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CENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS: A THREAT TO CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT:

In a society as varied as India's—linguistic, cultural, and social education is not only a way of gaining employment but also an engine that helps shape identity, conveys heritage, and grounds community norms. Though having uniformity within educational standards would provide system congruity and allow individuals a fair starting point, but with the increasing pressure to centralize all educational standards in one, overall framework—particularly following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—various opinions have emerged at the surface. Individuals are now making key questions as to what this does to the languages we speak, the freedom of our states, and India's numerous cultural identities. On one side, centralization offers uniformity and a feeling of national harmony but at the same time, it creates serious concerns—both legal and practical—about how power is distributed between the Centre and the States. In a country as diverse as India, where language and culture change so radically from region to region, these questions are more than just issues of policy. This paper examines how this increasing central dominance over education is transforming the federal balance, affecting regional languages and cultures, and putting into question how power is meant to be shared according to the Constitution. This paper discusses the implications of centralizing educational standards in India, giving special address to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Further, the paper argues in favour of an equilibrium model of educational governance taking inspiration from several other models of education in the world that balances standardization and regional self-determination.

KEYWORDS: Centre-State Relations, National Education Policy 2020, Educational Centralization, Linguistic Diversity, Cultural Identity, Federalism, Regional Autonomy

INTRODCUTION:

India's federal character is not merely something written on paper in the Constitution—it's a living reality forged by its unique linguistic and cultural diversity. Home to more than 1,600 languages and 22 of them being officially recognized, India's unity is not about everybody being the same; it's about celebrating our differences. This diversity is not cosmetic—it's integral to everyday life, particularly in how we educate our children. For decades, governments of states took the initiative of formulating curriculums for schools while ensuring that they included local language and culture in their education. It helped to preserve regional traditions as well as to facilitate the cooperative atmosphere between states as has been visualized by the Constitution. Recently, however, this has started to change through policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020¹, and it has stirred a fair amount of discussion throughout the country. Education was previously a state subject as mentioned in the Constitution, which implied that the states were entirely in charge of making decisions related to it according to the demographics of their region. Later, in 1976, the 42nd Amendment transferred education to the Concurrent List, which allowed the central government as well as the states to make decisions revolving around this subject. On paper, this was designed to foster cooperation, but practically, the Centre has begun asserting more authority. India is a federal country, but many thinkers like K.C. Wheare, Ivor Jennings, Paul Appleby, Granville Austin, and D.D. Basu, along with B.R Ambedkar's constitutional vision, have described India as a quasi-federal country due to its hybrid structure. This simply means that though India is federal in structure, still unitary in spirit. Despite this division of powers, the central government holds significant authority over the states. For instance, during a national emergency, the central government can assume greater control over state matters, effectively centralizing power. This emphasises that there is a tendency of the Central Government to assert more dominance over subject matters related to governance in the country. Policy measures such as the 1986 National Policy on Education implemented concepts such as the 10+2 system and advocated national boards such as CBSE and ICSE in pursuit of uniformity and quality in states. It definitely enabled children to shift across states and compete at a national level, but in the process, it's also led to imbalance—CBSE students tend to have an advantage in admissions tests and employment over state board children. The objective of the Central government was to reduce gaps and feeling of alienisation between the people while allowing them to migrate and exchange of ideas withing states. Whereas the aim was to enhance learning and promote equity,

¹ Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Education Policy 2020* (2020)

this move raises larger questions regarding who actually governs education. Others fear that this centralization is marginalizing provincial voices, driving local languages and customs out of the classroom. Language and culture identity are inseparable in the sense that language is formed by culture, while culture is influenced and impacted by language. People who lose their linguistic and cultural identity may lose an essential element in a social process that commonly teaches respect for nature and understanding of the natural environment and its processes.² In a nation as diverse as India, where language may equate identity, this isn't merely about textbooks or methodology of teaching—it's about representation, state sovereignty, and remaining faithful to the Constitution.

A number of nations have education policies that serve to strengthen national cohesion without undermining state or regional autonomy, lessons that India could use for serving the education policies better in situations where it is feared that there is more of a centralizing tendency in governance which may undermine state sovereignty. Germany provides one example of a federal system where states like Bavaria have a great deal of control over their educational systems, enabling them to add local history, dialects, and forms of cultural practice to the curriculum. These measures protect regional identity, but a unified civic education curriculum for all the states promotes national cohesion through shared values such as democracy and human rights. This is as opposed to India, where dominance by all-India boards such as CBSE may ride over state boards and local languages, tending to erase regional diversity. Finland is another example, with its decentralised framework giving municipalities autonomy to adapt schooling to regional necessities, like applying Swedish in multilingual regions alongside Finnish. Nationally, it has resulted in fostering oneness through attention to equity and critical thinking instead of the high-stakes exams that provide a competitive advantage in India's national exams for students following CBSE. Likewise, Canada permits provinces such as Quebec to focus on French culture and language while a national framework guarantees common objectives like citizenship education and multiculturalism. In contrast to India, where education has been transferred to the Concurrent List and measures such as the 10+2 system have centralized authority, Canada's system illustrates how national unity can exist with regional sovereignty. These illustrations indicate that India may gain by allowing states more autonomy to incorporate local languages and cultures into the NEP model, promoting unity and diversity. The NEP 2020³ is not only an education policy; it is a participant in recasting India's

² Vineet Kaul, 'Linguistic Diversity and Cultural Identity' (2013) 4 Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 4 550

³ Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Education Policy 2020* (2020)

federal structure.

State Control Over Education: A Historical Context

Prior to the release of the NEP 2020, education in India was managed mainly by state governments, as it aligns with the federal nature of the nation. The Constitution of India puts education in the Concurrent List, and hence the Centre as well as the States have the legislative power in relation to education. This arrangement permitted states to mould their education system according to local conditions and needs, with the flexibility to maintain local languages and cultures while dealing with specific socio-economic issues. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has consistently put great emphasis on educating children in the Tamil language to the point where it made teaching in the language compulsory for schools. In the same way, Kerala and West Bengal have also evolved education systems that emphasize local language teaching, literacy, and inclusivity so that the curriculum is aligned with local culture, history, and economic conditions.

The NEP 2020, on the other hand, seeks a more centralized and homogeneous approach to education. This represents a significant change from the traditionally decentralized model, with an emphasis on creating national standards for education in India. The policy brings in programs like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)⁴ and the National Testing Agency (NTA) to bring uniformity in academic content, tests, and results across the country. In this way, the Centre aims to provide similar quality education to all students, irrespective of the state they belong to. This drive towards standardization is based on the concept of national integration, enabling increased mobility of students across states and promoting a greater sense of national cohesion. The NEP also proposes a more flexible, interdisciplinary method of education, focusing on the cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, all of which are geared towards equipping students to deal with an increasingly changing world.

DISCUSSION:

Language, in India, is not just an instruction medium but a storehouse of cultural heritage, identity, and collective memory. Centralization of education jeopardizes this rich language canvas. NEP 2020's push for the development of Hindi and Sanskrit, while framed as

⁴ National Council of Educational Research and Training, *National Curriculum Framework 2005* (2005)

supporting national integration, tends to happen at the cost of regional and minority languages. State languages like Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Odia, and tribal languages like Santali, Gondi, and Bodo are already in a vulnerable position with minimal institutional support. Central boards and uniform syllabi have the tendency to marginalize these languages even further by presenting them as optional or supplementary instead of core subjects. This results in a slow yet devastating depletion of linguistic capital and denies students access to knowledge based on their own culture and language. The result is not just educational disadvantage but also cultural alienation. When children are compelled to learn in a language that is not their own nor commonly spoken in their country, the disconnect can have permanent psychological and academic consequences. It impacts student achievement, restricts freedom of expression, and weakens the universalism of education itself. More significantly, it contravenes the principle of equality under Article 14 of the Constitution⁵ and the right to cultural heritage under Article 29. UNESCO has already warned that almost half of the languages of India may vanish at the turn of the century if current trends are not changed.⁶ Educational policy takes centre stage in this trend. In adhering to a few major languages, India is in danger of turning its multilingual strength into a linguistic monoculture.

Education is an important vehicle for the spread of cultural heritage, values, and knowledge. In a nation such as India, where there are different regional histories, knowledge systems, and cultural orientations, the curriculum must capture this diversity. Initially, education came under List II (State List)⁷, thus conferring exclusive powers on the Central Government. But, by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act⁸, 1976, education was shifted to the Concurrent List (List III, Entry 25)⁹. This change constituted an important centralizing shift in Indian federalism. But in a centralized education system, where educational standards have been formulated largely by NCERT, the effort has been towards spreading a pan-Indian story, which frequently remains North Indian and Hindi-dominated. For instance, while Diwali and Holi find place in schools all over India, though simultaneously taught and observed, other important festivals such as Pongal (Tamil Nadu), Bihu (Assam), or Losar (Ladakh) are not given adequate attention. Historical topics, too, give prominence to Mughal and Mauryan empires at the expense of regional kingdoms such as Cholas, Ahoms, or Marathas. There has been active discussions and

⁵ Constitution of India (1950), art 14

⁶ UNESCO, 'A digital future for indigenous languages: Insights from the Partnerships Forum' (UNESCO, 2023)

⁷ Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule, List II (State List)

⁸ Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act 1976.

⁹ Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule, List III, Entry 25

debates over changing the curriculum of History because it doesn't brief the students with the rich history of the Marathas, Cholas or Ahoms. Such exclusion creates a feeling of non-belonging among students from sub-Saharan regions and undermines their cultural self-assurance. The lack of regional literature, folklore, and oral traditions in school books speeds up cultural homogenization further. The indigenous knowledge systems, particularly that of the tribal communities, are not brought into mainstream education. The results can be seen from the fact that most children in the country are absolutely unaware of their cultural and regional past and they only possess the bookish information inked in their textbooks. This possesses a threat to the legacy of the rich language and cultural heritage of our country. Their ecological insights, traditional health care practices, and artistic traditions go unnoticed within the standardized curriculum, robbing both tribal and non-tribal students of a more integrated grasp of Indian culture.

Growing centralization of education gives rise to important constitutional and federal issues. According to Article 246¹⁰ and the Seventh Schedule¹¹, Parliament and State Legislatures share jurisdiction in matters of education. But if central policies, through financial, political, or infrastructural constraints, become in practice binding in nature, then the essence of cooperative federalism is lost. A number of states, particularly Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, have pushed back against central efforts to impose uniform curricula or language requirements. Tamil Nadu, for instance, still refuses the three-language formula in favour of its traditional two-language policy (Tamil and English). These acts of defiance are not merely political gestures; they are claims of constitutional autonomy and cultural self-determination. The position of the judiciary also comes to the forefront here. Courts have long maintained the value of education in mother tongue and local autonomy. In *State of Karnataka v. Associated Management of English Medium Primary and Secondary Schools* ¹²(2014), the Supreme Court identified the value of the mother tongue in primary education. It was contented in this case that article 350A which was inserted in the Constitution by the 7th Amendment Act of 1956 states that it shall be the endeavour of every State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups. Yet the absence of implementation mechanisms and the growing influence of centralized boards renders such judgments symbolic rather than substantial. Therefore, though the Constitution

¹⁰ Constitution of India (1950), art 246

¹¹ Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule

¹² *State of Karnataka v Associated Management of English Medium Primary and Secondary Schools* (2014) 9 SCC 485

letter allows for twin control over education, the reality of the governing structure leans more and more towards the Centre, which brings into question the real nature of India's federalism. Other than the constitutional and¹³ cultural issues, the pressure towards centralized education policy also has with it an amount of quite tangible and emotionally charged socio-economic implications, more so for those students who are from marginalized or non-mainstream linguistic and cultural groups. A major percentage of the Indian population resides in tribal and rural locations, and to most of these communities, learning takes place through their native or regional languages. Such students are then expected to compete against each other through centralized tests which are largely conducted in Hindi or English. That puts them at a disadvantage immediately—not because they are not bright or capable, but because the medium of assessment itself is unaccustomed or inaccessible. What follows is a sort of structural exclusion that often passes unnoticed in domestic debates, but is felt with great intensity in classrooms, homes, and later in the labour market. This linguistic disconnection has an escalating effect on social mobility. Students who may be the first-generation learners in their families are left struggling with curricula that don't use their language—literally and figuratively. Centralized policy for education, in seeking to standardize without sufficiently accounting for diversity, threatens to reinforce existing disparities of opportunity. A Chhattisgarh tribal student or a child in Assam's remote district should not have to pay the price of linguistic disadvantage simply to enjoy the same rights as a child in Delhi or Mumbai.

Adding to the problem is the presumption, inherent in most central education policies, that a uniform solution can satisfactorily address the educational needs of a nation as diverse as India. For example, the drive to implement English-medium instruction in rural areas such as those in Odisha or Bihar is frequently done without investing in the required infrastructure or teacher training. Teachers, who themselves were trained and educated in local languages, are then asked to teach in a foreign language in which they are not proficient, while students are at a loss to comprehend concepts in a foreign language. This leads not only to substandard results but also widespread confusion, frustration, and even dropouts. It creates a learning environment where neither the teacher nor the student feels empowered. This disconnect between policy and ground reality is not merely a logistical problem—it is at the very core of India's constitutional commitments. Articles 21A and 45¹⁴ of the Constitution enshrine the right to education and seek to make early childhood care and education a fundamental state obligation. But the vision

¹³ Constitution of India, art 350A

¹⁴ Constitution of India, arts 21A and 45.

of "equal opportunity" rings hollow when linguistic and regional systemic barriers keep large segments of children from fully engaging in the education system. When educational reforms neglect regional realities, they don't merely create academic underachievement—They create cycles of poverty, exclusion, and disconnection from mainstream development. In the end, what is lost in the push toward standardization is the human face of education. What we fail to release is language is just a medium of instruction and teaching; it is not the entire education. A child can learn better in the language that he is most comfortable with and yet compete with the others and win. Through standardisation we do not assure them of a bright future but it might be possible that we throw them at a place where they are neither connected to their roots nor have, they adjusted with the world outside their culture. This further induced mental frustration and feeling of anxiety and separation from the society. Children are not empty containers waiting to be filled with centrally authorized knowledge; they are rather shaped by the languages, cultures, and experiences of the communities into which they were born. The same reforms that vow to prepare children for a world beyond borders threaten to push those already on the margins to the side, depriving them of the skills they require to thrive and contribute fully to the country's growth narrative.

CONCLUSION:

Finally, the NEP 2020's vision of an integrated education system presents opportunities and challenges for India's federal setup. While the policy seeks to standardize education throughout the nation to foster national integration, it also poses a threat to the erosion of state autonomy in education. India's federal structure, premised on the respect for regional diversity and the empowerment of the state governments, has facilitated localized education systems that are sensitive to regional differences in culture, language, and economy. Centralizing education policy through the NEP can endanger these regional differentials and undermine the authority of the state governments to decide their own educational priorities. The major challenge in the future is how to balance the Centre's ideal of national standards and the requirement of respecting state autonomy. It is only through a collaborative approach, where both the Centre and the States collaborate with each other to provide common access to education while upholding regional identities, that India can build an education system that is inclusive and nationally integrated. The major decisions involving the policies over education matters should also be deliberately discussed with the States that might be affected by such changes in the policies. The role of the States should not merely be of an advisory nature but they should be an equal part in the policy-making process of the States.