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Implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Education in Foundational Stage under NEP 2020

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Abstract –

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's educational landscape by prioritizing mother tongue-based education (MTBE) in the Foundational Stage (ages 3-8, covering Balavatika/pre-school to Grade 2). This policy mandates the use of the child's home language, mother tongue, local, or regional language as the primary medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8, to foster foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). Grounded in extensive cognitive and linguistic research, MTBE enhances comprehension, cognitive development, cultural identity, and equitable learning outcomes, particularly for multilingual and marginalized communities.

This article examines the theoretical underpinnings, policy provisions, implementation strategies, benefits, challenges, and best practices for MTBE under NEP 2020. It draws on global evidence, Indian case studies, and stakeholder perspectives to propose a roadmap involving teacher training, resource development, community engagement, and multilingual pedagogies. While NEP 2020 aligns with constitutional mandates (e.g., Article 350A) and international standards like UNESCO's emphasis on MTB-MLE, successful implementation requires addressing linguistic diversity, resource gaps, teacher preparedness, and societal preferences for English. The article argues that effective MTBE can transform early education, reduce learning gaps, preserve India's linguistic heritage, and build a strong foundation for multilingual proficiency and lifelong learning. Recommendations include scalable models, technology integration, and monitoring frameworks to realize NEP's vision of inclusive, joyful, and equitable education.

Keywords: – Mother Tongue-Based Education, NEP 2020, Foundational Stage, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, Multilingual Education, Linguistic Diversity.

Introduction

India's linguistic diversity is unparalleled, with over 19,500 mother tongues identified in the 2011 Census, of which hundreds are used in daily communication. Yet, the education system has historically favored dominant languages or English, creating barriers for millions of children, especially from tribal, rural, and linguistic minority backgrounds. Nearly 40-44% of children enter school facing a language mismatch, contributing to poor learning outcomes as documented in ASER reports.

The National Education Policy 2020 addresses this by restructuring school education into a 5+3+3+4 model, with the Foundational Stage (ages 3-8) as the critical period for cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. Section 4.11-4.12 of NEP 2020 explicitly states 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" in both public and private schools. This is not an imposition but a flexible, evidence-based approach emphasizing multilingualism.

The policy aligns with the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) and the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022). It recognizes that young children learn best through familiar languages, facilitating conceptual understanding before transitioning to other languages. This article explores the implementation of MTBE in this stage, balancing pedagogical ideals with practical realities in a diverse nation.

Theoretical Foundations of Mother Tongue-Based Education

Cognitive science and linguistics provide robust support for MTBE. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights language as a tool for thought and social interaction. Jerome Bruner emphasized the role of familiar linguistic scaffolds in cognitive development. Research by Jim Cummins on Common Underlying Proficiency demonstrates that skills developed in L1 (first language) transfer to L2/L3, debunking myths of language interference.

Global evidence from UNESCO and studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America shows that children taught in their mother tongue for the first 6-8 years achieve higher literacy, numeracy, and overall academic success, with lower dropout rates. In India, studies on tribal communities (e.g., Odisha's MLE programs) confirm improved attendance, comprehension, and self-esteem.

For the Foundational Stage, play-based, activity-oriented learning in the home language supports holistic development—physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and creative—as per NCF-FS. Oral language development precedes literacy, reducing cognitive load and enabling deeper engagement with concepts in mathematics, environmental studies, and arts.

NEP 2020 Provisions for Foundational Stage Language Education

NEP 2020 integrates language policy with curricular restructuring:

- Foundational Stage Focus: Emphasis on multilingual exposure with L1 as the primary vehicle. Oral proficiency in additional languages (e.g., regional and English) through stories and conversations, without using them as MoI initially.
- Three-Language Formula: Flexible choice, with two of the three languages being Indian (preferably including mother tongue). No language imposition.

- **Teacher Preparation:** Teachers proficient in children's L1, especially from local communities. NCFTE 2021 to incorporate multilingual pedagogies.
- **Resources:** Development of textbooks, primers, and materials in home languages. NCERT and CIIL initiatives for language primers.
- **Assessment:** Joyful, competency-based assessment aligned with FLN goals.
- **Inclusion:** Special attention to tribal, migrant, and differently-abled children.

These provisions aim for universal FLN by Grade 3, addressing equity and quality.

Implementation Strategies

1. **Language Mapping and Contextual Approaches:** States must conduct sociolinguistic surveys to identify dominant home languages vs. school MoI. Approaches vary: full MTBE where feasible; bilingual bridging; extensive oral use of L1 in dominant-language classrooms.
2. **Teacher Training and Recruitment:** Pre-service and in-service programs via DIETs, SCERTs, and universities. Incentives for local language speakers. Use of technology for training (e.g., DIKSHA platform).
3. **Curriculum and Materials Development:** Culturally responsive, play-based curricula. Creation of graded readers, storybooks, and digital content in multiple languages. Collaboration with NGOs and linguistic experts.
4. **Multilingual Pedagogies:** Translanguaging (fluid use of multiple languages), code-switching for scaffolding, and culturally relevant examples. Integration of arts, music, and local knowledge.
5. **Community and Parental Engagement:** Awareness campaigns to counter English-medium preferences. Parent-teacher partnerships and involvement of local bodies (Panchayats, SHGs).
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Integration with UDISE+, NIPUN Bharat dashboards. Regular FLN assessments and feedback loops.
7. **State Initiatives:** Odisha's pioneering MLE program, Assam's inclusion of indigenous languages, and efforts in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand demonstrate scalable models. CBSE directives encourage Indian languages as optional MoI.

Benefits of Implementation

- **Cognitive and Academic:** Stronger FLN, better concept grasp, higher-order thinking.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Reduces barriers for disadvantaged groups, lowers dropouts.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Strengthens identity, intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Multilingual Competence:** Better acquisition of additional languages long-term.
- **Socio-Economic:** Empowers communities, supports national integration while preserving diversity.

Empirical studies, including recent ones on reading skills, affirm positive impacts.

Challenges in Implementation

- **Linguistic Heterogeneity:** Classrooms with multiple mother tongues; script development for unwritten languages.
- **Teacher Shortages:** Lack of proficient educators in minor languages; urban-rural divides.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited textbooks, materials, and funding, especially for low-resource languages.
- **Societal Attitudes:** Parental preference for English due to perceived job market advantages; elite resistance.
- **Infrastructure and Policy Coordination:** Federal structure requires state buy-in; transition mechanisms from foundational to higher stages.
- **Assessment and Accountability:** Developing valid tools for multilingual contexts.

Best Practices and Case Studies

- **Odisha MLE:** Tribal languages in early grades with bridging to Odia; improved outcomes.
- **International Lessons:** Finland's mother tongue support, South Africa's bilingual models, and Philippines' MTB-MLE.
- **Technology:** AI translation tools, apps for storybooks, and online teacher communities.
- **Pilot Programs:** Expand successful pilots with rigorous evaluation.

Recommendations for Effective Rollout

- Establish a National Mission for MTB-MLE with dedicated funding.
- Mandate language mapping and 5-year state action plans.
- Invest heavily in teacher education (target: multilingual proficiency).
- Public-private partnerships for content creation (e.g., with language technology firms).
- Continuous advocacy and myth-busting campaigns.
- Research and documentation: Longitudinal studies on outcomes.
- Flexible timelines with incentives for early adopters.

Conclusion

Implementing MTBE in the Foundational Stage under NEP 2020 is not merely a policy directive but a transformative opportunity to build an equitable, rooted, and globally competitive education system. By grounding early learning in children's lived linguistic realities, India can unlock cognitive potential, nurture cultural pride, and achieve FLN goals for all. Success hinges on collaborative governance, sustained investment, teacher empowerment, and community ownership. As India aspires to be a developed nation by 2047, prioritizing mother tongues in education will ensure no child is left behind, fostering a truly inclusive "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat." The journey requires persistence, innovation, and unwavering commitment to linguistic justice.

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