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# Linguistic Nationalism

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VAIBAVI S G<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The multilingual culture of India has affected every aspect of life and had also been an important means for serving the nationalist movement of India, against the British. Although, some may consider the role of language to be minimal, language did prove to be an effective tool against the British during the nationalist movement. The rise of vernacular languages is an important marker in the aid of mass movements. For some leaders, it was the revisiting of historical glory, for some, the radicalization of independence struggle, and for some a matter of identity. Least of all, it definitely was a powerful political tool to fight for the independence of India. We now live in an India that recognizes regional linguistic affinities, that has states demarcated on linguistic lines and that which does not have a single national language. However, the journey till here was not a smooth one. The 1950s and the 60s saw many language debates and controversies and different perspectives. In a period where linguistic identity and conflicts have emerged as an acute problem plaguing the unity of the country, it becomes vital to look into the development of linguistic nationalism as well as linguistic conflicts of India. It is imperative to study whether the linguistic diversity of the country that had once furthered the cause of nationalist ideas, has now become a threat to the unity of nation. The paper endeavours to do the same*

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Linguistic Nationalism, Provincialism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nationalism may refer to the desire or movement of a group of people that promotes the interests of a particular nation (of the people), especially focused on the independence of the nation. It can be said to be the nation's wish and attempt to be politically independent. It is the rise of national consciousness. This sentiment of nationalism may be furthered through various means and language is one of them. This is what is conveyed through the term; linguistic nationalism. As it is understood today, it remains a driving force of politics in our country. However, it also remains to be a double-edged sword. The more you sharpen it, more is the possibility of danger. It can serve as a binding force or a divisive tool at the same time. It all depends on the person handling the sword. Nationalism may be furthered through political,

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cultural, religious or more importantly linguistic identities. Language played an important part by consolidating national identity and furthering the Indian National Movement. There are various aspects to this issue, which demand detailed study.

## **II. LANGUAGES AND THE INDIAN NATIONALIST MOVEMENT**

The Indian Nationalist Movement entailed the task of preserving, consolidating and strengthening India's unity, of constructing a pan-India identity which would foster the development of Indianness. However, this notion of Indian-ness has undergone multiple changes with time. India, in its history of thousands of years, has never held the ideal of a single language territory or what is known as monolingualism. Ancient and medieval kingdoms like Vijayanagara empire, for instance supported many languages including Kannada, Sanskrit and Telugu, even the Nizam of Hyderabad took three language area- Telugu, Marathi and Kanarese to form the kingdom and this multi-lingual culture was also reflected in the course of the Indian National Movement.

In order to understand the role of language nationalism in the Indian context, it is pertinent to study the topic from the perspective of the British as well as the Indian Nationalist leaders. The education policy of the British with the introduction of English and the Language policy of the INC are both important in understanding the role of languages in consolidating a national identity.

### **(A) English education policy**

The differentiated education policy of the Indians – vernaculars for the lower castes and the classical languages for the upper castes made the concept of one language as a common language throughout the country, a very distant possibility. The introduction of English education in India was marked by the initial debate between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. The conflict centred around: 1. Aim or Objective of Education, 2. Content of Education 3. Medium of Instruction, and 4. Agency.

The Orientalists held that the Indians could never master a foreign language and that Sanskrit and Persian literature was the “**source of national imagery and the expression of national feeling.**” The knowledge and literature of classical languages became indicative of Indian-ness for the Orientalists.

On the other side, there was a growing mobilization and need for English education. This was viewed differently by different people. For the Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, it signified the movement towards rationality and Western Science and for the Company it was another

means to ensure control and hegemony. The Anglicists advocated for the introduction of English and Western sciences as the primary objective. Their arguments were mostly based on the lines of Macaulay's minute of Feb 2, 1835. In his minute, he had said:

"I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. *I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education*"<sup>2</sup>.

Macaulay, through English, wanted to create "**a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect**"<sup>3</sup>.

It becomes evident from the above lines, that English education not only meant administrative expediency and convenience for the British, it also signified **superiority** of some sense.

Another aspect worthy of enquiry is of the stand of Christian Missionaries. This is a point where religion intertwined with language to break the existing Indian culture and enforce foreign beliefs. Missionaries used English as a gateway to introduce their beliefs and imagery to the Indians. Not only did they make use of the education policy, they also utilized Vernaculars to reach the most under-represented and under-privileged sections of the society. Gauri Vishwanathan in her book, "*Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*", has argued that since British had pursued a policy of religious neutrality, the Christian missionaries prescribed English Literature with Christian teachings and values. This however, did not please the Indians much, who were deeply attached to their religious beliefs. Eventually, by 1850s there occurred a shift in the British education policy whereby they reverted their stance to secular reading of English Literature<sup>4</sup>. This was largely influenced by the 1857 revolt after which the British did not want to ignite the fears of conversion among the Muslims or Hindus in any way.

Although, the debate ended with the introduction of English as the medium of education, "the British did invest in vernaculars for sheer administrative purposes. For instance, with the

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<sup>2</sup> Macaulay's Minute, (1835).

<sup>3</sup> Macaulay's Minute, (1835).

<sup>4</sup> Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary study and British Rule in India*, (1989).

passing of the Act of 1837, the revenue and judicial administration in the Bengal Presidency was dealt in Bengali, Hindustani and Odia”<sup>5</sup>.

At the outset, it could be easily concluded that the imposition of English over Indian languages did work in dual manner, it not only gave a sense of alienation but also helped Indian leaders to connect to the outer world and extract support. However, it would be highly wrong to say that the political consciousness in India emerged as a result of the imposition of the language as the political agitation against the British had already begun.

### **(B) The Language policy of the Indian National Congress (INC)**

The linguistic nationalism in India took form through two major aspects: (1) one pan- India language or the national language and (2) linguistic division of states. These problems were not only particular to the period of colonial times but also continue to be an important problem faced by nationalist leaders to this day. As substantive efforts by the colonial administration for the linguistic division of provinces had not taken place till 1911, the prospect of linguistic divisions was not considered by the INC too. The relationship of INC and regional political developments changed with times. In the initial years, the INC remained ignorant of the regional linguistic movements because of its potentially divisive nature. The Congress was focused on presenting a united front and hence was selective in its choice of issues. As was said by Gordan Johnson: “It was no good speaking to England with a babble of tongues”<sup>6</sup>. The efforts to make the INC a pan-India organization in a way led to the marginalization of regional matters.

This deliberate avoidance of regional identities was however disrupted with division of Bengal Presidency (1903-192). It is very well acknowledged that the division of Bengal was a wile strategy of the British to break the unity of the Bengalis and eventually undermine the growing political consciousness in the Presidency. **The Congress vehemently criticized the move and the most striking part of its narrative was the usage of the rhetoric of linguistic identity against the partition of Bengal.** It was for them, a separation of “**Hindu Bengali brothers**” from their “**Muslim Bengali brothers**”<sup>7</sup>.

As a result of their agitations against the partition of Bengal and the narrative of linguistic affinity, the Congress had to face broader demands of linguistic identity politics. Here, one can

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<sup>5</sup> Pratipuspa Mishra, *Language and the Making of Modern India Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956*.

<sup>6</sup> Gordan Johnson, *Provincialism and Indian Nationalism; Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880 to 1915, (1973)*.

<sup>7</sup> Pratipuspa Mishra, *Language and the Making of Modern India Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803–1956*.

see the ambivalence of Congress to these demands. They were reluctant in even discussing these issues.

The Congress tried to encourage a common language for the whole country in the form of Hindi, but the political consciousness of regional linguistic identities had grown enough to oppose such enforcement. Interestingly, though advocating for a common language, it also emphasized the vernaculars of the regions. Vernaculars were important tools to educate people, to awaken them, to raise political consciousness and to effectively counter a foreign language. We see how the languages of the nation helped consolidating the national identity and furthering the national movement. They also recognized the fact that INC being a purely national body and their lack of presence in the provinces adversely impacted them by limiting their popularity and following. It is also to be considered that the British had drawn and redrawn the boundaries of the provinces without any thought to cultural or linguistic affinity. Also, from 1919 onwards the mass politics had grown immensely and the Congress began mass mobilization in the mother tongue/ vernaculars. Eventually in 1921, Congress committed itself to reorganizing States on linguistic basis.

By 1950s, India came to be marked by linguistic differences and an Indian as not only as an Indian but also as a bearer of a regional linguistic identity. These differences constitute the national identity and hence, can never be separated. The growth of vernaculars definitely worked for the unity of the nation.

### **III. POST-INDEPENDENCE DYNAMICS**

Since the independence of India, the founding fathers of this nation were committed to ensuring and maintaining the integrity of the nation. While they advocated for an All-India identity, they also took regional considerations into account. We see that the pre-colonial set up and the course of the Indian National Movement had widened the process of nation-in-making, with people assuming a national identity apart from their regional preferences. However, language did pose as a potentially divisive issue in the initial years of the independent nation.

The controversy of language took its vital form as an agitation against Hindi. It had created conflict between the Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi speaking people. Although, our leaders did utilize regional languages for political education, it proved difficult for carrying out the official work of the nation. Therefore, the question was: What would be the official language of India for all India communication?

It invariably was a choice between English and Hindi. Interestingly, the choice had been made by some in the pre-independence era itself. Theirs was Hindi. Leaders like Gandhi and Jawahar

Lal Nehru advocated for Hindi. Gandhi had said English “*has sapped the energy of the nation . . . it has estranged them from the masses . . . The sooner therefore educated India shakes itself free from the hypnotic spell of the foreign medium, the better it would be for them and the people*”<sup>8</sup>. Such was the desire to outcast English.

However, this approach divided the nation into two groups: the pro-Hindi group and the Anti-Hindi group. The issue was also about the timeline of shift from English to Hindi. The pro-Hindi groups wanted immediate shift while the opposers wanted retention of English at least for some time if not for indefinite period. The anti-Hindi groups feared disadvantages in the educational and economic spheres of life. Hence, the Constitution initially “provided that Hindi in Devanagiri Script with international numerals would be India’s official language”<sup>9</sup>. “English was to continue for use in all official purposes till 1965, when it would be replaced by Hindi. Hindi was to be introduced in a phased manner”. After 1965 it would become the sole official language. “However, it also provided for the continuance of English after 1965 for purposes as specified by law”<sup>10</sup>. With time, the Anti-Hindi leaders became less and less open to acceptance and furthered their cause for the indefinite continuance of English.

The 1956 report of the Official Languages Commission recommended that Hindi should start progressively replacing English in various functions of the central government with effective change taking place in 1965. “Added to this was the order of the President in April 1960 (Hindi being the principal official language and English as associate official language)”<sup>11</sup>. In order to accommodate the grievances of the non-Hindi speakers, the Official Languages Act was passed in 1963. This Act was aimed at removing the prescribed restriction on the continuance of English in the form of the timeline, namely 1965<sup>12</sup>. However, this act did not serve its purpose effectively. That was still not considered as a strong assurance. As 26 January neared, apprehensions gripped the minds of the non-Hindi speakers. It ultimately took the form of a wide spread agitation. Owing to these reasons and others, the parliament amended the Official Languages Act of 1963 in 1967. “It provided that use of English in addition to Hindi for the official work would continue as long as the non-Hindi states want it, giving them full veto powers on the matter”<sup>13</sup>.

The episode of Anti-Hindi agitations teaches us an important lesson: the lesson of tolerance,

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<sup>8</sup> Gandhi, CWMG, Vol.37, p.22.

<sup>9</sup> India Const. art. 343.

<sup>10</sup> India Const. art. 343, cl. 3(a).

<sup>11</sup> Bipin Chandra, India after Independence (1947-2000).

<sup>12</sup> Official Languages Act, 1965.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

acceptance and positivity. The distinctive feature of our country lies in positive tolerance and acceptance of differences and we must protect this. The amendment of the Act and the position taken by our former politicians could have been due to political reasons, but it was very much needed to ensure equal opportunities to all and assure the non-Hindi speakers.

#### IV. THE LINGUISTIC DIVISION OF STATES

As already mentioned in the previous section, the provinces of British India were drawn in a haphazard manner without taking into account the regional/ linguistic affinity of the people. There was also the aspect of administrative expediency. Linguistic divisions represented cultural revivalism. Besides, the national movement had demonstrated that mass education could only be possible through vernacular means. But there were diverse opinions within the Congress and the leadership as to the linguistic divisions of state. There were apprehensions of states growing into hegemonic power centres based on language and would ultimately work for regional considerations, side-lining the national requirements.

The Government appointed S.K. Dhar commission to look into this matter but its recommendations were not considered. Leaders were still apprehensive. The same position was echoed by Nehru, even as late as 1952 when he argued that:

***“I have been overburdened with the thought that we must give the topmost priority to the development of a sense of unity in India because these are critical days. Any decision that might come in the way of that unity should be delayed till we have laid a strong foundation for it. The idea of linguistic provinces will intensify provincial feelings and that, undoubtedly will weaken the concept of a unified India”***.<sup>14</sup>

The history of India changed in 1952 when “a popular freedom fighter, Patti Sriramalu, undertook a fast unto death over the demand for a separate Andhra and expired after fifty-eight days. Intense riots and agitations followed his death and resulted in the formation of a separate state of Andhra Pradesh in October 1953.” The success story of Telugu speakers inspired other linguistic groups to voice their concerns. Eventually, conceding to the demands of the votaries of linguistic states, the government set up the States Reorganization Commission (SRC) in 1953. Accordingly, the “*States Reorganisation Act*”<sup>15</sup> was passed by parliament in November 1956. However, that was not the end of reorganisation of states in the country as different states continued to form even after the act. After years of Independence, we as citizens of this country can easily make out that the linguistic organization of the states has definitely provided for the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (1997), p.15.

<sup>15</sup> States Reorganisation Act, 1956.

integrity of the nation by considering the regional grievances and has not necessarily been a divisive mechanism.

## V. MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

### (A) Gandhi

Gandhi advocated for a common language for Indians, even before he had come to India. He spoke about the language of popularity and political agitations. He thought of a language that would make English redundant. Owing to his works in the multi-cultural and multi-lingual community in Africa, he had observed that Indian communities in South Africa, used a common language (Hindustani) among themselves even though their mother tongues were different. This popularity of Hindustani was promoted by Gandhi. He espoused the notion of “Swadeshi” in every sense. His commitment to a common language and the regional languages can be seen in the following statement made by him as a member of the second South African Delegation:

*“from the point of view of language before we can call 'our country' our own, it is necessary that there should be born in our hearts a love and respect for our languages ..... One sometimes also hears suggestions that something should be done so that all Indians are able to express themselves to each other in a common language. This is a possibility for the future. Everybody will agree that this language should be Indian in origin. But this step is for the future. We should begin to be proud of being born Indians and similarly we should also be proud of having been born Gujaratis [Gandhi was writing in Gujarati to a Gujarati audience]..... It is necessary for the people of one province to learn the languages of other provinces as well ... Those who have to serve their country and do public work will have to find time for their mother tongue.”<sup>16</sup>*

He argued that, education should be imparted in the regional mother tongues, while national politics be conducted in a common Indian language namely, Hindustani. This dual commitment to regional languages and a common national language baffled many leaders of the time. However, for Gandhi there was no conflict between mother tongues and development of a national language. He tried to justify this dichotomy with his notion of “*Thekaana*”, which insisted on the “proper place” of language. Once Gandhi said to his Malayali audience: “Each is good in its own place and will serve its purpose accordingly. May I illustrate this point? Malayalam in the Punjab is useless and so is English for a Punjabi farmer. But if you speak to

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<sup>16</sup> C.D. Deshmukh, *Hindustani: Rashtra Bhasha or Lingua-franca?* (1972).

the Punjabi in Hindi, e.g., ‘Salamalikum,’ he will smile at you and will say, ‘I know hm’.”<sup>17</sup>

He tried to emphasize regional languages though advocating for a national language at the same time.

### **(B) C. Rajagopalachari**

*“I want true emotional integration based on goodwill and a sense of justice done and not an illusory paper unity based on an official language imposed by enactment.”*

Chakravarti Rajagopalachari was an eminent politician, freedom fighter, statesman and a lawyer. He was the last Governor-General of India. He was also the one to be extensively associated with linguistic nationalism in India. Prior to understanding his stance on the issue, it is to be understood that the position of Rajaji changed with time.

With the 1937 elections, “Congress Party came to power in the Madras Presidency and C Rajagopalachari became the Premier of the Madras Presidency. One of the first and notable actions of the period was the introduction of Hindi as a compulsory language in primary schools. This move of the administration was received with mass agitation by Tamil groups in the province”. Soon after independence, the dynamics changed. As has been already discussed, the government of India had adopted Hindi as the country’s official language but had allowed a 15-year transition time for the non-Hindi areas by making a provision for English. As the deadline of 26 January neared, there were violent anti-Hindi protests from the non-Hindi speaking states. It was during this stage that Rajagopalachari reversed his stand of supporting Hindi.

He wrote much about the irrelevance of Xenophobia and how it could be detrimental to the cause of the nation. He unequivocally condemned the baseless opposition to English and rightly pointed out the fact that English was not the only foreign character in the Indian milieu. The whole administrative or parliamentary procedure was also English or foreign in character. Thus, the argument solely based on foreign-ness of English of Hindi votaries stood defeated. He also highlighted the advantages associated with English and how the removal of English can have serious effects on the lives of people:

*“ If the process of modernization is to go on without deteriorating into shoddy imitation, it is necessary to maintain intimate contact with the progressive West and for this purpose it is necessary to maintain unimpaired the study of English language and literature. No one with a sense of realism would deny the intimate connection between educational incentive and the*

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<sup>17</sup> Gandhi, CWMG.

*opportunities offered in the public service. The position that the study of English occupies at present in India is responsible, in the most direct sense, for such all-round progress as we have made. If this position is adversely affected as a result of any policy that we adopt, the consequence will be a distinct deterioration in national progress.”*<sup>18</sup>

His apprehension seems to have come true in the current times. At a time when English has invariably become the lingua-franca of the world, it is hard to even imagine what would have been the position of Indians had English been removed completely. It needs no more emphasis.

His argument was not focused on whether the adoption of Hindi would harm other languages, his contention was the inevitable suffering of non-Hindi speakers with the adoption of Hindi.

He rightly objected to the claim of Hindi being connective link among different languages. Hindi may connect the people of certain regions but would definitely fail in certain other parts of the country, namely the Southern India. Also, the notion of Hindi being the language of the mass and Hindi protagonists as the friends of the unprivileged sections is highly wrong. It is gravely wrong to assume that the voice of protests against the imposition of Hindi comes from only the elite and educated class. He aptly comments:

*“The argument is reduced to a cruel joke and an unreality in the non-Hindi areas where the masses are as ignorant of Hindi as the educated classes..... When the Hindi protagonists are speaking of the masses they are obviously thinking of the masses of the Hindi area only; they ignore the masses in non-Hindi India who are no less in number.”*<sup>19</sup>

Rajagopalachari was a true proponent of unity who had the courage to question, the foresight to caution, and the leverage to understand the undercurrents of such policy.

## **VI. STATUS QUO: HAS LINGUISTIC IDENTITY UNDERMINED NATIONAL UNITY?**

Homogenization of India's culture is impossible and the same should never be attempted. Occasionally, the nation erupts in rage over issues based on linguistic identity. The issue of language being still relevant after years of independence is worthy of inquiry. More often than not, conflict between states culminate in a bitter feud based on language. It may be because of other issues but have high probabilities of turning into a language-based conflict. There are contradicting opinions on whether the recognition of linguistic affinity has rendered negative results.

The imposition of Hindi has no doubt united the southerners against Hindi but the states often

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<sup>18</sup> Irfan Habib, Indian Nationalism- The Essential Writings, p. 201.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

find themselves engaged in conflicts over issues that prompts me to question:

Has linguistic identity or division of states fostered the idea of linguistic chauvinism or provincialism and undermined the unity of the nation?

This can be understood by examining the case of Karnataka for instance. Recently the Karnataka government became the object of intense criticism over its decision of setting up the Maratha Development Authority in 2020. There has always been skirmishes between Maharashtra and Karnataka over boundaries and this came as a new topic of conflict. Both the states have been involved in intense confrontation over Belagavi and certain other places, with Maharashtra claiming them to be included in its boundaries. The issue resurfaces every now and then. In 2019, bus services from Kolhapur district in Maharashtra to Karnataka were suspended, the screening of a Kannada movie in Maharashtra was stopped, the effigies of leaders were burnt and the boards which had names of restaurants written in Kannada were blackened. This is not particular to this case only it is the situation everywhere when two identities are in conflict. Also, the river disputes between Karnataka and other states often take linguistic form wherein the language acts as the prime contender.

The case of Karnataka is quite different from other states of southern India as there was never a Karnataka nationalist movement. Unlike Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, its cosmopolitan structure proves an obstacle for unifying Kannada nationalistic sentiments. There has also been a lack of dedicated political action for any such Kannada-centric movement.

However, this does not necessarily mean that two identities cannot be in conflict. It clearly shows that division of states has invariably led to the consolidation of regional identities. But these identities should be accompanied by national affinity. In no circumstance can we compromise on one for another. It is the political structure that gives shape to such conflicts most of the time. **In the cross-fire of politics, it is the unity that suffers.**

If a regional sentiment lacks political representation, it more or less results in no substantial change. Hence, it is to be understood that it is political undercurrents that play an important part in shaping such disputes. Unity of the nation is definitely not threatened by addressing linguistic demands or linguistic division of states, but by not recognizing the differences.

Likewise, the imposition of Hindi would do no good to the unity, if greater unity is the need of the hour.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The introduction of English and the proclivity of national leaders towards Hindi are two main

factors in this whole debate concerning language identity. English albeit, being useful and appealing for certain reasons, was at the same time un-appealing or rather unacceptable for certain other factors. Indian Nationalist leaders were determinant in using everything “Swadeshi” and advocated for boycotting everything foreign, from clothes to language. Realizing the practicality and effectiveness of Indian vernaculars, the Indian National leaders proposed educating the mass via these vernaculars in order to inculcate political consciousness as has been discussed in the paper. This however, should not be mistaken as a move towards recognising linguistic identities of India, because the nationalist leaders and the INC advocated for a common pan Indian language (in the form of Hindi) for years and desisted attempts to recognize demands for linguistic division of states. Post-independence the dynamics changed and so did the approach of regional leaders. The demand for division of states and addressal of linguistic issues strengthened over time. To quote B.R. Ambedkar, “*genius of India is to divide*”.<sup>20</sup> Although, the genius of India may lie in division as claimed, if gone unchecked it may lead us to a precipice of yet another rupture like the division of 1947 (given that separatist elements like Khalistanis and exponents of Dravidistan already exist). There always lies a threat of provincialism. Here comes the enigmatic aspect of this topic; on one hand, if too much emphasis is paid on linguistic demands the nation may have to run the risk of provincialism yet on the other hand, the addressal and acknowledgement of diversity appears to be the only means to ensure unity. Also, as the case of Karnataka showed, it is the political will and interests that shape most of the inter-state conflicts.

The solution is to handle linguistic issues with prudence, empathy and far-sightedness. There is a need to create empathy, understanding and solidarity among speakers of different languages. This however, is not a happy chance but requires years of dedicated service and activism not only by the political ranks but also by commoners.

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<sup>20</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Printing Press, 1955), pg. 11