

## IN OUR OWN WORDS

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The writer is the Vice-President of India.

We are proud of the fact that India is a linguistic treasure-trove, a nation widely acknowledged for its extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity. The plurality and co-existence of multiple languages add colour and vitality to our country and make it unique.

However, I am deeply disturbed that we are not doing enough to preserve our rich native languages. Governments need to be doubly careful while adopting policies regarding the medium of instruction, particularly at the primary and secondary school level. The mother tongue lays a strong foundation for the expression of creativity. Every effort must be made to nurture creativity at the formative stage.

Language is a tool for intellectual and emotional expression. It is a vehicle of inter-generational transmission of culture, scientific knowledge and a worldview. It is the vital, unseen thread that links the past with the present. It evolves with human evolution and is nourished by constant use. In short, our languages permeate every facet of our day-to-day life and form the very basis of our civilisation. In fact, they are the lifeblood of our identity, both individual and collective. They play a significant role in creating and strengthening bonds among people. More than 19,500 languages and dialects are spoken in India as mother tongues, according to the Language Census. There are 121 languages which are spoken by 10,000 or more people in the country.

Languages are never static. They evolve and adapt to the socio-economic milieu. They grow, shrink, transform, merge and, sadly, die. The great Indian poet, Acharya Dandi, had said that if the light of language does not exist, we will be groping in a dark world. It is extremely disheartening that 196 languages in India are classified as endangered. We may have to ensure that this number doesn't increase. We have to protect and preserve our languages and the best and only way is to constantly use them.

I have always emphasised the importance of protecting and conserving our linguistic heritage. We cannot afford to lose the treasure we have inherited, the repository of our collective knowledge and wisdom which we have amassed over the course of the long journey of our vibrant civilisation. When a language declines, it takes with it an entire knowledge system and a unique perspective of viewing the universe. The traditional livelihood patterns disappear along with our special skills, arts, crafts, cuisine and trade.

Language preservation and development needs a multi-pronged approach. We must start by making the mother tongue the medium of instruction in our schools, and certainly at the primary level. A number of studies conducted all over the world by different expert groups have established that teaching the mother tongue at the initial stages of education gives an impetus to the growth of mind and thought and makes children more creative and logical.

Audrey Azoulay, director-general of UNESCO, in her message on the occasion of International Mother Language Day (February 21) 2019 said: "For UNESCO, every mother tongue deserves to be known, recognised and given greater prominence in all spheres of public life. This is not

always the case. Mother tongues do not necessarily have national-language status, official-language status, or status as the language of instruction. The situation can lead to the devaluation of a mother tongue and to its ultimate disappearance in the long term.” In my view, this is a timely, important reminder.

There is a misconception that only English education offers opportunities to grow in the modern world. It's not true. There are only a handful of English-speaking countries like Australia, Britain, Canada, the US etc. Countries like China, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, etc did very well without English education. Knowing English is useful, like knowing other international languages. This can't be extended to make a case for supplanting the mother tongue with English, as some are advocating. It can be learnt easily at an appropriate stage, after a strong foundation is laid in the mother tongue.

We must take concrete steps to not only have the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary level, but also take all steps to make it the language of administration, banking and judicial proceedings. For me, this is at the heart of an effective democracy. We have to remove the existing linguistic barriers to realise the goal of inclusive governance. Wherever there is a government-public interface, it should be in the language people understand.

I am not advocating that we should not teach our children multiple languages, which are required to widen the horizon of their understanding of both literature and science. In fact, this is essential for India to enrich its vast human resources and become a leader in the knowledge economy of today and as it evolves in the years to come.

In 1999, UNESCO adopted a resolution on multilingual education and suggested the use of at least three languages in education: The mother language(s), a regional or national language and an international language. What is important to note, however, is the crucial role of the mother language, which, as UNESCO notes, “is a source of knowledge and innovation” and that the “command of a mother tongue facilitates general learning and learning of other languages”. It is heartening to note that the new draft National Education Policy puts forth a number of suggestions for supporting education in home languages and mother tongues, tribal as well as sign languages.

Incidentally, the United Nations has proclaimed 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages to preserve, revitalise and promote indigenous languages. We, in India, have a number of tribal languages, many of which are headed towards extinction.

I hope that more and more people will start using their native languages at home, in the community, in meetings and in administration. More people should write poetry, stories, novels and dramas in Indian languages. We must accord a sense of dignity and pride to those who speak, write and communicate in these languages. We must encourage Indian language publications, journals and children's books. Dialects and folk literature must be given adequate focus. Language should become a catalyst for inclusive development. Language promotion should be an integral part of good governance. Swami Vivekananda once said that language is the chief means and index of a nation's progress.

Our languages must serve as a means for the empowerment of the masses. In the Rajya Sabha, a provision has been made for its members to express themselves in any of the 22 scheduled languages. The Supreme Court has recently decided to make available its judgments in six Indian languages, to start with. This is a positive step in the direction of removing language barriers and ensuring equal access to justice.

The finance ministry has decided to conduct the examinations for employment in Regional Rural Banks in 13 regional languages, in addition to English and Hindi. The Railways and Postal

departments started conducting their exams in the states' official languages. Many bold decisions must be made to protect and nurture our languages.

India has the largest youth population in the world, with 65 per cent of its population being below 35 years of age. We must incentivise this energetic generation to keep alive their mother tongues and dialects. We must teach our children to love languages and equip them to protect and nourish the beautiful legacy of languages that we have received from our ancestors. To not do this urgently and effectively will result in serious consequences for the preservation of our unique cultural identity. We cannot afford to regret this as yet another missed opportunity.

Let's nurture the mother tongue. Let creativity bloom in full flourish. The mother tongue is the soul of expression.

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