

The Role of Language in India

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Introduction: Language and Politics in India

- Since independence in 1947, linguistic affinity has served as a basis for organizing interest groups; the "language question" itself has become an increasingly sensitive political issue. Efforts to reach a consensus on a single national language that transcends the myriad linguistic regions and is acceptable to diverse language communities have been largely unsuccessful.
- Many Indian nationalists originally intended that Hindi would replace English—the language of British rule (1757-1947)—as a medium of common communication. Both Hindi and English are extensively used, and each has its own supporters. Native speakers of Hindi, who are concentrated in North India, contend that English, as a relic from the colonial past and spoken by only a small fraction of the population, is hopelessly elitist and unsuitable as the nation's official language. Proponents of English argue, in contrast, that the use of Hindi is unfair because it is a liability for those Indians who do not speak it as their native tongue. English, they say, at least represents an equal handicap for Indians of every region.



Introduction: Language and Politics in India

Determining what should be called a language or a dialect is more a political than a linguistic question. Sometimes the word language is applied to a standardized and prestigious form, recognized as such over a large geographic area, whereas the word dialect is used for the various forms of speech that lack prestige or that are restricted to certain regions or castes but are still regarded as forms of the same language. Sometimes mutual intelligibility is the criterion: if the speakers can understand each other, even though with some difficulty, they are speaking the same language, although they may speak different dialects. However, speakers of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi can often understand each other, yet they are regarded as speakers of different languages. Whether or not one thinks Konkani--spoken in Goa, Karnataka, and the Konkan region of Maharashtra--is a distinct language or a dialect of Marathi has tended to be linked with whether or not one thinks Goa ought to be merged with Maharashtra. The question has been settled from the central government's point of view by making Goa a state and Konkani a Scheduled Language. Moreover, the fact that the Latin script is predominantly used for Konkani separates it further from Marathi, which uses the Devanagari script. However, Konkani is also sometimes written in Devanagari and Kannada scripts.



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- Regional languages are an issue in the politically charged atmosphere surrounding language policy. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, attempts were made to redraw state boundaries to coincide with linguistic usage. Such efforts have had mixed results. Linguistic affinity has often failed to overcome other social and economic differences. In addition, most states have linguistic minorities, and questions surrounding the definition and use of the official language in those regions are fraught with controversy.



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- States have been accused of failure to fulfil their obligations under the national constitution to provide for the education of linguistic minorities in their mother tongues, even when the minority language is a Scheduled Language. Although the constitution requires that legal documents and petitions may be submitted in any of the Scheduled Languages to any government authority, this right is rarely exercised. Under such circumstances, members of linguistic minorities may feel they and their language are oppressed by the majority, while people who are among linguistic majorities may feel threatened by what some might consider minor concessions. Thus, attempts to make seemingly minor accommodations for social diversity may have extensive and volatile ramifications. For example, in 1994 a proposal in Bangalore to introduce an Urdu-language television news segment (aimed primarily at Muslim viewers) led to a week of urban riots that left dozens dead and millions of dollars in property damage.



Linguistic States in India

The constitution and various other government documents are purposely vague in defining such terms as national languages and official languages and in distinguishing either one from officially adopted regional languages. States are free to adopt their own language of administration and educational instruction from among the country's officially recognized languages, the Scheduled Languages. Further, all citizens have the right to primary education in their native tongue, although the constitution does not stipulate how this objective is to be accomplished.



Linguistic States in India

As drafted, the constitution provided that Hindi and English were to be the languages of communication for the central government until 1965, when the switch to Hindi was mandated. The Official Languages Act of 1963, pursuing this mandate, said that Hindi would become the sole official national language in 1965. English, however, would continue as an "associate additional official language." After ten years, a parliamentary committee was to consider the situation and whether the status of English should continue if the knowledge of Hindi among peoples of other native languages had not progressed sufficiently. The act, however, was ambiguous about whether Hindi could be imposed on unwilling states by 1975. In 1964 the Ministry of Home Affairs requested all central ministries to state their progress on the switch to Hindi and their plans for the period after the transition date in 1965. The news of this directive led to massive riots and self-immolations in Tamil Nadu in late 1964 and early 1965, leading the central government, then run by the Congress, to back away from its stand. A conference of Congress leaders, cabinet ministers, and chief ministers of all the states was held in New Delhi in June 1965. Non-Hindi-speaking states were assured that Hindi would not be imposed as the sole language of communication between the central government and the states as long as even one state objected. In addition any of the Scheduled Languages could be used in taking examinations for entry into the central government services.



Linguistic States in India

Before independence in 1947, the Congress was committed to redrawing state boundaries to correspond with linguistics. The States Reorganisation Commission, which was formed in 1953 to study the problems involved in redrawing state boundaries, viewed language as an important, although by no means the sole, factor. Other factors, such as economic viability and geographic realities, had to be taken into account. The commission issued its report in 1955; the government's request for comments from the populace generated a flood of petitions and letters. The final bill, passed in 1956 and amended several times in the 1960s, by no means resolved even the individual states' linguistic problems.



Tensions and Violence Over Language in India

In 1965, many people died and immolated themselves in Anti-Hindi riots in southern India by ethnic Dravidians, whose languages has little in common with the Aryan languages spoken in the north.

Even regions with a long history of agitation for a linguistic state sometimes have found the actual transition less than smooth. For example, proponents began lobbying for a Telugu-speaking state in the early twentieth century. In 1956 the central government formed a single state, Andhra Pradesh, composed of the predominantly Telugu-speaking parts of what in British India had been the Madras Presidency and the large polyglot princely state of Hyderabad. Although more than 80 percent of the residents (some 53 million people as of 1991) of Andhra Pradesh speak Telugu, like most linguistic states it has a sizable linguistic minority. In this case, the minority consists of Urdu speakers centered in the state's capital, Hyderabad, where nearly 40 percent (some 1.7 million people in 1991) of the population speak that language. Linguistic affinity did not form a firm basis for unity between the two regions from which the state had been formed because they were separated by cultural and economic differences. Although there were riots in the late 1960s and early 1970s in support of the formation of two separate states, the separation did not occur.



Tensions and Violence Over Language in India

The violence that broke out in the state of Assam in the early 1980s reflected the complexities of linguistic and ethnic politics in South Asia. The state has a significant number of Bengali-speaking Muslims--immigrants and their descendants who began settling the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Muslims came in response to a British-initiated colonization plan to bring under cultivation land left fallow by the Assamese. By the 1931 census, the Assamese not only had lost a hefty portion of their land but also had become a disadvantaged minority in their traditional homeland. They represented less than 33 percent of the total population of Assam, and the Muslim immigrants (who accounted for roughly 25 percent of the population) dominated commerce and the government bureaucracy.

Assamese-Bengali rioting started in 1950, and in the 1951 census many Bengalis listed Assamese as their native tongue in an effort to placate the Assamese. Further immigration of Bengali speakers after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and a resurgence of pro-Bengali feeling among earlier immigrants and their descendants reawakened Assamese fears of being outnumbered. Renewed violence in the early and mid-1980s was sufficiently serious for the central government to avoid holding general elections in Assam during December 1984.



Languages and Social Status in India

Contemporary languages and dialects, as they figure in the lives of most Indians, are a far cry from the stylized literary forms of Indo-Aryan or Dravidian languages. North India especially can be viewed as a continuum of village dialects. As a proverb has it, "Every two miles the water changes, every four miles the speech." Spoken dialects of more distant villages will be less and less mutually understandable and finally become simply mutually unintelligible outside the immediate region. In some cases, a variety of caste dialects coexist in the same village or region. In addition, there are numerous regional dialects that villagers use when doing business in nearby towns or bazaars.



Languages and Social Status in India

English continues to serve as the language of prestige. Efforts to switch to Hindi or other regional tongues encounter stiff opposition both from those who know English well and whose privileged position requires proficiency in that tongue and from those who see it as a means of upward mobility. Partisans of English also maintain it is useful and indeed necessary as a link to the rest of the world, that India is lucky that the colonial period left a language that is now the world's predominant international language in the fields of culture, science, technology, and commerce. They hold, too, that widespread knowledge of English is necessary for technological and economic progress and that reducing its role would leave India a backwater in world affairs.



Languages and Social Status in India

Linguistic diversity is apparent on a variety of levels. Major regional languages have stylized literary forms, often with an extensive body of literature, which may date back from a few centuries to two millennia ago. These literary languages differ markedly from the spoken forms and village dialects that coexist with a plethora of caste idioms and regional lingua francas. Part of the reason for such linguistic diversity lies in the complex social realities of South Asia. India's languages reflect the intricate levels of social hierarchy and caste. Individuals have in their speech repertoire a variety of styles and dialects appropriate to various social situations. In general, the higher the speaker's status, the more speech forms there are at his or her disposal. Speech is adapted in countless ways to reflect the specific social context and the relative standing of the speakers.



Languages and Social Status in India

Only around 3 percent of the population is truly fluent in both English and an Indian language. By necessity, a substantial minority are able to speak two Indian languages; even in the so-called linguistic states, there are minorities who do not speak the official language as their native tongue and must therefore learn it as a second language. Many tribal people are bilingual. Rural-urban migrants are frequently bilingual in the regional standard language as well as in their village dialect. In Bombay, for example, many migrants speak Hindi or Marathi in addition to their native tongue. Religious celebrations, popular festivals, and political meetings are typically carried on in the regional language, which may be unintelligible to many attendees. Bilingualism in India, however, is inextricably linked to social context. South Asia's long history of foreign rule has fostered what Clarence Maloney terms "the linguistic flight of the elite." Language--either Sanskrit, Persian, or English--has formed a barrier to advancement that only a few have been fortunate enough to overcome.



Social Context of Language in India

Different languages often correspond with different customs, dress, food and cultural expression such as dance and music. Since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, regional languages, such as Bengali, Punjabi, and Marathi, have become relatively standardized and are now used throughout their respective states for most levels of administration, business, and social intercourse. Each is associated with a body of literature. British rule was an impetus for the official codification of these regional tongues. British colonial administrators and missionaries learned regional languages and often studied their literatures, and their translations of English-language materials and the Bible encouraged the development of written, standard languages. To provide teaching materials, prose compositions, grammars, and textbooks were often commissioned and, in some cases, were closer to everyday speech than was the standard literary language. Industrialization, modernization, and printing gave a major boost to the vocabulary and standardization of regional tongues, especially by making possible the wide dissemination of dictionaries.



Social Context of Language in India

Such written forms still often differ widely from spoken vernaculars and village dialects. Diglossia--the coexistence of a highly elaborate, formal language alongside a more colloquial form of the same tongue--occurs in many instances. For example, spoken Bengali is so divergent from written Bengali as to be nearly another tongue. Similarly, Telugu scholars waged a bitter battle in the early twentieth century over proper language style. Reformers favored a simplified prose format for written Telugu, while traditional classicists wished to continue using a classical literary poetic form. In the end, the classicists won, although a more colloquial written form eventually began to appear in the mass media. Diglossia reinforces social barriers because only a fraction of the populace is sufficiently educated to master the more literary form of the language.



Social Context of Language in India

The standard regional language may be the household tongue of only a small group of educated inhabitants of the region's major urban center that has long exercised politico-economic hegemony in a region. Even literate villagers may have difficulty understanding it. The more socially isolated--women and Dalits---tend to be more parochial in their speech than people of higher caste, who are often able to use a colloquial form of the regional dialect, the caste patois, and the regional standard dialect. An educated person may master several different speech forms that are often so different as to be considered separate languages. Western-educated scholars may well use the regional standard language mixed with English vocabulary with their colleagues at work. At home, a man may switch to a more colloquial vernacular, particularly if his wife is uneducated. Even the highly educated frequently communicate in their village dialects at home.

Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth century, radio, television, and the print media have fostered standardization of regional dialects, if only to facilitate communication. Linguistic standardization has contributed to ethnic or regional differentiation insofar as language has served as a cultural marker. Mass communication forces the adoption of a single standard regional tongue; typically, the choice is the dialect of the majority in the region or of the region's preeminent business or cultural centre. The use of less standard forms clearly labels speakers outside their immediate home base. To fulfil its purposes, the regional language must be standardized and taught to an increasing percentage of the population, thereby encroaching both on its own dialects and the minority languages of the region. The language of instruction and administration affects the economic and career interests and the self-respect of an ever-greater proportion of the population.





Any
questions?

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