Rethinking Educational Federalism in India: A Critical Examination of the Risks and Opportunities of NEP 2020 Implementation

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Abstract - The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant shift aimed at transforming India's education system to address challenges of the 21st century. It exists within a federal structure where education is on the Concurrent List, making it necessary to find a balance between national goals and state independence. This paper looks closely at the risks and opportunities NEP 2020 brings to educational federalism in India. Using methods like analyzing policy documents, examining media discussions, and conducting semi-structured interviews in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, this study reveals how federal tensions come up in language policy, curriculum design, and financial governance. Tamil Nadu's outright rejection of NEP's three-language policy shows its history of anti-Hindi movements and a strong commitment to cultural identity. Karnataka finds a middle ground by resisting language mandates while selectively engaging with NEP provisions. In contrast, Maharashtra shows practical curriculum changes but also raises concerns about centralization. The Union government's use of conditional funding adds to the perception of coercive federalism, weakening the cooperative frameworks set by the Constitution. Moreover, clarifications from the Supreme Court confirm that NEP is not mandatory, reinforcing state rights to educational independence. The findings suggest rethinking educational federalism through inclusive governance, adaptable frameworks that honor linguistic diversity, and financial structures that maintain state autonomy. This paper highlights a key dilemma of NEP 2020: it aims for national unity and educational quality while risking democratic federalism if centralization continues. These insights are significant for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working within the complex federal landscape of education.

Keywords-Educational Sovereignty, Federal Erosion, National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), Language Policy, Cooperative Federalism, India, Linguistic Pluralism, Fiscal Federalism

I. INTRODUCTION

India's education system exists at a unique crossroads of its constitutional federalism and cultural diversity. The Indian Constitution places education on the Concurrent List, letting both the Union and state governments create laws in this area. This federal setup aims to balance national standards with local needs, honoring India's broad cultural, linguistic, and social diversity.

The 42nd Amendment Act of 1976 officially moved education to the Concurrent List. It highlighted the importance of cooperation between the central and state governments. The writers of the Constitution aimed for a system where the Centre would set general policy guidelines, while states would have the freedom to design curricula, choose instructional languages, and manage education based on their specific social and cultural contexts. Over the years, however, this balance has faced challenges as the Centre has gained more sway over education through policy requirements and financial ties.

Historically, Indian education policy has reflected a deep understanding of its diverse sociolinguistic landscape. Language served not just as a means of instruction but as a key aspect of identity and political expression. The anti-Hindi protests in Tamil Nadu during the 1960s exemplify the strong federal pushback against perceived cultural dominance. Tamil Nadu's commitment to a two-language policy (Tamil and English) represented more than just educational choices; it was about asserting Dravidian identity and resisting North Indian linguistic control. Other states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, and West Bengal have similarly emphasized linguistic identity, influencing their education policies.

Since independence, three significant National Policies on Education have aimed to strike a balance between unity and diversity. The 1968 and 1986 policies highlighted the three-language formula as a way to accommodate different languages. However, these policies also acknowledged the importance of state authority in curriculum and language choices, allowing states to determine how the policies would be put into action.

The launch of NEP 2020 marked a new phase in Indian education. It promised a significant overhaul to meet the needs of a fast-evolving global knowledge economy. The NEP's emphasis on multidisciplinary learning, clarity of concepts, creativity, and fairness received broad support. Yet, this progressive vision also unearthed underlying federal tensions with its strict language requirements, national curricular frameworks, and proposed centralized assessment methods.

The NEP's three-language formula—requiring Hindi, English, and a regional language—sparked controversy in many states. Tamil Nadu strongly opposed it, labeling it a "new Hindi imposition." Karnataka and Maharashtra expressed serious worries about losing flexibility in their curricula and local relevance. Beyond language issues, parts of the NEP like the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and the National Testing Agency (NTA) for standardized assessments have raised concerns among states about increased central control over education.

Fiscal federalism pressures many states to adopt NEP guidelines, with central funding increasingly tied to policy compliance. This practice has led to claims of coercive federalism, moving away from the cooperative federalism intended by the Constitution and undermining states' financial and educational authority.

This paper explores the effects of these tensions by examining insights from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra—states that represent India's linguistic, cultural, and political diversity. It aims to outline the risks of federal decline while identifying opportunities for joint governance within educational federalism.

II. CASE STUDIES: STATE RESPONSES TO NEP 2020

Tamil Nadu: Historical and Political Roots of Anti-Hindi Sentiment

Tamil Nadu's resistance to the NEP's language policy stems from its Dravidian political history. The anti-Hindi movements of the 1930s and 1960s featured violent protests, including self-immolations and mass mobilizations. The state has since adopted a two-language system—Tamil and English—rejecting Hindi as either a medium or a compulsory language. According to The Print (2025), all major political parties in Tamil Nadu oppose the NEP's three-language policy, seeing it as a threat to Tamil identity and autonomy.

A senior official in Tamil Nadu's education department remarked, "The NEP's push for Hindi undermines our constitutional right to protect regional languages. We cannot let history repeat itself under the pretense of national integration." The Tamil Nadu government issued its own State Education Policy, prioritizing Tamil-medium instruction and resisting central mandates.

Karnataka: Strong Linguistic Identity and Practical Engagement

Karnataka holds a balanced stance, pushing back against Hindi imposition while engaging with certain NEP reforms. Activist movements like #NammaMetroHindiBeda express public frustration over mandatory Hindi signage in Bengaluru, raising concerns about cultural dilution. The government's stance combines pride in Kannada with practical policy changes.

An education expert in Bengaluru stated, "Karnataka sees the need for changes but insists on maintaining Kannada's importance. The NEP must be flexible to respect our linguistic culture; otherwise, it will encounter resistance." The state is creating a curriculum that aligns with NEP's educational goals while significantly adapting it to reflect local content.

Maharashtra: Practicality, Adaptation, and Negotiation

Maharashtra's experience shows an approach of practical adaptation. While Marathi is vital to its culture, the state first opposed mandatory Hindi in schools but later withdrew those plans after extensive public discussion and a review of policies. The

Maharashtra NEP Task Force report highlights the need to align national reforms with regional development needs.

A senior official in Maharashtra's education department emphasized, "The state supports modernizing education but requires protections for the Marathi language and curriculum independence. NEP guidelines must allow for this flexibility to ensure effective implementation."

III. OBJECTIVES

• To Investigate the constitutional and federal framework that shapes educational governance in India.
• To Examine controversial aspects of NEP 2020 related to language policy, standardizing curricula, and financial measures.
• To Explore the responses and perspectives of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra regarding NEP mandates.
• To Analyze how fiscal federalism affects NEP compliance and influences state autonomy.
• To Identify systemic risks from federal erosion and find opportunities to enhance cooperative federalism in education.
• To Develop suggestions for balancing national educational modernization with respect for state sovereignty and diversity.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design that includes:
1. Document Analysis: Reviewed the NEP 2020 text, constitutional provisions on education, state policies, Supreme Court decisions, parliamentary records, and government circulars.
2. Media Discourse Analysis: Analyzed print and digital content from various Indian media outlets to capture public narratives and political changes related to NEP in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra.
3. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted interviews with policymakers, bureaucrats, academic experts, and civil society members involved in education governance, using open-ended questions to understand disagreements and adaptation strategies.
4. Thematic Coding: The collected data was organized thematically around key issues like language policy,

control of curricula, financial conditions, and mechanisms for federal cooperation.

V. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on educational federalism and the implementation of NEP 2020 shows ongoing debates about language policy, curriculum control, financial governance, and the overall federal balance in India's diverse political landscape.

Singh (2024) examines the benefits of multilingual education, highlighting the importance of mother tongue instruction for learning outcomes and student involvement. He suggests that multilingualism not only boosts language skills but also supports cognitive growth and cultural identity. However, he warns against strict language rules in NEP 2020 that could alienate states with strong linguistic identities. Singh notes that enforcing language policies from the top, especially the three-language formula that includes Hindi, may lead to pushback rather than acceptance. This could hinder both educational and political aims.

Patnaik (2022) critiques NEP 2020's tendency toward centralization, especially in curriculum and regulation. He cautions that the policy may diminish states' ability to customize curricula based on local histories, cultures, and dialects, as well as their independence in governance. Patnaik places these concerns within India's constitutional federal framework, pointing out that excessive central control can increase tensions between national modernization efforts and regional diversity.

Gupta and Chatterjee (2023) explore the linguistic politics of South India, underscoring Tamil Nadu's long history of resisting the imposition of Hindi and linguistic uniformity. Their social and political analysis connects current resistance to NEP with a legacy of asserting Dravidian identity and cultural politics, particularly the anti-Hindi protests of the 1960s. They argue that understanding this historical backdrop is key to interpreting today's opposition to the NEP's language policy and its broader federal consequences.

Policy analyses by Politics for India (2025) highlight the role of financial pressure in shifting cooperative federalism toward a more centralizing model. Their thorough examination of funding conditions shows how linking financial support to NEP compliance

undermines the spirit of shared responsibility, leading to mistrust and resistance among states.

The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA, 2025) discusses variations in state capabilities and political will that affect uneven adoption of NEP. They advocate for decentralized, flexible implementation strategies that consider different state contexts, calling for federal systems that allow states to adapt reforms creatively without pressure.

Education for All India (2025) critiques NEP's top-down approach, warning that forcing policies could weaken democratic federalism and educational access. Their analysis emphasizes the importance of involving states, educators, and civil society in policymaking to encourage cooperative efforts rather than enforcing hierarchy.

Collectively, these studies provide a complex view of the challenges facing educational federalism in India. They depict NEP 2020 as a significant reform that offers potential benefits but also poses serious risks of undermining federalism if centralizing practices and financial pressures remain unchecked.

Educational Federalism in India

Educational federalism in India is strongly influenced by the country's constitutional framework. Since the 42nd Amendment in 1976, education has been included in the Concurrent List. This means that both the Union government and the states can make laws about education. The goal was to find a balance. The idea was to ensure national unity while also recognizing India's vast cultural, linguistic, and social diversity.

In reality, this balance is uneven. While the Constitution allows for shared authority, the central government typically has more power when it comes to making policies and controlling finances. This imbalance arises from India's fiscal system, where the Centre collects most of the revenue and then distributes resources to the states through grants and centrally sponsored programs. As a result, even though states are responsible for implementing education policies, central interests often overshadow the specific needs of states.

Education in India is closely tied to identity politics, particularly concerning language. In many areas, choices about the language of instruction are not just about teaching methods, but also about asserting cultural identity and resisting central mandates. Tamil Nadu's longstanding refusal to make Hindi mandatory is a prime example. This rejection stems from historical struggles to maintain Dravidian cultural independence. These conflicts show how education can become a political battleground for negotiating federal power.

Despite these challenges, some large-scale education initiatives highlight efforts for cooperation. Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme were created with the idea of cooperative federalism, sharing responsibility among different levels of government. They aimed to improve access, fairness, and minimum standards. However, these programs also demonstrate the limits of cooperation, as they often come with conditions that require uniform adherence. While these conditions aim to ensure quality, they generally limit the ability of states to tailor education to their specific needs and priorities.

Overall, educational federalism in India represents an ongoing negotiation between central authority and state independence. The constitutional structure promotes shared responsibility, but financial dependency and political negotiation significantly influence how this relationship works in practice. Battles over language policy, disparities in resources, and the requirements of cooperative programs illustrate how education can be a space for both teamwork and conflict. Understanding this complexity is crucial for assessing reforms like the National Education Policy 2020, which puts forward a common vision for the country while needing to navigate the realities of India's diverse federal framework.

Case Studies

NEP 2020 Educational Federalism Spectrum
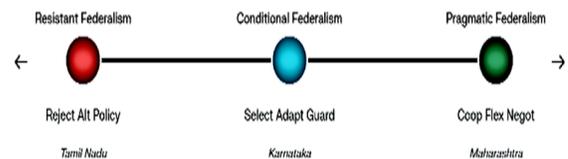
Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has clearly rejected the central three-language policy outlined in NEP 2020. The state insists on sticking to its well-established two-language policy, emphasizing Tamil and English as the main languages for instruction. This firm stance stems from Tamil Nadu's historical resistance to Hindi imposition, which is deeply rooted in the Dravidian movement and the anti-Hindi protests of the 1960s. This position goes beyond language; it represents a cultural and political assertion of Tamil identity and independence. There are concerns that NEP's language policy could undermine the state's unique linguistic heritage and political control. Tamil Nadu's reaction highlights how educational policies connect with federal dynamics and identity politics, showing that education is a means of cultural preservation and a way to engage in democratic federal debates.

Karnataka

Karnataka takes a moderate and selective approach in response to NEP 2020. The state cautiously accepts curricular reforms that focus on multidisciplinary education and critical thinking, but it strongly opposes making Hindi mandatory in schools. Karnataka's policy reflects pride in the Kannada language and a broader claim for federal independence. The state's careful engagement with NEP highlights the challenge of benefiting from modernization efforts while protecting regional language and cultural rights.

Maharashtra

Maharashtra shows a practical attitude toward NEP-driven changes. The state welcomes innovations like multidisciplinary and flexible curricula that aim to improve educational quality and inclusivity. However, Maharashtra has concerns about the growing centralization of educational governance, especially through organizations like the Higher Education Commission of India and financial conditions tied to NEP compliance. The state's discussions reveal a desire to engage constructively in national educational reforms while standing firm against perceived threats to its administrative and educational control.

These case studies illustrate the varied responses from different states. They are influenced by social and political histories, cultural identities, and negotiations with the federal system. Together, they show that implementing NEP 2020 goes beyond technical measures. It involves deep constitutional and cultural discussions within India's federal democracy.

VI. CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF NEP 2020 IMPLEMENTATION

Risks:
• Language Policy: NEP's three-language formula is controversial, especially in Tamil Nadu, where it raises fears of Hindi imposition. The Print (2025) quotes leaders in Tamil Nadu saying, "Our language is our identity, more than just communication. It embodies culture and autonomy."

Concerns in Karnataka and Maharashtra are similar.
• Curricular Centralization: Uniform national curricular frameworks and assessment methods could sideline local teaching styles. Maharashtra's Task Force warned that "national templates may undermine regional socio-economic realities and intellectual traditions."
• Fiscal Coercion: Tying funds to NEP compliance feels coercive. It undermines states' control over education. A Karnataka official pointed out, "When money controls policy, federalism becomes federalism in name only."
• Judicial Limitations: Supreme Court rulings (2025) confirm NEP's non-binding nature, supporting state autonomy. However, compliance still faces financial and political pressures.

Opportunities:
• NEP's focus on equity, quality, and multidisciplinary education creates a chance for positive change if it aligns with federalist principles. Tamil Nadu's effort to create its own education policy suggests potential for tailored adaptations that meet local goals within the broader national framework.
• The expansion of digital and vocational training under NEP can benefit from local innovation while remaining coherent across the country.

VII. MAJOR FINDINGS

1. NEP 2020 increases strain between states and the federal government, with language policy being a key issue where identity and autonomy clash.

2. States assert their educational sovereignty against what they see as central overreach in curricula and governance.

3. Fiscal conditions feel like coercive federalism, risking alienation and resistance from states.

4. Judicial clarifications offer legal relief but do not eliminate structural pressures.

5. The lack of cooperative frameworks limits trust and makes policy alignment difficult.

VIII. DISCUSSIONS

NEP 2020 stands between the goals of modernization and the realities of federalism. The risk of federal erosion grows when central policies ignore state-specific linguistic and cultural contexts. Language, which carries symbolic and political weight, can spark resistance and raise questions about democratic legitimacy. The centralizing tendencies of fiscal federalism increase dependency and reduce chances for collaborative governance.

Reimagining NEP implementation as a collaborative, negotiated process would build trust and ownership, allowing for policy alignment without losing diversity. Ignoring participatory federalism could lead to more conflict and less effective reforms.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

• National Interstate Education Council: Establish a forum for regular discussions between the Center and states on education policy to build trust and cooperation.

• Flexible Frameworks: Give states the power to customize language and curricular policies in line with local identity, culture, and needs.

• Decoupled Fiscal Support: Eliminate or limit conditions that tie central funding to strict NEP compliance, preserving financial independence.

• Linguistic Safeguards: Strengthen constitutional protections for linguistic and cultural diversity in education governance.

• Participatory Federalism: Engage local stakeholders, teachers, communities, and civil society in adapting policies to enhance democratic accountability.

X. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 provides an ambitious vision for India's educational future but encounters significant challenges within the federal democratic framework. Issues like language policy, curricular centralization, and fiscal conditions highlight a broader crisis of trust and state sovereignty in education. To achieve NEP's goals without compromising democratic pluralism, cooperative and negotiated federalism must take priority. India's strength lies in its diversity; policies should celebrate and incorporate this rather than override it. Adjusting NEP implementation through federal dialogue, respect for fiscal autonomy, and cultural awareness is crucial for preserving educational quality and federal democracy.

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