
***Beyond Linguistic Boundaries: The Evolution of India's
Federal Democracy from Ambedkar to Globalization***

*Lakshmi Naina Reddy, Suhani S Kumar & Mrinalini Sahu, 4th Year
Law Students at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat.*

Abstract

This research paper appraises India's linguistic federalism focusing on its constitutional origins and as an endeavor to balance cultural diversity with national unity. This paper traces the evolution of linguistic federalism through exploring the historical development. The progression goes beyond Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's original "one-state-one-language" principle. Research suggests that practical applications of state formations like Telangana and Jharkhand depict several limitations of linguistic federalism and the importance of superseding economic and political factors. The comparative analysis with Canada and Belgium provides alternative federal models and implications for India. Linguistic federalism's major challenges include administrative inefficiencies, economic disparities and the dominance of the English language. The contention is that while linguistic federalism has attempted to preserve India's multilingual culture, the existence of several limitations and tensions surpass its aim. The paper concludes that India's future lies in adaptive federalism that goes beyond traditional linguistic boundaries.

I. Introduction

Federalism is a mode of political organization that unites separate states or other policies within an overarching political system in a way that allows each to maintain its own integrity¹. Linguistic federalism in India creates a constitutional innovation where language serves as an administrative tool and protects cultural autonomy. It is different from traditional federal structures which are solely based on territorial or political considerations. In India, this system links language to governance in a unique way by creating and recognizing rights. This framework lets the states choose their lingual identity and the constitution ensures that such autonomy does not disrupt national unity. This research paper analyzes linguistic federalism in India post independence across five sub-parts. The first two parts explore linguistic policies from scholarly perspectives, analyzing constitutional debates and Ambedkar's views on the same. The third part dwells upon the practicality of the model, comparing India with other federal nations. Further, Fourth part remarks on the key criticism and challenges in times of globalization and economic disparities, which have further complicated the model.

II. Historical Context and Theoretical Framework of Linguistic Federalism

The establishment of the Dominion of India in 1947 comprised 565 princely states and 27 states within its territory wherein the internal borders between states did not reflect cultural or linguistic division, rather established on the grounds of administrative convenience under colonial rule.² After Independence, the Congress party feared that dividing states on linguistic grounds would undermine national unity and hinder the creation of a powerful central government during a fragile period.³ They suggested postponing such debates until priority concerns, like holding national elections, creating the constitution, and resolution of Kashmir conflict, were all addressed⁴.

¹ The editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Federalism', *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/federalism>>.

² Jack Greenberg, "Linguistic Reorganization and Indian Federalism: The Cases of Andhra Pradesh and Punjab" *Synergy: The Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies* (2021).

³ Id.

⁴ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi* 191 (Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2007).

India's long history showcases a rich tapestry of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. From 3000 B.C. until the 8th century, it remained relatively isolated. Subsequently, India was ruled by the Mughals which included Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Afghans followed by British rule for nearly two centuries, which introduced Islam, Persians, old Turkish influences, British English, and significant westernization. These historical shifts contributed to India's remarkable diversity.⁵

When drafting the Constitution⁶ for newly Independent India, the drafters considered these factors of diversity. The concept of federalism emerged, examining the relationship between the union like the country as whole and distinct administrative units like states. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, key member of the drafting committee, through his interventions in the Constituent Assembly debates redefined the nature of federalism that India had to adopt to uphold democratic principles. He advocated for a model of linguistic federalism with the principle that there should be 'one-state-one-language' and not 'one-language-one-state'. This rule remains enshrined in India's Constitution.

However, the ongoing debate whether to impose a single national language is crucial for understanding the structure of linguistic federalism in India. Ambedkar, in his writings of "Thoughts on Linguistic States" published in 1955⁷, cautioned against solving linguistic issues through "hooliganism" or party interests, emphasizing the need for rational discourse, as he called it the "cold blooded reasoning". "One-state-one-language" is a universal rule that many States' constitutions examined, from Germany, France, Italy to the constitutions of England and U.S.A⁸. As Ambedkar examines this rule, he embarks onto a space where moving away from this rule would only be a disastrous situation for a State. We see a diverse country like India, cannot escape this fate of surviving with multilingual States if it continues to be, as coined by Ambedkar in his writings— "a congerie of mixed states". He continued discussing in his writings of "Thoughts on Linguistic States" that a multilingual State would be unstable

⁵ Mustafa Delican, "The Language Policy of India" (2019).

⁶ The Constitution of India.

⁷ Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, *Thoughts on Linguistic States* 6-8 (1955).

⁸ Id.

as it would lack the “fellow-feeling of kin and kith” which is seen as a double-edged feeling wherein fellowship follows if they are their kin and kith and anti-fellowship follows if they’re not their kin and kith, hence, “it is a longing not to belong to any other group”. Two reasons mentioned by Ambedkar in response to why we should have “one State, one language”: first, democracy will be dysfunctional without the presence of fellow-feeling and solidarity. He mentions democracy would fail in a mixed state where faction would invite more discrimination which will challenge the core values of democracy. The second reason, he gives, is that the rule is the only solvent to racial and cultural conflicts. He cited the animosity between Maharashtrians and Gujaratis as an example, attributing it not to inherent antipathy but to their forced interactions with a shared administrative framework, like the government. He further mentions this can cause wars if these two distinct linguistic states are under the roof of administrations serving needs of only one faction. Ambedkar strongly believed in a dire need to remove racial and cultural tension between multilingual states.

Ambedkar was unequivocal in his stance against making regional language as official language of the State, arguing that such a move would foster division and factionalism. He posited that if Hindi and English were not accepted as the nation’s official languages, India would fragment into rival nationalities, leading to conflict. He warned that this would be “a death knell to the idea of a United India”⁹

Hence, the Indian federation held the idea of “Westminster Model” which aims to unify constituent units despite their diverse nature, culture, language, and identity backgrounds. India’s linguistic federalism exemplifies the democratic strength. The language policy was much debated and included accordingly in the drafting of the Constitution. Upholding Article 3 of the Constitution¹⁰, the States Reorganisation Act of 1956¹¹ transformed linguistic diversity from a potential division into national cohesion. The Article 351¹², though promoting Hindi, has faced debates and resistance from non-Hindi speaking regions of India.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ The Constitution of India, art. 3.

¹¹ The States Reorganisation Act 1956 (Act 37 of 1956).

¹² The Constitution of India, art. 351.

The practical solution regarding this problem was having English as a bridge-language in official settings for non-Hindi speakers, making Hindi and English as official languages of India under Article 343¹³. Additionally, Articles 29¹⁴ and Article 30¹⁵ protect minority languages, yet smaller communities continue struggling for recognition and access to resources, with UNESCO identifying 197 endangered languages. The 8th schedule of the Indian constitution¹⁶ recognizes only 22 official languages based on the 1971 census where the government declared that any language spoken by less than 1000 people cannot be included in the official language list.

Considering the above tenets of federalism and examining the theoretical framework, we can now turn to see how these principles have been manifested in practice.

III. Practical Applications of Linguistic Federalism in India

Linguistic federalism stemmed from the concept that a regional community is formed when people share a common language they develop cultural traditions, local myths, and political interests¹⁷. This led to the view that language played a central role in constituting these communities. States were formed coalescing many sub-regional identities within the sphere of their respective dominant languages in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka, etc.¹⁸ Time however has evidenced language cannot be the sole criterion for social cohesion¹⁹. Several aspects such as administrative competence, economics, politics, geography, and history, etc. have evolved the Indian federation in complex ways.

¹³ The Constitution of India, art. 343.

¹⁴ The Constitution of India, art. 29.

¹⁵ The Constitution of India, art. 30.

¹⁶ The Constitution of India, Eighth Schedule.

¹⁷ Ajay Kumar Singh, "Federalism and State Formation" in B.D. Dua and M.P. Singh (eds.), *Indian Federalism in the New Millennium* 87 (Manohar, 2003).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 103.

¹⁹ "Reorganisation or Fragmentation?" 5 *Economic and Political Weekly* 1981, 1982 (1970).

Ajit Singh²⁰ identified four principles on which state formation could take place:

- administrative convenience
- similarity in developmental needs
- economic viability
- cultural or linguistic affinity

He stated language was not considered as a sole criterion for reorganization. This theory arose during the creation of states of Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal, and Jharkhand which was driven more by immediate electoral politics than to assign regions the power of self-governance to strengthen federalism²¹. Jharkhand's formation led to a decline in Bihar's economic viability, while Chhattisgarh and Uttaranchal struggled to develop self-sustaining economies.²² There was no straightjacket formula that was followed regardless of the proposed principles. Reiterating these states' were formed on the basis of economic specificity and ecological-cultural distinctness²³ and linguistic lines were not a relevant prerequisite for the states of the Hindi heartland.

Initially language and social distinctiveness were critical in formation of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Assam²⁴. Demands for statehood varied leading to the formation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura involved ethnic and economic considerations, while religion, script, and sentiments influenced the creation of Haryana and Punjab.²⁵

Telangana's formation is one of the most controversial that identified the people's history distinct from the Telugu-speaking community in Andhra Pradesh, fueled by economic and political marginalization rather than linguistic identity. Initially the Congress, the TDP, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India declared their support for a separate Telangana only to secure their vote banks but not pay heed to the hardships of community at

²⁰ Singh, *supra* note 17, at 103.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 100.

²³ *Id.* at 102.

²⁴ Iqbal Narain, "Cultural Pluralism, National Integration and Democracy in India" 16 *Asian Survey* 903, 906 (1976).

²⁵ *Id.*

large²⁶. The success of Telangana is a defeat of the amoral politics as it represents social classes and political aspirations which are largely new²⁷.

Linguistic homogeneity often falls short in creating a cohesive state identity. It may create an 'imaginary state', it fails to create an 'imaginary community'²⁸. In many large Indian states such as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, an imaginary state failed to create a community. While using language to create states was helpful at first, it doesn't work well for managing the complicated social and political issues in these diverse regions like in the case of Gorkhaland today.

The above mentioned instances show that linguistic federalism, while important, often masks deeper issues that need to be addressed for true integration and accommodation as federal democracy. States like Jharkhand, Telangana, etc. highlight the limitations of the linguistic model in meeting the broader developmental challenges faced by diverse regions. Recognizing that India lacks a dominant cultural, economic, or linguistic group is essential for achieving unity in diversity²⁹.

India's Comparisons with other federations: Canada, Belgium & Yugoslavia

India and Canada being the oldest democracies, have adopted distinct approaches to linguistic recognition and quasi-federalism, reflecting their unique histories and social compositions. Canadian federalism was instituted at the Quebec Conference of 1864³⁰ and subsequently Canada's *Official Languages Act* of 1969³¹ established English and French as the country's official languages, providing bilingual federal services and institutional support for both communities addressing the needs of Quebec's francophone population, which comprises

²⁶ "Telangana's Message: The Troubled Formation of India's 29th State Suggests the Need for a New States' Reorganisation Commission" 49 *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, 8 (2014).

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Singh, *supra* note 17, at 105.

²⁹ B.D. Dua and M.P. Singh (eds.), *Indian Federalism in the New Millennium* 51 (Manohar, 2003).

³⁰ Swapnil S Kumare and Nivrutti Patil, "Comparative Study of Federalism in Two Democracies: India & Canada" 9(5) *IJARIE* 191 (2023).

³¹ Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, *English and French: Towards a Substantive Equality of Official Languages in Canada* (Government of Canada, 2021).

approximately 80% of the province's inhabitants³². The Canadian charter guarantees parliamentary, legislative and judicial bilingualism and services to and communications with the public³³.

In comparison, India's federal system recognizes 22 languages in the *Eighth Schedule*³⁴ of its Constitution, reflecting a more complex challenge. Linguistic federalism has not fully resolved conflicts stemming from diversity. Centralization in India, particularly through provisions like Article 356³⁵, allows the national government to intervene in state matters. In line with Canada's asymmetric federalism, where Quebec's distinct allows a significant degree of autonomy compared to other provinces³⁶ and follows a civil law system in contrast to the rest of Canada that is governed by a common law system.³⁷ Canada has granted Quebec a special status through asymmetric federalism, recognizing its unique linguistic, cultural, and legal identity, particularly by allowing greater control over areas like language, immigration, and civil law; India can learn from this by exploring similar tailored approaches to address regional aspirations and autonomy demands while maintaining national unity.³⁸

The Belgian experience in dealing with a multicultural and multi-linguistic polity provides an exceptional example to nations such as India which are facing an ever increasing heterogeneity among their linguistic populations³⁹. Learning from the experiences of other nations becomes almost critical while looking at the future of India. Unlike Canada's binary linguistic divide, India has had to navigate a much more complex linguistic landscape. Keeping in view the cautionary tale of Yugoslavia where weak internal cohesion led to disintegration along

³² Eugénie Brouillet, "The Supreme Court of Canada: The Concept of Cooperative Federalism and Its Effect on the Balance of Power" in Nicholas Aroney and John Kincaid (eds.), *Courts in Federal Countries: Federalists or Unitarists?* 135, 137 (University of Toronto Press, 2017).

³³ Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, *English and French: Towards a Substantive Equality of Official Languages in Canada* (Government of Canada, 2021).

³⁴ The Constitution of India, Eighth Schedule.

³⁵ The Constitution of India, art. 356.

³⁶ Douglas V Verney, "Federalism, Federative Systems, and Federations: The United States, Canada, and India" 25 *Publius* 81, 88 (1995).

³⁷ Government of Canada, Department of Justice, *The Canadian Constitution* (30 June 2021), available at: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/03.html> (Visited on October 2, 2024).

³⁸ Government of Canada, *Asymmetrical Federalism: Did We Want It? The Case of Quebec* (9 November 1993), available at: <https://publications.gc.ca/Pilot/LoPBdP/BP/bp408-e.htm> (Visited on October 2, 2024).

³⁹ Vandana Sharma, "Linguistic Policy of Belgium" *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 1137 (2018).

national, linguistic, and religious lines⁴⁰, the current challenge for India is not merely maintaining that unity, but ensuring it benefits the people by breaking free from ineffective political structures and creating a system that supports both true democracy and meaningful development of economy⁴¹. As the country evolves, its federal structure must adapt, moving beyond language to address broader socio-economic concerns. The pillars of regionalization, federalization, democratization and secularization must be reinforced for optimal federal nation building⁴². Linguistic federalism, despite its strengths, has been criticized a lot more specifically on its strengths itself. While the system is faced with a lot of challenges, each country has flexibility to adapt, reform and address its own issues in the country's context.

IV. Criticisms and Challenges to Linguistic Federalism in a Globalized World

While India has achieved tremendously in managing diversity as discussed above. But in a globalized world, this system of diversity's effectiveness is being questioned on the basis of administrative inefficiency, potential regional conflicts, or its compatibility with global integration. The system of linguistic federalism has been criticized many times – especially under the pretext of inefficiency, potential for conflict, and barriers to national unity.

Criticisms:

At its core, the critiques of such a system are bureaucratic redundancies and administrative duplication in terms of operational costs for the administrative services in a multilingual country. One of the examples is India, which has 22 official languages according to the Eighth schedule of the Constitution⁴³. In fact, there are over 1,600 languages and dialects spoken throughout India⁴⁴. Another example is Belgium – where they have seven parliaments⁴⁵ for a population of 11.5 million in order to maintain parallel administration for French and Dutch speaking people. Resources are very vital in the growth of the country, but in a multilingual

⁴⁰ Robert D Greenberg, "When Is Language a Language? The Case of Former Yugoslavia" 35 *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 431, 442 (2017).

⁴¹ "Reorganisation or Fragmentation?" 5 *Economic and Political Weekly* 1981, 1981 (1970).

⁴² Singh, *supra* note 17, at 106.

⁴³ The Constitution of India, Eighth Schedule.

⁴⁴ Jain College, "Official Languages of India", available at: <https://www.jaincollege.ac.in/blogs/native-languages-of-india> (Visited on October 4, 2023).

⁴⁵ Cynthia Kroet, "Belgium's Contest: Three Tiers, Seven Parliaments" *POLITICO* (15 May 2014), available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/n-belgium-ck/> (Visited on October 3, 2023).

country there are always these inefficiencies in resource allocation like translation costs. For example, the European Union spends approximately £3M⁴⁶, where every official document must be translated into 24 languages. This diverts resources from important government functions. Concrete proof that linguistic federalism sometimes leads to more reorganizations of states is the aforementioned *Telangana* case in 2014. It clearly shows how administrative inefficiencies in linguistic federal systems can aggravate developmental disparities. Both regions share the same language, *i.e.*, Telugu but the region's administrative separation from Andhra Pradesh was partially driven by inefficient governance under the linguistic federal model. The commonality argument which supports the linguistic federal model clearly here has failed to do its job. This asymmetrical system and decentralization can lead to inefficiency and can exacerbate inter-regional conflicts as in the case of Telangana. Language is important for one's identity but the same can impede national level communication and cooperation. As Mueller & Bundi's research has shown that people of different linguistic groups prefer separate governance styles, this could hinder the development of shared national values and goals⁴⁷. Over-emphasis on multilingualism can overshadow other important factors, risk of political fragmentation, for instance in the Gorkhaland movement within West Bengal⁴⁸, where even after having "homogeneity" there is still an internal separatist movement. Several studies have discussed multilingualism as a challenge for political decision makers and public administration⁴⁹.

Globalization's impact

The main idea behind the linguistic model in India was to protect cultural rights. But in foresight, it has only caused hindrance to the growth of the country in terms of globalization. Linguistic minority states or, the non-Hindi states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat etc., have shown higher economic growth and per capita income compared to Hindi-speaking

⁴⁶The Week Staff, "EU Overspends Its Translation Budget by £3m" *The Week* (30 August 2017), available at: <https://theweek.com/eu/88088/eu-overspends-its-translation-budget-by-3m> (Visited on October 2, 2023).

⁴⁷Sean Mueller and Pirmin Bundi, "Multilingual Federalism in Times of Crisis" [2024] *Regional & Federal Studies* 1.

⁴⁸Alina Pradhan, "Politics of Separation: The Case of the Gorkhaland Movement" (2012) 73(4) *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 683, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858876> (Visited on December 10, 2023).

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

states⁵⁰. This has created tensions in resource distribution through the federal structure, with economically stronger linguistic minority states resenting the subsidizing for poorer Hindi-speaking states. The three-language formula (regional language, English, and Hindi/modern Indian language) has been implemented unevenly across states⁵¹. I believe that states that emphasized English education alongside regional languages (mostly linguistic minority states) gained advantages in the global IT and service sectors. For example, IT hubs in Bangalore and Hyderabad attract more global companies due to their English-speaking workforce. In my opinion, when these states become more integrated with the global arena, the Hindi states lagged behind equally. The regional economic disparity in per capita income led to internal migration as economically successful states attract workers from poorer regions⁵². This internal migration led to policies where they started subsidizing poorer economic states. When such policies came into place the economically successful regions started to resist sharing their opportunities with migrants from poorer states. As mentioned, the English language also plays a role in creating such disparities as mentioned by Santosh Kumar Khare in his article states “English continues to be the language of the elite and is indeed more entrenched than ever, partly due to the demands of modernisation and globalization”⁵³. This observation directly points to how globalization has reinforced dominance of English in India’s socio-economic landscape, which in turn creates tensions between regions of different languages. He also mentions that only “5-10% possessing the linguistic tools to corner power and wealth” creating linguistic elite⁵⁴. Instead of resolving language hierarchies, globalization has added another layer with English becoming the de facto language of economic mobility. The pressure to learn English for global opportunities while maintaining regional language proficiency creates significant cognitive and resource burdens. This will in turn create a standardization of language against which Pattanayak argues that western-style monolingual nationalism is being inappropriately pushed in India, ignoring its inherent multilingual character⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ Shailendra Mohan, “Minority and Majority Linguistic Groups in India: Issues and Problems” (2010) 70/71 *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 261, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42931248> (Visited on October 2, 2023).

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Santosh Kumar Khare, “Truth about Language in India” (2002) 37 *Economic and Political Weekly* 4993, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4412955> (Visited on December 10, 2023).

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ D.P. Pattanayak, “Multilingualism and Language Politics in India” (1984) 11 *India International Centre Quarterly* 125, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23001652> (Visited on December 10, 2023).

This creates artificial conflicts between languages. In my opinion, while globalization pushes toward linguistic standardization (primarily through English), India's multilingual model reflects its civilizational heritage which plays a very important role in establishing uniqueness in the Global forum. This may lead to economic pragmatism where the practical demands of global trade and commerce often conflict with the ideals of linguistic federalism. Rather than choosing between extremes, India needs innovative approaches that can bridge local linguistic rights with global integration needs.

Alternative models and proposed reforms to address shortcomings

In my analysis, solutions or alternatives to the shortcomings require a multi-pronged approach. This includes implementing domain-specific language policies that separate market-driven sectors from cultural spaces, investing in AI-powered translation technology to reduce administrative costs, and adopting an educational model that promotes additive multilingualism rather than language replacement. Additionally, structural reforms in federal resource-sharing mechanisms could help balance economic disparities between states while protecting linguistic rights. These reforms would allow India to maintain its linguistic diversity while facilitating global economic integration.

V. Conclusion

Linguistic federalism in India is a unique constitutional experiment that has both succeeded and faced challenges since independence. Though it has been effective in its initial days, globalization and economic disparities have shown its limitations, as seen in cases like Telangana and many other states. In the case of Telangana even though there was linguistically homogeneity, economic marginalization did lead to political mobilization and demands for statehood. In this case there was linguistic commonality but this commonality was not a panacea for equitable governance within the region. This tension between the linguistic autonomy and economic development reflects how there is shift in federal discourse i.e. shift from linguistic to socio-economic concerns. And globalization has also further complicated the federal landscape. While our constitution remains committed to multilingual recognition, in practice the federal system in India has transformed away from mere linguistic boundaries for administration and aligned to more socio-economic aspirations. So, in this context linguistic federalism should become a more dynamic tool rather than a static promise by the constitution. A clear evolution from Ambedkar's theoretical framework to contemporary realities can be traced. Adaptive federalism is the way forward for India preserving its diversity. It may envision a federation that is restructured to create flexible application of linguistic federalism to balance economic disparities and preserve the extraordinary culture of about 121 official languages, 760 estimated languages and 1,600 dialects of languages in India.⁵⁶ The main goal is to move away from the narrow conceptions of the language based identity politics to broader, adaptive, equitable, and development-driven federalism. India must continue its legacy of multilingual recognition not just for its past but as a framework for inclusive governance in this contemporary times.

⁵⁶ Srishti Ms, "Did you know India has over 1,600 languages? Here's a look at the most spoken ones and their celebration days" MyNation, Jan. 10, 2025, available at: <https://www.mynation.com/india-news/did-you-know-india-has-over-1-600-languages-here-s-a-look-at-the-most-spoken-ones-and-their-celebration-days-spv4lb> (Visited on December 10, 2024).