

The Three-Language Formula in Contemporary India: Policy, Politics and the Challenges of Multilingual Education under NEP 2020

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Abstract

The Three-Language Formula (TLF) has governed the teaching of languages in Indian schools since the mid-1960s, and it remains one of the most politically contentious elements of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This paper traces the formula's origins in the Kothari Commission (1964-66) and the anti-Hindi agitations of Tamil Nadu, examines how NEP 2020 has reframed it around flexibility, mother-tongue-based foundational learning, and the promise that "no language will be imposed on any state," and analyses why this reframing has not resolved the underlying conflict. Drawing on the 2025 confrontation between the Union government and Tamil Nadu over withheld Samagra Shiksha funds, and the short-lived attempt by Maharashtra to make Hindi a compulsory third language, the paper argues that the TLF sits at the intersection of pedagogy, federalism, and identity politics. It further evaluates the practical challenges of implementing multilingual education — teacher shortages, material development, urban migration, and uneven state capacity — before offering recommendations for a more cooperative and evidence-based approach to language policy in schools.

Keywords: Three-Language Formula; NEP 2020; multilingual education; language politics; Indian federalism; Tamil Nadu; Maharashtra

Introduction

Few policy questions in India generate as much sustained political heat as the language a child should be taught in school. The Three-Language Formula (TLF) — the principle that every school student should learn three languages, at least two of which are Indian — has been part of the official architecture of Indian education since the late 1960s. It was designed as a compromise: a way to give children access to a regional or mother tongue, a link language for national communication, and English for global mobility, without formally privileging any single language as compulsory across the whole country.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, retained the TLF but recast it in the language of flexibility, choice, and cognitive science. It promised that no language would be imposed on any state, that students and states could choose their own combination of languages, and that at least the first years of schooling should, wherever possible, use the child's home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction. On paper, this was meant to defuse decades of suspicion, particularly in southern and non-Hindi-speaking states, that the formula was a vehicle for the gradual spread of Hindi.

In practice, the years since 2020 have shown that flexible language does not automatically produce flexible politics. Tamil Nadu's government has refused to implement the TLF at all, resulting in the Union government withholding thousands of crores of rupees in school-funding under the Samagra Shiksha scheme. Maharashtra's attempt in 2025 to make Hindi a compulsory third language in primary schools was withdrawn within weeks after mass protests. Karnataka, Kerala, West Bengal, and Punjab have each expressed reservations of their own. This paper situates these episodes within the longer history of language politics in India, examines what NEP 2020 actually says and how it differs from earlier formulations, and assesses the practical obstacles — pedagogical, administrative, and financial — that stand in the way of implementing genuinely multilingual classrooms, regardless of which languages are chosen.

Historical Evolution of the Three-Language Formula

Language conflict in the Tamil-speaking regions of South India predates independence. In 1937, the Congress ministry of C. Rajagopalachari in the Madras Presidency made Hindi compulsory in secondary schools. The move provoked sustained agitation led by E. V. Ramasamy "Periyar" and the Justice Party; two protestors died and over a thousand people were jailed before the order was withdrawn by the colonial governor in 1940. This episode established a pattern that would recur for the rest of the century: any attempt to mandate Hindi in Tamil-speaking areas was read not as a neutral administrative decision but as an assertion of North Indian cultural dominance over a distinct linguistic and political identity.

The more consequential confrontation came in 1965. The Constitution had originally envisaged Hindi replacing English as the sole official language of the Union fifteen years after independence, that is, from January 26, 1965. As the deadline approached, fears in Tamil Nadu (then Madras State) that English would be phased out entirely triggered a mass agitation led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under C. N. Annadurai. The protests turned violent; government estimates put the death toll at around seventy, and several protestors self-immolated. Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri intervened with assurances that English would continue as an associate official language for as long as non-Hindi states wished, a commitment later codified in the Official Languages (Amendment) Act of 1967. The agitation had lasting political consequences: it propelled the DMK to power in the 1967 state elections, ending Congress rule in Tamil Nadu and permanently linking Dravidian party politics to the defence of Tamil against perceived Hindi imposition.

It was against this backdrop that the Education Commission of 1964-66, chaired by D. S. Kothari, first formally proposed the Three-Language Formula as a national compromise. Broadly, the Kothari Commission recommended that Hindi-speaking states teach Hindi, English, and a modern Indian language (preferably a South Indian one), while non-Hindi-speaking states would teach their regional language, Hindi, and English. The formula was adopted in the National Policy on Education of 1968. Tamil Nadu rejected it outright. In January 1968, Chief Minister Annadurai moved a resolution in the Madras Legislative Assembly scrapping the three-language requirement in favour of a two-language policy of Tamil and English, arguing that a third, non-native language added an unnecessary burden without corresponding benefit. That two-language policy has remained in place in Tamil Nadu's government schools for more than five decades, surviving changes of government between the DMK and its rival, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

The TLF was reaffirmed, largely unchanged in substance, in the National Policy on Education of 1986 and its 1992 revision. Implementation nationally remained uneven: Hindi-speaking states frequently

treated the "modern Indian language" requirement as a formality, often defaulting to Sanskrit, while several non-Hindi states other than Tamil Nadu adopted the formula only partially or informally. By the time NEP 2020 was drafted, therefore, the TLF was less a settled national consensus than a fifty-year-old compromise that one major state had never accepted and that many others applied selectively.

NEP 2020: Provisions and Policy Framework

NEP 2020 situates its language provisions within a broader emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy. It recommends that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond, should be the child's home language, mother tongue, or a familiar regional language. This is presented as a pedagogical claim grounded in learning science rather than a purely cultural one: children are held to grasp new concepts more easily, and to develop stronger foundational skills, when taught in a language they already speak fluently, before a second and third language are layered on.

On the TLF specifically, the policy retains the requirement that school students learn three languages, of which at least two must be native to India, while explicitly stating that the choice of languages is left to states, regions, and, from the middle years onward, to students themselves. The text repeatedly stresses that "no language will be imposed on any State" and that the flexibility offered is greater than in previous formulations. A student may change one or more of the three languages after Grade 5 or 6, provided a basic level of proficiency in all three is achieved by the end of secondary school. The policy also revives interest in Sanskrit and other classical languages, offering them as options within the three-language framework, and encourages exposure to additional foreign languages from the secondary stage onward. Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) schools, and other institutions under direct central administration, are expected to offer Hindi, English, and a regional language as a matter of course, which effectively guarantees Hindi's presence in the curriculum of centrally-affiliated schools even in states that do not otherwise teach it. NEP 2020 also links its language recommendations to the broader project of curricular reform: the development of high-quality textbooks and teaching materials in home languages, bilingual teaching approaches for classrooms where the child's home language differs from the medium of instruction, and the training of teachers to work across languages.

Two features distinguish NEP 2020's formulation from its predecessors in emphasis, even if the underlying three-language structure is unchanged. First, the policy places the mother-tongue-medium recommendation for foundational years at the centre of its language philosophy, whereas earlier policies treated language primarily as a question of which three subjects to teach rather than which language to teach in. Second, it repeatedly foregrounds the language of non-imposition and state autonomy, a rhetorical shift that appears calibrated to pre-empt the very objections that Tamil Nadu and other states have historically raised. As the events of 2025 demonstrate, however, this rhetorical shift has not been sufficient to secure buy-in from every state, in part because the mechanism used to encourage adoption — linking central education funding to compliance — is itself experienced by state governments as a form of imposition.

The Pedagogical and Cultural Case for Multilingual Education

Independent of its political dimension, the case for mother-tongue-based multilingual education rests on a substantial body of research in cognitive and educational psychology. Comparative international evidence, including UNESCO's guidance on multilingual education, suggests that children taught

foundational literacy and numeracy in a familiar language acquire these skills faster and transfer them more successfully to additional languages introduced later, compared with children immersed from the outset in an unfamiliar medium of instruction. Studies of bilingual and multilingual children more broadly report associated cognitive advantages in areas such as attentional control and metalinguistic awareness, alongside social and cultural benefits: children who study in or alongside their home language tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom and are less likely to disengage in the early years, when the gap between home and school language is often greatest.

Proponents of the TLF also frame it as an instrument of national integration. By ensuring that most students encounter at least one language beyond their immediate region — in practice, most often Hindi in non-Hindi states, or a South Indian language in Hindi-speaking ones — the formula is intended to build a shared linguistic repertoire that supports internal migration, national administration, and a sense of common citizenship, while still preserving each region's primary language and identity. English, retained as the third element in most non-Hindi states, is defended on separate grounds: as a link language for interstate and international communication, and as a language of continued economic and academic opportunity.

Critics do not generally dispute the pedagogical evidence for mother-tongue instruction; the more contested claims concern the specific choice of the second and third languages, and whether the goal of "national integration" in practice functions as a euphemism for Hindi promotion. Scholars working on multilingual education in India have also cautioned that the cognitive-benefit case for learning three languages does not automatically extend to any three languages chosen for political reasons; the benefits documented in the literature are strongest where the languages taught are ones the community actually uses and values, and weakest where a language is added to satisfy a formula rather than a demonstrated local need.

Contemporary Politics of the Three-Language Formula

The years following NEP 2020's release have produced two flashpoints that illustrate, in different registers, why the TLF continues to generate conflict: a prolonged fiscal and constitutional standoff between the Union government and Tamil Nadu, and a shorter but equally intense confrontation in Maharashtra.

1. Tamil Nadu versus the Centre

Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government, led by Chief Minister M. K. Stalin, has consistently refused to adopt the three-language formula, maintaining the two-language policy of Tamil and English that has been in place since 1968. The state's position is that any third compulsory language, in practice, functions as an entry point for Hindi, regardless of the formal neutrality of NEP 2020's wording, and that the existing two-language system has served the state well in literacy and educational outcomes.

The Union Ministry of Education has linked the disbursement of funds under the Samagra Shiksha scheme, a centrally sponsored programme that supports school infrastructure and teacher salaries, to a state's implementation of NEP 2020, including the TLF, and to participation in the associated PM SHRI model-schools scheme. As a result, the Centre withheld more than ₹2,150 crore owed to Tamil Nadu for 2024-25, with a further tranche withheld for 2025-26, bringing the total withheld to over ₹3,500 crore by mid-2026. Kerala and West Bengal have faced similar, if smaller, freezes over their non-participation in PM SHRI.

Tamil Nadu's response has combined fiscal defiance with legal and rhetorical escalation. In its 2025-26 state budget, the government announced it would use its own resources to cover teacher salaries and school infrastructure costs that the withheld central funds would otherwise have supported, framing the move as proof that the state would not be coerced into changing its language policy regardless of the financial cost. The state also approached the Supreme Court under Article 131 of the Constitution, which grants the Court exclusive jurisdiction over disputes between the Union and one or more states, arguing that conditioning Samagra Shiksha funds on NEP and PM SHRI compliance was unconstitutional; the Court declined to grant an urgent hearing in mid-2025, leaving the matter unresolved. Political leaders on both sides have continued to trade public statements, with Chief Minister Stalin reaffirming in August 2025 that the state's language policy will not change, and Union government representatives maintaining that NEP 2020 imposes no language and that the funding condition relates to overall policy adoption rather than language specifically.

2. Maharashtra's 2025 Hindi Controversy

A parallel controversy unfolded in Maharashtra, illustrating that resistance to a compulsory third language is not confined to Tamil Nadu or to the Hindi–non-Hindi axis in the way it is sometimes framed. In April 2025, the Devendra Fadnavis-led state government issued a government resolution making Hindi a compulsory third language from Classes 1 to 5 in Marathi- and English-medium schools, citing alignment with NEP 2020. The order departed from the state's earlier practice, under which only Marathi and English had been compulsory in the early primary years.

The decision triggered swift and broad-based opposition, notably uniting the rival Shiv Sena (UBT) faction led by Uddhav Thackeray and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) led by Raj Thackeray — two factions whose relationship has otherwise been openly hostile — around the shared cause of protecting Marathi linguistic identity. Facing criticism from across the political spectrum, the government initially amended the order in June 2025 to make Hindi "optional" rather than compulsory, but this concession did not satisfy opponents, who continued to organise protests, including a planned mass rally in Thane. On June 29, 2025, the state cabinet withdrew both government resolutions entirely and announced the formation of a review committee, chaired by educationist Narendra Jadhav, to recommend a way forward on language policy in primary schools.

The Maharashtra episode differs from Tamil Nadu's in important respects. It did not involve central funding conditions, was resolved within roughly ten weeks rather than persisting for years, and involved a state government that broadly supports the Union government politically reversing its own order under domestic pressure rather than resisting central pressure. What the two episodes share is a common political logic: the perception that mandating any additional language provokes a strong reaction when it is seen as encroaching on an existing linguistic identity, and that regional-language pride can mobilise cross-party coalitions that a central policy, however flexibly worded, may not have anticipated.

3. Other States and the Wider Pattern

Beyond Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, several other states have expressed reservations about aspects of NEP 2020's language and funding architecture, though none has generated a confrontation of comparable intensity. Kerala's government has objected to what it describes as the use of Samagra Shiksha funds as a "tool" to compel adoption of the PM SHRI scheme, a criticism that overlaps with, but is analytically distinct from, objections to the TLF itself. West Bengal has likewise faced disbursement delays linked to non-participation in PM SHRI. Karnataka, while not refusing the TLF outright, has been cited in research literature as having uneven implementation on the ground — with only a small fraction of primary schools

operating functioning bilingual sections — illustrating that even states without an active political dispute over the formula face substantial gaps between policy and classroom practice.

Implementation Challenges

Even where a state accepts the Three-Language Formula in principle, translating it into functioning classroom practice faces a common set of obstacles that recur across the research literature on NEP 2020's language provisions. These are:

1. Teacher Availability and Training

The most frequently cited constraint is the shortage of teachers qualified to teach in, or through, three languages, particularly in regions with limited pre-existing multilingual teaching capacity. Recruiting and training teachers fluent enough in a regional language, Hindi, and English to teach effectively — and, at the foundational stage, to teach content through the child's home language rather than merely teaching that language as a subject — requires sustained investment in teacher education that many states have not yet mobilised at scale. Research on Karnataka's experience, for instance, has found that only a small proportion of primary schools have established genuinely bilingual sections, reflecting how far implementation still lags behind policy intent even in a state without an active political standoff.

2. Curriculum and Teaching-Learning Materials

Developing quality textbooks, assessments, and teaching-learning materials in dozens of home languages and dialects is a large and ongoing undertaking. India's linguistic diversity — with hundreds of languages and many more dialects recognised across its states — means that "mother tongue" instruction cannot rely on a small, fixed set of materials; many communities' home languages have little or no existing body of standardised educational content, and producing it requires linguistic expertise, community consultation, and time that outpaces the policy's implementation timelines.

3. Urban Migration and Linguistic Mobility

A related and increasingly significant challenge concerns India's highly mobile urban population. A child whose family has moved from one linguistic region to another may find that the local "mother tongue" of instruction is not, in fact, their own home language, complicating a policy designed around the assumption of relatively stable, regionally rooted linguistic communities. Schools in large, migrant-heavy cities face the practical difficulty of accommodating multiple home languages within a single classroom, a scenario the mother-tongue-instruction model does not straightforwardly address.

4. Resource, Infrastructure, and Fiscal Constraints

Multilingual education is resource-intensive: it requires more teachers per school, a wider range of instructional materials, and often smaller or better-differentiated classes than a single-medium system. States with constrained education budgets face difficult trade-offs between expanding language provision and meeting other pressing needs, such as basic infrastructure or foundational numeracy programmes. The Tamil Nadu dispute illustrates how these resource constraints can become entangled with the political dispute itself: a state that is already reluctant to adopt the TLF on policy grounds has additional reason for reluctance once compliance is also a precondition for receiving funds it would otherwise use to address these same resource gaps.

5. Political and Federal Friction

Finally, and cutting across the other challenges, is the recurring friction between central policy-setting and state-level implementation in a domain — school education — that sits on the Concurrent List of the Constitution, meaning both the Union and state governments have legislative competence. Language

policy is particularly sensitive to this friction because, unlike many other educational reforms, it intersects directly with regional identity and electoral politics. Both the Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra episodes show that language decisions, once politicised, are difficult to implement through administrative directive alone; they require a degree of negotiated consent that a uniform national formula, however flexibly worded, cannot guarantee on its own.

Federalism, Language Rights, and the Constitution

The recurring disputes over the TLF cannot be fully understood without reference to India's constitutional architecture on language and education. Article 29 protects the right of any section of citizens with a distinct language, script, or culture to conserve it, while Article 350A directs states to provide facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage for linguistic minorities. The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists the officially recognised languages, a list that has itself been a site of political contestation as communities seek recognition for their languages.

Education was moved from the State List to the Concurrent List by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, giving the Union government a formal role in setting national policy while leaving states with primary responsibility for implementation. This shared jurisdiction is precisely what makes disputes like the Tamil Nadu standoff constitutionally complex: the Union government argues that NEP 2020 and its associated schemes fall within its legitimate policy-setting role, while Tamil Nadu argues that conditioning funds on adoption of a specific policy — particularly one bearing on language, an area with strong state-level constitutional protections — amounts to coercion that exceeds the spirit of cooperative federalism. The Supreme Court's eventual disposition of Tamil Nadu's Article 131 suit, whenever it is decided, is likely to have significant implications not only for language policy but for the broader question of how far the Union government may use conditional grants to secure state compliance with policies in concurrent domains.

Recommendations

Several measures could reduce the recurring conflict around the TLF while preserving its underlying pedagogical goals.

First, delink core school-funding schemes such as Samagra Shiksha from language-policy compliance specifically, while retaining separate, opt-in incentive schemes for states that choose to adopt the full NEP 2020 framework, including PM SHRI. Tying basic funding for teacher salaries and infrastructure to a politically contentious policy choice conflates two different kinds of central-state relationship and has, in Tamil Nadu's case, entrenched rather than resolved the underlying dispute.

Second, invest disproportionately in the areas of implementation that are least politically contested but most practically difficult: teacher training in multilingual pedagogy, the development of quality materials in a wider range of home languages, and support for schools serving migrant populations. These investments would improve outcomes regardless of how any given state resolves the question of which three languages to teach.

Third, build in more formal, ongoing consultation with state governments before language-related directives are issued, rather than relying on post hoc negotiation after a policy has already provoked opposition, as occurred in Maharashtra. A standing intergovernmental mechanism specifically for language-in-education questions could allow disagreements to surface and be addressed before administrative orders are issued.

Fourth, separate the evaluation of mother-tongue-medium instruction, which enjoys substantial research support and relatively broad acceptance, from the more contested question of which second and third languages a state or student should study, so that debate over the latter does not stall progress on the former.

Conclusion

The Three-Language Formula illustrates how a policy framed in the technical language of pedagogy and flexibility can nonetheless become one of the most politically charged issues in Indian education. NEP 2020's emphasis on mother-tongue instruction and state autonomy represents a genuine, evidence-informed attempt to improve foundational learning outcomes, and the underlying case for early education in a child's home language is well supported by research. Yet the formula's implementation has been shaped as much by the history of the 1965 anti-Hindi agitations and the ongoing politics of regional identity as by pedagogical considerations, as the confrontations in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra since 2025 demonstrate. A more durable path forward likely requires separating the funding of basic school infrastructure from compliance with contested language choices, investing in the practical capacity — teachers, materials, and infrastructure — that any version of multilingual education requires, and treating language policy as a domain where sustained, genuine consultation with states is not an optional courtesy but a precondition for successful implementation.

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