

‘Mother Tongue’ and ‘Vernacular’: An Examination of the Terms in the Context of NEP 2020

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The Draft New Education Policy (DNEP) of 484 pages was released by Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2019. After incorporating the suggestions given, The National Education Policy was approved by the Union Cabinet of India in July 2020. The NEP 2020 replaces the previous National Policy on Education 1986. The objective of such a move is certainly, to bridge the gap that exists in the Indian education system- a colonial inheritance that clearly tilts in favour of the elite. English and vernacular are the two mediums of instruction that educational systems currently use, where vernacular largely translates to the official state language.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is committed to the cause of inclusive and equitable education as is apparent in the section that addresses multilingualism and the power of language, while equating home language with mother language as well as the language spoken by the local communities, -the policy takes into consideration the presence of multi – lingual families where the home language may be different from the local language. Hence, the term ‘wherever possible’ is accommodated in the wording of the draft to for the implementation of ‘home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language as the medium of instruction until at least grade 5, but preferably until grade 8.’, which is to be followed by private and public schools alike (NEP 13). To facilitate this, the government promises the benefit of ‘high quality textbooks’ in the home language/mother tongue while stating that the medium of instruction would still be the home language/mother tongue ‘wherever possible’ where the material for the same is not available. The policy

assures that teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach with students who have a home language different from the medium of instruction.

While holding on to the three-language formula, the policy offers greater flexibility by stating that “[T]he three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.” (NEP 14). Often, the concept of mother tongue is defined narrowly depending on the exigencies of the situation. The definition that’s generally accepted in the earlier documents of the census defines mother tongue to be ‘the home language of each child’: ‘the language spoken from the cradle . . . in the case of infants and deaf mutes . . . the mother tongue of the mother’ (1951 Census of India). But the distinctions between home language and mother tongue cannot be disregarded. Macmillan dictionary defines home language to be ‘someone’s native language’ and mother tongue as ‘the main language that you learn as a child’ on the other hand the regional language or the local language is defined by dictionary.net as ‘a language spoken in an area of a sovereign state, whether it be a small area, a federal state or province, or some wider area’. Various cultural and linguistic interests admit greater subjective definition, and there is a significant possibility of political manipulation and negotiation in the Indian context. This paper attempts to understand whether the new policy has the necessary apparatus to control and clarify the ambiguities that may arise as a result of the new equation in the medium of instruction in early education.

The NEP 2020 aims to maintain the three-language policy that is currently in use through the NEP 1986 with modifications. Currently, the school system in India, both state as well as CBSE have a three-language policy, where in state, depending on the medium, the first language is either English or the state language such as Kannada in Karnataka, second, either the state language or English and the third as the national language, Hindi. The CBSE Board follows a three-language formula as well but till class VIII and follows a two-language formula till class X, with English as a mandatory language. Students can either opt for either a foreign language or Hindi or Sanskrit along with English which is mandatory. The three Language Formula according to NEP 2020 aims to change the medium of instruction ‘Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade

8 and beyond it will be the home language/mother-tongue/local language/regional language' which is currently English in case of CBSE schools and either English or the State language in case of state schools. The three-language formula will continue to be implemented to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity. (NEP 14)

According to the HRD Ministry of Education, the three-language formula will continue to be implemented in schools "with greater flexibility" but "no language will be imposed on any state." It also states that the choice of the three languages will be the choice of States, regions, and students themselves, as long as at least two of the three languages are native to India (NEP 14). Saira Ijaz Ahmed in 'The International Journal of Social sciences and Education' discusses the 'Issue on Medium of Instruction in Pakistan' which, like India is still in its process of recovering from a colonial hangover. She states that "There is more than one option for the medium of instruction in the country such as Urdu as the national language of the country, English as the language of Ex-masters, and mother tongue as the people living in different parts of the country speaks different languages" (Ahmed:1) While the situation is similar in India in terms of the broad divide that has resulted between an English speaking elite and a vernacular-educated poor, the Indian context is infinitely more complex due to the existence of a vast language diversity.

It is an acknowledged fact that the current system of education has created a vast gulf between the students from the English medium schools and those from state language schools. Macaulay's Minute of 1835 we see the entire intention of bringing English to India was to create another section of the society who would be mediators between the rulers and the ruled and its implementation created an elite section-, the "babus" whose complex participation in the history of the Indian National Movement will not be discussed here. What is significant to this study is the fact that even today English medium education is still more expensive than Vernacular education, which has state aid; and the English medium of Instruction is the medium preferred by the elite (Macaulay 8). While the NEP 2020 aims to address the issue by providing a more uniform method of instruction, the question that concerns this research study is of its effectiveness, and the measure of inclusivity that is embedded in the wording of the document.

Several experts in the field of education have expressed the view that education is best taught in the mother tongue. The 2011 Census of India listed 270 mother tongues; of these, as per a 2017 study conducted by Resmi P Bhaskaran, only 47 languages were used as mediums of instruction in Indian classrooms (Bhaskaran 201). According to the General Notes from the Census 2001 'mother tongue' is defined as 'the language spoken in childhood by the person's mother to the person' (2001 Census of India). In reference to a Census in 2018, NDTV stated that 'More than 19,500 languages or dialects are spoken in India as mother tongue, according to the latest analysis of a census released this week. There are 121 languages which are spoken by 10,000 or more people in India, which has a population of 121 crore.' Mother tongue may not only differ from region to region but a single neighbourhood could have completely different languages or dialects as their mother tongue. A person from Dakshina Kannada, for instance could have Beary as her mother tongue while the person residing next to her could have Konkani as his mother tongue. The mother tongue can differ within a family as well where parents have different mother tongues. State language is the official language of a State adopted by the State Government such as Kannada in the case of Karnataka. Unlike State language, a regional language is the local language of a smaller area, such as Tulu is the regional language of Dakshina Kannada. Through the process of language standardization, a dialect becomes the standard language then used for official and literary purposes also the current medium of instruction for vernacular state schools.

In an article by Khubchandani, titled "Defining Mother Tongue Education in Plurilingual Contexts", the author observes that most education planners do not take into consideration, the "complexity of speech variation across dialects in flux" (Khubchandani 1) This paper attempts to analyse whether the new document is receptive to this complexity and finds that once again, there is inadequate attention paid to the same. The existence of several sub languages within a state lends a problematic to the adoption of the official state as the 'mother tongue' for medium of instruction. Though the policy elevates the position of the regional and local languages it does not address dialects and shared languages across border regions such as Dakshina Kannada. Dakshina Kannada borders Kerala and its well-established educational institutions are attended by several students from Kasargod district of

Kerala. According to the 2011 Census the major languages spoken in Dakshina Kannada are Tulu, Konkani, Kannada, Beary Bhashe, Malayalam, Are Bhashe, Deccani Urdu and Havyaka. Though there are 118852 people speaking Kannada (2011 Census of India), these include 10 different dialects of Kannada which applies to other languages spoken as well. Besides these major languages there are also people who speak Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Kodava thakk, Gujrati, Marathi and many more, residing in Dakshina Kannada. A class of just 15 students such as mine has 8 different mother tongues. Thus, the lack of explicitness regarding plurilingual societies such as the border areas and the various dialects of a language creates an ambiguity that may lead to multiple to interpretations of the direction regarding the medium of instruction in early education.

If the policy is implemented as stated in the National Education Policy 2020 by the Ministry of Education, families may find the need of adopting another mother tongue. If, due to the publication of textbooks, one dialect would have to be standardized, this would result in the selection of the dialect used by the governing classes. The process of language standardization is not an innocent process, and always has tilted in favour of the elite. One of the serious fallouts of the policy is the possible selection of one dialect as ‘home language’- identified in the document as also language of the local community- and the consequent erasure of several minor languages. A district such as Dakshina Kannada, for instance has languages that do not have scripts such as Konkani, Beary and Tulu and these languages may become particularly vulnerable. Language hierarchies that prevail in the present may merely be replaced by other language hierarchies. Khubchandani informs us of the “broad interpretation” of the mother tongue put by British rulers and Indian elite during the early stages of education where all minority languages not having a written tradition were regarded as “dialects” of the dominant language of the region. He detects “an implicit denial of the rights of linguistic minorities on the ground of practicability” in this interpretation (Khubchandani 243). A thorough study of the NEP2020 reveals that the document does not do enough to allay fears of similar denial of linguistic minorities in the present, and it does appear as if the ambivalence with regard to interpretation of the terms ‘mother tongue’, ‘home language’, ‘vernacular’ has not been resolved.

The policy acknowledges the imperatives of the social, cultural, economic and linguistic diversity of India that can make compulsory education in the mother tongue a contentious issue. Hence, the document makes the concession that the implementation must be done ‘wherever possible’ which again is ambivalent and subject to interpretation. India has tried implementing the mother tongue as a medium of instruction prior to the NEP 2020 as well. Article 350a of the Indian Constitution states “It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups.” In 2009, The Right to Education Act, too, stated that the medium of instruction in school should be the child’s mother tongue as far as possible (RTE 11). Due to the subjectivity of the term ‘as far as possible’ there has not been a concerted effort in this direction, and the wording of the new policy document is ominously synonymous.

A major issue that needs to be addressed in the NEP 2020 is the role of the teacher. The preferred medium of instruction implicates teachers with multi-lingual skills, multi-lingual teaching-learning materials, in a classroom of students with multiple ‘home languages.’ The policy states “Teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction. All languages will be taught with high quality to all students” (NEP 14). Considering the practicability of the situation, it is humanly impossible for teachers to know the home language of all the students. For instance, if the medium of instruction in a class such as mine, was in Kannada, a teacher be expected to know the seven other home languages as well and teach them in ‘high quality’. In a country where the average student teacher ratio is 24:1 (AISHE 1). It is indeed an incredibly tall order to find and recruit teachers with the required multi-lingual skills. Additionally, the allocation for primary education needs to be a considerably greater amount than what has traditionally been in both state and central financial budgets.

The policy of educating students with the mother tongue/home language/local language/regional language as the means of instruction does attempt to bridge the gap and create a type of education system which shows more equality compared to the previous

system. Being a part of the NEP, the policy is politically acceptable and in certain cases socially desirable as well as it helps minimize the colonial stain and the gap between the English educated and the others and with the translators, may be technologically possible too but the practical problems cannot be undermined. The policy is to be implemented with the fear of erasure of so many languages. In an attempt to break the existing language hierarchy, the policy may build another, equally invidious hierarchy.

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