LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY, EDUCATION, AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) promotes mother-tongue based multilingual education. Welcoming this recommendation, this essay looks at the policy in the context of India's linguistic diversity, and the already existing provisions for multilingual education. We list some of the conceptual and implementation challenges that NEP 2020 faces. The essay also overviews a few promising initiatives that show the way forward for a just, equitable, and sustainable policy for a mother-tongue based multilingual education in a democratic polity like India.

Keywords: *Linguistic Diversity, Mother-Tongue Education, National Education Policy 2020, Democracy.*

Introduction

In 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations established the 2nd of October, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, as the International Day of Non-Violence. The Resolution exhorted Member States, organizations, and individuals to "disseminate the message of non-violence, including through education and public awareness" (UN, 2007). This brief essay focuses on linguistic non-violence, specifically through mother-tongue based multilingual education.

The essay does so in the following parts: first, a brief overview of India's linguistic diversity; second, India's language-in-education policies; third, language recommendations in the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020); fourth, conceptual and implementation challenges of these recommendations; and fifth, some initiatives that indicate the way forward.

India's linguistic diversity

Counting languages and their numbers of speakers is notoriously difficult. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 30—46) gives an indication of some of the complexities involved. Recent work in "translanguaging" further complicates received notions of "named languages" (Otheguy et al., 2015). Even without this more recent methodological complexification, estimates of the number of "languages" of India vary greatly. A major source of the variation in numbers is the State's own procedures of naming languages. Here is a description by Ganesh Devy:

During the last census [in 2011], the citizens of India provided 19,569 names of 'mother tongues'. This data was described in technical terms as 'raw returns'. Based on previously available linguistic and sociological information, the authorities decided that 18,200 of these reported mother tongues did not match "logically" with any known information. A total of only 1,369 names, or 'labels' as they are technically called, were picked up as being "names of languages." The excluded 'raw returns' represented the responses of nearly 60 lakh [6 million] citizens. Thanks to the classification protocol, the linguistic citizenship of these 60 lakh citizens was just axed, rendered as not worth consideration.

In addition to the 1,369 mother tongue names shortlisted in scrutiny, there were another 1,474 mother tongue names placed under the generic label 'Others'. The enumerated people had languages of their own, but the classification system could not identify the languages they spoke.

The fortunate 1,369 were further grouped together under a total of 121 'group labels'. These were presented to the country as 'Languages'. Of these, 22 were the languages included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution: the 'Scheduled Languages'. The remaining 99 were described as the 'non-scheduled' languages. (Devy, 2020)

A "classification protocol" that reduces 19,569 "mother tongues" to 121 "group labels" does not inspire confidence (also see Rao, 2014a). As we will see below, this protocol has serious consequences for education. Another large-scale exercise was the People's Linguistic Survey of India (2010—2013), which Devy coordinated. This survey recorded 780 languages in India (Ghosh, 2021; Singh, 2013).

Other indicators also give an idea of the country's linguistic diversity. There are registered newspapers in 123 languages; the official All India Radio News Service broadcasts in 90 languages; and films are produced in 35 languages (Mohanty, 2019: 19—20).

In the event, here is a summary of languages with official status in the Indian constitution:

1. Official language of the Union of India [Article 343(1)]: Hindi (in Devanagari script)

2. Additional official language of the Union of India [Article 343(2)]: English

3. Official languages for communication between the states and between the states and the Union (Schedule VIII, Articles 344(1) and 351): (1) Assamese; (2) Bengali; (3) Bodo*; (4) Dogri*; (5) Gujarati; (6) Hindi; (7) Kannada; (8) Kashmiri; (9) Konkani**; (10) Maithili*; (11) Malayalam; (12) Manipuri**; (13) Marathi; (14) Nepali**; (15) Odia; (16) Punjabi; (17) Sanskrit; (18) Santali*; (19) Sindhi***; (20) Tamil; (21) Telugu; (22) Urdu

Note: 14 languages were initially included in Schedule VIII in 1950.

*** *One language added in 1967; ** Three added in 1992; * Four added in 2003. (Mohanty, 2019: 19)*

Managing linguistic diversity in education

An obvious challenge for the educational system has been the management of this linguistic diversity. The situation here is not encouraging. As Mohanty notes, "Apart from English and the 22 scheduled official languages, very few figure as languages of education. In fact, the number of languages used in Indian schools as languages of classroom teaching/learning or as language subjects in the curriculum is on the decline, and it is now down to less than half of what it was in 1970" (Mohanty, 2019: 73). Another researcher remarks that.

Of the 122 languages recorded in the Census, only 26 are used as mediums of instruction [MoI] at the primary stage. Only six of the non-scheduled languages, of the 100 recorded in the 2001 Census (all spoken by tribal groups in North-Eastern India) are used as mediums of instruction. No non-scheduled language, outside North-Eastern India is used as a MoI....

Thus, a large number of children in India begin school studying in an unfamiliar language. A rough assessment indicates that almost 25% of primary school children face moderate to severe problems in the initial months and years of primary school because their home language differs from the school language. (Jhingran, 2009: 266).

Jhingran goes on to list the groups of children who face a "moderate to severe learning disadvantage" because their medium of instruction at school is very different from their home language(s):

1. Indigenous children

2. Children whose language is considered a "dia-lect" of the regional language. They "have very low comprehension of the standard language used at school. Many of these languages are actually quite different from the regional language and cannot be called dialects. For all practical purposes, the school language is a second language for these children."

3. Children of migrants from another part of the country.

4. Children whose language, "though written and well developed", is not used as a medium of instruction in schooling.

All these difficulties are compounded by attitudes of teachers towards the languages and cultures of children from particular ethnolinguistic groups — especially in the case of non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous children (Jhingran, 2009: 267—268).

When schooling happens in a language other than the language(s) of the child there is much cognitive harm. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), and Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) give many examples. Here is what Gandhi had to say on the matter back in 1938:

Up to the age of 12 all the knowledge I gained was through Gujarati, my mother tongue. I knew then something of Arithmetic, History and Geography. Then I entered a High school. For the first three years the mother tongue was still the medium. But the school-master's business was to drive English into the pupil's head. Therefore more than half of our time was given to learning English and mastering its arbitrary spelling and pronunciation. It was a painful discovery to have to learn a language that was not pronounced as it was written. It was a strange experience to have to learn the spelling by heart… However, for the first three years, it was comparatively plain sailing.

The pillory began with the fourth year. Everything had to be learnt through English – Geometry, Algebra, Chemistry, Astronomy, History, and Geography. The tyranny of English was so great that even Sanskrit or Persian had to be learnt through English, not through the mother tongue. If any boy spoke in the class in Gujarati which he understood, he was punished. It did not matter to the teacher if a boy spoke bad English which he could neither pronounce correctly nor understand fully. Why should the teacher worry? His own English was by no means without blemish. It could not be otherwise. English was as much a foreign language to him as to his pupils. The result was chaos. We the boys had to learn many things by heart, though we could not understand them fully and often not at all…. I know now that what I took four years to learn of Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Chemistry and Astronomy, I should have learnt easily in one year, if

I had not to learn them through English but Gujarati. My grasp of the subjects would have been easier and clearer. My Gujarati vocabulary would have been richer. I would have made use of such knowledge in my own home. This English medium created an impassable barrier between me and the members of my family, who had not gone through English schools… I was fast becoming a stranger in my own home. I certainly became a superior person. Even my dress began to undergo imperceptible changes. What happened to me was not an uncommon experience. It was common to the majority…

High schools were schools for cultural conquest by the English. The knowledge gained by the three hundred boys of my high school became a circumscribed possession. It was not for transmission to the masses. (Gandhi 1938: 159—160)

In a brief three paragraphs, Gandhi presents a diagnosis that is as valid today as it was in 1938. A mother-tongue medium education facilitates learning; non-mother tongue teaching makes learning difficult for most students; and schooling in a "prestige" language creates a separate class of citizens. Nevertheless, in India today, English is widely perceived today as the great enabler for social mobility.

The Three-Language Formula

A prominent part of India's educational strategy to manage linguistic diversity has been the use of the so-called "Three-Language Formula" (TLF). Here is a quick description:

(a) The L1 to be studied must be the MT [Mother Tongue] or the regional language.

(b) The Second language:

— In Hindi-speaking states, the second language will be some other modern Indian language or English.

— In non-Hindi-speaking states, the second language will be Hindi or English.

(c) The Third language:

— In Hindi-speaking states, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language.

— In non-Hindi-speaking States, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language. (Jhingran, 2009: 274)

However, as Jhingran notes, in most states TLF is not being implemented "in the right spirit":

In Hindi-speaking states, Sanskrit is being taught instead of another regional (preferably South Indian) language as the third language. In South Indian states, Hindi is not being taught and only the regional language and English are included. Private schools do not follow the Formula and a large proportion use English as the L1. Also, the MoI is usually the regional language and not the MT of the children. The regional language is a second language for most children in the early primary grades and the Three Language Formula does not require that children must receive primary education in their MTs. Therefore, this strategy does not really support initiatives that aim at introducing MT-based multilingual education. (Jhingran, 2009: 275).

For a discussion of the incoherences between TLF and other educational policies in the country, see Mohanty (2019: 148-152). As he concludes: "But the TLF was too superficial and inconsistent to offer a comprehensive policy framework for India. Reducing the complex relationship between education and multilingualism of India to a simple 'three-language' formula was an unrealistic goal right from the beginning". (152)

Language education policies in NEP 2020

It is in the context of the foregoing remarks that one needs to view the language-education provisions and recommendations of India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). For our purposes, a crucial paragraph is the following:

Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language / mother-tongue / local language. Thereafter, the home / local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools. (GoI, 2020; Para 4.9, p. 12)

Para 4.9 might seem like an entirely positive recommendation, as we shall see, it has several problems at multiple levels.

A fundamental difficulty takes us back to the methodological point made earlier of language-names and language-varieties. The recommendation speaks of "mother tongue". Specifying the mother tongue is not easy. Bhojpuri is a case in point. Although the language has 51 million native speakers, it is listed in the Indian census 2011 as one of the 56 "mother tongues" under Hindi – as part of the "Hindi belt" (GoI, 2011). Thus, if a Bhojpuri child is being taught in Hindi, it is misleading to claim that the child is being educated in their mother tongue. Thus, in operationalizing the policy, the compound phrase "home language / mother-tongue / local language" will need a more nuanced approach: they are not equivalents.

A second difficulty with the NEP 2020 recommendation is the last sentence in the part cited above:

"This will be followed by both public [that is, free] and private [fee-paying] schools". Now, the profit-model of private schools in India crucially depends on English-medium teaching: it is their USP – their "Unique Selling Proposition"! No wonder, then, that this recommendation has come in for some severe criticism from this vocal and influential lobby. See some of the links critical of this recommendation in the initial part of Daniyal (2020). How policymakers will get this lobby to come to the table for discussion remains to be seen. There may be possibilities in the promise of bilingual education that is discussed below.

Unfortunately for MT-activists, but fortunately for the private-school lobby, NEP 2020 itself provides several "escape routes"! This is a third difficulty with NEP 2020. For example, in the para 4.9 cited above, the phrase "wherever possible" occurs twice. The 60-page document offers many such "opt-outs, modifications, alternatives, claw-backs" – as Skutnabb-Kangas has called them (2008; see also Rao, 2009, for a summary). Instead of framing the issue as a matter of linguistic rights, NEP 2020 presents MT-education as merely a desirable. Thereby, those reluctant to implement the recommendations will find it easy not to act.

A fourth battle front for the NEP 2020 recommendation is the fact that in several states the public school system itself is switching to English as medium of instruction! For instance, the state of Karnataka has identified a thousand government schools where the medium of teaching will be English. A neighbouring state, Telangana, is currently training nearly 2000 elementary school teachers as "trainers" to teach the other 35 thousand teachers to teach in English. These states have adopted English in order to counter the "outflow" of children from regional-language medium government schools to English-medium private schools.

It is too early to say whether the project has worked. But now that government schools themselves are offering English-medium education, parents have started to pull their children out of private schools, and admit them into public schools. The current COVID pandemic, in which millions have lost their livelihoods, has made this option even more attractive (Tiwari, 2020). To that extent, one might say that the project is successful.

But this fourth difficulty has shown up a certain incoherence between the NEP 2020 recommendation and the state governments' language policies. This has begun to be noticed elsewhere too as the title of this article indicates: "Will the NEP Throw a Spanner in Jagan Reddy's Plans for English-Medium Education?" (Gali, 2020). What then might be the way forward?

One possible solution seems to be to develop various models of bilingual education. By "bilingual", NEP 2020 means a regional language and English (and not, for example, two regional languages). The document mentions bilingual education at several places. For example, here:

Students whose medium of instruction is the local / home language will begin to learn science and mathematics bilingually in Grade 6 so that by the end of Grade 9 they can speak about science and other subjects both in their home language and English. In this regard, all efforts will be made in preparing high-quality bilingual textbooks and teaching-learning materials. (GoI, 2020; Para 4.12, p. 12-13)

If that is indeed the aim, then the extensive English-training programmes that some states are currently undertaking can be seen as preparatory capacity-building for a transition to bilingual education. As the document notes, a great deal of material will need to be developed. In fact, NEP 2020 recommends the setting up of an "Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation" (IITI) (GoI, 2020; Para 22.11, p. 53). The creation and availability of such "high-quality" material might prove to be attractive to the private-school system – including for-profit educational start-ups – as well.

The bilingual material will need to be both "from-below" (school textbooks and supplementary material for students) as well as "from-above" (teacher-education material and university-level material). For decades, governments as well as non-governmental organizations have sporadically prepared bilingual material, often for Indigenous (also called Tribal or Adivasi in India) children – that is, bilingual textbooks in the regional language and an Indigenous language. The main reason for these projects not scaling up is lack of sustained state and institutional support: they depended crucially on individual activists and sympathetic officials in the education bureaucracy. The project in the state of Odisha is one of the few with some sustained government support. The project began with 10 Indigenous languages, and then added a further 11 Indigenous languages as mediums of instruction at the primary education level. The stated aim of the project is a "Strategy to facilitate transition from 100% tribal language in class-I to 100% Odia by class-VI over a period of five years" (OPEPA, n. d.). Thus this project treats the MT of the learners as a "transitional" language to switch to the dominant language — once the learner has switched to the dominant language, their Indigenous language is perceived to be of no educational use (see Rao, 2014b for more context). It is to be hoped that an IITI which develops extensive bilingual

learning material will treat Indigenous languages as more than merely transitional languages.

Two promising initiatives

NEP 2020's recommendations for Higher Education Institutes include the following:

22.7. For languages to remain relevant and vibrant, there must be a steady stream of high-quality learning and print materials in these languages — including textbooks, workbooks, videos, plays, poems, novels, magazines etc. Languages must also have consistent official updates to their vocabularies and dictionaries, widely disseminated so that the most current issues and concepts can be effectively discussed in these languages. Enabling such learning materials, print materials, and translations of important materials from world languages, and constantly updating vocabularies has to become a national priority. (GoI, 2020: 52—53)

These are what we have called the "from-above" materials. In this context, it may be of interest to mention two examples of initiatives already underway to address what NEP 2020 calls "a national priority". The first is the "Translations Initiative" (TI) at Azim Premji University (APU), India. APU is a private, not-for-profit university with an explicit social purpose of helping to build a "just, equitable, sustainable, and humane society". (For an overview of the university's work in teaching linguistic human rights and multilingual education, see Rao, 2020b).

A major objective of TI is to make all the readings (in English) of the various programmes of the university available (initially at least) in Hindi and Kannada as well. This will enable access to higher education to a much larger pool of students than only those proficient in English. Simultaneously, TI is organizing "Kannada and Hindi seminars and discussions to build an academic climate for discourse among stakeholders. This process is towards generating new materials in Hindi and Kannada. We conduct capacity building workshops for translators" (APU, n. d.). With 30 collaborating institutes, and over 500 translators, APU's TI is a fairly large project.

In alignment with TI is a second, even larger, initiative: the National Translation Mission (NTM) of the Government of India. NTM has prepared a list of 69 "chief domains" in which they have identified "knowledge texts". As their website notes: "All prescribed text books, reference books and articles that are considered foundational in any discipline of college / university education are included for translation. Specific attention is given to the disciplines of Natural Sciences and Social Sciences." The result is a list

that currently ranges, alphabetically, from "Adult / Continuing Education" and "Anthropology", through "Linguistics" and "Management", to "Women's Studies" and "Zoology (General)". (NTM, n. d.a)

The project aims to make available translations of these "knowledge texts" in each of India's 22 Official Languages – a huge project indeed! To create a network of translators for such a massive project, NTM has been conducting regular Translator Education programmes. These "orient translators about the history and tradition of translation in India, problems and challenges in knowledge text translation in Indian Languages and how to use translation tools such as dictionaries, glossaries and thesaurus" (NTM, n. d.b). The project is already bearing fruit; NTM's 2021 catalogue lists 75 published translations, and many that are in preparation (NTM, n. d.c; see also Rao, 2020a).

Hopefully, these initiatives – those from-below and those from-above – will together create a sustainable ecosystem for relativizing the role of English in education in India; in promoting Indian languages as "knowledge-languages"; and making multilingual education a reality in India.

Towards a consultative federal democracy

Zooming out, the 60-page NEP 2020 needs to be located in the context of a federal democracy: consultation, collaboration, and consent are necessary. And these have to be between multiple stakeholders: the central government, state governments, and non-governmental agencies. Further, in the Indian constitution, education is in the so-called "Concurrent List" – states too can legislate on the subject. Indeed some 75% of the funding for education comes from the states; the central government in New Delhi contributes only 25% to the annual education budget. In such a political structure, a readiness to dialogue becomes that much more important. Further, issues of language and identity are emotionally charged, and need to be addressed carefully.

Finally, we must acknowledge that the road ahead is long, the challenges will need much work, and the task by its very nature is transgenerational. Persistence is needed to build an educational system of linguistic non-violence for those who are most vulnerable. Without persistence, there is no way to see the optimism that the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz holds out to us:

"It is only a night" by Faiz (1954; my translation)
The heart is not without hope
It has merely not tasted success
Yes, the night of sorrow is long
But it is only a night.

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ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКОЕ РАЗНООБРАЗИЕ, ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ И ДЕМОКРАТИЯ В ИНДИИ: ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ И ПРОБЛЕМЫ

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Национальная политика образования Индии 2020 (NEP 2020) продвигает многоязычное образование на основе материнского языка. Приветствуя эту рекомендацию, мы рассматриваем данную политику в контексте лингвистического разнообразия Индии, а также анализируем уже существующие предпосылки для многоязычного образования. Перечисляются некоторые концептуальные и реализационные проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются власти Индии в проведении NEP 2020. Статья также предлагает обзор нескольких перспективных инициатив, которые демонстрируют простые пути осуществления справедливой и устойчивой политики многоязычного образования на основе материнского языка в условиях демократической формы политического устройства, существующей в Индии.