

Understanding the Trajectory of Language Policy in India: From Colonialism to NEP 2020

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Abstract

India's language policy has been shaped by the country's vast linguistic diversity and the complex relationship between education and language. Here, colonial history plays a major role. When English was introduced into education, it resulted in the creation of a linguistic hierarchy, associating the English language with status and access to knowledge. When India achieved independence, an attempt was made to address these inequalities and preserve the multilingual identity of India by reforming the language policy.

This paper traces the development and changes in language policy of India from the colonial period to NEP 2020. It focuses on the changing role of the English language in the Indian education system. Major developments in language planning, like the Constituent Assembly debates and the Kothari Commission, are examined in the paper, along with how factors such as globalization, technology, and changing social aspirations have contributed to the growing importance of English in Indian education. Drawing on Sarangapani's work on language policy in India, this paper studies the complex development of language policy in India and the continuing tension between English and regional language education in the Indian education system.

Keywords: Language Policy; Language Planning; Multilingualism; English in India; Indian Education; NEP 2020

Introduction

The question of language has remained closely connected with education, identity and access in India. Its place in the educational system, however, cannot be separated from the country's colonial past. The advent of colonial powers and the knowledge they wielded deeply impacted indigenous populations. Access to education became directly related to access to a foreign tongue. Languages and their hierarchy were viewed as

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indicators of hierarchy in other domains like intellectual capability and civilisation. Thus, English was associated with high social status and power, while some Indian languages were relegated to the position of vernacular or low languages, and some others were viewed as tribal languages or dialects.

After independence, the struggle against the legacy of colonialism and the need for national development ensured nationwide protests for linguistic justice. Thus, Indian states were restructured along linguistic lines. Language became a paramount identity, and people's right to learn in their mother tongue and to seek office in the same language became enshrined in policy. However, English gradually reestablished its position in the educational domain, and English-medium education became socially aspirational.

Though the language of instruction was officially declared as the state language, English-educated education providers offering the same curriculum became socially aspirational. This language shift became more visible at the higher secondary level due to the growing importance of English in higher education and professional institutions. The changing position of English, alongside the continued importance of mother tongues and regional languages, has remained an important part of language-policy debates in India.

Against this background, this paper traces the trajectory of language policy in India from the colonial period to NEP 2020, with particular attention to the changing relationship between language, education and the position of English.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses a historical approach to examine the trajectory of language policy in India. The discussion draws on Sarangapani (2015) and Lange (2008), particularly their treatment of language policy, linguistic identity and the position of English in India.

The analysis focuses on:

- **Language and power**
- **Language and identity**
- **Language and educational access**
- **Language and national integration**
- **The changing position of English**

These aspects are used to examine major developments in Indian language policy, including the Constituent Assembly debates, the Kothari Commission, the three-language policy, the National Policy on Education of 1986 and 1992, and the developments leading to NEP 2020.

Methodology

This paper adopts a historical and document-based approach to examine the development of language policy in India. The discussion draws on major educational policies, reports of commissions, debates and relevant scholarly works concerning language and education. The analysis traces the development of language policy from the colonial period through post-Independence India and examines major stages such as the Constituent Assembly debates, the Kothari Commission, the three-language approach and the National Policy on Education of 1986 and 1992. The paper further considers the changing position of English in the context of liberalisation and the developments that led to NEP 2020. These materials are examined in relation to

language, education, identity, access and the changing linguistic needs of Indian society.

Post-Independence Language Policy and the Constituent Assembly

The development of language policy after independence reflected the need to respond to India's linguistic diversity while also addressing questions of national integration and educational development. The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE, 1959) maintained that it was necessary to ensure that the national and official languages of the Union attain the status of medium of instruction in all educational institutions. The states and union territories were also expected to give greater emphasis to the development of other regional and national languages as vehicles of humanities and social sciences. The Government of India also encouraged measures for promoting and improving the position of the language prevailing in each state and adopted a policy of mother-tongue education as part of the nation's cultural identity and self-affirmation, particularly during the early years of formal schooling.

In understanding the language policies that shaped post-colonial India, it is important to examine how language debates unfolded during the Constituent Assembly debates (1946–49). The debates on citizenship and unity, as well as on national language and federalism, reveal the complexity of linguistic policy in the newly independent nation. Unity and single citizenship were important ideas that emerged in the early sessions of the Constituent Assembly. At the same time, linguistic diversity remained an important concern in the process of nation-building.

The Constituent Assembly debates disclose the complexity of this process. Federal arrangements were possible only on the basis of mutual concessions. A homogenous and uni-lingual Union was considered but rejected on account of its implications for the unity of the country. By preferring a multi-lingual political arrangement at the Centre, the Congress also responded to the concerns of non-Hindi-speaking provinces (Lange, 2008). The character of state formation was subsequently reshaped in response to these linguistic concerns. The processes of recognition and delineation of states therefore became closely connected with questions of language and regional identity.

Kothari Commission and the Three-Language Approach

The Kothari Commission, which operated from 1964 to 1966, provided recommendations at the national level in terms of the national policy for education for the first time. It examined several aspects of educational policy, including a multi-language model in education, equality of educational opportunities, a common school system, improvement of education in rural areas, modernization of the examination system and the decentralization of educational administration (Sarangapani, 2015).

The Kothari Commission felt that knowledge of English was necessary to develop an appreciation of the scientific and technological advancements made in the West. It also recognized that an excessive use of English might alienate the people. The Commission observed that language policy was also influenced by political and regional considerations. Although it recognized the necessity of learning English, it did not provide sufficient direction on the implications of its wider adoption as a medium of instruction or on how opportunities for learning different languages could be balanced.

The debate over language remained complicated across different parts of the country. The position of Hindi was particularly sensitive in the South, where it was viewed differently from the South Indian languages. The Kothari Commission's

recommendations therefore reflected the continuing difficulty of developing a common approach to language in education while accommodating India's linguistic diversity. The question was not only which languages should be taught, but also how different languages could be accommodated within the educational system without creating further divisions.

National Policy on Education 1986 and 1992: Language and Educational Access

The provision of universal elementary education was reiterated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986, which was revised in 1992. Although the NPE included the provision of instruction through the mother tongue, it also provided for the teaching of Hindi and English as compulsory subjects in the regional languages. Thus, the policy continued to recognise the importance of regional and mother-tongue education while also retaining an important place for English within the educational system.

Although the NPE reiterated the mainstream recommendations, it highlighted that there continued to exist two major barriers to the realization of universal access to elementary education: high dropout and low retention rates in schools and, more importantly, the neglect of children's languages at all levels of schooling. The issue of language was therefore closely connected with the wider question of access to education.

In spite of these recommendations, very few initiatives were taken during this period to develop children's languages by the government and policy-making machinery in particular. The gap between policy provisions and their implementation remained an important concern. The continued neglect of children's languages also raised questions about the extent to which educational policy could respond to the linguistic diversity of Indian society.

The language policy of this period therefore reflected the continuing attempt to accommodate different linguistic needs within the educational system. At the same time, the presence of English alongside regional and mother-tongue languages showed that the position of English remained an important part of the wider language-policy debate in India.

Liberalisation and the Changing Position of English

The trajectory and impact of English in the decades following the early years of Independence have been documented (Sarangapani, 2015). More generally, the circumstances changed markedly in the context of 'liberalised India' after the early 1990s. Attitudes toward English shifted during this period. Earlier, English was often viewed as a language associated with colonial power, while its role in education was more cautiously approached. In the context of liberalisation, however, English increasingly came to be associated with knowledge, education and social and economic opportunity.

The general backdrop is of growing pressures of globalisation on different aspects of life, including the social, economic, cultural and political. This was manifested in a number of developments directly and indirectly linked to the growing importance of English, such as the spread of computer and internet technologies, the growth of private sector institutions, the development of English language and educational materials, the expansion of private coaching and training, and prospects of extensive outbound migration. Media and entertainment also contributed to the increasing visibility and use of English in everyday life.

These changes also had implications for educational access. Uneven access to basic education increasingly became marked by disparities along caste, class, community and social geography lines. English-medium education, in this changing social and economic environment, became increasingly aspirational for many sections of society. Current language policy in education is therefore shaped by a complex milieu involving multiple intersecting factors. State, market and community interact in different ways across states and regions. The roles of languages are also affected by different historical trajectories, national, state and district-level language politics, and the social contexts of particular regions and communities.

Evolution of Language Policy Leading to NEP 2020

The National Policy on Education of 1986, modified in 1992, remained the major national framework for education for more than three decades. During this period, significant changes took place in Indian society, the economy and the wider global environment. The growing importance of technology, changing educational needs and increasing demands for quality, equity and access created the need to reconsider the existing education policy. The formulation of a new education policy was therefore initiated through a broad consultation process involving governments, educational institutions, experts and other stakeholders.

The process gained a more formal shape with the constitution of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy under T. S. R. Subramanian in 2015. The Committee submitted its report in May 2016, followed by further consultations and the preparation of inputs for a draft policy. In June 2017, a new committee chaired by K. Kasturirangan was constituted to prepare the draft National Education Policy. The Committee submitted the Draft National Education Policy 2019, which was subsequently placed in the public domain for suggestions and comments. Around two lakh suggestions were received during the consultation process before the policy was finalised.

Language remained an important part of this policy development. The Draft National Education Policy 2019 proposed education in the local language or mother tongue at least until Grade 5 and preferably until Grade 8, along with a flexible bilingual approach where necessary. It also proposed the implementation of the three-language formula and greater attention to the development of language teachers and educational materials in Indian languages.

These concerns continued in NEP 2020. The policy retained the three-language formula while allowing greater flexibility and stating that no language would be imposed on any State. It also placed emphasis on the use of the home, local or regional language as a medium of instruction wherever possible, particularly in the early years of schooling. The development of bilingual learning materials was also emphasised. Thus, NEP 2020 can be viewed within the longer trajectory of language-policy debates in India, where questions of multilingualism, regional languages, educational access and the role of English have continued to interact with changing educational and social conditions. The policy was finally approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020.

Conclusion

The trajectory of language policy in India reflects the changing relationship between language, education and society. From the colonial period onwards, language has remained closely connected with questions of power, status and access to education. After independence, efforts were made to recognise linguistic diversity and strengthen

the position of mother tongues and regional languages. At the same time, the role of English continued to change within the educational system and gradually acquired greater social and educational value.

The debates of the Constituent Assembly and the recommendations of the Kothari Commission show the difficulty of developing a common language policy in a multilingual country. The National Policy on Education of 1986, revised in 1992, continued to recognise the importance of mother-tongue education while retaining English within the educational framework. With liberalisation and globalisation, however, the position of English became stronger. It was increasingly associated with higher education, knowledge, employment, technology and social mobility.

The development of NEP 2020 needs to be understood within this longer history. Its emphasis on multilingualism, the use of Indian languages and the continued place of English reflects concerns that have remained part of Indian language-policy debates for decades. At the same time, the policy emerges within a social environment in which English has acquired a strong aspirational value. This makes the relationship between policy and practice an important part of understanding India's contemporary language situation.

Language policy in India has therefore not followed a simple or uniform path. It has developed through the continuing interaction of linguistic diversity, educational needs, regional identities and changing social and economic realities. Understanding this trajectory helps place NEP 2020 within the wider history of Indian language policy and shows why questions surrounding language, education and access continue to remain important.

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