

On Teaching Sanskrit and Mother Tongues: An Open Letter to Smriti Irani

By Anveshi Web Editor in Broadsheet Latest Issue 4&5 on January 20, 2015.

– Sowmya Dechamma

Dear Ms Irani,

Many of us are aghast at your decision to remove German from the list of languages that a child could have studied in Kendriya Vidyalayas (central government schools under the Ministry of Human Resource Development). More troubling for me is the decision to make the study of Sanskrit compulsory. Some have rightly pointed out the incommensurability of such a decision: the axe on German and the active neo-liberal policies that the current Indian Government is pushing forward. They have also pointed out how in this global world, studying a foreign tongue would only increase the skills and worthiness of our children, paraded as future citizens. It does not need to be reiterated it was the German Orientalists starting from Wilhelm von Schlegel in 1823 who translated, consolidated and categorised Sanskrit literature as the sole claimant of “Indian Literature”. My concerns however, are elsewhere.

My son goes to a Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) in Hyderabad. I was indeed puzzled to know that the KV offered Hindi, Sanskrit, and German but no Telugu or any other living Indian tongue. Sometime ago, I went to the school authorities and asked them about the absence of Telugu, especially since the three language formula that they cite does mandate that all schools need to teach the “local” / “regional” language / mother tongue. The answer was even more puzzling. If students or parents want Telugu to be taught, there needs to be request from at least ten parents. What I did not understand is this – if teaching of a “local” language has to be requested for, how come the teaching of Hindi and Sanskrit does not follow the same logic?

But I have a more complicated question – what indeed is “local”? Or what is one’s “mother tongue”? In Hyderabad, given its social geography, Urdu is equally local as is Telugu. Urdu was the medium of instruction for quite some time until the 1956 linguistic reorganisation of states. Urdu implied culture and sophistication, had a “proper” history and culture, and unlike Sanskrit was and is accessible to all. Urdu

not only has a cultural history but also has a popular one so evident in cinema from Mumbai: it is Urdu cinema we consume not Hindi as has been pointed out so very often. So then, why not Urdu? What does Sanskrit suggest that Urdu doesn't? Let's forget Urdu for a little while and ask — what about other local languages that are not considered worthy enough to be included in the 8th schedule and modern enough to be called modern Indian languages? Telangana, where I now live has many such languages pretty much like elsewhere in India. Banjara, Gondi, Konda, Kui, Kuvi, Pengo and Manda are just to name a few. So, if the dominant local in Hyderabad is Urdu and Telugu, the local in Adilabad should be Gondi among others. If children learn best in their mother tongues, why not their own tongue?

I mention these languages because my children do not have a single mother tongue – one is Kodava, a language of Kodagu from Karnataka and another Telugu. Kodava like the above languages mentioned is oral and therefore does not become part of the list of languages desired in modern nation states. Historically, the idea of mother tongue is a recent invention. Sumathy Ramaswamy, Lisa Mitchell and Francesca Orsini have beautifully shown how mother tongues in the cases of Tamil, Telugu and Hindi respectively have been built over a period of time, how the construction of a mother tongue is largely an intellectual enterprise and how the idea of mother tongue is based on certain exclusionary strategies. More importantly I mention these “small” languages because I think there is a need to recover differences, a need to distinguish between lives practiced and imagined histories that have supposedly bound us together. The People's Linguistic Survey of India 2013 mentions that there are over 780 languages in India. Of these 780, around 210 languages belong to the north east India. How many of us can even name two among these 210 rich, diverse, north eastern Languages? Why should one bother? It is “they” who should know what is “ours”, not the other way round. Never in human history has “who has to know what” been naïve and bereft of power. In such a scenario when it would be immensely worthwhile to explore ways to study these languages, why Sanskrit?

Unlike German, Urdu, Hindi, Telugu and indeed English, these languages do not have the factor of “usability” or a writable history. If German is foreign, so is English. What do we do with it now? Stretching a little further, Sanskrit is foreign as well to most Indians. But then, languages grow, die, borrow, give, and evolve constantly. What is somebody else's now like English will become ours now either by direct or indirect forces of power. Aren't we proud of Tamil being one of the official languages of Singapore? Do we not gloat that Hindi, Bangla, Tamil, Sanskrit, etc are taught in

America, Canada, Europe and other places? That Hindi / Urdu cinema has an industry of its own in Nigeria is of huge consequence for us not only in terms of profit but also in matters of cultural-pride.

I am sure you are aware that it was not very long ago that Sanskrit as a language, as a carrier of privileged knowledge was denied to a majority of people, even if they wanted to learn it. It is no wonder that a language and knowledge it carried that was so well guarded within the still unbreakable walls of caste practices, died a natural death. Given the contemporary situation where a large percentage of children of “backward” and “lower” castes attend government schools, whose histories have no memory of Sanskrit, isn't it ironical that what was once denied to them is now made mandatory, even when they do not want it? The upper classes/castes to whom Sanskrit can be said to have belonged once choose between French or German or Spanish in their hip private schools.

May be we need to think as to why the recovery of difference from very “local” spaces becomes essential. Because it gives each one of us a space to claim as our own, because only then there is resistance to the merging of histories and spiritual symbols, because only then the indifference to histories of “small” people with small languages can teach us many a thing — in schools or elsewhere.

I am hoping that you will reverse this decision and will come up with more innovative ideas as to how and what our children learn.

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