

Achieving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy: Multilingualism in the Classroom and Teacher Preparedness

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Abstract: With the New Education Policy 2020, India aspires to be a knowledge society by means of inclusivity, quality education and by providing a solid knowledge based in Indian ethos and value system at the same time by preparing learners for the 21st century skills. Recognizing the need for solid foundation in early years of education the nation has adopted National Initiative on Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) in 2021 targeting to achieve universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by 2026-27. The country has made commendable advancement in terms of literacy as is evident from the recent Foundational Literacy Reports at the same time has also prepared for the basic restructuring of the teacher education programmes. However, whatever the initiatives made for achieving FLN one cannot ignore the importance of the children's mother tongue or the home languages. While ensuring FLN for everyone we cannot deny the need for lakhs of minority language speaking children whose language are denied of or at least paid lesser importance in the larger perspective. The paper deals with the importance of attaining universal FLN, the plight of the minority language speaking children and what the teacher education curriculum should put a thought.

Key words: Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), dropout, multilingualism, Mother Tongues, Indian languages, Integrated Teacher Education Programmes (ITEP)

Introduction:

India has got its third education Policy in July 2020. Providing quality education system to all students, irrespective of their place of residence, a with particular focus on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and under-represented groups (0.9. NEP 2020). The need for a strong foundation of learning in the early years is undeniable, 80% of the brain development takes place during this year and the learning experiences made in this age paves the way for lifelong learning. It is generally observed that children's learning patterns have been settled by the end of class III. It is accepted that children who has not attained basic literacy and numeracy skills by grade 3 lags behind their counterparts as their learning curve goes almost flat leading to dropout in the later stages. In India as we have a large proportion of first generation learners, for them ensuring FLN at a proper time is a big challenge, the problem is also compounded by the prevailing teaching learning contexts e.g. multi-grade classrooms, single teacher schools and medium of learning is different from the home

language. Such children by default do not attained foundational literacy and numeracy skills. As we consider foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) a gateway skill that enables a child to enter and continue to formal schooling processes. It is a fact that FLN skills help to strengthen cognitive, socio-emotional and relational skills. Realising the need the Government of India has already launched NIPUN BHARAT mission with the aim of achieving Universal FLN of all the children in the age group of 3 to 9 years by 2026. It is imperative that all the stakeholders including parents, community, NGOs and Community based Social Organisations take the mission seriously.

The goals of FLN centers around integrated and holistic development of the child, under which three development goals are identified. The three goals being 1. Children maintain good health and wellbeing, 2. Children became effective communicators and 3, children became involved learners and connect with their environment. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy mission envisions achievement of a set target of enabling children to become independent and engaged readers and writers who are able to transit from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’ and from ‘learning to write’ to ‘writing for academic success and pleasure’ for literacy. For numeracy, understanding of numbers and knowledge of mathematical concepts, and ability make connections between related ideas and ability to apply it in real life situations. However, in the present context passing the specified examination is the only purpose of learning, children hardly learn to understand, apply and articulate the new acquired knowledge. Taking into consideration of the reality, at present the focus is not on the completion of the syllabus rather it is on children’s competencies in various aspects of learning. The mission focusses on providing access and retaining children in foundational years of schooling, teacher capacity building, development of high quality and diversified learning materials (in the home language of the child) and tracking the progress of each child in achieving learning outcomes of children. The suggested strategies for attaining universal FLN would be – curriculum revamping, pedagogical innovations, continuous capacity building of teachers and educational administrators, revisiting assessment and assessment practices and administrative and community support.

In the foundational stage foundational learning and literacy plays a major important role in the sense that literacy has a direct connection with the later educational outcomes. The role of the home language and the cultural context of the child are undeniable in achieving

FLN goals. Here, in the context of North East India, with the existing linguistic diversity¹ accepting children's mother tongue as a valid medium of learning rather than a surreptitious intruder and teacher training in handling multilingual classrooms subsumes an important role.

Indian Multilingualism:

India is a country with grass- root multilingualism with around 780 languages written in 66 scripts (PLSI). In this country languages are hierarchically ordered, either by the number of speakers or by the power structure attached to the language. There are official languages, national languages, classical languages, regional languages, state languages, the lingua francas, languages listed in the census and a host of Other languages². There are 22 scheduled languages, 21/22 state languages and the rest of the languages do either belong to the rationalized mother tongues (1369 in number) or unclassified others (1474 in number). The 2011 census reveals that 96.71% of India's population speaks the scheduled languages. Then, only 3.29% of the population speaks the rest of the languages, obviously the number of speakers will be very small for these groups of mother tongues. The country had never failed to notice or even reiterated time and again the importance of bringing mother tongues in the education system in its various policies and programmes. The three language formula is followed in all the schools of the country, the purpose of which is attaining proficiency in at least three languages. The establishment of Central Institute of Indian Languages to look after needs of the languages of the country, Commission for Linguistic Minorities, which is designated as an Advisory body for the promotion of Minority languages, Art. 354 (A), Art. 164 and 338, 275(1) are a few significant rights given to the minority language by the government of India. The latest curriculum framework of the country the National Curriculum Framework (NCFSE) 2022 specifically mentioned about developing competencies in the home language the previous National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 set mother tongue based multilingual education as a goal of school education. India's stand on mother tongue education has been re-affirmed through RTE Act 2009 and the New Educational Policy (2020).

Languages and the NEP 2020: The NEP 2020 aims at providing a quality education system to all students, irrespective of their place of residence, a with particular focus on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and under-represented groups (NEP 2020, para. 0.9),

¹ In India's North East there are around 125 languages and many languages are minor, poorly scripted languages with limited linguistic domains.

² In the census of India languages spoken by less than 10,000 speakers are designated as others.

which means the needs of the speakers of minority languages which was denied /undermined in the education system because of various systemic issues or others will also be taken into consideration in providing quality education. In fact, the policy also considers for the respect of diversity and thereby a consideration for the local context in all curriculum, pedagogy, and policy, always keeping in mind that education is a concurrent subject; full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions, to ensure all students are able to thrive in the education system; (para. 0.13). Regarding Mother tongue, the policy gives its stand that, “It is well understood that children learn and grasp non-trivial concepts more quickly in their home language/mother tongue. Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be in the home language/mother tongue/local language. Thereafter, the home language/local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible (p.16), which precisely will mean, if states are willing all the mother tongues can be planned to come into the school system. The three language formula will still be continuing and proposes to promote multilingualism, national unity and for cognitive flexibility. Another attraction in the policy is the fun project/activity in on ‘The Languages of India’ sometime in Grades 6-8, which will also enable the students understand the remarkable unity among Indian languages (NEP 2020, para. 4.15).

It seems that many earlier propositions, plans and schemes are continuing in the document however, it is important to understand that if we look into the successfulness of the mother tongue education programmes the policy has many plans which need to be executed not half-heartedly, only than the desired goals will be achieved. The provisions like investing in teachers teaching in the regional languages and the schedule languages and the provision for states to enter bilateral agreement to hire language teachers to satisfy the three language formula gives a silver lining in the implementation of language education programmes in the country. India has set a target to achieve Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by 2026 and thereby launched NIPUN BHARAT programme recently, while setting this target it has clearly mentioned that “and with plenty of early reading and subsequently writing in the mother tongue in the early years” (NEP.para.4.10). The initiatives taken with regard to FLN will definitely help in making the mother tongues a medium of instruction in the schools in near future. This time the role of higher education institutes in promoting Indian languages as a whole also has been specified, realising the need for skilled language teacher there is plan for stating specialised language education programmes, teaching Indian languages and

culture in 4 year B.Ed programmes , scholarships to the people of all ages for learning Indian languages, developing a high-quality learning and print materials in these languages - including textbooks, workbooks, videos, plays, poems, novels, magazines etc. The policy also mentions about developing Consistent updates of vocabularies and dictionaries and documentation of Indian languages along with its associated arts and culture will be d via a web-based platform/portal/wiki, for preservation of endangered languages of India (para. 22.7& 22.15) is a laudable initiative and is of utmost importance for languages to be vibrant and relevant.

While agreeing that the nation has put many initiatives in the line, various rights and provisions were given to the states, institutions and local bodies in connection with the protection and promotion of their languages, whatever small the language is. It has taken various steps for promotion and protection of the Indian languages (irrespective of scheduled or non-scheduled). However, the pertinent question here is how we are preparing ourselves for the hundreds of minority languages to bring into the school system which are considered to be the identity and cultural marker of the group and in which the socio-cultural and indigenous knowledge is encapsulated. And the basic question to ask now is do the minority language speakers really want their languages to be taught in school which is perceived to be of no value in the globalised economy as at present³ . Will the newly entered languages which are considered to be a vehicle for cultural transmission, the tool for carrying forward the knowledge system of the group be able to win confidence of the smaller communities which are bound to sacrifice their language and their culture for making a living in the present day context?

Languages, language education in India's North East: India's accomplishment towards language/ mother tongue education cannot be considered satisfactory. Despite all the constitutional provisions, recommendations by many education commissions Sixth All Indian Educational Survey (NCERT, 1999) shows that in India only 41 languages are currently used either as the subject of instruction or as the medium of instruction, the figure has declined from 81 in 1970 to 67 in 1976, 58 in 1978, 44 in 1990 and 41 in 1998, showing a clear picture of non- preference to mother tongue in the curriculum. The condition is even worse if we consider the levels in which the mother tongue is used: the VI educational survey data reveals that 33 languages are used in the primary level, 25 in upper primary, 21 in secondary and 18

³ At present the learning of a language is directly linked with the economy, which can be linked with the associated elitism of English.

in higher secondary, the corresponding figure in the V survey was 43 in primary, 31 in upper primary, 22 in secondary and 20 in higher secondary, the picture is that of neglecting mother tongue education in the country as a whole. The ministry of Human Resource Development (presently Ministry of Education) data shows that 69-72 languages are taught in Indian schools.

On the other hand, India's Northeast has responded positively to this issue by incorporating minority languages into the school curriculum. In response to constitutional provisions, various initiatives, and the growing trend of identity assertion, many tribal and minority languages are now being integrated into the education system in Northeast India. These languages are primarily small languages that belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Out of around 125 languages of the North East 4 are included in the Eight Schedule. In the four states of North East (Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) 50 languages are reported to be taught⁴. In this regard, Sarajubala (2018) writes, “North East (NE) India is a multilingual region where the nature of linguistic diversity is rather complex. The region is home to around 125 different languages different tribes have different languages and different villages within tribes are having different dialects⁵. More than 98% of the languages spoken in this region are minor tribal languages which are either unscripted or poorly scripted. In many cases the inclusion in the school system is rather a status quo⁶, the general public is happy to include it in the school syllabus, the pressure group which demanded inclusion celebrate success in making the language a part of the school syllabus. After this no one cares about what is happening in the language within the larger school system⁷. Smaller languages are far excluded from the educational process in terms of medium of instruction as well as in the development of Teaching Learning materials. Adding to this problem is the trend of negligence observed in the developmental process of these languages”.

⁴ 50th Report National Commission for Linguistic Minorities, sadly there is no data provided for minority language in 51st and 52nd Report of NCLM!

⁵ In Manipur, the Tangkhul language has a variety of mutually unintelligible languages while claiming to be the speakers of the same language.

⁶ Though textbooks are there for 17 languages in Nagaland there are hardly any takers in the lower classes. (NERIE, 2010)

⁷ The Textbooks of Kom Language was written in 90s and till now no revision is made, around 100 Mising language teachers in Assam was appointed in 2000 now there are hardly any language teacher left to teach Mising! They are either retired from service, transferred to other places or made to teach Assamese or other subjects. (NERIE, 2017).

Need to revamp Teacher education: while the nation is preparing for universalisation of FLN and ensuring basic literacy and numeracy, the role of the mother tongues of the children assumes utmost importance. The FLN mission talks about providing a rich but with quality reading materials to encourage children to read and build numeracy skills. Here, in this regard providing readymade quality material to be used in classroom for every group of speakers is quite challenging. Many smaller languages e.g. Tarao, koireng, Purum, Chothe, Lamkang among others in Manipur do rarely have children's teaching learning material. The teachers teaching these group of speakers have to start from scratch. Here, we have to start with proper documentation of the language, the language need to be standardised, both in terms of the vocabulary and the grammar, it is only when we have a standardised language we can think of bringing it in school education. Once the language is brought in the system we can have constant updates of vocabulary and make the language a viable medium of learning. Adding to this problem is the dearth of teachers who can teach these languages. Handling a multilingual classroom with many minority language speakers, or compel to teach every child to achieve FLN at a proper stage is a mammoth task. The teacher has to be compassionate, open and should accept criticisms and should be able to find out a way to handle this situation. Taking into consideration of the prevailing negligence towards the mother tongues, waiting for the authorities to appoint language teachers and materials to be available in the classroom will remain a wishful thinking only. He has to deal with a language which he/she might not be familiar with and at the same time should help the learners by developing a lot of teaching learning material in the classroom.

In this backdrop teacher education programmes subsumes paramount importance. The NEP 2020 aims to raise the standards of the teacher education programmes by introducing ITEPs and to raise the standards of efficient teacher training. A sincere and concerted effort has to be made especially for the language teachers to equip enough to handle multilingual classrooms and raise awareness on multilingual nature of India and be able to develop few productive materials which are context specific.

As NEP 2020 outlines teacher qualifications, teacher recruitment, and continuous professional development of the teachers etc. The specifications mentioned in the policy document has to be fulfilled with sincerity and in war footing. The requirement is a strong political will to uplift the entire school education system.

The way forward:

National Education Policy 2020 envisions an India centred education system that contributes directly to transforming our nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. Achieving FLN goals will at least bring some sort changes in the system and we can look forward for a high quality education which will have a bearing in making an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. It is expected that by providing high quality education to all, India can hope to become a global knowledge superpower.

The nation as a whole in addition to making NIPUN BHARAT a mission, should be paying attention to the minute specificities of the states in terms of the language and its status in the education system of the state. For example, in the state of Arunachal Pradesh 13 native languages are recognised as third language as on 2021, the textbooks are written by the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and get it approved by the SCERT. In Assam the prescribed list of the books for *Ka –Shreni* (a sort of preparatory class) shows that altogether there are 14 languages, out of which 9 are the medium of instruction and 5 are designated as other languages. In this state – Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Garo, Nepali, Manipuri, Hmar, English and Hindi are also the medium of instruction as well as subject of instruction the remaining languages- Bihnpuriya Manipuri, Tiwa, Mising, Tai, Rabha and Deori languages are designated as other languages which are used in education as necessitates in the district . From class I onwards the other languages are no more found. 9 languages continue to feature in the Primary Education as a medium of instruction which is further reduced to 8 in the Upper Primary Classes. Again in the high school level 10 languages do appear either as MIL (Major Indian Language) or as an Elective subject (Sarajubala,2021). The state of Nagaland recognised 17 languages in the school and the government has appointed 17 language officers to look into the issues of language and its development. In this state Tinediye/Angami language is taught up to the university level. In Manipur 13 languages are recognised as subject of instruction up to class X and out of which 11 languages are taught up –to class XII. Mizo and Paite are taught in the degree level. The state of Mizoram recognises Mizo as the medium of instruction along with English. In this state the Chakma language is taught in the Chakma Autonomous District Council. Sikkim recognised 10 native languages as subject of instruction in the school education. Out of these 10 languages Limbu, Lepcha and Bhutia are numerically bigger languages and are taught in the colleges too. The state of Tripura recognises 5 languages native to the state. Of these the Chakma, Bishnpuriya Manipuri and Manipuri are taught upto class V, Kuki –Mizo is taught upto class XII, Kokborok is taught upto degree level. Till date there is no data available about teaching minority/tribal languages

in DIETs. Every state need to plan properly on how and what aspects need to be taken care of until and unless we address the issue in the local context, local languages we may miss the target. Therefore, a sincere approach with a strong will from all the stakeholders of education is desirable and the issue need to be addressed with utmost sincerity.

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I have known Ms. Bianca Tara Faith Nongkynrih for around a year, April 2023 when she joined the North Eastern Regional Institute of Education, NCERT as a Junior Project Fellow working on the Project, “A Study of Student’s Competencies in English and the Language Learning Competencies in English and the Language Learning Context: The Case of West Tripura, Gomati Districts of Tripura with special Reference to TTAADC Areas”. She is a hard-working person and sincere in her work. She has put her sincere efforts to collect data from the state of Tripura, which she has no familiarity in terms of topography and language and was able to collect data related to the research. Ms. Bianca is passionate about linguistics, and she has always been keen in pursuing her career in the area of linguistics. I’m pleased to support her doctoral fellowship application. I’m very confident that Bianca will be sincere and dedicated to her doctoral program and thereafter she will pursue her dream of understanding Identity construction through language and the role of media in it.

I strongly recommend her for the admission to PhD program in your esteemed institution.