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THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH LANGUAGES, ITS VARIOUS HUES AND FACES: LEARNING LANGUAGES IN INDIA

“Kem Cho”, exclaimed the President of America Barack Obama when he welcomed the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi at the White house for dinner recently. Kem Cho quite literally means “How do you do?” in Gujarathi, one of India’s many languages and the mother tongue of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. President Obama may have hit the right chord simply by talking to Mr Modi in his (Modi’s) mother tongue. That is the power of a language.

Languages are a medium of communication and growing up in India means knowing at the very least four languages to read and write. Why so you may ask? While children are taught three languages in Schools, most kids come from a different cultural background that speaks a different language.

For Indians, languages are very important as they define where one comes from. Indian state system is based on the most popular language spoken in the area. For instance, Gujarathi is spoken in Gujarat, or Punjabi is spoken in Punjab or Oriya is spoken in Orissa. It is believed that language is a preserver of cultures. It is perhaps one of the reasons why India’s myriad cultures are preserved today.

It is believed that India has over 900 languages. However, no official data is out to reveal all of them. A recent study by Bhasha Research & Publication Centre (“Bhasha” means “language” in Hindi) concluded that India has a diversity of languages unlike anywhere else in the world, with 780 languages reported in their volumes and maybe another 100 which could not be found to be reported.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Underlining these facts simply points out that multilingualism is the way of life for Indians. Growing up in India, I went to a school where we were taught English,

Kannada and Hindi. I grew up in a Tamil Brahmin family and spoke Tamil at home. Kannada is the official language of Karnataka which lies in the Dravidian belt.

India's history shows that southern region of the Sub-continent spoke dialects derived out of one singular language called Dravida. Dravida, as we were told in History classes is the Sanskrit word representing the five languages which are spoken in the region: Andhra (Telugu speaking), Tamil, Gujara (Gujarathi speaking), Tailangas, Maharastras (Marathi speaking) and Karnatakas (Kannada Speaking).

Why such a lengthy explanation? Well, most Dravidian languages have words derived from one common language. That is, Sanskrit. Therefore, when one speaks Malayalam a language native to Kerala, a Tamil speaking person can easily identify or understand the meaning of it. Or for instance, if one speaks Tamil to a Kannada speaking person, he/she should understand it simply because of the common words used.

So, at any given point, most Indians can speak many languages and therefore, language skills come naturally to us.

GROWING UP WITH LANGUAGES

I have vivid memories of dialects of Kannada which were spoken by the people around me when I grew up in my home town of Mysore. During the British rule, Mysore was the state capital and the area was known as the Princely state of Mysore.

There are various etymologies I have heard of the name 'Mysore'. But, by far, my favorite one has been the story of the demon Mahisha who was slain by Goddess Chamundeshwari. It is believed that Mahisasura {(Mahisha (buffalo) Asura (demon)} obtained a boon from Lord Brahma (The Creator) that no man could kill him. Drunk with this power, Mahishasura tried to over throw the heaven and the Gods too. Nothing could stop him.

To put an end to this, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the Destroyer) came together and through their anger came a woman. All the Gods gave her powers. She was known as Chamundeshwari.

After a fierce battle, Mahishasura was killed and peace was restored once again.

Almost every town, every city, every village has a similar story in India. These stories preserve the culture and legacy, history and folklore of those villages. Told in their dialect or language, these stories hold greater narrative values. They not only are rich in mythology, but also have high sense of moral which are imbibed into every generation that grows up hearing them.

Mysore has smaller villages around it today. Srirangapattana, Nanjangud, Mandya, Hassan, Gundlepet, Hunsur are all smaller towns with their own lore and

history. They each have a dialect derived out of Kannada which is the main language of Karnataka.

For example, Coorg or Kodagu which is known for the coffee plantations is home to Kodava language. With influences of Kerala's Malayalam and Karnataka's Kannada, this is a sweet dialect which uses Kannada script. Growing up in Mysore, one will be familiar to these languages as they are heard day in and day out either through friends or social meetings.

So, this inherent skill of learning many languages through associations, schooling and interaction is built among Indian children from a young age.

MY FEARS

Today the scenario is however different. While the government is making earnest efforts to encourage people to use local languages for communication at school, college and professional levels, many youth have begun to give into the infatuation of the English language.

Although I do not see this as a threat to the language itself as imbibing words from other languages only makes a language richer in vocabulary, I see it as a slow but steady decline in culture, folklore of native villages of India. While these tales, stories, folklore, culture, history are all built and communicated through the native methods of dramas and local art forms such as dance and song, their essence and soul will remain in those languages. Narrated in any other language may not yield the expected results. Youth are resorting to learning the Western language paying little or no heed to their own mother tongue for higher growth at international levels without realizing how little they will have to pass on to the future generations.

While this article merely touches the surface, there is much more that one can understand when one scratches the surface and researches deeper. And it is at this juncture I would like to quote my Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is Power" and learning many languages can only be strength.