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Editorial

Linguistic Landscape and Language in Education in South Asia: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

This article examines the linguistic diversity, language hegemony, and policy initiatives aimed at resisting the dominance of English and other mainstream national languages, while promoting indigenous languages, cultures, and epistemologies in South Asia. The article critically assesses the adverse impact of British Raj and its education policies, which aimed to produce "Brown Englishmen," as well as the recent multilingual turn taken by South Asian countries through their language education and language-in-education policies. Additionally, the article discusses the prevailing influence of English due to globalization and general public perception of English proficiency that provides linguistic, cultural, and economic capital. Nine authors from various countries in South Asia critically reflect on the language in education policies and practices, sharing the shortcomings and the way forward. The article reports on the policy practice gap, that despite numerous efforts by South Asian countries to promote and revitalize local languages through policy interventions, many private and public schools are shifting towards English-medium instruction, thereby further marginalizing indigenous languages. The article argues for the decolonial reimagination of language policies and practices. It advocates for the thoughtful implementation of language in education policies to promote local languages, cultures, and epistemologies. The article concludes that, although macro-level policies are progressive, celebrating pluralism and linguistic diversity, these policies do not align with the meso-level (institutional) and micro-level classroom practices of teachers, hindering the preservation of linguistic heritage in South Asia.

Keywords: *South Asia, diversity, hegemony, language policy, language in education, multilingualism*

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Introduction

In this article, we report on the status of languages in educational policy documents and practices of South Asian nation-states particularly Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Bhutan. South Asia is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, with languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan, Indo-Iranian, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, Tai-Kadai, and Andamanese families, as well as language isolates such as Burushaski and Kusunda. South Asia is home to languages like classical Tamil and Sanskrit, with histories spanning more than 4000 years. This recorded linguistic history of the region provides a fertile area for linguistic research, including historical reconstruction, language convergence, hegemony, linguistic diversity, and cultural amalgamation (Emeneau, 1956).

These nations have shared cultural integration since ancient times due to internal migration and the movement of people to this region from other parts of the world. However, in different historical periods, foreign invasions altered the linguistic landscapes as they imposed the dominant languages of the rulers, erasing or causing the extinction of the languages of minority communities. This linguistic imposition intensified after the arrival of Europeans in around 16th century, causing cultural and linguistic hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).

Macaulay's Minute (1835) discouraged the use of indigenous languages in educational spaces in South Asia. The primary objective of Macaulay was to perpetuate the British *Raj* by instilling British values and creating a social class to bridge the gap between the masses that the British ruled and the rulers (Poudel, 2022). This Minute influenced the subsequent educational policy documents, even after India's independence in 1947. Although Nepal remained a sovereign nation, i.e., it did not come under British colonial rule, Nepal could not remain untouched by colonial educational policies. With the establishment of Durbar High School in 1854 and Tri-Chandra College in 1919 (Poudel, 2021), the British instilled Western values in the minds of young Nepalis. The case of Bhutan differed slightly from that of Nepal and other South Asian nations, as the British did not directly rule Bhutan and had no influence over its education, but rather controlled its foreign affairs (Phuntsho, 2013).

These Western-dominated educational policies played a significant role in erasing the cultural and linguistic diversities of South Asian societies, promoting monolingual ideologies of colonialism (Pennycook, 1998). Studies show that learning is more effective if the learners' home and school languages are the same. On the other hand, if the learners are instructed in an unfamiliar language, they suffer psychological trauma leading to low academic performance (Mohanty, 2009). However, in actual classrooms, most of our students do not enjoy instruction in the mother tongue, despite reforms outlined in policy documents such as Nepal's National Education Policy (2019) and India's National Education Policy (2020). In the following sections, we contextualize our discussion of the linguistic landscape of these individual nations, discussing them in the context of colonization and its impact on the educational policy documents of these nations, as well as their strategies for resisting linguistic imperialism (Poudel, 2019; Poudel & Costley, 2024).

Language in Education in Nepal

Nepal is a diverse nation with 124 languages spoken by less than 30 million people of 145 ethnic communities (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These languages belong to the Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and a language isolate, Kusunda (Yadava, 2007), resulting in a situation of mutual unintelligibility among speakers of different mother tongues. The 2021 Census reports that, of these 124 languages, only 21 have 100,000 or more speakers. This situation indicates that over 100 languages are on the verge of extinction due to rapid language shift (Gautam, 2018), leading to a form of mass linguicide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

These minority languages have never been represented in the educational policy documents of the Nepali educational space (Poudel, 2019; Poudel, 2021). When Nepal introduced modern education in the 1950s by implementing the Nepal National Education Planning Commission (1956), Nepali gained a greater presence in the education system because the framers of these policies viewed local indigenous languages as a threat to national unity. They aimed to unify the country through a 'one nation, one language' policy. After the 1990 movement, Nepal adopted liberal education and economic policies, and English emerged as a more powerful language under the aegis of globalization, even sidelining Nepali in educational space (Poudel, 2022), despite the Constitution of 1990 declaration, which states that all the languages spoken within the territory of Nepal are national languages. However, the minority languages never got their wider use in political and educational settings. Nepali remained the medium of instruction in public school classrooms, while English gradually replaced Nepali in private schools, at least in urban settings.

The shift from English to Nepali in educational settings, particularly in the medium of instruction and the adoption of textbooks in Nepali or English, led to a challenging situation

regarding home and school language for children who did not speak Nepali at home. To understand the complex issue of the plurilingual and multilingual social construct in Nepal, we need to look back at the socio-historical events of Modern Nepal, during which Nepali educational policies evolved.

Nepali became a language of wider communication after the unification of smaller kingdoms by Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1767, as it was the language of administration adopted by the ruling elites. However, the indigenous communities remained isolated in the hinterlands due to the difficult mountain terrains and malaria-infested, inaccessible plains of the Terai. This isolation preserved linguistic and cultural diversity until recently. The Ranas considered themselves an elite class, distinct from the general public they ruled (Poudel & Baskota, 2025). These feelings of the Rana rulers encouraged them to establish a school in 1854. The establishment of Durbar High School had a lasting impact on the selection of languages in educational settings. The main ideology behind establishing this school was to educate the children of the Ranas in English, instilling Western values in them. Since this school did not enroll children from the general public, it produced a small number of English-educated human resources without a basic understanding of the multilingual and multicultural social construct of Nepali society. This school remained the sole educational institution to produce the required human resources for public administration until 1919, when Tri-Chandra College was established. Tri-Chandra College adopted the curriculum of Patna University, further enhancing the Western style of education. The People's Movement of 1951 overthrew the Rana Regime, and a new educational policy was drafted in 1956, which echoes the elitist values in its section on the selection of languages in the Nepali educational setting:

> *The study of a non-Nepali local tongue would mitigate against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use of it than Nepali–at home and in the community – and thus Nepali would remain a "foreign" language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language, then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result* (NNEPC - 1956: 97).

The NNEPC report reflects the continuation of an elitist mindset established by the Western model of education at Durbar High School and Tri-Chandra College, as the framers of these documents were graduates of this system. Their priority was to cause to 'disappear other languages' as they considered these 'other' languages a threat to 'national strength and unity'. The first seminal educational policy document ignored the multilingual construct of Nepali society by adopting a monolingual ideology. The intention of the Commission's members is indicative of eradicating indigenous languages other than Nepali, as these languages were perceived as a threat to the envisioned monolingual nation-state (Poudel, 2019). NNEPC set the model for educational policies in subsequent decades (Wood, 1987, p. 155). Scholars like Awasthi (2008) view NNEPC as an imported ideology stemming from the monolingual nation-state concept of Macaulay's Minute of 1835, a continuation of the colonial legacy.

Tribhuvan University, established in 1959 under the recommendation of the NNEPC, gave a new direction to language education in Nepal. It adopted English as a medium of instruction and used textbooks in English, except for indigenous language-specific programs, such as Nepali and Nepal Bhasha. The notice in the Nepal Gazette stated that Nepali would replace English as the medium of instruction in universities by 1974 (Malla, 1977). However, in practice, Nepali or other regional languages, such as Maithili, dominated the language of classroom discussions. The textbooks, reference books, and assessment writing language

remained English. The Central Department of English (CDE) at Tribhuvan University attracted a large number of aspirants for English from across the country because CDE continued the elitist legacy of Durbar High School and Tri-Chandra College. The myth of learning English with native speakers prevailed when the British Council and American Embassy made experts like Alan Davis available in 1969 and Hugh D. Purcell in 1971.

The National Education System Plan (NESP) of 1971 continued the monolingual ideology of the NNEPC of 1956 in its language policy within the educational setting. It states, 'Nepali will be the medium of instruction up to the secondary school and will in general be replaced by English in higher education' (Ministry of Education, 1971). English was introduced in class four as one of the official UN languages, with 10% of total school hours from class four to seven and 12% from class eight to ten. In 1984, the British Council at the request of the Ministry of Education and Culture surveyed English Language Teaching in Nepal. The survey led by Alan Davies reported low English proficiency among school children and ineffective textbooks and teaching methods (Davies, 1984). Following the report, no indigenous languages were encouraged in the educational space; English received high priority in the classroom language. Despite all these efforts, English proficiency remained very low among school graduates in Nepal.

Following the People's Movement of 1990, a new constitution was promulgated, which recognized the languages spoken within Nepal's territory as national languages. To achieve the constitutional objectives, the National Education Commission (NEC) encouraged the use of the learners' mother tongue as the medium of instruction in its 1992 report, and also recommended learning local languages to create a multilingual society (Ministry of Education, 1992). The Commission allowed schools to prepare their curricula to encourage learning local languages and culture with the approval of the Ministry of Education. However, these recommendations were not achieved, as the parents and children were reluctant to educate their children in their mother tongues, since these languages lacked social capital and career opportunities. The liberal economic and educational policies of the government lured affluent parents to English because they perceived that these languages can widen the horizon of educational and economic prosperity. This public demand for English-medium instruction led to the establishment of English-medium schools in every corner of the country.

The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) (2009) allowed the School Management Committee to determine the medium of instruction in schools in consultation with the local government body. The SSRP intended to ensure that children learn in their mother tongue in the first three grades of their education. However, the authorization changed the medium of instruction from local languages to English in many government-funded schools.

The National Educational Policy 2019, approved by the Council of Ministers on November 4, 2019, is being implemented in Nepal's educational system. Policy 10 concentrates on the issues of languages in the educational space. Policy 10.3.2 encourages mother tongue-based medium of instruction where possible. Policy 10.8 manages Nepali and English as media of instruction, reflecting the country's linguistic diversity. Policy 10.8.1 provisions for the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English. Policy 19.8.2 encourages the development of reading materials, both print and digital, in learners' mother tongues to bring learning within the learners' experience. Policy 19.8.3 encourages the preservation of indigenous languages, folk literature, scripts, and culture by incorporating them into the educational curricula. Policy 10.8.4 promotes Nepali fine arts, culture, and social life by teaching school-level social studies in Nepali and encouraging mother-tongue-based multilingual classrooms. At the secondary level, the medium of instruction will be gradually

extended to Nepali and English to expose learners to broader regional and global communication (Policy 10.9.4).

A closer look at these policies reveals the age-old intricate linguistic power hierarchy of dominant and minority languages in Nepal's educational policies. The inclusion or exclusion of a particular language from the educational system is indicative of perpetual social power dynamics due to the social structures. For example, the frequent mention of Nepali and English as media of instruction, as well as the use of terms such as 'arrangement', 'facilitate', and 'encourage' in mother tongue-based multilingual education, suggests a top-down approach that can give a feeling of imposition to minority communities in decision-making processes. The central authorities formulated these policies without understanding the local-level realities and the local bodies that implement them. As the local authorities were empowered in the federal system, they converted the medium of instruction from indigenous languages to English (Kharel, 2022). This process intensified when COVID-19 forced schools to go online, as digital learning materials were not available in local languages. The policies emphasize the preservation and development of indigenous languages and cultures; however, no provision is made to encourage local communities to participate in scientific studies of their linguistic and cultural patterns. Therefore, it is not a community-driven effort in linguistic and cultural revitalization, but rather an imposition from the central body on the federal units.

These policies aim to cater to learners' interests and needs by aligning with the nation's linguistic and cultural diversity. However, inadvertent emphasis on English and Nepali is certain to marginalize minority communities through a faster language shift. This leads to the extinction of endangered languages much faster (Gautam, 2018). Despite the positive intention of these policies, they perpetuate existing power ideologies inculcated by elites due to the lack of coordination between local bodies and the central one. To achieve these goals, genuine participation of local communities in the implementation, rather than imposition, and ownership is necessary.

Language in Education in India

India truly embodies the slogan "unity in diversity" through its linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Home to 1,369 languages and "dialects" from five major language families: Indo-European, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Semito-Hamitic (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2018), India's linguistic context is multi-layered and multi-ethnic, and its language education policy and practice a complex, multi-dimensional enterprise. Education policy and implementation follow a federal structure, as education is a matter of the "Concurrent" list of the Constitution of India, which means it is governed by both the central (national) government and individual states. The Ministry of Education, Government of India, administers school education through the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and other boards, while each state has its own SCERT and the state board of education for examinations (65 state boards in 2023; MoE, 2024). Government-run or aided schools, along with a vibrant private school sector, provide education within a complex school ecosystem.

A wide variety of languages are used in both school and higher education. Several national policies guide the implementation of languages in education at school, with the latest three - the National Education Policy (NEP) (2020), the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCFFS) (2022), and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2023) laying down a road map for language education in schools. While policy is clear on foundational learning in home languages and the gradual introduction of

other languages in education for a vibrant multilingual society, the interpretation and implementation of policy guidelines is affected by linguistic self-determination, socio-economic diversity and political climate, and hence proves challenging for policy makers as well as other stakeholders such as teachers, learners, school administrators, and guardians. A large body of literature on language education in India and its challenges, as well as education reports from both government (NCERT, for example) and private agencies (ASER, IFC, Macmillan, British Council) etc. suggests that language education, especially foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), remain key indicators of educational and economic success. In the following sections, we provide a glimpse of the complex Indian multilingual ecosystem and its implications for implementing language education in the diverse range of linguistic and socio-economic contexts in India, including the aspiration for English.

The complexity of Indian multilingualism

The national Census and several other surveys have tried to capture the diversity of languages in India. One of the earliest surveys -the Linguistic Survey of India (1894-1903) listed 179 languages and 544 dialects, the Ethnologue (n.d.) mentions 447 languages, while the Bhasha Research (2010-2012), conducted with inputs from states, reports on 780 languages (including some of which have traditionally been considered dialects). The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists 22 major Indian languages and English; however, many of the scheduled languages are actually umbrella terms that encompass multiple distinct languages. For example, Hindi, India's official language, has varieties such as Bhojpuri, Gondi, Awadhi, Magadhi, and Chattisgarhi, with more than a million speakers each. The distinction between language and dialect is more a political than a linguistic dilemma, and hence it is bitterly contested in terms of linguistic self-determination by minority language groups. These contestations have a significant impact on language education in India, a matter we will revisit in the next section.

The crucial point to note is that Indian multilingualism is a layered and complex phenomenon, and languages in India do not lend themselves to hard classifications. Rather, they exist in a continuum with overlapping etymologies and cultural expressions. In different regions and communities, the contexts of language use typically converge, making it difficult to say which language one has learned first or completely before learning a second. Indian multilingualism is *characterized by simultaneous rather than sequential language acquisition*. In other words, any 'normal' Indian child may hear one language at home, another in the neighbourhood and a third at the marketplace. It would be difficult for the child to distinguish between these languages while growing up, since two or three languages could coexist harmoniously in their environment. For example, a child may hear/learn to speak Bodo at home, Assamese in the larger community and Mising in the marketplace, all from infancy. Without being formally taught any of these languages, the child would learn to speak all three languages (with varying degrees of proficiency) in the appropriate context. At home, the child may also hear Hindi on TV or the ubiquitous mobile phone, and use it while playing with Bodo and Assamese-speaking friends. Quite possibly, the child would use several languages together to express meaning, using words from more than one language in the same sentence. This is more than "code-switching" or "code-mixing", because it is likely that the child has not consciously developed one linguistic "code" representing a particular language, but has begun storing and managing grammatical forms in a unique cognitive system that allows them to retrieve linguistic elements from a common core.

Multilingualism as an Educational Resource

Although Indian education policies since Independence in 1947 have reiterated the need to honor and celebrate the country's unique societal multilingual practices through language education, a gap persists between the goal and the practice. The NEP 2020, for example, provides a compelling argument to promote "multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning" (p. 5). It plans to "invest in large numbers of language teachers in all regional languages around the country, and, in particular, for all languages mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India" (p. 13). These teachers would be "encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction" (p. 13). Although well-intentioned, these strategies do not reflect the multilingual habitus of Indian citizens, nor the complex ways in which Indians use multiple languages fluently in society.

Another issue that policy struggles to address is accommodating non-dominant languages in education. The NEP (2020) declares that "the three languages [to be learnt within the TLF] will be the choice of States, regions, and students themselves, as long as at least two of the three languages are native to India" (p. 14) and that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language" (p. 13). This horizontal listing of "home language," "mother tongue," and "local language" as alternatives to regional language obscures the vertical hierarchy of languages, which continues to promote Scheduled languages at the expense of languages spoken by minoritized linguistic groups. Although the new formulation of the NEP does not name English or make it compulsory, aspirations for English have led to its inclusion as one of the languages in the TLF and have also contributed to the proliferation of low-fee, low-resourced private schools with English as the medium of instruction (EMI). The Ministry of Education, Government of India, reports that 58 to 69 languages are used as language subjects and/or media of instruction in India (MoE, n.d.). In Assam alone, nine languages have been adopted as languages of instruction, with several more included in the basket of languages in education. However, Hindi and English continue to be the non-regional languages in the TFL, forcing many children to begin literacy in a language not spoken at home or used in the immediate environment.

Furthermore, in many states, such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Hindi continues to be the medium of education in government schools, despite these states having many languages, including Bhojpuri and Awadhi, with over a million speakers. The same situation prevails in many states, especially in states like Assam and Odisha, which have, in addition to sizable populations speaking other Eighth Schedule languages such as Bengali and Hindi, many indigenous, tribal, and minority (ITM) languages. In a state like Nagaland, the situation is even more complex. Nagaland has 17 major tribes/language groups, as well as several varieties. There is no single tribal language spoken across the state, nor is there any tribal language that is mutually intelligible between communities, forcing the government to adopt English as the medium of instruction. There is also no official recognition of Nagamese, a creole that serves as the language of wider communication (LWC), which has been adopted by indigenous Nagas for inter-tribal communication.

For language education to respond adequately to the goal of education policies for a thriving multilingual country, language teaching in schools will have to follow a similar trajectory to language learning outside school. Educational achievement will have to be premised on strong foundational literacy in languages that children use to make sense of the world around them, as well as in languages that prepare them for higher education and career pathways. If the current poor performance in literacy and numeracy of Indian children (ASER, 2024; IFC, 2022; PISA, 2009) at the foundational stage of learning is to be arrested,

language education curricula and pedagogy will have to be restructured according to the guidelines of the NCFSE (2023), which lays out specific objectives and timelines for introducing three languages in education, named R1, R2 and R3. Keeping this classification in mind and utilising our traditional and historically experience of being multilingual, language education can be planned along the following lines:

- First, focusing on teaching or reading and writing in the familiar language, with the child's oral language proficiency and cognitive wealth as the base. For this, simple stories within the familiar culture should be used to develop reading comprehension of narrative, descriptive and comparative texts;
- Alongside this, oral familiarity with the second school language - which may be the LWC and already familiar to the child, or a language not available in the context - needs to be developed through simple language functions that have real-life use, such as greeting, asking for and giving information, and so on.
- Once the child has reasonable control over text reading and writing mechanics and composition in their most familiar language and have developed confidence in using Language 2 orally, they should be introduced to simple texts in L2, while continuing to develop their reading and writing skills in Language 1.
- During this period, the curriculum should be light, allowing the child to develop basic control over two languages and use them reasonably well for simple literacy and numeracy tasks.
- Gradually academic content in L1 and some content in L2 can be introduced, so that the child has enough language and confidence to learn new concepts/ideas in these languages r*eading on their own.*

Only when the child begins to communicate with ease in both school languages (orally and in writing; one at a time or in a mix of both) should the third language be introduced. By this time, the child will have learned to use their cognitive skills to effortlessly sort grammatical and cultural knowledge of the languages in their brain.

Until this happens, the child should not be assessed on their ability to reproduce textbook content, but rather on their use of language to perform real-life tasks, such as recounting their daily life, explaining how they solved a math problem, or describing a familiar plant. Learning content will be much faster and more comprehensible to the child if they have developed adequate linguistic skills to read material without the teacher's translation or paraphrasing, and if the material is aligned with their biological age and cultural experience. If we agree that the key to educational success and societal wellbeing is the ability to communicate one's learning in the most eloquent and economical way, we need to reimagine our language education policy and pedagogy. This means we must work towards moving children away from rote-learning of unfamiliar content to engagement with real life problems and contexts.

Language in Education in Pakistan

Language has been a dominant issue in Pakistan's education policy since its independence in 1947. The country has a multifaceted linguistic background, with Urdu as the national language and the lingua franca. As the official language, English also holds several additional statuses, including a medium of instruction, a language of business, and an educational language, alongside several regional languages spoken across different provinces. Throughout history, Urdu was encouraged as the national language from 1947 to 1973 to unite the country, but English remained mainly in management and higher education. Urdu has been recognized as the national language by the 1973 Constitution, allowing provinces to continue promoting their regional languages. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the

emphasis on Urdu-medium instruction increased; meanwhile, English-medium schools also grew exponentially, resulting in a linguistic divide. In 2009, the National Education Policy (NEP) was introduced, which emphasized English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics students from grade four onwards, extending to higher education. The introduction of the 2020 Single National Curriculum (SNC) aimed to ensure consistency in education, with English serving as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics students, and Urdu for all other subjects.

Existing Language in Education Policy

Pakistan's language policy provisions that Urdu or regional languages be used as the medium of instruction in early grades. However, in reality, English is introduced early in the first primary level of education in Pakistan. At the secondary and higher education levels, English has been declared a vital and dominant medium of instruction, particularly for science, technology, and higher studies in the country. It is also important to note that Madrassa Education was generally in Urdu or Arabic, with some addition of English and regional languages (Rahman, 2016). The educational policy has granted provinces autonomy, allowing them to promote their regional languages (e.g., Sindhi in Sindh, Pashto in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Overall, three language policies are implemented in Pakistan, with English holding the status of an aspirational language.

In Pakistan, the curriculum includes multiple languages, replicating the country's linguistic diversity. Urdu, the national language, serves as the primary medium of instruction in many public departments, while English is emphasized as a key language for higher education and official communication. Provincial and local languages, such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi, are incorporated into provincial educational programs to preserve cultural heritage. Arabic is taught in religious education in Madrassa (Rahman, 2004) due to its significance in Islam. The various governments of Pakistan have taken steps to encourage bilingual and multilingual education; however, differences exist between urban and rural areas, as well as between public and private institutions, in terms of language instruction, quality, and accessibility.

Since the existence of Pakistan in 1947, language policies have been controversial, and it is one of the reasons that Pakistan was deprived of its eastern arm in 1971. It was a contentious issue between Urdu and Bangla, but later on, this rift shifted from Urdu to English. Pakistan is a multilingual country, with Urdu as its national language and English as its official language, which has also influenced educational policies from time to time.

Not only that, but regional and local languages have also been influencing Pakistani educational policies (Rahman, 2004; Mansoor & Kamran, 2017). Regional languages like Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi are generally spoken in various parts of the country but are not specified as being of equal importance in education. Linguistic multiplicity is not fully addressed in policy-making, which is crucial to addressing challenges in language instruction.

Challenges of Language in Education Policies

Language divide is being confronted in Pakistan. English-medium educational institutions are often associated with higher socio-economic status, which can lead to disparities. This is why there is no equality in academic institutions. The high-ranked elite class is pursuing their siblings for English-medium educational institutions, while common and middle-class people are forced to continue their siblings' education in generally public-sector colleges and universities. But, on the other hand, religious-minded Pakistanis are studying in Madrassas or religious Maktabs of the country.

Regional languages are often ignored in favor of Urdu and English, which is creating an inferiority complex among the citizens of Pakistan. However, it is also a fact that these people are emphasizing their local languages in protest against Urdu and English. Besides, the frequent changes in language policy create inconsistency in education quality.

Future Directions

A balanced multilingual approach that promotes both Urdu and English, while ensuring regional and local languages are well-maintained, is essential. Though English is implemented as the medium of instruction, many teachers require training to improve their proficiency so that EMI can be implemented effectively. Likewise, there is an urgent need to implement mother-tongue-based education in regional languages to expand the literacy and comprehension ratio among Pakistani students. Pakistan's language-in-education policy remains a subject of debate, with concerns about national identity, socio-economic disparities, and learning outcomes shaping ongoing discussions.

Language in Education in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a predominantly monolingual country where Bangla is the national language. Approximately 98% of Bangladeshis speak Bangla (Hamid & Earling, 2016), despite the presence of 50 indigenous communities and 42 living languages, including 36 ethnic minority languages. These ethnic languages originated from mostly Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic language families ("Languages", 2022). On the other hand, Bangla originated from the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. Bangla has several regional dialects, including Chittagonian, Sylheti, Dhakaiya Kutti, and Noakhailla. Despite their somewhat mutually unintelligible vocabulary and phonological properties, Bangla is the only lingua franca across Bangladesh (Sareen & Rahman, 2005).

The language policy in Bangladesh was inevitably influenced by the country's political and historical background. After gaining Independence from the British Raj in 1947, Bangladesh entered the Pakistani Era, emerging as a new country as East Pakistan, a part of West Pakistan. During the Pakistani period, Urdu and English were predominantly used as official languages in East Pakistan; however, since the majority of people spoke Bangla, Bangla had already become the common language for communication in every sphere of life in this territory (Hamid & Earling, 2016). Later, protesting against the linguistic hegemony of West Pakistan, the Bangladeshi students sacrificed their lives in 1952 with the demand for Bangla as the national language in addition to Urdu.

Language in Education Policy

Bangladesh became an independent nation in 1971, and, with the motto of establishing 'Bangla Everywhere', the Bangla Implementation Acts were passed in 1972 and 1987. Bangla was declared as the medium of instruction at the secondary and higher secondary levels of education. Furthermore, some books were also translated into Bangla from English to align with the curriculum (Rahman, 2009). Due to the widespread use of Bangla, the use of English was further reduced as a medium of communication for official and educational purposes (Banu & Sussex, 2001). The language policies enacted by the Bangladesh government since Independence reflect its attempt to establish cultural and linguistic unity and homogeneity; however, its non-inclusivity of other languages, especially ethnic languages and English, in the education sector has remained adversarial among policymakers and educators. In particular, the necessity to develop proficiency in English as a global medium of communication and higher studies has become a pressing issue to be resolved in the Bangladeshi education system, time and again.

During the British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent, which included Bangladesh, English remained the second language and the official language in government offices and schools (Ara 2020). Following the enactment of the Bangla Implementation Law, the use of English was limited to official and academic activities (Shurovi, 2014; Rahman et al., 2018). To further complicate the situation, there has been ambiguity regarding the status of English in post-independent Bangladesh, which has recently been agreed upon by educators as a foreign language in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2018).

One of the consequences of replacing English with Bangla as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges was the deterioration of the standard of English in education. However, the soaring demand for English as a means to communicate with international communities, pursue higher studies, and access opportunities for better jobs abroad prompted the government to introduce English as a compulsory subject in the 1990s at the secondary and higher secondary levels of education. Furthermore, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in 1999 with the aim of upgrading and modernizing the teaching and learning of English at the school and college levels (Nuby et al., 2019). However, CLT was not implemented properly due to a lack of teacher training, a prevalence of exam-oriented classroom practices, excluding speaking and listening activities and a lack of the necessary logistic support, and all these factors resulted in the disappointing outcome of a low proficiency in English among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Bangladesh (Ara, 2020; Kirkwood, 2013; Nuby et al., 2019).

When it comes to English at the tertiary level, English is the prevalent medium of instruction at private universities; however, teachers mix Bangla and English in classroom discussions in public universities, indicating incongruities in language policies in higher education in Bangladesh (Hasan, 2022). Overall, the English Language Teaching (ELT) policy in Bangladesh has been termed as "fragmented and inconsistent" (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). The National Education Commission (NEC) in 2003 recognized the issue, stating that the lack of proficiency in both English and Bangla languages among the learners could be partly attributed to the absence of a clear and effective language policy in our education sector (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Rahman, 2009). Notably, the overall concern of the policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators evolved around developing learners' proficiency in Bangla and English as the core languages in education, leaving out the ethnic and indigenous languages.

Ethnic Minority Languages in Education

In Bangladesh, the ethnic minorities, also known as indigenous people, consist mainly of 10 tribal groups, including the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, which are the largest groups. The other groups include the Mros, Garo, Sadri, Santal, Manipuri, and Jumma, among others. They are considered ethno-linguistic minorities, characterized by distinct social, economic, cultural, and religious lives and languages (Sareen & Rahman, 2005). Immediately after the Independence of Bangladesh, the government declared a new constitution based on Bangali nationalism as the core ideology for its language and education policy, marginalizing the ethnic tribal people and their language in national policymaking (Sareen & Rahman, 2005).

According to the National Education Policy (NEP 2010), the Bangladesh government has committed to ensuring inclusive education to establish social equity and justice (Kabir & Hasnat, 2015). Therefore, the government of Bangladesh launched projects to offer primary education to the ethnic minorities in their mother tongues. According to that education policy, the indigenous children would be educated in their mother tongue from the pre-primary level to class II. From class III onwards, they would learn and study in Bangla, which is the mainstream language. In line with these projects, the government initiated steps in 2017 to

make textbooks available in five major tribal mother tongues: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Sadri. However, reports indicate a shortage of these textbooks written in ethnic languages in Tripura communities, mentioning that some schools in 2021 received only two textbooks as teachers' copies and none for the students. Therefore, many indigenous children in Sreemangal Upazilla were being taught in Bangla ("Indigenous Kids", 2022).

Apart from the scarcity of textbooks, a lack of school teachers versed in indigenous languages and the necessary training for teachers has become a major concern among educators. Apart from the education sector, the tribal and indigenous languages are facing adversity in society due to a lack of interest among young learners, who are more inclined to learn Bangla for academic benefits. Therefore, languages like Rengmitcha and Kharia are now spoken by only a few families. According to Prof Shourav Sikder, "A language dies when the youth refuse to speak it. It gets lost when the new generations don't want to use it, especially because there is no opportunity for primary education in their mother tongue" ("International Mother Language", 2022). However, if a language dies, a culture and history also disappear with it. Therefore, effective measures with policymaking initiatives are in demand at this time to preserve indigenous languages and their heritages.

Language in Education in the Maldives

The official language of the Maldives is Dhivehi, also known as Maldivian, an Indo-Aryan language closely related to the Sinhala language of Sri Lanka. However, language education in the Maldives is historically viewed as a religious activity, where children are expected to perform their religious rituals, such as learning to recite the Holy Quran for prayer. For this, Arabic was taught in Maktabs (religious schools) for Quranic recitation and religious studies. This idea was closely explained by research arguing that education was then informal and community-based, with a focus on Islamic teachings (Zahir et al., 2023). In the 20th century, Dhivehi served as the primary medium of instruction for primary education, with the language also taught as a subject (Mohamed, 2020). However, after the Maldives gained independence in 1965, English became the dominant medium of instruction. While Dhivehi remained a subject, its use as the primary instructional language diminished, particularly at higher levels (Mohamed, 2020). Today, the language education system in the Maldives focuses on three main languages: Dhivehi, English, and Arabic.

However, the poor use of the local language by children may lead to a detrimental impact on the Maldivian identity of future generations, as the foreign language English becomes dominant in the education system. Local researchers have extensively discussed the pressing issue of many Maldivian children struggling to competently communicate in their local language due to the mixing of languages in their everyday use of English. Some of these arguments are linked to the education system, as Dhivehi, the local language, is given less emphasis in the medium of instruction compared to English (Mohamed, 2020). This issue becomes more concerning due to the limited resources available in the local language and regional disparities, both in terms of access to quality language education and resources.

The diminished emphasis on Dhivehi as a medium of instruction has raised concerns about Maldivian identity. Research highlights the struggles of Maldivian children to communicate fluently in Dhivehi due to frequent code-switching with English (Mohamed, 2020). National assessments reveal low Dhivehi proficiency, with Grade 4 students scoring an average of 48%, compared to 63% in Mathematics and 57% in English. Similarly, in GCE O-Level exams, less than 50% of students pass Dhivehi, compared to higher pass rates in English and Mathematics.

The current proficiency level of students in Dhivehi suggests a need for a more balanced language education policy that strengthens Dhivehi while acknowledging the practical importance of English and Arabic in Maldivian society. The poor academic performance in Dhivehi highlights the need for targeted interventions, including improved teacher training, updated teaching materials, and community efforts to emphasize the importance of Dhivehi in maintaining cultural identity. Particularly, students in remote atolls face significant disadvantages in accessing quality language education. Limited resources, outdated teaching methods, and insufficient teacher training exacerbate these challenges.

To counteract the dominance of English, the government should promote Dhivehi-language content across media, entertainment, and digital platforms. Creating engaging materials such as books, games, and films in Dhivehi can appeal to younger generations, making the language more relevant and attractive. Besides, schools must adopt a balanced approach to teaching Dhivehi and English. Incorporating cultural and historical content into the Dhivehi curriculum can also strengthen its perceived value.

Summing up, the Maldives' focus on bilingual education has fostered English proficiency, aligning with global demands. However, the marginalization of Dhivehi threatens cultural identity, while Arabic remains underutilized in broader educational contexts. By prioritizing the preservation of Dhivehi and expanding the role of Arabic, while maintaining the practical benefits of English, the Maldives can create a language education system that reflects its cultural heritage and prepares its citizens for the globalized world.

Language in Education in Bhutan

Bhutan, despite its small size, with a land area of 38,394 square kilometers and a population of less than one million, is remarkably linguistically diverse country. The country is home to 19 languages, the majority of which belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family (van Driem, 1992). These languages exhibit similarities across multiple linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary, phonology, syntax, and semantics, which highlight their shared roots in a common ancestral language referred to as a 'Proto' language (Dorjee, 2014). Lhotshamkha, also known as Nepali, belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family, which shares linguistic affinities with Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and other related languages commonly spoken in India and Nepal. In contemporary Bhutan, Dzongkha serves as the national language, representing cultural and national identity, while English functions as the primary medium of instruction in education and as the language of technology, business, and international relations. This dual-language approach exemplifies Bhutan's efforts to preserve its linguistic heritage while adapting to the demands of globalization.

Under Bhutan's language policy, Dzongkha is designated as the official language, while English serves as the medium of instruction. However, it has been observed that Bhutanese individuals often demonstrate greater fluency in English than in Dzongkha, indicating an imbalance in bilingual proficiency. Rinchen (1999) found that students generally perform better in English compared to Dzongkha.

The increasing prominence of English and the declining use of Dzongkha can be attributed to several factors, including the introduction of Western-style education, strong Western influences, the limited availability of instructional resources in Dzongkha, and the accessibility of English-language materials. Wangchuk (2019) argues that Dzongkha instruction requires a shift in pedagogical methods, as the current approach, which relies heavily on rote memorization and reprimand, is ill-suited for a liberal education system. He further emphasizes that language instruction must account for the cognitive and linguistic

realities of learners, recognizing that individuals have diverse ways of acquiring and understanding new languages.

Until the 1960s, Bhutan did not have an official language policy, and no spoken language was designated as the national language. This lack of recognition was largely because none of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the region had evolved into a written form (Dorjee, 2014). Despite Dzongkha being regarded as a symbol of national identity and cultural heritage, learners often find it difficult to learn. This challenge arises from the scarcity of educational resources and the extensive use of Choekey (classical Tibetan) in Dzongkha instruction (Tenzin, 2002).

Bhutan's language policy is firmly rooted in its Constitution, which serves as the highest legal authority. Article 1, Section 8, proclaims, "Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan," and Article 4, Section 1, emphasizes the preservation, protection, and promotion of "language" and "literature" as integral aspects of Bhutan's cultural heritage. This official language policy provides a solid foundation for advancing Dzongkha as the national language while also emphasizing the preservation of the country's rich linguistic diversity.

The country's educational policy further emphasizes multilingualism, promoting proficiency in local minority languages, Dzongkha, and English (Dukpa, 2019). The School Education and Research Unit (2012) describes the gradual shift from home languages to Dzongkha and eventually to English as a "golden balance" that fosters both multicultural identity and multilingual competence (p. 133). However, the curriculum excludes minority languages, leaving their preservation entirely to families, as students are expected to acquire their home languages at home while learning Dzongkha and English at school (School Education and Research Unit, 2012, p. 103). Despite the Dzongkha Development Commission's efforts to promote Dzongkha, many schools have policies that prioritize the use of English within their premises. For instance, students are often penalized for not speaking English on school grounds. This practice reflects the reality that, apart from the Dzongkha subject, all other subjects are taught and assessed in English.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the scenario of language in education policies and practices in South Asian countries. Analyzing language in educational policies and practices of South Asian nations, we reveal that colonial historical forces and ruling classes significantly influenced the choice of language and its use in education. The hegemonic influence of ruling elites and their ideologies also impacted the preferences of entities at the bottom of the language pyramid. From the country-specific discussions, we have drawn some generic but telling insights and conclusions.

The language demographic data reveal that all South Asian countries are rich in linguistic diversity. Very few people in South Asia grow up with a single language. Whether they undergo simultaneous rather than sequential language acquisition or learning a second language outside home, multilingualism is the everyday reality. However, the diversity appears to be dwindling with the passage of time. Firstly, the British *Raj* introduced English to South Asia; although the British left, their legacy, including the English language, remained not only in the former colonies but also in Bhutan and Nepal, which had adopted the Western model of education through the colonies. English is now treated either as the official language or as an alternative to the national official language, or as an adjacent language, leading to the rise of English.

The language policies in these countries have aimed to cater to learners' interests and needs in recent decades by aligning with the nation's linguistic and cultural diversity. The

policies have also tried to address the voices of minority language speakers, recognizing that the policies should also help preserve these languages. However, inadvertent emphasis by common people on English and the mainstream national language is causing the marginalization of minority communities through a faster language shift and imminent language deaths.

The literature shows a tendency towards dissent regarding the rise of English and national language hegemony, which has led to the decline and death of local languages; ironically, however, the higher the dissent, the stronger the demand for learning English. This has led to the government's explicit policies being appropriated, resulting in EMI practices. EMI not only helped boost the presence of English in education but also the production of school graduates who perform better in English than in the national languages. Bhutan explicitly shows this situation. The literature also highlights concerns about countering the dominance of English and the national dominant language by creating an equitable situation to help preserve the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent.

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