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Between Tongues: Language, Identity and Three-Language Policy in Maharashtra's Education System

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the evolving three-language debate in Maharashtra through the lens of education policy, identity politics, and linguistic equity. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirms the Three-Language Formula, its implementation in linguistically diverse states like Maharashtra has reignited tensions around regional autonomy, cultural identity, and language hierarchies. The co-existence of Hindi as a national language, English as a global aspiration, and Marathi as a marker of regional pride presents a complex dilemma for children, parents, educators, and policymakers. Drawing on media reports, state documents, and sociolinguistic theory, the paper explores the manner in which language functions as a site of negotiation between state identity, national integration and global opportunity. It further examines how caste, class, and geography intersect with language in shaping access to meaningful education. Arguing that language is never neutral, the paper calls for a more locally grounded, inclusive and equity-driven approach to multilingual education.

Keywords: Multilingual education, Language policy, Three-Language Formula, Maharashtra schools, Linguistic equity, Education and identity

1. Introduction

Language is never a neutral medium of instruction, it is a bearer of history, identity and power. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued, *"Language carries culture, and culture carries... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world."* In India, the Three-Language Formula (TLF), was introduced in 1968 and reiterated in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It is designed to promote multilingualism while preserving regional languages (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Yet, the formula's implementation has been fraught with tension, particularly in states like Maharashtra, where linguistic identity intersects with regional pride, political assertion, and educational aspirations (Sonalkar, 2018; Pandey, 2021). The NEP's emphasis on Hindi as a third language in non-Hindi-speaking states has been resisted by regional parties that view it as cultural imposition.

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Simultaneously, English-medium education is growing rapidly across caste and class lines, seen by many parents as a pathway to upward mobility (Annamalai, 2004; Mohanty, 2009).

The result is a growing dissonance between *policy mandates and educational realities.* While municipal schools struggle with multilingual delivery, private institutions increasingly prioritize English, relegating regional languages to secondary status (Jhingran, 2005). This dynamic reinforces existing inequalities, particularly for marginalized learners navigating linguistic and systemic barriers (Kumar, 2020). This paper attempts to critically examine Maharashtra's three-language debate by mapping its policy evolution, exploring contemporary controversies and analysing language as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on policy documents, media reports and sociolinguistic theory, it argues that language planning in the state risks reproducing existing inequities unless rooted in local context and social justice imperatives.

2. Policy and Historical Background

The roots of India's Three-Language Formula (TLF) lie in post-independence efforts to balance national integration with linguistic federalism (Kumar, 2017). The idea that education should begin in the mother tongue had strong advocates well before Independence as well. Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, emphasized that "imparting education in a foreign tongue... has created a permanent bar between the educated classes and the masses" (Gandhi, 1921/1968). His critique of English-medium education was rooted not in isolationism but in his belief that language must serve social cohesion and self-rule (Swaraj).

These principles also shaped the Constituent Assembly debates, where members grappled with balancing the status of Hindi as a potential link language with the need to protect linguistic pluralism. The final compromise is reflected in Articles 343 to 351 of the Constitution. The part acknowledges Hindi as the official language while allowing states to retain their own official languages and promoting the development of regional languages (Austin, 1966). This constitutional framework laid the groundwork for later education policies that attempted to ensure multilingual competence without privileging one language unduly.

The TLF, formally proposed in the 1968 National Policy on Education and reaffirmed in 1986 and NEP 2020, recommended that students learn: (1) the regional language, (2) Hindi, and (3) English (MoE, 2020). However, its implementation has varied widely, often reflecting linguistic hierarchies, uneven capacities, and political resistance (Ramanathan, 2005). As later sections show, Maharashtra's navigation of this policy has been shaped by its own historical struggles for linguistic identity as well as the pragmatic pressures of English-language aspiration.

Maharashtra's language policy is grounded in the *Samyukta Maharashtra movement*, which positioned Marathi not just as a means of communication but as a symbol of regional pride (Deshpande, 1993). The demand for Marathi-medium education led to the strengthening of local-language instruction, reinforced by policy moves like the *2020 mandate* requiring Marathi in all schools (Government of Maharashtra, 2020). At the same time, the perceived imposition of Hindi continues to be a flashpoint, particularly for political groups emphasizing Marathi cultural autonomy (Baviskar, 2022). Meanwhile, the rise of English-medium education—especially post-liberalization—reflects what Bourdieu (1991) termed *"linguistic capital."* English is increasingly seen as the language of modernity, employability, and mobility (Mohanty, 2006). This shift is particularly visible in urban and aspirational rural schools, even among first-generation learners (Jhingran, 2005).

Thus, Maharashtra presents a classic case of *policy-practice contradiction*: While TLF is promoted as a model of balanced multilingualism, on the ground it reflects complex negotiations between *regional loyalty, national authority, and global aspiration.* The next section explores how these tensions are actively playing out in schools and public discourse.

3. Current Controversies and Stakeholders

Maharashtra's language politics remain intensely contested, with the three-language formula resurfacing as a flashpoint under the National Education Policy 2020. The *mandatory inclusion of Marathi in all schools*, irrespective of board or medium, has drawn support from regional parties but also sparked concerns from linguistic minorities and private institutions. At the same time, the Centre's quiet push for Hindi as a 'link language' has been met with caution or outright resistance, especially from political formations like the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena and segments of the Shiv Sena (UBT) (Patil, 2021).

These debates are not merely ideological, they shape the lived realities of parents, educators, and students. For many middle- and lower-income families, *English-medium education* represents a ticket to economic stability and social respectability (Joshi, 2019). Government schools continue to face declining enrolment as parents, including those from rural and marginalized communities, increasingly prefer low-fee private English-medium schools. This shift intensifies tensions, as government mandates emphasize Marathi while *popular demand increasingly favours English.*

Teachers remain another critical stakeholder group. In many schools, particularly in semi-urban and rural regions, there is an acute *shortage of trained language teachers*, especially for the third language. The result is a superficial or symbolic teaching of additional languages, undermining both comprehension and

multilingual goals (Raut, 2020). Teachers often report a lack of curriculum support, in-service training and clarity regarding language use in multilingual classrooms.

A third layer of complexity emerges from *linguistic minorities* in the state, particularly from the speakers of Urdu, Kannada, Gujarati, and tribal languages. These communities often find themselves caught between official policy and local practice, with little accommodation in either direction. For instance, Urdu-speaking students in public schools may face instruction in Hindi, Marathi and English, with their mother tongue entirely absent from the curriculum. These overlapping tensions highlight the disjuncture between language policy and *language realities*. The debate is not just about which language is taught, but *whose language is heard, valued or erased.* The current controversies thus reflect not only state-level political assertion but also broader questions of linguistic justice, identity recognition, and meaningful educational access.

4. Language, Inequality, and Everyday Schooling

The implementation of multilingual policy in Maharashtra reveals deep inequalities across caste, class, region, and school type. The state's official commitment to Marathi and the NEP's endorsement of the Three-Language Formula suggest a shared multilingual ideal. But, the schooling practices remain *uneven, fragmented, and often exclusionary***,** particularly for first-generation learners, rural children, and linguistic minorities. A key axis of inequality lies in the *urban–rural divide*. In well-funded private schools, particularly in urban areas, English is the primary medium of instruction, and regional languages like Marathi or Hindi are often reduced to secondary status or ritualised inclusion (Deshmukh, 2021). In contrast, municipal and Zilla Parishad schools, especially in tribal and remote regions often struggle to deliver even one language effectively due to *teacher shortages, resource gaps and pedagogical constraints* (Kale, 2022).

The *rise of English-medium aspirations* across caste and class locations has further complicated this terrain. English is increasingly seen as a prerequisite for higher education, employment, and social mobility. This results in many working-class families to shift their children from Marathi-medium government schools to low-fee English-medium private schools. However, these schools often *lack trained teachers proficient in English***,** resulting in what Mohanty (2009) calls "subtractive bilingualism" — where children lose competence in their mother tongue without gaining real fluency in English.

Classroom interactions further reflect this hierarchy. Children from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or linguistic minority backgrounds often report *shame or anxiety* when speaking in their home languages, which are either excluded from the curriculum or treated as deficient (Pardeshi, 2020). Teachers, lacking

adequate multilingual training, may inadvertently reproduce these hierarchies by prioritizing dominant languages or discouraging code-switching, even when it aids comprehension. As one teacher interviewed in a rural Vidarbha school put it, *"We are told to teach in Marathi, but many of our tribal children speak Gondi or Korku at home. They don't understand Marathi fluently in lower classes, and we don't have materials in their language"* (cited in Kale, 2022, p. 44).

The situation is further complicated for Urdu-speaking students in urban slums or border districts. These learners are frequently taught in Hindi or Marathi, with *no recognition of their linguistic identity* — violating the principle of mother tongue-based education (Pathan, 2018). This results in poor retention and comprehension rates, particularly in foundational literacy. The interaction between *language policy and structural inequality* is thus not a theoretical concern but a material one. It affects who speaks, who is silenced, and who succeeds in the classroom. Unless addressed through *contextualized, community-sensitive interventions*, multilingualism will remain a *symbolic gesture*, disconnected from the real linguistic lives of children.

The following table summarizes how different school types in Maharashtra approach language instruction and highlights the structural barriers each group faces in implementing multilingual education effectively.

Table 4.1. Language of Instruction and Access in Maharashtra's School Types

School Type	Language of Instruction	Challenges Faced	Typical Student Background
Urban Private (CBSE/ICSE)	English (primary), Marathi/Hindi	Tokenistic local language use, elite orientation	Upper/middle class, aspirational
Urban Low-Fee Private	English (nominal), weak support	Poor English fluency among teachers, rote learning	Lower-middle class, first-gen learners
Rural Zilla Parishad School	Marathi	Lack of multilingual resources, tribal language exclusion	SC/ST, tribal, economically weaker
Urdu-Medium Government	Urdu (often replaced with Hindi)	Curriculum gaps, low teacher availability	Muslim minority students

5. Analysis — Contradictions in Multilingual Policy

The disconnect between the *normative ideals of the Three-Language Formula (TLF)* and *the realities of classroom practice* in Maharashtra reveals fundamental contradictions at the heart of India's multilingual policy architecture. While TLF promotes additive multilingualism, school-level implementation often produces *hierarchical and exclusionary language arrangements*. This is often shaped by structural

inequality and market pressure. One core contradiction lies in the *unequal valuation of languages*. Despite policy assertions of linguistic equality, English remains the de facto language of prestige, opportunity, and advancement. In contrast, Marathi and Hindi, though officially promoted, often function as transitional or symbolic languages, particularly in elite institutions. This mirrors what Bourdieu (1991) described as *"linguistic capital"*, i.e. languages are not neutral tools but forms of power, unevenly distributed and differentially rewarded in social and economic fields.

In Maharashtra, this is evident in the language choices made by different social groups. Middle- and upper-class families overwhelmingly favour English-medium education, even when it means sending children to low-fee private schools with limited pedagogical quality (Joshi, 2019). For these families, multilingualism is not a cultural goal but a *risk to mobility*. Simultaneously, regional political discourse frames Marathi as essential to identity and citizenship. This places working-class and municipal school students under pressure to perform linguistic loyalty even when *English competence is increasingly demanded* by the job market.

Another contradiction emerges in relation to *curricular design and teacher training*. While NEP 2020 encourages mother tongue instruction in the early years, the state lacks adequate mechanisms to support tribal or minority languages. Even Marathi and Urdu medium schools report insufficient materials, teacher vacancies, and low institutional support (Kale, 2022; Pathan, 2018). The result is a *bureaucratically endorsed multilingualism* without the infrastructure to sustain it. These tensions are not accidental. They reflect deeper *institutional and ideological conflicts* about what kind of citizen the education system is expected to produce; one rooted in regional belonging, national integration or global employability. In practice, students have to navigate all three often without support.

Moreover, language policy is rarely designed with students' linguistic repertoires in mind. Instead of recognising code-switching, hybrid vernaculars, and classroom bilingualism as assets, these are often *disciplined or erased* by rigid curricular frameworks. This leads to alienation among first-generation learners, who are penalised not for being monolingual but for being multilingual in the "wrong" ways (Pardeshi, 2020). In sum, the contradictions in Maharashtra's multilingual policy are structural, not incidental. They emerge from mismatched visions between the *state, market, and community*. Thus, ironically, they are reproducing the very exclusions the Three-Language Formula was meant to redress.

6. Conclusion

The three-language debate in Maharashtra reveals more than a policy dilemma, it exposes a deeper crisis of equity, belonging, and recognition in Indian education. While multilingualism is officially endorsed through frameworks like the Three-Language Formula and NEP 2020, its implementation remains stratified. In practice, the symbolic promise of inclusion often masks the reality of exclusion, particularly for learners from tribal, linguistic minority, or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper has shown that language policy in education is not neutral. It operates within social hierarchies of power and aspiration. The unequal distribution of linguistic resources, teacher preparation and curriculum support reinforce a system where access to quality education is shaped by the language one speaks. English continues to dominate as a marker of mobility, while regional languages are either tokenized or instrumentalized. This often makes the home or tribal languages invisible.

Meaningful reform must move beyond one-size-fits-all mandates. A more just and context-sensitive language policy must cater to local realities. It must allow schools and communities to design instruction based on their specific linguistic environments. This requires sustained state investment in multilingual teacher training, inclusive textbook development and pedagogical models which treat linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a challenge. As Maharashtra reimagines its linguistic future, the question remains urgent: Can the education system create space for all tongues — not just dominant or aspirational ones? The answer will determine whether language continues to divide or begins to democratize access, voice, and opportunity in education.

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