

# Regenerating our languages and expressions for uncovering peoples' potential: Mewari in the Udaipur as a Learning City Process-Project<sup>1</sup>

Shilpa Jain<sup>2</sup>  
Shikshantar, India

## **Abstract**

*Language is not simply a means of conveying facts or information; it is a vibrancy embedded in all of our living and learning — from childhood until old age, from farming fields to cultural festivals. It enables us to connect with one another and supports us in making sense of the world we live in and in making sense of ourselves. Yet, only 600 of the world's 6,000 languages are anticipated to survive until the next century. The collusion of aggressive forces like globalization, nation-state building, mass media, schooling, etc. threaten the remaining 90% with extinction. If these languages disappear, so does our living human diversity — an infinitude of self- and collective-expressions, whole societies, ways of living and learning.*

*In this short paper, I will share how Shikshantar (a peoples' movement for radically transforming education and development) is working with concerned citizens of Udaipur to regenerate Mewari, the local language of the Mewar region of southern Rajasthan. Our efforts towards regenerating languages can also be viewed as conscious actions to challenge globalization and its 'culture of dependency' and regenerate the 'local' and Swaraj.<sup>3</sup>*

*“Akal devayun ni aveh; akal to heeyaon upajeh.”  
(“Wisdom/creativity/common sense cannot be given to you by an outsider;  
it can only be unearthed from the heart.”)*

— A Mewari Saying

A key element to uncovering/recovering/discovering peoples' potential is regenerating our local languages. Language is not simply a means of conveying facts or information; it is a vibrancy embedded in all of our living and learning, from childhood until old age, from farming fields to cultural festivals. It enables us to connect with one another and supports us in making sense of the world we live in and in making sense of ourselves. Yet, only 600 of the world's 6,000 languages are anticipated to survive until the next century. The collusion of aggressive forces like globalization, nation-state building, mass media, schooling, etc. threaten the remaining 90% with extinction. If these languages disappear, so does our living human diversity — a infinitude of self- and collective-expressions, whole societies, ways of living and learning.<sup>4</sup>

In this short paper, I will share how Shikshantar (a peoples' movement for radically transforming education and development) is working with concerned citizens of Udaipur to regenerate Mewari, the local language of the Mewar region of southern Rajasthan. Our efforts towards regenerating languages

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<sup>1</sup> © Shilpa Jain

<sup>2</sup> [shilpa@swaraj.org](mailto:shilpa@swaraj.org)

<sup>3</sup> The meaning I ascribe to *Swaraj* derives from a combination of Gandhiji's and Tagore's uses of it in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. It is creative, life-affirming 'self-rule' or 'rule-over-the-Self', where Self implies not only the individual but her/his relationships to community, Nature and the divine.

<sup>4</sup> *Down to Earth* recently (2002) had an excellent article about language and diversity of knowledges, wisdoms, cultures and ecologies. See [http://www.downtoearth.org.in/cover\\_nl.asp?mode=1](http://www.downtoearth.org.in/cover_nl.asp?mode=1)

can also be viewed as conscious actions to challenge globalization and its ‘culture of dependency’ and regenerate the ‘local’<sup>5</sup> and *Swaraj*.<sup>6</sup>

### **Background: Udaipur as a Learning City**

The regeneration of Mewari falls under the broader umbrella of the Udaipur as a Learning City (ULC) process-project. While the details of ULC have been discussed elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> its underlying principles can be summarized in two broad statements:

- a) ULC seeks to critique the current, dehumanizing model of Education and Development,<sup>8</sup> as it exists in Udaipur itself, and as it exists in Udaipur’s relation to surrounding villages and to larger national and global, state, market and media forces;
- b) ULC seeks to create and/or regenerate learning spaces and opportunities that support the nurturing of each individual’s full human potential and the city’s collective potential for meaningful, just and ecologically-balanced transformation.

It is helpful to think of ULC as a learning web.<sup>9</sup> It does not possess a center, any hierarchy, or set plans; rather it is marked by ever-growing, ever-changing points of engagement — a variety of people, places, relationships, etc., throughout the city. A learning web like ULC stands in sharp contrast to an education or teaching ‘funnel’, like a school or university. Such funnels do not recognize the diversity of the human spirit or the diversity of learning; they attempt to ‘suck’ all learning into one narrow place, which is managed/controlled by a few people. Those who prescribe funnels have little faith in people, much less in their potentials. They hold to the faulty belief that experts, teachers, and/or professionals are needed for people to learn and grow. In contrast, a learning web like ULC opens up infinite spaces and opportunities for self-, peer- and intergenerational-learning. No one is in control, and no pre-determined outcome/result is anticipated. Rather, ULC is a volunteer-led initiative, where local people — not the State or the Market — self-organize to explore their potential and to unfold possibilities for the future of their city.

### **The Immeasurable Value of Language**

As with any learning web, language is integral to Udaipur as a Learning City. It is one of the driving forces behind learning, understanding, feeling, engaging, experimenting, etc. Indeed, there is an intimate connection between Language and...

- Creativity: *our unique contributions to the world we live in*
- Confidence: *our self-esteem and self-worth*
- Self-knowledge: *how and in what ways we know ourselves*
- Honesty: *the assurance of truth in our expressions*
- Wisdom: *the deep, practical knowledge of living*
- Sensitivity: *our emotional and spiritual attunement to the world around us*
- Listening: *the openness with which we hear others’ expressions*

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<sup>5</sup> See The Case Against the Global Economy: And For a Turn Towards the Local. J. Mander and E. Goldsmith, eds. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning I ascribe to *Swaraj* derives from a combination of Gandhiji’s and Tagore’s uses of it in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. It is creative, life-affirming ‘self-rule’ or ‘rule-over-the-Self’, where Self implies not only the individual but her/his relationships to community, Nature and the divine.

<sup>7</sup> See Vidhi and Manav. “A Search for Meaning: Udaipur as a Learning City,” in Unfolding Learning Societies: Challenges and Opportunities. *Vimukt Shiksha* Special Issue. Udaipur: Shikshantar, March 2000.

<sup>8</sup> This model is defined by specific goals (Progress, as measured by increasing economic growth, military power, concentration of wealth), processes (nation-state building, industrialization, Green Revolution, urbanization, militarization, technologization, factory schooling, mass media, etc.) and actors (the State, corporations, transnational institutions, like the World Bank, IMF, WTO, experts/professionals, etc.).

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Illich, in Deschooling Society (London: Marion Boyars, 1970), elaborates on different ways to nurture learning webs and dismantle funnels like modern schooling.

- Questioning: *the critical cognition we use to better understand the world*
- Interdependence: *how we connect to and rely upon one another*
- Collaboration: *how we work together in mutually beneficial ways*
- Dignity of Labor: *the respect we afford to all life-essential work done with our hands*
- Leadership: *the courage to take risks and remain true to our values and convictions*
- Nature: *our intimate relationship with all life forms: mountains, rivers, plants and animals*

Added together, it becomes clear that language is a key element of our human expression and, therefore, of *Swaraj*. It allows us to share our ever-changing web of experiences, stories and relationships with nature, with our cultures, with our wisdom traditions, and with each other. Language links individuals with families, families with communities, communities with each other, with the earth, with the cosmos. Through language, we can begin to know who we are and what we have the potential to become — both individually and collectively.

### **Processes for regenerating Mewari language**

Although intimately integrated within Udaipur and its surrounding areas, Mewari is nonetheless among those languages threatened with extinction. It is increasingly less spoken and, therefore, is increasingly less heard. Both in homes and work places, Mewari is steadily being replaced by Hindi and, to a lesser extent, English. The combination of global media and modern education has elevated these other languages, equating them with status and prestige. Indeed, ‘educated’ children and youth say they speak Mewari less, because they consider it to be ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’.

Yet, Mewari is the first language for the vast majority of people who live in the Mewar region. Without it, the valuable qualities discussed above can neither be unearthed, nor cultivated, thus short-changing the unfolding of self- and collective-potential. Moreover, without a language of real expressions, the current crises in meaning and living cannot be critically and/or constructively faced and resolved. Therefore, under the auspices of the Udaipur as a Learning City process-project, learning activists of Shikshantar, together with other concerned citizens, decided to support a number of processes for regenerating Mewari:

#### ***Kani Ke Re Kagla (The Crow Tells the Story)***

Storytelling is one of the most obvious manifestations of human expression. Stories are how we say something about the world, about how we understand the world. Once told, we relate them to our own experiences, analyze them individually and in groups, in order to extract deeper meaning and understanding. As is true in many parts of India, storytelling has been a pervasive aspect of life in Mewar. Elders would gather children, tell them stories, and analyze them by making connections to important aspects of living and learning in their community. Although such stories might continue for generations, they would be adapted, re-ordered, embellished, simplified, etc., as people added their own experiences to them and as times and situations changed. Most stories would contain layers of meaning, which would alternately celebrate and contest life’s many complexities and nuances. In this way, stories would also be forms of resistance, as metaphors and characters would subversively challenge unjust structures of power, exploitation, etc.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As James C. Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) explains, stories are one example of ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance — the political activity in which subordinate groups covertly express their discontent and frustration with authority. In contrast to formal political organization, in which elites and literacy dominate, resistance via the oral discourse of folk cultures enables informal leadership and non-elites to thrive. This ‘hidden’ resistance is often the precursor to more overt kinds of political action.

But in the modern age of television and compulsory schooling, children's attention has shifted elsewhere, leaving little time for or interest in Mewari stories. As one man put it, "*Ghara ghara mein khel tamasho; gaoma perdgya futo tasho.*" ("Ever since this game [TV] has come into the house, village relationships have fallen apart.") In a single generation, lively gatherings and exchanges within and between families are being wiped out. Stories are quickly disappearing, because no one is there to listen to them. Once out of sight and out of sound, they will soon be out of mind and heart.

NGOs and government agencies are further accelerating the demise of stories. To propagate their agendas and transmit their messages, they often employ stories in their campaigns and activities. Yet, in the process, they remove layers of symbolism and meaning from stories. They simplify them to one or two main points, introduce stock characters and situations, and top them off with a 'moral' point. Such manipulation is only complemented by the corporate commercialization of stories (witness the recent flood of TV serials on Indian epics and mythologies, or the Disney-ization of folk tales from around the world).

Therefore, a simple starting point for regenerating Mewari seemed to be reviving interest in Mewari stories again. Inspired by existing and former Mewari writers (like Dayal Chand Soni and Chatur Singh Bavaji), Panna Lal Patel, a learning activist with Shikshantar, along with Mamta Joshi, a local artist, sparked this process by preparing a storybook in Mewari. The stories were translations of folk stories by Vijay Dan Dehta,<sup>11</sup> who had collected them from around Rajasthan and presented them in Marwari (another local language of Rajasthan, spoken in the western part of the state). Entitled Kani Ke Re Kagla,<sup>12</sup> the storybook was shared with a number of people, all over Udaipur, in nearby villages and towns like Chittor, Rajsamand and Bhilwara, and in other parts of Rajasthan. To date, over 1300 copies of the book have been distributed, which have been passed around within at least 120 villages, to at least 5000 households (and still growing...).

The response to the book was extremely positive. Children and youth, who had previously expressed views that Mewari was backward, took great interest in wanting to read and share the book. New relationships formed between people through and around the book, as it was passed from home to home within different neighborhoods and communities. Some people shared examples of how distant relatives, who had come for a visit, liked the book so much that they took it back with them to their village.

Just as exciting was the fact that people began to write their own stories in Mewari. One elderly woman, who felt so interested and motivated by the process, wrote 11 stories in two days! Children also began to collect and write stories. While the bulk of these are the stories of their elders, the hope is that this process will eventually lead them to write their own imaginative stories in Mewari. Indeed, many elders commented that this book reawakened wisdom in people. It encouraged them to think for themselves, in their own language again, and not to copy others.

#### ***Apni Vaath (Our Words/Ideas/Understanding)***

After the release of Kani Ke Re Kagla, more and more people began writing stories in Mewari and making their own illustrations. Shikshantar therefore decided to support the launch of a small bulletin in Mewari, Apni Vaath. It focuses on peoples' knowledge, power, their capacities for self-learning, and their wisdom. The four-page bulletin consists of drawings, riddles, folk sayings, jokes, songs, as well as stories. Creating a space and opportunity for multiple kinds of expression has not only encouraged more

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<sup>11</sup> See Vijay Dan Dehta, Batha Ri Fulwari. Borunda, Rajasthan: Rupayan Sthan, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> This is a line from a much longer poem. The Crow is a traditional character in Mewari stories. He often tells the story, while the Bat plays the role of the sidekick, goading him along, prompting him to continue and tell more stories. See "Hoonkara De Re Vagla" in the following pages.

people to get involved in regenerating Mewari, but has also helped to evolve a continuous relationship between people around Mewari.

In the last year (2002), 12 bulletins of Apni Vaath were produced. Approximately 150-200 people have contributed in some way to the bulletins (combined). They are men and women, children and elderly, of various caste backgrounds, from Udaipur and the larger Mewar area. Initially, 200 copies of the bulletin were produced, but each time, an additional 200 copies would need to be made, given how energetic peoples' responses were. It is estimated that each bulletin is received by a minimum of 1000-1200 people.

Responses to Apni Vaath have also been quite encouraging. Several people have commented that this bulletin is necessary, for it helps to revive the culture of Mewar. They recognize that as language changes (from Mewari to Hindi to English), so do culture, ideas and values. Such changes are dislocating people from their land, their communities and families. Parents, in particular, have felt that it is important for children to be around Mewari, so that they relate better to their surroundings and thereby grow intellectually and emotionally. A *doha* (poetic couplet) in Mewari clearly captures this linkage:

*Goon vin thakhur teekro, goon vin nar koonar,  
goon vin chandan lakhadi, goon vin meeth ganwar  
(Without a strong character (goon), a landowner is like broken fragments of pottery,  
Without rooted values (goon), a woman can destroy her household,  
Without special qualities (goon), sandalwood is like any other wood,  
Without wisdom and clarity (goon), a good friend can be the worst influence.)*

Many people have connected the development of one's 'goon', which is layered with meanings, with one's fluency in and depth of knowledge of Mewari. They see Apni Vaath as an opportunity to increase one's relationship to Mewari, and therefore one's understanding of the self and the larger environment.

### ***Seekh Sareerain Upajeh...*** (*Learning Emerges from the Body...*)

Alongside the creation and distribution of Apni Vaath, two other volunteers with Shikshantar, Laheru Zaveri and Mahesh Nayak, initiated a research into local livelihoods (*paramparic hoonar*) in and around Udaipur. They thought to explore the current state of these livelihoods, what is happening to them in this age of 'globalization', how their association with nature and with other communities has changed, etc. Mahesh began a process of interviewing various artisan families (*kumhar*-potters, *kheradi*-wooden toy makers, *cheepa*-block printers, *charamkar*-shoemakers, etc.) about their work, their families, the problems they are facing, the changes happening, while Laheru made sketches of their workplaces (which were often their homes as well). The interviews and drawings combined took the shape of a coloring book, entitled *Seekh Sareerain Upajeh...*. In the book, children were taken on a journey through Udaipur to meet real artisans and interact with them about their lives and work. The narrator of the adventure was Rai Budia, a major character of the *Gavri* drama tradition of the Bhil tribals of Mewar.

Multiple understandings emerged from and through this book. For example, the intimacy between traditional livelihoods/meaningful work and local language was extremely obvious (which is why the book is written in Mewari). Equally clear was the interdependency of men and women in their artisan work, as well as the interdependency of various livelihood/caste communities, and their holistic creation of a local economy. The market economy, based on cash flow, with little accountability or scope for human connection, was effectively breaking down many of these relationships. At the same time, compulsory schooling, combined with the influence of the mass media, was contributing to the decline of the next generation's interest in their livelihood.

Approximately 1000 copies of the book have been distributed, to approximately 2000 families. The response to *Seekh Sareerain Upajeh* has come most strongly from people in Udaipur city itself. The book seemed to reflect a lot of concerns urban dwellers feel about the current economic system and their future. Although villagers appreciate the book, many feel they are still trying to live and work in these interdependent ways. Shikshantar learning activists have also used the book as the basis for an innovative workshop, to explore art and work in various city neighborhoods. Children have enjoyed reading the stories and coloring the books, and may be forming closer relationships with the traditional livelihoods of their own families as well as with those artisans living in their neighborhoods. We are still doing follow-up on this book, so we feel more learnings will emerge.

### ***Hoonkara De Re Vagla (And The Bat Prompts Him On)***

With such of variety of contributions (songs, poems, jokes, riddles, stories, etc.) coming in for Apni Vaath, from such a variety of people (young and old, men and women), from different parts of Udaipur and Mewar, Shikshantar learning activists decided to put together another storybook: Hoonkara De Re Vagla. Based on the principle that every person is an artist and a writer, the book consisted entirely of local peoples' own writings and drawings. Unlike many other folk storybooks, there was no process of editing or refining their contributions — no 'professionalizing' or decontextualizing of peoples' creations. Rather, stories were collected and simply typed up into a book form. Each story offers two different perspectives: one of the writer and one of the illustrator, who themselves come from different backgrounds. This enables readers to see multiple interpretations of the stories. And since the addresses of the authors/artists are included in the book, the possibility of follow-up and further conversation exists.

So far, 700 copies of Hoonkara De Re Vagla have been distributed, to approximately 1500 households (and still continuing...) Like the other Mewari publications, it too has been well-received. The most obvious indicator of its success has been that the number of contributions in Mewari has grown even more after the distribution this book. People in Mewar have begun to realize that they too are capable writers and artists, with the understanding that "If she could do it, why can't I?" They are feeling inclined to share their experiences, so that their names are also included in the next Apni Vaath or book publication. Some individuals have also been making monetary donations to support Mewari storytelling. They see it as enriching the conversations and wisdom of their communities, and feel they have a stake in making sure it continues.

### **Mewari in learning parks with local children**

While learning parks in Udaipur have been elaborated on in another article,<sup>13</sup> they are mentioned here for their connection to Mewari. Children and youth (ages four to sixteen) are motivated to speak in Mewari, as they engage in various life expressions workshops (puppet-making, clay sculpture modeling, theater, dance, cooperative games, etc.) with Shikshantar learning activists and youth volunteers. Because the children feel most comfortable in Mewari, this enables them to explore their creativity and act on their natural instincts with ease. Also, being openly encouraged to use Mewari in these very public activities has helped many children to overcome their shyness and embarrassment — of the language itself as well as personally. In the various learning parks, parents and grandparents have also been telling stories in Mewari, thereby further honoring the important role of the language, as well as the important role of adult family members in children's lives.

In the coming months, we anticipate that many additional Mewari-related activities will unfold. For example, the process of rooftop organic farming, already begun with several families in Udaipur, has generated another experience of the connection among language, the dignity of labor and local

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<sup>13</sup> See "If Not Schooling, Then What?: Learning Parks of Possibilities" by Shikshantar learning activists. Available on <[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar)> and in Unfolding Learning Societies: Deepening the Dialogues. *Vimukt Shiksha* Special Issue. Udaipur: Shikshantar, April 2001.

agri/cultural practices. Another opportunity is emerging during the distribution of the various publications. Elders are sharing interesting experiences with youth and children, based on some of the issues being raised (around media, education, economy, etc.). This may turn into regular intergenerational meetings on key concerns of communities, or into research and writing for future articles in Mewari. Some youth have also expressed interest in starting a theater group in Mewari. Lastly, at Shikshantar, we have been thinking about how more kinds of community media can be created, like small bulletins or wallpapers, such that peoples' contributions can be shared within their own localities immediately, as well as with a larger audience in Mewar. In the coming year (2003), we see these, and many other spaces, opening up for Mewari.

### **Why the energy around Mewari?**

The energetic responses to Mewari may be the result of a few factors. First, Shikshantar is not trying to 'standardize' or 'fossilize' Mewari. It is said that approximately every 24 kilometers, a different Mewari emerges.<sup>14</sup> To respect this diversity, Shikshantar encourages people to write, act, sing, etc., in their own Mewari. Unlike literacy projects, we feel no need to make everyone conform to one standard (and usually artificial) language. Our hope is that this openness will combat the inherent tension of writing itself. That is, we are vigilant towards the danger of the written word, which tends to set forth one interpretation of a story as the 'true version', thereby denying the validity of all other stories, creative interpretations, etc. We have tried to ensure that people see what is written as only one perspective; there are infinite others which they should explore and share.

Second, Shikshantar has not tried to not sell any of its publications in Mewari (or any language for that matter). What is written in them is the common, shared wisdom of humanity; it is priceless. Nor can it be copyrighted and claimed as the 'work' of one man or one organization. The absence of money and private ownership in the process of regenerating Mewari has allowed people to freely share the books and bulletin. This may help to explain why they have reached so many homes so quickly and effortlessly.

Third, there have been no attempts to 'professionalize' the contributions, to make Mewari the purview of only a few special writers or artists. The absence of this hierarchy has made many people recognize the depth of their own potential as creators, and has opened up space for a diversity of contributors and therefore, of contributions.

### **Challenging the damage of literacy and Universal Elementary Education (UEE)**

No discussion on local language and its potential could be complete without a few comments on literacy, UEE, and Education for All (EFA). Sadly, much of what is done in the name of education today is actually undermining learning and language expression.

For example, Total Literacy Campaigns would be better termed 'literacy terrorism'.<sup>15</sup> One form of communication has been propagated as the pinnacle of human expression, while all others are degraded. Literacy privileges linear, reductionist, abstract analysis, while demeaning simultaneous, whole, concrete synthesis.<sup>16</sup> In this way, all visual and oral forms of communication — songs, drama, poetry, folk sayings, jokes, riddles, chants, storytelling, painting, pottery, etc. — are put down in the face of the

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<sup>14</sup> "Char kous pe pani, aath kous pe vani." ("Water changes every four kous; language changes every eight.") A *kous* is about three kilometers.

<sup>15</sup> See Dayal Chand Soni's powerful writing, "An Illiterate's Declaration to a Literacy Preacher," for a further elaboration on 'literacy terrorism'. Originally written in Mewari, parts translated in English appear on Shikshantar's website: [www.swaraj.org/shikshantar](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar).

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Shlain makes this argument quite convincingly in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (New York: Penguin, 1998). He suggests that the spread of literacy helps to explain the desecration of the feminine Goddess and the rise of patriarchy and misogyny in modern civilizations.

written word. And vast numbers of people, who had been communicating, sharing ideas and knowledge through these various forms, cultivating the valuable qualities linked to language (described above), suddenly become inarticulate, voiceless. They are dogmatically deemed *illiterate*. In this light, campaigns to ‘eradicate illiteracy’ suddenly take on a sinister purpose. What they are ‘eradicating’ seems to be whole ways of expression, making meaning, living together, etc.

Similarly, Education For All and Universal Elementary Education sabotages local languages. Both campaigns advocate the spread of schooling, increasing access, equity and enrollment. But the culture of schooling<sup>17</sup> is clearly detrimental to individual and collective learning and growth. In this specific context, the standardization of language, first through the narrow emphasis on the written word, and second through proliferation of rigid curricula and textbooks, stifles diverse self- and collective-expressions. Children are taught one form of communication (written), one way of thinking (rational, positivist) and one kind of knowledge (abstract, ‘scientific’). Incidentally, this teaching helps them believe that one style of living — modern, urban, elite — is what they all should aspire to. The current campaign to make education a fundamental right (being introduced as the 93<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution) provides the Indian counterpart to the EFA agenda.<sup>18</sup>

Literacy and EFA/UEE advocates may be thinking to themselves, “Schooling, writing and reading, give more freedom and choice to people, especially to those who are voiceless in today’s institutions. The language of power in those spaces is Hindi (or, better yet, English), not Mewari or any of the other hundreds of local languages of India. So why should we waste time in regenerating Mewari? Isn’t it more important to speak/write in Hindi? and then, if you can afford it, English?”

There are several assumptions in this comment that need to be exposed. First is the illusion of ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’. If we recognize the effects and implications of the modern context of Nationalism, Development and Globalization, then we see *really* what ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ literacy and schooling offer: to fit into the system, quickly, with as little noise or resistance as possible. But it is clear that a few more people in the system will not make it more equitable or diverse. Their involvement does not alter the power arrangement of that system, its hierarchy, control, elitism, etc. Rather, just as it consumes local languages — ruthlessly replacing them with ‘national’ and ‘global’ languages like Hindi and English<sup>19</sup> — so does the system consume the unique diversity of human beings and the human spirit.

This is not to say that people should not use letters or alphabets, or acquire the written word to express themselves. But we should recognize how literacy and education operate today, and the tensions inherent to them. They cut people off from life and their localities and urge them to follow the government, the market and experts, whose words (and worlds) they are asked to read and submit to. Unfortunately, it is

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<sup>17</sup> Here, I clarify between ‘schools’ as physical spaces and the ‘culture of schooling’, which encompasses an entire set of aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, relationships, goals and processes. The idea of people of different ages coming together in a place to learn something is obviously welcomed. However, schools today rarely provide an opportunity for this to happen in a meaningful way. Instead, a ‘culture of schooling’ dominates, in which labels, ranks, competition, teaching hierarchies, decontextualized information, stratification, and rote surface learning take precedence over developing full human potential. Schooling also prioritizes modernity and its models of Development, Governance, Industrialization, Consumerism, Science, etc.

<sup>18</sup> See “Exposing the Illusion of the Campaign for Fundamental Right to Education,” by Selena George and Shilpa Jain. Udaipur: Shikshantar, December 2000.

<sup>19</sup> In *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), James C. Scott describes how “the imposition of a single, official language may be the most powerful” way in which the State is able to centralize its control over people. In one fell swoop, a state language completely transforms power relations. The devaluing of local languages means the devaluing of the wisdom, knowledges and work rooted to the land, the hands, directly to peoples’ lives and livelihoods. Power and privilege thus shift to only those few who have mastered the new linguistic code (i.e., the state’s peons of lawyers, bureaucrats, teachers, etc).

also clear that those words/worlds are destroying much of nature, community, wisdom and hope, for social majorities everywhere.

Here is where the regeneration of local languages, like Mewari, becomes critical. For all of the reasons described earlier, language plays a vital role in resisting injustice and in regenerating more just, meaningful, and ecologically balanced lives. Mewari, like most local languages, is intimately tied to the practical knowledge of living and working together. Through it, localities nurture a vibrant, creative, dynamic life force. In particular, language ties to a special kind of leadership: leadership without followers. That is, local languages facilitate self-organizing — the coming together of people in organic, contextual ways, without experts, plans or state funding, for self-ascribed meanings and purposes. They cultivate a deep-rooted self-confidence, in individual and collective knowledges and abilities. Such leadership, self-organizing and self-confidence prove invaluable for freeing ourselves from the culture of dependency, first from the state, and now, more recently, from the market and NGOs. They also are crucial for addressing the political, economic, socio-cultural, ecological, spiritual crises before us.

It is clear that without our languages, we can neither know the world around us, nor can we know ourselves. And without such understanding, the road ahead will only be bleak.

### **Conclusion: Towards unearthing peoples' potential**

Any efforts towards uncovering or rediscovering peoples' potential must have a serious and deep-rooted faith in people. Unfortunately, that is missing from the bulk of 'participatory' or 'people-led' development, which, more often than not, simply gives lip service to peoples' talents and possibilities. Despite their 'moral' justifications of 'good governance', 'economic growth' and 'empowerment', the State, the Market (businesses and corporations), and NGOs all seem to view people as something to control and fit into the system. Their emphases on planning, experts, technology, science, products, scaling-up, replicability, etc., and the culture of dependency that they have spawned, are all testaments to this fact.

In contrast, unearthing peoples' potential requires serious commitments to long and in-depth processes directly with people. These allow plenty of room for mistakes and plenty of time to jointly evolve contextualized meanings and actions. Most importantly, such processes grounded on a sincere appreciation of and respect for the knowledges, wisdoms, and capacities people already have. This means setting aside egos, agendas, and plans, and opening up spaces and opportunities for listening, reflection and deep dialogue. It leads towards the flowering of a 'culture of expressions',<sup>20</sup> where every human being shares their complex web of experiences, stories and histories, through a multitude of visual, oral, written forms: farming, playing, relating, praying, weaving, singing....

Local languages are one of many possible links to peoples' potential and, ultimately, to *Swaraj*. We invite you to explore them in your communities, work places, and lives.

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<sup>20</sup>[17] For a process-proposal on regenerating expressions with children and youth, "Freeing Expressions: Letting the Real Flowers Bloom", please contact Munir Fasheh, Director of the Arab Education Forum, Harvard University <mfasheh@yahoo.com> or myself <shilpa@swaraj.org>.