

MOTHER TONGUE VERSUS ENGLISH MEDIUM FOR EDUCATION: A DISCOURSE

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Abstract— This article examines the latest circular from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), urging primary schools to prioritise their home or regional language as the primary medium of instruction. The recommendation raises questions about whether maintaining English as the main medium of instruction in India promotes social inclusion and fair education. It revisits ongoing debates regarding the country's language of instruction. The article features insights from experts such as Anurag Behar, CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation; Peggy Mohan, a linguist and author in New Delhi; Shailaja Menon, a professor at Azim Premji University; Shambhavi Gupta, a child language policy specialist from Bengaluru; and Krishan Kumar, a former NCERT director and professor at the University of Delhi's Department of Education. The study highlights the importance of mother tongue-based education in fostering child-centred learning and building an inclusive, fair education system within India's multilingual environment. It provides policymakers with practical advice for implementing multilingual education effectively.

Keywords— Pre-Service Teachers, Constitutional Values, Integration, Teacher Education, Equality, Justice, liberty, fraternity

I. INTRODUCTION

A mother tongue is the language children learn from their family, culture, and the region in which they live. It is also the language spoken by the majority in a community or area. According to UNESCO (2016), "Mother tongue-based bilingual (or multilingual) education approaches, in which a child's mother tongue is taught alongside a second language, can enhance performance in both the second language and other subjects." Mills (1993) characterised it as encompassing the language predominantly spoken at Home refers to the language in which a child demonstrates the highest proficiency, as well as the language spoken in their community. It is crucial that early education is provided in the mother tongue to prevent children from losing it, which violates their rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Walter, 2010). The mother tongue is essential for early communication and forms a child's personal, social, and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2016). The debate over the language of instruction is longstanding in India, a country with over 22 official languages and numerous dialects, where English has traditionally symbolised aspiration, authority, and social mobility.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically analyse the emerging debate on the use of the mother tongue versus English medium instruction at the elementary education level in India, particularly within the context of the new CBSE language policy.

2. To understand the Current Debate on mother tongue medium instruction.

Need and Significance of the Study

In a multilingual country like India, the medium of instruction is not just a linguistic choice but is closely connected to social inclusion, educational fairness, and cultural identity. Over the decades, English has been regarded as the 'language of progress', which has created a barrier to education for children from many disadvantaged groups. The new advisory issued by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in 2025, which recommends using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in primary education, has sparked this debate. This study is necessary because a substantial gap exists between India's language education policy and the actual practices observed at the school level.

This research aims to highlight that gap. By examining the perspectives of leading educators and authors, this study seeks to understand the social, educational, and political factors that support or oppose mother-tongue-based education. This research underscores the significance of perceiving linguistic diversity as an opportunity rather than a challenge. When children are instructed in their native language, they demonstrate enhanced engagement with learning, increased confidence, and equitable access to opportunities. The study offers pragmatic guidance for policymakers, teacher trainers, and educational institutions

on the effective implementation of mother-tongue-based education. In summary, this research not only elevates the discourse surrounding language issues but also makes a substantial contribution toward fostering democracy, inclusiveness, and high-quality education.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative content analysis to compare ideas from various authors, aiming to explore the social, academic, and political dimensions of the debate over mother tongue versus English medium instruction. Five key news or opinion articles published between May 2025 and July 2025 were selected for examination. These articles were categorised and analysed based on four main parameters: pedagogical effectiveness, sociolinguistic impact, the political history of language policies (including policy and power relations), and practical implementation challenges. This approach enables the researcher to compare perspectives, assess the impacts of policy, and reveal the complexities of language-based education in a multilingual country like India.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Studying in mother tongue instils strong values, says CJI Gavai

Press Trust of India
MUMBAI

Chief Justice of India (CJI) Bhushan Gavai on Sunday stated that studying in one's mother tongue enhances conceptual understanding and instils strong values for life, as he reminisced about his student days at a Marathi-medium school in Mumbai.



Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai

The CJI visited classrooms at his alma mater, Chikitsak Samuh Shirodkar School and interacted with his old classmates.

CJI visits alma mater, a Marathi-medium school in Mumbai, interacts with old classmates

Having studied from primary to secondary levels at the institution, he expressed deep gratitude to the teachers who shaped his early life, an official release stated.

in Marathi-medium, the CJI stated that studying in one's mother tongue helps in better conceptual understanding, and also instils strong values that stay with you for life.

"Whatever position I have reached today, my teachers and this school have played a significant role in it. The education and values I received here gave direction to my life. My journey in public speaking began on this very stage. Through speech competitions and cultural programs, I gained confidence. It is because of those opportunities that I am what I am today," he said. Recalling his schooling

He visited the classrooms, library, and art section of the school, interacting warmly with his old classmates and reliving fond memories.

The CJI felt proud and deeply emotional after the heartfelt tribute given by the students, the release stated.

Shambhavi Gupta

Mother tongue is necessary for elementary education.

In a government school considered the "educational capital" of Delhi, Class 3 students were asked to choose the language they would prefer to study. The answer was – in your native language. When students speak in their native language, they feel more confident and express their understanding better. Unfortunately, many students are taught English from the start – a language not used in their home and community. They struggle with words rather than grasping the subject matter, which leads to a lack of confidence and hinders learning. CBSE's new directive, which requires the mother tongue or local language to be taught at the elementary level, is welcome.

This policy aligns with the National Education Policy 2020 and UNESCO's recommendations, which emphasise the importance of education in the mother tongue for a child's understanding, learning, and social-emotional development. When children learn in their native language, they not only understand Better, but their ability to think, question, and learn confidently also improves. For example, a study in Bengaluru found that children taught in their mother tongue performed better in maths and language than those who read in English. However, some argue that this move will further delay progress for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they may be deprived of English. Nonetheless, research shows that establishing a strong foundation in the mother tongue from the outset makes it easier to learn English later on.

In a multilingual country like India, where children have one language at home, the second in the community, and

the third in the school – ignoring the mother tongue is not only educationally wrong, it is also an insult to linguistic and cultural diversity. The problem is not with learning English, but with teaching in the same way from the beginning. Language is a medium, not an end. Education at the primary level should be delivered in a language that children understand and relate to. Valuing children's languages in education not only promotes educational equality but is also a vital step towards social justice.

Shailaja Menon

A few days ago, a driver told me, "Ma'am, we do not know English, but we send our children to an English-medium school so they can have a brighter future." This mindset is widespread. Across India, millions of parents view English as a means to enhance their children's prospects, earn social respect, and secure better opportunities. They believe that knowing English can brighten their children's future. States that children should be taught in their mother tongue, especially up to the third grade. However, we need to understand that India is a multilingual country. Different languages are spoken at home, in society, and at school. Many families already have children learning two or three languages. So, what is your mother tongue? Some families speak Hindi, some Urdu, some Telugu, and some tribal languages. Sometimes, different languages are spoken in the same house. In such cases, it is not always possible to pick just one "mother tongue". Moreover, today's society has become global. Students aim for local opportunities but also want to make a mark nationally and internationally. Furthermore, this is where English often becomes a necessity, whether for college admissions, competitive exams, or job applications. Opportunities. Of course, young children should be taught in a language they understand and relate to their experiences. However, we should keep in mind that children can easily switch between languages, provided they get the right environment and approach.

Research shows that when teachers are trained and teaching materials are of high quality, children can develop a good comprehension of English, even if it is not their native language.

Therefore, the question is not "English or mother tongue?" Instead, it is, "How do we in multilingual India provide quality education to all children, respecting their linguistic background?" Policymakers must understand that language is not just a medium of communication, but also a source of identity, aspiration and self-confidence.

Anurag Behar

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a directive on May 22. Although some newspapers and opinion pieces strongly criticised it, their criticisms were largely misleading. The directive recommends teaching in the mother tongue during primary education. It is important to clarify that this instruction specifies that a child's first language – L1 – should be used as the medium of instruction. While it may be the mother tongue, it does

not have to be. Essentially, L1 is the language in which the child feels most comfortable.

When children read in a language they are familiar with, they learn more confidently. They find reading, writing, and thinking processes intuitive. Children should be taught literacy in their first language (L1), then in their second language (L2), and finally in their third language (L3). Once the child is literate in L1 and L2, other languages can be used for different subjects as well.

This directive from CBSE has been issued in light of India's multilingual scenario, which involves an effort to embrace children's languages and select a suitable language medium for them. It acknowledges the multilingual challenge without creating new issues. Many critics claimed it was removing English or reducing its importance, but that is a misunderstanding. This policy aims to provide children with a solid foundation in their familiar language first, rather than eliminating English. When children are educated in their mother tongue, they tend to read and write more quickly and develop deeper thinking skills. Subsequently, they can learn other languages such as English effectively. The primary objective of CBSE's directive is to promote a multilingual environment rather than impose a single language. For example, consider Class 1 students in Mangalore, Karnataka, where many children speak either Konkani or Tulu, but they also know the language of Kannada. If English is chosen as the medium of instruction, it can be unfamiliar and challenging for them. Kannada, being widely known, can serve as a more effective medium. This situation is common across India. In many regions, only a small number of people speak English. However, it is often made the primary medium of instruction, which impacts children's learning. CBSE's approach is based on research and experience related to language teaching – a step towards greater understanding and inclusivity. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan stated that in the coming years, the medium of instruction in educational institutions will be "mainly Indian and local languages." Higher education institutions like IITs are introducing courses in local languages, including technical subjects like engineering. Providing books in Indian languages remains a priority. "For students coming from rural areas or economically weaker sections, technology can help them understand the content in their preferred language."

Peggy Mohan

We are at a pivotal moment. Those less comfortable in English are now eager to engage in dialogue.

For some time, I felt that India had stagnated while other regions – Africa, South America, Central America, East Asia, and South-East Asia – are progressing toward a new future. A few years ago, we expected India to play a more prominent role globally, but that has not materialised.

Why? When comparing ourselves to other developing nations, it appears we are not advancing as much. We tend

to accept existing models set by the developed world, believing them to define a modern nation.

However, I now see that much of India's energy is focused on translation efforts. This isn't driven by government policies but by ordinary people's initiative. That is the most inspiring part. Suddenly, I am being invited to discussions, podcasts, and the launch of new Hindi books. I've been told that even if I hesitate while speaking Hindi, I will be encouraged to speak openly and expand my linguistic boundaries. Diglossia- using two or more languages simultaneously- serves different functions, with one considered a high' language like English, associated with science, mathematics, and power, and the other a low' language. Used for daily conversation, raising children, and the language of the poor. The English medium was made mandatory for science and technical education in India. It was believed that language was not just a way of reading and speaking, but also an ideology — a symbol of modernity. However, now that these languages have returned to the spotlight, they have firmly demonstrated themselves. They didn't die out, but they gave people who never had the chance before a way to become thinkers and inventors.

It's a new era

These are the new voices of people who had no public space until generations ago. Those individuals are now claiming that their ideas always existed, only that they have never been valued before. A new language system is currently emerging in India, which is breaking down diglossia. Let's seize this turning point to establish a new bilingual education system. Although English is taught in many government schools, children and teachers often feel uneasy with it. If we want to make this change, we need to begin with bilingual teaching, where the duplicate content in a book is presented in both English and the local language.

How will bilingualism help?

Education is only effective when both the teacher and the student share a common understanding of the language. Teaching in English without comprehension encourages only rote learning. Scientific thinking develops through understanding and applying technical terms in one's language.

English dominance since 1830

Many might be surprised to discover that Thomas Babington Macaulay, who created the English education policy, thought Indians should be taught in their native language up to eighth grade. However, during that period, the British intended to integrate Indians into their colonial framework through English instruction. Today, India's context has changed. Instead of imposing English, we should focus on creating alternatives and balancing strategies for inclusive education.

Krishan Kumar

The CBSE's decision to make the mother tongue the medium of instruction in the primary years demands structural changes and autonomy in the classroom.

The CBSE's move to use the mother tongue as the primary language in early education marks an important step forward. If schools implement this thoroughly, it could lead to numerous effects. The importance of integrating multilingual approaches into education is now clear. For instance, it's fair to ask, "How can a child learn a language they've never heard?" Although CBSE's recommendations are not legally binding, they are influential. This decision will encourage schools to reconsider their teaching methods. It also suggests that previous practices may have been flawed.

Effects of English Supremacy

The CBSE decision affirms the principle of multilingualism in India. However, reversing the system that favours English in education remains challenging. While English's dominance is not exclusive, it reflects a global trend that has historically helped preserve power and privileges. Schools that emphasise English have contributed to a social divide, suggesting that only those who can learn in English have access to quality education. This dominance is so strong that even impoverished parents aspire for their children to be educated in English, often willing to pay a high price despite recognising that their children may gain little from the schooling.

The role of mother tongue

The new CBSE policy highlights the importance of the mother tongue. However, its benefits are truly realised only when multiple languages are present in the same classroom. For instance, a Delhi class may have students from Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, and Bengali language backgrounds. Recognising this diversity is essential for mother-tongue-based teaching. We also need to acknowledge that children from dominant linguistic groups have always had an advantage over others. The new policy will only succeed if it effectively tackles this disparity.

Teachers & Curriculum

Teaching children from different language backgrounds in the same classroom can be challenging, yet it is possible. When teachers recognise and include students' languages in the school setting, everyone gains – including native English speakers. Multilingual education involves seeing children's languages as an asset for learning rather than an obstacle.

Language and Power

It is now a socially accepted fact that English is the language that promotes "progress and prosperity", a leftover from colonial times. While the English lack significant political influence today, they still hold considerable social sway. This social power influences schools to favour English. CBSE's policy will only succeed

if it dispels the myth that "education is only through English."

Key Findings

This research shows that in a multilingual country such as India, language policy is more than just an academic issue; it is deeply connected to social and political contexts. A comparison of the perspectives of five authors uncovered important insights:

1. Mother tongue-based education is both natural and effective for children. Shambhavi Gupta and Anurag Behar contended that using the mother tongue during early education improves children's comprehension, boosts their confidence, and accelerates their learning.
2. Multilingualism should be viewed as a resource, not a problem — both Krishan Kumar and Anurag Behar highlighted that classrooms for diverse languages foster inclusivity and democratisation.
3. Shailaja Menon and Peggy Mohan argue that completely removing English isn't practical, as it continues to be a language of aspiration and opportunity in society. They believe change should be slow and strategic.
4. All authors agree that a gap exists between policy and ground reality. They emphasise that, regardless of how progressive the language policy is, **successful implementation depends on strengthening** teacher training, textbook development, and local adaptation processes.

The core issue is not 'language' but 'quality' — Krishan Kumar specifically highlighted that education in English medium schools is often of poor standard. Therefore, reform will not be achieved solely by changing the medium, but by improving the teaching methods.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The debate about language in education in India extends beyond mere tools, encompassing issues of fairness, social hierarchy, and power. The Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) initiative to promote teaching in children's mother tongues aims to enhance cognitive development while challenging the long-standing dominance of English in society and its educational goals. This study examines the perspectives of five authors on the intricate relationships between language, culture, and education, without drawing hasty conclusions. Shambhavi Gupta and Anurag Behar emphasise that a child's learning experience is not just about academics but also involves cultural identity and self-esteem. Learning in one's native language fosters a more profound connection to educational institutions.

Krishan Kumar observes that the English language creates a hierarchy of authority within educational institutions, often favouring certain groups. Peggy Mohan notes that the societal significance of English has changed, and uncritical

adoption of it could endanger India's rich cultural diversity. Shailaja Menon adds complexity by questioning how mother-tongue education can be widely implemented when parents generally prefer English as the medium of instruction. The researchers emphasise that policy measures should include public opinion rather than relying solely on scientific evidence. All authors agree that for language policies to work, teacher training, curriculum design, and assessment methods need to align with the new linguistic framework. A policy statement alone is not enough.

Recommendations

In a multilingual society like India, the following recommendations aim to make education more inclusive, effective, and equitable:

1. Special training on multilingual pedagogy (e.g., translanguaging, code-switching) should be provided in all teacher training institutes, enabling teachers to utilise linguistic diversity as a valuable resource in the classroom.
2. Development of textbooks and academic content in local languages: NCERT and state education boards should ensure that quality textbooks, workbooks, and digital resources are available in the major languages of each region.
3. English should be taught as a subject, not as a medium. It should be introduced as an additional language at the primary level. Meanwhile, the medium of instruction should be the child's mother tongue or regional language, allowing their bilingual abilities to develop gradually.
4. Schools should be granted flexibility based on the local linguistic context — all schools should have the autonomy to decide on the medium of instruction according to their region, community, and the linguistic background of the students.
5. Parental and community participation should be increased. A dialogue with parents should be initiated to raise awareness of the benefits of mother-tongue-based education, thereby fostering support and trust at the societal level.

The government and policymakers must ensure that, regardless of the language medium used, there is no compromise on quality, resources, or teachers' abilities.

IV. CONCLUSION

CBSE's new initiative extends beyond merely changing language rules; it signifies a broader shift in educational philosophy. Successfully implementing mother-tongue education can significantly improve academic outcomes and promote social justice, cultural pride, and equal opportunities. This effort necessitates teamwork among teachers, curriculum experts, and schools. When executed correctly, this policy can make education more inclusive, fair, and impactful.

Research indicates that mother tongue-based education is more than just language replacement; it is vital for ensuring educational equity, fostering student-centred learning, and encouraging cultural participation. Entirely replacing English is impractical — it should be regarded as a subject rather than the primary language of instruction. The authors emphasise that the success of this policy depends on active participation from teachers, parents, and the community. While policies provide the foundation, real success relies on their practical implementation at the grassroots level. Change requires collective effort and initiative. Teacher involvement is essential. Considering India's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, these factors must be taken into account when implementing policies. A flexible, multilingual, and inclusive language policy should aim not only for academic success but also for fostering children's identity, self-esteem, and learning capacities.

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AUTHORS PROFILE

Shabnam pursued BA (H), MA Political Science, from the University of Delhi (2011, 2013), and completed her B.Ed. and M.Ed. in Social Science Education from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (2014, 2018). She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education at the Department of Teacher Training and Non-Formal Education (IASE), Jamia Millia Islamia. With her UGC-NET/JRF and SRF qualifications, she has gained significant academic credentials. She has served as an educator at the TGT and PGT levels in esteemed institutions across Delhi and Uttar Pradesh.

Her scholarly contributions include presenting over 20 research papers at both national and international conferences organised by reputable institutions such as AMU, NIEPA, Banasthali Vidyapith, and the University of Delhi. She has been the recipient of numerous accolades, including two 'Best Paper Presenter Awards' at international forums. Ms. Shabnam has published over ten research papers in UGC-CARE and peer-reviewed journals, as well as authored chapters in edited volumes by Rawat Publications and other distinguished international publishers. Her research interests encompass Social Science Pedagogy, Teacher Education, Gender Studies, Inclusive Education, Curriculum Studies, and the integration of Constitutional Values into educational practices.

Her professional development includes participation in over 20 workshops and faculty development programs sponsored by ICSSR, RUSA, and UGC, focusing on research methodologies, artificial intelligence in education, NEP 2020, and sustainable development. She remains actively involved in departmental teaching activities, academic conferences, and examination responsibilities. Her scholarly efforts demonstrate her commitment to fostering an inclusive, values-oriented education system that aligns with national priorities, such as NEP 2020, and the attainment of sustainable development goals.