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MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: A PATHWAY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF NEP-2020 IN ODISHA

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Abstract: Odisha is a linguistically diverse state having more than 60 tribal clans and numerous spoken languages in India, that indicates how important multilingual education (MLE) is to achieving the mission of the National Education Policy-2020. During the foundational years through mother tongue-based education, the policy emphasizes equity, inclusion, and all-round development. With the help of multilingual textbooks, teacher training, and community participation, in Odisha Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) initiative, which was started in 2006, offered early schooling in tribal languages like Santali, Kui, and Saura. These programs have protected indigenous cultural heritage, improved foundational literacy, and removed barriers to learning. However, still now certain issues are there like- inadequacy of qualified trained teachers, shortage of educational materials, opposition to mother tongue instruction, and trouble switching between Odia and English. Despite these challenges, the experience of Odisha shows that language variety may be an asset rather than a liability and that improving MLE is essential for sustainable, culturally sensitive, and equitable education that is in line with NEP-2020.

Keywords: Multilingual Education, NEP 2020, Mother Tongue-Based Instruction, Tribal Languages

Introduction

India is often described as a tapestry of diversity (Qureshi, 2023; Dalmia & Sadana, 2012), and it's easy to see why languages, customs and food traditions coexist, often in the same neighbourhood. Odisha is a good case for this pluralism. Even within the state, there is a lot of regional variation, especially in terms of language (Mishra, 2018). Odisha is a linguistically and culturally diverse space with different communities having their own dialects, speech styles and oral traditions (Satapathy, 2018).

Multilingual education – teaching and learning in two or more languages (Abello-Contesse, 2013; Cenoz, 2012) – is based on a simple but profound idea: children learn best when their mother tongue is the point of departure, to which regional, national or foreign languages are added on top. This is the core of the National Education Policy 2020, which is a real change in the way India approaches education with equity, inclusion and holistic development at the forefront (Suman, 2023; Ashokkumar et al., 2025). One of its more ambitious proposals is to press for bilingual instruction in the early years of school. The policy argues that learning in one's mother tongue is not only cognitively beneficial, but also incorporates regional and tribal languages into the mainstream of education, rather than confining them to the margins (Ahmad, 2020).

This is more so in the state of Odisha, where there are more than 60 tribal communities and a similar number of spoken languages. Multilingual education here is not a good idea but almost a necessity (Sahoo & Panda, 2024). At the same time, the linguistic diversity of the state poses both opportunities and real challenges for the effective implementation of NEP 2020 on the ground. This chapter discusses the strategic use of multilingual education to support Odisha in achieving its NEP 2020 objectives with a focus on Universal Elementary Education (UEE).

Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyse the provisions of the National Educational Policy-2020 related to multilingual education and their relevance in the context of Odisha.
2. To explore the major multilingual education initiatives in Odisha.
3. To analyse challenges in implementation of Multilingual education in Odisha.

Methodology:

A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted, data were collected through systematic review of policy documents, academic reports, and thematic content analysis was used for interpretation.

Objectives wise Analysis:

Objective-1: To analyse the provisions of the National Educational Policy-2020 related to multilingual education and their relevance in the context of Odisha.

Linguistic Diversity in Odisha: A Contextual Overview

You don't build a linguistic landscape like Odisha's overnight it's something that's taken shape over centuries, through waves of cultural exchange settling on top of roots that run deep and indigenous. Around 30 tribal languages are spoken across the state today, Kui, Santali, Saora, Juang, and Bonda among them, alongside 13 scheduled languages. Odia is the official language and the one you'll hear most in everyday life, but that prominence shouldn't obscure just how much linguistic diversity sits alongside it. For the people who speak these other languages, they're not simply tools for getting a message across they hold oral histories, folklore, rituals, and social customs, and they play a real role in shaping who people are. For a lot of children in Odisha's rural and tribal pockets, it's their mother tongue where the earliest cognitive, emotional, and social growth actually happens (Mukherjee, 2020; Dash, 2024).

Here's the problem, though: Odisha's mainstream schools have leaned heavily on Odia and English as the languages of instruction for a long time now. And that's had real consequences tribal and minority languages, whatever cultural or administrative weight they carry, have too often been left on the margins (Malik & Mishra, 2016). So, when children show up for their first day of school with little or no Odia or English under their belt, they're essentially playing catch-up from day one. Lessons don't quite land, speaking up in class feels risky, and genuine participation becomes hard to come by. Stretched out over time, that gap between the language spoken at home and the language spoken at school chips away at confidence, muddies comprehension, and can leave indigenous children feeling like they don't quite belong in their own classrooms which goes a long way toward explaining why dropout rates stay stubbornly high in these communities. None of it makes life easy for a state trying to deliver on Universal Elementary Education (UEE) or equitable access to good schooling (Nayak, 2020; Mohanty, 2022).

This is exactly the gap multilingual education (MLE) is meant to fill and "meant to" undersells it, because at this point it's less a nice option than a necessity. Instead of throwing children into an unfamiliar language from the start, MLE works from what's already familiar their mother tongue and builds outward from there toward regional and national languages. Get it right, and it does two things at once: it lays down solid academic foundations while also telling children their culture and identity don't have to be checked at the classroom door. There's also solid reason to believe this approach sharpens comprehension and retention, all while building real pride in where a child's language comes from (Sumartana et al., 2025). If Odisha can get its multilingual education policy right, the payoff could be substantial a narrower achievement gap, a real bridge between home and school, and an education system that actually reflects the many communities that call the state home (Nag, 2018; Das, 2021).

NEP 2020 and Multilingual Education in the Context of Odisha

At its core, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is built around three commitments inclusivity, equity, and holistic development — and together they represent an attempt to genuinely reshape Indian education (Swargiary & Roy, 2023). For Odisha, home to a substantial tribal population and an extraordinary range of languages, these aren't just words on a policy document. They cut straight to challenges the state has been wrestling with for years.

Consider, for example, the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), one of the key objectives of NEP 2020, which aims to ensure every child is able to read, write and use basic math by Grade 3 (Tripathi & Mahto, 2023). However, in Odisha many children enter their first classroom without exposure to Odia or English, let alone both (Pattanaik, 2020). That chasm alone can make even the simplest ideas seem beyond reach. Multilingual education offers a way out of this: teaching begins in the child's own language, building on cognitive foundations that are already in place rather than asking children to learn new ideas and a new language simultaneously (Ball, 2010). It is easier and faster to learn when it builds on what you already know, and then it is much easier to move into other languages.

The NEP 2020 also gives real weight to inclusive, equitable education something that matters enormously in Odisha, where tribal and rural students are often at a disadvantage even before they step into a classroom. Often the language disadvantage is at the bottom of it. Teaching languages such as Santali, Kui or Saura on a day-to-day basis has the potential to increase engagement and reduce dropout rates in a meaningful way, according to Mohanty (2018). In other words, simply acknowledging and valuing the languages that children already speak can go a long way in making classrooms feel like places they belong which is really the spirit behind NEP's broader mission.

There is also a cultural dimension to this. NEP 2020 clearly favours Indian languages, both regional and tribal, as important carriers of culture and knowledge (Rawat, 2024) which in practice means finding ways to bring Odisha's linguistic heritage right into the curriculum. This kind of recognition helps children to learn better and helps the next generation grow up with a real sense of pride in where they come from.

Finally, NEP calls for a complete re-thinking of curriculum and pedagogy, towards a more experiential, flexible, and culturally grounded learning (Bala, Kaur and Dhiman, 2025). Multilingual education also fits here, since it allows teachers to draw on community knowledge, folklore and local stories rather than teaching from a script alien to students' lives (Hornberger, 2009). And there is no surprise that lessons tied to a child's own world will feel less abstract and a lot more meaningful to learn.

All of this taken together points to the fact that multilingual education in Odisha isn't just a nice pedagogical idea under NEP 2020, it's close to a policy imperative. By doing so, the state can truly protect its linguistic heritage, build a more inclusive system and strengthen foundational learning, all at once — laying the foundation for an equitable education system rooted in Odisha's own culture.

Objective-2: To explore the major multilingual education initiatives in Odisha.

Multilingual Education Initiatives in Odisha

Odisha has been a pioneer in implementing multilingual education, particularly for tribal children. Key initiatives include:

1. Multilingual Education Programme (MLE)

In fact, Odisha has been ahead of the curve nationally in terms of multilingual education (MLE) especially for its large tribal population (Mohanty, 2017). In 2006, the state launched an initiative called the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program. The goal was to address a problem that had dogged tribal children for years: coming to school speaking only their community language, and being taught in Odia or English, languages many of them barely understood. Predictably, many students found themselves struggling to keep up in class and this was reflected in poor academic performance and, all too often, students dropping out altogether (Manocha & Panda, 2015). MTB-MLE was described as a radically different approach to education, based on equity, inclusion and respect for children's cultural and linguistic roots, rather than on children's adaptation to a system that was not created for them.

2. Initial Implementation and Expansion

The programme initially covered ten tribal languages-Kui, Santali, Saura, Juang and Munda-covering a few districts with sizable tribal populations. Today it includes more than 20 tribal languages and has expanded to serve more groups. This expansion is a recognition by Odisha that the diversity of language in the state is a strength and not a liability. The programme ensures that children start their education in

a language they understand by introducing early-grade instruction in the mother tongue of the learners, with a gradual transition to Odia and English.

3. Core Components of the Program

The MLE program is built on three main pillars: Initially, lessons were prepared in tribal language and Odia in bilingual textbooks (Das, 2021). The materials were designed to bridge the language gap, to ensure continuity of learning and to build multiple language fluency; Second, teacher recruitment and training was a major focus. Local educators who were fluent in community languages were identified and trained in pedagogical practices that support multilingual classrooms (De Jong, 2013), which strengthened community ownership and improved instructional effectiveness. And third, active community involvement was institutionalized. Tribal elders, storytellers, and cultural practitioners provided oral traditions, folk tales, and songs to be integrated into the curriculum to ensure cultural relevance and to provide children with a sense of pride in their heritage (Ahmad, 2024).

4. Curriculum Innovation

The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Odisha has prepared culturally sensitive curricula for MLE program. The material reflects tribal worldviews, folklore and indigenous knowledge systems including regional agricultural and environmental customs (Mishra, 2016). NEP 2020 will give a lot of importance to learning through experience, practice and context. Rather than forcing education on the tribal people, the curriculum recognizes their daily realities and uses them to make learning more meaningful and interesting.

5. Digital Tools and Language Preservation

Odisha has also, in recent years, invested in digital documentation and educational resources to promote and preserve tribal languages. By digitizing and recording stories, songs and oral traditions, priceless archives of linguistic and cultural heritage are being created. Mobile apps and audio-visual content are being developed to improve classroom teaching, especially in remote and hard-to-reach areas. (Sardar & Sahoo, 2024). These digital projects preserve tribal wisdom for future generations and offer kids growing up in the digital age accessibility and interactivity.

Objective-3: To analyse challenges in implementation of Multilingual education in Odisha.

Challenges in Implementation

Many people point to Odisha's multilingual education (MLE) initiative as a trailblazing attempt to make learning accessible and culturally appropriate. Even though there has been a lot of success in incorporating tribal languages into the early school years, there have been challenges along the way. The difficulties in maintaining and growing MLE in the state are exemplified by the following issues.

1. Shortage of Trained Teachers

One of the biggest practical roadblocks to making multilingual education work is simply a shortage of teachers who can handle a multilingual classroom. Most teachers in the system today were trained in a monolingual environment, with Odia and English as the medium of instruction so it is little wonder that many of them simply lack the language skills to teach in Santali, Saora, Kui or other tribal languages. Some attempts have been made to recruit teachers from local communities, which sounds like an obvious fix, but it has its own problem: many of these recruits haven't gone through formal teacher training, so they are often thrown into classrooms without the pedagogical grounding to back up their language skills (Singh, 2025). And there isn't much in the way of ongoing professional development to close that gap either. Put all of this together and even teachers who truly care and want to make multilingual education work often find themselves unsure about how to bridge home and school languages or how to actually deliver a multilingual curriculum in a way that lands with students.

2. Resource Constraints

The development of educational materials in multiple indigenous languages is not a quick or cheap process. It takes a lot of time, requires specialized expertise, and, most importantly, needs long-term stable funding (Mohanty, 2019). Furthermore, it is not enough that these textbooks, primers and supplementary materials are linguistically correct. They should also make pedagogical sense and be true reflection of the culture of communities they are meant to serve (Panda & Nayak, 2020). The difficulty is compounded for languages that do not have a written script or a settled orthography to begin with (Das, 2018). Getting to a usable script or standardized dialect is often a matter of getting linguists, educators,

and community members all in the same room – a slow and cooperative process, but one that is essential if the content is going to be any good (Mishra & Patnaik, 2021). Even when the materials are available, there is the very practical problem of getting them printed and physically delivered to remote, often hard to reach areas (Rout, 2020). Some of these logistical challenges have been proposed to be addressed by digital tools but in much of tribal Odisha, digital infrastructure is yet to be established and thus the impact so far has been limited (Behera, 2022).

3. Resistance to Change

But even here, a deeper, more personal obstacle is at work: how people actually feel about mother-tongue instruction (Mohanty, 2010). Many parents, school administrators and even teachers view Odia and English as the socially and professionally door openers (Panda & Behera, 2018). With such a mindset, it is not difficult to see why mother-tongue education is sometimes dismissed as inferior or not deserving priority (Nayak, 2019). Understandably, many parents are concerned that children taught in a tribal language will be at a disadvantage in standardised tests in the English and Odia dominated world (Das & Patnaik, 2021). Changing this kind of thinking doesn't occur with policy alone — it takes sustained advocacy, real awareness campaigns and clear, evidence-based messaging about how much early mother-tongue learning actually benefits children cognitively and academically (UNESCO, 2017). Unless this perception is changed, multilingual education will probably be an interim measure or a stopgap, rather than the central teaching strategy that it should be (Jhingran, 2009).

3. Transition Challenges

The trickiest part of multilingual education is probably figuring out how to move the children from their tribal language into Odia and English as they move up the grades, while not losing the ground they've gained (Mohanty, 2019). Although early mother-tongue instruction clearly provides a solid foundation, that foundation can be undermined if the medium of instruction suddenly changes later on, with little warning or support (Nayak & Mishra, 2020). That transition can be too abrupt without that proper scaffolding and children can find themselves lost, struggling with academic vocabulary and subject content they would otherwise be ready for. Such struggles can lead over time to frustration and a decline in motivation, and in some cases students leaving school altogether (Jhingran, 2009; Panda, 2018). The fix is no mystery bridging materials, bilingual instruction and gradual introduction of English and Odia alongside the mother tongue are all established strategies to smooth this transition (UNESCO, 2017). The problem in Odisha is not so much about what to do, but rather about doing it consistently: because these strategies are not uniformly applied across schools, real learning gaps persist, and they end up eroding how effective the entire program can be in the long run (Behera & Rout, 2021).

Conclusion

Odisha's experience with multilingual education really captures both sides of the NEP 2020 story — what's possible, and how hard it can be to actually get there. As one of India's most linguistically diverse states, Odisha has shown, in real and tangible ways, that mother tongue-based education can genuinely move the needle on equity, inclusion, and academic outcomes. Since the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program began in 2006, tribal languages have been woven into early education through bilingual textbooks, teacher training, and active community involvement. The results speak for themselves in some ways: stronger foundational literacy, indigenous culture kept alive rather than pushed aside, and a real boost to the sense of identity among communities that have long been marginalized. That said, this isn't a success story without complications. Missing standardized scripts, too few trained teachers, chronic resource shortages, and a lingering preference among parents for Odia and English all continue to hold the program back. And even where mother-tongue instruction works well in the early years, moving children over to Odia and English later on brings its own set of headaches. Still, what Odisha's experience really shows is that linguistic diversity should be treated as a strength to build on, not a problem to work around. If the state wants an education system where every child, regardless of what language they grew up speaking, actually has a fair shot at succeeding, multilingual education needs more investment, more consistency, and room to grow.

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