

Exploring the concept of a link language in the Indian nation-state

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PPOL6771: Emotions in State Behavior

Dr. Kanica Rakhra

February 6th, 2024

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Language is fundamentally linked to one's identity, and this oftentimes includes the identity of the nation. German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder once asked: "Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers?"(Rezakhanlou,2018). It stands together with or perhaps above architecture, flags and literature as a symbol of nationhood. Thus, the relationship between language and a nation is a vital one, as language is often used in the creation of nations. In fact, the idea of a nation has been legitimized throughout history partly on the basis of its citizens sharing a common language. For example, France is a country that uses the French language in order to strengthen its identity. Historian Eugen Weber famously described how French leaders following the Revolution transformed "peasants into Frenchmen" by molding a common cultural, linguistic, and national identity that was uniquely — and exclusively — French (Vaishnav,2019). While language can function as a hugely powerful binding force by fostering shared identity and forging a sense of unity, it can also act as a divisive element – focusing on differences and fueling tensions across communities. It has the potential to cause fragmentation too.

In the context of India and its long and arduous process of nation-state building, language has played both these roles of unification and division in different parts of the country. It is a very strongly diverse country linguistically with 22 official/major languages and innumerable regional dialects (Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d). Just to put things into perspective, a large section of the population uses Sanskrit for their prayers, their mother tongue with their families, affairs of the heart and private thoughts, and English for their careers. Every few kilometers, there is an observable change in the regional dialect. Such is the level of multilingualism in the country. A shared language or a common-link language as a collective medium of communication can bring a sense of collective identity. Nationhood relies very much on construction of this common and collective identity. This essay explores the complicated ways in which language can shape the dynamics within the Indian nation-state.

The importance of language in national identity and unity

National identity is an instrument in a political sense, but it is also regarded as an instrument of domestic policy which allows building and maintaining a consolidated society. It involves loyalty towards the nation or state. Every government needs the support of the public opinion, but to generate this sense of loyalty is not without problems, especially in multi-ethnic societies, precisely because of the threat of losing social stability (Ortmann, 2009). Whether or not a common language or a link language is important for India as a nation-state is a very complex and nuanced issue with good arguments on both sides.

India is a democracy with a constitution to guide its polity, but the cultural and political systems are not symmetric. The political systems setup via the Constitution are mostly inspired from the systems of other countries, whereas culture and/or tradition in India is intrinsically linked to multiple local communities. For example, NSA Ajit Doval argues that India is a civilizational state trying to connect itself to the concept of nation-state (A, 2022). But the idea of a nation-state arises out of a shared and common identity. The basis of this can be culture, religion, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, etc. In the case of India, caste, tradition and culture vary from place-to-place and region-to-region. While the word “secular” was added a little later to the Constitution of India, the country has always been secular, and so a shared identity on religion is out of bounds.

In this context, a common language can be used to bridge the gap between various communities in India, to fully achieve the vision of being a modern-day nation-state and realize the values of fraternity as described by the founding fathers of Indian Constitution in the Preamble part of the Constitution, where “... fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation” is declared to be a constitutional goal (Department of School and Literacy, n.d.). To elaborate further, the subsequent sections provides few more reasons as to why a common link language is important in the Indian context.

Shared Narrative: Fostering a bond of togetherness

One of the most potent roles language plays is that of constructing a shared national narrative – through literature, poetry, music, and everyday communication, a common link language can transmit cultural values, historical experiences and collective memories. It can facilitate the

creation of a shared outlook and understanding of what it means to belong to a particular nation, nurturing a sense of solidarity. Patriotic songs and historical epics (including religious texts) recited and delivered in a common tongue can evoke powerful emotions and instill a sense of shared destiny with the national anthem of India being a good example. Even though it is composed in a language (Sanskritized version of Bengali) that can't even be considered a common or link language, the national anthem is universally understood throughout the length and breadth of the country, fostering a sense of oneness amongst all Indians. None other than Mahatma Gandhi himself was in favor of a common language to bring together disparate communities in India under the umbrella of the Indian National Congress, which was spearheading the freedom struggle. For India to become independent, he realized that the freedom struggle had to become a mass movement. Therefore, his approach of non-violence for attaining independence, Salt March, picketing of liquor shops, Swadeshi movement, and the emphasis on one language could be interpreted as a means for unifying Indians for breaking free from the British colonial rule. Hindi in its Devanagari form and script was supposed to take that role of unifying all the people because it met the desired requirements enlisted by Gandhi himself at the Gujarat Educational Conference on 20 October 1917, namely: i. it should be easy to learn for the government officials; ii. capable of serving as a medium of religious; economic and political intercourse throughout India; iii. should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India; iv. easy to learn for the whole country and v. in choosing this language considerations of temporary or passing interest should not count (Sengupta, 2019).

There's a peculiar example of that of the Soviet Union that comes to mind on this matter. Formed in 1922 as the successor state of the Russian Empire, it was organized as a union of as many as fifteen national republics, of which the Russian Republic was the biggest and the most populous one. As such, Russian language was chosen as the official and state language in all the other republics within the Soviet Union. The Russian language enjoyed a great status in the constituent republics and did what Hindi is supposedly meant to do in India - foster a bond of brotherhood and togetherness. In spite of this, the spirit of oneness brought about by the common language in Russian was not enough to stop the Soviet Union from disintegrating in 1991 though it still enjoys a great level of respect in the former Soviet republics in the form of being an official language.

Linguistic barriers to India's labor movement

The French, the Germans and the Japanese have always stuck to their national language. They did so by riding on their economic strength, which came from the domestically brewed science and technology, research and publications – all in their own language (Raghunathan,2016). Within these places, people are employable across their country's length and breadth because a common language enhances the movement of labor in their respective countries. Even in the United States, due to a common language (English) in place, the labor has had little difficulty in moving from New York on the East Coast to the Silicon Valley on the West Coast in the past, and now towards the state of Texas in the southern part of the country. In India on the other hand, the contribution to the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, alongside other research fields has not been that great. Added to this is the fact that there is very little translated literature in these fields available in India's regional languages. English proficiency is very limited and its reach isn't that deep. The economic growth of the country that ought to be taken to the next level by the laborers, skilled or otherwise, is thus being hindered by the lack of a properly established common language in the country (Darbhamulla, 2022).

Hindi as a link language has faced significant opposition from some parts of the country, especially the southern region led by the state of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to some extent. The feeling on ground is that of fear and that Hindi is being imposed on them. In the case of Tamil Nadu, the opposition to Hindi has deep political roots stemming from the Dravidian movement that advocated for a distinct and separate linguistic identity for the people of the state and opposed Hindi on the basis of viewing it as a language with proximity to Sanskrit - a language seen as a vehicle of propagation of Hindu Brahminism and caste hierarchy (Anandi and Vijaybhaskar, 2017). There is also a sense of pride and inspiration amongst the people of Tamil Nadu over the rich cultural heritage of the language as it is very old in comparison to Hindi language which is relatively younger and perceived as a threat to ancient Tamil language (PTI, 2023).

In order to forge a strong economy by dismantling labor barriers through a common language, fears and concerns of these states and other regions with opposition towards Hindi must be addressed thoroughly. It is important that Hindi should not be imposed but provided as a viable alternative of choice to the people in these regions. The New Education Policy 2020 addresses few of these concerns by including education in mother tongue or regional language as a priority with

the option of selecting a modern/classical Indian language and/or Hindi/English as a third language of choice too (Ministry of Education, n.d.). States have also been given the freedom to choose the language combinations and implementation strategies to tailor it to their wishes.

An existent lingua franca: Hindi, not English?

Another important factor towards the development of Hindi as a link language in the future is its already existing position in an extensively large segment of India with 52.8 crore individuals, or 43.6% of the population, declaring Hindi (including its associated dialects) as their mother tongue. The next highest is Bengali, mother tongue for 9.7 crores (8%) — less than one-fifth of Hindi's count. In terms of the number of people who know Hindi, the count crosses more than half the country. Nearly 13.9 crore (over 11%) reported Hindi as their second language, which makes it either the mother tongue or second language for nearly 55% of the population (Firaque, 2022). In actual practice, it serves as the link language among people speaking different regional languages in Northern India, and to some extent even in the South. Putting it another way, excluding some areas of considerable size in the South, Hindi already operates as the lingua franca of India (The Economic Times, 2022). And this is not a new development. The Official Language Commission in its report of 1957 pointed out that Hindi “is understood to a considerable extent in areas outside the Hindi-speaking areas, in the market places in cities, at railway stations and in places of pilgrimage where persons hailing from different regions of India and not knowing English have occasion to converse.” (India, 1957). Gandhiji in his own experience stated that “I have heard Hindi spoken even in far off Southern provinces. It is not correct to say that in Madras one cannot do without English. I have successfully used Hindi there for all my work. In the trains I have heard Madras passengers speaking to other passengers in Hindi.” (Gandhi, 1956). He also called for serious attention to the fact that Hindi existed in non-Hindi provinces additionally through the Muslim minorities living there (Nayar, 1968). While Gandhiji impressed upon the need for and spread of Hindi in non-Hindi areas, he was crystal clear on the point that Hindi should in no way take the rightful place of regional languages in their regional spheres. Hindi was to supplement the regional languages and in no manner act as a substitute for them.

All said and done, it is true that the level of competency in Hindi is very elementary and the language does not prevail outside big cities or towns or religious pilgrimage centers in Southern

India. Kerala has the lowest native Hindi speakers of only 0.6% of the State population, the least in India, and Tamil Nadu has the smallest percentage of 2.11% of general Hindi speakers (R et al., 2019). However, as mentioned previously, Hindi has been a link language over a large segment of the country and thus, has a naturally built-in advantage in its favor. This advantage stands sharply against the fact that no other Indian language comes close to emulating this dominance. Nor does any regional language have such a wide reach and appeal. Only Hindi, in either a broken or a finished form serves as a lingua franca all across northern India and partially in Southern India as well. A striking fact in all this is that the southern or the north-eastern parts of the country have not been able to form a similar lingua franca, which has to some extent enhanced the attraction of Hindi as a supplement to the regional languages(The Economic Times, 2022), thereby serving as a medium of inter-regional communication in these parts of the country. And this achievement by Hindi of a position of a virtual lingua franca over such a large part of the country is the result not borne out of a government diktat. It is essential as this shows natural selection over forced imposition. Also, there is some evidence to suggest that, when people from different regions not familiar with English interact over time, it is Hindi that emerges as a link language even when some of them did not know the language to start with (Nayar, 1968). This is evident from industrial establishments as well in the central states like that of Odisha where workers and staff come from all over the country, and among the non-English knowing workers, it is Hindi rather than Oriya that gets chosen as the medium of communication, for Hindi is more familiar to them than any language except their own (Nayar, 1968). The educated people may speak in English amongst themselves but when in contact with a non-English speaking population, the overwhelming tendency is to use Hindi. A fascinating example is that of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The primary composition of the population there mostly consists of settlers from other parts of the Indian mainland and as such Malayalam, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu all find their usage there. Yet, without any coercion or leadership or struggle or imposition from the government in this regard, most of the population there is bilingual and Hindi has naturally emerged as the link language and medium of communication amongst different communities (Nayar, 1968).

Conclusion

In order to fully realize its dream of being a nation-state of its constituents, India must look at the concept of implementing a common link language. While Hindi has the requisite potential as mentioned in the arguments above, care must be taken to avoid any forceful imposition that could further lead to divisions in our already fractured society. Binding together history, communication and national symbolism has to be balanced out by sharing the focus with linguistic diversity, equality and inclusivity.

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