The Linguistic Hypocrisy Of NEP 2020: English Education And Ideological Contradictions In Indian Policy

Dr. NIKUNJA KISHORE SA

Assistant Professor (English)

Radhanath Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Cuttack

Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a vision of inclusive, learner-centred education, emphasizing multilingualism and foundational literacy. Yet its stance on English language education reveals a deep ideological split. While English remains indispensable for global mobility, higher education, and employability, NEP 2020 simultaneously promotes mother tongue instruction and flexible language pathways without resolving the structural inequities that limit English access for marginalized learners. This paper critiques NEP 2020's ambiguous language policy, arguing that it perpetuates linguistic elitism under the guise of equity and flexibility. Drawing on historical policy documents, sociolinguistic realities, and classroom practices, the paper calls for a coherent, justice-oriented approach to English education in India. It highlights contradictions in digitalization rhetoric, pedagogical support, and learner guidance, and proposes structural reforms to democratize English proficiency while preserving linguistic diversity. The analysis contributes to global conversations on language, equity, and educational policy in digitally mediated contexts. It situates NEP 2020 within India's multilingual heritage and global education debates, showing how unresolved contradictions in English policy mirror wider tensions in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: NEP 2020, English education, language policy, linguistic justice, digital divide, India, multilingualism, educational equity

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a historic shift in India's educational vision, promising flexibility, equity, and learner-centric reforms. Yet beneath its progressive rhetoric lies a troubling ambiguity—especially in its treatment of language. While the policy celebrates multilingualism and foundational literacy, its stance on English education is riddled with contradictions. India's

multilingual reality – with 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of regional tongues – makes language policy uniquely complex. NEP 2020's attempt to balance cultural preservation with global competitiveness reflects broader debates about English as a lingua franca. Globally, countries like China, Japan, and South Korea have grappled with similar dilemmas, often prioritizing English for internationalization while struggling to protect local languages. This paper critically examines NEP 2020's language policy, focusing on the ideological tensions surrounding English instruction and its implications for equity in a digitally mediated educational landscape.

Historical Context: English and Indian Education Policy

From Macaulay's Minute (1835) to the National Policy on Education (1986), English has occupied a complex space in Indian education—simultaneously a tool of empowerment and exclusion. The NCF 2005 acknowledged this duality, advocating for English as a second language while warning against linguistic elitism. NEP 2020 inherits this legacy but fails to resolve its contradictions. It promotes mother tongue instruction in early years while leaving English instruction to "local discretion," thereby reinforcing regional disparities.

The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948) emphasized English for higher learning, while the Kothari commission (1964-66) reinforced the three-language formula. These policies reveal a persistent ambivalence: English as a necessity for Science and Technology, yet a threat to indigenous identity. Comparisons with Sri Lanka's "Sihanla Only Act" (1956) and Bangladesh's language movement highlight how language policies can spark political upheaval. India's cautious balancing act has avoided outright conflict but perpetuated inequality.

NEP 2020's Split Personality on Language

NEP 2020's language policy is a paradox. On one hand, it emphasizes the importance of English for global mobility and higher education. On the other, it advocates for mother tongue instruction and flexible language pathways. This duality reflects a deeper ideological tension: a desire to democratize education while preserving elite linguistic privilege. The policy avoids committing to a national strategy for English instruction, leaving learners at the mercy of local infrastructure and political will. For example, Kerala and Odisha integrate English early, producing globally mobile graduates, while Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh etc. delay English, leaving rural learners disadvantaged. The policy's silence on national benchmarks for English proficiency creates confusion. This ambiguity reflects ideological tensions: policymakers seek to appease nationalist sentiments while acknowledging English as indispensable for global competitiveness.

Pedagogical Contradictions and Learner Confusion

The policy's pedagogical vision is equally conflicted. It promotes "joyful learning" and "experiential pedagogy" but offers little guidance on how English can be taught effectively in multilingual classrooms. Classroom case studies reveal stark contrasts. In urban private schools, English-medium instruction begins in Nursery and KG classes supported by digital tools and trained teachers. In rural government schools, learners often encounter English very late, taught by underprepared teachers. This disparity fosters psychological stress: rural learners perceive English as a "gatekeeper" subject, essential for jobs but inaccessible. Teachers are expected to be multilingual, digitally literate, and pedagogically innovative whereas without adequate training or resources they are ill-equipped to balance mother tongue and English instruction. On the other hand, learners, especially from marginalized backgrounds, face confusion: Is English essential or optional? Is mother tongue instruction a right or a constraint?

Digitalization and Linguistic Gatekeeping

NEP 2020 celebrates digitalization as a tool for equity. Yet digital platforms often privilege English, creating new barriers for learners without English proficiency. The policy's emphasis on online content, digital assessments, and virtual classrooms risks deepening the digital divide—especially when English remains the dominant medium. Without a clear strategy to support English learning, digitalization becomes a gatekeeper rather than a bridge. India's digital push – through platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM – has expanded access, but mostly the content available is English-dominant. Rural learners with limited English proficiency struggle to benefit. Again, internet penetration in rural India, according to TRAI reports, remains below 50% compounding inequalities. Without deliberate policy, digitalization risks reinforcing linguistic hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Recommendations for Linguistic Justice

To resolve these contradictions, the policy must:

- Recognize English as a necessary skill for all learners, not a privilege for the few.
- Provide structured, equitable English instruction from early grades and set national benchmarks for English proficiency.
- Train teachers in multilingual pedagogy and digital literacy.
- Develop digital content in multiple languages, including English and regional tongues.
- Frame language policy as a matter of justice, not just flexibility by encouraging community-based language programmes to integrate local culture with English learning.

Conclusion

India's experience holds global relevance. As nations navigate globalisation, the challenge is to democratise access to English without erasing local languages. As the present author argues, "If English is essential, why not make it accessible to all? If mother tongue is essential, why not elevate it without sidelining English?" This is not a call for linguistic hierarchy, but for **linguistic justice**—where every learner, regardless of background, can access the cognitive, cultural, and economic power of language. NEP 2020 must move beyond rhetorical celebration of diversity to structural reforms that ensures every learner - urban or rural, elite or marginalized – can access both global as well as linguistic capital.

References

1. Coleman, H. (2011). *Teaching and Learning English in India: Policy and Practice*. British Council.
2. Gandhi, M. K. (1937). *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Government of India.
3. Government of India. (1948). *Report of the University Education Commission* (*Radhakrishnan Commission*). Ministry of Education.
4. Government of India. (1966). *Education and National Development*: *Report of the Education Commission* (*Kothari Commission*). Ministry of Education.
5. Government of India. (1986). *National Policy on Education*. Ministry of Human Resource Development.
6. Mohanty, A. K. (2010). *Languages, Inequality and Marginalization*. Orient Blackswan.
7. Mohanty, A. K. (2019). *Multilingual Education in India: Concepts and Practices*. Routledge.
8. Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.
9. Hamid, M. O. & Baldauf, R.B. (2008). *Language-in-education policy in Bangladesh: English and Bangla in Competition*. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 7(2),119-134.
10. Jayasuriya, L. (2015). *Language Policy in Sri Lanka: Implications for Social Cohesion*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 38(3), 421-437
11. Kumar, K. (1991). *Political Agenda of Education*. Sage Publications.
12. Macaulay, T. B. (1835). *Minute on Indian Education*. Government of India.
13. NCERT. (2005). *National Curriculum Framework*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
14. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). (2024). *Annual Report on Internet Penetration in Rural India*. TRAI.
15. Tikly, L. (2016). *Language, Education and Social Justice*. Routledge.
16. UNESCO. (2021). *The Digital Learning Divide: Policy Recommendations for Multilingual Education*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.