

# IS HINDI OR ENGLISH BENEFICIAL AS THE LINK LANGUAGE?

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

Residents of only 12 of the 35 States and Union Territories (UTs) reported Hindi as their first choice of language for communication (Census 2011). But there is a caveat. “Hindi” is an umbrella term encompassing 56 languages (mother tongues) including Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Hindi and Chhattisgarhi. While 43% of Indians speak “Hindi”, only 26% speak Hindi specifically as their mother tongue.

This begs the question whether Hindi needs to be made the link language. This is in the context of Union Home Minister Amit Shah saying that when citizens of States communicate with each other, they should do so in the “language of India”, with Hindi as an alternative to English. This sparked criticism from the Opposition. Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee President D.K. Shivakumar said Bengaluru became India’s IT capital because of English.

The argument used for pushing Hindi as an alternative to English, because it is spoken by the majority, cannot be tenable as it is a majoritarian one. Instead, we need to answer a utilitarian question: which language would be beneficial for citizens as they seek better lives — Hindi or English? In other words, would native Hindi speakers benefit by learning English or should Hindi be imposed on the non-Hindi speaking population for their “benefit”?

A comparison of the Human Development Index (HDI) of States and UTs shows that regions with a higher share of English speakers also have higher HDI scores (Chart 1), while States with a higher share of Hindi speakers have relatively low HDI scores (Chart 2). This means there is a positive correlation between a higher standard of living and a higher share of English speakers.

This is also borne out in migration-related numbers. More people from the Hindi-speaking States have been migrating towards the non-Hindi speaking regions in search of better livelihoods. In the 2017 Economic Survey, an analysis of railways passenger data who travelled in unreserved compartments was used as a proxy to measure work-related migration. “This class of travel serves less affluent people who are most likely to travel for work-related reasons,” the report argued. Movements of nine million such passengers between 2011 and 2016 were considered and travel less than 200 km was ignored.

Map 4 shows the heat map of net passenger flows for FY2015-16 at the State level. In States such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab and Delhi, there was net in-migration. The number of people who migrated into these States was higher than those who migrated to other States. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh recorded higher net out-migration.

Juxtaposing this with Map 3 shows that the States which recorded net out-migration broadly correspond to the States which have a high share of Hindi speakers. In contrast, the States which recorded net in-migration broadly correspond to regions with fewer Hindi speakers. The exceptions were Kerala, Odisha and, to an extent, Maharashtra. Map 3 shows not just those who speak Hindi as a mother tongue, but also those who mentioned it as either a second or third language of preference (Hindi as an all-encompassing term).

An analysis of the 2011 Census data (Table 5) also shows that net in-migration for Hindi States, where Hindi is spoken by at least 50% of the population, is negative. This indicates that the migrant outflow was higher than the inflow in these States. In non-Hindi States, the net in-migration was positive. This pattern was observed for all types of migrations including those done for work and education.

To summarise, relatively more people from Hindi-speaking States migrate to non-Hindi States, and there is a strong correlation between a region's HDI and a higher share of English speakers. This suggests a stronger case for English to be the link language rather than Hindi, contrary to what the Union government seems to imply.

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