

**Research Process**  
**4(1) January – June 2016, pp. 74-80**  
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## **Reinvigorating the Forgotten Plea: Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools**

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*This paper tends to reinvigorate the forgotten plea of eminent philosophers like Gandhi and Tagore to impart primary education in mother tongue. While doing so, this paper tends to bring together international perspectives and research which highlights that mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education has a positive impact on learning and learning outcomes. By treading through the writings of various scholars and reports, this paper outlines how numbers of English medium schools have mushroomed exponentially and the vernacular medium schools have either converted to English medium or are in a miserable state. While indicating the potential fallout of such trend for the individual young minds, this paper highlights its impact for society as a whole.*

**[Key Words:** primary education, mother tongue, bilingual, multilingual, vernacular]

### **Introduction**

*Of all the superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing the ideas of liberty and developing accuracy of thought (Gandhi, 1966: 43)*

This paper has been written in the backdrop of observance of International Mother Language Day on 21 February worldwide to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. Unfortunately in the contemporary Indian society the issue of mother tongue has been articulated more in political tone, than as necessity of imparting education during the formative years of schooling for the healthy development and socialization of child. The ideals of eminent social philosophers like Gandhi and Tagore have conveniently been ignored in this regard. With each passing year, the more India matures as a nation the deeper gets its obsession with the western culture in general and English language in particular. In post-independent India we witness a lot of linguistic mobilization in the name of regional languages, but these are more inclined to gain political mileage on the basis of linguistic chauvinism than to mobilize people to reveal the emancipatory potential of learning and education in the mother tongue.

Research shows that mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education has a positive impact on learning and learning outcomes. The 2014 Education for All Global Monitoring Report found that, children taught in their local language, showed a marked advantage in achievement in reading and comprehension compared with children only taught in English. Research has also shown that mother tongue-based multilingual education has a positive impact on the acquisition of a second language. Further, it is only when the mother tongue is given adequate representation in the primary socialization that a child acquires basic and essential skill of that particular language- listening, speaking, reading and writing. This helps the young one in inculcating an attitude of appreciating, preserving and promoting mother tongue. This in turn will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue. It becomes all the more important when we have embarked on an ambitious path of right to quality education for all – harping on widening access, ensuring equality and inclusiveness. Education in the mother language is an essential part of achieving these goals.

It is very well understood that in British India, vernacular languages growth was stifled under the Macaulay policy. But unfortunately vernacular languages in post-independent India could not get its due place and importance. As India got more liberalized and assertive, especially in post 1990s, liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) era the insecurity has deepened and marginalization of vernacular languages is even greater than the British period. English as a medium of instruction has successfully wiped out vernacular medium schools. It is not surprising therefore, that the numbers of English medium schools have mushroomed exponentially and the vernacular medium schools have either converted to English medium or are in a miserable state. The proponents of such change misleadingly argues that in the present globalized era giving up English education will be a retrograde step as that would turn our house into prison by preventing global integration of India and by preventing India to reap the fruits of rapidly growing global economy. The proponents of English would argue that English is a global language, the language of global business and economy. Further, not only that even the scientific and technological knowledge are invariably available in English, therefore, to excel in English means to maximize gain in the knowledge society. Several studies worldwide have proved such assertion as mistaken and unwarranted. Tucker summarizing those studies argue that, ‘Thus, the results of research reported by Modiano (1968, 1973) in Mexico; by Skutnabb-Kangas (1965) in Finland; as well as those from diverse studies summarized by Gudschinsky (1975) for Latin America where a higher proportion of children who are introduced to schooling in their vernacular and later bridged into the second language, develop literacy in their mother tongue, achieve higher level of content mastery and second language proficiency and remain longer in

school than children who are schooled exclusively in the second language' (Tucker 1977:3).

Further, highlighting the vacuity of such an argument that scientific and technological knowledge can be better grasped with English being the first language has proved to be mistaken by Nolasco, who argues that 'The ideas of science are not bound by one language and one culture. The Russians, Germans, and French boast of excellent scientific discoveries without using English. The top five performers in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), namely Singapore, Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei, and Japan, are countries where English is not the first language' (Nolasco 2009:6). Despite these studies and examples worldwide, our country is recklessly marginalizing and ignoring the importance of vernacular languages in initial schooling of children, and days are not far away when we will establish another committee to revive it.

### **Looking through English as a Medium of Education at Primary level**

English one would argue due to its colonial roots, is not just another language of communication, English is the language of domination. English, in other words is power; it symbolizes one's status and privileges. The objection with English is not as language per se, but with the notion of linking English with power and hierarchizing all languages with English being at the top. It perpetuates a culture of superiority where English medium education and English speaking gentry has a sense of superiority complex and privilege, studying in English medium school is like joining an exclusive elite club. In other words, what such a culture promotes is prioritizing English at the cost of vernacular language and conveniently ignoring the fact that English is not and can't be the 'natural' language of the majority of Indians. As Pathak would argue, 'English is the 'cultural capital' of the privileged classes. To allow English to dominate in the domain of education is to perpetuate inequality and deprive many with the fruits of knowledge' (Pathak 2002:163). Anticipating its larger repercussions, Pathak writes that, 'Because of their excessive dependence on English material, children from English-medium schools are not encouraged to tap the abundant cultural resources stored in the Indian languages. This alienation is essentially their alienation from the larger collective- its experiences, victories, struggles, sufferings. The 'knowledge' they acquire does not help them to relate to the larger society; it makes them outsiders, colonizers. English, as it is practiced, does not unite; it alienates, separates, and brutalizes' (ibid:152). In a similar vein Krishna Kumar has outlined the wider repercussions of promoting English as a medium of instruction, he writes 'The socializing force of English applies not only to the children who study in English-medium schools, but also to those who do not. To English-medium school children, English 'teaches' self-confident articulation and personal advancement, to the children who attend state schools, English is a reminder of their disability and risk of stagnation' (Kumar 1996: 72). It is this arrogance and power associated with English as a language which scholars object.

UNESCO report based on study conducted in many countries around the world, attempts to demystify the myth about English as a medium of instruction, the report states, 'What seems to be standing in our way is a set of myths about language and learning, and these myths must be revealed as such to open people's eyes. One such myth is that the best way to learn a second (read foreign - JS) language is to use it as a medium of instruction. (In fact, it is often more effective to learn additional languages as subjects of study.) Another is that to learn a second language you must start as early as possible. (Starting early might help learners to have a nice accent, but otherwise the advantage goes to learners who have a well-developed first language.) A third is that the home language gets in the way of learning a second language. (Building a strong foundation in the first language results in a better learning of additional languages.) Clearly, these myths are more false than true, yet they guide the way policymakers tend to think about how speakers of other languages must learn dominant or official languages' (UNESCO 2008:12). With these empirical studies worldwide one can demystify the myth about English as a medium of instruction.

### **Why is Mother Tongue important?**

It is widely accepted that the best medium for teaching a child in the initial years is his mother tongue. UNESCO emphatically asserts the importance of mother tongue for child in their initial schooling, 'Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium' (UNESCO 1953:11). Every child is born into a cultural environment; the language is both a part of, and an expression of, that environment. Thus, the acquiring of this 'mother tongue' is a part of the process by which a child absorbs the cultural environment; it can, then be said that this mother tongue plays an important part in shaping the child's early concepts. He will, therefore find it difficult to grasp any new concept which is so alien to his mother tongue. So, if a foreign language belongs to a culture very different from his own, then the young child's learning difficulties are greatly increased (UNESCO 1968: 690). But unfortunately against this conventional wisdom, we see a frantic race by parents to make their child English in language, taste, and manners. Gandhi was of the view that 'Our language is the reflection of ourselves, and if you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thought, then I say that the sooner we are wiped out of existence the better for us...Why this handicap on the nation? Just consider for one moment what an unequal race our lads have to run with every English lad' (available at <http://www.mkgandhi.org>). Had Macaulay been alive, he would have definitely been very satisfied in seeing at the result of his sinister design. Today every household is guided by and is a carrier of Macaulay's ideology and worst of all the Indian state is directly or indirectly contributing in this endeavor. Whereas Gandhi and Tagore, who cautioned us

against this have been confined to the street names and bhavan names, and reduced to silent museum pieces after independence. In post-independent and post-colonial society, despite the warnings given by Gandhi and Tagore, unfortunately we ignored the warning, we conveniently allowed English to do what Macaulay wanted!

Further, writing in *Young India*, Gandhi also argued 'The foreign medium has caused brain fag, put an undue strain upon nerves of our children, made them crammers and imitators, unfitted them for original work and thought, and disabled them for filtrating their learning to the family or the masses. The foreign medium has made our children practically foreigners in their own land. It is the greatest tragedy of the existing system. The foreign medium has prevented the growth of our vernaculars...Who can calculate the immeasurable loss sustained by the nation owing to thousands of its young men having been obliged to waste years in mastering a foreign language and its idiom of which in their daily life they have the least use and in learning which they had to neglect their own mother tongue and their own literature? There never was a greater superstition than that a particular language can be incapable of expansion or expressing abstruse or scientific ideas. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers' (*ibid.*). Gandhi asserted that 'among *the* many evils of foreign rule this blighting imposition of a foreign medium upon the youth of the country will be counted by history as one of the greatest. It has sapped the energy of the nation, it has shortened the lives of the pupils, it has estranged them from the masses, it has made education unnecessarily expensive. If this process is still persisted in, it bids fair to rob the nation of its soul. The sooner therefore educated India shakes itself free from the hypnotic spell of the foreign medium, the better it would be for them and the people' (*ibid.*). The underlying assumption of Gandhi's thought of promoting initial education in vernacular medium was because through vernacular language the young generation would be able to keep or establish a living contact with the masses. Therefore, there was no place for English in Gandhi's scheme of education- 'Nai Talim'. Gandhi was thoroughly convinced that no country can become a nation by producing a race of translators (Gandhi 1966: 42-43).

The critics of Gandhi criticized him for non-cooperation for giving up English education a retrograde step as that would turn our house into prison by preventing fresh air to blow into the national life. Gandhi replied, 'I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any of them' (Acharya 1997: 602). Similar echo is found in the writings of Tagore, who equated mother tongue in education as the breast milk (*shikshaya matribhashai matridugdha*). The prevailing system of education Tagore thought was like the bright compartments of a train running through the vast darkness outside. According to Tagore, education can't be universalized unless the mother tongue was the

medium of education (*ibid.*). He emphatically asserted that the aim of universalizing education is not possible through medium of English.

There is a frantic effort by the parents to train their child in English language as early as possible. Therefore, the concept of nursery, now the pre-nursery or play school. The mushrooming English medium convent schools are testimony to it. I am personally not against them, they do represent excellence but their lopsided emphasis on English as the sole medium especially in the formative years is debatable. In some of these schools, these schools not only emphasize on English but penalize any use of non-English language through fine, admonishment, ridicule etc. Imagine the psychological impact on the tender minds of the young one, who has to daily come to terms with the paradox of speaking the mother tongue at home and other places but in school speaking their mother tongue would cost them fine or punishment. This to my mind creates enormous pressure on the tender mind.

Where the foreign language belongs to a wholly new culture, a child may find difficulty: to interpret to himself the new ideas in terms of his own medium of thought-his mother tongue-and to express his own ideas and thoughts through the new modes of the alien tongue. Ideas which have been formulated in mother tongue are so difficult to express through another language. A child faced with this task at an age when his power of self-expression even in his mother tongue are but incompletely developed, may possibly not achieve adequate self-expression. Nolasco quite succinctly put forward the benefits of imparting primary education in mother tongue. 'One's own language enables a child to express him/herself easily, as there is no fear of making mistakes. MLE (multilingual education – the education method where mother tongue is the medium of instruction and other language is taught as a subject - JS) encourages active participation by children in the learning process because they understand what is being discussed and what is being asked of them. They can immediately use the L1 to construct and explain their world, articulate their thoughts and add new concepts to what they already know. MLE empowers the teachers as well, particularly when they are more fluent and adept in the local language than in the languages of wider communication' (Nolasco 2009:4). Such a medium of education argues Nolasco 'also empowers the parents who can take an active part in the education of their children because the school's and the community's language are also their language. MLE brings the community closer to the school and its programs' (*ibid.*:4). These deliberations clearly establish that primary education if imparted in the mother tongue has immense benefits for the child.

### **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need to come out of the politics of symbolism. The issue here demands much more serious attention than observance of a day. Let us reinvigorate the forgotten plea of Gandhi and Tagore to promote primary education in the vernacular medium. An honest effort in this regard would resurrect their ideals and bring their importance back to the national discourse,

otherwise these founding fathers have been reduced to silent museums, coins, streets and bhavan names. Lamenting on the state of vernacular languages in India, Joga Singh (2013) stated that vernacular language are on the verge of extinction. Raising the pitch further, he asks the readers to read UNESCO (2003) document 'Language Vitality and Endangerment' to make assessment of Indian languages themselves. The following statements, Joga Singh says will, provide an indication of the direction the Indian languages are moving into. 'This mirrors the typical process of language death; people become ashamed of their own language and abandon it in favour of a more prestigious one. Eventually, they no longer pass on their native tongue to their children so that 'the minority language is then effectively deserted by its speakers, becoming appropriate for use in fewer and fewer contexts, until it is entirely supplanted by the incoming language' (Quoted in Singh 2013). India has to come out of this colonial hangover, what India needs today is not the galaxy of anglicized oriental people, instead it needs to revitalize its energy in transmitting the traditional wisdom and culture, to inculcate a sense of unity through a shared culture and history. This sense of unity can't be inculcated through a foreign language; it has to be through our indigenous vernacular language.

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[The final revised version of this paper was received on 21 March 2016]