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Historical Overview of Language Politics in Post- Colonial India

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Historical Overview of Language Politics in Post-Colonial India

Ilyas Khan [α] & Ahbab Ali khan [σ]

Abstract- One of the main political issues in Indian politics is connected to language problem. After India's independence the government decided that the official language of India will be Hindi. In this paper, I have attempted to take a look at study of politics of languages in late colonial India. A set of languages used by political operators in the Indian scenario where the diverse political scenarios play a vital role in the linguistic matters viz, organization of languages, language policies and planning, minority and majority languages. The motive of this paper is to present the historical overview of language politics in India and its impact on the documentation and organization of languages. How the political concern influences the up gradation and degradation of the status of a language. It further illustrates how the government policies used for the development of majority languages, causing a threat to minority languages.

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I. Introduction

After India's independence the government decided that the official language of India will be Hindi. India is the home to the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families, two of the world's largest. Hindi belongs to the family of Aryan languages. India is one of the multilingual nations in the world today. Languages of the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman language families are also spoken in India, though by relatively few people compared to speakers of the other two families. This multitude of languages reflects India's lengthy and diverse history. During the last few thousand years, the Indian sub-continent has been both united under various empires as well as fragment into many small kingdoms. This has helped spread many common linguistic features among Indian languages without allowing any particular language to become overwhelmingly dominant. Having attained independence from the British in 1947, Indian leaders chose Hindi as the official language of India in the hope that it would facilitate regional communication and encourage national unity. They were aware of many of the difficulties inherent with instating a single language in India's multilingual environment, and they accordingly laid out a clear time-line and plan for introducing Hindi and phasing English out. Despite this planning, Hindi and English today still share their status as official languages. This is due to many unseen obstacles in addition to tactical errors made by some of the promoters of Hindi. Urdu speakers were more curious to take Urdu as the official language of India. Before the independence, Urdu was the official language in India. Except Britishers, people used to communicate in Urdu. Mahatma Gandhi used the term "Hindustani" to solve the language problem. Hindus were not in favour of Urdu and Muslims in Hindi as a national language. Although Urdu and Hindi are the same languages with different names. After independence, Hindi and English used as official languages. These errors led to forceful counteractions by groups who felt that Hindi was being imposed upon them.

This situation insists me for the analysis of political and social aspects of language planning and promotion as overview of it. English is useful as such and it really does not take an overwhelming hold in Indian general social life except for those in the educated classes. Many Indians feel that English is no longer a foreign language-they have made it very much their own. Regarding Hindi, they indicated that regardless of its status as a national language, people communicate with whichever language or mixture of languages they are most comfortable with. The point is that there is a great deal of opposition to Hindi by the Urdu speaker as well as the other southern language speaker. Unable to synthesize the divergent viewpoints I had been exposed to from my various observations, I decided to make the historical overview of language politics in postcolonial India, so that I could answer some of the questions on my mind. What are the issues behind the language policy and planning? Why was it so strongly criticized in India? Why not India can function effectively with a common regional language? How important was the language politics to Indians? And finally, what will happen in the future?

The information I have gathered to answer these and other questions have been obtained from literary, Internet, and other sources. These sources were extremely helpful for understanding the history and theoretical background of the language issue. The India news servers on the Internet provided very current information; however, much of it was only tangentially related to the topic.

II. Position of Languages in India

As mentioned above, India is the home of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families. It also

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contains speakers of two other language families, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman. Given in the Atlas of World Languages (Moseley and Asher 1994, p.207. Even though the Tibeto-Burman family has the fewest speakers, it boasts the largest number of languages. However, one should be aware of the fact that the number of languages which are recognized changes after each census. This is partly because of the difficulty of deciding whether something is a dialect of another language or a related to it. Such questions have provided the basis for many scholarly debates on the relationships among languages in India. In 1961, over 190 languages were listed, which was a paring down of the 1,652 mother tongue languages names submitted by census takers. Many of these reductions affected languages which could claim only a low number of speakers-some as few as one or two. Later, many languages were subsumed under Hindi, and other language groups were consolidated, which ultimately decreased the number of recognized languages to 175 in 1971 and to 145 in 1981. Despite this still quite a large number, the speakers of the eighteen scheduled languages recognized by the Constitution of India represent 95.6 percent of the population.

- Indo- Aryan - 491,086,116 74.3%
  Dravidian - 157,836,723 23.9%
  Austro-Asiatic - 7,705,011 1.2%
  Tibeto-Burman - 4,071,401 0.6%

Language documented from a documentary linguistics perspective. It aims "to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community." which aims to describe a language's abstract system of structures sand rules in the form of a grammar or dictionary. New technologies permit better recordings, with better descriptions, all of which can be housed in digital archives, like Ailla or Paradisec, and be made available to the speakers with little effort.

The Indian census takes the widest possible definition of "Hindi" as the broad variety. The native speakers of Hindi so defined are 41% of Indians. English is recorded as the native language of 226,449 Indians in the 2001 census. English is the second "language of the Union" besides Hindi.

Eight scheduled languages of the Indian constitution are as follows:

Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujrati, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Sindhi, Nepali, Punjabi, Sinhalese Assamese. Maithili, Bhili, Santali Kashmiri. Gondi Konkani, Dogri, Khandeshi, Kurukh, Meitei, Tulu, Bodo, Khasi, Mundari and Ho.

Thirteen languages account for more than 1% of Indian population each, and between themselves for over 95%; all of them are "scheduled languages of the constitution."

Scheduled languages spoken by less than 1% of Indians are Santali (0.64%), Manipuri (0.14%), Bodo(0.13%), Dogri (0.01%, spoken in Jammu and Kashmir). The largest language that is not "scheduled" is Bhili(0.95%), followed by Gondi (0.27%), Tulu (0.17%) and Kurukh (0.099%).



Fig. 1: The names of each state in the script of the dominant language of that state

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III. Language Politics, Policy and Planning

Mahatma Gandhi and other secular political leader prefer Hindustani should be our national language. Having gained independence from the British in 1947, the leaders of the new Indian nation recognized the opportunity to unite the many regions of India with a common, universal language. Mahatma Gandhi felt that this was essential to the emergence of India as a *self-proclaimed* nation. He pointed out five requirements for any language to be accepted as the national language:

- It should be easy to learn for government officials.
- It should be capable of serving as a medium of religious, economic, and political intercourse throughout India.
- It should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India.
- It should be easy to learn for the whole of the country.
- In choosing this language, considerations of temporary or passing interests should not count. (Das Gupta 1970, p.109).

The task of the Indian government was an important but difficult one-not only because choosing the link language was a controversial task, also because it would be difficult to get the public to accept any particular language. Starting years before independence, Gandhi tirelessly supported Hindustani, which is a kind of compromise between Hindi and Urdu, as the best choice for a national language. However, after the partition and the subsequent emigration of millions of Muslims, Hindu leaders in Congress felt little need for Gandhi's concessions to the Muslims. They accordingly focused on Hindi and left Urdu and Hindustani to their own fates. Though it did not have an assured dominance over the other languages in India, Hindi seemed the clearest choice from the beginning. English, despite its prominence and somewhat even distribution throughout the nation, was unacceptable for several reasons. As the language of the colonial power which had just been ousted, English was to many a "symbol of slavery" (Nayar 1967, p.12). According to Ralph Fasold (1988, p. 182), "the former colonial language is an absolutely atrocious choice as a national language. Nothing could be a worse symbol of a new nation's self-awareness than the language of a country from which it had just achieved independence." More importantly, a foreign tongue such as English would not contribute to the national identity in the way that an indigenous one could.

English also had few speakers-only about one percent of India's population. Hindi claimed the greatest number of speakers of all the Indian languages and it was closely related to several of the other most widely spoken ones. Though it was unrelated to the south Indian languages, it was also thought that Hindi would not be entirely foreign to south Indians because of the strong Sanskrit influence it shared with the four main Dravidian languages. Whether or not this thinking was correct, Hindi was chosen as the official language amidst Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's assurance that it would never be imposed on people in non-Hindi areas.

The Indian constitution, in 1950, declared Hindi in Devanagari script to be the official language of the union. Unless Parliament decided otherwise, the use of English for official purposes was to cease 15 years after the constitution came into effect, i.e., on 26 January 1965. The prospect of the changeover, however, led to much alarm in the non Hindi-speaking areas of India, especially Dravidian-speaking states whose languages were not related to Hindi at all. As a result, Parliament enacted the Official Languages Act, 1963 which provided for the continued use of English for official purposes along with Hindi, even after 1965. In late 1964, an attempt was made to expressly provide for an end to the use of English, but it was met with protests from states such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, West Bengal, Karnataka, Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh. Some of these protests also turned violent. As a result, the proposal was dropped, and the Act itself was amended in 1967 to provide that the use of English would not be ended until a resolution to that effect was passed by the legislature of every state that had not adopted Hindi as its official language, and by each house of the Indian Parliament.

The position was thus that the Union government continues to use English in addition to Hindi for its official purposes as a "subsidiary official language," but is also required to prepare and execute a programme to progressively increase its use of Hindi. The exact extent to which, and the areas in which, the Union government uses Hindi and English, respectively, is determined by the provisions of the Constitution, the Official Languages Act, 1963, the Official Languages Rules, 1976, and statutory instruments made by the Department of Official Language under these laws.

Various steps have been taken by the Indian government to implement the use and familiarisation of Hindi extensively. Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha headquartered at Chennai was formed to spread Hindi in South Indian states. Regional Hindi implementation offices at Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram, Mumbai, Kolkata, Guwahati, Bhopal, Delhi and Ghaziabad have been established to monitor the implementation of Hindi in Central government offices and PSUs. Annual targets are set by the Department of Official Language regarding the amount of correspondence being carried out in Hindi. A Parliament Committee on Official Language constituted in 1976 periodically reviews the progress in the use of Hindi and submits a report to the President. The governmental body which makes policy

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decisions and established guidelines for promotion of Hindi is the Kendriya Hindi Samiti (est. 1967). In every city that has more than ten central Government offices, a Town Official Language Implementation Committee is established and cash awards are given to government employees who write books in Hindi. All Central government offices and PSUs are to establish Hindi Cells for implementation of Hindi in their offices. Recently, the Modi government announced plans to promote Hindi in government offices in Southern and Northeast India.

IV. Minority and Majority Languages in India

A majority language is usually spoken by a majority of the population in a country or in a region of a country. In a multilingual society, the majority language is generally considered the high status language, also called the dominant language or killer language. In India, Hindi considered as a majority language that is spoken by 41% people and other languages are minority language. Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam etc, these languages are minority languages. Regularly uses of majority languages causes to minority language and sometime resulting total loss of minority language. Government should maintain the status of minority languages along with majority languages.

V. Conclusion

India is a multilingual country where linguistic diversity found. Politicisation of languages has been since the independence. People have agitated for long time to get status as a national language. Many times Indian government try to find solutions but they couldn't. They solve the language problem to make official language that is Hindi along with English.

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