

University of Madras
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Multilingualism in Indian Administration
Keynote Address
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Mr. Chairman, Justice Rajan, Prof. Ramasamy, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I deem it a matter of great privilege to participate in this seminar and deliver the keynote address. I may, on this occasion, inform the members of the audience that within the four walls of this small hall and under the auspicious of this humble seminar, **we are really initiating today a discussion on a subject that is of vital importance to the languages of India and ultimately to the future of the nation itself – in terms of its unity and stability. This observation, is no exaggeration.**

The Socialist Secular Democratic Republic of India, which is a Union of States, is really a unique example and perhaps a unique experiment in nation building. We do not have today, anywhere in this world, a secular democratic republic, consisting of States, each of which represents a large population, having behind it a proud past history and also a language with great literary, philosophic and spiritual heritage. The only nation that was somewhat comparable, was the erstwhile soviet union and that does not exist today. India, therefore, is the only democracy in the world, consisting of States, comprising people who are so large in number, so varied in past history, so rich in their heritage, and so proud of their language and – yet having a commonality of culture and civilization.

People who, remained fragmented and lived as individual kingdoms within the sub continent were brought and held together as one nation under a foreign rule, and they had to decide on their own to live and work together as one nation when the external compulsion disappeared. **The monumental exercise in forging a new nation was done through the Constituent Assembly.** Among

the many problems that were discussed and settled in the Constituent. Assembly, the most controversial one was the question of a common language. **Whatever decision was taken, on this issue of language, was not something that was to the full satisfaction of everyone concerned. It was not even a case of a compromise leaving behind a happy sense of reconciliation and consensus; it was acceptance with reservation; with a sense of inevitability.**

In the constitution we find only the following articles that are important.

343. Official Language of the Union

(i) The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script.

The form of numerals to be used for the official purposes of the Union shall be the international form of Indian numerals.

(2) Notwithstanding anything in clause (1), for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement:

Provided that the President may, during the said period, by order authorize the use of the Hindi language in addition to the English language and of the Devanagari form of numerals in addition to the international form of Indian numerals for any of the official purposes of the Union.

(3) Notwithstanding anything in this article, Parliament may by law provide for the use, after the said period of fifteen years, of –

(a) the English language, or

(b) the Devanagari form of numerals,

for such purposes as may be specified in the law.

345. Official Language or Languages of a State

Subject to the provisions of Articles 346 and 347, the Legislature of a state may by law adopt anyone or more of the languages in use in the State or Hindi as the language or languages to be used for all or any of the official purposes of the State:

Provided that, until the Legislature of the State otherwise provides by law, the English language shall continue to be used for those official purposes within the State for which it was being used immediately before the commencement of this Constitution.

A review of the proceedings would show that some of the Hindi enthusiasts, from the Hindi belt did not even want to mention in the constitution the names of other languages of the country. It was due to the leadership of such great statesman as Nehru that reference has been made in Art 345 to the Regional Languages and their uses in the concerned States.

We are aware that the use of English as an official language is for fifteen years, and provision has been made in the constitution, for the transition from English and Hindi to Hindi alone as the official language. The following steps have been taken in accordance with the provisions in the constitution;

- i. The President appointed an **Official Language Commission** on 07.06.1955 with B.G. Kher as Chairman and 20 other members. The Commission submitted its report on 06.08.1956.
- ii. The President appointed a Committee of 30 members – 20 from Lok Sabha and 10 from Rajya Sabha – under the chairmanship of G.B. Pant to examine the recommendations of the Official Language Commission. The Committee submitted its report on 08.02.1959.
- iii. After examining the recommendation of **the Committee of Parliament on Official Language**, the President issued an order on 27.04.1960. The President in his order had broadly accepted the recommendations of the Committee, but had not specified any deadline for the switchover to Hindi.
- iv. The **Official Language Act** passed by the Parliament received the assent of the President on 10.05.1963.

All the debates concerning the problem of languages in India, after the adoption of the constitution, were concentrated on the continuance of English

beyond 1965. There have been a number of meetings of the congress party in which the continuance or otherwise of English language in addition to Hindi was debated. The most important one was the meeting of the All India Congress Committee held in Gauhati, Assam on 19.01.1958. The important part of the resolution in the Congress Session is as follows:

“Provision may be made for the use of the English language after the fixed period in the manner prescribed in article 343, section (3) of the Constitution.”

We are also aware of the fact that there had been strong and persistent demands from non Hindi states, especially southern states, for the continuance of English beyond 1965, There were also persons like the elder statesman C.Rajagopalacharai who argued that English should permanently continue as the official language of India.

The debate in a way came to some sort of an end by an assurance given by Pandit Jawarhlal Nehru in the parliament that English would continue as an additional official language as long as the non Hindi states would want such continuance: The assurance given by Nehru in the Parliament on 07.08.1959 is as follows:

“English will continue as an associate language and I would not take it away till I was asked to take it away by the non-Hindi-speaking areas”.

It was only an assurance by way of a statement of the Prime Minister in the Parliament and it had no statutory guarantee as such. The real worth or the worthlessness of this commitment can be judged from the fact that it was thrown to the winds by the very first Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri who succeeded Nehru and was supposed to be the greatest admirer and almost the disciple of Nehru.

There has been a long history of struggle which resulted in the continuance of English in practice but there is no statutory guarantee, whatsoever, for the continuance of English.

Now I come to the main question. All the debates and discussions from the time of appointment of the Official Language Commission, as mentioned earlier,

were concentrated on the continuance of English as an additional official language of India besides Hindi. There was no significant discussion, whatsoever, regarding the use of the Regional Languages in the offices that come under the direct jurisdiction of the Government of India. It appears, as though, that as far as the Central Government is concerned, Hindi would be used for all practical purposes and in all places where English was used under the British regime. **In other words, at the national level Hindi replaces English and the language of the Government of India will be Hindi.**

We are aware that we have in India a strong and dominant Central Government and the State Governments are no more than major panchayats in the Union. The use of the Regional Languages therefore, will be reduced to the offices of the State Governments for purposes within the concern States only and Regional Languages will have no part to play in any of the administrative aspects of the offices of the Government of India, even within the State.

You must remember that the Government of India does not exist in Delhi alone. The influence of the Government of India and its offices are pervasive in the country like the nervous system in a human body.

We have numerous and powerful offices of the Government of India, located in all the states. We have the railways running through the length and breadth of the country. We have banks that have branches even in villages. We have offices that deal with Income Tax, Insurance, Passport, Import and Export, National Highways, Airways, Shipping, Post and Telegraph Offices, High Courts and other Central Government offices in the states. The Regional Languages, that is to say the language of the people in non-Hindi states, have no part to play in the functioning of all these offices i.e., in the functioning of the Government of India.

I request the members of the audience to kindly contemplate for a moment and try to visualise what this really means in terms of the languages of India. The grim fact emerges that the country, for all practical purposes, will be administered by Hindi and the use of the regional language will be restricted to limited uses even within its own state. Even in such important field as education all the Government of India Research Institutes, Central Universities, Institutes of National Importance,

all of which will be among the most prestigious. Centres of learning and research will be only in Hindi.

One can witness this from the fact that the tickets for trains which are used by persons who do not know even their mother tongue are issued only in Hindi and English. I remember very well that as a high school student. I have bought train tickets in Tamil right under the foreign Government, but now even in the smallest railway station handled by one single all purpose Station Master the ticket is issued only in Hindi and English. You have banks to-day in the nook and corner of the country. If you look into the cheque books, you will find only English and Hindi.

If I travel from London to Chennai, in an aircraft of the British Airways, I find when it takes off at Heathrow Airport or when it takes off at Chennai Airport, an announcement is made in Tamil, the reason being that in Chennai bound plane, or at Chennai, there would be a large number of Tamils as passengers and the announcement is meant, not for the crew, but for the passengers. Similarly, if you fly from Stuttgart in Germany to Chennai in a Lufthansa Aircraft you will hear announcement in Tamil. I don't think that I need make mention about planes from Malaysia, Srilanka and Singapore. But in the flights from Chennai to Madurai or Chennai to Trichy, or for that matter in any flight even within Tamil nadu, all the announcements are in Hindi and English. If I buy an Inland letter for posting I am supposed to know English or Hindi in order to find out, where and how to fold it and where to paste it.

The parliament of India is the parliament of the people. It is the parliament of my country. As a citizen of India, and as one among 65 million Tamils, I am entitled to have the Acts and Bills passed by the parliament in the language that I understand. By no stretch of logic in a democratic country, can you say that, notwithstanding the fact that, 65 million people of the country speak your language, you can read and understand the Act passed by your own parliament only if you know English or Hindi.

When you look at the functioning of the offices of the Government of India within your own state, you start wondering whether you really have a Government of your own at Delhi. It is impossible in the whole world to find an example of a

free country where the people are ruled by a language that they do not know; that they do not understand, that is not their own.

You will also find that all the autonomous institutions and industrial concerns of the Government of India function in English and Hindi. All the major and medium private industries, Indian or foreign, function only in English to-day and that will be in Hindi tomorrow.

The continuance of English does not affect Hindi adversely since there is a powerful parliamentary Committee which ensures the use of Hindi in parallel.

Some may raise the question, whether it is possible for the Government to print Forms, Acts, Bills and Reports in all the national Languages. If you want that 1100 million people, speaking 22 languages, to come under the flag of one nation, you have to necessarily meet their minimum, legitimate requirements. You must remember that each regional language is spoken by a population whose strength is more than the population of many of the countries of the world. If I take Tamilnadu the population is more than 65 million. i.e., more than the population of Great Britain [with 60 million,] a country that has a Parliament of its own; an Army, a Navy, an Air force and Embassies all over the world. **Of the 222 countries of the world, only eighteen have a population, more than the State of Tamil Nadu. Is it difficult for such a State to be given the privilege of being administered in its own language in addition to English and Hindi.** For a country like India, is a combination of 3 languages too many. Our own neighbour, Srilanka, with a population of 21 million has three official languages, Singapore which is only a city state with a population of 4.6 million has four official languages. In Europe, there are a number of countries having, as their citizens, people with different mother tongues. All their Languages are made official Languages even in such small countries as Belgium and Switzerland.

Is it too much for a population of 65 million people to expect the following within their one state in addition to Hindi and English.

- The tickets for the trains within the state are in their language

- The cheque book, the post card, the inland letter, the numerous forms and their accounts in the Post Offices are in their own language also.
- The offices, of their Central Government in their own State will function in the Language that they will understand, i.e., their own language.
- Their language has the status of the language of their Government, at least, within their own state.

On October 7 and 8, 2003 I wrote an article in **Dinamani** pointing out the kind of totally unacceptable condition that exists in the use of Regional Languages in India. In response to this article Thiru. N. Varadharajan, State Secretary of the Communist party of India (Marxist) sent me a copy of the language policy of his party. It reads as follows:

“Equality of all national languages in parliament and **Central Administration** shall be recognised. Members of Parliament will have the right to speak in their own national language and simultaneous translation will have to be provided in all other languages. All Acts, government orders and resolutions shall be made available in all national languages. The use of Hindi as the sole official language to the exclusion of all other languages shall not be made obligatory. It is only by providing equality to the various languages that it can be made acceptable as the language of communication throughout the country. Till then, the present arrangement of the use of Hindi and English will continue. The right of the people to receive instruction in their mother tongue in educational institutions upto the highest level shall be ensured. The use of the language of the particular linguistic state as the language of administration in all its public and State institutions shall also be ensured. Provision for the use of the language of the minority or, minorities or, of a region where necessary in addition to the language of the state shall be made. The Urdu language and its script shall be protected.”

Government of India appointed a commission under the title: **Commission on Centre State Relations** under the Chairmanship of Justice S.S. Sarkaria with Thiru. B. Sivaraman and Dr. S.R. Sen as members. The commission in its report of 1988 has made the following recommendation regarding the use of what it calls the local language. It is unfortunate that the national languages of the States, some of which have more than a millennium of history and literature of International standing, have come to be referred to as mere local languages, However, the recommendation of the Sarakaria Commission is as follows:

“The work of the Government, which involves or affects the local people, obviously must be carried on in the local language. This is even more important in a welfare State. It is necessary that all the forms, applications, letters, bills, notices, etc, are available in the local language as well as the official language. This is of particular relevance to the various departments of the Union Government as often this important aspect is lost sight of in a bid to bring about a mindless uniformity. It is equally; relevant in the case of State Governments also. In many of the States sizeable linguistic minorities are concentrated in certain areas. Unfortunately, overzealous action like painting road signs or issuing public notices only in Hindi or in State language, issuing municipal bills (even in the national capital) only in Hindi and retaliatory action in local language in some State capitals, increased bitterness.”

It's a commission appointed by the Government of India, It appears that the Government of India have not accepted the recommendation of the Commission as far as we can judge from the practice that is followed by the Government of India. It is an extremely modest requirement to be satisfied. The Government of India must have accepted it for planned implementation – but it has not been, so far accepted and implemented.

It appears that the Government of India, have a policy, well settled, that they will implement any good, legitimate suggestion, and inevitable

requirement, only after a demand is made, agitation is started, unrest is created and a few are made heroes.

It must be pointed out that the occasional use of the state language in some forms or publications on the basis of the personal decision of an officer, or even the minister in charge at a particular time, is of no consequence. The use of Regional Language must be a statutory requirement.

We are not sure as to what would be the situation, if at any time in accordance with the constitution, the country decides to use only Hindi as the official language, of Indian Administration. **If the present practice of restricting the use of the Regional Languages strictly to the functioning of the state Governments only continues, I can say without any hesitation that before the end of this century, all the Regional Languages will be reduced to – what the British used to call the Indian languages, - vernaculars. i.e. dialects.** I believe that we did not fight against the British and gain freedom, to leave an unenviable legacy to posterity. We inherited an ancient literary language which is now modern and vibrant. It is now going through a process of devaluation and our great grandchildren will only inherit a dialect.

I am aware of the fact that there are political parties which have been demanding that all the Indian languages mentioned in the 8th schedule of the constitution must be made official languages. It remains only as a demand from certain limited quarters of the country, essentially in the party policies. I am not able to anticipate the future prospect of this category of demand which requires constitutional amendment.

It is my considered view that the language reform that is absolutely necessary we would like to advocate may consist of two stages outlined below;

1. Stage 1

Use of Regional Languages in Indian Administration – on the basis of the orders of the Government of India or a resolution in the Parliament.

2. Stage 2.

Use of Regional Languages in Indian Administration that may require constitutional amendment.

As far as this seminar is concerned, we may make the following recommendations for urgent reform. In addition to English and Hindi as official languages, the Government of India must meet the following requirements.

1. Must use in each State, the official language of the State in all the offices of Government of India without exception.
2. Must make provision for the simultaneous translation of the speeches in the parliament in all the languages of India, listed in Schedule VIII of the constitution.
3. Must ensure that all the Acts that are introduced, for discussion must be available in all the Regional Languages of India.
4. All the Reports and Journals published by the Government of India, in any of its Ministries, Autonomous Organisation that are issued in Hindi, must also be available in translation, in all the Regional Languages.
5. The Government of India have an institution for the development of Hindi. Similar institution for each Regional Language or a major institution with a full fledged department for each Regional Language, including Hindi, must be established.
6. The Government of India, must initiate a programme of recruiting, educating and training translators in each Regional Language, so that quality of language is assured in any translation including the parliamentary proceedings.

I am of the opinion that these steps do not need constitutional amendment. The recommendations made can be implemented through orders of the Government of India or through an appropriate resolution in the Parliament.