
Negotiating Languages and Opportunities: English, Multilingualism, and Social Mobility in India

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Abstract

Multilingualism in India is a significant factor in employment, social mobility and socioeconomic equality. This conceptual review aims to discuss the economic value of English, labour-market relevance of multilingualism and its imbalance, within the context of multilingualism in India. Drawing on the insights from the fields of sociolinguistics, education, labour economics, and language policy, the paper discusses how English has a dual role- as a skill for the job market and a language capital that is influenced by class, caste, place, and quality of education. The value of English in professional, administrative and multinational corporate jobs is reflected by the wage premium. But this elite distinction can also foster an insidious narrative that passes along self-perceptions of merit and employability. Meanwhile, a nation's regional-language economies and their quantified workforce requirements, public-sector job selection processes, consumer markets, and the large informal sector show that employability is not a function of mere English skills. Having the linguistic and literacy knowledge to communicate in more than one language and the ability to read and write in more than one language might offer communicative, cognitive, and occupational benefits in a variety of work settings. It critically undermines the traditional binary choice of English versus vernaculars and offers a more nuanced notion of linguistic employability that is attuned to the context. The present paper emphasizes that policy in education needs to support the promotion of multilingualism, that is, the acquisition of competence in English should not infringe on learners' aptitude in home and regional languages. This would contribute to accessing more jobs and curb the continuing language, educational and socioeconomic disparities in India.

Keywords: multilingualism, employability, English language, workforce requirements, regional languages etc.

Introduction

India is said to be 'linguistic museum', with twenty-two languages named as the official languages of India as per the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution and several hundred mother tongues or thousands of lesser-known dialects/ languages which have 100,000 speakers or more. This diversity is not simply an item of cultural interest, but is firmly related to employment and social justice/ social mobility issues. In terms of the knowledge economy, the judiciary and higher bureaucracy, the informal economy and labour markets and in terms of everyday governance, English is the de facto language and Hindi or regional tongues are predominant. The impact of multilingual competence and jobs is not straightforward and definitive.

The multi- or bilingualism environment in India has already been a topic of debate in the job market. The ability to speak English on the other hand, remains a device for perpetuating the class and caste hierarchies (Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2006, LaDousa, 2014). But there is a growing indication especially from the empirical and sociolinguistic studies that the majority of Indians' workforce gains from their multilingual competences, instead of English monolingualism (Annamalai, 2001; Vaish, 2008). There is policy space in between these two views, with a reference to Three Language Formula and another to the National Education Policy, 2020 (MoE, 2020), which is also related to the inequity of the India's IT-BPO industry, government jobs and informal economy. It isn't about the importance or not of language in the Indian job market; it's about which language, for which and what types of costs to the society.

English as Economic Capital: The Case for Linguistic Privilege

The most empirical logic in this discussion is that, Indians mastering the English language also serves as an economic capital that stands out on its own from other skills and talents. In the landmark study cited in *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2013) used nationally represented data to reveal that, after accounting for education, caste, and region, the wages of fluent English speakers were significantly higher than the wages of the nonfluent ones, with the wage differential between fluent and nonfluent speakers estimated at a level well above that of partial English speakers. These results accord with the qualitative findings of the sociolinguists and the point that has been stressed for many years, namely that English is not a mere language but a symbol of class position, degradation and a pathway to white-collar, salaried work in postcolonial India (Kachru, 1983; Ramanathan, 2005).

The dominance of this 'linguistic capital' argument has a concrete topical aspect. Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006) in the 'American Economic Review', showed how the transition towards a globalizing takes place with English using economy influenced intra-household schooling decisions. Families with access to the broad range of resources could easily access English-medium schools to reap a return to the modern luxury job market; lower caste and lower income families accessed mainly traditional caste-based occupational networks through vernacular-medium government schools. The study in effect mapped a

linguistic stratification process actively being created and recreated in the practice of schooling which had long-term impact on occupational mobility from one generation to the next.

In the “Economic and Political Weekly”, Faust and Nagar (2001) went even further and argued that the English-medium education system in India serves as a mechanism of social fracturing that not only puts the rich and poor on different sides of the fence, but dissimilar educational and occupational avenues as well, which seldom converge. They argued that a huge growth in the private English-medium school sector has taken place in India since independence, and this has been related well with pre-existing socioeconomic advantage (LaDousa, 2014).

India's IT-BPO industry is considered as one of the sectors where English holds the premium. In the British Council-commissioned report English Next India, Graddol (2010) noted that the competitive edge India had acquired through its large pool of English-speaking workers was far from match by other countries with larger or similar numbers of technical workers. In terms of industry needs, English communication skills have been continuously highlighted by industry association NASSCOM to be one of the important employability skills for knowing the industry, which is servicing oriented and geared towards clients from the US and UK.

If English is systematically paid more in the Indian labour market (Azam, Chin & Prakash, 2013) and if access to good-quality English-medium education is unevenly distributed across class, caste and urban-rural lines (Munshi and Rosenzweig, 2006; LaDousa, 2014), then English is not merely a skill acquired through merit but is an inherited form of capital. Children of English-speaking or English-aspiring families are exposed to private education from an early age and can acquire a high level of linguistic ability much quicker than most children, before turning age 18 or entering the job market, and then receive a form of profit, a reward for a skill that is a function of family resources and disposition rather than their personal effort and abilities. In contrast, children from lower income, rural, or historically marginalized walks of society who are placed structurally in under-resourced and vernacular medium government schools are structurally excluded from gaining the fluency, academically as well as in terms of work-related skills (Faust & Nagar, 2001). One key consideration is whether the employees are paid to develop their actual capabilities and output, or whether they are paid for what they took from their expensive and high-quality education in English-medium instruction. This training could be a good sign of previous training, but does not necessarily reflect the person's actual ability or job performance. Ramanathan (2005) and Vaish (2008) suggest that, the premium paid for English proficiency may not just be a reflection of the demand of the labour market for valuable skills. Instead, language English might uphold class and caste privileges as “merit” and “employability.”

In *Managing Multilingualism in India* (2001), one of the most important sociolinguists of India, Annamalai challenged the prevalent historic approaches to multilingualism by proposing it was not a "problem" to be handled in order to produce a monoglot Indian

population fluent in English, but rather a resource of the society, on which educated public administration could act, allowing it to participate more broadly in economic and civic life than any single language policy will achieve. His argument is that this is because, apart from English, the vast majority of Indian workers, especially in agriculture, retail, construction and the informal sector which have the lion's share of Indian workers work in regional languages. In this perspective, English monolingualism is a measure of employment, which is a highly inaccurate reflection of the employment landscape in most of India.

There is some evidence in cognitive science literature on bilingualism in general that balanced bilingualism can be associated with benefits on executive function and task switching, as well as problem solving, all of which are potentially relevant to a wide variety of professions, not just English (Bialystok, 2010). Although a majority of this cognitive research takes place away from the Indian context, Indian language-policy scholars have pointed to this research to conclude that India's multilingual population, a majority of whom inherit multilingualism by necessity, thus enters the labour market with transferable cognitive advantages that education with only English may be less capable of mimicking than authentic multilingual education (Mohanty, 2006).

More sophisticated approaches were taken up in addressing the field of English Language Education in India; Vaish (2008) compared government-school students learning English as an additional language to provide an important corrective. She concluded that when students achieved biliteracy, or competent literacy in both their home language (or regional language) and English, their educational and occupational results were outstanding compared to programs that ignored the home language(s) or taught second-language learners only English. Ultimately, her work appears misleadingly to frame the issue as an 'English versus vernacular' question; the better question to ask is how linguistic competence, in all languages but particularly English, is developed in schools.

In addition, there is a federal labour-market argument which applies only to Indian public sector. In India, which is still one of the top, most coveted job categories, knowing the official language of the state along with Hindi and/or English is mandatory not just in government service exams, but also for exam positions such as teaching, banking exams, and railway exams. However, the Union Public Service Commission and many State Public Service Commissions have historically allowed candidates to sit for exams in regional languages, in addition to English and Hindi and recognised that employability in India is not limited to English. Indeed, more attention has been drawn to the fact that domestic Indian markets, too, rely on a growing cadre of regional language and Hindi-speaking employees to handle their own non-English speaking consumers, a field that is growing parallel to that of the internationally oriented, English-medium BPO, which dominates the popular discourse on the BPO/ITES industry (Graddol, 2010).

From that perspective the counter-argument is not denying the existence of premium value for English in some of these visible, high-tech, export sectors in the city. It contends, instead, that this "premium" has been generalised into a national story on employability,

which must be reflective of a much larger reality of multilingual employment in India, agriculture, manufacturing, retail, household services, programs, most of the employment is multilingual in both the sense of being done in Hindi or regional language and of having a skilled and a multilingual workforce and policies which overwhelmingly privilege English risk to deprive this vast economy of an adequate skilled multilingually capable workforce (Annamalai, 2001; Mohanty, 2006).

Policy Interventions: The Three Language Formula and NEP 2020

India's language-in-education policy has set out to make multilingualism the middle ground between vernacularised exclusivism and English-only education, although with some success. The recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964-1966) were followed and the Three Language Formula that was incorporated in all subsequent National Policies on Education required that every school child must have knowledge of own mother tongue or regional language, Hindi (in non-Hindi-speaking states) and English or another modern Indian language (Hindi-speaking states). The formula was deliberately formulated to keep the regional linguistic identity, national integration in Hindi and in terms of international/economic connectivity in English (Annamalai, 2001).

In practice, the implementation of the Three Language Formula has had a certain geographical unevenness and has been politically contentious. Many southern states have denied the compulsory introduction of Hindi saying that it is an imposition on their linguistic identity and that it raises the threat of their own job markets and cultural freedom being threatened (Sonntag 2003). In his comparative study of language politics, Sonntag places the tension between Hindi, English, and regional languages in India in a global context of linguistic globalization, in which local political players use language politics as a tool to safeguard the regional markets and access to education in regional languages while English is furthering its importance into the domains of elites.

There are probably no more recent and ambitious attempts to reconcile these tensions today than that of the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020 states that the medium of instruction till at least Grade 5 and preferably till Grade 8 shall be home language, mother tongue or regional language with a distinct reference to research that indicates that children would grasp fundamental concepts more easily in a familiar language. Meanwhile, the NEP 2020 approves and restates the Three Language Formula and emphasises the need of using technology and bilingual teaching-learning resources for better development of mother-tongue literacy and English proficiency at the same time since multilingualism, not only English, has been reaffirmed as a cognitive and employability asset of youth in the modern time.

This policy stance is questionable on many grounds. While a pedagogically well-intentioned focus on mother-tongue instruction in early schooling, as laid out in the objectives and outcomes of NEP 2020, may benefit children, the critics argue, it may fail at the same time to offer children any advantage in a labour market that continues to reward early, sustained exposure to English, exactly the advantage offered by private English-medium

schools which are disproportionately attended by more affluent fathers of the nation (LaDousa, 2014). The focus of public schools on regional language instruction and the continuing emphasis and pressure being placed by private schools on English-language instruction from the early stages may actually increase, not decrease, the gap between public and private school graduates' employability, an objective NEP 2020 intends to achieve, but one that may be difficult to forestall since studies of the aspirational demand for English-language schooling among Indian parents show an entrenched preference across the class lines (Faust & Nagar, 2001; LaDousa, 2014).

But supporters refute this criticism because it is an incorrect interpretation of the policy's intent and evidence. Mirji Mohanty (2006) has contended that in the context of multilingual education in India, beginning with the L1 and then moving to other languages in a uniform fashion (English) has better long-term effects on literacy and the acquisition of additional languages than early language immersion in English. Thus, the philosophy of NEP 2020 when properly adapted and used with appropriate teacher training and materials, can lead to a more truly multilingual workforce with improved skills for both local and overseas jobs, instead of superficial English proficiency with a limited capacity in any of the foundation language skills.

Designing the policy will be the easy part; implementation capacity will be the problem. India's vastly unequal state capacities for training teachers, fashioning textbooks in multiple languages and writing assessment systems create the possibility of varying employment outcomes resulting from a policy that makes sense on paper, as a result of which it is also in danger of producing outcomes that are even more varied if it is adopted by states, districts, or schools, which adopt it, and how. Continued shortcomings in basic literacy have been documented in Indian states through reports prepared from the Pratham Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) initiative and thus can be assessed only in the context of the systemic capacity in the education sector.

It is too early to determine the nature of multilingualism in the job market preceding even that of India, because the Indian labour market is a fractured market with vastly different language requirements. In the formal, export-oriented IT-BPO industry, English is almost a hard requirement, because the industry is preoccupied with exporting to English-speaking clients and markets, primarily from the USA and UK (Graddol, 2010). The sector involves a consistent tendency to hire graduates from English medium institutions in urban areas, thereby further skewing employment of the IT industry towards urban areas, such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and the National Capital Region. In IT industry, ethnographic studies have also revealed that English fluency is an informal but potent segregation mechanism which is being used to recruit, as well as for determining promotion in IT-related positions, with the enhancement of services at the higher tier depending on the ability to speak English (Upadhya, 2016).

In contrast, government jobs (central, state civil services, PSUs including public-sector banks, railways, teaching positions, defence jobs etc.) have a very strict multilingual approach

and provide exam papers in all languages, such as Hindi, English, and in several state government jobs, the language of the state concerned. This contraction in the number of jobs in this sector, although it has occurred in comparison to the growth in jobs in India, is yet another example of why this is an important channel of social mobility because it still observes the English fluency requirement that is absent in private sector IT-BPO work, thereby enabling those educated in majority government schools that teach mostly in regional-medium to secure jobs in the government sector and thereby move up the social ladder into the employ of the government (Annamalai, 2001).

Work in the informal sector, which leaves agriculture, construction, small retail, domestic work, and informal manufacturing to consume the vast majority of the Indian workforce is mainly conducted in regional language, Hindi or very local dialects, and rarely in English, with the exception of workplace functions such as communication. (Mohanty, 2006) The invisibility of this sector in the mainstream 'language and employment' discourse, where most of the focus is on IT-BPO and high-paying professions, is debatable both as regards methodology and politics. It suggests a bias in both the literature and public policy toward employment that appears to be characteristic of the 'Western labour market', defined as the collective American experiences of the top-tier of the American workforce. (Faust & Nagar, 2001)

This sectoral division suggests that it is not possible to make a blank statement either that "English is essential for employment in India" or that "multilingualism alone is sufficient for economic security. The more accurate, though less appealing, one had to draw is that various sets of linguistic skills are rewarded in various parts of the Indian labour market, with individuals located in different, and class, caste, geography and educational opportunity-dependent, parts of the labour market enjoying the opportunity to command different linguistic skills. The correct, if less amicable, consequence is that various linguistic skills can be commodified in different places of the labour market, and that the ability to get different linguistic competences rewarded depends on where residents land on the long axis of the labour market, and is determined in part by class, caste, geography and educational opportunities. (Azam, Chin, & Prakash, 2013; Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2006).

The Persisting Debate: Equity, Aspiration, and the Politics of Language

A deeper normative question which goes beyond data alone must also be posed: Should Indian language and employment policy consciously strive to remove the economic premium presently enjoyed by English, on equity grounds, even though it is not the desired path of a large number of Indian parents/children, who continue to want English-medium education because they believe that it offers real economic benefits, which is ultimately an economic value to Indian children which is true, and which is currently perceived to be true by a host of children and families, as Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2013) demonstrate? Ramanathan (2005) presents this in the following terms in *The English-Vernacular Divide*, as an irreducible tension between "vernacularization" and "internationalization" agendas in Indian policies for education in other languages, the one that

considers language and culture as a right to equity, the other that finds the survival of the individual and the creating of the nation within the internationalizing frameworks of global labour markets. To her, Indian policy has always sought to do both without satisfactorily addressing the antagonisms between them; today Indian education exists such that formal education in English is offered to everyone, but only to those who can find private education, tuition, or city residence.

This is manifested in concrete ways in parental choice-making. In contrast, LaDousa (2014) provides ethnographic descriptions from north Indian villages of parents' high preference for English-medium schooling, regardless of whether they come from a resourceful family or not, regardless of whether their insistence on English is a betrayal of their mother tongues, and based more on a rational economic calculation because of the labour markets they and their children must navigate. This raises an actual policy conundrum: Short-term reforms of the system of learning language that re-emphasises mother-tongue instruction based on pedagogical logic could be viewed by the very community they claim to serve as denying the learners' linguistic capital, that the market explicitly values. The ability to implement a language policy is not the only challenge for any policy aimed at equity, the aspirations of the people who would benefit from the policy are a logical response to the returns to English that they observe in the labour market (Azam, Chin, & Prakash, 2013).

Another aspect of this discussion relates to the controversial status of Hindi as a national link language. As stated above, the central government promotes Hindi as the medium for inter-state communication and as a means for many forms of official work. Non-Hindi states, mostly in the South have had a tradition of resistance to so-called imposition of Hindi which stresses the convenience that use of a Hindi-speaking state language presents in the recruitment process of the government and leads to "normalize one regional language as more national compared to others" (Sonntag, 2003). This political opposition is not simply expressive, there are real employment consequences at least on five components of the training process for employment, Hindi fluency is a precondition to recruitment examinations, employment announcements in government offices, and eligibility for employment opening; this fluency requirement can work in favour of or against candidates based on their linguistic background relative to Hindi.

These tensions as related matter cannot be reduced to one solely pedagogical or technical without becoming a political question, when the issue of multilingualism and employment are linked in India. Education and employment policies, and the negotiation which is implicit in them, but often explicit, about language choice are both economic and cultural assertions, a naming and claiming of various types of linguistic capital, and a political negotiation between regions, castes and classes, each having different stakes in the process of definition and distribution of linguistic capital (Ramanathan, 2005; Sonntag, 2003).

Conclusion

Multilingualism and employment in India is, in essence, a discussion of other competing understandings of economic justice and of national identity, both in debate and

through language policy. This evidence is well founded and documented and it would be intellectually dishonest not to recognize that English continues to be a valuable asset in the most prominent and globalized work fields in India. However, it has also been demonstrated that this premium does not extend evenly to all parts of the labour market system in India, that the vast majority of workers in India will find their jobs in settings where regional languages and Hindi are in the majority, and that multilingual skills not English monolingualism is what appears to provide the strongest cognitive and educational basis for continued employability in the Indian labour market.

Though there is an attempt to institutionalise the inclusion of the MTEF (Mother-tongue Education Framework) in NEP 2020 as the use of mother tongues now is permanently on the agenda, the future of the plan remains to be seen, for its ultimate success will depend not on the soundness of its linguistic theory, but on India's ability to implement it fairly in its widely heterogeneous States, resource scenario, and school systems (ASER reports, Ministry of Education, 2020). That capability proved lacking and there is a serious danger that good intentions against mother-tongue policies in poorly resourced government schools will be matched by continued aggressive English-medium education in highly resourced private schools, a situation promoting rather than solving the unequal educational inequalities the policy intends to overcome.

The question of multilingualism and employment in India cannot be resolved through a one-goal approach through language policy: the challenge to language policies is not a language one, but a structural one as the witnessing deep and persistent inequalities of access to quality education, urban infrastructure and economic opportunities cannot be removed from language policy. Multilingualism is not necessarily a superlative advantage nor a slur on Indian employment; it is, instead, a surface of conflict over which Indian struggles to earn a wage wage, conflict over Indian struggles with class, caste, region, and opportunity.

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