

Empowering Learning Through Language: NEP 2020's Vision for Multilingual and Mother Tongue Education

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Abstract

Language is not merely a communication tool but a key determinant of cognitive, cultural, and social development. In multilingual societies such as India, the language of instruction profoundly shapes learners' comprehension, identity, and academic success. Recognizing this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reimagines India's linguistic and educational landscape by placing mother tongue and multilingual education at the heart of foundational learning. The policy envisions early education in the learner's home language to strengthen conceptual clarity, inclusivity, and cultural rootedness. This paper critically examines the vision for multilingual and mother tongue education outlined in NEP 2020, integrating insights from linguistic theory, policy analysis, and empirical research. It contextualises India's linguistic diversity, reviews global and national experiences with mother-tongue-based education, and identifies the challenges and strategies for effective implementation. The study finds that NEP 2020's language policy is progressive and pedagogically grounded, yet its success depends on teacher training, curriculum localization, and community engagement. Ultimately, empowering learning through language reflects both a pedagogical necessity and a democratic imperative, ensuring that education resonates with the learner's linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Multilingual Education, Mother Tongue-Based Education, Language Policy, Inclusive Education, Linguistic Diversity

Introduction

Language shapes thought, identity, and understanding; it is both the medium and message of learning. In a country like India, home to 122 major languages and 19,500 mother tongues with 22 scheduled languages (Census of India, 2011), language in education is not only a pedagogical choice but also a matter of equity, access, and cultural preservation. The diversity of India's linguistic landscape is a source of richness but also of educational complexity.

For decades, India's education system has struggled with the medium of instruction dilemma, oscillating between indigenous languages and English dominance. While English-medium education has become a symbol of social mobility, it often alienates children from their cultural roots and impedes early comprehension (Annamalai, 2012; Mohanty, 2019).

Learners from rural and tribal backgrounds who are taught in unfamiliar languages experience significant learning disadvantages, resulting in lower retention and achievement rates (UNESCO, 2011).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 addresses this challenge through a paradigm shift: it prioritizes mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, (MoE, 2020, p. 14, 2020). The policy aims to harness linguistic diversity as a pedagogical strength, not a barrier. This vision aligns with India's constitutional provisions (Articles 29, 343–351) and global commitments such as the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education.

This paper examines the philosophical foundations, policy provisions, and implementation pathways of NEP 2020's multilingual approach. It situates India's policy within international best practices, analyses existing literature on mother tongue-based education, and evaluates opportunities and challenges in realizing this linguistic vision.

Historical Background: From Colonial Legacy to Policy Reform

The question of language in Indian education has deep historical roots. During the British colonial period, Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) institutionalized English as the language of power and knowledge, creating a divide between the English-educated elite and the vernacular-educated masses (Viswanathan, 1998). Post-independence policymakers attempted to correct this imbalance through the Kothari Commission (1966) and the Three-Language Formula, which sought to balance national integration with linguistic diversity (NCERT, 1966). However, implementation remained inconsistent due to political, social, and economic pressures (Annamalai, 2012).

Subsequent education policies, such as the National Policy on Education (1968, 1986, and 1992), reiterated the importance of mother tongue instruction but failed to institutionalize systemic mechanisms for its realization. English continued to dominate urban education and private schooling, reinforcing socio-economic stratification (Ramanathan, 2005; Graddol, 2010). Against this backdrop, NEP 2020 emerges as the first comprehensive policy to integrate multilingual education within the national framework, linking it explicitly to equity, inclusion, and quality learning outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The rationale for multilingual and mother tongue-based education rests on robust theoretical foundations across psychology, linguistics, and pedagogy.

Socio-Cultural and Cognitive Perspectives

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory asserts that language is the primary tool for cognitive development. Learning occurs through social interaction mediated by language, which means that when instruction is delivered in a familiar language, learners can connect new knowledge with prior experience. Learning in an unfamiliar language disrupts this process, increasing cognitive load and limiting comprehension.

Similarly, Cummins' (1979) Interdependence Hypothesis explains that cognitive and academic proficiency in the first language (L1) provides a foundation for learning additional languages (L2). This principle, often termed additive bilingualism, suggests that strong L1 skills facilitate L2 development, whereas subtractive bilingualism (replacing L1 with L2) can hinder both.

Linguistic Human Rights and Cultural Identity

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) introduces the concept of *linguistic human rights*, asserting that education in one's mother tongue is a fundamental right. Language is inseparable from identity; neglecting it in education marginalizes linguistic communities and erodes cultural heritage. In India, where languages are deeply tied to ethnicity and region, respecting linguistic diversity ensures cultural continuity and social harmony.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist theorists such as Piaget (1954) and Bruner (1996) emphasize that learners actively construct meaning from experiences. When education is imparted through a familiar linguistic and cultural context, learners can better internalize and interpret new information. NEP 2020's emphasis on contextualized, play-based multilingual education in early childhood reflects this constructivist approach.

Translanguaging and Multilingual Pedagogy

Modern linguistic pedagogy recognizes that multilingual learners naturally draw upon all their languages for learning. García and Wei (2014) describe *translanguaging* as the process of blending linguistic resources dynamically. NEP 2020 implicitly supports this approach by allowing flexibility in using multiple languages within classrooms, enabling children to transition smoothly between home, school, and societal languages. Together, these theories affirm that language-inclusive education is not only equitable but cognitively superior, forming the intellectual foundation of NEP 2020's multilingual policy.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze NEP 2020's policy framework supporting multilingual and mother tongue-based education.
2. To review national and international research evidence on the benefits and challenges of multilingual education.
3. To evaluate the implementation mechanisms, opportunities, and barriers of NEP 2020's linguistic vision.
4. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening multilingual education in India's foundational and school stages.

Review of Related Literature

A comprehensive review of both national and international research reveals that mother tongue-based and multilingual education enhances learning outcomes, equity, and identity formation. This section synthesizes key studies and reports that shape our understanding of how linguistic inclusion impacts educational success.

Global Perspectives on Mother Tongue-Based Education

The importance of learning in one's first language has been recognized globally since the mid-20th century. UNESCO's landmark report (1953), *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, established that initial literacy and learning in the mother tongue lead to better comprehension and retention. This foundation was reaffirmed in UNESCO's subsequent reports (2003; 2021), emphasizing that multilingual education promotes inclusion, equity, and lifelong learning especially in diverse societies.

Benson (2004) conducted a comparative study in sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating that learners instructed in their home language performed significantly better in reading and numeracy than peers taught in foreign languages. Similarly, **Heugh (2011)** analyzed multilingual education programs in Africa, concluding that the longer children receive instruction in their mother tongue, the higher their academic performance and self-confidence.

In Southeast Asia, **Malone and Paraide (2011)** evaluated the Philippines' Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program, finding improved literacy skills, reduced dropout rates, and stronger teacher-student rapport. **Burton (2013)** examined bilingual education models in Papua New Guinea and highlighted community participation as a crucial factor in sustaining local language instruction.

Tollefson and Tsui (2018) expanded on the sociopolitical dimensions of language policy, arguing that linguistic hierarchies often mirror social inequalities. They emphasized that inclusive language policies like India's NEP 2020 must balance linguistic rights with economic aspirations.

National Studies and Indian Experiences

In India, multilingualism is not an exception but the norm. Yet, policy and practice have often diverged. The Kothari Commission (1966) introduced the Three-Language Formula, aiming to balance national integration and linguistic diversity. However, implementation remained inconsistent, with English often dominating formal education (Annamalai, 2012).

Mohanty (2019), in his seminal work *The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages*, argued that education in a non-native language alienates learners and contributes to early school dropout particularly among tribal and rural populations. His evaluation of the Odisha Multilingual Education (MLE) Project (2006–2018) revealed substantial improvement in attendance, literacy, and community participation when tribal children learned in their home language.

Nayak and Mohanty (2021) further found that children exposed to multilingual pedagogy showed higher metalinguistic awareness and adaptability in later language learning. Similarly, Patra and Nayak (2021) highlighted that mother tongue-based education fostered a sense of belonging and reduced cultural alienation among tribal learners in eastern India.

Kumar and Tamminga (2020) explored bilingual classrooms in North India and observed that natural code-switching (or *translanguaging*) enhanced comprehension and engagement. Their findings support NEP 2020's flexible approach to multilingual pedagogy.

The ASER (2022) report also revealed that foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes improved when instruction occurred in the home language, particularly in Grades 1–3. Conversely, students in English-medium private schools often demonstrated rote learning without deep comprehension.

From a socio-economic perspective, Annamalai (2012) and Ramanathan (2005) critique the “English-medium obsession,” warning that equating English with quality education deepens inequity. Both scholars argue for balanced bilingualism, where English is taught as a subject but not imposed as the sole medium of instruction.

NEP 2020 and the Policy Vision for Multilingual Education

The National Education Policy 2020, India's first comprehensive education reform in three decades, repositions language as central to inclusive, high-quality education. Recognizing India's multilingual reality, the policy seeks to “ensure that no child loses the opportunity to learn and excel because of language barriers” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 14).

Guiding Principles

The policy envisions language as a medium of empowerment rather than exclusion. Three fundamental principles guide its approach:

-  **Linguistic Equity:** Equal respect for all Indian languages, promoting diversity and social justice.
-  **Cognitive Advantage:** Learning in the home language leads to better conceptual understanding.
-  **Cultural Continuity:** Preserving linguistic heritage while enabling global competencies.

These principles align with Article 29(1) of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to conserve one's language and culture, and with Article 350A, which mandates mother tongue instruction for linguistic minorities.

Major Policy Provisions

Medium of Instruction (MoI):

NEP 2020 recommends the mother tongue or regional language as the MoI up to Grade 5 and preferably till Grade 8. The intent is to ensure comprehension during the formative years while introducing additional languages gradually.

Three-Language Formula:

Retaining flexibility from the earlier Kothari model, the NEP encourages learning three languages two native to India and one that ensures national or global linkages (often English). States have autonomy to decide combinations.

Promotion of Indian Languages:

The policy encourages the development of teaching materials in all major Indian languages, including classical (Sanskrit, Tamil) and tribal languages. It also mandates the establishment of the Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) to support this vision.

Multilingual Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE):

Under the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) Mission and NIPUN Bharat (2021), the policy integrates play-based multilingual learning from ages 3–8, ensuring that early education connects with the child’s home linguistic environment.

Teacher Education Reforms:

The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2021) revised curricula to include multilingual pedagogical methods. B.Ed. and D.El.Ed. Programs now emphasize strategies for using local languages and translanguaging techniques.

Technology and Digital Resources:

The DIKSHA and SWAYAM platforms provide multilingual digital content, while the National Digital Library (NDLI) is expanding to include regional-language materials.

Assessment and Translation Framework:

NEP 2020 proposes multilingual assessment models and translation tools to ensure inclusivity in standardized testing (e.g., NTA examinations in multiple languages).

Implementation of Multilingual Education under NEP 2020

The translation of NEP 2020’s vision into practice has involved multiple layers of governance, institutional coordination, and pedagogical innovation. Implementation efforts vary across states, reflecting India’s federal education structure, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic disparities.

➤ Institutional Mechanisms and Policy Instruments

Following the policy’s adoption, the Ministry of Education (MoE), along with NCERT, SCERTs, and State Education Departments, initiated several reforms to operationalize multilingual education.

National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat, 2021):

This mission mandates the use of the child’s home language or regional language in early grades to achieve reading and numeracy proficiency. Learning materials, activity-based modules, and storybooks have been developed in over 30 regional languages.

National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF–FS, 2022):

The NCF operationalizes NEP’s linguistic recommendations by emphasizing multilingual play-based learning. It encourages local storytelling, songs, and cultural expressions to strengthen linguistic identity and comprehension.

DIKSHA and SWAYAM Portals:

These platforms now host digital content in multiple languages, such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, Assamese, Odia, and Urdu. Teachers can access regionally contextualized materials aligned with NEP’s inclusive language approach (NCTE, 2022).

Textbook and Curriculum Development:

NCERT has revised primary-level textbooks in multiple languages, while states such as Odisha, Karnataka, and Assam have integrated tribal and regional dialects into classroom resources.

Teacher Professional Development:

SCERTs have launched multilingual pedagogy modules focusing on translanguaging, bilingual lesson planning, and inclusive communication. The National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA) includes training for multilingual classrooms.

Translation and Resource Centres:

The Bharatiya Bhasha Vishwavidyalaya (Wardha) and the proposed Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) aim to promote translation, terminology development, and multilingual academic publishing.

➤ **State-Level Implementation Experiences**

Implementation success varies across India's linguistically diverse states. Some states have made notable progress, while others face systemic hurdles.

Odisha -Tribal Multilingual Education (MLE) Program

Odisha has been a pioneer in integrating tribal languages into education. Since 2006, its MLE program covering 21 tribal languages has been mainstreamed under NEP 2020 guidelines. Mohanty (2019) found improved attendance and comprehension among tribal learners. Teachers receive bilingual training, and community elders help develop culturally rooted materials.

Karnataka-Bilingual Learning Model

The Karnataka State Education Department (2022) introduced bilingual textbooks and classroom strategies combining Kannada and English. Studies by Ramachandran and Naik (2023) indicate increased reading comprehension and self-confidence among students, especially in rural schools.

Assam and North-Eastern States

Assam, Nagaland, and Meghalaya have launched programs to preserve endangered tribal languages such as Karbi, Mizo, and Garo. The SCERT-Assam (2022) collaborated with local linguists to produce early literacy materials, aligning with NEP 2020's goal of inclusive multilingual education.

Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh – Foundational Learning

Through the NIPUN Bharat Mission, these states are developing home-language storybooks and teacher handbooks in Hindi and local dialects (Bundeli, Awadhi). Implementation remains uneven due to teacher shortages and a lack of assessment tools.

West Bengal and Kerala

West Bengal's trilingual education model (Bengali-English-Hindi/Urdu) and Kerala's inclusive policies have strengthened language diversity and improved retention rates. Kerala's State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT, 2023) emphasizes translanguaging to support migrant and linguistic-minority students.

➤ **Community and Parental Engagement**

Community participation is a cornerstone of NEP 2020's multilingual vision. Local stakeholders contribute in three main ways:

Cultural Knowledge Integration: Parents and community elders help incorporate folklore, songs, and local narratives into classroom content.

Language Resource Development: Volunteers assist in developing glossaries and translating textbooks into local dialects.

Awareness Campaigns: NGOs such as Language and Learning Foundation (LLF, 2023) and Room to Read India conduct workshops highlighting the cognitive benefits of mother tongue-based learning.

➤ **Technological and Digital Inclusion**

The NEP 2020 implementation strategy leverages technology to promote linguistic inclusion. Key digital initiatives include:

Bhashini Platform (2022): A multilingual AI-based platform translating educational content among Indian languages.

SWAYAM Prabha Channels: Broadcasts academic content in 12 languages.

DIKSHA Mobile App: Offers localized pedagogical resources for teachers in multiple Indian languages.

AI-based Transliteration Tools: Developed by IIT Madras and C-DAC to facilitate real-time classroom translation.

Challenges and Barriers in Implementation

Despite NEP 2020's progressive stance on multilingual and mother tongue-based education, several structural and contextual barriers hinder effective implementation.

Policy–Practice Gap

The gap between policy intent and classroom practice remains significant. Although NEP 2020 recommends mother tongue instruction up to Grade 5, most private and urban schools continue to prefer English due to parental demand and societal prestige (Annamalai, 2012). State boards struggle to align curricula and assessments with multilingual goals, and implementation often remains symbolic rather than systemic (Mohanty & Panda, 2020).

Teacher Preparedness

Teachers are central to multilingual education but often lack adequate training. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2021) highlights that pre-service programs rarely include multilingual pedagogy. Many teachers lack proficiency in local languages or confidence to manage linguistically diverse classrooms, leading to inconsistent application of policy ideals (Mohanty, 2019).

Resource Constraints: Learning Materials and Infrastructure

The scarcity of quality textbooks, digital content, and supplementary materials in regional languages remains a critical issue. Translating and standardizing resources across India's linguistic diversity is slow and expensive (Nayak & Mohanty, 2021). In tribal areas, limited print exposure and orthographic inconsistencies restrict effective mother tongue instruction (Pattanayak, 2021).

Sociocultural and Economic Factors

Parental preference for English-medium education continues to undermine policy goals. English is widely perceived as a tool for mobility and prestige (Ramanathan, 2005; Phillipson, 2009). Moreover, caste, class, and regional inequalities shape linguistic hierarchies, often marginalizing minority languages in formal education (Annamalai, 2012).

Administrative and Monitoring Constraints

Weak coordination among ministries, states, and local bodies limits policy implementation. Data systems like UDISE (2023) lack multilingual indicators, and financial allocations for teacher training, translation, and monitoring remain inadequate. As a result, accountability and sustainability are often compromised.

Assessment and Evaluation Challenges

Assessment practices remain largely monolingual, disadvantaging students taught in regional languages. Reliable multilingual evaluation tools are lacking, creating discrepancies between instructions and testing languages (Mohanty, 2019). This limits the ability to measure authentic learning outcomes.

Recommendations

To realize the multilingual and mother tongue-based education goals outlined in NEP 2020, a multi-pronged and context-sensitive strategy is essential. The following recommendations aim to strengthen teacher capacity, resource development, policy monitoring, and community participation.

Intensive Teacher Training Programs

Teacher competence is pivotal for successful multilingual education. Pre-service and in-service teacher education should include structured modules on multilingual pedagogy, bilingual strategies, and linguistic diversity management (NCTE, 2021). Training should focus on enabling teachers to use students' home languages as scaffolding tools for conceptual understanding. Continuous professional development and peer-learning communities can enhance teacher confidence and classroom adaptability.

Localized Learning Material Development

Developing culturally relevant and linguistically diverse materials is crucial for sustaining mother tongue instruction. Collaboration among local educators, linguists, and community elders can ensure authenticity and inclusivity in textbooks and supplementary materials (Mohanty & Panda, 2020). Regional universities and State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs) should be empowered to co-create context-sensitive resources, including digital and print media, in various scripts and dialects.

Public Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns

Persistent societal bias toward English-medium education must be addressed through strategic awareness initiatives. Campaigns should disseminate evidence on the cognitive, emotional, and academic benefits of mother tongue learning (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2008). Community workshops, media outreach, and parental orientation programs can help reshape public perceptions and foster pride in linguistic diversity. Engaging civil society and local leaders will strengthen advocacy for multilingual education.

Expansion of Digital Multilingual Resources

Leveraging technology can significantly enhance accessibility. Platforms such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and e-Pathshala should be expanded to include high-quality interactive learning content in regional and tribal languages. Artificial intelligence-based translation tools, text-to-speech systems, and language-learning applications can support teachers and learners in multilingual contexts. Partnerships with ed-tech firms can accelerate digitization and dissemination of mother tongue-based educational resources.

Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation Frameworks

Robust monitoring mechanisms are necessary for assessing the effectiveness of multilingual education. Establishing research cells within NCERT, NIEPA, and universities can facilitate evidence-based evaluation of language policy implementation. These cells should collect longitudinal data on learning outcomes, teacher preparedness, and community engagement (UDISE, 2023). A transparent and periodic review mechanism would ensure policy accountability and adaptive reforms based on empirical evidence.

Incentivizing State-Level Innovations

Given India's linguistic diversity, state-specific strategies are vital. The central government should incentivize innovative multilingual practices such as bilingual bridge programs, local language immersion models, and community participation

initiatives—through special grants, awards, and public recognition. This approach can encourage states to design contextually relevant frameworks aligned with NEP 2020 while promoting inter-state knowledge exchange.

Collaborative Governance and Policy Coherence

Effective implementation requires coordination among ministries, academic bodies, and local governance structures. Creating an inter-ministerial task force on multilingual education could ensure policy coherence and avoid duplication of efforts. Strengthening collaboration between NCERT, NCTE, CBSE, and state education departments would streamline curriculum, assessment, and teacher training reforms across India.

Community Involvement and Cultural Integration

Multilingual education thrives when rooted in community participation. Involving parents, local storytellers, and traditional knowledge bearers in classroom practices can help sustain linguistic heritage while enriching learning experiences. Encouraging school community partnerships will also enhance student identity, motivation, and inclusiveness in multicultural classrooms.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's educational philosophy by recognizing the intrinsic relationship between language, learning, and identity. Its strong advocacy for multilingual and mother tongue-based instruction reaffirms the pedagogical principle that children learn best when taught in a language they understand and emotionally connect with. This approach not only enhances comprehension, creativity, and cognitive flexibility but also nurtures cultural continuity and self-esteem among learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, translating this progressive vision into practice remains a complex challenge due to systemic gaps, inadequate teacher preparation, scarcity of localized resources, and sociocultural preferences for English as a symbol of prestige and mobility. To realize the full potential of multilingual education, India must invest in comprehensive teacher training that equips educators with multilingual competencies, develop culturally relevant and high-quality materials in regional languages, and leverage digital platforms to ensure accessibility. Additionally, research and monitoring frameworks should be strengthened to assess learning outcomes and guide evidence-based reforms, while public awareness campaigns can help shift societal attitudes toward valuing linguistic diversity. The success of NEP 2020's multilingual vision ultimately depends on coordinated efforts across government agencies, educational institutions, and communities. By empowering learning through language, India can move closer to an inclusive and equitable education system, one that celebrates linguistic plurality as a source of strength and ensures that every child learns not only in a language they know, but in a language that knows them.

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