



REVIEW ARTICLE

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN INDIA: AMBEDKAR'S IDEAS ON LINGUISTIC STATES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

India's linguistic diversity has been central to its political and social fabric, shaping regional identities, governance structures, and national integration. The reorganization of Indian states along linguistic lines was a landmark decision that continues to influence the country's federal structure. One of the most influential figures in this debate was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who provided a nuanced perspective on the formation of linguistic states. He not only supported linguistic reorganization as a means to enhance administrative efficiency, democratic representation, and cultural preservation, but also expressed concerns about linguistic chauvinism and its potential to fragment national unity. His vision of linguistic diversity remains relevant in contemporary India, where language continues to be a contentious issue in politics and governance. This paper revisits Ambedkar's ideas on linguistic states and national identity, analysing his contributions to the state's reorganization debate and the implications of his arguments in present-day India and also to explore the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's ideas in light of current language-related debates, regional linguistic movements, and demands for new states. The demand for linguistic states was a powerful force in post-independence India, with movements driven by cultural and administrative aspirations. While the reorganization of states on linguistic lines helped address regional grievances and created a more administratively efficient structure, it also led to the rise of regionalism and identity-based politics, validating some of Ambedkar's concerns. The discussion also extends to Ambedkar's views on Hindi as a national language and the role of English as a neutral link language in governance and education, which acts as a neutral medium for communication and access to modern education. The paper ends with linguistic identity politics, coupled with ongoing debates on language policies, highlights the need for a balanced approach that respects linguistic diversity while fostering national unity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the cursor of nation-building, the state revolves around various elements and ideas, particularly in a democratic nation like India (Bharat). In India, linguistic diversity is an essential feature, with over 19,500 languages and dialects spoken across the country (Gupta, 2021). The amalgamation of multiple dimensions to bond in static framework in order to be nation, is not an easy task, to which intellectuals had articulated their versions of national prosperity. As per, Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of Modern Linguistics, said the following: "The human mind and language are comparable to the two sides of a sheet of paper (one does not exist without the other)" (Saussure, 1959). In this manner, language claims as a potential instrument for which significantly define the factor that predominantly stands for national identity, political as well as dynamic of social structure in India; country with vast presence of linguistic diversity and complex interplay among language, identity and regional governance has shaped the politics of India into a greater scope of developmental momentum. Such diversified experience of the land, puts central subject of 'multiculturalism' as an important phenomenon, where the play of culture and identity gets explore in bigger picture for their representation in certain lines of state's

prevalence. India is composed of numerous semi-national states, each with its own dialects, ethnocentric prejudices and distinctive profile (Friedrich, 1962), where language plays its dynamic role of vocal communication among societies and the reflection of language recognition often gets erupt with controversy. This is because the state, formulates of total 22 official language under Eight schedule of Constitution of India, which easily perpetuates to negligence of language of minorities in large, these views with dominant nature of language among a particular society over another, even experience of multilingual society prevails. The pedagogically of mother tongue of minorities, rise of determination based on regional or geographical structure and ethnicity, involves into political implications that creates disagreements or dissatisfaction within the state. The role of language in Indian politics gained its prominence during the period of national movement, which arise with the question to recognise the states based on linguistic identities; made the birth of Andhra Pradesh in the year 1953, followed by other states of India, ensured with linguistic tensions and conflicts creating both unity as well as challenge of governance. Against this backdrop, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a prominent Indian social reformer, jurist, and politician, played a critical role in shaping the Indian linguistic landscape and language policy, argued that language

was a tool of power and that the domination of one language over others could lead to social inequality and exclusion (Ambedkar, 1947).The politics of language in India has been overviewed with an evolution over the decades which has engaged towards linguistic identities, continuing its presence towards the electoral politics, regional movements and agitations, and also influencing policy decisions. With the contemporary times, the politics within the language in India has been engaged with a new phase which has been accepted its experience from Anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu. The demand for Gorkhaland and language-based identity assertions in the states like Assam, Manipur, Maharashtra, Karnataka which has provided a potent force in Indian politics. In addition to that, the role of language especially in education, administrative mechanism and digital governance has brought towards a new significant dimension into the linguistic debate.

In regard to this, the question arises, is there should be a national language or a linked language among the states of India? The status of English is considered as a significant tool or benevolent instrument which focus to link the entire nation and bring under a common platform of communication. There is often debate in the relation to Hindi language as a national language and a demand for recognition of more regional language in official governance which predetermine to rise continuously. This paper seeks to explore the complex relationship between language and politics in India, highlighting the importance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's perception in linguistic states and national identity, as well as assessing contemporary challenges in linguistic governance. and its impact in India's federalism and Deeper understanding of linguistic diversity while ensuring the democratic representation and cultural preservation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To understand Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's perspective on Linguistic States and National Identity and to evaluate the contemporary challenges of India's linguistic politics.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study, descriptive method has been adopted and collected data is primarily based from secondary sources such as books, journals, magazines, reports published by government reports.

AMBEDKAR AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

“While everybody talks about Dr Ambedkar’s contribution towards the upliftment of Dalits and his work in framing the constitution of India, his monumental efforts towards nation building have gone unnoticed,”. these were the words of Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat (former ICSSR chairperson), (TheHindu, 2016).

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the great Indian Constitution maker and „a symbol of revolt“ (as mentioned by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India), was one of the leading nation-builders of modern India (Bhatt, 2018). Ambedkar is considered as a central architect in the making of modern India, shaping its foundational stone in constitutional, political, social, and economic parameters.

As a chief architect of the Indian constitution, he played a very crucial role in drafting a framework and including the basic and essential dimensions of democracy, ensuring productivity in terms of social justice, fundamental rights, equality to each of the citizens. His vision for India can be an attribute which goes beyond the political structure, as manifesting it with annihilation of caste, gender equity, and economic self-resilience, which can be articulated his fight against the caste discrimination and significant legal and institutional reform. To determine, Ambedkar's idea on economic development influenced by his deep study of western economic thought, which emphasizes the need of industrialization, labour rights, state-led planning for national progress. He is envisioned as the first persona, who puts the legal foundation of the republic that was captivated with inclusive and progressive democratic ethos in India's modern history.

STATES REORGANIZATION ACT, 1956 AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS ON LANGUAGE IN INDIA

The formation of states on the basis of language has its presence in the colonial era, when India was divided into British Provincial and Princely States. But it is also to mention, that linguistic identity was not a major criterion for state boundaries and the British structured regions largely based on administrative ease and economic interest. After independence, the new constitution of India did not say much about the reorganization of the state on the basis of language, the Government of India later constituted a committee in 1947 headed by Justice S. K. Dhar of the Allahabad High Court to look into the matter; committee opposed the proposal to reorganize the state on the basis of language and opined that the state should be reorganized on the basis of administrative convenience (Shill, 2021). The demand for the creation of state on the basis of language has been initiated specially in South India when the momentum has been carried out by Vishal Andhra Movement where people of Telugu speaking regions demanded a separate Andhra state crafted out from Madras Presidency, later succeeds, followed by several other demands and movements for formation of states, primarily on the basis of linguistic basis. The States Reorganization Act of 1956 was a landmark law which came to intensify with a significant prospect of reshaping India's political map by reorganizing the boundaries of states on the basis of linguistic lines, formulates with the certain provisions like evolution of the old provisions and creation of new linguistic states, reduction in the total number of states from 27 to 14, and formation of six union territories were the crucial steps under the banner of the act. The Act is visualized as a foundational route for India's federal structure, enhancing a stable balance of linguistic expedition with administrative efficiency, which is even recognized as a successful implementation, but often faces multiple challenges in contemporary time. Moreover, The Constitution of India contains provisions regarding language mainly covered under Part XVII, Articles 343 to 351, as mentioned;

Table1. Provisions regarding language in the Indian constitution (Part XVII: Official Language, 2023)

Chapters	Articles	Provision
Chapter 1: Language of the Union	Article 343	Official language of the Union
	Article 344	Commission and Committee on Official language
Chapter 2: Regional Languages	Article 345	Official language of states
	Article 346	Language for communication on between states and union
	Article 347	Recognition of a Language for a Section of People
Chapter 3: Language of the Supreme Court, High Court, etc.	Article 348	Language of the Supreme Court, High Court and Legislation
	Article 349	Special Procedure for Bill on Language
Chapter 4: Special Directives	Article 350	Right to submit representation in any language
	Article 350A	Facilities for Instructions in Mother Tongue at the primary Level
	Article 350B	Special officer for linguistic Minorities
	Article 351	Directive for Development of Hindi language

AMBEDKAR’S VISIONS ON LINGUISTIC STATES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The articulations regarding formation of linguistic states in India are available mainly in the three documents. Firstly, a statement submitted by Ambedkar to the Linguistic Provinces Commission in 1948 entitled as Maharashtra as a linguistic province. Secondly, an article published by him in the Times of India in the year 1953 with the title Need for Check and Balance. And thirdly, his own book Thoughts on Linguistic States which was published in the year 1955. This provides an important approach of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar towards

the argument in favour of linguistic provinces and its notion for political compulsions as followed;

The Principals of Linguistic States: To Ambedkar, the country as diverse as India with multiple arenas, could not be effectively governed without recognizing the significance of the diversity, which has determined to follow by rational principles rather than relying on political or emotional opportunistic behaviour. A state where the majority spoke the same language would function smoothly as because of the communication among the people and the government would considerably minimize; this would represent a better engagement in the democratic processes. A Linguistic Province produces what democracy needs, social homogeneity; now homogeneity depends upon their having a belief in a common origin in the possession of a common language and literature, in their pride in a common historic tradition, community of social, customs, etc. (Bhadarge, 2016). He added, democracy cannot work without friction unless there is fellow-feeling among those who constitute the State; faction fights for leadership and discrimination in administration are factors ever present in a mixed State and are incompatible with democracy (Moon, 1979). The language as a component of cultural identity, to which he believed that the linguistic province would prevent the domination of a particular linguistic group over another, the need of linguistic province is justified with the advantage that the nation produces as a social homogeneity considered for prevalence in effective functioning of democracy. Despite of its initial support towards the linguistic province, Ambedkar later also recognized the potential difficulties in linguistic states. He was worried about the linguistic states which has the capability to encourage regionalism and separatism, bow the seed for threatening the India's unity. And he was concerned that if the people identified more with their language than the country itself, it would lead to regional conflicts and rise of linguistic chauvinism. The structure of Government of India will have to cast in a dual form, as a central and a number of provincial governments, creating difficulty in maintaining the cordial administrative relationship between the central and the provincial government; 'Linguistic provinces will result in creating as many nations as there are groups with pride in their race, language, and literature', (Ommen, 2007); eventually leads to breakdown of India. A state which homogeneous in its population can work for the true ends of democracy, for there are no artificial barriers or social antipathies which lead to the misuse of political power (Sarangi, 2006).

Prevention of Splitting of Indian states: The deep concern about the potential fragmentation of Indian states along linguistic lines where he acknowledged the administrative and cultural benefits of linguistic states and proposed a structured and balanced approach to linguistic reorganization. Ambedkar rejected the one- language, one-state formula and alternatively proposed multi-linguistic states. Ambedkar rejected the one-language, one-state formula and alternatively proposed multi-linguistic states, based on practical course of administrative work. The motive of establishing a strong central authority, which puts a preventive measure from tendencies of separatists, governed by law, committees of members sharing representative of different linguistic sections in order to participate in ministry and preserve their culture. He also puts his view towards special powers to protect the minorities on the basis of language, religion, and race; minority people of the Multi-lingual state should have right to set aside any act of injustice that might have been done any one section (Bhadarge, 2016). As it is not possible to pursue of a separate state on the basis of one particular language in such diverse society like India, but it is preventive in the status of multilingual condition where the preservation of linguistic culture is survival and considered to stand as a wall of obstacle against the fragmentation among societies.

One- State and one Language: His view for national language is basically shaped by the three main considerations which are likely to link with the need for administrative efficiency, national integration, and linguistic diversity of India. He does not was in favour of an immediate removal of English as it presents a necessary element for governance diplomacy and education to which he observed that Hindi

had the largest number of speakers in India able to make a natural candidate for a national language but is also acknowledged as a strong opposition from non-Hindi states which is cleared visible as stated to promote the education and incentives rather than coercion. *"The formula 'one state, one language' is sound. The formula 'one language, one state' is bad and leads to linguistic domination and regional imbalances."* (Moon, 1979) Moreover, he opposes this very idea of each state having an official language because he believes that it contains the seed of fragmentation that would tear India, as a nation, into shreds. He comes with a solution to avert such dire consequence by proposing that the Constitution of India should provide for only Hindi and English to be the national languages in place of allowing individual states to have official languages (Sarkar, 2020).

Moreover, Ambedkar's visions on nationalism or national identity were deeply rooted by the principles of social justice, equality, and democracy. He believes that nation should be based on a strong feeling of social unity and in relation to 'internationalism', the human brotherhood; fraught with the spirit of democracy, would not base itself upon a tyranny nor would it ever be a menace to any community and nation. To Ambedkar, nationalism cannot exist without the feeling of nationality; true nation is not merely defined by geographical boundaries or political sovereignty but by a shared community to justice and human dignity (Subhash, 2016). According to Ambedkar the most significant barrier to national unity in India is the caste system which divide the people of the country into rigid social hierarchies and denied basic rights to smaller communities like the Dalits; emphasized a common area where people live together and are connected through common descent, history, culture and language. Therefore, he said that *"feeling of oneness, the consciousness of a common heritage, consent desire and desire to live together"*, as the most important element of a nation. He said that caste is not only limited to a social level, it is also a division of labourers that's why he fought against caste-based occupations (Khatoun, 2021). As the chief of the architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar played a pivotal role in shaping India's legal and institutional framework to uphold the ideas of justice, liberty equality, and fraternity; determines on democracy was not just about electoral representation but creating an environment where every citizen regardless of caste and gender or religion, had equal access to opportunities and dignity (Chandrachud, 2024).

Ambedkar strongly opposed the idea of theocratic state and insisted that religion should be a private matter, separate from government. His vision of national identity was secularism, his vision of making India not just a political but also social democracy based on the edifice of liberty, equality justice and fraternity, his urge to end centuries of oppression and ill- treatment meted out to the depressed classes could only materialize in the context of secular state where pursuit of knowledge, cultivation of excellence of mind and inculcation of fellow feeling towards members of others communities would get priority (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). He desires that *"religion should be the force which deepens the solidarity of human society"* which can bring people together for social and emotional unity, can lead the people to military unity and political stability. To him, *"the divine right of the majority to rule the minorities according to the wishes of the majority"*. Ambedkar believes that these religions should be binding forces behind creating national spirit and in no situation, these religions should be a symbol of inhuman treatment and ignominy. He had the arguments in support of his claim that people speaking different languages might not be able to exchange thoughts and actions for development and happiness of all men irrespective of race, caste and religion. Moreover, one language could not only tighten the sense of human unity in a nation but also remove racial and cultural tension. Therefore, nationalism should be based on a strong will to live as a nation and deep feeling to make a state or cultural home with definite territory (Bhatt, 2018). Today, his ideas remain relevant as India continues to wrestle with issues of caste, communalism, and social inequality; visions remind us that a nation is not built on laws and policies but on the values of justice, dignity, and fraternity, which ensures that every citizen feels an equal part of the national fabric.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF INDIA'S LINGUISTIC POLITICS: Basically, the linguistic politics of India remains a complex issue, shaped with the historical, societal, political, federal, governance, and national integration-like features which align with linguistic federalism, as was institutionalized to accommodate India's diversity. Some of the current challenges that India's linguistic politics has witnessed are mentioned below;

Linguistic Federalism and Linguistic Nationalism: India as a union of states was much debated in the Constituent Assembly of India. The concept of linguistic federalism refers to the organization of a nation's federal structure based on language-based states, to which its endorsement of linguistic states is considered to role as a governance in people's mother tongue, cultural preservation, and effective administration. Although the motive of linguistic federalism is considered for a better engagement with governance, when administration is conducted in the native language, which ensures the stability of local political representation and greater decentralization of power, which is necessary for a country like India in order to promote regional development and cultural autonomy. *"The formula of 'one state, one language is sound. The formula 'one language, one state is bad and leads to linguistic domination and regional imbalance'".* (Ambedkar, 1955).

The relevance in terms of linguistic federalism comes to the ground when the nations ensure for the coverage of regionalism or regional nationalism, clashing with the idea of unity of the nation, this erupts more with the demand for statehood as Ambedkar arguments that a large state should be divided for a better governance has resurfaced in the modern demands from the newly states, causing the language dominance persists such as protests against imposition of language. As such, major correspondence of linguistic nationalism makes progress within the banner of regional chauvinism where states prioritize linguistic identity over the national unity, which could be traced from the incidence of Tamil nationalism where Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu has historically opposed Hindi imposition and central authority. Similarly, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena and Shiv Sena have continuously promoted linguistic nationalism and often attacked towards the Hindi-speaking migrants from North India, to which the eastern states like West Bengal, Orissa and others.

New Education Policy (NEP), 2020: One of the most detailed debates in the Constituent Assembly was whether Hindi should be the official language of India (Khanna, 2017). In June 2019, "Draft National Education Policy, 2019" was published under the leadership of Dr. K. Kasturirangan, eminent former astronomer of the country (Shill R., 2021). As a result, a protest and demonstrations went organized in several states after its recommendations and Trend in the social media emerged with hashtag stop-hind-imposition. However, the three-language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping in mind the constitutional provisions, the need to promote multilingualism, as well as promote national unity. However, there will be greater flexibility and no change will be imposed on any states. As the three-language learned by the children will be the choices of the states, region, and of course, the students themselves; so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India. This ensures the state autonomy while protecting linguistic diversity and national unity (Gohain, 2025). The controversy, emerges with the Tamil Nadu government, as Stalin (Chief Minister of the state) when he says that the "North Education Policy", as he calls the NEP, is a trojan horse for "Hindi imperialism" (Sinha, 2025). This controversy remains highly relevant with the Ambedkar's linguistic federalism over imposition and neutrality of the linked language respecting the state autonomy in education policy. The notion of, *'Hindi is a lokbhasha and it is best that it remains so'* (Yadav, 2025); highlights the need of stability in the nation, rather indulge to linguistic struggle.

One Language, One Nation Debate: The administrative units created by British, paid no attention to the language principle (DHNS, 2016) It is followed the constituent assembly debate whether India should hold with the linguistic states or maintain multilingual provisions as a state with a single dominant language is necessary for smooth function of

administration, cultural and linguistic preservation and political and social unity but often the question comes forward with the multilingual reality of India because of the diverse culture and enforcing one language could marginalize the linguistic minorities and lead to a situation that could be quoted under linguistic discrimination and alienation. Most recently, on the occasion of 'Hindi Language Day' on September 14, 2019, the controversy started when Union Home Minister Amit Shah asked for 'One State, One Language', he said that only Hindi language can unite India and basically to this, importance should be given to the spread of Hindi language (Shill R., 2021). The imposition of a particular language could be danger for the unity of the nation. It can affect the learning ability of non- native speakers thereby affecting their self-confidence, can also endanger other languages and dialects and reduce diversity, as the national integration cannot come at the cost of people's linguistic identities and even language is integral to culture and therefore privileging Hindi over all other languages spoken in India takes away from its diversity (Engage, 2020).

REFLECTIONS AND WAY FORWARD

To scratch from the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on domestic politics and national identity, the insights determine about India's socio-political framework reflecting the importance of constitutionalism, social justice, democracy, freedom, and individualism. The determination to become a successful democratic nation has to be the presence of anti-discrimination commitment and belief in the democracy which is not just about periodic election but also continuous empowerment of marginalized community. The vigorous change in the Indian's linguistic politics has to keep in the deflection of Ambedkar's idea of linguistic states where each language has the potential to hold the full sides and are to be respected in the eyes of laws of constitution and considered with the multilingual society where the diversity of India and the presence of Indians are profoundly determined. To hold the vision of our great nation, the diversity is the prime tool which is to be engaged and used in a fruitful way, sidelining the struggles based on linguistic ideas, as the Chauvinism emerged, which would end the idea of India, which was actually curved in the thoughts of Ambedkar and other personalities laying down the foundational stone of Mother India Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's idea of linguistic states was founded on the ideas of administrative effectiveness, cultural identity, and democracy. Although he warned that language may incite conflict and division, considered it as an essential instrument for empowerment and significantly preserved both the advantages and difficulties of his vision are still evident in India's language politics today. To end, the regional identities and governance have been strengthened by linguistic rearrangement, national discourse is still shaped by language policy discussions. It is essential to revisit Ambedkar's observations in order to achieve a balance between national unity and linguistic diversity; especially in order to ensure that language continues to serve as a bridge for social cohesion rather than a barrier to national integration, his theories provide an enduring framework for promoting inclusive governance. Ambedkar's ideas are being used as a guide to create a more equitable and cohesive society as India negotiates its multilingual realities.

"I want all people to be Indians first, Indian last, and nothing else but Indians" (Moon, 1979).

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