

Multilingualism in Policy and Practice: A Critical Study of NEP 2020 and UGC Language Initiatives

Dr. Ajey Kumar S

Lecturer in English, Government Polytechnic, Nalgonda, Telangana

doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV12I8-190474-459

Abstract—India’s linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for educational policy and practice. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 redefines language education by positioning multilingualism as a pedagogical resource, a cognitive advantage, and a medium of cultural continuity (Government of India, 2020). Complementing this policy vision, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced initiatives such as *Learn One More Bharatiya Bhasha* and the establishment of *Bharatiya Bhasha Clubs* in higher education institutions (HEIs) to operationalise multilingual learning (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2025). This paper undertakes a qualitative policy analysis of NEP 2020’s language-related provisions and examines the extent to which recent UGC guidelines translate policy intent into institutional practice. The study critically evaluates the coherence between vision and implementation, identifying challenges related to faculty preparedness, curricular standardisation, institutional capacity, and equity. It argues that while NEP 2020 provides a conceptually robust framework for multilingual and culturally grounded education, its effectiveness depends on sustained institutional commitment and academic rigour rather than symbolic adoption.

Keywords—NEP 2020, multilingualism, language policy, Bharatiya Bhasha, higher education, UGC

I. INTRODUCTION

Language policy has long occupied a central place in India’s educational discourse, shaped by colonial legacies, regional identities, and socio-economic aspirations. Education functions not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as a space where linguistic identities are negotiated and reproduced. The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant shift in this domain by foregrounding multilingualism as an educational strength rather than a logistical challenge (Government of India, 2020).

NEP 2020 conceptualises language as integral to learning, cognition, and cultural formation. By advocating the use of the mother tongue or home language in early education and encouraging

exposure to multiple languages across stages, the policy seeks to align pedagogical practice with linguistic research and India’s plural social reality. At the same time, it emphasises the role of Indian languages in preserving cultural knowledge systems, literary traditions, and artistic expressions (Government of India, 2020).

In higher education, the implementation of this vision is supported by UGC initiatives such as *Learn One More Bharatiya Bhasha* and *Bharatiya Bhasha Clubs*. These initiatives aim to expand access to Indian language learning beyond formal degree programmes and promote informal, participatory modes of engagement (UGC, 2025). Despite their importance, there is limited academic analysis examining how these measures translate NEP 2020’s language vision into institutional practice. This paper addresses this gap through a critical examination of policy intent and implementation challenges.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyse NEP 2020’s conceptualisation of multilingualism and the educational role of language.
2. To examine the policy’s emphasis on Indian languages, arts, and cultural continuity.
3. To evaluate the UGC’s *Bharatiya Bhasha* initiatives as mechanisms for policy implementation in higher education.
4. To identify structural and institutional challenges affecting implementation.
5. To suggest policy-relevant measures for strengthening multilingual education in HEIs.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach based on document analysis. Primary sources include the *National Education Policy 2020*, particularly the sections addressing multilingualism

and the promotion of Indian languages, arts, and culture, and the UGC guidelines issued in December 2025 concerning the *Learn One More Bharatiya Bhasha* initiative and Bharatiya Bhasha Clubs (Government of India, 2020; UGC, 2025).

The analysis employs thematic interpretation to examine policy objectives, conceptual coherence, and feasibility of implementation in higher education institutions. Secondary literature on multilingual education, language policy, and higher education governance in India is used to contextualise and critically assess the policy framework (Cummins, 2000; Mohanty, 2019). As a document-based study, the paper does not include empirical field data; this limitation is acknowledged, and the study is positioned as a foundational analysis to inform future empirical research.

IV. MULTILINGUALISM AS EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY IN NEP 2020

NEP 2020 frames multilingualism as a central pedagogical strategy rather than an ancillary skill. Drawing on linguistic and cognitive research, the policy asserts that conceptual understanding is enhanced when learners engage with content in familiar languages (Government of India, 2020). Consequently, it recommends the use of the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction in the foundational years, while also promoting exposure to additional languages.

This approach challenges long-standing assumptions that equate educational quality with exclusive reliance on English-medium instruction. Research in bilingual and multilingual education supports the view that learning in familiar languages strengthens comprehension and cognitive flexibility (Cummins, 2000; Mohanty, 2019). Importantly, NEP 2020 avoids prescribing a rigid language hierarchy and explicitly states that no language will be imposed on learners (Government of India, 2020).

However, translating multilingual pedagogy into practice presents significant challenges. Effective implementation requires teachers with multilingual competence, availability of instructional materials across languages, and assessment systems that accommodate linguistic diversity. In higher education, English continues to dominate as the language of academic mobility and professional

advancement, complicating efforts to institutionalise multilingual engagement (Mohanty, 2019).

V. LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND CIVILISATIONAL CONTINUITY

A distinctive feature of NEP 2020 is its explicit linkage of language education with cultural and civilisational continuity. The policy positions Indian languages as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems, philosophical traditions, and artistic expressions that must be preserved and transmitted through education (Government of India, 2020).

The policy advocates integrating Indian literature, classical texts, folk traditions, and regional arts into curricula across educational stages. It also calls for systematic documentation, translation, and digitisation of endangered languages and oral traditions as part of a broader effort to preserve linguistic diversity (Government of India, 2020).

At the same time, this cultural emphasis raises critical concerns. Language policy scholars caution that cultural promotion through education can inadvertently privilege dominant linguistic traditions if issues of representation and power are not adequately addressed (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Without inclusive strategies and scholarly rigour, cultural initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

VI. UGC'S BHARATIYA BHASHA INITIATIVE: INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

The UGC's *Learn One More Bharatiya Bhasha* initiative represents a structured attempt to operationalise NEP 2020's multilingual vision in higher education. The initiative encourages students to acquire an additional Indian language through credit-based courses aligned with national qualification frameworks (UGC, 2025).

Complementing this academic approach, Bharatiya Bhasha Clubs are envisaged as informal spaces for linguistic and cultural engagement through literature, performances, discussions, and peer interaction. Such initiatives acknowledge the limitations of purely classroom-based instruction and aim to foster participatory language learning environments (UGC, 2025).

However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends heavily on institutional capacity. Faculty availability, curriculum standardisation, and funding remain uneven across HEIs. In the absence of monitoring mechanisms and academic integration, language initiatives risk being treated as compliance-driven activities rather than sustained educational practices.

VII. CRITICAL DISCUSSION: CHALLENGES AND GAPS

The analysis reveals a gap between NEP 2020's conceptual vision and institutional readiness. Multilingual education requires long-term investment in teacher education, curriculum development, and assessment frameworks. Many HEIs, particularly state-funded institutions, face structural constraints that limit effective implementation (Mohanty, 2019).

Equity concerns are equally significant. Students from linguistically privileged backgrounds may find it easier to engage with additional language learning, while first-generation learners may prioritise languages perceived as economically advantageous. Language policy research highlights the risk of reinforcing inequalities if multilingual initiatives are not supported by inclusive institutional strategies (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Furthermore, cultural promotion through language education must be anchored in critical scholarship. Romanticising linguistic heritage without addressing contemporary linguistic practices and power relations may limit the transformative potential of NEP 2020's language policy.

VIII. CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 represents a significant reorientation of language policy in Indian education by positioning multilingualism as a cognitive asset and Indian languages as carriers of cultural continuity (Government of India, 2020). The UGC's Bharatiya Bhasha initiatives mark an important step towards translating this vision into higher education practice (UGC, 2025).

However, the realisation of this vision depends on sustained institutional commitment, academic rigour, and equitable implementation. Multilingual

education cannot be reduced to symbolic initiatives or short-term programmes; it requires long-term policy support, faculty preparedness, and mechanisms for critical evaluation. This study concludes that while NEP 2020 provides a strong conceptual foundation for multilingual and culturally inclusive education, its success will ultimately be determined by the quality and consistency of institutional practice.

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