

## Language Diversity and Multilingual Education in the Framework of NEP 2020

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**Abstract:** *Language diversity is one of the defining features of India's cultural and educational landscape. Recognizing the importance of linguistic plurality, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the promotion of multilingualism as a key strategy for improving the quality and inclusiveness of education. This study examines the role of language diversity and multilingual education within the framework of NEP 2020 and analyzes how the policy aims to strengthen learning outcomes through the use of multiple languages in the educational process. NEP 2020 advocates the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, highlighting the cognitive, cultural, and pedagogical benefits of learning in one's first language. The policy also encourages the preservation of India's linguistic heritage while fostering communication across diverse linguistic communities. By promoting multilingual competence, NEP 2020 seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable education system that respects cultural diversity and enhances students' cognitive development.*

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**Introduction:** India is a linguistically diverse nation, home to hundreds of languages and dialects that reflect its rich cultural heritage and social complexity. This diversity, while being a source of cultural strength, also presents unique challenges in the field of education. Language plays a central role in shaping cognitive development, identity formation, and social interaction, making it a critical component of the learning process. However, historically, the Indian education system has often prioritized a limited number of dominant languages, particularly English, sometimes at the cost of regional and indigenous languages.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant shift in the approach to language in education. It acknowledges the importance of linguistic diversity and emphasizes multilingualism as a foundational principle of effective learning. By promoting the use of the mother tongue or home language as the medium of instruction, especially in the foundational years, the policy seeks to make education more accessible, inclusive, and meaningful.

**Objectives of the Study:** The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze the significance of language diversity in education.
2. To examine the provisions of NEP 2020 related to multilingual education.

3. To explore the role of mother tongue instruction in improving learning outcomes.
4. To identify challenges in implementing multilingual education in India.
5. To suggest strategies for effective implementation of language policies in schools.

**Research Methodology:** The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is based on secondary sources such as policy documents, academic journals, books, and reports related to language education and NEP 2020. A qualitative approach has been used to analyze and interpret the data, focusing on conceptual understanding and policy analysis.

**Language Diversity and Its Educational Significance:** Language diversity is an integral aspect of India's socio-cultural fabric, reflecting its rich heritage, pluralistic identity, and historical evolution. With more than 19,500 languages and dialects spoken across the country, India represents one of the most linguistically diverse societies in the world (Census of India, 2011). This linguistic plurality serves both as a valuable educational resource and a complex challenge for policymakers and educators. Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a carrier of culture, tradition, values, and indigenous knowledge systems. It significantly shapes how individuals perceive reality, construct meaning, and engage with their social environment (Kramsch, 1998).

In educational contexts, language diversity plays a crucial role in influencing learning outcomes and academic success. Research indicates that children learn most effectively when instruction is delivered in a language they are familiar with, particularly during the foundational years of schooling (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2016). When students are taught in an unfamiliar or second language, they often face difficulties in comprehension, expression, and participation, which can result in lower academic achievement and increased dropout rates (Mohanty, 2010). Such language barriers disproportionately affect learners from marginalized and tribal communities, thereby reinforcing educational inequalities.

Multilingual education seeks to address these challenges by recognizing linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a limitation. It promotes the use of multiple languages in the teaching-learning process, enabling students to build upon their existing linguistic repertoire while gradually acquiring additional languages (Garcia & Wei, 2014). This approach not only strengthens conceptual understanding but also enhances cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001). Furthermore, multilingual education fosters cultural awareness, mutual respect, and social inclusion by validating students' linguistic identities and encouraging intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2016).

**Multilingual Education in NEP 2020:** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places strong emphasis on multilingualism as a cornerstone of educational reform in India. It recognizes that language is fundamental to learning and cognitive development, and seeks to create an educational environment where linguistic diversity is respected, preserved, and effectively utilized (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy aligns with global educational frameworks that advocate mother tongue-based multilingual education as a means of improving quality and equity in education (UNESCO, 2016).

**Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction:** One of the most significant recommendations of NEP 2020 is the use of the mother tongue, home language, or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond. This recommendation is grounded in extensive research demonstrating that children grasp concepts more effectively when taught in their first language (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2016). Instruction in the mother tongue enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and active classroom participation, while also strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy skills (Mohanty, 2010). It also supports emotional security and cultural continuity among learners.

**Promotion of Multilingualism:** The policy advocates the systematic learning of multiple languages, including regional languages, Indian languages, and foreign languages. The three-language formula is re-envisioned with greater flexibility, allowing states, regions, and students to select languages based on their sociolinguistic context and preferences (Ministry of Education, 2020). This flexible approach promotes linguistic competence, national integration, and global communication skills. Multilingual proficiency also enhances employability and cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly globalized world (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

**Preservation of Linguistic Heritage:** NEP 2020 underscores the importance of preserving and promoting India's linguistic heritage, including classical, indigenous, and tribal languages. It encourages initiatives for the documentation, digitization, and revitalization of endangered languages, as well as their inclusion in educational curricula (Ministry of Education, 2020). This effort is essential for safeguarding cultural diversity and ensuring the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge systems (UNESCO, 2016).

**Language and Cognitive Development:** The policy highlights the cognitive advantages of multilingualism, emphasizing that exposure to multiple languages enhances brain development, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and memory (Bialystok, 2001). Multilingual learners often demonstrate greater adaptability and cognitive flexibility, as they are able to navigate different linguistic and cultural contexts effectively (Cummins, 2000). By promoting multilingual education, NEP 2020 aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals who are intellectually agile and culturally aware.

**Benefits of Multilingual Education:** Multilingual education offers a wide range of benefits for students, educators, and society at large. By integrating multiple languages into the teaching-learning process, it not only enhances academic outcomes but also contributes to cognitive development, cultural preservation, and social equity. Scholars and international organizations have consistently emphasized that multilingualism is a powerful tool for fostering inclusive and quality education (UNESCO, 2016; Garcia & Wei, 2014).

**Cognitive Benefits:** Learning multiple languages significantly enhances cognitive abilities such as memory, attention, problem-solving, and analytical thinking. Research indicates that multilingual individuals demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility and executive control, enabling them to switch between tasks more efficiently and adapt to new learning situations (Bialystok, 2001). Multilingualism also improves metalinguistic awareness, allowing learners to better understand the structure and function of language itself (Cummins, 2000). These cognitive advantages contribute to overall intellectual development and lifelong learning capacity.

**Academic Achievement:** Students who receive instruction in their mother tongue during the early years of education tend to achieve better academic outcomes. A strong foundation in the first language supports the development of literacy and numeracy skills, which can be effectively transferred to additional languages and subjects (UNESCO, 2016; Mohanty, 2010). Studies have shown that children who begin their education in a familiar language exhibit higher levels of comprehension, participation, and retention, leading to improved performance across the curriculum (Cummins, 2000). This approach also reduces dropout rates and enhances overall educational attainment.

**Cultural Preservation:** Multilingual education plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity and heritage by promoting the use of local and indigenous languages. Language is closely tied to traditions, values, and knowledge systems, and its preservation ensures the continuity of cultural practices across generations (Kramsch, 1998). By incorporating regional and tribal languages into education, multilingual approaches foster a sense of pride and belonging among learners, while also encouraging respect for cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2016).

Social Inclusion: By accommodating diverse linguistic backgrounds, multilingual education promotes inclusivity, equity, and social cohesion. It reduces language-based barriers to education, ensuring that students from marginalized and minority communities have equal access to learning opportunities (Mohanty, 2010). Inclusive language policies help create a supportive classroom environment where all learners feel valued and respected. Furthermore, multilingual competence enhances communication across different social groups, contributing to national integration and global understanding (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Challenges in Implementing Multilingual Education: Despite its wide-ranging benefits, the implementation of multilingual education in India faces several structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural challenges. These challenges often hinder the effective realization of policy goals outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and require careful consideration for successful implementation (Ministry of Education, 2020; UNESCO, 2016).

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of adequately trained teachers who are proficient in multiple languages and skilled in multilingual pedagogy. Effective multilingual education requires teachers who can seamlessly integrate different languages into classroom instruction and facilitate meaningful learning experiences. However, many schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas, face a shortage of qualified educators with such competencies (Mohanty, 2010). Additionally, limited access to teacher training programs and professional development opportunities further exacerbates this issue (UNESCO, 2016).

Closely related to this is the problem of insufficient infrastructure and resources. Many schools lack access to appropriate teaching-learning materials, multilingual textbooks, and technological support necessary for implementing multilingual education effectively. The development and distribution of high-quality instructional materials in multiple languages demand substantial financial investment and institutional coordination, which may not always be feasible in resource-constrained settings (NCERT, 2021).

Another critical challenge stems from the socio-cultural and economic preference for English-medium education. English is often perceived as a language of upward mobility, global communication, and better employment opportunities. As a result, many parents and students prioritize English over regional or mother tongue instruction, sometimes resisting multilingual or mother tongue-based approaches (Annamalai, 2004; Mohanty, 2010). This perception can create tension between policy objectives and societal aspirations.

The complexity of managing multiple languages within a single classroom also presents practical difficulties. Teachers must balance the use of different languages while ensuring that all students achieve the desired learning outcomes. Designing curricula, assessments, and evaluation systems that accommodate linguistic diversity is a demanding task that requires systematic planning and expertise (Cummins, 2000). Without proper support, this complexity may lead to inconsistent implementation and reduced effectiveness.

Furthermore, resistance to change among stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and policymakers, can slow down the adoption of multilingual practices. Many educational systems have long been rooted in monolingual or bilingual frameworks, making the transition to multilingual education challenging. Institutional inertia, lack of awareness, and limited policy clarity can further impede progress (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

In addition, issues related to standardization and language selection pose challenges. Determining which languages should be used in multilingual settings, especially in linguistically diverse regions, can be contentious and politically sensitive. Balancing regional representation while maintaining administrative feasibility remains a complex task (UNESCO, 2016).

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated and sustained effort involving policymakers, educators, communities, and other stakeholders. Investments in teacher training, infrastructure development, awareness campaigns, and research are essential to ensure the successful implementation of multilingual education in India (Ministry of Education, 2020).

**Conclusion:** Language diversity is a powerful asset that can enrich education and promote holistic development. NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for integrating multilingual education into the Indian schooling system. By emphasizing mother tongue instruction, promoting linguistic diversity, and fostering cognitive development, the policy aims to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment. The transformation envisioned by NEP 2020 requires sustained efforts, innovative approaches, and collective commitment. By embracing multilingualism, India can build an education system that not only respects its cultural heritage but also prepares learners for a globalized world.

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