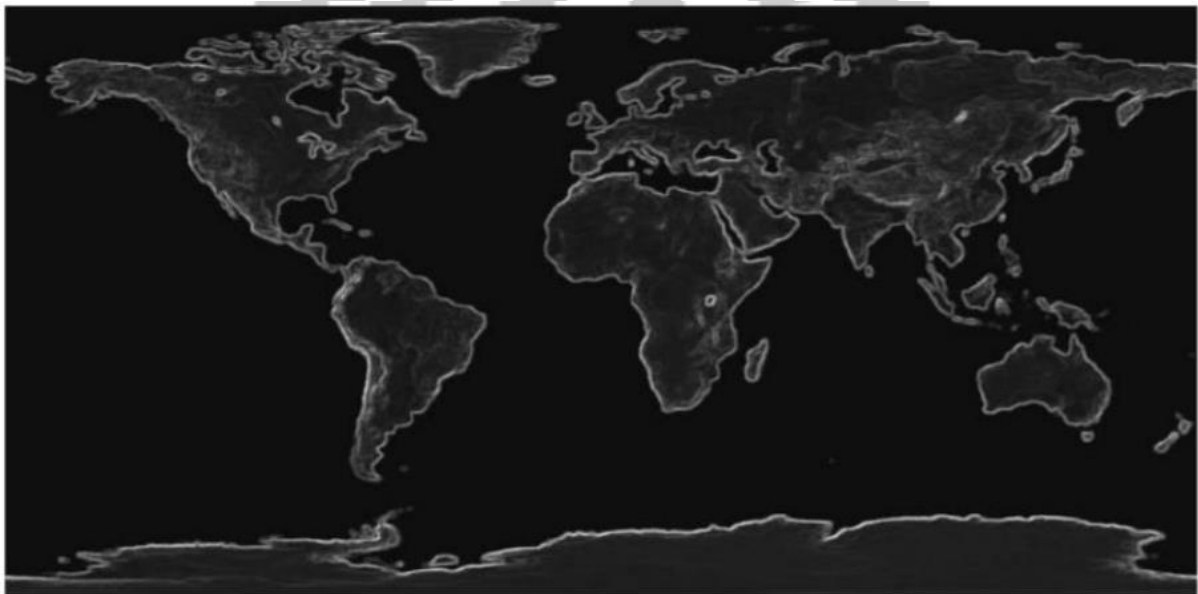




NEP 2020- A CASE FOR THE DRAVIDIAN VETO ON THE THREE- LANGUAGE FORMULA

Importance and Opportunity from the Dravidian view of the NEP

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A New Education Policy (NEP) is formulated every few decades in India. The latest policy was released on the 31st of July this year, its predecessor having been published thirty four years ago in 1986, last updated in 1992. Amongst other changes, the NEP 2020 proposed the introduction of a 3-Language formula in schools across the country. The NEP states that the mother tongue (i.e. regional language) would be the mode of instruction till the 5th grade, preferably up till the 8th. Out of the three languages, at least two are to be native to India. For instance, for a student in Kerala, the languages taught in a government school would be Malayalam, English and any other regional language of the country. The rationale behind the implementation of the three language formula is to promote multilingualism and that *“in order to preserve and promote culture, one must preserve and promote a culture’s languages”* (Section 22.4, pg. 53, NEP 2020). The policy also places great emphasis in mainstreaming Sanskrit across all levels of education, *“due to its vast and significant contributions and literature across genres and subjects, its cultural significance, and its scientific nature”* (Section 22.15, pg. 55, NEP 2020).

On August 3rd, barely three days after the draft of the NEP 2020 was released, Tamil Nadu’s ruling party AIADMK released a statement rejecting the three language formula, and firmly asserted that there would be no deviation from the state’s two-language policy, which it has been following for decades. AIADMK’s rejection was also echoed by opposition parties- in fact, the DMK was the first of the political entities in Tamil Nadu to react to the NEP 2020, and urged the AIADMK to raise its voice against it.

“The unilateral decision to approve the NEP 2020 without discussion or deliberation in the Parliament undermines the foundational principles of our democracy” wrote M K Stalin, president of the DMK party, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal. He writes: *“Trilingual education not just imposes severe burden on the children but it also imposes an identity which people in different states may not be able to relate to”*.

In this piece, I hope to bring out potential problems with regard to the implementation of the three-language formula in the NEP 2020, based on some of the arguments raised against Hindi imposition by E.V. Ramasamy, a leader of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. I will do so by tracing trends of majoritarian appeasement in India since pre-independence politics and bring out Ramasamy’s contentions with such an approach. I will then briefly elucidate his vision for a truly egalitarian nation which he hoped to arrive at through the Dravidian and Self-Respect movements. I will also highlight the emphasis on anti-Hindi and anti-Sanskrit imposition in these movements, and Ramasamy’s rationale for this stance. Next, I will review the NEP 2020’s three-language formula in light of the Dravidian ideology discussed in the previous section, and lay down some arguments for why this formula could be counter-productive. Finally, I will show how the NEP 2020 can be used as an opportunity for state governments to assert the necessity for more independence from the central government.

The long history of favouring majoritarian trends

Since the time of the initial Indian National Congress and the nationalist movement spearheaded by it, we have seen political parties selectively grasp culturally ex-situ and archaic traditions and beliefs in order to reinforce a sense of indigenous 'nationalism'. What initially developed as a weapon against colonial rule, eventually turned into a suicide mission for the diverse populations that occupied the Indian sub-continent. By selectively using traditions that



pertained to the Hindu communities of North India, the nationalist movement developed a more exclusive appeal, and sidelined the beliefs and needs of other cultures. As Romila Thapar points out in one of her lectures in 1972, the dichotomies which score our nation today did not appear as vehemently in the Pre-British era (*"Past and Prejudice", 1975- Sardar Patel Memorial Lectures delivered over All India Radio, 12th January, 1972*).

What most scholars, activists and politicians realized in retrospect, Tamil Nadu's E.V. Ramasamy caught on during the time of the freedom struggle. Though he was initially a part of the Congress party, even taking part in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), Ramasamy soon realized that the Congress placed very little emphasis on abolishing the caste system, the primary source of various inequalities in the country. In 1925, he left the Congress party, discontent with its disregard of the caste question, and began to develop an independent set of politics, which accommodated the needs of oppressed groups and challenged the upper castes and elites.

When India was declared independent on the 15th of August, 1947, Ramasamy, who had adopted the name 'Periyar', announced that it was a day of mourning. Flags were burned and protests broke out across the state in demand for a separate "Dravida Nadu". Periyar believed that India had not truly achieved independence yet- only a mere transfer of power from the British to the upper castes and north Indian capitalists had taken place. They would continue to wield enormous power over, and exploit the lower castes and South Indians in the name of the Indian nation. In one of his speeches, Periyar says, "God, religion, casteism, nation, patriotism, etc. are not feelings or emotions that come to people naturally. It is something that is created by a class of people who want to retain their economic and social control over ordinary people.... 'Nation' has become a word that stupefies and generates madness among people...".

What is "Self-Respect"? Who is a "Dravidian"?

Periyar's aim in establishing the Self-Respect movement was an attempt at enabling oppressed people- women, Dalits and lower castes- to abandon the social, cultural and political institutions that disadvantaged and degraded them, namely caste and religion (which both manifested with patriarchal tendencies). The movement was initiated in tandem with the 'Dravidian' movement, which was launched against pervasive and extensive Brahmin domination. It sought to establish a separate nation, 'Dravidu Nadu', to get rid of caste and gender oppression. Though people associate this demand with the secession of southern states from the rest of India, Periyar thought differently. For him, Dravida Nadu meant a place where all oppressed people from anywhere in the world can belong, and experience self-respect and equal rights. He said that anyone, be it a tribe in Japan or an Arab who feels that they are being oppressed, is a Dravidian and therefore belongs to Dravida Nadu.

Role of Language in the Dravidian Movement: Critique of Sanskrit and Anti-Hindi Imposition

From its genesis, the anti-Hindi imposition sentiment had been an active part of the Dravidian movement, though full-fledged protests only broke out in 1937. Periyar was able to see the latent effects of a new nation ruled by Hindi-Hindu upper caste elites. He feared that their majoritarian tendencies would discredit and discard other languages, cultures or movements that did not uphold caste hierarchy. He helped the masses realize that the glorification and



promotion of Sanskrit wasn't to preserve the language, but to further expand the power Brahmins wielded over the rest of society. Periyar showed that Sanskrit was the linguistic mode by which priests (i.e. Brahmins) justified their superiority over other castes, and hence would be counter-productive in the process of emancipating the masses from caste oppression (*Aanaimuthu, V, (1974), cited in Pandian, MSS (1996): Towards National-Popular: Notes on Self-Respecters' Tamil, Economic and Political Weekly*). Several efforts made by the central government to push for Hindi to be mainstreamed in southern states were all a ploy to strengthen the center's influence (again, upheld by North Indian upper class/caste, elite Hindus) in the regions which did not share its history, and hence could not be swayed by their 'great ancient Hindu nation' propaganda which heavily depended on the glorification of an imagined/constructed 'Hindu' past.

Many anti-Dravidian sympathizers have tried to label Periyar as an anti-national and a secessionist, and reduce the Dravidian movement to a superiority battle between Hindi and Tamil. However, these are gross misrepresentations. In fact, Periyar discounted the excessive glorification of the Tamil language as well. He claimed that clinging on to a romanticized idea of what once was would be counter-productive while trying to form a modern state. In one of the magazines of the movement, Periyar wrote, "*It has become a duty of the rationalist that such talk [about ancient Tamil ideas] should not be evoked for any reform from now on.*" He believed that the constant revisiting of the past in the present and as a pathway to the future would only further continue the subjugation of some sections of society.

However, Periyar did point out that the language of Tamil had a more equitable past. For one, there has been no mention of the system of caste in any ancient Tamil literature. The Tamil word "*jaadi*" for caste is not indigenous to the language, but an appropriation of the Sanskrit term. This did not stop him from identifying misogyny and casteism in popular works of Tamil literature used by Tamil pandits to follow similar patterns to their counterparts in the north, to reinforce their superiority.

Instead, Periyar favoured the mainstreaming of the English language. Rather than viewing it as a remnant of oppressive colonial rule, Periyar saw it as an opportunity for a clean slate. English did not have the system of caste enshrined in it, and it was being used to propagate rationalist and democratic revolutions in thinking all over the world. Periyar thought of it as an ideal vehicle to create a medium of communication which offered equal access to all. As English was not an ancient language, it had also developed the ability to be self-critical, accepting new vocabulary and concepts into its scope, changing itself in accordance to what was relevant in the present context. In many ways, this embodied what Periyar believed was the path to building the future of a nation- as MSS Pandian put it, "*Rationality and science, faith in human emancipation and progress through struggle, and history*".

Reviewing the NEP in light of the Dravidian stance on Hindi imposition

It has almost been half a century since the demise of Periyar, yet we have seen several attempts by the central government in recent years to undermine the culture of South Indian states via Hindi and Sanskrit imposition, among others. The NEP's emphasis on mainstreaming Sanskrit in government schools across the country is in line with their previous efforts at Hindi imposition in Tamil Nadu before and after independence. The centre has continuously made attempts to intervene with the state's socio-cultural politics or ignore it altogether when



convenient - the most stark and recent example of this was their siding with the Supreme Court ban of *Jallikattu*.

The rationale behind the introduction of the three-language formula aside from “preservation of culture” was to improve employment rates by creating job opportunities that required knowledge of multiple languages. There has been no research which indicates that a lack of fluency in a third language has caused unemployment. Tamil Nadu has consistently managed to provide employment for people leaving the agricultural sector compared to the rest of the country. This was possibly by using the two-language formula which gave emphasis on mainstreaming English in government schools. Fluency in English has not only played a role in providing more employment opportunities in urban settings as well as abroad. As Swaminathan S. Anklesariya Aiyar pointed out in his piece “*How English Survived in India*” (2004), Dravidian leader Annadurai’s vehement opposition to Hindi-imposition “*ensured the continuation of English, and so made possible the outsourcing revolution that is moving lakhs of jobs from the West to India.*”

The stated objectives of the NEP are to improve skills and employment standards for the youth. How would reviving a dead language cause substantial improvements in these frontiers? The NEP has listed employment in the tourism sector as an answer. But tourism is not an accommodative source of employment- its requirements will not expand to fit in a large in-flux of graduates. Moreover, if revenue generation is the main concern here, given that international tourism is more profitable than intra-national tourism, the government should be emphasizing on the teaching of English and perhaps even other foreign languages. Tamil Nadu has consistently been the highest contributor to the income generated by the tourism sector for the past five years. The NEP 2020 also has listed as one of its objectives to raise the gross enrolment rate in higher education India from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035. How will the drastic destabilization brought about by the three-language formula affect Tamil Nadu state’s GER which is already at 49% (All India Survey of Higher Education 2018-19)?

There is a global leaning towards increasing the use of technology to simplify education and employment in times of a pandemic. Technology could very well become a new mode of ensuring social equality, if the central government made efforts of providing good quality internet connections and devices at the grass root levels of the country. While the government has been hailing online learning as the new culture in times of a pandemic, it is simultaneously propagating a three-language education model in an era when translation technologies are already being used widely.

Over time, the use of languages in political propaganda has become tropes rather than mere identities: Sanskrit stands for solidification of an ancient order in a modern time, while Tamil (by realizing the advantages of English and accommodating it using the two-language formula) has lived to the Dravidian promise of mobility and aspiration. The Sanskrit trope, when being pushed by a government led by a populist leader, is a false promise of a “new” order which is quite literally more of the solidification of same old hierarchies in a modern setting as it could inhibit the upward mobility provided by English.

NEP 2020 is a re-set point for the entire nation which disadvantages and undermines the progress of the few states which have managed to be relatively more successful by devising their own schemes. Moreover, it could potentially be an attempt to disguise the imposition of majoritarian trends, by infusing it with aspirational qualities and passing it off as a solution for



unemployment. This could in turn make the consumption of more majoritarian ideologies palatable to the large Hindu and Hindi speaking population of the country.

NEP 2020 – an opportunity for state governments to regain some autonomy from the center

After demonetization and GST, the states became heavily dependent on the center. A PRS report released soon after GST was implemented revealed that 48% of the states' revenue relied on central transfers. NEP 2020 is a new dimension to this dependency. In 2016, the process of demonetization which shook the country's economy was also carried out with no consultation of the state governments. The NEP 2020 is another such scheme that was put forth without receiving inputs from the state governments, despite education being on the concurrent list. This is another instance of blatant disregard of the foundational federal dynamic of the country. With great difficulty, some states, like Tamil Nadu, have managed to devise their own course for progress and have been successful. Instead of imitating or learning from the models in states which have shown improvements in socio-economic indicators, the center is trying to force all states to develop at the same rates using models which have proven to be not as successful in the past.

Pathways of development at sub regional levels are diverse; the state governments need to demand that space to develop, to flourish on their own terms and demand for un-infringed autonomy. Statistics regarding education vary rampantly throughout the country and respective state governments would be in a better position to devise policies in accordance with their needs. Though the Dravidian movement was largely contained within Tamil Nadu, Periyar's ideas, especially with regard to the Dravidian identity's emphasis on a de-nationalized past as the pathway of uplifting pre-existing socio-economic oppressions, can be an effective tool to analyze the failings and dangers of enforcing a uniform system which only guarantees unified regression.