

Historical Overview of Language Politics in Post-Colonial India

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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

Index terms— historical linguistic, language politics, language policy and planning, language documentation, minority and majority language.

1 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

45 language, people communicate with whichever language or mixture of languages they are most comfortable
46 with. The point is that there is a great deal of opposition to Hindi by the Urdu speaker as well as the other
47 southern language speaker. Unable to synthesize the divergent viewpoints I had been exposed to from my various
48 observations, I decided to make the historical overview of language politics in postcolonial India, so that I could
49 answer some of the questions on my mind. What are the issues behind the language policy and planning? Why
50 was it so strongly criticized in India? Why not India can function effectively with a common regional language?
51 How important was the language politics to Indians? And finally, what will happen in the future?

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

56 2 II.

57 3 Position of Languages in India

58 As mentioned above, India is the home of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families. It also A contains
59 speakers of two other language families, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman. Given in the Atlas of World
60 Languages (Moseley and Asher 1994, p.207. Even though the Tibeto-Burman family has the fewest speakers, it
61 boasts the largest number of languages. However, one should be aware of the fact that the number of languages
62 which are recognized changes after each census. This is partly because of the difficulty of deciding whether
63 something is a dialect of another language or a related to it. Such questions have provided the basis for many
64 scholarly debates on the relationships among languages in India. In 1961, over 190 languages were listed, which
65 was a paring down of the 1,652 mother tongue languages names submitted by census takers. Many of these
66 reductions affected languages which could claim only a low number of speakers-some as few as one or two. Later,
67 many languages were subsumed under Hindi, and other language groups were consolidated, which ultimately
68 decreased the number of recognized languages to 175 in 1971 and to 145 in 1981. Despite this still quite a
69 large number, the speakers of the eighteen scheduled languages recognized by the Constitution of India represent
70 95.6 percent of the population. Language documented from a documentary linguistics perspective. It aims "to
71 provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community." which aims
72 to describe a language's abstract system of structures sand rules in the form of a grammar or dictionary. New
73 technologies permit better recordings, with better descriptions, all of which can be housed in digital archives,
74 like Ailla or Paradisec, and be made available to the speakers with little effort.

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

78 Eight scheduled languages of the Indian constitution are as follows:

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

82 Thirteen languages account for more than 1% of Indian population each, and between themselves for over
83 95%; all of them are "scheduled languages of the constitution."

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

87 4 Language Politics, Policy and Planning

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

93 ? It should be easy to learn for government officials.

94 ? It should be capable of serving as a medium of religious, economic, and political intercourse throughout
95 India.

96 ? It should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India. ? It should be easy to learn for the whole
97 of the country. ? In choosing this language, considerations of temporary or passing interests should not count.

98 (Das Gupta 1970, p.109).

99 The task of the Indian government was an important but difficult one-not only because choosing the link
100 language was a controversial task, also because it would be difficult to get the public to accept any particular
101 language. Starting years before independence, Gandhi tirelessly supported Hindustani, which is a kind of
102 compromise between Hindi and Urdu, as the best choice for a national language. However, after the partition
103 and the subsequent emigration of millions of Muslims, Hindu leaders in Congress felt little need for Gandhi's
104 concessions to the Muslims. They accordingly focused on Hindi and left Urdu and Hindustani to their own fates.

105 Though it did not have an assured dominance over the other languages in India, Hindi seemed the clearest choice
106 from the beginning. English, despite its prominence and somewhat even distribution throughout the nation, was
107 unacceptable for several reasons. As the language of the colonial power which had just been ousted, English
108 was to many a "symbol of slavery" (Nayar 1967, p.12). According to Fasold (1988, p. 182), "the former
109 colonial language is an absolutely atrocious choice as a national language. Nothing could be a worse symbol of a
110 new nation's selfawareness than the language of a country from which it had just achieved independence." More
111 importantly, a foreign tongue such as English would not contribute to the national identity in the way that an
112 indigenous one could.

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

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

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

136 Various steps have been taken by the Indian government to implement the use and familiarisation of Hindi
137 extensively. Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha headquartered at Chennai was formed to spread Hindi
138 in South Indian states. Regional Hindi implementation offices at Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram, Mumbai,
139 Kolkata, Guwahati, Bhopal, Delhi and decisions and established guidelines for promotion of Hindi is the Kendriya
140 Hindi Samiti (est. 1967). In every city that has more than ten central Government offices, a Town Official
141 Language Implementation Committee is established and cash awards are given to government employees who
142 write books in Hindi. All Central government offices and PSUs are to establish Hindi Cells for implementation
143 of Hindi in their offices. Recently, the Modi government announced plans to promote Hindi in government offices
144 in Southern and Northeast India.

145 5 IV. Minority and Majority Languages in India

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

153 V.

154 6 Conclusion

155 India is a multilingual country where linguistic diversity found. Politicisation of languages has been since the
156 independence. People have agitated for long time to get status as a national language. Many times Indian
157 government try to find solutions but they couldn't. They solve the language problem to make official language
158 that is Hindi along with English. ¹

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Figure 1: Fig. 1 :

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