

CHAPTER-14

Language education and NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thematic paper examines the transformative approach to language education as outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Recognizing that multilingualism has significant cognitive benefits for young learners, the policy mandates that the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5 and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond should be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language. This shift aims to bridge the gap between spoken and taught languages to enhance conceptual understanding. The paper analyzes the implementation of the three-language formula, which is characterized by greater flexibility and ensures that no language is imposed on any state, provided that at least two of the three languages are native to India. Furthermore, the study explores the policy's strategy to mainstream Sanskrit as an experiential and contemporary option at all levels of education, alongside other classical languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia. The inclusion of foreign languages at the secondary level is also discussed as a means to foster global knowledge and mobility. Key institutional reforms are highlighted, including the establishment of the Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) and the use of technology to support language learning through platforms like DIKSHA. Finally, the paper evaluates the policy's emphasis on recruiting bilingual teachers and the integration of language with art and culture to preserve India's linguistic wealth. The findings suggest that NEP 2020 views language not merely as a communication tool but as a vital vessel for cultural identity, national integration, and holistic development.

KEYWORDS: Language Education, National Education Policy (Nep) 2020, Multilingualism, Medium of Instruction, Mother Tongue, Three-Language Formula, And Holistic Development

1 INTRODUCTION

Language policy in education has been one of the most contested issues in India for a long time since it involves questions relating to identity, equity, nation-building and access to knowledge (International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences [IJELS], 2024). Earlier education policies in 1968 and 1986 endorsed a three-language formula; but implementation was uneven and was often distorted by political debates over Hindi, English and regional languages (Government of India, 1968; Government of India, 1986). NEP 2020 re-examines this legacy in the context of a rapidly globalizing, digital, and multilingual India and tries to balance the constitutional commitments towards linguistic diversity with the aspirations for national integration and global competitiveness (Government of India, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2022).

This policy gives unprecedented importance of mother tongue or home language-based instruction in the foundational and preparatory stage (Grade 1 to 5 preferably till 8th) as children learn best the language they know poorly (Government of India, 2020; Singh & Kathuria, 2024). It simultaneously reaffirms the Three-Language Formula with explicit

flexibility for states and schools, and also encourages the learning of other Indian and foreign languages (Kothari Commission, 1966; Government of India, 2020). This paper makes a thematic analysis of the provisions of language education by NEP 2020 in terms of (a) the multilingual mandate and medium of instruction, (b) re envisioned Three-Language Formula, (c) preservation and promotion of classical and Indian languages, (d) institutional and technological support, (e) implications for teacher education, (f) opportunities and challenges for holistic development.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: LANGUAGE, MULTILINGUALISM, AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

NEP 2020 considers a multilingualism as a cognitive, social and cultural asset rather than a problem (IJELS, 2024). Cognitive science and educational research states that learning in L1 improves critical thinking, problem-solving, memory retention and executive functioning because children can link new concepts with old linguistic and cultural schemas (JETIR, 2025; EuroSchool, 2024). Multilingual persons often show higher cognitive flexibility, or the ability to switch between tasks or mental sets, as well as greater control over attention, all of which can have a positive impact on academic performance across subjects (K.R. Mangalam Global School, 2025).

From a sociocultural angle, the mother tongue is the most significant medium through which children absorb the cultural norms, stories and ways of interpreting the world; the mother tongue is a "repository of history, tradition, and folklore," as expressed by India's Union Education Minister, in the context of Bharatiya Bhasha Utsav and NEP 2020 (Pradhan, 2024). Mother tongue-based education, therefore, aids not only in cognitive development but also emotional security, affirmation of identity and sense of belonging, all important building blocks of holistic development (JETIR, 2025; Smile Foundation, 2025). Simultaneously, the ability to use multiple languages, including link languages such as Hindi and English and foreign languages, can broaden the communicative repertoire, social networks and economic opportunities of learners, contributing to global competence (JJPP, 2025; Lingaya's Vidyapeeth, 2025).

Holistic development is understood as integrated growth of cognitive, social, emotional, ethical and cultural dimensions of the learner in NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020). Language, in this framework, is not only a means of communication, but also an essential medium for values education, aesthetic appreciation, intercultural understanding and participation in democratic life (SEL India, 2024). A thematic analysis of the language provisions of NEP 2020 thus needs to pay attention to the connection of policy discourses with the realisation of these broader goals and the conditions required in schools to achieve them, which are multilingual education.

3 NEP 2020 AND THE MULTILINGUAL MANDATE

3.1 *Medium of Instruction and Mother Tongue*

A unique feature of NEP 2020 is its explicit suggestion that wherever possible, the medium of instruction in schools shall be 'the home language, mother tongue, local language, regional language', at least till grade 5, and preferably up to grade 8 and thereafter (Government of India, 2020). The policy refers to research evidence which found that foundational learning outcomes, such as numeracy and literacy, and basic conceptual understanding, are much better when children are taught in a language they understand well in the early years (JJPP, 2025; JETIR, 2025). Empirical studies from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha and Chhattisgarh have

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shown that children taught in their mother tongues or familiar regional languages are often doing better than their counterparts in English medium schools, as indicated by factors such as comprehension, participation and confidence (Smile Foundation, 2025).

Mother tongue-based education has various inter-related advantages. It consolidates conceptual clarity by giving students the opportunities to allocate cognitive resources to understanding ideas and not to decoding an unfamiliar language (EuroSchool, 2024; JETIR, 2025). It supports the participation in the classroom and minimizes anxiety as the children are free to ask questions and admit doubts and also interact with peers to a greater extent (Smile Foundation, 2025). It also helps to keep children from marginalized linguistic communities in school by limiting alienation and affirming their cultural identities in a way that contributes to equity and inclusion (IJELS, 2024; JJPP, 2025).

3.2 Multilingual Exposure during Early Childhood

NEP 2020 places language policy in a wider curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 design, having a strong focus on the foundation stage (ages 3-8) (Government of India, 2020). In this phase, the policy promotes rich exposure to multiple languages through play-based activities, stories, songs, and local cultural practices with a core literacy with the child's home language or familiar regional language (Government of India, 2020; SEL India, 2024). Such exposure is intended to utilize the natural ability of children to learn more than one language and ensure that literacy and numeracy are founded on a linguistically accessible cognitive base (JETIR, 2025).

This multilingual mandate is in line with international research on additive bilingual education, which suggests that good literacy knowledge in the L1 facilitates rather than hinders the acquisition of additional languages (JETIR, 2025; K. R. Mangalam Global School, 2025). Instead of the Indian languages and English being viewed as a competition with each other with Indian languages losing out (zero sum competition), NEP 2020 encourages a sequential and additive process of language learning in which the foundation of local languages is built upon and the other Indian and foreign languages are gradually superimposed on top of it as the learner progresses through the school (IJELS, 2024).

4 THE THREE-LANGUAGE FORMULA: FLEXIBILITY, PURPOSE, AND CHOICE

4.1 Evolution of the Three-Language Formula

The Three-Language Formula was first expressed in the National Policy on Education of 1968 and was reiterated in 1986, which envisaged that pupils in Hindi speaking states are to learn Hindi, English and a modern Indian language (preferably of the South) while the pupils in non-Hindi speaking states would learn the regional language, Hindi and English (Government of India, 1968, 1986). In reality, there was a wide variation in the implementation of the formula; many schools, particularly private English-medium ones, did not follow the formula to its fullest extent, and political contestation over the imposition of Hindi reduced its acceptance in some states (Lingaya's Vidyapeeth, 2025).

NEP 2020 retains the basic structure of the three language formula but emphasizes that it should be implemented "keeping in mind the Constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism as well as national unity" (Government of India, 2020). Importantly, the policy assures that 'no language will be imposed on any State', thereby signalling sensitivity to concerns in the federal and regional arenas and to language movements (Government of India, 2020).

4.2 Flexibility and Indigenous Primacy

Under NEP 2020, students are expected to learn three languages in school; but states, schools and the learners are given much flexibility over the choice of a specific combination provided

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that two out of the three languages are native to India (Government of India, 2020; NDTV, 2025). This indigenous primacy clause aims at the protection and promotion of Indian languages in a space where English tends to dominate the conceptualized language of mobility and prestige (IJELS, 2024). It also opens the door to the increased inclusion of tribal and minority languages in the state-level school curriculum (JJPP, 2025).

The medium of instruction can be any of the three languages, but it should be in line with the mother tongue recommendation in the foundational level and should be pedagogically suitable (Government of India, 2020). The third language can be English or any other language of India or any foreign language, as per the regional priority and aspiration of parents (Lingaya's Vidyapeeth 2025). By structurally embedding both flexibility and indigenous primacy, NEP 2020 essentially tries to meet the goals of national integration, cultural preservation, and global engagement (SEL India 2024).

4.3 Foreign Languages and Global Integration

At the secondary level, NEP 2020 promotes the introduction of foreign languages like French, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean languages along with Indian languages and English (NDTV, 2025). This policy move is justified in terms of facilitating access to global knowledge systems, international collaboration, as well as expand the higher education and employment options for students in a globalized economy (JJPP, 2025). Exposure to foreign languages too is being positioned as a means to foster cross-cultural understanding and empathy; but this is clearly placed after a strong foundation in Indian languages in the early and middle years (IJELS, 2024).

5 PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL AND INDIAN LANGUAGES

5.1 Sanskrit and Other Classical Languages

NEP 2020 special attention is given to Sanskrit calls it an important modern, living, and classical language and should be available as an "interesting and enriching" choice at all levels of school and higher education (Government of India, 2020). The policy suggests experiential and communicative methods of teaching the Sanskrit so that it does not remain limited to rote learning of grammar and texts but is associated with the modern way of using it and knowledge fields (SEL India, 2024). Sanskrit is to be offered in both the public and private institutions with flexible points to enter or exit the course and without being a compulsory subject (Government of India, 2020).

Along with Sanskrit, the policy accords a due recognition to the other classical Indian languages such as, inter alia, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, etc. and calls for their propagation by means of provision of curricular materials, teachers training and research support (Government of India, 2020; JJPP, 2025). Encouraging the study of classical languages has been seen as a way to open a window to India's ancient tradition of textual and intellectual expression in the spheres of philosophy, literature, science, and the arts to enrich their intellectual and aesthetic horizons (IJELS, 2024). Linking classical language education with creative and critical inquiry in the present day can strengthen continuity of culture without resorting to narrow and exclusionary cultural nationalism (SEL India, 2024).

5.2 Regional, Tribal, and Minority Languages

Beyond classical languages, NEP 2020 emphasises the need to conserve and propagate India's large number of regional and tribal languages, many of which are in danger of extinction (Government of India 2020; SEL India 2024). It encourages states to have local language curriculum, primers and story books in tribal and minority languages for early grades that is

often a bridge model wherein the child's mother tongue is gradually linked to the language of the region or state (Smile Foundation, 2025). Programmes such as Odisha's Multilingual Education programme in which tribal languages such as Santali and Kui are included in the early curriculum and learning process, exemplify the extent of such initiatives for more participation and learning from the marginalized (Smile Foundation, 2025).

Mother tongue-based multilingual education also promotes linguistic human rights so that children do not have to abandon their languages to have access to education (JETIR, 2025; JJPP, 2025). By bringing local oral traditions, songs and cultural practices into classroom activities, schools can help to validate student identities and make learning more relevant to the lived experience of students (EuroSchool, 2024; Smile Foundation 2025). However, such efforts are dependent on political commitment, community involvement, continued investment in materials, as well as teacher capacity (IJELS, 2024).

6 INSTITUTIONAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

6.1 *Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI)*

Recognizing the need for multilingual education for involvement of strong translation and resource development, NEP 2020 envisages setting up and strengthening institutions, including Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) (Government of India, 2020). The IITI is envisaged to be a premier body for the high-quality translation of academic, literary and technical materials between Indian languages and between Indian and foreign languages thereby enabling knowledge flow across linguistic boundaries (SEL India, 2024). It is expected to facilitate the production of textbooks, reference works and digital resources in several languages and define the standards for quality translation (JJPP, 2025).

Such institutional support is critical in the sense that the transition to mother tongue and multilingual education cannot be successful without sufficient availability of curricular materials, assessment tools and further reading materials in different languages (JJPP, 2025; Singh and Kathuria, 2024). Translation and adaptation work also need to be sensitive to local differences in dialects and culturally embedded concepts that do not translate cleanly across languages (SEL India, 2024).

6.2 *Digital Platforms and Open Educational Resources*

NEP 2020 greatly emphasizes on the use of technology for the increase of accessibility of multilingual content, with platforms such as the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) having a central role (Government of India, 2020). DIKSHA is a platform for digital textbooks, interactive content and teacher resources in multiple Indian languages that can be viewed on low-cost devices and offline that makes it particularly important for rural and underserved areas (Ministry of Education, 2022). By curating and spreading open educational resources, such platforms have the potential to cut down the cost and time it takes to produce educational resources in many different languages (K. R. Mangalam Global School, 2025).

Technology can also facilitate learning of language with the help of audio visual aids, interactive quizzes and peer learning communities making the language class more interesting (K. R. Mangalam Global School, 2025). However, digital divides in terms of device access, connectivity, and digital literacy are still significant and there is a risk that technology-led solutions will increase existing inequities if not planned with care (JJPP, 2025; SEL India, 2024). Creating the conditions in which digital resources are pedagogically sound, culturally responsive and that are accessible to learners with disabilities are also important (IJELS, 2024).

6.3 *Assessment and Language Proficiency Measurement*

Although NEP, 2020 calls for holistic and competency-based assessment, implications of this in language assessment across language-bodies are still being worked out in practice

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(Government of India, 2020). Assessment frameworks will have to make distinctions between language as a subject (e.g. Hindi , English , Sanskrit) and as a medium of instruction (e.g. use of Telugu to learn mathematics) and suitable tools for both (JJPP, 2025). There is a growth in debate in policy and research circles on the need to develop multilingual assessment instruments, ones which can capture the full linguistic repertoire of students, rather than focusing on languages in isolation (IJELS, 2024).

7 NEP 2020, MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS, AND TEACHER EDUCATION

7.1 *Changing Demands for Teachers*

The movement to mother tongue-based multilingual education under NEP 2020 radically alters the expectations of the teachers, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms (Singh & Kathuria, 2024). Teachers are not only expected to be competent in at least two languages but also have pedagogical skills on how to deal with translanguaging practices, how to support the learner who has different home languages, and how local cultural resources can be integrated into teaching (Gurukul Journal, 2025). Research brings out a significant lack of teachers for teaching effectively in more than one language especially in rural and tribal set ups, where the diversity of languages is high (Singh & Kathuria, 2024).

Teachers also have to contend with aspirations from parents in the community as many parents aspire for English medium education for perceived economic mobility in spite of the evidence that building early literacy in the native language leads to better long term outcomes including in English (Smile Foundation, 2025; JETIR, 2025). This tension of negotiation between the ideologies of language places teachers at the frontline of negotiating ideologies of language and require good professional support, communication of policy rationales and engagement with parents and communities(IJELS 2024).

7.2 *Rethinking Teacher Education Curricula*

It can be argued by scholars that teacher education has an important role to play in the realisation of the multilingual vision behind NEP 2020 (Singh & Kathuria, 2024; Gurukul Journal, 2025). Pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes must include programmes on multilingual pedagogy, theories of language acquisition, sociolinguistics and culturally responsive teaching (Gurukul Journal, 2025). Teacher trainees need to be provided with opportunities to develop an ability in at least two Indian languages, practise classroom strategies such as code-switching, use of translation, group work across languages and develop multilingual teaching and learning materials (JJPP, 2025; Gurukul Journal, 2025).

Recent literature shows a host of priorities for teacher education reforms in this domain as follows:

Some examples are: - Revamping of curricula in teacher education institutions, including courses on Multilingual Education, Linguistic Diversity and Language Policy issues in India (Singh & Kathuria, 2024; IJELS, 2024)

Designing school-based practicum experiences in multilingual classrooms for the purpose of trainees seeing and experimenting with inclusive language practices under mentorship (Singh & Kathuria, 2024)

From the paper it has the following: "Providing continuous professional development workshops on bilingual and multilingual teaching techniques; assessment in multilingual settings and the use of digital resources such as DIKSHA for language teaching (Gurukul Journal, 2025)."

Recent literature suggests several priorities for teacher education reforms in this area:

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- Revamping curricula in teacher education institutions to include coursework on multilingual education, linguistic diversity, and language policy in India (Singh & Kathuria, 2024; IJELS 2024).
- Designing school-based practicum experiences in multilingual classrooms so that trainees can observe and experiment with inclusive language practices under mentorship (Singh & Kathuria, 2024)
- Providing continuous professional development workshops on bilingual and multilingual teaching techniques, assessment in multilingual settings, and the use of digital resources such as DIKSHA for language teaching (Gurukul Journal, 2025).
- Encouraging teachers to critically examine their own language attitudes and how these shape their interactions with students from different linguistic backgrounds (IJELS, 2024; SEL India, 2024).

7.3 *Structural Challenges in Implementation*

Despite NEP 2020's progressive orientation, the implementation of its language provisions faces a number of structural challenges. First, there is a paucity of qualified bilingual or multilingual teachers in many regions like has been established in the empirical studies of multilingual classrooms in India (Singh & Kathuria, 2024). Second, the development and distribution of quality texts and materials in several Indian languages, including the tribal and minority languages, is logistically challenging and costly (JJPP, 2025; JETIR, 2025). Third, prevailing language hierarchies often privileges English and dominant state languages over minority tongues which might hamper community support for mother tongue programmes unless sustained advocacy is undertaken (Smile Foundation, 2025; IJELS, 2024).

Furthermore, many states have already introduced large-scale English medium schools, be they public or private and might not be willing to go back to the mother-tongue based models without concrete incentives and evidence of long-term benefits (IJELS, 2024; JJPP, 2025). There is also the challenge of ensuring that there is an alignment between language education policy, examinations and higher education admissions, if the high-stake assessments continue to be predominantly in English or a handful of dominant languages, there is a chance that schools and parents resist multilingual strategies which may be perceived to disadvantage students in competitive examinations (Ministry of Education, 2022; SEL India, 2024).

8 LANGUAGE EDUCATION, EQUITY, AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

8.1 *Cognitive and Academic Outcomes*

Evidence in multilingual education research from India and similar environments suggests that children with a mother tongue education foundation do better with respect to comprehending information and participation in the classroom as well as long-term academic achievement than those whose education is conducted from the starting point in an unfamiliar language (JETIR 2025, Smile Foundation 2025). When well-designed, multilingual education also leads to good proficiency in other languages as literacy skills and metalinguistic awareness lead from one language to another (K. R. R. Mangalam Global School, 2025).

By taking into account and drawing on children's whole language repertoire, the NEP 2020 language framework is based on new understandings of bilingualism and multilingualism as dynamic and resourceful, rather than deficits (JJPP, 2025; IJELS, 2024). This orientation can work to counteract deficit narratives about learners from nondominant language backgrounds and consider them as being capable and resourceful as participants in the classroom (Gurukul Journal, 2025).

8.2 *Socio Emotional Wellbeing and Identity*

Language plays a central role in the manner in which children construct and express their identities, aspirations and relationships (Pradhan, 2024; SEL India, 2024). When languages of

pupils are acknowledged and valued by the schools, this contribute to their positive self-concept, emotional security, trust in institutions; however, when languages are ignored or stigmatized, they risked alienation, low self-esteem and disengagement from learning (Smile Foundation, 2025; JETIR, 2025). NEP 2020's focus on mother tongue-based education and incorporation of local art, stories and cultural practices into the language curriculum can therefore play an important role in creating an environment that promotes socio-emotional well-being (Government of India, 2020; SEL India, 2024).

Holistic development also implies the development of empathy, respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue. Multilingual classrooms, appropriate support can be a place for students to learn to listen and work together across linguistic and cultural differences and thereby internalize the values of pluralism and democratic citizenship (JJPP, 2025; Gurukul Journal, 2025). The study of several Indian languages, classical as well as modern, along with well-considered foreign and languages can widen the horizons of the learners and their capacity of imagination and sensitivity in the areas of ethics (IJELS, 2024).

8.3 Equity, Inclusion and Linguistic Justice

The NEP 2020 language policy has profound implications for the issues of equity and social justice. Historically, the use of high-status languages like English has been linked to class, caste, and urban spaces in India, which reproduces educational and economic inequalities (IJELS, 2024). Mother tongue-based multilingual education can counteract some of these inequities by creating more equitable conditions for learning in the early years and giving value to the knowledge systems contained in marginalized languages (JETIR, 2025; Smile Foundation, 2025).

However, if this implementation is uneven, if it is confined to only some parts of the country or type of schools, it could invite a situation where it ends up opening a dual system where some children participate in good multilingual programs while others continue to be educated in languages they do not fully understand (JJPP, 2025; Singh & Kathuria, 2024). Therefore, making NEP 2020's commitments translate into adequately resourced programmes across government schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas, is of utmost importance from a linguistic justice perspective (Gurukul Journal, 2025).

9 DISCUSSION: OPPORTUNITIES, TENSIONS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

The language education framework provided in NEP 2020 provides several significant opportunities. It offers a logical policy statement of the mother tongue-based multilingual education, which is in line with tendencies in recent research and constitutional principles (Government of India 2020; IJELS 2024). It provides the opportunity to be innovative in the field of multilingual pedagogy, development of resources and language learning technologies through institutions like IITI and websites like DIKSHA (SEL India, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2022). It also puts to the fore the role of teacher education in sustaining multilingual classrooms and an orientation of pre-service and in-service programs (Singh and Kathuria, 2024; Gurukul Journal, 2025).

Simultaneously, the policy will need to address the entrenched language hierarchies, preference of parents to English medium education, and variation in institutional capacity between states (Smile Foundation, 2025; JJPP, 2025). The language provisions may be aspirational instead of transformative without clear implementation roadmaps, timelines and monitoring mechanisms (IJELS, 2024; SEL India, 2024). The key will be careful sequencing of the reforms, cooperative

federalism between states and central government, and the long-term community involvement (JJPP, 2025).

Future research may focus on: (a) the systematic description of effective mother tongue-based multilingual education patterns in different states in India and scaling them; (b) creating multilingual assessment instruments that are sensitive to the complete range of students; (c) specifically investing in teacher recruitment and training in multilingual education; and (d) long-term studies to follow cohorts of students under new language regimes and generate powerful evidence to reinforce policy (Singh and Kathuria, 2024; JJPP, 2025; IJELS, 202

10 CONCLUSION

According to the Government of India 2020, NEP 2020 is a massive rethinking of the idea of language education in India as the expression of multilingualism, of mother-tongualism and flexible but indigenous-oriented trilingual options, as an instrument of comprehensive development, equality and national unity. It theorizes language not only as a utilitarian vehicle of conveying content but as a cognitive tool, a cultural warehouse and an instrument of building inclusionary and plural democratic society (Pradhan, 2024; SEL India, 2024). Nevertheless, the policy would transform only to the extent that states, institutions and communities are able to rally the human, material and ideological resources required to turn the concept of multilingual classrooms into a living breathing reality and not a policy document (Singh & Kathuria, 2024; JJPP, 2025).

To practitioners and education scholars, NEP 2020 opens up opportunities in research, creation and questioning of language and power and learning inquiries (IJELS, 2024; Gurukul Journal, 2025). It will be critical to maintain the dialogue between policymakers, educators, linguists and communities to make sure that the incredible diversity in India is the pathway leading to educational excellence and social justice, as opposed to something that impedes them (JETIR, 2025; Smile Foundation, 2025).

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