

Language and State Formation in India: Analysing the Role of Linguistic Identity in Territorial Reorganization

Nancy Bhardwaj

Ph. D Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract:

Language has been the fundamental and crucial element for the political and territorial reorganisation of newly sovereign India, serving as both an emotional symbol of identity and a strategic instrument of mobilisation. This paper analyses the role of linguistic identity in shaping state formation. To investigate how language functions in federal restructuring, the study uses a historical-analytical approach based on secondary sources and theoretical frameworks such as Paul Brass's ethnolinguistic mobilisation, Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," and Sudipta Kaviraj's postcolonial state theory. Case studies demonstrate how language rearrangement fostered recurrent demands for autonomy and strengthened sub-nationalism, even as it maintained the Union by embracing diversity. The study makes the case that language in India is a dynamic political resource that continues to influence regional identity, federal stability, and democratic participation, rather than just being a cultural characteristic. The study helps to clarify the persistent conflict between regional assertion and national unity in multilingual democracies by placing India's linguistic politics within larger discussions of nationalism and federalism.

Key Words: Language politics; State formation; Linguistic identity; Federalism in India; Territorial reorganization; Sub-nationalism; Ethnolinguistic mobilization; Imagined communities; Regional autonomy.

1.1 Introduction

Language being a versatile skill, is used not solely to communicate but also as a key identifier of cultural identity and political assertion. In a country as linguistically diverse as India, where the 2011 Census recorded over 19,500 languages or dialects spoken as mother tongues (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011 – Language tables*. Government of India), the merging and union of language and politics have been inescapable. The biggest task post-independence was unifying a nation fractured by colonial administrative boundaries, regional loyalties, and linguistic divisions. The demand for states organized on linguistic lines soon became a major force, culminating in the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953 and the subsequent States Reorganization Act of 1956 (Report of States Reorganization Commission, 1955).

In order to acknowledge the country's multilingual aspect, the Indian constitution, along with Hindi and English as official languages, included 14 languages in the Eighth Schedule, later expanded to 22, but the state formation on the basis of language posed challenges to national unity and raised questions about the balance between regional identity and federal integrity and highlighted the need for a balance between federalism and regionalism.

The conflict of argument over choosing Hindi as a national language among Hindi speaking and non-Hindi speaking states explains how language acts as a tool to instigate political debates and conflicts and how language remains a politically sensitive issue. Movements in several states like Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Maharashtra, and Assam, among others, explains how the linguistic identity is deeply tied to local pride and historical narratives. While linguistic reorganization helped contain many regional tensions, it also opened the door to recurring demands for recognition and autonomy based on linguistic and ethnic lines

Language became a central vehicle for political mobilization and regional autonomy in postcolonial India (Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, religion, and politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press). Linguistic identity offered a more emotionally resonant basis for statehood than purely administrative considerations (Guha, R. (2007). *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*. HarperCollins). Language here functioned both as a unifying tool and a potential source and cause of fragmentation.

This paper explores how language served as a tool for state formation in India by analysing key historical developments, linguistic movements, and the ongoing impact of language-based state demands on the country's federal structure.

1.2 Review of Literature

The relationship between language and state formation in India has generated significant scholarly interest across political science, history, and sociolinguistics.

- i. Brass laid an early foundation by studying how religious and linguistic identities became tools for political mobilization, particularly in North India. Language became the symbol of group identity and a major instrument of political mobilization (Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, religion and politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.) He argued that language is used not solely as a cultural attribute but as intentional tool used by political actors to shape administrative boundaries and access state power. Language became the symbol of group identity and a major instrument of political mobilization.
- ii. Guha provides a detailed historical account of post-independence India, focusing on how linguistic identity often served as a more engrossing and emotionally vibrant basis for statehood than administrative logic. Of all the possible bases for statehood, language proved to be the most effective and emotionally charged (Guha, R. (2007). *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*. HarperCollins.) His work highlights the popular mobilizations leading to the creation of Andhra Pradesh and the cascading demands for other linguistic states.
- iii. Saragi investigates the intellectual and constitutional aspects of language politics. The recognition of some languages and not others in the Eighth Schedule institutionalized a graded inequality within Indian multilingualism. (Sarangi, A. (2009). *Language and politics in India*. Oxford University Press). She examined how the addition of languages to the eighth schedule highlighted hierarchies in language, which impact policy - making and representation and hence cause inferiority among regional dialects due to lack of representation and resource allocation.

- iv. Baxter while writing earlier, offers a scheme of comparative discussion between India and other multilingual states. The Indian solution, though far from perfect, has offered a viable alternative to secessionist conflict in multilingual societies (Baxter, C. (1969). *The Jana Sangh: A biography of an Indian political party*. University of Pennsylvania Press) suggesting that despite of having vast linguistic diversity, India manages the internal linguistic conflicts through federalism unlike other multilingual states which fail to do so.
- v. Kaviraj brings a theoretical concept of the use of language by suggesting that the Indian state is not merely created by rules and political leaders but with the idea that how people think of India, the language and dialects they use while narrating the stories about India. The modern Indian state was imagined through the vocabulary of its languages—it was not merely created by elites but narrated through linguistic idioms. (Kaviraj, S. (1997). *Politics in India*. Oxford University Press.) He, in a way tries to emphasize how language is housed in the minds of people and how that language shape the narrative of nation- building and how that language functions as an ideological tool in the framing of state identity, especially in the early years of the Republic.
- vi. Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” adds global theoretical depth to this discussion. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.) He explains that members of the nation don’t know every other member personally but still they have the idea of nationalism because of the shared language, as it constructs national identity, and this idea is highly applicable in a country like India, where federalism and regionalism are at times at conflict.
- vii. More recently, Tillin assesses the long-term implications of linguistic state formation on Indian federalism. Language-based states in India have fostered political stability, but they have also deepened sub nationalism and encouraged localized populism (Tillin, L. (2013). *Remapping India: New states and their political origins*. Hurst & Co) She argues that the creation of states on the linguistic basis have almost shifted the idea of creation of the states on basis of language to other criteria and demands, but it has created regional identities, which in a way cause fragmented political ideas and landscapes and complicate central governance.

All the work of these scholars emphasize that language in India is not a passive cultural marker but a vital and contested political tool as it has influenced constitutional design, administrative restructuring, and regional politics—making it essential to understand India’s federal structure.

While there is a considerable scholarship on the relationship between language and Indian state formation, several gaps remain in the current body of literature. Primary works by scholars like Benedict Anderson (1983), Paul Brass (1974), and Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) provide the relationship between language and identity and how language shapes identity and politics. Similarly, Louise Tillin (2013) and Craig Baxter (1969) explains language as a tool to federalism and state reorganization.

Nonetheless, much of this literature remains either historically focused on the immediate post-independence period and use of language as a tool for state formation or theoretically concentrated, without fully engaging with the immediate linguistic movements and their implications for Indian federalism today.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and anti – positivism approach to inspect how language has operated as a tool in the process of state formation in India. The research is principally historical-analytical, combining theoretical perspectives with empirical case studies to trace the evolution of language-based political demands and their institutional outcomes.

1.3.1 Sources of Data

The study is contingent on secondary sources, including:

- Academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles
- Government documents such as the States Reorganisation Commission Report (1955) and the Constitution of India.
- Newspaper archives and reports on recent linguistic movement
- Scholarly databases.

1.3.2 Analytical Framework

The paper employs a collection of qualitative data and examines data from different theoretical lenses and hence adapts the theoretical triangulation method to understanding the role of language in state formation.

- Imagined communities (Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.) elucidate the idea of a construct of national consciousness in the mind of people on the basis of language.
- Postcolonial state theory (Kaviraj, S. (1997). *Politics in India*. Oxford University Press.) explains how language is embedded in the mind of people and how this idea led to the creation of India.
- Ethnolinguistic mobilization (Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, religion and politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.) expound how language is used as an intentional tool by political actors in demand of state.

1.3.3 Case Selection

A comparative case study method is used. It includes both:

- Historical cases: such as the formation of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.
- Contemporary movements: such as Gorkhaland, Tulu Nadu.

1.3.4 Limitations

- The study is majority focused on secondary data and is limited by the absence of field interviews.
- The focus of the study is mainly on linguistic movements which overpower other demands for state formation.

1.4 Research Objectives

This paper aims to explore the complex interplay between language and state formation in India by focusing on both historical precedents and contemporary movements. The specific objectives of the research are:

- i. To examine the historical context of linguistic reorganization in India and how language-based demands influenced state formation post-independence.
- ii. To analyse key theoretical perspectives—such as Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities and Sudipta Kaviraj’s ideas on postcolonial nationalism—as they relate to language and identity.
- iii. To investigate contemporary linguistic movements (e.g., Tulu Nadu, Gorkhaland, Bundelkhand) and assess how language continues to serve as a tool for political mobilization.
- iv. To evaluate the role of language as both an emotional and strategic mechanism in shaping regional identities and influencing demands for statehood.
- v. To identify the tensions and challenges within the Indian federal structure arising from language-based state formation and emerging linguistic claims.

1.5 Analysis and Discussion

The role of language in India’s state formation is both historically grounded and politically dynamic. Language has not merely been a medium of communication but a potent marker of identity, political mobilization, and territorial claims.

1.5.1 Historical Role of Language in State Formation

The reorganization of states in 1956 based on linguistic lines marked as a critical juncture in Indian federalism. Potti Sriramulu’s hunger strike, and the demand of creation of Andhra Pradesh on linguistic basis explains how language could be wielded to mobilize collective emotion and political pressure. The subsequent acceptance of language as a key for reorganization demonstrated that the Indian state acknowledged language as an authorized basis for administrative division.

This development, however, was not purely an appeasement to culture—it was also a pragmatic political decision. By recognizing language-based demands, the state aimed to defuse secessionist pressures and strengthen national unity through accommodation rather than suppression (Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, religion and politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.)

1.5.2 Linguistic Identity and Political Representation

Language continues to be a tool for political bargaining in post-independence India. In states like Tamil Nadu, language is not merely a tool for communication but an attribute of Tamilian identity and as a result language fuse with the idea of regional pride. This led to the development of a hate toward centre, as imposition of Hindi by them will mallify their Tamil identity causing anti-centre sentiment, fuelling Dravidian politics. Similarly, in Punjab, linguistic identity intertwined with religious and cultural claims, resulting in the Punjab Reorganisation Act (1966).

In these cases, language was not an isolated demand—it was linked to questions of autonomy, economic control, and cultural preservation.

1.5.3 Emerging Linguistic Movements

Present day demands for creation of new states new states reveal that language remains a mobilizing force even decades after the initial reorganization. These movements often argue that their linguistic identity is ignored in mainstream governance and that statehood would ensure better cultural recognition and development.

However, such demands also raise concerns about administrative feasibility and the potential proliferation of micro-regionalism, which could strain the federal structure.

1.5.4 Language as an Emotional and Strategic Tool

Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities (Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.) is particularly relevant here. Shared language creates a sense of emotional belonging and oneness among people who are unfamiliar with each other but still feel one because of the common attribute they share and here common binding force is language which solidify a collective political identity. Simultaneously, as Sudipta Kaviraj notes, this emotional connection is transformed into institutional claims through legal and political mechanisms (Kaviraj, S. (1997). *Politics in India*. Oxford University Press.)

Thus, language in India is not just a cultural symbol—it is a dual-purpose instrument: a source of belonging and a means of political assertion.

1.4.5 Contradictions and Tensions

While linguistic reorganization has brought stability in some regions, it has also deepened sub-nationalism and created new demands for recognition. There is a delicate balance between preserving unity through diversity and allowing diversity to fragment governance. This tension reflects the continuing challenge of federal nation-building in a multilingual democracy.

1.6 Key linguistic movements and their outcome in India:

Region /Language	Movement	Outcome	Significance
Andhra (Telugu)	Andhra Movement, 1950	Andhra Pradesh created in 1953	First state formed on linguistic basis

Tamil Nadu (Tamil)	Dravidian Movement	Strong regional autonomy, anti-Hindi stance	Rise of regional parties, linguistic pride
Punjab (Punjabi)	Punjab Suba Movement	Punjab reorganized in 1966	Language and religion combined in identity politics
Gorkhaland (Nepali)	Gorkha Janmukti Morcha	Partial autonomy via Gorkhaland territorial admin.	Demand for full statehood persists
Tulu Nadu (Tulu)	Tulu Nadu State Demand Committee	No statehood granted yet	Emerging demand based on cultural linguistic identity.
Bundelkhand (Hindi Dialect)	Regional parties' advocacy	Under review, no formal recognition	Socio economic factors tied with linguistic regions

1.7 Conclusion

Language has been both a building block and a battleground in the formation of modern India's federal structure. From the pre-independence nationalist discourse to the linguistic reorganization of states in the 1950s and beyond, it is evident that language has never been a neutral medium in India—it has consistently carried deep cultural, political, and emotional weight. The formation of Andhra Pradesh based on linguistic identity set a precedent that echoed across the country, culminating in the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. This act, while aiming to stabilize the Union by acknowledging linguistic diversity, also sowed the seeds for future demands, as regional identities became more politically articulate and assertive.

This paper has shown that language functions as a potent marker of identity, often interwoven with caste, class, religion, and region. Theoretical insights from Anderson, Kaviraj, and others highlight that linguistic communities in India are not merely cultural collectives but also political constructs that seek recognition, autonomy, and governance within a democratic framework. Language becomes the platform through which cultural pride, historical grievances, and political aspirations are negotiated.

Contemporary demands for new states—such as Gorkhaland, Bodoland, and Vidarbha—though driven by varied factors, frequently invoke linguistic and cultural distinctiveness as central justifications. This points to the evolving nature of linguistic politics in India, where globalization, migration, and education policies also shape how communities perceive and assert their linguistic rights. At the same time, the homogenizing pressures of national languages like Hindi and English continue to provoke resistance and anxiety in various corners of the country, especially among speakers of marginalized and minority languages.

In conclusion, language in India is more than a mode of communication; it is a dynamic force that shapes political boundaries, electoral strategies, and social movements. While linguistic reorganization has helped democratize Indian federalism by giving voice to regional aspirations, it has not resolved all contradictions. Rather, it has created a living, evolving model of governance that must continually adapt to the plurality it seeks to represent. As India continues to grapple with its immense linguistic diversity, policymakers must strike a delicate balance between national unity and regional autonomy, ensuring that the country's democratic ethos remains inclusive and participatory.

1.8 Acknowledgement

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to **Prof. Ravi Shekhar**, whose mentorship, critical insights, and unwavering support were instrumental in shaping the course of this research. His thought-provoking lectures and deep understanding of social and cultural geographies inspired me to explore the nuances of language and identity in India with greater academic rigor. His timely feedback and encouragement at every stage of this project have been invaluable, and I remain deeply thankful for the opportunity to learn under his guidance.

I also wish to acknowledge the Centre for Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University for providing a stimulating academic environment and access to valuable resources. My sincere thanks go to the library staff for their assistance in sourcing key texts, and to my peers and friends for their constructive discussions, encouragement, and moral support.

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