

Three-language formula: Chhattisgarh offers an education case study

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We must foster multilingualism.

Summary

- *The National Education Policy 2020 takes a wise approach to schooling in the context of languages used and fostered. If Hindi-speaking states fulfil the NEP's potential, it'll give a fillip to our diverse linguistic heritage and also improve education.*

Growing up mostly in Bhopal, then the capital of undivided Madhya Pradesh, I was exposed to a range of **language** variants that we bundle between Hindi and Urdu, all of which I loved. English was a part of the environment, including at **school**. My first language, though, was neither Hindi in any of its forms, nor English. It was Chhattisgarhi. My family hailed from a small town called Sarangarh in Chhattisgarh. At home, we spoke Chhattisgarhi.

By the time I graduated from school, I counted **various versions** of Hindi, Urdu, English and Chhattisgarhi as my own languages. For college, I went to Trichy in Tamil Nadu, and developed deep admiration for the Tamil language and culture. I learnt to understand the language,

but could not speak fluently. Now I have been living in Karnataka for decades, amid Kannada's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

Even as a child, I noticed and was puzzled by the curious phenomenon of many in my extended family and friends circle, living in Chhattisgarh, preferring to speak in Hindi and not Chhattisgarhi (which also has variants).

Over time, it became clear that it was a much wider social phenomenon. It was almost as though Hindi was the language of mobility, of the elite, or the 'court language' as it were. As you moved up, or wanted to move up, or wanted to show that you already had, you abandoned your own beautiful and sweet language for another.

We ourselves, not all but a significant proportion of Chhattisgarh's people, were imposing Hindi on ourselves. Despite my love for Hindi, and greater fluency in it, I found this abhorrent. It was particularly galling that we ourselves were doing this.

The roots of this socio-cultural phenomenon were to be found in many spheres. One of the key ones was that Hindi was sanctified as a language and Chhattisgarhi 'relegated' to being its dialect. Many of us had internalized this hierarchy, not understanding that 'a language is merely another dialect, but one with an army.'

One of the most important parts of this 'army' was the school education system. Not only was Hindi the medium of instruction in school, with Chhattisgarhi left unstudied, even the very use of the latter was discouraged.

By the time Chhattisgarh became a separate state in 2000, there were enough people—civic leaders, literary figures, politicians, educators and more—trying to turn this tide. But like any social tsunami, it had and continues to have momentum.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has created a framework to change things significantly for Chhattisgarhi and other languages faced with such tsunamis. How is this? Consider the approach of the NEP. (For full disclosure: I was a member of the drafting committee of the NEP.) The approach has three key thrusts.

One, that the first language of literacy and the medium of instruction should be the student's mother tongue (note that there is a no language-versus-dialect hierarchy in this), because it is educationally the most effective. Or, if that is not practically possible because it is spoken by a very small community, it should be the child's next most familiar language. This is a boost for all languages in the country, not just in the state of Chhattisgarh.

Second, even if the mother tongue is not the medium of instruction—meaning, for example, that textbooks are not in that language—the teacher and school must use the mother tongue abundantly and extensively as a bridge to the medium of instruction.

This approach is diametrically opposite to the earlier approach, where the use of the mother tongue, Chhattisgarhi in our case, would be hushed and even punished. Now it is to be actively encouraged. This empowers all languages in the state, not only Chhattisgarhi, including the state's rich range of tribal languages.

Third, we must foster multilingualism. A key part of this is how the NEP has changed the 'three-language-formula.' This enables the possibility of teaching any language as the second or third one, while conferring all mother tongues with official legitimacy. This opens significant possibilities. In fact, this can address the challenge of teaching a third language in India's so-called but misnamed 'Hindi-speaking states.'

Let us take the example of Chhattisgarh to make this clearer. Chhattisgarhi as the mother tongue should be the first language of literacy and the medium of instruction. Thereafter, Hindi and English (or anything else) can be the second and third languages.

This addresses a real problem; to explain why they do not teach a third language, these states have often sought refuge in the following question: 'Where do we get the teachers if we want to teach other languages?' However, enough teachers will indeed be available for these three languages. In fact, the same teacher may be able to teach both Chhattisgarhi and Hindi. The same approach will work in vast swathes of the country. For example, in regions where Mythily, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Mewari and Garhwali are spoken.

Schools in Chhattisgarh are showing signs of change. They use books partly written in Chhattisgarhi, and I often see the language freely used

in classrooms. This is good for education. It also nurtures the Chhattisgarhi language and culture.

We now have to see how 'Hindi-speaking' states use the space provided by the NEP. If they make the best use of its potential, it will give a fillip to our diverse linguistic heritage and also improve education.

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