

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
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Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
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In Pursuit of Knowledge

THE NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMISSION

The website of the National Knowledge Commission (<http://knowledgecommission.gov.in>) informs us that the Commission “is a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, with the objective of transforming India into a knowledge society. It covers sectors ranging from education to e-governance in the *five focus areas* of the knowledge paradigm: ACCESS (easy access to knowledge), CONCEPT (all levels and forms of education), CREATION (effective creation of knowledge), APPLICATIONS (of knowledge systems), [and] SERVICES (like e-governance).”

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was established on 13th June 2005 and given a timeframe of three years from 2nd October 2005 to 2nd October 2008 to achieve its objectives, which include identifying and suggesting “steps that will give India the ‘knowledge edge’ in the coming decades, i.e. to ensure that our country becomes a leader in the creation, application and dissemination of knowledge.”

LANGUAGE IN INDIA ARTICLE REPRODUCED AS RESOURCE

Language in India www.languageinindia.com is proud that the National Knowledge Commission has found an article published in its pages a few years ago suitable for inclusion in the very short list of resources under **language**.
<http://www.languageinindia.com/oct2001/ramasamyk1.html> (MOTHER TONGUE AND MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION - A CONTINUING BATTLE by K. Ramasamy, Ph.D.).

While being very thankful to the Commission for this honor bestowed upon this journal (a journal of “little people” in Indian linguistics), we still have some serious concerns about their recommendation, issued in a letter to the Prime Minister of India on October 20, 2006.

AN IMPORTANT LETTER FROM THE NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMISSION TO THE PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA



Sam Pitroda, Chairman, NKC

This document focuses on “on the significance of language, not only as a medium of instruction or as a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. We came to the conclusion that an understanding of, and a command over the English language, is perhaps the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities.”

The letter further states, “English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which makes for highly unequal access. ... The National Knowledge Commission recommends that the teaching of English as a language should be introduced, along with the first language (either the mother tongue or the regional language) of the child, starting from Class I in school.”

The Commission also suggests an outline for this early education in English in these practical words: “This phase of language learning should focus on using both languages to create meaningful learning experiences for the child without disproportionate emphasis on grammar and rules.” As evident from subsequent paragraphs in the report, the

Commission visualizes teaching-learning English not only as a language but also for teaching-learning some subjects in early elementary education.

PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS IN A FREE SOCIETY

Parental aspirations carry the day in favor of early English education in India. Indian Educationists want mother tongue education at the earliest levels of education, but the schools they guide, direct, and superintend go in the opposite direction! And most of these educationists send their children to English medium schools. Politicians and others who help mould public opinion are no exception to this trend.

MERITS AND DEMERITS

Years ago I compared both the positions (*mother tongue versus English*) and came to the conclusion that there is merit in both the positions: early childhood education exclusively through the mother tongue, or mainly through English. See my chapter 6 on Science Through Mother Tongue and Second Language in my book *Language in Science* (<http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2003/languageinscience.html#chapter6>). An earlier original version in hard copy appeared in 1978.

EMERGING TRENDS

However, I did not anticipate the growing lack of appreciation we find now in India of the fact that there may be some value in learning through and learning the mother tongue. This trend has some serious consequence for the future of Indian civilization. Indian languages may be found superfluous in a world where every one wants to use English. Indian languages will be relegated to certain ritual function. Hybridization of Indian languages that encompasses every walk of life and every medium of communication will result in not only in poor speaking skills in Indian languages but also will result in reluctance to employ writing in Indian languages.

Already there is a tussle between the minority Indian languages and the language of the dominant majority in Indian States. This tussle will now be resolved in favor of mastering a common medium, English. Both the minority and the majority will lose their languages probably, or as I said above, will re-allocate functions for the minority and dominant majority language/s of the state.

The role of the Three Language Formula is going to be further diluted. When one could use English for all practical purposes, why should we learn Hindi? An argument ably put forth by a great South Indian leader, C. N. Annadurai, fondly remembered and called Anna, when he spoke at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii, 1968. In any case, there is a significant section in India that never felt comfortable with this formula. Growth of Hindi as a mass communication medium and personal deliberations may

continue as the language assumes other functional roles in inter-personal oral communication. Again it is more or less going to be Hinglish!

IMPORTANCE OF CREATING EQUAL ACCESS



I know how important it is to create equal access to higher education and employment, etc. This was something denied to my family, my community and me for generations. For centuries, equal access meant merely acquisition of writing in my own mother tongue. The New Century interprets equal access as fair acquisition of English! While this interpretation and hopeful message is good, how effectively have we eliminated other constants that make it impossible to have equal access?

It is going to be almost impossible to a vast majority of first generation learners to learn English effectively and compete with those who have been blessed with a formal education in their communities and families for centuries. The process of selection is always in operation, ruthlessly reinforced by our social stratification, religious beliefs, etc. I, for one, am not really sure that knowledge and efficiency in the use of English is *the* (or most important) determinant for equal access. It certainly helps the ruling classes of the nation to create knowledge and wealth.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

I do not want to be negative: the proposal has immense potential for national reconstruction. In fact, even leaders of the stature of Lalu Prasad Yadav and the Left Front Government in West Bengal have suggested action in a similar vein. But we should also remember that this proposal brings with it many problems. Some of these problems I've mentioned above. There are many others.

To begin with, we need to understand why such proposals and plans in the past did not work well. The Madras English Language Teaching Campaign (MELT), for example, was a great movement, but, for various reasons, the standard of English in Tamilnadu has not improved. Equal access was not the driving force for this campaign, but it did aim at helping teachers and students in their quest for better standards in English. Equal access or better access to jobs through the mastery of English was also a slogan of the non-Brahmin movement of the Justice Party in the Madras Presidency. Ultimately it was not English but the political will of the people in Tamilnadu that created more access to jobs and higher education.

What I would wish is that the National Knowledge Commission continues to do its work on their current proposal, identify areas of negative consequences for our civilization, and suggest strong and mandatory steps for the uplift of the rural students and first generation learners. A strong teacher training program that focuses not only on improving the teachers' efficiency in using English in their role as model setters but also in changing their worldview toward our own mother tongues and their usefulness as media of communication. Let culture learning still be part of the mother tongue curriculum even as it is further improved to carry out modern functional needs in business communication, etc. The content of English curriculum should be so designed that it adds to mother tongue education and not replace it.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Then, I visualize a situation where the English juggernaut will move forward whether we have made provisions for its move forward or not! Parental insecurity and anxiety for the upward movement of their children in their economic journey, a strong hallmark of Indian middle class, will become the determinant in all these! Governments will fall in line! And we all will cherish that at least we are able to speak our mother tongues to some extent, and we will create a special class of people who will be a rare breed of people efficient in our mother tongues, and who would be in demand to perform master of ceremony-like duties!

Please read the Commission's letter to the Prime Minister of India given below:

LETTER FROM THE NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMISSION TO THE PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA

20th October 2006

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

In your meetings with the National Knowledge Commission, you have always stressed the importance of an inclusive society as the foundation for a knowledge society. This led us to reflect on the significance of language, not only as a medium of instruction or a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. We came to the conclusion that an understanding of, and a command over the English language, is perhaps the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. More often than not, teaching is in English. Even if it is not, in most subjects, books and journals are available only in English. And those who do not know English well enough, find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations.

This reality is not lost on our people, who recognize that the English language is a critical determinant of access to, and opportunities for a better life. Available information suggests that middle-income or lower-income households spend a large proportion of their modest income on sending their children to relatively expensive English medium schools. Such educational opportunities for children are a priority that is almost at par with health care for the family. But there are a very large number of people who simply do not have the resources for this purpose. The outcome is exclusion. We believe that inclusion is possible through public provision.

There is an irony in the situation. English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which

makes for highly unequal access. Indeed, even now, no more than 1 per cent of our people use it as a second language, let alone a first language.

These realities cannot be changed overnight. But the National Knowledge Commission believes that the time has come for us to teach our people, ordinary people, English as a language in schools. And we are convinced that action in this sphere, starting now, would help us build an inclusive society and transform India into a knowledge society. In just twelve years, it would provide our school leavers with far more equal access to higher education and, three to five years thereafter, much more equal access to employment opportunities.

We engaged in informal consultations on this subject with a wide range of people in government, academia, media and industry. We consulted some Chief Ministers in the states. We consulted Members of Parliament. We consulted people in professions such as medicine and law. We consulted civil society organizations. There was unanimity of views that this can and should be done. In order to work out the modalities in terms of first steps, we also constituted a Working Group. The report submitted by this group was used as an input in our deliberations.

The National Knowledge Commission recommends that the teaching of English as a language should be introduced, along with the first language (either the mother-tongue or the regional language) of the child, starting from Class I in school. This phase of language learning should focus on using both languages to create meaningful learning experiences for the child without disproportionate emphasis on grammar and rules.

We recognize that nine States (of which six are in the north-east) and three Union Territories have already introduced English as a compulsory subject from Class I onwards. In addition, as many as twelve States and three Union Territories have made English a compulsory subject, at different stages in primary school, by Class V at the latest. However, the implementation is slow. The quality of English language teaching is simply not good enough. The support systems, such as the number of teachers or materials for teaching, are neither adequate nor appropriate. We are recommending a fundamental change that seeks to introduce, nationwide, the teaching of English as a language starting in Class I. This is not meant to be a stand-alone, add-on subject. It is meant to be integrated into the school curriculum.

Language learning cannot be separated from, and must be integrated with, content learning. Therefore, English should also be used to teach some non-language, content subjects, starting from Class III in school. The choice of subjects for this purpose can be left to schools depending on the proficiency of teachers and availability of materials. This would, in effect, create multi-medium schools. It would also help reduce the divide between English medium schools and regional languages medium schools.

The pedagogy of language learning as well as teaching should be suitably contextualized, to lend meaning to real situations and daily lives. Moreover, assessment should be based on proficiency rather than specifying achievement targets that reward mastery of single

texts acquired through rote learning. To this end, a National Testing Service (NTS) for certification of language competence as well as recruitment of language teachers should be set up.

In order to meet the requirement for a large pool of English language teachers, graduates with high proficiency in English and good communication skills should be inducted without formal teacher-training qualifications. They could be selected through an appropriate procedure developed by the National Testing Service and then given a short-term orientation. Further, the nearly four million school teachers all over the country, regardless of their subject expertise, especially teachers at the primary level, should be trained to improve their proficiency in English through vacation training programmes or other short-term courses. Most teacher training programmes are not based on a real assessment of needs of teachers. Thus, the entire teacher training system catering to preservice and in-service training that exists today, including training for language teaching, needs to be thoroughly reviewed, recognizing the centrality of language in the curriculum.

A multiplicity of English textbooks should be made available to address the diversity of English language environments in the country. However, to ensure that certain standards are maintained, benchmarks may be laid down for content of textbooks at each stage. For this purpose, an expert group should be set up to develop pedagogically sound English textbooks for every level, from Class I to XII. These should be used as models by states and made freely available on the web to allow easy access. While the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) may continue to be a nodal agency for textbook development for state board schools, the writing of textbooks needs to be decentralized further. To make the exercise more collaborative, civil society organizations with expertise in the domain should be involved in developing textbooks.

Since language learning takes place not only through direct instruction but also through assimilation from the environment, the classroom needs to be equipped with appropriate supplementary audio-visual and print material. Resource libraries could be set up in every classroom, comprising of a collection of books, magazines, newspapers, audio-visual material and posters, appropriate to the age of the students, on a variety of subjects. Language learning opportunities should also be created outside the class room through specific bi-lingual radio and TV channels, which could be introduced for formal and informal teaching and learning of English. Knowledge clubs could be formed to discuss and disseminate knowledge as well as extend the use of English outside the classroom. Given that language learning requires extensive resources, a centrally sponsored scheme of financial assistance for developing English language resources (teachers and materials) should be instituted to address this requirement.

State governments would need to be equal partners in the implementation of this idea. We therefore propose that the Prime Minister discuss this matter with all Chief Ministers at the next meeting of the National Development Council, to formulate a National Plan for the teaching of English as a language, in addition to the regional language, starting in

Class I. This would also ensure that at the end of twelve years of schooling, every student is proficient in at least two languages.

Thank you and warm personal regards,

Sam Pitroda
Chairman,
The National Knowledge Commission

cc- Shri Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Dy. Chairman, Planning Commission

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Bethany College of Missions
6820 Auto Club Road, Suite C
Bloomington, MN 55438
USA
mthirumalai@comcast.net