

INDIAN CULTURE- Language

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview

It is difficult to overstate the cultural significance of language in India. It is a key marker of identity, often overriding other markers such as religion and caste. It is revealing, for example, that many ethnic groups are called (in English) by terms derived from their language: Bengalis speak Bengali; Tamils speak Tamil, Malayalis speak Malayalam, Gujarati speak Gujarati, and so forth. One cannot understand the history of India without appreciating the division between Indo-Aryan languages (in north India) and Dravidian languages (in the south). Most people in India are bilingual, many are trilingual and it is not uncommon for someone to speak four or five languages. Historically speaking, Sanskrit, Tamil, Persian and English are the dominant languages of India, but major literary works have been published in another dozen languages.

Diversity

The linguistic diversity of India is remarkable. While no accurate figure exists for the total number of languages in India (largely due to poor field research and the inability to distinguish between languages and dialects), a consensus figure would be about 550. These languages fall into five families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Daic/Tai. The first two families, however, account for 98% of the population. Indo-Aryan languages, including Hindi and most north Indian languages, are spoken by 74% of the population. Dravidian languages, mostly in south India, are spoken by about 24%. Austro-Asiatic languages are spoken by 1.3% of the population, Tibeto-Burman languages by 0.6% and Daic/Tai by 0.1%

Classical languages

Sanskrit Sanskrit, an Indo-Aryan language and part of the Indo-European family, is the language of the ancient Vedas (c. 1200 BCE). For this reason, Hindu tradition venerates Sanskrit ('perfectly-formed') as the classical language of India. In part, the elevated status of Sanskrit is a result of its long history in the region. Even by the time of the Buddha (c. 500 BCE), Sanskrit had ceased to be a spoken language and was preserved as a ritual language known only to priests (and scholars). The secretive, esoteric quality of Sanskrit only increased over the centuries, as it receded further and further from everyday discourse and popular comprehension.

Tamil Tamil, the oldest Dravidian language, is India's other classical language. Tamil literary texts date from about 200 CE, but inscriptions indicate the existence of a proto-Tamil in the 3rd c. BCE. The origins of Tamil and the Dravidian family as a whole are still a matter of debate, although it appears that these languages are stand-alone and have no historical relationship with any other languages outside India.

Sanskrit-Tamil mixture

Despite claims of a 'pure' Tamil, even the earliest state of the language, poems composed in the first centuries of the Christian era, show the pervasive influence of Sanskrit. It is also true, however, that ancient Sanskrit displays many Dravidian words and roots. The admixture of these two major language families is also evident in the hybrid languages that developed in south India in the medieval period. Many Tamil scholars and poets writing between about 800 and 1300 CE used what is known as *mani-pravalam* ('rubies and pearls'), which combined Sanskrit and Tamil words, morphology and grammar. Malayalam, a Dravidian language that emerged as a literary language about 1300 CE, is heavily influenced by Sanskrit vocabulary and poetic conventions.

Court languages

Both Sanskrit and Tamil served as court languages for various kingdoms, notably the Gupta Empire (4-6th c. CE) and the Chola Empire (9th-13th c. CE), respectively. Prakrit, a vernacular form of Sanskrit, had court status during the reign of Asoka (3rd c. BCE) and other north Indian rulers who followed him. Pali, another vernacular form of Sanskrit, was (and remains) the sacred language of Theravada Buddhists and was used as a sacred language by certain sections of Jains during the medieval period. Persian was the court language of most Muslim rulers as well for the British until 1832, when it was replaced by English.

Official languages

After Independence, the status of court languages has passed to 'official' languages. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognises 23 official languages, a list that has grown over the years as follows:

1950: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Telugu and Urdu

1967: Sindhi

1992: Konkani, Manipuri and Nepali

2003: Maithili, Dogri, Bodo and Santali

Hindi was declared the official language of India by the 1950 Constitution, although English was also designated as an 'associate official language.' English was to continue as the de facto official language of government until 1965, after which all official communication was to be in Hindi. This transition, however, never took place (because Tamils opposed it), and English remains the lingua franca of India in government as well as many areas of public life. In addition to these 23 official languages at the federal level, four more languages are officially recognised for use at state level: Khasi and Garo in the state of Meghalaya; Mizo in Mizoram; and Kokborok in Tripura.

Language politics

North-south divide A territorial cleavage between Indo-Aryan languages in the north and Dravidian languages in the south runs deep in Indian culture and politics. The now-discredited 'Aryan invasion theory' held that light-skinned, Sanskrit-speakers invaded and conquered an India inhabited by dark-skinned Dravidian-speakers. This idea, which has only been discarded by scholars in the past few decades, is still influential in popular thinking and continues to shape political and cultural life, particularly in the south. During most of the twentieth century, an anti-Sanskrit (and anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin) movement dominated politics in Tamil-speaking areas. Tamil-speakers felt that their culture and language was treated as second-best to a Sanskritic culture dominated by Brahmins. The political campaign focused on the increased representation of non-Brahmins in government employment, especially in the courts and legislature, as well as the use of Tamil in schools and universities. After Independence in 1947, one faction called for a separate state of 'Dravidistan.' In 1967, Madras state was renamed Tamil Nadu ('Land of Tamils').

Bangladesh A similar language dispute led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1972. After Independence in 1947, Pakistan consisted of two chunks of territory on either side of India: a (largely) Panjabi-speaking West Pakistan and a Bengali-speaking East Pakistan. When the demands of Bengali speakers that their language be given equal status were not satisfied, tensions grew and led to war.

Language states Even when language disputes remain peaceful they shape the lives of many Indians. Most states established since Independence have been created as a result of a language community demanding greater control of government. Today, many states are in effect language communities: Malayalam in Kerala, Bengali in West Bengal, and so forth. Significant minority language communities exist everywhere, but most states are dominated by a single language.

Tribal languages

The power of languages and scripts as markers of cultural identity is vividly demonstrated in the case of India's tribes. India has more than 500 different tribal languages, mostly Tibeto-Burman but also Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Daic/Tai and Indo-Aryan. Of these, only two (Santali, an Austro-Asiatic language, and Bodo, a Tibeto-Burman language) are included among the nation's 23 official languages. At the state level, too, tribal languages have little status. Each state has one or more official languages, but again only a few (Santali in Jharkhand, Bodo in Assam, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, Kokborok in Tripura and Mizo in Mizoram) are tribal languages. Each of these state official languages, and especially Santali and Bodo at the national level, required sustained political struggle and sometimes armed conflict to win recognition. Tribal languages are also marginalised in the market place of speech. Most of them are endangered, dozens are on the brink of extinction and a few (such as Tolcha, Paite, Sengmai and Rangkas) are no longer spoken.

An alarming statistic is that only 50% of tribal people speak a tribal language as their first language; the other 50% have acquired a dominant regional language (Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, etc.) as their mother tongue. Similarly, while most Indians speak two or three languages, very few speak a tribal language as their second or third tongue

Questions/Discussion

1. Despite the powerful forces of globalisation, which tend to homogenise people and cultures, culture and politics in India appear to be fragmenting along linguistic lines. English may be the lingua franca, but thousands of newspapers and books are published every year in each of a dozen regional languages. Large states are breaking down into small units defined by languages and dialects.
2. What is the role of a classical (court or imperial) language? Does it marginalise small, regional languages, impoverishing them at the expense of a hegemonic elite tongue? Or does it benefit everyone by enabling cultural, political and economic consolidation and coherence? Does a single language serve to minimise petty ethnic conflicts? Compare the effect of Sanskrit in India with, say, Latin during the Roman Empire, or Mandarin in China.
3. Many of India's tribal languages are endangered. Draw up a list of the now-extinct languages of India and consider what extinction actually means. Are we, as a global community, more concerned with the extinction of a rare species of butterfly than the disappearance of a language?

Reading

Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru and S. N. Sridhar (eds.), *Language in South Asia* (Cambridge, 2008)

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