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FOREWORD

It is with immense pride and a deep sense of purpose that I present the inaugural issue of the Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ) to the global community of scholars, researchers, and students. Named in reverence to the towering legacy of Allama Shibli Nomani — a scholar whose intellectual contributions transcended boundaries of language, discipline, and geography — this journal aspires to carry forward that same spirit of rigorous, cross-cultural inquiry.



SNAJ was conceived from a simple but pressing conviction: that meaningful scholarship should not be confined by the language in which it is written, nor by the discipline from which it emerges. India's intellectual tradition has long thrived at the confluence of languages — English, Hindi, and Urdu among them — and it is this confluence that our journal seeks to honour. By welcoming original research across the humanities, social sciences, education, and emerging interdisciplinary, multilingual fields, we hope to build a genuinely inclusive platform for academic dialogue.

As Chief Editor, I have had the privilege of witnessing the dedication of our editorial board, reviewers, and contributors, whose collective commitment has shaped this first issue. Every article herein has passed through a rigorous double-blind peer review/ indexed process, and each is assigned a Crossref indexing, registered DOI, reflecting our unwavering commitment to academic integrity, originality, and permanence in the global research ecosystem.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our esteemed reviewers, editorial board members, and the scholars who entrusted us with their research. It is through their collective effort that this journal has moved from vision to reality. I also invite researchers, academicians, and students from across disciplines and linguistic traditions to consider SNAJ as a home for their scholarship in the issues to come.

It is my sincere hope that this journal will serve not merely as a repository of research, but as a living, evolving conversation — one that bridges languages, disciplines, and generations of scholars in pursuit of knowledge.

With warm regards,

Dr. Mohammad Zahid

Chief Editor
Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ)

The Three-Language Formula in India: A Narrative Review of Language Policy, Multilingual Education, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

The Three-Language Formula (TLF) has been central to India's language-in-education policy since its formal acceptance in the National Policy on Education (1968). The policy aimed at institutionalising multilingualism in the school system to harmonise national integration, regional linguistic identities and access to global knowledge. However, over its long time, its implementation has been very diverse between governments and between education systems. This paper provides a socio-linguistic analysis of the historical development and policy path of the TLF. The study is about concepts of language policy, language planning, multilingual education and linguistic inequality. The study examines how policy goals are related to implementation outcomes. It concludes that the TLF's impact has been influenced by the state-level political environment, language ideology, institutional capacity, teacher availability, and the increasing socioeconomic value of English. The uneven implementation of language policies, with regional differences across southern and northeastern India, suggests that they are rooted in local histories and sociolinguistic contexts. The paper discusses the implications of National Education Policy 2020 for multilingual education and language planning. It argues for a move away from universal prescriptions to contextually relevant multilingual frameworks through mother-tongue based education to deal with India's linguistic diversity.

Keywords: Three-Language Formula, language policy, multilingual education, sociolinguistics, linguistic diversity

Introduction

India's linguistic diversity has been a major factor in shaping educational policy and public debate. With twenty-two languages recognized in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and hundreds of other regional languages, language planning and educational administration have become complex issues in India (Annamalai, 2001). Language policy in multilingual communities involves more than communication and teaching; it also involves identity, social participation, political representation and educational opportunities (Spolsky, 2004).

Since independence, governments have tried to set up language-in-education policies that reconcile linguistic diversity and national unity. Debates in education have continued to focus on critical issues such as the role of Hindi, the continuing importance of English and the place of regional languages (Das Gupta, 1970). Such debates tend to mirror the larger tension between

nation-building and linguistic regionalism, and language policy is one of the most sensitive parts of educational planning in India.

In order to settle these conflicting issues, the Three-Language Formula (TLF) was formulated. The teaching of three languages at the school level regional language or mother tongue, Hindi or another modern Indian language, and English was officially adopted in the National Policy on Education (1968) (Government of India, 1968). The formula was designed to promote multilingualism, to reinforce national communication and to provide access to larger educational and economic opportunities. This was reiterated in the National Policy on Education (1986) and continues to influence current debates on multilingual education especially in relation to the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, 1986; Ministry of Education, 2020).

There is broad policy support for the TLF, but its implementation has been uneven

across states and education sectors. Various regions have understood and adapted the policy to suit their respective socio-linguistic circumstances and political agendas. The ongoing two-language policy of Tamil Nadu shows how the regional language movements and identity politics have the power to shape the educational language planning (Ramaswamy, 1997; Schiffman, 1996). The increasing social and economic importance of English has changed the public perception of multilingual education and has affected the deployment of language policy at educational institutions (Graddol, 2010; LaDousa, 2014).

Studies on language policy show that the outcomes of implementation are affected by official policy documents, linguistic ideologies, institutional capacity, availability of teachers and community attitudes towards particular languages (Cooper, 1989; Hornberger, 2002; Spolsky, 2004). Thus, it is important to understand the history of the TLF in the larger social and political conditions in which language policies are introduced.

The article deals with the historical evolution, trends of application and present-day importance of the Three-Language Formula in India. This study investigates the factors affecting policy implementation and assesses the applicability of the TLF in the context of present educational reform. The fields of language policy, multilingual education and sociolinguistics are drawn on. A lot of focus is given to the issues of linguistic diversity, regional political issues and the increasing demand for English-medium education. The report recommends that future language policy efforts should promote more flexible multilingual approaches that are sensitive to the local linguistic landscape and advance equitable educational opportunities.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative review approach to examine the historical evolution, implementation, and contemporary relevance of the Three-Language Formula (TLF) in India. A

narrative review is appropriate for synthesizing diverse literature and developing a comprehensive understanding of complex educational and policy issues (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR using keywords such as Three-Language Formula, language policy in India, multilingual education, language planning, and National Education Policy 2020. Additional sources included government policy documents and UNESCO reports. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and official publications relevant to language policy and multilingual education.

The selected literature was analysed thematically to examine the historical development of the TLF, its implementation across different regions, and the implications of recent educational reforms, particularly the National Education Policy 2020.

Historical Evolution of the Three-Language Formula

The origin of the Three-Language Formula (TLF) is closely linked with the language and political problems of the first few decades of independent India. Language was an important issue in the discussions on national integration, political representation and educational advancement. The existence of considerable linguistic diversity, along with a federal political system, necessitated the emergence of political strategies to incorporate regional language identities into the process of nation building (Das Gupta, 1970).

The Constitution of India was an attempt to reconcile these conflicting interests. Article 343 provided for the establishment of Hindi as the official language of the Union, but English was retained for official use during a transitional period. But soon disputes about the future status of Hindi and English became a burning political issue. Many states that did not use Hindi as their official language feared that giving Hindi a more

prominent role would give it too much power and damage the local languages (Annamalai, 2001). The problems were most acute in South India where language was closely bound up with regional identity and political mobilization. The language policy became a more and more contentious issue in the 1950s and 1960s as the central government sought ways to promote national communication without alienating linguistic minorities. The 1956 reorganization of states on linguistic lines highlighted the role of language as a basis of political identity and administrative organization. Meanwhile, educational administrators started to consider multilingualism as a necessary condition of a country having a considerable language diversity (Kumar, 2005).

The most important formulation of multilingual educational policy was the recommendations of the Education Commission (1964–66) popularly known as the Kothari Commission. Language education, according to the Commission, should be geared towards the twin purposes of national integration, cultural preservation and intellectual advancement (Education Commission, 1966). It envisaged a paradigm in which students would acquire proficiency in three languages over the course of their schooling. The specific pattern varied from region to region but the basic principle included the study of the regional language or mother tongue, Hindi or other modern Indian language and English.

The TLF was formally incorporated into the National Policy on Education (1968) which underlined the importance of multilingual competence to promote national unity while respecting the linguistic diversity (Government of India, 1968). The policy sought to diminish linguistic divisions by enhancing the pupils' competence in languages beyond their immediate linguistic milieu. The retention of English was due to the continuing importance of the language in higher education, administration, science and international communications. Thus, the formula was a compromise between conflicting linguistic and political projects, rather than a purely

educational project. The TLF looked simply, but implementing it was anything but simple. Educational administration continued to be mainly a government function, allowing different areas to implement the strategy based on local goals and sociolinguistic contexts. As a result, the languages selected, the time spent on instruction and the quality of language instruction varied significantly. Many governments adopted the formal structure of the strategy, while others adapted the implementation in response to local political issues (Kumar, 2005).

The most cited example of the alternative policy trajectory is Tamil Nadu. The state has a long history of opposing the compulsory teaching of Hindi, with linguistic groups seeing such policies as an assault on their regional language identity. Instead of a full implementation of the TLF, Tamil Nadu followed a two-language policy that stressed Tamil and English (Ramaswamy, 1997; Schiffman, 1996). This experience demonstrated that school language policy is embedded in broader political and cultural contexts.

The importance of multilingualism was emphasized in the National policy on Education (1986) which reaffirmed support for the TLF (Government of India, 1986). This period saw a changing educational language environment, driven by changing economic situations and a growing demand for English. Economic liberalization, access to higher education and globalization increased the prestige of English especially in urban and middle-class households (Graddol, 2010). These trends gradually transformed the practical significance of multilingual policy, since educational aspirations were increasingly associated with English-language proficiency.

The latest major effort to address the language issues in Indian education is the National Education Policy 2020. The policy reiterates the principle of multilingualism, emphasizing the importance of home languages and mother tongue-based education in the early years, as well as addressing contemporary issues

of educational quality, inclusion and linguistic diversity (Ministry of Education, 2020). The persistence of multilingualism in national policy papers indicates that the goals of the TLF remain relevant. Still, past experiences of implementation show that language policies are not only determined by official decrees but also by regional politics, institutional capacity, and social perceptions of particular languages.

The development of the TLF is an example of the intricacies of language planning in a multilingual democracy. The formula has functioned as a framework rather than a fixed policy paradigm and has been understood and altered differently across diverse linguistic and political contexts.



Figure 1. Historical evolution of major language policy milestones influencing the Three-Language Formula in India.

Theoretical Framework: Language Policy, Multilingualism, and Linguistic Capital

The Three-Language Formula (TLF) is better understood in terms of theoretical perspectives that regard language not just as a medium of communication but as a social, political and educational resource. Language planning is well established and remains well established as a process motivated by larger processes of power, identity, and social inequality through research in language policy and multilingual education (e.g., Cooper, 1989; Spolsky, 2004). The TLF implementation must be

looked at beyond the official policy documents and administrative directives.

Language policy theory offers a useful perspective. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy is composed of three interrelated components: language practices, language beliefs or ideologies and language management. The degree of correspondence across these elements is often a key factor in the success or failure of educational language policies. Official support for multilingualism in India is often countered by a strong social preference for English-medium education. The problems in the implementation of the TLF can be explained by the gap between policy goals and public expectations. Language planning theory offers a relevant perspective. According to Cooper (1989) language planning is primarily about controlling language behaviour in particular social situations. But policies do not necessarily produce desired results; their success depends on institutional capacity, community engagement, and political will. The inconsistent application of the TLF among Indian states is one illustration of this principle. The strategy has been embraced nationally for decades but has been implemented with major regional variations due to regional political priorities and administrative constraints.

The ecological perspective on multilingualism adds to the understanding of the TLF. Haugen (1972), for example, argues that language is part of a wider social context in which languages interact with cultural, political, and institutional forces. Expanding on this view, Hornberger (2002) elaborated on the continua of biliteracy framework, arguing for the need to recognize multilingual realities rather than create rigid linguistic hierarchies. In this view, the most effective way to do multilingual education is to ensure that pedagogical approaches are aligned with the linguistic resources that are already present in communities. The evidence from different multilingual regions of India suggests that language strategies are more effective when they are in conformity with the local sociolinguistic context.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital can be applied to the language and social inequality relation. According to Bourdieu, languages have different economic and symbolic worth in the society. Those who become proficient in socially esteemed languages gain academic, professional, and social benefits. English has a very important role in this hierarchy in modern India. The link between higher education, professional employment and global mobility has spurred demand for English-medium education across social strata (Graddol, 2010; LaDousa, 2014). Thus, language choices in education are often determined by cultural factors and beliefs about economic prospects.

This attention to linguistic capital reveals a central tension within the TLF. The strategy promotes multilingualism and language diversity. Yet, the public favors English due to its perceived economic benefits. According to Mohanty (2010), differential access to English can further deepen broader educational and socio-economic inequalities. The challenge for language policy is to preserve linguistic diversity and simultaneously ensure equitable access to key linguistic resources.

Research on bilingual and multilingual education provides an extra perspective of analysis. Cummins (2000) states that a strong base in the first language helps in cognitive development and also in the later languages. UNESCO (2003) also highlighted the educational benefits of mother-tongue-based instruction particularly during the formative years of education. These perspectives challenge the idea that success in education is about replacing indigenous languages with dominant national or global languages. They advocate for plurilingual approaches that see language diversity as a pedagogical asset.

In sum, these theoretical frameworks suggest that the implementation of the TLF should be understood as a dynamic interaction of language ideologies, educational systems, political contexts and social inequality patterns. They also provide a framework for understanding

why the same policy intentions have led to different outcomes in different sites and educational contexts. These insights have been drawn upon in the following discourse to talk about the current challenges and opportunities in the context of multilingual education in India.

Implementation of three-language formula: Regional experiences and contemporary challenges

For more than fifty years the Three-Language Formula (TLF) has been an integral component of Indian educational policy, but its implementation has been uneven across regions. These differences are linguistic demography, political history, educational infrastructure, and public attitudes to certain languages. Instead of a single national plan, the TLF has been more of a flexible framework, with many governments and school systems interpreting it in various ways.

In many Hindi speaking states, the formal structure of the TLF has remained largely the same. Students learn Hindi as their first language, English as their second language and Sanskrit or another modern Indian language as their third language. The educational advantages of the third language have been questioned. The third language is often given less importance in the teaching and is considered a supplementary topic rather than an integral part of multilingual education in many institutions (Kumar, 2005). Therefore, the goal of achieving significant multilingual competence has not always been achieved. The experience of the non-Hindi speaking states has been more varied. Tamil Nadu shows the maximum divergence from the TLF. Since the late 1960s, the government has generally pursued a multilingual policy, giving prominence to Tamil and English. This is connected to the historical resistance against the compulsory Hindi education and is a part of a larger problem of language autonomy and regional identity (Ramaswamy, 1997; Schiffman, 1996). The Tamil Nadu case shows the political and cultural aspects beyond educational issues in regard to linguistic rules. It shows how models of

policy paradigms other than nationally endorsed can produce multilingual educational outcomes.

In many states in the Northeast, multilingualism is part and parcel of the fabric of everyday social life. There are a number of places where different languages are used systematically in communication, education, and government. Such situations often exhibit more linguistic variation than is assumed in the TLF. The presence of tribal languages, regional languages, Hindi and English makes educational settings much more complex than the three-language model envisaged by national policy. Research on multilingual education indicates that education programs that are based on local linguistic contexts are more effective than programs based on standardized policy guidelines alone (Hornberger, 2002; UNESCO, 2003).

Availability of educators is a key constraint on the implementation of TLF. For multilingual education to work, instructors need to be sufficiently competent in the languages they are expected to teach. Educational institutions in many parts of the country face the challenge of attracting and retaining qualified language educators (Jhingran, 2005), especially in areas where the third language is not widespread. The lack of professional experts has a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching and restricts opportunities for meaningful language acquisition. The desired policy outcomes are usually larger than the resources available to implement them. Other problems are the development of curricula and teaching material. Multilingual education requires textbooks, assessment tools and teaching strategies that enable learning through several languages. The availability of these resources varies widely from state to state and education system to education system. Private schools may have better financial and administrative capacity than government schools servicing linguistically diverse populations, which may mean fewer constraints. These differences lead to unequal educational experiences and affect the efficiency of the implementation of language policy.

The TLF has also been influenced by the importance of English. In recent decades English has become important socially and economically in India. It is often seen as a path to higher education, employment, and international opportunities (Graddol, 2010; LaDousa, 2014). As a result, parents and children often focus on English proficiency, at times at the expense of other elements of multilingual education. The growth of English-medium education is an example of the influence of wider socio-economic issues on the language choice in education.

The proliferation of English medium education has engendered a paradox in language policy. Official policy documents continue to highlight the importance of multilingualism and the importance of Indian languages. On the other hand, there is an increasing public demand for educational methods that provide more exposure to English. This contradiction demonstrates the relationship between language and socio-economic disparity as explained by Mohanty (2010). Better skills are associated with educational benefits, and worse skills are associated with less social mobility. Thus, language policy is often involved in questions of equity and cultural preservation.

The other significant problem is the place of tribal and minority languages in the educational system. While it theoretically acknowledges linguistic diversity, in practice the TLF has frequently given prominence to the dominant regional languages of Hindi and English. A large number of minor language communities do not have adequate representation in formal schooling (Mohanty et al., 2009). Mother-tongue based multilingual education research shows that children learn better when taught in languages that they understand and use in their daily lives (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2003). The restricted inclusion of many minority languages is a significant obstacle to inclusive educational policy.

The National Education Policy 2020 has recognised the importance of multilingual

education by acknowledging the importance of home languages and mother tongues in the foundational years of education (Ministry of Education, 2020). This methodology is consistent with international research on multilingual education, but it requires the presence of qualified teachers, learning materials and institutional support to be implemented. The TLF experience indicates that policy objectives alone are not sufficient. Continued investment and administrative commitment are required for successful implementation.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital and Mohanty's (2010) notion of the "double divide," language policy in India can be argued to function within large systems of social inequality. English skills are often an indicator of educational advantage, and students educated in marginalized languages are more likely to face barriers to higher education and

employment. Thus, language choices are not just questions of education but also questions of social mobility and distributive justice. These inequities continue to impede the implementation of multilingual programs that seek to advance both language diversity and educational equity.

The practical application of the Three-Language Formula brings out the intricacies of language planning in a multilingual democracy. The interpretation and implementation of language policies is influenced by regional political context, availability of educational resources, linguistic ideologies, and socio-economic aspirations. The varied experiences of implementation across India suggest that policies that are sensitive to local linguistic realities are more effective in supporting multilingual education than a one-size-fits-all national approach

Region	Language Arrangement	Major Characteristic
Hindi-speaking states	Hindi + English + Third language	Formal implementation largely maintained
Tamil Nadu	Tamil + English	Two-language policy
Northeastern states	Multiple local languages + Hindi/English	Complex multilingual environments
Urban private schools	English-centred multilingualism	High demand for English
Tribal/minority-language areas	Variable implementation	Limited resources and teacher availability

Table 1. Illustrative patterns of Three-Language Formula implementation across different educational contexts in India.

NEP 2020 and Future Directions for Multilingual Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is the most extensive reform in India's educational policy in recent decades. A key aspect of educational progress is to stress multilingualism. The policy does not essentially alter the Three-Language Formula (TLF), but it reiterates the importance of linguistic diversity and emphasizes the use of home languages and mother tongues in early education (Ministry of Education, 2020). The idea is drawn from international research on multilingual education and ongoing debates in India on language and

learning. The crux of NEP 2020 is that children learn best when they are taught in languages that are comfortable to them. The policy promotes the use of home language, mother tongue, local language or regional language as the medium of instruction at least up to Grade 5 and preferably beyond where feasible (Ministry of Education, 2020). Research has shown that strong primary language literacy and cognitive bases facilitate the learning of other languages and lead to improved educational outcomes (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2003), and this is consistent with the statement. It highlights the importance of early language learning in addressing educational

inequalities for children beginning school in foreign languages.

The policy is designed to go beyond narrow definitions of multilingualism. Multilingualism is considered a way to cognitive development, cultural understanding and national integration, not just language learning, according to NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020). This is in accordance with contemporary scholarly perspectives which regard language diversity as an asset to education rather than an obstacle to learning (Hornberger, 2002). The practice celebrates the linguistic plurality of diverse cultures and promotes more inclusive teaching practices.

But even with these ambitions implementation still faces significant hurdles. One big problem is there are not enough good teachers who can teach in many different languages. Successful implementation of mother-tongue based multilingual education needs linguistic competence, appropriate pedagogical training and curricular support. Experience with the TLF shows that failure to achieve policy goals is often constrained by scarcity of educators, lack of educational resources and differences in institutional capacity among the states (Jhingran, 2005). Similar challenges are expected to affect implementation of NEP 2020.

Another problem is the continued dominance of English in the economy and in education. Nevertheless, despite the focus on Indian languages in policy, there is a large public demand for English-medium education across many social strata (Graddol, 2010; LaDousa, 2014). English fluency for many families is linked to going on to further education, job opportunities and social mobility. As a result, schools often struggle to meet parental demands for English language proficiency and the state's requirements to foster multilingualism and mother tongue instruction. This tension has defined language policy in India and is unlikely to disappear with the new policy framework.

The situation of minority and tribal languages deserves careful consideration. While NEP 2020 does accept the need to preserve India's linguistic heritage, the real challenge is how to effectively integrate the minor languages into the education system. Scholars argue that multilingual education policies should not be symbolic but should also provide concrete support to marginalised language communities in the form of teacher training, curriculum development and resource allocation (Mohanty et al., 2009). Without such approaches, linguistic inclusion may be an aspirational goal, not an educational reality.

The future of multilingual education in India would depend upon the strategies of policy formulation and implementation sensitive to the local sociolinguistic milieu. Instead of a uniform model for the whole country, greater flexibility may improve educational planning by allowing governments and localities to adapt multilingual frameworks to their own linguistic contexts. This approach would better reflect the multilingual realities of modern India and research that highlights the importance of context-sensitive language planning (Spolsky, 2004). In this sense NEP 2020 is both a continuation and a redefinition of the earlier multilingual strategy. Its success will depend on its capacity to turn its commitment to linguistic diversity into sustainable pedagogies that promote equity, inclusion and meaningful multilingual proficiency.

Conclusion

The Three Language Formula has been a part of the language-in-education programme of India for over five decades. The policy was to reconcile linguistic diversity with national unity and to ensure access to a vast amount of knowledge, reflecting the general problems of language planning in a multilingual context. The importance of multilingualism in successive education programmes is a reflection of its continued significance in the Indian education set up.

This analysis shows that the implementation of the TLF has been subject to influences other than formal policy design. Interpretations and implementations of the policy vary from government to government, depending on the political environment of the region, language ideologies, institutional capacity and socio-economic objectives. Tamil Nadu, the multilingual northeast and the Hindi-speaking states demonstrate that language policies function in specific sociolinguistic contexts and generate different results. These differences indicate the limits of conceiving of language policy as a nationally unified project.

The increasing importance of English has changed the world of multilingual education. English is linked to academic and economic advancement, but research has shown that successful multilingual education requires ongoing support for students' home languages and local linguistic resources (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2003). Policymakers are not faced with a choice between English and Indian languages but with the task of creating educational systems that allow different linguistic competences to be attained without reproducing existing inequalities. The National Education Policy 2020 is a renewed commitment to linguistic diversity in the educational system, a commitment to the importance of multilingualism and mother-tongue-based education. Achieving these goals requires adequate training of teachers, curriculum development, allocation of resources and institutional support. The historical experience of the TLF shows that policy objectives alone are not enough for successful implementation.

Language planning in India has to be aware of the regional linguistic situation as well as the need for educational equity and inclusiveness. In this perspective, the multilingualism is conceived as a goal of state policy and a social phenomenon that is continuously constituting the educational experiences of the people throughout the country. The long history of the Three-Language Formula offers important lessons about the possibilities

and limits of language policy in a linguistically diverse democracy.

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ABOUT

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ) is an international, multidisciplinary and multilingual research publication dedicated to advancing rigorous scholarship across the humanities, social sciences, education, language and emerging interdisciplinary fields. Published biannually in fully open access online format, SNAJ upholds a double-blind peer review process to ensure the highest standards of academic integrity, originality and scholarly merit. Every article published in the journal is assigned a Crossref-registered Digital Object Identifier (DOI), ensuring permanent discoverability and citation traceability in the global research ecosystem.

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