

Language Barriers: Inequalities of India's National Education Policy

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Summary

The Indian government recently approved a new National Education Policy that proposes vast reforms to school structure and higher education. The policy also includes a new language policy, which states that the preferred medium of instruction should be the mother tongue, local or regional language till Class 5 or even Class 8. The paper discusses the possible inequalities that this policy could result in.

On 29 July 2020, the India's government approved a new National Education Policy (NEP) which proposes vast reforms in the school system and higher education. The new NEP replaces the 1986 version by responding to changing demands and offering a more [skill-oriented education](#). While elements such as wider access to education and a potential increase in the financial allocation to education are encouraging, the proposal to make the mother tongue or regional language the medium of instruction till at least Class 5, has triggered an intense debate on inequality.

Overall, NEP 2020 modifies the existing structure of education and brings in new ways to cater to the changing needs of society. Some key features include a revised pedagogy in a 5+3+3+4 format instead of a 10+2 which brings children from ages three to five years into the formal schooling system. It also includes a single regulator for higher education institutions, multiple entry and exit options for degree courses, an overhauled curriculum allowing students to pick subjects across arts or science streams, increased use of technology and an emphasis on vocational education and internships from Grade 6.

While the policy has been touted as [visionary](#), it has also been criticised for being discriminatory. The language policy within the NEP does not address the issue of inequality that stems from the medium of instruction. It states that the [preferred medium of instruction](#) till Class 5, and possibly Class 8, should be the home language – mother tongue, local language or regional language – and not English, as it is today. The rationale for this policy is that students will learn and [understand](#) the subject better in their mother tongue. However, the policy impedes the progress of various groups in the society.

This language policy perpetuates class divides by reinforcing the socio-economic status and the potential of the elite while limiting social mobility for the remaining majority. [Across India](#), school enrollment has risen but the quality of education in government schools has deteriorated. As a result, students from better financial backgrounds joined private schools, leaving the rest with a lower quality of education, and increasingly difficult competition from their richer peers who had access to English and a better education. As a consequence, the elite found themselves in a better position to attain employment or higher education opportunities than the rest. This is bound to worsen with NEP 2020 as it increases the

difficulty of learning English, especially among [first-generation learners](#). Being exposed to English from a young age through [rhymes](#) and short, simple sentences could ease the process of learning it later but this policy negates that possibility and makes it harder for them to pick up the language in future.

Even in the scenario where the policy is implemented in both private and government schools, the elite still find themselves in an advantage position because of their access to more and better resources. Students, who attend a private school where the medium of instruction is the state language, will still have [access to English books](#) and other educational resources at home or within their social circle. As a result, learning in their mother tongue gives them the added advantage of being multilingual and available to more opportunities; whereas the rest attend under-resourced, poor-quality, 'mother tongue' medium, government schools.

The policy also creates division within the state by privileging the students who already speak the dominant language. States which choose to put in place the state language or local language will disadvantage those who have a different mother tongue. For instance, those living in West Bengal, who do not speak Bengali, will be [doubly disadvantaged](#) by this policy. This is largely the case for [tribal students](#), where the dominant state language is completely alien to them. Therefore, students who speak non-scheduled languages will have to learn the state language as well as English in future to catch up. This is made worse by the fact that many of these students [already lack access](#) to education, and will now have to learn a new language in order to benefit from it.

The language policy also creates gender disparity as women will not receive equal opportunities to learn English. [Research has shown](#) that parents tend to send their sons to private schools and daughters to government schools. This will mean that the sons will receive a better education, have a greater proficiency in English and be able to move up the social ladder. However, women will be disadvantaged by the quality of education in government schools and will have to pick up English at a later stage. This could also potentially hinder their employment and further education opportunities as well.

The policy has also left nuances vague. For instance, it promises to encourage teachers to use a [bilingual teaching](#) method to cater to students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction and for those whose parents travel [between states](#) with different local languages. However, it remains to be seen how feasible these methods are. Given that education is on the Concurrent List of the Constitution, states can decide to what extent they wish to implement the policy. Perhaps more could follow the lead of the [Andhra Pradesh](#) government, which has made English medium compulsory in all its state government schools despite the NEP recommendations.

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