
Marginalising Regional Languages: The Hindi Dominance in India



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Abstract

India is a multilingual country, with 22 national languages and thousands of regional languages. It has also been a source of contention, estrangement, prejudice, and dominance for a variety of political actors and agendas. Indian states, parties, laws, policies, educational systems, media outlets, and social movements are highly influenced and shaped by the local languages. This paper highlights the north-south divide in India especially in connection with language politics. In doing so, the paper examines how Hindi as a national language affects north-south relations, and how it sparks resistance and fuels the emergence of anti-BJP parties in the southern states of India. By tracing the historical and contemporary politics of southern India, the paper reflects how opposition to Hindi imposition has been a key factor in the rise of anti-BJP parties in the region. These parties have used language politics as a strategy to mobilise their voters and gain influence in the region. In conclusion, the paper brings forth the complex interplay between language, identity, and political power in contemporary India.

Keywords: language-centric politics, north-south division, Hindi language, marginalisation.

Introduction

With a population of more than 1.3 billion, India is home to more than 1,600 languages. Language has always played a significant role in India's political landscape, with political parties leveraging it to attract voters. However, the current ruling party's aggressive promotion of a single language at the expense of others has sparked

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opposition and anger across the country resulting in the resurgence of language-based identity politics in the southern states. Ganesh Narayan Devy, a prominent linguist, who spent his entire life documenting India's over 700 languages and tens of thousands of dialects, deemed the most recent attempts to impose Hindi to be "laughable and hazardous."¹ Hindi is the most widely spoken language in India, with over 40 per cent of the population considering it as their first language.² The demand for Hindi as the only national language by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been met with resistance from southern states, where people speak Dravidian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. These languages are very different from Hindi, both in terms of grammar and vocabulary, and many South Indians feel that their languages are being marginalised because of active promotion and acceptance of the Hindi language.

The north-south divide in India has its roots in colonialism when the British ruled India. The British used English as the administrative language, which gave people from the south an advantage since they were more likely to be educated in English than people from the north. This created a perception of the south being more advanced and prosperous than the north, a phenomenon which continues to this day. The demand for Hindi as a national language has been seen by some as an attempt to reverse this perception and give the North a more prominent role in Indian politics and society. This has led to protests and even violence in some parts of southern India, with people feeling that their cultural identity is being threatened.

This article analyses the political and social ramifications of language politics in the country, emphasising the significance and diversity of southern Indian languages, which are frequently overlooked and marginalised in the national discourse. In addition, the article addresses measures in India to address language politics, such as constitutional recognition of official languages and state-level programmes to promote regional languages and cultures.

Furthermore, the paper analyses the success of anti-BJP parties in the southern states of India and how resistance to Hindi imposition has played a pivotal role in their electoral victories. It also investigates the diminishing levels of resistance to Hindi imposition in certain regions, particularly at a time when leaders who champion the cause of local languages come to power with the support of voters. This article advances knowledge of the intricate problem of language politics in India and emphasises the value of linguistic diversity and comprehension in fostering peace and harmony in a heterogeneous nation like India.

Historical Context

The decision of the East India Company to make English the official language of India can be regarded as the starting point of language politics in India. Many leaders of the independence movement supported the use of Hindi as the country's official language instead of English. As India gained independence in 1947, the issue of language politics became more challenging. After realising the importance of linguistic diversity, the newly formed government added language-promoting and preserving clauses in the Constitution. Yet, the argument over a national language continued, with some in favour of Hindi and others arguing that doing so would devalue other languages and cultures.

The Indian government established a policy of fostering Hindi as the country's official language in 1950.³ There was opposition to this approach in various southern Indian regions where people spoke Dravidian languages including Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam.⁴ Many South Indians believed that their languages were being neglected in favour of Hindi since they were extremely different from Hindi in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Southern India's opposition to Hindi as *lingua franca* led to the creation of a bilingual policy, with English and Hindi serving as official languages alongside regional languages.⁵ The central government has made attempts since

then to encourage linguistic diversity and conserve regional languages. There are 22 regional languages recognised under the Indian Constitution,⁶ and there are state-level programmes to support local languages and cultures. However, there is still a lot more to be accomplished to address the country's fundamental linguistic and political challenges.

Hindi as Official Language: Implications for Regional Languages

The decision to make Hindi the official language triggered protests and discussions across the country. Due to its extensive use and cultural importance, where one faction claimed that Hindi should be the country's only official language, others countered that doing so would marginalise other languages and cultures, especially in India's southern regions. The Official Languages Act of 1963 was enacted in response to the debate over the designation of Hindi as an official language. With the usage of English for official purposes until Hindi could be brought in, this Act acknowledged Hindi and English as official languages of the Union.

Hindi's promotion as the national language was nevertheless met with opposition in the Dravidian-speaking states of southern India. The central authorities established a compromise strategy in 1965, making Hindi the official language of the Union but allowing English to be used for official purposes.⁷ The strategy also included language-use requirements for state governments and administrations. Notwithstanding these initiatives, India's debate over the designation of Hindi as its national language continues. The government has attempted to support linguistic diversity and conserve regional languages, but disputes over language politics between northern and southern India still exist.

It has resulted in state-level language policies. The economic and political realms are where language policy can be seen to affect the north-south divide. The federal government and bureaucracy in

India are dominated by Hindi-speaking north Indians, which has resulted in a concentration of power in the north and a fight for south Indian states to obtain a fair distribution of resources and representation. Due to this, south Indians feel alienated from and resentful of the central authority.

The adoption of Hindi as the official language of India and its subsequent promotion as a national language has been seen by many in south India as an attempt to marginalise their languages and cultures. South Indian states have also faced challenges in promoting their regional languages and cultures due to the dominance of Hindi-speaking north Indians in the central government and bureaucracy. In the 1960s, when the central government imposed the three-language formula in south Indian schools, making it compulsory for students to learn Hindi, English, and a regional language, it was seen as an attempt to impose Hindi on students and marginalise their languages. This led to protests and demands for the policy to be revised to allow for greater flexibility in language learning. This has made it difficult for south Indian states to gain a fair share of resources and representation in national institutions. For instance, Tamil was not recognised as an official language of the Indian Railways until 2013, despite being one of the most widely spoken languages in the country and one of the official languages of the 22 languages.⁸

In 2017, the Government of India announced that Hindi would be the sole language for banking exams conducted by the Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS).⁹ This decision was met with widespread protests in southern India, where many people felt that their languages were being excluded. The IBPS decision was seen as part of a larger trend towards promoting Hindi at the expense of other languages. South Indian states argued that the use of Hindi in banking exams would put their students at a disadvantage, as they might not be proficient in the language. The controversy eventually led to the

government backing down and allowing for the use of regional languages in the exams.

Hindi is often used in official interactions and documents by governments. Hindi has occasionally been used solely in official documents and communications, despite the Official Languages Act designating both Hindi and English as official languages of the Union. South Indians who may not be fluent in Hindi and feel excluded from national institutions have faced difficulties as a result of this. There have also been discussions about Hindi's use in media and entertainment. There are worries that South Indian cultures and languages are becoming suppressed as a result of the predominance of Hindi in Indian popular culture and its music. These examples demonstrate the difficulties that can arise over language regulations in India, as well as the necessity for a balanced strategy that takes into account the country's linguistic variety. Hindi should not be promoted as the nation's official language at the cost of other languages and cultural traditions. All languages must be given equal weight and growth possibilities, according to the government.

Resistance Against Imposition of Hindi as a National Language and Marginalisation of Regional Languages

A country's linguistic diversity is reflected in its regional identities, with each region having its distinct language, culture, and traditions. Due to their diverse linguistic and cultural heritage, the south Indian states have a strong sense of regional identity. A good example of a region with a strong cultural legacy is Tamil Nadu. Provided that a state's distinct identity and culture are viewed as crucial elements which must be preserved, Tamil is used in the educational system, the media, and the government. Several south Indian states share the aforementioned opinion as local languages also contribute to defining regional identity. The south Indian region views the campaign to make Hindi the official language as an effort to impose a north Indian identity on the rest of the country. It has led to

animosity and marginalisation among south Indians as they believe that their languages and cultures are being disregarded and undervalued.¹⁰

The north-south divide has led to an imbalance in democratic participation, with north Indian politicians controlling national politics. This has resulted in a sense of discrimination and alienation among south Indians. To garner support and gain more participation for their states, south Indian parties took advantage of the language issue as a unifying force. The movement of the 1920s emphasised South Indians' unique Dravidian heritage as well as their linguistic and cultural identity. The movement, which was led by figures like EV Ramasamy, CN Annadurai, and MG Ramachandran, continues to remain a major political force in Tamil Nadu to date.¹¹

Since the 1930s, Tamil Nadu in particular has led the charge against the imposition of Hindi. The Tamil Nadu government passed laws making Tamil the language of instruction in schools and government offices, which further strengthened the Tamil identity.¹² In 1956, Indian states underwent a linguistic restructuring in response to demands for a better acknowledgement of local languages and traditions. It led to the development of states based on linguistic and cultural identity, such as Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Another major resistance against the three-language formula, which required students to learn Hindi, English, and their regional language, was opposed by many south Indians.¹³

In 1968, the Madras Legislative Assembly passed a resolution opposing the aforementioned framework, which was later replaced by the two-language formula. The issue of the three-language formula in India has been a topic of discussion for several years. The Three Language Formula was introduced in the National Education Policy of 1968, which mandated the study of three languages in schools. The syllabus mandated that students learn Hindi, English, and their mother tongue or a regional language. There has recently been a push to

replace the three-language formula with a two-language formula, which would do away with the need to study Hindi as a third language that is required in states where Hindi is not spoken.¹⁴

This has been a controversial subject in states like Tamil Nadu, where there is a push-back to the enforcement of Hindi as a compulsory language. The opposition to the three-language formula argues that it is a way to establish cultural hegemony and an attempt to force Hindi on non-Hindi-speaking jurisdictions. The proponents of the three-language formula advocate that it encourages linguistic unity and national integration. The dispute over the three-language formula continues, as do the protests in Tamil Nadu against the government's reassessment of the National Education Policy.¹⁵

The state of Karnataka has a long history of bilingualism, with Kannada and English being the official languages. There has been resistance against the imposition of Hindi and the state government has consistently opposed any attempts to make it a compulsory language in schools and government offices. Also, the state of Kerala has a unique model of education, which emphasises the importance of the mother tongue and regional languages in education. This has helped a great deal in strengthening the Malayalam identity and has been a model for other states in India.

In 2017, there were protests in Tamil Nadu against the use of Hindi in signboards on the Chennai Metro Rail, which were seen as an attempt to impose the language on the state.¹⁶ The protests led to the removal of the Hindi signage and a reaffirmation of the use of Tamil in public spaces. The BJP government's recent efforts to establish Hindi as the primary language in India as a part of the *One Country, One Everything* policy have been criticised as a part of a 'Hindi imperialism'¹⁷ goal, and non-Hindi speaking states in the south and east India have resisted the move. The comment of Amit Shah, the Minister of Home Affairs of India, "There is one language that has the potential to thread the nation together in harmony, it is the Hindi

language,” has also further contributed to deepening the resistance. Tamil parties outline their strategies for the 2021 elections to combat the imposition of Hindi and promote Tamil.¹⁸

Regional languages and identities, including Tamil identity, Telugu identity, Kannada identity, Malayalam identity, and Bengali identity, have emerged as a result of these encroachments.¹⁹ In addition to being used as a method of resistance against the intrusion of Hindi as the national language, these native languages have had a significant impact on the development of regional identities in India. For India's linguistic diversity to be preserved and its cultural and linguistic identities to be strengthened, regional languages must be promoted and protected.

North Indian languages and culture have historically dominated India's entertainment sector, particularly Bollywood. South Indian languages and cultures are not adequately represented in or acknowledged by mainstream Indian cinema as a result. South Indian movies have evolved as a massive cultural force for the region, with their own signature style, language, and issues. Due to this, south India has developed a distinct regional identity that frequently contrasts with the north Indian identity (that the Bollywood works to portray). The perception that India is a conglomeration of diverse regional identities rather than one country has been reinforced by this cultural split, which has contributed to the north-south divide in India. Recognising and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity is crucial for the entertainment industry, which should also strive for a more inclusive strategy that honours and celebrates various regional tongues and cultures.

Language Politics and the Success of Anti-BJP Parties in the Southern States

India has a long history of political parties using language politics as a means to gain power. Language is a tool of dominance and manipulation. It has become a key factor in shaping the political

landscape of the country, with political parties often leveraging linguistic identity and sentiments to build their electoral base. This has been particularly evident in the southern states of India, where language politics has played a significant role in the success of anti-BJP parties. The Modi administration has brought back the entirety of the language-centric policy. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) have long held the position of power in Tamil Nadu.²⁰ Both parties strongly oppose the imposition of Hindi and have aggressively campaigned against it. Particularly, the DMK has based the entirety of its political platform on Tamil nationalism and the defence of Tamil language and culture. The Tamil Nadu population responded to this passionately, and the party has since had a lot of political success. The DMK used the anti-Hindi agitation to galvanise the public against the central Congress government and seize political control of the state. They also used it to promote Tamil nationalism in Tamil Nadu and the demand for Telangana to be recognised as a distinct state in Andhra Pradesh.

The Janata Dal (Secular) and Congress, two prominent secular parties, have emerged as the dominant anti-BJP parties in Karnataka by aggressively promoting Kannada as the primary language of communication and opposing the imposition of Hindi. This approach has earned them a significant following among the people of Karnataka, who consider the promotion of their language and culture to be a critical issue. The BJP's language policy has been effectively criticised in Kerala by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and Congress. Protection of the Malayalam language and culture has long been a priority for the CPI-M. The people of Kerala, who take pride in their language and culture and see them as crucial to their identity, have responded favourably to this position. Because of this, the CPI-M has been effective in developing a broad base of support throughout the state, particularly in the rural parts.

The issue of marginalisation faced by non-Hindi-speaking minorities due to the prevalence of Hindi in government, media, and education has garnered widespread attention and has become a topic of public discourse. The gravity of the situation has been recognised by native speakers of regional languages, who fear the endangerment of their languages. The promotion of Hindi as a link language and the use of English in government and education has resulted in the neglect and marginalisation of minority languages, leading to a decline in their use and preservation. This has particularly affected regional languages such as Kashmiri, Punjabi, and Assamese.

The submission of the 11th Volume Report to President Droupadi Murmu by the Official Language Committee, led by Home Minister Amit Shah, sparked outrage.²¹ The report was written in such a way that non-Hindi speakers were forced to speak Hindi. The Committee's responsibility was to evaluate the progress made in the use of Hindi for official purposes and to offer suggestions on how to use Hindi more frequently in official communications. According to insiders with knowledge of the committee, it has made about 100 recommendations, one of which is that the central institutions in the states with a Hindi-speaking population should teach Hindi in IITs and IIMs.²² Regarding the usage of Hindi in government offices, the Education Ministry has not yet reached the same level of Hindi usage as other ministries like the Home and Defence as yet. The committee used certain criteria to evaluate language usage and discovered that many central universities, including Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), only use 25 to 35 per cent of the appropriate language instead of 100 per cent reliance on Hindi.

BJP's Policies and Actions Escalating Language Politics

Since its inception in 1980, the BJP has lobbied for Hindi to be recognised as India's national language. Hindi has been recognised by

the party as a symbol of Hindu identity and culture, and it is thought that Hindi can bring the nation together.²³ To do this, the BJP has recommended that Hindi be proclaimed the official language of communication in all Indian government institutions, educational institutions, media outlets, and public signage. The party has also urged that all laws and government documents be translated into Hindi. The National Innovation Mission, National Broadband Network, and Public Broadcasting Corporation are just a few of the several programmes and projects that the BJP has funded and committed money to encourage the growth and promotion of Hindi.

On 14 September each year, a celebration also honours Hindi writers, poets, journalists, and activists with prizes and accolades.²⁴ The BJP, however, is opposed to the use of English as a language of teaching in India and rejects the designation of other languages as classical or scheduled languages. The party's position essentially entails that Hindi should be used as the major language of communication in India, with other languages serving as secondary languages. Hindu nationalism that underpins the BJP's philosophy is what drives the party's insistence on establishing Hindi as India's national language.²⁵

The party holds that Hindu culture and identity, which it considers to be fundamental to India's national identity, will develop and be preserved as a result of the promotion of Hindi. Notwithstanding this, many people have condemned the BJP's promotion of Hindi as the nation's official language as an effort to impose the language and culture of the Hindi-speaking north on the rest of the nation. The party has also come under fire for allegedly neglecting India's rich linguistic and cultural variety and fostering the homogenisation of the country's identity through the use of the Hindu language and culture. Even though the BJP is to blame for the widening of the north-south divide, it has been successful in winning seats in elections and restraining the Congress in parts of southern and western India. After overthrowing a Congress administration and maintaining power, the BJP feels optimistic about its performance in

Kerala and Karnataka. Despite not being in charge in Telangana, the BJP has made great progress there. Even though the BJP did not succeed in defeating the Trinamool Congress in the West Bengal elections, it still gave it a difficult time.

Conclusion

Language politics has aggravated the north-south divide in India. The dominance of Hindi and English has been challenged, and space has been made for more variety and inclusivity in Indian culture because of the resurgence of the regional languages as symbols of identity. Hindi's enactment as the only official language provoked outrage for restricting the representation of non-Hindi-speaking people and weakening democracy. The employment of regional languages in politics can encourage better representation and inclusivity, leading to a stronger and more vibrant democracy. Inclusion in the political system has also been damaged. There is an increasing need for a more comprehensive approach to language policy that takes into consideration regional identities and diversity given the complexity of language politics in India and their effects on democracy. Under this strategy, officials would have to acknowledge India's diversity and the significance of regional identities.

The historical background of language politics in India and the effects of colonialism would also need to be taken into account by decision-makers for a more nuanced strategy. This entails accepting that the declaration of Hindi as the country's official language can be considered a continuation of colonial tactics aimed at marginalising non-Hindi-speaking people. To comprehend the demands and worries of the indigenous communities about language regulations, policymakers would also need to engage in a conversation with stakeholders and communities. Consensus-building and ensuring inclusivity and equal representation of all populations in language policies heavily rely on the aforementioned.

India's north-south split could be bridged through education and effective use of media. These can be invaluable tools for

encouraging respect and awareness of local languages and cultures, resulting in a more diverse and cohesive society. Recognising the value of regional languages in education and promoting their use alongside Hindi and English is essential and involves the formulation of a curriculum that accommodates all Indian languages and ensures that students have an educational opportunity in their mother tongue. This would improve educational achievements and provide regional languages with a sense of pride and identity. Media, especially social media, can be a significant source of content in regional languages to promote regional cultures and identities. When social media and digital platforms are used more often, there is an opportunity to promote local languages and cultures on a national level and to a bigger audience.

Although the opposition to the implementation of Hindi in southern India may have decreased over time, it is still a subject of great concern that continues to spark disagreement and protest. Language policy requires a more comprehensive approach that considers regional identities and diversity. For this, it would be necessary to acknowledge the value of regional languages, encourage their usage alongside Hindi and English, develop a curriculum that covers all Indian languages, and make sure that every student has access to instruction in their mother tongue. To foster deeper awareness and respect for regional cultures and identities, it is also necessary to encourage regional media sources and create material in regional languages. India can do this by fostering a more diverse, cohesive, and respectful society of individual identities.

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