

How should India promote Hindi? By doing nothing

Squabbles over language are heating up

5月 08, 2025 05:19 上午



LAST MONTH in Bangalore, India's tech capital, concertgoers heckled a pop star with demands that he sing in Kannada, the local language. He told them off; the police registered a complaint against him. In New York Diljit Dosanjh, a Punjabi actor and singer, arrived at the Met Gala wearing a cape embroidered with the Punjabi alphabet, seen as an assertion of linguistic pride. In Tamil Nadu the chief minister said parents should give babies Tamil names. Meanwhile, a central-government push to promote the use of Hindi

nationally gathers pace. Speakers of other languages are, predictably, pushing back.

Language is a touchy subject in a country with 22 legally recognised ones and hundreds more besides. It is also the *raison d'être* for most Indian states. When internal boundaries were [reshaped after independence](#), it was on linguistic lines: Gujarat for Gujarati speakers, Maharashtra for Marathi. Some activists set themselves on fire rather than be forced to speak a strange language. Southern states, especially, have long bristled at what they see as attempts by the north to “impose” an alien tongue. Attempts at compulsory teaching of Hindi caused agitations in the south even before independence.

And yet governments at both state and national levels persist with language politics. Goings-on in Maharashtra make it clear this is a fruitless pursuit. The state recently obliged young pupils to learn Hindi as a third language, before quickly being forced to U-turn. Maharashtra is run by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rules nationally and in most northern Hindi-speaking states. If the party cannot impose its will on a state it controls, what hope in the south?

Nor is the government-promoted language one that many people speak. Demotic Hindi is a varied and forgiving language, spoken differently in different regions of the country. The Sanskritised version promoted by the BJP would be analogous to Modern Standard Arabic if it were heavily retrofitted with classical vocabulary: a made-up thing with little resonance. Unsatisfied with foisting Hindi upon people, the chief minister of BJP-ruled Delhi last week declared Sanskrit—spoken natively by roughly zero people—as the language of the future.

If the idea is to give Indians a common tongue with which to communicate with each other, it is counterproductive. In the south Hindi is associated with [northern dominance](#). The burden of language policies often falls on schoolchildren; being forced to study

something does not inculcate a love for it. And Hindi-promotion anyway seems at odds with other stated priorities, such as a government effort to create an AI translator that will help “transcend language barriers”.

It is undeniable that India is divided by its languages. But it is getting less so. A study by Leena Bhattacharya and S. Chandrasekhar of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in Mumbai found the chance two random Indians could speak in a common tongue, based on data from the 2011 census, was about one in four, up from one in five in 1971. There has been no census since, but the next one will no doubt reveal that the probability has risen.

One reason is that Hindi has spread without—or despite—ham-fisted government efforts. The influence of Hindi-language pop culture from Mumbai has helped, as has the [growing use](#) of the roman alphabet for Hindi words in advertising and online. Migration from poor, northern, Hindi-speaking regions to the prosperous south has contributed, too. Between 2001 and 2011 native speakers of Tamil in Tamil Nadu grew 14.3%, in line with population growth of 15.6%. Native speakers of Hindi in the state more than doubled, mostly in cities.

The second reason is the rise of English. Parents rich and poor send their children to English schools. Streaming services have widened access to English-language entertainment. Social media are mostly in English. And English is the language of economic mobility.

A sensible government would acknowledge that English is, after 200-odd years of British rule and nearly 80 in an “associate official” role, an Indian language, one that gives India an advantage over many other emerging economies, and promote it accordingly. But a truly enlightened one would heed the lyrics of a song from “Sadhu aur Shaitaan”, a Hindi comedy film from 1968. “Stop this argument about English, Hindi or Urdu,” it goes. “Speak Tamil, speak Bengali.

Speak the languages of all nations. Learn the knowledge of all nations.”■

Subscribers to The Economist can sign up to our [Opinion newsletter](#), which brings together the best of our leaders, columns, guest essays and reader correspondence.
