

## **Mother Tongue-Based Education Policy in Nepal: An Ethnic Activists Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The study explored the interpretations of ethnic activists towards policy provisions associated with mother tongue-based education in Nepal. The study has used socio-anthropological approach to policy analysis and adopted an ethnographic design. Information were collected through in-depth interviews with two ethnic activists who have rich experiences advocating for mother tongue-based education. The study shows that ethnic activists have viewed the mother tongue-based education policy as a liberal reform, a historic achievement, and diversification in the education system compared to the past. However, the activists are not fully satisfied, arguing that the policy is imperfect and that the state has distorted the constitutional intent and the activists' spirit as well. In addition, the study reveals activists' scepticism that the state has shown malevolent intentions, apathy, and strategic manoeuvring by imposing the burden of establishing and operating separate mother tongue-based schools on linguistic communities. While the state should have made a stronger effort to incorporate multilingual education into ongoing schools. Furthermore, this policy is insufficient to support the fundamental right of every citizen to receive education in their mother tongue, as noted in the Constitution of Nepal. The findings of this study have reflected the idea that the anthropology of policy is a political and ideological tool, and a site of contestation and negotiation.

**Keywords:** Ethnic-activist – mother-tongue-based-education – education-policy-analysis - interpretation

### **Introduction**

Mother tongue is not merely a means of communication for interacting with one's home, family, and community. Instead, many studies have identified mother tongue as a powerful weapon for a child's multi-dimensional development. Bialystok (2011) contends that the mother tongue contributes greatly to the development of cognitive and intellectual skills. It not only serves to enhance self-expression, maintain cultural identity and social bonds, promote emotional well-being, transmit traditional values and historical narratives, and ensure the continuity of heritage (Fishman, 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013) but also enables children to acquire a second language and develop linguistic competence (Cummins, 2000). Furthermore, it assists children in developing problem-solving abilities, promoting critical thinking and problem-solving ability, and leads to better academic performance

(UNESCO, 2003). These various facts justify the use of the mother tongue in children's learning.

The idea of mother tongue-based education, as opposed to the oppressive tradition of providing education in the colonial ruler's language in their colonies or country territory, emerged from the 1953 UNESCO report "The Use of Local Languages in Education". The report strongly recommended the use of the mother tongue for literacy and early learning, as learning in the mother tongue improves the learner's understanding and engagement, and students can learn other languages more effectively if they have a strong foundation in their mother language (UNESCO, 1953). I understand that this report has proven to be a milestone in developing policies for imparting mother tongue-based education. Subsequently, African, Asian, and Latin American countries such as the Philippines, Tanzania, and Kenya, which gained independence from European colonialism, used mother tongue-based education in the 1960s-1980s (Bangbose, 1991; Gonzalez, 1998). These events have provided inspiring momentum to advance mother tongue-based education as a fundamental human right worldwide.

Education for All Program (1990) emphasized the need for inclusive education. This program opened the door to discussion on using the mother tongue-based education in worldwide (UNESCO, 1990). It indicates that by the early 2000s, the concept of mother tongue-based education had achieved acceptance at the global level. The mother tongue-based education also supported by Dakar Framework for Action (2000). It believed using the mother tongue-based education improves education quality and makes it more relevant from early childhood to primary and adult education (UNESCO, 2000). The United Nations Sustainable Development (2015) Goal 4 highlighted the need of inclusive, equitable, and quality education through mother tongue-based education. for fair and good education. However, numerous mother tongue around the world is still not used as a medium of instruction. As a result, sixty percent of children living in such areas are still out of school. The unjust language policies in education have left the poor in a state of suffering that continues from generation to generation (Romaine, 2024).

For a long time, linguistic diversity in Nepal has been a major issue of language policy in education. The first debate on which language to teach in Nepal was initiated during the reign of Dev Shamsheer Rana concluded that education should be provided in the Nepali language (Sharma, 2062BS). Similarly, after the political changes in Nepal in 2007 BS, the Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEC) was formed in 1953 to identify educational problems and possibilities and recommend a plan for developing the national education system in Nepal. Although some indigenous community people's opinion was to get mother tongue-based education, the Commission recommended providing education only in the Nepali language (Nepal National Education Planning Commission [NNEP], 1956). It became the key foundation for promoting a one-language policy in education (Caddell, 2002). Strengthening this recognition even more, the National Education System Plan (NESP) 1971-76 also continued the one-language policy in the education system of Nepal (Ministry of Education [NESP], 1971). I observed that around the 1960s, while UNESCO was advocating and initiating mother-tongue-based education by strongly recommending the

use of mother-tongue in education, at the same time, on the contrary, NNEP 1956 and NESP 2971-76 seems to be laying the foundation for a one-language policy in education. Comparing the recommendations of the NNEC 1956 and the provisions of the NESP 1971-76, I found that the one-language policy in education remained intact despite the change in the political system from the rule of the Rana regime to democratic and autocratic Panchayat era.

Mother tongue-based education has gained considerable importance in Nepal over the past thirty years, and several recent studies have also claimed that language policies have considerable impact on children's learning outcomes, their participation in education (Poudel & Costley, 2023). The Constitution of Nepal 2047 BS constitutionally recognized Nepal as a multicultural and multilingual nation for the first time. The education policy of Nepal has changed a lot in terms of language policy since that time (Government of Nepal, 2047), which in the past, especially the panchayat era, had imposed a single-language policy in the name of national unity (NESP, 1971). Now the education policy of Nepal is focused on mother tongue-based education. The Constitution of Nepal 2072 brought a lot of changes. It ended the monarchy and established the Federal Democratic Republic. This constitution recognized that Nepal is a country with different languages, religions, and cultures. The Constitution of Nepal 2072 also made great changes to the language policy. These changes were made to address the fact that Nepal has a lot of diversity (Government of Nepal, 2072). Nepal is a country with a lot of languages. There are 124 mother tongues spoken in Nepal. Some of these languages, 21 to be exact, have more than 100,000 speakers (Statistical Office of Nepal 2023). This means that the education policy of Nepal should be based on mother tongues. Mother tongue-based education should be mandatory. This helps ensure that children from all linguistic communities in Nepal receive an education in their mother tongue. This is important if Nepal wants to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as stated by the United Nations in 2016 (UNESCO, 2016). The education policy of Nepal and the Sustainable Development Goals should be closely linked.

In recent years, some new policies have been formulated and employed to implement the fundamental right to education as stated in the Constitution 2072, such as the Compulsory and Free Education Act 2075. Article 28 of this Act ensured the right of all Nepali citizens to receive education in their mother tongue up to the secondary level. To achieve this, it specifies that communities shall establish and operate separate schools while the central, provincial, and local governments shall provide necessary financial support for institutions providing mother tongue education. Furthermore, it has been stipulated that the educational institutions run by the community or the government will provide education in the mother tongue based on the demand of the citizens (Government of Nepal, 2075BS). Similarly, article 29 of the Act stated that the community responsible for establishing a mother tongue-based school or educational institution is tasked with its operation and management. Additionally, it allows for central, state, and local governments to provide an annual budget at the request of these communities, supporting the operation of schools that offer mother tongue education. Furthermore, the central, provincial, and local governments can implement additional measures to support mother tongue education based on local needs (Government of Nepal, 2075BS).

Researchers have conducted a lot of research on language policy in schools, including using a student's mother tongue as the medium of instruction. For example, Phyak (2014) conducted a critical ethnographic study exploring how language ideologies shape the adoption and implementation of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in a multilingual school in Nepal. This study explored how using the mother tongue can help students learn better. It has also analyzed the problems that can come up when a school tries to make this work. Similarly, Pradhan (2017) has conducted a study on how knowledge is constructed and contested in mother tongue education schools in Nepal. This study has analyzed school textbooks, classroom practices, and daily interactions. The study found that the use of mother tongue in the curriculum is a critical aspect of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in education. Phyak (2021) has analyzed Nepal's language policy in education from a decolonial perspective. Phyak (2021) studied the language policy in education in Nepal from a decolonial perspective. This study finds that neoliberal language policies adopted in education provide inadequate space for indigenous languages in Nepal. Furthermore, this study suggests that language studies should not focus solely on the language itself but rather on the history and culture of the communities that speak those languages. Phyak and Khanal (2025) have conducted another research to examine the Model School Plan in Nepal. In this research, the researcher criticized how education reform programs reproduce and disseminate neoliberal ideologies. Their critical analysis has identified school gentrification, unequal resource allocation, and linguistic diversity erasure. This plan has promoted endogenous privatization, elite capture, school stratification, and the displacement of low-income students. It ultimately expands social, linguistic, and epistemic injustices. Nevertheless, these studies have not sufficiently explored how ethnic activists, and local communities interpret the mother tongue-based education policy, as their interpretations significantly affect its implementation in schools. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the practical execution of policies related to mother tongue-based education.

To address the existing knowledge gap, this study has analyzed the official texts of the mother tongue-based education policy. Additionally, it has interpreted the policy from the perspectives of ethnic activists who promote the use of mother tongue-based education. Finally, the study has examined the current implementation status of the mother tongue-based language policy as outlined in the existing educational policy. This study focused on single research question. That is:

- How ethnic activists interpret the policy provisions regarding mother tongue-based education?

All stakeholders need to understand educational policy and its practices. This study is important for understanding how policy provisions related to mother tongue-based education are interpreted by ethnic activists and local communities. It helps policymakers and implementers to understand the perspectives of ethnic activists and local communities regarding policies, and revise and improve these policies. The ethnic activists and local communities' interpretations play a crucial role in translating policy into practice. Their interpretations can assist or oppose policy provisions determining the extent to which they are

implemented and accepted in schools. This study enables policymakers and implementers to understand the interpretations of ethnic language activists and local communities.

As another focus of this study is to understand how policy provisions for providing mother tongue-based education are being implemented in practice, it enables policymakers, teachers, language communities, and researchers to understand the overall status of the implementation of mother tongue-based education policies. The main duty of the government is to provide quality education for all. For this task, the government provides some facts and information about the strengths and limitations of the policy and the logistical, financial and political support and obstacles encountered in the implementation process, which can provide important input to policymakers in the revision of the policies and the formulation of the new policy. Finally, this study will help teacher educators and policymakers to understand the core meaning of mother tongue-based policy and revise the policy.

### **Approach of the Policy Analysis**

For this study, I employed anthropology of policy approach (Shore & Wright, 1997). The anthropology of policy views policy as a political and ideological tool, a cultural script, and a site of contestation and negotiation. It recognizes that when policy is implemented, there is a dynamic interaction between state mandates and local narratives. This approach prefers an ethnographic design for policy studying (Wedel et al., 2005). A central idea of anthropologists of policy do not accept that policies are fundamentally neutral or purely technical instruments. Instead, policies carry political ideologies of dominant groups. Policy is seen as a vehicle for the expression of the political ideas of powerful groups. Shore and Wright (1997) argue that "Their political nature is disguised by the objective, neutral, legal-rational idioms in which they are portrayed" (p. 8). It suggests that policies might seem impartial at first glance, but they are fundamentally influenced by dominant political ideology. As Shore and Wright note, in the name of impartial policy, policies serve the interests of politically dominant groups by promoting their specific ideological values. Since the inception of modern schooling in Nepal, the language and culture of indigenous peoples have been subjected to dual exploitation by English and Nepali language (Poudel et al., 2022; Choi & Poudel, 2024). In this context, I used this idea as a tool for analyzing how influential groups penetrated their political ideologies into mother tongue-based education policy in the name of fair policy. Furthermore, it helped me understand how ethnic activists have perceived the new policies made by the Nepali government for mother tongue-based education and identify alternative voices of ethnic activists on government policies.

Another key idea in the anthropology of policy is policy as a cultural script, which holds that formal policy texts should be seen not simply as technical instructions but as texts that carry and communicate cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies. Shore and Wright (1997) asserted that "The text of policy functions as a repository of cultural ideology rather than a neutral instrument of governance" (p. 10). This highlights the fact that policy documents are not neutral. Those who construct the policy tend to embody their cultural ideologies in policy. In simple language, this means that policy makers can either undervalue the cultural ideology, norms, and values of others in policy or promote their cultural ideology, norms, and values while ignoring the ideology and social values of others. I used this idea to analyze how

ethnic activists interpret this cultural script written into policy. I used this idea to analyze how ethnic activists interpret this cultural script written into policy. Additionally, I used it to explore the feelings of the subordinate group by examining how the dominant group's cultural ideology, beliefs, and values were inserted into education policy while sidelining the ideology and social values of the subordinate group.

The anthropology of policy emphasizes policy as a field of contestation and negotiation among many voices and competing interpretations. Policies are not simply written rules that everyone accepts without questions. Instead, policy becomes a kind of debate ground. In the field of debate, different interest groups or stakeholders' debate and reach an agreement. Shore and Wright (1997) emphasize "Policies are sites of political contestation where various interests, identities, and interpretations converge and collide" (p. 21). They further assert that "when policy is translated from the written word into everyday life, it becomes a battleground for contestation" (p. 22). These assertions make it clear that the creation of an official policy text is only the beginning. As policies are implemented, different stakeholders negotiate their meaning. When the state makes policy, ethnic activists often read these official documents through the lens of their lived experiences. They may view the policy not as direct directives, but as a reflection of cultural and political interests. They can inquire about several aspects of the policy provisions. For instance, does the policy genuinely promote linguistic diversity, or does it favour the dominant language and its associated values? Is the policy designed for actual implementation, or is it merely created to appease us? I used this concept to investigate whether official policy statements on mother tongue-based education are being challenged or supported by ethnic activists. Furthermore, I used it to explore the conflict of interest that exists between the implementing agencies and ethnic activists.

The anthropologist of policy claims that policies are not implemented in a vacuum. The state creates policy texts with clear mandates, but actual implementation is always revisited by local settings and cultural practices. Shore and Wright (1997) note, "The translation of policy into practice is a dynamic and contingent process, frequently diverging from the original script" (p. 16). The local setting negotiating state-made policies adapt and modify state mandates according to their needs and interests. Consequently, the policy's intended effects are constantly restructured through local interpretation and revision. Despite policies to promote mother tongue-based education in Nepal, the lack of educational human resources and limited learning materials further complicate the challenges of implementing multilingual education. The lack of culturally relevant materials and appropriate educational tools has made it difficult for schools to achieve these ambitions. Without the necessary investment in resource development, teachers and administrators face significant difficulties in adapting curricula to local contexts (Rai et al., 2011). I utilized this concept to investigate how these policies are ultimately implemented, considering the shortage of trained teachers, lack of educational resources, and the presence of various languages within the local setting.

### **Methodology of the Study**

In this study, I used an ethnographic design under qualitative research approach (Cresswell & Poth, 2018), which is complementary to my anthropology of policy analysis. In

educational policy research, this method has been used in several studies. For instance, to understand how policy reform influences the transfer process at community college (Felix, 2018) and educational reform in schools (Zoch, 2017). Through this design, the researcher can explore the patterns of mental activity within a cultural group as conveyed through ritual and traditional social behaviour. Equally, it can discover the ideas, beliefs, and physical activities of the cultural group expressed through language and actions (Fetterman, 2019). This design assisted me in uncovering hidden layers of policy processes that are invisible and undetectable from traditional policy studies (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

The key purpose of ethnographic design is to concentrate the study on cohesive groups of cultural exchanges. Sometimes, these cultural groups can be small, but usually, they are larger, involving many people interacting over time (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I included two cultural groups: ethnic activists and the local community as a cultural group. A purposive sampling strategy (Campbell et al., 2020) was used to select two ethnic activists who have long advocated for mother tongue-based education in Nepal, as well as two members of the local community, as participants. May this policy have a direct impact on the preservation and promotion of their language and culture. An ethnographers use multiple sources of data, although they may sometimes rely primarily on one (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). A purposive sampling strategy (Campbell et al., 2020) was employed to select two ethnic activists who have long advocated for mother tongue-based education in Nepal as participants. Ethnographers utilize multiple sources of data, though they may sometimes focus primarily on one (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Ethnographic studies involve extensive fieldwork to collect data primarily through interviews, participant observations, field notes, symbols, artifacts, and various other sources (Atkinson, 2014; Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to explore their interpretations of the policy provisions related to mother tongue-based education.

In ethnographic studies, data analysis is grounded in the participants' perspectives, referred to as the 'emic perspective.' This involves reporting their views in verbatim quotes, followed by synthesizing the data. The researcher also applies their own 'etic scientific perspective' to filter the information and create a comprehensive cultural interpretation (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I interpreted the policy of mother tongue-based education from the perspective of ethnic activists while using the etic scientific lens. This approach helped prevent any prejudices I might have had. In the data analysis process, I began by transcribing each segment of the interview recorded on my cell phone. Next, I identified various codes from the transcribed text. Then, I organized these codes into several categories. Finally, I merged similar categories to develop overarching themes, translated these themes and associated quotes into English, and discussed each theme by placing relevant quotes, which is consistent with the thematic analysis approach presented by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Liberal Reform, Achievement, and Diversification in Education**

The first perspectives of ethnic activists about the policy of mother tongue-based education are liberal reform, achievement and diversification in education system. The ethnic activists claim that with the change in the political regime, education policy of Nepal is gradually moving forward with liberal reforms regarding equity. In this context, Participant 1 stated that “Since the establishment of the federal democratic republic in Nepal, mother tongue-based education has become more liberal.” This statement reflects that after the transformation of Nepal into the Federal Democratic Republic, the state has ensured the right to receive education in one's mother tongue in its education policy. This is a more liberal reform compared to past political regimes. Correspondingly, participants 2 also said that "Significant progress has been made legally and constitutionally. After the political change in 2047 BS, there was little initiative for mother tongue-based education, but the political change of 2062-63 BS has brought significant progress." This statement highlights the view that after the political changes of 2047 and 2062/63, notable achievements have made in the law and constitution on mother tongue-based education. These achievements have facilitated meaningful progress in mother tongue-based education, signifying a greater recognition of linguistic and cultural rights.

Above the discussion highlight that with the transformation of Nepal into the federal democratic republic in 2063, the significant changes have also taken place in educational policy. It has especially focused on providing education to students in their mother tongue. These changes have strengthened the right of children from different ethnic groups to receive education in their mother tongue. The political regime changes of 2047 BS and 2062/63 BS were notable events that promoted this progress, demonstrating a broader commitment to linguistic and cultural inclusion in national development.

Another main interpretation of ethnic activists about policy of the mother tongue-based education is achievement. The ethnic activists perceived it as a great achievement. In this case, the participant 2 said that “I think this is a great achievement. Yesterday, our language scripts were lost, we had to endure oppression even when we spoke our language. But now the state has accepted the fact that we are multilingual, multicultural, and multi-ethnic.” In this statement, the activist reflects a sense of pride and liberation that the recognition of Nepal's multilingual and multicultural identity by the state is a major achievement. It sees it as the result of a historic struggle against linguistic oppression and as a step towards inclusion and cultural acceptance in national policies. In this regard, participant 2 was also expressed similar opinion. He articulated that “There is no doubt that we should accept it happily.” This statement expresses a positive affirmation. They seem to embrace the recent changes in policy of mother tongue-based education with gladness and gratitude.

Above the statements show that ethnic activists are proud of the state's recognition of Nepal's multilingual and multicultural identity. They described this policy as a hard-won victory after years of linguistic oppression. They have realized this recognition as a shift towards greater inclusion and respect for diverse cultures within national education policies. Their statements revealed a deep sense of appreciation and hope for more equitable and culturally connected educational future.

An equally important interpretation of ethnic activists on the mother tongue-based education policy is diversification in education system. The mother tongue-based education policy has attempted to diversify the education system in line with the linguistic structure of the country. In this regard, participant 2 said that “The positive aspect of this policy is that it seeks to diversify the education system, such as providing multilingual education, and has also made provision for opening schools that provide education in the mother tongue.” In this statement, the provision in the policy that supports multilingual education and mother-tongue-based education is viewed as a positive development. This initiative has the potential to transform Nepal's education system into a multi-modal framework, introducing state-driven multilingual schools alongside mother-tongue-based schools driven by mother-tongue communities. In the support of this idea, participant 1 again added his argument, “our society is multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural, right? That is the reality, isn't it? That is exactly our reality. If we do not have a multilingual education policy, we will be disconnected from reality.” This demonstrates the claim that multilingual education is necessary because it acknowledges the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of our country. If we fail to represent it in education, we fail to see the reality of our linguistic diversity and deny many communities the right to education in their mother tongue.

In these statements, it seems that the ethnic activists feel that mother tongue-based and multilingual educational initiatives are advantageous. Here, equity in education can be promoted by making public schools multilingual as well as permitting linguistic groups to form mother tongue-based education and multilingual schools. This policy can diversify the education system by addressing the diversity in Nepal. Due to the neglect of diversity, many indigenous communities have lost their right to education in their own mother tongue.

Based on the discussion, it can be said that ethnic activists have realized that after the change in political regime in Nepal, there has been a significant restructuring in the country's education policy by adopting the principles of multilingual and mother tongue-based education. They argue that the major reforms initiated in 2047 and particularly during 2062/63 highlight the nation's increasing commitment to inclusive development through linguistic justice in school education. This reform effort not only promotes the linguistic rights of various ethnic communities but also helps preserve and transmit their cultural heritage to their offspring. Ethnic activists view this policy as a hard-won conquest over historical linguistic marginalization. As the policy ushered in a period of diversification in education by allowing both state-run multilingual schools and mother-tongue-based schools run by linguistic communities, they have seen it as a ray of hope for establishing an equitable and culturally responsive education system. Ultimately, the ethnic activists have felt this was an effort to align the education system with the true diversity of the nation's population. It suggests that, as Shore and Wright (1997) state, "The text of policy functions as a repository of cultural ideology rather than a neutral instrument of governance" (p. 10). It seems to be an attempt to capture the ideology of the ethnic movement rather than being a neutral tool in this policy.

### **Twisting Constitutional Intent and Activists' Spirit, Imperfect, and Malevolent Intention**

The second perspectives of ethnic activists concerning the policy of mother tongue-based education are twisting constitutional intent and activists' spirit, imperfect, and malevolent intention. In the eyes of ethnic activists, the mother tongue-based education policy has distorted the constitutional intent and the activists' spirit, is imperfect and has malevolent intention. They have experienced that the mother tongue-based education policy has distorted the basic essence of the constitution and the intentions of ethnic activists. Remembering the people's thoughts when the constitution was made, Participant 1 stated his argument this way: "This constitution is not as it was imagined. It is not seen in the same depth as it was thought when the constitution was made." This statement expresses dissatisfaction with the current mother tongue-based education policy. It believes that the current education policy has distorted the spirit of the Constitution, which was created with high hopes. It shows the feeling that the mother tongue-based education policy has failed to touch the depth and intent of the Constitution. Participant 1 also added another statement that confirmed this idea. He said:

We did not request education in our mother tongue merely to protect our language and culture. The key reason for the demand for education in our mother tongue is that our children understand learning content more effectively and quickly when instructed in their mother tongue. We did not request that every school offer a specific mother tongue as a subject, nor did we call for the establishment of separate mother tongue-based schools.

This statement highlights that the primary aim of promoting mother tongue-based education was not just to maintain cultural identity but also to improve children's learning outcomes by utilizing the language they comprehend most effectively. It clearly indicates that the request was for a policy allowing mother tongue as the medium of instruction in current schools, rather than the establishment of separate schools.

From this discussion, it can be concluded that there is deep disappointment among ethnic activists toward the mother tongue-based education policy. They argue that this policy deviates from the key intent of the Constitution and fails to achieve the educational goals. They reiterate that their actual demand was to promote learning by making the students' mother tongue the medium of instruction within existing schools, but the policy has allowed the establishment of separate schools that teach in the mother tongue. This seems to distort the intent of the Constitution and the spirit of ethnic activists.

Another significant interpretation of ethnic activists is that the mother tongue-based education policy is imperfect. The participant 1 argued that the act does not mention how to manage the resources and teachers needed to implement mother tongue-based education. He said that:

The Act outlined what needed to be done, but it did not provide guidance on how to do it. It is mentioned that schools can be opened to provide education in the mother tongue, and multilingual education can be used in existing community schools. However, there is a significant need to effectively manage various resources and mobilize teachers on how to deliver this education. Finding a way to manage these resources and teachers is the key thing missing for the successful implementation of the Act.

The quote indicates that the Act intends to establish mother tongue-based schools in separately and promote multilingual education in existing community schools. However, it lacks a practical roadmap that includes the necessary resources for implementation. Without specific strategies for managing resources and training or deploying teachers, the policy cannot be effectively carried out. Another participant also has a similar statement. Participant 1 expressed his opinion in this way:

If the community can operate a mother tongue-based school, it can be said that the government will provide funding, and the community will need to handle other necessary arrangements. But not all language communities may be able to function on their own. Even though they may be able to obtain the funds necessary to do this, they may not be able to make other arrangements for school.

This statement uncovered a significant problem with the policy. The policy thinks all communities can operate and run schools in their language if they receive funds. Some communities may not have the know-how to manage and operationalize a school, which can prevent them from making the plans they need, even with funding. We need to fix this. The policy should have plans for different communities and help them build their skills so that all can benefit. The policy should assist communities in getting the skills they need to run mother tongue-based schools.

The discussion showed that the policy has some defects. The policy says that communities can start schools that teach in their mother tongue. But the policy does not provide specific and clear guidance to schools that need to do this, such as the necessary resources, supportive structures, or clear guidelines for effective implementation. The policy also does not tell the schools how to do this in a way that works. The ethnic activists state that without the assistance and support from the government, it is very hard to make mother tongue-based education programs work in places that do not have much experience. Mother tongue-based education programs need this assistance to be successful. The policy needs to do more to support mother tongue-based education programs.

Additional main interpretation of ethnic activists about policy of the mother tongue-based education is malevolent intention. The ethnic activists have strongly expressed that the policymakers' malevolent intention is reflected in the mother tongue-based education policy. In this context, participant 1 stated:

The provision that communities, rather than the state, should be responsible for opening and operating schools that provide education in their mother tongue may discourage advocates of mother tongue-based education. The ongoing advocacy from mother tongue communities for education in their native languages may have shifted the responsibility for implementation onto the linguistic communities that raised the issue, rather than the state. If so, it is that the state has brought this policy to assess the linguistic community or for revenge.

It is mentioned in this statement that this policy does not place the responsibility of implementing mother tongue-based education on the state but gave it to the linguistic community which advocates mother tongue-based education. Such manoeuvres reveal the

policymakers' questionable motives, as they indicate an intention to penalize these communities that raised the issue of mother tongue-based education while pretending to implement reforms. The similar argument did participant 2. He said that:

It is said that the community itself will open and run educational institutions in its native language. It is said that the government can provide some financial support. An attempt is being made to place the entire responsibility on the linguistic community. This is not possible, and it is not good either.

This statement claims that policymakers are intentionally trying to transfer constitutional responsibilities of the state to linguistic communities. By placing the sole responsibility for implementation on the mother tongue community, the state appears to be evading its duty. This action may indirectly serve as a form of retaliation against proponents of mother tongue-based education.

The discussion concludes that transferring the entire responsibility for establishing and operating mother tongue-based education to the linguistic community demonstrates the policymakers' intention to ignore the constitutional obligations of the state. This intention not only distracts the state from doing its job, but it also seems to be punishing the community that advocates for education to be based on the mother tongue. In fact, this act has served as a means to force communities to leave their agenda; it hurts what the community is trying to do, and it goes against what the Constitution really means. The criticism of ethnic activists is that the state is also trying to escape its responsibility through this act. It has created a dilemma within the communities that advocate mother tongue-based education.

The ethnic activists are not fully happy with the education policy of mother tongue-based education. They think this policy goes against what the Constitution is trying to do, and it is also not in line with the expectations they are fighting for. The government should have made sure that mother tongue-based education in existing schools but instead, they are telling linguistic communities to start and run their own schools separately. This was not a want of ethnic activists, and it is not a practical approach through the lens of public education. The policy has made some errors, such as not ensuring that funds are allocated to schools at the local level and not clearly stating how it will be implemented. It does not assist them to be better at what they do. The ethnic activists felt let down by the mother tongue-based education policy. It appears that the policy is made just for the sake of making. These flaws render the policy ineffective. Shifting the responsibility for full implementation to linguistic communities appears to be a deliberate move by policymakers to penalize those who advocating for mother tongue-based education while diverting attention away from the state's obligations in this area. Ultimately, this covert retaliation threatens to undermine community efforts towards mother-tongue-based education, erodes their confidence, and undermines of the promises made in the Constitution. This discrepancy highlights that the policy is not only flawed but also politically shaped. As Shore and Wright (1997) argue, "their political nature is disguised by the objective, neutral, legal-rational idioms in which they are portrayed" (p. 8). In this context, the policy actually has a hidden reason that has assisted the ideas that are already established. The policy is really protecting the state and the dominant ideologies.

## **State Apathy, Strategic Manoeuvre and Imposition Responsibility on the Community**

The third perspectives of ethnic activists regarding the policy of mother tongue-based education are state apathy, strategic manoeuvre and imposition responsibility on the community. The ethnic activists claimed that the state is apathetic, that the state has taken a strategic move to escape responsibility and has entrusted the impossible task of mother-tongue-based education to the mother-tongue community. They feel that the state is indifferent towards mother tongue-based education. In this regard, participant 1 said,

The responsibility of allocating resources lies with the government. Budgeting should have been done for that; there should have been arrangements for the curriculum, teacher management, and necessary infrastructures, but there has been no willingness to do that from their side. There is no mention of necessary and appropriate management anywhere.

This statement shows the state's apathy. It has not done its job to give funds from its treasury for mother tongue-based education. It also hasn't made a plan, required curriculum, trained teachers, and physical infrastructure. The state can't do what it must do because it doesn't have detail plan and adequate resources. The government knows that just asking communities to manage mother tongue-based education is not enough. By not doing more, the state is showing it does not care about its duties. The state must do more to help mother tongue-based education. Participant 1 has another statement that supports this interpretation. He says:

The state is withdrawing from its involvement. The state says things should be done. When it is time to do them, the state tells you to do it yourself. The state seems to have avoided its duties by handing the work to the linguistic communities.

This statement reflected the state's indifference. While the state supports mother tongue-based education in theory, it has effectively shifted the responsibility for implementation onto linguistic communities. The state appears to have abdicated its entire responsibilities for mother tongue-based education by refusing to provide direct support, resources, and leaving communities to manage themselves.

This discussion has shown that the state does not exert its full strength toward mother tongue-based education. Because the government has not ensured funds are made for a detailed plan, trained teachers, an appropriate curriculum, and essential infrastructure for mother tongue-based education. The policy is on paper, while the practical implementation is left to the linguistic communities, which is not possible. This shows that the state has not done its duties as per the Constitution. Without clear rules and full resources, the provision of mother tongue-based education is just a promise and means nothing. The state's inaction shows a lack of interest in mother tongue-based education. Overall, it can be concluded that the state is indifferent to ensuring mother tongue-based education.

Another notable interpretation by ethnic activists is that the mother tongue-based education policy is a strategic manoeuvre by the state to satisfy the linguistic community. Participant 1 argues that the linguistic community has taken on most of the responsibility for implementing the mother tongue-based education. Therefore, he contends that the policy is merely a strategic move designed to gain the support of the linguistic community. He states:

As per the policy, the community itself should implement mother tongue-based education, but not all community members have the capacity to do this. Saying

this actually means not doing. I think this is a way for the state to running away its responsibilities.

This statement indicates that ethnic activists think that the mother tongue-based education policy is a plan to make communities handle the task of teaching kids in their own language. In fact, the government used this policy as a tool to evade what the Constitution says about mother tongue-based education. The state should facilitate mother tongue-based education, but the state is not doing so. In this context, participant 1 adds another argument:

Another thing is that it seems that they are trying to move all responsibility for the fundamental rights to education of the child onto the concerned community, in a way that says, if you want to teach in your mother tongue, do it yourself.

In this statement, this policy appears to be a designed strategic move to impose the state's obligation for children's fundamental right to education on those communities. By sweet-talking that if you want mother-tongue-based education, you should do it yourself, the state has delegated its duty to ensure equitable education to the linguistic community.

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that this policy seems to function as a strategic manoeuvre to transfer the responsibility of providing mother tongue-based education onto the linguistic communities. The state has provided the duty to implement mother tongue-based education in communities. This means the state seems to be forgetting that it is supposed to make sure all kids get an education. The constitution strongly supports the right to learn in one's mother tongue, but in reality, the Act has often implicitly abandoned mother tongue-based education. At last, this reveals a deliberate attempt by the state to distance itself from its educational responsibilities.

One significant interpretation by ethnic activists regarding mother tongue-based education is the imposition of responsibility on the community. They argue that it is inappropriate to expect linguistic communities to take responsibility for establishing and operating mother tongue-based education. In this regard, Participant 1 says, "Not every community can operate a school that teaches in its own mother tongue. It should be held under the state's responsibility". This statement emphasizes how the state, through policy, has unfairly shifted the responsibility of establishing mother tongue-based education onto communities that lack the necessary resources and expertise. Although this fundamental right to education is primarily the duty of the state, its responsibility is imposed on the linguistic community itself. A similar argument was also made by participant 2. He said that "education is a responsibility of the state; this duty cannot be delegated to the community. The constitution guarantees every citizen the right to education in their mother tongue, as established by law. Therefore, the state must ensure compliance with this obligation". This statement suggests that receiving education in one's mother tongue is a constitutional right of all learners. It is the state's obligation to uphold. It argues that the state should not delegate this responsibility to linguistic communities; If that were to happen, it would appear that the state could escape its constitutional duties. This provision undermined the equitable distribution of education among all linguistic groups.

This discussion shows that the current policy regarding mother tongue-based education has inappropriately placed the burden of establishing and operating schools on resource-poor linguistic communities. The Constitution states that all people have the right to receive an education in their own language as a fundamental right. But the act puts the responsibility of doing this on the people of those communities. This is not fair because it

shows that the state does not really care about giving everyone the chance to get an education. As a result, learners from mother tongue communities who speak their mother tongue do not have the same learning chances as other learners. This is a problem because the Constitution states that everyone should have an education, no matter what language they speak. The state is not keeping its promise to provide all learners in Nepal with an education, especially learners who speak their mother tongue. This policy provision can be understood through the perspective of Shore and Wright (1997), who explain, “Policies are sites of political contestation where various interests, identities, and interpretations converge and collide” (p. 21). In this policy, the policy shows a conflict with the constitutional provision. This has hurt the interests of ethnic activists, and policymakers' priorities have won.

### **Conclusion**

Ethnic activists, who have felt subjected to linguistic marginalization for centuries, have appreciated the mother tongue-based education policy as a liberal reform, a key achievement, and a diversification in the education structure. However, they have also felt betrayed. The policy's provision to establish separate mother tongue-based schools driven by linguistic communities has distorted the constitutional intent and the intention of ethnic activists to integrate multilingual education within existing schools. The policy's failure to allocate adequate resources for mother tongue-based education, provide clear implementation guidelines, and provide capacity-building support programs suggests that the commitment to reform is only superficial. Instead of effectively fulfilling its constitutional duties, the state has abdicated, placing the sole responsibility for establishing and operating mother-tongue-based schools on the less-resourced and less capable language communities. This indirectly hurts those who advocate mother tongue-based education. This pretended strategic manoeuvre has the potential to undermine the efforts of ethnic activists, undermine the trust of the mother tongue community in the state, and expand unequal access to educational opportunities that existed in the past. This policy does not appear to fulfill the constitutional promise of education in Nepal. It also does not help achieve the goal of education that respects different cultures, something ethnic activists have wanted for a long time. Mother tongue-based education policy is not as simple as it sounds. As Shore and Wright (1997) pointed out, the state has pretended to be neutral by enacting policies that are favorable to itself. But in reality, the government is prioritizing its own interests over the rights of ethnic communities. The government needs to be careful about how it implements the mother tongue-based education policy.

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