

The Role of Language in Indian Multiculturalism

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Introduction:

“वाचामेव प्रसादेन लोकयात्रा प्रवर्तरे” (1:3) ... “इदमन्धं मः
कृत्स्नं जायेर् भुवनत्रम् |
यदद शब्दाह्वयं ज्योर्िरा संसारान्न दीप्यरे”|| (1:4) (Daṇḍī, *Kāvyādarśa*)

[Through the sole grace of the Word (/language), it elevates the everyday pursuits of human existence...This profound darkness would envelop the entirety of the world, unless the light summoned by the sound illuminates from within it.]

India stands apart from other countries as one of the most linguistically rich and diverse nations in the world, owing to the 1600 languages and dialects that are spoken and used within the country.. A well-known aphorism effectively illustrates the linguistic diversity of

India: "कोशे-कोशे पानी बदले, चार कोशे बानी" (The language spoken in India varies every few kilometers, akin to the changing taste of water). Language signifies the culture and remains an essential part of social bonds amongst people. Culture, identity, as well as a sense of unity, is important for any nation, and linguistic diversity compliments this. Accordingly, this essay aims to discuss how the multitude of languages spoken in the country shape India's identity, culture and provide social cohesion.

Linguistic Diversity in India

As per the census of 2011, there are 122 major languages and around 1599 other languages spoken within the country. Hindi is widely spoken and used by almost half the population. Other vernaculars such as Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu and Gujarati have a considerable amount of speaker base as well. The constitution of India recognized 22 languages, shown in the eighth schedule, which reflects the importance placed on linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism.

This multilingual characteristic of the country serves to transcend borders and fosters unity among the multitude of Indians due to the interactions with other cultures and communities.

Every language has its own traditions, stories and values, which together shape the larger Indian identity. For example, Punjabi and Urdu express Punjabi culture and Tamil expresses Dravidian culture in the South. The occurrence of this linguistic diversity regionally strengthens the feeling of belongingness in the speakers and helps them in preserving their cultural identities.

Language as a Marker of Cultural Identity

“अनादिनाधनं ब्रह्म शब्दत्वं यदक्षरम् ।

विवर्तरेऽर्तभावेन प्रदिश्या जगर्ो यः ॥” *Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari* (1/1)

(Trans.) The Brahman, which is eternal and unbounded, whose fundamental nature is the Word, serves as the origin of the manifested phonemes and manifests as objects, from which the creation of the universe arises.

In India, language can be a very important marker of cultural identity. It is not only a communication tool but also a part of our history and our tradition, a repository of collective memory. In many communities, language forms the very fabric of their social setup. Local languages showcase through literature, music, as well as art, allow the protection of local culture. The literary traditions in languages like Bengali, Kannada have, therefore, thrived on the genial inter-linguistic influences — the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali or that of Kuvempu in Kannada serve as instances of the latter observation — their works not just helping their languages but the cultural discourse of India.

In addition to festivals and rituals, there are linguistic elements in such events that play a role in promoting a shared cultural identity. For example, while celebrating Diwali, Pongal or Eid, we tend to use different languages in different regions reflecting our own traditions. This linguistic expression in the context of a cultural celebration strengthens the bonds between those sharing a language while also welcoming outsiders to join in, as well as a multicultural society.

Language and National Unity

Though it becomes tough to survive in the biggest democracy because of enormous linguistic diversity, still it has become an opportunity. For civic harmony, the Indian Government has understood the need for the promotion of Multilingualism. The Three Language Formula enshrined in the National Policy on Education promotes the study of Hindi, English and a

regional language leading to linguistic pluralism and communication between communities.

This can have serious consequences for national integration. India attempts to bridge over the cultural divides by propagating a common linguistic framework while respecting individual regional linguistic framework. For example, in many regions, regional Hindi works as a lingua franca among speakers of various languages, thereby fostering a common identity

Additionally, the promotion of English as a global language of commerce and education further integrates India into the global community while allowing for local languages to thrive.

Challenges of Linguistic Diversity

Rājaśekhara, A famous poet and scholar from 10th Century AD, in his text *kāvyamīmāṃsā*, described the Indian subcontinent (named as *āyāvarta*) as divided into multiple cultural zones or *Cakravartī-kṣetras*. Each *Cakravartī-kṣetra* was distinguished according to its usage of language, traditional dressing and typical ways of common behaviour; i.e. *rīti*, *vṛtti* and *pravṛtti*.

While linguistic diversity is certainly beneficial, India's linguistic diversity has its own challenges. Language-based tensions can produce social tensions, as evidenced by a number of regional movements in India where individuals advocated for the inclusion of specific languages into their local or regional political and social context. As seen in these movements for the inclusion of languages such as Bodo and Maithli into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, a wider struggle for linguistic recognition and representation within India remains strong. Ultimately, many local and regional movements for language recognition are simply a means for those advocating for them to preserve their own cultural identity and identity, placing their own dignity at the local level (and not downplaying the efforts of supporters who actively engaged or worked toward the ongoing preservation, publication and development of their local or regional languages). A number of case studies demonstrate the intersection of language with cultural identity in India. One such example is the Gorkha community in West Bengal, who have historically fought for the recognition of the Nepali language because it is considered a significant aspect of their identity. The demand for statehood in the form of Gorkhaland has been intricately linked to linguistic identity, showcasing the extent to which language can serve as a unifier for cultural and political advancement.

Another example includes the emergence of regional political parties in Tamil Nadu where the Tamil language serves as the focal point of political activities. The Dravidian movement,

also known for its devotion to the Tamil language and culture, has considerably influenced the politics and social identity of the state. These case studies illustrate that language is not only a means of communication, but also a powerful instrument for socio-political change.

Likewise, the predominance of select languages (primarily Hindi and English) lays waste to regional languages, and by extension, cultural heritage. With concerning global statistics from UNESCO that suggest a language dies every two weeks, and when the languages that are commonly regarded as lesser-spoken in India fade away into oblivion, individuals lose the cultural and linguistic variances and accompanying relationships that create social cohesion and an identity in community, especially those cultures whose culture and social cohesion depend on their language and its associated practice.

The Role of Education in Language Preservation

Education is crucial in protecting linguistic diversity in India. Research on bilingual and multilingual models of education suggest they promote cognitive growth and improve academic achievement. By making local languages a part of education, schools can create value by developing identity, promoting regional languages while giving children the ability to learn the language of the nation and the world. Additionally, literature festivals, such as the Sahitya Akademi and the various state-based literary festivals, promote regional languages and the textual production associated with them with the objective of inspiring younger generations to interact with their linguistic heritage. Such festivals foster the preservation of languages while also stimulating intercultural dialogues that are important to the multicultural society that is India.

Conclusion

In summary, language plays a central and complex role in Indian multiculturalism. India's linguistic diversity is an essential component of its culture, partly by affecting social engagement and partly by providing opportunities for social cohesion, as a source for bringing together peoples that speak different languages. Linguistic challenges remain for the circle of social cohesion described here, particularly, issues of cultural representation and the sustainability of local languages. There is hope for stable progress toward centering multilingualism and cultural pluralism for a stronger social cohesion agenda, grounded and responsive to its diverse peoples. The social interrelationship of language and culture is essential to a shared national identity for its communities. As India wrestles with the complexity of its language environment, it represents a growing community that embraces its

linguistic diversity, and ultimately multiculturalism in a globalized world. It is not an imposition but rather additive to the collective of Indian society.

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