

## LITERARY MULTILINGUALISM II: MULTILINGUALISM IN INDIA

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### Summary

Being a multilingual country India has a great many languages. By the 1991 decennial census 114 languages, and 216 mother tongues containing a minimum of 10,000 speakers each are clustered under those 114 languages, were counted, though the actual mother tongue inventory is enormous. There may have been some changes recorded by the subsequent (2001) census, but its data have not yet been published. A recent survey has put the total number of languages and dialects at 325. Of all the Indian languages 22 are at present scheduled in the Indian Constitution, together spoken by the great majority of the population; and of them the most widely spoken language is Hindi. Hindi is also India's official language along with English. Even though most Indian states have a major language, none of them are monolingual. There are about 25 scripts.

Out of this multilingual situation arises Indian bilingualism of one kind where Indians may have, beside their own language, a second Indian language, even a third one at times. This bilingualism, or trilingualism, may at one level be natural because of the contiguity of the languages. In addition educated Indians acquire a degree of English through the school system and its ancillaries. This gives the Indian elite a second kind of bilingualism that may be quite potent, though with little proliferation among the masses.

Indian bilingualism of either kind is conducive to communication, even to writing in two individual languages, but not as such to the production of bilingual texts. Occasional code mixing may be present, but it is very occasional. The textual bilingualism in India is located in history. Two instances may be cited, both related to Sanskrit. The first is the use of Sanskrit and Prakrit in so-called Sanskrit drama, where

the convention was that men of higher social order would speak Sanskrit and lower-order men as well as women would speak Prakrit. The second instance is that of Maṇipravāla, the hybrid of one of the main Dravidian languages—Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu—and Sanskrit. The purpose was to acclimatize Sanskrit while looking after the interests of the languages themselves. In this Malayalam was the most active.

## 1. Introduction

There are two denotations to the word “multilingual” in the two everyday English dictionaries the author uses, *Collins Cobuild* (1987) and *Longman* (1991), one denotation dealing with sites, the other with persons. “A multilingual dictionary”, for instance, is a site containing many different languages. “A multilingual secretary”, on the other hand, is a person that speaks many different languages. If one were compiling such a dictionary, he/she might have been tempted to add here the tale of a legendary court jester to an Indian prince, who spoke many languages and with such equal ease that he had to be tripped up in the dark in order to find out which of these languages was his mother tongue. Obviously, the word “multilingual” in the second sense is an extension of “bilingual” that is more common and may in certain cultures be the order of the day. A completely multilingual person may indeed be a maverick. It is in both these senses that the author will deal with the issue of multilingualism in India. The author will also invoke an additional sense in which the multilingual site can be taken, as a multilingual country where many different languages are spoken. This is analogous to multiculturalism, the aftermath to a widespread diaspora; but while multiculturalism does not necessarily imply linguistic multiplicity on the public level, multilingualism by definition does. For a country to be multilingual is to have many different languages active on both private and public levels, though not entirely without any underlying inter-lingual tensions. India is a signal instance of such multilingualism. The author will speak of this multilingualism first, then go on to the other two senses, the one referring to a person, the other to a site *per se*—the multilingual person and the multilingual text. In fact this first is the most obvious, without which the other two senses might not have arisen.

## 2. Indian Multilingualism

India has a decennial census that includes a language count. The last census was held in 2001, but its data have not yet been published. The 1991 census counted 114 languages and 216 mother tongues grouped under them and containing a minimum of 10,000 speakers each. However, the actual mother tongue (mother’s tongue or its immediate equivalent) inventory was enormous. This was set against the background of a population of 838,583,988 that went up to 1027,015,247 in 2001. Yet that may not mean a noticeable change in the language count, unless of course a few are reported lost. However a recent community-based count by the Anthropological Survey of India has put the total languages and dialects at 325. Interestingly, all counts show a few languages of non-Indian origin too like Arabic, Chinese and Persian. The Indian languages belong to five families: Indo-European, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Andaman-Nicobarese. 22 of these languages now enjoy a national status being part of a Schedule in the Constitution. They are: *Indo-European*: Assamese, Bengali, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya,

Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Urdu; *Dravidian*: Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu; *Austro-Asiatic*: Santali; *Tibeto-Burman*: Bodo and Manipuri. Taken together they are spoken by an overwhelming majority of the population, among them Hindi most widely (over 40%) and Sanskrit least (around 0.01%). English is not scheduled, though accepted as an official language, the principal official language being Hindi. For instance, all in-flight announcements in Indian airlines are first made in Hindi, then in English. English is also the second language in the three-language formula pursued in school education. At the same time it is a medium of instruction in higher education, a recognized literary language and a principal language of the national press. However, the primary speakers of the language are only about 0.02%.

The number of scripts in which the Indian languages are written is about 25, there being no organic relation between language and script; and except for Roman and Perso-Arabic, and perhaps an invented script like Ol Chiki, they belong to one family, that of Brahmi. Many languages are written in a common script, while a few languages are written in several scripts, depending on the states over which they are spread. Yet a few other languages may still be unwritten. Almost all of India's 28 states and 7 union territories have their major languages recognized as state languages, though none of the states and union territories is monolingual, the linguistic minorities varying roughly from 4% to 37%. However, the state of Nagaland has adopted English as its official language. Besides, not all the 22 scheduled languages are state languages, though most of them are. Of those that are not, Sanskrit and Sindhi are not confined to one place—Sanskrit for reasons of its universally valid classical status but Sindhi for historical reasons. The [Indian] Sindhi speakers had once been inhabitants of Sindh, from where they migrated when, at the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, Sindh was included in Pakistan. Two other languages does India share with Pakistan on a large scale, Punjabi and Urdu, the latter being the official language of Pakistan, but they both have their homes in India. Bengali and Nepali too are shared with other countries, the first split in 1947 like Punjabi, Bengali is now also the official language of Bangladesh, the second, while remaining the official language of Nepal, has acquired a complementary Indian location, due to migrations and domicile over a long stretch of time.

This demographic multilingualism has yielded some functional multilingualism. Indian railway stations usually have their names written in three scripts, Devanagari, Roman and the script in which the major language of the state is written, and sometimes, when Devanagari is also the state script or when there is a concentration of Urdu speakers in the region or the immediate neighborhood, in Perso-Arabic as well. Thus to travel from one end of the country to the other is to be assured of the links no doubt, holding the states together, but also to get a view of the state individualities. Individualities are also apparent in the great number of languages in which radio broadcasts are made (104 by one count) and newspapers are printed (34). This is true of the cinema, too, though in a much smaller number of languages (17 or so). However in education a much greater number (67) is in use at one level or the other. And in harmony with all this the National Academy of Letters, the Sahitya Akademi has been keeping a close track of the literatures written in the major languages including two that are not in the Schedule, English and Rajasthani (minor languages, too, are beginning to get its attention), as seen from its publications and its annual awards for both original works and works of inter-Indian translation. This is also borne out by a project like the integrated history of

Indian literature, where all the languages recognized by the Sahitya Akademi are put under the scanner. In fact the three volumes published so far under the authorship of Sisir Kumar Das are witness to a multilingual literary historiography, where there is a simultaneous focus on the many and the one, on Indian literatures and Indian literature.

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[sify.com/cities/chennai/fullstory.php?id=13895926](http://sify.com/cities/chennai/fullstory.php?id=13895926) [This is a website on *kṛtis* or compositions set to music with words in Maṇipravāla].

[www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/southasian/cuvl/indicmss/palm.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/southasian/cuvl/indicmss/palm.html) [This is a website set up by the South & Southeast Asian Studies section of the Columbia University Libraries apropos a palm-leaf manuscript in its possession written apparently in Maṇipravāla].

### Biographical Sketch

**Amiya Dev**, a Ph.D. from Indiana University, USA, Amiya Dev taught Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University (India) for over three decades and was Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal (India). He was also a Vice-President of the International Comparative Literature Association. Author of many articles in Bengali and English on literature and culture, and of biographies of two major Bengali poets, Sudhindranath Datta and Buddhadeva Bose, he is at present an Editorial Fellow of the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture. He lives in Kolkata .