

Jörg Hafer¹

The question of the place of Hindi & English in Indian higher education

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In India, a debate is underway about what role Hindi and English should have for future higher education. The debate was initiated by government representatives who want to advance their Hindu nationalist policies. The conflict highlights the historical and current contradictory developments in which the Indian higher education system and the higher education policies of Hindu nationalist government policy find themselves.

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1. Less English and more Hindi in academic education. Recommendations, angry reactions and relativizations

In September, India's [Official Language Committee \(OCL\)](#) delivered its 11th recommendation report to acting President Draupadi Murmu. From the previously unpublished report, which contains over 100 recommendations of the ruling BJP-dominated body, passages regarding the use of Hindi in universities and institutes were leaked:

„Sources close to the Committee said it has made around 100 recommendations, including that Hindi should be the medium of instruction in IITs, IIMs, and central universities in the Hindi-speaking states.“ ([Mathew 2022](#))

"Use of Hindi as medium of instruction and other activities should be Hindi in all technical and non-technical institutions in the country and use of English should be made optional,' the committee has recommended." ([Sultan 2022](#))

Shortly thereafter, the head of government of Tamil Nadu, M. K. Stalin, expressed disapproval respectively hostility, which can be seen against the background of the decades-old harsh dispute over a "national language Hindi" between the non-Hindi-speaking states, such as Tamil Nadu and the national central governments.

"All [State] languages should be elevated into official languages of the Union government. Do not take a totally opposite position and attempt to make Hindi

¹ joerg.hafer@uni-potsdam.de

mandatory and force another language war on us. Do not try to test the fire of our mother language affinity,' Mr. Stalin said in a three-page statement." ([The Hindu Bureau 2022](#))

The debate about Hindi as India's national official language still shapes Indian society today under the term "anti-Hindi imposition" and is passionately conducted on social media under the hashtag #HindiImposition. Against this background, the heads of government of other states quickly joined the opposition from Tamil Nadu and insisted on their linguistic independence.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has accused the Centre government of trying to create division in society with its imposition of the Hindi language. [...] The Kerala CM said the state teaches Hindi in schools and will continue that trend, "but a move to impose the language is not welcome, it is not acceptable because it is aimed at creating division". ([OnManorama Staff 2022](#))

In the following days, the chairman of the OCL, Bharturhari Mahtab, first pointed out that the recommendations do not have a general character, but only refer to the states in which Hindi is used as an official language (so-called "A-category" of the states). The news portal "Indian Express" asked the chairman:

"Are these recommendations intended for every state government, its institutions, and departments across the country? 'No, they are not,' senior BJD MP and deputy chairman of the Committee Bhartruhari Mahtab told The Indian Express. 'The reaction of the Chief Ministers of Kerala and Tamil Nadu appear to be based on misleading information, as some reports that appeared on the Committee's recommendations were confusing, [...] The Report submitted to the President is confidential, they said. [...] The language used for communication in the administration should be Hindi, and efforts should be made to teach the curriculum in Hindi, but the latter is not mandatory.'" ([Mathew 2022](#))

And although it is assumed that the recommendations will not make it through the parliaments, in which the Indian states play a strong role, this political push received a lot of attention due to the explosive nature of language policy in India, its importance for (higher) education and its significance for the ideological positioning of the incumbent Indian government ([Lem 2022](#)).

2. Pro-Hindi as part of the strategy, anti-English as a tactic in the government's education policy

The leaked recommendations of the Commission, its semi-public commentary and official retreat can be seen as elements of the policy of the Indian BJP government, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi (PM) and Home Minister Amit Shah, which are powerfully promoting Hindu nationalist policies in all sectors of society (keyword: Hindutva). Education policy is one of the main fields of action. This therefore includes the verbal ideological escalations that PM Modi and Home Minister Shah carry out on official occasions, and which can be read in the press. Educational justice is propagated with an anti-colonial gesture.

„Earlier, knowledge of the English language was considered a criterion of being intellectual. In reality, the English language is just a medium of communication. This language barrier was a hindrance. Many young talents from villages could not become doctors and engineers because they were not well-versed in English,' [Modi] said, [...]

adding the 'New Education Policy of the Centre will pull the country out from this slave mentality surrounding the English language'.“ ([Times of India 2022b](#))

„The Official Language Committee, chaired by minister of home affairs Amit Shah, claimed the plan would help the country reduce the dominance of English, which is used in the majority of degree programmes. They argued this would be a step towards undoing colonial-era influence and improving access to education.“ ([Lem 2022](#))

The use of equal opportunities and independence for one's own language policy is the moral legitimation, but the ideological function is also to exert pressure on an academic culture that, in the eyes of the Hindu nationalist movement, places too many "anti-national" worldviews in the foreground. Accordingly, liberal representatives of universities and institutes reacted with alarm.

„Because the powerful home minister is apparently involved in these recommendations everyone expects possible implementation,' said Satyajit Rath, professor emeritus at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune.[...] Ayesha Kidwai, a professor of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, also opposed the plan. If implemented, it could violate the law that gives all Indians a right to education despite religion, ethnic or language differences, she said. [...] Professor Kidwai was most concerned over how such changes could affect students. 'More importantly, Indians will not be able to access education outside India, or enter the local market as job-seekers' [...]" ([Lem 2022](#))

Thus, while both sides claim to promote equal opportunities and reduce disadvantage, they refer to different traditions of India's self-image, which are mutually exclusive. This conflict is reflected in the entire complex language problem in the Indian higher education system.

3. English as a hurdle and opportunity: The language dilemma in (university) education

A historical starting point of the language problem was the question of which language should be enshrined as an official language in the constitution of independent India in 1949. This was preceded by disputes within the Indian liberation movement at the end of the 30s over the relationship between language, cultural diversity, and national unity. At the time of independence, this question had not been resolved, also regarding the universities, which at that time were elitist and English-speaking.

„At the time of Independence, the language of instruction in higher education throughout India was almost exclusively English. While there are no accurate statistics for English literacy in India, it was quite unlikely that even 5 per cent of Indians were literate in English in 1950. [...] There were fundamental disagreements among the founders of modern India about language policy. Mahatma Gandhi argued strongly for the use of Hindi as the national language – and the medium of instruction in higher education. India's first prime minister, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, was sympathetic to the continued use of English.“ ([Altbach 2021, 6](#))

In addition, there was the question of representation of the more than 250 regional languages, 22 of which are now listed as official languages. In many of these language cultures, a new centrally placed official language was perceived as a continuation of heteronomy. For the representatives of the so-called anti-Hindi movement, especially in the southern and eastern states, colonial English as a "neutral" platform for communication across language borders was closer than the focus on Hindi.

"Many political leaders in the south and in some other parts of the country were opposed to Hindi and, thus, favoured English as a 'link language' and some emphasised the use of regional languages in education, while others favoured English." ([Altbach 2021, 6](#))

The language problem was largely solved in subsequent decades by leaving the regulations largely to the states. The original constitutional goal of enforcing Hindi as an official Indian language and abolishing English after a transition period of 15 years was increasingly softened in favor of regional and English language. This process took place in some places in the form of protests and violent clashes between central and regional actors.

4. High linguistic diversity and dominance of English in tertiary education

Today, in the 28 Indian states and 8 centrally administered "Union Territories" (UTs), all 22 officially listed languages are somewhere one of the official languages, of which several exist side by side in all states. In addition to the regional languages, English (22 times) and Hindi (17 times) are the most widely spoken, in many states and UTs both are used. The last comprehensive data on the proportion of the population who speak these languages come from the last census in 2011. There, about 44% of respondents said that one of their mother tongues was Hindi. A total of 10% said they were English speakers or "able to speak some English". In addition, there is a large gap in the proportions of the English-speaking population along the distinguishing features of urban/rural and caste affiliation. The fact that the proportion of English-speaking people increases with income and level of education is probably more a consequence of the fact that English facilitates access to better-paid jobs and that English is the norm in universities today (see: [Rukmini 2019](#)). In absolute terms, however, India is still the country with the largest English-speaking population in the world after the USA.

"Almost all of the universities and specialised research institutions, most sponsored by the central government, continued to use English as the language of instruction and scientific work. [...] While the language debate in Indian higher education has not entirely ended, English has emerged as the key language in Indian higher education. Its role, always strong, has increased in importance as globalisation has affected the higher education sector in the twenty-first century. The traditional role of English has given India significant advantages in global higher education. Professors and students can communicate easily with peers in other countries, and mobility is enhanced. Indian universities can more easily enrol international students. Indians may contribute directly to the global knowledge network" ([Altbach 2021, 6](#))

English language proficiency can be seen as an entry requirement and barrier to higher education and at the same time represents a huge advantage for India, as the absolute high numbers of the English-speaking population make the country compatible with the global labour market, both in terms of the outgoing workforce and the needs of the incoming companies.

„The new economy offers wide career options, including work in call centres, business processing offices and multinational corporations where India's perceived proficiency in English has been the main attraction. The dominance of English in higher education institutions, which the government is now trying to undo, opens doors to high-paying professional, managerial and scientific careers both in India and abroad. Remittances, reaching US\$87 billion in 2021, from a world diaspora of Indian workers largely hired for their English skills, boost the Indian economy.“ ([Salomone 2022, 2](#))

The fact that English remains attractive and is regarded as a key to professional success is also reflected in the educational aspirations of families and partly explains their preference for private schools and universities (see [Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2022, 36](#); [Kumar 2022](#); [Salomone 2022](#)). Even in the academic community, the importance of English is hardly denied.

„While [Professor Kidwai] acknowledged that English language education has a colonial origin in India, she was unconvinced this was sufficient reason to stop using it. 'The status of English in independent India and in this globalised world has changed its significance – it is a language of global and wider communication,' she said, adding: 'Getting rid of the language English would not be an act of decolonisation but insularity.'“ ([Lem 2022](#))

5. Counterfactual symbolic politics and real challenges in the education system

The question of English in tertiary education in India touches on issues such as educational equity, cultural identity, and the future of Indian universities. However, it does not go far enough to justify the importance of the English language only with the requirements of globalized labor markets and economic competition. Government policy is in a dilemma. Given India's ambition to become a global player in higher education, it simply does not make sense to fall behind. This will effectively place tight limits on current efforts to roll back English. An even stronger move towards the growing sector of private educational institutions, in which English remains the central language of instruction, is therefore foreseeable.

„Professor Rath predicted that any move to push universities to teach in Hindi would result in 'a pretence of education in Hindi, just as there is, for decades, a pretence of official correspondence in Hindi', referencing the language's use in government administration. He worried that India's private institutions, which have mushroomed in recent years, will offer English-language education to students who can afford it, 'creating further schismatic hierarchies'.“ ([Lem 2022](#))

In order to increase participation in education and reduce inequality in India's educational landscape, all stakeholders agree that significant investments must be made and further reforms implemented. The goal of the Indian government is to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education from currently about 27% (for comparison: Germany about 70%, worldwide about 36%, see: [Roser & Ortiz-Ospina 2013](#)) to 50% by 2035, which means creating about 35 million new university places in 13 years ([Mony 2020](#)). The necessary measures for this include the systematization and standardization of teacher training, the creation of control mechanisms and systematic quality assurance. Against this background, the display of anti-colonial attitudes and the prospect of higher educational opportunities due to non-English teaching is a counterfactual but dangerous symbolic policy that makes promises that it cannot keep.

“In the 21st century, some forces adopted the brain drain theory and today PM Narendra Modi is changing this theory into brain gain theory. Students should overcome their linguistic inferiority complex, as now there is a government led by PM Narendra Modi and they can display their abilities in their own languages,...' [...] Shah said language has nothing to do with one's intellectual capabilities. 'It's only a medium of expression. Believe me, your capacity to understand and analyse will be boosted if you study in your mother tongue. From today onwards, students will not only receive technical and medical education in their mother tongue, but will also be able to conduct research in their own language,...'” (The Times of India 2022a)

To de-ideologize the language question, the promotion of English language competence must be combined with diversity-appropriate and culturally sensitive positions that recognize structural diversity as part of Indian (educational) culture and do not deny existing inequality. Here the dividing line runs between an attitude that perceives English as a way of promoting national and international exchange and connection, as opposed to a religious-nationalist position that aims at a uniform, definable, national, and linguistic identity. The rapidly expanding Indian higher education system will face enormous tasks in the coming decades. One of them will be to accommodate the growing diversity of students (and teachers!) by increasing participation in education. To address this problem in an example-setting way, India can build on a tradition of diversity that defines openness to the other and to the world as part of an Indian identity. India should seize this opportunity.

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