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## The Language of Learning

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*Should children in Indian schools be taught in their mother tongue or English? This should not be an either/or question. The time to teach multiple languages in primary schools is now, it will mean better learning outcomes for children.*

Enrolling in the English-language Kattywar High School in Rajkot in 1880, a young Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was “completely at sea.” “Geometry was a new subject in which I was not particularly strong,” he reported, and “the English medium made it still more difficult for me” (Guha 2013). Despite struggling with the language as a student, Gandhi eventually went to England, was admitted to the London bar, and founded the English-language *Indian Opinion* and *Young India* newspapers (also subsequently finding geometry “easy and interesting”). He communicated widely as a moral and political leader. Would Gandhi’s life and influence have been the same without early English education?

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Nearly 150 years later, students in modern India still struggle when confronted with education in unfamiliar languages. With 22 Constitutional languages plus English, and 31 languages with more than a million speakers, India has a rich linguistic tapestry. But with this diversity also comes the challenge of deciding what language to teach in, the “medium of instruction.” A rickety education system, where students (and their teachers) struggle to understand lessons in their own mother tongue, operates in a rapidly growing and globalising economy where the demand for English education has never been greater.

As formal education spread across the subcontinent, the large vernacular languages quickly became the dominant languages used for instruction, although not necessarily matched with the mother tongues of the population at large.

The contemporary policy response is essentially full-throated support for vernacular education in poorly resourced government schools and tacit support for English-medium private schooling, while ignoring the vast majority of languages that are not official state languages, such as tribal languages and local dialects. With a New Education Policy around the corner, what direction policies on medium of instruction take remains an important, yet open question.

### Does Mother Tongue Education Matter?

Lord Macaulay in his famous 1835 “Minute” strongly advocated English-language education, claiming “that English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit or Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanskrit or Arabic.” However, the practical limitations of implementing this policy were soon clear: where were the teachers and books in India for mass English-medium education? Instead, writing to the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie in 1853, Sir Charles Wood of the East India Company advocated primary education in the vernacular and college education in English. The implementation of this policy was at the Presidency or province level, so the dominant mother tongue of the region, such as Marathi in Bombay or Bengali in Bengal (which initially included Bihar and Orissa as well), was used as the medium of instruction. Large princely states of the period also mimicked this policy: Urdu was used in most schools in Hyderabad and Malayalam in Travancore.

As formal education spread across the subcontinent, the large vernacular languages quickly became the dominant languages used for instruction, although not necessarily matched with the mother tongues of the population at large. Take the case of Hyderabad State where the Nizam’s administration introduced formal mass education in 1868. The Urdu scholar Tariq Rahman recorded that of 162 educational institutions in 1880-81, 105 taught in Persian-Urdu, 35 in Marathi, 19 in Telugu, and three were English-medium schools (Rahman 2008). This Urdu-medium instruction was at odds with the mother tongue of many residents of the Nizam’s Dominions. Motaman Jung, Secretary to Government, Educational Department of Hyderabad expressed his frustration, “Considering the population, schools ought to exist as far as mass education is concerned in the following ratios: Telugu 4, Mahratti 3, Canarese 1, Persian 1. Facts however show the reverse of this viz., Persian 4, Mahratti 2, Telugu 1, Canarese 0” (Jung 1886). There was a similar mismatch across

South India: in Malabar where students were often taught in Tamil, as well as the Dharwad region where Marathi was used with Kannada-speaking students.

With so many students being taught in a language different from the one they spoke at home, educational achievement was drastically lower. Districts where the medium of instruction was different from the students' mother tongue had 18% lower literacy rates than districts where these were the same, while college graduation rates were 20% lower (Jain 2017).

The importance of language in education and the social sphere was well recognised within the Independence movement: the provincial Congress committees were organised on linguistic lines, for instance. Following Independence, the Telugu-speaking districts of Madras State advocated a separate province on linguistic lines. While the Congress leadership at the time was disinclined towards linguistic states (the country had just been violently divided on basis of religion, and the "JVP Committee" consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya opposed another identity-based division), it acceded to this demand after activist Potti Sreeramulu's death from a hunger strike in 1953.

The subsequent reorganisation of states proceeded on linguistic lines, with districts assigned to the state formed on the basis of a common tongue. In its report, the Fazal Ali Commission, examining the matter, explicitly referenced mother-tongue instruction as justification for creating language-based states.

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After reorganisation, state legislatures were quick to formalise their linguistic status by implementing the new languages in schools. In 1958, the Kerala Education Rules declared that "The medium of instruction in all institutions shall ordinarily be Malayalam." Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat and other states formed on linguistic lines passed similar laws, cementing the role of large regional languages in education while simultaneously correcting the mismatch between most students' mother tongues and the medium of instruction. Since students now understood their lessons much better, shortfalls in educational achievement in the mismatched districts went away by the 1990s. The reorganisation of states on linguistic lines, by implementing mother tongue instruction, was successful in closing persistent educational gaps.

### **Important baatein kya sirf English mein hoti hein?**

As the Indian economy globalised in the 1990s, the value of spoken English skills increased dramatically. Employment in the sectors that took advantage of globalisation—call centres and business process outsourcing units - increased quickly, with the National Association of Software & Service Companies (NASSCOM) estimating that outsourcing-related businesses increased employment from approximately 50,000 in 1991 to over two million in 2010. So did the numbers of Indians finding work abroad. Driven by the Y2K software crisis, a large number of Indians moved from India to the United States, Europe and Australia between 1995 and 2015. The oil boom in the Gulf offered service sector work where knowing English was a significant advantage. So both internal and external factors increased the value of knowing English.

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By 2011, the economic value of spoken-English skills had become a population-wide phenomenon. In a widely cited study, Mehtabul Azam, Aimee Chin, and Nishith Prakash (2013) used India Human Development Survey data to show that the earnings were 34% greater for men who spoke fluent English and 13% higher for those who speak a little English, compared to those who spoke no English. The value of English-language skills were higher among those who have at least completed high school, indicating that English was an important gateway for better paying jobs in the service sector.

In West Bengal, another study examined what happened when in 1983 the Left Front government suddenly banned English in primary grades, and introduced it as a subject only in grade six. Adult incomes (measured in National Sample Survey Office data) were 26% lower for the cohorts who missed English instruction in early years (Chakraborty and Kapur (2016). Along with economic returns, speaking English fluently had a social cache as well: in the movie *English Vinglish* Sridevi's character learns English for social acceptance, not for a better job or greater sales. On a survey, college students in Hyderabad said they wished to speak English better because it would not only help them communicate better in professional settings, but give them confidence in social interactions (Jain,

Maitra and Mani 2019).

Greater economic and social value of English translates into more demand for English-medium education in the school system. One analysis estimates that the number of children enrolled in primary schools, particularly English-medium schools, increases by 5% when a new information-technology enabled business opens nearby (Steinberg and Oster 2013). Much of this demand is met by private schools, although governments in several states, including Uttar Pradesh, are converting some schools to English medium.

India's debates and experiences with different languages of instruction were not unique. A number of countries discarded the colonial yoke in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and were keen to recalibrate their education systems to serve the national mission. Along with mass education, instruction in the colonial language was replaced with the local vernacular. For instance, Morocco became independent of France in 1956, but French was the medium of instruction in secondary schools till 1983. Once a sufficient curriculum was developed and teachers trained, Morocco switched to Arabic instruction. This change increased participation in schooling, but the loss of French writing skills led to substantial reduction in earnings, mainly because the economic and business elite continued to operate in French (Joshua and Lavy 1997).

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Modern Indian parents have flocked to the attraction of English-language education, largely ignoring the potential for mother tongue instruction in helping students actually learn. One open question is the quality of English instruction when, outside of elite schools and metropolitan cities, teachers and parents themselves have a tenuous grasp on the language. Students in these settings might end up both devoid of the benefits of mother tongue instruction, as well as the economic returns to English. Another concern is high paying jobs that attract so many to English might be limited, so future cohorts could see lower rather than higher “returns” to knowing the language.

On a more optimistic note, young children have considerable capacity for learning new languages, especially before 12 years of age (the “Critical Period Hypothesis”) (Birdsong 2018). This suggests that the trade-off between mother tongue and other tongues might not be as stark as policymakers make it out to be. Schools could teach using multiple languages in the primary years, and that such instruction would both enhance learning as well as prepare students for an increasingly connected nation. The potential for technology to teach lessons in multiple languages is largely unharnessed. Policymakers and teachers could use artificial intelligence to translate books and lessons into different languages at scale, so The Feynman Lectures on Physics are easily available in Oriya, and *Geetanjali* is accessible in Punjabi, in Gurmukhi script. Is the next frontier mass distribution of e-book readers that deliver text and multimedia content in every Indian language, customised for individual learning needs?

India's schools are tasked with educating the largest cohorts of young people in human history. The medium of instruction might have a significant influence on how students learn, and their subsequent lives and careers. Reflecting on his education many years later, the immortal sage wrote

*It is now my opinion that in all Indian curricula of higher education there should be a place for Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English, besides of course the vernacular. This big list need not frighten anyone. If our education were more systematic, and the boys free from the burden of having to learn their subjects through a foreign medium, I am sure, learning all these languages would not be an irksome task, but a perfect pleasure. A scientific knowledge of one language makes a knowledge of other languages comparatively easy.*

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