English Studies in the Context of Multilingual India: Teaching and the New Education Policy

Ratna Raman

Abstract

English has been making inroads into India and is contentiously entrenched as a connecting language all over the country due to processes of colonialism. There is an urgent need to examine the role envisaged for English in schools, along with the mother tongue and the local language as well as the role visualized for English Studies at the University. In the divide between empirical sciences and languages, languages continue to be treated merely as functional mediums for the same. The qualitative analysis, ethical value, and the cultural signification a language represents through literature plays a negligible role in the schooling process instead of providing building blocks for language as an organic medium and celebrating the multiplicity and range that language occupies in terms of emotional, psychic, cultural and educational dimensions. This article draws attention to why the framers of the New Education Policy 2020 need to make this a part of pedagogic practice.

Keywords: New Education Policy 2020, pandemic, English studies, local languages, regional literature.

The Pandemic and its Impact

The post-covid world continues to impinge upon our lives. For almost two years, it has resulted in the complete shutting down of the world as we knew it. Even today, almost a month short of two years, at New Delhi, the university struggles to get its offline teaching in place. Matters have been complicated by the fact that several students from other cities and states are in their hometowns and the university has lost teachers.
in various departments. Teaching has been conducted online, for the second ongoing year. For two years now, young people who have been enrolled at the university have no idea at all about what university life at a college campus entails.

What is worse, many of them were inducted into the pandemic crisis, in their last year at school. So familiar worlds, both at school and at the university have either been wrung out or have been ripped asunder; there are now three batches of undergraduate students; coping variously in different years at the university, and in the meanwhile both students and teachers try to grapple with the nature of online education. Technology and networks are often an issue. Connectivity is a problem, for those who have access to the internet and to laptops. For those who struggle with cell phones, it is a strain to learn via digital media on such a diminutive screen. On the other hand, several students at the lower end of the spectrum, both culturally and economically do not have access to digital technology and there is still a sizeable number of Indian students who come to the university as first generation university goers and neither Covid nor online teaching with erratic connectivity have been kind to them.

Recently, in response to a flash boycott of online classes initiated by elite students living in the capital, the Delhi University administration quickly announced the opening up of the university for offline classes, as they are now being called, although this constituted regular modes of teaching in the classroom, in the pre-Covid era. Now, there is a mad scramble for a return to classroom teaching. This is indeed a strange predicament, because of the issues of finding resources and travelling amidst the rigors of social distancing, isolation, varied stages of vaccination and finding accommodation in a strange new city for a short period of time; such is the nature of the ground difficulties that the students will need to negotiate. The events of this week and after will highlight the fault lines that exist in the context of higher education with a crumbling infrastructure, wherein social distancing protocols will jostle with the crush of OBE systems of examination and evaluation and the systems of teaching languages and literatures in the post-Covid period. It is becoming increasingly clear to a large number of teachers and students that teaching in the classroom is the most relevant teaching pedagogy and best extant practice despite all other odds.
We have in the period after the Covid lockdown witnessed attrition in the online teaching processes, with students in their late teens. There are burnouts, eyestrain and a regular dip in attendance by the end of the term. A percentage of low participation is because of lack of connectivity and access. A greater proportion is because learning through actual contact and engagement with a skilled teacher and learning in the classroom continue to be the most vital components of holistic learning. Technology, can only provide for contingencies or for occasional fallback. It cannot become a permanent replacement for classroom teaching or the teaching human.

The New Juggernaut

It therefore becomes crucial for us to recognize that the NEP 2020 is being thrust upon the education system that is already teetering because of an unforeseen pandemic that loomed over a system gripped by the octopus arms of rapid-fire change that is being put in place without discussion or review.

Accelerating the state of discomfort in higher education, that has been wrung by the pandemic, humungous centralized policies in education continue to be pushed in by the government, and these are being hurried through, as part of a top-down method of implementation that has been at work for almost a decade. With the pandemic afoot, people across all walks of life are struggling to cope and institutions continue to be eroded in the face of loss of human power and infrastructural deficits, to say nothing of connectivity. Lockdown and online teaching have also added their own share of stress and attrition. How do we deal with this juggernaut that promises to crush all extant systems underfoot?

The New Education Policy: An Increase in Time and a Reduction in Curriculum and Quality

An examination of the NEP 2020 brings to the fore all these concerns: In a country that is besieged not only by Covid, but by all manner of hierarchies of class, caste, gender, and language to say the least, how does one respond to the issues raised by the NEP 2020? This article attempts to draw attention to the new challenges that centres of higher education are being coerced into facing. It will examine the space occupied by language and the humanities and the role of English studies in particular, and draw attention to some of the claims being made by the NEP 2020.
The article seeks to examine the increase in the years of study in the new education programme floated by the NEP 2020 as well as the focus on teaching and learning in the mother tongue that the NEP 2020 lays thrust upon, setting up a three-language formula that will also be part of university curricula. While the introduction of the three-language formula at the school level is a relevant option in a country with diverse languages, many of them part of a long list of national languages, we must look closely at exactly what is the nature of the learning factor that is being introduced at the All India level. On the one hand, the number of years in school are apparently to be increased. The introduction declares that by 2030 there will be an attempt to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Such a lofty goal will require the entire education system to be reconfigured to support and foster learning” (NEP, p. 3).

The argument that the 10+2 system will be replaced with a 3+3+4+5 alternative is based on the premise that no bridge exists between the young infant and the schooling system till the age of six years. This is factually incorrect, particularly in urban India, where nursery schooling has been in existence for as long as one can remember and Indian schoolchildren spend two to three years in prenursery and nursery schools before joining Class I. Despite the assertion that “the entire education system” will “require to be reconfigured” the NEP is merely filling old wine in new bottles. It is also important for us to examine whether slow but consistent fixing of the extant problems in education is a better option than the dismantling of an older framework that involves the reinventing of the wheel.

NEP’s modus operandi seems to involve a dilution in the course content at the university, following the dilution in course content at school. Arguably, why should developed and well-rounded children, who have already spent fifteen years at the school as per NEP 2020, come to college in the first place? Why do all of them require a university education?

At the university level, there is an attempt to stretch the course over four years, diluting core teaching, seeing it as a passive space of regurgitated learning and reiteration of whatever the schooling system has imparted over fifteen years. This explains why the academic council at its meeting on February 9, approved of a four-year programme in which the number of credit courses to be taught over four years have
been drastically reduced. The increase in the number of years at the university level for a Bachelors course that could be completed in three years previously, has been offset by a reduction of the dissemination process itself. How can young people, who have learnt less over fifteen years, be offered even less content yet again for another four years and benefit by such experience in a world where systems of knowledge are rapidly expanding? How will the same set of young people suddenly manage to skill and school themselves and become ready to undertake research under a system, that has taken the synergy out of the learning process altogether?

The NEP does not stop at this. Its plans to reduce the years spent in specialization in specific subjects remains very troubling. For instance, at the end of four years, a student can complete a Master’s degree in one year. The question to ask at this point is, how does such change improve the pedagogy of an MA? If the reduction of credits is the example to draw from, no intensive specialization/learning programme is being offered over the four years that the NEP plans to introduce. The reduced number of credits required by students who complete four years at college, will only curtail dissemination of teaching and learning, that is guaranteed to damage excellence and expertise. This is not best pedagogical practice. The MA at the university has just lost been devalued, because the addition of one more year at the BA level has only added on a series of other courses and reduced the required number of credits.

If we compare this system with what was in place around 35 years ago, at the end of any Master’s degree any student with decent grades could begin to teach and tutor undergraduate students and sometimes, even tutor students working towards their Masters. The MPhil and the PhD, rightly so, were research trajectories for students engaging with further specialization in order to teach at the universities. All of this, formatted and forged as part of the best practices of the university are being brutally struck down. Now the suggestion that at the end of a diluted four-year undergraduate programme students can move into a PhD programme is laughable, if it was not so outright alarming.

Currently there is a lot of pressure on the university teacher to not only clear NET, finish a PhD and be published variously, all of which are ambitious programmes, because the transition from studying to teaching
is a complex phenomenon and students need sound core specialization and training in their undergraduate years, as also during their MA. It is important for the NEP to recognize that it cannot propose mixed modes of studying in higher education. The context of specialization of knowledge involves intensive learning and not a dilution. The purpose of schooling the young till they are 18 years old is to allow them to develop into well rounded personalities. There is little need to demolish centres of specialization and render irrelevant the ground-work that has been established by different disciplines in the university.

The NEP manifesto outlines the purpose of education, provides examples of world class institutions (this time of higher learning) and also introduces us to the graduate class of ancient India.

The aim of education in ancient India was not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self. World-class institutions of ancient India such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila and Vallabhi, set the highest standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research and hosted scholars and students from across backgrounds and countries. The Indian education system produced great scholars such as Charaka, Susruta, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Bhaskaracharya, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Chakrapani Datta, Madhava, Panini, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Gautama, Pingala, Sankardev, Maitreyi, Gargi and Thiruvalluvar, among numerous others, who made seminal contributions to world knowledge in diverse fields (NEP, p. 4).

I learnt about Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi and Vikramshila in history class at school. However, it is the NEP 2020 that informs me that these universities had thousands of students from India and the world leaving the mind boggled. Thousands of students as opposed to the lakhs we teach at Delhi University? Was ancient India’s geopolitics global? Did people engage in time travel on Star Trek’s space machine to get to Nalanda and Takshashila and study there? Who were the people who could have accessed these centres of learning? What documents remain in existence, telling us about these thousands of students, Indian and foreign enrolled there? In an age, when guilds and tribes were ways of life, and education was the prerogative of the very few, specifically male in gender, and deeply divided by the hierarchies of caste and community, these fabrications that build upon ancient India and mythologize it beyond recognition are deeply disturbing, especially as any attempt to
question these changes is met by arguments about India’s continued colonial shackles and blinkered mindset.

The recent responses by a section of university teachers to the unilateral scrapping of MPhil programmes in the University as the overturning of a Macaulayan system of education is disturbing because this is a tacit refusal to recognize that the university has been upgrading its teaching pedagogy and methodology steadily. At the university level English Studies “provide a useful index of social development in India since the 1980s,” and have “enabled interrogations of the colonial legacy of the discipline” (Gupta et al., 2015, p. ix).

Troublingly, while the NEP 2020 is drafted in the English language, it does not acknowledge the centrality of the English language as the medium of dissemination and chooses instead to celebrate Sanskrit:

The importance, relevance, and beauty of the classical languages and literature of India also cannot be overlooked. Sanskrit, while also an important modern language mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, possesses a classical literature that is greater in volume than that of Latin and Greek put together, containing vast treasures of mathematics, philosophy, grammar, music, politics, medicine, architecture, metallurgy, drama, poetry, storytelling, and more (known as ‘Sanskrit Knowledge Systems’), written by people of various religions as well as non-religious people, and by people from all walks of life and a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds over thousands of years (NEP, p. 14).

The Problems with the New Policy

An engagement with the voluminous material available in a particular language and the creation of a parallel number of years required for its dissemination, seems to be the thrust of the new education policy that has adopted for itself a system of quantitative measures to evaluate the relevance of social sciences and extant languages and the medium of instruction. The irony is that the desired reduction of the role of English, has not met with a volume of quality teaching materials in regional languages. Take for instance, the teaching of Sanskrit, at the school level from middle school, and into senior school. Within the schooling system, it is not taught to students in order that they may speak it. In fact, the teaching of Sanskrit is plagued with the problem that all mother tongues and regional languages face in the school syllabi. All regional languages
are taught at a very functional level. The study of Sanskrit and Hindi at the undergraduate level is available at Delhi University. Departments in Sanskrit and other national languages are already in place in universities all over India wherein students train, specialize, research and teach.

The problem lies not in the availability of a range of subjects and literature in any language, but in the disseminating of languages to students in a friendly learning context and the absence of good reading and reference material and libraries that can further learning. As a policy, many schools in the capital and in several states teach science, social studies and mathematics in regional languages. Adequate, extensive and well produced learning reading aids that can foster learning remain in short supply. The teaching/learning of science, social science and mathematics in the regional language or the mother tongue in a stepmotherly fashion does not really open up the rich, imaginative and emotive wealth of any language. In fact, the teaching of functional English and functional regional languages make up the mainstay of teaching practices in most schools. Students are seldom grounded in the wealth and welter of poetry or literature that is available in any particular language. It is a well-known fact that a large number of students memorize paragraphs and essays and then reproduce them in every language that is taught to them. The ability of young minds to grapple with words and ideas, essential to root them in a cultural and social matrix, and enable their minds to grow has not been part of the middle and senior school programmes. To make such practice possible, we need to train and develop expertise in every linguistic and literary field. Good teachers cannot be made overnight.

As a matter of fact, the role of the full-length essay in English, arguably the most efficient medium of education that has evolved as part of English curriculum in schools has not been part of the teaching and learning syllabi for well over fifteen years. We struggle with this at the university, where the technologically aided cut-paste method is now adopted by students as survival tactics in lieu of the rigor of critical thinking.

Any literature in any language can open up the emotive life of the person who is immersed in it. Languages through stories, poetry, memory and myth build up a complex humanistic grid. For this to happen, the use of language primarily as a medium of instruction for mathematics and
science subjects, as is the current practice falls terribly short. Unless this is taken care of in the schooling process, not much leeway can be made. All schools urgently require teachers well versed in regional literature. The state needs to train teachers for the same and enable skilled teachers to emerge, while also ensuring that well-crafted and finished books on regional literatures exist in libraries and are in circulation. Teachers steeped in regional literatures and with great command over the particular language will have to be trained. None of this can happen overnight, as it requires meticulous collation of material, and then a process of training wherein it can be assimilated. To dismantle English as a link language or as the most evolved medium of instruction available to us would be a grievous mistake.

Meanwhile, unable to comprehend the enormous changes in curriculum that were carried out in English studies as well as other disciplines, the NEP is working at great dilution in core specializations. It is therefore unclear as to what role the NEP visualizes for languages at the university level. New policies of maximizing education have already led to the shutdown of smaller language departments such as Tamil, and Telugu, in undergraduate colleges at Delhi university. How does the NEP plan to promote and sustain regional literatures in this case? While the plan to do so remains delightfully vague, the attempt to trim down credits and thereby pare down the syllabi of various disciplines seem to be gaining momentum.

To add to the chaos, there is an attempt to introduce a hybrid system of education, partially online and largely offline. While the hybrid is currently an experimental technology, being introduced in cars, such dual systems of dissemination of education are unlikely to be a success in systems of teaching. Arguably, open book exams might be a great idea whose time has come, but open book exams though an online system of examination cannot be the only/permanent way forward for an empowering system of teaching, learning and evaluation.

It is true that data can be continuously spewed out by e-universities and e-schools, but something as vital as the need to educate the young and impressionable into future adult citizens cannot be undertaken by an inert system of technological disbursal that diminishes language study, and treats dismissively and reductively both the trained teacher and the enormous study material that has been collated over the years and been
made available. The scope of Language and Literary Studies must be made more expansive as languages play a central role in the collection of data, both scientific and qualitative, and central to human existence. It would work against the larger interests of higher education to reduce language studies and limit their functioning and continue to engage with the teaching of language as a two-dimensional utility.

References
Phoenixkrjune

Ratna Raman is Professor in the Department of English, Shri Venkateshwara College, University of Delhi. She is deeply interested in women’s writing, 19th century literature, the 20th century novel and Indian classical literature.
ramanratna@gmail.com