

Case for multilingual education

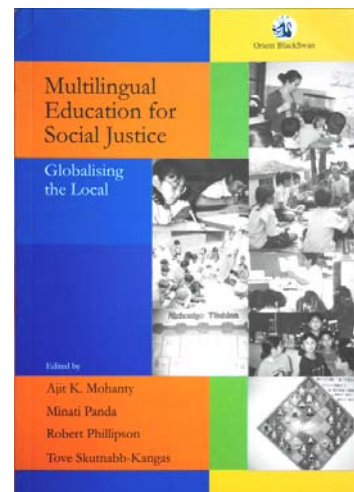
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It is a call to respect the inalienable right of all to learn their languages and through their languages

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Edited by Ajit K. Mohanty, Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas; Orient Blackswan 1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 675.

“Multilingual education is human rights education,” is the constant refrain of Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, one of the two “inspiring pioneer scholars,” to whom the book is dedicated. The book is a passionate call to respect and enshrine the inalienable right of all the children of the world to learn their languages and through their languages. Denial of linguistic human rights is a crime against humanity. The book is also a powerful indictment of the sinister privileging of languages like English that are marginalising and decimating humanity’s rich language resources.



This is a collection of articles by some of the leading thinkers in the emerging field of Multilingual Education (MLE), which means using two or more languages as media of learning. Many of them have also been closely associated with pioneering experiments in vastly different cultural contexts across continents, from Nordic countries to Africa, the Americas and Asia. It is of immense value to lay readers as well as experts and doers in the MLE. To the latter, it presents a critique of different paths and modes that are emerging from experiments, including those in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (India).

Psychological damage

Many writers dwell, with deep anguish, on the enormity of emotional and psychological damage done to the child when forced into a classroom that uses an alien language. The bewilderment, incomprehension, and disconnect with its cultural moorings trigger an individual and collective tragedy of monumental proportions.

The panic of choice that has gripped many countries like India about the language of education, the authors say, is totally unwarranted — in fact, laughable. As Rama Kant Agnihotri argues “multilinguality rather than ‘a language’ is characteristic of being human”, and it is “the default human situation.” In a true multilingual system, mother tongues and languages of regional,

national and wider communication can have their legitimate place. This is the central message of the book, which powerfully refutes the crudity of arguments that, to equip children to face global competition, English must be enforced as medium of learning. “Multilingual education is just for all.” And it is not about language alone, but also about “building a better world, a world of diversity.” Multilingualism is necessary for empowerment of the underprivileged in fighting for a more just and equitable world order.

The movement for the MLE is part of the worldwide movement for the rights of the most marginalised minorities, the indigenous peoples, and also, in a way, part of the environmental movement for protection of biodiversity. Language, culture, and ethnicity are the foundations of identity formation. Ensuring the language rights of national minorities is a necessary precondition for prevention of ethnic conflicts and for peace and stability, as tragically witnessed in the recent history of Sri Lanka.

Impact

Skutnabb-Kangas and many others take a critical look at the homogenising impact of globalisation and the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, which she argues is also closely related to biodiversity. “Much of the knowledge about how to maintain biodiversity is encoded in the small languages of indigenous and local peoples. Through killing them we kill the prerequisites for maintaining biodiversity.” The book warns that a grim process is afoot of disappearance or inferiorisation of most languages. It is not an innocent or inevitable process. It is a part of the elite design of domination. Many articles bring out the relationship between language and power and relate the hierarchisation of languages to global and local power relations. Robert Phillipson’s piece, for instance, traces how English has transformed from the language of colonisation to the language of neo-imperialism. He cautions against the argument for English as a ‘lingua franca’, because in reality, it functions more as a “lingua frankensteinia”, a language that terrifies and exterminates others. .

The book resonates with the contemporary Indian scene, where language, particularly as a medium of learning, has become a fiercely contested terrain. The scales are disastrously tilting to suit the elite design of language as tool for domination. The Dalit, indigenous, migrant, poor child, if helped to learn in the medium of its language, will blossom into a strong, confident, creative person, equally participating in building the India of our dreams.

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