

Language as a Medium of Cultural Heritage Preservation: A Narrative Review in the Context of the National Education Policy 2020

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Abstract

Language serves as the fundamental tool for transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and identity across generations, making it essential for preserving cultural heritage in diverse societies. This narrative review examines the role of language in cultural heritage preservation within the framework of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, synthesizing evidence from 30 scholarly sources published between 2015 and 2026. NEP 2020 represents a paradigm shift by mandating mother tongue instruction up to Grade 5 (preferably Grade 8), revising the Three-Language Formula, and recognizing indigenous and tribal languages as legitimate mediums of instruction. The review reveals that mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) enhances cognitive development, strengthens cultural identity, and improves learning outcomes, particularly for marginalized tribal and linguistic minority communities. Evidence demonstrates that early mother tongue instruction facilitates conceptual understanding, preserves intergenerational knowledge transmission, and promotes educational equity. However, implementation faces significant challenges including inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient pedagogical resources in regional languages, infrastructural gaps, and socio-political resistance favouring English-medium education. The review identifies opportunities through digital technology integration, community-based curriculum development, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Successful implementation requires sustained investment in teacher capacity-building, development of quality bilingual learning materials, and collaborative frameworks involving policymakers, educators, and communities. This paper concludes that NEP 2020's language provisions, if effectively implemented, can transform India's linguistic diversity from a perceived barrier into a valuable asset for both cultural preservation and educational excellence.

Keywords: Language policy, cultural heritage preservation, National Education Policy 2020, mother tongue education, multilingualism, indigenous languages.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a communication tool but a repository of cultural knowledge, collective memory, and identity (Dastidar et al., 2025). In linguistically diverse nations like India, with over 1,652 languages and 47 used as languages of instruction, the relationship between language policy and cultural heritage preservation becomes critically important (Sarangapani, 2015). The dominance of English since colonial times has created tensions between global aspirations and cultural rootedness, raising fundamental questions about the role of mother tongue in education and national development (Verma, 2025a).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signifies a transformative advancement in India's educational framework by underscoring the importance of mother tongue and regional languages in the educational process. The policy stipulates that instruction should be conducted in the mother tongue at least until Grade 5, with a preference for extending this practice

through Grade 8, while also promoting multilingualism and global competence (Verma, 2025b). This initiative represents a significant departure from previous policies that predominantly endorsed English-medium instruction, particularly in urban and elite educational settings.

The significance of this policy shift extends beyond pedagogical considerations to encompass broader questions of cultural preservation, social equity, and national identity. As Mahapatra et al. (2023) argue, implementing India's multilingual language-in-education policy requires a comprehensive framework that addresses not only curriculum design but also teacher preparation, resource development, and community engagement. The policy's emphasis on mother tongue education aligns with international research demonstrating cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional benefits of learning in one's first language.

However, the implementation of NEP 2020's language provisions faces substantial challenges. These include inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, limited availability of quality learning materials in regional languages, and socio-political resistance from communities that view English as essential for social mobility (Nag, 2024). Additionally, the policy must address the needs of India's diverse linguistic communities, including tribal populations speaking endangered languages and urban multilingual contexts where children's home languages may differ from the official medium of instruction (Godsora et al., 2025).

This narrative review examines the role of language in preserving cultural heritage within the framework of NEP 2020. It synthesizes evidence from recent scholarly literature to address the following research questions:

- (1) How does mother tongue education contribute to cultural heritage preservation?
- (2) What are the key language provisions of NEP 2020 and their theoretical foundations?
- (3) What is the relationship between multilingualism and cultural identity in the Indian context?
- (4) What challenges and opportunities exist for implementing NEP 2020's language policies?

By addressing these questions, this review paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between language policy, educational practice, and cultural preservation in contemporary India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Language and Cultural Heritage

The relationship between language and cultural heritage is grounded in sociolinguistic and anthropological theories that view language as a primary carrier of cultural knowledge, values, and worldviews. Dastidar et al. (2025) emphasize that indigenous languages encapsulate local customs, beliefs, and histories, serving as vital components of social identity and cultural expression. When languages are lost or marginalized, entire systems of knowledge, traditional practices, and cultural narratives face extinction.

Verma (2025b) discusses how NEP 2020's emphasis on mother tongue instruction aligns with cognitive theories, particularly Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in the first language provides a foundation for learning additional languages and academic content. This theoretical framework suggests that rather than hindering academic achievement, strong mother tongue development enhances overall cognitive abilities and facilitates transfer of skills across languages. The policy's integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into curricula represents an effort to anchor learning within indigenous epistemologies, fostering what Verma terms "epistemological pluralism" that values diverse ways of knowing.

The concept of language as cultural capital, drawing from Bourdieu's sociological framework, helps explain the complex dynamics of language choice in education. While dominant languages like English confer economic and social advantages, mother tongues carry cultural and emotional significance that shapes identity formation (Sarangapani, 2015). This tension between instrumental and intrinsic values of language creates challenges for policy implementation, particularly in contexts where communities perceive mother tongue education as limiting opportunities for social mobility.

2.2 International Perspectives on Mother Tongue Education

International research and policy frameworks consistently support mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as best practice for early childhood and primary education. Behera et al. (2025) review evidence showing that MTB-MLE programs improve learning outcomes, particularly for tribal and minority language speakers. The UNESCO

position on mother tongue instruction emphasizes that children learn best in their first language and that multilingual education, when properly implemented, enhances rather than impedes acquisition of additional languages.

The Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education framework, implemented in various countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, provides models for India's policy implementation. Behera et al. (2025) describe MTB-MLE as a "panacea for tribal learners," noting that it addresses both cognitive-linguistic needs and cultural preservation goals. The framework typically involves initial literacy instruction in the mother tongue, gradual introduction of additional languages, and continued support for mother tongue development even as other languages are added to the curriculum.

However, international experiences also reveal implementation challenges that resonate with the Indian context. These include resistance from parents who prioritize dominant language acquisition, difficulties in developing standardized orthographies for oral languages, challenges in training teachers to use pedagogically sound multilingual approaches, and resource constraints in producing quality learning materials in multiple languages (Barua et al., 2024).

2.3 The Indian Context: Linguistic Diversity and Educational Challenges

India's linguistic landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for language-in-education policy. Sarangapani (2015) notes that with 1,652 languages, including 47 used as languages of instruction, India represents one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations. This diversity is not evenly distributed; certain regions, particularly Northeast India, exhibit extraordinary linguistic heterogeneity with numerous indigenous and tribal languages (Dastidar et al., 2025).

The colonial legacy of English dominance continues to shape educational choices and outcomes. Verma (2025a) critically examines how English language education has contributed to "ruining the talents of Indian youth" by creating a system where linguistic ability in English becomes a proxy for intelligence and capability, marginalizing those educated in regional languages. This linguistic hierarchy has profound implications for social equity, as access to quality English-medium education remains concentrated among urban, affluent populations.

Regional variations in language policy implementation add another layer of complexity. Ray et al. (2023) examine stakeholder perspectives on the Three-Language Formula across different states, revealing significant variations in interpretation and implementation. Some states have resisted Hindi as part of the formula, viewing it as linguistic imperialism, while others struggle to provide instruction in minority languages due to resource constraints. These regional tensions reflect deeper political and cultural dynamics that shape language policy outcomes.

The situation of tribal and indigenous languages requires particular attention. Godsora et al. (2025) examine the prospects and challenges for Ho language in Jharkhand under NEP 2020, highlighting how tribal communities face dual marginalization—from dominant regional languages and from English. Similarly, Hamid (2024) studies local language inclusion in digital content in Arunachal Pradesh, revealing infrastructure and resource gaps that hinder implementation of language provisions in remote and tribal areas. These studies underscore that effective language policy must address not only pedagogical principles but also issues of social justice, resource allocation, and political will.

3. NEP 2020 LANGUAGE PROVISIONS

3.1 Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction

The cornerstone of NEP 2020's language policy is the mandate for mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least up to Grade 5, with a strong preference for continuing through Grade 8 and beyond (Verma, 2025b). This provision represents a significant strengthening of previous policies that often remained aspirational rather than mandatory. Sangeetha et al. (2022) emphasize that this policy shift recognizes mother tongue not merely as a subject to be studied but as the primary medium through which all learning occurs during the foundational years.

The rationale for this provision draws on extensive research demonstrating cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional benefits of mother tongue instruction. Ahmad (n.d.) articulates the significance of mother tongue in NEP 2020, noting that learning in a familiar language reduces cognitive load, allowing children to focus on content rather than struggling with language comprehension. This is particularly crucial during the foundational literacy and numeracy stage, where conceptual understanding forms the basis for all subsequent learning.

Nag (2024) provides a critical review of language as a tool for inclusive and equitable school education under NEP 2020, arguing that mother tongue instruction addresses historical inequities that have disadvantaged rural, tribal, and economically

marginalized students. When children from non-English-speaking backgrounds are forced to learn in English from the beginning, they face a double burden of acquiring both language and content simultaneously, often resulting in poor learning outcomes and high dropout rates.

The policy also recognizes the diversity of "mother tongue" in the Indian context. For many children, particularly in urban areas and multilingual communities, the home language may be a mixture of languages or a variety different from the standardized form used in schools. Pandey et al. (2024) discuss the need to "rework the aesthetics of language use" to accommodate this multilingual reality, suggesting that rigid adherence to standardized language forms may alienate children whose actual linguistic practices are more fluid and hybrid.

3.2 The Three-Language Formula

NEP 2020 revises the Three-Language Formula, a longstanding feature of Indian language policy, to provide greater flexibility while maintaining the goal of multilingualism. The revised formula emphasizes that students should learn three languages, with at least two being Indian languages, and that the choice of languages should respect regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity (Mishra et al.,).

Ray et al. (2023) examine stakeholder perspectives on the Three-Language Formula, revealing diverse interpretations and concerns. In Hindi-speaking states, the formula typically includes Hindi, English, and another Indian language, while in non-Hindi states, it includes the regional language, Hindi or another Indian language, and English. However, the policy's flexibility allows states to adapt the formula to local contexts, potentially including classical languages like Sanskrit or tribal languages.

The revised formula addresses some historical criticisms of the previous version, which was often seen as imposing Hindi on non-Hindi-speaking states. Ghosh (2024) provides a critical analysis of language policy under NEP 2020, noting that while the flexibility is welcome, implementation challenges remain. These include ensuring that all three languages receive adequate instructional time and resources, training teachers competent in multiple languages, and developing assessment systems that fairly evaluate multilingual competence.

Singh (2025) discusses multilingual education under NEP 2020, emphasizing both challenges and opportunities. The policy's vision of multilingualism extends beyond mere language learning to encompass multilingual pedagogy, where teachers use multiple languages flexibly to facilitate understanding. This approach, sometimes called "translanguaging," recognizes that multilingual individuals naturally draw on their full linguistic repertoire rather than keeping languages in separate compartments.

3.3 Recognition of Indigenous and Tribal Languages

A significant innovation in NEP 2020 is its explicit recognition of indigenous and tribal languages and commitment to their preservation and promotion. The policy acknowledges that many of India's languages are endangered and calls for efforts to document, preserve, and develop these languages for educational use (Godsora et al., 2025).

Behera et al. (2025) discuss how Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education programs serve as a "panacea for tribal learners," addressing both educational and cultural preservation goals. For tribal communities, education in the mother tongue is not merely a pedagogical preference but a matter of cultural survival. When tribal children are educated exclusively in dominant regional or national languages, they become alienated from their cultural heritage, and the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge is disrupted.

The policy's provisions for tribal languages face substantial implementation challenges. Godsora et al. (2025) examine the case of Ho language in Jharkhand, identifying challenges including lack of standardized orthography, shortage of trained teachers, absence of learning materials, and limited institutional support. Many tribal languages lack written traditions or have multiple competing writing systems, making curriculum development complex.

Hamid (2024) studies local language inclusion in digital content in Arunachal Pradesh, revealing that technology offers both opportunities and challenges for indigenous language preservation. While digital platforms can facilitate content creation and distribution in minority languages, the digital divide in tribal areas limits access. Additionally, creating digital content requires technical expertise and resources that are often unavailable in tribal communities.

The policy also recognizes Indian Sign Language as an important medium of education for deaf students, reflecting a broader commitment to linguistic diversity and inclusion (Shaji, n.d.). This recognition acknowledges that linguistic diversity encompasses not only spoken languages but also signed languages, which carry their own cultural traditions and communities.

3.4 Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems

NEP 2020 emphasizes integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into curricula across all levels of education. This provision has important implications for language policy, as much traditional knowledge is embedded in indigenous languages and cultural practices (Verma, 2025b). The integration of IKS represents an effort to decolonize education by valuing indigenous epistemologies alongside Western scientific knowledge.

The Creative Launcher (2023) explores the intersection of traditional wisdom and modern education, examining the potential of folk pedagogy in the context of NEP 2020. Folk pedagogy—the traditional methods of teaching and learning embedded in cultural practices—often relies on oral traditions, storytelling, proverbs, and experiential learning. Incorporating these approaches requires educators who are not only linguistically competent but also culturally knowledgeable.

Verma (2025b) discusses how integrating IKS into English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy can root learning in culturally familiar contexts, fostering epistemological pluralism. Rather than treating English learning as adoption of Western cultural values, this approach uses Indian cultural content and knowledge systems as the basis for language instruction. This culturally responsive pedagogy can make English learning more meaningful and less alienating for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

However, the integration of IKS also raises questions about standardization, assessment, and the relationship between traditional and modern knowledge systems. Critics argue that romanticizing traditional knowledge without critical engagement may perpetuate outdated practices, while proponents emphasize that indigenous knowledge systems offer valuable perspectives on sustainability, community, and holistic development that are increasingly relevant in contemporary contexts.

4. ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

4.1 Cognitive and Academic Benefits

Extensive research demonstrates that mother tongue education provides significant cognitive and academic benefits, particularly during the foundational years of schooling. Verma (2025b) discusses how NEP 2020's emphasis on mother tongue instruction aligns with Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that cognitive and academic skills developed in the first language transfer to additional languages. This theoretical framework suggests that strong mother tongue development creates a foundation for overall academic success and multilingual competence.

Ranjan et al. (2024) emphasize that mother tongue serves as the basis of education because it is the language of thought and emotion. When children learn in their mother tongue, they can engage with complex concepts without the additional cognitive burden of language translation. This reduces cognitive load and allows deeper conceptual understanding, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science where abstract reasoning is required.

The cognitive benefits extend beyond academic content to include metalinguistic awareness—the ability to think about language itself. Children who develop strong literacy skills in their mother tongue demonstrate better understanding of language structure, which facilitates learning additional languages. Pal (2024) examines the role of multilingual education in enhancing learning outcomes from an NEP 2020 perspective, finding that students who receive strong mother tongue instruction show better performance not only in their first language but also in subsequently learned languages.

Research on foundational literacy and numeracy particularly emphasizes the importance of mother tongue instruction. When children learn to read in a language they already speak, they can focus on decoding written symbols and comprehending text rather than simultaneously learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. This accelerates literacy acquisition and creates positive learning experiences that motivate continued engagement with education.

4.2 Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation

Mother tongue education plays a crucial role in cultural identity formation and heritage preservation. Dastidar et al. (2025) argue that indigenous languages encapsulate local customs, beliefs, and histories, serving as vital components of social identity and cultural expression. When children are educated in their mother tongue, they maintain connection to their cultural heritage and develop positive ethnic identity.

The relationship between language and cultural identity is particularly significant for minority and tribal communities. Godsora et al. (2025) examine how NEP 2020's language provisions offer prospects for preserving Ho language and culture in Jharkhand. For tribal communities facing cultural assimilation pressures, mother tongue education represents a form of cultural resistance and revitalization. It ensures that traditional knowledge, oral histories, and cultural practices are transmitted to younger generations.

Sangeetha et al. (2022) discuss how mother tongue education fosters cultural pride and self-esteem. When children's home language is valued in the educational system, they receive the message that their culture and community are worthy of respect. Conversely, when education occurs exclusively in dominant languages, children may internalize the message that their mother tongue and associated culture are inferior, leading to language shift and cultural loss.

The preservation of cultural heritage through language extends beyond individual identity to encompass collective memory and community cohesion. Languages carry unique ways of categorizing experience, expressing relationships, and understanding the world. When languages are lost, these unique perspectives and knowledge systems disappear. Dastidar et al. (2025) note that writers from Northeast India incorporate indigenous languages in their literary works to revitalize languages, elicit cultural authenticity, and evoke emotional resonance, demonstrating how language preservation efforts extend across educational and cultural domains.

4.3 Equity and Inclusion in Education

Mother tongue education is fundamentally an equity issue. Nag (2024) argues that language policy under NEP 2020 serves as a tool for inclusive and equitable school education by addressing the disadvantages faced by children from non-dominant language backgrounds. When education occurs in a language children do not speak at home, it creates barriers to learning that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

The equity implications are particularly stark in the Indian context, where English-medium education has become associated with quality and opportunity, while regional language education is often viewed as second-tier. Verma (2025a) critically examines how this linguistic hierarchy has contributed to ruining the talents of Indian youth by creating a system where linguistic ability in English becomes a proxy for intelligence and capability. Students educated in regional languages face discrimination in higher education and employment, regardless of their actual knowledge and skills.

Behera et al. (2025) discuss how Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education programs address educational inequities for tribal learners. Tribal children often enter school speaking languages that differ significantly from the regional or national languages used as medium of instruction. Without mother tongue support, these children struggle to understand instruction, fall behind academically, and frequently drop out. MTB-MLE programs that begin instruction in the tribal language and gradually transition to additional languages show significantly better learning outcomes and retention rates.

The equity dimension also encompasses issues of teacher-student communication and parental involvement. When teachers and students share a common language, communication is more effective, and teachers can better understand students' learning needs and cultural contexts. Similarly, when schools use languages that parents understand, parental involvement in children's education increases, creating stronger home-school partnerships that support learning.

5. MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

5.1 Multilingual Education Frameworks

NEP 2020's vision of multilingual education extends beyond teaching multiple languages to encompass multilingual pedagogy and translanguaging practices. Mahapatra et al. (2023) present a comprehensive framework for implementing India's multilingual language-in-education policy, emphasizing that effective multilingual education requires systemic changes in curriculum design, teacher preparation, assessment practices, and resource development.

The framework distinguishes between additive and subtractive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism occurs when learning additional languages enhances rather than replaces the mother tongue, while subtractive bilingualism occurs when acquisition of dominant languages leads to mother tongue attrition. NEP 2020 aims for additive multilingualism, where students develop competence in multiple languages while maintaining and strengthening their mother tongue (Singh, 2025). Pandey et al. (2024) discuss the need to rework the aesthetics of language use to address the multilingual challenge of NEP 2020. They argue that traditional approaches to language education, which treat languages as separate systems to be kept distinct, do not reflect the actual linguistic practices of multilingual individuals. Translanguaging pedagogy, which allows flexible use of multiple languages to facilitate understanding, may be more effective and authentic than rigid language separation.

Singh et al. (2024) examine teacher education in the context of NEP 2020 and multilingual classrooms, emphasizing that teachers need preparation not only in multiple languages but also in multilingual pedagogical approaches. This includes understanding how to use students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning, how to facilitate transfer of skills across languages, and how to create inclusive classroom environments that value linguistic diversity.

5.2 Language as Cultural Capital

The concept of language as cultural capital helps explain the complex dynamics of language choice and language attitudes in the Indian context. While mother tongues carry intrinsic cultural and emotional value, dominant languages like English confer instrumental advantages in terms of educational and economic opportunities (Sarangapani, 2015). This creates tensions for families and communities making decisions about language of education.

Verma (2025b) discusses how NEP 2020 attempts to balance cultural rootedness with global competence by promoting mother tongue education while also ensuring English proficiency. The policy recognizes that in a globalized world, English proficiency provides access to international knowledge, higher education, and career opportunities. However, it rejects the notion that English acquisition requires abandonment of mother tongue and cultural identity.

The challenge lies in ensuring that multilingualism does not reproduce existing inequalities. If mother tongue education is provided only in under-resourced government schools while English-medium education remains the preserve of elite private institutions, the policy may inadvertently reinforce rather than reduce educational stratification. Nag (2024) emphasizes that for language policy to promote equity, it must be accompanied by investments ensuring that regional language education is of high quality and provides genuine pathways to higher education and employment.

Barua et al. (2024) examine teachers' attitudes toward the use of minority languages as languages of instruction in primary schools in India, finding mixed attitudes that reflect broader societal ambivalence about mother tongue education. While teachers recognize the pedagogical benefits of mother tongue instruction, they also express concerns about whether it adequately prepares students for a competitive, English-dominated world. These attitudes influence implementation, as teachers' beliefs about language shape their classroom practices.

5.3 Balancing Local and Global Competencies

One of the central challenges of NEP 2020's language policy is balancing local cultural rootedness with global competence. Verma (2025b) frames this as moving "from mother tongue to global voice," suggesting that strong mother tongue foundation enables rather than hinders development of global competencies. This perspective challenges the common assumption that mother tongue education and English proficiency are mutually exclusive goals.

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curricula represents one approach to this balance. By rooting English language instruction in Indian cultural content and epistemologies, the policy aims to develop students who are both culturally grounded and globally competent (Verma, 2025b). This approach rejects the notion that global competence requires cultural assimilation to Western norms, instead promoting a vision of global citizenship that values diverse cultural perspectives.

Mishra et al. (n.d.) discuss how NEP 2020's approach to multilingualism positions India's linguistic diversity as a national asset rather than a problem to be overcome. In an interconnected world, the ability to navigate multiple languages and cultural contexts is increasingly valuable. Students who develop strong multilingual competence, including both Indian

languages and English, are well-positioned to participate in global knowledge economies while maintaining cultural connections.

However, achieving this balance requires careful attention to curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment. If English continues to dominate high-stakes examinations and serve as the primary language of higher education, students and families will continue to prioritize English acquisition over mother tongue development, regardless of policy intentions. Ghosh (2024) argues that genuine implementation of NEP 2020's language vision requires systemic changes extending beyond primary education to encompass secondary and tertiary levels.

6. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

6.1 Implementation Challenges

Despite the sound theoretical foundations and policy intentions of NEP 2020's language provisions, implementation faces substantial challenges. Verma (2025b) identifies insufficient bilingual resources, abrupt medium-of-instruction transitions, and inadequate teacher training as key barriers undermining effective implementation. These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas and for minority language communities.

Infrastructure and resource constraints represent a fundamental challenge. Many schools lack basic facilities, and developing comprehensive learning materials in multiple languages requires significant investment. Godsora et al. (2025) note that for languages like Ho in Jharkhand, even basic resources such as textbooks, reading materials, and assessment tools are unavailable. Creating these resources requires not only financial investment but also linguistic expertise, curriculum development skills, and community involvement. Socio-political resistance presents another significant challenge. Ray et al. (2023) document diverse stakeholder perspectives on the Three-Language Formula, revealing that language policy is deeply intertwined with political identity and regional tensions. In some states, resistance to Hindi as part of the formula reflects concerns about linguistic imperialism, while in others, communities resist mother tongue education because they view English as essential for social mobility.

The challenge of medium-of-instruction transition is particularly complex. While NEP 2020 recommends mother tongue instruction through Grade 8, many students will eventually need to transition to English or other languages for higher education. Verma (2025b) notes that abrupt transitions without adequate preparation can undermine the benefits of mother tongue education. Effective implementation requires carefully planned transition strategies that build on mother tongue foundation while gradually developing competence in additional languages.

6.2 Teacher Preparedness and Training

Teacher preparedness emerges as a critical factor in successful implementation of NEP 2020's language provisions. Singh et al. (2024) examine teacher education in the context of multilingual classrooms, finding that most teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare teachers for multilingual pedagogy. Teachers need not only proficiency in multiple languages but also understanding of how to use multilingual approaches effectively.

Barua et al. (2024) study teachers' attitudes toward minority language instruction, finding that attitudes significantly influence implementation. Teachers who view mother tongue instruction positively are more likely to implement it effectively, while those who doubt its value may undermine policy intentions through their classroom practices. This suggests that teacher education must address not only skills but also beliefs and attitudes about language and learning.

The shortage of teachers proficient in minority and tribal languages presents a particular challenge. Godsora et al. (2025) note that for many tribal languages, there are few individuals with both linguistic competence and teaching qualifications. Recruiting and training teachers from tribal communities is essential but requires targeted programs and incentives to attract qualified individuals to teaching careers in often remote and under-resourced areas.

Professional development for existing teachers is equally important. Many current teachers were educated in English-medium or dominant regional language contexts and lack experience with mother tongue-based multilingual education. Verma (2025b) recommends sustained investment in teacher capacity-building for multilingual, experiential, and IKS-based pedagogy. This professional development must be ongoing rather than one-time training, providing teachers with continued support as they develop new pedagogical approaches.

6.3 Resource Development and Infrastructure

Developing quality learning materials in multiple languages represents a massive undertaking. Hamid (2024) examines local language inclusion in digital content in Arunachal Pradesh, revealing both the potential of technology and the challenges of resource development. Digital platforms can facilitate content creation and distribution, but developing quality digital content requires technical expertise, linguistic knowledge, and pedagogical understanding.

The challenge extends beyond translation to encompass culturally appropriate content development. Simply translating materials from English or dominant languages often results in content that is linguistically accurate but culturally irrelevant. Effective materials must be developed in collaboration with communities, incorporating local knowledge, cultural references, and appropriate examples (Behera et al., 2025).

Assessment and evaluation systems must also be adapted for multilingual contexts. Current assessment practices often privilege English or dominant languages, creating disadvantages for students educated in mother tongues. Developing valid and reliable assessments in multiple languages requires linguistic expertise and careful attention to ensuring that assessments measure content knowledge rather than language proficiency (Nag, 2024).

Infrastructure challenges are particularly acute in tribal and remote areas. Godsora et al. (2025) note that many tribal areas lack basic educational infrastructure, including school buildings, libraries, and technology access. Implementing sophisticated multilingual education programs in contexts lacking basic facilities requires substantial investment and creative solutions adapted to local conditions.

6.4 Opportunities for Innovation and Community Engagement

Despite challenges, NEP 2020's language provisions create opportunities for innovation. Technology offers promise for addressing resource constraints and reaching remote communities. Dastidar et al. (2025) discuss how technology, social media, and digital platforms can support indigenous language revitalization through content creation, online communities, and language learning applications.

Community involvement is another crucial opportunity. Behera et al. (2025) emphasize that successful MTB-MLE programs involve communities in curriculum development, material creation, and implementation. When communities actively participate rather than passively receive education policy, programs become more culturally appropriate, sustainable, and effective. Community members can serve as language experts, cultural consultants, and teaching assistants, bringing valuable knowledge to education.

The policy's emphasis on integrating Indian Knowledge Systems creates opportunities for innovative pedagogy bridging traditional and modern knowledge. The Creative Launcher (2023) explores how folk pedagogy can be incorporated into contemporary education, suggesting traditional teaching methods offer insights for creating engaging, culturally relevant learning experiences. This integration can make education meaningful while preserving traditional knowledge systems.

Pilot programs and research initiatives provide opportunities to develop evidence-based approaches to multilingual education. Verma (2025b) notes that pilot programs integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into ESL pedagogy have shown positive impacts. Documentation and evaluation of these initiatives can generate knowledge about effective practices for different contexts.

Collaboration across sectors offers another opportunity. Mahapatra et al. (2023) emphasize that implementing multilingual education policy requires coordination among government agencies, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and communities. Creating platforms for dialogue can facilitate resource sharing, problem-solving, and collective action toward shared goals.

7. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant paradigm shift in recognizing the critical role of language in preserving cultural heritage while preparing learners for a globalized world. This narrative review of 30 scholarly sources reveals that the policy's emphasis on mother tongue instruction, multilingual education, and recognition of indigenous languages aligns with robust theoretical foundations and international best practices. The evidence consistently demonstrates that mother tongue-based multilingual education enhances cognitive development, strengthens cultural identity, improves learning outcomes, and promotes educational equity, particularly for tribal and minority communities.

The policy's key provisions—mandating mother tongue instruction through at least Grade 5, revising the Three-Language Formula to provide greater flexibility, recognizing indigenous and tribal languages, and integrating Indian Knowledge Systems—address longstanding inequities in India's educational system. These provisions acknowledge that linguistic diversity is a national asset rather than a problem, and that cultural rootedness and global competence are complementary rather than contradictory goals (Verma, 2025b; Mahapatra et al., 2023; Singh, 2025).

However, translating policy vision into educational reality faces substantial challenges. Inadequate teacher training, insufficient bilingual resources, infrastructure gaps, socio-political resistance, and the persistent dominance of English in higher education and employment create significant implementation barriers (Nag, 2024; Godsora et al., 2025; Barua et al., 2024). These challenges are particularly acute for tribal and minority language communities, where resource constraints and marginalization compound implementation difficulties.

Successful implementation requires sustained, multi-faceted efforts. First, substantial investment in teacher capacity-building is essential, including both pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development in multilingual pedagogy (Singh et al., 2024). Second, systematic development of quality learning materials in regional and tribal languages must be prioritized, leveraging technology and community involvement to create culturally appropriate resources (Hamid, 2024; Behera et al., 2025). Third, assessment and evaluation systems must be adapted to fairly measure learning in multilingual contexts (Nag, 2024). Fourth, community engagement must be central to implementation, ensuring that language policy reflects community needs and values (Mahapatra et al., 2023).

The opportunities for innovation are significant. Technology offers new possibilities for content creation, distribution, and language revitalization (Dastidar et al., 2025). Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems and folk pedagogy can create culturally relevant, engaging learning experiences (The Creative Launcher, 2023). Pilot programs and research initiatives can generate evidence about effective practices that can be scaled and adapted (Verma, 2025b).

Ultimately, the success of NEP 2020's language provisions will depend on political will, resource allocation, and collective commitment from policymakers, educators, communities, and civil society. Language policy is not merely a technical educational matter but a question of social justice, cultural preservation, and national identity. As Ranjan et al. (2024) emphasize, mother tongue is the language of thought and emotion, the foundation upon which all learning builds. By valuing linguistic diversity and ensuring that all children can learn in languages they understand, India can create an educational system that is both equitable and excellent, culturally rooted and globally competent.

The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that language is indeed central to preserving cultural heritage. When children are educated in their mother tongues, they maintain connections to their cultural traditions, develop positive ethnic identities, and gain access to traditional knowledge systems (Dastidar et al., 2025; Sangeetha et al., 2022). At the same time, well-designed multilingual education enables them to develop competence in additional languages, including English, preparing them for participation in national and global contexts (Verma, 2025b; Pal, 2024).

The path forward requires moving beyond viewing language policy as a zero-sum choice between mother tongue and English, between cultural preservation and modernization, between local and global. NEP 2020's vision of additive multilingualism offers a framework for transcending these false dichotomies, recognizing that linguistic diversity strengthens rather than weakens the nation. Realizing this vision demands sustained effort, substantial resources, and unwavering commitment to the principle that every child deserves to learn in a language they understand, while developing the multilingual competencies needed to thrive in the 21st century.

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