



Linguistic Diversity & Sustainable Development: Lessons from Grassroot Multilingualism

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0. Setting the Stage

Linguistically aware researchers tend to treat South Asia as a coherent unit, mainly due to the extensive levels of multilingualism found in the region. Attitudes towards multilingualism have traditionally been positive – people in the region have added linguistic varieties to their kitty without compromising upon their mother tongues. Throughout South Asia, people have used different linguistic varieties at home, at work, amongst friends, in the market, to entertain themselves, for rituals, etc (Khubchandani 1997). These behaviours and attitudes have brought about a different conception of what it means to know a language. Sentences such as “I can understand around 80% of language X” is commonly heard and understood in our circles. The idea that we do not need to engage with a language in all its manifestations to be a user of a language characterizes a South Asian multilingual. The cultural disposition to engage with linguistic varieties and the willingness to interact on a neutral ground with one’s interlocutors have led to a convergence of the grammatical properties of language in South Asia. For example, the use of constructions such as “thoda thoda” created by repeating a word to get a distributional meaning has transcended the boundaries of various language families of South Asia.

While we have managed to preserve our linguistic diversity over the millennia and develop a positive attitude towards multilingualism, things have been changing over the past two centuries to such an extent that today we are worried about the

loss and death of our mother tongues. – if things stay the way they are, we are, by the end of the century, in grave danger of losing 90% of our linguistic diversity, especially our mother tongues (Skutnab-Kangas et al., 2011). The social spaces available for our mother tongues have shrunk and as a result, they are being pushed to the brink of extinction.

The reasons for this drastic change in the fortunes of the mother tongues of South Asia are complex and varied and are being discussed and debated throughout the world. In this paper, I wish to discuss a particular dimension of this change in fortunes that I feel has not been given due attention: the issue of the ways we conceptualize our linguistic diversity. The underlying assumption of my paper is that human knowledge, practices, and beliefs influence and are in turn influenced by the sociocultural environment they are part of. While, in this paper, I draw upon examples from my immediate domain of research, the conclusions, I believe, would have a generality that is applicable across South Asia.

In this paper, I seek to bring forth for discussion two interrelated issues:

- a. What would constitute an appropriate conceptualization of linguistic diversity & multilingual practices?
- b. What effect does a monolingual perspective of language have on the multilingual practices developed in the subcontinent over the centuries?

The contexts in which I discuss the aforementioned issues are the concerns and attitudes related to linguistic diversity which have featured prominently in our public discourse in recent years. Coupled with the issue of shrinking space for our mother tongues, are two seemingly opposite orientations to mother tongues:

On the one hand, we have a rejection of the linguistic traditions which the mother tongues are seen to represent. Articulations by a certain section of Dalit intellectuals rejecting mother-tongue education in favour of English-based education are a case in point. Building temples of Goddess English and the celebration of Macaulay's birthday are manifestations of this trend (Anand 2010). Mother tongues, it is argued, are too steeped in caste and gender practices to

offer any sort of hope to their native speakers. They are seen as representing the long history of discrimination and repression that the majority of the populace has experienced (Prasad 2007). Rejection of the mother tongue in favour of languages like English is thereby seen as an attempt to overthrow the yoke of the sociocultural practices of the past (Illaiah Shepherd, 2020).

The second orientation, on the other hand, looks at mother tongues as a *primordial* identity around which socio-political mobilizations can be made. A typical strategy is to locate the glory of the user of the mother tongue in the past and blame their poor current state on the marginalization of the community at a later stage in history. Restoration of the past glory and prominence of the community serves as a rallying point for the members of the community. It is thus quite common to observe a clamour for greater visibility in the corridors of power with the hope that this visibility would result in a greater allocation of resources for the community. Demands can take various shapes such as:

- the demand for recognition as a “language” as opposed to a dialect: The cases of Konkani, and Maithili serve as examples of where the demands were met. Many other “dialects” are demanding recognition as “languages”. Bhojpuri is a case in point.
- the demand for the language to be included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution: The 8th schedule of the Constitution provides a list of languages that are recognized and patronized by the Union Government in the form of financial allocations. The schedule consisted of 14 languages in the 1950s. Today, the list consists of 22 languages. Many other languages such as Banjara are demanding their inclusion (See memorandum, dated 9th of August, 2016, submitted to the Minister, School Education, Sports and Youth Welfare, Government of Maharashtra).
- the demand for recognition as a classical language: the list of languages included in the list of classical languages of India is increasing by the year. The list started with Tamil & Sanskrit. In more recent times, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Odia have been included. The latest wanna-be-included language is Marathi.

While these demands differ in their scope, they do share the orientation outlined above.

Given this context of public discourse on the issue of language, the questions related to different conceptualizations of language not only offer a vantage point to understand the reasons for the linguistic crisis which we are all facing but also discover the common crucible from which these differing orientations emerge and continue to find nourishment. Such an examination has the potential of offering ways in which we could move towards building a sustainable linguistic ecosystem that would ensure a hospitable environment for our languages.

Before we attempt to get a grasp on the issues outlined above, let us first examine the expanse of the notion of linguistic diversity.

1. The Expanse of Linguistic Diversity

The notion of diversity has a transdisciplinary import – we speak of diversity in the natural world (especially biodiversity) as well in the social world (diverse societies, cultures, languages, etc.). Let us use this transdisciplinary nature of the notion to our advantage and examine the notion of linguistic diversity in the mirror of our understanding of biodiversity.

While biodiversity is generally discussed in terms of the diversity of species, it is well-recognized that the complexity of the living world can be captured only by recognizing several levels of diversity: along with species diversity, we can talk about genetic diversity, ecosystem diversity, and functional diversity. Genetic diversity captures the diversity within a species while functional diversity refers to the different behaviours of various species in a given ecosystem. Consideration of diversity at all these levels adds different dimensions to the notion of biodiversity.

Similarly, discourse on linguistic diversity generally focuses on the number of languages that coexist in a region. Such an exclusive focus can be a hindrance to understanding the true nature of the linguistic variety at hand. Linguistic diversity needs to be examined from the perspective of intra-language diversity, various

linguistic ecosystems, and the functions which different linguistic varieties perform in a given ecosystem. A user's linguistic repertoire is constituted by all these levels of linguistic diversity.

Differences in the nature of various linguistic ecosystems are of vital importance. For example, the ecosystem generally referred to as the "Hindi belt" is quite different in nature from the ecosystems which exist in the southern parts of India. The distinctness of linguistic traditions we observe in the south is not to be found in the Hindi belt where traditions are of a more diffused nature. Levels of multilingualism in the Konkan belt are much higher than that of that in the Hindi belt (See Census 2011).

A language may exist in two ecosystems but may perform different functions. To consider an example: Marathi is used in multiple states of India. Besides Maharashtra, we find a substantial number of speakers of Marathi in the states of Gujarat, M.P., U.P., Bengal, Orissa, Karnataka, T.N., etc. However, Marathi performs different functions in the lives of its users within Maharashtra as compared to other parts of the country.

A major level of linguistic diversity is the one that exists within a language – differences in register, style, etc. Intra-language differences can be captured by describing the different uses the language is put to in a given ecosystem. Marathi spoken in the Kolhapur region differs from that of the Pune region. The difference is not only grammatical but also a matter of way of speaking. Marathi used in textbooks is different from those used in public speeches. We observe such differences in our daily lives but they hardly become a part of our description of the language.

Understanding "what linguistic varieties are for" is an important component of our understanding of the notion of linguistic diversity. An exclusive focus on different languages very often leads us to misunderstand the nature of the linguistic variety at hand. Consider, for example, a linguistic variety named Parushi as used by the Nath Panthi Dauri Gosavi community (henceforth NPDGC). Traditionally this community has lived a lifestyle of nomads and is currently classified under

the category DNT by the government of Maharashtra. During my study of Parushi (Pandey 2019), I realized that the variety has two characteristics:

- i. It consisted of a small lexicon of about 150–200 words. The connotations of Parushi words were all negative: they signified those aspects of the life of NPDGC which represented situations of danger to its users or certain aspects of their living that they wanted to hide from strangers. Given their nomadic lifestyle, the importance of the availability of such a resource can be easily appreciated.
- ii. The grammatical structure used while speaking Parushi was exactly that of Marathi.

Example:

khəplə	khəplə	tʃiŋra	gasərləj
run	run	police	have-come

Run away! The police is here.

Upon discussing the nature of Parushi with the members of the community, especially our highly educated informant, we were given to understand that Parushi was the language of the community which is now being forgotten and gradually lost. The above characteristics of Parushi were, according to them, a result of this loss. However, it was quite clear to me that Parushi served as a register for the specific uses of the community – it was a variety developed *within* the Marathi spoken by the NPDGC. However, given the exclusive focus on languages, it was difficult to conceptualize a variety as such. The model readily available was that of a language under the threat of endangerment and that is what our informant was latching on to.

Upon looking at other such communities, I realized that several such Parushis were being used by other nomadic communities. Parushi was not a preserve of the NPDG people. Rather other communities had developed their own Parushis for their use. It leads to a realization that Parushi was not the name of a language but a linguistic function – a resource developed within the domain of Marathi, a resource that had a clearly defined use. Parushi is a name of a register developed to be used explicitly as a code by the users of a community in presence of strangers. Moreover, the perceptive naming of a linguistic function (rather than

a language) indicates a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of multilingual practices. An invaluable lesson that my engagement with Parushi taught me was to pay greater attention to articulations developed by communities over the centuries and engage with these formulations more seriously.

2. Two Conceptualizations of Linguistic Varieties

An important aspect of linguistic diversity is the variety of functions that linguistic varieties fulfil. A necessary characteristic of a multilingual setup is the functional differentiation of languages. Multilingual users distinguish between different uses of languages that they employ. These uses constitute a cline with two poles: face-to-face communication & one-to-many discourse (stage-discourse). Characterizing these two poles of language use involves two different conceptions of “language”. Face-to-communication is best explained by a conception of *language as a flow* while stage discourse relies on *language as a discrete entity*¹. The former typically involves the use of “mother tongues” while the latter typically involves the use of stabilized, decontextualized & (to various degrees) standardized languages (Britto 1986).

Traditional wisdom emerging from the grassroot-multilingualism prevalent in South Asia for millennia captures the two conceptualizations of language in a startlingly observant way: languages of face-to-face communication (*boli*) are said to vary every few kilometres while standardized languages are referred to as *shuddha bhasha* which should not be taken to mean “pure language” but rather a language which is conceptualized as a discrete entity, or simply, a language which has been codified through a written grammar.

The identification of a region with its linguistic practices is established through the open-ended concept of *kshetra* (*patta* in Marathi) – a region with fuzzy boundaries (Khubchandani 1997). Thus, we have terms such as Konkani *kshetra*, Hindi *kshetra*, etc. Superimposed on a *kshetra* is (possibly) a *shuddha bhasha* which essentially serves as a language of transregional communication, used

1 Grammatically speaking, the former has low lexical density & relies on a complex clausal structure while the latter has a high lexical density and uses nominalizations to a larger extent.

mainly in stage discourse. Historically speaking, a *shuddha bhasha* is often developed through a patron-client relationship between a state and the cultural elite of the region. As a result, the linguistic & cultural practices of stage discourse of the elite were primarily the focus of development. Through this development emerged an aesthetics of textuality which decided the order in the universe of texts. Written texts constituted the centre of this universe, usually at the cost of the aural texts of the non-elite. These aural texts have had all the characteristics of stage discourse but the elitist bias in the aesthetics of texts ensured that these aural texts never found their rightful place as a kind of *shuddha bhasha*. It is important to note that, in such a conceptualization, linguistic identity is defined in terms of mother tongues and not *shuddha bhasha*. Thus, linguistic identity in a multilingual situation carries all the qualities of a *boli* – it is deeply contextual & thus essentially fluid.

3. Recasting Linguistic Diversity

The core premise of the paper is that linguistics as a science has developed a methodology for studying language as a discrete entity but *not* as a flow. Coupled with this limitation is the principle of egalitarianism: all languages are in principle equal. This principle has been taken to mean that *any* language can be used to perform *any* linguistic function. While one may agree with the statement that all languages are *potentially* equal, we also need to realize that such a postulation of equality is purely formal and in no way substantive. It is akin to stating that all Indians are equal in the eyes of the law. However, in practice, in a multilingual situation, no two languages in a speaker's repertoire function the same way.

Given its exclusive focus on language as a discrete entity, linguistics essentially adopts a monolingual approach to language. In such an approach, the object of description is taken to be an asocial entity that is universal in its function. Here, linguistic boundaries are taken to be neatly marked (through the grammar), and the variety is assumed to be internally homogeneous i.e. the social background of the speakers is irrelevant to the description of the grammar.

In the last two centuries, the process of nation-building and the formation of nation-states created a need to fashion a citizen (or a colonial subject) suitable to the needs of a modern state. Converting people into citizens involved studying their languages used in their everyday communication. The 18th - 20th C witnessed not only the process of standardizing a large number of languages of South Asia but also a study of the mother tongues. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India conducted at the turn of the 19th - 20th century can be seen as a part of this process.

As a result, the methodology developed for studying languages of stage discourse was & is used to study languages of face-to-face communication. This re-fashioning of mother tongues as discrete entities was a new development in the history of South Asia. All of the previously described languages such as Sanskrit, the Prakrits, the Apabrahmsas, the Desis, Pishachis, etc. were languages of stage discourse described in a hierarchical derivational relationship. We hardly have any record – let alone a description – of the mother tongues of the previous eras. The consequences of this re-fashioning of our linguistic diversity were immense. Let us consider one such dimension – the identification and labelling of dialects:

Everyone agrees that there are several dialects of, say, Marathi but no one can put a number to it. The problem is not limited to Marathi: enumerating dialects has always been a problem across the globe. Why should this be the case? I think the answer lies in the assumption that linguistic varieties used in face-to-face communication can be counted. I wish to submit that such an assumption belies our experience of linguistic diversity – to understand the nature of dialects what we need is the conception of language-as-a-flow. The two conceptions of language are not alternative ways of viewing the same reality but rather that the linguistic realities they capture are of a different kind.

So, what the linguistic studies/surveys of dialects offer are snapshots of the linguistic fluidity existing in the region. There is no limit to the number of snapshots one can take, hence the difficulty in providing a dialect count. The snapshots are static in nature and thereby offer a sense of rigidity to the linguistic practices of the region. Given the monolingual bias of linguistic methodology, this snapshot brings into focus only a few of the many varieties spoken in the region. It is from

this double move that a description of a dialect emerges. This description has all the characteristics of a discrete entity: it is conceptualized as being internally homogeneous. So, while snapshots may serve a useful purpose in that they give us some idea of linguistic diversity, forgetting that what we are observing is a snapshot leads to a disfigured representation of the linguistic reality of a region and has far-reaching consequences.

A consequence of tying dialects with regions is that it leads us to view multilingual regions (home to innumerable mother tongues) as unilingual ones or at least a region where the *majority* speak the “dialect”. As a result, what is essentially a set of various overlapping concentric circles is reduced to a single circle. This reduction leads to a postulation of linguistic communities that are defined in isolation. Interaction with other such linguistic communities is seen as a kind of intercultural communication, something “external” i.e., as not being constitutive of the community’s self-identification. Complex organic ties are thus partitioned into a series of one language – one community units and linguistic identities essentially solidified or rather fossilized.

Consider an example that I examined a few years ago. A few intellectuals from the Banjara community submitted a memorandum to the Government of Maharashtra demanding the inclusion of their language in the 8th schedule of the constitution. The way they couched their demands was telling – their claims were based on:

- i. Postulation of the unity of Banjara people, with claims of autonomy.
- ii. Locating the unity of the Banjara people in the past where the “original” form of the language was in use.
- iii. Unity of language was equated with a unity of culture.
- iv. Formulations of a (lost) glorious past.

The memorandum defines the Banjara people and their culture as an autonomous, historically developing community. The revivalist tone of the demands is quite obvious. Of course, this observation is not limited to the Banjara people alone. Many other examples from the present, as well as the past, can be cited.

What we are observing, across South Asia, is a shift in the role of mother tongues from having a low-key instrumental value (characteristic of multilingual polities) to a high-key defining function (characteristic of monolingual imaginations). (See Khubchandani 1992).

The two orientations to mother tongues alluded to at the beginning of the paper can be seen as a response to this kind of fossilization and shift in function. Two comments are in order:

a. It is important to note that people who promote progressive values such as “pluralism”, “multiculturalism” etc. too make this sort of reduction. These terms are often taken to mean respect & non-interference in the ways of living of other communities. The crucial question is: what is the nature of “self” & “other”? Are they fluid or fossilized? What are the means we use to differentiate between the “self” and the “other”?

b. In matters related to language, there is more consensus across political & social ideologies than we realize. After all, the imagination of one language – one region – one community is just one step short of the one language – one community – one nation conceptualization.

4. Concluding Remarks

The monolingual approach adopted by the state while appropriating the mother tongues into its fold has resulted in a shift in linguistic attitudes and patterns of language use. The ever-increasing effort of the state to penetrate deeper to create & exploit markets has provided a gigantic dimension to this shift in attitudes and patterns. This has resulted in a flattening out of linguistic complexity and thereby a loss of linguistic diversity at all levels. Language shifts & language loss, strengthening of revivalist tendencies, etc. are some of the effects of this shift.

Stemming this tide of language conflict, language endangerment & loss is a long haul and would require a strong will & concerted efforts on the part of the polity.

Part of these efforts would involve a critical examination and reconceptualization of what the term linguistic diversity means for us. Luckily, we have centuries of experience in grassroots multilingualism in the truest sense of the term. We, intellectual workers, should learn to listen and understand the voices that have emerged from these experiences and discover ways in which these voices can be made an integral part of our policy-making and planning processes. One of the major learnings could be the clear-cut conceptual separation of languages used for stage discourse and language use in face-to-face communication. Development of the former should be the object of language policy and planning. These stage discourse languages should be viewed from a functional perspective i.e. use-based perspective rather than a user-based perspective. The extent to which we can create democratic spaces for the creation and development of use-based codes made accessible to all – through education – would be a determining factor in our attempt to create a sustainable ecosystem for our languages.

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