

Speaking in my own tongue

Nineteen years ago, in November 1999, the General Conference of the Unesco proclaimed February 21 as the International Mother Language Day to coincide with the Language Day Movement in Bangladesh. The genesis of this commemoration lies in widespread protests by the Bengali-speaking majority in the region, then known as East Pakistan, against the Government of Pakistan's language policy. Urdu was the sole national language of Pakistan under this policy. These protests reached a crescendo on February 21, 1952, when students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law. Many protestors were killed. The unrest continued till February 29, 1956, when Bengali was recognised as the second official language of Pakistan. February 21 is observed every year in Bangladesh as the Language Movement Day or "Shohid Dibosh" (Martyrs' Day).

In her message on the 19th International Mother Language day, Unesco's director general reminds us that, "A language is far more than a means of communication; it is the very condition of our humanity. Our values, our beliefs and our identity are embedded within it". Language is clearly an emotive issue because it is embedded in our social life. It enables us to communicate our emotions and ideas. It fosters group identity and fraternity. Usually, we express our thoughts much better in our mother language. It has been found that children learn better, especially at the primary stage, if they are taught in their mother tongue.

Language is intertwined with identity and is, therefore, a contested issue. Preservation of languages has inevitably been linked to the preservation of a culture as well as artistic and intellectual heritage. Many language groups felt vulnerable during the colonial times and many continue to do so in the globalised era. Noting that every two weeks, one of the world's languages disappears, the United Nations General Assembly's resolution of May 16, 2007 called upon all countries "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world". The same resolution proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages to promote unity in diversity and international understanding, through multilingualism and multiculturalism.

We need to preserve the multicultural nature of our world and the best way to do that is to preserve all its languages and also enrich them. Let me recall Gandhiji's words: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

India has always believed in diversity and plurality. It has respected all languages. However, since language and culture are intertwined, there is an absolute need to strengthen the indigenous languages, including those spoken by the many tribal groups in our country.

As the UN has noted, "Language is fundamental to communication of all kinds, and it is communication that makes change and development possible in human society. Using — or not using — certain languages today can open a door, or close it, for large segments of society in many parts of the world." Language is the lifeline of a culture and, in a way, defines the larger social milieu. It plays an important role not only in communication but also in forging bonds among people who speak the same tongue. It provides a collective identity to people and forms an essential component of their cultural values.

Aphorisms in a language, that pass from generation to generation, reveal the customs, practices and values of its speakers. While this year's theme is "Linguistic diversity and multilingualism count for sustainable development", the issue that is close to my heart — one I have been advocating for quite some time — was the theme of the International Mother Language Day in 2012: "Mother tongue instruction and inclusive education".

India is a mosaic of diverse languages and cultures. While a majority of Indians speak Hindi, which can be described as the country's lingua franca, Telugu and Bengali are the other widely spoken languages in India. Tamil, perhaps, is one of the oldest languages in the world. Several other languages are spoken across the country. Each of them has a rich linguistic tradition and represents the richness of the dialect of the region in which it is spoken.

However, what is most important is to promote the use of the mother tongue. A child can grasp knowledge better in his or her mother tongue compared to any other language. A child will also be able to communicate and articulate her thoughts effectively in her native language. I have been emphasising the need for all state governments to make mother tongue a compulsory subject in schools. I am glad that Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have decided to make Telugu a compulsory subject till intermediate from the coming academic year. Some other states have also made mother tongue a compulsory subject in schools and I hope the rest will follow suit soon. Other languages can also be taught in order to promote diversity, multilingualism and inclusiveness.

Large-scale promotion of mother tongue is the best way to increase literacy in India beyond the current level of 74 per cent. With strong language competency in the mother tongue, a student will be able to learn other languages faster and can become a true polyglot in a multicultural, globalised world.

Following British rule, English became a highly popular medium of instruction in the country's educational institutions. It became the link language in the country and is used in government offices and elsewhere. Unfortunately, many people, especially the urban-educated and those who have received education in elite institutions, feel it infra dig to speak or read and write in their mother tongues. This undesirable trend has to be reversed.

World over, people not only take pride in speaking in their mother tongues, but also try to propagate them. I regularly interact with foreign dignitaries who prefer to speak in their mother tongues even though they are fluent in English. Various heads of state, for example, from Russia, France, Switzerland, China, Germany and Iran, use their national languages. This is simply because they take pride in their languages. They use language to assert their national identity.

Let me greet you on the occasion of International Mother Language Day and urge all citizens of our country to learn their mother language well and also become fluent in as many languages of the world as they can. Let us strengthen our linguistic and cultural roots by making our children learn the mother language first and gradually introduce them to other languages. A multilingual and multicultural world will be possible only by strengthening individual mother languages.

Each tree in this huge orchard of world languages must have strong roots, beautiful flowers and fruits. We need to have an educational system that incorporates mother languages, a publishing industry that encourages Indian language publication, and an internet regime that allows communication and transmission of knowledge in different Indian languages. Individuality and plurality can and must go hand in hand. That has been the essential Indian vision. It is the same vision that can enable us to be true Indians as well as global citizens at the same time.

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