



THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION: GANDHI'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The question of language in education has remained one of the most complex and debated topics, particularly in multilingual societies like India. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the foremost leaders of India's independence movement and a visionary thinker on education, strongly advocated for the use of the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction in early education. Gandhi believed that language is not merely a tool for communication but a critical carrier of culture, values, identity, and emotional expression. This paper explores Gandhi's perspective on the role of the mother tongue in education and its relevance in contemporary educational debates. It analyzes Gandhi's philosophical writings, particularly his vision of *Nai Talim* (Basic Education), and argues that mother-tongue instruction fosters not only deeper cognitive understanding but also cultural rootedness and ethical development. Drawing upon relevant literature, policy documents, and comparative educational models, the paper also examines the cognitive and social benefits of mother-tongue education. The methodology includes qualitative content analysis of Gandhi's texts and contemporary educational research. The discussion section evaluates the impact of colonial education policies, the growing dominance of English-medium education, and the recent recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India. The findings suggest that Gandhi's model remains highly relevant today and should be integrated within a pluralistic and multilingual educational framework. The conclusion offers practical suggestions for educational reform in India and similar contexts, with a focus on linguistic justice, inclusivity, and balanced multilingualism in line with Gandhian ideals.

KEYWORDS: Mother Tongue, Gandhi, Education, Multilingualism, Language Policy, Cultural Identity, Basic Education, NEP 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

Language in education is a fundamental issue in multilingual societies like India, where linguistic diversity intersects with historical, political, and cultural dimensions. Since the colonial period, the dominance of English as a medium of instruction has influenced educational policy and social mobility in India. Yet, this trend often marginalizes indigenous languages and disconnects learners from their cultural roots. Mahatma Gandhi's educational philosophy provides a powerful counter-narrative to this trend. He believed that the use of the mother tongue in early education was not merely a pedagogical necessity but a moral imperative. According to Gandhi, a child's first language is intimately connected to their identity, thought processes, and sense of belonging.

Gandhi's concept of *Nai Talim* or Basic Education, developed in the 1930s and 1940s, emphasized craft-based learning, moral development, self-reliance, and instruction through the mother tongue. In his writings in *Young India* and *Harijan*, Gandhi consistently argued that education in a foreign language leads to a disconnect between knowledge and life, fosters rote learning, and alienates students from their communities. For Gandhi, true education meant the holistic development of the individual—intellectual, moral, and emotional—and this was only possible when the child learned in a language they understood deeply.

In recent years, the debate on the medium of instruction has resurfaced with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which recommends mother tongue or regional language instruction at least until Grade 5. This recommendation has reignited interest in Gandhian ideals and their relevance in present-day India. However, challenges remain in implementing such policies, especially in urban and elite contexts where English is often perceived as the only path to success.

This paper aims to explore Gandhi's views on mother tongue instruction, compare them with contemporary research and policies, and propose a Gandhian framework for inclusive and equitable education. It addresses the following questions: What was Gandhi's position on the role of the mother tongue in education? How does this align with contemporary educational research? What challenges and possibilities exist for implementing such a model today?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relationship between language and education has been widely explored by scholars across disciplines. Research in linguistics, cognitive psychology, and education has established that learning in one's first language facilitates comprehension, critical thinking, and emotional security. According to Cummins (2000), strong foundational skills in the first language support the acquisition of second languages and overall academic success. UNESCO (1953,



2003) has consistently advocated for mother tongue instruction in early childhood, recognizing its role in inclusive education.

In the Indian context, various scholars have highlighted the historical marginalization of indigenous languages due to colonial policies. The imposition of English as the dominant medium of instruction during the British Raj created an educational elite disconnected from the masses (Rahman, 1996). Post-independence, while Indian languages gained constitutional recognition, English retained its prestige and power, particularly in higher education and employment.

Gandhi's educational philosophy has been studied in several works (Sharma, 2002; Singh, 2011). His idea of *Nai Talim* is viewed as a radical alternative to colonial education. According to Gandhi, instruction through a foreign language is intellectually taxing for children and leads to superficial learning. He argued that the mother tongue is essential for developing originality, moral character, and a sense of national unity.

Recent studies, such as Pandey (2023), revisit Gandhi's ideas in light of the NEP 2020. These works argue that Gandhi's vision offers a culturally rooted, socially inclusive, and pedagogically sound model for Indian education. However, implementation challenges, including lack of trained teachers, inadequate resources in regional languages, and societal preference for English, persist.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology, focusing on textual and thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary texts include Gandhi's writings, such as *Young India*, *Harijan*, and his speeches and letters compiled in collections like *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Key themes related to language, education, and identity are identified and analyzed.

Secondary sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy documents related to language and education. Relevant literature on multilingual education, the cognitive science of language learning, and the history of educational policy in India is included to contextualize Gandhi's ideas within modern research.

The analysis aims to bridge Gandhi's philosophical insights with contemporary educational realities. The interpretive approach is particularly suited to exploring ideological and ethical dimensions, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of the values underlying Gandhi's educational vision.

Limitations of this methodology include the lack of empirical field data. However, the aim is not to test a hypothesis but to develop a conceptual framework based on Gandhian thought and assess its relevance in current contexts.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Gandhi's insistence on mother tongue instruction emerges from a deep understanding of the connection between language and thought. He wrote, "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them... It is a crime to make education through a foreign tongue." He believed that education should be accessible to all, not just the elite fluent in English.

One of the core tenets of Gandhi's educational philosophy is *rootedness*. A child learning in their mother tongue is more likely to understand concepts, participate in discussions, and relate knowledge to their lived experiences. Gandhi contrasted this with English-medium instruction, which, in his view, turned students into "second-hand Europeans," alienated from their own culture and community.

Gandhi's *Nai Talim* proposed a holistic model in which education integrated practical work, moral instruction, and intellectual development—all in the mother tongue. Language, in this model, was not a neutral medium but an instrument of social empowerment and cultural preservation.

In contrast, post-independence India continued to valorize English, especially in urban and elite contexts. English became associated with economic opportunity, global mobility, and prestige, while regional languages were relegated to the margins.

Contemporary cognitive research supports Gandhi's views. Learning in a familiar language reduces cognitive load, enhances retention, and fosters a positive self-concept (Cummins, 2000). However, policy implementation remains a challenge. Although NEP 2020 advocates for mother-tongue instruction till Grade 5, the policy is non-binding and lacks clear roadmaps for multilingual regions and urban settings where English-medium schools dominate.

A Gandhian model of education would advocate for multilingualism without hierarchy. Mother tongue would be the foundation, but students would also gradually learn regional and global languages, including English. Such a model promotes both inclusion and competence, without sacrificing cultural identity.

5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The analysis yields several key findings:

1. Gandhi viewed the mother tongue as central to the educational process. For him, language was not just a tool but the very soul of learning.
2. Instruction in the mother tongue leads to better cognitive development, comprehension, and emotional well-being. This is supported by both Gandhi's philosophical insights and modern research.
3. Mother tongue instruction also strengthens cultural identity, moral development, and community cohesion.
4. Gandhi's educational philosophy challenges the elitism inherent in English-medium instruction and advocates for educational equity.



5. While modern policies like NEP 2020 align partially with Gandhian principles, practical barriers—such as lack of resources, teacher training, and parental preferences—remain significant.
6. A balanced multilingual approach, rooted in the mother tongue but inclusive of other languages, aligns with both Gandhian ideals and global best practices.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on mother-tongue education was visionary, rooted in a profound understanding of the links between language, identity, and knowledge. In a globalized world where English dominates education and employment, Gandhi's perspective serves as a reminder that linguistic diversity and cultural rooted

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