

‘English-only’ Policy and Language Attitudes in Indian States

Bhargavi, C.

Indian Institute of Technology Jodhpur

cbhargavi.hcu@gmail.com

The lasting prominence of the English language interwoven in India’s educational and administrative systems is rooted in its colonial past and evolving to meet the standards of globalisation. The complex and often contested issue of English in education seems to be a pragmatic response to its economic value and global reach. At the same time, the preference also reflects more profound socio-cultural and epistemological implications tied to coloniality—the persistence of colonial power structures and ideologies in post-colonial societies. There is little doubt that English medium education disproportionately benefits certain strata of society, creating barriers for socially disadvantaged communities. The commodification of English proficiency as ‘linguistic capital’ further establishes socio-economic disparities, positioning English as a tool for empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion. Thus, English medium education is often pitched against education through local, regional or native languages/mother tongues. The change in public perception and attitudes towards the value of English and regional languages as mediums of instruction may have a far-reaching impact on language-in-education policymaking and practices across the country. However, very few studies have empirically explored the issues mentioned earlier. Against the above background, this paper critically examines the recent spread of an ‘English-only’ policy in many Indian states by analysing policy documents and records available in the public domain. Drawing on the theoretical framework of coloniality developed by Aníbal Quijano, this study situates the ‘English-only’ policy within the broader lenses of linguistic hierarchies, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural identity while investigating how these English-centred policies perpetuate coloniality by marginalising native languages. The paper further analyses language attitudes (societal perceptions and beliefs about the value of English versus regional languages) as a critical factor sustaining the ‘English-only’ paradigm. Using a questionnaire and an interview schedule, the study captures the attitudes of bilingual Telugu speakers in parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where the implementation of an English-only policy as a political response to a popular demand led to debates across the country. The findings indicate that the English-only medium of instruction policy in schools is more of a populist policy than a well-planned academic policy decision.

It reflects a social mindset entrenched in colonial legacy. The analysis of language attitudes reveals that English trumps Telugu as the preferred medium of instruction in schools for economic mobility and social prestige. The study makes a case for a robust multilingual education policy that caters to the aspirations of students from various socio-economic backgrounds by focusing on the cultural and cognitive benefits of learning in native languages without ignoring the benefits that come with the mastery of English. In addition, it emphasises studying language attitudes for educational policy-making to ensure more localised and community-driven realistic policies are formulated and implemented.

Keywords: Language-in-education policy, Language attitude, Coloniality, India