

CRISIS DEFUSED: ON HINDI IMPOSITION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The Centre has moved quickly to defuse a potentially volatile controversy over the charge of Hindi imposition. It is quite apparent that the Narendra Modi government did not want the language issue to acquire disproportionate importance at a time when it is embarking on its second innings with a huge mandate. Further, given the impression that the ruling party does not have much of a presence in South India, barring Karnataka, it did not want to be seen as being insensitive to the concerns of southern States, especially Tamil Nadu. The reference in the newly unveiled draft National Education Policy to [mandatory teaching of Hindi in all States was withdrawn](#) following an outcry from political leaders in Tamil Nadu, a State that is quite sensitive to any hint of 'Hindi imposition' by the Centre. The modified draft under the heading 'Flexibility in the choice of languages', has omitted references to the language that students may choose. However, the broader recommendation regarding the implementation of a three-language formula remains, something Tamil Nadu, which will not budge from its two-language formula, is averse to. The gist of the original sentence in the draft NEP was that students could change one of the three languages of study in Grade 6, provided that in Hindi-speaking States they continued to study Hindi, English and one other Indian language of their choice, and those in non-Hindi-speaking States would study their regional language, besides Hindi and English. The revised draft merely says students may change one or more of their three languages in Grade 6 or 7, "so long as they still demonstrate proficiency in three languages (one language at the literature level) in their modular Board examinations some time during secondary school". It may not amount to a complete reversal, but is still important in terms of conciliatory messaging.

However, there is a larger issue here. Ever since the Constitution adopted Hindi as the official language, with English also as an official language for 15 years initially, there has been considerable tension between those who favour the indefinite usage of English and those who want to phase it out and give Hindi primacy. [In Tamil Nadu, it is seen as a creeping imposition](#) of Hindi in subtle and not-so-subtle forms. The tension has been managed based on the statesmanship behind Jawaharlal Nehru's assurance in 1959 that English would be an associate language as long as there are States that desire it. One would have thought that with the ascent of coalition politics the instinct to stoke differences based on language would die out. Unfortunately, it keeps coming up, especially in the form of imposing the three-language formula on States. Language is primarily a utilitarian tool. While acquisition of additional tools can indeed be beneficial, compulsory learning should be limited to one's mother tongue and English as the language that provides access to global knowledge and as a link language within India. It is time attempts to force Indians proficient in their mother tongue and English to acquire proficiency in a third are given up.

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