

Living the Vision of NEP 2020: Multilingualism, Cultural Diversity and Multidisciplinary Learning in Indian Classrooms

Dr. Veerendra Kumar Pathak,
Ms. Shreya Jain

Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) serves as a blueprint for a transformative educational journey, moving India from a “factory-model” of schooling to a “holistic-learning” ecosystem. This research explores the triad of Multilingualism, Cultural Diversity and Multidisciplinary Learning as the primary drivers of this change. By synthesizing current pedagogical theories with practical classroom interventions, this paper provides a roadmap for educators and policymakers. It highlights how linguistic flexibility, the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and the removal of rigid disciplinary silos can enhance cognitive development and social cohesion.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Multilingualism, Multidisciplinary Pedagogy, Cultural Inclusion, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), 5+3+3+4 Structure.

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Dr. Veerendra Kumar Pathak

Directorate of Education,
GNCT of Delhi
Email - drvkpathakdoe@gmail.com

Ms. Shreya Jain,

Program Head, SHABD,
New Delhi
Email - shreyasworkspace@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) marks the first education policy of the 21st century in India, arriving 34 years after its predecessor. Its core objective is to create an “India-centric” education system that directly contributes to transforming the nation into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. The vision of NEP 2020 is not merely a change in curriculum but a fundamental shift in pedagogical culture.

As per NEP 2020 (Section 4.11), “Multilingualism and the power of language” are essential for learning. Simultaneously, the policy emphasizes a “Holistic and Multidisciplinary” approach (Section 11), aiming to develop all capacities of human beings—intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional and moral.

2. Literature Review: The Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1 The Cognitive Power of Multilingualism

Research consistently shows that children whose early education is in their mother tongue/home language have higher self-esteem and better learning outcomes. According to Cummins’ (2000) “Interdependence Hypothesis,” proficiency in a first language provides a “common underlying proficiency” that facilitates the learning of second and third languages. NEP 2020 leverages this by advocating for the Three-Language Formula with added flexibility.

2.2 Multidisciplinary Learning and 21st Century Skills

The world is no longer divided into neat boxes of “Science” or “Arts.” Modern challenges like climate change or pandemics require an understanding of biology, sociology, economics and ethics simultaneously. Gardner’s (2008) “Five Minds for the Future” emphasizes the “Synthesizing Mind”—the ability to integrate ideas from different disciplines into a coherent whole.

2.3 Cultural Diversity as a Pedagogical Asset

Banks (2015) argues that “Multicultural Education” is not just about celebrating festivals but about “Content Integration,” where teachers use examples and information from a variety of cultures to illustrate key concepts.

3. Methodology

This study employs a Mixed-Methods Secondary Research Approach, utilizing a qualitative framework to synthesize policy intent with practical implementation data. By relying on a “triangulation” of data sources, the research ensures that theoretical guidelines are cross-referenced with real-world school outcomes and international benchmarks.

3.1 Policy Document Review: Framework Analysis

The foundational stage of this research involves a thematic analysis of India’s core educational reforms:

- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** Analyzed for its strategic vision on multidisciplinary education, vocational integration and the shift from “rote” to “competency-based” learning.
- **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023:** Evaluated to identify specific pedagogical shifts in the 5+3+3+4 structure, specifically focusing on the “Secondary Stage” (Grades 9-12) where multidisciplinary choice is most prevalent.
- **Data Extraction:** Key parameters for analysis include curriculum flexibility, assessment reforms (formative vs. summative) and teacher autonomy.

3.2 Case Analysis: Evaluation of Pilot Models

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, this study reviews documented outcomes from ongoing Project-Based Learning (PBL) initiatives. The research analyzes secondary data (annual reports, pilot results, and institutional case studies) from:

- **Directorate of Education (DoE), GNCT of Delhi:** Reviewing the “NEEV” and other project-led interventions in state schools.
- **Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVS):** Examining the implementation of “PM SHRI” (Schools for Rising India) models which serve as regional labs for NEP-aligned experiential learning.
- **Private Progressive Schools:** Analyzing “Best Practice” reports from institutions that have early-adopted IB-inspired or inquiry-based models within the Indian context.

3.3 Comparative Study: International Benchmarking

The methodology includes a comparative policy analysis to determine the global competitiveness of the Indian reform.

- **Finland’s “Phenomenon-Based” Learning:** A comparison of “Holisticity” and “Contextuality” between the Finnish model and India’s proposed multidisciplinary subjects.
- **International Baccalaureate (IB) Framework:** Aligning NCF 2023’s “Cross-Cutting Themes” with the IB’s interdisciplinary approach to assess how Indian students might transition into global higher education environments.

4. Pillar I: Inculcating Multilingualism

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Section 4.12) marks a paradigm shift from “monolingualism” to “functional multilingualism.” It recognizes that children learn and grasp complex concepts most quickly in their home language, thereby reducing the cognitive load of translating while learning.

A. The “Translanguaging” Pedagogy

Traditional Indian pedagogy often enforced a “strict language separation,” where using a native tongue in an English-medium setting was seen as a barrier to proficiency. In contrast, an NEP-aligned classroom adopts Translanguaging—the act of using a student’s full linguistic repertoire to process information.

- **The Strategy in Practice:** During a Physics lesson on Gravity, the teacher provides the technical framework in English. However, to ensure deep conceptual anchoring, they allow students to discuss the “feeling of weight” in their mother tongue (e.g., Marathi or Bengali). By using a familiar Hindi idiom or a local analogy to illustrate “attraction,” the teacher bridges the gap between abstract physics and lived experience.
- **The Cognitive Benefit:** Research suggests that when the brain isn’t struggling to decode a foreign language, it can allocate more neural resources to understanding the scientific principle itself.

B. Structural Intervention: Multilingual Word Walls

To institutionalize this approach, classrooms should move beyond verbal cues to visual linguistic aids.

- **The Concept:** “Multilingual Word Walls” serve as a living glossary. For every core scientific or mathematical term, the wall displays its equivalents in multiple languages.
- **Example:** | English | Sanskrit | Tamil | Hindi/Local Dialect | | Energy | *Urja* | *Aatral* | *Shakti* | | Force | *Bala* | *Visai* | *Taaqat* |
- **Goal:** This fosters “Metalinguistic Awareness”—the ability of a student to see the common threads between different languages, thereby enhancing overall literacy.

C. The Language Bridge: Bilingual Textbooks

One of the most significant hurdles in NEP implementation is the “English-Regional Language” divide in higher education. The methodology proposed here is the 60:40 Bilingual Ratio.

- **Instructional Design:** Primary explanations and contextual examples are written in the regional language (60%), while technical nomenclature, definitions and key summaries are provided in English (40%).
- **Conceptual Clarity:** This ensures that a student’s understanding of “Photosynthesis” is rooted in their natural vocabulary, but they remain equipped with the English terminology required for global scientific discourse.
- **Application:** Digital textbooks (e-books) can feature “toggle” switches or hover-over translations, allowing for a personalized linguistic scaffold.

5. Pillar II: Strengthening Cultural Diversity

NEP 2020 seeks to bridge the gap between “local roots” and “global aspirations.” The objective is to move away from a Eurocentric curriculum to one that acknowledges India’s historical contributions, fostering a sense of identity that empowers students to engage with the world as equals.

A. Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS): Beyond Tokenism

Rather than treating Indian Knowledge Systems as an isolated elective, the NEP 2020 advocates for its seamless integration into core STEM subjects. This approach validates indigenous logic within a modern scientific framework.

- **The Strategy: Historical Contextualization**

When introducing the Pythagorean Theorem ($a^2 + b^2 = c^2$), educators can present the Baudhayana Sulba Sutras. By showing that these geometric relationships were utilized in the construction of Vedic altars centuries before Pythagoras, students realize that mathematical truth is universal and has deep-rooted Indian origins.

- **Practical Suggestion: The “Heritage Botany Project”**

Students act as “community ethnographers” by interviewing elders about local medicinal flora (Ayurveda/Siddha/Unani).

Example: Create a “Community Botany Guide” where a plant like *Tulsi* or *Turmeric* is documented through two lenses: its traditional curative uses and its chemical properties (e.g., Curcumin in Turmeric) as studied in modern Biology.

B. Art-Integrated Learning (AIL)

Art-Integrated Learning is a cross-disciplinary pedagogy where students use various art forms to explore and internalize academic concepts.

The Strategy: Ethno-Mathematics

In primary grades, the Warli Art of Maharashtra serves as an ideal tool for teaching “Symmetry,” “Congruence” and “Geometric Tessellation.” The use of basic shapes—triangles, circles and squares—to represent complex human life allows children to visualize abstract math in a familiar cultural context.

The “E-Twinning” Initiative

To promote national integration (the “Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat” vision), schools should implement a digital Cultural Box Exchange.

- **The Mechanism:** A school in Kerala (coastal, spice-rich culture) is “twinned” with a school in Himachal Pradesh (mountainous, cold-climate culture).
- **The Outcome:** Students exchange digital portfolios containing local folksongs, recipes for regional staples and history of local festivals. This transforms “Geography” from a textbook chapter into a lived connection with a peer.

C. Value-Based Education and Indian Ethos

The curriculum should also integrate the concepts of *Nishkama Karma* (selfless action) and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) into Civics and Environmental Science.

- **Environmental Stewardship:** Linking modern sustainability (SDGs) to the ancient Indian practice of sacred groves (*Devarakadu*), teaching students that ecological conservation is an ancestral duty, not just a modern policy requirement.

6. Pillar III: Multidisciplinary Learning in Practice

NEP 2020 seeks to abolish the “hard separations” between arts and sciences, curricular and extra-curricular activities and vocational and academic streams (Section 4.9). This encourages a holistic brain development approach, where students see the world as an interconnected web of knowledge.

A. The “Village Pond” Unit: A 360-Degree Inquiry

The Middle Stage (Grades 6-8) is the ideal period to transition students from subject-specific learning to Thematic Units. Instead of studying “Water” as an isolated chapter in a Geography textbook, the “Village Pond” serves as a living laboratory.

- **Scientific Inquiry (Biology/Chemistry):** Students collect water samples to test pH levels, turbidity and identify local micro-organisms, linking textbook concepts of “Ecosystems” to their immediate environment.
- **Historical Context (History/Civics):** Researching the origin of the pond or local *Baolis* (step-wells). Students interview village elders to understand ancient water-sharing rituals and community management systems.
- **Quantitative Analysis (Mathematics):** Applying geometry and volume formulas ($V = l \times w \times h$ or cylindrical approximations) to estimate the pond’s capacity and calculating evaporation rates based on seasonal temperature changes.
- **Creative Expression (Literature/Art):** Analyzing local folklore, poems, or songs dedicated to water and documenting the project through a “Pond Journal” that combines data with creative writing.

B. Vocational Integration: The “Bagless Days” Initiative

Section 4.26 of the NEP introduces 10 Bagless Days to reduce the divide between “intellectual” and “manual” labour. This is not merely a break from school but an immersion into the dignity of labour.

- The Strategy: Expert-Apprentice Model
Students are paired with local “Master Craftsmen”—carpenter, potter or electrician. The focus is on Applied Knowledge.
- The “Carpentry & Geometry” Workshop:
In a classroom, an “obtuse angle” is an abstract drawing. In a carpentry workshop, it is a structural necessity for a stable bookshelf. Students apply the Theorem of Pythagoras and concepts of Parallelism to build a physical product.
- Outcome: This transforms vocational skills from a “fallback option” into a high-value competency, aligning with the global STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) framework.

C. Flexible Subject Combinations (Secondary Stage)

At the Secondary Stage (Grades 9-12), the NEP allows students to choose “unlikely” combinations, such as Physics with Fashion Design or History with Applied Mathematics.

- The “Design Thinking” Approach: A student studying Chemistry and Fine Arts might focus on the “Chemistry of Pigments,” leading to career paths in Art Restoration or Material Science.
- Application: Schools should implement “Modular Scheduling,” allowing common time blocks for project-based electives that cut across different streams.

7. Strategic Suggestions for Stakeholders

The success of NEP 2020 depends on a synchronized “ecosystem shift.” If one stakeholder remains anchored in the old “industrial-age” model of education, the transition to a holistic framework will be stalled.

7.1 Stakeholder Action Matrix

Stakeholder	Suggested Action	NEP Reference	Objective
School Leaders	Redesign timetables to allow “Common Blocks” (90–120 mins) for multidisciplinary projects instead of 40-minute periods.	Sec 11.7	To provide the time required for deep, inquiry-based immersion.
Teachers	Transition from “Sage on the Stage” to “Guide on the Side,” facilitating peer-to-peer learning and student-led inquiry.	Sec 12.1	To foster critical thinking rather than rote memorization.
Parents	Shift mindset to view Vocational Skills (Coding, Carpentry, Pottery) as core competencies, not “hobbies.”	Sec 4.26	To remove the social stigma surrounding manual and technical labour.
Boards (CBSE/ State)	Replace high-stakes, “one-day” exams with a 360-degree Holistic Progress Card (HPC).	Sec 4.34	To track skills, values, and peer-evaluations alongside academic marks.

7.2 Implementation Roadmaps

A. For School Leaders: The “Modular Timetable”

Standard 40-minute bells are the biggest enemy of multidisciplinary learning.

Suggestion: Implement “Project Wednesdays” or “Flexi-Fridays” where the second half of the day is dedicated entirely to cross-subject themes (e.g., The “Village Pond” unit mentioned in Section 6). This allows teachers from different departments to co-teach.

B. For Teachers: The PARAKH Framework

The newly established PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) standards require teachers to assess “how a student thinks” rather than “what they remember.”

Suggestion: Use Formative Rubrics. Instead of a single mark, grade students on *collaboration, digital literacy and empathy* during their group projects.

C. For Parents: The “Life-Skills” Portfolio

The NEP suggests that by 2025, at least 50% of learners shall have exposure to vocational education.

Suggestion: Schools should host “Skill Exhibitions” where parents see the mathematical and scientific rigor behind vocational tasks. Seeing a student use Trigonometry to design a chair (Carpentry) or Microbiology to maintain a compost pit (Gardening) changes parental perception of “academic value.”

8. Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 From Tokenism to Deep Integration

The primary challenge in modernizing Indian education is avoiding “Policy Dilution.” As this paper has argued, the success of NEP 2020 depends entirely on the Intentionality of the classroom environment.

- **The Trap of Tokenism:** Historically, “Cultural Diversity” was relegated to an annual cultural day or a single chapter in a textbook. To “Live the Vision,” schools must move toward Deep Integration, where cultural context is the lens through which all subjects are viewed—from the geometry of temple architecture to the chemistry of traditional metallurgy.
- **Multilingualism as a Cognitive Asset:** We must dismantle the hierarchy that places English at the apex and regional languages as “remedial.” Research in neuroplasticity suggests that multilingual students possess higher executive function and cognitive flexibility. By treating a child’s mother tongue as a bridge rather than a barrier, the Indian classroom can unlock higher levels of critical thinking and emotional intelligence.

8.2 Overcoming Implementation Friction

The transition to a multidisciplinary, skill-based model will inevitably face “systemic friction.”

- **Teacher Mindset:** The shift requires teachers to unlearn their role as the sole source of knowledge and embrace a “collaborative inquiry” model.
- **Assessment Alignment:** Unless the “Board Exam” culture is fundamentally altered to reward application over memorization, the classroom will remain a site of rote learning regardless of policy intent.
- **Digital Equity:** For the “Language Bridge” and “Global Citizen” goals to be met, digital infrastructure must reach the last mile, ensuring that a student in a rural village has the same access to “E-Twinning” as a student in an urban private school.

8.3 Final Synthesis

In conclusion, “Living the Vision” of NEP 2020 is about creating a symbiotic learning environment. It envisions a classroom where a student is not fragmented by subject silos but is empowered by a holistic identity.

The ultimate success of this reform will be measured by a student who can:

- Solve a complex Mathematical problem using the efficiency of Vedic techniques;
- Debate the Social and Ethical implications of that solution in their mother tongue;
- Document and present their findings in English to a global audience.

By rooting the students in their local reality while giving them the wings of global standards, India can finally transition from an “Educational System” to a “Learning Society.”

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