



## A Study of National Language Controversy in India

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### ABSTRACT

India has heterogeneous population, means India is multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic country. Being multilingual country India has over fifteen hundred languages and dialects of which eighteen languages have been listed as the official languages in Schedule VIII of Indian Constitution. Our national leaders wanted India to get freedom from English Language. It was because English had been not only symbol of alien rule but also a symbol of those Indians through whom the British had maintained their rule in India. English in fact perpetuated the division between the people. Efforts have been made to replace English by Hindi as the official or link language but nothing has come out of it. The things have been spoiled instead. Hindi is spoken by a large majority of people in majority of states and regions. The Constitution also provides for the promotion and development of regional languages. So, the non-Hindi states have started using their regional languages along with English for official purposes. This has retorted not only the growth of Hindi but also stood in the way of national integration. It was on this account that a resolution had to be passed that English would continue as an associate official language so long as the non-Hindi state do not accept Hindi. Another aspect of politics of language has appeared in the shape of medium of instruction in education.

Keywords: Official Language Commission, Politics of Language, Hindi-English Controversy etc.

### INTRODUCTION

India has a rich heritage in terms of languages and every language spoken, even by the most remote areas, is respected by the Constitution through the likes of Article 29 and Schedule VIII. "History demonstrates that, from times immemorial, India has been a multilingual country, each language having a certain region in which it was supreme, but none of these regions truly constituted unilingual kingdom or principality."<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi considered the removal of English language from the official desks as of national importance. He wrote, "We should no more neglect thus destroy our own language. The English insist on speaking their mother tongue and using it for all their purposes. Let us do the same and thus raise Hindi to the high status of a national language."<sup>2</sup>

Most of the members of Constituent Assembly wanted to fulfill Mahatma Gandhi's dream who had opined that there should be a national language which would give a distinct identity to the nation. Dr. N.G. Ayyangar says in one of his speeches at the Assembly, "There was one thing about which we reached a fairly unanimous conclusion that we should select one of the languages in India as the common language of the whole of India, the language that should be used for the official purposes of the Union."<sup>3</sup>

In India in the multi-party set up various political parties have served as pressure groups and influenced the post-independence modifications in the official language policy. Congress party as a whole did not have a language policy acceptable to all its members, and most of the solutions offered were in the nature of compromise. Pressure for amending the official language policy, therefore, came as much within the ruling party as from outside. The two main issues now were the relative positions of Hindi and English in the official sphere and implementation of the 1965 deadline for replacing English by Hindi as the official language of India. As the fifteen year time limit for switching over to Hindi began to come to an end, it was feared, chiefly in the non-Hindi areas, that the removal of English as an associate official language would not only be difficult but disastrous.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was quoted as saying, "One language can unite people. Two languages are sure to





divide people. This is an inexorable law. Culture is conserved by language. Since Indians wish to unite and develop a common culture, it is bounden duty of all Indians to own up Hindi as their official language."<sup>4</sup>

Apart from technical considerations, the main political objection to Hindi as the official language is that it places the non-Hindi areas particularly South India, which belong to a different language family. English on the other hand, being a foreign language is believed to place an equal linguistic burden on both Hindi and non-Hindi regions.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Following are the main Objectives of the study.

1. To study National Language Controversy.
2. To explore the historical background of the study.
3. To discuss about Hindi-English controversy.

Historical Background: The Official Language Commission in 1956 had endorsed the constitutional provision thereby aggravating the non-Hindi opposition which perceived the implementation the official language provisions as a threat to the political status of the non-Hindi regions.

The Official Language Commission's report contained that Hindi was being chosen "not because it is better developed than the other regional languages; not because a greater or more varied wealth of literary output is available in it; not because it has presently a large availability of books in sciences and in different other branches of modern knowledge. It was chosen...because it happens to be understood and spoken by the largest number of people."<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the political significance attached to the official language question, a Special Committee of Parliament appointed to review the Commission's report, cautioned against too hurried switch over to Hindi. Within Congress party, opinion was divided. Nehru, G.B. Pant and other leaders favored a go-slow policy. At the Pragjyotishpur session of Congress in 1958, Nehru pleaded for a consensus of the opinion on the language question and criticized the imposition of majority decisions on a minority. He repeatedly assured the non-Hindi areas that English would remain an associate official language as long as the non-Hindi regions wanted it. At the same time, advocates of Hindi like Govind Das and P.D. Tandon insisted on a rigid implementation of the fifteen year deadline and showed their impatience at the delay in making Hindi the official language. Their intolerance and failure to come to a compromise only served to unite various groups from the non-Hindi areas. The latter, if previously demanding an equal role for their respective languages, now united in their support of English and opposition to the move to treat 1965 deadline as a rigid one. The result of the agitation was the Presidential Order of April 1960 which definitely extended the time-limit for a final switch-over, followed by legislation in 1963 to establish the associate language status for English.

According to Ralph Fasold, "Former colonial language is an absolutely atrocious choice as national language. Nothing could be a worse symbol of a new nation's self-awareness than the language of a country from which it had just achieved independence."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Hindi is a better option as it is an indigenous language and identifies with a large proportion of the population of India.

Hindi- English Controversy: The passing of the Official Languages Act, 1963 should be examined against the background of the changed composition of the Congress Parliamentary Party following the General Elections of 1962. India's third general elections weakened the Hindi group within the party. While representation from the non-Hindi states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Orissa and Madras increased from 100 to 124 that from the Hindi states dropped from 186 to 150. Moreover, within the Hindi states the Congress suffered significant losses, so that as pointed by Weiner, "The Hindi region was threatened with the possibility of five years of uncertain government."<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, opposition within the Hindi areas was comprised largely of Hindi communalist political parties like the Jana Sangh and the Samyukta Socialist Party, which identified Hindi with Hindi political

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interests. This adversely affected Hindi's chances of being accepted as the official language of India. The changed political atmosphere, with a weakened Hindi group in the Lok Sabha, facilitated the introduction and passing of the Bill providing for the continued use of English for official purposes after 1965. Section 3 of the Official Language Act, 1967 provides that English may be used for official purposes after 1965.

Dissatisfaction with the Official Language Act from both the Hindi and non-Hindi groups, and the resulting agitation, necessitated an amendment. The question of amendment came up after 1967 general elections which brought significant changes in the composition of the Lok Sabha. As in 1962, the results of the 1967 elections considerably influenced subsequent language policies in India. In the first place, the Hindi group within the Congress Parliamentary Party registered further losses. Out of a total 211 seats in the Hindi areas, Congress won only 120 seats in 1967. The rest of the seats went mostly to the Jan Sangh and the Samyukt Socialist Party. Secondly, and more important, the unchallenged dominance so far enjoyed by the Congress was curtailed. As compared to 1962, Congress strength declined by 3.7 percent and 4.3 percent in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies respectively. Though Congress returned to power at the Centre, it lost control over more than half the states. In particular, the victory of the Dravid Munnetra Kazhgam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu was significant. The DMK has already favored an anti-Hindi policy and advocated the use of English for official purposes.

In the field of language planning, an interesting outcome of the 1967 elections was the overwhelming importance gained by the non-Hindi section among the Congress Chief Ministers. The relatively poor performance of Congress in Hindi states in 1967 increased the number of non-Hindi Congress Chief Ministers. This in turn strengthened the support for English as the associate official language is to be handled by the Union Government, in recent years the state governments have been playing an important role through the Chief Ministers Conference. Here the non-Hindi leaders could effectively influence policy debates because the number of Chief Ministers from the Hindi states could never outnumber their counterparts from the Hindi states. English thus got a boost from the non-Hindi Chief Ministers.

The elections strengthened the non-Hindi groups both in the State Assemblies and in the Lok Sabha, and altered the composition of Congress. Moreover, the weakened position of Congress made it dependent on the political support of the other parties in Parliament. Thus, a favorable climate was created for evolving a compromise solution on the language question. It was under these changed circumstances that the draft bill providing for the continued use of English on a compulsory basis for official purposes came up before Parliament. Without much opposition the Official Language (Amendment) Act was passed ensuring that English shall be continued as an associate language as long as the non-Hindi states wanted it.

The amended Act of 1967 established a two-language policy for official transactions. It provides that English shall be used for the purposes of communication between the Union and a state which has not adopted Hindi as its official language. Further, where Hindi is used for purposes of communication between one state and another which has not adopted Hindi as its official language, such communication in Hindi shall be accompanied by a translation of the same in English. The compromise formula evolved by the 1967 Act has presented the settlement of the bitter controversy.

Conclusion: If we analyze the language problem in the politics of our country we come to certain concrete conclusions. Despite linguistic heterogeneity the problem of national language is not beyond solution. India stands for unity in diversity. Hence Hindi as well as other regional languages deserves a place. However, English, a foreign language is a language of the elite and not of the masses. It should be treated as optional to be chosen by the students opting for study of scientific and technical subjects and enabling them to come in contact with the foreign countries. Thus Hindi in Devnagri script is the 'lingua franca' whereas regional language be an associate language. National integration has suffered an eclipse due to language being the base for political reorganization of the country. It has fomented linguistic chauvinism which is not only inimical to the Federal Centre but impairs antipodal unity. The politics of language is the creation of the communalists. The perpetuation of distinction between Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani languages is the outcome of their vicious minds. In fact, both the regionalists and





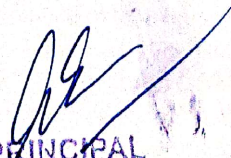


Communitarians find a convenient scapegoat in linguists.

There is a constructive aspect of language politics as well. It has initiated a huge number of people into organizational modes of political participation. It has politicized the people. The solution of this complicated problem first in Constituent Assembly and then in the Parliament in 1963 and 1967 indicates the politics of decision-making in our country. Non-Hindi speaking states have so far an upper hand. Problem of national language is solvable. India is a land of diversities, linguistic diversity being one of them. India for its survival has been aspiring for unity in diversities. Hindi and all other regional languages deserve due recognition which has been long denied because of supreme position attributed to the language of elite and intellectuals it could hardly be the language of the masses. No doubt, it does deserve a proper place in our scheme of things as it is the preserve of technocrats, scientists, doctors and bureaucrats. It is communicating link with the foreign countries. Politics of language is outcome of the brains of Hindu and Muslim communalists the die-hard nationalists and staunch Hindu fundamentalists. In fact Hindi and Urdu are the two sides of the same coin, then why enmity of Muslims to Hindi and hatred of Hindus to Urdu. The self-seeking politicians exploit the sentiments of the lemming millions and make them fight on frivolous issues.

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