Revitalizing Indigenous Languages and Cultural Heritage through Indian Knowledge System in NEP 2020

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Abstract:

Indigenous languages in India are vital repositories of local wisdom, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. The study aims to examine how these languages function as repositories of local wisdom within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), underscore their national significance and analyse their integration as mediums of instruction under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Indigenous languages are not merely tools of communication but embody traditional knowledge, ecological practices and philosophical insights essential for sustainable development. Preserving them strengthens cultural identity, promotes social cohesion and enhances educational outcomes, particularly when used as the medium of instruction in early schooling. It emphasizes that NEP 2020 focus on mother-tongue instruction provides a transformative opportunity to integrate indigenous knowledge with modern pedagogy, thereby fostering cognitive growth, inclusivity and intergenerational transmission of heritage. The findings underscore the need for policy support, teacher training, digital preservation and community participation to revitalize indigenous languages, ensuring that India's linguistic diversity continues to serve as a source of cultural pride and sustainable development.

Keywords: Indigenous languages; Indian Knowledge System; NEP 2020; Cultural Heritage; Language Preservation

Introduction:

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world which is home to hundreds of indigenous languages that serve as living repositories of centuries of cultural, ecological and philosophical knowledge (Kumar, 2024). Theoretically, it can be understood through sociolinguistic and cultural-linguistic perspectives, which view language as a carrier of collective memory, social identity and community wisdom (Abbi, 2020). These languages originated from the historical

evolution of regional communities, reflecting local environments, social structures, oral traditions, folklore and cognitive frameworks unique to each community. They preserve traditional knowledge systems encompassing agriculture, medicine, ecology, arts and spiritual philosophies, forming a crucial part of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Mehta, 2025). Despite their deep historical roots, many indigenous languages face the threat of extinction due to globalization, urbanization and the dominance of major languages, resulting in the erosion of traditional knowledge (Bhunia, 2025). Today, their relevance remains significant, offering insights into sustainable living, biodiversity conservation and culturally grounded problem-solving methods, while also reinforcing cultural identity, social cohesion and intergenerational continuity (UNESCO, 2022). Recognizing this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes using the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction in early schooling, providing a transformative opportunity to integrate indigenous knowledge with modern pedagogy. This approach enhances cognitive development, comprehension, critical thinking and inclusive learning, while safeguarding linguistic diversity and cultural heritage.

Literature Review:

Indigenous languages are vital repositories of cultural heritage, traditional wisdom and social identity. They preserve oral traditions, ecological knowledge and community histories (Abbi, 2020; Vineeta, 2024), shape cultural identity and social cohesion (Kumar, 2024) and contribute to the Indian Knowledge System in medicine, astronomy and philosophy (Datta & Mete, 2024; Bhunia, 2024). Their role extends to inclusive and holistic education (Mehta, 2025) and global sustainability goals, with UNESCO (2022) and the UN (2019; 2015) recognizing them as gateways to cultural diversity and resilience, while Redvers (2023) highlights their ecological significance. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strengthens this vision by promoting mother tongue instruction at least until Grade 5 (Government of India, 2020). It enhances inclusivity, comprehension and learning outcomes (Singh, 2025; Chakraborty, 2025), while digital archiving supports revitalization (Saxena & Kaur, 2025). Teacher education remains crucial, with calls to embed IKS into training (Haloi & Kharbirymbai, 2025) and reimagine multilingual pedagogy (Singh & Kathuria, 2024). UNICEF affirms the benefits of mother tongue learning (McCaffrey & Jhingran, 2024), though challenges such as resource gaps persist (Shabnam & Kaushal, 2024). Overall, NEP 2020 offers a transformative pathway to align indigenous language preservation with education reform, cultural pride and sustainable development.

Rationale of the study:

Indigenous languages are the custodians of cultural heritage and traditional wisdom, which is central to sustaining identity, social cohesion and knowledge systems in India. They encapsulate oral traditions, ecological knowledge and scientific practices that contribute significantly to the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). However, globalization, rapid urbanization and dominant language policies have led to the marginalization and endangerment of many indigenous tongues. Recognizing their cultural, educational and ecological importance, global frameworks such as UNESCO, 2022 and the United Nations 2019; 2015 emphasize safeguarding these languages for achieving sustainable development goals and strengthening community resilience. Within the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a transformative framework by advocating mother tongue instruction and integrating indigenous knowledge into curricula. This creates opportunities for enhancing inclusivity, cognitive growth and cultural pride but challenges such as insufficient teacher training, resource limitations and implementation gaps hinder effective adoption. Therefore, the urgent need to revitalize indigenous languages through NEP 2020, align them with IKS and ensure their preservation as living systems of knowledge that support education reform, sustainable development and cultural continuity.

Objectives:

1. To explore the role of indigenous languages as repositories of local wisdom within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS).
2. To highlight the national importance of preserving indigenous languages.
3. To analyse the integration of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction under NEP 2020.

Methods and Materials:

This study is relying entirely on secondary sources such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, UNESCO and UN reports and scholarly articles on indigenous languages, Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and multilingual education. Materials were collected from academic databases like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, Shodh ganga and official government portals, then analyzed through a thematic review, focusing on three dimensions i.e. the cultural and knowledge value of indigenous languages, their national importance and their integration within NEP 2020 which help to develop holistic understanding of how indigenous languages can be revitalized.

Results: Indigenous languages serve as living archives of India's cultural heritage, embodying local wisdom, ecological knowledge and philosophical traditions that sustain the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Abbi, 2020; Bhunia, 2025). Preserving them is of national importance, as they not

only safeguard traditional knowledge and strengthen unity in diversity but also ensure the transmission of values and practices vital for sustainable development (Redvers, 2023). In align with this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes their integration as mediums of instruction, particularly in the early years of schooling, to enhance comprehension, cognitive growth and cultural identity (Sastry & Ghosh, 2023). Together, these efforts highlight how indigenous languages function as powerful tools for intergenerational continuity, inclusivity and the preservation of India's intellectual and cultural richness.

Discussion:

Indigenous Languages as Repositories of Traditional Knowledge:

Indigenous languages in India are more than communication tools; they are vital repositories of traditional knowledge in areas such as agriculture, medicine, environmental conservation and cultural practices (UNESCO, 2022). They encapsulate centuries of wisdom, providing insights into sustainable living and ecological balance. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is deeply rooted in these languages, preserving knowledge in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, arts and spirituality (Datta & Mete, 2024). Integrating these practices with modern system underscores their contemporary relevance. These languages safeguard and transmit traditional knowledge across generations, supporting sustainable development and the vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' (UN, 2019). However, globalization and declining use threaten this invaluable knowledge. Preservation efforts are essential to maintain cultural heritage and local wisdom, as losing these languages would erase unique worldviews, traditions and knowledge systems (Vineeta, 2024).

National Importance of Preserving Indigenous Languages:

India is home to a vast linguistic diversity, with hundreds of indigenous languages spoken across the country. These languages are not merely means of communication but serve as repositories of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and collective identity (Datta & Mete, 2024). The loss of any indigenous language can result in the erosion of unique cultural practices and centuries of accumulated wisdom. Preserving them is essential for maintaining social cohesion, promoting education and safeguarding the rich intellectual traditions of India (UNESCO, 2018).

1. Cultural Heritage and Identity: Indigenous languages carry folklore, rituals, oral traditions and arts that form the backbone of community identity. Preservation ensures continuity of India's diverse cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2018).

2. Preservation of Local Knowledge: Many languages encode traditional knowledge in agriculture, medicine, ecology and crafts. Protecting these languages safeguards invaluable insights for sustainable development (Datta & Mete, 2024).

3. Educational and Cognitive Benefits: Teaching children in their mother tongue improves learning outcomes, comprehension and literacy, aligning with the goals of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) (Ministry of Education, 2020).

4. Social Cohesion and National Integration: Recognizing and promoting indigenous languages fosters inclusivity, reduces marginalization and strengthens national unity by valuing all linguistic communities (UNESCO, 2022).

5. Scientific and Technological Contributions: Indigenous languages preserve empirical observations in medicine, agriculture and ecology, which can inspire innovations and contribute to national research (Redvers, 2023).

6. Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Preservation contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), ensuring inclusive education and participation of all communities in national development (UN, 2019).

Preserving indigenous languages is critical for sustaining India's cultural diversity, traditional knowledge which are not only vessels of local wisdom but also drivers of educational, scientific and sustainable development (Abbi, 2020). Protecting and promoting them ensures intergenerational transmission of heritage, strengthens national identity and aligns with global initiatives for cultural preservation.

Integration of Indigenous Languages in NEP 2020:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes using the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5 and preferably up to Grade 8 (Singh, 2025). This approach enhances comprehension, cognitive development and learning outcomes, while preserving linguistic diversity and cultural identity (Chakraborty, 2025). Learning in the mother tongue enables students to understand concepts more deeply, develop critical thinking and engage actively in classroom discussions, fostering better overall academic performance (Saxena & Kaur, 2025). It encourages the development of curriculum frameworks, textbooks and assessment tools in indigenous languages for promoting culturally relevant pedagogy that integrates local knowledge and traditions (Haloi & Kharbirymbai, 2025). Teacher training programs are emphasized to equip educators with the skills required for multilingual classrooms, ensuring effective delivery and inclusive learning experiences (Singh & Kathuria, 2024). Despite challenges like limited resources

and trained teachers, integrating indigenous languages strengthens literacy, reduces drop-out rates, fosters inclusivity and preserves India's linguistic heritage (UNICEF, 2024). This approach aligns with the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), supports cultural pride and promotes lifelong learning, making India's linguistic diversity a source of strength rather than a barrier. Therefore, the integration of indigenous languages under NEP 2020 is a transformative approach that promotes equity, quality and cultural sustainability in education, ensuring that India's linguistic diversity becomes a source of strength rather than a barrier (Haloi & Kharbirymbai, 2025).

Recommendations:

Preserving indigenous languages is vital for sustaining India's cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and educational inclusivity (UNESCO, 2021). Based on the role of these languages in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and their integration under NEP 2020, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Use mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction up to at least Grade 5, with expansion to higher levels (Shabnam & Kaushal, 2024), supported by localized curricula, textbooks and assessments.
- Provide teachers with training in multilingual pedagogy and recruit educators from local communities (Singh & Kathuria, 2024) to improve inclusivity and cultural connection.
- Create digital archives and use modern tools (Haloi & Kharbirymbai, 2025) like AI to preserve oral traditions, folk songs and ecological wisdom for future generations.
- Involve elders and community knowledge-keepers in education and cultural activities to promote intergenerational transfer (UNICEF, 2024) of traditional wisdom.
- Link indigenous language preservation with Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting their role in education, sustainable communities (United Nations, 2015) and ecological balance.
- Encourage research on indigenous languages, especially their contributions to medicine, agriculture, ecology and technology, supported by interdisciplinary projects (Tiwari, 2025).
- Organize national campaigns, festivals and media programs (Sastry & Ghosh, 2023) to celebrate linguistic diversity and inspire cultural pride among younger generations.
- Establish language preservation centers and research institutes and collaborate with UNESCO and global organizations for resources and recognition (UNESCO, 2021).

Therefore, safeguarding indigenous languages requires a comprehensive approach that combines education, community involvement, digital preservation, research and policy support. By valuing

these languages as living repositories of wisdom, India can strengthen its cultural identity, promote inclusivity and align with both national priorities and global sustainable development goals.

Conclusion:

The preservation and promotion of indigenous languages is not only a cultural imperative but also an educational, social and developmental necessity for India. As living repositories of wisdom, they safeguard ecological knowledge, traditional practices and philosophical insights that enrich the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The integration of these languages under NEP 2020 provides a transformative framework for ensuring inclusivity, equity and cultural relevance in education. Moreover, their alignment with national priorities and global sustainable development goals underscores their far-reaching importance. By fostering multilingual pedagogy, encouraging community participation, leveraging digital technologies and strengthening policy initiatives, India can revitalize its linguistic heritage for future generations. Ultimately, valuing and protecting indigenous languages will sustain cultural diversity and intergenerational knowledge transfer and also empower the nation to harness its diversity as a source of strength, innovation and unity.

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