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Regional languages, educational reform, and nation-building in India: A critical reading of NEP 2020 in historical and global context

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of regional languages in India's nation-building process, with a particular focus on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Drawing on historical developments, postcolonial language politics, and comparative insights from multilingual polities such as East Timor, Malaysia, and the European Union, the paper explores how language functions as a site of cultural identity, political negotiation, and educational access. While NEP 2020 promotes mother tongue instruction and multilingualism, its implementation faces significant structural and ideological barriers. The paper critiques the policy's centralizing tendencies and lack of enforceable measures, arguing that without sustained investment and localized planning, the vision of linguistic inclusion remains aspirational. By situating India's language debates within broader global patterns of linguistic planning and identity politics, the analysis underscores the need for flexible, region-sensitive frameworks to preserve linguistic diversity and ensure educational equity.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, regional languages, language policy, nation-building, linguistic identity, educational equity, multilingualism, India, language and governance

Introduction

India's linguistic diversity has always been central to its cultural and political identity. With more than 1,600 mother tongues and roughly 200 languages spoken across the country, the linguistic landscape of India is unparalleled in complexity and scope (Jha, 2018, p. 30) [5]. The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) reintroduces the role of these regional languages within a new framework that promises inclusivity and holistic development. However, the interface between regional languages and educational reform is not new. Historical precedents and cultural tensions continue to shape the narrative around linguistic identity and its place in national progress.

Language in India is not only a medium of communication but a bearer of identity, culture, and power. It reflects the historical trajectories of communities and the politics of representation. The British colonial administration, as noted by Jha, 2018 [5], grappled with the decision of whether education should be delivered through classical languages like Sanskrit or vernaculars like Hindustani. By the 19th century, the emergence of vernacular spheres helped consolidate regional, political, and literary domains (Jha, 2018, p. 29) [5].

The post-independence Indian state took a conscious step toward linguistic reorganization, recognizing the role of language in governance and identity. This decision materialized through the States Reorganization Act of 1956, which created states based on linguistic lines. This reorganization was not only a political necessity but a response to the aspirations of linguistic communities that viewed language as a core element of self-rule and cultural preservation (Hingorani, 2020, p. 36).

NEP 2020 reopens the discussion on linguistic inclusion in education. The policy emphasizes the use of mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond (Govinda, 2020, p. 604) [2]. This marks a significant shift from the prevailing trend of English-medium instruction in urban areas. It also signals an attempt to democratize access to quality education by grounding learning in familiar linguistic contexts.

Yet, the policy's presentation has drawn both praise and critique. R. Govinda argues that while the policy is ideationally rich and ambitious, it often ignores practical constraints such as inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching resources in regional languages, and insufficient teacher training (Govinda, 2020, p. 605) [2]. The gap between policy vision and ground reality remains a critical fault line.

Language is also instrumental in nation-building. Hingorani explains how the integration of regional languages into education and public life fosters national consciousness. He points out that cultural programs like the National Book Trust and the National Literary Academy were initiated to bridge regional divides through literary exchange (Hingorani, 2020, p. 36).

However, regional languages have historically had to compete with English and Hindi. As Karat observes, the introduction of English during colonial rule was uneven and disproportionately benefited the coastal states. This skewed development fostered regional disparities and tensions over linguistic dominance (Karat, 1973, p. 110) [6]. Post-independence, Hindi was promoted as the national language, but its reception varied widely, with strong resistance in southern and northeastern states.

The NEP's stance on multilingualism echoes these historical tensions. While promoting regional languages, the policy also maintains English as a critical link language. This dual emphasis reflects both political pragmatism and social reality. The resistance to imposing any single language is rooted in India's complex federal structure, where states retain significant power over education.

In recent times, sociolinguistic research has documented a transformation in the role of language for political control

and social mobility. Annamalai notes that while English once dominated these domains, vernacular languages are now increasingly asserting themselves in state politics and administration (Jha, 2018, p. 30) [5].

Despite its promise, NEP 2020 has faced critique for centralizing educational governance. Poonam Batra argues that the policy undermines the constitutional education agenda by proposing a homogenized and overly regulated education system, which could exacerbate educational inequality and marginalize linguistic diversity (Batra, 2020, p. 597) [1].

Historical Context

Language has been central to the making of Indian national identity and the struggle for independence. The early 20th century witnessed a significant debate between classical and vernacular languages in education. While British administrators like Gilchrist and Carey advocated for the study of vernaculars over classical languages, colonial policy inconsistently supported both, often using language to reinforce administrative control (Jha, 2018, p. 49) [5].

The role of English in colonial India evolved rapidly. It came to dominate education, administration, and access to power, sidelining regional languages, which were relegated to the status of 'vernaculars' (Jha, 2018, p. 31) [5]. This categorization was not neutral; it imposed a hierarchy of languages that resonated well into the post-independence period.

Vernacular domains were not passive recipients of this hierarchy. From the 19th century, regional linguistic movements emerged to assert local identities. These movements often had their own political imaginations that did not align neatly with pan-Indian nationalism. In Bengal, Maharashtra, Madras, and Punjab, linguistic identity became a powerful force for social mobilization and cultural autonomy (Jha, 2018, p. 30) [5].

Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders recognized the importance of language in mobilizing the masses. During the freedom movement, the Congress adopted the principle of linguistic provinces to rally regional support, promising post-independence recognition of linguistic identities (Hingorani, 2020, p. 35). After independence, these promises led to demands for state reorganization. The creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953, following the death of Potti Sriramulu, marked the beginning of linguistic reorganization in earnest. The 1956 States Reorganisation Act institutionalized language as the basis for state formation, formalizing the link between language and political power (Hingorani, 2020, p. 35) [3].

However, this process was not without tension. The creation of linguistic states, while fulfilling the aspirations of many communities, also risked promoting regionalism at the expense of national unity. The 1955 States Reorganisation Commission warned against an exclusive focus on linguistic criteria, recommending a balanced approach to state boundaries (Hingorani, 2020, p. 35).

The vernacular revival also shaped public education. Regional universities began using local languages as mediums of instruction. This was a cultural and political victory for language movements that had long sought parity with English and Hindi (Hingorani, 2020, p. 36). At the same time, language politics evolved in different directions. In the Hindi-speaking heartland, languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi were subsumed under the broader category of Hindi, marginalizing their unique literary traditions (Jha, 2018, p. 49) [5]. This policy led to resistance, as speakers of these languages sought separate recognition and protection. Colonial legacies in linguistic classification, particularly through projects like the Linguistic Survey of India, continued to influence postcolonial language policy. These classifications shaped public perceptions and administrative decisions, often ignoring the fluid, overlapping nature of India's linguistic reality (Jha, 2018, p. 41) [5]. Comparable experiences in newly independent nations highlight how language policy also becomes a site for negotiating identity and inclusion. Similarly, postcolonial societies such as East Timor have faced complex challenges in building inclusive language policies. As Taylor-Leech (2008) [9] observes, language in such contexts becomes a contested site for constructing new national identities, reflecting both colonial legacies and internal pluralism (p. 154)

NEP 2020 and Language Policy

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [1] places a renewed emphasis on the use of Indian regional languages in education, especially at the foundational stage. It marks a departure from earlier policies that passively tolerated English as the dominant medium of instruction in many schools, even in regions where the majority of the population speaks a different mother tongue. The policy stipulates that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the mother tongue or the local/regional language" (Govinda, 2020, p. 604) [2].

This recommendation revives earlier proposals dating back to the Kothari Commission (1964–66), which advocated for the use of the mother tongue in early education as essential for better learning outcomes and for preserving cultural identity (Haragopal, 2020, p. 590) [3]. Despite its ambitious tone, NEP 2020 [3] does not legally mandate the use of regional languages; rather, it recommends their use "wherever possible." This phrasing has drawn criticism for being non-committal and lacking enforceable clarity (Batra, 2020, p. 595) [1].

In its advocacy for multilingualism, NEP 2020 proposes a "three-language formula" that encourages the study of three languages by each student—two of which should be native to India. This formula continues the legacy of earlier national education policies, but NEP 2020 [1] avoids specifying what these three languages should be, allowing states flexibility (Govinda, 2020, p. 604) [2]. The policy's linguistic provisions are aimed at strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy, which are expected to improve if children are taught in their mother tongues. However, there is little engagement with the infrastructural and pedagogical challenges of implementing this shift. Many states lack the resources to train teachers in regional languages or to produce sufficient learning material in those languages (Govinda, 2020, p. 605) [2].

Further, the policy proposes the creation of a National Repository of high-quality learning resources in regional languages. This digital repository aims to make textbooks, audio-visual material, and interactive content available in multiple Indian languages. Critics have argued that while this is a forward-looking vision, its success is contingent upon addressing the digital divide and ensuring regional inclusivity in content creation (Govinda, 2020, p. 605) [2].

The NEP's promotion of Sanskrit has been noted as a symbolic gesture that aligns with ideological leanings. The policy describes Sanskrit as "a beautiful and scientific language" and proposes its widespread optional offering across school and higher education levels (Govinda, 2020, p. 604) [2]. Critics like Batra have expressed concern that this symbolic elevation may come at the cost of actual support for spoken regional languages that are already struggling for recognition and resources (Batra, 2020, p. 597) [1].

Regional Languages and Educational Equity

The NEP 2020 aims to bridge educational disparities through linguistic inclusivity, particularly by encouraging the use of mother tongues and regional languages in early education. However, a closer examination reveals that its promises often remain ungrounded in practical strategy, especially concerning marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

The policy proposes the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction until at least Grade 5. This recommendation is seen as a tool to improve comprehension and learning outcomes among children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom regional languages are often the primary mode of communication at home. Despite this, there is no clear articulation of how infrastructural limitations, such as the lack of trained teachers and learning materials in these languages, will be addressed (Batra, 2020, p. 595) [1].

NEP 2020 further introduces the concept of 'Special Education Zones' (SEZs) for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which include a broad spectrum of the population—Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, women, and people with disabilities.

Cultural and Identity Preservation

Language is more than a communication tool; it is deeply tied to the cultural, emotional, and intellectual life of a community. In India, regional languages serve not only as vehicles of daily interaction but also as repositories of literature, folklore, spiritual traditions, and collective memory.

Historically, language has played a pivotal role in the formation of cultural identities in India. The revival of vernacular languages in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the creation of literary canons and cultural renaissances in regions like Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat (Karat, 1973, p. 10) [6]. These movements used language as a platform for social reform, community mobilization, and resistance against colonial and caste hierarchies.

In the 19 th century The Gujarati and Marathi reformers, used the vernacular press to spread ideas of social equality and modernization among people. This helped to enliven regional cultures and bridge traditional values with emerging bourgeois aspirations (Karat, 1973, p. 10) [6].

In the context of education, preserving language is crucial to preserving identity. The regional languages not only shape, how knowledge is transmitted but also how learners see themselves in relation to their community and the broader nation. Batra suggests that homogenizing education disregards this relationship, risking "deep discord in the national fabric" (Batra, 2020, p. 598) [1].

Furthermore, vernacular languages are not static; they evolve with time and usage, adapting to the communicative needs of different generations. This dynamism, however, requires platforms for expression and institutional reinforcement. NEP 2020 is making an attempt to provide space to these regional languages by making them the languages of instruction in schools. As Wright (2016) argues, even in European contexts, successful revitalization of minority languages depends on creating viable institutional spaces and social incentives that counterbalance historical marginalization (p. 270)

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the vision presented by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [1], the path to implementing its language-related provisions is fraught with structural, administrative, and resource-related challenges. These challenges become even more pronounced in the context of India's vast regional, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

One of the most critical concerns raised by educationists is the shortage of trained teachers fluent in regional languages. India currently faces over one million teacher vacancies, and a significant proportion of existing teachers are inadequately trained (Batra, 2020, p. 597) [1]. The Justice Verma Commission (2012) recommended increased investment in teacher education and the development of curricula that address diversity and inclusion. However, NEP 2020 introduces a homogenized teacher education model, neglecting the unique needs of diverse states and student populations (Batra, 2020, p. 598) [1].

The policy's approach to educational governance further complicates implementation. By proposing a centralized regulatory system for curriculum, funding, and accreditation, the NEP undercuts the constitutionally mandated role of state governments in education. In a country organized around linguistic states, such centralization weakens the capacity of state governments to address local linguistic and educational needs (Batra, 2020, p. 598) [1].

Infrastructure is another major bottleneck. The policy envisions digital repositories and technology-driven solutions to support multilingual education. However, many rural schools lack basic infrastructure, l*et al*one the digital tools required to access such resources. Govinda argues that without addressing infrastructural gaps—such as electricity, internet access, and digital literacy—these proposals remain disconnected from the lived realities of teachers and students (Govinda, 2020, p. 605) [2].

Opportunities and Future Outlook

Despite its many challenges, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [1] outlines a number of opportunities that could support the development and institutional strengthening of regional languages in India. If implemented thoughtfully and supported with adequate investment, these proposals may help reshape the educational and linguistic landscape of the nation.

One such opportunity is the policy's support for foundational literacy and numeracy through the use of local languages. While the establishment of a National Mission on Foundational Literacy and a digital repository may seem out of touch with ground realities, as Govinda points out, the broader idea of improving access to learning in the mother tongue remains valid and potentially transformative (Govinda, 2020, p. 605) [2]. With the right balance of localized teacher support and materials development, these

digital tools could enhance learning outcomes in under-resourced regions.

Govinda notes that the NEP is filled with visionary statements that imagine a radically restructured education system aligned with future global trends. These include aspirations to make India a global knowledge power through multilingual and inclusive education (Govinda, 2020, p. 604) [2]. This rhetorical shift could, if followed through with real reforms, strengthen public commitment to India's multilingual traditions and promote diversity in knowledge production.

The emphasis on vocational training and skill development at the school level also opens up avenues for incorporating regional linguistic knowledge into practical and community-based education. Although earlier versions of vocational training failed due to poor planning and lack of infrastructure, the NEP proposes renewed efforts to integrate local work settings and community professionals into the schooling system. If designed appropriately, such initiatives could align educational content with local linguistic and cultural realities (Govinda, 2020, p. 606) [2].

Another prospective strength of the NEP is its proposed creation of a pluralist framework that can adapt to state-specific educational needs. Though currently more aspirational than operational, this approach has the potential to respect India's federal and multilingual structure, fostering greater local ownership of educational reforms (Govinda, 2020, p. 606) [2].

Moreover, the NEP's emphasis on teacher autonomy and empowerment, if implemented sincerely, can encourage the development of pedagogical materials in regional languages. This would require professional training programs that prepare teachers not only in subject matter but also in culturally responsive and linguistically relevant methodologies.

There is also a possibility for cross-state collaboration. States like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh can serve as models for others because they have succeeded in developing multilingual curricular frameworks, such as,. By sharing best practices, states can collectively strengthen their regional education systems without waiting for centralized directives.

Finally, the policy opens space for rethinking education governance. The idea of delinking the Education Secretariat from the Directorate of Education, although underdeveloped in the NEP, points to a broader need for institutional reform. A more decentralized, accountable administrative structure could empower local bodies to innovate and implement regional language initiatives effectively (Govinda, 2020, p. 606) [2].

Conclusion

This research traced the role of regional languages in the nation-building of India, with a particular focus on the provisions and implications of the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 [1]. Historically, regional languages have served as critical instruments in both colonial resistance and post-independence state formation. Language movements in India, from Tamil to Maithili to Gujarati have reflected aspirations of regions for cultural autonomy and recognition. These movements, led by grassroots organizations or state supported initiatives, highlighted the political and emotional significance of language in shaping national consciousness.

NEP 2020's policy of language represents a complex, and at times contradictory, approach. On the one hand, it promotes mother tongue as medium of instruction and multilingualism, reflecting longstanding educational theories and constitutional commitments to linguistic pluralism. On the other hand, its non-binding language provisions, centralizing governance framework, and limited engagement with infrastructure and teacher training casts doubt on its transformative potential. Cultural identity, educational equity, and implementational challenges reveal systemic gaps that must be addressed.

At the same time there are actionable opportunities. Existing state-led efforts, such as those in Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, which demonstrated how localized and inclusive policy implementation can yield tangible results. The integration of language with vocational education, teacher empowerment, and digital resource development holds promise if backed by sustained political and financial investment.

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