by the multi-institutional project could include:

Indian Language Materials Production Programme: Involve pre- and post-doctoral scholars in partner institutions for producing original works and translations in Indian languages, and to facilitate curricularising such materials. Original materials and bridge materials in different disciplines with a strong focus on social sciences and humanities to be produced; writing and translation workshops (general as well as language-specific) to be conducted. Initial steps to include cataloguing and annotating existing materials; preparing state-of-the-language analytical reports; baseline studies about existing teaching-learning practices: which Indian language materials students are using, who is using Indian language medium to study, teach or write examinations; and paribhasha dictionaries and standardisation of technical and critical terminology. What needs to be taken up on a large scale is translation from Indian language to Indian language, Indian language to English, and where required English to Indian languages. Creation of Indian language materials by students could also be an invaluable resource; this could include Wikipedia entries, audiovisual resources, and compilations of material on peer-to-peer learning platforms.

Curriculum Augmentation Programme: Dearth of quality teaching-learning materials in Indian languages is an important

gap. We could set up across partner institutions a Curriculum Augmentation Programme to work on strengthening student comprehension of existing curricula through bridge materials, and transformation of “grey” materials and courseware into edited publications. Cataloguing of resources, in at least five to six Indian languages to begin with, could provide the basis for enhancing curricular access in the language contexts where model curricula, infused with Indian language materials, can be piloted.

Teacher Education Training for Indian Language Use in Higher Education:

Teacher education training workshops for bilingual pedagogy at UG and PG levels could be designed and piloted by collaborating institutions. A web-forum for sharing of pedagogic strategies in relation to bilingual/multilingual classrooms could be created. Based on the web-forum discussions, we could work towards a teacher manual for pedagogy using Indian languages, and incorporate these materials and concerns in faculty development programmes, either through the older schemes of the academic staff colleges or the newly proposed Faculty Development Centres.

Research Programme in Indian Languages and Higher Education:

An important feature of the project would be a robust interdisciplinary research programme engaging with Indian languages, with a focus on education, translation, and localisation. Research training would include components of Indian language use and curation of archival materials, and in modular format can be shared across collaborating institutions, or joint training programmes organised. Research projects on issues relating to language, equity and access could also be developed and housed in different collaborating institutions.

Digital Archive and Resources: Setting up a digital hub for digitising, aggregation, archiving, documentation, sharing platforms, e-learning platforms, training platforms, would be a priority. Developing new e-content and making it available for teaching-learning could be

dovetailed with production of new materials in Indian languages. It was also proposed that mandatory Indian language computing skills be introduced, especially for research degrees.

Integration of Indian Archives: Many attempts at digitisation of resources in Indian languages are underway across India, sometimes including overseas partners. These attempts are patchy and more often than not undertaken in isolation. Systematic integration of incomplete or partial archives created by existing initiatives and making them available for the curricularising process is a crucial need. While this effort may not be the central focus of the proposed Indian languages project in higher education, it could be a valuable parallel activity. The attempt would be not to host all the resources in one physical space or one digital server, but to create a metadata-level directory and an integrated search engine which would help in systematising and retrieving data from all repositories through a single directory. Some existing initiatives to build upon would include the National Library Catalogue, the National Mission for Manuscripts at the IGNC-DELHI, the Digital Library of India project of the Ministry for Communication and Information Technology, the Digital Colonial Documents project of a consortium of Australian universities, the Digital South Asia Library jointly assembled by the University of Chicago, etc.⁵

In terms of promoting the mainstream visibility of Indian languages, the group will take up lobbying and policy-oriented activities such as getting the UGC to validate Indian language work for faculty promotion and increments. It was also suggested that we should work out the modalities for a future Inter-University Centre for Indian languages in higher education. Additionally, it was proposed that an annual Indian languages *mela* be organised, with multiple panels, activities, film screenings, and theatre performances. It would also be an occasion to showcase what is happening in multi-institutional programmes.

Following up on its role as consultation host, TISS has committed to the

following: assemble, with INFLIBNET support, A Digital Hub for ILHE; support five-six internal faculty research proposals to produce material in Indian languages and conduct workshops to support this activity; conduct research training workshops for MPhil-PhD students (open to other institutions); conduct Wikipedia research training programme for BA and MA students; support the editing and assembling of a volume of analytical state-of-the-language reports; begin work towards assembling a “cook-book” or teacher manual for bilingual/multilingual pedagogy; and host the Indian Languages Mela.

NOTES

- 1 The policy note was based on collective deliberation by and inputs from (in alphabetical order): Preetish Acharya (RIE, Bhubaneswar), Satish Deshpande (Delhi School of Economics), Abhay Dubey (Indian Language Programme, CSDS, Delhi), Mary E John (Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi), Tejaswini Niranjana (Higher Education Innovation and Research Applications, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore), Suhas Palshikar (University of Pune), Pankaj Pushkar (ICSSR General Fellow at CSDS), Ravikant (CSDS), K C Suri (University of Hyderabad), Anil Kumar Verma (Christ Church College, Kanpur), and Yogendra Yadav (CSDS). The note was facilitated by Publics and Policies Programme of the CSDS.
- 2 The Kannada University study was carried out by V B Tharakeshwar and M Usha, with support from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, availed of through the Regional Language Resources Initiative of the Higher Education Cell, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society.
- 3 The study was done under the aegis of the Institute for Research in Development and Democracy (ISERDD), with support from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, availed of through the Regional Language Resources Initiative of the Higher Education Cell, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society.
- 4 Sushanta Kumar Sarma and Ishan Agrawal (2010), “Social Science Research in Vernacular Languages”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, XLV: 42.
- 5 We are indebted to Graham Shaw, formerly of the British Library, for drawing our attention to some of these initiatives. What is significant about these initiatives is not just the number of items digitised, but the processes evolved and benchmarking standards developed. Similarly, there is much we could learn from the processes that have been developed and implemented with regard to selection of materials, editing, and translation in the Indian Languages Programmes at CSDS – Lok Chintan Granthamala and the Lok Chintak Granthamala – and initiatives at Centre for Social Studies, Surat.