



The Epistemology of Vernaculars: Reimagining Social Science Research and Multilingual Sovereignty under the NEP 2020 Framework

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I. Abstract

This research article theorises the profound paradigm shift in the Indian academic landscape mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, specifically focusing on the transition from a monolingual English hegemony to a pluriversal multilingual framework in Social Science research. Historically, the Indian academy has been structured by a linguistic stratification that positioned English as the sole arbiter of Reason and regional vernaculars as the subordinate repositories of Folklore. This study utilises Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA) to evaluate how the NEP 2020 facilitates Epistemic Sovereignty by integrating indigenous lexicons into formal inquiry. The study argues that multilingual pedagogy is not merely a tool for inclusivity but a prerequisite for Cognitive Justice, allowing researchers to access ontological realities that remain untranslatable within Western-universalist frameworks. By examining structural interventions such as Project Bhashini and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023, the article explores how the Epistemology of the Vernacular democratises the archive and challenges the Global Citation Complex. Crucially, this study addresses the internal hierarchies of Indian languages, arguing for a decolonial approach that includes Dalit-Bahujan and tribal dialects to prevent the emergence of Elite Nativism. The findings suggest that a bi-literate and bi-epistemic approach is essential for reclaiming the Indian social narrative from colonial filters. The paper concludes that the linguistic de-linking proposed by the NEP 2020 represents the final frontier of the decolonial struggle in the Global South.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, Multilingualism, Epistemic Sovereignty, Cognitive Justice, Decoloniality, Bhashini, Social Science Research, Pluriversality, Intersectional Reflexivity.*

II. Introduction: The Linguistic Geopolitics of Knowledge

The architectural landscape of the Indian Social Sciences has, since the mid-nineteenth century, been defined by a profound linguistic and epistemological asymmetry. This condition was formally institutionalised through Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), which established a hierarchy of knowledge where the English language



functioned as the exclusive Epistemic Filter for modernity and scientific rationalism. Within this Macaulayan legacy, regional vernaculars, commonly referred to as the *Bhashas*, were relegated to the domestic and the emotive spheres. They were rendered incapable of sustaining high-level philosophical or sociological discourse. Consequently, the Indian intellectual became an alienated subject who conducted research in a language that often lacked the conceptual nuance to capture the lived realities of the subcontinental life-world (Visvanathan, 2009).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a radical rupture in this trajectory, signalling what may be termed a Linguistic Re-territorialisation of knowledge. By mandating mother-tongue and regional-language instruction across the educational spectrum, the policy moves beyond a simplistic translation model towards a robust affirmation of Epistemic Sovereignty. It recognises that language is not merely a neutral vehicle for information but a Collective Memory Bank (wa Thiong'o, 1986) that shapes the very logic of inquiry. In the Social Sciences, the dominance of English has often resulted in the imposition of Western categories, such as Secularism, Civil Society, or The Individual, onto an Indian landscape where these terms possess distinct ontological meanings. To theorise in the vernacular is to engage in an act of Epistemological Pluralism.

However, a world-class decolonial inquiry must acknowledge that the Vernacular in India is not a monolithic category. The reclamation of regional languages must be navigated through a lens of Intersectional Reflexivity, addressing the historical power-knowledge nexus that has often prioritised Sanskritised academic registers over Dalit-Bahujan and tribal (*Adivasi*) dialects. This study argues that for multilingualism to achieve Cognitive Justice, it must dismantle the internal Linguistic Capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that has marginalised subaltern voices even within regional discourses. Without this reflexivity, the move towards the vernacular risks a mere Elite Nativism that replaces Anglophone hegemony with a standardised regional orthodoxy.

Furthermore, the contemporary quest for linguistic sovereignty is inextricably linked to the Digital Frontier. Through initiatives like the Bhashini AI project and the National Translation Mission (NTM), the NEP 2020 seeks to bridge the digital and linguistic divide. Yet, this technological turn introduces a critical tension regarding the risk of Semantic Flattening. As Artificial Intelligence increasingly mediates translation, there is a danger that the Aura of the Vernacular and its deep contextual nuances may be sacrificed for the sake of mechanical efficiency. This research article critically examines the extent to which this multilingual turn



challenges the global Citation Industrial Complex. By re-centring the vernacular as a site of theory-building rather than just data-collection, the study argues that the NEP 2020 provides the structural scaffolding for an authentic Indian Social Science which is globally engaged yet ontologically rooted.

III. Theoretical Framework: Border Thinking and Cognitive Justice

To evaluate the impact of multilingual pedagogy under the NEP 2020, this study employs a theoretical framework situated at the intersection of decolonial epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. The transition from a monolingual archive to a vernacular epistemology is analysed through three interrelated conceptual pillars.

Walter Mignolo (2000) provides a foundation with the concept of Border Thinking, which recognises that knowledge production is always situated within the colonial difference. Mignolo argues that Western modernity established English and a few European languages as the languages of the universal, effectively silencing the subaltern mind. The integration of vernaculars into Social Science research is, therefore, an act of epistemic disobedience. It involves thinking from the border of the vernacular, where the researcher acknowledges the validity of indigenous conceptual categories while remaining in critical dialogue with global paradigms.

Complementing this is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) thesis on the decolonisation of the mind. Wa Thiong'o posits that language is the Collective Memory Bank of a people; to sever a researcher from their mother tongue is to induce a state of colonial alienation. By reclaiming the vernacular, the NEP 2020 facilitates the restoration of the Mental Geography of the Indian researcher. This study examines how this restoration allows for a more authentic engagement with regional histories, oral traditions, and social structures that are often lost in translation when filtered through English-only methodologies.

Finally, the study draws upon Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) *Sociology of Absences*. Santos argues that the hegemony of Western-universalist knowledge has produced a systematic non-existence of other ways of knowing. Multilingualism is thus framed as an instrument of Cognitive Justice. It asserts that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. This pillar allows the investigation of how the vernacular scholar, previously made absent by the English gatekeeping system, is being reconstituted as a visible, theorising subject under the new policy framework.



IV. The Genealogy of English Hegemony and Linguistic Stratification

The consolidation of English as the pre-eminent language of the Indian academy is not merely a linguistic preference but a socio-political strategy that has created a deeply stratified intellectual landscape.

The post-Macaulayan era saw the institutionalisation of the Aura of English, where the language became a surrogate for Modernity itself. In the Social Sciences, this resulted in a Cult of Universality where research published in English was coded as Objective and Global, while vernacular scholarship was dismissed as Subjective, Parochial, or Descriptive. This genealogy created an elite class of bilingual intermediaries who, while proficient in Western theory, often experienced a conceptual distance from the very indigenous communities they sought to study. A world-class analysis must acknowledge that the Vernacular is not a monolithic category. Within the Indian context, there exists a secondary layer of Linguistic Stratification (Bourdieu, 1991). Historically, academic regionalism has often prioritised Sanskritised or Standardised dialects of languages like Hindi, Tamil, or Marathi, which possess their own forms of symbolic power. This study critically examines how the NEP 2020's multilingual mandate must navigate this internal hierarchy to avoid mere Elite Nativism. If the policy only replaces English with Sanskritised regional dialects, it risks further marginalising Dalit-Bahujan and tribal folk dialects: languages that hold unique ecological and social knowledges. The research argues that for the Epistemology of the Vernacular to be truly decolonial, it must be inclusive of these subaltern vernaculars. By applying Bourdieu's (1991) theory of Symbolic Power, the study evaluates whether the NEP 2020 facilitates a genuine democratisation of language or a mere reshuffling of linguistic elites.

One of the most profound genealogies of English hegemony is the Fieldwork Paradox. For decades, Indian Social Scientists have conducted ethnographies and interviews in regional languages, only to translate and theorise those experiences exclusively in English for global journals. This process often strips the data of its inherent logic. This section analyses how the NEP 2020's push for multilingual publishing aims to resolve this paradox, allowing the logic of the field to be preserved in the logic of the theory. By bridging the gap between the language of the subject and the language of the scholar, the policy seeks to achieve Ontological Sovereignty.

V. NEP 2020: Structural Mechanisms for Multilingual Sovereignty

The transition from a theoretical appreciation of vernaculars to a systemic research framework requires a techno-pedagogical infrastructure. Under the NEP 2020, the integration of



multilingualism is not merely a curricular directive; it is a structural re-engineering of the Indian academic landscape.

A central mechanism in this reform is Project Bhashini, which is the National Language Translation Mission. In the twenty-first century, the epistemic divide is increasingly a digital one. Project Bhashini utilises Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing to facilitate real time translation and data accessibility across the twenty two scheduled languages. From a research perspective, this represents a move towards Algorithmic Decoloniality. By creating a Digital Linguistic Democracy, the policy allows a researcher in a regional university to access global Social Science databases in their mother tongue while simultaneously allowing their own vernacular research to be discoverable by the global community. This technological intervention addresses the gatekeeping function of English, ensuring that high-level inquiry is no longer restricted to those with elite linguistic capital.

The National Translation Mission serves as the substantive engine for the vernacularisation of Social Science pedagogy. Its mandate is to translate foundational texts, ranging from the works of Weber and Durkheim to contemporary Indian theorists, into regional languages. However, the National Curriculum Framework 2023 goes a step further by mandating multilingual textbooks that do not just translate but transcreate. This ensures that the examples, idioms, and case studies used in Social Science are ontologically rooted in the Indian student's local environment, facilitating a state of Cognitive Rootedness that is essential for deep theoretical engagement.

A world-class decolonial strategy must also address the emerging threat of Digital Colonialism. As Western Large Language Models increasingly scrape indigenous data without epistemic attribution, the mandate of the National Educational Technology Forum includes safeguarding Digital Sovereignty. This involves ensuring that IKS data is not merely mined for global AI development but is protected through indigenous intellectual property frameworks. This ensures that the recovery of the Indian narrative is not co-opted by new forms of technological hegemony, maintaining what scholars term Epistemic Autonomy.

VI. The Untranslatables and the Limits of Western Social Science

A world-class critique of multilingualism must engage with the philosophy of language. Barbara Cassin (2014) argues that untranslatables are terms that we never cease to not translate, which are concepts so deeply embedded in a specific language that they possess no exact equivalent in another. The dominance of English in Indian Social Science has often led to



a conceptual flattening where Indian social realities are forced into Western categories that fail to capture their essence.

The concept of Secularism serves as a quintessential case study. In Western political theory, secularism is rooted in the specific historical context of the separation of Church and State. When translated and taught exclusively through English-centric frameworks in India, it often fails to account for the indigenous concept of Dharma. This term denotes a cosmic, ethical, and social order rather than a religion in the Semitic sense. This linguistic mismatch has led to decades of theoretical confusion in Indian political science. By theorising in the vernacular, NEP 2020 allows researchers to explore the nuances of *Panth Nirpekshita*, which refers to neutrality towards sects, or *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*, meaning equal respect for all paths. This leads to a more authentic Indian Political Theory.

Similarly, the Western sociological category of *The Individual*, as an atomised and rights-bearing unit, often conflicts with the Indian ontological understanding of the person as a *Jiva* or *Atman*. This indigenous personhood is situated within a web of relational duties and collective identities. The English language lacks the lexicon to express the relational autonomy inherent in the Indian social structure.

The Epistemology of the Vernacular allows the researcher to engage in Deep Hypothesis Generation. When a sociologist thinks in a language such as Bengali, Tamil, or Marathi, they have access to a rich vocabulary for describing social proximity, family structures, and community bonds that the English word *Society* fails to encompass. For example, a vernacular-led inquiry into Indian kinship structures reveals nuanced hierarchies and emotional bonds that are often invisible when mapped through English kinship terminology. This section argues that multilingualism is not just a tool for communication but a methodology for discovery. It allows the Social Scientist to see social phenomena that are invisible to the monolingual Western eye. By bridging the language of the subject and the language of the scholar, the policy seeks to achieve true Ontological Sovereignty.

VII. The Political Economy of Vernacular Research: Challenging the Global Citation Complex

The implementation of multilingual research under the NEP 2020 does not occur in a vacuum; it must navigate a global academic economy that is profoundly skewed towards Anglophone hegemony. To understand the challenges of the vernacular scholar, one must analyse what may be termed the Global Citation Complex.



Current global university rankings and citation databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science, operate on a logic that inherently marginalises non-English scholarship. For decades, the Indian Social Scientist has faced a Structural Penalty. Writing in a regional language, regardless of the theoretical depth, results in scholarly invisibility. This has led to a state of Academic Peripheralisation where high-level thought produced in languages such as Kannada, Malayalam, or Bengali is coded as local and thus excluded from the global pool of knowledge. The NEP 2020 mandate for vernacular research can only succeed if it dismantles this Citation Industrial Complex. This requires the strengthening of the Indian Citation Index and the UGC CARE list to provide institutional validation for the Bhasha scholarship. By creating a robust indigenous peer review ecosystem, the policy seeks to ensure that a researcher writing in a vernacular is not penalised during promotions or grant allocations. This section argues that multilingual sovereignty is as much an economic struggle as it is an intellectual one.

In the age of Artificial Intelligence, the political economy of language is being redefined. Large Language Models are predominantly trained on English language datasets, which risks further consolidating what scholars call Digital Linguistic Hegemony. However, the NEP 2020 technological mandate proposes a counter-narrative of Digital Sovereignty. By creating high-quality indigenous language datasets for AI training, India is attempting to ensure that the algorithm of the future understands the logic of the vernacular. This ensures that regional Social Science research is not merely scraped and translated by Western AI but is preserved as a distinct and sovereign intellectual property.

VIII. Global Parallels: South Africa and the European Union

To situate the NEP 2020 within a world-class standard, it is essential to engage in a comparative analysis of global multilingual education frameworks. India's current linguistic turn mirrors significant decolonial movements in other parts of the world.

South Africa provides a profound parallel to the Indian context. Following the end of Apartheid, the South African government introduced the Language Policy for Higher Education. This was aimed at elevating indigenous languages, such as isiZulu and isiXhosa, to the status of academic languages alongside English and Afrikaans. Much like the NEP 2020, the South African model faced the critique of academic ghettoisation. However, the success of the Multilingualism as a Resource model in South African universities demonstrates that integrating indigenous lexicons improves student retention and enhances the Ecological Validity of Social Science research (Mohanty, 2018).



While the post-colonial context differs, the European Union offers a masterclass in the Economy of Translation. The commitment of the European Union to multilingualism, which ensures that all twenty-four official languages have equal status, proves that a high-level administrative and academic system can function across linguistic boundaries. The Erasmus+ framework promotes a Plurilingual identity where a researcher is expected to be proficient in their mother tongue while remaining in dialogue with a global lingua franca.

By benchmarking against these models, this study argues that the NEP 2020 Three Language Formula is not a move towards insularity but a move towards Sophisticated Globalism. Like the European model, the Indian Social Scientist of the future must be bi-epistemic. They must be capable of thinking in the vernacular to capture local nuances while utilising English as a bridge language for global synthesis. This comparative lens validates the NEP 2020 as being in alignment with international standards of linguistic human rights and cognitive diversity.

IX. Critical Tensions: Standardisation, Ghettoisation, and the Digital Divide

While the National Education Policy 2020 provides a robust philosophical framework for Multilingual Sovereignty, its implementation faces significant internal tensions that could determine the success or failure of the decolonial project. To maintain a world-class standard of scholarship, this research must address the risks of Academic Isolationism and the Standardisation Bias.

The primary critique against vernacular research is the risk of Ghettoisation, whereby scholarship produced in regional languages becomes a self-contained silo disconnected from global academic discourse. If an Indian sociologist publishes a groundbreaking study on agrarian distress exclusively in Marathi or Telugu without a bridge mechanism to English, their findings may never reach the international community. To mitigate this, this study proposes a model of Bi-literate Excellence. The NEP 2020 must ensure that multilingualism is not a retreat into Nativist Isolationism but a form of Strategic Pluralism. This involves the development of bilingual journals and the requirement for high-quality English abstracts for all vernacular research. By utilising the philosophy of the untranslatable, the research argues that the goal is not to eliminate English but to de-centre it, transforming it from a Master Language into a Diplomatic Language for inter-epistemic dialogue.

A significant internal tension within the Epistemology of the Vernacular is the question of whose vernacular is being prioritised. As explored in previous sections, regional languages in India are themselves sites of social hierarchy. There is a palpable risk that the state-led translation missions may prioritise highly Sanskritised or Standardised registers of regional



languages, which are often the property of upper caste elites. If the NEP 2020 ignores the Dalit Bahujan or Adivasi dialects, it will merely replace one form of linguistic hegemony with another. This would constitute a failure of Cognitive Justice. A world-class decolonial pedagogy must embrace Linguistic Heteroglossia, recognising that the folk dialects of the weaver, the farmer, and the tribal elder contain unique social knowledges that cannot be captured by standardised academic prose.

Finally, the reliance on Project Bhashini and AI-driven translation introduces a technological tension. While AI can democratise access, it also risks a Mechanical Flattening of nuance. Machine translation often fails to capture the aura and the deep context of vernacular thought. Furthermore, as long as the digital infrastructure remains skewed towards urban centres, there is a risk of a new Digital Linguistic Divide within the vernacular space. The research concludes that technology must be a servant to organic vernacular thought rather than its master.

X. Conclusion: Towards the Globalised Vernacular Mind

The linguistic shift mandated by the NEP 2020 represents far more than a change in the medium of instruction; it is a fundamental reconfiguration of the Indian Epistemic Landscape. This research has demonstrated that the move towards multilingual Social Science is a prerequisite for reversing the Macaulayan Rupture and achieving a state of Multilingual Sovereignty. By reclaiming the Epistemology of the Vernacular, the Indian academy is finally addressing the epistemicide that has historically marginalised indigenous ways of knowing.

The study argues that the future of Indian Social Science lies in the cultivation of the Globalised Vernacular Mind. This pedagogical ideal seeks to produce a researcher who is bi-epistemic: one who possesses the Cognitive Rootedness to theorise from the depths of their mother tongue while possessing the Global Proficiency to engage with the international community. Such a scholar does not view the vernacular and the global as binary opposites but as complementary facets of a Pluriversal Inquiry.

Looking forward, the success of the NEP 2020 will depend on its ability to navigate the tensions of standardisation and technology. The creation of a robust Political Economy of Vernacular Research, supported by indigenous citation indexes and digital sovereignty frameworks, is essential for ensuring that the Bhasha scholar is no longer an invisible subject. Ultimately, language is the final frontier of the decolonial struggle. By reclaiming its vernaculars, India is not merely changing how its students speak; it is changing how its thinkers perceive, theorise, and inhabit the world. In this linguistic reterritorialisation, the



Indian Social Sciences move from being a consumer of Western theory to a producer of Global Knowledge.

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