

Hindi or English, comparing apples and oranges

The project to remove English from India remains misplaced and dangerous to development and integration



D. SHYAM BABU

True to their well-earned reputation, the people of Tamil Nadu have once again stood up against attempts to 'promote' Hindi in non-Hindi States. It would be a pity if we dismissed the protests as regionalism or separatism. The three-language formula (TLF) under the draft National Education Policy (NEP), now modified, stipulated mother tongue and English compulsory everywhere till class X, and Hindi in non-Hindi States and non-Hindi languages in Hindi States to be taught. The proposal was rightly seen as a Trojan horse to smuggle Hindi into non-Hindi States. History vindicates the fear.

The old TLF under the Official Language Resolution of Parliament in 1968 was never implemented either in letter or in spirit. While Hindi-speaking States never bothered to promote non-Hindi and "preferably one of the Southern languages", non-Hindi states continue to teach Hindi (Tamil Nadu obtained an exception to this irrational policy).

Is it such a crime that one part of the bargain has not been honoured? One might as well argue that the Hindi States deprived their students of learning an additional language, while non-Hindi States are better off with a third language in the toolkit of their students. But the irony of the TLF is that to be an Indian one must have fluency in two Indian languages, in addition to English which we originally wanted to disappear from the land.

By dropping the clause for com-

pulsory teaching of Hindi, the government has merely averted the backlash from several non-Hindi States, but it is persisting with the TLF. Unless the government amends Part XVII of the Constitution (which deals with the language policy) to be in sync with the global trend of mother tongue plus English, we are bound to witness many an avoidable controversy.

Absurd policy

Our language policy is based on a honourable objective: decolonising all walks of our national life. Therefore, progressive replacement of English with Hindi was thought to be a sound beginning. But things didn't work out the way we hoped in 1950.

One, the project to remove English has become redundant. From being a language of colonialism, English transformed itself into a global language of culture, science and technology, and world politics. Its universalist claims are also backed by its capacity to absorb words from other languages.

Two, the intent to replace English with Hindi is based on an erroneous understanding that all languages are similar. All Indian languages are languages of identity and cultural expression whereas English is a language of mobility and empowerment. There is no point in comparing apples and oranges.

However, history also teaches us that primacy of a language is rather transient. There was a time the English (and even Germans) were communicating in French. One cannot now rule out the possibility of Mandarin replacing English as the global language in future.

Three, though Tamil Nadu's position is seen as 'anti-Hindi', it contains an implicit question: why on earth should students learn a third

GETTY IMAGES



language which they, after they leave high school, are unlikely to use? There was a time Bihar opted for Telugu as the third language, just as Andhra Pradesh chose Hindi. But Bihar reneged on the TLF and Andhra Pradesh persisted with the same. How would Bihar students have benefited from Telugu being a third language on their school-leaving certificate? How are students in non-Hindi states benefiting from Hindi as a third language? Wouldn't it be sensible if the policy replaced the third language and allowed students to choose a subject or a skill?

Four, the TLF in any form is unconstitutional. A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court ruled in 2014 (in *Karnataka v. Recognised-Aided Schools*) that imposition of even the mother tongue as the medium of instruction is violative of one's fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression [Article 19(1)(a)]. If the government cannot even force students to learn in their own mother tongue, where does it obtain the right to make language(s) teaching compulsory?

Reflecting the 'condition' that Article 344(3) imposes on the language policy that it must "have due regard to the industrial, cultural and scientific advancement of India," the Bench advanced the rationale for English: "For example, prescribing English as a medium of instruction in subjects of higher education for which only English books are available and which can

only be properly taught in English may have a direct bearing and impact on the determination of standards of education."

Five, the TLF is not only irrational but impractical as well. Consider a scenario even under the revised NEP: every State is required to teach one modern Indian language, in addition to mother tongue and English. Bihar, say, re-opts for Telugu but it has hardly any teachers proficient in that language. Should it import Telugu teachers? Create an academy? How long does the venture take and how much will it cost?

Six, a case can be made that India ought to introduce English throughout school and college education so that all Indians will be conversant in their mother tongue and English. Such a policy will be beneficial to the Hindi States. Consider the demographic trends: by 2060, non-Hindi States, especially in the south, are projected to experience demographic decline and attendant labour shortage. The situation in the north will be the opposite. Embracing English as the second language will promote mobility and economic development, especially in the north, and make India a more legible place to its citizens.

The Macaulay test

The common thread that runs through issues such as language in administration, medium of instruction and inclusion of a third language in curriculum is the project to remove English. Until the project is dismantled, the forces it unleashed through Part XVII will continue to wreak havoc with the country. The draft NEP recommends English throughout school education but it is, strictly speaking, counter to the spirit of Part XVII.

Several States have already made their respective languages

the sole language of administration. As if to hurt the prospects of students from poorer sections, States stipulate mother-tongue instruction being mandatory only in government and aided schools. The well-off are free to access English medium education in private schools.

While English stands dismantled as a second/link language in administration, Hindi remains unacceptable to non-Hindi States. So, an educated person from a non-Hindi State will be clueless in a Hindi State and vice-versa. It does not matter whether he is transacting some business or attending an official meeting. Therefore, instead of promoting national integration, the official language policy has accomplished the opposite.

While firing the opening salvos in India's language war, Lord Macaulay suggested a simple test of asking people on what language they prefer. The least a government in a democracy can do is to fathom the people's will and act accordingly.

Unpack what is at stake

The non-Hindi States habitually join Tamil Nadu against any attempts to impose Hindi but they never bother to unpack what is at stake. Is it merely their cultural pride that cannot reconcile to Hindi? Sub-national aspiration can go only thus far. Instead of merely opposing Hindi imposition, they can build a better case for English as the second language throughout the country. That process will also expose their own hypocrisy. For starters, why don't they formally align their positions with Tamil Nadu and demand similar exemption that the former enjoys from the three-language formula?

D. Shyam Babu is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal