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**Multilingualism in India: Language, Education, and the NEP 2020 Framework**

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**Daggula Haribabu**

Junior Lecturer in English, Govt Jr. College, Chanchalguda, Hyderabad

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**Abstract:**

India's multilingual landscape, with over 1,600 languages, plays a crucial role in shaping education and society. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes the importance of multilingualism and emphasizes mother tongue-based education at the foundational stage to enhance cognitive development and learning outcomes. The policy reaffirms the three-language formula, advocating for a balanced approach to linguistic diversity while promoting national integration. However, challenges remain in implementing equitable language policies, particularly for minority and tribal languages, which often face marginalization due to the dominance of English and Hindi in formal education and administration. NEP 2020 also highlights the role of digital technology in language learning, enabling wider access to multilingual educational resources. While multilingual education fosters cognitive flexibility, social cohesion, and academic success, socio-political and economic factors continue to influence language choices in education. The increasing role of globalization further complicates the linguistic landscape, affecting language preferences and societal attitudes. This paper examines the implications of NEP 2020 on India's multilingual education system, assessing its potential to bridge linguistic gaps and promote inclusivity. It argues for an inclusive language policy that values linguistic heritage while addressing practical challenges in execution. By analyzing language policies, educational frameworks, and societal perceptions, this study underscores the need for a dynamic and context-sensitive approach to multilingual education that aligns with NEP 2020's vision for equitable and holistic learning.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, NEP 2020, language policy, education, linguistic diversity, mother tongue-based education, three-language formula, linguistic heritage.

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## **Introduction**

Multilingualism refers to the ability of individuals or communities to communicate effectively in more than one language. It encompasses not just the knowledge of multiple languages but also their use in daily life, education, governance, and social interactions. In a global context, multilingualism is often seen as a means of promoting cultural exchange and understanding, but in India, it is an intrinsic part of national identity. India, with its vast geography and long history, is home to an extraordinary diversity of languages. According to the *Census of India 2011*, there are *122 major languages and 1599 other languages* spoken across the country, reflecting an unparalleled linguistic variety (Census of India, 2011). The Indian Constitution itself recognizes *22 scheduled languages* under the *Eighth Schedule*, including Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, and others, which are used in education, administration, and cultural practices (Government of India, 1950). This rich tapestry of languages is not merely a matter of communication but also a vital component of the cultural and social fabric of the nation.

Language plays a critical role in shaping both education and society in India. It is through language that knowledge, traditions, and cultural values are transmitted from one generation to the next. The medium of instruction in education influences not only what is taught but also how effectively students learn. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that children learn best in their mother tongue during the early years of schooling, which supports cognitive development and academic success. Recognizing this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritizes multilingual education by recommending mother tongue or regional language instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8 and beyond (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy underscores the cognitive and socio-emotional benefits of learning in one's home language and aims to reduce learning disparities for children from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, NEP 2020 promotes the three-language formula with greater flexibility, ensuring the inclusion of regional languages while also fostering national and global communication skills (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Beyond education, language serves as a marker of identity and belonging in Indian society. It determines access to social participation, economic opportunities, and political representation. NEP 2020 acknowledges the need for linguistic inclusivity in higher education by encouraging multilingual content and translation initiatives, enabling students to pursue higher studies in Indian languages (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, despite these efforts, linguistic diversity can also lead to social and political tensions when certain languages are privileged over others, marginalizing speakers of minority and tribal

languages. Thus, in the Indian context, multilingualism is not only a reflection of cultural richness but also a critical factor in shaping inclusive education and a cohesive society.

### **India's Linguistic Diversity**

India is often described as a linguistic mosaic, home to an astounding variety of languages that reflect its deep-rooted cultural and historical diversity.

The linguistic diversity is not merely a matter of numbers but serves as a living testament to India's *pluralistic culture and historical evolution*. Each language encapsulates the customs, folklore, religious practices, art forms, and worldviews of the community that speaks it. For example, *Tamil and Sanskrit* are among the oldest languages in the world, with classical literature and philosophical texts that form an essential part of India's intellectual and spiritual heritage. Similarly, regional languages like Bengali, Marathi, and Malayalam have produced rich literary traditions, including poetry, novels, and theatre, contributing to the cultural landscape of India. According to Annamalai (2001), India's multilingual character reflects its history of interactions among diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, from ancient migrations to colonial and modern influences. The coexistence of these languages within a single nation underscores India's unique ability to maintain unity while embracing cultural plurality. Therefore, the linguistic diversity of India is not just a characteristic of its demography but a profound reflection of its civilizational depth and cultural richness, preserved and celebrated through generations.

### **Multilingualism in Indian Education**

Multilingualism plays a critical role in shaping the educational landscape of India, influencing both the way knowledge is delivered and how students engage with learning. Recognizing the country's linguistic diversity, the Indian government introduced the *Three-Language Formula* in 1968, later reaffirmed in the National Policy on Education 1986 and 1992, and again emphasized in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This formula mandates that students learn three languages: the regional or mother tongue, Hindi, and English aiming to promote national unity while respecting linguistic diversity (Government of India, 1968; Ministry of Education, 2020). The goal is to ensure that students remain connected to their local cultures through their mother tongue, gain access to wider national communication through Hindi, and engage globally via English. In primary and secondary schools, using the child's mother tongue or regional language as a medium of instruction is believed to facilitate better comprehension and emotional connection with learning materials, especially in the early years (UNESCO, 2003).

However, despite its inclusive intent, the implementation of multilingual education faces numerous challenges. One significant issue is the lack of adequately trained teachers

proficient in multiple languages, especially in rural and tribal areas where local dialects are vastly different from mainstream languages (Mohanty, 2009). Additionally, there is often a shortage of textbooks and learning materials in many regional and minority languages, making it difficult to deliver quality education in the child's mother tongue (Jhingran, 2009). The prioritization of English as a key to social mobility also leads to a perception among parents and communities that regional languages are less valuable, which undermines efforts to promote mother tongue-based instruction. These challenges are compounded by administrative and logistical difficulties in managing multilingual classrooms with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Despite these obstacles, multilingual education has both positive and negative impacts on learning outcomes. On the positive side, research shows that children learning in their mother tongue exhibit better cognitive development, higher academic performance, and stronger cultural identity, as they can relate better to the content being taught (UNESCO, 2008). Studies also highlight that multilingual students develop greater metalinguistic awareness, critical thinking, and adaptability (Cummins, 2000). However, there are also negative consequences when multilingual education is poorly implemented. Language confusion can occur when children are forced to switch between languages without adequate support, leading to lower comprehension and academic underachievement (Mohanty, 2009). The absence of well-developed teaching resources and trained educators often exacerbates this problem, resulting in educational inequality, especially for children from marginalized linguistic communities. Thus, while multilingualism in education holds great promise for inclusivity and enriched learning, it requires sustained policy attention, resource allocation, and teacher training to be effective.

### **Role of Multilingualism in Society**

Languages play a fundamental role in shaping social interaction, identity, and inclusion in a multilingual country like India, where language is not just a means of communication but a marker of cultural heritage and community belonging. Language determines how individuals relate to one another, how they access opportunities, and how they perceive themselves within the broader social structure. According to Joseph (2004), language is deeply intertwined with personal and group identity, shaping one's sense of belonging and social recognition. In India, people often identify themselves not only by region or religion but also by the language they speak, such as Bengali, Tamil, or Marathi, which fosters a strong linguistic identity. This linguistic identity can promote solidarity within communities but can also create divisions when certain languages are privileged over others in public domains. In terms of inclusion, when individuals can access education,

employment, and public services in their languages, they feel more integrated into society; conversely, when these services are available only in dominant languages like Hindi or English, speakers of minority languages may feel excluded and marginalized (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Multilingualism also plays a crucial role in India's administration, media, and governance, as the state must cater to a linguistically diverse population. The Indian Constitution (Articles 343 to 351) recognizes Hindi and English as official languages for central government purposes but also allows states to adopt their official languages, reflecting the multilingual reality of governance (Government of India, 1950). This federal linguistic arrangement enables administration in regional languages at the state level, fostering accessibility and local governance. In the media sector, multilingualism is visible through television, radio, newspapers, and digital platforms that publish content in various languages, ensuring that different linguistic communities are informed and represented. However, despite these efforts, *language barriers* often hinder effective communication, especially in inter-state interactions or national-level discourse, where Hindi or English dominate. Speakers of less widespread languages may struggle to access vital information or participate fully in civic life when materials are not available in their native languages (Annamalai, 2001).

Additionally, linguistic discrimination remains a persistent problem in Indian society, where speakers of minority languages may face prejudice or be deemed inferior in educational, professional, and social settings. For example, the high status given to English as a language of upward mobility often stigmatizes those who are not proficient in it, reinforcing class and educational inequalities (Mohanty, 2010). Regional tensions have also emerged over the imposition or dominance of certain languages, as seen in protests against the compulsory teaching of Hindi in non-Hindi-speaking states. These conflicts highlight how language policies, if not inclusive, can lead to social unrest and feelings of disenfranchisement among linguistic minorities. Therefore, while multilingualism in India reflects the country's cultural richness and democratic ideals, it also poses significant challenges related to identity, inclusion, and equality that need continuous attention through sensitive and balanced language policies.

### **Government Policies and Efforts**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift in India's approach to education by placing strong emphasis on mother tongue-based and multilingual education, particularly in the foundational and elementary stages of schooling. Recognizing the cognitive and socio-emotional benefits of learning in one's native language, NEP 2020

recommends that “wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 13). The policy underscores that children learn and grasp concepts better when taught in a language they speak and understand, which leads to improved learning outcomes and stronger conceptual foundations. Furthermore, NEP 2020 encourages a flexible multilingual approach, promoting not only the use of the mother tongue but also the inclusion of other Indian languages and English as additional languages to enhance students' linguistic abilities and prepare them for global communication. This initiative is rooted in the understanding that language is critical for children's intellectual, emotional, and cultural development, and early education in one's mother tongue fosters a deeper connection with learning materials and helps prevent alienation from schooling.

In addition to NEP 2020, the Indian Constitution provides robust support for linguistic diversity, recognizing the multilingual nature of the country as a core part of its democratic and cultural framework. Articles 343 to 351 of the Constitution address the use and protection of languages in India. Article 343 establishes Hindi as the official language of the Union, while also allowing the continued use of English for official purposes. Importantly, Article 345 empowers each state to adopt its official language for intra-state communication and governance, acknowledging the linguistic variety of different regions (Government of India, 1950). Furthermore, Article 29 ensures the protection of the cultural and linguistic rights of minorities, stating that any group with a distinct language, script, or culture has the right to conserve it. Article 350A directs the government to provide facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups. Additionally, the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists 22 scheduled languages, thus granting them official recognition and safeguarding their development through state support. These constitutional provisions, along with NEP 2020, reflect India's commitment to preserving its rich linguistic heritage and ensuring that education and governance are inclusive of all linguistic communities.

### **Conclusion**

Preserving multilingualism is essential for safeguarding India's rich cultural heritage, fostering inclusive social development, and ensuring equitable access to education and opportunities for all linguistic communities. Languages are not merely tools for communication but carriers of collective memory, cultural knowledge, and unique worldviews. As *UNESCO (2008)* highlights, every language reflects a way of thinking and understanding the world, and preserving linguistic diversity is crucial for maintaining

cultural diversity. In India, where hundreds of languages and dialects coexist, preserving this multilingual heritage is also a means of protecting the rights and identities of various ethnic and regional communities. At the same time, there is a critical need to balance linguistic diversity with national unity, ensuring that the multiplicity of languages does not become a barrier to social cohesion or effective communication across regions. The Indian Constitution itself reflects this balance by recognizing multiple official languages while also establishing Hindi and English as link languages for national integration (Government of India, 1950). However, rather than suppressing smaller languages in favour of dominant ones, India must strive for a model of unity that embraces linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a division.

Education plays a vital role in promoting linguistic tolerance and inclusion. By implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education as emphasized in National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, schools can validate and celebrate students' linguistic identities, making education more meaningful and accessible. This approach helps reduce dropout rates and enhances cognitive and academic outcomes, especially among children from marginalized linguistic backgrounds (Mohanty, 2010). Furthermore, fostering multilingual proficiency among students can nurture mutual respect, empathy, and understanding across different language groups, thereby strengthening social bonds. Therefore, education systems must be designed to promote not only the learning of dominant languages like Hindi and English for national and global participation but also the preservation and development of regional and minority languages. By encouraging linguistic tolerance and inclusion, India can move towards an equitable and culturally vibrant society where every linguistic group feels valued and represented.

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