

Extract from the Draft National Education Policy 2019

Multilingualism and the power of language

Multilingualism is a necessity of India (as of much of the developed world), and must be considered a boon and an opportunity for learning and expanding one's horizons rather than a burden. Children learn languages extremely quickly when immersed early, and multilingual children in studies around the world have also been found to learn faster and be placed better later in life than those who are unilingual. It enriches them intellectually and culturally, and allows them, throughout their lives, to think in more than one way, by being equipped with the structures of expression, vocabulary, idioms, and literature of more than one language. A multilingual India is better educated and also better nationally integrated. Moreover, India's languages are some of the richest, most scientific, and most expressive in the world, with a huge body of ancient as well as modern literature that help form India's national identity.

Despite the rich, expressive and scientific nature of Indian languages, **there has been an unfortunate trend in schools and society towards English as a medium of instruction and as a medium of conversation.** Logically speaking, of course, English has no advantage over other languages in expressing thoughts; on the contrary, Indian languages have been specifically developed over centuries and generations to express thoughts in the Indian scenario, climate, and culture. Moreover, Indian languages are very scientifically structured, and do not have unphonetic, complicated spellings of words and numerous grammatical exceptions; they also have a vast and highly sophisticated ancient, medieval, and modern literature in the Indian context; as a consequence, they have a certain home-feel and "apnaapan" quality in the Indian context, making them easier, more relatable, and more relevant for children and adults alike to learn and speak, and with which to learn and express deep concepts across school subjects.

What then is the reason that English is being pursued by so many in India as a medium of instruction and of conversation, when most other technologically advanced countries of the world have naturally kept their

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own native languages for these purposes? The answer, of course, is that, since Independence, **the economic elite of India have adopted English as their language;** only about 15% of the country speaks English, and this population almost entirely coincides with the economic elite (compared with, e.g. 54% of

Indians who speak Hindi). Furthermore, the elite often use English (whether deliberately or inadvertently) as a test for entry into the elite class and for the jobs that they control: English is regularly used by the elite as a criterion to determine whether someone is “educated”, and perhaps most unfortunately of all, as a prerequisite for jobs - even in cases of jobs where knowledge of English is entirely irrelevant. This sad scenario and attitude (again, it may well be inadvertent) has resulted in the marginalisation of large sections of society based on language, keeping them out of higher-paying jobs and the higher socio-economic strata.

This attitude has kept the elite class and the jobs they control segregated from the economically weaker sections of society, which of course contain many hardworking, smart, high quality, highly skilled, and educated people who happen not to speak the language of the colonists and current elite. It has created an unnatural aspiration of parents for their children to concentrate on learning and speaking languages that are not their own.

For true equity and inclusion in society, and in the education and employment systems across the country, this power structure of language must be stopped at the earliest. A major effort in this direction must be taken by the elite and the educated to make increased use of languages native to India, and give these languages the space and respect that they deserve (particularly in hiring, societal events, and in schools and all educational institutions, as well as in daily conversation wherever possible). An importance and prominence must be returned to Indian languages that has been lost in recent years. Language teaching jobs must be created in schools and universities across the country to help connect together Indians from differing geographical areas as well as from differing socio-economic strata.

In particular, taking into account the enhanced abilities of young children to learn languages, and to help break the current divide between the economic elite and the rest of the country, in addition to teaching languages native to India, English must also be available and taught in a high quality manner at all government and non-government schools. The emphasis should be on functionality and fluency. Meanwhile the medium of instruction, and the depth of study of literature, arts, and culture in the Indian context should be conducted and explored to the extent possible through the local language/ mother tongue and other Indian languages.

We further observe that English has not become the international language that it was expected to become back in the 1960s. As already noted, most advanced countries use their own native languages as the languages of interaction and transaction, and it is suggested that India works towards the same, or its rich language and cultural heritage, along with the rich power of expression, may slowly be lost. It is also strongly recommended that interactions between people

within India be conducted in languages native to India; thus Indian languages must be heavily promoted again and with new vigour