

Multilingualism and India

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India is a land of 23 official languages and our culture is multilingual in nature. Being the home of the Indo-European language family and one of the world's oldest language families, the Dravidian language family, India is a treasure trove for languacultural studies. However, it has had its own fair share of problems arising due to the innate linguistic differences. The most prominent one amongst them, about which I would like to detail, would be the Anti-Hindi riots that had its roots in Tamil Nadu, my native state and something that spread throughout the whole of South India, thereby leading to highest level constitutional amendments that have, till date, been in effect. This has also led to mild and harmless hostility between certain aspects of the languacultural divide that exists between speakers of South Indian languages and Hindi speakers.

It should be noted that India is quite unique in its own sense when it comes to languacultural aspects. Indian languages broadly fall into four language families, namely, Indo-European, Dravidian, Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic. Speakers of Indo-European languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi and Urdu reside primarily in North India and the Dravidian languages, namely, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam reside primarily in South India. Dravidian and Indo-European language speakers constitute 20 of the 22 official languages.

It is to be noted that although there are differences even between the languages belonging to the same language family, there is a notable contrast between the Indo-European language group and the Dravidian language group. The former has its primary language in India, being Hindi, and the latter having Tamil at the head of its chart. So the whole equation effectively boiled down to two languages trying to maintain their status in terms of the Indian Union.

After independence, India was divided into states on linguistic lines. Currently there are 28 states and 7 Union territories, and all the states have a language of their own except for in North India where 5 states have a common languaculture bound by Hindi. With Hindi being the second most widely spoken language in the world in terms of native language speakers, the Indian Parliament which functions in terms of having maximum elected representatives from a particular state, efforts started to reduce the usage of English in India, post-independence.

As per the new bill, Hindi was to become the sole official language of India on January 26, 1965, ironically India's Republic Day. This was an act widely criticized by the non-Hindi speaking states because the act demanded that Hindi be compulsorily made the de facto language of all the states and further trouble arose when it was to be made the language for Civil service examinations, replacing English. It effectively meant that even all the non-Hindi speakers, who were previously bound by the English language as their mode of communication between each other, because of British colonialization, had to forcibly learn Hindi and adopt Hindi as a near-native language in order to survive or qualify for any governmental positions in the country, since it demanded that proficiency level.

In other words, the primary objective was not removal of English as the official language but strict imposition of Hindi as the sole official and national language of the country. With Hindi-speaking states having a lion's share in the parliament in terms of elected representatives, the central government, headed by a Hindi speaking Prime Minister, had all the liberty to enact legislations favoring Hindi. This effort also meant that native Hindi speakers would win hands down in qualifying for Civil services and higher-level examinations, not because of merit but because of possessing the sole quality of being a native speaker of a language, which was not so for the rest of the country.

Even though a forcible imposition effort like this was innately wrong in any perspective, people from South India who come from a different language family and also a slightly different race, viewed it as being racial and against their interests. Tamil being the head of the Dravidian language family chart took lead and voiced opposition to this. The fact that the South Indian states had only a minority representation in the parliament added to their woes and so people, led by certain political parties, took to the streets and condemned this move which would force them to learn Hindi in place of a language that they already knew, English. Tamils and fellow Dravidian language speakers viewed the imposition of the mother tongue of a particular region in India, as the official language of a whole country, as tyranny.

In an address in 1962, former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C N Annadurai made the following statements opposing Hindi imposition: "It is claimed that Hindi should be common language because it is spoken by the majority. Why should we then claim the tiger as our national animal instead of the rat which is so much more numerous? Or the peacock as our national bird when the crow is ubiquitous?"

Widespread agitations followed and several hundreds were imprisoned or severely injured. Nearly 500 people were killed because of indiscriminate firing. In addition to all of this, high drama continued as four university students and two other academicians immolated themselves, right after sending letters to the president and the prime minister. This erupted into full-scale violence and the central government was forced to change the enacted legislation that made Hindi the sole official language. Further constitutional amendments followed and official language status was accorded to all the rightful languages and English has till-date remained the link-language. To this day, the people who died in the riots are viewed as martyrs by all Tamil people. Language related tensions have followed even after this, but the Anti-Hindi riots would remain a blot in the multilingual fabric of India because of the sheer scale of killings and violence.

Many attempts have been made to keep things at bay, but politicians continue to use this sensitive issue as a trump card in their election manifestos. Very recently, Tamil was not allowed to be used as a courtroom language in the High court whereas Hindi was allowed to and this added to the misery, since it was absurd for the court proceedings to go on in Hindi, a language that was totally unrelated to Tamil Nadu. Even as we speak, there is a case going on in the Supreme Court of India about this situation and it is my best guess that common sense would prevail and Tamil would be allowed as a courtroom language in Tamil Nadu.

In my opinion, the best possible way to resolve this tension would be to let the states, which intrinsically have a high level of autonomy, to decide what is best for them. The central government which has already put forth a law giving official language status to 23

languages should not intervene in the everyday proceedings of the state, which is the only body that can enact legislations favoring the survival of its own native language. Even though the legislations are in place, Hindi, with its sheer majority in numbers is able to allocate any amount of funding for its development and not allot the funding required for another language for it to develop, evolve and survive. As we all know, a language which is not given due attention to develop itself, over a period of time, especially, considering the present day global world, will fail to live up to the society on which it's foundations are inextricably built. Such languages cease to evolve over time and eventually die out. All efforts should be made by the government to allot every official language its due status so that it serves the common good and benefits the entire nation. It also helps every language progress in its own right and therefore helps the government focus on developmental issues that spending time on controlling riots, which are inevitable in India, the foundations of which are strongly imbibed in languaculture.

I think the best way forward, in situations like these, is concern, be it in India or any country having problems because of multilingualism. Concern for languacultures by the central government is of utmost importance. It is to be noted that agitations and language related problems have occurred only when efforts have been made to impose one language over a set of people who do not speak it or are native to it. Tensions have also happened when no provisions have been made to show any concern for a languaculture. The issue of language and multilingualism serves as a classic example to demonstrate that a language is not just a means of communication between people but also serves as a component of the society, that which we refer to as languaculture. This takes a great degree of predominance in South Asian communities which consider linguistic identity to be of the highest order. If enough of concern was shown to the Bengali sentiments during the forcible Urdu imposition in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), several deaths could have been avoided.

However 'Language Movement Day', more commonly known as 'International Mother Language Day' and the Anti-Hindi riots of 1965, in India, are stark reminders of how administrative bodies need to be concerned about languacultural aspects of a society. It is to be noted that concern is not a term to be mistaken for 'undue advantage' or 'unfair play', but is a holistic term which would be interested in fostering a warm and encompassing relationship between different languacultures and I am sure that such a concern would serve the greater good, when it comes to the progress of a nation. It would be wise to preserve and maintain languacultures than impose one over the other, considering the context I have explained, which had led to irreversible loss of life and property.

I would like to conclude my essay by saying that, for any multilingual country, with languacultural problems, the best thing to do would be to identify the root aspects of handling languacultural problems and then cut the whole root cause of it than dealing with the symptoms such as riots or violence. The cause-effect analysis should be done taking into account Synchronic and Diachronic approaches and the whole study should be given very comprehensive attention. When governments handle such issues with a concerned approach, showing the sense of concern required for preserving languacultures and developing them, it would lead to a multilingual country in which people are more concerned about the progress of a whole nation than worrying about linguistic differences.

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