

Rethinking Tamil Nadu's Two-Language Policy: Diglossia, Learning Outcomes, and the Limits of Language Count

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Abstract

The renewed conflict between the Union government's three-language formula under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 — operationalised in 2026 through the Central Board of Secondary Education's mandate that every Class IX student study three languages, designated R1, R2, and R3 — and Tamil Nadu's decades-old two-language policy has been argued almost entirely in terms of language count. This article contends that language count is not the primary explanatory variable. State-level comparisons of English Proficiency Index scores, employability rankings, and foundational-literacy data (ASER, NAS) show that Kerala's trilingual formula produces learning and proficiency outcomes comparable to, and on some measures better than, Tamil Nadu's bilingual formula, while several trilingual Hindi-belt states perform far worse than either. The article relocates the genuine pedagogical burden facing the Tamil-medium learner in the diglossic gap between written Tamil (*Eḷuttut Tamiḷ*) and spoken Tamil (*Pēccut Tamiḷ*) — a burden documented in the reading-acquisition literature and, following Ferguson (1959) and Fishman (1967), structurally comparable to but wider than the High–Low register gaps of Swiss German and Arabic. A second, independently evidenced critique concerns implementation capacity: teacher shortages, compressed timelines, and incomplete materials, illustrated by Karnataka's third-language staffing and failure statistics and by the Supreme Court's scrutiny of the CBSE's 2026 rollout. The article proposes a framework relating three analytically distinct burdens — cognitive, diglossic, and administrative — and shows that the empirical record supports only the latter two. The analysis suggests that policy attention is better directed toward the quality of first-language literacy instruction across Tamil's register gap, and toward implementation readiness,

than toward the number of languages specified in policy — though the pedagogical response indicated by the diglossic account itself remains to be validated empirically.

Keywords: three-language formula, two-language policy, Tamil Nadu, diglossia, Ferguson, National Education Policy, language planning, sociolinguistics, learning outcomes

1. Introduction

On 15 May 2026 the Central Board of Secondary Education issued Circular Acad-33/2026, making the study of three languages compulsory for Class IX students from 1 July 2026. The circular designates the three as R1, R2, and R3 — the student's first, second, and third curricular languages respectively — and requires that at least two of the three be drawn from the officially recognised Bhārtīya Bhāṣās. It is the latest operational form of a policy lineage stretching back to 1968, and it has reopened a dispute Tamil Nadu has sustained for almost sixty years. The state's Education Minister, under the newly formed government of Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay, moved swiftly to reaffirm that Tamil Nadu would continue teaching only Tamil and English. The Supreme Court has since declined interim relief against the CBSE circular. It has, however, tagged the matter for detailed hearing and required the Union government to submit a readiness report — an indication that the dispute remains legally as well as politically unsettled at the time of writing.

The public argument has proceeded almost entirely on a single axis: whether the correct number of languages for a Tamil Nadu schoolchild is two or three. Proponents of the three-language formula invoke national integration, labour mobility, and the cognitive benefits of multilingual education. Opponents invoke cognitive overload and the state's founding anti-Hindi agitations. Both sides treat language count as the operative causal variable. This article tests that assumption against comparative evidence and finds it wanting.

The article makes one negative claim and two positive claims. The negative claim is that language count, considered on its own across the major comparator states, fails even a basic sorting test in which policy predicts outcome; it therefore cannot carry the causal weight both sides of the public debate assign to it. The first positive claim is that the genuine linguistic burden facing the Tamil-medium learner is better located in Tamil's own diglossia — the structural gap between the literary register of the textbook and the spoken register of the home. The second positive claim is that the strongest practical objection to the 2026 mandate is administrative: a compulsory third language is being introduced without adequate lead time, trained teachers, or materials, in a school system whose general implementation capacity is already well documented as strained.

It is worth stating what would count as evidence for the positive causal claim this article does not make — namely, that language count causes better or worse outcomes. A defensible claim of that kind would require a comparison holding constant, or statistically controlling for, prior socioeconomic and infrastructural investment across states. It would require longitudinal or quasi-experimental data tracking the same cohort before and after a language-policy change, rather than cross-sectional snapshots of states that differ on many dimensions at once. And it would require a specified mechanism — instructional-time displacement, genuine cognitive load, or some other pathway — through which an additional language would produce the outcome in question. None of the evidence reviewed in Section 3 meets this bar. What that evidence does establish is the weaker but still useful negative finding above, which is sufficient to shift the burden of proof back onto those who invoke language count causally.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the three-language formula's history and Tamil Nadu's recurrent refusal of it. Section 3 tests the language-count hypothesis against comparative state data, including a direct engagement with Kerala as the strongest challenge to this article's own argument. Section 4 develops Tamil diglossia as the better-evidenced linguistic account of the burden Tamil-medium learners face. Section 5 examines the administrative evidence, which this article treats as the strongest current basis for state resistance to the 2026 mandate. Section 6 briefly situates the dispute within Tamil Nadu's constitutional and fiscal relationship with the Union and explains why the political contest persists despite the weakness of its pedagogical framing. Section 7 proposes a framework relating the cognitive, diglossic, and administrative burdens to one another. Section 8 concludes with the article's policy implications, and Section 9 states its limitations and the studies that should follow.

2. The Three-Language Formula: History and Recurring Contestation

The idea that Indian schoolchildren ought to study three languages predates the Republic's education-policy apparatus. The University Education Commission first proposed a three-language requirement in its 1949 report, comparing it to the multilingual education systems of Belgium and Switzerland. The Commission acknowledged that Hindi held no inherent linguistic superiority over Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, or the other scheduled languages — several of which it recognised as possessing a longer literary history than Hindi — while nonetheless anticipating Hindi's eventual primacy as the medium of inter-state communication. This tension, formal acknowledgment of linguistic parity alongside an assumption of Hindi's eventual national role, recurs with little modification in the 2026 dispute over whether CBSE policy treats English as a “foreign” language relative to Hindi and the other scheduled languages.

The Education Commission of 1964–66 (the Kothari Commission) recommended a graduated three-language formula, adopted in the 1968 National Policy Resolution: Hindi, English, and a modern Indian language in Hindi-speaking states; the regional language, Hindi, and English elsewhere. Tamil Nadu, under Chief Minister C. N. Annadurai, declined to implement it. Annadurai's objection turned on an asymmetry: non-Hindi states would be required to learn a link language that Hindi-speaking states were not symmetrically required to learn in return, and he reportedly indicated willingness to accept the formula only if every state adopted it uniformly — a condition that has never obtained. Tamil Nadu's enduring two-language policy dates from this refusal. Schiffman (1998) later observed that the formula has been honoured more in the breach than in practice nationally — that is, most states have implemented it partially, unevenly, or nominally — with English consolidating as India's de facto instrumental language in the absence of a genuinely national one. The 1986 National Policy on Education reiterated the 1968 formula without substantive revision; NEP 2020 supplanted it with a restated commitment to multilingual education, now operationalised through the CBSE's R1–R2–R3 framework. Tamil Nadu's institutional response in 2026 — immediate and framed as a non-negotiable commitment rather than a policy under review — reproduces Annadurai's posture almost without modification, despite a complete change of ruling party between the 2021 and 2026 assemblies. This continuity across party lines suggests the opposition draws on a stable stratum of the state's political culture, a point Section 6 returns to.

Karnataka and Kerala are the two principal comparator cases within the same NEP 2020 framework, and they diverge sharply from Tamil Nadu and from each other. Karnataka formally implements the three-language formula but has experienced acute friction specifically over Hindi: in the 2024–25 SSLC examinations, 1.42 lakh students — 19.72 per cent of those who sat the Hindi paper — failed. Kerala implements the same formula (Malayalam, Hindi, English) with markedly less political friction, a divergence observers attribute to Kerala's particular history of educational reform rather than to any difference in the formula's inherent difficulty. As Section 3 shows, this divergence in political friction is not matched by a corresponding divergence in learning outcomes between Kerala and Tamil Nadu — which is already suggestive that the causal weight commonly assigned to language count is misplaced.

Why, then, has this specific dispute remained unresolved for almost sixty years, surviving changes of government, party, and — as of May 2026 — the entry of an entirely new political formation into power in Tamil Nadu? The political science literature supplies a more adequate answer than pedagogy can. Brass (1974) treats language demands in India as a durable instrument of elite mobilization and centre–state bargaining, one whose political utility does not depend on its

pedagogical correctness. Ramaswamy (1997) goes further, showing that Tamil has functioned in the state's political culture since the late nineteenth century as an object of affective devotion in its own right — a mother-figure to be protected — rather than merely an instrumental medium whose adequacy could be settled by literacy data. Read against this literature, Tamil Nadu's opposition to the three-language formula is not best modelled as a policy position awaiting better data, but as an identity claim for which pedagogical argument, including the argument advanced here, is unlikely to be dispositive on its own. The remainder of this article nonetheless works through the empirical and sociolinguistic terrain that public argument has largely bypassed, on the grounds that clarifying what the pedagogical evidence does and does not show remains worthwhile even where it will not settle the underlying political contest.

3. Testing the Empirical Claim: Does Language Count Predict Outcomes?

If the three-language formula imposes the cognitive burden its critics allege, trilingual states should show measurably worse outcomes than bilingual Tamil Nadu on comparable measures. If it confers the advantages its proponents allege, trilingual states should outperform Tamil Nadu. Table 1 assembles the comparative evidence needed to test both predictions.

A word on method is required before the data are read. The comparative state evidence is used here not to estimate the causal effect of language count, but to test a much weaker proposition: whether language count is at least a plausible first-order *sorting* variable — whether knowing a state's formal language policy allows one to predict, even coarsely, where it falls among high-performing and low-performing states. If a variable fails even this coarse sorting test, the burden shifts to its defenders to show why it should nonetheless be treated as causally primary. This is a plausibility test, not a regression exercise, and Section 3.4 explains why a formal regression is not statistically meaningful for this variable.

The outcome measures in Table 1 are of three distinct kinds, and they are not interchangeable. First, English-related outcomes — the EF English Proficiency Index and graduate-employability rankings — bear on the claim that a state's language policy affects its students' eventual command of English and labour-market readiness; they say nothing directly about first-language literacy. Second, foundational-literacy outcomes — ASER's reading assessments — bear on early reading acquisition in the child's first language; they say nothing about English or employability. Third, school-achievement outcomes — the National Achievement Survey (NAS) — measure subject-matter learning across the curriculum, which is affected by language policy only indirectly, through the medium and quality of instruction. Each measure is used below only for the claim it can actually support, and conclusions are not transferred across the three kinds.

Table 1. State-Level Comparative Indicators by Formal Language Policy

State	Formal Policy	EF EPI Score	ASER 2024: Class 5 Govt. Reading (%)	NAS 2021 Relative Standing
Tamil Nadu	Two (Tamil, English)	540	37%	Below national average (Class 8 mathematics/science; Class 10 science)
Kerala	Three (Malayalam, Hindi, English)	537	>64%	Above national average
Punjab	Three	498	66%	Above national average; top-ranked in several subjects
Karnataka	Three (Kannada, Hindi, English)	517	— (not separately reported in sources reviewed)	— (not separately reported)
Uttar Pradesh	Three	399	Below national average despite 2022–24 improvement	Below national average
Bihar	Three	445	— (qualitatively “struggling” in sources reviewed)	Below national average
Madhya Pradesh	Three	460	— (qualitatively “struggling” in sources reviewed)	— (not separately reported)
National average	—	490	44.8%	—

Note. EF EPI figures are drawn from a single edition's state fact sheet to preserve internal comparability across rows; other editions place Tamil Nadu and Kerala within a few points of one another but occasionally reverse their relative order, which does not affect the argument made here. ASER figures denote the percentage of Class 5 government-school students able to read a Class 2-level text; all ASER and NAS figures cited in this article refer to government schools unless otherwise stated. The national-average row is included as the reference point against which the state figures are read in Sections 3.1–3.2. A dash indicates that the sources reviewed did not report a directly comparable disaggregated figure for that cell; these gaps are noted rather than filled by estimation.

3.1 English proficiency and employability

Kerala and Tamil Nadu occupy adjacent positions at the top of the EF EPI state ranking, separated by single-digit margins, and both stand far ahead of the Hindi-belt states implementing the same trilingual formula as Kerala: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh together occupy the

bottom of Table 1's EPI column. This pattern does not support language count as an explanatory variable in either direction. If trilingualism depressed English acquisition, Kerala's proximity to Tamil Nadu would be hard to explain. If trilingualism enhanced it, Uttar Pradesh's position near the bottom — despite nominally studying the same three languages as Kerala — would be equally hard to explain.

The India Skills Report 2025 shows the same pattern for graduate employability. Kerala ranks first among Indian states; Tamil Nadu sits immediately behind it. Two states at the top of this ranking hold opposite positions on the R1–R2–R3 question, which is difficult to reconcile with any strong claim that language count primarily determines graduate employability.

3.2 Foundational learning outcomes: the inconvenient finding

Here the pattern complicates any straightforward defence of the two-language policy on efficiency grounds. ASER 2024 found that only 37 per cent of Tamil Nadu's Class 5 government-school students could read a Class 2-level text, well below the national average shown in Table 1. Kerala, by contrast, is reported in the same survey round as leading the country in foundational literacy, with more than 64 per cent of its Class 5 government-school students reading at or above the benchmark; Punjab reaches 66 per cent.

One interpretive caution should be entered immediately, because it anticipates the argument of Section 4. What ASER's Tamil reading task assesses is, unavoidably, reading in the *literary* register of Tamil — the register of the printed test card — not the spoken register the child commands natively. To the extent that Tamil's High–Low register gap is as wide as the sociolinguistic literature holds it to be, a low score on such a task is compatible with two quite different situations: children who cannot read, and children who can decode but stumble at the register boundary. The composite figure cannot distinguish them. Tamil Nadu's strikingly low ASER figure is therefore at least consistent with the diglossic account developed in Section 4 — though the measure itself cannot distinguish diglossic difficulty from broader literacy failure, and the figure is read here as compatible with that account rather than as evidence for it.

NAS 2021 places Tamil Nadu among the lowest-scoring states nationally in Class 8 mathematics and science, and among the states recording sub-200 mean scores (out of 500) in Class 10 science. Kerala was among a small group of states — with Punjab and Rajasthan — that outperformed the national average across most subjects in the same survey. Two qualifications matter. First, NAS 2021 excluded several Tamil Nadu districts from sampling owing to a natural calamity that year, a data-quality concern independent of any policy question; the Tamil Nadu NAS figures should be read as suggestive rather than definitive pending a methodologically unimpaired round (this

limitation is restated in Section 9). Second, and more important for this article's argument, neither ASER nor NAS supports attributing Tamil Nadu's foundational-literacy shortfall to its own language policy, since the weakest-performing comparator on the same measures — Uttar Pradesh — implements the three-language formula, not the two-language policy.

What ASER and NAS most plausibly indicate is a literacy problem internal to Tamil Nadu's own primary-school system. Two levels of that problem must be kept apart. The state may have a general, system-level weakness in early literacy instruction, of the kind the state-capacity literature reviewed in Section 5 documents across much of India; and within that general weakness, Tamil's own register structure may impose an additional, language-specific burden that composite reading measures cannot isolate. Section 4 argues for the second claim without denying the first — and neither is a claim about the state's language-count policy as such.

3.3 The strongest challenge to this argument: Kerala

Kerala is the strongest available challenge to the position defended here, and it deserves direct engagement rather than passing mention. A defender of the three-language formula could argue that Kerala's strong outcomes do not show language count is irrelevant; they show that a well-resourced, well-sequenced trilingual implementation works, and that Tamil Nadu's own weaker foundational-literacy figures might be still weaker under a comparably imposed trilingual mandate. On this reading, the two-language policy functions as a mitigating factor rather than a neutral one, and Kerala's success is evidence for trilingualism done well rather than evidence against language count as a variable.

This is a coherent counter-hypothesis, and it cannot be excluded definitively; no dataset reviewed here permits a counterfactual estimate of how Tamil Nadu would perform under a different formula, imposed at a different pace, with different resourcing. Three considerations nonetheless weigh against it. First, if trilingualism per se were the operative mechanism behind Kerala's strong outcomes, the same mechanism should also lift Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, which have implemented the identical formula for far longer than the current dispute has existed; it manifestly has not. Second, Kerala's comparative advantage over Tamil Nadu is strongest precisely on the measure — foundational literacy in the child's first language — that the diglossia argument of Section 4 predicts would be least affected by the number of additional languages studied and most affected by prior investment in first-language pedagogy; and Kerala's literacy achievements substantially predate NEP 2020. Third, the burden-of-proof asymmetry noted in Section 1 applies symmetrically: a claim that trilingualism causes Kerala's strong outcomes requires a specified mechanism and a comparison controlling for Kerala's much longer institutional investment in

literacy infrastructure, which the proponents of that claim have not supplied any more than this article has supplied a mechanism for the opposite claim.

The conclusion to draw from the Kerala case should therefore be stated without ambiguity: Kerala does not demonstrate that trilingualism causes superior outcomes; it demonstrates only that strong outcomes are compatible with trilingual schooling when supported by stronger literacy infrastructure. That is precisely the negative finding this article defends, not a refutation of it.

3.4 Descriptive statistics and the limits of formal testing

Table 1's EF EPI column also supports simple descriptive comparison. Among the six three-language comparator states (Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh), the mean EF EPI score is 476.0, with a range of 138 points (399 to 537). The width of that range is itself the interpretively significant fact: it shows that formal language policy is compatible with radically different outcomes, which is exactly what one would expect if implementation quality rather than policy content were doing the causal work. Tamil Nadu's own score of 540 sits 64 points above the six-state trilingual mean — but only 3 points above Kerala, the strongest performer within that cohort. Tamil Nadu does not outperform the three-language formula so much as it performs at the level of that formula's best-implemented case and well above its worst-implemented cases.

A natural further step would be a formal correlation or regression of the indicators in Table 1 against language count. That step is not attempted here. Among India's twenty-eight states, only Tamil Nadu formally implements a two-language policy; every other major state, whatever the friction over its implementation, nominally follows some version of the three-language formula. A predictor variable with this little cross-sectional variance — effectively one treated unit against many controls that are not themselves uniform in outcome — cannot support a meaningful regression coefficient, and a coefficient computed from it would create a false impression of statistical rigour. Because Tamil Nadu is the only major state that varies on the policy variable, the correct comparison is the qualitative best-versus-worst comparison *within* the three-language cohort that Sections 3.1–3.3 undertake — a comparison that isolates implementation quality as the operative variable precisely because language count is held constant across it.

4. Relocating the Burden: Tamil Diglossia as a Linguistic Fact Independent of Language Count

If language count does not adequately explain the outcome pattern in Section 3, a more linguistically precise account of whatever genuine burden Tamil-medium schoolchildren

experience is required. Tamil sociolinguistics supplies one directly relevant to Tamil Nadu's foundational-literacy figures: the diglossic relationship between written Tamil (*Eluttut Tamil*, எழுத்துத் தமிழ்), the register of textbooks, formal writing, broadcast news, and public speech, and spoken Tamil (*Pēccut Tamil*, பேச்சுத் தமிழ்), the register acquired natively in the home. Diglossia is offered here as the best available language-specific account of that burden — a ground for reframing the debate — not as a completed causal demonstration, and not as a monocausal explanation of Tamil Nadu's literacy figures, which Section 3.2 has already located partly at the system level.

Ferguson's foundational 1959 paper coined “diglossia” for communities in which two varieties of a language serve complementary social functions: a High (H) variety reserved for writing, formal education, and public discourse, and a Low (L) variety used in ordinary conversation, the two differing not merely in style but in grammar, lexicon, and often phonology. Ferguson's four original cases were Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole/French; Tamil was not among them, but Britto's (1986) dedicated monograph and Schiffman's (1998, 1999) subsequent work have established Tamil as a well-documented additional case, with an H–L structural distance both scholars treat as unusually wide relative to Ferguson's original examples. Fishman's (1967) extension of the concept — to cases where H and L interact with bilingualism within a single community, and where the child acquires L natively and meets H substantially through schooling — describes the Tamil situation exactly: Tamil's diglossia is not a static sociolinguistic backdrop but an active feature of the child's early literacy experience.

This is not merely an impressionistic observation. Comparative reading-acquisition research on Tamil- and Malay-speaking children in Singapore — drawing on Annamalai and Steever's (1998) description of Tamil phonology and morphology, and extended by Nag and Narayanan (2019) on orthographic knowledge and early reading and spelling development — characterises Tamil as a case of “extreme diglossia,” a designation reflecting the unusually wide gap between the child's home register and the school register relative to comparable diglossic languages. The same body of work notes a striking asymmetry of scholarly attention: spelling errors attributable to diglossic interference have been documented in depth for Malay-speaking children, while comparable published work on Tamil-speaking children remains sparse, notwithstanding a linguistic burden that is, on the account above, at least as severe in the Tamil case.

The evidentiary standard applied to the language-count claim in Section 1 should be applied here as well. A defensible causal claim that diglossia *impairs* Tamil literacy acquisition — rather than merely coinciding with weak literacy outcomes — would require: (a) an error-classification scheme distinguishing reading and spelling errors attributable specifically to the H–L gap from

errors attributable to orthographic complexity, instructional quality, or other confounds; (b) a longitudinal comparison of children receiving explicit H–L bridging instruction against a matched control group; and (c) a cross-linguistic benchmark — for instance, an effect-size comparison against the better-documented Malay case — locating Tamil's H–L gap on a common scale rather than describing it only qualitatively as “extreme.” This article does not supply that evidence, and no dataset gathered for it does. What the cited literature does establish is that Tamil diglossia is real, structurally wide, and plausibly consequential for early literacy — which makes the diglossic account both better evidenced and considerably more specific than the generic cognitive-overload account it is offered in place of. The generic account is contradicted by the comparative data of Section 3 and by the mainstream developmental literature on childhood multilingualism (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012); the diglossic account is supported by a dedicated, if still thin, reading-acquisition literature. Closing the remaining evidentiary gap requires the study designs specified in Section 9.

4.1 Illustrating the H–L gap

The abstract description above is easier to evaluate against concrete minimal pairs. Table 2 sets out representative High–Low contrasts across several linguistic levels, each given in Tamil script, in transliteration (following the Lehmann–Schiffman–Zvelebil conventions used throughout this article: macrons mark long vowels; subscript dots mark the retroflex consonants *ṭ*, *ṇ*, *ḷ*; *ṇ* and *ṟ* mark the alveolar nasal and rhotic respectively; and *ḷ* marks the retroflex approximant distinctive to Tamil), and in gloss. These conventions are standard in Tamil linguistics and are provided for reference; the Tamil script forms are the primary source for readers familiar with the script. The examples are based on the author's native-speaker knowledge and on the descriptions in Schiffman (1999) and Britto (1986); they illustrate the general pattern and are not phonetic transcriptions. Spoken forms are given in a broadly supra-regional colloquial variety; regional colloquials diverge further still.

Table 2. The High–Low Register Gap in Tamil: Representative Minimal Pairs

Linguistic level	Written Tamil (H)	Spoken Tamil (L)	What the contrast shows
Finite verb morphology ('he is coming')	அவன் வருகிறான் avan varukirāṇ	அவன் வர்றான் avan varrāṇ	The H present-tense marker -kir- is reduced in L; the child who says varrāṇ must learn varukirāṇ as a partly new form at school.
Neuter verb ('it is coming')	அது வருகிறது atu varukiratu	அது வருது atu varutu	H and L differ in both stem and ending; the L form is not derivable by simple sound substitution.

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Subramanian A., Ph.D. and Arulmani A.S

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Linguistic level	Written Tamil (H)	Spoken Tamil (L)	What the contrast shows
Negation ('he did not come')	அவன் வரவில்லை avaṇ varavillai	அவன் வரலே avaṇ varalē	The H negative -villai and the L negative -lē are distinct morphemes, not pronunciation variants of one another.
Case marking (locative, 'in the house')	வீட்டில் vīṭṭil	வீட்லே vīṭlē	The H locative -il corresponds to L -lē, with concomitant reduction of the stem-final geminate.
Pronoun and agreement ('when will you (pol.) come?')	நீங்கள் எப்போது வருவீர்கள்? nīṅka! eppōtu varuvīrka!?	நீங்க எப்ப வருவீங்க? nīṅka eppa varuvīṅka?	Pronoun, interrogative, and agreement suffix all differ; the whole clause must be re-learned as an H template.
Lexicon ('very'; 'water')	மிகவும் mikavum; தண்ணீர் taṇṇīr	ரொம்ப rompa; தண்ணி taṇṇi	Some H–L pairs are related by regular reduction (taṇṇīr ~ taṇṇi); others are lexically unrelated (mikavum ~ rompa).

Note. The pedagogically important point is not any single pair but their cumulative distribution: the H–L contrast in Tamil runs through inflectional morphology, negation, case, agreement, and core lexicon simultaneously, so that the literary register confronts the beginning reader not as a spelling convention over the language she speaks but as a partly distinct grammatical system.

4.2 Diglossia beyond Tamil: a comparative typology

Situating Tamil within Ferguson's broader typology shows that the H–L phenomenon is not uniquely Tamil, even as it highlights the unusual width of the Tamil gap. Table 3 places Tamil alongside two of Ferguson's classic cases.

Table 3. Diglossia Across Language Communities (after Ferguson 1959)

Speech community	High (H) variety	Low (L) variety	Typical domains of H	Typical domains of L
German-speaking Switzerland	Standard (written) German	Swiss German (Schweizerdeutsch)	Writing, formal education, national broadcasting	Home, everyday conversation, informal local media
Arabic-speaking communities	Classical / Modern Standard Arabic (fuṣḥā)	Colloquial dialectal Arabic ('āmmiyya)	Religious and formal text, pan-Arab broadcasting	Home, street, informal conversation
Tamil-speaking communities	Written Tamil (Eḷuttut Tamil)	Spoken Tamil (Pēccut Tamil)	Textbooks, formal writing, public speech, news broadcasting	Home, informal conversation, most spoken media

Note. Both Britto (1986) and Schiffman (1998) treat the Tamil H–L structural distance — extending to morphology and syntax, not only phonology and lexicon, as Table 2 illustrates — as wider than the Swiss German case and broadly comparable in scope to the Arabic case, though systematic cross-linguistic measurement of H–L “distance” remains methodologically underdeveloped across all three.

4.3 Pedagogical implications

Treating diglossia rather than language count as the primary linguistic variable carries implications the current policy debate has not explored. Cummins’s (1979) linguistic-interdependence hypothesis, developed originally for bilingual education, holds that strong literacy development in the child’s first language and register provides the foundation on which additional-language literacy is subsequently built, rather than competing with it for a fixed cognitive resource. Applied to the Tamil case, this suggests that strengthening H-variety literacy instruction within Tamil itself — rather than reducing exposure to other languages — is the intervention most directly indicated by the ASER and NAS shortfalls documented in Section 3. Skutnabb-Kangas’s (2000) work on mother-tongue education and Hornberger’s (2002) continua-of-biliteracy framework point to a further implication: assessment instruments such as ASER and NAS, which report a single composite “Tamil” reading score, may be obscuring exactly the H–L distinction this section identifies as pedagogically central — the possibility already raised in Section 3.2. Disaggregating H-variety literacy from L-variety oral competence as separate assessment targets would make future survey rounds considerably more diagnostically useful.

If the diglossic burden is real, the obvious pedagogical response is explicit bridge-register instruction: teaching the systematic correspondences between spoken and written Tamil directly — as register, not as error — rather than requiring children to induce them unaided from exposure to literary texts. The design, sequencing, and empirical validation of such an intervention, however, lie beyond the scope of the present article; Section 9 specifies the study that would be required before any such curriculum could responsibly be adopted.

5. The Administrative Burden: Implementation Deficits as the Empirically Strongest Critique

The cognitive burden, then, is poorly evidenced, and the diglossic burden is real but misattributed to language count. A third burden withstands scrutiny on its own terms: the administrative cost of introducing a compulsory third language without adequate lead time, trained teachers, or materials. This is a claim about implementation capacity, not about trilingualism as a linguistic matter, and the evidence for it is considerably more direct than for either of the other two burdens.

Table 4. Karnataka's Third-Language (Hindi) Implementation Indicators

Indicator	Figure
Sanctioned Hindi-teacher posts, government schools	5,060
Vacant posts	1,528 (approx. 30%)
Class X (SSLC) Hindi failure rate, 2024–25	19.72% of students who sat the paper (approx. 1.42 lakh students)
Subsequent policy response	Third-language (R3) evaluation moved to a non-aggregated grading system from 2025–26, itself contested by the state Governor

Against a 30 percent staffing shortfall, the SSLC Hindi failure rate is easier to attribute to instructional capacity than to any intrinsic difficulty of trilingual acquisition. Other explanations deserve acknowledgment: low student motivation toward a subject perceived as externally imposed, curriculum and assessment design, and the well-known tendency of pass rates to reflect examination policy as much as learning. None of these can be excluded on the available data. Teacher shortage is nonetheless the most directly evidenced contributor, and likely one of the central drivers of the failure pattern, for two reasons: it is the only candidate explanation directly measured (the vacancy figures are administrative fact, not inference), and it is the explanation contemporaneous Karnataka reporting itself converges on — parents and educationists describing Hindi treated by under-resourced schools as a low-priority examination subject rather than a genuinely taught language, a description of pedagogical neglect rather than cognitive overload.

Karnataka's vacancy rate is, moreover, not an idiosyncratic failure specific to third-language instruction; it instantiates a documented general pattern in Indian state capacity for education delivery — chronic teacher absenteeism, persistent sanctioned-post vacancies, and a recurring gap between enacted curricula and classroom-level implementation. Kremer, Chaudhury, Rogers, Muralidharan, and Hammer (2005) found roughly a quarter of government schoolteachers absent on any given day across the states surveyed; Muralidharan and Sundararaman's (2011) experimental work in Andhra Pradesh, and Pritchett's (2013) broader diagnosis of Indian schooling as a system in which formal enrolment has outpaced actual instructional capacity, point to the same structural condition. Read against this literature, Karnataka's third-language experience is not evidence that trilingual curricula are administratively harder than other curricular content; it is evidence that *any* curricular addition introduced into a system with this level of implementation capacity will tend to underperform its formal design. This reframing strengthens the administrative

argument: the CBSE's 2026 rollout is exposed to a well-documented general vulnerability of Indian education administration, which is precisely why the seven-week implementation timeline in Table 5 is analytically significant — it affords none of the slack that a system already known to underperform its formal design would need to meet even a well-designed mandate.

Table 5. Implementation Timeline of the CBSE 2026 Three-Language Mandate

Date	Event
15 May 2026	Circular Acad-33/2026 issued; three languages (R1–R2–R3) made compulsory for Class IX, effective 1 July 2026
27 May 2026	Supreme Court issues notice to the Centre, CBSE, and NCERT; seeks a logistical-readiness report; declines to stay the circular
30 June 2026	Deadline for schools to update R1–R3 language offerings on the CBSE's OASIS portal
1 July 2026	Mandate takes effect for Class IX; schools directed to use Class VI R3 textbooks as interim material pending dedicated Class IX texts
14–16 July 2026	Supreme Court scheduled to hear detailed arguments, including the Centre's readiness report

A coalition of parents and educators, organised as the petitioner Friends of People for Active Democracy, brought this implementation gap before the Supreme Court, arguing not against the three-language policy in principle but specifically against the adequacy of its preparation. The bench under Chief Justice Surya Kant, while declining to stay the circular, required a formal readiness report from the Union government — a judicial acknowledgment, short of injunctive relief, that the implementation concern has sufficient substance to warrant scrutiny.

5.1 The counterfactual of a well-resourced rollout

Kerala's comparatively low level of political friction over its own three-language implementation, noted in Section 2, is instructive here. Kerala did not introduce Malayalam, Hindi, and English on a seven-week timeline against teacher-vacancy rates comparable to Karnataka's. Its implementation, whatever its imperfections, has been sufficiently gradual and resourced that Kerala's political class has not needed to make administrative failure central to its position — unlike Karnataka, where prominent educationists and the Kannada Development Authority have explicitly framed opposition around teacher shortages and falling pass rates rather than around trilingualism as a linguistic proposition. The comparison suggests that political resistance to the three-language formula across India's southern states correlates more closely with implementation adequacy than with any state-level difference in underlying attitudes toward multilingual

education. Tamil Nadu's deeper and more consistent resistance is the evident exception, rooted in a political history considerably older than NEP 2020 and not resolvable by improved administration alone. Separating the administrable objection from the historically entrenched one therefore matters: the former is, in principle, curable by better sequencing and staffing; the latter is not and treating them as a single undifferentiated grievance makes the curable objection appear as intractable as the political one.

Finally, the administrative argument applies to Tamil Nadu with particular force, and not merely by Karnataka's proxy. Because the state has taught only Tamil and English for nearly six decades, it possesses no routine third-language infrastructure across its school system: no cadre of trained third-language teachers in government schools, no timetable slots, no graded materials, and no assessment apparatus for an R3 subject. Any rapid transition would therefore require teacher recruitment or redeployment at scale, timetable restructuring, materials development, and multi-year sequencing — a heavier lift than in states that already nominally operate the formula. The administrative objection accordingly stands on its own: even a reader who accepted the three-language policy in principle, and who rejected every other argument in this article, would still confront an implementation problem that a seven-week circular cannot answer.

6. Why the Dispute Persists: The Constitutional Frame in Brief

If the pedagogical evidence for the language-count framing is as weak as Sections 3–5 suggest, why has the dispute proved so durable? The answer is that the schooling question functions, for both the Union and the state, substantially as a proxy for a longer-running and more consequential argument about the constitutional distribution of authority over language itself — an argument that, as the Brass and Ramaswamy literature reviewed in Section 2 indicates, has never primarily been about children's cognition at all.

The constitutional architecture can be stated briefly. Education moved from the State List to the Concurrent List (Seventh Schedule, List III, Entry 25) under the Forty-Second Amendment of 1976, the basis on which the Union claims authority to prescribe curricular content, including language requirements, even for state-administered schools. Against this, Article 350A obliges the state to endeavour to provide primary-stage instruction in the mother tongue of linguistic-minority children, and Articles 29 and 30 protect minority educational and cultural rights — provisions Tamil Nadu's advocates have periodically invoked against centrally imposed curricular language mandates. No Supreme Court ruling has yet addressed the specific question the 2026 dispute raises: whether a school-curriculum language requirement imposed through a board circular, rather than primary legislation, is a permissible exercise of Concurrent List authority. The question remains

open not because earlier rulings were ambiguous but because it has never been squarely litigated — prior language-education cases have turned on medium of instruction or minority rights rather than on the Union's authority to mandate curricular languages. The pending petitions are framed narrowly around implementation readiness, which means the 2026 litigation is unlikely, on its current framing, to resolve the underlying federal question even if it addresses the administrative one.

The fiscal dimension operates alongside this constitutional uncertainty. Tamil Nadu's refusal to enrol its schools in the PM SHRI scheme — a centrally sponsored programme exceeding ₹27,000 crore tied to NEP 2020 standards — has been met, according to state officials, with delays in Samagra Shiksha disbursements conditioned on PM SHRI participation; Kerala, West Bengal, Delhi, and Punjab have reported comparable friction in the same funding cycle. Tamil Nadu's resistance to the 2026 CBSE mandate is best read as one instance of this broader and older federal contest — which is why a dispute that the learning-outcome evidence of Section 3 suggests could be de-escalated through better implementation has instead endured across six decades and every change of government. A fuller constitutional-law treatment falls outside this article's scope and is noted in Section 9 as a matter for separate study.

7. Disaggregating the Burdens: A Framework

The preceding sections have treated the cognitive, diglossic, and administrative burdens as analytically distinct, but their relationship to one another has so far been implicit. Table 6 makes that relationship explicit.

Table 6. A Framework Relating the Cognitive, Diglossic, and Administrative Burdens

Burden	Locus	Strength of supporting evidence	Relationship to the other burdens
Cognitive (language-count)	Number of languages studied	Weak — not supported by the state-level comparisons in Section 3 or by mainstream findings on childhood multilingualism (Adesope et al., 2010; Bialystok et al., 2012)	Frequently conflated with the diglossic burden in public debate, though empirically distinct from it
Diglossic	Internal to Tamil (the H–L register gap)	Strong — supported by dedicated sociolinguistic and reading-acquisition research (Britto 1986; Schiffman 1998, 1999; Nag & Narayanan 2019)	Exists independently of language count; not created and not obviously relieved by adding or removing a second or third language, although curricular time pressure can affect how much bridging instruction is feasible

Burden	Locus	Strength of supporting evidence	Relationship to the other burdens
Administrative	Implementation capacity: teachers, materials, timeline	Strong — supported by Karnataka staffing and failure data and by the Supreme Court's own readiness concerns	In principle resolvable independently of the other two, through better sequencing and resourcing, as the Kerala comparison in Section 5.1 suggests

The framework is not additive — this article does not claim the three burdens sum to a total “burden score” — but it clarifies three relationships public argument currently obscures. First, the diglossic and administrative burdens are largely independent in origin: a state could resolve its administrative burden through better sequencing while the diglossic burden persisted untouched, since the latter originates in Tamil's own register structure rather than in curricular administration. Second, the two nonetheless interact in one consequential direction: the diglossic burden is *magnified* by administrative deficits, because under-prepared and under-supported teachers are precisely those least able to provide the explicit H–L bridging instruction that Section 4 identifies as the indicated response — so implementation failure does not merely add a separate cost, it compounds the linguistic one. Instructional time is the related channel through which language count could touch the diglossic burden indirectly: a third language that displaces Tamil instructional hours does not create the H–L gap, but it narrows the curricular room available for bridging it — the sense in which Table 6's caveat about curricular time pressure should be read. Third, the cognitive burden, being weakly evidenced on its own terms, functions in public debate primarily as a rhetorical amplifier for the other two: objections that are actually about diglossia or administration are routinely phrased as “three languages will overload the child,” because that framing carries more immediate emotional purchase than a claim about register distance or teacher-vacancy rates, even where the latter are the better-evidenced grounds available. Recognising this substitution is a precondition for arguing Tamil Nadu's strongest case — the diglossic and administrative burdens — on its own considerable merits.

8. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article has tested, against comparative state-level evidence, the assumption shared by both sides of the 2026 dispute over Tamil Nadu's language policy: that the number of languages a child studies is the decisive variable for learning outcomes. Kerala's trilingual outcomes on English proficiency and employability rival Tamil Nadu's bilingual outcomes on the same measures, while several trilingual Hindi-belt states perform far worse than either. Tamil Nadu's own foundational-literacy figures show no advantage attributable to its bilingual policy, and on several NAS

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Subramanian A., Ph.D. and Arulmani A.S

Rethinking Tamil Nadu's Two-Language Policy: Diglossia, Learning Outcomes, and the Limits of Language Count

measures show a marked disadvantage, subject to the sampling caution stated in Sections 3.2 and 9. Section 3.3 engaged the strongest challenge to this reading — that Kerala succeeds because of, not despite, a well-implemented trilingual formula — and found it not decisively excludable but considerably less parsimonious than the account offered here.

In place of the language-count framing, Section 7's framework disaggregates three burdens currently treated as one. The cognitive burden receives little support from either the comparative data or the developmental literature on childhood multilingualism. The diglossic burden is well supported by the sociolinguistic and reading-acquisition literature on Tamil's H–L register distance, but it originates within monolingual Tamil literacy acquisition and is neither created by nor substantially relieved by any particular choice about a second or third language. The administrative burden is the most directly evidenced of the three, illustrated by Karnataka's Hindi-teacher vacancy figures and SSLC failure rates and by the Supreme Court's own request for a CBSE readiness report ahead of its July 2026 hearing.

Three implications follow, stated as implications of the analysis rather than as a policy programme. For Tamil Nadu, the analysis points inward: the most promising line of intervention on the evidence reviewed lies in explicit bridge-register instruction between spoken and written Tamil in the primary grades, and in assessment instruments that disaggregate H-variety literacy from L-variety oral competence — proposals whose direction the diglossic account indicates, but which require the empirical testing specified in Section 9 before adoption. For the Union, any language mandate, whatever its merits, requires realistic lead time, funded teacher recruitment, and completed materials before enforcement; a seven-week timeline against interim textbooks converts even a defensible policy into an administrative imposition. For Tamil linguistics, scholarly attention is more productively directed toward the diglossia question — where the literature remains thin relative to its pedagogical significance — than toward re-litigating the two-versus-three-language question on cognitive-load grounds.

The core claim can be stated concisely: the two-versus-three-language debate is analytically misframed insofar as it treats language count as the primary pedagogical variable; disaggregating the burdens would allow Tamil Nadu's genuine and well-evidenced objections — a compressed implementation timeline, conditional funding used as a compliance instrument, and a persistent literacy shortfall within Tamil itself — to be argued on their own merits, rather than routed through a language-count framing that the comparative evidence reviewed here does not sustain.

9. Limitations, Anticipated Objections, and Directions for Further Research

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Subramanian A., Ph.D. and Arulmani A.S

Rethinking Tamil Nadu's Two-Language Policy: Diglossia, Learning Outcomes, and the Limits of Language Count

Several limitations should be stated plainly, both for scholarly candour and because they mark the most useful directions for follow-up work.

First, the state-level comparisons in Section 3 are correlational, not causal, and Section 3.4 explains why a formal regression across the language-count variable is not statistically meaningful given the near-absence of cross-sectional variance outside Tamil Nadu. A properly controlled study, ideally exploiting within-state or within-district variation in the timing or intensity of three-language implementation, would be necessary to make any stronger claim than the negative finding advanced here.

Second, the NAS 2021 round's exclusion of several Tamil Nadu districts owing to a natural calamity introduces a sampling irregularity specific to that state and year, as noted in Section 3.2; conclusions resting on Tamil Nadu's NAS 2021 standing should be treated with corresponding caution pending a methodologically unimpaired round.

Third, two objections to the diglossia argument deserve explicit reply. A critic might object that Tamil Nadu's low ASER scores reflect socioeconomic factors — household poverty, first-generation learners, pandemic-era learning loss — rather than diglossia. This is partly correct and is not denied here: socioeconomic factors certainly contribute, as they do everywhere. But they cannot be the whole account, because on the standard socioeconomic indicators Tamil Nadu compares favourably with the national average, while its foundational-literacy figure falls below it; a purely socioeconomic explanation predicts the opposite ordering. The diglossic account is offered as a language-specific contributor consistent with that anomaly, not as a monocausal explanation, and only the error-classification study specified below can apportion the two. A second critic might object that the argument neglects students in English-medium and other non-Tamil-medium schools, whose numbers are substantial and growing. This is a genuine scope limitation: the diglossia argument applies directly to Tamil-medium instruction and to the Tamil-language subject taught in all streams, and its interaction with English-medium schooling — where the child faces a second-language medium *and* the Tamil H–L gap in the Tamil class — is a distinct and arguably harder problem, flagged here for separate study.

Fourth, the diglossia literature reviewed in Section 4, while well established in its qualitative dimensions since Ferguson, Fishman, Britto, and Schiffman, remains underdeveloped in the quantitative reading-acquisition tradition specifically for Tamil. The Singapore-based comparative research (Nag & Narayanan, 2019, and companion studies in the same volume) is the principal exception: it documents Tamil children's early orthographic knowledge and reading development within an explicitly diglossic frame, and it finds the published record for Tamil markedly thinner than the parallel record for Malay. The study that would close the gap can be specified concretely:

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Subramanian A., Ph.D. and Arulmani A.S

Rethinking Tamil Nadu's Two-Language Policy: Diglossia, Learning Outcomes, and the Limits of Language Count

a cluster-randomised comparison, within Tamil Nadu's government-school system, of schools receiving explicit H–L bridge-register instruction in Classes 3–4 against matched control schools, stratified by district and socioeconomic composition, with reading and spelling errors classified by whether they are attributable to the H–L gap specifically — following the error-taxonomy approach developed for Malay — and with H-register literacy and L-register oral competence assessed as separate outcomes. Until such a study exists, the pedagogical implications in Section 4.3 should be read as well-motivated hypotheses, not established findings ready for curricular adoption.

Finally, this article has confined itself to the pedagogical and sociolinguistic dimensions of a dispute that, as Section 6 notes, extends into recruitment examinations, public employment, and the constitutional distribution of authority over language policy. A fuller constitutional-law treatment of the Concurrent List question falls outside this article's scope and is left for separate treatment, ideally once the Supreme Court's pending hearing clarifies whether the 2026 litigation will engage that question directly.

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