

LANGUAGE POLICY FOR EDUCATION IN INDIA: WALKING ON THE PATH OF LOKMANYA TILAK'S VISION OF NATIONAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

India faces a huge challenge with respect to its language policy. The legacy of English-based education instituted by the British rulers not only continues but it is growing. This is an important cause of socio-economic inequity as it creates unequal growth opportunities for the non-English speaking people comprising largely of rural-urban poor and lower-middle class. In context of this, the paper reviews the principles and thoughts of Lokmanya Tilak on language and education. The paper shows how the Lokmanya Tilak was a visionary who had forewarned of the language-based domination of the English-speaking class. His vision of national education was based on the need to create national pride and respect among the Indian through education in vernacular languages. The paper further shows how the New Draft Education Policy 2019 is an attempt to walk on the path shown by Lokmanya. Finally, the paper concludes with the relevance and need for putting earnest efforts to walk on this path to create a truly modern India.

Keywords: Language policy, Lokmanya Tilak, National education, New Education Policy 2019

Thoughts of Lokmanya Tilak on Language and Education

Lokmanya Tilak was among the first to promote national education as against the education promoted by the British (Tilak, 2006). He was highly critical of the education imparted by the British. He was among the first to promote education in vernacular language (Tilak, 1894; Bhagawat & Pradhan 2014; Pagri, 2019). This became one of the important parts of his Swaraj movement. Lokmanya was of the view that educating children in English language cannot instil the spirit of national pride. It can be done only by providing education in their own vernacular language. This is because the education in English language given by schools started by the British was focussed on developing skills among Indians to do clerical work. There was no scope for developing national pride and a thinking man. Lokmanya believed that if all Indians get such clerical education than the country will never develop. The education imparted in schools and colleges started by the British was western in culture even if it was taught by Indians. Young people who passed out from such education system are highly influenced by the western culture and they do not think about the nation. Developing education system based on vernacular language was fundamental in the model of national education proposed by Lokmanya Tilak.

One of the important arguments proposed by Lokmanya Tilak against education in English language is based on the heavy burden it imposed on the students in India. Taking education in foreign language as against mother-tongue requires more time and effort in understanding the otherwise simple concepts. For example, Lokmanya said,

"We spend twenty or twenty-five years for the education, which we can easily obtain in seven or eight years if we get it through the medium of our vernaculars."
(Pagri, 2019).

The British rulers created schools and colleges where education was imparted only in English language. While opposing this policy of imposition of English, Lokmanya raised an important question that why we are asked to take education in English by the British rulers when they themselves are not learning our languages, even when they are staying in India for a long period. In his famous speeches in Ahmednagar District, Lokmanya said,

"The question of vernaculars also comes in with this question of Saranya. The principle that education should be given through the vernaculars is self-evident and clear. Do the English educate their people through the French language? Do Germans do it through English or the Turks through French?" (Bhagwat and Pradhan, 2014)

Another argument presented by Lokmanya in support of the vernacular language was based on the assumed link between knowing English and getting education. He rightly observed that it was wrongly assumed that one who writes and speaks good English is the one who is well educated. He suggested that there is no need to link knowhow of any language to the level of education. Only knowing language is not education.

The most important aspect of Lokmanya's focus on vernacular language was its relation to his programme of 'national education'. He considered national education as one of the pillars of the political movement for India's freedom. The objective was to develop the pride of one's own culture, language, history, and religion among the children and youth in India. For this it was found that they should be able to get education in the Marathi language instead of the English language imposed by the British. He travelled across various parts of Maharashtra to promote national education and raise funds for the same. He delivered many speeches for the same. In one such speech at Solapur, Lokmanya said, *"National education is which enables you to know your nation.... I was first proud of the present system of education... but afterwards I asked myself the question as to why in spite of equal abilities and intelligence, our country lags behind other nations?"* (Bhagwat and Pradhan, 2014).

His answer to this was lack of national education that can instil pride for the country and thereby motivate them to work for higher goals. He further said,

"People ask me, 'Why do you make this issue of national education? Were you yourself not denied the opportunity for national education?' My answer to them is: we are making all these efforts so that our boys should learn at the age of 15, what we did at the age of 35". On the burden of learning English, Lokmanya said, *"English is a difficult language We have to learn it simply because it is*

the language of the rulers. This is a sheer burden on us. If knowledge had been imparted to me in Marathi, I would have learnt at 25 what I know at the age of 52"
(Bhagwat and Pradhan, 2014).

Language Policy in Independent India: Tilak's Forewarning Coming True

The language policy adopted and implemented in India post-independence have been highly influenced by the legacy of the education system set-up by the British rulers (Baskaran, 2017; Groff, 2016). In the initial period there was an attempt to institute one single national language based on the Russian model (Saba, 2011). It was proposed to have Hindi as the common national language with option of one local language. But Hindi was widespread in India and especially in the Southern States Hindi was not spoken or used. There was strong mass movement in the Southern States against having one single Hindi language as the national language. Later the notion of national language was dropped and instead the policy was to use Hindi as the official language. But States where Hindi was not spoken felt that English could be better suited as the official communication language because it was understood in these States. Hence, the legacy of the British haunted the making of the language policy in India to the extent that the policy makers were not able to remove English from the official and as well as informal systems of communication.

New Draft Education Policy: Walking on the Path of Tilak's Vision

After realisation of the pitfalls of the English-based learning, the recent draft National Education Policy of 2019 has attempted to bring vernacular languages in the forefront. The

Absence of a national language and the continuation of English in official communication had its impact even in the education policy. The education system based on English language continued and flourished even after the independence. Even the Government-sponsored education institutes imparting primary to higher education accept and use English as the formal language. The private institutions solely focus on English-based teachings. Even if government-funded public schools follow vernacular language the higher education is available in English language. So, students from rural background and urban poor families face a herculean task of competing with their English-speaking peers in higher education. This has created a social inequity in education-based opportunities among the poor non-English-speaking students and affluent English-speaking students. For example, there is very high rate of drop-outs from school and colleges due to fear of language-induced learning difficulties (Mamidi, 2017). The education policies in the past admitted that their language policy of teaching three languages, such as English, Hindi, and one local language, has failed because students did not achieve fluency in any of the languages taught and they were not able to communicate effectively (Dhongde, 1990).

Lokmanya Tilak's thoughts related to the pitfalls of English language are now evident. In absence of a clear policy of vernacular language-based education the students find it difficult to understand and grasp the fundamental concepts behind the curricular teaching. This leads to rote learning without the understanding of the basic concepts. It is only students whose parents and teachers are able to impart good foundation of English language at very early age are able to grow their mental capacities in understand the concepts and applying the same in real life. Majority of the rural and urban middle-lower class students who do not get this support end- up doing rote learning that curtails their future career and growth opportunities. After the colonial period the influence of globalization ensured that English remains a dominant language in developing countries like India. Even in the field of education and academic publications the economics superpowers like the USA and UK ensured that English is the dominant language (Altbach, 2007).

This is a new form of extension of the imperial powers of the colonial rulers into the developing world. This is exactly what Lokmanya Tilak warned while he was promoting national education based on vernacular languages.

draft policy clearly identified the pitfalls on foreign language. The detail policy document prepared by the Committee headed by Dr. K. Kasturirangan, states that,

“The Policy...recognises the large numbers of students going to school to classes that are being conducted in a language that they do not understand, causing them to fall behind before they even start learning. Thus there is a strong need for classes in early years to be conducted in students’ local languages.” (Government of India, 2019).

The emphasis on vernacular languages is also based on the scientific studies which shows that the Child learns fast if he is taught in his mother tongue. This is what Lokmanya Tilak also argued while promoting the model of vernacular language. The draft policy states that,

The science of child development and language acquisition suggests that young children become literate in (as a language) and learn best through (as a medium of instruction) their “local language” i.e. the language spoken at home. (Government of India, 2019)

The draft policy further highlights the lack of quality textbooks in vernacular language. It is proposed to start an ‘Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI)’ to develop quality educational content in vernacular languages. The IITI will take the responsibility of high- quality translation of all education material in different vernacular languages. It is proposed to translate all NCERT textbooks and other teaching-learning materials into vernacular language through the IITI. It is proposed that the medium of instruction until Grade 5 and preferably till Grade 8 shall be given in home language/ mother tongue/ local language.

The draft policy has taken right steps in the direction of the vision presented by Lokmanya Tilak. This goes close to his vision of national education. This is reflected in the following statement that emphasizes learning of local language, culture, and traditions of our country:

“As so many developed countries around the world have amply demonstrated, being well educated in one’s language, culture, and traditions is not a detriment but indeed a huge benefit to educational, social, and technological advancement. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that India’s languages, art, and culture be given a prominence again that has been lost in recent years. These cultural resources of one’s country help make the people human beings equipped with cultural values, identity, and expression, which is necessary to work efficiently, creatively, and with happiness.”

(Government of India, 2019) Such an approach will help in realizing the vision of Lokmanya Tilak by creating a sense of national pride among the children and the youth in India. Walking on the path of Lokmanya’s vision of national education the draft policy further highlights the richness in our languages and literature which needs to be integrated in our education systems through focus on local languages. In this regard, the draft policy states that:

“India’s languages are among the richest, most scientific, most beautiful, and most expressive in the world, with a huge body of ancient as well as modern literature (both prose and poetry), along with films, and music that help form India’s national identity and wealth. For purposes of cultural enrichment as well as national integration, all young Indians should be aware of the rich and vast array of languages of their country, and the treasures that they and their literatures contain.” (Government of India, 2019)

This is a major hindrance in creation of a modern powerful India. The New Draft Educational Policy 2019 is an attempt to rectify these problems. It is an attempt to follow the path laid by Lokmanya towards creating national pride and growth through education in vernacular languages. Effective implementation of such a policy will be a fitting tribute to Lokmanya Tilak’s contribution in the field of education.

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