

'NEP PRESCRIBES NO LANGUAGE; STATES CAN CHOOSE'

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

The Ministry of Education in November 2021 constituted a high-powered committee, the Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti, for the promotion of Indian languages, led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-affiliated Sanskrit proponent and Padma Shri awardee **Chamu Krishna Shastry**. The committee is tasked with preparing an action plan for the growth of Indian languages as prescribed under the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which requires the mother tongue to be the medium of instruction in schools and higher education institutions. He speaks on the road map being readied by the panel. Excerpts:

The committee will soon complete one year. How much ground have you covered so far?

We are making a study of the current situation of languages in schools, higher education institutions and other domains of language use, such as jobs. We have found that there are 35 mother tongues as mediums of instruction, and as part of the three-language formula, 160 languages and mother tongues are taught (for example, Hindi is a mother tongue and a language, while Garhwali is a mother tongue but not a language).

The first roadblock in implementing NEP is providing study material, and our focus for the first year is to prepare books in the languages of the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution from Class 1 to the postgraduate level in all streams of education such as science, humanities and commerce.

What will be the key focus areas for promoting Indian languages?

Apart from textbooks, we also need to prepare teachers to be bilingual. Then, there is a need to ensure employment opportunities, and not just teaching jobs for language students. We have held discussions with the Chairman of the National Skill Development Corporation on incorporating languages as a qualification.

However, there is resistance from certain non-Hindi States, which say the NEP, 2020 imposes Hindi.

Until now, none of the education policies had such a strong emphasis on ensuring education in Indian languages. It is the first time in NEP that we are seeing a strong push for Indian languages...The term Indian languages has been used 30 times. There is also flexibility given to States to choose the languages for the three language formula. No language has been prescribed. States will decide, they have the freedom to choose. It will be a democratic and decentralised process. There is no imposition.

Under the NEP, the mother tongue will be the medium of instruction till Class 5 or preferably till Class 8. How will it be implemented, say, in Delhi, where there is a plurality of languages?

I will answer this question in a different way. Before English, was there ever any conflict over languages? Borders of the States kept expanding or contracting, and there were new kings, but was there a dispute over language?

There are many commonalities in Indian languages — their phonology is similar, 50%-60% of the vocabulary is common, sentence structure is common, subject-object-verb pattern is common, there is a common literary source, and similar aspiration, as a result of which people were able to understand different languages. There was no wall between languages.

Since the NEP says either mother tongue or regional language can be medium of instruction, does that mean Tamil will be the medium of instruction in Tamil Nadu as the dominant mother tongue?

This is the image created about Tamil. Weavers in Sivakasi speak Saurashtri, Gounder community in Coimbatore speaks Telugu. There are also Malayalam and Kannada speaking populations.

The State's population is six crore and 30-35% of them speak other languages. Even Tamil has 12-13 different dialects. But for some special reasons, Tamil Nadu has only promoted Tamil. Now they will face problems [in implementing NEP] for only learning Tamil. Tamil is also on the wane in the State. In 2010, there were 75% Tamil medium students in Class 12, and in 2020, this figure is down to 55%. Tamil is also [on the decline] because of their policy. They have to change their mindset.

(Read full interview on <https://bit.ly/3dW8ybp>)

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