

The Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual Education Conference

Exploring the role of languages for education and development

238A

Indian Diaspora in South Africa and the Loss of Home Language

By Debjani Sahu

South Africa is a rainbow nation. The country is known for its multilingual and multicultural diversity and is home to a large Indian diaspora. This population accounts for approximately 2.75% of the total population of South Africa. However, policies of the government in the past have impacted the home language of this diasporic community.

The maintenance of the vernacular dialect was an imperative concern for Indians in the 1930's and 1940's. Segregation policy during the apartheid period led to ghettoization, and the Indian diaspora were officially prevented from retaining their home language. Factors such as diverse regional background, and society fragmented by class and caste structure also made it difficult for the diasporic community to retain their language(s). Moreover, Afrikaners used state power to impose the Afrikaans language to implement their policy of divide and rule, and later the British imposed English. Thus, English and Afrikaans language became the primary mediums of education.

With time, Indian home languages took a back seat, and finally disappeared. A sizeable portion of the present generation raised in South Africa does not use their mother tongue. English is the preferred language in most Indian homes in Durban, although a minority, particularly senior citizens, still speak some Indian dialects such as Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and Gujarati as their first language. However, English is used as the primary language for correspondence. This paper will look into government policies of South Africa in regard to language and education and how it has directly or indirectly affected the Indian diasporic community while they are grappling with it.

With the advent of the technological boom, satellite TV and the internet, Indian communities are once more connected to their homeland. Various media sources, such as films and entertainment channels are helping the diaspora to reassert their lost language. Indians are also using various platforms and organisations to promote and conserve their lost home languages. Within the community, groups divided by different caste or region have pooled assets to maintain and promote language through various mediums and cultural associations.