

Exams in local languages makes only limited sense

The request of the chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC), mandated to regulate quality in higher education institutions, to universities to allow students to write their examinations in their local languages even if the course is offered in English is a bit baffling while his call for using local language in the teaching-learning process at universities required wider discussion before implementation. The suggestion for the promotion of translation of original writing in local languages must, however, merits an unqualified welcome.

Educators are unanimous in their opinion that the medium of instruction at the early stages should be the mother tongue as it makes comprehension easier. Both the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy, 2020, seek to promote local languages until at least Class 5, but preferably till Class 8 and beyond. It is very clear that they favour a multi-lingual approach to education, especially at the early level. The medium of instruction can change later but the basics of the learning process that children imbibe in the early stages would stand them in good stead even when they change the medium. In India, however, this is an idea which is still on the discussion table; the pre-primary and primary education is still conducted in languages other than the mother tongue in a good share of institutions.

A great many varsities in India have adopted English as the medium of instruction at the graduate level and above keeping in mind the versatility of the students who get enrolled in them. The reason could also be that higher educational qualifications with the medium of instruction being a language which has more acceptability across regions and abroad would be an idea that will help them in an increasingly globalised world.

The UGC must offer its rationale in asking such universities to move to a bilingual system while conducting examinations. The primary question is whether it will advance the cause of higher education if the course is conducted in one language and the examination done in another. It must assess the chances of the new proposal resulting in reserving the job of teachers to those who are proficient in local languages. The UGC must also explain if it has thought through such a scenario, especially when the global trend is that the teachers evaluate the students on a 360-degree basis instead of yearly assessments.

Curiously, the UGC's suggestion is in line with the reported recommendations of the Committee of Parliament on Official Language, headed by Union home minister Amit Shah, last year. It has suggested that the medium of instruction in all higher educational institutions in Hindi-speaking areas should be Hindi and in others, the respective local language. This is applicable even to institutions of national importance such as IITs.

From the looks of it, they are all attempts to promote local languages. However, there are people who have a lurking fear that it is a ploy to banish English from the campuses first and then impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking areas in the name of national integration. No one has a doubt about the need for encouraging local languages but careful thought must go into their promotion as the medium of instruction at the university level. It will not be a good idea to shoot at the tyres of a racing car just to replace them with new, untested ones.