

Mother Tongue as a Tool for Foundational Literacy under National Education Policy 2020

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Abstract- *The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the central role of the mother tongue in building strong foundations of literacy and learning, particularly in the early years of schooling. Recognizing that language is not merely a medium of communication but also a carrier of culture, identity, and cognition, NEP 2020 advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8. This approach aligns with global research which highlights that children learn best when taught in a language they understand, as it enhances comprehension, creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression. The policy underscores that foundational literacy and numeracy, being the bedrock of education, can be most effectively achieved when children are introduced to reading and writing in their home language, which minimizes cognitive load and bridges the gap between home and school environments. Moreover, using the mother tongue promotes inclusivity by reducing barriers for students from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby democratizing access to quality education. NEP 2020 also stresses the importance of multilingualism, encouraging a transition from the mother tongue to other Indian and global languages in later stages, thus ensuring both rootedness and global competency. Hence, the mother tongue emerges not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a powerful enabler of equitable and holistic education envisioned by NEP 2020.*

Index Terms- *Mother Tongue, Foundational Literacy, NEP 2020, Multilingualism, Inclusive Education, Early Childhood Learning etc.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's education system, with a strong emphasis on the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction during the foundational years. It recommends teaching in the home language or regional language at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8, to promote conceptual clarity, comprehension, and emotional connection with learning. [1] Global and national research consistently demonstrates that children acquire literacy and numeracy skills more effectively when introduced in their first language, as it reduces cognitive barriers and helps them transition smoothly to additional languages [2,4]. NEP 2020 also integrates the three-language formula with flexibility, enabling learners to develop multilingual proficiency while safeguarding India's linguistic diversity. [3, 5] The policy underlines that language is not only a vehicle of communication but also a key to preserving cultural heritage, identity, and inclusivity. By advocating for textbooks, digital resources, and teacher training in regional languages, NEP 2020 seeks to make foundational literacy both equitable and holistic. [6] Furthermore, the promotion of the mother tongue ensures that children from marginalized communities are not alienated in the classroom, thus advancing social justice in education. [7] In essence, NEP 2020 positions the mother tongue as a vital pedagogical tool that bridges the gap between home and school, fosters cognitive growth, and lays the foundation for lifelong learning in a multilingual society.

Understanding Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) refers to the ability of children to read with comprehension and perform basic mathematical operations by the end of Grade 3. These skills are considered the cornerstone of all future learning, as they enable children to progress to higher levels of education with confidence and competence. [1] Literacy, in this context, extends beyond decoding words; it includes the capacity to understand, interpret, and communicate effectively. Numeracy involves not only the ability to recognize numbers but also to apply basic mathematical concepts such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division in real-life situations [8]. Research indicates that children who fail to achieve FLN in the early years often struggle throughout their schooling and are at risk of dropping out. [8]

The NEP 2020 has identified FLN as an “URGENT NATIONAL MISSION,” recognizing that without these skills, the goals of equitable and quality education cannot be realized. [1] Initiatives such as the *NIPUN Bharat Mission* have been launched to ensure that all children attain FLN competencies by 2026–27. Importantly, FLN must be developed in a language familiar to the child, which is why the policy emphasizes the use of the mother tongue or regional language in early grades. This approach reduces cognitive barriers and builds stronger conceptual foundations, linking directly to inclusive education. Thus, FLN is not only a technical skill set but also a critical enabler of lifelong learning and social equity.

Mother Tongue as the Medium of Early Learning

The mother tongue plays a crucial role in shaping a child’s early learning experiences, as it is the language of thought, identity, and cultural connection. Studies have consistently shown that children learn best when taught in the language they speak and understand at home, as it minimizes cognitive overload and fosters better comprehension.[2] In early grades, the mother tongue not only enhances literacy but also promotes confidence, creativity, and participation in the classroom [9]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8, to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy. [1] This approach is based on the principle

that conceptual clarity is achieved when children learn in familiar linguistic environments, making the transition to additional languages smoother in later years. Furthermore, teaching in the mother tongue ensures inclusivity, as it helps bridge the gap for children from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds who might otherwise feel alienated in classrooms dominated by unfamiliar languages. [6] Additionally, the use of the home language in early learning aligns with global best practices, where countries with strong educational outcomes have prioritized mother tongue-based instruction in the foundational years. [8] Thus, the mother tongue is not just a medium of communication but a pedagogical tool that builds cognitive skills, fosters equity, and preserves cultural identity in education.

The mother tongue plays a central role in shaping a child’s early learning as it is closely linked to thought, identity, and cultural understanding. When children are taught in the language they speak and hear at home, they are able to grasp concepts more easily, reducing cognitive strain and improving comprehension. Learning in the mother tongue during the early years not only strengthens reading and writing skills but also builds confidence, creativity, and active participation in the classroom. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes using the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8, to ensure strong foundational literacy and numeracy. This approach also promotes inclusivity by supporting children from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds, while making the transition to additional languages smoother in later years. Thus, the mother tongue serves as a vital tool for holistic education.

NEP 2020 and its Provisions on Language Policy

Certain provisions are outlined under the language policy that must be followed:

- a) Medium of Instruction: Emphasizes the use of mother tongue or regional language as the medium of teaching at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8.
- b) Foundational Learning: Stresses that children learn best in their home language, which supports comprehension, conceptual clarity, and foundational literacy.

- c) Three-Language Formula: Continues the policy where students learn three languages – two of which must be native to India – but with greater flexibility and without imposing any single language.
- d) Multilingualism: Encourages learning multiple languages to build cognitive skills, cultural appreciation, and global competencies.
- e) Flexibility: Gives states, regions, and schools the freedom to choose languages according to local needs and contexts.
- f) Teaching Materials: Calls for the creation of high-quality textbooks, digital content, and resources in regional languages.
- g) Teacher Training: Focuses on training educators to teach effectively in local languages.
- h) Classical & Tribal Languages: Promotes preservation and teaching of India's classical languages and encourages inclusion of tribal languages.
- i) Indian Sign Language: Recognizes and promotes Indian Sign Language (ISL) as part of inclusive education.
- j) Global Readiness: Seeks to balance rootedness in mother tongue and culture with opportunities to learn national and international languages.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of language in education, highlighting India's linguistic diversity. It recommends using the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably up to Grade 8, to strengthen foundational literacy and comprehension. The policy continues the *three-language formula* with flexibility, encouraging multilingualism without imposing uniformity. It also supports the development of quality learning materials and teacher training in local languages. By promoting classical, tribal, and sign languages, NEP 2020 adopts an inclusive and holistic approach, balancing cultural rootedness with global readiness.

Pedagogical Benefits of Using Mother Tongue in Education

Using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction provides significant pedagogical benefits, especially in the early years of education. Children understand

concepts better when taught in the language they use at home, as it reduces cognitive load and allows them to connect prior knowledge with new learning. [2] Research shows that literacy skills acquired in the first language provide a strong foundation for learning additional languages, supporting smoother transitions to bilingual or multilingual education. [9]

Mother tongue-based instruction also enhances classroom participation and learner confidence, as students are more likely to express themselves freely when they understand the medium of communication. It fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving because students focus on the content rather than struggling with comprehension. [10] Furthermore, the use of the home language bridges the gap between school and community, strengthening parental involvement in education and validating local culture and identity.

The National Education Policy 2020 recognizes these benefits, recommending the use of the mother tongue or regional language at least until Grade 5. This ensures inclusivity for learners from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds while promoting equitable and effective foundational learning outcomes. [1]

Mother Tongue and Cognitive Development in Early Childhood

The mother tongue plays a vital role in shaping cognitive development during early childhood, as it is the language through which children first experience the world, think, and communicate. Learning in the mother tongue strengthens memory, comprehension, and problem-solving abilities, since children are not burdened with the additional challenge of processing unfamiliar languages. [2] It enables them to grasp abstract concepts more effectively by connecting new knowledge to their existing linguistic and cultural framework. Cognitive skills such as reasoning, critical thinking, and creativity develop more naturally when instruction is provided in the home language, as children can engage more confidently and actively in classroom discussions (Cummins, 2000).

Furthermore, research indicates that strong literacy skills developed in the mother tongue create a solid

foundation for learning additional languages later in life. Once children acquire basic reading and writing skills in their first language, they can transfer those skills to other languages with greater ease. [9] The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reinforces this perspective by recommending the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction in the early grades, thereby ensuring equitable learning opportunities.[1] In this way, the mother tongue is not just a tool for communication but a crucial medium for fostering cognitive growth, academic success, and holistic development in early childhood.

Inclusivity and Bridging Socio-Cultural Gaps

Language plays a crucial role in ensuring inclusivity within education systems, particularly in linguistically diverse countries like India. The use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction fosters a sense of belonging among learners by validating their cultural identity and heritage. When children learn in their home language, they are more likely to participate actively in classroom discussions, reducing feelings of marginalization and alienation. [2] This practice also enhances self-esteem and confidence, as students can express themselves freely without the barrier of unfamiliar languages. The NEP 2020 strongly emphasizes mother tongue-based education as a strategy to make classrooms inclusive, democratic, and reflective of India's cultural diversity. [1] By integrating regional and tribal languages into mainstream education, the policy contributes to reducing disparities among different linguistic groups. Moreover, the use of the mother tongue bridges socio-cultural gaps between communities and the formal education system. It allows learners from marginalized or rural backgrounds to access education on an equal footing with their peers, thereby addressing issues of inequality and social exclusion. [12] Additionally, when schools respect and promote multiple languages, they encourage cross-cultural understanding among children, nurturing tolerance and harmony in pluralistic societies. [11] Mother tongue education also provides continuity between home and school environments, fostering stronger family engagement in the learning process. Such inclusivity not only improves learning outcomes but also strengthens the broader social fabric by creating more cohesive,

empathetic, and culturally aware citizens. Thus, mother tongue-based education emerges as a transformative tool for bridging socio-cultural divides and building inclusive learning ecosystems.

Challenges in Implementing Mother Tongue-Based Instruction

While the pedagogical and socio-cultural benefits of mother tongue-based instruction are widely recognized, its practical implementation faces several challenges. These difficulties stem from policy, resources, teacher preparedness, and socio-economic factors that often hinder effective execution.

Challenges:

1. Shortage of Learning Materials – Lack of textbooks, storybooks, and digital resources in regional and tribal languages.
2. Teacher Training Gaps – Many teachers are not adequately trained to teach in multiple languages or dialects.
3. Dialectal Diversity – Variations within a single language make it difficult to create standardized teaching materials.
4. Parental Aspirations – Parents often prefer English or dominant languages for better job prospects, resisting mother tongue education.
5. Transition Barriers – Shifting from mother tongue to additional languages (like English/Hindi) in higher grades may cause learning gaps.
6. Policy and Administrative Hurdles – Inconsistent policies across states and lack of coordination in curriculum design.
7. Assessment Challenges – Limited frameworks to evaluate learning in local languages.
8. Technology Limitations – Insufficient digital tools and content in minority languages hinder modern teaching approaches.

Strategies for Effective Integration of Mother Tongue in Schools

To ensure that mother tongue-based instruction is implemented effectively and sustainably, schools must adopt holistic strategies that combine pedagogy, policy support, and community participation.

Strategies:

1. Curriculum Development – Design localized curricula and textbooks in regional and tribal languages to make learning contextually relevant.
2. Teacher Training – Provide continuous professional development for teachers to handle multilingual classrooms and mother tongue pedagogy effectively.
3. Bilingual Transition Models – Introduce a gradual shift from mother tongue to additional languages (such as Hindi or English), ensuring conceptual clarity without abrupt transitions.
4. Resource Creation – Develop quality teaching-learning materials, including storybooks, digital apps, and audiovisual content, in diverse languages.
5. Community and Parental Involvement – Encourage parents and community members to contribute local stories, cultural practices, and oral traditions to classroom learning.
6. Policy Support – Implement clear guidelines for the use of the mother tongue up to at least Grade 5 (as suggested by NEP 2020), with flexibility for regional adaptations.
7. Assessment Frameworks – Develop evaluation tools in the mother tongue to fairly measure learning outcomes without linguistic bias.
8. Technology Integration – Use ICT, digital libraries, and AI-based language tools to expand access to learning in multiple languages.
9. Inclusive Practices – Recognize and integrate dialectal variations to ensure no child feels excluded due to linguistic diversity.

Multilingualism and Transition to Other Languages

Multilingualism is a defining feature of India's educational and cultural landscape, and it plays a pivotal role in shaping children's cognitive and social development. Research suggests that children who begin their education in their mother tongue gain stronger conceptual clarity, which provides a solid foundation for acquiring additional languages later. [9] The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes this principle by advocating mother tongue instruction at least until Grade 5, followed by a gradual and structured transition to regional and global languages such as Hindi and English. [1] This approach minimizes cognitive overload and ensures

that children are not alienated during the early stages of learning.

The transition to other languages in a multilingual framework fosters not only academic proficiency but also intercultural awareness and global competence. Studies have shown that multilingual education enhances metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving ability, and flexibility in thinking. [13] However, a successful transition requires carefully designed bilingual or multilingual models where both the mother tongue and second language are used complementarily rather than competitively. Resources, teacher preparedness, and pedagogical strategies must support this shift to ensure continuity in learning. Thus, multilingualism, when supported through mother tongue-based instruction and smooth transitions, not only enriches learning outcomes but also strengthens national integration and global readiness.

Global Best Practices and Indian Context

Globally, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) has been recognized as an effective approach to strengthen foundational learning. Countries such as Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Papua New Guinea have adopted mother tongue instruction in the early grades, followed by a systematic transition to national and international languages. UNESCO (2016) highlights that children taught in their home language during the foundational years demonstrate higher literacy rates, reduced dropout, and better academic outcomes. Similarly, studies from sub-Saharan Africa show that multilingual models incorporating the mother tongue improve comprehension and retention compared to monolingual systems. [11] These practices emphasize the importance of culturally relevant curricula, trained teachers, and community participation in ensuring sustainability.

In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has aligned itself with these global best practices by recommending mother tongue or regional language instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably Grade 8. India's linguistic diversity, with over 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects, presents both opportunities and challenges in adopting

global models. Unlike smaller nations, India requires large-scale policy coordination, development of localized teaching materials, and teacher training in multiple languages. Nevertheless, initiatives such as regional textbook development, tribal language preservation programs, and digital resources in local languages demonstrate India's efforts to adapt global principles to its unique context. Thus, while global best practices provide valuable insights, India's scale and diversity demand context-specific solutions that balance inclusivity, feasibility, and quality.

Policy Implications and Role of Stakeholders

The effective integration of mother tongue-based education in India requires strong policy support and active participation from all stakeholders. While NEP 2020 provides a progressive framework, its success depends on translating policy into practice through curriculum reforms, resource allocation, and inclusive strategies. At the same time, multiple stakeholders—including government, teachers, parents, communities, NGOs, and technology providers—must collaborate to ensure that language policies are not just theoretical ideals but living practices in classrooms. Below are the key policy implications and the roles of stakeholders that shape successful implementation.

1. Curriculum Reform – Development of localized and multilingual curricula aligned with NEP 2020.
2. Teacher Training Policies – Mandatory pre-service and in-service training on multilingual pedagogy.
3. Resource Allocation – Investment in textbooks, digital tools, and libraries in regional and tribal languages.
4. Standardization vs. Flexibility – Balancing standardized frameworks with flexibility for dialectal and regional differences.
5. Assessment Reforms – Creating evaluation systems in mother tongue to ensure fair measurement of learning.
6. Equity and Inclusion Mandates – Policies to prioritize marginalized and tribal language groups.
7. Technology Integration – Encouraging EdTech tools for multilingual classrooms and digital inclusivity.

Role of Stakeholders:

1. Government – Policy design, funding, curriculum development, and nationwide implementation.

2. Teachers – Delivering mother tongue-based instruction and facilitating smooth transition to other languages.
3. Parents and Communities – Supporting home-school continuity, contributing local stories, and encouraging use of home language.
4. Education Boards/Institutions – Designing flexible syllabi and examinations in multiple languages.
5. NGOs and Civil Society – Promoting literacy programs, creating community learning resources, and advocacy.
6. Technology Providers – Developing multilingual apps, digital textbooks, and AI-based language tools.
7. Researchers and Academics – Conducting impact studies to refine policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

The use of the mother tongue as a tool for foundational literacy under NEP 2020 represents a transformative step in reshaping India's educational landscape. It not only strengthens conceptual clarity and cognitive development but also promotes inclusivity, cultural preservation, and equity in classrooms. By allowing children to begin their educational journey in a language they understand, barriers of comprehension and participation are significantly reduced, thereby improving learning outcomes and reducing dropout rates. The NEP 2020 provisions align with global best practices, highlighting the importance of multilingualism and smooth transitions to other languages, ensuring that learners remain rooted in their cultural identity while preparing for global opportunities. However, the successful implementation of mother tongue-based education requires overcoming challenges such as shortage of resources, lack of teacher preparedness, and societal preference for English. This calls for coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, parents, communities, and technology providers to create an enabling ecosystem. Ultimately, mother tongue-based foundational learning is not just a pedagogical necessity but also a moral imperative, as it bridges socio-cultural gaps and fosters an inclusive, democratic, and culturally vibrant education system. By embracing linguistic diversity, India can ensure

that every child learns with dignity, confidence, and equal opportunity.

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