



LANGUAGE AS A VITAL INSTRUMENT OF POLITICS: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC STATE FORMATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Language is not merely a medium of communication; it is a powerful socio-political instrument capable of shaping identities, constructing communities, and redrawing the geographical boundaries of a nation-state. In the context of post-independence India, language assumed a uniquely central role in the political reorganisation of states, emerging as both a unifying cultural force and a potent source of conflict. The reorganisation of Indian states along linguistic lines, a process formally initiated by the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, represents one of the most consequential experiments in democratic political engineering in the twentieth century. This article examines the intricate relationship between language and political power in India, tracing how linguistic identity was mobilised as a basis for state formation. Drawing upon historical, political, and sociolinguistic frameworks, the study investigates the theoretical underpinnings of language politics, the institutional mechanisms through which linguistic claims were adjudicated, and the long-term socio-political consequences of linguistic state formation. The article also analyses specific case studies, including the creation of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, and more recently Telangana, to illustrate how language functioned as both a catalyst for political mobilisation and a primary criterion for state demarcation. The findings reveal that while linguistic reorganisation resolved certain contradictions inherited from colonial administration, it simultaneously created new axes of political contention, fuelling sub-regional identities and minority language grievances. The article concludes by arguing that language continues to operate as a live variable in Indian politics, with significant implications for federalism, democracy, and national integration.

KEYWORDS: Language Politics, Linguistic States, States Reorganisation Act 1956, Linguistic Federalism, Political Mobilisation, India, Identity Politics, Sub-Nationalism, Telangana, Sociolinguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a singular position in the political life of India. In a country characterised by extraordinary linguistic plurality, home to hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects, the question of which language should govern public life, define territorial boundaries, and mediate access to state resources has never been merely academic. It has been, and continues to be, one of the most contested and consequential political questions in the nation's history.

The relationship between language and political power is ancient, but it acquired particular urgency in the modern period with the emergence of nation-states premised on the idea that a shared language constitutes the natural basis of political community. In Europe, the nineteenth-century nationalist movements drew heavily upon linguistic identity to legitimate their claims for self-determination. India's encounter with this question was mediated by its colonial history, its extraordinary diversity, and the specific political choices made by the nationalist movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress.

During the freedom struggle, the Congress party had itself organised along linguistic lines, creating provincial units corresponding to major language groups, and had made an implicit commitment that independent India would reorganise its administrative provinces to reflect linguistic realities. The Nehru Report of 1928 and several Congress resolutions had affirmed this position. Yet, when independence arrived in 1947, the political leadership hesitated. The partition of India along religious lines had cast a long shadow, and many senior leaders, most notably Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, feared that reorganising states on linguistic grounds might trigger a second partition, this time fracturing the nation along linguistic fault lines.

The dramatic hunger strike unto death by Potti Sriramulu in 1952, demanding a separate Telugu-speaking state, and his subsequent death, which triggered widespread riots and compelled the government to create Andhra Pradesh in 1953, marked a decisive turning point. It demonstrated unambiguously that linguistic identity was a force that could no longer be resisted or deferred. The States Reorganisation Commission, constituted in 1953 and submitting its report in 1955, recommended a broad



reorganisation of states along linguistic lines, which was substantially implemented through the States Reorganisation Act of 1956.

This article undertakes a systematic examination of the phenomenon of linguistic state formation in India: its historical antecedents, theoretical foundations, political mechanisms, and enduring consequences. It argues that language functioned not merely as a cultural marker but as a vital instrument of political mobilisation and state-building, and that understanding the politics of linguistic reorganisation is essential for understanding the character of Indian federalism, democracy, and national identity.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the historical and political context within which linguistic state formation emerged in post-independence India.
2. To analyse the role of language as a political instrument in the mobilisation of sub-national identities and demands for territorial reorganisation.
3. To evaluate the theoretical frameworks, including theories of nationalism, political sociology, and sociolinguistics, that illuminate the relationship between language and political power.
4. To investigate key case studies of linguistic state formation, including Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra-Gujarat, Punjab-Haryana, and Telangana, with particular attention to the political processes and social consequences involved.
5. To assess the long-term implications of linguistic reorganisation for Indian federalism, inter-group relations, and national integration.
6. To identify continuing tensions and unresolved questions in the politics of language and territory in contemporary India.
7. To formulate policy recommendations for the more equitable and democratic management of linguistic diversity in the Indian federal system.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

The existing literature on linguistic politics in India is substantial but uneven. Political scientists such as Paul Brass (1974), Jyotirindra Das Gupta (1970), and Myron Weiner (1967) have produced influential accounts of language as a dimension of political mobilisation and conflict. Brass's pioneering work examined how language, religion, and caste function as ethnic resources deployed strategically by political elites to advance claims against the state. Das Gupta (1970) situated language conflict within the broader context of national development and group politics, arguing that the management of language policy was central to the viability of the post-colonial state. Historians like Ramachandra Guha (2007) have provided richly contextualised narratives of the linguistic reorganisation of states,

documenting the passions, pressures, and political negotiations that produced the 1956 settlement. Sociolinguists including Braj B. Kachru (1983) and E. Annamalai (2001) have examined the structural dimensions of multilingualism in India, illuminating how language policy interacts with social stratification and cultural identity.

However, several significant gaps persist in the literature. First, most existing studies focus on the period of initial reorganisation, the 1950s and early 1960s, and do not adequately engage with more recent dynamics of linguistic politics, including the creation of Telangana in 2014 and continuing agitations in other regions. Second, the theoretical frameworks applied tend to privilege either political science perspectives focusing on elite bargaining and institutional design, or sociolinguistic perspectives focusing on language structure and use, with insufficient integration between the two. Third, there is limited comparative analysis that situates the Indian experience within a broader global context of linguistic federalism and multinational states.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, there is a lack of interdisciplinary studies that bring together political science, sociology, and linguistics to offer a holistic account of linguistic state formation. The present study seeks to address these gaps by combining historical analysis with political sociology and sociolinguistic theory, while also extending the temporal scope to encompass contemporary developments. It further contributes by examining the intersections of caste, class, and regional identity with linguistic politics: dimensions that have received insufficient attention in the existing literature.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon an integrated theoretical framework that combines insights from nationalism theory, political sociology, sociolinguistics, and federal theory.

4.1 Language and Nationalism

The foundational theoretical insight derives from the scholarly tradition that links language to nationalism. Ernest Gellner (1983) argued that industrialisation created the conditions for nationalism by requiring a standardised, literate culture transmissible through formal education, a culture that was invariably linguistically defined. For Gellner, nations are not primordial but constructed, and language is a key instrument of construction. Benedict Anderson (1983) complemented this argument with his concept of the "imagined community", the idea that nations are communities imagined into being through shared cultural practices, most importantly through print-capitalism, which disseminated standardised vernacular languages. These insights are directly applicable to the Indian case, where the printing press and the standardisation of regional languages in the colonial period helped consolidate linguistic identities that became the basis for political claims.



4.2 Language as a Political Resource

Paul Brass (1974) offered a more explicitly political framework for understanding language politics, arguing that language functions as an ethnic resource that political elites strategically deploy to mobilise constituencies and advance claims against the state. On this view, the success of linguistic movements depends not simply on the cultural salience of a language but on the organisational capacity of linguistic elites and the specific political opportunity structures available to them. This elite-competition model is useful for explaining why some linguistic groups succeed in winning recognition and territorial autonomy while others do not, and why the timing and form of linguistic demands vary considerably.

4.3 Sociolinguistics and Language Policy

From sociolinguistics, this study draws upon the work of Joshua Fishman (1972) on language loyalty and language maintenance, and Charles Ferguson's (1959) concept of diglossia, the coexistence of a high and low variety of a language in a speech community. The political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) is also relevant here. Bourdieu conceptualised language as a form of symbolic capital whose value is determined by its position in a hierarchical linguistic market. Dominant languages accumulate capital and confer social and economic advantages upon their speakers, while subordinate languages are devalued. This framework helps explain why linguistic minorities resist the dominance of majority languages and why struggles over the official status of languages are simultaneously struggles over social power.

4.4 Federal Theory and Linguistic Federalism

Finally, this study draws upon theories of federalism, specifically the literature on ethnic or multinational federalism, which examines how federal systems can accommodate the claims of territorially concentrated ethnic or linguistic groups (Kymlicka, 1995; McGarry & O'Leary, 1993). India's linguistic federalism represents a distinctive model in which the federal units are partly defined by linguistic criteria, creating a system in which territorial and linguistic boundaries overlap, a model sometimes described as "ethno-federal" or "linguistic federal." The theoretical question of whether such arrangements promote stability or exacerbate conflict is directly relevant to the Indian experience and is addressed in the empirical sections of this article.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, combining historical analysis, textual analysis, and comparative case study methods. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including scholarly monographs, journal articles, government reports, commission reports, and parliamentary debates, supplemented by primary historical documents where available.

The case study method is used to examine specific instances of linguistic state formation, allowing for a detailed analysis of the political processes, social dynamics, and institutional outcomes

involved in each case. The cases selected, Andhra Pradesh (1953/1956), Maharashtra and Gujarat (1960), Punjab and Haryana (1966), and Telangana (2014), represent a range of temporal, regional, and political contexts, enabling both within-case analysis and cross-case comparison.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon political science, sociology, history, and sociolinguistics. Analytical triangulation, the use of multiple theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to illuminate the same phenomenon, is employed to enhance the robustness and depth of the analysis. The interpretive framework is informed by critical political sociology, which is attentive to questions of power, inequality, and contestation in the production of political outcomes. No primary data collection was undertaken for this study, and the limitations of a secondary-source methodology are acknowledged.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Historical Background: Language and Colonial Administration

The roots of India's linguistic politics lie in the colonial period. The British administration had drawn provincial boundaries that rarely corresponded to linguistic realities, the Bengal Presidency, the Bombay Presidency, and the Madras Presidency each contained populations speaking multiple languages, with no particular effort made to group linguistically similar communities together. The colonial period also witnessed the standardisation and codification of major Indian languages through printing, grammar-writing, and dictionary-making, processes that helped consolidate distinct linguistic identities and create a sense of belonging to a particular language community. The proliferation of vernacular newspapers and literary societies from the mid-nineteenth century onwards created a public sphere in which linguistic identity became a matter of collective consciousness and cultural pride. By the time of the nationalist movement, linguistic identity had become a politically potent force, and the Congress recognised this by reorganising its own provincial units along linguistic lines from 1920 onwards.

6.2 Pre-Independence Commitments and Post-Independence Hesitation

The Indian National Congress had made repeated commitments to linguistic reorganisation. The Nagpur session of 1920 reorganised the Congress's own structure along linguistic lines, creating provincial Congress committees corresponding to major language groups, the Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee, the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee, and so on, rather than the existing administrative provinces. The Congress's 1928 Nehru Report and various resolutions at subsequent party sessions affirmed the principle that independent India would reorganise its states on linguistic grounds. When independence came in 1947, there was therefore a widespread expectation that the new government would honour these pledges. The initial hesitation of the Nehru government, reflected in the Dar Commission report of 1948 which advised against linguistic reorganisation on grounds



of national unity, was therefore experienced as a betrayal and generated intense political pressure.

6.3 The Potti Sriramulu Episode and the Creation of Andhra Pradesh

The pivotal event that forced the government's hand was the fast-unto-death of Potti Sriramulu in 1952. A Gandhian activist deeply committed to the cause of a separate Telugu-speaking state, Sriramulu undertook his fast in October 1952 and died on 15 December 1952 after 58 days without food. His death triggered widespread violent protests across the Telugu-speaking districts of the Madras Presidency, forcing the Nehru government to announce the creation of Andhra State, carved out of the Madras Presidency, in December 1952 (formally constituted in October 1953). This episode was enormously consequential, it demonstrated that linguistic demands backed by mass mobilisation and self-sacrifice could compel the state to yield, even against its initial preferences, and set a precedent that other linguistic groups would pursue with similar determination. The government recognised that ad hoc responses to individual demands were no longer sustainable, and the States Reorganisation Commission under Justice Fazl Ali was constituted in 1953.

6.4 The States Reorganisation Commission and the Act of 1956

The States Reorganisation Commission submitted its report in September 1955, recommending a broad reorganisation of states along linguistic lines, while also taking into account administrative feasibility and the interests of linguistic minorities. The Commission's report was a landmark document, intellectually serious, empirically grounded, and politically sensitive, recommending the creation of 14 states and 6 centrally administered territories broadly reflecting the linguistic geography of the country. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956, enacted by Parliament in August 1956 and coming into force on 1 November 1956, implemented most of the Commission's recommendations, reorganising the country into 14 states and 6 union territories. The Telugu speakers were united in Andhra Pradesh, Kannada speakers in Mysore (later Karnataka), Malayalam speakers in Kerala, and so on. This reorganisation was a momentous act of political engineering, resolving some of the most pressing linguistic grievances, though leaving unresolved contentious issues including the fate of Bombay city and the Punjab question.

6.5 Subsequent Reorganisations: Maharashtra-Gujarat, Punjab-Haryana, and Telangana

The 1956 reorganisation was not the end of the process. Bombay state was retained as a bilingual entity after 1956, immediately generating intense agitation from both the Samyukta Maharashtra movement and the Mahagujarat movement. The language riots in Bombay in 1956 and subsequent years were among the most violent in independent India, and the government ultimately relented: on 1 May 1960, Bombay state was bifurcated into Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Punjab reorganisation of 1966 was driven by a different dynamic, the Akali Dal's demand for a

Punjabi Suba, complicated by the fact that many Hindus had designated Hindi rather than Punjabi as their language in censuses. The Shah Commission recommended the bifurcation of Punjab into a Punjabi-speaking Punjab and a Hindi-speaking Haryana, implemented in November 1966. The most recent and instructive case is the creation of Telangana in 2014, where sub-regional grievances within a linguistically unified state demonstrated that linguistic reorganisation does not necessarily resolve all political grievances but can create new ones. The Telangana case illustrates how within-language political mobilisation, driven by claims of economic deprivation and administrative marginalisation, can be as intense as across-language mobilisation.

6.6 Language, Identity, and Political Mobilisation: Theoretical Reflections

The Indian experience of linguistic state formation confirms the central importance of language as a form of political identity, a basis for community formation, collective action, and claims against the state. Yet it also complicates simple models of linguistic nationalism. Language has functioned in India not as a single, unified political force but as one axis of identity among several, intersecting with caste, class, religion, and region in complex ways. The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu fused linguistic pride with anti-Brahmin caste politics; in Maharashtra, the Marathi identity articulated by the Samyukta Maharashtra movement was inflected by class; in Punjab, linguistic identity was inseparable from religious identity. These intersections suggest that language is not a simple, autonomous political force but a medium through which multiple grievances and aspirations are articulated, a politically plastic resource capable of being mobilised in different ways by different groups at different times.

6.7 Language Policy and Minority Languages

One of the most significant consequences of linguistic state formation has been its impact on linguistic minorities within the reorganised states. When state boundaries are drawn to accommodate the majority language, linguistic minorities within those states are frequently left vulnerable. The Urdu-speaking Muslim populations in many North Indian states, the Konkani speakers in Maharashtra, the Tulu speakers in Karnataka, and numerous tribal language communities across India have all experienced varying degrees of marginalisation within the linguistic federal system. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which lists languages entitled to official recognition and support, has been expanded from the original 14 languages to the current 22, partly in response to political pressure from minority communities. The politics of the Eighth Schedule illustrates that the accommodation of linguistic diversity is an ongoing process, not a completed settlement, as many language communities including Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Tulu, and Gondi continue to press for inclusion.



7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis conducted in this study yields several significant findings regarding the role of language as a political instrument in the context of Indian state formation.

First, language functioned as the primary organising principle of sub-national political identity in post-independence India, serving as a more potent and widely shared basis of collective action than either caste or class in the specific context of territorial reorganisation demands. The capacity of linguistic movements to mobilise mass popular support, as demonstrated by the Andhra agitation, the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, and the Telangana movement, testifies to the deep emotional resonance of linguistic identity.

Second, the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 represented a pragmatic and broadly successful political accommodation of linguistic diversity. By creating states that largely corresponded to major language groups, it gave linguistic communities a sense of cultural ownership over their state governments and created institutional structures, particularly in education and administration, that reflected vernacular linguistic realities. This accommodation significantly reduced, though did not eliminate, inter-linguistic tensions.

Third, linguistic reorganisation created a structural incentive for further political mobilisation on sub-linguistic or regional grounds. By establishing the principle that territorial boundaries should reflect cultural identities, the 1956 reorganisation implicitly legitimated subsequent demands based on regional sub-identities. The Telangana case is the clearest illustration, but the same dynamic is visible in demands for separate states in Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, Bodoland, and Saurashtra.

Fourth, the politics of language in India is irreducibly intersectional, always mediated by caste, class, religion, and region. Linguistic movements that succeed tend to be those that manage to articulate linguistic claims in conjunction with other powerful social grievances, creating broad coalitions. Movements that fail tend to be those that remain narrowly linguistic, unable to build the broad social coalitions necessary for sustained mass mobilisation.

Fifth, the creation of linguistic states has had complex and contradictory effects on linguistic minorities. While it has given majority language communities greater cultural and institutional resources, it has frequently marginalised smaller language communities and created pressures for linguistic assimilation that threaten linguistic diversity. This is a structural tension within the linguistic federal model that has not been satisfactorily resolved.

Sixth, the Indian experience demonstrates that language is a permanently live variable in democratic politics, it cannot be settled once and for all by a single act of reorganisation but requires ongoing institutional attention, negotiation, and accommodation.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for the more equitable and democratic management of linguistic diversity in India:

1. **Strengthening Linguistic Minority Protections:** The current protections for linguistic minorities under Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution are inadequate. There is a need for a more robust statutory framework for linguistic minority rights, including enforceable rights to mother-tongue education at the primary level, guaranteed representation in state public services, and independent institutional mechanisms for grievance redressal. The Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities requires stronger powers, resources, and institutional independence.
2. **Democratic and Transparent Mechanisms for State Reorganisation:** There is a need for a permanent, independent States Reorganisation Commission with a clear mandate and transparent criteria for evaluating reorganisation demands. Such a commission should conduct periodic reviews of state boundaries and make recommendations based on rigorous empirical analysis, public consultation, and constitutional principles.
3. **Promoting Multilingualism in Education and Administration:** A renewed commitment to multilingual education, implemented through adequate investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and infrastructure, would promote linguistic diversity and equip citizens for participation in a multilingual society. A genuine commitment to the use of regional languages in public administration, courts, and legislative bodies would enhance the democratisation of public institutions.
4. **Expanding and Clarifying the Eighth Schedule:** The criteria for inclusion of languages in the Eighth Schedule should be clarified and made more transparent. Languages with a substantial speaker base, a developed literary tradition, and sustained demand from their communities should be considered for inclusion on principled rather than politically motivated grounds.
5. **Strengthening Inter-State Mechanisms for Shared Resources:** Stronger institutional mechanisms for cooperative management of shared resources, including binding arbitration and independent regulatory authorities, are needed to reduce the politically toxic overlay of linguistic identity on inter-state resource disputes.
6. **Research and Documentation of Endangered Languages:** Government support for the systematic documentation, preservation, and revitalisation of endangered languages is urgently needed, requiring sustained funding for linguistic research, community-based language programmes, and the integration of linguistic heritage into school curricula.

9. CONCLUSION

This article has traced the complex relationship between language and politics in the context of Indian state formation, examining



how linguistic identity was mobilised as a basis for territorial reorganisation and how the resulting linguistic federal system has shaped and been shaped by democratic politics. The central argument advanced is that language is not merely a cultural or communicative phenomenon but a vital instrument of politics, a resource through which communities define themselves, articulate grievances, make claims on the state, and contest the distribution of political power and material resources.

The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 and the subsequent reorganisations of 1960, 1966, and 2014 represent successive accommodations of linguistic political claims within the Indian democratic framework. They testify to the capacity of Indian democracy to absorb and channel intense social pressures, to negotiate peaceful settlements of potentially explosive conflicts, and to adapt its institutional structures to the evolving demands of a diverse society. They also testify to the limitations of such accommodations, their tendency to resolve one set of grievances while generating new ones, and their incomplete attention to the claims of linguistic minorities.

The politics of language in India is not a relic of the past but a living dimension of contemporary democracy. The continuing agitations for new states, the ongoing controversies over the official status of languages, and the bitter conflicts over water resources between linguistically defined states all testify to the enduring salience of linguistic identity as a political force. The challenge for Indian democracy is to manage this linguistic diversity through institutions that are genuinely inclusive, responsive, and equitable, that acknowledge the political significance of language without reducing politics to language alone. The Indian experience of linguistic state formation offers important lessons for the comparative study of multinational and multilingual democracies, demonstrating that linguistic diversity need not be a source of fragmentation, but can be a resource for democratic pluralism, provided that the political and institutional architecture is designed to accommodate rather than suppress the claims of linguistic communities.

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