

Multilingualism in India: NEP 2020's Vision and Challenges

Rajiv Ranjan Mahto
rajivmahto@gmail.com

Abstract

Multilingualism in India is not merely a policy consideration but a lived reality. It is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the country. There are five language families present in the country which carry this cultural fabric. India's linguistic diversity, with over 1,600 mother tongues, has historically been marginalized in education, favoring dominant languages like Hindi, English and other scheduled languages. With the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, multilingual education receives renewed emphasis, challenging dominant language paradigms. This paper discusses the implications of NEP 2020 in promoting linguistic diversity, particularly among marginalized and indigenous communities. We reflect on the policy's potential to correct historical wrongs in language education and critically analyze the challenges of implementing multilingualism in an educational context that has long favored dominant languages.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Multilingualism, Indian Languages, Linguistic Rights, Mother Tongue, Education Reform.

1. Introduction

Multilingualism in India has often not been centred around indigenous languages but instead around dominant languages such as Hindi and English (Annamalai, 1997). NEP 2020 offers a pivotal moment to reorient this linguistic imbalance by prioritizing mother tongues and local languages in early education. The policy's vision is to foster inclusivity while also addressing the linguistic aspirations of indigenous and minoritized communities.

In this paper, we examine how NEP 2020's emphasis on multilingual education reflects a broader recognition of linguistic diversity, which has long been sidelined in favor of dominant Indo-Aryan (IA) and Dravidian (DR) languages. We also highlight the potential for the policy to address the linguistic rights of indigenous, tribal, and minoritized (ITM) groups, aligning with Skutnabb-Kangas' (2014) observation regarding the inappropriate choice of instructional languages as a direct cause of the educational challenges faced by these communities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to redress this imbalance by promoting multilingual education, particularly through the use of mother tongues or local languages as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5. This policy aims to foster inclusivity, improve learning outcomes, and address the educational challenges faced by indigenous, tribal, and minoritized (ITM) communities.

However, implementing multilingual education faces several challenges, including regional disparities, shortages of teaching materials, a lack of trained teachers, and parental preferences for English as the medium of instruction. This paper examines NEP 2020's potential to promote linguistic diversity and

suggests policy recommendations, such as localized strategies, strengthening teacher training, and engaging communities to ensure successful implementation. While NEP 2020 holds promise for promoting linguistic equity, its success will depend on sustained efforts and context-specific solutions.

2. Multilingual Education in India

India's linguistic landscape is complex, with over one thousand and six hundred languages as mother tongues. Historically, educational policies have failed to fully account for this diversity, and opted instead for a linguistic hegemony that marginalizes regional and tribal languages. NEP 2020 challenges this by advocating for early childhood education to be conducted in the child's mother tongue or local language, particularly up to Grade 5 (Government of India, 2020). This is indicative of a general recognition of the cognitive and cultural benefits of learning in one's actual first language.

In regions like Jharkhand, where Austroasiatic and Dravidian languages are spoken by a predominantly large population, education continues to be delivered primarily in Indo-Aryan languages, thus perpetuating Mohanty's (2019) 'double divide' between dominant and minoritized languages. This gap is particularly evident in classrooms, where students struggle to engage with a curriculum delivered in a language that is not their own, further exacerbating educational inequalities.

3. NEP 2020's Vision for Multilingualism

NEP 2020 provides an unprecedented opportunity to shift the linguistic focus in Indian education. By emphasizing multilingualism through the medium of instruction and textbook, the policy aims to create more inclusive educational environments that respect and reflect the linguistic realities of students. The policy proposes that the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5 should be the child's mother tongue or home language, aligning with research that indicates children learn better when taught in their native language (Government of India, 2020). This vision is particularly relevant in tribal-dominated regions like Jharkhand, where linguistic diversity is often seen as a barrier rather than a resource.

NEP 2020 also promotes the revival of classical and regional languages, ensuring that linguistic diversity is maintained and celebrated across the country. Schools and higher education institutions are now encouraged to introduce courses and resources in regional languages, providing students with the opportunity to engage with their cultural heritage (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2014), thereby playing an active role in their revitalisation.

4. Challenges in the implementation of multilingualism

The potential benefits of NEP 2020 are significant, but several challenges stand in the way of its full realization. Listed below are some of these challenges.

4.1 Regional Disparities

Implementing multilingual education in a country as diverse as India is a herculean task. This diversity is multifarious and lacks uniformity as the geography and demography changes. Although the political states in India were formed based on linguistic boundaries, the linguistic variations within the states are potentially so wide to form complexities towards a uniform education system. Although the Government of India recognizes twenty-two languages as the scheduled official languages and endeavours to make education available through them, the core educational infrastructure has proven inadequate when it is about catering to all the mother-tongues.

4.2 Shortage of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs)

One of the major challenges in the implementation of MLE is the shortage of TLMs. This has always been the argument which went in favour of the dominant languages and against the minority

languages. Mohanty (2019) reports that the availability of appropriate materials and administrative support for development of the same varies significantly from region to region. This is particularly true in states like Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where the multilingual reality is not reflected in the educational infrastructure at all.

4.3 Lack of Trained Teachers

One of the major hurdles in adopting a multilingual approach is the shortage of teachers trained to teach in multiple languages. Most teacher training programmes in India have traditionally focused on Hindi and English, leaving a significant gap in the ability to provide education in regional and tribal languages.

4.4 Structural and semantical differentiation

In some states, there are cases where the mother tongues belong to one language family, while the medium of instruction and textbooks are from another language family. In such cases, the syntactical and semantical differences prove to be a major hurdle. For example, in West Bengal, the state official language Bengali is an IA language, whereas, there are languages like Santhali, Ho, Kudmali and Mundari which have a two tense structure. The three tense structure of Bengali, then, becomes a hurdle for these learners. Similarly, there are differences at the level of vocabulary due to language alienation. One such noticeable example is at the level of pronouns. These tribal languages have four pronominals for first person plural. To map them to one label 'we' is an uphill task for a teacher of English in this region.

4.5 Parental Preferences

Many parents continue to favor English as the medium of instruction, perceiving it as key to better job opportunities and socio-economic mobility. This preference often conflicts with the policy's emphasis on mother tongues, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, where English-medium schools are proliferating.

5. Policy Recommendations

While NEP 2020 provides a strong foundation for promoting multilingualism, its success depends on thoughtful implementation and sustained policy support. The following recommendations aim to address the challenges outlined above:

5.1 Localized Implementation Strategies

Policy implementation must be sensitive to the unique linguistic contexts of different states. Jharkhand, for instance, could benefit from a more localized approach that prioritizes the languages spoken by its indigenous communities. This could help bridge the existing 'double divide' and create more equitable learning environments (Mohanty, 2019).

5.2 Strengthening Teacher Training

Robust teacher training programs are essential to the success of multilingual education. Investments must be made in developing teacher competencies in multiple languages, particularly in regions with high linguistic diversity.

5.3 Community Engagement

The success of NEP 2020's multilingual vision also hinges on community buy-in. Efforts must be made to engage parents and local communities in discussions about the value of mother tongue education, addressing concerns about future opportunities while highlighting the cognitive and cultural benefits of multilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2014).

6. Conclusion

The NEP 2020 offers India an opportunity to redefine its linguistic policies and embrace the multilingualism that characterizes its educational and social landscape. In states like Jharkhand, where indigenous languages continue to be marginalized, the policy could serve as a powerful tool for ensuring linguistic rights and promoting educational equity. However, successful implementation will require sustained commitment, localized solutions, and community involvement. Only then can India's multilingual reality be truly reflected in its educational practices.

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