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## Utopia of Language: on the Backdrop of 21st February

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### **Abstract:**

*Mahatma Gandhi 1909 in his writings elaborated: "From the point of view of language before we can call 'our country' our own, it is necessary that there should be born in our hearts a love and respect for our languages." No words truer can express the beauty, aesthetics, purity and sanctity of language. It is often stated that our mother tongue is as reverent for us as our own mother. This alone can shed a light on the fact why language debates became such burning issues, cause of riots and wars, decisive of the political fates of competing parties in elections and overall the main reason behind linguistic reorganization of Indian states.*

*75% of Indian population are speakers of Indo-Aryan languages while 20% speak the Dravidian languages, with the rest minorities being speakers of Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan languages filling up the ethnic Indian diaspora. In Schedule VIII of Indian Constitution 22 regional languages are officially recognized as the predominantly majority speaking languages. Language alone can express the creative thoughts of an individual, erudite works of legends, the calligraphy of literary opulence while at the same time be the voice of our aspirations, hopes and progress. The 21<sup>st</sup> February carries a special significance on the minds of Bengali speakers who fought and died for protecting the integrity of their mother tongue.*

**Keywords:** *Three language formula, constitution, language movement, official language, UNESCO*

### **1. Introduction**

The diversity of India is reflected in its multiculturalism, multilingualism and the practices of different ethnic minority groups. More than one thousand languages are spoken by the 900 million plus people living in India. India being the birthplace of both the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families, two of the world's largest and most diverse linguistic groups. Within small minorities the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman languages are also spoken. The rich history of wars, conquests and trades over last 5000 years have given rise to a multitude of cultural norms and traditions that had resulted in unification of Indian states and also its fragmentation into regional kingdoms during different historic periods. In this backdrop the evolution of diverse language groups took place on Indian soil. Some languages have lost their distinctive characteristics and some new linguistic forms emerged with the passage of time.

Language Families	Percentage to Total Population (in 1981)	Percentage to Total Population (in 2001)
Indo-Aryan	74.3%	76.86%
Dravidian	23.9%	20.82%
Austro-Asiatic	1.2%	1.11%
Tibeto-Burman	0.6%	1.00%

*Table 1: Comparative statistics of Language Families, 1961 and 2001 (Census of India, 1961 & 2001)*

The linguistic reorganization of states on the basis of languages led to the recognition of about 22 major Indian languages under VIII<sup>TH</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The speakers of these languages are residents mainly of the linguistically reorganized states maintaining the integrity of their age-old traditions, customs and norms through thousands of years of rich traditional history.

Language	Speakers (in millions)	Percentage share of total population	States
Assamese	13	1%	Assam, Arunachal Pradesh
Bengali	83	8%	West Bengal, Tripura (Bangladesh)
Bodo	1.4	0%	Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya
Dogri	2.3	0%	Jammu and Kashmir
Gujarati	46	4%	Gujarat, Damian and Diu
Hindi	422	41%	Andaman and Nicobar islands, Bihar, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan
Kannada	37	4%	Karnataka, Goa, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh
Kashmiri	5.5	1%	Jammu and Kashmir
Konkani	2.5	0%	Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka
Maithali	12.2	1%	Bihar
Malayalam	33	3%	Kerala, Lakshadweep, Tamil Nadu
Manipuri	1.5	0%	Manipur
Marathi	71	7%	Maharashtra, Goa
Nepali	2.8	0%	Sikkim, West Bengal
Oriya	32	3%	Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh
Punjabi	29	3%	Chandigarh, Punjab, Rajasthan
Sanskrit	0.001	0%	Uttarakhand
Santhali	6.5	1%	Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand
Sindhi	2.5	0%	Rajasthan, Gujarat
Tamil	72	6%	Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh
Telegu	74	7%	Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh
Urdu	52	5%	Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi

Table 2: Scheduled Languages spoken by more than 10,000 speakers (Census of India, 2001)

## 2. Language Movement – a Battle for Linguistic Freedom

Be it erstwhile Soviet Union or the creation of Bangladesh the rise and fall of nations are forever intricately bound to the emotions related to customs, norms, traditions, culture and language of the people. In the backdrop of the tumultuous and volatile skirmishes that the language debate has resulted perhaps the date 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1952 will always be remembered as a day where a nation (Bangladesh) proudly stood up against the oppression under the umbrella of a common culture, a single language to fought against the forcible imposition of a foreign language, alien traditions and culture. The violent battle and bloody riots that ensued led to the birth of a new nation that celebrated their freedom from the forces of oppression by protecting the beauty, purity and richness of their language – the voice of their unity, freedom of expression and reflections of their culture and aesthetics. Since then 21<sup>st</sup> February became a significant day for voicing one's expression of linguistic freedom and UNESCO in 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1999 declared this day as the International Mother Language Day. The United Nations General Assembly established 2008 as the International Year of Languages in their resolution commemorating the significance of 21<sup>st</sup> February.

## 3. History of Language Evolution in India

Ancient Indian languages like Pali, Magadhi, Brahmi, Maithili, and even Sanskrit of the Gupta period have lost their popularities and has slowly faded out from Indian psyche. Instead the birth of mixed languages such as Urdu, an admixture from colloquial Hindi and Arabic languages gain wide popularity during Mughal era. Although Urdu was spoken in the northern parts of India but it failed to gain wide acceptance beyond the borders of Mughal kingdom. In the southern parts of the country regional languages, traditions and cultures under the active patronage of kings from such dynasties like Chola, Chalukyas, and such lead to flourishing development of a rich treasure of regional languages of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi and such others. While on the north-eastern parts of the country occupied mainly by numerous ethnic tribes developed their own variety of languages and dialects from Manipuri, Mizo, Naga, and Nepali as well. The tribal belt comprising Bengal, Bihar and Orissa had their own distinctive language of Santhali being widely spoken in this belt.

## 4. Language debate

During the eighth Hindi Sahitya Sammelan in Indore in 1918 Gandhiji observed:

*“My humble, but a firm opinion is that unless we do not provide Hindi the national language status and other regional languages their adequate importance, till then all talks of a ‘swarajya’ are meaningless. Hindi alone can become the national language. No doubt it presents some difficulty to the educated classes of Madras. If Hindi attains to its due status, then it will be introduced in every school in Madras and Madras will thus be in a position to cultivate acquaintance with other province.”*

But Mrs. Annie Besant did not concur with Gandhiji's views and stressed on the importance of provincial autonomy and proposed a bilingual policy for the provinces without specifically mentioning a language policy for the Central Government in her Presidential Address at the Calcutta Congress of 1917.

These opposing attitudes by the two thespians on the language issues became the backdrop of pro-Hindi and anti-Hindi stances that threatened the national interests in independent India. The pro-Hindi supporters considered English as the foreign language and maintained Hindi to be the national as well as official language. But this opinion is vehemently opposed by anti-Hindi groups as they continue to view Hindi as the provincial language which was being forcefully imposed on them by giving the status of the official language. The newly independent country saw much hassles over language issues and the threads of discord between Hindi speaking north Indian states and non-Hindi southern states spill over finally during Nehru's governance. Although Gandhi was a proponent of Hindustani but once the partition of the country took place, the Indian government felt no need to promote Hindustani or Urdu which were mainly spoken by the Muslim populace and focused their attention on Hindi.

### 5. Indian Constitution and Language Issues

The Constituent Assembly debates recorded fierce opposition regarding adoption of Hindi as the National Language during the framing of the Constitution in 1946 between representatives of northern states, the pro-Hindi group and the anti-Hindi group comprising of representatives of the south Indian states. By the end of three years in 1949, a compromise was reached in the form of Munshi-Ayyangar formula. The proponents of the compromise K. M. Munshi and Gopalsamy Ayyangar, members of the Constituent Assembly suggested that no National Language shall be specified in the Indian Constitution but all the official languages shall be registered only. A temporary end to the discord was reached and the Chapter XVII of the Constitution was drafted accordingly. Article 343 stated that Hindi in Devnagari script as the Indian official language which will finally replace English as the official language at the end of fifteen years since after the time the Constitution came into effect on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1950. Article 344 directed the setting up of a Language Commission within the first five years of the Indian government rule which would deal with the language issues and recommend the ways to promote Hindi as the official language slowly phasing out English. Article 345 ensured that all inter-state and Centre-state communications would be conducted in the official language of the country while Article 348 stressed that all legal matters related to court proceedings, promulgation of laws, bills, ordinances, rules and regulations would be officiated in English. Article 351 made sure that the Union of India follows its obligatory duty of promoting Hindi as the official language of the Union.

### 6. First Language Commission

First Language Commission was convened on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1965 under the chairmanship of B. G. Kher. The Commission in its 1956 report stated many recommendations regarding slowly phasing out English by replacing it as the official language. Govind Ballabh Pant chaired the Parliamentary Committee on Official Language which reviewed the Kher Commission report. In 1959 the Committee submitted its report to the President recommending Kher Commission's report and approving the use of Hindi as the official language.

### 7. Politics and Language issues

The anti-Hindi movement slowly lost its momentum when the Indo-Pakistan war broke out in 1965 and then again in 1971. The threat to national security forced the language issue in the background for the time being although the matter remained far from resolved. The failure of Hindi becoming a Pan-Indian language was adjudged due to the overzealous enthusiasm showed by leaders of such organisations like Hindi Sahitya Sammelan and the Nagari Pracharani Sabha who believed in literally shoving down Hindi amongst non-Hindi states without first giving it a chance to be accepted by all in the name of promoting Hindi as the sole official language. In reality though the language debate never abated. People from southern states were ready to accept English as the National Language but not Hindi and accorded it to the global importance enjoyed by the English language. The essence of the debate was that if Hindi is given the official status then it would confer an undue advantage to Hindi speaking people from northern parts of the country. Besides an impressive treasure trove of literary opulence in most of the regional languages led to the question why Hindi should be given a priority over every other language. It is a complicated issue not only "*a matter of psychological resentment, for while this elevation of one language to the status of official language endows great benefits and advantages on those whose mother tongue it is, it also places a discriminatory burden on others*" as felt by Nayar (1969, p. 15). The issue of official language thus flared up as the regional issue with non-Hindi states vehemently opposing the imposition of Hindi upon them according to Das Gupta (1970, p. 136). The government policy of promoting Hindi as the National Language was met with violent agitations by non-Hindi states. The rising antagonism made Pandit Nehru declare: "*I do not wish the people of Non-Hindi areas to feel that certain doors of advance are closed to them because they are forced to correspond – the Government, I mean – in the Hindi language. They can correspond in English. So I could have it as an alternate language as long as people require it and the decision for that – I would leave not to the Hindi-knowing people, but to the non-Hindi-knowing people*" in his Parliamentary speech on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1959 while addressing the concerns of language issues.

### 8. Official Languages Act, 1963

Soon on the heels of the Prime Minister Nehru's assurance the Official Languages Act was passed in 1963 giving concrete structure to government's plan of action. Tamil opposition and secessionist demands of the DMK party from Tamil Nadu vehemently opposed the Act. A state-wide protest broke out under the aegis of DMK leader Annadurai. The date of 25<sup>th</sup> January 1964 was noted as the Black Letter Day in the history of the Language Movement as on this day the first language martyr, Chinnaswamy, a DMK party member, took his life by self-immolation igniting severe protests amongst all those who opposed imposition of Hindi on non-Hindi states. The government plans of introduction of Hindi in civil service examinations, in government jobs in a way to slowly phase out English worried the non-Hindi students as well and they started participating in the protest against Hindi imposition. Chief Minister of the

Madras state (now Tamil Nadu), M. Bhaktavatsalam on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1964 recommended a new strategy of the Three-language formula (English, Hindi and Tamil) that could be introduced in the language scheme in his state Legislative Assembly.

The student movement was slowly organizing and finally Tamil Nadu Students Anti Hindi Agitation Council was formed in the month of January 1965 to wage anti-Hindi protests. A clash ensued a day before the Republic Day between the ruling Congress party workers and students which soon turn into a riot. The uncontrollable violence led to police action which resulted in many deaths, some by self-immolation and poison consumption. The violent situation forced Lal Bahadur Shastri's government to back down and honour Pandit Nehru's assurances that English will remain as the language of inter-state and centre-state communications and civil services examinations will also have the options of English for non-Hindi student's benefits. These agitations had dramatic effect on Tamil Nadu politics and for the first time in 1967 elections the Congress party was defeated by the DMK and a new era of Dravidian political parties was ushered in the southern parts of the country. The Indira Gandhi government amended the previous Act and the Official Language (Amendment) Act, 1967 was passed which adopted the policy of bilingualism, English and Hindi as the official languages for all government purposes.

### 9. Three Language Formula

In the Chief Ministers Conference held in 1961 the proposal for the Three Language Formula came up for consideration. The Official Languages Act was the stepping stone for the advocates of Three Language Formula to voice their suggestions. Finally, Kothari Commission set up in 1968 made a lot of recommendations regarding education policies of the nation and with regard to Three Language Formula the Commission drafted the proposal as:

*First Language* – to be studied would be the mother tongue of the student.

*Second Language* – would usually be English or some other modern Indian Language in Hindi speaking states; whereas in non-Hindi states it would be Hindi or English.

*Third Language* – for Hindi speaking states would be any language other than the Second Language or English; and in non-Hindi states it would be English or any modern Indian Language not being studied as the Second Language.

Languages to be under TLF	Number of years to be taught
Mother tongue	10 years
Official language (Hindi/ English)	6 years (class V onwards)
Modern languages (other than the above two)	3 years (class VI - VIII)

Table 3: Three Language Formula – TLF (Data Source: Singh, 2000, p. 193)

Linguistic expert, Ramakant Agnihotri while expressing his views on language issues voiced, "If a child is born with two languages, she should attain high levels of proficiency in those languages, because then her conceptual clarity becomes very high, and fosters her ability to learn other languages." The Commission's proposal was accepted in most of the Indian states barring Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Tripura where the bilingual policy is still in vogue. The students are taught the mother tongue and English as the two languages in vehement denial of the Central Government's trilingual policy (Three Language Formula). Kamal Sridhar (1989) found: "The Three Language Formula is a compromise between the demands of the various pressure groups and has been hailed as a masterly - if imperfect - solution to a complicated problem. It seeks to accommodate the interests of group identity (mother tongues and regional languages), national pride and unity (Hindi), and administrative efficiency and technological progress (English)" as was quoted by Baldrige (1996, p. 12).

### 10. Reviewing the Current Scenario of Language Policy in India

At the present instant, the continuation of the Three Language Formula seems to be the best option to protect the nation's integrity and prevent further problems related to language issues. It is true that the Hindi speaking states may not be happy with the implementation of this formula but a peek at the world history reflects that there are no uniform solutions for the language debate. To tie a nation on the basis of a commonality may work for western cultures where 'one nation' theory may work but a country, rich in diversity, soaked in the essence of multiculturalism and linguistic pluralism need to recognize people's sentiments and show respect to India's multilingualism and cultural diversity.

The acceptance of Hindi may have failed but perhaps a language like Sanskrit considered to be the 'language of Gods', mother of most Indian languages and born on the very soil of India, thousands of years ago, could resolve the issue once and for all. Yet in the era of globalization, active trade and commerce, Sanskrit has little relevance as a means of communication where the popularity of English surpasses that of Sanskrit any day. Then again, as compared to English, languages like German, French, Japanese are not that much common beyond the realm of their concerned nations and erstwhile colonies, yet still people of these countries are proud of their mother tongue and do not feel obliged to learn a foreign language to be in the thick of development and progress. It is true that the thorough knowledge of mother tongue not only give us an instinctive surge of pride and self-worth, it also helps reduce the inferiority complex that tends to control the psyche of Indian students not comfortable with English, a view affirmed by Spolsky (1978, pp. 55-64) that "the language policy of the school system is both a result of the pressures and a source of pressure itself." He found that education is "the strongest weapon for enforcing language policy." In his observations Spolsky (1978, pp. 53-63) stated the difficulties that societal language planning may incur such as attitudes of the immediate family members, pressures of religious customs, ethnic identities, political interferences, cultural traditions, socio-economic influences, scientific outlook, effect of mass media, legal issues and also sometimes the issues of national (military pressures) security.

A shift in policy change under the BJP rule was expected but the educational policy of the current HRD minister, Smriti Irani regarding replacing the German language course from KV curriculum with traditional Sanskrit language became a source of controversy and severe criticism. The shift in policy that effected in 2014 was meted with outrage from various corners of the society as the policy overlooks a number of serious flaws. First of all, the replacement of Sanskrit in KV may not be the right course of action since the utility of the language in modern India is highly questionable. Economics and market practices favour a more modern language such as English as a means of easy communication. Considering the importance of developing a deep understanding of international policies to be a more productive global citizen certainly require to have a working knowledge of certain international languages; learning German would certainly give that edge to today's students and hence it was a prudent choice that most of them had made. But irrational policies and politicization of the language issues coupled with the numbness shown by the successive ruling parties in an effort to resolve these issues has certainly thrown a spanner in the future educational prospects of many students. Consequently, around 80,000 students currently pursuing German language in Class VI-VIII would feel stranded with this sudden policy change.

Sanskrit Bharati, the organisation favoured by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is zealously pursuing the adoption of Sanskrit in CBSE curriculum in a bid to promote Sanskrit, develop a sense of national spirit and fundamentally lead up to India accepting a national language with the passage of time. But poor choices made in the past regarding promotions of Hindi certainly require that we remain at our guard and do not become overzealous while spreading a certain brand of nationalism and attack the sentiments of people which could backfire rapidly and once again repeat the tragedy of the 1960s with respect to language issues. The National Curriculum Framework of 2005 upheld the views of the National Education Policy of 1968 specifically regarding the Three Language Formula. The 2005 policy reiterated that the Three Language Formula "*is a strategy that should really serve as a launching pad for learning more languages*" and left the inclusion of the foreign languages option wide open for the future.

## 11. Conclusion

It is high time that instead of griping about the superiority of one's own language and grumbling about our insecurities we as a nation respect our strength, celebrate our linguistic diversity and strive for excellence by developing the bountiful treasures of all our traditional, regional languages. The capabilities of man are not limited to his articulateness, with meticulous hard work, determination, and dedication to do his very best, he can surpass all his obstacles and emerge victorious; time and again history has been proof enough of man's fortitude in all his exploits. Once more, we need to agree with that determination to solve all our issues as a united nation, not vitiated by petty politics, uncorrupted and strong as ever. On the very notes of the Sarkaria Commission (1983) we should call on a nationwide ban on frivolous fights over language issues, discredit corrupt politicians and organisations that tend to create disharmony by promoting their brands of Linguism and accept the multilingual diversity with wholehearted alacrity.

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