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Higher Education through Regional Languages: Sociolinguistic Challenges in India

*Saroj Kumar**

Abstract

The ambitious National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) of the Government of India proposes to implement Indian languages as medium of instruction in its higher education. Many changes are required at different levels politically, economically, linguistically, sociolinguistically and socio-psychologically, in order to make a language medium of instruction at any level of education in a country. Such initiatives become manifold difficult to implement in a country like India where diversity can be seen in every walk of life. The linguistic and cultural diversity makes India unique and it is considered its strength. At the same time, it becomes challenging to make any amendment to the existing policy and law. The study tries to explore the sociolinguistic challenges in making the Indian languages media of instruction in higher education. The study deals with the role of language attitude, language policy, the relative social perception of Indian languages, the long-term effect on the economy, career prospects for the learners, etc. The study tries to focus on the trends of higher education globally in relation to medium of instruction.

Keywords: Medium of Instruction, Language Policy, Sociolinguistics and Education

Introduction

National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is one of the important steps taken by the Government of India to provide good quality education to everyone. One of the fundamental changes the policy has in comparison with the previous one is that it

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya-824236, Bihar, India. Email: posttosaroj@gmail.com

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focuses on Indian values, thought, philosophy, and the Indian Knowledge System (NEP 16). It is also one step forward in decolonizing the Indian education system. Additionally, what makes the policy unique is the way it has been designed to serve both the local and the global purposes (NEP 4). It tries to make every learner a proud Indian at the same time a global citizen (NEP 6).

The NEP 2020 emphasises the importance of Indian culture, tradition, value system and Indian languages. In order to maintain the linguistic diversity of the Indians, the policy promotes and acknowledges the importance of, "… multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning" (NEP 5). It also tries to remove language barriers faced by the rural students both at the school and the higher education levels. The most important decision about the promotion of Indian languages and the problem of the medium of instruction is to provide education at all levels in local and Indian languages. A drastic change has been made in higher education to serve the 21st century needs of India. The NEP 2020 says:

> More HEIs shall be established and developed in underserved regions to ensure full access, equity, and inclusion. There shall, by 2030, be at least one large multidisciplinary HEI in or near every district. Steps shall be taken towards developing high-quality higher education institutions both public and private that have medium of instruction in local/Indian languages or bilingually. The aim will be to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035. (35)

At the policy level the statement, "Steps shall be taken towards developing high-quality higher education institutions both public and private that have the medium of instruction in local/Indian languages or bilingually" sounds promising and radical but putting such policies into execution have always challenges, particularly in the Indian context. It brings forth many questions for which finding answers would be difficult and challenging. Such questions related to offering courses in local or regional languages are:

1. What percentage of students would prefer their higher education in local or regional languages medium?
2. How to address the relative positive attitude the people generally have towards the English language in India?
3. How can the perception of the people about the local and/or regional languages (to an extent it is a reality too) be changed?

4. Will the students who complete their higher education through local or regional language mediums have the same job prospects in comparison to English medium students?
5. Will the international employability of the students not be affected?
6. Will it not affect the mobility of the students and teachers within India too?
7. Will their local linguistic competence and culturally narrow mental horizon not obstruct them to establish inter-regional communication within the country?
8. Since the emphasis of the policy has shifted from English medium instruction to local or regional language instruction, will it not affect the internationalization of Indian higher education?
9. Will it not be a sort of obstacle in competing with countries like China, Taiwan, Japan, etc. in attracting international students to help boost the Indian economy further?
10. How the government (both the centre and the states) will address the accusation that India has implicitly two education systems; namely one for the rich and affluent where the medium of instruction is English, and the other for the poor where the medium of instruction is Hindi or Indian regional languages?
11. Will the adoption of local or regional languages as a medium of instruction not "accentuate a spirit of regional revivalism and may accelerate the process of national disintegration" (Gajendragadkar 258)?

The study will try to explore these challenges and provide some recommendations for implementing local or regional language instruction in higher education in India. It will try to take empirical evidences from the research conducted in this area and will consider the secondary data available from different countries where English is not the mother tongue.

Discussion

It is quite common academic and professional practice that before implementing any policy we need to do feasibility studies. It is quite evident that India needs to impart higher education in local or regional languages to those sections of society who are poor and live primarily in the rural India. They do their schooling in Hindi or

a regional language medium and their competency in the English language is not satisfactory. However, there is a possibility that even though their competency in English is low, still they want to pursue their higher education in English medium instruction. We need to know the percentage of students who want to go for local or regional language instruction in higher education. First of all, a pilot project should be launched to assess its consequences and feasibility.

One of the challenges that we have to deal with is how to address the relatively positive language attitude the people in general have towards the English language in India. Language attitude means the relative feeling and perception the people have towards different languages or a variety of languages in different domains. Some common perceptions the Indian people in general have are: the people who know English are relatively more refined, sophisticated, well-mannered, educated, etc., the learners who study in institutions where the medium of instruction is English have better career opportunities and they get a better job and earn more (Jha 368-92). The language attitude they have is based on facts rather than just perception. In such a situation if a learner gets an option to choose from, he/she will prefer a higher education institution where the medium of instruction is English. However, the data suggests that around 75% of Indian students still study in a school where the medium of instruction is either Hindi or any other regional language (Kumar 2021). Going to Hindi or regional language medium schools is not a matter of choice but a compulsion. They cannot afford to go to private schools and the number of private schools in rural India is still quite less. It has been observed in the last two decades that there has been a significant rise in private English medium schools in rural India. Since the per capita income has grown significantly in India, and people have a positive attitude towards English, people want to put their wards in English medium schools. An effort should be made so that the local or regional language instruction in higher education should not be imposed either implicitly or explicitly. It should be available as a choice for the learner.

In order to handle the language attitude of the people, the governments (both the central and the state) have to take some measures. The changing of attitude is an unmarked phenomenon and it takes lots of time. The measures taken should be of two types: long-term measures and short-term ones.

Deglobalization of the learners in terms of job opportunities

Another challenge the government would have to face in making local or regional language instruction in higher education is to provide employment opportunities to

the students. The government is expected to take some measures to provide equal job opportunities to those who will complete their higher education in local or regional language instruction and English medium instruction. After the liberalization, the jobs in private sectors have increased significantly and many multi-national companies are now in India. The private sectors (multi-national corporates and companies), to some extent even the government sectors too, look for employees who can communicate and perform their duties in the English language too.

One of the significant contributors to the Indian economy is the group of Indian people who work in different countries and they send foreign currency to India. What makes them employable internationally other than their skill and knowledge is their competency in the English language. When they pursue their higher education in English, they not only learn the courses offered in the programme but also develop competency in English. One argument may be that the students who will complete their higher education in local or regional language instruction can be taught the English language separately as one of the courses in their higher education but still, it would be difficult for them to apply their academic or professional knowledge in a context other than their regional languages. It would be a challenge to sustain the international employability of such students. One of the purposes of English medium instruction in higher education in India is to foster global human resources and to ensure global career prospects.

Another challenge the government will have to face is the mobility of students and teachers within India. English language, to a great extent, provides a common medium to communicate within India. It removes the language barriers between two states where there is no common regional language. For example, a student of Bihar can communicate with a student of Kerala because one language that is common between them is English. A teacher from Telangana teaches at a university in Bihar because he/she can communicate in English. Therefore, it appears that giving the learners a choice to study in local or regional languages not only limits their mobility internationally but also within India.

The local or regional language instruction may also stop or to some extent, it would be a hindrance to the interaction of students and teachers of different states. Many student and teacher interaction programmes have been taking place in Indian higher education system. If such students are unable to interact nationally and internationally, there is a possibility that such students will have a very restricted worldview too. Their approaches to looking at the issues may be narrow and limited.

There is a possibility that they may not be able to develop a universal approach to looking at the things and issues.

Indian history has many incidents related to conflicts between speakers of different languages. We have seen in the past how Indian states were formed based on languages. For example, Andra Pradesh became a new state based on language. Tamilnadu witnessed severe anti-Hindi agitation. Language is one of the important attributes of human identity and consequently, people form linguistic communities and they have a strong bond with their regional languages. However, there is nothing wrong with it. It is a quite common sociolinguistic phenomenon across the globe. In such a case the adoption of a local or regional language as a medium of instruction may accelerate "a spirit of regional revivalism and may accelerate the process of national disintegration" (Gajendragadkar 258).

English is an Indian language

English is the only language which is accepted by the majority of the Indian population without any grudge. It has been enjoying officially as a "subsidiary official language" of India after 1965 and practically the "main official language" of India (Notification c). In one way it has served the purpose of integrating all the linguistic communities of India. It can be considered a language of national integration. English has been in use in India for four centuries. Indian writers have produced significant literature (literature of every academic discipline) in the English language. They too are an integral part of our literary and cultural history of India now.

Internationalization of Higher Education

An effort has been made towards the internationalisation of higher education by accepting the English language as an academic lingua-franca internationally. Acceptance of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is "the most significant trend in educational internationalisation" (Chapple 01). In this regard, McKinley, Rose and Zhou stipulate in their recent article on Chinese higher education that "the exponential global growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI) has occurred in parallel with the rapid internationalization of higher education. According to Rose et al., Hu 2019 and Tong et al., China has been highly defensive and protective of the maintenance and growth of Mandarin since the language preserves the cultural and historical heritage of China. Throughout the twentieth century, the Chinese have been quite reluctant to accept the English language in general and EMI in higher education in particular. However, in the last two decades exponential growth has

been witnessed in the rise of EMI in higher education in China. One of the reasons behind accepting EMI in higher education in China is to attract international students to Chinese higher educational institutions along with the internationalization of Chinese higher education.

Similar to China, Japan too has amended its policy related to the EMI in higher education. In 2014, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) took initiatives to increase the number of courses offered in EMI. The MEXT's focus was to internationalise Japanese higher education (MEXT 2014). The project aims to "… identify 37 universities: 13 as "top global universities" intended to compete in the top 100 university world rankings and 24 "global traction universities" intended to lead the internationalization of higher education in Japan" (Rose & McKinley 111). Similar is the case of Taiwan as well. In order to internationalize its education system, Taiwan has made English instruction at the primary level in school education and "Taiwanese government started to push second instruction into primary schools, targeting fifth and sixth graders in the elementary level in 2001, in order to cultivate their youth to become internationally competitive" (Pachura 37). Similar is the case with most of the countries where English is not the first language.

Conclusion

The implementation and promotion of local or regional language as a medium of instruction is a well-thought initiative to preserve and maintain the Indian languages and consequently preserve Indian culture and tradition. The only problem is how to execute it since the policy that tries to implement local or regional language as a medium of instruction in higher education came quite late. The English language has penetrated so deep into Indian society that it would be quite challenging for the regional languages to compete with it. However, if the government takes measures to tackle the challenges that have been discussed earlier, the NEP 2020 can be implemented successfully but the process is going to be troublesome and painful. The government will have to take measures to ensure the employability of the learners who will study in regional language medium in higher education. It is desirable to promote regional languages without promoting regionalism. The other key challenge is how to attract international students in India and promote Indian higher education globally.

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