Language Policy In India: An Unstable Equilibrium?

Abstract

This article provides a short overview of language policy in India and situates this within a broader comparative perspective. It argues that India successfully managed to defuse linguistic conflict at the time of independence by combining elements of linguistic territoriality with the protection of linguistic minorities (personality) and the retention of English as an associate official link language. However, the article also shows how this 'Indian' middle way in language policy is currently being challenged by the rise of Hindi 'majoritarian' nationalism and the rise of regional (state) linguistic nationalism in response.

The State and Language Policy in Multilingual Societies

In multilingual societies, language is often a source of conflict (Laitin 1989). Language serves both as a 'thin bond', providing the basis on which social groups within the state compete and negotiate for resources and as a 'thick bond' generating collective and individual identities in which histories are told or cultural and religious practices unfold (Mitra, 2001:52; Sengupta 2017a). States decide on what is/are the official language(s) of the state, i.e in which language will the state communicate with its citizens through legislation, administration, court action or public policy more widely. Scholars of language policy refer to this process as 'status planning'. States also make decisions on the language of instruction in schools and the use of language in the media more broadly, i.e. what is referred to as 'acquisition planning'. Finally, states attempt to achieve and maintain the cohesion of a language by settling its scripture, syntax, grammar and vocabulary, i.e. through 'corpus planning' (Wright 2016: 47-77). Multi-lingual states differ in their chosen language policies. These choices are rarely neutral. They reflect the normative preferences and understandings of political elites and citizens more widely on what is required to make and sustain a sense of national community within a polity.

In the past decades, the normative underpinnings of language policy have been subject of considerable debate among political theorists (Barry 2001; Kymlicka and Patten 2003, Van Parijs 2011, Cetrà 2019). Classical liberalists emphasize the need for a common language to facilitate the emergence of a national or polity-wide demos and they support the right of individuals to use that language in public communication irrespective of their place of living. Although not withholding the right of individuals to speak a language of their choice at home, national integration requires the promotion of a single (often dominant) language at the expense of minority languages. In contrast, scholars of liberal nationalism or multiculturalism emphasize the possibility of a polity-wide demos forged out of multiple languages and they support the right of sub-state territories to give preferential treatment to regionally dominant languages.

The language policy which a state eventually adopts also reflects the demographic, socio-economic and political power associated with certain language groups within the state (Brubaker, 2013). For instance, the imposition of Sinhala in Sri Lanka reflected the majoritarian status of this language and its close association with Buddhism as the dominant religion. Ultimately, privileging Sinhala supported the building of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist nation, at the expense of its Tamil-speaking and (predominantly) Hindu Tamil minority. It also reduced, though not extinguished the role of English as an official link-language.

Language Policy in Federal States

Not all multilingual states are federal, but in most multi-lingual states, citizens who speak the same mother tongue tend to live territorially concentrated. Therefore, federalism – the constitutional division of powers between a centre and territorial sub-state entities – is well-suited to accommodate multilingualism. Firstly, to accommodate minority languages the boundaries of the units in a federal state can be drawn in such a way that citizens who speak a regional language have a 'province', 'state', 'canton' or Land of their own. Secondly although it is usually within the remit of the central or federal government to determine which language must be spoken in communication with the central government and institutions, federal units may be free to set their own status and acquisition language policies. Despite these two principles, we observe wide differences in the practice of language policy across federal states. For instance, in Belgium, the territory comprising the Flemish and Walloon Region are uniformly Dutch and French-speaking (leaving aside a few municipalities predominantly near Brussels holding linguistic minorities). Therefore, citizens in Flanders must address the federal, regional and local authorities in Dutch, attend schools in that language and use it in the workplace. In Wallonia, the same principle applies to French, whereas in Brussels citizens are free to choose either language. Therefore, Belgium applies the principle of 'territoriality' (where you live determines what language you are expected to use in public interactions). In contrast, the principle of 'personality' assumes that irrespective of where you live in a multilingual state, you should be entitled to seek

services in the language of your choice so long as that language has official status (e.g. French and English in Canada).

Learning from India: The Linguistic Middle Way?

Is there a middle way between the Belgian territorial approach to linguistic diversity and that of the Canadian (though not Quebec) government which is built on personality? In answering this question, I provide some insights from India, one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the word, with, according to the 2011 census, 122 languages spoken by more than 10,000 citizens and 60 by more than 100,000. Scholars of comparative language politics and policy usually uphold India as a relatively successful example of the management of linguistic diversity (Brass, 1974; 1994, Bajpai, 2011, Stepan et.al. 2011), but the country's language policy has been the product of intense negotiations and power struggles (Adeney, 2007, Austin 1966; Brass 1974, Sarangi 2009, Swenden 2017).

Like its neighbour to the North (Pakistan) and South-East (Sri Lanka), language policy was an important issue at independence. During colonial times, English acquired an important status as an elite language, used in higher education, the courts or official communication more generally. Yet, vernacular languages were allowed to play a role; especially in education. After all, the British empire lacked the resources to roll out English across all schools and administration. It simply wanted to establish a small group of elite citizens who through their knowledge of English (and so it was assumed also 'English manners') and one or several vernacular languages could operate as interlocutors between the colonizer and its subjects. With Indian independence on the horizon, the retention of English as an official language was queried, especially due to its non-vernacular origins and its association with colonization. However, the linguistic fractionalization of India meant that a vernacular alternative could not be found so easily. While a plurality of Indians understood Hindi, it was not the mother tongue for about 60 percent of the population. Most non-Hindi speaking Indians of the North, East and West of India may understand Hindi due to the Indo-European origins of their regional languages (e.g. Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Rajasthani), but this is often not the case for the inhabitants of South India or the North-East who speak Dravidian or Tibetan-Burmese languages with little or no affinity with Hindi. When the matter was put to a vote in Constituent Assembly, 78 members cast their vote in favor of Hindi with 77 against. In light of this smallest of possible majorities, it was decided to postpone its implementation until 1965, but in the meantime, commissions were set up to oversee the phasing out of English and supervise the progress of Hindi as the national language (Chandhoke 2007).

Although the eventual privileging of Hindi was envisaged, this plan coincided with the sanctioning of regional languages enlisted in Schedule VIII of the Constitution. The federated entities (states) were free to promote these regional languages in their communication with citizens or schooling. However, this measure also provoked concerns among speakers of important minority languages within these states. For instance, Telugu speaking citizens of Madras in the South feared that their language was suppressed by the dominant Tamil-speaking political elites of the state. This provoked massive protests which persuaded Indian leaders to embark on a process of linguistic reorganization. The Telegu speaking part of Madras came into being as Andhra Pradesh, and a successive number of state reorganizations between 1953 and 1966 gave most Indian regional languages 'a state of their own'. That said, the Hindi-speaking states of the North were not merged into one unit, thus preventing the formation of a federal unit which could dominate the others in the union. If anything, state reorganizations after 1966 have divided some of these Hindi-speaking states further (as in the case of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand) as well as for the first time in 2014 a non-Hindi speaking state (Telangana which was carved out of Andhra Pradesh despite sharing the Telugu language).

In 1965, the decision to upgrade Hindi to a national language was kicked in the long grass (and has not -yet- come to pass). Hindi became an official language and English retained the status of associate official language. Around the same time arrangements fell in place to follow the 'three language formula' in education as recommended by the Central Advisory Board of Education. Since 1966 – with some modifications – (1) the medium of instruction for children during the first ten years of education (primary and secondary) is their mother tongue -if numbers warrant- or an official state language. In case

of the former, the Office of the Commission of Linguistic Minorities has recommended the appointment of 'one teacher provided there are not fewer than 40 pupils speaking the language in the whole school or 10 such pupils in a class' (CLM, 1971 as cited in Sridhar 1996: 333). In addition, pupils receive (2) 6 years of minimum education in Hindi or English introduced as of 5th-7th grade and (3) three years of education in another modern Indian or foreign language introduced in 8th to 10th grade (Groff, 2017).

India's linguistic settlement has been summarized by David Laitin as de facto "3 +/- 1" (Laitin, 1989). Hindi and English preoccupy a special position as all-India languages, as is the main language of the state in which Indians are resident (which may or may not be Hindi). The '-1' in Laitin's formula refers to those citizens for whom Hindi is their mother tongue, limiting their need to learn languages to just English and another Indian language (often Sanskrit in the Hindi-belt states, even though that language is hardly spoken). Conversely, the '+1' refers to citizens who neither speak Hindi nor the regional or state language as their mother tongue. These linguistic minorities therefore need to learn Hindi, English and the language of the state in which they reside in addition to their mother tongue (which may or may not be the official language of a different Indian state). Overall, this linguistic compromise appears to have worked reasonably well. It almost made language a 'non-issue' at the national level and appears to have struck a balance between accommodation by allowing the promotion of some regional languages in the state and integration (by retaining English as an important connecting language whilst recognizing a special role for Hindi and the need for the constitutional protection of linguistic minorities).

Unsettling the Middle Way?

Despite the relative stability of the linguistic arrangements which fell in place during the 1950s and 1960s, India's linguistic compromise is challenged in a number of ways. Some of these challenges have become more obvious with the arrival of a Hindu-nationalist party in government at the center, headed by Narendra Modi. The Hindu nationalist BJP has been in power with an absolute parliamentary majority since 2014 (against expectations, it even increased its majority in the 2019 general elections). Although Hindi is not the first language of most of the Hindus, it is India's dominant indigenous language and it is the most widely spoken language of the states of the 'Hindi-cowbelt' of North and Central India, the traditional heartland of the BJP. The rise of Hindu (and Hindi) nationalism reopened the debate on the status of English as an associate official language and the promotion of Hindi as the lead (national) language. Official tweets of the Indian government are often issued in Hindi, Modi addresses most rallies in Hindi and Devanagari script was also introduced on new rupee notes. Furthermore, efforts are made to increase the position of Hindi in education (Montaut 2010). For instance, in April 2017, the Centre sought to make Hindi compulsory in all Central Board of Secondary Education Affiliated Schools across India, at least until grade 10, though pledged to do so in consultation with the states (Sengupta 2017b). This provoked the state governments of West Bengal and Kerala into making Bengali and Malayam compulsory within their state educational systems (ibid.). Such forms of 'linguistic outbidding' undermine the constitutional right of linguistic minorities within these states from receiving education in their mother tongue. For instance, in the case of West Bengal they could strengthen the grievances of the Nepali-speaking minority in Darjeeling who may push for separate statehood as a result. Hindu nationalists also undermine the protection and provision of Urdu in state-schools given its association with Islam. Due to a lack of Urdu medium-schools in North India, the instruction of Urdu is often left to madrasas, strengthening its association with Islam and weakening the knowledge of the strong secular tradition within Urdu literature (Matthews 2003). Educational provision in Urdu is hampered by the fact that Urdu does not have majority status in any of the Indian states, including in Jammu and Kashmir, the only state in which Urdu is the official state language. Furthermore, Urdu is most widely spread in Uttar Pradesh, a state currently in control of the BJP. The language survey of 2011 already demonstrated that the share of Urdu speakers in the Hindi-belt of North India has dropped (compared with 2001), in contrast with the South where it has gained further ground (The Wire 2018).

Hindi nationalism may turn language into a more salient issue in Indian Politics once more. Even without it, the current

compromise displayed signs of instability which have not been subject to detailed research.

First, efforts to add to the number of languages with 'Scheduled Status' under the Eight Schedule of the constitution have continued. The number of languages included has increased progressively from 14 at independence to 22 at present. Choudhry (2016: 185-6) is of the view that 'since neither the inclusion, nor exclusion of a language in the Eight Schedule has real institutional implications, the politics surrounding the Eight Schedule is largely symbolic'. Yet, inclusion is often seen as a stepping stone towards making languages official and thus compulsory for official or administrative purposes in the state in which they dominate (Sarangi, 2015: 210). Furthermore, the political dynamics to which Eight Schedule inclusion gives rise can instil a 'competitive, aggressive' zero-sum logic (Montaut, 2005: 98) which sits at odds with the multilingual reality of India on the ground and risks undermining the constitutional protection of minority languages.

Second, linguistic federalism while making states more linguistically homogenous, has not eradicated linguistic minorities (Sridhar 1996: 332). Linguistic minorities can take on several forms: (1) speakers of major (regional) languages who reside in a state where they are in a minority position either as the result of recent migration or because they populate sub-state territories in which state minority languages have been spoken for a long-time; (2) speakers of small languages which do not find recognition as official languages in Schedule VIII of the constitution (3) minorities of languages associated with lower castes or tribes, and therefore often 'inferior' in status and official recognition (e.g. Santhali, Gondi) (4) speakers of languages associated with a minority religion, in particular Urdu, due its association with Islam (5) speakers of languages which are associated with ethnicity other than lower caste or tribe (e.g. Anglo-Indians). The Indian constitution protects the language rights of these minorities. A Commissioner of Linguistic Minorities (and his/her Office) is tasked to oversee these rights. However, concerns have arisen about the implementation of the Commissioner's recommendations or the seriousness with which state governments complete and submit their annual state reports to the Commissioner (Adeney 2017).

Finally, language provisions in the educational sector are contested. For instance, despite its 'high status' Tamil Nadu refuses to enforce Hindi as a compulsory language, confining itself to Tamil and English. Conversely, at the state level instruction in the mother tongue may not be offered to linguistic minorities in view of the lower-status of their language, e.g. as tribal languages; or it may only be offered until the end of the first grade, after which mainstreaming into the more high-status state majority language is attempted. Furthermore, many parents opt to send their children to private schools where the medium of instruction is English; the most popular language at college or university level and the language with the widest employment opportunities. The prevalence which parents and children place on the medium of instruction may produce a disjuncture between the formal intent of the three-language-formula in education and its perception on the ground. The formula seeks to achieve linguistic plurality but in reality, 'discourse about medium constructs ideological competition through linguistic opposition,' (LaDousa, 2005), especially between high status languages such as English and the vernacular state official languages (but also between the latter and state minority languages). In this context, Hindi (or other Indian languages) are often seen as patriotically Indian, whereas English is 'un-national' even if it facilitates pan-Indian social and economic mobility. In a context of rising Hindu, Hindi (and Indian) nationalism, this dynamic and its implication for the survival of India's linguistic diversity on the ground requires closer study.

The Indian case generates important insights for the management of linguistic diversity in large multi-lingual polities or organizations, from Nigeria, South Africa to Indonesia and the European Union. It also provides an important test case for the how normative precepts of language policy play out on the ground. Scholars of comparative language politics in plurilingual states should move beyond the usual suspects of Canada, Belgium, Spain and Switzerland, and bring in more experience from plurilingual states from the Global South.

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