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Multilingual Mandates vs. Classroom Realities: Evaluating Teacher Capacity for Mother-Tongue Instruction Under NEP 2020

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Abstract–

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 outlines a visionary shift toward Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), mandating that foundational learning (up to Grade 5) be conducted in a child's native or regional language. While the cognitive and pedagogical merits of this directive are well-supported by global linguistic research, the operational success of such a massive systemic pivot rests almost entirely on the shoulders of frontline educators. This paper critically examines teacher readiness to navigate the multilingual expectations of the NEP 2020 framework. Through a mixed-methods investigation involving surveys of 500 primary educators and in-depth interviews with school administrators across five linguistically diverse Indian states, this study identifies a profound disconnect between policy idealism and classroom praxis. The data reveals acute deficits in pre-service pedagogical training for trans languaging, a severe mismatch between teacher deployment and hyper-local linguistic demographics, and a chronic shortage of bilingual instructional materials. Ultimately, the findings suggest that without an aggressive, structural overhaul of teacher education and localized resource allocation, the NEP's multilingual mandate risks compounding, rather than alleviating, existing educational inequities.

Keywords – National Education Policy 2020; Multilingual Education; Mother-Tongue Instruction; Teacher Readiness; Trans languaging; Educational Policy Praxis; India.

INTRODUCTION

"एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति" (*Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*)

"Truth is one; the wise call it by many names." — RigVeda (1.164.46)

The linguistic landscape of the Indian classroom is arguably one of the most complex in the world. multilingual education posits that foundational knowledge—whether it be mathematical logic or scientific inquiry—remains constant, even when delivered through diverse linguistic vehicles. Yet, for decades, the formal education system has operated in stark opposition to this pluralism. Children enter school speaking a rich tapestry of local dialects, only to be immediately confronted with instruction in a standardized state language or English, abruptly transforming early schooling into a stressful exercise in decoding an alien language.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to aggressively correct this historical oversight. By recommending that the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5 remain the mother tongue, local, or regional language, the NEP aligns Indian educational policy with decades of consensus in cognitive neuroscience. Theories of linguistic interdependence demonstrate that establishing robust conceptual foundations in a child's first language naturally scaffolds the subsequent acquisition of secondary and global languages.

Yet, a policy is only as effective as the practitioners tasked with its implementation. The transition from a rigid, monolingual instructional model to a dynamic, multilingual one places extraordinary demands on primary school teachers. They are now expected to fluidly navigate classrooms where multiple mother tongues intersect, employing strategies like "trans-language" without diluting academic rigor. This paper investigates whether the Indian teaching workforce is currently equipped to translate the NEP's multilingual vision into an equitable classroom reality.

RESEARCH WORK

1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To capture both the statistical scope of teacher readiness and the nuanced realities of their daily challenges, this research utilized a sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase surveyed 500 primary-level educators randomly sampled from public schools across five states characterized by high intra-state linguistic diversity (Assam, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh). To contextualize these metrics, the qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 40 school principals and regional training coordinators, focusing on institutional barriers to MTB-MLE implementation.

2. THE LINGUISTIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC DISCONNECT

The most immediate operational hurdle identified in the data is the friction between state-level teacher deployment and micro-local linguistic realities. While 68% of surveyed educators reported high proficiency in their state's official language, a mere 32% claimed native or functional fluency in the specific tribal or sub-regional dialects spoken by their incoming foundational learners.

This gap forces teachers into an impossible position: they are mandated by policy to teach in the mother tongue, but lack the linguistic capital to actually do so, often resulting in a reluctant reversion to the standardized state language.

3. PEDAGOGICAL ANXIETY AND THE TRAINING VOID

"आचार्यात् पादमादत्ते पादं शिष्यः स्वमेधया । पादं सतीर्थ्यब्रह्मचारिभ्यः पादं कालक्रमेण च ॥"

"A student learns a quarter from the teacher, a quarter from their own intelligence, a quarter from peers, and a quarter over time."

This ancient verse beautifully deconstructs the learning process, yet it relies on a critical assumption: that the foundational "first quarter" imparted by the teacher is comprehensible to the student. Teaching a multilingual classroom requires highly specific pedagogical frameworks, such as translanguaging—the intentional and fluid use of multiple languages to maximize student comprehension.

However, current teacher education programs in India remain deeply traditional. A staggering 81% of the surveyed educators stated that their pre-service training included absolutely no specialized coursework on multilingual pedagogy. Left to their own devices, teachers reported experiencing high levels of "pedagogical anxiety." They frequently expressed fears that utilizing local dialects might harm their students' future prospects in an English-dominated job market, highlighting a tension between the NEP's pedagogical logic and the socio-economic pressures exerted by parents.

4. THE LOCALIZATION OF RESOURCES

Finally, the research exposes a critical infrastructure deficit regarding localized academic materials. Effective mother-tongue instruction requires high-quality, culturally relevant textbooks and digital resources. Qualitative interviews revealed that while state governments have successfully translated materials into major regional languages, there is a total vacuum of standardized academic literature in localized dialects. Teachers reported spending hours unofficially translating curriculum materials on the fly—a practice that is unsustainable and leads to massive inconsistencies in instructional quality across districts.

5. DECODING THE POLICY TEXT: NEP 2020 AND THE THREE-LANGUAGE FORMULA

To fully understand the pressures placed on educators, one must examine the specific mechanisms of the NEP 2020, particularly its revitalization of the "Three-Language Formula." Unlike previous iterations that often resulted in rigid, rote memorization of a third language, NEP 2020 advocates for a more flexible, culturally rooted approach, stipulating that at least two of the three languages taught must be native to India.

For teachers, this policy directive presents a dual challenge. First, they must ensure foundational literacy in the mother tongue (Language 1). Second, they must seamlessly introduce the state/national language (Language 2) and an additional language (Language 3) without causing cognitive overload. Survey data revealed that 74% of educators feel the policy text is highly theoretical, offering no practical blueprint on *how* to sequence these languages in

a 40-minute class period. Furthermore, teachers face immense pushback from parents who view English not just as a language, but as an economic necessity. Navigating the NEP's promotion of indigenous multilingualism against the socio-economic hegemony of English has become a daily diplomatic challenge for school administrators.

6. THE ASSESSMENT DILEMMA: EVALUATING COGNITION BEYOND LANGUAGE

Another critical dimension of teacher readiness involves the evaluation of student learning. The NEP 2020 advocates for formative, holistic assessments that measure core competencies. However, surveyed teachers expressed profound confusion regarding how to execute this in a translanguaged classroom. When a child explains a scientific concept flawlessly using a hybrid of formal Marathi and a local Gondi dialect, standard evaluation rubrics force teachers to mark the answer incorrect. Until state educational boards redesign their evaluation matrices to accommodate linguistic fluidity, teachers remain trapped between the NEP's progressive pedagogy and the rigid mandates of standardized testing.

CONCLUSION

"सा विद्या या विमुक्तये" (*Sā vidyā yā vimuktaye*)

"That is true education which liberates."

The ultimate goal of education is liberation—not just philosophical liberation, but the freeing of a child's mind from cognitive barriers and systemic constraints. The NEP 2020's mandate for Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education represents a deeply necessary, scientifically grounded intervention in India's educational trajectory. It rightly recognizes that a child's native language is their greatest cognitive asset, and forcing them to abandon it at the school gates acts as a cognitive prison rather than a liberating force.

However, the findings of this study deliver a sobering reality check: the policy is currently running far ahead of the system's capacity to execute it. The gap between the NEP's ideological intent and classroom reality is currently bridged only by the improvised, unsupported efforts of overburdened teachers.

If this multilingual mandate is to succeed, it requires a systemic overhaul of how India trains, deploys, and equips its educators. This necessitates integrating rigorous multilingual pedagogical modules into all teacher training programs and adopting hyper-local recruitment strategies to ensure the linguistic profiles of teachers match the communities they serve. Furthermore, state governments must invest heavily in linguistic task forces dedicated to developing academic materials in indigenous and tribal languages. Without these foundational investments in the educators themselves, the NEP's promise of liberating, multilingual learning will remain an elegant theory rather than a lived reality for India's children.

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