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LANGUAGE QUESTION IN INDIA: CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES FROM THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE TO THE POST-INDEPENDENCE NATION-STATE.

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Abstract: *This paper examines the language question in India, tracing its trajectory from the anti-colonial struggle to the formative decades of the post-independence state. It explores the competing visions of national unity and regional identity as articulated by movement leaders and debated within the Constituent Assembly. By analysing the compromise formulas embedded in the Indian Constitution and the subsequent policy shifts that led to linguistic reorganisation, the paper argues that the Indian state's management of linguistic conflict evolved from a technocratic pursuit of uniformity to a democratic recognition of pluralism. Utilising the theoretical frameworks of nationality-formation and positive democratic channels, this study demonstrates how language serves as a vital link between society and the state in a multilingual democracy.*

Key Words: *Language, Constituent Assembly, Munshi-Ayyangar Formula, Dar Commission, JVP Committee.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The language question in India is not merely a matter of administrative convenience but a fundamental problem of nation-building. It represents the tension between the body politic and the linguistic garb it wears - a metaphor famously used by the Official Language Commission of 1956 to suggest that language should be tailored to the state's requirements (Das Gupta,1970). During the freedom struggle, language was envisioned as a tool for mass mobilisation and national integration. However, in the post-independence era, it became a site of intense political contestation as regional communities sought to assert their distinct identities. As Rama Kant Agnihotri (2015) observes, the linguistic decisions of the early nation-state were often dominated by an elite that completely overlooked the diverse cultural and pluralistic language traditions deeply embedded in Indian society.

2. PERSPECTIVES DURING THE ANTI-COLONIAL FREEDOM MOVEMENT

During the anti-colonial struggle, the leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC) recognised that English was an alienating force that separated the elite from the masses. Mahatma Gandhi was the foremost advocate for a common Indian language. In his 1941 "Constructive Programme," Gandhi included the recognition of provincial languages as a cornerstone for achieving *Poorna Swaraj* (Mitchell, 2009). Gandhi's preference was for *Hindustani* - a syncretic blend of Hindi and Urdu - which he believed could serve as a bridge between different religious and regional groups (King, 1997).

However, the perspective of the national leadership was often at odds with burgeoning regional aspirations. The articles in the Telugu publication *Desabhimani* argued that the regional populace suffered under colonial rule, as both the British officers and their subordinates often lacked knowledge of the local tongue, i.e. Telugu (Mitchell,2009). While leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru initially viewed these regional demands with skepticism - preferring a centralised modernisation project - the Congress had committed itself to the principle of linguistic provinces as early as the 1920s to ensure better mass participation (King,1997).

3. THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY: CHAMPIONING PERSPECTIVES AND CONTESTING CLAIMS

The debates within the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950) brought the language question to a state of near-paralysis. Two major blocs emerged: the Hindi enthusiasts and the proponents of regional languages and English. The Hindi bloc, largely representing North India, demanded that Hindi in the Devanagari script be declared the sole national language immediately, viewing it as a symbol of decolonised identity (King,1997).

Agnihotri (2015) argues that these debates were characterised by an elite-driven consensus that prioritised containing political safeguards for religious minorities over the rights of linguistic minorities. This focus led to a compromise that Rochana Bajpai (2000) notes shifted the discourse from identity to backwardness, where group-preference provisions were valid only to redress the disadvantages of the marginalised, rather than to protect unique cultural identities. For non-Hindi speakers, particularly from South India, the immediate imposition of Hindi was seen as Hindi imperialism, and they championed the retention of English as a neutral administrative tool to ensure equality of opportunity.

4. THE CONSTITUTIONAL COMPROMISE: THE MUNSHI AYYANGAR FORMULA

To prevent a breakdown of the Assembly, the leadership adopted the Munshi-Ayyangar Formula, which was eventually codified in Part XVII (Articles 343–351) of the Constitution. This formula attempted to resolve the contestation through several key mechanisms:

1. Designation of Official Language: Hindi in Devanagari script was named the official language of the Union, rather than the national language, to avoid implying a hierarchy of tongues.

2. The 15-Year Grace Period: Article 343 provided that English would continue to be used for all official purposes of the Union for fifteen years (until 1965) (King,1997).

3. Parliamentary Provision: The Constitution gave Parliament the power to provide for the continued use of English beyond 1965, a safety valve for non-Hindi regions.

This compromise was essentially a stay of execution for English, based on the hope that a consensus would emerge over time.

5. CONTINUITIES AND DIVERGENCES IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE

The post-independence era revealed sharp divergences from the idealistic discourse of the freedom struggle. While the movement had promised linguistic states, the early Nehruvian state resisted this, fearing it would trigger separatism and threaten national security. The Dar Commission and the JVP Committee (consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Pattabhi Sitaramayya) initially rejected the demand for linguistic reorganisation (King,1997).

However, the state was forced to diverge from this centralised path due to mass pressure. The death of Potti Sriramulu in 1952, after a 56-day fast for a separate Andhra state, served as a catalyst that transformed the linguistic movement into a mass phenomenon. This forced the government to establish the States Reorganisation Commission, leading to the redrawing of India's internal boundaries along linguistic lines in 1956 (Mitchell,2009).

A continuity from the colonial period, however, remained in the administrative attitude toward language. The 1956 Official Language Commission operated with a technocratic conviction that political conflicts over language were reactionary and that administrative efficiency should dictate linguistic policy (Das Gupta,1970). This disconnect between the technocratic elite and political passion led to major friction between the Centre and the provinces.

6. POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND PROVINCIAL CONTESTATION

The official policy framework sought to address the language question through the Three-Language Formula, which aimed to balance the regional language, Hindi, and English in the education system. Yet, provincial governments often resisted this. In Tamil Nadu, the rise of language devotion (*tamilpparru*) led to a fierce anti-Hindi movement. Proponents of Mother Tamil framed Hindi as a common or vulgar language that threatened the ancient, pure status of Tamil (Ramaswamy,1997).

By the mid-1960s, as the 15-year deadline for English approached, the rivalry reached a boiling point. The non-Hindi areas, driven by a fear of losing access to central services, formed a coalition to defend English (Das Gupta, 1970). This led to the Official Languages Act of 1963 (and its 1967 amendment), which ensured that English would remain an associate official language for as long as non-Hindi states desired.

7. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS: LANGUAGE AND THE NATION-STATE

Conceptually, the Indian experience challenges the traditional view of the nation-state as a monolingual entity. Paul Brass defines nationality-formation as the process by which ethnic groups utilise objective features like language to acquire a subjective sense of peoplehood and political prominence (Brass,1974). In India, language became the primary vehicle for this process, allowing regional groups to negotiate their place within the Union.

Jyotirindra Dasgupta (2015) offers a positive reinterpretation of these conflicts. He argues that instead of being a threat to stability, language politics in India has served as a positive democratic channel for pursuing political integration. The Indian state developed a pluralistic decision-making system that recognised separate yet related language communities. This system relied on a convergence of interests rather than amalgamative integration, proving that a nation-state could maintain unity through a coordinated structure of organisational representation rather than forced uniformity.

8. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of the language question in India reveals a state that muddled through intense crises to reach a stable, if untidy, pluralism. From the syncretic vision of Gandhi's Hindustani to the pragmatic Munshi-Ayyangar Formula and the eventual concession to linguistic states, the Indian nation-state learned to accommodate the passions of the tongue. While the early state elite viewed language as a technical garb, the democratic process transformed it into a fundamental expression of citizenship. The Indian example suggests that for a diverse nation-state, the relationship between language and politics is not a zero-sum game; rather, the recognition of linguistic diversity can strengthen the democratic fabric by providing legitimate channels for regional identity and political participation.

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