ISSUE BRIEF

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THE LANGUAGE POLICY RIFT BETWEEN TAMIL NADU AND THE CENTER

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August 20, 2025

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

Introduction

One of the most prominent federal crises in Indian history is the ongoing language policy dispute between the central government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the ruling DMK party in Tamil Nadu. The three-language formula at the heart of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is seen by Tamil Nadu as a backdoor Hindi imposition that jeopardizes its linguistic sovereignty and cultural identity. As the state has refused to follow the linguistic stipulations of the NEP, the Union government has withheld Rs 2,151 crore in Samagra Shiksha grants. 40 lakh students are impacted by this impasse, which also brings to light underlying conflicts between regional autonomy and centralized nationalism that may alter India's federal system. The conflict goes beyond educational policy and represents opposing theories of federalism, the DMK's support for federal educational autonomy and the BJP's vision of centralized educational uniformity—confront each other constitutionally in the Tamil Nadu language dispute. This conflict appears in a number of interrelated areas. Politically, it symbolizes the DMK's opposition to what it portrays as the BJP's 'Hindutva policy' that marginalizes regional languages while imposing Hindi as the 'sacred' language; constitutionally, it calls into question the Center's power to tie federal funding to policy compliance without state approval;

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and educationally, the three-language formula contradicts with Tamil Nadu's historically successful two-language policy.[1] Tamil Nadu's challenge to the Center's use of "Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan funds as a tool to blackmail the state" goes beyond simple policy disagreements to the essence of Indian federalism.[2] The Tamil Nadu Supreme Court case under Article 131 seeks to clarify the constitutional limits on the central government's power over states within cooperative federalism. It seeks clarification whether the central government can impose laws or directives on states without exceeding constitutional boundaries, aiming to ensure a balanced and respectful federal relationship as envisioned by the Constitution.[3]

Historical Roots of Language Politics in Tamil Nadu

The opposition to linguistic imposition in Tamil Nadu has a long history that dates back to the colonial era. When Chief Minister C. Rajagopalachari made Hindi mandatory in schools in 1937, it sparked the first significant anti-Hindi movement. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy spearheaded protests that led to 1,198 arrests and two fatalities.[4] At least 63 people were killed in violent protests during the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation, which was crucial because Hindi was about to become India's only official language.[5] Due to the self-immolation of seven young men, Tamil politics is still influenced by potent martyrdom myths.[6] Hindi's total domination was essentially avoided by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's promise that

1 Business Today. "Tamil Nadu Govt Moves SC against Central Govt for Withholding Rs 2,291 Crore in Education Funds." *Business Today*, 21 May 2025. https://www.businesstoday.in/india/story/tamil-nadu-govt-moves-sc-against-central-govt-for-withholding-rs-2291-crore-in-education-funds-477102-2025-05-21.

2 Economic Times. "Nobody Needs to Study a Third Language; Please Throw It in Dustbin: DMK Slams BJP on NEP." *The Economic Times*, 13 March 2025. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nobody-needs-to-study-a-third-language-please-throw-it-in-dustbin-dmk-slams-bjp-on-nep/articleshow/118968411.cms.

3 India Today. "Tamil Nadu Approaches Supreme Court against Centre for Withholding Education Funds over Not Implementing NEP." *India Today*, 21 May 2025. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/law-news/story/tamil-nadu-approaches-supreme-court-against-centre-for-withholding-education-funds-over-not-implementing-nep-2727925-2025-05-21.

4 New Indian Express. "Explainer: What Is Three-Language Formula at Centre of Row between Union Govt and Tamil Nadu?" *The New Indian Express*, 12 March 2025. https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Mar/12/explainer-what-is-three-language-formula-at-centre-of-row-between-union-govt-and-tamil-nadu.

5 Nalankilli, Thanjai. *Hindi Imposition Papers, Volume 3: History of Anti-Hindi Imposition Agitations in Tamil Nadu*. Self-published PDF, 2019. https://ia904500.us.archive.org/5/items/hindi-imposition-papers-volume-3-history-of-anti-hindi-imposition-agitations-in-tamil-nadu/Hindi%20Imposition%20Papers%20(Volume%203)%20History%20of%20Anti-Hindi%20Imposition%20Agitations%20in%20Tamil%20Nadu.pdf.

6 Ellalan Padai (blog). "Student Protest against Anti-Hindi Agitation in 1965." Posted 10 December 2013. https://ellalanpadai.wordpress.com/2013/12/10/student-protest-against-anti-hindi-agitation-in-1965/.

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English would remain an associate official language.[7] Tamil Nadu became the only Indian state to never use the three-language formula after Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai formalized the state's linguistic uniqueness by enacting a two-language policy that taught exclusively Tamil and English. The state's high academic achievement and fluency in English are attributed to this distinctive educational approach, which established a viable substitute for the national language framework.

BJP's National Education and Language Agenda

What academics refer to as 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan'—an India with a single language (Hindi), one religion (Hinduism), and one cultural identity—is reflected in the BJP's strategy.[8] The party's strategic culture is demonstrated by its use of constitutional uniformity and financial coercion to further its policy objectives. The tendency of this framework to delegitimize opposition as anti-national is reflected in Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's description of the DMK government as "undemocratic and uncivilized" for opposing NEP. Despite being supposedly optional, the NEP's three-language formula puts real pressure on the adoption of Hindi due to teacher supply and textbook availability issues.[9]

Previous Conflicts and Ongoing Tensions

Decades of disputes over language policy have led to the current predicament. During the Emergency, the 42nd Amendment of 1976 changed the center-state dynamics in education by moving education from the State List to the Concurrent List.[10] This modification made it possible for the Center to use financing channels and policy directives to overrule state preferences. The current DMK government portrays the pattern of resistance that Tamil Nadu has established against central language policies as a defense of Tamil cultural rights and constitutional federalism.[11]

7 Sriram, S. "The Memories of a Spark: Reconstructing the 1965 Riots in Madurai." *SubVersions* 2, no. 1 (2013). http://subversions.tiss.edu/vol2-issue1/sriram/.

8 Mallapur, Nilanjan. "Modi Government's Plan to Make Hindi India's National Language Stirs Conflict." *The Diplomat*, 27 May 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/modi-governments-plan-to-make-hindi-indias-national-language-stirs-conflict/.

9 NDTV. "Explained: Three-Language Formula in National Education Policy." *NDTV*, 10 March 2025. https://www.ndtv.com/education/explained-three-language-formula-in-national-education-policy-7891593

10 BYJU'S. "7th Schedule of Indian Constitution – State List." Updated 24 January 2024. https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/7th-schedule-indian-constitution/.

11 Wikipedia. "Dravidian Parties." Last modified 23 February 2008; updated continually. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dravidian_parties.

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Stakeholders and Interests

I. DMK and Tamil Nadu Regional Parties: Protecting Tamil Identity

The basis for DMK's resistance to the three-language formula is its constitutional interpretation of defensive cultural nationalism and cooperative federalism.[12] Chief Minister Stalin views the three-language formula with the argument that BJP's 'Hindutva policy' regards Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam as 'second-class languages'.[13] The party's strategy includes bringing a lawsuit under Article 131, holding all-party meetings on federal problems, and combining coalition building, public mobilization, and legal challenges.[14] The ruling DMK exploits historical memory for political mobilization, as seen in Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin's threat of 'another language war' that directly refers to the heritage of the 1965 agitation. Reflecting the movement's core tenets of social justice, rationality, and Tamil language nationalism, the larger Dravidian political environment, including the opposition AIADMK despite its partnership with the BJP, shares a basic resistance to the imposition of Hindi. When Tamil identity is seen as in danger, this ideological unity allows for persistent opposition across party lines.

II. BJP and Central Government: National Integration Through Uniformity

Instead of imposing Hindi, the BJP's narrative structure portrays the three-language formula as fostering linguistic diversity and national cohesion. The policy "allows choice of any Indian language, not just Hindi," according to Union Education Minister Pradhan, who also charges the DMK with "manufacturing controversy for political gain." Critics, however, describe the withholding of INR 2,151 crore as "blackmail" intended to compel NEP compliance.[15] The centralized strategic culture of the BJP, which sees regional resistance as polarizing separatism, places a strong emphasis on ethnic nationalism and hierarchical decision-making. This strategy explains the party's electoral difficulties in

12 Gopala-Krishnan, R. "Dravidian Politics: A Critical Examination of Its Impact and Challenges." *LinkedIn Pulse*, 22 July 2023. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dravidian-politics-critical-examination-its-impact-gopala-krishnan/.

13 The Diplomat. "Modi Government's Language Policy Reignites Old Conflict in Southern India." *The Diplomat*, 25 February 2025. https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/modi-governments-language-policy-reignites-old-conflict-in-southern-india/.

14 Hindustan Times. "Tamil Nadu Moves Supreme Court over 'Coercion' to Adopt National Education Policy." *Hindustan Times*, 21 May 2025. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/tamil-nadu-moves-supreme-court-over-coercion-to-adopt-national-education-policy-101747808110400.html.

15 Times of India. "Explained: DMK-Led Tamil Nadu Govt vs Centre over NEP." *Times of India*, 23 February 2025. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/explained-dmk-led-tamil-nadu-govt-vs-centre-over-nep/articleshow/118498483.cms.

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spite of decades of organizational work and is in direct opposition to Tamil Nadu's pluralistic traditions.[16]

III. Students, Parents and Civil Society

40 lakh pupils whose education is dependent on the withheld Samagra Shiksha monies are directly impacted by the language policy conflict. Program quality is impacted by educational uncertainty; free textbook programs, teacher training, and classroom repairs are all on the verge of being suspended. Tamil Nadu's position is generally supported by civil society organizations, which see the conflict as a federal rights problem rather than a matter of linguistic choice. Locally and in Delhi, student organizations have staged rallies to show widespread disapproval of what they see as central coercion.[17]

IV. Broader Indian Public and Federal Concerns

Similar issues have surfaced in Maharashtra, Karnataka, West Bengal, and other non-Hindi states, demonstrating how the Tamil Nadu conflict affects India's linguistic landscape. With ramifications that go well beyond Tamil Nadu's borders to impact national political discourse and constitutional interpretation, the controversy raises important issues regarding unity vs diversity in Indian federalism.

Analysis of the Issue

A. Competing Narratives and Strategic Cultures

The DMK uses ‘civic nationalism’ that combines Tamil cultural pride with constitutional protection. According to this narrative, the party is committed to Indian constitutional values while safeguarding Tamil identity against northern rule. Stalin exemplifies this approach by emphasizing that "Tamil does not have enmity towards any language" but opposes imposition.[18] The party frames the contemporary resistance as a continuation of a sacred struggle for Tamil dignity by invoking the 1965 agitation, which

16 Vater, John J., and Ronojoy Sen. “The Three-Language Formula Revisited: ‘Hindi Imposition’ Stokes Protests.” *ISAS Briefs* no. 703. Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 2024. https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ISAS-Briefs-703_John-Vater-and-Ronojoy-Sen.pdf

17 Vision IAS. “Tamil Nadu Opposes Three-Language Policy in Schools under the NEP 2020.” *News Today* (Current-Affairs Bulletin), 28 February 2025. https://visionias.in/current-affairs/news-today/2025-02-28/polity-and-governance/tamil-nadu-opposes-three-language-policy-in-schools-under-the-nep-2020.

18 M.K. Stalin, statement on Hindi imposition and Tamil identity, February 26, 2025, in letter to DMK cadres, cited in "Language war in Tamil Nadu: Stalin says 'won't oppose Hindi if you don't impose it'," Deccan Herald, February 26, 2025, https://www.deccanherald.com/india/tamil-nadu/language-war-in-tamil-nadu-stalin-says-wont-oppose-hindi-if-you-dont-impose-it-tamil-nep-3-policy-3422472.

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forges emotional ties to historical sacrifice. In contrast, 'hierarchical, centralizing strategic culture' of the BJP is reflected in its policies, which place a premium on national unification and uniformity. The party uses Hindu-centered ethnic nationalism to portray regional resistance as a polarizing form of separatism that threatens national cohesion. The claim made by Education Minister Pradhan that "Tamil Nadu must come to terms with the Indian Constitution" is a prime example of the legalistic rationale for central control in this context.

The 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan' movement based on Hindutva, which aims to create cultural homogeneity through a common language, religion, and identity, is furthered by the three-language formula. Despite the NEP's assurances of flexibility, Hindi is given preference in practice because of ideological affinity, resource allocation, and administrative ease. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's vision of "building Hindu unity by overcoming internal divisions based on caste, language, and region" is in line with this.

To rally supporters and defend their stances, both parties draw on cultural icons and historical memory. The BJP's "constitutional compliance" narrative seeks to delegitimize state resistance as unlawful non-compliance, while the DMK's "Tamil Nadu versus the Centre" framework produces a binary opposition that reduces complicated federal problems to identity-based politics.

B. Policy and Political Dimensions

The NEP suggests that students learn three languages, at least two of which must be native to India. This seems flexible, but it also puts pressure on students to adopt Hindi. The need for a third language has been called into question by Tamil Nadu's two-language policy, which combines Tamil and English and has resulted in good educational outcomes and English proficiency. By tying the release of funds to NEP compliance, the Center turns educational policy into a contest between state autonomy and federal authority.[19]

The withholding of Rs 2,151 crore, or 60% of Tamil Nadu's Samagra Shiksha budget, is an unparalleled example of fiscal coercion by the federal government. This tactic uses administrative discretion to compel policy compliance while avoiding the legislative and constitutional processes. The Supreme Court's denial of an urgent hearing raises questions about judges' hesitancy to become involved in federal cases, which may encourage the use of coercive measures.

19 India Foundation. "Is Tamil Nadu Govt's Opposition to the Three-Language Policy Justifiable?" *Chintan*, 11 March 2025. https://chintan.indiafoundation.in/articles/is-tamil-nadu-govts-opposition-to-the-three-language-policy-justifiable/.

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The intensifying rhetoric shows how language concerns go beyond ordinary political rivalry. A deeper ideological mismatch can be seen in the BJP's designation of Tamil Nadu as 'dishonest and uncivilized' and the DMK's description of NEP as 'Hindutva policy'. The BJP-AIADMK alliance faces internal strain over language issues, with AIADMK's silence on NEP opposition revealing the complexity of coalition politics when cultural identity conflicts with electoral pragmatism.[20]

C. Social and Economic Implications

The 4 million children's learning quality is directly harmed by the fund withholding, which also has an impact on support services, teacher preparation, and classroom infrastructure. Students from rural and marginalized areas who rely on Samagra Shiksha programs are particularly disadvantaged, leading to inequality based more on political disagreements than academic ability. Principals in CBSE-affiliated schools are unsure about language requirements due to administrative paralysis, illustrating the difficulties in implementing policies. The language dispute exacerbates regional isolation and linguistic nationalism, which could radicalize moderate voices on both sides. The DMK's mobilization of historical trauma from 1965 agitation creates emotional investment in resistance, while BJP's constitutional arguments attempt to delegitimize cultural concerns as separatist tendencies. This polarization reduces space for compromise and collaborative federalism.[21]

The Tamil Nadu case sets precedents for center-state relations in a variety of policy areas. The balance between union and state power could be drastically changed if federal financial coercion proves effective and inspires similar strategies in other domains. On the other hand, if state resistance is effective, it may encourage more regional challenges to central programs, which could lead to a fragmentation of national policy coherence. The Supreme Court's final decision under Article 131 will have a big impact on how the constitution interprets fiscal conditionality and cooperative federalism.[22]

Evidence and Support

Federal rights claims are constitutionally validated by the Supreme Court's resolute decisions regarding state autonomy and the abuse of Article 356, as well as other issues. The Court's

20 Al Jazeera. "India's Language War: Why Is Hindi Sparking a North-South Divide?" *Al Jazeera*, 10 April 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/10/indias-language-war-why-is-hindi-causing-a-north-south-divide.

21 Deccan Herald. "SC Refuses Urgent Listing of TN's Plea Accusing Centre of Withholding Funds under Samagra Shikhsa Scheme." *Deccan Herald*, 9 June 2025. https://www.deccanherald.com/india/tamil-nadu/sc-refuses-urgent-listing-of-tns-plea-accusing-centre-of-withholding-funds-under-samagra-shikhsa-scheme-3577381

22 Teachers' Institute. "Centre–State Educational Policies: Governance and Challenges." *Teachers.institute*, 27 March 2025. https://teachers.institute/school-education/centre-state-educational-policies/.

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unwillingness to hold urgent hearings on funding disputes, however, points to a judicial preference for political settlement over legal action, highlighting the complexity of the constitutional landscape that calls for cautious handling.

The DMK-led alliance won a resounding victory in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, while the BJP received only 11% of the state vote, indicating that voters in Tamil Nadu prefer federal balance rather than centralized rule. Tamil Nadu's opposition to central policies has democratic legitimacy thanks to this election mandate, which also confirms the success of identity-based mobilization against alleged federal overreach**.**

The successful opposition to the 1965 imposition of Hindi, which led to the continuation of English as an associate official language, shows that persistent regional opposition can compel changes to central policy. The proposals of the Rajamannar Committee demonstrate that institutional strategies for federal transformation can be successful when backed by constitutional interpretation and political activism.

Conclusion

A pivotal moment in Indian federalism, the Tamil Nadu language policy dispute touches on issues of unity, diversity, and constitutional governance that go well beyond issues of educational policy. The dispute is a reflection of deeper tensions between the DMK's support for regional autonomy and the BJP's idea of centralized nationalism, which will shape center-state relations for years to come. Both parties' approaches are significantly shaped by their strategic cultures; the DMK's consensus-building, federal autonomy paradigm emphasizes regional heterogeneity and constitutional balance, while the BJP's hierarchical, centralizing framework results in policies that prioritize uniformity. Compromise is challenging but not impossible due to these fundamental differences, necessitating sophisticated political leadership that can embrace collaborative federalism and move beyond zero-sum thinking.

With ramifications that go beyond state lines to influence national political discourse and constitutional interpretation, the 2026 Tamil Nadu elections will act as a referendum on these conflicting visions. Federal democracy requires balancing unity and diversity through institutions capable of managing legitimate differences while maintaining national coherence, making the Tamil Nadu language dispute a crucial test of India's federal evolution and democratic accommodation of diversity.

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