

Education in Bharatiya Bhasha and Indian Knowledge System (IKS) under National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Towards Decolonising Indian Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 uses Indian languages and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a primary blueprint to finally decolonize the country's classrooms. For too long, the structures left behind by colonial education have fostered a kind of "epistemic dependence," where privileging English over indigenous traditions gradually chipped away at India's intellectual self-confidence and civilizational heritage. The NEP 2020 aims to reverse this legacy by championing mother-tongue-based instruction and weaving traditional wisdom back into the modern curriculum. By leaning into the philosophy of "Swaraj in Ideas," the policy seeks a balanced middle ground: staying deeply rooted in local culture while remaining fully engaged with the global community. While the shift toward linguistic inclusion boosts cognitive learning and preserves vital cultural knowledge, the integration of IKS introduces a more sustainable, interdisciplinary way of thinking. Of course, moving from theory to practice isn't without its hurdles—specifically regarding teacher training, the development of new resources, and the need to maintain strict academic rigor. Ultimately, the NEP 2020 stands as a transformative attempt to build an education system that is inclusive, culturally grounded, and authentically Indian.

Introduction

India's identity as a "civilisational state" is defined by a pluralistic tapestry of linguistic and intellectual traditions that predates the modern concept of the nation-state. For millennia, Indian Knowledge Systems



(IKS) served as a global beacon for learning, encompassing a staggering breadth of disciplines—from the linguistics of Panini and the political economy of Chanakya to the advanced surgical techniques of Sushruta and the mathematical breakthroughs of Bhaskara. This knowledge was never static; it was a living, breathing ecosystem of inquiry that thrived through *Vada* (rigorous debate) and *Anubhava* (direct experience).

However, the colonial era introduced a systemic rupture. The British colonial administration, particularly following Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous Minute of 1835, sought to create a class of "interpreters" who were Indian in blood but British in taste and intellect. By elevating English as the sole language of "reason" and dismissing indigenous knowledge as "oriental fables," the colonial state initiated a process of epistemicide—the systematic destruction of indigenous ways of knowing.

For seven decades after independence, the ghost of this colonial framework continued to haunt Indian classrooms. While the physical occupiers left in 1947, the "colonised mind" remained, viewing Western paradigms as the only valid benchmarks of modernity. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a historic attempt to break these shackles. By institutionalising *Bharatiya Bhasha* (Indian languages) and IKS, the policy seeks to move toward "Swaraj in Ideas"—a term coined by philosopher K.C. Bhattacharya to describe intellectual self-reliance. This paper argues that NEP 2020 is not just a policy document but a manifesto for decolonisation, aiming to reconcile India's ancient wisdom with modern scientific inquiry to create a more equitable and rooted educational future.

The Colonial Legacy: Understanding Epistemic Dependence

To appreciate the radical nature of NEP 2020, one must first confront the depth of the damage done by the colonial education system. Colonialism in India did not just extract material wealth; it extracted the Indian student's confidence in their own culture.

The colonial project was built on the premise that India was a "tabula rasa"—a blank slate waiting to be civilised. This narrative ignored the fact that India had a functional indigenous school system—the *Gurukuls*, *Pathshalas*, and *Madrasas*—that predated British arrival. As Dharampal's *The Beautiful Tree* (1983) documented through British archival records, the indigenous education system was widespread, decentralised, and surprisingly inclusive before it was dismantled to make way for the centralised, English-medium colonial model. The British did not find a vacuum; they created one.



As the English language became the gatekeeper of social and economic mobility, *Bharatiya Bhasha* were relegated to the status of "vernaculars"—a term laden with colonial condescension implying a lack of intellectual depth. This created a hierarchy where those who spoke English were "modern," while those who spoke Sanskrit, Tamil, or Hindi were deemed "traditional" or "backward." This bifurcation led to a state of "epistemic dependence," where Indian scholars began to view their own history and science through the lens of Western Orientalism.

As Arnab Chatterjee (2022) notes, colonial knowledge was often a tool of control, where Indian realities were translated and simplified to fit European categories. This made indigenous knowledge look like "superstition" simply because it did not fit the narrow empirical parameters of 19th-century European positivism. Even the travelogues of Indian scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as those of Abu Taleb or Lutfullah, show a constant struggle to maintain cultural dignity while navigating this emerging Western dominance (Chatterjee, 2025).

The Philosophy of 'Swaraj in Ideas'

The conceptual heart of NEP 2020 lies in the revival of intellectual autonomy. Decolonisation, in this context, is not about looking backward with blind nostalgia; it is about looking forward with a sense of self-awareness.

Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya, writing during the height of the freedom struggle, warned that "political subjection is a thin thing compared to the subjection of the mind." He argued that Indians had developed a "ghostly" existence, thinking in English concepts that did not match their lived reality (Bhattacharya, 1954). NEP 2020 addresses this by insisting that education must be "rooted" in the local context.

A common critique of decolonisation is the fear of parochialism. However, NEP 2020 explicitly avoids this trap. It does not suggest that Indian students should stop learning Shakespeare, Einstein, or modern economic theory. Rather, it suggests that a student should learn about global concepts *after* they have a firm grasp of their own linguistic and cultural foundations. This "rooted cosmopolitanism" allows an Indian student to engage with the world as an equal contributor, not as a mimic.

By integrating IKS, the policy acknowledges that "modernity" is not a Western monopoly. There is an "Indian Modernity" that can be found in the sustainable practices of tribal communities or the ethical governance models found in the *Arthashastra*. The goal is to move from a "unipolar" world of knowledge to a "multipolar" one where different epistemologies coexist.



The Linguistic Revolution: Bharatiya Bhasha as a Medium of Instruction

Perhaps the most debated aspect of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on the mother tongue. This is not a political move but a pedagogical necessity backed by cognitive science.

Research in cognitive psychology has consistently shown that children learn complex concepts—especially in mathematics and science—much faster when taught in their home language. When a child is forced to learn a new concept in a foreign language (English), they face a "double burden": they must struggle with the language and the logic simultaneously. By advocating for the mother tongue until at least Grade 5, NEP 2020 aims to unlock the creative potential of millions of students who were previously silenced by the "English barrier."

Languages are not just tools for communication; they are "libraries of the mind." As Sheldon Pollock (2011) suggests, the choice of language in pre-modern India was deeply tied to the "cosmopolis" of culture and power. When a language is marginalised, the specific local knowledge it carries—about medicinal plants, local weather patterns, or community ethics—also disappears. By promoting *Bharatiya Bhasha*, the policy ensures that the vast indigenous knowledge stored in regional languages is preserved and brought into the formal economy of ideas.

The policy's flexible three-language formula is designed to foster national integration without imposition (Government of India, 2020). It encourages students to be "polyglots"—fluent in their mother tongue, a second Indian language, and English. This prepares the Indian student for a globalised world while ensuring they remain anchored in their own civilisational identity.

Reclaiming IKS: Beyond the Textbook

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in NEP 2020 is a move toward a holistic, interdisciplinary curriculum that challenges the "silo" mentality of colonial education.

The "Western" history of science often ignores the contributions of the non-West. NEP 2020 aims to correct this by introducing students to the *Sulba Sutras* (geometry), the concept of *Shunya* (zero), and the metallurgical wonders of ancient India. As Kapil Kapoor (2005) emphasizes, Indian knowledge traditions were scientific in the truest sense—based on observation, experimentation, and logic (*Nyaya*). This is not about "claiming everything was in the Vedas," but about providing a rigorous, evidence-based history of Indian scientific achievement.



In an era of climate change, the indigenous Indian view of nature—not as a resource to be exploited, but as a sacred entity to be protected—is more relevant than ever. By integrating texts like the *Vrikshayurveda* (ancient botany) and tribal ecological practices, NEP 2020 offers students a framework for sustainable living that is deeply rooted in Indian philosophy rather than purely Western "resource management" models.

Rabindranath Tagore's experiment at Shantiniketan serves as a spiritual precursor to NEP 2020. Tagore believed that education should happen in harmony with nature and through the medium of the arts. Arnab Chatterjee (2015) highlights how Tagore used folk forms like *Jatra* to make education a community experience, bridging the gap between high culture and folk tradition. NEP 2020 echoes this by moving away from "siloes" learning toward a more integrated approach where arts, sciences, and vocational skills are given equal weight.

Challenges, Policy Implications, and Conclusion

While the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is ambitious and transformative, its successful implementation depends on addressing several practical and structural challenges. One of the most critical challenges is teacher training. The shift towards education in Bharatiya Bhasha and the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems requires educators to be adequately trained in both content and pedagogy. Teachers must be equipped to handle multilingual classrooms, develop teaching materials in local languages, and incorporate indigenous knowledge into their lessons in a meaningful and context-sensitive manner. Without proper training and capacity-building, the objectives of the policy may remain largely aspirational.

Another important challenge lies in balancing standardisation with diversity. India's knowledge traditions are highly diverse, varying across regions, languages, and communities. Any attempt to incorporate these traditions into a national curriculum must avoid homogenisation and respect local variations. This requires a decentralised and flexible approach to curriculum design, where regional knowledge systems are given due importance while maintaining overall academic coherence.

Resource development is equally crucial for the effective implementation of NEP 2020. The policy emphasises the need for high-quality textbooks, digital resources, and research materials in Indian languages. It also highlights the importance of translation efforts to make knowledge accessible across linguistic boundaries. In this regard, the expansion of public and school libraries, the establishment of digital libraries, and the formulation of a National Book Promotion Policy are important steps towards



creating a supportive educational ecosystem (Government of India, 2020, p.9). These initiatives are essential for promoting a culture of reading and ensuring that students have access to diverse and high-quality learning materials.

At the same time, it is important to ensure that the integration of Bharatiya Bhasha and Indian Knowledge Systems is guided by academic integrity and inclusiveness rather than political considerations. The credibility of this initiative depends on its ability to maintain scholarly rigour, encourage critical thinking, and remain open to diverse perspectives. Indian Knowledge Systems must be presented not as static or monolithic traditions but as dynamic and evolving bodies of knowledge that can engage with contemporary issues and global debates.

Despite these challenges, the potential of NEP 2020 to transform Indian education is significant. By promoting multilingualism, experiential learning, and indigenous knowledge, the policy seeks to create a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally grounded education system. It recognises that true educational reform must address not only institutional structures but also the underlying epistemological frameworks that shape knowledge production.

In conclusion, the emphasis on Bharatiya Bhasha and Indian Knowledge Systems in NEP 2020 represents a decisive step towards the decolonisation of Indian education. It reorients the educational system to be rooted in India's cultural and intellectual traditions while remaining globally relevant. By aligning with the idea of "swaraj in ideas," the policy seeks to restore intellectual autonomy and confidence. However, its success will depend on careful implementation, academic rigour, and sensitivity to India's diversity. If these conditions are met, NEP 2020 has the potential to create a holistic, inclusive, and globally competitive education system that is deeply grounded in Indian epistemology while engaging meaningfully with the wider world.

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