



Linguistic Minorities In India: From Constitutional Protections To Educational Practices

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Abstract: India is widely recognised as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. According to the 2011 census there are 121 languages including 22 scheduled languages and 99 non-scheduled languages as well as numerous other mother tongues spoken throughout the country. To protect this diversity the Indian Constitution provides safeguards for linguistic minorities through numerous provisions. These Constitutional provisions ensure that linguistic minorities can preserve their languages and culture and have access to educational opportunities in their mother tongue. Despite these guaranteed provisions, the educational experiences of linguistic minorities often reveal a significant gap between constitutional commitment and its practical implementation. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between constitutional guarantees for linguistic minorities and their actual implementation in the educational sector. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore and interpret the complexities of language policy, constitutional promises and their practical implications for linguistic minorities in India. This research is primarily based on secondary data sources drawing on a review of language policy, educational policies, government reports and existing scholarly literature on linguistic minorities in India. This approach helps in understanding policy intent and implementation gaps. The study highlights several challenges that hinder the effective implementation of these provisions including the absence of mother-tongue instruction, the shortage of trained teachers in minority languages, limited availability of textbooks and teaching materials and more importantly the lack of institutional support. The findings suggest that although India has provided a constitutional and policy framework for safeguarding linguistic minorities. But the lack of effective implementation mechanisms and sufficient resources has resulted in ongoing gaps between policy intentions and educational practice. The study suggests that strengthening institutional support, enhancing policy implementation, and providing proper mother tongue based education are vital for protecting linguistic rights and fostering inclusive education across the country.

Keywords: Linguistic Minorities, Constitutional Provisions, Language Policy, Educational Practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is widely recognised as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. It is home to 121 languages including 22 scheduled and 99 non-scheduled languages as well as numerous other mother tongues spoken across the nation (2011 census). After independence, the dream of nation-building based on a single language and culture has not been accepted by the majority of people. Ultimately, India has embraced multilingualism and state boundaries were drawn along linguistic lines to accommodate this diversity. Despite the dominance of a single language in most states each state is multilingual with

linguistic minorities. To protect the interests and rights of these minorities the constitution provides various safeguards to preserve their languages and cultural heritage.

Language is not merely a collection of words but it reflects the culture, history and civilisation of the society. A language on the verge of extinction would amount to the extinction of the art, literature, culture and civilisation of a society. In this regard, language is a marker of our identity and an essential medium through which individuals understand and interpret their social world. In other words, it is not easy to conceive of our society and knowledge without language. It plays an essential role in shaping our thoughts, transmitting knowledge and maintaining cultural continuity. When a community loses its language, it risks losing a significant aspect of its collective identity and cultural heritage.

Education acts as a vital channel through which languages are preserved, transmitted and developed across generations. In multilingual societies like India, the medium of instruction significantly influences whether their language continues to bloom or gradually declines. The use of the mother tongue in education has long been recognised as a vital approach to fostering effective learning, preserving culture, and strengthening individual self-identity. Scholars and international organisations have consistently emphasised that children learn most effectively when they are taught in their first language, particularly during the early stages of education. The UNESCO Conference held in 1951 in Paris centred on the issue of imparting instruction in a child's mother tongue. The mother tongue serves not only as a means of communication but also as the language through which children develop their earliest concepts and understanding of the world around them. Language education also assumes a crucial role in preventing language loss and protecting linguistic minorities from cultural assimilation. Providing opportunities for children to learn and study in their mother tongue helps foster a positive sense of identity and belonging among themselves. In this context, language policy in education is directly related to the linguistic situations of a particular country. The linguistic character of a specific country shapes policies related to language rights, language promotion and language planning.

The Indian Constitution recognises linguistic diversity and provides safeguards for linguistic minorities through various provisions. Several provisions of the Indian Constitution aim to ensure that linguistic minorities can preserve their languages and culture and have access to educational opportunities in their mother tongue. Article 29 guarantees the right of minorities to preserve their languages, scripts, and cultures. Article 30 permits linguistic minorities (as well as religious minorities) to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Article 350A directs states to provide instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education for children belonging to linguistic minority groups. In addition, Article 350B provides for a Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities to monitor the implementation of these safeguards. Together, these provisions reflect the constitutional commitment to protecting linguistic diversity within the education system.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, the educational experiences of linguistic minorities often reveal a gap between policy intentions and practical implementation. In many parts of India, the dominance of majority or state languages in the education system limits educational opportunities in minority languages. The shortage of trained teachers proficient in minority languages, limited financial resources, and inadequate availability of textbooks and teaching materials further hindered the effective implementation of mother-tongue based education. As a result, many children belonging to linguistic minority communities are compelled to receive education in languages other than their mother tongue which negatively affects learning outcomes. Therefore, the present study examines the relationship between constitutional guarantees for linguistic minorities and their practical implementation in the educational sphere in India.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Before examining the constitutional and educational aspects of linguistic minorities in India, it is important to understand the concepts of "minority" and "linguistic minority." The Indian Constitution uses the term 'minority' in several articles including Articles 29, 30, 350A, and 350B. Among these, Articles 350A and 350B specifically address issues concerning linguistic minorities. While the Indian Constitution provides certain safeguards for minorities to preserve their language, culture and educational rights, it does not define the term "minority" or establish clear criteria for determining minority status.

In the absence of a clear definition of the term minority in our Constitution, the term linguistic minority has been clarified through judicial decision. The Judiciary defined it in one of the cases to apply Article 30 of the Constitution: "A linguistic minority for Article 30 (1) must at least have a separate spoken language. A language does not need a distinct script for its speakers to be recognised as a linguistic minority. In our country, some languages that lack their own script are recognised as linguistic minorities entitled to the protections of Article 30(1). Similarly, the judiciary clarifies that the unit of the Linguistic minority is determined at the State level (as declared by the state government) as no linguistic group in India can claim majority status at the federal level.

Generally, minority languages in most countries of the world are defined only by the criterion of numerical inferiority to the majority language spoken in that State or the State's official language. Such a numerical definition would render all the languages spoken in India as "minority languages". Even Hindi (including its dialects and variants) which is the official language of India and it is spoken as a mother tongue by more than 40% of India's population constitutes a relative minority nationwide. Consequently, the minority languages of India generally share the features "non-dominant" and "different" from the rest of the population. This definition indicates that a language attains minority status when the community within the State constitutes a minority. It allows a language to be considered as a minority language if the community using it is numerically large or in the majority at the State level but non-dominant (Benedikter, 2013). Even though there are different definitions of linguistic minority over the world, defining the term has proved so difficult and complex that neither experts in this field nor the international agencies have succeeded to date. Therefore, there is no universally accepted fixed definition worldwide.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION FOR LINGUISTIC MINORITIES IN INDIA

In this section, we explore the constitutional provisions available for Linguistic Minorities in India. As mentioned earlier, the Indian Constitution includes no definition of linguistic minority, provides no criteria for defining it, and provides no list of recognised minorities. Thus, the judiciary has clarified that a linguistic minority is any group that speaks a distinct language and occupies a non-dominant position at the State level. India has recognised linguistic diversity and provides several provisions to protect their rights particularly in the field of education.

There are certain provisions for linguistic minorities under Articles 29, 30, 347, 350A, and 350B of the Indian Constitution. However, our concern here is only to examine those provisions directly related to the educational rights of linguistic minorities in India. Among these, only Article 350A guarantees mother-tongue instruction at the primary level which obliges every state and local authority "to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups." Article 29 confers broader rights upon linguistic minorities to preserve their "distinct language, script or culture". Article 30 grants both Religious and Linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. These constitutional provisions collectively form the legal foundation for safeguarding the rights of linguistic minorities in India.

Article 29: Cultural and Linguistic Conservation

29(1) "Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same". This provision ensures that linguistic groups can preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage.

29(2) "No citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the State or receiving aid out of State funds on grounds of religion, race, caste, language or any of them".

Article 29 provides an important safeguard against discrimination in educational institutions and indirectly supports the protection of linguistic diversity.

This provision does not impose any positive obligation on the state to take steps to conserve the language and culture of linguistic minority groups. But it prevents the state from imposing any other language on a linguistic minority (Jacob, 1972).

Article 30- Right of the Minorities to establish and administer educational Institutions -

30(1) *“All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice”*. This provision is one of the most significant constitutional safeguards for minority communities in India. It allows minority communities to establish and administer educational institutions that promote their language and culture while providing educational opportunities to their community members.

Article 30(2) further provides that *“the State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language”*.

Article 30 grants minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice, but the constitution does not distinguish between Religious and Linguistic Minorities. It is generally observed that the Religious Minorities have been placed at an advantageous position in view of the National Minorities Commission Act, 1992. Moreover, while this right is guaranteed, it is not absolute; the state may regulate and control minority institutions to ensure educational excellence.

Articles 350A and 350B: Specific Provisions for Linguistic Minorities

Articles 350A and 350B were not originally part of the Constitution but were incorporated by the Seventh Amendment Act of 1956. The idea of providing mother-tongue instruction at the primary level was first recommended by the Provincial Education Ministers Conference in 1949. The central government accepted this recommendation but its non-binding nature led to inconsistent implementation across states. Nonetheless, the constitutional framers did not consider it necessary to incorporate this safeguard into the Constitution as originally framed. Later, the States Reorganisation Commission while examining safeguards for linguistic minorities felt the need to grant constitutional recognition to this right. Based on the commission's recommendation, the Constitution was amended to incorporate Articles 350A and 350B. However, the right to instruction in the mother tongue for linguistic minorities has been recognised only at the primary stage (Jacob, 1972).

Article 350A- Right to Instruction in Mother Tongue

“It should be the endeavour of every State and local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups” and the President may issue such directions to any State as he considers necessary for the securing of such facilities. It helps in strengthening Articles 29(1) and 30(1) which guarantee the cultural and educational rights of linguistic minorities.

The implementation of this provision has been discussed in various policies. For example, the Chief Ministers' Conference in 1961 recommended that arrangements must be made for instruction in the mother tongue by appointing one teacher, provided there are not fewer than 40 pupils speaking the language in the whole school or 10 such pupils in a class (Kamal K. Sridhar 1996). More recently, the New Education Policy 2020 emphasises mother-tongue instruction which plays a critical role in children's cognitive development. Children learn and grasp concepts more quickly in their native language. The medium of instruction should be the home language until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 and beyond (NEP, 2020). Such measures aim to ensure that children from minority communities are not disadvantaged in the early stages of education.

Article 350B - Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities

Article 350B ensures that *“There shall be a Special Officer for Linguistic minorities (NCRLM) who is appointed by the President of India”* to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for linguistic minorities under this Constitution. The officer reports all issues concerning linguistic minorities periodically. The President shall present those reports before each House of Parliament and send them to the Governments of the concerned States. This mechanism serves as an important institutional framework for monitoring the protection of Linguistic minorities.

All these constitutional provisions reflect India's commitment to safeguarding the rights of linguistic minorities. However, the effectiveness of these safeguards ultimately depends on their practical implementation within the education field.

IV. LANGUAGE POLICY IN EDUCATION IN INDIA

Language in Indian education always remains a central focus. The Language policy in education has evolved through various educational reforms and policy initiatives. The language-related issues in Indian education have been resolved around (i) which languages can serve as mediums of instruction at various levels of education; (ii) which languages should be studied as subjects; (iii) the roles to be played by Hindi and English and (iv) what should be the medium of languages at the early stages for minority speakers. Historically, English became the medium of instruction during British rule in India. Soon after independence, it was believed that the only way to revive long-neglected Indian languages and uphold democratic rights was to use them as media of instruction in education, administration and media. There were no issues with the main dominant languages but the major problem was with the minority languages (Sridhar, 1996).

The Government of India produced a series of reports to decide language issues in education. We will consider only those reports which are directly relevant to this paper. Beginning with the University Education Commission's Report (1949), it recommended that students at the Higher Secondary and University stages should be conversant in the regional language, Hindi, and English. This policy did not favour the speakers of minority languages; consequently, it was replaced by the recommendations of the Secondary Education Commission (1952). The Commission recommended that at the secondary level students should study the following languages: (i) the mother tongue; (ii) the regional language of the state; (iii) the link language Hindi; and (iv) any one of the classical languages (Sridhar 1996). But before this recommendation, the Provincial Education Ministers Conference in 1949 recommended mother-tongue instruction at the primary level of education if a sufficient number of students spoke minority languages. The central government accepted this recommendation but its non-binding nature led to inconsistent implementation across states. Nonetheless, the constitutional framers did not consider it necessary to incorporate this safeguard into the Constitution as originally framed. The States Reorganisation Commission, while examining safeguards for linguistic minorities felt the need to grant constitutional recognition to this right. Based on the recommendation of the commission the Constitution was amended incorporating articles 350A and 350B through the Seventh Amendment Act of 1956. This was a gap in the constitutional provision. The right to instruction in the mother tongue for linguistic minorities has been recognised only at the primary stage. (Jacob, 1972).

Furthermore, to address Indian multilingualism the Education Commission (1964-1966) recommended the "Three Language Formula" which included (i) the mother tongue or the regional language; (ii) the official language of the Union (Hindi) or the associate official language of the Union (English); and (iii) a modern Indian or foreign language not covered under (i) and (ii), and other than that used as medium of instruction. This recommendation has been accepted in every education policy. Recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also emphasises the importance of mother-tongue-based education. The policy recommends that, whenever possible the medium of instruction should be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 and beyond. Further, policy states that children learn and grasp concepts more quickly in their own language. Thereafter, the home/local language would continue to be taught wherever possible. Both public and private schools have to follow this. High-quality textbooks, including those in science are made available in the home languages/mother tongues. All efforts are made early on to ensure that any gaps between the language the child speaks and the medium of instruction are bridged. In cases where home language/mother tongue textbook material is not available, the language of transaction between teachers and students remains the home language/mother tongue wherever possible. Teachers are encouraged to use a bilingual approach including bilingual teaching and learning materials for students whose home language may differ from the medium of instruction. All languages are taught with high quality to all students (NEP 2020).

The official policies of the government of India along with those of all state governments adhere to the principle of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at least in the initial stages preferably throughout the educational career. Many states face practical issues related to teacher availability, curriculum development, and resource allocation. In the case of speakers of the country's major national languages who reside in their "home" states (i.e., approximately 91% of the population), there has been no serious problem in implementing this policy. This policy has been more difficult to implement in small

towns and rural areas where teachers might not be available to teach small groups of children. Similarly, the real problem is the choice of medium of instruction for the minorities who speak one of the unrecognised (tribal or other smaller communities) languages.

V. CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES VS EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES: GAPS IN IMPLEMENTATION

India has established a strong constitutional framework for protecting linguistic minorities. Despite these constitutional guarantees, minority languages often lack adequate representation in the education system particularly in mother-tongue instruction. Studies have demonstrated substantial gaps between policy statements and their implementation. For example, the State of Karnataka made Kannada the sole compulsory first language at the primary and secondary levels even in schools run by linguistic minorities. On the one hand, no other languages can be made compulsory for minority schools as they have a fundamental right to conserve their language; on the other hand, in practice some states have made their official languages compulsory in schools (Benedikter, 2013). If states fail to implement those provisions, there is no specific legal mechanism allowing individuals or groups to enforce the rights enshrined in Articles 29 and 30. Further, the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2007) examines the status of both linguistic and religious minorities states that the concept of “backwardness” is confined to only religious minorities as it has no relevance for the linguistic minorities because in some cases religious minority faces discrimination and denial of constitutional rights; however, linguistic minorities do not encounter such discrimination. As a result, the commission has not recommended any criterion for identifying ‘socially and economically backwards classes’ among the linguistic minorities. But this assumption relies on a narrow formal definition of discrimination that focuses solely on the direct denial of rights. Discrimination today often takes the form of structural and institutional practices especially in education. The absence of mother-tongue-based instruction, inadequate funding, and the limited presence of their language in the school system constitute clear examples of systemic exclusion.

Similarly, Article 350 A is the exclusive right of the linguistic minority. Nevertheless, this responsibility for safeguarding mother tongue instruction at the primary level does not fall within the fundamental rights of citizens granted in the constitution; rather, it is the state’s obligation to promote minority languages based on the numerical strength of their speakers. As a result, implementation has been inconsistent and inadequate in most states (Annamalai, 2012). Most States have very reluctantly fulfilled their duty under Article 350A of the Constitution to provide primary education in the mother tongue of linguistic minorities, while others have not complied at all. Furthermore, this constitutional provision requires India’s education authorities to assess the demands of linguistic minorities and to open separate sections of schools or distinct schools if a certain minimum number of interested pupils is reached the 10:40 ratio: 10 pupils per class, 40 pupils per school (Benedikter, 2013). Indian States take shelter under the last clause of the above statement claiming that the class does not include 10 pupils speaking a particular mother tongue though this is not correct. The other reason these States may give is a lack of funds to appoint teachers (Viswanatham, 2001).

There is multiple evidence that state governments tend to ignore the requests of the Commissioners for Linguistic Minorities for information on the extent to which speakers of minority mother tongues have been provided with facilities for instruction in their mother tongues. For example, the government of Bihar claims to have provided facilities for instruction in Oraon, Ho, Santali, and Mundari, but has not provided any figures to support these claims since 1975-76 (NCLM). Paul R. Brass rightly states that “recognition of a mother tongue and minority language within a state is no guarantee that facilities will be provided for students in government schools to receive instruction through the medium of their mother tongue” (Brass, 1994). Minority languages face marginalisation through restrictions on their use in education, administration, and public life. The impact of this marginalisation is most evident in education, where minority children do not get sufficient command of their mother tongue. Linguistic minority groups must choose the school language which is generally the dominant language of the state where the school is located (Puri, 2020).

Thus, significant gaps exist between policy pronouncements and implementation. The numerous records of complaints registered with the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India by different linguistic minority groups regarding the use, disuse, misuse, and underuse of their languages in the

education sector reflect the state policy of institutional and cultural linguistic discrimination against minority mother tongues. Many public education authorities have failed to fulfil their responsibility to provide mother tongue instruction due to financial constraints or a lack of political will.

VI. CONCLUSION

To safeguard the interests of linguistic minorities in India the constitutional framework reflects a strong commitment. Provisions such as Articles 29 and 30 ensure the preservation of language, culture, and script, and grant minorities the right to establish and maintain educational institutions of their choice. At the same time, Article 350A mandates mother tongue based education at the primary level. All of these provisions establish a legal basis designed to safeguard linguistic minorities within the Indian educational system. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that these guaranteeing constitutional provisions do not necessarily ensure their effective implementation. In practice, linguistic minorities often face challenges such as limited availability of mother tongue based instruction, insufficient educational resources, a shortage of trained teachers, and the predominance of the state language in schools. The condition is worse for tribal languages, which are used only as media through the end of the primary grades, after which the state languages take their place as the main media. Officials frequently neglect promoting minority languages in education because they think it might hinder the integration of minority into wider society. This reasoning results in inaction despite constitutional obligations. These issues highlight a persistent gap between constitutional ideals and educational realities. Therefore, guarantees become meaningful for the linguistic minority groups only through effective policy implementation, adequate resources, and strong institutional commitment. It is equally important to strengthen mother tongue based education and to recognise linguistic diversity within the education system. These measures are essential for fostering inclusive and equitable education in multilingual countries like India.

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