

Importance of understanding our languages

■ Vidyadhar Date

In Mumbai, a civic garden in the upper-class suburb of Bandra West was renamed after Darryl D'Monte, the late senior Mumbai journalist and environmental crusader last year amidst some fanfare. Now, the civic administration has put up a board in Devanagari Marathi which makes a travesty of his name and also the Marathi language. It reads Dorel instead of Darryl. And this when the State Government is promoting Marathi, over a fortnight ending on January 28, with events and activities that honour the language and culture.

As part of the promotion of the language, shops have even been asked to put up boards in Marathi, which many people cannot read. It indicates what is wrong with the language policy in India. Part of the blame lies with the monolingual English language elite and some in regional languages who want to foist English on schools as the medium of instruction. This is without any understanding of reality. Many parents are not equipped to teach children in English or even in their own mother tongues. The result is that we now have children who are good neither in regional languages nor in English. This is the case in large segments of society.

The ridiculous board outside the civic garden in Mumbai is a result of such a policy. In this case, however, the appalling contract system introduced in civic gardens is also responsible. For errors and corruption, the administration absolves itself and puts all the blame on the contractor. The D'Monte family apparently is unaware of the error because like many of the younger generation across language affiliations, the Devanagari script is unclear and unfamiliar. Darryl's family is one of the oldest East Indian Christian families in Bandra and belonged to what was

originally a mainly agrarian community. The mother tongue of this community is a dialect of Marathi which many in its upper sections have stopped using long ago.

The problems don't centre around Marathi, dialects of languages, English or Hindi. There are problems galore and they are across India and have to be considered before taking any step involving a language. For instance, the conversion of a Hindi medium school to English, mid-session, violates Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution (freedom of speech and expression) and cannot be permitted, a court in Rajasthan ruled recently while setting aside the Rajasthan Government's decision to convert Shri Hari Singh Government Senior Secondary School in Pilwa, Jodhpur district, to an English medium one in September 2021.

The parents maintained that they were not against English as a medium of instruction, but against the 'complete conversion of the present institution'. The abrupt change, they said, would compel students to take

admission in other schools during the academic session, which would affect their studies. The Rajasthan Government argued that the students could easily take admission in the numerous Hindi medium government schools in the same area.

The government seems to be so casual about people's problems. In this case, the State Government evidently thinks it is easy to get admission in another school – in a village how many schools would there

be in the vicinity to choose from? The problem with the craze about introducing English as the medium of education in schools is that most families and schools in non-urban settings do not have enough resources even for studies in the local languages. The dominance of English and the relegation of regional languages is one problem. Then the regional languages elite also hinder transmitting knowledge with their insistence on the use of Sanskritized

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terms. These deter youngsters from learning their own languages. It is much better to retain English terms or use simple words in the regional language rather than Sanskritized words. For instance, why say *yakrut* for liver, when *kaleji* or just the English word for the organ – 'liver' – is fine?

Then there is the issue of snobbery in every language. In the Rekhta Urdu learning programme, an Urdu writer pointed out that

even a professor of Urdu in Pakistan found himself laughed at because he deviated a little from the normal way of speaking. A scholar and head of Mumbai University's Urdu Department, a Konkani Muslim, complained to this columnist some time ago about the bias he faced from some North Indian speakers of the language who felt that only they wrote and spoke correct Urdu.

As English is widely accepted the world over, many British have become monolingual and are paying a heavy price as they are often stereotyped as lazy, closed-minded, rude people. Language experts observe that the British are reportedly the worst in Europe at learning foreign languages, with 80% of Europeans in the 15-30 year age bracket being able to read and write in at least one foreign language whereas only 30% British people in this age group (15-30) can do so.

In India, dialects suffer more discrimination. That is why it is important that Damodar Mauzo, a Konkani writer from Goa, recently won the prestigious Jnanpith Award. He knows multiple languages including Portuguese, English, Marathi, Hindi and this has greatly helped him. He is a liberal and has written with much insight about the Catholic community in Goa. However, there was no reference to him in an academic book on Goa recently brought out in the US.

Language can be the cause of divisions in society. In the instance of Konkani, script is a dividing factor. The Christians in Goa have been demanding that Konkani is written in

the Roman script while others insist on writing in Marathi or the Nagari script which is a precursor of Devanagari. In terms of script, the case of Hindi and Urdu are similar. Ashok Vajpeyi, the noted Hindi writer whose love of Urdu is well known, said at a seminar celebrating both languages that 'Hindiwallas' observed centenaries of Urdu writers. He stopped short of saying Urduwallas did not do this for Hindi writers. There are a lot of translations of Urdu into Hindi but not the other way around, some Hindi writers observe.

Then there is the problem of widespread ignorance regarding the language issue at all levels. For instance, Sadanand Date, a police officer praised for his role in the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai, recalled his experience of a meeting of Adivasis addressed by the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh in a Naxalite area in that State. He noticed that the audience was not reacting at all. Only then it was realized that they did not know Hindi. Sadanand Date got an interpreter who knew the local dialect, he acted as a translator and the problem was solved. This does not happen in most cases and a lot is lost without the translation!

This is probably the main reason why the Naxalites have succeeded despite all the efforts to stop them: Language! Learning the local language has helped the Naxalites manage inroads in tribal areas. They have learnt local *bolis*, dialects and reached the ears of the tribals. Whereas the governments are talking to the tribals in a language only the governments understand!

For the rest, our insular upper class is one of the major problems in the way of learning languages or dialects and thus a hurdle in the way of communication of any kind. So why are we celebrating a language with 'language weeks' and fortnights without understanding the language?

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