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Higher Education and Regional Languages

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This article is based upon **“Is it practical to conduct higher education in regional languages?”** which was published in Livemint on 27/08/2021. It talks about the introduction of India’s regional languages in higher education and the pros and cons associated with it.

In India, teaching and learning have largely been in foreign languages whereas Indian languages have never got the much deserving importance in the field.

However, the **National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP, 2020)** has emphasized the use of regional languages for instruction at the primary and higher education levels.

With regard to this, the **All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)** has granted permission to 14 colleges across the country to offer select engineering courses in 11 regional languages including Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Gujarati, Malayalam, Assamese, Punjabi and Oriya.

The unavoidable question here is whether it is practical to precipitate a regional-medium shift in higher education, especially in the face of a largely dysfunctional public education system.

Positive Aspects of Higher Education in Regional Language

- **Subject-Specific Improvement:** Several studies in India and other Asian countries suggest a positive impact on learning outcomes for students using a regional medium rather than the English medium.

Performance in science and math, in particular, **has been found to be better among students studying in their native language** compared to English.

- **Higher Rates of Participation:** Studying in the native language results in **higher attendance, motivation and increased confidence for speaking up among students** and **improved parental involvement** and support in studies due to familiarity with the mother tongue.

Poor grasp of English has been tied by many educationists to dropout rates at the premier engineering education institutions as well as poor performance of some students.

- **Additional Benefits for the Less-Advantaged:** This is especially **relevant for students who are first-generation learners** (the first one in their entire generation to go to school and receive an education) or the ones **coming from rural areas**, who may feel intimidated by unfamiliar concepts in an alien language.
- **Increase in Gross-Enrollment Ratio (GER):** This will help provide quality teaching to more students and thus **increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** in higher education.
- **Promotes Linguistic Diversity:** It will also **promote the strength, usage, and vibrancy of all Indian languages.**
 - This way, private institutions too will be motivated to use Indian languages as a medium of instruction and/or offer bilingual programmes.
 - It would also help **prevent language-based discrimination.**

Challenges Associated

- **Shift in Hiring Paradigm:** The decision to promote regional language in tertiary education will interfere with the hiring decisions of the premier institutions as they will be **forced to consider language proficiency as a primary criteria** as opposed to subject matter expertise.
 - They will also have to **give up on looking from the global talent pool** for teaching.
- **Insignificant for Institutions with Pan-India Admissions:** A regional language focus is not **meaningful in a scenario where the institutes see entrants from across the country** such as IITs.
- **Availability of Quality Material in Regional Languages:** Another challenge is the availability of study material such as textbooks and scholarly literature.
 - Also, **quality control of these translations** will be of utmost importance to keep semantic irregularities at bay.
- **Placement Associated Challenge:** Many public sector units accept Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (**GATE**) **scores for entry-level positions**, which is conducted in English medium.
 - Given the already lamentable employability of college-educated individuals, studying in a regional language could further **inhibit job opportunities.**
- **Availability of Faculty:** Given the English-medium legacy of higher education in India, **attracting and retaining quality teachers** who are willing and able to teach in regional languages will be a challenge.
- **Maintaining Pace with Global Standards:** Delivering technical courses in regional languages may **prevent students from competing in global labour and education markets**, where fluency in English yields a distinct edge.
 - A lack of opportunities for Indian students at the international level may prove counterproductive to the NEP, 2020's aim of bridging the gap between elites and the rest.
 - It also goes **against the vision of promoting the internationalization of education.**

Way Forward

- **Building Foundation:** Promoting regional languages by the kind of fiat that the government has adopted is problematic.

A foundation needs to be built first, for instance, through grants to **popularise science and technological education in the regional language**, etc.
- **Bringing IITI into Play:** High-quality learning and print material in Indian languages, shall be first developed by creating quality programmes in translation and interpretation.

In this regard, the Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) will be established which will employ scholars in Indian languages, subject experts and experts in translation and interpretation.
- **Fair and Equitable System for Education:** The Government shall work to develop an equitable system based on the principles of fairness and inclusion.
 - It must **ensure that the personal and social circumstances of students should in no way be obstacles** to realising their full academic potential.
 - At the same time, ensuring inclusion through the use of the mother tongue/ regional language, it should also **set up a basic minimum standard of education which eliminates all disparity.**
- **Adopting the “Regional Language Plus English” Notion:** While it is necessary to strengthen Indian languages as a medium of education, it is equally **imperative for students to have a good command over the English language** since they are global natives in the 21st century.

Indian languages must be supplemented by English.
- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** AICTE has recently developed a tool which translates English content online into 11 Indian regional languages.

To provide such a facility to all of its students, the institutions **prioritise providing electronic devices and internet facilities to school and college students** from socially and economically weaker sections.

Conclusion

- Indian languages are a ***sine qua non*** for educational and cultural development since they strengthen equity in education and will prepare students to live in a local, national and global society utilising a harmonious blend of Indian languages and English.
- A holistic approach is required for the implication of native-language instruction in an increasingly globalized world.

A shift from “**mother tongue versus English**” towards the “**mother tongue plus English**” is required.

Drishhti Mains Question

“While education in regional language in the initial years of students may facilitate better learning and understanding, it is equally important for them to have good command over the English language in order to keep pace with the Global standards of education”. Discuss.
