

# Integrating Multilingual Education in India: A Critical Analysis of NEP 2020 and Its Implications for Regional Languages

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## Abstract

If God had so wished, he would have made all Indians speak with one language ... the unity of India has been and shall always be unity in diversity.

- Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore's words beautifully encapsulate the essence of India's soul, highlighting the enchanting diversity of languages in 'Incredible India.' As a nation, India cherishes the spirit of harmony in its cultural mosaic despite the multitude of languages and pluralism. India's unity is rooted in embracing these differences and nurturing the spirit of peaceful coexistence and shared identity. The 2011 Census of India reveals that 'more than 19,500 languages or dialects are spoken in India as mother tongue... There are 121 languages which are spoken by 10,000 or more people in India (Press Trust of India). As the land of Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese, and Semito-Hamitic language families, India ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the number of spoken languages. However, the Indian Constitution officially recognizes only 22 languages –

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## Introduction

The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution granted official status to Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu in 1950. Then Sindhi was added in 1967, Konkani, Manipuri (Meitei) and Nepali in 1992, then Bodo, Dogri, Maithili and Santhali in 2004, Making it a total of 22 languages (TNN).

Language is a susceptible subject in the context of a state and community, as it is also inextricably linked with the expression of art and culture. Language is the determinant of the communication across cultures. It plays a significant role in preserving cultural artifacts like literature, drama, music, cinema, etc. So, preserving and promoting culture means preserving and promoting language.

Unfortunately, Indian languages have not received their due attention and care, with the country losing over 220 languages in the last 50 years alone. UNESCO has declared 197 Indian languages as 'endangered'. Various unscripted languages are particularly in danger of becoming extinct. When senior member(s) of a tribe or community that speak such languages pass away, these languages often perish with them; too often, no concerted actions or measures are taken to preserve or record these rich languages/expressions of culture (Ministry of Human Resource Development).

This alarming trend should serve as a wake-up call, urging us to take immediate steps to preserve and promote our diverse linguistic heritage. Even the 22 languages recognized and adopted as the

official languages by the Constitution of India are exposed to severe difficulties on many fronts. Most of them are facing the question of remaining relevant and vibrant due to the need for high-quality learning and print material. There is no steady stream of quality textbooks, workbooks, audio-visual content, drama, poetry, novels, magazines, and translations for the learners and speakers of these languages. Their vocabulary and dictionaries need to be consistently updated and disseminated, as happens in the case of world languages like English, Spanish, French, German, Hebrew, Korean, and Japanese. These are necessary for the discussion over current issues and concepts to be possible in these languages. High-quality translations, learning, and print material help significantly keep a language vibrant, relevant, and current with integrity. Despite various measures implemented to address these issues, we as a nation have needed to catch up on many fronts. The need for skilled language teachers and facilitators has made the situation even worse. Language teaching is about more than just facilitating a language's literature, vocabulary, and grammar. There has to be a constant focus on enhancing learners' ability to converse and interact in a language. Language has to be used as a means of communication.

The existence of a multitude of languages across India necessitates linguistic diversity in Indian school education. It poses a massive challenge for the Indian education system and policymakers. So, the education policy planners had these severe questions in mind while drafting the Indian languages, art, and culture segment of the policy pragmatically. They knew that school education could play a significant role in sustaining this multilingualism in India. So, the National Education Policy 2020, designed by K. Kasturirangan Committee, provides a comprehensive framework for transforming language education in India.

Vocal for local and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* are the key concerns in the present policy which puts a considerable emphasis on exploring and promoting the Indian knowledge system through Indian languages, arts and heritage. NEP 2020 states that the teaching and learning of the Indian languages need to be integrated with school and higher education at every level (Yadav) .

The policy articulates specific innovative ideas about language teaching at the school level. It emphasizes multilingual education at the school level and simultaneously recognizes the value of preserving and promoting the Indian languages while striving to ensure that the learners gain proficiency in global languages, too. It has put ample focus on promoting all regional languages and mother tongues of different regions irrespective of their status. The ultimate object of the policy is to familiarize the students with the ethos of cultural diversity and multilingualism in the country. It also aims to enhance professional efficiency in more than one language among them. Efficiency in more languages will equip them to pursue innumerable careers in various multinational organizations and companies across the globe.

The reconfiguration of the curriculum and pedagogy of the school education has the aim of producing engaged, productive, and responsible citizens for the country. They will contribute to making an equitable, inclusive India of the future. This policy will help in realizing the vision of a constructive plural society as dreamt by the makers of the constitution of India. The chapter entitled 'Promotion of Indian Languages, Arts and Culture' of NEP2020 states that the learners' mother tongue or the regional language should be the medium of instruction at the elementary level and beyond.

The home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language will, whenever possible, be the medium of instruction up until at least Grade 5, but preferably up to Grade 8 and beyond. The three-language formula will still be used, but it will be done so while promoting both national unity and multilingualism (Ahmed).

NEP has recommended the three-language formula at the school level to promote multilingualism and strengthen national unity. This Three Language Formula states that every student in Indian schools will be taught three languages. One of these languages will be a regional/local or mother tongue. Another one has to be a native Indian language. The third language option can be English or any other global language. This formula must be followed in letter and spirit by both government and private schools nationwide. This step aims at promoting multilingualism through education. It also seeks to enable the learners to communicate confidently across the country. It also aims to strengthen the spirit of unity by exposing students to diverse cultures and languages. Fostering respect for linguistic diversity will be a significant step in making "Ek Bharat-Shreshth Bharat."

This decision will not be imposed without taking into consideration the choice of the Indian states. All states will have the autonomy to choose their respective languages for school curricula. Besides, learners will also have the liberty to select one or more of the three languages according to their preferences. However, students must learn the basic proficiency level of the three languages by the end of secondary school. The medium of instruction in the native language would be compulsory till grade 8 and beyond. This promotion of the mother tongue is a significant step because, for a longer time, English has been in the vogue as the primary medium of instruction in private schools. They provided little or no emphasis on the use of local languages.

Research done at the global level indicates that language education rooted in the mother tongue develops the cognitive faculties of a child in a better way. The language-grasping power of children is at its best at an early age, leading to higher levels of comprehension and retention. With the growing age, they will have a more robust foundational understanding of languages that will facilitate smoother and more effective teaching and learning. One of the advantages of teaching instructions in the mother tongue is that the students will have the ease of understanding the basic concepts. They will benefit a lot from the availability of high-quality books on science, mathematics, and other textbook materials in their mother tongue. They will quickly grasp complex subjects in vernacular language. At the same time, the constitutional obligation on the part of the government will be fulfilled. The children who hail from linguistic minority sections will have the choice to access the facility for instruction in their mother tongue. It will also develop a sense of pride and respect for their culture, heritage, and diversity among the students from their childhood. It will increase students' interest in learning new languages. They will be eager to learn more languages as they move towards higher education. A strong base for learning new languages will influence the promotion of multilingualism, cultural enrichment, and national integration.

Besides the high-quality learning of Indian languages, other foreign languages, such as Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Thai, Persian, etc., will also be taught at the school level as an option of a third language. Further, experiential learning pedagogy will expose the students to the knowledge of global cultures and enhance their mobility across the world as per

their interests and aspirations. State and central governments will also invest in language teaching by appointing teachers in all regional languages across the nation. It will boost the rate of employment in the country.

This provision in NEP 2020 will be a significant initiative in the direction of rescuing the extinction of regional languages in India. It will play a crucial role in preserving and revitalizing them. Language learning will be further enhanced through the innovative and experiential inclusion of art, music, storytelling, local texts, poetry, films, and theatre.

The languages of India, along with their art and culture, will be documented through online portals, web and wiki to preserve the original language and their knowledge. The general public will also be invited to contribute to the portal and add their learning resources, with high-level knowledge of the language. These web portals will be managed by universities and their research team and funded by NRF. Students will be awarded scholarships on the basis of language. Various awards and incentives will be awarded for outstanding poetry and prose in Indian languages in the context of various categories, which will be established to ensure vibrant novels, poetry, journalism, textbooks and other works (Sharma).

Students will be benefited to a great degree as it will enhance and develop their linguistic competencies effectively. They will be more aware and able to express their cultures and arts in the coming future. That will empower the linguistic minorities to recognize, preserve, and promote their culture and linguistic heritage. This approach will be an insurance for the survival of the endangered languages and promote multilingualism and cultural diversity across India. This systematic promotion of vernacular languages will help in achieving sustainable development goals as well as robust technological advancement. The ambitious target of providing holistic education to the students will be realized through this significant change.

This policy promises to foster healthy social interconnections and national integration through the flexibility of multilingual education. It has the potential to encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of India's linguistic diversity among learners. This policy will assist in bridging the gaps between different linguistic communities, undermine linguistic hegemony, and promote national integration.

Critics of this landmark move cite the issue of additional burden on the learners at a young age. Students' inability to cope with the extra pressure and learning demands can make it challenging for them. Though this step has been welcomed by most of the states of the Union of India, some states have also raised their concerns in this context. Tamil Nadu has opposed this formula by stating that they want to protect their culture and heritage by lessening the importance of their regional language. According to some critics, this policy aims to promote Hindi in the educational curriculum of non-Hindi-speaking states and regions. Some Southern states like Tamil Nadu prioritize their local language, English, over Hindi, which has led to a complex and precarious landscape in education. Some of the sections of the Tamil community and leaders want to implement only a two-language formula, with the second language being English, which is considered the language of knowledge, advantage, possibilities, and empowerment. They cite their concerns about the deliberate imposition of Hindi, which might lead to the elimination of English from the school curriculum. They say that

they are not opposing the voluntary learning of Hindi but the compulsion or imposition of a non-native language in the form of Hindi. This misunderstanding about the denial of proper options or alternatives has led to resistance from the state stakeholders. “Several linguistic activists and educationists observed that the move would eventually end up in students being forced to learn Hindi because of scarcity of teachers in other languages” (Anbuselvan). The shortage of non-Hindi teachers, ineffective teachers' training, and lack of sufficient resources may prove a significant hindrance in the successful implementation of this formula.

Other challenges also hinder the successful implementation of multilingual education under National Education Policy 2020. One such challenge is the need for more adequate infrastructure and resources in remote regions. Here, schools need more facilities, qualified trainers and teachers, quality teaching-learning material, and multilingual educational resources. It will require a substantial investment on the part of the state and central governments.

First, an excellent team of teachers and faculty will have to be developed. Strong departments and programmes in Indian languages, comparative literature, creative writing, arts, music, philosophy, etc. will be launched and developed. The programmes will, in particular help to develop a large cadre of highquality language teachers - as well as teachers of art, music, philosophy and writing - who will be needed around the country to carry out this Policy. (Mandavkar)

Despite the research and pedagogical advantages of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, the parents and communities resist this approach, especially in urban areas. In a society that considers English as a window and gateway to the world for economic and social mobility, it is going to be a tough challenge on the policy implementation front. Parents often prefer their children to be instructed and educated in English from an early age. The fear of the limitation of future opportunities, societal pressure, and preference poses a significant hurdle in the acceptance of this policy.

Balancing regional and national interests is another critical issue in this direction. Promotion of the regional languages and their preservation and balancing it with pan-India languages like Hindi and English is particularly challenging in a multicultural country like India. Language is not just a means of communication; it is also linked to regional identity and political allegiance. It will require careful negotiation to avoid linguistic conflicts among the states. At the same time, measures are to be taken to ensure that no community remains linguistically marginalized.

If one thinks about the significant implications of the multilingual education policy, one can see that it seeks to ensure the revitalization of India's endangered language. This policy has the potential to provide a framework for the preservation of regional and tribal languages by incorporating them into the education system. To ensure the survival of local languages for future generations, the new teaching-learning material, literature, textbooks, and cultural resources in these languages will be developed systematically. This step will lead to the standardization and strengthening of regional languages. With this constructive approach, the resurgence of regional languages appears to be a near possibility in both educational and cultural domains. But, at the same time, it is essential to ensure that this bold and visionary attempt promotes linguistic diversity without undermining national integration.



Thus, the National Education Policy 2020 approach proposes some positive steps in the direction of ensuring linguistic diversity in India's educational system. The promotion of multilingual and mother-tongue learning has the potential to improve learning outcomes, preserve diversity in the linguistic landscape, and foster social harmony and coexistence.

...the introduction of multilingual education under NEP 2020 marks a landmark step towards embracing India's linguistic heritage and leveraging it to nurture well-rounded and empowered learners. By bridging the gap between regional languages and academic instruction, the policy aims to empower students with a strong foundation in their mother tongue while nurturing proficiency in multiple languages (Dhokare, Jadhav and Gaikwad).

However, there are conservable challenges related to educational infrastructure, social preferences, and the balance of regional and national interests. These challenges need to be carefully addressed to fulfill the vision of multilingual diversity in the education system. Some complexities also need to be navigated to empower all the linguistic communities in India. As the success of a policy depends on its robust implementation, timely monitoring of the educational outcomes of this policy will also be crucial. The commitment and positivity of the stakeholders to embrace and support this multilingual approach will be a significant step in creating an inclusive, diverse, and unified nation.

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