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Mother Tongue and Linguistic Globalisation

M. K. Chand Raj, Ph.D.

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Any Practical Use for the Mother Tongue?

In a globalised world, does the mother tongue have any significance? Is it not more practical to make use of a single language throughout the entire world? These are some pertinent questions arising from so many quarters nowadays. But there is ample evidence to prove that development of a country is closely associated with the development of its own language. In other words, a developed nation has its own developed language too.

Form and Function of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue is the medium of one's own inner thoughts and contemplations. Thought and language are interrelated. Hence for acquiring knowledge in a better and unambiguous way, the mother tongue is the best medium. It has been scientifically proved that assimilation of facts is easier through one's own language.

This is the major reason why the founders of nations gave importance to mother tongues while they contemplated the idea of sovereign state after saving their nations from the clutches of colonisation. Eminent personalities like Lenin, Mao Tse Tung and M. K. Gandhi were vehement advocates of mother tongue. They put emphasis on the use of mother tongue for all communications, administration and education.

Decline of mother tongue is a clear sign of the degradation of the society as a whole. If the mother tongue becomes insignificant, the self-esteem of the speakers will be affected adversely.

Death of Languages

The extinction of Cornish in England in the eighteenth century is an example of language death. Similarly so many ancient languages like Pictish, Etruscan, Gothic, etc., can be added to this list. Languages like Latin, Ancient Greek and Sanskrit can also be referred to as dead ones in this context. A good number of languages of Amerindian groups had vanished from the earth due to European colonisation.

Need to Save Endangered Languages

Action on behalf of endangered species around the world is welcome. Endangered languages are also equally important and these should be saved from extinction. Languages are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. The extinction of a language represents irrevocable loss of a portion of our own humanity. Death of a language means the loss of linguistic history, human values, culture, verbal art and oral literature represented by the language concerned.

Significant Increase in the Rate of Disappearance of Languages

Although languages have come into existence and died away throughout human history, it was only in the 1990s following publication of a series of worldwide surveys, that people began to notice that the rate of disappearance was significantly increasing. Aboriginal languages of Australia and Africa are the worst affected in this regard.

Linguistic globalisation is the main reason for the growing death rate of languages. One single language (English) has been globalised not only among the international elite, but on a massive basis, posing a threat to many local languages. Of the six thousand or so languages in the world, it is estimated that about half of these will disappear in the course of the present century. On an average, one language would be dying out every two weeks or so. Therefore, for the survival of their language, language sensitivity needs to be developed among the speakers. Resistance movements should be launched to save the most endangered languages.

International Mother Tongue Day

In 1999, the UNESCO introduced 21st of February as International Mother Tongue Day. The idea behind this episode is to be understood in depth since the history of a nation was rewritten because of this issue: Mother Tongue!

Linguistic Significance and Political Movements

The Bengali Language Movement (*Bangla Bhasha Andolan*), which campaigned for the use of Bengali in the domains of power in East Bengal and fought to make it one of the official

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languages of the state, at par with Urdu, was primarily a linguistic issue. But it had a political significance too: for a new state. The Urdu-speaking Pakistani elites' hegemony was challenged by the modern, educated Bengali-speaking class. The students and middle-class professionals, too, have joined the latter ones.

From 1947 onwards the movement made an impact upon the social scene by demanding Bengali as: (1) the medium of instruction; (2) the language of the courts; (3) the language of administration and (4) the language of mass communication in East Bengal.

Though the demand for Bengali increased, all the official documents existed in Urdu or English. The people of Bengal felt marginalised and alienated. The rising emotions of the Bengalis were neglected by the government repeatedly. Consequently, processions and demonstrations became daily occurrences. The students and other demonstrators chanted thus: *Rashtro Bhasha Bengla chai* (We want Bengali as a state language.).

On 21 February 1952, students of the Dhaka University started the agitation against the language policy of the government ignoring the imposition of Section 144 in Dhaka. Thousands of people, along with the students, took part in the violent demonstration. The police opened fire, killing and injuring several persons including students. As a result of this, the government was forced to recognise Bengali as a state language. This event led to the formation of a nation called Bangladesh in 1971.

The UNESCO's pronouncement to observe 21 February as International Mother Tongue Day was to commemorate the martyrs who fought for their mother tongue.

Status of the Mother Tongue in Keralam

How can we save our mother tongue? How can we fight this linguistic globalisation? How can we defend the fundamental linguistic rights of all citizens of the world to be educated and to have access to their public services in their own language? First, regional language (mother tongue) should be made official language of the state. It should compulsorily be used as a medium of communication in government, the law courts, the media and the educational system.

In some states in India the mother tongue is not given the importance it deserves. Keralam is a typical example in this regard. Here a student can study from pre-primary level to post-graduate level without learning the regional language: Malayalam. Also, Malayalam has been given the stature of being only one of the official languages, along with English. Since Malayalam is not compulsory, the insensitive bureaucrat still continues to use English in government communications.

Double-Standards of Intellectuals

Majority of the so-called intellectuals of Keralam have a double standard in this regard. They express concern for Malayalam, praise the language with sophisticated words and tell others to

love the mother tongue in their speech to varied audiences. But in their personal life they neglect the language. They send their children to the English medium schools, thereby giving a wrong signal to the common man that Malayalam medium schools are inferior to the former ones.

Vanishing Indian Language Medium Schools

The English medium culture thus promoted by the elites became a status symbol in the society. The business-minded school managements and their supporters, through their propaganda, tried to accept a wrong notion among the people of Kerala: the future of the student who studies in the Malayalam medium school is doomed. While English medium institutions (that too from LKG) are opened in every nook and corner of the state, the government /government aided Malayalam medium schools are vanishing from the scene. In this regard, the government authorities often become the silent spectators, if not the catalysts.

Mother Tongue Medium Still Only a Vision and a Future Goal

A vital point to be understood with regard to the medium of instruction is that all the education commissions constituted by the Central Government were of the view that the desired standard of education would be attained only if the medium of instruction is switched over to the mother tongue of the students. But this ideal is not materialised till date.

As I pointed out earlier, the double standard of the intelligentsia is the main factor in this regard.

Colonial Mindset

There was a debate in Indian parliament to amend the official language act in favour of Hindi and regional languages. During that period an English Language Convention was held in Kottayam to protest against this. The participants of the convention opposed the idea of changeover of medium of instruction and administration from English to the native languages. So many intellectuals like K.M.Chريان, Dr. Ramaswamy Mudaliar, K.P.Kesava Menon and Dr. A.V.Varghese participated in the convention. Another educationist, Dr.M.V. Paily, through his articles, emphasised the “superiority” of instruction through the English medium. Likewise, so many examples can be cited which show the colonial mindset of the (so called) elite intellectuals.

A Crisis, Demands and Solution

The Malayalam language, the mother tongue of Keralites facing a crisis due to the lack of proper language policy in the Kerala state. A state’s language policy should be decided by the government officially, through legislation. Such a policy should cultivate language proficiency of the people in order to meet the state’s priorities. The policy should establish the rights of individuals to learn, use and maintain the native language - the mother tongue. There should be a government regulation regarding its own language use in broader sense including steps to facilitate clear communication, train and recruit personnel. The democratic government has a responsibility to provide the public to access the machinery without any language barrier.

Effective teaching of English is quite necessary, since it is a world language. But this surely doesn't mean that the study of one's own language should be neglected or marginalised.

A country can prevent the ill effects of globalisation by becoming self sufficient in priority items like food, medicine and technology. The protection of the mother tongue should also be added to this list. For that, we have to develop a language sensibility. This would, also become a part of our fight against colonisation spreading under the guise of globalisation.

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