

Reflections

National unity and linguistic diversity in independent India

Bipan Chandra

The language problem was the most divisive issue in the first twenty years of independent India, creating the apprehension among many that the political and cultural unity of the country was in danger. It was also inevitable that linguistic diversity would give birth to strong political currents around language-based issues, especially as educational and economic development, job and other economic opportunities and access to political power were deeply linked to the question of language.

The model that independent India has adopted is not that of assimilation into or suppression of the many languages by one of them, which is in any case impossible in a democratic polity, but accepting and living with their 'multiplicity', in a manner that conflict situations do not emerge or remain for long if they emerge.

The Controversy

The controversy on the language issue became most virulent when it took the form of opposition to Hindi and tended to create conflict between Hindi speaking and non-Hindi speaking regions of the country. The dispute was not over the question of national language. The Indian national movement had carried on its ideological and political work through the different Indian regional languages. Its demand then was for the replacement of English by the mother-tongue as the medium for higher education, administration and courts in each linguistic area.

The issue of national language was resolved when the constitution-makers virtually accepted all the major languages as 'languages of India' or India's national languages. But the matter could not end there, for the official work of the country could not be carried on in so many languages. There had to be one language in which the central government would carry on its work and maintain contact with the state governments. The question was what would be this language of all-India communication? In other words, what would be India's official and link language? Only two

candidates were available for the purpose: English and Hindi. It was on this question that heated debates occurred in the Constituent Assembly.

But, in fact, the choice had already been made in the pre-independence period by the leadership of the national movement, which was convinced that English would not continue to be the all-India medium of communication in free India. For example, even while appreciating the value of English as a world language, through which Indians could access world science and culture and modern western ideas, Gandhiji was convinced that the genius of a people could not unfold itself nor could their culture flower in a foreign language. Nehru echoed these sentiments in his 1937 article on 'The Question of Language' and also during the Constituent Assembly debates.

Hindi or Hindustani, the other candidate for the status of official or link language, had already played this role during the nationalist struggle, especially during its mass phase. This role of Hindi had been accepted by leaders from non-Hindi speaking parts of the country because of its being the most widely spoken and understood language in the country. Lokamanya Tilak, Gandhiji, C. Rajagopalachari, Subhas Bose, and Sardar Patel were some of Hindi's enthusiastic supporters. In its sessions and political work, the National Congress had substituted Hindi and the provincial languages in place of English. Reflecting a national consensus, the Nehru Report had laid down in 1928 that Hindustani which might be written in Devanagari or Urdu script would be the common language of India, but the use of English would be continued for some time. Ultimately the constitution of free India was to adopt this stand, except for replacing Hindustani by Hindi. Consequently, because of the near unanimity in the pre-independence period, the real debate in the Constituent Assembly occurred over two questions: Would Hindi or Hindustani replace English, and

what would be the time frame in which the replacement would occur?

As soon as the discussion on the question of official language began, sharp differences arose and the problem proved to be extremely difficult, especially as it was highly politicized from the beginning. The question of Hindi or Hindustani was soon resolved, though with a great deal of acrimony. Gandhiji and Nehru both supported Hindustani, written in Devanagari or Urdu script. Though many supporters of Hindi disagreed, they had tended to accept the Gandhi-Nehru viewpoint. But once the partition was announced, the champions of Hindi were emboldened, especially as the protagonists of Pakistan had claimed Urdu as the language of Muslims and of Pakistan. The votaries of Hindi now branded Urdu 'as a symbol of secession'. They demanded that Hindi in Devanagari script be made the national language. Their demand split the Congress party in the middle. In the end the Congress Legislative Party decided for Hindi against Hindustani by 78 to 77 votes, even though Nehru and Azad fought for Hindustani. The Hindi bloc was also forced to compromise; it accepted that Hindi would be the official and not the national language.

The issue of the time frame for shift from English to Hindi produced a divide between Hindi and non-Hindi areas. The spokespersons of Hindi areas were for the immediate switch over to Hindi, while those from non-Hindi areas advocated retention of English for a long if not indefinite period. In fact, they wanted the *status quo* to continue till a future parliament decided to shift to Hindi as the official language. Nehru was for making Hindi the official language, but he was in favour of continuing English as an additional official language, making the transition to Hindi gradual and actively encouraging the knowledge of English because of its usefulness in the contemporary world.

The case for Hindi basically rested on the fact that it was the language of the largest number, though not of the majority, of the people of India; it was also understood at least in the urban areas of most of northern India from Bengal to Punjab and in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The critics of Hindi talked about it being less developed as a literary language and language of science and politics. But their main fear was that Hindi's adoption as the official language would place non-

Hindi areas, especially south India, at a disadvantage in educational and economic spheres, especially where language-based competition decided appointments in the government.

Ambiguous Provisions

The constitution makers were aware that as the leaders of a multi-lingual country they could not ignore, or even give the impression of ignoring, the interest of any one linguistic area. They incessantly worked for and succeeded in arriving at a compromise, though this led to the language provisions of the constitution becoming 'complicated, ambiguous and confusing in some respects.'

Implementation of the language provisions of the constitution proved to be a formidable task even though the Congress Party was politically dominant all over the country. The issue remained a subject of intense controversy, which became increasingly acrimonious with passage of time, though for many years nobody challenged the provision that Hindi would eventually become the sole official language.

The chances of Hindi's success as an official language were spoilt by the proponents of Hindi themselves. Instead of taking up a gradual, slow and moderate approach to gain acceptance of Hindi by non-Hindi areas, the more fanatical among them showed misplaced zeal and tended to adopt an arrogant, callous, almost aggressive attitude towards the non-Hindi objectors. Instead of relying on persuasion, they depended on imposition of Hindi through government action. Their zeal and enthusiasm tended to provoke a counter-movement.

Instead of developing a simple standard language which would get wide acceptance or at least popularizing the colloquial Hindi as spoken and written in Hindi areas as also in many other parts of India, the protagonists of Hindi tried to Sanskritize it, replacing commonly understood words with newly manufactured, unwieldy and little understood words in the name of the 'purity' of language and of getting rid of alien influences. This made it more and more difficult for non-Hindi speakers or even Hindi speakers to understand or learn the new Hindi. This was especially the case with the All-India Radio, which could have played an important role in popularizing Hindi, but which instead took to so Sanskritizing its Hindi news bulletins that many listeners would switch off their radios when Hindi news was

broadcast. But the purifiers of Hindi did not relent and resisted all attempts to simplify the Hindi of news broadcasts. This led many uncommitted persons to join the ranks of the opponents of Hindi or at least to become non-committal towards the implementation of the constitutional provisions.

However, Nehru and the majority of Indian leaders remained committed to the transition to Hindi as the official language, for they believed that, though the study of English was to be encouraged, English could not continue for ever as India's official language. But they also believed that the interests of national unity as also economic and political development required that full transition to Hindi should not get time-bound and should await politically more auspicious and less-controversial times when the willing consent of non-Hindi areas could be obtained.

Sharp differences on the official language issue surfaced during 1956-60, once again revealing that disruptive tendencies were quite strong in the country. The report of the Official Languages Commission in 1956, the recommendations of the Joint Parliamentary Committee which reviewed the report, and the Presidential Order of 1960 asking for the implementation of these recommendations aroused suspicion and anxiety in the non-Hindi areas and groups. Nor were the Hindi leaders satisfied. For example, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee stated in his dissenting note to the Report of the Official Language Commission that the outlook of the commission was one of the 'Hindi speakers who are to profit immediately and for a long time to come, if not for ever.' Similarly, in March 1958, C. Rajagopalachari, ex-president of the Hindi Pracharini Sabha in the south, declared that 'Hindi is as much foreign to the non-Hindi speaking people as English to the protagonists of Hindi.' On the other hand, two major champions of Hindi, P. D. Tandon and Seth Govind Das, accused the Joint Parliamentary Committee of being pro-English. Many of the Hindi leaders also attacked Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the minister of education, for dragging their feet in implementing the constitutional provisions and deliberately delaying the replacement of English. They insisted that the deadline for the changeover to Hindi laid down in the constitution must be rigidly observed. In 1957, Dr. Lohia's Samyukt Socialist Party and the Jan

Sangh launched a militant movement, which continued for nearly two years, for the immediate replacement of English by Hindi. One of the agitational methods adopted by the followers of Lohia on a large scale was to deface English words on sign-boards of shops and in other places.

Fully aware of the danger that the official language issue could pose to Indian polity, the dominant leadership of the Congress took the grievances of the non-Hindi areas seriously and handled the issue with great care and caution. It incessantly worked for a compromise. Nehru, in particular, tried to assuage the ruffled feelings and cool down the political temperature. He opposed use of coercion or imposition of a majority decision on the issue and supported instead a consensual approach. He time and again made it clear that an official language could not and would not be imposed on any region of the country and that the pace of transition to Hindi would have to be determined keeping in view the wishes of the non-Hindi people. In this he was given support by the leaders of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

In pursuance of Nehru's assurances, though with delays caused by internal party pressures and the India-China war, an Official Languages Act was passed in 1963. The object of the Act, Nehru declared, was 'to remove a restriction which had been placed by the Constitution on the use of English after a certain date, namely, 1965.' But this purpose was not fully served as the assurances were not clearly articulated in the Act. The Act laid down that 'the English language may...continue to be used in addition to Hindi.' The non-Hindi groups criticized the use of the word 'may' in place of the word 'shall'. This made the Act ambiguous in their eyes; they did not regard it as a statutory guarantee. Many of them wanted a cast iron guarantee not because they distrusted Nehru but because they were worried about what would happen after Nehru, especially as the pressure from the Hindi leaders was also growing. The death of Nehru in June 1964 increased their apprehensions which were further fuelled by certain hasty steps taken and circulars issued by the various ministries to prepare ground for the changeover to Hindi in the coming year. For example, instructions were given that the central government's correspondence with states would be

in Hindi, though in case of non-Hindi states an English translation would be appended. Similarly, the information and broadcasting ministry notified that after 26 January 1965, routine circulars would be issued in Hindi only and important circulars alone would be issued along with English translations.

Insensitive Steps

Though Nehru's successor as prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, took a correct stand, he did not unfortunately show enough sensitivity to the opinion of non-Hindi groups and take effective steps to win their trust and allay their growing fears that from 26 January Hindi was going to be the *sole* official language. Instead, he declared that he was considering making Hindi an alternative medium in public service examinations. This meant that while non-Hindi speakers could still compete in the all-India services in English, the Hindi speakers would have an advantage in being able to use their mother tongue.

The fear for the future led many non-Hindi leaders to change their line of approach to the problem of official language. While previously their demand had been for slowing down the speed of the replacement of English, now they started demanding that there should be no fixed deadline for the changeover. This also meant changing the basic provisions of the constitution regarding the official language. Some of the leaders went much further. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and C. Rajagopalachari, for example, demanded that the constitution should be amended and English should be made the official language of India.

As 26 January 1965 approached, fear psychosis gripped the non-Hindi areas, especially Tamil Nadu, and a strong anti-Hindi movement developed there. On 17 January, the DMK organized the Madras State Anti-Hindi Conference which gave a call for observing 26 January as a day of mourning. Students, who felt most aggrieved because of concern for their careers and apprehension that they would be outstripped by Hindi-speakers in the all-India services, took the most active part in organizing a widespread agitation and mobilizing public opinion. They raised and popularized the slogan: 'Hindi never, English ever.' They also demanded amendment of the constitution. The students' agitation soon developed into state-wide unrest. The Congress leadership,

though controlling both the state and the central governments, failed to gauge the depth of the popular feeling and the widespread character of the movement and instead of negotiating with the students, made an effort to repress it. In the early weeks of February, there was widespread rioting and violence. There was large-scale destruction of railways and other union property.

So strong was the anti-Hindi feeling that some people were willing to give their lives to prove that Hindi was unacceptable. Several Tamil youth, including four students, burned themselves to death in protest against the official language policy. Two Tamil ministers, C. Subramaniam and Alagesan, resigned from the union cabinet. The agitation continued for about two months, taking a toll of over 60 lives through police firings. The only eminent central leader to show concern for the agitators was Indira Gandhi, then the minister for information and broadcasting. At the height of the agitation she flew to Madras, 'rushed to the storm-centre of trouble', showed some sympathy for the agitators and thus became, after Nehru, the first northern leader to win the trust of the aggrieved Tamils as well as of the people of the south in general.

Efforts were made by the Jan Sangh and the SSP to organize counter-agitation in the Hindi areas in favour of Hindi and against English, but they did not get much public support.

The agitation forced both the Madras and the union governments and the Congress Party to revise their stand. They now decided to yield to the intense public mood in the south, change their policy and accept the major demands of the agitators. The Congress Working Committee announced a series of steps which were to form the basis for a central enactment embodying the concessions and which led to the withdrawal of the Hindi agitation. There was, however, a delay in the relevant enactment because of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, which silenced all dissension in the country.

With the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri in January 1966, Indira Gandhi became the prime minister. As she had already won the trust of the people of the south, they were convinced that a genuine effort would be made to resolve the long-festered dispute. Another favourable factor was the muting of their anti-English fervour by the Jan Sangh and the SSP who accepted the

basic features of the agreement worked out in 1965.

Despite facing economic problems and the weakening of the Congress position in the parliament in the 1967 elections, Indira Gandhi moved the bill to amend the 1963 Official Language Act on November 27. The Lok Sabha adopted the bill, on 16 December 1967, by 205 to 41 votes. The Act gave an unambiguous legal form to Nehru's assurances of September 1959. It provided that the use of English as an associate language in addition to Hindi for the official work at the centre and for communication between the centre and non-Hindi states would continue as long as the non-Hindi states wanted it, giving them full veto powers on the question. Thus a virtual indefinite policy of bilingualism was adopted. The parliament also adopted a policy resolution laying down that the UPSC examinations were to be conducted in Hindi and English and in all the regional languages with the provision that the candidates should have additional knowledge of Hindi or English. The states were to adopt a three-language formula according to which in the non-Hindi areas, the mother tongue, Hindi and English or some other national

language was to be taught in schools while in the Hindi areas a non-Hindi language, preferably a southern language, was to be taught as a compulsory subject.

The government of India took another important step on the language question in July 1967. On the basis of the Report of the Education Commission in 1966, it declared that Indian languages would ultimately become the medium of education in all subjects at the university level, though the time frame for the changeover would be decided by each university to suit its convenience.

After many twists and turns, a great deal of debate and several agitations, small or big, and many compromises, India had arrived at a widely accepted solution of the very difficult problem of the official and link language for the country. Since 1967, this problem has gradually disappeared from the politics of the country, demonstrating the capacity of the Indian political system to deal with a contentious problem on a democratic basis, and in a manner that promoted national consolidation. Here was an issue which emotionally divided the people and which could have jeopardized the unity of the country, but to which a

widely acceptable solution was found through negotiations and compromise. And it was not only the national leadership provided by the Congress, with some hiccups on the way, which came up to the mark; the opposition parties too measured up when it came to the crunch. And in the end the DMK, in whose rise to power in Tamil Nadu the language issue played an important role, also helped by cooling down the political temper and by becoming a part of the political system.

Of course, no political problem is solved for all times to come. Problem solving in a nation as complex as India is bound to be a continuous process. But it is significant that Hindi has been making rapid progress in non-Hindi areas through education, trade, tourism and films, radio and television. Use of Hindi as an official language has also been growing though English usage is still dominant. Simultaneously, English as a second language has been spreading fast all over the country, including in Hindi speaking areas. One aspect of this is the extent to which private English medium schools, however poor in staff and other facilities, now dot the countryside from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. The standards of

spoken and written English have fallen but the English-knowing classes have multiplied manifold.

Both English and Hindi are likely to grow as link languages and languages of mutual communication among different language speakers, just as regional languages are more and more occupying the official, educational and media spaces. Proof of the growth of Hindi, English and regional languages lies in the rapid growth of newspapers in all of them. In fact, English is not only likely to survive in India for all time to come, it remains and is likely to grow as a language of communication between the all-India intelligentsia, as a literary language, and as the second language of the universities. Hindi, on the other hand, has so far failed to perform any of the three roles. Of course, the ideal of making Hindi the link language of the country at all levels of communication and at the intellectual level remains. But the way the enthusiastic protagonists of Hindi promoted Hindi's cause, they pushed back the chances of this happening for a long time to come.

These are excerpts from a chapter of a forthcoming book. Bipan Chandra is professor emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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