
THE LINGUA FRANCA AND THE FEDERAL FABRIC: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S LANGUAGE POLICY, IDENTITY, AND ASPIRATION

Vaibhav Singh Yadav, Law Graduate from Campus Law Centre, DU¹

ABSTRACT

India's linguistic landscape is one of extraordinary diversity, where every region, every community, and even every street can have its own distinct voice. Language in India is not merely a tool for communication; it is a marker of identity, a gateway to opportunity, and a cornerstone of the nation's federal cohesion. This article explores the historical, constitutional, and socio-economic dimensions of India's language policy, tracing its evolution from the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly to the dual-language framework institutionalized under the Official Languages Act, 1963.

The study examines the ongoing tension between Hindi, promoted as a symbol of national unity and cultural identity, and English, which has become a language of aspiration, global mobility, and socio-economic advantage. It highlights how English proficiency, while opening doors to opportunity, has also reinforced socio-economic stratification, creating a "new caste" shaped by linguistic skill. Simultaneously, the promotion of Hindi faces resistance in non-Hindi-speaking regions, reflecting the challenges of balancing national integration with regional identity.

The article further analyses contemporary education policies, particularly the National Education Policy 2020 and its three-language formula, alongside the uneven promotion and funding of classical languages. By drawing lessons from India's linguistic reorganization and comparing its approach with international examples such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the study underscores the consequences of exclusionary language policies and the benefits of inclusive, flexible approaches.

Ultimately, this research advocates for a "new linguistic federalism" that preserves cultural diversity, promotes equitable economic and educational opportunities, and leverages multilingualism as a source of national unity. In

¹ Law graduate from Campus Law Centre, DU, practicing at the Allahabad High Court, Lucknow Bench. Formerly Legal Head at Naz Foundation

this vision, every Indian language is not only a living cultural heritage but also a pathway to dignity, opportunity, and collective identity.

Keywords: India, language policy, linguistic diversity, Hindi, English, multilingualism, federalism, socio-economic stratification, National Education Policy 2020, classical languages, language and identity, linguistic federalism.

1. Introduction: The Enduring Paradox of Language in India

India is a country where every few hundred kilometres, the rhythm of speech changes where a lullaby in Bengal sounds nothing like a folk song in Punjab, and a street conversation in Tamil Nadu bears no resemblance to one in Gujarat. We live in a nation of many voices, yet we constantly ask ourselves: *can we speak as one?* At the time of independence, our leaders had to answer a question that touched every heart, what language should carry the voice of India? Hindi, spoken by millions? English, the legacy of our colonisers but also a key to the wider world? Or the countless mother tongues that people love and fight for in their daily lives? The choice was never simple, and even today, it isn't. Our language policy is more than just law or bureaucracy it is about dignity, opportunity, and identity. It is about who we are when we speak, and how we wish to be heard as a nation.

2. The Genesis of a Dual-Language State: From Constituent Assembly to Legislative Mandate

2.1. The Constitutional Blueprint: A Compromise on Paper

India's language policy finds its foundation in the Constitution, and contrary to common misconception, the country does not have a "national language." Instead, it recognizes certain official languages within a carefully designed but initially temporary framework. Part XVII of the Constitution, specifically Articles 343 to 351, is dedicated to the official language provisions. Article 343(1)² designates Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, as the official language of the Union. This provision, however, came with a crucial addendum in Article 343(2)³, which stipulated that the English language would continue to be used for all official purposes for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of the Constitution. This clause

² INDIA CONST. art. 343, cl. 1.

³ INDIA CONST. art. 343, cl. 2.

was a deliberate compromise, intended to facilitate a smooth transition away from English without causing immediate disruption.

Beyond this temporary arrangement, the Constitution placed a clear directive on the Union government. Article 351⁴ makes it a responsibility of the Central government to promote the spread and development of the Hindi language, so that it may serve as a medium of expression for the "composite culture of India". This constitutional mandate has served as the legal basis for pro-Hindi policies and has been a persistent source of contention in non-Hindi-speaking states.

Provision	Description	Significance
Article 343(1)	Declares Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language of the Union.	Establishes the constitutional primacy of Hindi.
Article 343(2)	Continues the use of English for official purposes for a period of 15 years from the Constitution's commencement.	The original compromise to ease the transition away from English.
Article 343(3)⁵	Grants Parliament the authority to extend the use of English by law even after the initial 15-year period.	A flexible clause that proved crucial in preventing linguistic tensions.
Article 348(1)⁶	Mandates that all proceedings in the Supreme Court and High Courts shall be in English until Parliament provides otherwise.	Formalizes English's enduring role in the judiciary.
Article 348(2)⁷	Permits a state Governor, with the President's consent, to authorize the use of Hindi	Provides a path for states to incorporate regional languages in their high

⁴ INDIA CONST. art. 351

⁵ INDIA CONST. art. 343, cl. 3.

⁶ INDIA CONST. art. 348, cl. 1

⁷ INDIA CONST. art. 348, cl. 2.

	or another state language in High Court proceedings.	courts, subject to central approval.
Article 351	Directs the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language as a medium for the composite culture of India.	The constitutional foundation for the promotion of Hindi and a key source of linguistic tension.

2.2. *The Catalyst of Conflict: The 1965 Anti-Hindi Agitations*

The constitutional compromise was tested as the fifteen-year deadline approached. On January 26, 1965, as Hindi was set to become the sole official language, widespread protests erupted across the state of Madras (now Tamil Nadu)⁸. The anti-Hindi agitations were a powerful expression of Dravidianist resistance, led by student movements and political parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK).⁹

The protests were driven by a profound fear of socio-economic and political marginalization. Non-Hindi speakers, particularly students, were concerned that the shift would "inflict severe disabilities" on them, making it difficult to compete for coveted central government jobs and positions in the civil services. For these communities, language was not merely a matter of identity; it was a "life and death matter," directly linked to economic opportunity and future prospects. The widespread violence and self-immolations that ensued underscored the depth of this frustration and forced the central government to re-evaluate its policy.

2.3. *The Official Languages Act, 1963: A Pragmatic Institutionalization*

In response to the growing unrest, Parliament enacted the Official Languages Act, 1963¹⁰, which came into effect on January 26, 1965. This legislative action fundamentally altered the constitutional arrangement by leveraging the flexibility provided in Article 343(3). The Act's pivotal provision, Section 3, explicitly stated that the English language could "continue to be used, in addition to Hindi," for all official purposes of the Union. This Act effectively removed the temporary fifteen-year limit on the use of English, institutionalizing a permanent dual-

⁸ Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford Univ. Press 1966).

⁹ Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Riots in Tamilnadu: Problems and Prospects of India's Language Crisis*, 26 *ASIAN SURV.* 265 (1965).

¹⁰ The Official Languages Act, No. 19 of 1963, INDIA CODE (1963).

language policy.

The Act represented a political victory for linguistic federalism and became a cornerstone of Indian governance. It ensured administrative continuity, facilitated communication across diverse linguistic regions, and, most importantly, helped to calm the strong opposition from non-Hindi-speaking states. This pragmatic solution acknowledged the reality that English was not just a colonial relic but an indispensable tool for a multilingual nation.

3. The Two Poles of Aspiration and Identity: English vs. Hindi

3.1. English: The Language of Opportunity and Global Linkage

Over the decades, English in India has evolved from a colonial legacy into a powerful socio-economic tool. It is widely considered a "skill" that serves as a "passport to the world of ideas" and a crucial enabler of economic mobility¹¹. This transformation was particularly accelerated by the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, which led to the explosive growth of the information technology (IT) and service sectors. As India integrated into the global economy, English became the lingua franca for business transactions, international diplomacy, and academia, cementing its position as a vital language of opportunity and progress.

Our national leaders in India never tried to outlaw the English language. Over the years, it has stopped feeling like a foreign tongue and has blended into our daily lives. In fact, many Indians today speak English with such fluency that they often surpass native speakers. Just look at some of our brightest names—Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, V.S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie—writers who have dazzled the world with their command of the language. English has become a tool that connects us to the world, and it's not just India—countries like China are also pushing their people to learn it, recognizing how important it is in today's global stage.

The economic value of English proficiency is not merely a perception; it is empirically quantifiable. A study found that, after controlling for a variety of factors such as age, education, and geography, the hourly wages of men who speak fluent English are on average **34% higher** than those who do not speak English at all. This return to English fluency is significant,

¹¹ Shamika Ravi & Mudit Kapoor, *The Economic Value of English in India*, BROOKINGS INDIA RESEARCH PAPER NO. 9 (Mar. 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/India-Value-of-English.pdf>

equivalent to the economic benefit of completing a secondary school education and half the value of a bachelor's degree.

3.2. Hindi: The Language of National Unity and Cultural Mandate

In contrast to the pragmatic, global role of English, Hindi's position is rooted in constitutional directive and demographic reality. As noted, Article 351 places the responsibility on the Union to promote Hindi as a language of "composite culture." This mandate is bolstered by its extensive reach; according to the 2011 Census¹², Hindi is the first language for over 520 million people, making it the most widely spoken language in the country. Proponents of Hindi view its promotion as essential for national unity and for fostering a shared identity among the country's diverse populace.

The user's data on language demographics provides a powerful illustration of this distinction. While Hindi is a primary language for a majority of the population, English is a native language for a negligible number (259,000) and a second language for a much larger, but still minority, group (83 million). This imbalance underscores why English has flourished as a language of aspiration without government promotion, while Hindi, despite a constitutional mandate, faces resistance from communities that view its promotion as an imposition.

3.3. Socio-Economic Stratification and the Rise of a "New Caste"

The economic premium associated with English proficiency, while a driver of social mobility, also reinforces existing hierarchies and creates a new form of socio-economic stratification. English is described as the "language of the aspirational, which is the elite". The data confirms that the economic benefits of English are not evenly distributed; they are particularly pronounced for more educated and experienced workers.

This dynamic creates a self-perpetuating cycle of advantage. Access to high-quality English-medium education is often a privilege reserved for the urban, affluent, and educated classes. This privileged access to linguistic capital directly translates into quantifiable economic returns and access to high-paying jobs in the civil services and private sector. The result is the emergence of a "new caste" where an individual's life prospects are heavily dependent on their

¹² Office of the Registrar Gen. & Census Comm'r, Census of India 2011, Language Data (2011), <https://censusindia.gov.in/>.

English proficiency, which itself is a function of their socio-economic background. This situation presents a paradox: a language that was introduced as a tool of colonial power has become a tool of internal stratification within an independent nation, reinforcing the very social divisions that policies aim to address.

4. The Battlefield of Education and Public Policy

4.1. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020¹³ and the Three-Language Formula

The ongoing debate over India's language policy is most visible in the education sector. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to promote multilingualism through a flexible "three-language formula". The policy's official position is that it does not impose any specific language on any state and that students and regions are free to choose their languages, provided at least two of the three are native to India.

Despite these assurances, the policy has been met with strong opposition from states like Tamil Nadu. The state government views the formula as a "covert attempt to introduce Hindi through the backdoor" and a violation of cooperative federalism. This opposition is a direct legacy of the state's historical anti-Hindi agitations and its long-standing institutionalized two-language policy (Tamil and English). The deep-seated suspicion is that any central policy, regardless of its stated intent, could be a "Trojan horse" for Hindi imposition and an "assault on state autonomy".

4.2. The Classical Languages Conundrum: A Case Study in Disparity

The government's stated policy is to promote all Indian languages and to keep them vibrant. However, an analysis of funding for classical languages reveals a stark disparity between stated goals and resource allocation. India currently has eleven languages with official classical status, including Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Odia, Bengali, Prakrit, Assamese, Marathi, and Pali.

Data from a Right to Information (RTI) request from the Hindustan times¹⁴ exposes a profound

¹³ Ministry of Education, National Education Policy 2020, GOV'T OF INDIA (July 29, 2020), https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English.pdf.

¹⁴ Swati Sharma, Govt Spent 17 Times More on Sanskrit Than Other Classical Languages, HINDUSTAN TIMES (Mar. 5, 2024, 10:15 AM IST), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sanskrit-vs-other-classical-languages-funding>.

imbalance in central government spending between 2014-2015 and 2024-2025. This data shows that the central government spent a colossal **₹2532.59 crore** on the promotion of Sanskrit, which is more than 17 times the combined funding of **₹147.56 crore** allocated to the other five classical languages (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia) that received the status earlier. Tamil, despite being the first language to be declared classical, received **22 times less** funding than Sanskrit. This massive investment in Sanskrit, which has a negligible number of speakers according to the 2011 Census, also surpassed the combined funding for Hindi, Urdu, and Sindhi.

The spending patterns on classical languages highlight a significant disconnect between the stated policy of promoting all languages and the practical allocation of resources. The disproportionate prioritization of Sanskrit, a language with minimal speakers, over other classical languages with millions of native speakers raises fundamental questions about the rationale behind the policy. If the primary goal is the preservation and promotion of living linguistic heritage, the funding should be more equitable and tied to demographic realities and educational needs. The current resource allocation suggests an ideological agenda is at play, aimed at promoting a specific cultural and historical narrative rather than a policy for effective and equitable language development.

5. Language as an Emotive and Separatist Force: Lessons from History and the Neighbourhood

5.1. Linguistic Reorganization within India: A Triumph of Federalism

The user's query rightly identifies language as an emotive issue that has been a reason for the creation of many states in India. The most prominent example is the formation of Andhra Pradesh¹⁵, which was carved out of the Madras Presidency in 1953. This pivotal moment was a direct result of the hunger strike and subsequent death of Potti Sriramulu, who was demanding a separate state for Telugu-speaking people.

His sacrifice galvanized public opinion and forced the government to concede. The formation of Andhra Pradesh set a powerful precedent that led to the widespread reorganization of state boundaries along linguistic lines through the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. Rather than destabilizing the nation, this process is widely regarded as a successful move that strengthened

¹⁵ B. Shiva Rao, *The Framing of India's Constitution: A Study* (1968).

India's federal structure by acknowledging and accommodating regional linguistic identities. It provided a sense of self-government to these communities and diffused secessionist tendencies, proving that linguistic diversity can be a source of unity, not division, when managed through a policy of accommodation.

5.2. International Parallels: The Perils of Exclusion

The wisdom of India's accommodating approach becomes clear when compared to the outcomes of exclusionary language policies in neighboring countries. The Sri Lankan Civil War¹⁶, which lasted for over two decades, has its roots in the "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956. This Act, which made Sinhala the sole official language, was violently opposed by the Tamil-speaking minority. It was perceived as a clear act of oppression and contributed to decades of discrimination, violent anti-Tamil pogroms, and ultimately, a bloody civil war¹⁷.

Similarly, the creation of Bangladesh¹⁸ from East Pakistan was fueled by a powerful language-based movement. In 1948, the government of Pakistan declared Urdu as the sole national language, despite the fact that Bengali was spoken by the majority of the country's population. This policy of linguistic and cultural suppression, combined with economic exploitation, served as a "catalyst" for a national awakening and a powerful struggle for an independent Bengali identity, culminating in the Liberation War of 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh¹⁹.

The history of India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan/Bangladesh presents a clear distinction in how language policy shapes national destiny. The central point is that it is not linguistic diversity itself that is a threat to national unity, but rather the denial of that diversity and the imposition of a dominant language. India's pragmatic approach of accommodating linguistic demands through state reorganization, despite initial resistance, ultimately served to strengthen the federal union. This stands in stark contrast to the policies of exclusion in its neighbors, which led to devastating civil conflict and the secession of a country. The current debates around language policy in India are a test of whether the lessons of this historical experience are being remembered.

¹⁶ K.M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Univ. of California Press 1981).

¹⁷ A.J. Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict* (C. Hurst & Co. 1988).

¹⁸ Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (Columbia Univ. Press 1972).

¹⁹ Sarmila Bose, The Question of Language in the Creation of Bangladesh, 31 J. CONTEMP. ASIA 385 (2001).

6. Conclusion: Towards a New Linguistic Federalism

The history of language in India is a story of continuous negotiation and compromise. The constitutional blueprint, the legislative response to protest, and the pragmatic coexistence of English and Hindi have, however imperfectly, served as a bulwark against the kind of linguistic conflict that has destabilized India's neighbors. English has become an indispensable economic skill that provides a "passport" to global opportunity, while Hindi continues to carry the mandate of national unity and cultural expression.

The ongoing debates, however, reveal a policy in need of reform. The perception of the NEP 2020 as a Trojan horse for Hindi and the stark funding disparity for classical languages suggest that the delicate balance between federal autonomy and central directive is under strain. The need of the hour is a nuanced policy that moves beyond the old paradigms and embraces a genuine linguistic federalism. This involves:

- **A commitment to a genuine, non-discriminatory education policy** that empowers states to make autonomous choices, thus fostering trust and upholding the principle of cooperative federalism.
- **A re-evaluation of resource allocation** for language promotion. Funding should be distributed equitably, tied to demographic realities and tangible preservation efforts, rather than serving a purely ideological agenda.
- **Harnessing multilingualism as a national asset.** A future-ready education model should integrate strong foundational learning in the mother tongue with high-quality English instruction. This approach would create a workforce that is cognitively sharper and culturally grounded while also being globally competitive, helping to bridge the socio-economic divide created by linguistic stratification.

Ultimately, the future of India's language policy lies not in the forced ascendance of one language over others, but in the acknowledgment and celebration of its immense linguistic diversity. The goal should be to build a system where every Indian language provides a path to economic stability and opportunity, ensuring that the essence of these languages is preserved for generations to come.