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# The Mother Tongue Paradox — NEP's Language Promise and the Politics of Implementation

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# The Mother Tongue Paradox — NEP's Language Promise and the Politics of Implementation

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GS1

GS2

 The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India has 22 languages in the 8th Schedule but 122 languages with over 10,000 speakers and 1,600+ dialects. NEP 2020 mandates mother tongue instruction, but teacher availability, textbook development, and parental preference for English create implementation gaps. Is the three-language formula a policy aspiration or an achievable standard? How do you balance linguistic diversity with national integration and global competitiveness?"*

International Mother Language Day provides an occasion not merely for celebrations of linguistic heritage but for an honest accounting of whether India's education system actually delivers on the promise of mother tongue-based learning. The National Language Education Mission announced on February 21, 2026, under the NEP 2020 framework, is a welcome initiative — but its success will be determined not by policy design but by implementation in classrooms where the gap between aspiration and reality is often widest.

## THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY ARCHITECTURE

India's approach to language in education rests on a multi-layered framework. Article 350A of the Constitution directs states to provide primary education in the mother tongue where children of linguistic minority groups are sufficiently concentrated. The 8th Schedule recognises 22 languages as official languages of the Union. The three-language formula — dating from the 1964-66 Kothari Commission — has been a standard feature of school education policy for six decades.

NEP 2020 strengthened this framework in significant ways. It extended the mother tongue instruction period to at least Grade 5 (ideally Grade 8), argued that early childhood learning is more effective in a familiar language, and positioned multilingualism as a cognitive and cultural asset rather than a barrier to learning. The NLEM operationalises this through digital archiving of endangered languages, Centres of Excellence at seven central universities, and a more rigorous push on three-language implementation.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION REALITY

The gap between policy and practice is substantial. Three structural problems have persistently undermined mother tongue-based education in India.

**Teacher availability.** Teaching in Santali, Bodo, Konkani, or Maithili requires teachers who are both subject-competent and fluent in that language. For many of India's scheduled languages — let alone the over 100 languages with significant speaker populations that are not in the 8th Schedule — this teacher pipeline simply does not exist at scale. Training programmes, teaching material, and assessments have overwhelmingly been developed for Hindi, English, and major regional languages.

**Parental preference.** In a country where English fluency is tightly correlated with economic mobility, parents — particularly from lower-middle-class and aspirational backgrounds — actively seek English-medium schooling for their children from the earliest grades. This is not irrationality; it is a rational response to labour market realities. Any policy that mandates mother tongue instruction against parental preference will either fail on the ground or succeed only in deepening inequality between those who can afford English private schools and those stuck in the public system.

**Curriculum and textbook development.** Translating NCERT textbooks into tribal and minority languages is a decades-long unfinished project. SCERT bodies in many states have made efforts, but quality, timeliness, and coverage remain patchy. Digital archiving of endangered languages — one of NLEM's stated goals — preserves a linguistic record but does not by itself create educational capacity.

## THE NORTH-SOUTH DIMENSION

The three-language formula has never been politically neutral. Tamil Nadu has consistently refused to implement it on the ground that a three-language policy in non-Hindi-speaking states effectively means the state learns Hindi as the third language — and that this amounts to an imposition of Hindi on speakers of Dravidian languages with independent, ancient literary traditions.

This tension resurfaced sharply in 2019 when the original NEP draft appeared to make Hindi mandatory, leading to protests in Tamil Nadu. The final NEP 2020 backed down, stating that no language would be imposed on any state. But the structural incentive remains: for a Hindi-speaking student, learning Hindi + English + a regional language meets the formula's requirement, while for a Tamil-speaking student, the same formula requires learning Hindi specifically.

NLEM's success depends on resolving — not papering over — this political tension. The Centres of Excellence for Indian languages at central universities are valuable for research and preservation. But classroom implementation in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka requires a political accommodation that acknowledges the asymmetry in the three-language formula's burden-sharing.

## WHAT INDIA GETS RIGHT — AND WHAT IT MUST FIX

India genuinely has world-leading linguistic diversity — a resource that cognitive scientists increasingly recognise as a source of intellectual flexibility and problem-solving capacity. Countries with successful multilingual education models (Switzerland, Luxembourg, Singapore) demonstrate that early multilingualism, when properly resourced, produces educational outcomes superior to monolingual instruction.

The research base strongly supports mother tongue instruction in early grades. UNESCO’s own evidence suggests that children learn to read faster, understand concepts more deeply, and transfer skills more effectively when initial instruction is in their home language. The problem is not the policy direction of NEP 2020 — it is broadly correct. The problem is that the resources (teachers, materials, assessments) required to make it work have not been proportionately invested.

NLEM needs to be less about announcements and more about the unglamorous work: building teacher training pipelines for tribal and minority languages, creating quality multilingual textbooks, and investing in mother tongue-medium school infrastructure in regions where displacement of indigenous languages by dominant regional languages is most acute — specifically Adivasi communities in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and the northeast.

The paradox of Indian language education is that in a country of unmatched linguistic richness, the educational system has systematically disadvantaged speakers of languages outside the major regional and national mainstream. NLEM can change this — but only if it is treated as a long-term capacity-building programme, not a political gesture on International Mother Language Day.

### UPSC RELEVANCE

International Mother Language Day (February 21, UNESCO 1999), 8th Schedule (22 languages), Article 350A, Kothari Commission (1964-66), NEP 2020, NLEM, three-language formula, SCERT, Linguistic Minorities Commissioner.

### MAINS GS-1:

Indian society and diversity; linguistic communities; cultural heritage.

### GS-2:

Constitutional provisions on language; right to education; minority rights; centre-state tensions on language policy.

### INTERVIEW:

“The three-language formula places an unequal burden on non-Hindi-speaking states. Should it be replaced with a two-language formula — regional language + English — as Tamil Nadu argues?”

**★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA**
**8TH SCHEDULE — 22 OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:**

Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu

Languages added over time: Originally 14 in 1950; Sindhi added 1967; Konkani, Manipuri, Nepali added 1992; Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Santali added 2003

India has: 122 languages with 10,000+ speakers; over 1,600 dialects/mother tongues per Census 2011

**CONSTITUTIONAL LANGUAGE PROVISIONS:**

Article 343: Hindi in Devanagari script as official language of the Union

Article 344-351: Official Language Commission, use of English, regional languages

Article 350A: Primary education in mother tongue for linguistic minority children

Article 350B: Special Officer for Linguistic Minorities

**NEP 2020 LANGUAGE FRAMEWORK:**

Three-language formula strengthened; mother tongue instruction mandated until Grade 5 (ideally Grade 8)

Medium of instruction: Home language / mother tongue / local language in early grades

Classical language learning encouraged (Sanskrit + other classical languages)

NEP 2020 drafted by K. Kasturirangan Committee

**KEY LANGUAGE POLICY HISTORY:**

Kothari Commission 1964-66: First formal three-language formula recommendation

1965: Hindi as official language; anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu → riots, deaths → English continued

2019: NEP draft controversy — Hindi mandatory clause → dropped in final NEP 2020

Tamil Nadu's stand: Two-language policy (Tamil + English); no Hindi

**OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

Linguistic Minorities Commissioner: Statutory body under Article 350B; reports to President

Endangered languages: Andamanese, Great Andamanese, Sentinelese, Toda, Gondi sub-varieties — UNESCO atlas lists 197 Indian languages as endangered

NLEM: Centres of Excellence at 7 central universities; digital archiving of endangered languages; three-language formula implementation push

Sources: The Hindu, PIB, NCERT

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