

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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**Is It Time for India to Abandon Its
Antiquated *Rajbhasha* Policy?**

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The History of the Language Policy in India

In 1906, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in his book *Hind Swaraj or Home Rule*,

A universal language for India should be Hindi, with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagari characters. In order that the Hindus and the Mohammedans may have closer relations, it is necessary to know both the characters. And, if we can do this, we can drive the English language out of the field in a short time.¹

In spite of significant differences between Mahatma Gandhi and other Congressmen at the time (Mahatma Gandhi also supported Hindustani at times), the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi reigned supreme, and the policies of Mahatma Gandhi tended to be widely accepted in the Congress. This was in spite of the fact that the seeds for linguistic provinces were sown in the early 20th century itself. For example, the Indian National Congress in 1917 decided to constitute a separate Andhra Congress Provincial committee. A consensus was also slowly emerging that administration had to be provided in a language that was understood by its people. In spite of a potential conflict between Hindi as a national language and the concept of linguistic provinces, however, the Congress, at that time naturally wanted to avoid partition and show that it was not opposed to the interests of the Muslims, and emphasized religious harmony over linguistic identity.²

Protests Against the Language Provisions of the Indian Constitution

Accordingly, the Indian constitution provided that Hindi and English were to be the languages of the Central Government until 1965, when a switch to Hindi would be necessary. Provinces were however free to use their own languages. Even at the time the decision to select the language of a region as a national language proved controversial and invoked protest from several parts of South India, Western India, North Eastern India but particularly in Tamilnadu. The strongest of these protests took place in December, 1964 and January 1965 in Tamilnadu when the 15 year mandate for phasing out English at the Central government was to expire. Several hundreds of people were killed in these agitations.

India Before and After 1991: Did India Survive and Prosper in spite of Its Language Policy?

Since independence, India has pursued a so-called mixed economy where the public sector was in the commanding heights of the economy, and the private sector had a relatively less important role to play. The public sector apparently failed to meet the aspirations of the burgeoning middle class both in terms of career avenues and its ability to provide the requisite number of career opportunities to meet the growing numbers of the educated classes, and people had to look for other career options both in India and abroad.

Implications of the Language Policy

The national language policy remained stagnant because of the fear that to change it in favor of some other language, say, English, or even Hindi exclusively, overriding the roles of regional languages, would create a discrimination based on language and would therefore be incompatible with the principles of a democracy.

The so-called **Three-Language-Formula** was developed as a compromise, and as an imperfect solution to what may then have been termed an intractable issue because many Hindi zealots at the time may have been unable to think beyond Hindi and many of those opposed to it were similarly unable to think beyond English.

If one were to retrospect over this situation four decades later, we would come to the conclusion that this policy has caused more confusion and chaos than good. While it may have lured one part of the country into a feeling of *Rajbhasha* complacency, many were genuinely angry at it and saw it as a blatant sign of discrimination based on language. If one were to analyze the **Three-Language-Formula**, the Hindi-speaking states saw little need to implement it, and even if they did so, taught a language like Sanskrit which was clearly out of the economic equation.

Points of Discrimination – Job Markets, etc.

As a result of this, some states had two and some had three languages. National Language Policy was perceived to be the first point of discrimination. Many who opposed Hindi claimed that if Hindi zealots had their way, English would soon be removed. However, for most people this itself was always in doubt because Hindi was only the official language of the Central government, and did not seem to reach the status and efficiency needed to achieve a language of corporations, industries, businesses, etc. Those who learnt Hindi in the Hindi-speaking states had it as their native language, their mother tongue; those who learnt it elsewhere did not. This was perceived to be the second point of discrimination. Again, those who learnt Hindi in a Hindi medium school learnt their mother tongue as their first language; those who learnt it elsewhere learnt it as an alien language as a second or a third language. This was perceived to be the third point of discrimination.

Theoretically, it may have allowed a part of the country to take over the job market through unnatural means, triggering, as a result a series of other reactions inimical and

antithetical to the nation's integrity and may have even encouraged laziness at the expense of merit and greatly hampered productivity.

English was, on the other hand, perceived to be neutral. In spite of this, politicians even in many non-Hindi speaking states abandoned English or greatly reduced its power with unabashed political motives. Nonetheless, all these factors coupled with the fundamental irreconcilability between the policies followed in Central and most State governments, and the need to look elsewhere for job opportunities may have clearly triggered a demand for English.

This was aided in no meager measure by a series of fortuitous happenings.

Enter Globalization!

One was the process of globalization dictated by the suzerainty of the USA and the impregnability of English as the language of global commerce. Another was the advent of the computer and the Internet.

Economic Reforms in Tandem with the Collapse of the USSR System

In addition, India's economic reforms coincided perfectly with the collapse of the USSR and the process of globalization.

Another factor may have been ingrained in the very nature of the Indian economy: India is a complex country and many parts of the country have economic connections with other parts of the world and not necessarily with the Hindi heartland. This is one reason why India may have become an economic success story after economic reforms.

Deceleration of Secessionist Movements in India

It may also be interesting to note that all secessionist movements within economically strong States have ceased after liberalization and economic reforms, and many historians may one day see 1991 as a turning point for India. India after 1991 is more or less a completely different country.

Late in the 20th century, most Communist countries collapsed due to inherent contradictions in their own economic and political structures. The major objection to India's language policy in the 21st century, may be, that the spread of a language native to one particular region in a multilingual and multiethnic country through political power is normally associated with Marxist countries and failed or failing states and if pushed beyond a point, may be even incompatible with minority rights.

Lessons from the Neighborhood

Two classic cases in our own neighborhood, in addition to the erstwhile USSR, were Pakistan and Sri Lanka where perceived discrimination based on language sowed the seeds of instability and led to disintegration or civil war.

Interpreting the Constitution

In the case of India, which loosely follows a policy on similar lines, some checks and balances in the Indian Constitution were and are available.

A complete incompatibility between the language policies of the Centre and the States could be constitutionally imagined and adopted by various States. We could also interpret the provisions of the Constitution to sustain an incompatibility between India's language policy and the Constitution, which only decreed that Hindi was the official language of the Central government and that it would replace English for use in Central government offices and for correspondence with States only after all States have unanimously agreed.

This provision, when insisted upon, could have led to several other interesting counter-reactions that may one day become a topic of discussion between historians, linguists and even economists.

Now, in the seventh decade of India's independence, such a switchover at the Central government level shows no signs of happening. Instead, the usage of *Rajbhasha* even in central government offices has only been declining and is only being propped up through artificial and clearly unsustainable means.

Unity in Diversity and State-sponsored Discrimination Based on Language Identity

Most other multi-ethnic societies like Canada, Mauritius, the European Union and Switzerland emphasize on Unity in Diversity, and do not allow state-sponsored discrimination between languages. Therefore, putting all this in perspective, India may have survived and prospered as a result of natural and automatic course corrections to outdated language policies and not because of them.

Private Sector Corporations and Language Use

In recent years, private sector companies have clearly shown that they cannot support the language of a community in a multi-lingual country. Private sector companies opt for neutral languages like English, or always and without exception, start their services in multiple Indian languages simultaneously. Hindi may have spread because it may have provided a kind of emotional bonding that an alien language like English cannot. For example, the **Three-Language-Formula** in later years was a vehicle that popularized Hindi cinema outside the Hindi heartland.

Spread of Hinglish

Another interesting but most certainly unintended outcome in the post-1991 era was the spread of a certain kind of pidgin Hindi or Hinglish as an entry level link language, because it may have been more closely related to Indian languages than English. Hindi also may have been able to provide a certain feel-good factor necessary to sustain national integration in early years of independence.

However, spreading the language of one region through artificial means may be a very dangerous long-term strategy. It can perhaps even promote fanaticism and hatred in the long run, by allowing the people of a particular region to think themselves as superior to others.

Discourse of Coercion and Suicidal Consequences of Attempts to Revive *Rajbhasha* Rhetoric

Hence, after providing a superficial level of unity just enough to compensate for the weaknesses of English as a link language, the language of one particular community may begin to divide beyond a point, and, as a result, encourage English even more. Hindi may not provide a win-win proposition at any other level, either. Hence as a written language, or as a language used exclusively in formal communication, it is well and truly defunct outside the Hindi belt.

It may be extremely dangerous and suicidal to attempt to revive it through artificial means, and such efforts would only be synonymous with words such as *enforcement* and *imposition*, terms not associated even with the spread of English in India, either during the British Raj or after. Complaints about Hindi imposition continue even to this day and this is clearly not good either for long-term National Unity or for Centre-State relationships. The government should not keep on promoting such policies.

Anomalies in India's Policies – Failure to Develop Mutual Respect for Other People's Languages

India's policies may have had other anomalies. While India was in most cases genuinely secular, it may not have been able to create a framework which created a mutual respect for other people's languages in India. The concept of *linguistic states* only fructified in the 1950's after Potti Sriramulu intensified his agitation for a Telugu-speaking state. Nehru initially opposed him, only to yield later.

As discussed, India's policies may have encouraged English even more, and may have even encouraged the learning of other foreign languages at the expense of Indian languages, by not promoting a healthy atmosphere where Indians could learn each other's languages. In English medium schools, one cannot generally learn their own mother tongue, if it is not Hindi, and certainly not if his or her mother tongue is different from the state he or she is residing in, and cannot learn the language of the state either if it is a non-Hindi speaking state.

English and Hindi in Collusion to Kill Other Languages

This has allowed both English and Hindi to kill other Indian languages. People often learn languages, including foreign ones, which are not useful to them. With the growing craze for English medium schools, where Hindi is the only available option as a second language, other Indian languages are slowly getting destroyed.

Again, politicians or rulers have never selected national languages in the five Thousand-year old history of human civilization, and Hindi is only the Official Language, according to the Indian Constitution. Such concepts may also have something to do with Marxism. Rulers, however, selected administrative languages in consultation with their subjects. Since Ancient times, polyglot countries like India have always had neutral link languages like Sanskrit which was the lingua franca of the elite in ancient India. We can argue that neutral link languages can be selected but only if all states and union territories agree beforehand.

Peculiar Developments, Strange Scenarios

Such policies may have thrown up other interesting results. This is a policy, which encourages Mumbaikars to speak in Hindi and write in English, but not the other way round, even in their own state, for example, although their mother tongue is Marathi.

A policy, which may have ensured that some educated South Indians did not speak to educated North Indians in Hindi to protest against discrimination and show that they respect their minority rights, but later encouraged them to use it sparingly and in informal situations once they realized that Hindi was losing the battle. Speak in Hindi and they reply back in English. Keep speaking in English and they may speak to you in Hindi, but only very sparingly, if they know it, perhaps just to show you that they have nothing against Hindi as a language. Other North Indians may have done a quick Arithmetic; those who felt that Hindi was more beneficial to them may have supported it. Things may be changing now, as the English fever catches on.

India's Language Policies Not Working as Intended

India's language policies have, therefore, not worked as intended. Clearly, they cannot. Instead they have been producing a series of interesting counter-reactions, which historians may one day ponder over. If pushed through artificial means, they can only further destabilize the country.

Many eminent scholars have come to the conclusion that India's language policies are against the interests of the country and potentially extremely dangerous. One may want to read Mohanram's **Hindi against India** or a series of short articles by eminent historian Ramachandra Guha in the columns of *The Hindu* titled "**Hindi Chauvinism**" and "**Hindi against India**". The book, *Constitution and Language Politics of India*, by B.V.R. Rao is another good read among a couple of others. All of them are patriots.

What About Non-Constitutional Languages?

Let us move to another interesting topic for debate. Are languages such as Bhojpuri, Mythili, Urdu, Angika and Santhali really a part of Hindi? Bhojpuri with 150 million speakers has a flourishing rival entertainment industry and a distinct literature.

Many linguists think it is a distinct language in its own right and may soon be included in the Eighth schedule as a separate language. Mythili with 45 million speakers may have a recorded history even older than Hindi and has its own traditional script. Urdu with 75 million speakers, despite many similarities with Hindi, is clearly a different language with a different script. Angika (25 million speakers) and Santhali (8 million speakers) may again not technically be a part of Hindi. Many of these like Mythili and even Marwari are separate languages according to the Eighth schedule.

At the time of independence, Dhulekar supported the cause of Hindustani while Purushottam Das Tandon supported the cause of Hindi. All this is good food for thought.

So, What are the Alternatives?

Sanskrit was offered as an alternative choice at the time of independence in some circles in Kolkata and in South India, and may have eventually been accepted even by Tamilnadu, on account of its neutrality. However, Sanskrit may not have been a strong contender initially. Hindi and English spread because vested interests spread them. Who will promote Sanskrit? Maybe patriotism and its simplicity may enable it to spread. One might, however, want to note that even a dead language like Hebrew has successfully been resurrected in recent times. What about an option between Sanskrit and Urdu? What about Prakrit?

India may not have been ready for a United States of India model in the early years of independence. Now it probably is and has already been moving in that direction. It perhaps may have no other option but to move in that direction. Centralization may be antithetical to the very idea of India and can only serve to destroy it. Nehru's *Statist* policies may have been opposed to the very idea of India.

One may be surprised to learn that there may be a range of other possible solutions. In vernacular schools, people may learn the language of the State, English and Sanskrit. Those who don't want to take Sanskrit may opt for Urdu. In English medium schools people may learn English and Sanskrit or Urdu. However, people may be asked to learn a little bit of the local language.

Alternatively, we may implement a completely different kind of a proposal. People may opt for any one living Indian language, which in most case may mean their mother tongue, the precondition being that they learn the local language of the state in which they are residing in. Schools can decide to introduce them depending on the demand. We can also have a composite third language taught which would include two or three living Indian languages. We can have a combination of all these. Alternatively, the Centre can

set up a body to promote Indian languages, set up libraries, research institutes, in every town and district, translate international books into all Indian languages, make technical information available to the common man, especially information which is most needed by him in areas such as Agriculture, give away prizes to scholars, provide translation services in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha in all Indian languages so that only people from a few states do not benefit.

There may be thousands of other possible solutions, literally thousands. We can even opt for a combination of all these.

Hindi for UN?

The Central Government cannot ask the UN to consider its request to make Hindi an official language of the UN without a formal endorsement of all States and Union territories.

Recently, the Ministry of External Affairs asked the UN to consider its request to make Hindi an official language of the UN. If the Centre does this without a formal endorsement by all States and Union Territories, it will only be an endorsement of its arbitrary USSR type, Rajbhasha policies, i.e., politicians “selecting” languages. This may be antithetical to the long-term stability of the Union since “selecting” the language of a region and spreading it through political power is clearly a Marxist paradigm and has already been associated with terms such as *enforcement, imposition, demands for independence* and over 500 deaths in India and would be tantamount to interfering in the process of the natural spread of languages in India by resorting to artificial methods, affect long-term communal harmony and will even make a mockery of economic reforms.

These people may be completely out of their breadth in understanding the difference between an official language and an entry-level link language and may not be even able to understand the complexity of the language issue in India. This will be a big step backwards. They cannot take us back to the Nehruvian era. Furthermore, India’s language policy was never in line with the principles of federalism.

Did all states get together and draft India’s language policy? Or was it a hasty compromise?

The Concept of Federalism

“Selecting” the language of one state is even fundamentally opposed to the concept of Federalism and the concept of equal states because it is heavily biased towards some States and heavily biased against some others. Such paradigms are not even workable if one were to consider the natural spread of languages and the principles of a free market economy and will keep on throwing up counter-reactions. However, the Central Government may want to make both Sanskrit and Urdu official languages in the UN after a thorough debate and a discussion. Any proposal would need to be carried only after

consensus-building after obtaining the written endorsement of all States and Union Territories, which, in turn, have to discuss it with communities within their states. This must be done, even if it takes years or even decades, only after all objections are sorted out.

Any other approach is extremely dangerous, especially since India's language policy has been extremely controversial and has been associated with terms such as *imposition*, *enforcement* and *demands for separation*.

Revise the Language Policy

India's language policy should have been revised a long time ago, possibly even as early as 1956, and even now it is not too late. Since India is an emerging economic Superpower, all other developing nations will look forward to India for light and inspiration. The Central Government must set up a committee with representatives of people from all States, linguists and scholars to draw up a new language policy for India. It may also want to draw up a plan to undo the possible damage caused by old policies.

Since India's greatness is its unity in diversity, the logical stand may be to identify common elements in Indian culture right from Kerala to Assam and use them as a tool for national integration. One cannot however, blindly keep endorsing *Rajbhasha* policies anymore. It is clearly time for a change.

Notes

¹ Early Gandhi and the Language policy of the India National Congress, M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D., *Language in India* <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2005/earlygandhi1.html>

² The roots of Linguistic Reorganization of Indian provinces Dr Annie Besant and her home rule movement M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D., *Language in India* <http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2005/lingreorganization1.html>

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