

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION: CHALLENGES OF THE THREE-LANGUAGE POLICY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India is a multilingual society with 22 official languages and over a thousand other languages. It is influenced by globalisation and liberalisation on one hand and a social thrust for maintenance of regionalism or local culture on the other. Language in education has been widely debated from the formative years of India's independence. The State Reorganisation Commission divided states on the basis of language as a technique to ease administration. However, the issue of language planning and the necessity of a proper language policy in the field of education perennially exists, given the complexities faced by a multilingual society. The three-language policy was created with a vision to achieve equality of opportunity, linguistic rights for every ethnic group, and ultimately attaining universal education among all citizens. The policy mandates the learning of three languages at the primary education level. This paper examines the provisions of the three-language formula. It attempts to critically analyse the challenges posed by the three-language formula and the failure of its proper implementation across the country. The paper suggests prospective solutions for achieving the goal of promoting and conserving all languages while at the same time, keeping in mind the interests of all the learners with respect to their individual mother tongues, even if they belong to the minority group of a region.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Education, Language, Three-language formula

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION: A PATH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY

Merriam-Websters dictionary defines language as a “form or manner of verbal expression”. Language is the most important resource of a community, which is used as a key to knowledge. Education is the formal means of gaining knowledge and overall development. Language forms the basis of education, since a person can be educated only through language. Therefore, linguistic rights form a part of educational right.

Modernization through English education is considered as a kind of Westernization¹. This has been widely resisted by various parts of the Indian society to assert the identity and importance of a local linguistic culture. The dominance of English has led to the fear of endangerment of local languages, especially minority languages. According to the UNESCO standards, a language faces a situation of endangerment when the percentage of children in that speech community studying that language falls below 30%.² There exist several tribal languages which fall in this category.

Language planning in India should address the problems of all sections of the society. Every attempt should be made to maintain and develop not only the dominant language but also the less dominant languages spoken by fewer numbers of people.³ The complexity of the problem increases when the urban-rural divide is also considered. Therefore, balancing languages in education is of utmost significance in the development of society.

ADVENT OF A NATIONAL FORMULA FOR EDUCATION

Gandhiji held it necessary for every child to have the foundation of his development laid on the solid rock of the mother tongue rather than wasting of immeasurable energy in mastering a foreign language without much use and also by neglecting one’s own mother tongue.⁴ Learning

¹ Michael Freeman, *Law and Sociology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006), 360

² Yogendra Singh, *Culture change in India* (Rawat Publications, New Delhi 2000), 142

³ AK Srivastava, *Language Planning in multilingual contexts: Educational and Psychological implications in Language Planning* (CIIL Mysore 1986), 43-52

⁴ English Medium Students Parents Assn. v. State of Karnataka AIR 1994 SC 1702

in alien language inflicts cruel strain on the children, renders the learning process mechanical, and threatens to atrophy the development of mother tongue.⁵

Given the multilingual nature of India, the government has put in efforts to ensure linguistic integration by giving equal importance to all languages. The British presence in India for hundreds of years had led to the imbibing of English in all activities, most importantly, in the sphere of education. A compromise ensued that, as per Article 343 of the Indian Constitution, Hindi would become the sole official language of India in 15 years. Several events made this transition impossible, and another compromise in 1965, becoming the Official Languages Act of 1967, guaranteed that English would be retained as an “associate official language.”

In lieu of the language debates, the Education Commission, also known as the Kothari Commission, included a plan for the linguistic integration of India. Known as the “three-language formula”, the plan mandates the teaching of a combination of three languages in the pre-university curriculum. The goal of this formula is to achieve national unity by creating multilingual citizens, specifically, ones equipped with the languages of different regions. The three-language formula, represents a “unity in diversity.” This formula was greatly emphasized by the National Policy on Education (1968) which stated that “The energetic development of Indian languages and literature is the *sin qua non* for educational and cultural development. Unless this is done, the creative energies of the people will not be released, standards of education will not improve, knowledge will not spread to the people, and the gulf between the intelligentsia and the masses will remain, if not widen further.”⁶

THE THREE LANGUAGE FORMULA

The Three Language Formula (TFL) which emerged as a political consensus on languages in school education was a strategy to accommodate at least three languages with in the ten years of schooling. The All India Council for Education recommended the adoption of the Three Language Formula in Sept. 1956. According to this formula, every child has to learn the following:

1. The mother tongue or the regional language;

⁵ English Medium Students Parents Assn. v. State of Karnataka AIR 1994 SC 1702

⁶P Ishwara Bhatt, *Law and Social Transformation in India*, (Eastern Book Company, Lucknow 2009), 320

2. The official language of the union or the associate official language of the Union so long as it exists (official language of the union is Hindi and its associate official language is English);
3. Modern Indian language or a foreign language, not covered under (1) and (2) above and other than that used as the medium of instruction.

The First Language (L1): The language that we learn from our childhood is usually spoken by our parents, family members and the other people around us. This is known as our first language or L1. Since this is the language we know best and use commonly, the government decided that the medium of instruction at primary stage should be one's own regional language. First language is acquired naturally, through interacting with family members and friends without much formal instruction. But even though we may communicate effectively in our first language, many of us do not have a complete knowledge of all the sounds and letters of the language or its grammar. This is because we acquire it informally. Therefore, formal instruction in the first languages is provided in the School.

The Second Language (L2): One of the aims of education is to expose the learner to various situations and develop such ability which enables him/her to gain knowledge from every possible source and share the same with others. Therefore, the learner needs to learn the second language (L2) which in our country usually is either Hindi or English. The second language is learnt consciously and deliberately for a specific purpose i.e., to gather information and acquire knowledge. The sounds, letters and grammar of the second language can be learnt properly only when they are deliberately taught by the teachers and consciously learn by the students. Under the three-language formula, second language (L2) is taught at a later stage in the primary school curriculum, after the child has already learnt one language well i.e. his/her L1. We use first language to communicate and to express our feelings and thoughts in our day-to-day life situations. On the other hand, second language is used in situations other than personal.

The Third Language (L3): For instance, if a child's mother tongue is Tamil and he/she learns English as his/her second language. When he/she goes to a village in Bihar he/she may not be in a position to speak to people either in the first language (Tamil) or second language (English). In such cases, communications or interaction with other people becomes difficult, and may even be impossible at times. This is where third language (L3) has a significant role to play.

The spirit of the three-language formula thus provides Hindi, English, and Indian languages, preferably a south Indian language for the Hindi-speaking States, and a regional language, Hindi, and English for the non-Hindi-speaking States.

MULTILINGUALISM ACROSS THE WORLD

International human rights instruments have extensively provided for protection of language rights in education. For instance, Article 26(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights states that “In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.”

Apart from India, there exists several other multilingual countries in the world, such as Canada, Morocco, Bolivia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, and Australia.

Canada is officially bilingual under the Official Languages Act and the Constitution of Canada that require the federal government to deliver services in both official languages. Also, there is always a guarantee for minority languages, where numbers warrant. 59.3% of the population speaks English as their first language while 22.9% are native speakers of French. The remaining population belongs to some of Canada's many immigrant populations or to the indigenous population. Under the language policy of Canada⁷, proficiency in English Language is expected by the students, along with French as a first language; both are official languages of the state. Other than these, all other non-official/non-Aboriginal minority languages, according to the Canadian Census 2001, are Chinese, Italian, German, Spanish, Punjabi, Arabic, Portuguese, Polish, Tagalog and Hindi. Korean, Russian, Tamil, and Gujarati are other minority languages studied as second language.

⁷ Barbara Burnaby, Memorial University of Newfoundland, *Language Policy and Education in Canada, Volume 1: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*
<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/2890/CRLC00349.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed on 29-04-2019)

About 850 languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea (PNG)⁸, where pre-school and early primary education is provided in some 350-400 languages. No other country in the world uses local languages as widely as PNG. Previously, the formal education system used English as the medium of instruction, but based on positive experiences in using local languages in non-formal education, the formal system was reformed. In the new system, the first three years of formal education is taught in the mother tongue of the learner. English becomes the medium at later grades. Elementary schools that use local languages are run by local communities. Reasons for the successful use of local languages include strong community participation, decentralization, local relevance, cost-effectiveness, and the active role of NGOs.

REGIONAL LANGUAGES: THE PROBLEM WITH MANDATORY IMPOSITION

In addition to the implications of the three-language formula, the imposition of a regional language as the compulsory medium of instruction has been highlighted in a series of cases.

In *Gujarat University v. Krishna Ranganath Mudhokar*⁹, the Gujarat University's rule which prescribed Gujarati or Hindi as the sole medium of instruction and examination was invalidated. This is because it was violative of the rights of Anglo Indians. Similarly, in *DAV College v. State of Punjab*¹⁰, the Government of Punjab had compulsorily affiliated some colleges to the Punjabi University which had prescribed Punjabi in Gurmukhi script as the sole and exclusive medium of instruction. The Supreme Court declared it as violative of the rights of Arya Samajists to use their own script and language for instruction.

Article 350-A¹¹ provides that the State shall take every endeavor to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups. This Article aids in the development and conservation of a language. For instance, in *Sahyadri Education Trust v. State of Karnataka*¹², the Karnataka Government

⁸ <http://www.languageeducationpolicy.org/lepbyworldregion/papuanewguinea.html> (Accessed on 27-04-2019)

⁹ AIR 1963 SC 703

¹⁰ AIR 1971 SC 1731

¹¹ Indian Constitution

¹² ILR (1988) Kant 2188

Code which made Kannada language as the sole medium of instruction and denied permission for English Medium Schools was nullified by relying upon Article 350-A.

The policy of compelling children to learn a regions language as one of the compulsory subjects has been widely criticized. In India, there exists the concept of single citizenship. This means that all the citizens are allowed to move freely throughout the country and settle in whichever part of the country they please. In *General Secy., Linguistic Minorities Protection Committee v. State of Karnataka*¹³, the constitutionality of the government order which made study Kannada language compulsory at primary stage of education was challenged before the Full Bench of the Karnataka High Court. This order was held to be violative of Article 14¹⁴ because the interests of children whose mother tongue is not Kannada, but who happen to reside in Karnataka owing to their parents' employment either temporarily or for long duration will be adversely affected. The Government shall however be at liberty to introduce Kannada as one of the two languages and make the study of Kannada compulsory as one of the three languages.

CRITICISMS TO THE THREE-LANGUAGE FORMULA

As stated in the report of the Education Commission (1964-66)¹⁵, "In effect the formula established equality with regard to the study of languages between the Hindi and the non-Hindi areas..." However, in practice, the implementation of the three-language formula has led to several difficulties and has not been very successful. Several factors have contributed to this situation. Among these are the general opposition to a heavy language load in the school curriculum, the lack of motivation for the study of an additional modern Indian language -in the Hindi areas and the resistance to the study of Hindi in some non-Hindi areas.

Even though the number of languages taught in many schools is three, the languages are not those in the three-language formula. The preferred third language in the Hindi States is often Sanskrit and not a modern Indian language (a southern language), though classical languages like Sanskrit do not find place in the formula.

¹³ ILR (1989) Kar 457 (FB)

¹⁴ Indian Constitution

¹⁵ Ministry of Education, Government of India, *Report of the Education Commission of India 1964-66- Education and National Development*
rishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/2041424/1/CCS270.pdf

Controversies, subsequently, have arisen in favour or against accommodating such classical languages within the formula. Differences are also there in the motivation for learning of the third language. While there is economic motivation for learning Hindi in non-Hindi States, the motivation for learning southern languages in Hindi States does not exist. This results in lack of equality in learning objectives of the third language. In addition, there exists a huge problem concerning the place of minority/tribal language in the policy on account of the fact that every State is multilingual with two or more minority languages.

Heavy cost and effort is involved in providing for the teaching of the second and third languages. The teachers also face many difficulties in their task of language teaching. The most important are lack of modern teaching aids and training in the new techniques of language teaching. There is also a problem of the presence of the mixed mother-tongue groups in the language class.

In some cases, the language learnt in school is a completely strange and unknown. Most teachers in rural areas do not speak or understand the children's language so there is no communication between teachers and children. Even when the teachers come from the children's home community, they often do not use the local language in teaching the curriculum as the textbooks are in the state language.

The situation of the three-language formula was made worse by defective planning and by the half-hearted way in which the formula was implemented. Considerable resources have been wasted over what may be regarded as an unproductive programme of Implementation. As far as the third language is concerned, the students in many areas have gained very little because of the unreal situation in which most of them studied it and the inadequate facilities that were provided for the purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to make a more workable model of the three-language policy, the following recommendations can be taken into consideration:

1. English will continue to enjoy a high level of importance. A working knowledge of the English language with reasonable proficiency is necessary for all students who wish to pursue their higher education.
2. Hindi, being the official language, is equally important as the student's mother tongue. It is both the student's and his/her parent's choice to decide whether he/she will learn his mother tongue or Hindi as the first or second language, in addition to English. Schools should have provisions to teach all the local languages of the region.
3. Any modern Indian language, classical Indian language or foreign language can be learnt as the third language. Learning four languages will not be made compulsory at any stage. However, a student is free to learn four languages if he/she wishes to.
4. A student is required to exhibit a certain degree of proficiency in each of the three languages. The number of years for which a language is learnt is irrelevant.
5. The secondary schooling level i.e Classes VIII-X is the ideal time for learning the second additional language. This is because, at this point of time, the student would have mastered the first additional language to some extent, and it would be easier to learn another additional language.

CONCLUSION

There exists a highly positive relationship between multilingualism and greater achievements. Multilingual children not only have control over several different languages but they are also academically more creative and socially more tolerant. Multilingualism in India is widely praised by the scholars. Bhatia and Ritchie (2006)¹⁶ have stated that language rivalry and conflict in India often does not lead to linguistic and national disintegration.

The Government of India should make every conceivable effort to sustain multilingualism rather than suppress it. Our educational system has constantly weakened the multilingualism that characterises our society. Education planners need to make every possible effort to empower the languages of the underprivileged, dalit and tribal and endangered communities. The current need is for a clear policy to promote and utilize different languages in schools as a

¹⁶ Amitav Choudry, *Linguistic Complexity and the 'Three Language Formula': language and education in India*, in *World Yearbook of Education 2003: Language Education*, 242 (Jill Bourne and Euan Reid ed., 2005)

medium of instruction and to make knowledge in every known discipline available in all the Indian languages so as to promote every language equally.

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