

## *Shed the myopia, refocus on the relevance of English*

**T**he aspiration to have their child/children speak in English is a dream that many Indian parents have, recognising its critical role in ensuring better socioeconomic opportunities. Despite this widespread desire, national education policies have consistently neglected English language instruction for over seven decades.

Since India's independence, educational policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, influenced by political ideologies, have aimed to restrict the spread of the English language and diminish its significance across various sectors. Yet, the neutral nature of English, recognised by the Constitution of India as a tool of equality, safeguards its position, allowing it to maintain a vital role in the nation. This ongoing conflict between restrictive policies and constitutional safeguards has significantly hindered the ability of the economically deprived masses to achieve proficiency in English, perpetuating a cycle of educational and socio-economic disadvantage. This neglect has disproportionately affected marginalised children in government-run schools, deepening educational inequalities. In contrast, children from affluent families have had the resources to achieve proficiency in English, thus widening the chasm between those who can and cannot speak the language. Alarming, the 2011 India Census reveals that 90% of the population does not speak any English, highlighting a stark linguistic divide that underscores the failure of education policies to bridge this gap. Surprisingly, the policy does not mention this issue. Nor does it provide any measures to address it.

The NEP 2020 continues to devalue English, labelling it as foreign and ignoring its crucial role as a connector in the globalised economy. It also lacks a defined strategy to improve access to English for economically disadvantaged groups, thereby worsening the challenge of closing this critical educational gap.

### **The 'agenda' behind the cover of 'diversity'**

The NEP 2020's three-language formula ostensibly promotes linguistic diversity but conceals a deeper agenda aimed at reviving the concept of a Hindi-India, particularly by diminishing the role of English in India. This approach not only is in conflict with the aspirations of millions who view English as a ladder to socio-economic mobility but also stands at odds with the Constitution, which safeguards against the imposition of any single language on the nation.

The Constitution enshrines English and Hindi as official languages, deliberately refraining from appointing a national language, while it also



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protects regional languages, thereby preserving a critical balance. This framework recognises English as an instrumental language, pivotal to education, health, law, trade, and global communication, ensuring neutrality among diverse ethnic groups, while it positions regional languages as carriers of India's rich cultural heritage. However, the NEP 2020 risks unsettling this balance by potentially overlooking these constitutional safeguards.

This move is misguided and will ultimately fail, squandering valuable time and resources. This will force the nation to revisit the contentious linguistic debates of its past instead of promoting English to a stature that complements the cultural significance of regional languages. Recognising this constitutional discord can guide India away from historical pitfalls toward a more inclusive and pragmatic language policy.

Since the economic liberalisation of 1991, the demand for English has surged, aligning with the global narrative that "the world is flat". This means that proficiency in English is not just desirable but also essential for participating in India's economic growth and seizing international opportunities. Ironically, successive governments have ignored this shift, choosing instead to cling to regional and nationalistic language policies.

The NEP 2020 not only continues to marginalise English but also gives a disproportionate thrust to regional languages, inadvertently fuelling regional identity politics. This approach fails to recognise that there is no inherent conflict between nurturing regional languages and promoting English. The real issue arises from the attempts to position Hindi as the national language, which stymies the spread of English among the masses.

The anti-English stance is not new. Post-independence, there was a significant push to establish Hindi as the lingua franca of India, which led to systematic efforts to diminish the role of English, despite its status as a co-official language. This was underpinned by the belief that Hindi, unlike English, could not be a neutral bridge across India's diverse cultural landscape.

### **The thread from the past**

This bias can be traced back to the freedom struggle, led predominantly by Hindi-speaking leaders who envisioned a monolingual Hindi-speaking India, post-independence. The partition with Pakistan, which removed Urdu from the equation, only intensified the focus on Hindi. Despite this, the multilingual reality of India and the constitutional provisions for equality and linguistic diversity necessitated the retention of English as an official language alongside Hindi.

The National Policy on Education 1968 introduced a three-language formula supposedly to spread Hindi across non-Hindi-speaking regions, thereby integrating the nation linguistically.

However, this formula faced opposition, particularly from Tamil Nadu, which saw it as an imposition of Hindi while diminishing the role of English. The NEP 2020, despite claiming flexibility in language choice, subtly continues this agenda under the guise of offering choice, thus not addressing the core issue of language imposition.

The practical implementation of this policy shows its flaws. While it allows for the selection of languages, the infrastructure and resources are heavily biased towards Hindi. This not only limits real choice but also undermines the policy's goal of fostering multilingualism. The emphasis on Hindi and Sanskrit, due to cultural and political motivations, neglects English, which remains crucial in the professional, educational, and legal contexts in India.

### **Be pragmatic**

In comparison, countries such as China have recognised the importance of English, mandating its study to align with global economic shifts and the aspirations of its middle class. This is in stark contrast with India's approach, where the lack of a focused English language policy may hinder our global economic engagement and social mobility.

To rectify this, India needs a pragmatic language policy that respects its cultural diversity while addressing the practical needs of its citizens. A two-language formula, comprising a regional language and English, would better serve the aspirations of Indians to be global citizens while preserving their unique cultural identities. Such a policy would enable broader participation in global economic opportunities and ensure that all Indians can engage effectively in the professional, educational, and legal spheres of life.

The government must prioritise the promotion and the development of English not as a competitor to Indian languages but as a vital tool for national and international communication. This approach aligns with the democratic principles of equality and individual rights, ensuring that every citizen can participate fully in the nation's socioeconomic activities without linguistic barriers.

India, as a liberal democracy, must be responsive to the needs and wants of its citizens. It is high time its language policy reflects this, promoting a balanced multilingual framework that genuinely supports the aspirations of all Indians. English is India's solution.