MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

(Excerpts from the address "Some aspects of University Education" by D.S. Kothari from the proceedings of Vice-Chancellor's Conference 1962)

A few words on the problem of the medium of instruction at the university stage may not be out of place. One does not expect that when we discuss a subject such as this, one’s views will be readily shared by others. It is sometimes heartening to remember that "If education can be defined in one word, that word is controversy; where concord arises, learning withers; where conflict rules, education flourishes." In dealing with the language problem we are concerned with a dynamic and creative situation, and a discussion of the subject will benefit us all provided it is free, frank and objective and in a conference such as this it cannot be otherwise. The first condition for dispassionate discussion is a mind receptive and 'utterly at ease'.

It seems that so far as the near future is concerned universities have to function largely on a bilingual basis instead of monolingual basis, namely, the regional language and English, as recommended by the National Integration Council (June 1962). For post graduate study and research, and to serve as a link for inter-communication between the universities, and also with the outside world, English is an obvious choice for us in the context of the times. On the other hand to facilitate understanding of difficult subjects and basic concepts, and to bring together workers and thinkers which is an essential process for advancement of science and industry in the country, the use of regional languages becomes almost a necessity. (Hindi should be taught as a compulsory language at the school stage to serve as a 'communication link' throughout the country). As the National Integration Council (June 1962) has observed:

"In the Council's view, the change in the medium of instruction is justified not so much by cultural or political sentiments as on the very important academic consideration of facilitating grasp and understanding of the subject-matter. Further, India's university men will be unable to make their maximum possible contribution to the advancement of learning generally, and science and technology in particular, unless there was a continuous means of communication in the shape of the regional languages between its masses, its artisans and technicians and its university men. The development of the talent latest in the country will also, in the view of the Council be retarded unless regional languages are employed as media of instruction at the university stage."

It is most important that the introduction of regional language as medium of instruction is not misinterpreted to mean shutting out of English from university life and work. In fact, for successful completion of the first degree course a student should possess an adequate command of English to be able to express himself with reasonable ease and felicity, to understand lectures in that languages, and to avail of literature in English (particularly scientific and technical). With this aim in view adequate stress should be laid on the study of English as a language right from the school stage. The study of Russian should also be on a much more extensive scale than at present.

As has been pointed out on several occasions, the present arrangement under which a large proportion of students at the first degree stage, and also later, use their regional language for the purpose of examinations, though class room instruction is given through the medium of English, is educationally undesirable and unsatisfactory. A sudden switch over in the medium of instruction for a student in passing from school to university has in most cases very
unwholesome effects. In a student's life, the change from school to college is a crucial stage. On entering college he finds that there is a far greater demand on his powers of understanding and concentration than he was accustomed to at school. When to this is added the perplexity inherent in a sudden change in the medium of instruction in going from school to college, no wonder that many a student feel bewildered and lost, and loses zest in studies. The difficulty of medium of instruction is added to that of subject-matter, and the two together become too much for a good many students. At the early stage of the undergraduate course it will be, therefore, an advantage if the bulk of the instruction is given through the regional languages. As one goes higher up the educational ladder, more and more instruction would be through the medium of English. Whatever may be the medium of instruction, it is important (in the interest of academic mobility and for other reasons) that a teacher at the university stage should be entitled to lecture in English (even at the undergraduate stage), if he so desires. I am thinking - I need not say again, of the near future and not what the position would be, or should be, after some decades. In such a case a teacher would probably have to put in more effort in getting the subject matter across than if he were lecturing in the student's own language. But the point is that the understanding and grasp of difficult subject would be much better and creative if it was presented to students in their own language.

Whatever may be the policy and programme of the universities the medium of instruction it is important that energetic action be taken to produce books and literature, particularly scientific and technical, in the regional languages. This is important for a variety of reasons. It would help to bring together the elite and the mass of the community. It would assist materially in the progress of industrialization. It would help in the dissemination of science and the scientific outlook.

As the Integration council has observed, the change in the medium of instruction in a university is primarily a matter for the university concerned. For a variety of reasons and circumstances there cannot be a rigid formula in this matter which could be applied indiscriminately to all the universities. In the transition from English to regional language as medium of instruction, every precaution should, of course, be taken to ensure maintenance of adequate standards. In fact, the purpose and also the desirability of the change should be judged by the improvement it makes in the quality and standard of education. We must proceed most carefully, but careful action is not synonymous with slow speed or no action at all. In fact, caution is meaningful only if it is tied to a policy of deliberate action.

The importance of a common linguistic link between the universities cannot be gainsaid, but what is still more important is that they should co-operate in joint programmes of teaching and research, in forging and sharing common aspiration and common aims. We should, with all the energy and enthusiasm we have, developed a corporate intellectual life amongst the universities in the country. And no impediment should be allowed to stand in the way of this process.

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(Excerpts from Sampurnanand Committee and from the recommendation of National Integration Council)

The Sampurnanand Committee, in its Report on Emotional Integration, has endorsed the recommendation of the National Integration Council. The Committee says: The importance of having Indian languages as media of instruction from the lowest to the highest stage of education is a matter of profound importance for national integration. There is
urgent need to remove the gulf that has existed between the masses of the people and the intellectual elite. For centuries Indian intellectuals had to work in some common language, first Sanskrit, then Persian and recently; English. The gulf between them and the masses of the people has, therefore, persisted. Only the adoption of regional languages as media of instruction right up to the university level will help to remove the gulf. We wish to endorse and emphasise what the National Integration Council said at its recent meeting (June 1962): "India's university men will be unable to make their maximum possible contribution to the advancement of learning generally and science and technology in particular, unless there is a continuous means of communication in the shape of the regional languages between its masses, its artisans, technicians and its university men. The development of talent in the country will also, in the view of the Council, be retarded unless regional languages are employed as media of instruction at the University stage.

Further, the Committee summarizing it's recommendations says:

The use of Indian languages as the medium of instruction from the lowest to the highest stage of education is a matter of profound importance for national integration as only the adoption of regional languages as media of instruction right up to university level will bridge the gap between the intellectual elite and the mass of the people. Safeguards have to be devised, however, to prevent the lowering of standards. The change-over to the regional language must be preceded by preparation of text-books and arrangements for translation from English and, wherever possible, from other modern (foreign) languages.

In order to maintain inter-university and inter-state communication special attention must be paid to the teaching of the link languages, Hindi and English, when the change-over to regional languages is accomplished.

Special efforts must be made to forge links between universities in different parts of the country when the regional languages become media of instruction, or else, wide gaps will be created not only between universities but also amongst different States. For purely intellectual purposes students in universities, should have a good knowledge of the English language so that they can express themselves with facility. It is necessary; therefore, that they should frequently listen to lectures and write tutorials in English.

To ensure that the universities are not cut off from one another, that common standards are maintained and gifted Indians are enabled to reach the highest degree of excellence in their chosen field of knowledge, there should be provision for English as an associate medium of instruction in the universities. This is a necessary corollary to the recognition of English as an associate official language. The use of this associate medium of instruction can be made in some selected colleges, in a university or in some divisions in a large college. Details in this connection will have to be worked out by the universities to suit varying conditions and requirements.

The recommendations of the National Integration Council (June 1962) are reproduced below:

"In the Council’s view, the change in the medium of instruction is justified not so much by cultural or political sentiments as on the very important academic consideration of facilitating grasp and understanding of the subject-matter. Further, India's university men will be unable to
make their maximum possible contribution to the advancement of learning generally, and science and technology in particular, unless there was a continuous means of communication in the shape of the regional languages between its masses, its artisans and technicians and its university men. The development of the talent in the country will also, in the view of the council be retarded unless regional languages are employed as media of instruction at the university stage. The Council considers that while generally speaking the replacement of English as medium was thus an inevitable end which should be actively pursued, every care should be taken by universities to ensure that the transition is made without jeopardizing the quality of education and after careful preparation, e.g., the co-operation of teachers and the availability of good standard books written by university teachers or other experts for which every incentive should be provided by the authorities concerned.

The council lays stress on the importance of teaching English as a compulsory subject, whether in any transitional scheme of the adoption of regional languages as medium of instruction or even after the replacement has been fully carried out at a future date. In the transitional stage, English will serve as the link among university men and between university and university in respect of exchange of professors and migration of students; whilst, at all times, as a language of great international importance, English would furnish a link with the outside world, constitute an indispensable tool for further study and assist in the development of the regional languages.

The council hopes that while English would thus be an international link at all times, its place as an internal link will gradually be taken by Hindi as it develops. The Council therefore urges that at the University stage, the students should be equipped with a progressively better command of Hindi in addition to a good working knowledge of English such as would enable them to follow lectures delivered in that language.

In the light of these considerations, the Council reiterates the recommendation of the Chief Minister's Conference that the standard of teaching both in Hindi and English should be improved and maintained at a high level in schools and colleges. The change in the medium of instruction in a university is primarily a question for the university to decide. While it seems natural that regional languages would gradually become the media of instruction at the university stage, the Council sees no reason why there should be any bar to use of English and Hindi as a medium of instruction in a university, or in some of its colleges. Indeed it foresees that in some special circumstances the establishment of such a college might become a desideratum. In this connection, the Council urges that there should be a provision in every university permitting the use of Hindi or English as an option to the regional language for answering examination papers."