

GETTING THE LANGUAGE COUNT RIGHT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Amendments, Schedules, and Important Articles

The story, “Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant”, by [Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi](#), is about the death of an elephant. For a reader, the story may appear to be about a rather “big death”, but what the writer wanted to say was that there are also many “small deaths”. They include the deaths of Dalits and tribals who are trapped by hunger and humiliation. Anonymity surrounds them and our lack of compassion gives them finality.

The death of a tree or a forest sacrificed at the altar of development is mourned but not spoken about. Similarly, the death of a language is literally shrouded in silence. Because of its nature, a language is not visible and fails to move anyone except its very last speaker who nurtures an unrequited hope of a response. When a language disappears it goes forever, taking with it knowledge gathered over centuries. With it goes a unique world view. This too is a form of violence. Large parts of culture get exterminated through slight shifts in policy instruments than through armed conflicts. Just as nature’s creations do not require a tsunami to destroy them, the destruction of culture can be caused by something as small as a bureaucrat’s benign decision. Even a well-intentioned language census can do much damage.

Over the last many decades, successive governments have carried out a decadal census. The 1931 Census was a landmark as it held up a mirror to the country about the composition of caste and community. War disrupted the exercise in 1941, while it was a rather busy year for the new Indian republic at the time of the 1951 Census. It was during the 1961 census that languages in the country were enumerated in full. India learnt that a total of 1,652 mother tongues were being spoken. Using ill-founded logic, this figure was pegged at only 109, in the 1971 Census. The logic was that a language deserving respectability should not have less than 10,000 speakers. This had no scientific basis nor was it a fair decision but it has stuck and the practice continues to be followed.

Hits and misses

The language enumeration takes place in the first year of every decade. The findings are made public about seven years later as the processing of language data is far more time consuming than handling economic or scientific data. Early this month, the Census of India made public the language data based on the 2011 Census, which took into account 120 crore speakers of a very large number of languages. The Language division of the Census office deserves praise but the data presented leaves behind a trail of questions.

During the census, citizens submitted 19,569 names of mother tongues — technically called “raw returns”. Based on previous linguistic and sociological information, the authorities decided that of these, 18,200 did not match “logically” with known information. A total of 1,369 names — technically called “labels” — were picked as “being names of languages”. The “raw returns” left out represent nearly 60 lakh citizens. And because of the classification regime, their linguistic citizenship has been dropped.

In addition to the 1,369 “mother tongue” names shortlisted, there were 1,474 other mother tongue names. These were placed under the generic label “Others”. As far as the Census is concerned, these linguistic “Others” are not seen to be of any concern. But the fact is that they have languages of their own. The classification system has not been able to identify what or which languages these are and so they have been silenced by having an innocuous label slapped on them.

The 1,369 have been grouped further under a total of 121 “group labels”, which have been presented as “Languages”. Of these, 22 are languages included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, called “Scheduled Languages”. The remainder, 99, are “Non-scheduled Languages”. An analysis shows that most of the groupings are forced. For instance, under the heading “Hindi”, there are nearly 50 other languages. Bhojpuri (spoken by more than 5 crore people, and with its own cinema, theatre, literature, vocabulary and style) comes under “Hindi”. Under Hindi too is the nearly 3 crore population from Rajasthan with its own independent languages. The Powari/Pawri of tribals in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh too has been added. Even the Kumauni of Uttarakhand has been yoked to Hindi. While the report shows 52,83,47,193 individuals speaking Hindi as their mother tongue, this is not so. There is a similar and inflated figure for Sanskrit by counting the returns against the question about a person’s “second language”.

English use

As against this, the use of English is not seen through the perspective of a second language. Counting for this is restricted to the “mother tongue” category — in effect bringing down the figure substantially. Given the widespread use of English in education, law, administration, media and health care, a significant number of Indians use English as a utility language. To some extent it is the language of integration in our multilingual country. Therefore, isn’t the Census required to capture this reality? It can, given the data on the language of second preference, but it does not for reasons that need no spelling out. So the Census informs us that a total of 2,59,678 Indians speak English as their “mother tongue” — numerically accurate and semantically disastrous.

The language Census may not attract as much attention as news about fuel prices. But in the community of nations, the Indian census is bound to be discussed. A body such as UNESCO will look at it with interest. From the 1940s, when its General Council decided to establish a Translation Bureau to years later, in 2008, when its Executive Board debated “Multilingualism in the Context of Education for All”, UNESCO has progressively developed its vision and deepened its understanding of global linguistic diversity.

Focus points

From time to time, UNESCO tries to highlight the key role that language plays in widening access to education, protecting livelihoods and preserving culture and knowledge traditions. In 1999/2000, it proclaimed and observed February 21 as International Mother Language Day, while in 2001 the ‘Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity’ accepted the principle of “Safeguarding the linguistic heritage of humanity and giving support to expression, creation and dissemination in the greatest possible number of languages.” In pursuit of these, UNESCO has launched a linguistic diversity network and supported research. It has also brought out an Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, which highlights the central place of language in the world’s heritage. Is our language census consistent with these ideas and principles?

One expects that the Census in India should adequately reflect the linguistic composition of the country. It is not good practice when data helps neither educators nor policy makers or the speakers of languages themselves. The Census, a massive exercise that consumes so much time and energy, needs to see how it can help in a greater inclusion of the marginal communities, how our intangible heritage can be preserved, and how India’s linguistic diversity can become an integral part of our national pride.

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