

Landmarks

Kothari Commission, 1964-66 on Language Education: In Retrospect

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Background

Kothari Commission, 1964-66, was created to find a model of education for an integrated socialist and secular India. Mid-1960s saw some of the worst language riots in India. The elder statesman C Rajagopalachari cautioned that without English India's federal structure may be under threat¹. Since independence, there had been two commissions and numerous committees, with little progress in finding a nationally acceptable model of education. The government resolution appointing the Education Commission, 1964-66, noted:

... a wide and distressing gulf persists between thought and action and programmes concerning the quality of education, even where these were well-conceived and generally agreed to, could not be implemented satisfactorily..²

The Commission

Including its chairman, Daulat Singh Kothari, the 17 members of the Commission were eminent educationists³. Besides, the Commission spent about a 100 days going round the country and finding out. In 1966, it submitted its recommendations to the Government of India (GoI), suggesting a system that would promote "national prosperity and integration". The Commission dwelt upon the desirable objectives, method and medium of general, vocational, religious and teacher-education and

remuneration, school and college buildings and other related issues. Summary of its recommendations is a 140-page document⁴. Annexes and enclosures account for another thousand pages.

Highlights of some of the important recommendations of Kothari Commission, relating to language education, are given below.⁵

1. Evolution of a Language Policy (Section 1.49): To help social and national integration, a language policy must be evolved. ⁶
2. Development of Modern Indian Languages (1.50): It is essential for development of community feeling. Energetic action is needed to produce books and literature. UGC should provide guidance and funds.
3. Medium of Education at School and College (1.51): The development of the modern Indian Languages is linked with the place given to them in the educational system. About thirty years ago, Rabindra Nath Tagore had said:
In no country of the world, except India, is to be seen this divorce of language of education from the language of pupil...⁶
In general, India wanted to bridge this gap.
4. Language of Communication: The country should have one language as the medium of higher education (1.53), so that students and teachers can move from one part of the country to the others.

5. All graduates will need to have some proficiency in a library language (1.60), which will be English for most students. Other languages should also be developed besides Hindi (1.62). We should create B A and M A programmes where students can study two Indian languages together.
6. Policy for Urdu: Urdu should be taught, because it is “spoken by certain sections of the people in different parts of the country” (1.56).
7. Role of English & Foreign Languages: All India institutions can continue using English for the time being (1.55). A change over to Hindi may be considered in due course. Just now, a student should possess an adequate command over English. The Commission felt that India would need a small but proficient group of people knowing some foreign languages (1.57).

Critique

Due to lack of space, discussion is limited to the following issues, namely,

- (1) a. Mother Tongue, & Medium of Education,
- b. Role of Hindi / Urdu and Regional Languages, and
- c. Role of English and Foreign languages.

Mother Tongue (MT) in Education

Since Charles Wood’s despatch of 1854⁷, all commissions and committees have supported the use of MT in the early years of education⁸. Learning is not smooth where both medium and message are new.

But we choose medium of instruction in view also of things other than students’ familiarity with the language. Primary education also needs methods, materials, teachers and teacher education. We, therefore, take a language which has a tradition of use in education, rather than another without such a tradition. That is where

the pinch comes. Of the nearly 1700 mother tongues enumerated by the Census of India, over a 1,000 have no tradition of use in schools⁹.

Kothari Commission says that relevant material be prepared in these languages. Japanese do so¹⁰. But the task in India is stupendous. Printed collections of even native poems and stories are unavailable in many modern Indian languages. Birhor and Kurukh, spoken in Jharkhand plateau, for instance, do not have enough of even these. Even Maithili, Santhali, Konkani, Nepali, Manipuri, etc., relatively developed, with a tradition of written literature, do not have a body of academic writing¹¹. They do not have books in Natural and Social Sciences, Economics, Geography and History. Textbooks come out of a tradition of academic discourse.

Besides, people speaking many of these languages are many and poor. Printing even an alphabet book for all school-age children in all of these languages may cost a fortune. Where is so much money going to come from? Will all or only some mother tongues be used in education? Shall we do so in a phased manner – producing a quota of books in some languages this year, in some others next year, and so on? The Commission has no word on these issues.

Consequently, many modern Indian languages are not taught in schools even today. Census figures for Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal, etc., besides those for languages of many scheduled tribes in Central and peninsular India, such as *Lambadi* or *Lamani*, show that there are more languages in this region than those used in the (government) schools.

Promotion of Hindi and Regional Languages

Commission recommended encouragement to Hindi and regional languages as the media of internal, regional and national communication,

But this was selectively implemented in different states. In Bihar, for instance, study of English was made optional in the late 1960s, but no language from another region was introduced. Mother tongue and Hindi are generally taught enthusiastically, but the place of the third language, to be taken from another region, is either left vacant, or, is generally filled with lip-service to Persian, Arabic or Sanskrit. This policy created an unnecessary over-load of languages, and was criticised¹².

The Commission recommended that books could be specially written in and for those languages that have no tradition of academic books. But text book-writing is a skilled-job. They come out of a certain culture of reading and writing in the community, they take shape in the network of authors, publishers and distributors, all catering to a reading public. Where are the readers of academic books in many modern Indian languages? Do we have enough people who can write books on various subjects for various classes in various languages? Experience of the Children's Book Trust¹³, National Book Trust, Sahitya Akademi and the other government bodies engaged in the business of book-production is not quite encouraging. They are always behind schedule, their show rooms are burdened with unsold copies. Whereas this is true that some deliberate effort is required to create appropriate literature in some languages, it must be recognised that state has hardly ever been the best producer of literature of any kind.

Kothari Commission also recommended creation of appropriate books through translation. But a good translation is no easy job. The translator needs to know the subject and the source and the target languages involved. Again, experience of the National Translation Mission at Mysore has not been very encouraging¹⁴. Creating academic resources may take time, skill and money. Voluntary organizations can take them as campaigns, if possible, with help from the

government. We can encourage book production in our languages, by both translation and original writing. *Amar Chitra Katha*¹⁵ series of books have been both literary and commercial success. We may learn from them.

Kothari Commission would like Hindi to replace English as the language of Pan-Indian communication, and as the sole medium of instruction at the university level. But, being pragmatic, the Commission recommended support to both Hindi and the regional languages. Theoretically, the policy is sound. The student will continue to have education in the familiar language. UGC must encourage preparation of text books in these languages¹⁶. Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam and Tamil seem to have some academic and technical literature even in natural and social sciences. But many other languages have few books of this kind in them.

Then there is the problem of attitude. Even when an occasional academic paper or book appears in a modern Indian language, it remains unrecognized¹⁷. It is possible today to write in Hindi and other regional languages many all India examinations for admissions to institutions of higher education, and for recruitment in government service. Yet, in actual practice, only a few choose from Indian languages¹⁸.

Kothari Commission recommended preparation of terminology in Hindi and other regional languages. The Council of Scientific and Technical Terminology (CSTT) has prepared glossaries of administrative terminology¹⁹, none of which significantly furthers the use of Hindi in non-conventional domains. The question once again is how it can happen. Must we translate "collector" and "commissioner" and "atom", etc. which have through usage become parts of modern vocabulary, just as many words from Persian, Portuguese and other foreign languages in use in India have become²⁰?

So has it been for the administrative terminology. Even all so called "Hindi-speaking" states have

not agreed upon the Hindi rendering of administrative terms. They are one thing in Bihar, another in U P, and yet another in M P and Rajasthan, etc.”Grievance” is “wyathaa” in one place, “shikaayat” in another²¹. Agreement among other states is farther away. Even among various authorities of the Government of India even “limited co-ordination” has not been achieved²².

Kothari Commission recommended creation of institutions for training of teachers who would teach Hindi and regional languages in “other” regions. Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra, and its regional centres, and sister institutions were created. But once again needs were under-assessed, and recommendations remained unimplemented²³. The following table shows how many students have expressed any interest in learning another regional language.

Native Speakers of / in City	Language I	II	III	IV
Tamil, Chennai	English 100%	Hindi 20	Malayalam 05	Sanskrit 05
Kannada, Mysore	English 80	Hindi 40	Tamil 20	Sanskrit 05
Telugu, Hyderabad	English 100	Hindi 60	Tamil 50	Sanskrit 10
Hindi, Delhi	English 100	Urdu 40	Punjabi 20	Sanskrit 10
Punjabi, Patiala	English 100	Hindi 80	Urdu 20	Sanskrit 10
Kashmiri, Jammu & Udhampur	English 100	Hindi 60	Urdu 80	Dogri 05, Sanskrit 05
Dogri, Jammu & Udhampur	English 80	Hindi 80	Urdu 20	Punjabi 10 Sanskrit 10
Oriya, Bhubaneswar & Cuttack	English 80	Hindi 80	Bengali 20	Sanskrit 10
Bengali, Kolkata	English 100	Hindi 80	Oriya 10	Sanskrit 5, Assamese 5
Marathi, Nagpur	English 80	Hindi 80		Sanskrit 5

Table: Language Preference in Education²⁴

The Central and Sainik schools, created by the GoI for its nationally transferable employees’ children use English for instruction¹. Following the recommendations of the New Education Policy in 1986, Navodaya Vidyalayas were created as model schools for rural students. They also use English as medium of instruction. On the whole, thus, there seems to have been little change in the status of Indian languages as subjects and media in education.

English and Foreign Languages

The Commission recommended continued use of English for technical education and by all India institutions. The IT boom in India, India’s popularity as an outsourcing destination, etc. are acknowledgements of its relatively long and strong tradition in English language education². But English continues to be a foreign and

inaccessible languages to an overwhelmingly large number of students, particularly from rural and disadvantaged sections. We have to take English to them³.

The Commission also recommended creating institutions for research in learning and teacher-education in English and other foreign languages. In over 50 years since its creation, the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad⁴, and its branches and sister institutions have produced a few thousand trained teachers of English, and a few dozen books. This hardly answers the needs of the country. India needs far too many teachers far more quickly. Possibly, it needs modules of pre- and in-service teacher education that equips its English teachers to work and innovate in difficult circumstances. English continues to remain a badly taught and difficult to learn language.

Experts say that given the exposure and motivation, learning of any language is inevitable. For English, there is motivation. Exposure is required, through both books and electronic media. Where is a child in an urban slum, or in a hamlet in the hills, going to see or hear any English, if not even at their school? These children have no or limited access to books, journals, television, internet and other mass media. But with some effort, the situation can be reversed. In each cluster of schools, as the Commission said, resource centres can be created. If the government does not have enough money, public-private partnership in this area can be encouraged.

Among foreign languages, Kothari Commission advocated special place for Russian. It also recommended creation of institutes and university departments across India to teach Russian. Keeping Russia's eminence in the world politics in the mid-1960s in mind, and keeping its work in atomic and space sciences, and ocean technologies in mind, a student would have profited by learning Russian. Today German and Chinese can also be learnt. Indian universities and schools anyway teach few foreign languages⁵.

Conclusion

Constituted in the shadow of the Chinese Aggression of 1962, and of the rising language tension in Bengal and in Southern states, recommendations of Kothari Commission appropriately reflected the secular-socialist-nationalist thinking of the time, and recommended a kind of education which would produce citizens well-grounded in the local tradition and well-groomed to take their place in the global community. It had the vision of a world-class education in a mix of English and the local languages. But the problem was that India was neither small and monolingual like Japan, so that it could invest in the development

its native resources; nor was it a totalitarian state like China, so that it could impose the will of the state upon all its people. Its recommendations, particularly for language education, remained largely unimplemented.

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Endnotes

¹Shah (1968:59)

²Cited in the Report of the Kothari Commission, Chapter on Implementation, P.138

³H L Elvin was then Director of the University of London's Institute of Education; Sadatoshi Jhara came from the School of Science and Engineering, Waseda University, Tokyo; Roger Revelle was Director, Centre for Population Studies at Harvard University, U S A; S A Shumovsky was at the Ministry of Higher and Special Education and in the Department of Physics at the Moscow University, Moscow; and, M Jean Thomas had been Inspector-General of Education, France, and an Assistant Director-General of UNESCO, Paris. Among Indians, besides Prof Kothari, himself a world-class Physicist and Chairman of the University Grants Commission of India, the Commission had three Vice-Chancellors – Prof M V Mathur of the University of Rajasthan, Dr B P Pal of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, and Dr Trigun Sen of the Jadavpur University⁴. It had all the senior bureaucrats of the Ministry of Education of the Government of India, and a handful of eminent professors of Education.

⁵*Report of the Education Commission*, 1964-66, Summary of Recommendations, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 1967

⁶Chapter I, Paragraphs 49 to 62,

⁷delivering the convocation address of the Calcutta University

⁸See Chaudhary (2009: Ch.5, Pp.380-82)

⁹For a survey of them, see Koul(2001) &(2005), Chaudhary (2001), Hasnain (2001), Lakshmi Bai (2001) and references there. .

¹⁰See Koul (2005:72-83)for a list of languages used as the medium of instruction in India.

¹¹See Horseley, William & Buckley, Roger (1990)

¹²Recently I came across a 10-page book by Dr Prem Mohan Mishra on Chemistry in Maithili, where equations are given in Roman, but linking phrases are in Maithili. That is a welcome exception. But can we, on this basis, say Maithili is rich in Academic literature?

¹³Shivaram Karanth, the Jnanpitha award winning Kannada novelist and a former member of the UNESCO's Executive Council, was highly critical of the language over-load on children in India. See his interview in *The Hindu*, April 29, Sunday, 1984

¹⁴ . In the 50 years since its inception, Children's Book Trust has published close to 1,000 titles on General Fiction, Science Fiction, Indian History/Heritage, Natural History, Travelogue, Non-Fiction/Information, Popular Science, Great Institutions, Short Stories/Humour Stories, Short Plays/Dramas, and Read-Aloud Books/Picture Books. These are published not only in English and Hindi, as was the case earlier, but in various Indian languages to a certain extent, says the website of the Trust <<http://www.childrensbooktrust.com/about.htm>>. And all this at commercially unviable costs

¹⁵NTM was created in July 2008. Till October 2013, it has two translated publications. Ten books are nearing publication. These include six bilingual dictionaries.

¹⁶ A popular series of books produced for children in the 1980s in both English and many Indian languages

¹⁷Some money was set aside by the UGC for the purpose of book writing. But this was more in the nature of tokenism than business. No accomplished writer would write a book for Rs 5,000/-, as was the case until the last years of the last century. Now, at least at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras it has been revised to Rs one lakh.

¹⁸Personal experience.

¹⁹In 2007, 221,385 examinees opted to write Joint Entrance Examinations to IITs in English. But only 39,856 people chose to do so in Hindi. See Chaudhary (2009:530).

²⁰ See Bai (2001). CSTT published a glossary of 13,000 terms in English-Hindi in 1991 and in Hindi-English in 1992 (p292). The glossary contains administrative terms like "allowed, collector, director", etc.

²¹See Chaudhary (2009)

²²See Bayer, Jennifer Marie (1986)

²³Lakshmi Bai (2001:290)

²⁴ See Koul (2005), (2001) and Lakshmi Bai (2001) for some details on this issue.

²⁵From Koul (Ed., 2005 : 10-59)

²⁶Koul (2005:52)

²⁷Chaudhary, Shreesh (2007) Also see Saxenian, Anna Lee with Motoyama, Yasoyuki&Quan, Xiaohong (2002)

²⁸ “17 % Indian employers and 25% American employers surveyed by this World Bank team expressed dissatisfaction with the English communication skills of Indian engineering graduates. ...command of English is a barrier for many students, in particular from rural areas...”, say Blom, Andreas & Saeki, Hiroshi (2011 :21-24)

²⁹Since 2006, called English & Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad

³⁰As an exception, Kerala offers a choice of the following languages in its secondary schools: Arabic, French, German, Greek and Latin, besides English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil in its primary schools. Many other states, particularly in North India, offer no foreign language in schools. Their list of classical languages is limited to Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, without necessarily requiring a pass at the final examination.

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