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What language do Indians prefer to read in?

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It's a question that continues to baffle: what language do Indians prefer to read in? Demographers, politicians, social scientists, marketers and journalists are just four categories of professionals intrigued by this persistent bother.

The most uniquely placed pundit in this conundrum is the applied statistician because on her shoulders lies the burden of numbers. Viewed in those terms, the National Youth Readership Survey (NYRS), 2009, was the single-biggest gust of information to unravel one of the deepest secrets of contemporary Indian culture, namely, how do Indians read?

Its findings would perhaps permit the new generation of planners to understand why most Indians peruse books out of economic necessity than for cultural reasons. They read in a foreign language for making themselves employable, competitive and, generally, address the survival instinct. But they gradually assimilate the goodness contained in those books and magazines through Indian idioms.

Yet, statisticians are unable to substantiate many established truisms with facts. Somewhere along the line, the claim about English's all-powerful influence over the reading culture is demolished by findings on the ground.

In rural India, which according to Census 2001 is home to 72.8% Indians, the most-preferred language of reading is Hindi, which has an aggregate 39.5% share in central, northern and eastern India. Among newspaper readers, Hindi's primal position in those three slices of India is reflected in the 98%, 86% and 44% shares, respectively, reported from these regions.

The urban share of Hindi is as high as 37.2% as first-choice language and the all-India share is 38.5%. English, in contrast, has just 1.2% share in rural, 4.1% in urban and 2.5% in the aggregate.

Now that we have burst the 'bubble' about English's superior position, it is time to wonder how it comes to enjoy disproportionate support from government and non-government sources. From related findings in NYRS 2009, we get a hint of economic clout behind the rankings enjoyed by some languages.

According to the last census, native speakers of Hindi account for about 43% of all Indians and another over a fourth nationally can understand or speak the language. Yet, English, which the census had stated as the native language of merely 2.26 lakh people, got the rank of second language of the Union after Hindi.

Yet, the economic influence of English, in terms of both aspiration and remedy, keeps less people drawn to Hindi than natural.

One sees the economic reason most marked in the case of Bengali. This is the second-most popular language (8.1% in 2001) with a rich literary heritage. Yet, NYRS 2009 is sad to report that in terms of language preference among newspaper readers, it is placed uniformly seventh in the rural, urban and national lists.

Bengali is the native language of vast parts in the east, but though this region is the most populous, it is also the poorest. In contrast, Marathi and Gujarati, which stood fourth and seventh in absolute terms in the census, are placed high on the readership scales.

Marathi is second across the board (9.4% rural, 11.8% urban), while Gujarati, though fourth

among urbanites, is eighth among rural folks, 7% and 4.5% respectively. The rural-urban disparity in Gujarat may have some thing to do with this.

The case of Malayalam is interesting. The language of Kerala — the most literate ‘big’ state and one that successive National Sample Survey Organisation surveys have identified as blessed with the lowest urban-rural divide—is the first-preferred reading language of 9%of rural folk, but only 3.8% of urbanites.

This means that Malayalis in villages are more likely to prefer newspapers published in the mother tongue than in towns. Such a free fall is not noticed in the case of other languages . In neighbouring Tamil Nadu, for instance, more urban people prefer Tamil (10.9%) than villagers (7.2%). The same goes for Kannada, Telugu, Oriya, Assamese and Gujarati. Malayalam, we found, is an important language among students, the unemployed, those in the ‘unpaid housework’ and unemployed segments. Another curiosity is that it is second in Hindi as the most preferred language of magazine readers: 10.4% compared to 34.5% in Hindi and 9.2% in Tamil.

An individual’s educational achievement contributes to economic standing. We see that among young Indian newspaper readers holding at least a graduate degree, the three most-preferred languages are Hindi, Tamil and Marathi. But in the magazine market, the order changes considerably: Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali and English (a rich fourth compared to seventh in newspapers).

It’s a wonder that unemployed Malayalis are voracious magazine readers: 27% compared to 17% Hindi and 12.9% Tamil. In fact, it is the only time we see Hindi’s supremacy being dented!

The place of English in all this is a mystery. Viewed from the dispassionate prism of statistics, it should not be a viable medium for publishers. Among male newspaper readers, it is placed 10th (2.3% share) and females , ninth (3%). In the magazine market, English is fifth most-preferred for males (6.5%) and seventh for females (6.3%).

The biggest ‘explosion’ in terms of myth-bursting is that just 5.3% of graduate newspaper readers and 10% of magazine subscribers go for it. The political influence of English is also debatable because, as NYRS 2009 shows, 63.4% of youth literates read newspapers for information on current events.

If English is not present high in this segment, then what explains the psychological domination of the English news media? On the other hand, we find that 32.2% of our youngsters go for magazines only for entertainment ,withjust16.9%saying they sourced them for information. Since English is fourth in the magazine list, may we assume that it’s the language of light reading ? In the final analysis, English and Malayalam are two oddities in Indian publishing, demanding more intensive research into the reasons explaining their statuses , both perceived and real, as languages of influence.

(The author is director, NCAER-CMCR . Views are personal.)

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