The uniformity project
Down the years, lessons have not been learnt in framing a language policy for a diverse country

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The recent fracas over a circular of the Home Ministry that was apparently meant to encourage the use of Hindi in social media and via hundreds of "urban official language operational committees" across the country brings to mind several similar experiments, and lessons not learnt, from India’s past. It is in the realm of education that India’s bureaucrats and politicians sought to impose Hindi early on, and it is in this realm that the challenge of managing both standards and expectations remains.

The 1949 Radhakrishnan Education Commission report gave considerable space to the vexed question of the medium of instruction for schools and colleges across India. Arguing for regional languages to be developed alongside a "federal language" Hindi, the report also referred to English as a language of international communication and alluded to the yugra-dhama, or the philosophy of the age. "Sense of the oneness of the world is in the making and control over a medium of expression which is more widespread and has a larger reach than any of our languages today will be of immense benefit to us."

The 15 years that followed were supposed to be spent on the development of scientific terminology in textbooks and other regional literatures, efforts that would enable the use of regional languages as a medium of instruction in institutions of higher learning. Instead, following the 15-year timetable laid down by the Constitution in transition towards Hindi, administrators in Delhi switched over to Hindi as soon as possible.

So, for instance, Osmania University was to be made into a model Hindi University. A unique Urdu-medium institution that was also the region’s sole university refused to be material for another experiment in higher education. This new imposition by faraway Delhi was roundly criticized by student movements even from the ruling Congress party who pleaded the right to vote on their conscience rather than by party whip. Five years of protests led Nehru to one need: it was "no good trying to force a decision on the Andhra government and people."

In school education, too, the natural reflex was to impose uniformity, focus on a hand-hailed way of "national integration". To a 1951 memorandum from the Anglo-Indian community that cited Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution on minority rights and requested that their schools, where English remained the medium of instruction, be allowed to affiliate with state boards in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh by an amendment of their regulations, P. Gunganee, an officer in the ministry of education opined: "If I may say so, the attitude taken up is parochial one, and does not account for the inevitable trend towards making Hindi the official language of the Union, and the regional language the language of a State. Such an attitude is bound to do more harm than good. As is common knowledge, English is a fast-dying means of instruction. It is either Hindi, or the regional language, which is coming to the fore. And within the course of a decade or so, English, for all practical purposes, will have become a dead language." Gunganee’s faith in the inevitable death of English and certainty that it was the Anglo-Indians who were "parochial", was echoed by other officials in the ministry.

However, since education remained a state subject until the 42nd constitutional amendment of 1976, state boards and most universities were left free to pursue their own interpretation of recommendations sent forth from the central government, either the ministry of education, home affairs, or the newly created University Grants Commission. The battle between Centre and state in the realm of language policies did not end with the linguistic reorganisation of states or various amendments to the Official Languages Act; indeed, the ongoing expansion and reform of higher education is proof, if proof is needed, that big challenges remain.

Here, it might be useful to recall the evidence of the physicist Meghnad Saha almost one hundred years ago. To the Sudler Commission in 1918, Saha described English as a "foreign tongue" and distinguished between understanding English and being able to write correctly. Saha admitted that it took "time, study, and long practice" to master the language.

However, recognizing an "adequate" knowledge of English to be a matter of "national necessity" and "daily importance", Saha recommended that the "best solution" would be "to insist from the student the acquisition of the capacity for understanding English, and reduce an English book with fluency, but not the capacity for writing English correctly."

While his advice might help educators feel less terrible about the utterly inadequate resources that have accompanied the tremendous expansion of higher education in India today, purportedly with English as the medium of instruction, it is also noteworthy that a sizeable number of Indians have mastered English. And just as it remains important for the central government to acknowledge the importance of regional languages across India, it is equally important that the government not feel embarrassed by or apologetic for Indians’ enviable fluency in a now apatently Indian language: English. Indians have always and will continue to speak multiple living languages. This blend legacy cannot be wished away by dictats from the Centre in favour of a homogenizing and almost unrecognizable official Hindi.

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