

5. Third Language in Higher Education – Polity

The Tamil Nadu government strongly opposed the UGC’s circular mandating the teaching of a third language in higher education

Concept and Background

NEP 2020 retains the three-language formula (1968 legacy) but re-frames it as a choice-based, flexible multilingual model, not a uniform prescription. No language is to be imposed on any State is a key policy assurance repeatedly highlighted in NEP-related explanations.

Core design as per NEP framing

1. Students learn three languages, with at least two being Indian languages.
2. Choice is contextual- State/region/school ecosystem and student preference are intended to matter.

Medium of instruction emphasis – NEP encourages teaching wherever possible in home language/mother tongue/local/regional language at least till Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 and beyond.

Policy Objectives

Promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity

1. Reduce “English-only” orientation and encourage Indian language learning.
2. Support India’s cultural pluralism through language competence.

Cognitive and pedagogical rationale – Multilingual education is argued to enhance

1. Cognitive flexibility
2. Metalinguistic awareness
3. Learning transfer across subjects (especially in early years)

National integration narrative – A third language is positioned as a bridge across regions and cultures, potentially improving inter-state mobility and communication.

Employability rationale – Multilingual skills can be positioned as workforce assets, especially for–

- a. Tourism, hospitality
- b. Public services
- c. Media/communications
- d. Sales, client-facing roles
- e. Translation/localisation and the digital content economy

The UGC “Third Language in Higher Education” Trigger

Recent current-affairs reporting notes UGC issued a circular/directive pushing (or mandating, per some reports) third-language teaching in higher education, which triggered opposition—particularly from Tamil Nadu. The debate escalates because higher education has

1. Diverse course loads (professional degrees)
2. Credit constraints
3. Faculty availability challenges
4. Institutional autonomy concerns (universities vary widely in capacity)

Federalism and Political Economy of Language

Tamil Nadu’s two-language policy (Tamil + English) is a long-standing model rooted in historical anti-imposition politics and social consensus. Therefore, any higher-education “third language” push is interpreted as

1. Indirect Hindi imposition, even if formally framed as flexible choice.
2. Centre overreach, raising concerns on state autonomy in education policy.

This becomes a classic federalism friction point – Centre’s national policy vision vs States’ linguistic-cultural priorities.

Implementation Issues and Challenges

Capacity and feasibility constraints

Faculty shortage – Many institutions do not have qualified language faculty across Indian languages, especially outside major universities.

Infrastructure gaps – Language labs, content, assessment design, and scalable teaching models are uneven.

Credit and timetable overload – In professional courses (engineering, medicine, law, management), adding language credits can

- a. Increase workload
- b. Reduce room for electives
- c. Generate student resistance

Equity concerns

Marginalised learners may face a double burden – Students from weaker schooling backgrounds may struggle with

- a. Foundational proficiency in English
- b. Academic language skills needed for discipline learning
- c. Adding a third language can widen achievement gaps if supports are weak

Autonomy and governance concerns

Institutional autonomy – Universities argue curriculum design is an academic matter; “mandates” can be seen as micromanagement.

State autonomy – States with established language policies may view a uniform “third language” push as contradicting cooperative federalism.

Risk of policy backlash – If perceived as coercive, it can

1. Polarise public debate
2. Reduce acceptability of multilingualism (even when pedagogically valuable)
3. Convert an education reform into an identity conflict

Balanced Way Forward

Flexibility first – Treat third language as choice-based and credit-flexible, not one-size-fits-all.

Multiple implementation pathways – Allow

1. Bridge/online language modules (SWAYAM-like)
2. Certificate add-ons rather than compulsory core credits
3. Skill-based language tracks (basic/intermediate/advanced)

Resource provisioning – Fund faculty recruitment, visiting faculty models, and digital content creation in Indian languages.

Equity safeguards – Remedial support, diagnostic assessments, and differentiated learning tracks.

Respect state models – For two-language states, consider

1. Optional third language with incentives
2. Recognition of bilingual excellence rather than compulsion

Stakeholder consultation – UGC + States + universities should co-design a framework to avoid confrontation and improve compliance legitimacy.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/ugccircular-on-third-language-is-an-attempt-to-impose-hindi-governors-address/article70528870.ece>