



A Symphony of Tongues: The Multilingual Soul of India

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Abstract

India is not merely a country of many languages; it is a civilisation built upon linguistic plurality. With hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects, India's multilingualism shapes its politics, culture, education, and daily life. This paper explores India's linguistic diversity from ancient times to modern digital initiatives, examining constitutional frameworks, regional realities, cultural expressions, and the challenges facing endangered languages. As linguist Ganesh aptly says, "Every Indian language is a museum of the country's history, its philosophy, and its identity." In celebrating its many tongues, India navigates both opportunities and complexities to preserve the soul of its multilingual nature.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Indian Languages, Language and Culture.

Introduction

Walk through the Chandni Chowk in Delhi or along Commercial Street in Bengaluru, and the air hums with conversations in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Urdu and many other languages. Sellers call the prices in one tongue, buyers reply in another, and friends switch easily between languages, sometimes even mid-sentence. As linguist Peggy Mohan observes, "Multilingualism in India is not an exception; it is the rule" (Mohan, 2021) [6].

The linguistic diversity of India is staggering. The census of India 2011 documented 122 major languages and over 19,500 dialects (Census of India, 2011) [2]. Yet despite this vast mosaic of languages, India has sustained an extraordinary balance between linguistic plurality and national unity- a phenomenon that linguist Udaya Narayana Singh calls "unity in polyphony".

This rich tapestry of languages reflects not just numbers but everyday life, cultural exchanges, and shared histories. From lively markets and classrooms to films, literature, and online platforms, languages in India shape identity, relationships, and creativity. Understanding this multilingual landscape involves looking at its historical roots, government policies, regional differences, cultural expressions, and the growing influence of technology in shaping how people communicate and connect.

History Roots of India's Linguistic Diversity

Ancient Era: India's linguistic heritage spans thousands of years, with Sanskrit emerging as the foremost classical language of religious texts like the Vedas, philosophical treatises like the Upanishads, and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. As Sheldon Pollock writes, "Sanskrit was not

just a language but a cosmopolitan culture that linked diverse regions of South Asia" (Pollock, 2006) [7].

However, Sanskrit was not India's only classical language. Pali and various forms of Prakrit also flourished, especially within Buddhist and Jain traditions. Pali became the language of the Buddhist canon, while Prakrit were widely used in inscriptions, folktales, and poetry accessible to the broader public. The Jain Agamas, for instance, were predominantly composed in Prakrit, underscoring their significant literary and spiritual role.

Equally remarkable is Tamil, one of the world's oldest living languages, whose literary tradition has remained unbroken for over two thousand years. Its classical works, especially the Sangam poetry composed between 300 BCE-300 CE which capture the emotional and cultural landscapes of ancient Tamil society. As Tamil scholar A.K. Ramanujan beautifully remarked, "In Tamil, the landscape speaks, emotions become places, and poetry breathes history" (Ramanujan, 1985) [9]. Linguistic diversity in ancient India was not only regional but also thematic. Languages developed specialised vocabularies for philosophy, medicine, astronomy, poetry, and governance. Ayurveda texts were written in Sanskrit and regional languages like Malayalam, illustrating how knowledge travelled linguistically across India.

Medieval Era: The Medieval period brought new linguistic influences. With the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire came Persian, which became the language of administration, culture, and art. Historian Muzaffar Alam writes, "Persian was not merely imposed from above; it became a language of cultural synthesis" (Alam, 1998).

Out of this cultural exchange emerged Urdu, which blended Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and local dialects, eventually

becoming one of India's major literary languages. Urdu's poetry—especially ghazals—became an exquisite expression of romance, sorrow, and mysticism. Poet Mir Taqi Mir captured its soul, saying: "Mir ke deen-o-mazhab ko ab pucho kya, unne to ashaaq rakha hai." ("Ask me not of Mir's faith; he belongs only to the lovers.")

Simultaneously, regional languages blossomed. Braj, Awadhi, Maithili, and Bengali produced literary classics. Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas in Awadhi retold the Ramayana in accessible language for common people. Vidyapati's Maithili poetry immortalised themes of love and devotion.

Moreover, Bhakti and Sufi movements catalysed the use of local languages for religious and poetic expression. Saints like Kabir and Meera Bai composed verses in Hindi dialects, challenging religious orthodoxy and social hierarchies. Kabir's couplet, "Bura jo dekhhan main chala, bura na miliya koi; Jo dil khoja apna, mujhse bura na koi," remains timeless in wisdom.

Colonial Era: English came with colonial rule, transforming India's education, administration, and intellectual climate. Gauri Viswanathan notices, "English became both a colonial instrument and a nationalist tool, paradoxically uniting Indians while serving colonial interests" (Viswanathan, 1989). Whereas English started as a tool of control, it also evolved as a language of resistance and reform. Leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and subsequently Jawaharlal Nehru spoke English to express visions for a modern India. English came to be used in the freedom movement through speeches and writings that were addressed both to colonial powers and the global international community.

At the same time, colonial infrastructure—railways, postal services, and urban centres—coalesced speakers of various languages. Hindi papers emerged in Bengal, while Bengali pamphlets were distributed in Punjab. This formed new systems of interregional linguistic exchange.

Constitutional Provisions and Language Policy

Language Provisions and Language Policy

India was confronted at independence with the key question: how to integrate such linguistic diversity into one national identity?

During Constituent Assembly debates, Purushottam Das Tandon had made a passionate plea for Hindi as the sole national language of India. T.T. Krishnamachari of Tamil Nadu retorted: "We may create a situation in this country worse than we have experienced in Europe, if we attempt to thrust a language down people's throats" (CAD, 1949).

The Compromise

Article 343 proclaimed Hindi the official language of the Union, but English would remain until Parliament made it otherwise.

Therefore, English is still rooted in governance, tertiary education, and law.

Eight Schedule

Initially adding 14 languages, the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution recognises 22 languages today (Constitution of India, Eighth Schedule). Granting recognition provides:

- Literary and cultural funding.
- Official status within government functions.
- Competitive examination eligibility.

As Ganesh Devy puts it, "Recognition is more than legal status—it is a shield for a language's survival" (Devy, 2014).

However, debates continue regarding languages such as Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, and Tulu, whose speakers are seeking inclusion in the Eighth Schedule.

Three-Language Formula

The Three-Language Formula, introduced during the 1960s, sought to achieve linguistic unity:

- Mother tongue/regional language.
- Hindi (or English in non-Hindi states).
- English or a third modern Indian language.

But it evoked resistance in states such as Tamil Nadu, leading to the 1965 anti-Hindi agitations. As historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy states, "In Tamil Nadu, language is politics" (Venkatachalapathy, 2010).

Bhasha Sangam and Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat

Contemporary efforts such as Bhasha Sangam also contribute to promoting respect and appreciation of India's linguistic diversity. Initiated under the government's flagship scheme Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (EBSB) in 2017, Bhasha Sangam aims to enhance national integration by familiarising citizens—especially students—with the fundamentals of all 22 languages included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Through simple daily-use phrases, greetings, and cultural insights, the programme generates interest and appreciation for India's multilingual tapestry.

Bhasha Sangam content is being spread through schools, mobile apps, and online platforms, making the learning both accessible and interactive. It not only commemorates linguistic diversity but also complements the vision of building unity in diversity, which is the very foundational constitutional and cultural ethos of India. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, "When we know each other's languages, we also begin to understand each other's hearts" (Modi, 2019), highlighting how linguistic acquaintance can foster mutual respect and emotional identification between communities of different backgrounds.

Therefore, Bhasha Sangam is a significant development in the efforts of institutions towards safeguarding linguistic heritage while promoting national unity.

The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI)

Linguist Ganesh Devy's PLSI recorded: More than 780 languages are spoken in India. Several are not included in official census statistics.

Through Devy's words, "Language is not just a tool of speech; it is the architecture of thought" (Devy, 2014).

PLSI highlights how India's linguistic narrative goes far beyond the Eighth Schedule.

One interesting find was the presence of languages such as Toto (used by less than 1,500 individuals in West Bengal), highlighting the importance of documentation and preservation.

Regional Linguistic Realities

South India

- **Tamil Nadu:** Tamil pride remains intense. The anti-Hindi agitations of 1965 remain a touchstone for linguistic identity. As Anna Durai famously said, "I would rather cut off my tongue than speak Hindi" (Venkatachalapathy, 2010).
- **Kerala:** Malayalam exists alongside English and dialects like Mappila Arabic among Muslim communities. The

state's high literacy rate has ensured robust literary output in Malayalam.

- **Karnataka:** Kannada thrives alongside Tulu, Konkani, Kodava, and English, especially in cosmopolitan Bengaluru.
- **Andhra Pradesh & Telangana:** Telugu has a thriving literary tradition. Hyderabad remains a unique Urdu speaking hub in South India.

North and West India

- **Punjab:** Punjabi dominates everyday life. As Daljit Nagra writes, "Punjabi is a language of exuberance, music, and stories."
- **Maharashtra:** Marathi retains cultural prestige. Cities like Mumbai pulse with multilingual exchanges.
- **Rajasthan:** Dialects like Marwari, Mewari, and Shekhawati remain vibrant in folk traditions.

East and Northeast India

- **West Bengal:** Bengali defines literature, films, and intellectual thought. Tagore referred to Bengali as "the language of the heart."
- **Assam:** Assamese exists alongside Bodo, Bengali, and tribal languages.
- **Northeast:** Every state is a multilingual universe. Arunachal Pradesh has more than 50 languages alone.

Multilingualism and Education: NEP 2020

NEP 2020 strongly emphasises fostering multilingualism and preparing the education system accordingly. It suggests that the medium of instruction, at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8, should be the mother tongue of the regional language to establish a strong foundation for learning and understanding.

The policy further requires that teachers are trained to manage multilingual classrooms effectively and that multilingual teaching materials are developed. Studies consistently indicate that children learn ideas more quickly and thoroughly when educated in their native language. As the NEP states, "Children learn best in their home language" (NEP, 2020).

Despite these progressive measures, much remains to be achieved. Most parents continue to opt for English-medium schools, viewing English as the key to better career prospects. Additionally, there is a scarcity of quality textbooks, teaching resources, and teachers trained in various regional languages, which hampers the effective implementation of multilingual education.

Language in Popular Culture and Media Cinema

Bollywood tends to combine Hindi and English, as in *Dil Chahta Hai*, *Gully Boy*, and *3 Idiots*.

Regional cinemas are also blockbuster hits, with big films in Tamil (Ponniyin Selvan), Telugu (RRR), Kannada (KGF), and Malayalam (Drishyam), demonstrating how various languages do justice on the screen.

As Baradwaj Rangan writes, "Language is not a barrier for cinema in India—it's a bridge to more audiences."

Music

India's music realm is diverse in languages. Popular singers like Kishore Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar sang in numerous Indian languages. A. R. Rahman composed numbers in Tamil, Hindi, and even English. Hits such as *Why This Kolaveri Di* (Tamil-English) and *Apna Time Aayega* (Hindi-English rap)

were smash hits across all of India. Even classical greats such as M.S. Subbulakshmi and Bhimsen Joshi sang in local languages, making traditional music a hit across the nation.

Social Media

On social media, individuals make videos and posts in languages such as Bhojpuri, Marathi, Tamil, Bengali, and others. Platforms such as Koo and ShareChat promote content in various languages, keeping regional languages alive and opening them up to new readers. Numerous singers, poets, and comedians put their work online, bringing local languages to the forefront in today's digital era.

Challenges to Linguistic Diversity

- Intergenerational transmission of languages is diminishing, with later generations adopting dominant or world languages for improved economic prospects.
- Most minority and tribal languages do not have resources for formal education, which results in falling levels of literacy and usage.
- Media and entertainment predominantly advance dominant languages, marginalising smaller languages from popular culture.
- Pressure for standardization in administration and technology denies lesser-spoken languages official usage and online presence.
- Government policies, at times, target the advancement of regional majority languages at the expense of smaller linguistic communities.
- Inter-marriage and migration lead to language shift or blending, decreasing the prevalence of pure mother tongues.
- Economic marginalisation of small-language groups restricts resources for preservation and documentation.
- Loss of linguistic diversity jeopardises related cultural heritage, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Preservation Efforts

India's language heritage is not merely about vocabulary—it's about memories, songs, identities, and tales. With the fate of hundreds of languages hanging in the balance, preservation is no longer an academic exercise; it's a race against time to salvage cultural heritages.

SPPEL (Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages) Spurred by the government, SPPEL toils in the background but persistently documents languages that are on the brink of extinction, many spoken by only a few hundred individuals. Every recording is akin to preserving a tune that will perhaps never be sung again.

Role of Sahitya Akademi: Sahitya Akademi is not merely honoring authors—it's cultivating languages. With patronage for 24 Indian languages, it sustains rich literary voices through books, translations, and public readings. It prevents languages from being lost in the void.

Stories Passed Down the Generations: Grandmothers still tell bedtime stories in their mother tongue in villages and tribal tracts. Festival songs, night lullabies, and riddle-puzzles during harvests—these are daily acts of preservation, woven into life.

Digital Help: Apps and Archives: Today's young people might not speak their ancestral tongues well, but apps, YouTubes, and podcasts are fast becoming bridges. New technology tools are learning old languages in fresh ways, breathing new life into interest among young generations.

Local Heroes: Teachers and Volunteers: From Ladakh to the Northeast, volunteers conduct informal classes in the forgotten dialects. What they do might not be noticed, but each child who learns to communicate in their mother tongue is a small win for culture.

Festivals and Pride Movements: Local festivals now host indigenous languages with pride. Poetry recitals, folk music evenings, and local theater are providing endangered languages a platform—literally and figuratively.

According to Ganesh Devy, “Reviving a language is like reviving a culture’s heartbeat.” It’s not just about communication—it’s about memory, attachment, and belonging. In saving a language, we save a world.

Language is the Soul of India

India's multilingual nature is both a blessing and a bane. It fuels controversies concerning identity, policy, and politics, but it is the pulse of the nation's cultural existence. As G. N. Devy observes, "Language is the memory of a community" (Devy, 2014). Every language contains stories, songs, beliefs, and perceptions of the world, intertwining the varied strands of India's identity.

Despite tensions over linguistic boundaries, the everyday reality across India is a rich tapestry of tongues. Whether in literature, music, cinema, or street conversations, languages mingle and transform, reflecting centuries of cultural exchange. Mahatma Gandhi’s words resonate deeply: “A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and the soul of its people.”

But language in India is not just heritage—it's hope, the future. The emergence of digital technology, mother tongue schooling, and regional media means even smaller languages have a voice to exist and thrive. India's linguistic diversity ensures no one voice speaks for the nation. Rather, it's a chorus of multiple voices, each indispensable to the song of its soul.

In India, to speak a language is not only to communicate—it is to belong, to remember, and to dream.

Conclusion

India's tale is, in its essence, a tale of many voices. Not the accident of geography it has become for modern Indians, but the country's multilinguality is a testament to the richly intricate steps of history, migration, art, faith, and humanity's desire to express identity. Every language, whatever its number of speakers - millions or a couple of hundred - is a container of bits of collective memory, sagacity, humor, and the cadences of common life.

What emerges from this journey is a picture of India as a country where languages have rarely been found in isolation. From Sanskrit sutras and Tamil love poems to Urdu ghazals and tribal chants, languages have crossed over, borrowed from each other, and evolved over the centuries. They have been tools of power and protest, of spiritual quest and political struggle, of individual imagination and group belonging.

This cohabitation has not, however, been frictionless. The pressure between national integration and linguistic diversity has repeatedly appeared, reminding us that language cannot be separated from issues of identity, government, and cultural chauvinism. Controversies regarding official languages, demands for addition to the Eighth Schedule, and local claims to linguistic identity indicate that language policy in India is not simply administrative—it is deeply emotional and political.

But the strength of India's multilingual culture is evident. Markets in urban centers, music that crisscrosses state boundaries, and the success of state films all prove that Indians are still piezoning and negotiating across various languages in everyday life. Projects such as Bhasha Sangam and digital media are creating new channels for the old and new languages to gain new groups of people and relevance.

There is still, however, a pressing task: to safeguard and support those languages hanging on the edge of disappearance. These are not "minor" languages; they are irreplaceable reservoirs of knowledge systems, ecological knowledge, oral literature, and distinctive worldviews. To lose them would be to lose innumerable ways of knowing the world.

Eventually, India's linguistic landscape resists simple classification. It is at once an inheritance and an unfolding phenomenon—a living witness to the nation's creative flexibility and cultural assurance. India's true strength does not reside in selecting one voice over another but in entwining all its voices in a common tale that honors diversity and values bonding.

As India progresses, adopting technology, education reform, and cultural exchange, the safeguarding and celebration of its linguistic heritage will be essential—not just as an expression of cultural pride, but as a commitment to the many diverse human experiences and aspirations these languages embody. Because in India, to speak any language is to be part of a great conversation stretching across time, space, and communities—a conversation that is, quite simply, the nation's soul.

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