

## **Contextualising Mother Tongue-Based, Multilingual Education in the Landscape of North-East India: Prospects and Challenges**

*Ayesha Dkhar & Porixita Kakoty*

### **Abstract**

Central policies are envisaged with certain visions which may not always take into account ground realities or feasibility of implementation. National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, strongly recommends using the Mother Tongue (MT) as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) till class V. Lo Bianco et al., promotes the use of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) on the basis of various studies which show primary education through the MT is beneficial for children. However, the application of the recommendations of NEP, 2020, to use MT as a MOI, seems to be a tough task as more than 200 different MTs are present in North-East India (NEI) alone. As a result, the use of MT in schools of NEI will not represent the tribal identities and linguistic rights of the majority of students. This article highlights the prospects and challenges of using mother tongue and its applicability in NEI as recommended in NEP, 2020.

**Keywords:** National educational policy 2020, mother tongue-based multilingual education, North-East India, tribal identity

### **Introduction**

Primary knowledge is passed to children through their MT. The education imparted to them in school as well is best understood through the same. Once children enter school, they are exposed to a multilingual environment.

Multilingualism exists in every nation. As Trudgill (1983, p. 119), points

out there is hardly any nation that is truly monolingual. This awareness leads to stress on the need for equal opportunity to access education by everyone and as such MTB-MLE is accentuated. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The Government of India has also acknowledged promotion and use of MT or native language in educational policies. These policy frameworks do not always fit in the multicultural and multilingual settings. In the context of NEI, Bhaumik mentions that, “clubbing together hugely diverse identities into a postcolonial region may be the cause of many a policy failure” (2009, p. 21).

### **Review of Literature**

Studies in the past few decades have supported the use of MT in primary classes for maximum understanding for the children (Pattanayak, 1981; Fishman 1996; Cummins, 2001). Mallikarjun (2004) posits the importance of one’s language as a linguistic right necessary for pedagogic growth. Recent developments in language policy frameworks forward more assertive views on the use of the MT as a MOI and promotion of multilingualism. On the other hand, Mohanty (2010, p. 143) states, “the distinction between regional language and mother tongue was not clear and it formalised the imposition of the majority state languages as media of school education on the minority and tribal language children in forced submersion models of schooling”. Agnihotri (2014) also puts forth the argument that local multilingualities are marginalised by the relatively more homogeneous dominant multilingualities. Groff, in her study of India’s linguistic diversity states, “Language ideologies legitimise the power dynamics favouring some perspectives over others, some linguistic varieties over others, some forms of linguistic practice over others, and some forms of linguistic categorisation over others” (2017, p. 157).

Stroud (2001) highlights that futuristic language policy, recommending linguistic citizenship in the arena of education in which marginal languages play an important role. Emenanjo (2002) states, “Language policies must be sensitive to the linguistic realities and political complexions of the polity.”

The presence of multi-home languages in most classrooms of NEI, leads

Maisuangdibou (2020) to question the NEP, 2020, and says it will hinder equal inclusive instruction through mother tongues.

This study will try to find out the functional aspects of NEP, 2020, as it recommends the use of MT in the classroom as a MOI. While some majority languages are celebrated in academic space, some other minor and tribal languages are at a disadvantaged position in NEI.

### **Language Policies and Education in India**

Post-independence, many educational policies have recommended frameworks for language use in the classroom. Based on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, India laid the foundation of the first National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1968 which initiated MT or regional languages as a medium of acquiring higher education and Three Language Formula as an initiative to bring uniformity in the all-India education system.

NPE 1986 (modified in 1992), outlined promoting the Scheduled Tribes (ST) languages in school curriculum and “devise instructional materials” in ST languages for primary-level education (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 1986).

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 recommends implementing Three Language Formula in India in its letter and spirit; it also asserts that home language should be the medium of instruction at least at primary level, if there aren't provisions for continuing it at the higher level. However, this structure is in de jure existence rather than reality. In NEI, only Schedule Languages<sup>1</sup> are always preferred in the educational curriculum as the regional language. Maisuangdibou significantly points out “the assamesenisation in Assam, meiteinisation in Manipur and mizonisation in Mizoram, thus neglecting the smaller communities that possess distinct cultures and languages, is a threat to the core value of the region diversity and plurality” (2020, p. 39).

NEP 2020 prioritises the structural betterment of education by maximising learning outcomes and minimising dropout rates. It suggests in para 4.11, “Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Class 5, but preferably till Class 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language” (MHRD, 2020). Banuri and Sarma (2020) criticise this because “the issue of children's ‘mother tongue’ and home language used for instruction in schools, especially

in the case of migrant and Adivasi families, has not been addressed". Further, NEP 2020 refrains from imposing any language on any states and there will be flexibility in a three-language formula.

### *Language Data of North-Eastern States and a Brief Analysis*

NEI hosts languages belonging to different branches of the language family. The eight states of NEI; Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Sikkim hold over 200 ethnic groups (North-Eastern Region Vision, 2020), have their own socio-cultural traditions and every group associates their food habits, attire, language, and belief system with their tribal and community identity.

Table 1 presents a compilation of data of North-Eastern states of India, their respective official languages, prevalent mediums of instruction in schools till class 5 and the reports of Census of India 2011 incorporating languages and dialects along with the number of speakers.

Fewer languages have the privilege to be used as a medium of instruction in educational set-up. Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Manipuri, Nepali, Bodo, Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Hmar, Karbi, and so on are the only languages that are used in 'teaching-learning' in elementary levels in schools in NEI. According to the Unified District Information System for Education plus (<https://udisepplus.gov.in/#/home>), only 11 languages are used as MOI in primary schools of NEI. This reflects the imbalance in the use of MTB-MLE in a region where more than 200 languages are spoken.

1. Majority of languages in NEI belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, yet there is no representation of any of them (except Bodo) in the list of Schedule Languages of India.
2. Some languages which are designated as 'others' represent those languages that are mother tongues that remain 'unclassified' and are 'relegated' as a result (Language Atlas, 2011, MoHA, 2022). This absence of representation results in these languages being excluded from formal settings.
3. Despite having many languages and language varieties, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Assam, and others either use English or dominant language as medium of instruction in primary education.
4. Nagaland hosts language varieties such as Konyak, Ao, Lotha, Angami and each of these language varieties have a population of more than 1,50,000, yet none of these are used as a medium of

Table 1: Language Report on NEI

| Sl. No. | States            | Official Languages**                   | Medium of Instruction Till class 5**                     | Report of Languages*                   |  | Other languages and dialects*   |   |
|---------|-------------------|--|--|--|--|---|---|
|         |                   |  |  | Languages                              | Population of Speakers                             | Languages/ Dialects   | Speakers' Population  |
| 1.      | Arunachal Pradesh | English                                | English  | Nissi<br>Adi<br>Bengali<br>Others      | 3,95,745<br>2,40,026<br>1,00,579<br>6,47,377       | Mishmi<br>Monpa<br>Nocte<br>Tangsa<br>Wancho                                  | 42,017<br>12,398<br>30,308<br>36,546<br>58,450  |
| 2.      | Assam             | Assamese<br>Bengali<br>Bodo<br>English | Assamese<br>Bengali<br>Bodo<br>English                   | Assamese<br>Bengali<br>Hindi<br>Others | 1,50,95,797<br>90,24,324<br>21,01,435<br>49,84,020 | Bodo<br>Bishnupriya<br>Deori<br>Dimasa<br>Karbi<br>Lalung<br>Mishing<br>Rabha | 14,16,125<br>53,867<br>27,441<br>1,31,474<br>5,11,732<br>38,281<br>6,19,197<br>1,01,752 |
| 3.      | Manipur           | Manipuri                               | Hmar<br>Lushai<br>Manipuri<br>Paite<br>Tankhul<br>Thadou | Manipuri<br>Mao<br>Thado<br>Others     | 15,22,132<br>2,24,361<br>2,33,779<br>8,85,522      | Tangkhul Anal<br>Gangte<br>Himar<br>Kabui<br>Kom<br>Kuki<br>Lakher            | 1,83,091<br>26,508<br>15,274<br>49,081<br>1,09,616<br>14,621<br>30,875                  |



|    |         |                    |                    |  |   |  |   |
|----|---------|--------------------|--------------------|--|---|--|---|
| 7. | Sikkim  | English            | English            | Nepali<br>Hindi<br>Bhotia<br>Others                | 3,82,200<br>48,586<br>41,889<br>1,37,902    | Lepcha<br>Limbu<br>Rai<br>Sherpa<br>Tamang | 38,313<br>38,733<br>7,471<br>13,681<br>11,734 |
| 8. | Tripura | Bengali<br>English | English<br>Bengali | Bengali<br>Tripuri/<br>Kokborok<br>Hindi<br>Others | 24,14,774<br>9,50,875<br>77,701<br>2,30,567 | Bishnupriya<br>Halam<br>Mogh               | 22,112<br>23,089<br>35,722                    |

Note: \* Source: Language atlas, *Census of India, 2011* (Ministry of Home Affairs [MoHA], 2022).

\*\* Source: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (n.d.)

instruction in school. Educational policies aspire to promote the inclusion of mother tongues but with the reported languages present it becomes a strenuous task.

### *Feasibility of MTB-MLE in NEI: A Critical analysis*

According to Lo Bianco et al., (2016), MTB-MLE is the use of MT in instruction, with multilingual approaches to education in pre-school and early primary years. The question now arises about the functionality of MTB-MLE in India in general and NEI in particular. The Seventh All India School Educational Survey (7th AISES, National Council of Education Research and Training [NCERT], 2006) reports that there are only 47 languages used either as a subject or as a medium of instruction. The Eighth AISES shows 86.62 per cent of schools at primary stage teach through their mother tongue in comparison to 92.07 per cent of schools in the Seventh Survey (NCERT, 2016). This indicates mother tongue usage in the classroom has degraded subsequently, a tendency of retrogression followed in NEI as well.

Benson & Young (2016, pp. 8-14) forward strategies for language mapping through the collection of data from school and communities. They also conducted interviews with school children's families for the same. They suggested certain strategies which can be helpful to promote multilingualism while maintaining mother tongue education:

- Organising a *Multiple Immersion Programme* where dominant language speakers and multilingual teachers facilitate language learning of non-dominant language speakers.
- Using L1-speaking teaching assistants and multilingual teaching faculty.
- Innovative use of multilingual teaching-learning materials.
- Community participation, and parents' use of L1 in the classroom.

However, applying these strategies in diverse NEI might need careful consideration because according to Language Atlas, 2011 (MoHA, 2022), there is an uneven population distribution of speakers of a particular language both in intra-state and inter-state. For example, a language like Bishnupriya, which is spread in Assam and Tripura, being a minor language in both states is not properly represented in any of these states as a medium of instruction.



García (as cited in Benson & Young, 2016) supports *translanguaging* as an effective way of managing multilingual learners in a classroom that supports their linguistic development. However, Ticheloven et al. (2021) state that there are challenges in establishing meaningful *translanguaging* in multilingual classrooms. Similarly, languages from different language families are used by the students as mother tongues in NEI; hence to balance *translanguaging* would create another problem in the classroom.

Ball (2011) suggested that teachers should be professionally trained in order to teach lessons in non-dominant languages so that the children will get the necessary support. However, to recruit a sufficient number of multilingual teaching assistants, the government has to organise training programmes and upscale the recruitment drive at a greater speed.

NEP 2020 states, “Teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction” (MHRD, 2020, p. 13). But preparing multilingual materials, and translating textbooks to different languages needs a proper plan of action, and trained linguists have to be appointed.

In states like Arunachal and Nagaland where the sole official language is English, English medium schools are preferred for job prospects. Sharma (2020) has observed that all the states of NEI suffer from ‘complications of ethnic conflict’ and hence, lack a strong union to magnify their voices to the centre demanding their right to indigenous languages.

## Conclusion

The MTB-MLE approach in NEI seems to raise many challenges. The Government of India is acknowledging the diversity of NEI through NEP 2020 by including local languages as the medium of instruction and spreading awareness of the importance of non-dominant, tribal and minority languages through initiatives like ‘Ek Bharath Shrestha Bharath’.

It will be a massive task to apply the MTB-MLE approach in NEI. There has to be a common ground of understanding between both the official languages of the States and the minority languages. The execution of the planning for MTB-MLE should be guided with some aid for its success. Herzog-Punzenberger et al. (2017) have forwarded some

recommendations for multilingualism in the light of diversity.

- For people to value plurality of the languages as a resource, policy makers need to reconceptualise linguistic and cultural diversity at the policy level.
- Special care should be given to Early Childhood Education and Care so that language learning and academic language development through multilingual resource building works in tandem.
- Teacher training programmes should be re-examined catering linguistic sensibilities so that they could acquire strategies to support learners in a diverse setting.
- Learners' family language should be strategically used wherever possible and culturally-embedded tasks should be practiced, so that the child develops conceptually and cognitively.
- ICT can be used strategically to demonstrate concepts through pictures, animations and audio-visual modes.

NEP 2020, promotes the merging of modern technology and cultural aspects of languages like theatre, music, etc., for a better language teaching-learning experience. If the Government agencies collaborate with local libraries, museums, community centres, and youth clubs, it will enhance the success of the MTB-MLE.

### Notes:

1. The Indian Constitution's Eighth Schedule lists 22 languages that have received official recognition, status, and encouragement and are referred to as Schedule Languages (MoHA, 2008).

### References

- Agnihotri, R.K. (2014) Multilinguality, education and harmony, *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(3), 364-379 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2014.921181>
- Ball, J. (2011) *Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000212270>
- Bhaumik, S. (2009). *Troubled periphery: The crisis of India's North East*. SAGE Publication.
- Banuri, M., & Sarma, S. (2020, August 7). NEP 2020: Hits and misses. *India Development Review*. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://idronline.org/>

- nep-2020-hits-and-misses/
- Benson, C., & Young, C. (2016). How can mother tongue-based MLE be carried out in classrooms where three or more local languages are represented as mother tongues? In B. Trudell & C. Young (Eds.), *Good answers to tough questions in mother tongue-based multilingual education* (pp. 8-14). SIL International. [https://www.sil.org/sites/default/files/files/sil\\_2016\\_good\\_answers\\_to\\_tough\\_questions\\_0.pdf](https://www.sil.org/sites/default/files/files/sil_2016_good_answers_to_tough_questions_0.pdf)
- Cummins, J. (2001). Bilingual children's mother tongue: Why is it important for education? *Sprogforum*, 7(19), 15-20. <https://inside.isb.ac.th/nativelanguage/files/2015/11/Bilingual-Childrens-MotherTongue.pdf>
- Emenajo, E.N. (2002). Language policies and Cultural Identities. *World Congress on Language Policies*. [https://www.linguapax.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CMPL2002\\_Plenari\\_EEmenajo.pdf](https://www.linguapax.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CMPL2002_Plenari_EEmenajo.pdf)
- Fishman, J.A. (1996). What do you lose when you lose your language? In G. Cantoni (Ed.), *Stabilizing indigenous languages* (pp. 71-81). Center for Excellence in Education, Northern Arizona University. <https://www2.nau.edu/jar/SIL/Fishman1.pdf>
- Groff, C. (2017). Language and language-in-education planning in multilingual India: A minoritized language perspective. *Language Policy*, 16, 135-164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-015-9397-4>
- Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Le Pichon-Vorstman, E., & Siarova, H. (2017). *Multilingual education in the light of diversity: Lessons learned, NESET II report*. Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/71255
- Lo Bianco, J., Slaughter, Y., & Schapper, A. (2016). *UNICEF EAPRO- Suggestions for UNICEF EARPO strategy (2016-2020) on multilingual and social cohesion*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306741873\\_UNICEF\\_EAPRO\\_-\\_Suggestions\\_for\\_UNICEF\\_EAPRO\\_Strategy\\_20162020\\_on\\_Multilingual\\_Education\\_and\\_Social\\_Cohesion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306741873_UNICEF_EAPRO_-_Suggestions_for_UNICEF_EAPRO_Strategy_20162020_on_Multilingual_Education_and_Social_Cohesion)
- Mallikarjun, B. (2004.) Language rights and education in India. *Language in India*, 4. <https://www.languageinindia.com/feb2004/lucknowpaper.html>
- Maisuandibou, M. (2020). Northeast India and education: A critical dialogue in the light of the national education policy 2020. *The Perspective of India's New Education Policy*, 1, 31-49. The Native Tribe. [https://www.academia.edu/49470685/Northeast\\_India\\_and\\_Education\\_A\\_Critical\\_Dialogue\\_in\\_the\\_Light\\_of\\_the\\_National\\_Education\\_Policy\\_2020](https://www.academia.edu/49470685/Northeast_India_and_Education_A_Critical_Dialogue_in_the_Light_of_the_National_Education_Policy_2020)
- Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (n.d.). *About North East*. Retrieved December 2, 2022, from <https://mdoner.gov.in>
- Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (2008). *North Eastern region vision 2020*, North Eastern Council. [https://necouncil.gov.in/sites/default/files/about-us/Vision\\_2020.pdf](https://necouncil.gov.in/sites/default/files/about-us/Vision_2020.pdf)
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (2009). *Annual report 2008-2009*. Department of Official Language, Ministry Of Home Affairs, GOI. <http://www.rajbhasha.gov.in/>

- annualreporteng.pdf
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (2022). *Language atlas of India 2011*. Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, Ministry Of Home Affairs, GOI.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (1968). *National policy on education 1968*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/NPE-1968.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/NPE-1968.pdf)
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (1986). *National policy on education 1986*. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. [https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nep/Policy\\_1986\\_eng.pdf](https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nep/Policy_1986_eng.pdf)
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). *National education policy 2020*. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Mohanty, A. (2010). Languages, inequality and marginalisation: Implications of the double divide in Indian multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2010(205), 131-154. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2010.042>
- National Council of Education Research and Training. (1967). *Report of the Education Commission (1964-66)*, National Council of Education Research and Training. <https://indianculture.gov.in/reports-proceedings/report-education-commission1964-66>
- National Council of Education Research and Training. (2005). *National curriculum framework*. National Council of Education Research and Training.
- National Council of Education Research and Training. (2006). *Seventh all India school education survey*. National Council of Education Research and Training. [https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/programmes/7thSurvey%20Reports/Schools\\_Physical\\_Ancillary\\_Facilities.pdf](https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/programmes/7thSurvey%20Reports/Schools_Physical_Ancillary_Facilities.pdf)
- National Council of Education Research and Training. (2016). *Eighth all India school education survey*. National Council of Education Research and Training. [https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/programmes/AISES/8th\\_AISES\\_Concise\\_Report.pdf](https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/programmes/AISES/8th_AISES_Concise_Report.pdf)
- Pattanayak, D.P. (1981), *Multilingualism and mother-tongue education*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, A. (2020). Ethnic conflicts in North East India, *Journal of Critical Review*, 7(4). <https://www.jereview.com/admin/Uploads/Files/61b5c7c9912cc0.76965261.pdf>
- Stroud, C. (2001). African mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language: Linguistic citizenship versus linguistic human rights. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 22(4), 339–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630108666440>
- Ticheloven, A., Blom, E., Leseman, P., & McMonagle, S. (2021). Translanguaging

challenges in multilingual classrooms: Scholar, teacher and student perspectives. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 18(3), 491-514. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1299142>

Trudgill, Peter. (1983). *On dialect: Social and geographical perspectives*. New York University Press.

United Nations. (n.d.) *Sustainable development goals*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN. Retrieved December 15, 2022, from <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

*Ayesha Dkhar* is a Research Scholar of Linguistics in the Department of HSS, Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati (IIITG).  
[dkharayesha@gmail.com](mailto:dkharayesha@gmail.com)

*Porixita Kakoty* is a Research Scholar of Linguistics in the Department of HSS, Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati (IIITG).  
[porixitakakoti@gmail.com](mailto:porixitakakoti@gmail.com)