

The Popularity of Hindi and English in Manipur: An Educational Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the popularity of Hindi and English in the educational landscape of Manipur, a multilingual state in Northeast India where Meiteilon is the dominant mother tongue. Drawing from sociolinguistic theories and educational policy frameworks, the study explores how language preferences are shaped within the school system, and how these preferences intersect with questions of identity, mobility, and access to opportunity. In an era marked by the expansion of English-medium private education and state-imposed promotion of Hindi, the study analyzes the symbolic, functional, and ideological roles of both languages in classroom instruction, curricular design, and student aspirations. The paper conceptualizes “language popularity” in education through three interrelated dimensions: instructional utility, perceived educational value, and institutional prestige. Using Fishman’s domain theory, Bourdieu’s notion of linguistic capital, and the framework of language ideology and planning, it interprets how Hindi and English are deployed and received across urban–rural divides, generational cohorts, and school types. The findings reveal that English holds high symbolic and economic capital, often viewed as the language of upward mobility and global relevance. Hindi, in contrast, while widely taught, is considered instrumentally useful but lacks aspirational appeal among students and teachers. Meiteilon, though culturally significant, remains marginalized due to inadequate policy support. The study also examines the implications of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020’s three-language formula for Manipur’s schools. It argues that without flexible, region-specific implementation strategies, the formula risks deepening educational inequities. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a balanced and inclusive approach to language

education—one that affirms local identity, fosters multilingual competence, and promotes equitable access to both national and global opportunities. The research contributes to ongoing debates on language planning, curriculum design, and cultural assertion in postcolonial and linguistically diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: language education, local identity, multilingual competence

INTRODUCTION

Language in education is not merely a medium of instruction; it is a reflection of power, identity, and opportunity. In a multilingual region like Manipur, language choice in schooling plays a vital role in shaping access to knowledge, inclusion, and long-term success. The state's linguistic profile is dominated by Meiteilon (Manipuri), the mother tongue and a key cultural identifier. Alongside it, Hindi and English have been institutionally introduced through school curricula, media, and administrative policies. English is the associate official language and Hindi is the popular market language in major markets of Manipur. Hindi was never encouraged since the establishment of educational institutes though dedicated nationalists have been encouraging the teaching and learning of Hindi post-independence. The popularity of these two languages, especially in formal education, is deeply influenced by the interplay between national integration efforts, globalization, and community identity.

Hindi, promoted as the national language, is widely taught in government and private schools. However, its practical value beyond examinations and limited bureaucratic engagement is often questioned by learners. English, on the other hand, has emerged as a language of aspiration. It is seen as essential for upward mobility, participation in the digital economy, and success in competitive examinations and global academia. These perceptions are especially prominent among urban learners, private school students, and English-medium institutions.

This paper critically examines the popularity of Hindi and English in Manipur's educational domain by analyzing the symbolic, functional, and ideological value of these languages in schools and among learners. Drawing from theoretical and empirical literature, it explores the

sociolinguistic patterns and policy dynamics that shape language choices in formal education, while considering how local languages like Meiteilon are positioned within this hierarchy. The objective is to understand how educational institutions, policies, and social expectations co-construct language hierarchies and learner attitudes, and how these impact equitable access to quality education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine the sociolinguistic dynamics of language popularity in Manipur's educational settings, the paper employs an interdisciplinary framework integrating four key theories:

Domain Theory (Fishman, 1972)

Fishman's domain model is used to analyze how languages function across social contexts. This allows a comparative understanding of the roles of Hindi and English in education, media, family, and administration. For instance, English dominates digital learning and higher education, while Hindi has limited but formal use in state-level schooling and public discourse.

Linguistic Capital (Bourdieu, 1991)

Bourdieu's theory sees language as symbolic capital—an asset that facilitates access to power, prestige, and resources. English, in this framework, is high-value capital: those fluent in it have better access to higher education and employment. Hindi, meanwhile, functions as lower symbolic capital—seen as useful but not prestigious.

Language Ideology (Irvine & Gal, 2000)

This perspective helps analyze how attitudes and beliefs about Hindi and English are embedded in educational practices. Language ideology shapes teacher preferences, curriculum content, and student motivation. English is idealized as “modern” and “elite,” while Hindi is often reduced to a bureaucratic necessity.

Language Policy and Planning (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997)

This theory allows assessment of how national and state education policies influence language planning in schools. NEP 2020's promotion of a trilingual formula poses challenges in a region like Manipur, where English is prioritized, Hindi is contested, and Meiteilon is marginalized despite being the native language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in Northeast India often highlights tensions between national language policies and regional linguistic identities. Many scholars underscore the disjunction between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. Mother-tongue education is widely advocated by local communities and scholars, yet it remains poorly implemented due to lack of materials, trained teachers, and institutional support.

Chhetri (2021) reports that while Hindi does not evoke strong cultural sentiment, learners in Northeast India, including states like Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur are open to acquiring it as a pragmatic or inclusive tool. Roy and Swargiary (2024) report a similar trend in Northeast states, noting that English holds higher prestige, especially among aspirational youth in urban and semi-urban areas. Studies from Arunachal Pradesh show Hindi's dominance in schooling is due to the absence of a dominant regional language rather than any organic linguistic integration.

In Manipur, Meiteilon enjoys constitutional recognition and cultural reverence. However, campaigns for its classical language status and opposition to Hindi imposition reveal a resistance to linguistic homogenization. Student unions and civil society organizations argue that excessive focus on Hindi may lead to the erosion of local identity. At the same time, the expansion of English-medium institutions, especially private schools, reflects a pragmatic consensus on English's value in education and employment.

CONCEPTUALIZING LANGUAGE “POPULARITY” IN EDUCATION

In educational research, “popularity” of a language is not a superficial metric limited to the number of its speakers or its frequency of use in schools. Rather, it is a complex, multi-dimensional construct shaped by social perceptions, institutional policies, historical legacies, and pedagogical practices. In the context of Manipur, a state marked by multilingualism and competing language ideologies, conceptualizing the popularity of Hindi and English requires a nuanced approach that integrates both structural and affective dimensions.

Popularity as Educational Capital

One of the foundational ways to understand popularity in educational settings is through the lens of *linguistic capital* (Bourdieu, 1991). Languages

that are perceived as gateways to better educational opportunities, employment, and social advancement tend to enjoy greater popularity among learners, parents, and educators. English in Manipur, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, exemplifies this trend. Its association with private schools, higher education, digital platforms, and competitive exams has positioned it as the most valued linguistic asset. In contrast, Hindi is often viewed as a subject to be passed, not a skill to be mastered—useful in national contexts but carrying limited capital within the state.

Popularity as Curriculum Visibility and Medium of Instruction

Another key dimension of language popularity lies in its *presence and function* within the curriculum. In Manipur's education system, English is widely used not only as a subject but also as the medium of instruction, especially in private and some government-aided schools. This dual presence increases both its exposure and functional utility for students. Hindi, although a compulsory subject in many schools, is rarely used beyond the language class itself. Its absence as a medium of instruction or as a language of intersubject discourse reduces its practical relevance and perceived legitimacy. In contrast, Meiteilon is often taught as a subject, but its status as a medium of instruction is mostly confined to the lower primary level.

Popularity and Socio-cultural Aspiration

Popularity is also shaped by *aspirational factors*. Language becomes popular when it is tied to images of success, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. English enjoys a unique symbolic status in this regard. It is the language of the internet, higher education, science, and international communication. For students in Manipur, particularly those from middle-class or urban families, English is not just a subject but a lifestyle choice—a passport to national and global participation. Hindi, while connected to Indian national identity, does not carry the same aspirational pull. In fact, for some learners, especially from communities resistant to cultural homogenization, learning Hindi may feel like a political or cultural compromise rather than a personal aspiration.

Popularity and Institutional Endorsement

The role of *institutions* in shaping language popularity cannot be overstated. Government policies, teacher attitudes, availability of textbooks and resources, and training programs all contribute to the social positioning

of a language. English receives strong institutional support: government schemes, international partnerships, and teacher education programs often emphasize English competency. By contrast, Hindi's institutional support is more symbolic and top-down, driven by central policy rather than local demand. This has resulted in a passive form of inclusion in curricula—compulsory yet under-resourced and under-motivated.

Popularity and Resistance

Interestingly, the absence of popularity may also stem from active *resistance*. In Manipur, anti-Hindi protests and cultural movements often reflect concerns over linguistic imperialism. These forms of resistance, while political in nature, influence educational attitudes. Students may internalize these discourses and view Hindi not as a neutral subject but as an imposed language. In contrast, while English is also a non-native language, it is rarely resisted. Its perceived neutrality, utility, and association with modern life insulate it from the kinds of ideological opposition faced by Hindi.

Popularity as Performance and Outcome

Finally, popularity can be gauged through *academic performance and learner outcomes*. Students tend to perform better and engage more with languages they perceive as relevant and rewarding. Anecdotal evidence and classroom observations suggest higher motivation and achievement in English than in Hindi, especially in English-medium schools. Moreover, many students report difficulty in connecting with Hindi content, which they feel lacks cultural proximity or everyday relevance in the Manipuri context.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEMES

This study applies a qualitative analytical lens to interpret patterns of language use and preference within educational settings in Manipur. Drawing from policy texts, classroom observations, and existing research, the following themes emerge:

Language Use Across Educational Domains

Using Fishman's domain model, it is evident that:

Primary Schools: Hindi is taught as a subject but is rarely used as a medium of instruction. English-medium private schools increasingly dominate, especially in urban areas. Government schools often rely on Meiteilon or bilingual instruction.

Secondary and Higher Education: English is the preferred medium in private institutions and higher education. Students associate English with academic excellence and national-level examinations. Hindi continues as a subject, but with declining perceived relevance.

Educational Media and Resources: Textbooks, online platforms, and instructional videos are predominantly in English. Hindi-language materials are more accessible in rural areas but are often considered secondary in academic value.

Attitudinal Favorability and Classroom Ideology

English as a Language of Aspiration: Students and parents view English proficiency as essential for success in exams, entrance into prestigious colleges, and future employment. Teachers also emphasize English due to curriculum demands and standardized assessment systems.

Hindi as a Curriculum Requirement: Hindi is seen as necessary for fulfilling syllabus obligations, especially in CBSE-affiliated schools, but lacks motivational appeal. It is rarely used for classroom discussion or academic writing.

Resistance and Identity in Language Choice: In government schools, attempts to enforce Hindi as a medium or increase its hours often provoke resistance. Students and educators express concern that this undermines both Meiteilon and English competency.

Language as Capital in Educational Access

Drawing from Bourdieu, it is clear that:

- English is elite capital, often accessible only to students in private schools or urban settings with exposure to English-speaking environments.
- Hindi is instrumental capital, useful for clearing specific exams or engaging with central government institutions but not seen as transformative.
- Meiteilon has emotional capital, but its institutional utility remains limited due to lack of policy support, teacher training, and high-quality instructional materials.

Generational and Spatial Patterns in Educational Preference

Generational Divide: Young learners (ages 10–25) strongly prefer English, particularly in digital learning, competitive test preparation, and

higher education goals. Older generations, including teachers trained in Hindi-medium institutions, continue to use Hindi, though often in a limited instructional capacity.

Urban–Rural Divide: Urban schools emphasize English-medium education, supported by digital tools and parental investment. Rural schools rely more on Hindi for materials and basic instruction due to limited English exposure and resources.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND LANGUAGE PLANNING IN SCHOOLS

NEP 2020 and the Three-Language Model

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes a balanced trilingual approach, recommending the teaching of the mother tongue, Hindi, and English. In Manipur, this model poses both opportunities and challenges. While it potentially strengthens Meiteilon's presence, the practical implementation often leads to Hindi's inclusion at the expense of deeper English proficiency or local language support.

Medium of Instruction and Equity

The growing dominance of English-medium instruction in private schools contributes to educational inequality. Government schools, lacking adequate English-trained teachers and resources, struggle to prepare students for competitive exams conducted in English. Hindi, though present, fails to bridge this gap effectively.

Promoting Multilingual Competence

An effective educational strategy in Manipur must avoid treating languages in zero-sum terms. Instead, multilingual competence should be encouraged, with early literacy in Meiteilon, transitional English instruction from upper primary onwards, and optional Hindi at the middle or secondary stage.

CONCLUSION

The popularity of Hindi and English in Manipur's educational sphere reflects broader sociopolitical, economic, and ideological dynamics. English, associated with academic and career advancement, holds the highest symbolic and practical value among learners. Hindi, while present in the curriculum, is perceived as functional rather than aspirational. Meiteilon, despite strong cultural relevance, remains marginalized in formal education

due to systemic neglect. A sustainable and inclusive language policy must recognize these realities. Educational institutions should aim to empower students through multilingual proficiency while affirming regional identity and ensuring equal access to national and global opportunities. In Manipur, achieving this balance is essential for equitable and culturally grounded educational development.

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