

The Political History of Indian Languages: Evolution, Identity and Nation-Building

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ABSTRACT:

India's linguistic landscape, encompassing over 1,600 languages and dialects, has profoundly shaped its political trajectory from ancient times through colonial rule and into the post-independence era. This paper explores the evolution of Indian languages as instruments of identity formation and nation-building, highlighting how linguistic diversity both unified and fragmented the nation. Ancient scriptures like the Vedas established Sanskrit as a unifying elite language, while vernaculars such as Tamil and Prakrit fostered regional identities amid empire-building under the Mauryas and Guptas. Colonial policies exacerbated divisions by promoting English and codifying regional tongues, sparking resistance that intertwined language with anti-imperial nationalism. Post-1947, the challenge of nation-building intensified debates over a national language, pitting Hindi proponents against non-Hindi regions fearful of cultural erasure. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 redrew boundaries along linguistic lines, affirming language as a core political identity marker and birthing regional parties like the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. Anti-Hindi agitations in the 1960s forced constitutional compromises, retaining English as an associate language and embedding the Three-Language Formula in education policy, though implementation remains contested. This interplay reveals language politics as a double-edged sword: empowering subnational identities while straining national cohesion. Contemporary issues, including the Eighth Schedule's 22 scheduled languages and demands for inclusion of others like Bhojpuri, underscore ongoing tensions between federalism and unity. Drawing on historical precedents and policy analyses, the paper argues that India's multilingualism has fortified democratic pluralism but demands adaptive governance to mitigate

exclusionary risks. Ultimately, language policy must evolve to embrace hybrids blending English, Hindi, and regionals for inclusive nation-building in a globalized world.

KEYWORDS:

Language Politics, Nation-Building, Linguistic Diversity, Federalism, Identity Formation, Indian Multilingualism.

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Colonial Transformations:

British rule standardized English for administration, marginalizing indigenous languages and fuelling revivalist movements. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated Bengali modernization, while Telugu and Marathi elites codified scripts to assert cultural revival. The 19th-century census institutionalized linguistic categories, amplifying “divide and rule” by pitting Hindi against Urdu in the north. Pre-independence, Congress leaders promised linguistic states to accommodate diversity, a pledge delayed post-Partition amid unity fears. This era crystallized language as a nationalist symbol, evident in Gandhi’s Hindustani advocacy versus Ambedkar’s multilingual federalism.

Post-Independence Reorganization:

The 1950s linguistic agitations, culminating in the 1956 States Reorganisation Act, created unilingual states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, decentralizing power but entrenching regionalism. Potti Sriramulu’s fast-unto-death for Telugu catalysed this shift, influencing Punjab and Maharashtra formations. Regional parties emerged, leveraging language for mobilization: DMK in Tamil Nadu opposed Hindi “imposition,” securing English’s permanence via 1963 Official Languages Act amendments. The Eighth Schedule, expanded from 14 to 22 languages, symbolized recognition but sparked demands from unscheduled groups.

Sl. No.	State Reorganization Milestones	Year	Key Language Demand	Outcome
1	Andhra State	1953	Telugu	First Linguistic State
2	State Reorganization Act	1956	Multiple	14 States redrawn
3	Punjab/Haryan split	1966	Punjabi/Hindi	Bilingual resolution
4	North-East States	1970s	Tribal languages	Enhanced federalism

Early Agitations:

Anti-Hindi protests began in the 1930s in Tamil Nadu against mandatory Hindi education under C. Rajagopalachari's government, marking early resistance to linguistic centralization. Potti Sriramulu's 1952 fast-unto-death for a Telugu-speaking Andhra state triggered the first linguistic state reorganization, pressuring national politics.

State Reorganizations:

The Dhar Commission (1948) rejected language-based states fearing disintegration, but the JVP Committee (1949) faced mounting demands leading to the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. Bombay split into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960 amid riots, while Punjab divided into Punjab and Haryana in 1966 after Punjabi-Hindi tensions.

Hindi vs. Regional Languages:

The Constitution envisioned Hindi replacing English by 1965, but 1965 Tamil Nadu agitations forced indefinite English retention alongside Hindi. Official Language Commissions in 1956 and parliamentary committees recommended gradual transitions, averting imposition amid non-Hindi regions' fears.

Political Impacts:

Dravidian parties like DMK rose to dominance in Tamil Nadu through anti-Hindi platforms, rejecting secessionist roots for linguistic autonomy. Linguistic homogeneity improved administration and empowered regional parties, reinforcing "unity in diversity" without national fragmentation.

Language Policy Debates:

The Constitution's Article 343 designated Hindi in Devanagari script as official, with English transitional till 1965, a deadline unmet due to southern protests. The Three-Language Formula (TLF) mandated Hindi, English, and a regional language in schools, but Tamil Nadu rejected it, prioritizing Tamil-English bilingualism to preserve identity. Kothari Commission (1964-66) envisioned TLF for national integration, yet uneven implementation bred inequities: Hindi speakers learn fewer languages, advantaging them. Recent NEP 2020 reiterates TLF flexibility, promoting mother-tongue instruction amid globalization's English tilt.

Identity and Regionalism:

Language fuels identity politics, with Shiv Sena's Marathi advocacy and Akali Dal's Punjabi mobilization challenging Congress dominance. In Punjab, Gurmukhi script symbolizes Sikh identity, intertwining faith and linguistics. Southern states view Hindi promotion as majoritarian, echoing Dravidian ideology against "Aryan" dominance. Census data shows Hindi (44%) and English's elite status overshadow regionals, prompting revival efforts like classical language declarations (Tamil, Sanskrit, etc.). Social media amplifies these debates, blending tradition with digital activism.

Nation-Building Challenges:

Metalinguistic federalism bolsters democracy by accommodating diversity, yet risks balkanization evident in 1960s violence (70 deaths in Tamil Nadu agitations). English bridges divides as a neutral "link language," but exacerbates class gaps. Globalization favours bilingualism (regional + English), diminishing Hindi's role outside north India. Schedulable languages like Tulu face neglect, hindering integration.

Sl. No.	Policy Framework	Focus	Criticisms
1	Official Languages Act	Hindi-English balance	Southern resistance
2	Three Language Formula	Trilingual education	Implementation bias

3	NEP 2020	Mother tongue priority	Urban-rural divide
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Contemporary Dynamics:

As of 2026, debates persist over Hindi in military exams and digital content, with BJP's cultural nationalism clashing against federal voices. Classical status expansions (Kannada, 2024) reward political lobbying. Pandemic-era online education highlighted digital divides in non-English/Hindi mediums. Future policies must prioritize inclusion via tech-driven multilingualism for equitable nation-building. India's linguistic odyssey demonstrates resilience: from imperial unifiers to democratic divisors, languages remain pivotal to identity and unity.

Conclusion

India's languages have always been a double-edged sword: pulling people together while sometimes driving them apart. Think about it from Sanskrit holding ancient kingdoms together, to local tongues building strong regional pride, through colonial rule and India's big push after independence to redraw states along language lines. We've got things like the Three-Language Formula and the Eighth Schedule trying to juggle all this diversity without losing national unity. Sure, speaking multiple languages has made our democracy richer and more vibrant, but it's also sparked regional rivalries, classroom headaches, and governance headaches. Today, fights over Hindi, English, and even getting online in your mother tongue keep things lively. Smarter policies that honour local languages but blend them with Hindi and English for smoother connections. In the end, India's lesson is clear: celebrating our linguistic mix isn't just about saving culture; it's how we build a tough, open-hearted nation that thrives in a global world. Looking ahead, we need flexible plans that mix it all up for real unity.

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