

# A STEP THAT WOULD TRIGGER LANGUAGE PHONOCIDE

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'Nations that accommodated linguistic diversity prospered' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, [recently urged the use of Hindi as the lingua franca](#), rather than English, in inter-State communication. He suggested (reportedly at the Parliamentary Official Language Committee) that when [citizens of States who speak other languages](#) communicate with each other, it should be in the “language of India”. It is quite natural that a leader of a political stream that raised the slogan, ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan’ would air such a quixotic idea. It was V.D. Savarkar, the Hindutva icon, who first advocated the idea of Hindi to be declared the national language and articulated the slogan, ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan’. R.V. Dhulekar, a member of the Constituent Assembly, bluntly stated in the Assembly, “You may belong – to another nation but I belong to Indian nation, the Hindi Nation, the Hindu Nation, the Hindustani Nation.”

India has a harmonious symphony of [linguistic pluralism](#); it is not a disarranged cacophony. Ganesh N. Devy, in ‘Indigenous languages’, a UNESCO lecture in October 2008, and also in a media article, “Tribal languages in a death trap” in August 2011, has mentioned how Sir George Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India (1903-1923) had identified 179 languages and 544 dialects in India. The 1961 Census reports mentioned a total of 1,652 ‘mother tongues’, out of which 184 ‘mother tongues’ had more than 10,000 speakers, and of which 400 ‘mother tongues’ had not been mentioned in Grierson’s survey, while 527 were listed as ‘unclassified’. In 1971, the linguistic data offered in the Census was distributed in two categories — the officially listed languages of the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, and the other languages with a minimum of 10,000 speakers each. All other languages spoken by less than 10,000 speakers were lumped together in a single entry ‘Others’. That practice continued to be followed in subsequent enumerations. This practice made many languages invisible, says Prof. Devy.

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The so-called ‘National Grandiosity’ of Hindi is a dubious fallacy unsupported by facts. Prof. Devy had exposed the myth of Hindi as a pan-Indian language. In an article in *The Hindu* on June 7, 2019, “Language, the opening move”, he wrote: “The 2011 Census data on languages, published last year, was heavily doctored. It presents Hindi as the ‘mother tongue’ of over 52 crore people by subsuming more than 5 crore claimants of Bhojpuri and more than 9 crore speakers of nearly 61 other languages — claimed as ‘other’ by their speech communities — from Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. ‘The Hindi’ is probably spoken by not more than 30% of the population, but it is not the mother tongue for the remaining 70%.”

Hindi is not a lingua franca for Indians; nor is it a dominant language. It is only a primus inter pares among numerous Indian languages.

The imposition of one language in neglect of the others in a multilingual state is disastrous. Pakistan and Sri Lanka are textbook examples of how stubbornness over language ruined nations. After Partition and Pakistan was formed, Pakistan became a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic state. In 1948, the Government of Pakistan ordained the Islamisation of East Pakistan, with Urdu as the sole national language. “There can only be one state language if the

component parts of this state are to march forward in unison, and in my opinion, that can only be Urdu,” asserted Jinnah. This arrogance of the West Pakistan elite ignited the violent Bengali language movement or Bhasha Andolan in East Pakistan, advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of the then Dominion of Pakistan in order to allow its use in government transactions, in education, in media, in currency and to maintain its writing in the Bengali script. The Language Movement catalysed Bengali nationalism and the eventual separation of East Pakistan from Pakistan.

The Sinhala Only Act (the Official Language Act) of 1956 was a high point in Sri Lanka’s history. It triggered intense enmity and distrust between the Sinhalis and the Tamils. The Act replaced English with Sinhala as the sole official language of the nation with the exclusion of Tamil. Sinhalese was the language of Sinhalese people who formed 70% of the population. Tamil was spoken by Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils (and most Muslims) who together constituted around 29% of the country’s population. The Act was discriminatory and alienated the Tamil community from the mainstream. The Act also symbolised the Sinhalese majority’s zeal to assert Sri Lanka’s identity as a Sinhala nation state; for Tamils, it epitomised minority oppression and a justification for the demand for a separate Tamil nation. This friction sparked the decades-long civil war and ruined the nation.

In contrast, the nations that accommodated linguistic diversity prospered. Singapore has a multi-ethnic population (Chinese, Malay and Indian). In its formative years, there was immense pressure to declare Chinese as the official language of Singapore. But Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of modern Singapore, quelled the demand and opted for English. English language proficiency made the city state a global business hub. In an article in *The Straits Times* (2004) he had said, “When we became independent in 1965, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce committee came to see me in my office, then at City Hall. They urged me to have Chinese as our national and official language. I looked them in the eye and said, ‘You must be mad, and I don’t want to hear any more of that from you. If you do, you are entering the political arena. I have to fight you. Because, Singapore will come apart.’ Supposing I had been otherwise inclined, which my colleagues would not have allowed, and had said, ‘Yes, okay.’ What would have happened to Singapore? Where would the Malays be, and the Indians, what future would they have? The English-educated Chinese would also be against us. The country would fall apart. Let us assume that we were all Chinese, no Malays, no Indians. Could we make a living with Chinese as our language of government and our national language? Who is going to trade with us? What do we do? How do we get access to knowledge? There was no choice.”

In South Africa, the national anthem of this Rainbow Nation, since 1997, is a five-language lyrical composition, making it the most unique anthem in the world in this regard. The languages are Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans and English. South Africa is an emerging leader of the African continent and its accommodative linguistic policy helped them a lot.

India should emulate the multi-linguistic accommodative policy of Singapore and South Africa; not the disastrous linguistic chauvinism of Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Imposing Hindi, which is the first language of the residents of only 12 of the 35 States and Union Territories (in the 2011 Language Census of India, and where Andhra Pradesh and Telangana figure together in the 2011 data) as a lingua franca would initiate the phonocide of other Indian languages. And it would prove to be catastrophic.

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