Breaking language barriers in India

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The language of the “mainstream” has historically been exclusionary, as we know from the struggles of indigenous groups and races trying to access the language of the colonizer, or women trying to access any language in the written form. Language, with its links to human expression, identity, and dignity, finds itself at the very core of any political claims and expressions. Hence, it is imperative to understand the role of local language and cultures that these languages represent to ensure women’s active engagement in the development process.

Creating inclusive spaces for dialogues around development, and spaces where languages are free to interact and learn from one another is central to any attempt towards inclusive development. Journey of language within different castes, regions, and religions is needed to be given due importance to make the different groups equal stakeholders in the development process. Close interaction within languages will promote creation of resources in regional languages.

Over the past two decades, Nirantar’s various experiments in India with the politics of language have created such spaces for interaction. Nirantar has a wide range of experience in the myriad ways in which languages may interact, whether be it mainstream languages or regional languages.

In this paper, we look back at the Nirantar center for gender and education experience of using critical pedagogy around literacy and language education with adult women and adolescent girls, and the founding of Khabar Lahariya, a regional language newspaper run exclusively by women, to illustrate the ways in which regional languages interact with the mainstream discourse, and create space for the voices of marginalized groups.