

Finding Linguistic Equity Through Multilingualism in NEP 2020

Dr. Riya Raj¹, Dr. Manjri Suman^{*2}

¹Assistant Professor, M.A. MPhil, PhD in Linguistics, Department of English and Modern European Languages, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1297-4791>, Email: riya@gbu.ac.in

²Assistant Professor, M.A. MPhil, PhD in Linguistics, Department of English and Modern European Languages, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3816-6298>, Email: manjri@gbu.ac.in

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ABSTRACT:

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is the most significant rethinking of Indian schooling since 1986, and its language provisions are among its boldest. The policy asks that children be taught in their mother tongue at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8. On paper, this is a straightforward pedagogical decision, backed by decades of international evidence. In practice, it lands in the middle of one of the most linguistically complex societies on earth, and asks a great deal of teachers, states and parents who have long organised their aspirations around English. This article examines what NEP 2020 says about language, why the evidence supports it, and what stands in the way of turning the policy into practice. Drawing on Agnihotri (1995), Cummins and Swain (1986), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), García (2009), and empirical work from India and abroad, we argue that the policy's ambitions are sound but its success will depend on far more than the drafting committee could deliver: sustained investment, real cooperation between the Centre and the states, a serious rethink of teacher preparation, and, most importantly, a willingness in Indian families and communities to keep their languages alive and to pass them on with pride.

Keywords: Linguistic equity, multilingualism, NEP 2020, Indian school system, pedagogical practices

1. Introduction

India's first national education policy came in 1968, more than two decades after independence. It gave us the 10+2+3 structure of schooling, the three-language formula, and the promise of free and compulsory education till the age of fourteen. The 1986 policy carried them forward and added explicit commitments to the education of women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, minorities and persons with disabilities, along with vocational education from Class VIII (Pallathadka et al.,

2021). The 1992 Programme of Action tidied up the 1986 policy but left its bones intact. For nearly three decades, the essential shape of Indian schooling barely moved.

NEP 2020 breaks with much of this inheritance. The school structure is now 5+3+3+4 rather than 10+2+3. The medium of instruction is meant to be the child's home language for a longer stretch than before. And the tone of the document is less

that of an administrative reform than of an attempt to reimagine what school in India is for.

The country in which this reimagining has to take place is linguistically unlike almost any other. The 2011 Census counts 121 languages with more than 10,000 speakers each, of which 22 are listed in the Eighth Schedule. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (Devy, 2014) this number is more than 780 and justifiably so if one takes into account the instances of diglossia, code-switching etc. Multilingualism is a reality in India and not a far-fetched concept. People grow up speaking their home languages, using another language on the streets and finally learning a totally different language like English at school.

In the current scenario, NEP 2020's emphasis on mother tongue instruction, multilingual classrooms, and indigenous materials is a big shift from the kind of English-centric schooling that has dominated the urban areas and it must be acknowledged that it is a much-awaited shift. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that multilingual education outperforms monolingual education in every aspect. This paper is an attempt to list that evidence and also to ponder over things that will make the policy work.

Historical Context: Language Policy in Indian Education

The supremacy of English in India is one of the most significant outcomes of the colonial legacy. We are using the word significant due to the influence it holds on the people of this country. Macaulay's Minute of 1835 argued that public funds in colonial India should stop supporting traditional Sanskrit and Arabic learning. The policy stated that it wanted to produce "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This led to English reaching the top most rung of the educational hierarchy which pushed Indian languages downward. It won't be an understatement to say that the Indian Education system still feels the burden of those minutes.

This arrangement was always frowned upon by the Indian nationalists. Tagore's Santiniketan, Sri Aurobindo's writings on education, and most

systematically, Gandhi's Nai Talim (New Education) in the 1930s insisted that education must happen in the child's own language, connected to local craft and culture. The Zakir Husain Committee of 1937 gave these ideas a national shape, and the Wardha Scheme translated them into a curriculum. Sadly, this vision was largely displaced after 1947 by an examination-heavy, English-inflected, textbook-driven system. NEP 2020 can, in part, be read as an attempt to recover what was lost.

The constitutional foundation was laid in Articles 343 to 351. Hindi in Devanagari was made the official language of the Union, English was retained for official purposes, and the Eighth Schedule listed a set of languages that has since grown from fourteen to twenty-two. Crucially, the Constitution left the medium of instruction in schools to the states, and the states have used that freedom in very different ways.

The Kothari Commission (1964–66) produced the first genuinely national vision for education, and it was Kothari that gave us the three-language formula in something close to its modern form: a first language (usually the mother tongue or regional language), a second (Hindi in non-Hindi states, and a modern Indian language, preferably a southern one, in Hindi states), and a third (typically English). The formula was a pragmatic compromise between regional pride, national integration and global engagement. In practice it has rarely been implemented as intended. Hindi-speaking states have often replaced the southern Indian language with Sanskrit; Tamil Nadu has resisted Hindi altogether. The formula can be aptly described as a slogan and not a classroom reality.

The 1968 policy came up with the three-language formula with a view to promote Indian languages. The 1986 policy emphasized similar ideas with specific commitments to minority languages. However, neither of the two policies thought of tackling the increasing dominance of English-medium private schooling. This was a painful but probably an inconspicuous reality during those times. What about the future of those students who probably struggled due to not being taught in

their home languages or failing parental aspirations. Also, no one seemed to pay heed to the fate of the hundreds of Indian languages that neither appear in any schedule nor are the medium of instruction in any school. NEP 2020 carries the baggage of these unresolved questions. It would be factually incorrect to say it answers them all but it does at least bring them out in the open.

NEP 2020 and Mother Tongue Education

The central commitment of the policy is unequivocal:

“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” for both public and private schools (NEP 2020, p. 13).

There are a few very note-worthy points in the above sentence. To start with, it does not intend to make children study their mother tongue as a mere subject but as the medium through which all the other subjects are learned. If applicable to private as well as government schools it would be a real change from the current scenario specially in the urban areas. And, finally, the four-term phrase “home language / mother tongue / local language / regional language” to acknowledge that these labels often do not point at the same thing. A child in a Bhojpuri-speaking household in Delhi may study in Hindi, watch television in a mix of Hindi and English, and hear Bhojpuri only from her grandparents. Each of these languages has some claim on the label “mother tongue,” and the policy leaves the question of which one to work out on the ground.

The evidence supporting mother tongue instruction is by now well established. UNESCO has long held that children learn concepts better in a language they understand, particularly in the early years (UNESCO, 2011; Ball, 2011). UNICEF has documented improvements in enrolment, attendance and engagement when instruction shifts to the home language (UNICEF, n.d.). The World Bank (2021) has shown that home-language instruction in the early grades improves reading outcomes and reduces

“learning poverty”, which by definition means, the share of children who cannot read a simple text by age ten. India’s own Annual Status of Education Report has repeatedly found that a large fraction of children in Grade 5 cannot fluently read a Grade 2 text, and much of that gap is plausibly due to the mismatch between the child’s language and the textbook’s.

For a country in which hundreds of languages are quietly being displaced by dominant ones, this is not only a pedagogical realignment but a cultural one. If schools in this country continue to treat Indian languages as things to dispense with, the Republic Day rhetoric about taking pride in one’s own language will not suffice.

Multilingualism: Why the Evidence Matters

The case for multilingual classrooms is based on significant theoretical and empirical work done over decades. Agnihotri (1995) while describing a conventional language classroom points out the most important trait that inhabits these classrooms. They forbid the use of any language other than the target language. He reminds us of the burden children carry while absorbing new content and navigating through a new medium simultaneously. This certainly does not sound good or helpful for children at such a young age. Behavioural research documents the affective cost: silence, disengagement, and eventually, dropout.

Multilingual classrooms invert this scene. When children are allowed to draw on their whole linguistic repertoire, the classroom becomes a place of affirmation rather than erasure. The classic studies of Peal and Lambert (1962), Gardner and Lambert (1972), and Cummins and Swain (1986) collectively established what earlier researchers had missed: multilingualism is positively correlated with cognitive flexibility, creative thinking, problem-solving and metalinguistic awareness. The older twentieth-century view of bilingualism as a source of confusion has been almost entirely overturned.

Jim Cummins’ (1979) work is particularly relevant to Indian classrooms. His distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

(CALP) is a useful corrective to a common Indian parental instinct. Conversational fluency in English can be picked up in a couple of years; the academic register needed to actually learn mathematics or science in English typically takes five to seven. A child who can chat in English on the playground may still be years away from being able to learn through English. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis adds a further, reassuring point: skills built in the first language transfer to the second. Time spent building a strong mother tongue foundation is not stolen from English rather a precondition for it.

More recent work in the translanguaging tradition (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014) takes the argument a step further. Instead of treating a child's languages as separate systems to be kept apart in the classroom, translanguaging sees a multilingual child's whole repertoire as a single flexible resource. A student might read a text in Hindi, discuss it in Maithili with a classmate, and write about it in English. Indian classrooms have been doing this informally for as long as they have existed. What NEP 2020 could permit is the recognition of that practice as pedagogically legitimate rather than something teachers have to hide.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) frames all this in terms of linguistic human rights, arguing that children have a right to be educated in a language they understand, and that submersion education, dropping children into an unfamiliar-language school with no support, can amount to a form of "linguistic genocide." One need not accept the strongest version of the claim to feel the force of the underlying ethical point: no child should have to give up her language as the price of admission to school.

There is also, worth mentioning, a growing neuroscientific literature on the lifelong benefits of bilingualism, better executive function, greater cognitive reserve, delayed onset of dementia symptoms in old age (Bialystok, 2017). What is striking from an Indian perspective is that most Indian children already arrive at school bi- or multilingual. A school system that treats this endowment as an obstacle is, in effect,

squandering a resource that many other societies work hard to build.

Evidence from Elsewhere

The Indian debate does not happen in a vacuum. Similar debates have played out across the postcolonial world, and the results are worth attending to.

Ethiopia moved much of its schooling to mother tongue instruction in the mid-1990s. Longitudinal studies since have found that children who receive at least six years of mother tongue education outperform peers taught in Amharic or English, on measures of both content learning and second-language acquisition, a large-scale illustration of Cummins' interdependence hypothesis.

The Philippines adopted a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in 2012, mandating instruction in one of nineteen regional languages from Kindergarten through Grade 3. Early evaluations have shown gains in reading and mathematics, alongside implementation troubles around teacher training and materials, troubles that mirror what India is likely to face.

Nordic countries are of a different kind and hence they offer different insights. Countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden have built sturdy multilingual systems in which children of immigrant families receive first-language support alongside instruction in the national language, and in which minority languages such as Sámi are actively protected.

Closer to home, Nepal's 2015 constitution recognised the right to basic education in one's mother tongue. Across the cases mentioned above, the consistent finding is in favour of early mother tongue instruction. It also proves that doing so does not slow the acquisition of a second language. It would rather accelerate it, provided the transition is designed carefully.

Indian Experiences with Multilingual Education

India also has its history of multilingual schooling before NEP 2020. Odisha's Multilingual

Education programme, launched in 2006, introduced instruction in ten tribal languages, including Santali, Kui, Kuvi, Saora and Munda, in selected districts, in partnership with the National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium and several NGOs. Odisha is a state with one of the highest tribal populations which in turn makes education a challenge for the tribal children. Evaluations by the Central Institute of Indian Languages and independent scholars have found overall improvement in attendance, dropout rates and learning in participating schools. Just as importantly, they have found that community engagement, locally recruited teachers, parent councils, culturally rooted materials, is at least as important as the linguistic shift itself. And the transition to Odia, the state language, was not delayed by the MLE model but eased by it. Children who had built strong literacy in Kui or Saora moved into Odia in Grade 4 or 5 more confidently than peers who had been thrown into Odia from Grade 1.

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have run comparable programmes in tribal-majority areas, with similar findings. Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand have experimented with Gondi, Kurukh and Ho, though implementation has come and gone with successive state governments. The NCERT and SCERTs have produced primers and teacher-training modules in dozens of Indian languages. The Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore has done a great deal of quiet, patient work on non-scheduled languages, and the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre in Vadodara has produced grammars and materials in languages that had never before been written.

Kerala offers a different kind of encouragement: a long, well-resourced Malayalam-medium school system that has also produced strong English speakers. Karnataka's experience in the other direction is instructive too. The state tried, in the early 1990s, to mandate Kannada-medium instruction in all state-recognised schools, and lost the case in the Supreme Court in 2014 on grounds of parental choice. Language policy imposed without persuasion, and without matching investment in the quality of instruction, can generate backlash even when the pedagogical

case is strong.

Two things emerge from these Indian experiments taken together. First, mother tongue and multilingual education in India is not a theoretical proposition. It is a practical possibility with a track record. Second, most of these programmes have depended on external funding, individual champions, and sustained NGO involvement. They have rarely been institutionalised or scaled. If NEP 2020 is to make a real difference, its contribution has to be to move mother tongue education from the margins of educational innovation into the ordinary business of the state school system.

Key Provisions of NEP 2020

Teaching materials: NEP 2020 imagines a genuine democratisation of teaching materials. Rather than confining resources to a single language or discipline, the policy asks teachers, parents and learners to help produce locally relevant learning materials, content covering the local language, history, geography and culture. The policy also calls for a significant reduction in curricular content: "Curriculum content will be reduced in each subject to its core essentials, to make space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning" (NEP 2020, p. 12).

This decongestion matters in its own right. Indian textbooks, especially in the middle and secondary grades, have long been criticised for their density and their preference for factual recall over understanding. Trimming these clears up space for exploratory teaching which can best be supported in a multilingual classroom. When children are given the positive environment where they can use all of their linguistic repertoire, the questions and answers start to come more easily and without any struggle.

Once the classrooms become multilingual, we would also need to change the parameters of defining proficiency. For language classroom, proficiency should no longer just mean formal accuracy but the ability to voice one's experiences across various domains of life. This would mean a small but profound shift. Instead of worrying about whether our children "speak correctly?" to

“can the children use language to do different things?” This will also do justice to Indian Language Pedagogy.

Pedagogy: The role of the teacher according to the policy’s vision is very different from what it has been so far in conventional classrooms. A teacher is no longer the sole giver of knowledge but a facilitator who runs a conversation. Teachers are expected to break the ice with students, treat errors as normal stages of learning rather than failures, and use multilingualism as a resource and not a problem. Teacher training modules are to include dedicated sections on multilingual pedagogy. The shift from a deficit view which treats the child’s language as a problem to a resource view which considers the child’s language as an asset is one of the policy’s significant moves.

The policy is candid about the state of the teaching profession:

Teachers truly shape the future of our children and, therefore, the future of our nation. It is because of this noblest role that the teacher in India was the most respected member of society. Only the very best and most learned became teachers... The quality of teacher education, recruitment, deployment, service conditions, and empowerment of teachers does not reach the desired standards. (NEP 2020, p. 20)

The policy adds that “the high respect for teachers and the high status of the teaching profession must be restored so as to inspire the best to enter the teaching profession” (NEP 2020, p. 20). This is easier said than done. The teaching fraternity today is routinely overburdened with non-academic duties, election work, census enumeration, mid-day meal supervision etc. which leaves them little time or energy for actual teaching. The profession is no longer a prized destination for talented young people, and no policy document alone can change that. The pedagogical vision of NEP 2020 rests on a teacher whom the current system does not yet produce and does not yet properly reward.

The policy also envisages open, multilingual, technology-enabled repositories of educational resources, greater teacher participation in content

creation, and wider public access to high-quality learning materials. And it insists that “all curriculum and pedagogy, from the foundational stage onwards, will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage,... language...” (NEP 2020, p. 16).

The three-language formula: NEP 2020 continues to endorse the formula but tries to make it more flexible. No language will be imposed on any state; the choice of the three will be left to states, regions and even students, so long as at least two of the three are Indian. This flexibility answers, at least in principle, decades of political contestation, and it opens the door for tribal and non-scheduled languages to enter the formula. In practice, the three languages still tend to collapse into one medium of instruction and two lightly studied subjects. Changing that will need more than flexibility on paper.

Higher education and assessment: The language provisions extend, in aspiration, into higher education, with the ambition that programmes will increasingly be offered in Indian languages and that materials will be developed for technical and professional courses. This is a welcome ambition and a hard problem: the disciplinary vocabularies of modern science and social science have grown up in English, and building rigorous Indian-language equivalents is patient, unglamorous work. The proposed Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation is a small but sensible start. Language policy also cannot be separated from assessment. So long as high-stakes examinations, school boards, entrance tests, government recruitment, are conducted mostly in English or a handful of scheduled languages, families will invest rationally in those languages regardless of what happens in Grade 3. NEP 2020 gestures at examination reform, including a shift towards competency assessment and the possibility of examinations in a wider range of languages. If that materialises, it will do more to give multilingual education a chance than any curricular provision could on its own.

Key Challenges

For all its ambition, NEP 2020 has to survive

contact with the ground. Sahoo (2021) identifies several structural obstacles: the policy offers no concrete plan for changing the medium of instruction at scale; India's sheer size and diversity make uniform implementation extraordinarily difficult; the shift from rote learning to experiential, multilingual learning requires a change in attitudes among teachers, administrators, parents and policymakers; implementation depends heavily on Centre-State cooperation, which varies enormously across states; the private sector, which accounts for roughly 70% of higher education, adds further complexity; and sustained financial investment over decades will be needed.

Beyond these, several ground-level realities deserve more attention than the policy itself gives them.

The definitional problem: The phrase "home language / mother tongue / local language / regional language" quietly hides some of the hardest questions in Indian language policy. For a Bhojpuri-speaking family in a Hindi-medium school in a Punjabi-majority Delhi neighbourhood, which of these four is the mother tongue? For migrant families, for interlinguistic marriages, and for the millions whose home languages do not appear in the Eighth Schedule, the choice is not obvious. Without careful linguistic mapping of school catchment areas, mother tongue instruction will default to whichever regional language the state prints textbooks in.

Urban linguistic heterogeneity: Classrooms in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad or Delhi routinely contain children from ten or fifteen linguistic backgrounds. Providing "mother tongue instruction" to each is not logistically feasible. The honest question is what a good multilingual classroom looks like when there is no single mother tongue to teach in. Translanguaging offers one answer, but it needs teachers with training and confidence that the system does not yet supply.

Teachers: The demand for teachers competent to deliver multilingual instruction in dozens of Indian languages massively exceeds the current

supply. Teacher-education institutions are built around a small set of scheduled languages, and the pipelines for teachers of tribal and non-scheduled languages are thin or absent. Without a substantial rebuild of pre-service and in-service teacher education, and a way to recognise local speaker-teachers who may lack formal credentials, the policy's pedagogical vision cannot be realised.

Materials: Producing good textbooks, workbooks, teacher handbooks and digital resources in the twenty-two scheduled languages is already a large undertaking. Extending that to tribal and non-scheduled languages is another order of difficulty. Community-generated materials are a real part of the answer, but they need editorial and pedagogical support if they are to complement rather than replace professionally produced resources.

Assessment: As long as high-stakes examinations stay in a narrow set of languages, families will keep investing in those languages. A serious multilingual policy needs a serious multilingual assessment system.

Digital divide: NEP 2020 leans heavily on digital delivery and open repositories. But the digital divide, across rural and urban, gender, caste and class lines, means that any strategy leaning on technology alone risks widening the very inequities the policy hopes to reduce. Connectivity, devices and digital literacy must come with the content.

The political economy of English: English enjoys enormous cultural and economic prestige in India, and no policy can wish that away. Parents who choose English-medium schools are not making an educationally uninformed choice; they are reading the labour market. A mother tongue policy that fails to ensure that mother tongue-educated children eventually acquire strong English will lose the confidence of parents, and eventually of policymakers too.

Endangered languages: The deepest challenge is the fate of the hundreds of Indian languages that are not the medium of instruction anywhere. For these languages, absence from the school system is a fast road to intergenerational shift and eventual loss. NEP 2020 opens the door to

including them but does not walk through it. Doing so will require mapping, documentation, script development, materials and teacher recruitment, patient work that has to be started somewhere.

Can mother tongue instruction be guaranteed for every child, given the linguistic mixture of large Indian cities? What infrastructure exists to support such a transformation? And how do we avoid further overburdening teachers who are already underpaid and overworked? These are questions no policy document, however well-intentioned, can answer on its own.

The Way Forward

The drafting committee of NEP 2020 deserves appreciation for coming up with the current version of NEP 2020 as it clearly shows its understanding of India's multilingual reality. However, the vision alone is not going to play the trick and it needs a solid roadmap for implementation if it is to move beyond wishing to active reality. This has to be done on three different levels of responsibility.

To begin with the institutional level, the Centre and state governments need to work together to build the financial, infrastructural and human resource capacity that is required for this policy. Plans would need to be made for periods of ten-to-fifteen-years in order to expand mother tongue instruction. This is the most challenging task that the NEP2020 wishes to undertake. It will also mean a substantially expanded teacher-education pipeline, including certification for speakers of non-scheduled and tribal languages who may not fit conventional credential requirements. The teachers who are already employed would also need to be trained for professional development. Programmes like orientation workshops will not serve the purpose here. Most of these programmes are conducted with a lot of zeal and most of the learnings are forgotten long before its practical application comes to question. A massive investment in a national infrastructure would be required for producing textbooks, digital resources etc. in various Indian languages. There would also be a need of stratified linguistic mapping so that schools are actually aware of

what their neighbouring areas speak. It would also require reforms in examinations that would permit testing in more languages. Another important requirement would be some sort of protection for endangered and non-scheduled languages, including support for documentation and community-led revitalisation.

There are several ways in which the government can incentivize multilingual people and one of them is through hiring such people in government services from clerical grades through the civil services because a government job till date is an aspirational destination for millions of Indian families. What the state can do is to expand the range of Indian languages in which these exams can be taken. This would send a clear message to the people of the country that multilingual competence is valued in practice and not just in policies.

When it comes to languages, there are many experts who play a crucial role. These include linguists, teacher educators, curriculum designers, and researchers, each with their own unique tasks. To make a real difference, universities and research institutes can team up with state councils of educational research and training (SCERTs) and district institutes of education and training (DIETs). Together, they can create new materials and assess how well they work. Meanwhile, publishers and tech companies can focus on supporting all Indian languages, not just the most widely spoken ones. Professional groups can also develop teaching methods that combine different languages, tailored to the specific needs of Indian classrooms, rather than simply adopting approaches from other countries. This way, we can create a more inclusive and effective language education system. But the most durable protection for India's linguistic diversity will not come from policy at all. It has to come from families and communities themselves. In their capacity as parents, grandparents, teachers and citizens, individuals have to make sure the languages of their homes get spoken to the next generation.

Language shift is ultimately a matter of daily choices: what parents speak to their children at

bedtime, what stories grandparents tell, what songs are sung at weddings, what languages fill the local market and the neighbourhood mosque or temple. Attaching a sense of pride and dignity to one's own language is central. Languages that speakers are proud of are languages that survive. That bottom-up commitment is the most effective defence against language loss, and it is something no government can mandate.

There are, encouragingly, signs of a wider cultural turn. Regional-language cinema is drawing extraordinary audiences. Small-language publishing houses are finding readers. Vernacular creators are thriving on digital platforms. Public appetite may finally be catching up with pedagogical evidence. NEP 2020 arrives at a moment when this shift is possible in a way it has not been for decades.

Conclusion

The evidence for multilingual education is by now overwhelming. Decades of research from Peal and Lambert (1962) through Gardner and Lambert (1972), Cummins and Swain (1986), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and García (2009) have established that multilingualism is cognitively beneficial, socially enriching and academically advantageous. NEP 2020 is right to place the mother tongue at the centre of early education, and its vision of collaborative, locally grounded, pedagogically flexible schooling is both principled

and overdue. It is also a course correction; an acknowledgement that the drift towards monolingual, English-medium urban schooling has come at a cost measurable in learning outcomes, in dropout rates and, most invisibly, in the slow erosion of India's linguistic heritage.

One of the most underappreciated benefits of the multilingual classroom is the cultivation of tolerance. When children learn in an environment that treats all languages as legitimate, they develop respect for the speakers of those languages. In a country whose social fabric is repeatedly tested along linguistic, religious and caste lines, a school system that treats every child's language as an asset is not only a pedagogical intervention but a civic one. As Agnihotri (1995) puts it: "If language is at the centre of the whole educational enterprise, the sooner we recognise the potential of the multilingual classroom, the better for us."

Whether NEP 2020 succeeds will depend not on the elegance of its language provisions but on the seriousness and consistency with which they are implemented and on whether India's communities come to see their own languages as things worth keeping. Policy can open doors. Walking through them is the work of teachers and parents, linguists and administrators, publishers and platforms, and above all of the children themselves, who deserve at the very least a classroom in which the language they bring from home is not a liability but a resource.

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