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## **Managing Ethnic Conflicts in India: Linguistic Accommodation through State Reorganization**

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Received: 05.04.2026; Accepted: 07.04.2026; Available online: 10.04.2026

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### **Abstract**

*In liberal democratic societies characterized by a multicultural and multilingual structure, preserving diverse cultures is a matter of paramount importance. India – a vast, multi – ethnic, multi – lingual, and multi – religious nation – is bound together by an unbreakable bond formed by a combination of a robust constitutional foundation, profound cultural synthesis, democratic processes, and geographical unity. India is often described as a 'salad bowl' – where each ingredient retains its distinct identity – rather than a 'melting pot' (where everything dissolves into a single entity); and it preserves its unity by enabling diverse cultures to coexist side – by – side without losing their unique distinctiveness. But the fundamental question arises here is – despite such immense diversity and differences, how was India able to maintain its territorial integrity as a nation – state? Perhaps, the key to this fundamental question – and to this success – lies in the method through which the federal units were constituted via a multi – stage process of state reorganization; a method that consistently sought to organize India's territory into units of 'appropriate size.' Against the backdrop of the 'state reorganization process', this research paper examines the various strategic measures adopted at its different stages, while upholding territorial integrity. It also endeavors to explore the nature of the Indian state's institutional response to ethnic and linguistic demands; in this context, particular emphasis has been put on the 'States Reorganization Commission' and what has been its impact on Indian democracy.*

**Keywords:** Language, States Reorganization, democracy, ethnicity, federalism, constitution

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### **Why Language Holds Importance and Matters the Most in Our Lives?**

A strong connection exists between language and ethnic identity. An individual's sense of ethnic identity is shaped and preserved through the language they use (Prakash and Kumar 2021: 15). Language acts as a defining feature of one's own ethnic identity. It is the medium through which human culture, customs, beliefs, traditions, and knowledge are transmitted from one generation to the next and serves as a medium of communication among individuals belonging to a particular community or nation. Language is not merely a means of self – expression; rather, it also embodies the cultural and historical achievements of a society. A common and widely understood language acts as a powerful catalyst for social cohesion; it serves simultaneously as a medium for everyday communication and a repository of collective cultural identity, fostering a sense of unity, solidarity, and belonging among its members. It has been observed that language acts as

the main vehicle of culture, and linguistic diversity often defines cultural boundaries (Webber 2022: 166). Shared linguistic experience contributes to the formation of a collective identity. It is held that every nation is a linguistic entity. In this connection, Edward Freeman has stated that “mankind instinctively takes language as the badge of nationality” (Karna 2002: 81). With the rise of the nation—state, the concept of ‘one language, one nation’ gained much popularity in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this period, the concept of nationhood became closely intertwined— not merely with the idea of a common language in general— but rather with the notion of a shared language specific to that particular. Across various historical contexts, language has played a pivotal role in both integration and disintegration. Following the Second World War, many colonial states across the globe attained independence and endeavored to establish a national language as the foundation of their national educational development and promotion of national culture— for instance, Pakistan adopted Urdu, Hindi was adopted in India, Sinhala was adopted by Sri Lanka, and Arabic was used in Algeria (Hobsbawm 1996: 1071). However, the consequences proved to be utterly disastrous. In 1971, Pakistan lost its eastern wing— which subsequently transformed into independent Bangladesh for its Bengali— speaking population; meanwhile, Sri Lanka was confronted with a civil war that lasted for several decades. The European model of constructing an artificial political community based on shared language, culture, and national identity failed to gain any significant acceptance. India—the world's largest democracy— is arguably one of the most culturally diverse nations and is widely recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world; frequently ranking among the leading nations globally in terms of the number and diversity of languages. This multilingual nature of India has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political structure, as a result of which linguistic issues have assumed paramount importance (Goswami 1997: 1). When India had just attained independence, there was concern as to whether—despite its linguistic and cultural diversity— it would be able to maintain its unity as a nation— state. Due to its multilingual nature, many researchers expressed skepticism regarding the stability of the Indian state and predicted that the country would face territorial disintegration (Harrison 1960). Soon after independence, the language issue emerged as a major problem that evolved into a ‘major challenge to Indian nationalism’ (Harrison 1956: 620–36). Linguistic diversity gave rise to three major languages— related problems, which the country's national leaders had to address with extreme caution. These three problems were related to: (a) the linguistic reorganization of India's states, (b) the status of minority languages within the states, and (c) the issue of the official language. These problems had to be resolved by striking a balance between the country's ethnic and diverse cultural identities within the framework of national unity— specifically through deep deliberation and effective, pragmatic political strategies.

### **Issues of Linguistic States in India before Independence: An Overview**

During the pre— independence era— specifically in 1905, amidst discussions regarding the Partition of Bengal—the Indian National Congress (INC), for the first time, endorsed the concept of reorganizing Indian territories on linguistic lines. At that time, the idea of partitioning Bengal was put forward on religious grounds—a step that was vigorously condemned by the Indian National Congress (INC). In those days, this had evolved into an extremely sensitive issue; as E. Schwartzberg aptly observed that the Partition of 1905

awakened the Congress's sensitivity to linguistic questions in the context of the territorial reorganization of British India (Schwartzberg 1999: 158). However, the concept of reorganizing India's territories on a linguistic basis gained gradual momentum in the subsequent years— particularly in 1920, 1927, 1928, 1937, and 1948— during which linguistic issues emerged as a central element of the nationalist movement. In 1908, the Indian National Congress (INC) endorsed the formation of Bihar as a separate organizational province, extending similar support to the cases of Sindh and Andhra in 1917. However, it was not until 1920 that the Congress's stance in favor of creating provinces on a linguistic basis became clearly consolidated. It was precisely for this reason that, during the 1917 session, Dr Annie Besant vehemently opposed the linguistic principle. During the 1920 session held at Nagpur, the Indian National Congress (INC) formally recognized, for the first time, the idea of restructuring provinces along linguistic lines as a specific political agenda; indeed, the Congress itself reorganized its own organizational structure on a linguistic basis (Singh and Kim 2000: 2). The All— Parties Conference Report (APCR) 1928 had also mentioned that the principal factor— “must necessarily be the wishes of the people and the linguistic unity of the area concerned” (APCR 1928: 61). Following the formation of the ‘Indian Statutory Commission’ (ISC)— also referred to as the ‘Simon Commission’— under the leadership of Sir John Simon in 1927, numerous memoranda were dispatched to the British Government’s ‘India Office’ in London. The report of the Simon Commission had far— reaching implications— particularly in the context of the movement for forming provinces in British India along linguistic lines. The creation of separate provinces such as Orissa and Sind in April 1936 was influenced by linguistic and cultural factors; this marked the beginning of a significant shift in India's political landscape towards the recognition of regional identities (King 1999: 68). The formation of Orissa and Sindh as distinct linguistic states in British India demonstrated the dominance of centrifugal forces driven by the aspiration to establish culturally homogeneous units; this trend of division subsequently gained further momentum and continued to influence the process of state formation even after independence (Sharma 1995: 81–83).

### **From Constituent Assembly Debate to Linguistic Reorganization of States: Language, Federalism and State Formation**

In August 1947, at the threshold of independence, India inherited from the British Raj a complex and fragmented structure— consisting primarily of provinces under direct British rule along with numerous autonomous princely states. Prior to the Partition, British India was generally considered to comprise 17 provinces. When India was partitioned to create the two nations of India and Pakistan, 11 of these provinces (including Madras, Bombay, Bihar, Orissa, and the United Provinces) acceded to India; conversely, 3 provinces joined Pakistan, while the remaining 3 (Punjab, Bengal, and Assam) were divided between the two nations. By 1950— when the Constitution of India was adopted— and prior to the state reorganization of 1956, these provinces and princely states were reorganized into a new classification of states (Part A, B, and C states). There were approximately 565 princely states in the Indian subcontinent (often cited as falling within the range of 560 to 565). From time to time, calls for the reorganization of states along linguistic lines were raised within the Constituent Assembly. However, it appears that leaders such as Nehru, Patel, and Azad were unwilling to accept these demands, as doubts regarding this issue had

arisen in their minds immediately after independence. A month later, after the Constituent Assembly elections— in August 1946— the demand for the formation of linguistic states was raised. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, a prominent member of the Congress Working Committee and the Congress President in 1948, advocated for the reorganization of Indian states on a linguistic basis and argued quite strongly that “the whole problem must be taken up as the first and foremost problem to be solved by the Constituent Assembly” (Austin 1966: 240– 241). Since the Partition of the country gave rise to numerous grave administrative, economic, and political issues, on November 27, 1947—addressing the issue of linguistic states—Nehru explicitly declared: “first thing must come first, and the first thing is the security and stability of India” (Sarangi and Pai 2011: 8). On June 17, 1948, the Constituent Assembly constituted a ‘Linguistic Commission’—led by retired Allahabad High Court Justice S.K. Dar—which was officially known as the ‘Linguistic Provinces Commission’ and is also widely known as the ‘Dar Commission’. The Commission has also expressed concern that creating divisions on linguistic grounds would give rise to additional linguistic minorities and fuel sub— nationalism—a development that would pose a threat to the newly formed nation at a time when the foundation of a strong nationalist spirit among its citizens has yet to be inculcated and it rejected the demand of the linguistic reorganization of states within the Indian territory and finally concluded that “the formation of provinces on exclusively or even mainly linguistic consideration is not in the larger interests of the Indian nation and should not be taken in hand” (Anderson 2013: 167). In light of growing opposition and the discontent stemming from the Dhar Commission's recommendations, the Indian National Congress—during its annual session held in Jaipur in December 1948, precisely eight days after the publication of the ‘Dar Report’—adopted a resolution. Through this resolution, the ‘JVP’ Committee was constituted—taking its name from the initials of its members—Nehru, Patel, and Sitaramayya—for re— considering the entire matter (Austin 1966: 242). The JVP Committee officially presented its report on April 1, 1949, which did not support the creation of linguistic states. The commission also was of the opinion that: “the present is not an opportune moment for the formation of new provinces.” (Bhargava 2012: 251). However, at the same time, the national leaders also realized that the call for the restructuring of states on a linguistic basis could no longer be ignored for much longer. In 1952, when a devout Gandhian—Sri Potti Ramalu began fasting unto death in support of forming a separate state for Telugu— speaking people named ‘Andhra Pradesh,’ widespread violence erupted across the entire region; although his self— sacrifice resulted in the creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh on October 1, 1953, it also compelled the broader issue of state reorganization to take center stage in the national discourse. On December 22, 1953, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared in Parliament that a commission would be set up to look into the issue of the reorganization of the states within the Indian Union objectively and impartially. Consequently, a State Reorganization Commission (SRC) was formally constituted on December 29, 1953, headed by S. Fazal Ali (a former judge), with the inclusion of two other eminent commissioners, H.N Kunzru (a Kashmiri Pandit and scholar and legislator of long standing) and K.M Pannikar (a noted Historian) (Mitra and Bhattacharyya 2018: 75). The SRC clearly stated in the report that language alone should not be the sole factor in reorganizing states and simply repudiated the idea of ‘home land concept and ‘one language one state’ (Report of the SRC 1955: 46). It finally concluded that “a balanced approach” to the whole problem is “necessary in the

interests of our national unity” (Report of the SRC 1955: 45). Although the implementation of the States Reorganization Act of 1956—largely in accordance with the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission (SRC)—led to the emergence of 14 new or reorganized states of equal power and status, this process was neither entirely successful nor peaceful; this was largely because the 1956 reorganization failed to resolve all complexities regarding linguistic boundaries and left many disputes among dominant linguistic groups unresolved. The State of Bombay—formed after independence and expanded in 1956 under the States Reorganization Act—comprised both Marathi— and Gujarati— speaking populations. As a result, Samyukta Maharashtra and Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad had led the two popular movements in the two parts of Bombay state (Mitra 2006: 126). Under immense political pressure, the bilingual Bombay State was broken up into two states—Maharashtra and Gujarat on May 1, 1960. The formation of the Maharashtra state included the Marathi— speaking regions, while the Gujarati— speaking regions formed Gujarat, with Ahmadabad as its capital. As a bilingual state comprising Punjabi and Hindi— speaking regions, Punjab faced a demand—spearheaded by the Akali Dal—for a “Punjabi Suba”. In 1966, in light of the Shah Commission's report, the state was bifurcated through the ‘Punjab Reorganization Act’ into Punjab (Punjabi— speaking and Sikh— majority) and Haryana (Hindi— speaking); concurrently, the hilly territories were incorporated into Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh was declared a joint capital with the status of a Union Territory.

By 1966, the Government of India had reorganized the mainland states primarily on linguistic grounds— a process that included the reorganization of 1956 and the creation of the states of Punjab and Haryana— yet it had overlooked the complex, distinct ethnic and strategic considerations of the Northeast. The creation of Nagaland as the 16th state of the Indian Union on December 1, 1963, marked a crucial turning point in the political history of Northeast India. As the first state to be carved out of the original state of Assam following India's independence, it established a significant precedent: that ethnic diversity could be accommodated—and the regional aspirations of tribal communities fulfilled—not merely through autonomy under a larger state, but rather through the conferral of full statehood. Following the North— Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971, full statehood was conferred upon Manipur, Tripura, and Meghalaya on January 21, 1972. Prior to this, Manipur and Tripura were Chief Commissioner— administered provinces (later Union Territories), while Meghalaya was constituted in 1969 as an autonomous sub— state within Assam. Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, a second phase of state reorganization was observed in the Northeast region—one that was grounded primarily in tribal ethnicity and indigenous people's demands, asserting claims to economic advantages and priorities, rather than in linguistic aspirations (Gupta 1997: 230; Weiner 1978). In November 2000, to enhance the administrative efficiency, economic development, and regional representation—and primarily to fulfill the demands of distinct geographical, cultural aspirations and tribal ethnicity rather than linguistic identity— Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand were formed by partitioning the large states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. On June 2, 2014— against the backdrop of long— standing socio— economic disparities, regional neglect, and decades of political agitation—Telangana formally separated from Andhra Pradesh to emerge as India's 29th state. The primary objective of this bifurcation was to satisfy the demands of the people of the Telangana

region for better governance and equitable development; a process that brought about the enactment of the 'Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act, 2014'.

### **Conclusions:**

It appears that the process of reorganizing the boundaries of India's states has not yet been completed— even though most of the major ethnic cleavages had already been resolved. The process of democratization flowed through the country following the State Reorganization of 1956, awakening political consciousness and a sense of distinct identity among a vast segment of the population— and even today, certain social groups continue seeking recognition as full statehood. The regionalization of politics— and the consequent emergence of new social groups— have elevated the states within the Indian Union to a more prominent position, endowing them with the confidence to challenge the authority of the Centre. The Federal restructuring of democratic institutions and norms has bolstered the bargaining strength of regional states; notably, these states continue to pursue their own distinct 'political cultures' as well as their own trajectories of socio— economic development (Pai and Kumar 2018: 95). This process also ensures the accommodation of regional identities while upholding democratic principles; and it has been carried out in accordance with the guidelines of Article 3 of the Indian Constitution. In this regard, it has been argued that: "Within the framework of a centralized but accommodating State, democracy has enabled regional forces to successfully press their demands. These successes were manifest early in the area of identity politics, namely, in the reorganization of India along linguistic lines" (Kohli 2001: 11). The regional recognition of identity through the reorganization of states on linguistic lines has helped undermine the foundations of separatism and secessionist tendencies—without, at the same time, compromising the principle of (internal) self— determination; moreover, these newly formed states have contributed to the process of national integration and have also performed better economically (Dasgupta 1988: 151— 53). It was observed that those who led the movement demanding full statehood—namely, the political elites and the various groups they represented (linguistic, ethnic, class, and tribal)—were themselves the primary beneficiaries (Bhattacharyya 2019: 96). The language— related issues that still persist can be classified into two major categories: firstly, there are certain linguistic groups that are numerically strong but do not have a state of their own. For example, neither Urdu nor Sindhi possesses a state or region of its own, as they lack geographical concentration in any specific area. Speakers of these two languages are scattered across various states of India. They may be described as stateless minorities. Secondly, there are certain languages that, despite being spoken by a significant number of people within a state, have not been adopted as the state's official languages. For instance, in several states of India's northeastern region—such as Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland—the local languages or dialects, predominantly spoken by the most people are not officially acknowledged as the languages of the state. Alongside Hindi, they have adopted English as the state's official language. The reason for this is not that the inhabitants of these states speak this language; rather, the primary reason is that developing a common language— one that is intelligible to the diverse communities within these states— remains a major challenge.

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