

## **Multilingual Education and Language Practices in Anganwadi Centres Addressing Diversity in Foundational Years**

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### **Abstract**

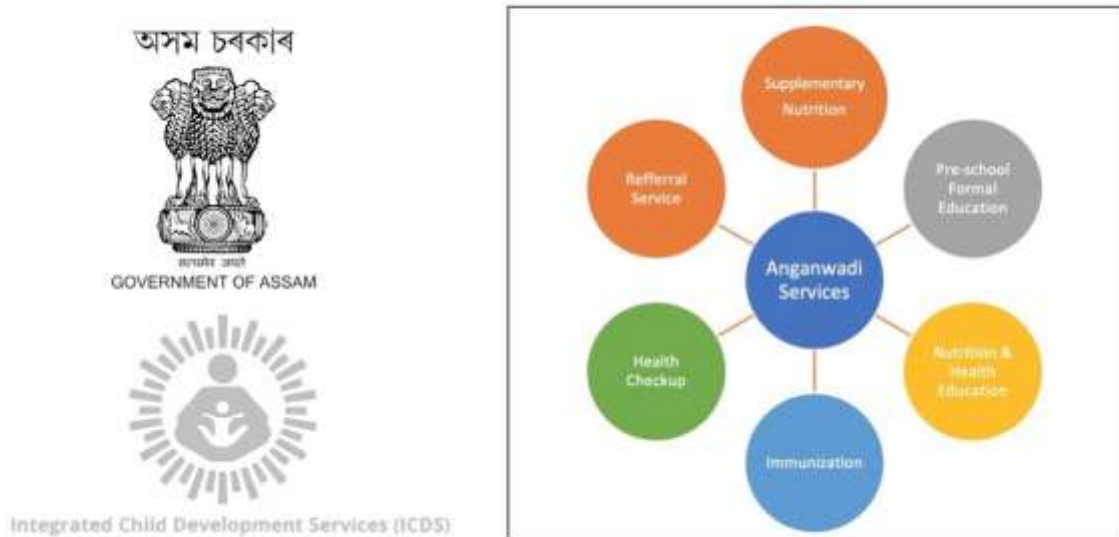
This study explores multilingual education and language practices in Anganwadi Centres as a means of addressing linguistic diversity in the foundational years of early childhood education in India. Drawing upon secondary data from scholarly literature, government policies, and institutional reports, the research analyzes how mother tongue-based and multilingual pedagogies influence learning outcomes, social inclusion, and identity formation among young children. The study finds that children taught in their home or familiar languages exhibit greater comprehension, confidence, and participation, laying stronger foundations for future learning. However, the implementation of multilingual education in Anganwadi Centres remains limited due to inadequate teacher training, lack of multilingual materials, policy-practice gaps, and sociocultural attitudes favoring dominant languages. The research emphasizes the need for systemic interventions, including teacher capacity-building, community engagement, and curriculum reform, to integrate multilingual pedagogy effectively. It concludes that multilingual education is both a pedagogical necessity and a social imperative for equitable and inclusive early learning.

**Keywords:-** Multilingual education, Anganwadi Centres, early childhood education, mother tongue instruction, linguistic diversity, translanguaging, foundational learning, inclusion, language policy, NEP 2020.

### **Introduction**

Language plays a crucial role in early childhood education as it forms the foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional development. In multilingual societies like India, where hundreds of languages and dialects coexist, the language of instruction in the foundational years significantly influences children's learning trajectories and identity formation. The concept of multilingual education (MLE) is rooted in the understanding that children learn best in their home or mother tongue during their early years and gradually transition to additional languages. This pedagogical approach not only strengthens foundational literacy and numeracy but also promotes inclusivity, equity, and cultural belonging. Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), established under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, serve as crucial community-based institutions providing early childhood care and education (ECCE) to children aged 3 to 6 years. Given the linguistic and cultural diversity of India, Anganwadi Centres are uniquely positioned to implement multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogies that cater to children from different language backgrounds. However, despite strong policy support—such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes mother tongue-based instruction in the foundational stage—there remain significant

gaps in the translation of multilingual education principles into everyday classroom practices at the Anganwadi level.



The theoretical and pedagogical foundation of multilingual education lies in recognizing language as a cognitive and cultural resource rather than a barrier. UNESCO (2003) advocates mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as a global strategy for improving learning outcomes, ensuring inclusion, and preserving linguistic diversity. Research in psycholinguistics and educational linguistics (Cummins, 2000; García, 2009) suggests that learning in the mother tongue during the early years enhances comprehension, self-expression, and metalinguistic awareness, facilitating smoother acquisition of additional languages later. In India, where children may speak one language at home, another in the community, and a third in the classroom, multilingual education becomes essential for bridging these linguistic realities. Anganwadi Centres, located in rural and tribal areas, often cater to children whose home languages differ significantly from the regional or dominant instructional language. In such contexts, monolingual teaching approaches can alienate children, limit participation, and impede learning. Adopting multilingual strategies such as translanguaging, code-switching, storytelling in multiple languages, and using culturally familiar songs and rhymes can create more inclusive learning environments. These practices also help preserve local languages, many of which are endangered due to limited institutional recognition. Thus, multilingual education in Anganwadis is not merely a pedagogical concern but a social imperative for ensuring equitable access to quality early education.

Despite its theoretical and policy support, the implementation of multilingual education in Anganwadi Centres faces several practical challenges. Many Anganwadi workers, who are frontline educators, lack formal training in multilingual pedagogy or sufficient proficiency in multiple local languages. Teaching and learning materials are often available only in dominant regional or national languages, neglecting the linguistic realities of the children they serve. Studies (Mohanty, 2019; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012) have shown that language hierarchies in education systems—where certain languages are valued over others—can marginalize children from minority linguistic communities.

### **Scope of the research**

The need for this study arises from the growing recognition that language plays a fundamental role in shaping children's early learning experiences and that addressing linguistic diversity in early childhood education is crucial for achieving educational equity. India's multilingual character presents both an opportunity and a challenge for educators working with young children in diverse linguistic contexts. Anganwadi Centres, as the first point of contact between children and formal learning, serve millions of children from different linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, many of these children encounter a mismatch between their home language and the language used for instruction. This linguistic disconnect can create barriers to comprehension, participation, and emotional engagement, leading to early learning disadvantages. The need to implement effective multilingual education strategies in Anganwadi Centres has therefore become increasingly urgent, especially in the light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which recommends the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the foundational years. This study seeks to address the gap between policy intentions and ground-level practices by analyzing how Anganwadi workers and caregivers currently handle linguistic diversity and what challenges they face in promoting multilingual learning environments.



Finally, the need for this research is reinforced by the broader goal of achieving inclusive and quality education for all, as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and India's NEP 2020. Early childhood is a critical stage for cognitive and linguistic development, and the language experiences children have during this period significantly shape their lifelong learning outcomes. By focusing on multilingual education and language practices in Anganwadi Centres, this study seeks to contribute to evidence-based policy formulation and pedagogical innovation in early childhood education. It also aims to bridge the gap between linguistic diversity and educational inclusion by demonstrating that multilingualism, when properly utilized, is not a barrier but a powerful resource for learning. Understanding the dynamics of language use in Anganwadi settings will help identify strategies to enhance teacher training, develop contextually relevant learning materials, and strengthen community engagement. The study is therefore essential for rethinking early education in multilingual contexts, ensuring that every child, regardless of

linguistic background, has equitable opportunities to learn, express, and succeed from the very beginning of their educational journey.

### **Theoretical and Contextual Contribution of the Research**

The theoretical and contextual contribution of this research lies in its attempt to integrate the principles of multilingual education with early childhood pedagogical practices, specifically within the framework of India's Anganwadi Centres. The study draws upon established theories of language acquisition, sociocultural learning, and multilingualism to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language diversity can be addressed in foundational education. Theoretically, this research is grounded in the works of Lev Vygotsky (1978), Jim Cummins (2000), and Ofelia García (2009), who emphasized the social, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of language learning. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory asserts that learning occurs through social interaction and that language serves as a primary mediating tool for cognitive development. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis and threshold theory highlight that proficiency in the first language supports the acquisition of additional languages, reinforcing the rationale for mother tongue-based instruction in early childhood. García's concept of translanguaging further expands the theoretical scope by recognizing children's use of multiple languages as an integrated system rather than as separate linguistic entities. Together, these theoretical perspectives establish a framework for understanding how multilingualism can be leveraged as a pedagogical resource rather than treated as a challenge. This research contributes to existing theory by situating these global frameworks within the localized context of Anganwadi Centres, thereby extending the application of multilingual education to grassroots early childhood settings in India.

### **Literature review**

Multilingual education in the foundational years is anchored in a robust body of scholarship linking language, cognition, and identity formation. Classic theories of language-mediated learning emphasize that meaning is co-constructed through social interaction and culturally situated practice. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory positions language as a psychological tool that mediates thought and learning, with guided participation and scaffolding enabling children to operate within their zone of proximal development. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis proposes that proficiency developed in the first language transfers to additional languages, provided that the first language is supported and valued in schooling. Building on these foundations, translanguaging scholarship reconceptualizes children's repertoires as integrated, dynamic resources rather than separate, compartmentalized codes. In early childhood contexts this implies that children's home languages, regional varieties, and emergent school languages can be orchestrated fluidly by educators to support comprehension, participation, and metalinguistic awareness. These theoretical perspectives collectively argue that mother tongue-based, multilingual, and culturally sustaining pedagogies are not remedial approaches but cognitively advantageous and identity-affirming.

The international policy landscape has increasingly endorsed mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), especially for early grades. Global guidance highlights that initial literacy and numeracy are most effectively developed in languages children understand well, with systematic and additive introduction of additional languages. In the Indian context, policy frameworks have converged toward this view. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the



foundational stage and encourages multilingual exposure. Curricular documents in early childhood further emphasize play- and story-based learning, local knowledge, and community participation, which align with multilingual and culturally responsive practices. Yet policy endorsement does not automatically translate into classroom practice, particularly in community-based early childhood settings like Anganwadi Centres, where workforce preparation, resource availability, and local linguistic ecologies vary widely.

Empirical studies across diverse multilingual settings consistently report benefits of mother tongue or familiar-language instruction in early years. Children demonstrate better phonological awareness, vocabulary growth, and narrative competence when taught through languages they comprehend deeply. A strong foundation in the familiar language facilitates transfer to second and third languages in later grades, improving decoding, reading comprehension, and writing fluency. In tribal and rural regions, where children may enter Anganwadi Centres speaking minoritized languages, monolingual instruction in a dominant regional language can dampen participation, increase classroom anxiety, and delay concept formation. Research in early childhood also notes socio-emotional gains: children exhibit greater confidence, willingness to speak, and sense of belonging when their home languages are recognized as legitimate classroom resources. These outcomes are especially salient in inclusive education agendas that seek to reduce early disparities.

Language hierarchies, however, shape the ecology of early years provision. English and dominant regional languages often carry socioeconomic prestige and gatekeeping power for future schooling and employment. Parents' aspirations for English-medium education can lead to ambivalence or resistance toward mother tongue use in preschool years, even when evidence favors familiar-language instruction for foundational learning. Anganwadi workers and supervisors navigate these tensions while responding to local expectations, administrative guidance, and material constraints. Studies of parental beliefs indicate that language choices are rarely purely pedagogical; they are entwined with imagined futures, mobility, and identity. Effective multilingual programs therefore pair classroom practices with community engagement that explains how home-language strengths underpin later additional-language success.

### **Methodology**

This research is based entirely on secondary data and adopts a descriptive and analytical qualitative approach to examine multilingual education and language practices in Anganwadi Centres, focusing on how these practices address linguistic diversity during the foundational years. The study does not involve primary fieldwork; instead, it synthesizes existing scholarly research, government reports, policy frameworks, and institutional publications related to multilingual education and early childhood care and education (ECCE) in India. The primary aim of this methodology is to consolidate and analyze the current state of knowledge, identify key patterns, highlight implementation challenges, and derive implications for practice and policy.

Data for this study were collected from multiple credible secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journals, official policy documents such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, reports by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), and research studies by organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and NCERT. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR were used to locate relevant studies published between 2005 and 2024. Keywords including “multilingual education,” “Anganwadi Centres,” “mother tongue instruction,”

“early childhood education,” “language diversity,” and “translanguaging pedagogy” were used to identify literature. The inclusion criteria focused on studies and reports that discussed early childhood or foundational education in linguistically diverse contexts, with particular attention to India and other multilingual societies in South and Southeast Asia. Studies focusing solely on monolingual or post-primary education were excluded to maintain thematic precision.

Once collected, the literature was systematically reviewed and thematically organized to extract core findings relevant to multilingual education in early learning contexts. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize data into key domains, including (i) policy and theoretical frameworks of multilingual education, (ii) current language practices in Anganwadi Centres, (iii) challenges in implementing multilingual pedagogy, (iv) teacher preparedness and professional development, and (v) community participation and parental attitudes. This process allowed for the identification of recurring themes, gaps, and contradictions across different studies and contexts. A comparative dimension was also applied by analyzing successful multilingual models from different states—such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh—to draw lessons that could inform broader national strategies.

The methodology emphasizes interpretive analysis over statistical measurement, aligning with the study’s aim to understand practices, perceptions, and policies surrounding multilingual education. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing information from academic literature, official data sources, and field reports from international and national agencies to ensure the reliability and comprehensiveness of insights. The analytical framework adopted for this study is guided by sociocultural and ecological perspectives on language learning, which view language practices as deeply embedded in social contexts, power relations, and cultural identity. The analysis further integrates elements of translanguaging theory, which highlights the fluid and dynamic use of multiple languages in classroom interactions.

This qualitative secondary research design allows for a holistic understanding of how multilingual education functions within India’s early childhood ecosystem, especially in the unique sociolinguistic environment of Anganwadi Centres. By synthesizing diverse sources of evidence, the methodology enables the identification of effective strategies, systemic gaps, and areas for future research and intervention. The findings derived through this approach are intended to inform policymakers, teacher educators, and practitioners seeking to strengthen multilingual and inclusive pedagogical practices in early childhood education across India.

### **Results and Discussion**

The review of existing studies and reports on multilingual education in early childhood contexts reveals a strong consensus that using children’s home or familiar languages in the foundational years significantly improves learning, engagement, and social inclusion. Research findings consistently demonstrate that multilingual approaches in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) enhance children’s cognitive and linguistic development by allowing them to connect new concepts with their existing language repertoire. Studies aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) and UNESCO (2003) recommendations affirm that children taught initially in their mother tongue develop literacy and comprehension skills more effectively and transition more smoothly to second and third languages. In states where pilot multilingual programs have been implemented—such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh—children in mother tongue-based classrooms showed

higher attendance, increased participation, and improved vocabulary growth compared to those in monolingual environments. This pattern confirms Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, suggesting that a strong foundation in the first language supports the acquisition of additional languages. Such outcomes reinforce the view that multilingual education is not only a cultural necessity in linguistically diverse societies like India but also a pedagogical strategy that enhances the quality of early learning experiences.

However, despite widespread recognition of its benefits, the practical implementation of multilingual education in Anganwadi Centres remains fragmented and inconsistent across regions. The literature identifies a significant gap between policy directives and field-level practices. Most Anganwadi workers use the regional or state language as the medium of instruction, often because learning materials, storybooks, and training modules are only available in one dominant language. As reported in studies by Mohanty (2019) and Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012), this monolingual orientation marginalizes children who speak tribal or minority languages, causing them to experience disengagement, confusion, and silence during learning activities. For instance, in multilingual tribal belts, children enter Anganwadi classrooms with rich oral traditions and vocabulary in their mother tongues, but when educators communicate solely in the regional language, these linguistic resources are neither recognized nor utilized. The result is a form of "subtractive bilingualism," where children's home languages are gradually devalued rather than integrated into the learning process. This linguistic discontinuity between home and school environments poses a major challenge for inclusive education, especially in rural and tribal areas. The lack of locally relevant, multilingual teaching-learning materials also constrains the ability of Anganwadi workers to engage effectively with children in multiple languages.

<b>Focus Area</b>	<b>Findings / Observations</b>	<b>Implications for Anganwadi Practice</b>	<b>Supporting Sources</b>
<b>Effectiveness of Mother Tongue-Based Learning</b>	Children learn more effectively and develop stronger literacy and numeracy skills when taught in their home language during foundational years.	Incorporate mother tongue as the primary medium in early instruction to improve comprehension and participation.	UNESCO (2003); Cummins (2000); NEP (2020)
<b>Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Development</b>	Multilingual exposure enhances cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and emotional security among learners.	Encourage the use of familiar languages in songs, stories, and play to promote holistic development.	García (2009); Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh (2012); Benson (2017)
<b>Current Language Practices in Anganwadis</b>	Most Anganwadi Centres use regional or dominant state languages, often excluding children's home	Conduct language mapping of communities and integrate children's first languages into daily	Mohanty (2019); NCERT (2022); UNICEF (2021)

	languages.	activities.	
<b>Teacher Preparedness and Training</b>	Anganwadi workers lack formal training in multilingual pedagogy and often rely on informal translation.	Introduce continuous training programs in multilingual and translanguaging methods for Anganwadi educators.	UNICEF (2021); MWCD (2020); García (2009)
<b>Availability of Learning Materials</b>	Learning resources are mostly monolingual, with limited materials in tribal or minority languages.	Develop and distribute multilingual storybooks, rhymes, and visual aids tailored to local contexts.	NCERT (2022); Room to Read (2021); Pratham (2020)
<b>Parental and Community Attitudes</b>	Parents value dominant or English languages for upward mobility, leading to limited support for mother tongue instruction.	Conduct community awareness programs to explain the long-term benefits of multilingual learning.	Mohanty (2019); Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh (2012); UNICEF (2021)
<b>Successful Multilingual Models</b>	States like Odisha and Andhra Pradesh have implemented MTB-MLE programs with improved learning outcomes and participation.	Replicate community-based multilingual models and localize them according to regional linguistic needs.	Odisha MLE Project (2018); NEP (2020); UNESCO (2019)
<b>Translanguaging and Informal Multilingual Practices</b>	Educators often use code-switching and translanguaging unconsciously, aiding comprehension.	Recognize and formalize translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy in Anganwadi training frameworks.	García (2009); Benson (2017); Cummins (2000)
<b>Systemic and Policy Gaps</b>	Lack of coordination between ECCE policy, curriculum, and language education frameworks hinders implementation.	Ensure alignment between national policy, ECCE curriculum, and ground-level language practices.	NEP (2020); MWCD (2020); UNESCO (2021)
<b>Long-Term Impact and Inclusion</b>	Multilingual education contributes to educational equity, inclusion of marginalized groups, and preservation of linguistic heritage.	Position multilingual education as both a pedagogical and cultural right within Anganwadi systems.	Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh (2012); Cummins (2000); UNESCO (2003)

Parental aspirations and community perceptions also play a decisive role in shaping language practices in Anganwadi Centres. Studies from Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh reveal



that while parents recognize the importance of their home language for cultural identity, many associate English or dominant regional languages with social mobility. This creates a tension between parental expectations and educational recommendations. Educators, therefore, face the dual task of promoting mother tongue-based learning while reassuring parents about its long-term academic benefits. Evidence from UNICEF and UNESCO-supported programs shows that when parents are engaged through awareness sessions or language-inclusive activities—such as storytelling days or cultural exhibitions—they become more supportive of multilingual instruction. Hence, fostering community participation emerges as a vital component of successful multilingual education implementation in early childhood contexts.

The findings emphasize that systemic reforms and policy coherence are necessary for sustaining multilingual education in Anganwadi Centres. While the NEP (2020) outlines clear recommendations for mother tongue-based education, its success depends on alignment between policy, curriculum, and implementation mechanisms. The absence of multilingual content in ECCE materials, inadequate teacher training infrastructure, and limited assessment tools for multilingual learning continue to undermine progress. The literature suggests that developing multilingual resource banks, teacher mentoring systems, and simple language mapping frameworks at the local level can significantly strengthen implementation. Moreover, adopting flexible assessment practices that evaluate comprehension and oral expression across multiple languages can create a more equitable evaluation process. The overall discussion indicates that the transition from monolingual to multilingual early childhood education requires an ecosystemic approach—integrating policy support, curriculum adaptation, teacher capacity-building, and community engagement.

### **Conclusion**

The present study highlights that multilingual education in the foundational years is a cornerstone for achieving inclusive, equitable, and high-quality early childhood education in linguistically diverse societies like India. Through a comprehensive review and analysis of secondary data, it is evident that the use of children's home or familiar languages in Anganwadi Centres significantly enhances learning outcomes, classroom participation, and socio-emotional development. When children learn in a language they understand, they are more confident, expressive, and actively engaged in classroom activities, which lays a strong foundation for literacy, numeracy, and lifelong learning. Multilingual education not only supports cognitive growth but also fosters a sense of cultural identity and belonging, allowing children from diverse linguistic communities—especially tribal and rural backgrounds—to see their languages valued and represented in the learning environment. This reinforces the principle articulated by Vygotsky and Cummins that language is not merely a tool for communication but a vehicle for thought, social interaction, and identity formation.

Despite its well-documented benefits, the study reveals that the implementation of multilingual education in Anganwadi Centres remains uneven and largely aspirational. The gap between policy intent and ground-level practice persists due to several systemic challenges—limited teacher training, inadequate multilingual materials, linguistic hierarchies, and lack of institutional support. Anganwadi workers often lack formal preparation in multilingual pedagogy and rely on informal translation or code-switching without structured guidance. Additionally, sociocultural factors such as parental preference for English or dominant regional languages and the undervaluing of minority

or tribal languages further constrain progress. These findings point to the need for a paradigm shift in how multilingualism is perceived and operationalized in early education. Rather than viewing linguistic diversity as an obstacle, educators and policymakers must recognize it as a resource that enriches teaching and learning.

For multilingual education to be effective in Anganwadi Centres, a comprehensive and systemic approach is essential—one that integrates policy coherence, curriculum flexibility, teacher capacity-building, and community participation. Developing multilingual learning materials, providing continuous professional development in mother tongue-based and translanguaging strategies, and engaging parents in understanding the value of home-language learning are key steps toward sustainable change. Moreover, the alignment of multilingual practices in Anganwadi Centres with primary education policies can ensure continuity in children's learning experiences, preventing language shock during school transitions. The broader implication of this study is that multilingual education, when implemented thoughtfully, contributes not only to academic success but also to social justice and cultural preservation.

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