



## Language, Education, and Unity: Navigating Multilingualism in India's National Policy Framework

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### Abstract

India's linguistic diversity is both its greatest cultural asset and one of its most pressing educational challenges. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to transform Indian education through a multilingual, inclusive, and culturally rooted framework that recognizes the importance of mother tongue-based instruction, particularly in the foundational years. This paper critically examines the pivotal role of language in the successful implementation of NEP 2020, analysing the cultural, psychological, infrastructural, and pedagogical dimensions of multilingual education. It explores how enduring linguistic hierarchies—especially the dominance of English—continue to shape questions of access, identity, and equity within the Indian educational landscape.

The paper argues for a necessary paradigm shift: one that embraces linguistic plurality not as a source of fragmentation, but as a powerful driver of cognitive development, social cohesion, and national integration. Drawing upon historical precedents, constitutional provisions, and contemporary policy debates, the study offers a set of innovative and actionable recommendations. These include the development of robust multilingual teacher training ecosystems, the introduction of language-neutral entrance examinations, and the promotion of translation-driven knowledge dissemination to bridge linguistic divides.

Ultimately, the paper advocates for the rigorous and wholehearted implementation of the NEP 2020 language policy — a policy that is at once forward-looking and deeply rooted in India's civilizational ethos. By doing so, it envisions India emerging as a global leader in education — one that is inclusive, equitable, and authentically Indian — truly becoming a Vishwaguru in the fullest sense of the term.

**Keywords:** Multilingual Education, Linguistic Equity, Knowledge Translation, Translanguaging Pedagogy, Inclusive Assessment, Language Policy Innovation.

India is rapidly positioning itself as a global powerhouse in education, research, and intellectual capital. From Silicon Valley to CERN, and from Fortune 500 boardrooms to global health organizations, Indian professionals excel across technology, science, business, medicine, and the arts. According to the 2023 Ministry of Education report, India ranks among the top five nations for research output and hosts one of the world's largest higher education networks. Indian universities are climbing global rankings, and international student enrollment is steadily rising.

This progress brings responsibility. Sustaining it demands transforming India's educational foundations—especially access, equity, and language policy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a visionary blueprint rooted in India's civilizational values and aligned with global standards. Central to NEP is multilingualism and mother tongue-based education in early learning, recognizing language not just as instruction but as identity, culture, and cognition.

With 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects, India's linguistic diversity is vast and complex. NEP promotes a flexible multilingual model that leverages mother tongue instruction to enhance inclusion and learning. However, challenges remain: uneven infrastructure, shortage of multilingual teachers, lack of standardized materials, and societal biases elevating English as a status symbol. The gap between policy and practice is especially wide in underserved regions. This paper examines language as a critical factor in NEP 2020's implementation, proposing pragmatic strategies to bridge linguistic divides. Thoughtful integration of India's languages can deepen learning, boost cultural confidence, and advance the country's goals for equity and

global leadership. Ultimately, India is not just adapting to global education trends but actively shaping them.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark effort toward decolonizing the Indian mind and fostering national cohesion. By reimagining the education system through an inclusive, culturally rooted, and future-ready framework, NEP 2020 aspires to bridge long-standing regional, linguistic, and socio-cultural divides. It is the result of over five years of extensive consultations, deliberations, and research involving stakeholders from across the educational spectrum. Its design reflects a vision to not only reform but transform the foundational and structural dimensions of Indian education. If implemented sincerely and effectively, NEP 2020 holds the potential to bring about significant and positive transformation in the Indian education system. It urges a deep understanding of the policy's intent and emphasizes strategic, context-specific implementation.

The policy proposes structural reforms such as the new 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical model, which integrates early childhood care and education (ECCE) into the mainstream through Anganwadis, Balvatikas, and pre-primary institutions. Recognizing learning as a lifelong process beginning from infancy, the NEP envisions a strong foundation through foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), 21st-century skills, and vocational education. It also aligns itself with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing universal access, equity, and quality learning outcomes.

Other key innovations include:

- Formation of school complexes for optimal resource sharing

- A shift toward competency-based assessments
- Common standards for public and private institutions
- Teacher training and continuous professional development
- Policies to overcome language barriers in education

Crucially, the success of any policy lies in its implementation. This demands a comprehensive understanding of the policy among all stakeholders—administrators, educators, policymakers, and the community. A top-down yet inclusive approach is essential, where leadership from academic institutions, media, educationists, and policy advocates work in synergy. Teachers, as the frontline implementers, need to be well-informed, adequately trained, and continually supported. However, this remains a substantial challenge given the disparities in infrastructure, training, and awareness across different regions of the country.

Implementing any large-scale reform also requires time, adaptability, and sensitivity to local, political, cultural, and financial dynamics. Institutional change is a gradual process, and the rollout of NEP 2020 must account for long-term planning, incremental adaptation, and realistic timelines. Though the scope of NEP is ambitious, its goals are achievable with a phased, strategic, and region-specific roadmap. As Dale Carnegie once said, "Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small parts." In this spirit, the present study aims to develop a step-by-step, multi-level strategy to support the successful implementation of NEP 2020 reforms—particularly in addressing language barriers that often hinder inclusive and effective learning.

While the metalinguistic fabric of India is undoubtedly a blessing, its full potential can only be realized when young minds are first enlightened with faith in and appreciation for

this diversity. However, any such attempt must begin with the decolonization of the Indian mind—liberating it from its lingering colonial hangover. Education empowers, but this empowerment is not uniform across the country, as evident from the current state of Indian education and the attitudes of a significant portion of its educated population. It is within this backdrop that deeper questions emerge: How can language become a bridge rather than a barrier in the learning process? What reforms can make multilingualism a strength rather than a constraint? These are the questions the following discussion seeks to address.

Multilingualism, while a cultural asset, presents considerable challenges in crafting a cohesive and inclusive language policy for a nation as linguistically diverse as India. Every major education commission—from the Radhakrishnan Commission to the NEP 2020—has attempted to address this complex issue. Yet, a solution that is both practical and widely acceptable remains elusive. English has, over time, become deeply entrenched in India's communication and educational systems, to the extent that it now functions as a default language of aspiration, mobility, and status. This preference for English—rooted in historical, socio-economic, and psychological factors—is not confined to urban elites but pervades even rural communities, where families often seek English-medium education for their children in pursuit of better opportunities.

Language, as a carrier of culture and identity, demands sustained and meaningful engagement for genuine internalization. Yet, many Indians—academicians included—struggle to envision scholarly or professional work outside the English language. This is especially true in the realms of science, technology, and the social sciences, where the ecosystem for research and publication remains largely anglicized. Contributing to this dependency are systemic issues: limited access to high-quality academic content in Indian languages, a lack of trained translators,

inadequate infrastructure for vernacular research, and an absence of user-friendly technical vocabulary in regional languages. As a result, even those who strongly support linguistic decolonization find themselves relying on English for precision and accessibility.

The consequences are not merely academic; they touch upon broader questions of identity, pride, and national development. The continued dominance of English contributes to a subtle cultural dislocation, where India's rich linguistic and intellectual heritage is underutilized or overlooked. This disjunction has also played a role in the persistent brain drain, as many educated Indians aspire to migrate to English-speaking countries in search of recognition and better prospects. Addressing these challenges demands more than policy declarations—it requires conviction, sustained investment, and a fundamental reimagining of our educational priorities.

The transformative potential of education in the mother tongue is widely recognized, and NEP 2020 provides a roadmap to realize this vision. Yet, meaningful implementation demands overcoming systemic inertia, rethinking entrenched norms, and building confidence in Indian languages as carriers of modern knowledge. Change, as history teaches, requires "vision, perseverance, and consistent effort" (Kumar 45). If embraced fully, NEP could transform India's linguistic diversity from a source of division into one of strength.

At this crossroads, India faces a critical question: can it devise and implement a language policy that balances global engagement with the revitalization of indigenous languages? The solution lies in a pragmatic, phased approach—retaining English's functional role while expanding Indian languages across domains, guided by equity, inclusivity, and cultural pride.

Education rests on four pillars: students, teachers, curriculum, and infrastructure. NEP

2020 articulates a bold vision to strengthen each through coordinated efforts, continuous assessment, and strategic course correction (NEP 2020, p. 12). Financial incentives matter, but lasting motivation stems from "meaningful recognition" and institutional appreciation. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted, "The linguistic barrier to development must be broken through education in local languages" (Modi).

Despite English's colonial origins, it functions as India's associate and link language, spoken by over 35 million Indians—the largest English-speaking population outside the US and UK (Census of India 2011). Yet, India remains a "Babel of tongues," lacking a universally accepted national language other than English (Rao 23). Hindi, while constitutionally the official Union language, has not achieved pan-Indian acceptance, especially in the South.

Concerns persist that reducing English's role might hamper higher education, research, and international engagement. Given English's dominance in academia and diplomacy, such apprehensions are understandable. However, India's language policy must reconcile these practical demands with the need to nurture a national identity free from linguistic insecurity. As Iyengar observed about the judiciary, English legal terms often lack precise Hindi equivalents, complicating equitable interpretation (qtd. in Basu 210).

Historically, India's linguistic unity evolved through Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, and Urdu before English colonization introduced a new administrative lingua franca. English became a symbol of socio-economic mobility but also deepened cultural alienation and inequality. A resilient national identity requires a policy rooted in indigenous traditions yet responsive to modern realities, enabling gradual integration of Indian languages in education, administration, science, and law without abruptly displacing English.



A phased transition is essential; abrupt removal of English could disrupt systems dependent on it. India's pluralism demands a multilingual framework where states may adopt regional languages under Article 345, but English retains its global utility (Government of India, *Constitution*, art. 345). Until sufficient regional-language professionals emerge, English remains indispensable in complex technical and academic fields. This complex reality calls for a nuanced approach to linguistic democratization, balancing tradition, inclusivity, and modernization.

India's linguistic diversity is a profound source of cultural richness but poses significant challenges for language policy and education. Both the Constitution and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 embrace multilingualism and mother-tongue instruction as essential for equitable learning. Yet, in higher education and professional fields, English dominates as the medium of instruction and administration, revealing a tension between constitutional ideals and practical realities.

Until regional languages gain full acceptance at the university level – with enough qualified graduates to staff academic and administrative positions – English will continue to prevail. Senior policy, planning, and documentation largely occur in English, with regional translations often symbolic rather than functional. This challenge is especially acute in technical disciplines like engineering and medicine, where English remains central due to limited academic resources and the entrenched practice of conceptualizing specialized knowledge in English. Thus, bilingualism becomes a practical necessity, even among proponents of Hindi or other regional languages, who rely on English for clarity in technical discourse.

A persistent tension exists between linguistic nationalism and modernization's demands. Attempts to promote Hindi as a national alternative to English face resistance

due to regional linguistic pride and modernization pressures. As S. Radhakrishnan Iyengar notes about the judiciary: "Our courts are accustomed to English... It is not always possible to find a proper equivalent to an English word in the Hindi language and then proceed to interpret it with all the precedents and rulings which refer only to the English words" (qtd. in Basu 210). This problem extends across specialized fields including law, science, and technology.

The Linguistic Survey of India identifies 179 languages and 544 dialects, categorized under four major families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burman (Grierson). The Constitution recognizes 22 scheduled languages, with English serving as a "link language" between Hindi and non-Hindi states (Government of India, *Constitution of India*). While Hindi is the most widely spoken, it covers only about 40.42% of the population (Census of India 2011), highlighting the absence of a clear linguistic majority. The Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities defines such minorities as groups "having a distinct language or script of their own," regardless of whether they are among the scheduled languages (Government of India, *Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities*). This intricate linguistic mosaic makes crafting inclusive and effective language policy a formidable challenge.

Nevertheless, NEP 2020 reflects a thoughtful, visionary approach, promoting an education system that is "experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable" (NEP 2020, p. 3). It shifts away from rote learning to nurture critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. The policy's preamble states, "Education is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development" (NEP 2020, p. 4), aligning with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and

promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO). NEP emphasizes human development pillars—knowledge, ethics, compassion, unity, and cultural preservation—preparing citizens for an inclusive, pluralistic society.

Ultimately, NEP aspires to cultivate "good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values" (NEP 2020, p. 5). It envisions education not only as a pathway to employment but as the foundation for responsible, thoughtful citizenship rooted in democracy and cultural consciousness.

Multilingualism stands at the heart of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which firmly declares that "no language will be imposed on any student" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 14). From the foundational stage (age three), children are introduced to three languages, nurturing natural multilingual abilities. The NEP emphasizes 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" (National Education Policy 2020). This aligns with Gandhiji's timeless observation: "The most effective medium of teaching a child is his mother tongue" (Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 70, p. 66).

As UNESCO underscores, "Mother tongue-based multilingual education is a key strategy for inclusion and quality learning" (UNESCO, 2003), making the NEP's stance globally aligned. Mohanty (2009) similarly argues that mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is not just a pedagogical choice but a critical tool for achieving social justice, especially for marginalized communities.

This trilingual approach ensures proficiency not just in the mother tongue but also in two additional languages, with science

and mathematics taught through bilingual methods to deepen comprehension and cognitive development. Cummins (2001) powerfully states, "Multilingualism is a resource, not a problem, for cognitive development, creativity, and educational success", challenging deficit views of linguistic diversity.

Critics have raised concerns about linguistic centralization and the burden of three-language learning, particularly for marginalized groups. However, the NEP addresses these by emphasizing interactive, skill-based, and activity-centered language learning, minimizing rote memorization and reducing cognitive overload. As Annamalai (2001) reminds us, India's linguistic policies have long tried to balance national integration with respect for regional linguistic autonomy—a delicate act requiring innovation rather than uniformity.

The policy is backed by strong commitments: large-scale recruitment of multilingual teachers (especially for Eighth Schedule languages), inter-state language-teacher exchanges, and the integration of technology to democratize access. Importantly, NEP 2020 recognizes the limits of English's practical reach. Despite its global utility, only about 8–10 lakh Indians emigrate annually for work or study (Bureau of Immigration, 2020), while the majority of India's workforce—42.6% in agriculture, 25.1% in industry, 32.2% in services—rarely requires English for economic participation (Ministry of Labour, 2020). As Pattanayak (1990) insightfully notes, "English in India is both a bridge and a barrier — a bridge to global opportunities, but a barrier to equitable access for millions of non-English speakers." Scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) caution that "a nation that loses control over its languages loses control over its knowledge systems," underscoring that linguistic sovereignty is not a nostalgic ideal but an intellectual and developmental imperative. As G. N. Devy also warns, "A civilization that loses its languages loses its memory" (Devy, 2016, p.

42), making India's linguistic diversity not just a cultural asset but a civilizational necessity.

Article 350A of the Constitution firmly mandates: "It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups" (Constitution of India, Art. 350A). Yet, as Pattanayak (1981) notes, the constitutional framework has often been unevenly implemented, leaving many minority languages vulnerable to exclusion.

India's great intellectual contributions – from Ayurveda and yoga to the decimal system and classical literature – emerged from Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, Persian, and other Indian languages, long before English entered the scene. As Mohanty, Panda, and Phillipson (2010) argue, striking the right balance between English and regional languages is essential if India's multilingualism is to serve as a foundation for equitable development rather than deepen divides.

As NEP 2020 envisions, education must "be rooted in India's heritage and values while preparing learners for the 21st century" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 4). To realize this vision, India must move beyond the narrow equation of English with opportunity and embrace its multilingual legacy as the foundation for inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant education – enabling the nation to emerge, in the true sense, as a *Vishwaguru*.

### **Reimagining Action: Language-Inclusive Strategies for NEP 2020**

To transform the NEP 2020 from a visionary blueprint into lived educational practice, a recalibration of linguistic priorities is essential. Bamgbose (2000) reminds us that language policies, when poorly designed, become mechanisms of exclusion, while well-designed

policies can empower marginalized voices. The following proposals aim to reengineer the relationship between language, learning, and national identity in India:

#### **1. Establish Knowledge Translation Hubs**

Develop dedicated centres across major universities to curate, translate, and contextualize high-impact global research into Indian languages. These hubs would not merely translate words but reinterpret knowledge through culturally resonant idioms, making cutting-edge scholarship accessible to local learners. As Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues, denying children access to knowledge in their mother tongue is a form of "linguistic genocide" and a violation of their human rights.

#### **2. Create Multilingual Pedagogy Labs**

Rather than traditional teacher training institutes, set up experimental pedagogy labs that equip educators to teach across languages. These spaces would focus on translanguaging techniques, indigenous knowledge systems, and cognitive strategies for bilingual/multilingual teaching—turning language multiplicity into pedagogical strength (Mohanty, Panda, & Phillipson, 2010).

#### **3. Design Entrance Examinations with Linguistic Parity**

Introduce national-level university entrance assessments that are not merely "available" in multiple languages but are designed from inception with linguistic neutrality in mind. This means avoiding idiomatic bias, ensuring equitable terminology across languages, and validating regional languages as equal conduits of academic thought (King & Benson, 2004).

#### **4. Launch a National Lexicon Innovation Drive**

Empower academic and linguistic bodies to coin, test, and refine contemporary academic and technical terms in regional languages. A national contest-style model,

engaging students and scholars in building this evolving lexicon, could ignite ownership and pride in academic expression across vernaculars (Annamalai, 2001).

#### **5. Institute Language Equity Fellowships**

Offer prestigious fellowships for research and content creation in Indian languages—especially in STEM and social sciences. These fellowships would not only fund academic work but also mentor scholars in navigating the publishing and dissemination ecosystem in non-English mediums (Ramanathan, 2005).

#### **6. Mandate Linguistic Access Reviews**

Just as policies today require gender audits, mandate linguistic access reviews for all centrally funded education programs. This ensures that content, platforms, and delivery mechanisms accommodate multiple language users—not as a feature, but as a foundational principle (UNESCO, 2003).

India's rich multilingual heritage is not a challenge to be managed but a civilizational asset to be leveraged. If India wants to claim its place as a global leader in knowledge, innovation, and cultural diplomacy, it must begin by securing linguistic equity at home. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) powerfully asserts, reclaiming linguistic sovereignty is essential for intellectual freedom. The National Education Policy 2020 offers a bold and necessary framework to transform this diversity into a pillar of educational justice and national integration. By institutionalizing multilingual strategies, India can set a global example, redefining what inclusive, future-ready education truly looks like.

In conclusion, India's rich multilingual heritage is not a challenge but a civilizational asset, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a bold framework to transform this diversity into a force for educational equity, cognitive growth, and national integration. To realize this vision, we need more than good

intentions; we need deliberate infrastructure, innovation, and imagination. Knowledge Translation Hubs must localize global research; Multilingual Pedagogy Labs must equip educators for linguistically diverse classrooms; language-neutral assessments must break the bias linking English with intelligence; and fellowships must support not only scholars but also storytellers and custodians of India's knowledge traditions—in every language the nation speaks. Technology, too, must be harnessed—not as a substitute for human agency but as a force multiplier for inclusion, accessibility, and quality. Equally critical is a cultural shift: language must no longer be seen as a dividing line between elites and the masses, but as a bridge to deeper understanding, creativity, and national pride. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o famously reminds us, "A nation that loses control over its languages loses control over its knowledge systems" (1986)—a warning and a call to action for India as it reshapes its educational future.

To translate NEP 2020 from visionary blueprint to transformative reality, India must embed equity through bold, structured multilingual initiatives. This study identifies key priorities to advance NEP's multilingual promise: establishing Knowledge Translation Hubs to democratize access to cutting-edge research; launching Multilingual Pedagogy Labs to train educators in translanguaging and bilingual innovation; developing linguistically neutral entrance exams to ensure fair and inclusive assessment; driving a National Lexicon Innovation Initiative to expand regional language vocabularies for modern disciplines; introducing Language Equity Fellowships to champion research and creativity in Indian languages; and instituting mandatory Linguistic Access Reviews to weave multilingual inclusivity into every centrally funded educational program. Together, these steps can catalyze a systemic shift toward an educational ecosystem that truly reflects India's linguistic and cultural richness.



Ultimately, India stands at a historical juncture. By embracing linguistic plurality not as a constraint but as creative capital, and by embedding multilingualism at the core of its educational architecture, the nation can redefine global paradigms of education and emerge as a true Vishwaguru. In the end, it is not the number of languages we speak, but how we let each language speak to our shared future, that will define India's place in the world.

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