
POST-COLONIAL IMPOSITIONS: ASSESSING EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE POLICIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

From the time of gaining independence from the British Empire, language policy has been a contentious issue in India, with respect to an Indian language to be placed by the side of English as an official language. There has since then been a conflict between governments which wish to impose Hindi, and the several states of India where Hindi is not identified as a prominent language or a mother tongue. This paper will examine the background and history of language policies in India, as well as the consequences that have ensued due to Hindi imposition from a sociological perspective. This paper will then pose certain recommendations and assess the desirability of such language imposition in India.

Keywords: Language policies, Independence, Colonial, Imposition, Government, Languages

INTRODUCTION

As a post colonial nation, India's relationship with English is one of a balance between its practical usage in the current day, and its symbolism as an instrument of colonial oppression (Gupta, 1995). As of data available in 2018 Census, there was around 121 languages in India, spoken by 10,000 or more people. India also has over 22 scheduled languages. The number of mother tongues in India has totaled to 18, 659 (Press Trust of India, 2018). The widespread functional utility of English as a means of international communication does make it important and indispensable.

However, the imposition of English and Hindi across the country despite its diversity has created socio political tensions. Since coming into power in May 2014, the Bhartiya Janta Party- led National Democratic Alliance Government has issued several official orders, circulars and notifications for the promotion of the Hindi language in the union. This paper will examine the origins of language policies in India, and the politics of language imposition in the post colonial

context. The paper will then assess the effects of such imposition, consequences for the future and recommend desired policy measures.

BACKGROUND

After gaining independence from the British empire, one of the tasks of the Indian government was to choose a national language. English was kept as the official language due to its ease among erstwhile government officials and consequent ease of administration. English was however, unacceptable as a national language as it was seen as a symbol of slavery, and only about 1 percent of the Indian population at the time spoke English. Several actions were taken to aid the ascendancy of Hindi, and the Indian government adopted a plan to phase out English over a fifteen year period and replace it with Hindi, by 1965 (Baldrige, 1996; Isaka, 2004)).

However, the international importance of English and its use in the bureaucracy, led to the continued study of English and therefore, English came to share the position as an official language with Hindi, rather than being relinquished entirely. The planned changeover from English to Hindi did not occur, and therefore, Hindi was never designated in the Indian constitution as the national language (Baldrige, 1996).

Despite this, the government in 1965 went forward with the fifteen year plan and instructions were given for communication between the center and the states to be in Hindi, with an accompanying English translation for the non-Hindi speaking state of the union. This determination by the center led to protests and resistance in many non-Hindi speaking regions of India, and most notably in Madaras. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party led the organization of the Madras State Anti-Hindi Conference on January 17, 1965, which was a week before the scheduled date for Hindi's ascent as the sole official language of the union (Khan, 2018).

The agitations led to violence and clashes between Anti-Hindi and Anti-English groups. Due to the agitations, a compromise was then formed between the two groups. In February 1965, a resolution was passed by the Congress Working Committee which stated that the position of English as an official language would not change unless all states consented to the same. The government of the day led by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, ruled out its earlier position on replacing the use of English with Hindi. This move was also a reason why the party won a significant number of seats in South India, including the 1977 general elections (Baldrige, 1996).

However, subsequent Union governments have taken steps to promote and impose the use of Hindi in the non hindi speaking states. For example, the new rupee notes issued by the Reserve

Bank of India after demonetization in November 2016 carry numerals in the Devanagari script (used to write in Hindi, among a number of other languages). In March 2017, milestones on national highways in Tamil Nadu suddenly changed from English to Hindi. Most recently, in April 2017, the president of India gave “in principle” approval to the recommendation made by a Parliamentary panel that the “HRD [Human Resource Development] Ministry needs to make credible efforts for making Hindi a compulsory subject,” and that Hindi should be “compulsorily taught in all CBSE [Central Board for Secondary Education] schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas [Central Schools] until Class X (Ranjan, 2017).

Further, historians have posited that cultural aspects have also played a role in the mass assimilation of Hindi and assimilation of other languages. For example, a major attraction has been the Hindi film industry, which has led to the popularization of the Hindi language in non-Hindi speaking areas of India. As historian Ramachandra Guha writes, Hindi cinema, over time, “made the Hindi *language* comprehensible to those who previously never spoke or understood it. When imposed by fiat by the central government, Hindi was resisted by the people of the south and the east. When conveyed seductively by the medium of cinema and television, Hindi has been accepted by them. It has become a widespread yet erroneous assumption that Hindi is widely understood across India, and is liberally used within the media as well (Ranjan, 2017; Scroll, 2019).

DISCUSSION

Despite the historical background of language policy and that Hindi was never designated as the national language of the Union, the myth that is a national language has been peddled by several politicians. In September 2016, the Home Minister Rajnath Singh said that Hindi “has been accepted by us as” a national language (The Indian Express, 2016). In April 2017, the Information and Broadcasting Minister Venkaiah Naidu referred to it as “the national language.” (The Hindu, 2017).

The exact extent to which the Union government uses Hindi and English, respectively, in different areas, is determined by the provisions of the Constitution, the Official Languages Act, 1963, the Official Languages Rules, 1976, and statutory instruments made by the Department of Official Language under these laws. Various steps have been taken by the Indian government to implement the use and familiarisation of Hindi extensively (Khan, 2018).

The Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha headquartered at Chennai was formed to spread Hindi in South Indian states. Regional Hindi implementation offices at Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram, Mumbai, Kolkata, Guwahati, Bhopal, Delhi and Ghaziabad have been established to monitor the implementation of Hindi in Central government offices. Annual

targets are set by the Department of Official Language regarding the amount of correspondence being carried out in Hindi. A Parliament Committee on Official Language constituted in 1976 periodically reviews the progress in the use of Hindi and submits a report to the President (Khan, 2018).

The governmental body which makes policy decisions and established guidelines for promotion of Hindi is the Kendriya Hindi Samiti (established in 1967). In every city that has more than ten central Government offices, a Town Official Language Implementation Committee is established and cash awards are given to government employees who write books in Hindi. All Central government offices and PSUs are to establish Hindi Cells for implementation of Hindi in their offices. Recently, the Modi government announced plans to promote Hindi in government offices in Southern and Northeast India (Khan, 2018).

There are several adverse effects to the imposition of a language in areas where it is not spoken. For a person in India who does not speak either English or Hindi, there is a lack of access to several services, and therefore, they do face discrimination on several counts. For example, such a person cannot access post office services and forms in their mother tongue, cannot have their Aadhaar card or PAN card to have information printed in their mother tongue, and cannot expect to be sure to sit for several entrance examinations for employment (Chatterjee, 2017).

Such a non user of Hindi cannot expect the union government to promote higher education in her mother tongue—according to the recommendations that the president agreed to, the Ministry of Human Resources Development will promote the use of Hindi in all states, encouraging educational institutes that don't already have a Hindi department to found one. Further, other areas of regulation are also affected. For example, in flight announcements are also carried out only in Hindi and English, and not in the mother tongues of the destination area.

The Hindi non-user cannot access the government of India's website in their mother tongue, which is a service readily available to the Hindi user. They also cannot call the central-government run tourist helpline and expect to speak in their mother tongue. They also cannot expect to hear their mother tongue on "national" channels such as DD National—the lingua franca at the government-owned nationwide channel is English or Hindi—and Rajya Sabha TV (Chatterjee, 2017).

Therefore, it is clear that language imposition has far reaching consequences in terms of accessibility of resources and opportunities in the country, as well as general access to information. With the imposition of Hindi, there is also a resultant erasure of oral traditions and cultures in other languages throughout the country, as citizens are forced to adapt to a homogenous identity (Bopegamage & Kulahalli, 1971; Isaka, 2004).

The Union Government's efforts to make Hindi a 'national language' have resulted in it being 'firmly moored to a vastly associational Sanskrit, with all its casteist baggage intact'. This process of 'Sanskritization' means that the highly associational vocabulary of the Hindi that is promoted in the country, is used to purge thousands of words it has assimilated through the centuries from regional dialects, Islamic and European languages (Pande, 2017; Bopegamage & Kulahalli, 1971).

This results in the exclusion of several sections of society, from access to news, information, crucial documents, and employment opportunities. Sociologically, this has adverse consequences and leads to the marginalization of non-Hindi users. The purification of a language in this manner, promotes caste hierarchies and the supremacy of a particular religion (Pande, 2017; Bopegamage & Kulahalli, 1971). This is reminiscent of the first language controversy in the subcontinent, when Hindus in Uttar Pradesh sought to replace Urdu as a language of administration in the 19th century. Inevitably, such a homogenization becomes a proxy for the supremacy of a certain sect of society (Scroll, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The imposition of either English or Hindi in India in a manner which is divorced from various cultures and social contexts is unproductive, and has far reaching consequences. The government can implement policy measures in order to place all languages on an equal footing. In the age of the internet and mass accessibility, it is crucial that resources, notifications, laws and policies be translated into different languages for all citizens to be on an equal footing (Chatterjee, 2017).

A transformation of education policy must necessarily move from a promotion of Hindi, for various languages to be taught in schools. This is the manner in which to ensure that diverse traditions in India are not erased (Mishra, 2000). The latest draft of the National Education Policy has recommended the implementation of the 'three language formula' from primary school, which would mandate that children in non-Hindi states would compulsorily have to learn Hindi, in addition to English and another Indian language. This has been revoked after protests largely from Tamil Nadu (The Hindu, 2019).

The most important acknowledgment by the government should be that Hindi is not in fact the national language of the union, and this is not enshrined in the constitution. Language is an important marker of human identity, and in a truly democratic society, various identities must be given equal importance. Such an accommodation of all languages cannot be dismissed as a logistical issue, by the government. It is clear that the imposition of language is largely undesirable, and can result in deep seated discrimination. What is at stake in these tensions of

language imposition, are the formation of an 'Indian' identity and what 'values' are Indian. Such a majoritarian imposition of identity can also lead to tensions among religions and castes as well.

In the post colonial context, it has been crucial for various governments of the country to do away with English, which despite its utility is a symbol of oppression. However, the solution to finding a balance between English and Indian languages should not then be to impose a single language and consequently, a homogenous identity that must be followed by all citizens.

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