

1. Multilingual Education in India and NEP-2020

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Abstract

The concept of multilingual education holds significant relevance in a linguistically diverse country like India, where hundreds of languages and dialects coexist. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings renewed attention to this diversity by emphasizing the importance of multilingualism in strengthening cognitive abilities, cultural awareness, and inclusive education. This article explores the implications of multilingual education in the Indian context, particularly in light of the NEP 2020, which advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8. It discusses how this policy shift aims to bridge the learning gap, enhance comprehension, and promote equity in education, especially for children from rural and marginalized backgrounds. The article also examines challenges such as the availability of trained multilingual teachers, development of multilingual textbooks as well as learning resources, and the practical implementation across states with differing linguistic demographics. Furthermore, it reflects on the potential long-term benefits of multilingual education in fostering national unity while preserving local languages and cultural heritage. By critically analyzing the policy framework and its envisioned outcomes, the article provides insights into how NEP 2020 can transform the educational landscape of India through a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach. It concludes with recommendations for effective implementation strategies and stakeholder involvement to ensure the success of multilingual education in India. Through this discourse, the article underlines the pivotal role of language in shaping a more equitable and holistic education system.

Key words: Language, Multilingual education and NEP-2020

India is the home to a rich tapestry of languages and dialects. This multilingual fabric is not just a marker of cultural identity but also a reflection of the nation's complex history and social diversity. Language is not only an excellent medium for exchanging thoughts and feelings, but more than that, language is a social concept which plays an important role in the formation of culture and a cohesiveness of society. The excellence of language is a sign of the prosperity of culture. It is a means of inter-class and inter-group communication, it is human's natural means

of mental contact with organized society; and within that society, it serves multifarious social purposes (Aquilina, 1958, p.11). It plays a great role in the cultural framing of identities, social organizations, and interpersonal relationships and it conveyed values, beliefs, and experiences (Tank and Anburaj, 2024). Lingual prosperity of India provides it a unique place in the word.

India is a land of diversified language traditions. Languages in India are deeply intertwined with cultural practices, religious rituals, and traditional knowledge systems. They act as vessels carrying centuries-old folklore, literature, and customs unique to each community. Highlighting the importance of language, Dandi writes-

इदमन्धं तमः कृत्स्नं जायेत भुवनत्रयम्। यदि शब्दाद्वयं ज्योतिरासंसारं न दीप्यते॥ (काव्यादर्श/1/4).

means if there was no light in the world in the form of words i.e., the light of language or the light of words, did not illuminate the universe, then this entire world would have become dark (Kavyadarsh/1/4). Since ancient times, there has been a system of serious thinking, meditation and writing about language in the Indian knowledge system. Two of the six Vedanagas' Nirukta and Vyakarana, are excellent examples of ancient Indian linguistic discourse.

According to Oxford dictionary, language stands for the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country. It is a system of random sound symbols uttered by pronunciation elements through which people of a language society exchange ideas with each other (Tiwari, p.1). In such a multilingual nation, the role of language in education becomes crucial—not only as a medium of instruction but also as a bridge between culture, identity, and learning. This article aims to explore the evolving landscape of multilingual education in India, with a particular focus on the vision, promises, and practicalities of the NEP 2020. By examining policy directives, pedagogical implications, and on-ground realities, the discussion will shed light on how multilingualism can serve as a powerful tool for educational equity and national development in 21st-century India

Diversity of languages in world and India

There are more than 7152 languages in the world (Ethnologue.com, 2025). Which are associated with the more than 12 language families which includes Indo-European, Davidian, Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Niger-Congo, Austronesian, Trans-New Guinea, Australian, Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Otomanguean, and Kra-Dai. Among these families, Indo-European language family is the largest family of languages which is spoken in the world. Classical languages like Sanskrit, Greek and Latin also belong to this language family. About half of the world's population speaks the languages of the Indo-European family.

In linguistically diverse India, about 77% of the population speaks languages belonging to the Indo-European language family. About 21% of the population belongs to the Dravidian language family. The number of people speaking languages like Munda and Khasi, belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family, is around one percent. The percentage of people speaking Burmese and Tibetan languages, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is

0.8%. Thus, if we see, even today the majority of people in India speak languages belonging to the Indo-European language family followed by other dominating language families' languages.

At present, more than 600 languages and dialects are in use, in India, which are spoken from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari and from Manipur to Gujarat. Total 22 languages have been recognized under the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India, which include Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Bodo, Santhali, Maithili and Dogri. The number of people speaking these 22 languages included in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution is around 95% of total population of India. The special thing in this is that every Indian who speaks these languages as the mother tongue must have knowledge of some other language spoken around him. Naturally, every Indian is bilingual, there is a need to learn languages of other language families as well, to be capable of multilingualism which is an urgent demand of NEP 2020.

Need of Multilingualism in India

Multilingualism or being multilingual denotes the ability to speak, understand, read and write more than two languages. This can be a personal or social ability, which depends on whether a person or community uses more than one language or not. Multilingual Education refers to the use of two or more languages as a medium of instruction (Tripathi, 2023). Basically multilingualism in education involves the teaching and learning of local majority languages alongside languages that hold international status and new minority languages (Perez-Vidal & Roquet Pugès, 2023). This definition highlights the need to address local cultural and linguistic needs while also preparing students for national and global participation. In a multilingual country like India, knowledge of more than one language is useful in personality development. It is also beneficial in social harmony and national integration. Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of multilingual education are profound. It can foster a deeper understanding of concepts, preserve endangered languages, empower communities, and promote social cohesion. The NEP 2020 thus presents an opportunity to reimagine India's education system in a way that is both rooted in cultural heritage and aligned with contemporary global needs.

The usefulness of multilingualism can be seen in the light of the following points -

1. Cognitive development: Learning more than one language can boost brain functions, such as memory, attention, problem-solving, creativity and transfer of learning.
2. Linguistic awareness: It plays a significant role in linguistic awareness, which helps in developing the ability to seriously reflect on language structures, rules and use them efficiently.
3. Promoting cultural harmony: In the process of learning of different languages, students can become familiar with different cultures, attitudes and values. It also helps in developing

intercultural competence in them, which is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds.

4. Improved academic achievement: it is natural that students who receive education in their mother tongue and simultaneously thought other language too, it boosts lingual prosperity among students too. It also brings with it the opportunity to read and understand the literature of different languages which is a great asset as it offers a variety of perspectives and the key to a huge repository of codified knowledge (Saraf,2014).

5. Acquisition of new knowledge and linguistic skills: Knowledge of other languages helps one to acquire new knowledge and linguistic skills as one can access texts written in other languages more easily and confidently and can also transfer the acquired skills and knowledge to other languages.

6. Promoting social inclusion: Providing education in multiple languages can ensure that every child has equal access and opportunity to learning, regardless of their linguistic background. It can promote a sense of belonging and identity among people speaking minority languages and reduce discrimination and deprivation.

7. Preserving linguistic diversity: Multilingual education can help preserve and revive India's linguistic diversity and heritage. It can promote linguistic rights and dignity of people of different languages, especially those who are marginalized.

8. Increasing human capital: Multilingual education can equip learners with the language skills and competencies required to participate in various spheres of life such as education, employment, research, innovation, etc. It can also enhance their employability and mobility in the world.

9. Developing a sense of national integration: Multilingual education can promote mutual understanding and respect among people of different languages and different cultures. It can also enhance social unity and harmony among diverse population groups in India, which ultimately results in national unity.

Reflection about language in NEP-2020

The NEP 2020, launched after more than three decades since the last policy overhaul, places a strong emphasis on using the mother tongue or regional language as the primary medium of instruction, particularly in the foundational years of schooling. The policy recommends that wherever possible, education up to Grade 5—and preferably till Grade 8—should be conducted in the child's home language or regional tongue. This marks a paradigm shift from earlier policies that often prioritized English or Hindi at the expense of local languages, which led to challenges in comprehension, retention, and overall learning outcomes, especially for children in rural or non-Hindi-speaking areas.

Multilingual education, as advocated by NEP 2020, seeks to create an inclusive classroom environment where children can learn in a language they understand, thereby improving cognitive development and reducing dropout rates. Keeping these utilities in mind, the first National Education Policy-2020 emphasizes the promotion of multilingualism. Along with this, useful suggestions have also been given for the promotion of multilingual education and the training of multilingual teachers. The National Education Policy-2020 accepts that Indian languages are not only a powerful means of communication and learning but it preserves the treasure of Indian knowledge tradition and cultural heritage too. Multilingual knowledge is an important aspect of the development and Indian identity.

Multilingualism has been accepted as a fundamental principle of study and teaching in the document of National Education Policy 2020 (p.13). Guidance measures have been given for the preservation and promotion of Indian languages from school level to higher education. While this document expects education in mother tongue at school level, it promotes the study and teaching of multilingualism in school education to higher education too. Apart from this, in section 4 of NEP-2020 document, from point no. 4.11 to 4.22, under the heading 'Multilingualism and the power of language', the need for multilingualism and measures for its promotion have been discussed. This policy expresses concern about the extinction of more than 220 languages in the last 50 years (NEP-2020, 22.5 page no. 53). This policy advocates bilingual education system to revive languages and bring them into practice. In this context, emphasis has been laid on creating curriculum in at least two languages and providing students the facility to study in their regional language. Knowledge of more than one language is also a sign of a person's scholarship, social acceptance, and educational progressiveness.

This policy talks about implementing the three-language formula. This policy emphasizes that students of every Hindi speaking state should learn languages of South India or Northeast India or language other than Hindi and students of non-Hindi speaking states should adopt Hindi as their main language. This will not only pave the way for the creation of a national language but will also end the differences arising in the linguistic context. This will serve as the basis for the creation of national unity. Accepting the important role of teachers in implementing multilingualism, it has been emphasized that their linguistic proficiency should be kept as a criterion in the context of their training and appointment (Section-15 of NEP2020).

Major challenges associated with multilingualism in education

It is within this context that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 makes a significant intervention by promoting multilingual education as a cornerstone of its vision for equitable and inclusive learning. However, implementing a multilingual education system in a country as diverse as India is not without its challenges. Questions arise around the availability of qualified teachers fluent in local languages, the creation of quality teaching-learning materials in multiple languages, and the complexities of policy execution across states with varied linguistic demographics. Moreover, balancing the mother tongue with the need to learn other

languages like Hindi and English—seen as essential for higher education and employment—adds another layer of complexity.

There are many challenges that need to be addressed in the context of implementing multilingual education. These challenges include-

1. Lack of resources: Implementing multilingual education will require adequate resources such as trained teachers, appropriate curriculum, quality textbooks, assessment tools and digital platforms. However, many schools, especially in rural and remote areas, lack these resources.
2. Lack of policy support: Although the National Education Policy 2020 and the Nipun Bharat Mission (NIPUN) advocate multilingual education, there is still a gap between policy and practice. Many states have not yet adopted or implemented these policies effectively. There is also a need for greater coordination and collaboration between various stakeholders such as the central and state governments, educational institutions, civil society organizations and communities.
3. Lack of awareness: A large number of parents, teachers, students and policymakers are not aware of the benefits of multilingual education. They have misconceptions or prejudices about certain languages or dialects. English is still preferred as the medium of instruction. Parents believe that it will provide better opportunities for their children's future.
4. Curriculum Development: Balancing the use of mother tongues or regional languages with a national or standardized curriculum is a challenging task that requires specialized skills and resources. It is also important to ensure that students have access to the latest knowledge and that their linguistic background is valued.
5. Assessment and Evaluation: Developing fair and standardized assessment methods across languages may prove difficult. Ensuring fair and consistent assessment of students when using multiple languages is challenging.
6. Transition to Higher Education and Employment: While multilingual education may be effective at the primary level, moving to higher education or the job market may require proficiency in a more widely spoken language, potentially detrimental to students who are fluent in their mother tongue but lack market language proficiency. Nowadays, knowledge of English is becoming almost a mandatory requirement for employment. These are some of the major challenges which need to be resolved. In this context promotion of other Indian languages along with English is a tuff task.

Measures to implement multilingual education

The aim of multilingual education is to make students proficient in their mother tongue as well as other languages, so that their intellectual, social and cultural abilities can be properly developed. Its role becomes even more important in a multilingual country like India, where many languages are spoken in different states and communities. However, effectively

implementing multilingual education is a challenging task, which requires concrete strategies and measures. These measures can be understood in the light of the following issues-

1. Primary education in mother tongue: According to pedagogy methodology, children should be given their primary education in their mother tongue as it increases their ability to understand and learn. This keeps them connected to their roots and they are able to understand basic concepts easily. Therefore, making mother tongue a compulsory part in primary classes will be an important step towards effectively implementing multilingual education.
2. Follow the bilingual and trilingual policy: India already has the Three-Language Formula in place, under which students are taught three languages – mother tongue, regional language and a national or international language (often English). To make it effective, states should strengthen their local languages as well as give due place to national and global languages.
3. Training and development of teachers: To successfully implement multilingual education, teachers should be given special training in the context of multilingualism. For this, teachers have to develop the ability to prepare teaching material in different languages. They should be introduced to new methods of language teaching using technical means. Special attention should be paid to the recruitment of multilingual teachers so that they can teach students in different languages easily.
4. Adaptation of textbooks and curriculum: To make multilingual education effective, it is necessary to prepare textbooks and curriculum in accordance with multilingual contexts. For this: Government and private publishers should be encouraged to develop quality textbooks in different languages. Keeping in mind the language proficiency of the students, the curriculum should be designed in such a way that they can gradually move from one language to another easily. Multilingual content can be made more accessible using digital and online resources.
5. Use of technology: In today's digital age, technology can be helpful in effectively implementing multilingual education. For this, text material in different languages should be made available on digital learning platforms. AI based translation tools and audio-visual content should be used to assist in language learning. Mobile apps specially designed for language teaching should be developed.
6. Promoting language literacy programs: Government and non-government organizations should work together to increase awareness of multilingual education. Parents, teachers and communities should be educated about the benefits of multilingual education through language literacy programs.
7. Respect and preservation of linguistic diversity: To make multilingual education effective, it is necessary to encourage linguistic diversity. In this context, emphasis should be laid on the preservation of local languages and dialects to prevent the problem of extinction of languages. Literature, art, culture and folk tales in regional languages should be included in education. Multilingual competitions and cultural programs should be organized at the national level.

8. Policy and legal support: The government should implement concrete policies and rules to promote multilingual education. Despite teachers' favorable attitudes, institutional barriers, such as language policies and a lack of adequate training, restrict its full implementation. Addressing these barriers necessitates a revision of language policies and providing specialized training for teachers. For this, the provision of multilingual education under the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) should be strictly implemented. Financial resources should be provided to ensure multilingual education. The establishment and management of multilingual schools should be simplified.

9. Community and parent participation: Community and parent participation is necessary to make multilingualism in education successful. For this, parents should be encouraged to play an active role in the language learning process of children. Language related workshops and programs should be organized in schools and communities. Local communities should be included in education policy implementation committees.

10. Research and evaluation: Research and evaluation should be done regularly to ensure the effectiveness of multilingual education. The progress of multilingual education in different schools should be assessed. Teaching methods should be improved by analyzing the language learning ability of students. Emphasis should be laid on academicians and policy-makers working together to understand and solve the challenges of multilingual education.

11. Assessment of languages: Multilingual education should use fair and valid assessment tools and criteria that measure the learning outcomes and progress of learners in different languages. It should also provide constructive feedback and assistance to learners to improve their language skills. Apart from this, it should mark and reward the achievements and efforts of learners in multilingual education.

12. Flexible and inclusive approach: Multilingual education should be tailored to the needs and contexts of different learners and communities. It should include all languages and dialects spoken in India, including tribal languages, sign languages, classical languages, foreign languages, etc.

Conclusion:

Multilingual education, as envisioned in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, represents a progressive and inclusive step towards reshaping India's educational landscape. In a country marked by immense linguistic and cultural diversity, the emphasis on mother tongue and regional languages as mediums of instruction during the foundational years and learning of other Indian language along with English is both a recognition of India's rich heritage and a strategic approach to improving learning outcomes. By promoting the use of languages familiar to children, NEP 2020 aims to make education more accessible, engaging, and meaningful, especially for students from rural and marginalized communities.

The policy acknowledges that language is not merely a tool for communication but a vital medium for thinking, understanding, and constructing knowledge. Multilingual education fosters cognitive development, strengthens cultural identity, and nurtures respect for linguistic diversity. It also plays a crucial role in preserving indigenous languages that are at risk of extinction. However, the successful implementation of this vision requires coordinated efforts from governments, educators, curriculum developers, and communities. Challenges such as the shortage of multilingual teachers, lack of quality learning materials in regional languages, and infrastructural limitations must be systematically addressed.

Furthermore, while promoting the mother tongue, the policy also underscores the importance of multilingualism by supporting the learning of Hindi, English, and other languages. This balanced approach prepares students to thrive in both local and global contexts. In conclusion, NEP 2020 offers a transformative framework to harness the power of multilingual education in building a more inclusive, equitable, and knowledge-rich society. Its effective execution has the potential to empower learners across India, bridging linguistic divides and fostering a generation that is both rooted in its culture and ready for global challenges.

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