

Relearning English through Decolonial Praxis: NEP 2020 as a Framework for Change: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: This article undertakes a thematic analysis of India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) to argue that the policy document not only discusses decolonization but also charts a path to the praxis of decoloniality. The article is written with theories of modernity and coloniality in mind, particularly the theories of coloniality of power, propounded by Anibal Quijano; theories of epistemic disobedience and delinking by Walter Mignolo; and the theory of linguistic decolonization by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The article works on seven interlocking themes in the policy document: epistemic reclamation, linguistic decolonization, delinking from the colonial structure of schooling, restoration of the image of the instructor as the "guru", revival of local knowledge and the reversal of global epistemic narratives. The article then works on the instructional pattern of the policy document to show how the suggestions of the policy regarding curriculum changes, indigenous language implementations and recognition of local and indigenous practices satisfy the criteria of decolonial praxis in the true Freirean sense. The article concludes by establishing the policy document as a tool for delinking the Indian education system from the Western epistemology-led global coloniality of power.

Keywords: Academic Dependency, Coloniality, Decolonial Praxis, Epistemologies, Indian Education, NEP 2020

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1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent achieved political independence from the colonial powers in 1947. Even after 78 years of independence, the education system of the country survives multiple colonial elements which were inherited from the British. The school and the university that independent India inherited were, in their architecture, language, curricula, and examinations, artefacts of colonial governance institutions designed, in Thomas Babington Macaulay's notorious formulation of 1835, to produce "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835/1957).

Decolonial theorists have long insisted that the end of formal empire leaves intact a deeper structure, what Anibal Quijano (2000) calls the coloniality of power, through which Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge, language, labour, and being continue to organize the postcolonial world. Education is the principal apparatus through which this coloniality reproduces itself, for it is in the classroom that each generation learns which knowledges count, which languages confer prestige, and which pasts are worth remembering.

This article asks whether that self-description can be sustained analytically: is NEP 2020 a decolonial document, and if so, in what sense does it move beyond decolonial rhetoric to decolonial praxis? According to Paulo Freire's canonical definition (1970), praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in an effort to transform it". A document achieves praxis not by lamenting coloniality, but by pairing its diagnosis with mechanisms of transformation. The argument put forth here is that NEP 2020 meets this criterion: in seven analytically distinguishable themes, the policy not only identifies the colonial legacy in Indian education but also spells out tangible measures, curricular paradigms, statutory institutions, language academies, funding structures, and timelines to dismantle it.

Section 2 brings together the theoretical framework, locating the analysis in the modernity /coloniality /decoloniality framework and the historiography of colonial education in India. Section 3 describes the method. The thematic analysis of the policy text is presented in Section 4. Section 5 argues that the architecture of policy implementation makes these themes into praxis. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Coloniality, Decoloniality, and Praxis

2.1. The Coloniality of Power and Knowledge: Quijano and Grosfoguel

The Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000, 2007) distinguished colonialism, a political-military relation of domination that can end, from coloniality, the enduring matrix of power that colonialism installed and that survives it. Central to this matrix is the coloniality of knowledge: the classification of the world's epistemic traditions into a hierarchy in which European rationality figures as universal "knowledge" while all other traditions are demoted to "culture," "folklore," or "superstition." Ramón Grosfoguel (2007) extends this insight into the sociology of the academy, describing an international division of intellectual labour in which the Global South supplies data and "experience" while the North supplies theory, a structure Syed Farid Alatas (2003) analyses as "academic dependency." Any education policy that aspires to decoloniality must therefore be assessed on whether it disturbs this hierarchy: whether it restores the colonized society's status as a producer of theory, science, and pedagogy rather than a consumer of them.

2.2. Epistemic Disobedience and Delinking: Mignolo

Walter D. Mignolo (2011; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) argues that the exit from coloniality requires epistemic disobedience, a refusal of the premise that legitimate knowledge has a single (Western) genealogy and delinking, the deliberate detachment of a society's institutions from the epistemic assumptions of Western modernity. Delinking is not isolationism; it is the re-anchoring of institutions in pluriversal foundations, such that borrowing from the West becomes a choice among options rather than an obligatory template. For education policy, delinking would manifest in the re-derivation of curricular categories, pedagogical ideals, and institutional forms from indigenous intellectual genealogies.

2.3. The Language Question: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) identifies language as the most intimate carrier of coloniality. The colonial school's "cultural bomb," he writes, annihilates a people's belief "in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle," making them "want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves." The imposition of the coloniser's language as the medium of instruction severs the child's conceptual world from her lived world and installs a lifelong association of intelligence with foreignness. Linguistic decolonization, the restoration of mother tongues as media of serious knowledge, is therefore not a sentimental preference but a structural precondition of epistemic freedom.

2.4. The Coloniality of Being: Fanon and Maldonado-Torres

Frantz Fanon (1961/2004) demonstrated that colonialism operates not only on territories and economies but on the psyche of the colonized, producing an internalized inferiority that outlives the coloniser's departure. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) systematizes this as the coloniality of being: the lived experience of populations whose humanity, knowledge, and language are perpetually marked as deficient. In education, the coloniality of being appears wherever schooling makes particular children, tribal, Dalit, linguistic-minority, rural, experience the curriculum as foreign to their lives, and wherever their communities' knowledges are absent from, or denigrated within, the syllabus. A decolonial policy must therefore be read for its treatment of precisely these populations.

2.5. Epistemologies of the South, Decolonizing Methodologies and Praxis

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) argues that global justice is impossible without "cognitive justice", the recognition of the epistemologies of the South as valid ways of knowing and calls for an "ecology of knowledges" in which scientific and popular, written and oral, metropolitan and indigenous knowledges interact on terms of mutual intelligibility. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) similarly insists that decolonization requires indigenous peoples to become researchers of, and authorities over, their own knowledge rather than objects of others' research. Finally, Paulo Freire (1970) supplies the criterion by which this essay distinguishes decolonial

discourse from decolonial praxis: praxis is the dialectical unity of reflection and action; “verbalism” (reflection without action) and “activism” (action without reflection) are both its degenerate forms. A policy text achieves praxis when its critique of coloniality is fused to implementable, resourced, time-bound mechanisms of transformation.

2.6. Colonial Education in India: The Object of Delinking

The specific coloniality that NEP 2020 confronts has been richly historicized. Gauri Viswanathan (1989) showed that English literary education was consciously deployed in India as an instrument of moral governance before it was so used in England itself. Macaulay’s Minute (1835/1957) dismissed “the whole native literature of India and Arabia” as inferior to “a single shelf of a good European library” and redirected state funding toward English education for a filtering elite. Dharampal (1983), drawing on early colonial surveys, documented the extensive network of indigenous village schools teaching in local languages, open across a wide social spectrum that colonial policy defunded and displaced; he called this destroyed inheritance “the beautiful tree.” Sanjay Seth (2007) analyzed how Western schooling in colonial India installed rote examination-oriented “cram” as the dominant mode of learning, while Krishna Kumar (2005) traced how the colonial construction of the teacher as a subordinate functionary of the textbook and the examination displaced older, more authoritative figures of the teacher. The colonial system, in sum, bequeathed to India: an English-medium prestige hierarchy; a curriculum from which Indian knowledge traditions were largely evacuated; a rote, high-stakes examination culture; rigid separations of academic from vocational learning; a devalued teaching profession; and a population of first-generation learners for whom school remained culturally foreign. These six inheritances form the object against which NEP 2020’s decoloniality can be measured.

3. Method

The article employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the full text of NEP 2020, read deductively through the decolonial concepts assembled above. The policy’s sixty-six pages were coded for passages that (a) diagnose colonially inherited structures, (b) invoke pre-colonial or indigenous intellectual resources, (c) redistribute epistemic or linguistic authority, or (d) institute mechanisms of transformation. Codes were consolidated into seven themes, presented below. Because the object of analysis is a policy text, the claims advanced concern the document’s design and internal logic; the empirical fate of its implementation is still a distinct question.

4. Thematic Analysis

4.1. Theme One: Epistemic Reclamation: India as Producer of Knowledge

The policy’s most explicit decolonial gesture is its restoration of India’s status as an originator of world knowledge. The Introduction anchors the entire document in the classical triad of Jnan (knowledge), Pragya (wisdom), and Satya (truth), and recites a genealogy of institutions such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, and of scholars like Charaka, Susruta, Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, Panini, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Maitreyi, Gargi, Thiruvalluvar who are credited with “seminal contributions to world knowledge” in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, metallurgy, linguistics, and the arts. This is precisely the move Mignolo calls epistemic disobedience: it refuses the Macaulayan premise that serious knowledge has a European genealogy and asserts a pluriversal one.

Crucially, the gesture is not confined to the preamble. Paragraph 4.27 mandates that “Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning” be incorporated “in an accurate and scientific manner” across mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, yoga, architecture, medicine, agriculture, engineering, linguistics, literature, and governance, and provides for specific courses in “tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional (organic) crop cultivation, natural farming,” together with a secondary-school elective on Indian Knowledge Systems. It performs a subtler act of genealogical reclamation: it derives the ideal of holistic, multidisciplinary education not from the American liberal-arts

college but from Banabhatta's Kadambari and the sixty-four kalaas, asserting that "the very idea that all branches of creative human endeavour... should be considered 'arts' has distinctly Indian origins." The policy thereby decolonizes even the vocabulary of its own reforms as it does not import the liberal arts; it repatriates them. In Santos's (2014) terms, the curriculum is reconceived as an ecology of knowledges in which tribal ethno-medicine and modern pharmacology, Panini and computational linguistics, may coexist as objects of "accurate and scientific" study rather than as hierarchically ranked civilizational strata.

4.2. Theme Two: Linguistic Decolonization: Dismantling the Macaulayan Hierarchy

If language is, as Ngũgĩ (1986) argues, the deepest vault of coloniality, then NEP 2020's language provisions are its most radical decolonial instrument. Paragraph 4.11 mandates that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language," and decisively that "this will be followed by both public and private schools." The extension to private schools targets the precise site at which the English-medium prestige economy reproduces itself. Paragraph 4.15 then performs the necessary psychological reversal, declaring that education in one's own language "is not a detriment but indeed a huge benefit", a sentence that reads as a direct rebuttal of the internalized inferiority Fanon diagnosed and Macaulay engineered.

Part 22 of the policy widens the front. The policy mourns the loss of "over 220 languages in the last 50 years" and the endangerment of 197 more; it mandates Academies for every Eighth Schedule language to coin contemporary vocabularies and issue current dictionaries so that these languages can carry twenty-first-century science and public life, not merely heritage; it establishes an Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation; it directs higher education institutions, public and private, to teach in Indian languages directly or bilingually; it creates a web platform to document endangered tribal languages and their oral literatures; and it makes "proficiency in Indian languages... part of qualification parameters for employment opportunities." This last provision attacks the material base of linguistic coloniality: as long as English monopolized employability, mother-tongue education remained a sentimental gesture; by attaching livelihood value to Indian languages, the policy converts linguistic decolonization from exhortation into political economy. The mainstreaming of Sanskrit and of classical Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Pali, Persian, and Prakrit significantly, a list spanning Sanskritic, Dravidian, Buddhist, Jain, and Indo-Islamic traditions further restore the multilingual depth of the Indian archive that colonial philology had museumised.

4.3. Theme Three: Structural Delinking: Dismantling the Colonial Architecture of Schooling

Colonial schooling in India was an examination machine: Seth (2007) shows how it made "cram" the rational response of Indian students to an alien curriculum assessed by high-stakes tests, while its Victorian taxonomy severed "academic" from "vocational," arts from sciences, and curricular from "extra"-curricular. NEP 2020 targets each element of this architecture. The 10+2 structure is replaced by a 5+3+3+4 design whose Foundational Stage is deliberately grounded in indigenous early-childhood institutions and repertoires. Anganwadis, the Balavatika, and, per paragraph 1.3, "the numerous rich local traditions of India developed over millennia in ECCE involving art, stories, poetry, games, songs." Paragraphs 4.34 to 4.38 reorient assessment "from one that is summative and primarily tests rote memorization" toward formative, competency-based evaluation, redesign Board examinations to be passable "without much additional effort" beyond ordinary schooling, and explicitly name the "coaching culture", the commercial afterlife of the colonial examination as a harm to be eliminated. Paragraph 4.9 abolishes "hard separations" among arts, humanities, sciences, and vocational streams, dissolving what the policy elsewhere calls "harmful hierarchies among, and silos between, different areas of learning." This is delinking in Mignolo's precise sense: not the reform of the colonial template but the substitution of its organizing categories.

4.4. Theme Four: Restoring the Guru: Decolonizing the Teaching Profession

Krishna Kumar (2005) described the colonial invention of the "meek dictator": a teacher stripped of curricular authority, subordinated to textbook and examination, poorly paid and lightly regarded. Chapter 5 of NEP 2020

opens with a countervailing memory, “the teacher in India was the most respected member of society... Society gave teachers, or gurus, what they needed” and frames its entire reform agenda as a restoration: merit scholarships to recruit rural and local candidates who “speak the local language,” the halting of “the harmful practice of excessive teacher transfers,” relief from non-teaching administrative duties, and “more autonomy in choosing aspects of pedagogy.” The quietly radical provision is paragraph 5.6, under which schools will hire “local eminent persons or experts as ‘master instructors’... in traditional local arts, vocational crafts, entrepreneurship, agriculture.” This grants formal pedagogic authority to bearers of uncredentialed, community-held knowledge, including weavers, farmers, folk musicians, thereby breaking the colonial state’s monopoly on who may count as a teacher and enacting, within the school itself, Santos’s ecology of knowledges.

4.5. Theme Five: The Dignity of Labour: Decolonizing Vocation

The colonial curriculum’s contempt for manual work compounded older caste hierarchies of head over hand, producing what section 16 candidly names a “social status hierarchy associated with vocational education” under which such education is “perceived to be inferior to mainstream education and meant largely for students who are unable to cope.” The policy’s response is integrative rather than segregative: vocational education is to be woven into all schools and higher education institutions; every child in Grades 6 to 8 undertakes a hands-on survey of crafts including carpentry, electric work, gardening, pottery and a ten-day “bagless” internship with local artisans; and, most significantly, paragraph 16.5 mandates that “Lok Vidya, i.e., important vocational knowledge developed in India, will be made accessible to students through integration into vocational education courses.” The category of Lok Vidya, which is people’s knowledge, imports into state policy a concept from Indian intellectual movements that have long insisted on the epistemic dignity of artisanal and agrarian knowledge. Read with paragraph 16.4’s emphasis on “the dignity of labour and importance of various vocations involving Indian arts and artisanship,” the chapter attacks the coloniality of knowledge at its most material stratum: the devaluation of embodied, hereditary, community-transmitted skill.

4.6. Theme Six: Redressing the Coloniality of Being: SEDGs, Tribal Learners, and Curricular Belonging

Maldonado-Torres’s (2007) coloniality of being finds an almost verbatim echo in paragraph 6.2.3: “Children from tribal communities often find their school education irrelevant and foreign to their lives, both culturally and academically.” That a state policy document names the school’s foreignness to the child rather than the child’s deficiency relative to the school is itself a decolonial inversion of the diagnostic gaze. The remedies follow the diagnosis: curriculum and pedagogy “from the foundational stage onwards” are to be “strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos” (para 4.29); “any biases and stereotypes in school curriculum will be removed, and more material will be included that is relevant and relatable to all communities” (para 6.20); Special Education Zones and a Gender-Inclusion Fund channel resources to the districts and populations coloniality most marginalized; teachers familiar with local languages are preferentially deployed; and the policy commits to recruiting “more high-quality teachers and leaders from SEDGs” so that authority within the school ceases to be socially foreign to its students. Education is here reconceived as an instrument for restoring full epistemic personhood to those whom the colonial-modern order rendered deficient.

4.7. Theme Seven: Reversing the Flow: From Academic Dependency to Vishwa Guru

Alatas (2003) and Grosfoguel (2007) describe a global academy in which theory travels South, and data travels North, and in which the ambitions of Southern scholars terminate in Northern universities. NEP 2020 sets out to reverse this circuitry. Section 17’s National Research Foundation is premised on the argument (para 17.4) that solutions to India’s challenges “must be done in India and cannot simply be imported”, a one-sentence manifesto of delinking from academic dependency. Section 12 pursues “internationalization at home,” promotes India “as a global study destination providing premium education at affordable costs thereby helping to restore its role as a Vishwa Guru” (world teacher), encourages high-performing Indian universities to open campuses abroad, and fosters international curricula in Indology, Indian languages, AYUSH systems of medicine, and yoga. The direction of aspiration is inverted: India is projected as an exporter of higher learning, as it was in the age of

Nalanda, rather than a supplier of students to the metropole. The invocation of Vishwa Guru is not mere civilizational vanity; within the decolonial frame it functions as what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) call “re-existence”, the affirmative reconstruction of an identity that coloniality had defined only by lack.

5. From Discourse to Praxis: The Implementation Architecture

Freire’s criterion now permits the decisive step of the argument. Many postcolonial policy documents reflect on coloniality; NEP 2020 is distinguished by the density of the action fused to its reflection. Each theme identified above terminates in a named instrument, a responsible body, and, in most cases, a date. Epistemic reclamation is operationalized through the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE 2020-21), the NCPFECCE for early childhood, mandated Indian Knowledge Systems content, and NRF funding lines for research in Indian languages, arts, archaeology, and linguistics. Linguistic decolonization is carried by statutory language Academies, the Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation, bilingual textbook mandates, B.Ed. dual degrees in education and languages, the endangered-languages web platform, and the employment-qualification provision. Structural delinking is scheduled: universal foundational literacy and numeracy by 2025; the transformed assessment system by the 2022-23 session; PARAKH as a standing National Assessment Centre; the phase-out of the colonial-era affiliating-university system over fifteen years. Teacher restoration proceeds through the four-year integrated B.Ed. as minimum qualification by 2030, National Professional Standards for Teachers by 2022, and the master-instructor pathway. Vocational revalorization is targeted as fifty per cent of learners exposed to vocational education by 2025 and institutionally housed in the NCIVE. Equity is financed through the Gender-Inclusion Fund and parallel Inclusion Funds, and spatially targeted through Special Education Zones. The reversal of knowledge flows is capitalized through the NRF and the commitment to raise public education expenditure to six per cent of GDP, with yearly joint reviews by MHRD, the States, and CABE (section 27) supplying the reflexive loop, action returning to reflection that completes the Freirean circuit. The policy, in short, does not merely narrate decoloniality; it budgets, schedules, and institutionalizes it. That is the difference between a decolonial text and a decolonial praxis.

6. Conclusion

Read through the modernity/coloniality framework, NEP 2020 emerges as a document of unusual decolonial ambition. It performs epistemic disobedience by re-deriving the very ideals of holistic education from Indian genealogies; it wages Ngũgĩ’s language war on the terrain that matters most, the medium of instruction and the labour market; it delinks the structure of schooling from the colonial examination machine; it restores pedagogic authority to the guru and the artisan; it dignifies the knowledges of hand and field; it names, and legislates against, the foreignness of the school to the tribal child; and it seeks to reverse the global circuitry of academic dependency. Above all, it fuses these reflections with instruments, budgets, bodies, and dates, thereby satisfying the Freirean criterion that distinguishes praxis from verbalism. Its tensions with global capital, with majoritarian temptation, with the long Indian history of unfunded educational promises are the tensions of any state-led decolonial project, and they mark the terrain on which its praxis will be tested rather than grounds for denying that the praxis has been designed. If Macaulay’s Minute of 1835 was the founding text of educational coloniality in India, NEP 2020 is most coherently read as the first comprehensive state attempt to write its repeal, not by burning the shelf of the European library, but by rebuilding, beside it and beneath it, the beautiful tree.

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