

National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the Promotion of Classical Languages:

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the revival and promotion of classical languages, particularly Sanskrit, within the modern education system. This paper critically reviews the policy's vision and implementation strategies for integrating classical languages into school and higher education curricula. It examines the political, cultural, pedagogical, and institutional implications of these efforts while highlighting key challenges such as teacher availability, curriculum reform, and resource development. Drawing from historical and international parallels, the paper argues that NEP's success in revitalizing classical languages depends on sustained support, inclusive access, and innovative pedagogies aligned with contemporary educational needs

Keywords: NEP 2020, Classical Languages, Language policy, IKS, Educational Reform

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's educational landscape, offering a comprehensive roadmap to transform the structure, content, and values of the education system. One of its notable aspects is the renewed focus on the promotion of classical Indian languages, particularly Sanskrit, as an integral part of cultural revival and knowledge dissemination. This emphasis aligns with the broader civilizational objective of reclaiming India's intellectual heritage, wherein classical languages serve as vehicles of traditional wisdom in areas such as philosophy, science, literature, and ethics.

The policy acknowledges the need to make these languages accessible, relevant, and appealing to modern learners by integrating them within contemporary pedagogical frameworks. It promotes multilingualism and diversity, while emphasizing the preservation and revitalization of India's rich linguistic traditions. By doing so, NEP 2020 envisions not only a linguistic revival but also a cultural reawakening grounded in inclusive and innovative education. Stepping into the fifth year of implementation, this paper provides a critical policy review of NEP 2020 with a specific focus on its treatment of classical lan-

guages, examining its objectives, strategies, challenges, and the broader implications for Indian polity and education.

II. Multilingualism & Role of Classical Languages in Social Integration

Language plays a central role in shaping thought, culture, and identity. It is the essential medium for effective teaching and learning in any educational system. India, since ancient times, has been enriched by innumerable languages and dialects (10,000+ mother tongues, 122 recognised languages and 22 official languages) which have contributed significantly to the subcontinent's technological and cultural heritage. But colonialism, modernisation, and subsequently globalisation have endorsed English to percolate into the Indian educational system as a medium of instruction, promising global competitiveness and domestic social mobility. It has had a direct implication on constraining and paralysing the natural and habitual evolution of the Indian knowledge system ((Mishra & Mishra, 2024; Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024; S. K. Sharma, 2024).

Vernacular languages have had to face intense demoting under the influence of colonialism, modernisation, and globalisation. While this has been the ground reality, researchers have been arguing in favour of the efficacy of the mother tongue in helping

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a child attain optimal cognitive development and cultural expression. As early as 1953, UNESCO emphasised that the mother tongue contributes to equality in classrooms, improving learning outcomes and comprehending other languages more proficiently, contributing to lowering drop-outs ((Nag, 2024; E. Sharma, 2023).

Since independence, there have been several attempts in India to promote vernacular languages, including the classification of some languages as classical languages. Classical languages, when taught in inclusive, non-hierarchical ways, can foster a deeper appreciation of India's shared civilizational values, contributing to social cohesion and cultural empathy across linguistic and regional boundaries. Moreover, the promotion of classical languages plays a crucial role in resisting the homogenizing effects of linguistic centralization, especially in the wake of globalisation and the expanding dominance of English. By validating India's linguistic plurality and embedding classical language learning within a multilingual educational approach, policymakers can help dismantle existing linguistic hierarchies. This contributes to not only linguistic justice but also to educational equity, as learners from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds find their histories and traditions reflected in the curriculum.

Now, the National Education Policy 2020 also has recognised the inevitability of upholding Sanskrit and other classical languages. It opens new pathways to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems, which resonates with international efforts to revitalise endangered or marginalised languages and traditions.

III. Exploring the Global Perspective on Promoting Classical Languages

International experiences offer valuable lessons for India in its efforts to promote classical languages. A prominent example is the revival of Hebrew in Israel, which illustrates how a language can be successfully reintegrated into the fabric of national identity and education (Hebrew Language Committee, 2020). Similarly, Latin and Greek continue to be preserved in many European education systems through elective classical studies, highlighting the crucial role of political will, curricular integration, and community participation in the revitalization of ancient languages (UNESCO, 2019).

In more recent times, several countries have undertaken innovative measures to rejuvenate minority or classical languages. In Wales (UK), the “Cymraeg 2050” strategy is a comprehensive initiative aimed at increasing the number of Welsh speakers to one million by the year 2050. This goal is being pursued through bilingual education, targeted teacher recruitment, and active promotion of the Welsh language in public life (National Assembly for Wales, 2017).

New Zealand's revival of the Māori language has been significantly supported by initiatives like Kōhanga Reo, or language nests, which immerse young children in Māori from an early age. These efforts, backed by both community engagement and institutional support, have led to a steady increase in fluent speakers as of 2023 (Government of New Zealand, 2023).

In Ireland, the Irish language (Gaeilge) has been revitalized through the expansion of Gaelscoileanna, or Irish-medium schools. The government has institutionalized the language by making its study compulsory in schools and promoting it through cultural programmes and digital platforms like Duolingo, which has attracted millions of learners globally (Government of Ireland, 2010).

Catalonia in Spain presents another instructive case. Here, the regional government mandates Catalan instruction in all public schools and actively promotes its usage across administration, media, and public services. Despite ongoing legal challenges over linguistic autonomy, support for Catalan remains strong and deeply rooted in regional identity (Parla.cat, 2024).

These global examples collectively demonstrate that the survival and flourishing of classical and minority languages are possible through well-designed policies, consistent investment, early educational interventions, and widespread community involvement. India's National Education Policy (NEP) can draw meaningful insights from these international models to strengthen its approach to promoting classical languages.

IV. NEP 2020: Transforming the Indian Education System & Fostering Multilingualism

The National Education Policy 2020, drafted and adopted at a crucial juncture of transformation in the 21st-century global education system, envisages a

paradigm shift in education in India. It has been established to align our education system with Sustainable Development Goal 4, transforming India into a global knowledge superpower, while balancing our ancient knowledge systems, underscoring education as the foundation for realising human potential, social justice, and national development. NEP 2020 attains significance since it emerged after more than three decades since the last major education policy, the National Policy on Education (1986), which was slightly modified in 1992. Aimed at fostering critical thinking, creativity, ethical values, and adaptability, NEP 2020 aspires to revamp all aspects of the education system, integrating foundational literacy and numeracy, social-emotional learning, multilingualism, and respect for diversity. It also emphasises teacher empowerment, inclusion of marginalised groups, and promotion of Indian languages and traditions ((Ministry of Education, 2020).

One of the central pillars of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on language, recognizing its profound role in cognitive development, cultural identity, and educational outcomes. NEP aims to overcome the shortfalls of the earlier education policies (1968 and 1986), and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, which did not give adequate emphasis on implementing mother tongue as the medium of instruction. India, being a multilingual country with no language able to ascertain its supremacy as the national language demographically or geographically, NEP 2020 advocates for multilingualism and proposes a flexible 'three-language formula', allowing students to learn at least two Indian languages. Under this framework, students are encouraged to learn three languages, two of which must be native to India. While the policy does not impose any particular language combination, it suggests that where possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5- and preferably up to Grade 8- should be the mother tongue or regional language (Ministry of Education, 2020; Nag, 2024; E. Sharma, 2023).

NEP 2020 further stresses the inclusion and promotion of classical languages like Sanskrit and Tamil, recognizing their role in preserving India's cultural and intellectual heritage, calling them *Athmanirbhar Bhashas*. Sanskrit, in particular, is highlighted as a foundational language for Indian knowledge systems, with proposals for dedicated institutions, resources, and teacher training (Bhattacharyya, 2024; Mishra &

Mishra, 2024). In essence, NEP 2020 aims to foster a culturally rooted yet globally relevant education system by embracing linguistic diversity and ensuring that India's rich classical traditions find a meaningful place in the learning process. Let us try to analyse how NEP has addressed the efforts to promote multilingualism and preserve the classical languages.

V. Classical Languages & Multilingualism: Promotion & Preservation

The movement to recognize languages as "classical" in India was initiated by speakers of Tamil, who first demanded this designation. In response, the Government of India sought guidance from the Central Sahitya Akademi and formed the Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC) to establish a framework for granting classical status to Indian languages.

Based on the recommendations of this committee, four essential criteria were laid down:

1. The language must have early texts and recorded history dating back 1500 to 2000 years.
2. It should possess a substantial corpus of ancient literature that is regarded as a significant cultural heritage by its speakers.
3. The literary tradition must be original and not derived from other speech communities.
4. There should be a clear distinction between the classical form and its modern derivatives, potentially including a break in linguistic continuity.

Upon fulfilling the above conditions, in 2004, Tamil was recognised and elevated to 'classical language' status, and subsequent to the revision of the criteria in November 2005, Sanskrit (2005), Telugu (2008), Kannada (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014) were added to the list. In 2024, the criteria were revised again, and based on the recommendations of the LEC, the Government of India expanded the list to include Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali (Ministry of Culture, 2024).

The Ministry of Education has adopted various initiatives to preserve and promote the classical languages. These include the establishment of three Central Universities through an Act of Parliament dedicated to the promotion of Sanskrit, and the creation of a Centre of Excellence to advance research and scholarship in the classical language. Additionally, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is advised to institute academic Chairs in select Central

Universities to strengthen teaching and research. To further encourage scholarly engagement, the government also introduces two major international awards to honour eminent scholars contributing to the field of classical Indian languages (Ministry of Culture, 2024).

Undoubtedly, these languages are not only repositories of religious and literary texts but also vehicles of ancient knowledge systems related to mathematics, astronomy, logic, linguistics, medicine, and ethics. The NEP envisions the linguistic inclusion of the classical languages as essential conduits for accessing India's ancient intellectual, philosophical, and cultural heritage, as well as opening up the scope of participation and engagement in learning from early age. The policy encourages integrating classical languages into interdisciplinary learning, connecting ancient concepts with contemporary disciplines. The objective is to promote academic and research advancement, strengthen international collaborations, and support the nation's cultural preservation and economic development. The policy also provisions integration of these languages with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects. In line with the goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Government of India in November 2021 formed a high-powered committee to recommend strategies for the development and promotion of Indian languages (Bhattacharyya, 2024; Ministry of Culture, 2024).

It has been noticed that Sanskrit, in particular, is highlighted for its comprehensive body of literature and scientific knowledge contributing to cultural heritage and scientific temperament, and the policy recommends that it be made widely available across all school levels through innovative and engaging methods. The policy proposes that Sanskrit be offered at all levels of education as an optional language and also supports the development of pedagogical materials and digital resources to make classical language learning more engaging and accessible.

Additionally, NEP acknowledges the importance of offering other classical languages, such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Pali, and Prakrit, based on regional and cultural contexts. These languages, with their own rich traditions of literature, music, and philosophy, are recognized as equally significant in India's linguistic landscape. By enabling students to study these languages through

elective options or as part of the school curriculum, NEP aims to foster linguistic pride and promote cultural continuity.

Teacher education is another critical component. NEP 2020 calls for specialized programs to train educators in classical language instruction, ensuring that teaching is not only accurate and comprehensive but also engaging and inclusive, ensuring that students across linguistic regions have equitable access to such education. Another strategy put forth in NEP is the development of digital resources like e-learning platforms and e-documents to make learning accessible and affordable (Bhattacharyya, 2024; Wadekar et al., 2022).

Overall, this policy framework positions classical languages as a dynamic element of India's educational transformation, blending tradition with innovation to empower learners and preserve cultural heritage.

VI. Implementation: Impact & Challenges

The initiatives envisaged by the Government of India to preserve and promote classical languages, within a short span of a few years, have had promising outcomes. The NCERT Annual Report 2019-20 claimed that Sanskrit has attracted 36% more enrolment since 2014-2015 (Bhattacharyya, 2024). But, subsequently, despite its promising vision, the promotion of classical languages faced multiple hurdles.

The significant shortage of qualified teachers forced schools to hire unqualified teachers or outsource from other schools. The shortage of funds for teacher training and updated teaching materials has also been hindering the effective delivery of the subject. Institutional capacity, including infrastructure, to support classical language learning, varies across regions. Additionally, the symbolic elevation of Sanskrit has been critiqued for potentially sidelining other classical languages. There are also concerns about inclusivity, particularly in non-Hindi-speaking and tribal regions, where the relevance and accessibility of Sanskrit may be limited.

Recent developments in several states have added to the complexity. In Maharashtra, a Government Resolution in 2024 proposed making Hindi the third compulsory language from Class I. This sparked protests from regional political parties and cultural activists, who argued that it undermined Marathi linguistic

identity and contradicted the spirit of NEP 2020, which recommends introducing the third language from Class VI. Due to widespread opposition, including symbolic protests and political backlash, the state government was compelled to revoke the decision and form a review committee led by Dr. Narendra Jadhav. The revised policy restored choice, allowing students to opt for any Indian language as the third language, provided there were at least 20 students per group opting for it.

Similar tensions have emerged in other states. Tamil Nadu continues to resist the three-language formula, asserting its two-language policy in defiance of central recommendations. In Karnataka and West Bengal, educators have raised concerns over the additional burden and lack of clarity regarding the integration of classical languages into existing curricula. These controversies underline the challenges of balancing national educational priorities with regional linguistic identities and the practicalities of implementation.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative step toward redefining the linguistic landscape of Indian education by reviving and integrating classical languages into the national curriculum. It marks a decisive shift from colonial-era models of education toward a system that values India's civilizational knowledge traditions and linguistic diversity. By promoting classical languages such as Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and others, the NEP aims to reconnect learners with India's intellectual and philosophical heritage, fostering both cultural rootedness and national pride. However, this vision requires more than policy pronouncements- it demands systemic restructuring, resource commitment, and inclusive pedagogical practices.

The promotion of classical languages must be situated within the broader objective of multilingual education, which is crucial for fostering equity and inclusion in India's pluralistic society. Classical languages serve as cultural bridges, capable of uniting diverse linguistic communities through shared historical narratives and philosophical thought. At the same time, their revival must avoid reinforcing linguistic hierarchies or marginalizing vernacular and tribal languages. The challenge lies in implementing classical

language promotion in a way that complements regional linguistic identities, strengthens educational outcomes, and enhances intercultural understanding.

To make this vision a reality, the NEP's implementation strategy must address critical gaps. These include the shortage of trained teachers, inadequate infrastructure in many regions, and a lack of engaging and age-appropriate teaching materials. A major policy thrust is needed to support the creation of digital content, teacher education programs, and Centres of Excellence that are accessible across linguistic zones. Moreover, effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms must be developed to ensure that the promotion of classical languages aligns with the principles of inclusivity and linguistic justice.

Ultimately, reviving classical languages is not merely about preserving the past—it is about equipping future generations with the tools to engage critically with India's intellectual traditions and contribute meaningfully to global knowledge systems. If implemented with cultural sensitivity, technological innovation, and educational equity at its core, NEP 2020 has the potential to transform classical language education from an elite pursuit into a participatory and transformative learning experience for all.

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