

Unity in Diversity: Lessons from India and the European Union

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Introduction

Language is not only a medium of communication but it is also a very core political institution. It shapes people's access to power, their sense of belonging, and how they relate to the political community around them. In large and diverse polities, language often becomes a site of negotiation, conflict, and compromise. Both the European Union and India have populations that are marked by deep linguistic diversity which attempt to aim at maintaining political cohesion and democratic legitimacy in their state.

This paper approaches the aspect of language, primarily as a question of identity and social cohesion, rather than about direct democratic participation. This distinction can be said to be important because, in the European Union, political participation largely occurs at the national level, which limits the extent to which language functions as a direct barrier to democratic engagement. However, language remains to be crucial in shaping ideas such as symbolic inclusion, collective identity, and the perceived legitimacy of supranational governance. In India, the language question was even more immediate at the moment of independence, as it was a time when linguistic diversity was widely seen as a potential threat to national unity.

The Indian state responded not by imposing uniformity but by recognising and accommodating diversity through constitutional and federal mechanisms, for example as seen through the inclusion of multiple languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and the linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956. These measures allowed linguistic identities to be institutionally recognised within the Indian political framework. This thus reduced the risk of fragmentation and strengthened national cohesion (Sharma, 2019).

The European Union formally embraces multilingualism as a foundational value, which is grounded in the principle of linguistic equality and cultural diversity. Yet, the practical management of having twenty-four official languages always generates persistent tensions related to institutional efficiency, symbolic inclusion, and the construction of a shared political identity (Sharma, 2013). India faced similar concerns but adopted a different approach, it was one based on recognition, decentralisation, and flexibility (Emeneau, 1956; Sharma, 2019). This paper argues that linguistic plurality does not inherently weaken political cohesion. Rather, when diversity is institutionally recognised and politically negotiated, it can strengthen social cohesion and help in long term stability. By placing India and the EU in such a dialogue, the paper uses the Indian experience to rethink the aspect of multilingual governance at scale.

Theoretical Foundations of Language, Identity, and Power

Language tends to occupy a very unique position in both the political and social theory because of how it operates simultaneously as a cultural marker and a mechanism of power. Scholars in sociolinguistics argue that language is deeply embedded in identity, shaping how individuals understand themselves and how they see their place within a community (Kaul, 2013). At the same time, language remains to be an aspect that determines access to institutions such as education, law and administration, making it a key site wherein both the factors of inclusion and exclusion stand produced.

When looked at from a political perspective, linguistic hierarchies often mirror the broader structures of power. Certain languages often tend to become associated with the aspects of authority, economic mobility and prestige, while others are often made to remain marginalised. This creates asymmetries that can lead to conflict. However, scholars also emphasise that linguistic diversity itself is not the source of instability and that the aspect of instability only emerges when linguistic groups are unequally recognised or when state policies privilege one language over others (Sharma, 2019).

A constructivist approach, in this case, towards the realm of International Relations provides further insight into this issue. Constructivism argues that identities are not fixed and are rather shaped through social and political processes; and when we look at language, we realise how it plays a crucial role in this process, as it structures how communities imagine themselves and others. This, thus means that institutional arrangements and policy choices are both aspects that can transform linguistic diversity into either a source of fragmentation or a basis for cohesion. Therefore, the key question is not whether diversity exists but about how it is governed.

Historical Foundations of Linguistic Diversity

The relationship between the aspects of language and political unity in EU remains to be deeply rooted in the history of its nation building process, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; wherein during this period that the standardisation of national languages became central to the construction of modern nation states. Language was used to create a sense of shared identity and to consolidate political authority within the very defined territorial boundaries. As a result, linguistic unity became also closely associated with political sovereignty.

The process of European integration did not replace these national identities but it rather layered a supranational political structure on top of them. Hence, the European Union operates within a context wherein language remains to be closely tied with the aspects of national identity and sovereignty; and it is this historical legacy which helps explain why member states are reluctant to transfer authority over language and education to the EU level and moreover as to why multilingualism is both a value and a challenge within the Union (Sharma, 2013).

India presents a fundamentally different historical trajectory. Long before the emergence of the modern state, the Indian subcontinent was characterised by widespread multilingualism, linguistic variations, and very importantly also cultural exchange. Emeneau (1956) described India as a “linguistic area,” highlighting how languages from different families influenced one another through contact. This resulted in shared structural features across languages, despite them having different origins.

This historical context tends to remain of extreme significance because of its portrayal of the fact that linguistic diversity in India was not a modern problem. Instead, it was a deeply embedded social reality. Multilingualism was part of everyday life, wherein it helped in facilitating the factors of trade, governance, and cultural interaction. As a result, linguistic accommodation was not seen as a threat but as a normal feature of social organisation.

Colonial rule had introduced new dynamics into India’s linguistic landscape. English became the language of administration and elite power, wherein it created a hierarchy that privileged only those who had access to colonial education (Sharma, 2019). At the same time, colonial authorities simultaneously classified and codified these languages, linking them to the aspects of census categories and political representation.

These colonial legacies, furthermore, even continued to shape contemporary India. Wherein English remains to be the language which is associated with upward mobility and global connectivity, while also functioning as a "link language" across diverse regions. This dual role complicates the language question, as English is both a tool of inclusion and a marker of inequality at the same time. Thus, it can be said that the debates which prevailed at independence were, therefore, shaped not merely through the factor of linguistic diversity but also by concerns about reproducing colonial hierarchies.

Institutional Responses to Linguistic Diversity

The European Union and India, over a period of time, have adopted distinct institutional approaches towards the aspect of linguistic diversity, each reflecting their different historical contexts and political structures. The EU’s language regime continues to be based on the principle of formal equality, wherein all official languages are recognised and citizens have the right to communicate with the institutions in their own language. Such institutional policies reflect a strong normative commitment to both the aspects of inclusivity and cultural diversity.

However, the practical functioning of EU institutions is what often tends to reveal a different reality. A limited number of working languages are what dominate the decision-making processes, creating a gap between symbolic recognition and actual practice. This gap is also what can lead to the feelings of exclusion and complicate the development of a shared political identity. For example: The European Parliament operates with full multilingual interpretation, allowing representatives to speak in their own languages, while all official documents are translated into all recognised languages. At the same time, internal decision making within institutions such as the European Commission often relies on a limited number of working

languages, particularly English and French, in order to ensure efficiency (Sharma, 2013). This creates a situation where multilingualism is strongly protected at the formal and symbolic level, but more restricted in everyday administrative practice.

Furthermore, the EU's limited competence in language policy, due to the principle of subsidiarity, means that implementation remains fragmented across member states. India's approach continues to be one which is more deeply embedded in its institutional structure, wherein the Constitution does not declare a single national language but instead recognises the multiple languages prevailing through the Eighth Schedule. This recognition is complemented by federalism and the linguistic reorganisation of states. Thus, by aligning political boundaries with linguistic identities, India was able to reduce tensions and integrate the aspect of diversity into the political system (Sharma, 2019).

In the Indian context, multilingualism is reflected not only in constitutional recognition but also in everyday governance practices. Parliamentary proceedings are conducted primarily in Hindi and English, with translation facilities are available for other languages. At the state level, administration and political functioning take place largely in regional languages, reflecting the linguistic composition of each state. Similarly, while higher courts such as the Supreme Court primarily function in English, lower courts and state institutions often operate in regional languages. This layered system allows linguistic diversity to be accommodated across different levels of governance, although it also reflects certain hierarchies, particularly the continued dominance of English in elite and legal spaces.

This approach is what reflects a difference in the understanding of the relationship prevailing between the two factors of language and unity. Moreover, rather than viewing linguistic diversity as a threat, India's treatment of it as a reality that needed to be accommodated, was what allowed linguistic identities to coexist within a single political framework, strengthening rather than weakening the state.

Policy Gaps and Ongoing Challenges

In the European Union, the challenge lies less in formal exclusion and more in the tension between symbolic inclusivity and practical functioning. While citizens have the right to engage with EU institutions in their own language and official documents are translated accordingly, internal communication and decision-making often rely on a limited number of working languages. This creates a subtle gap between formal linguistic equality and the everyday experience of multilingual governance. As a result, the issue is not one of direct exclusion, but of how linguistic diversity is managed within institutional constraints.

In India, the challenges are more closely tied to implementation and internal hierarchies. While the constitutional framework is broadly inclusive, not all languages receive equal institutional support. Smaller and tribal languages often remain under-resourced, and the continued dominance of Hindi and English produces new forms of inequality. This raises an important question regarding the extent to which India's model is inclusive in practice. While linguistic

diversity is formally recognised, actual access to power and opportunity continues to be unevenly distributed, particularly in spaces where English retains its association with education, administration, and upward mobility.

Lessons for the European Union from India

India's experience tends to offer us with several important lessons for the European Union. Firstly, it goes ahead to demonstrate that political recognition of linguistic diversity can be something which reduces the conflict by affirming belonging. When linguistic identities are acknowledged, groups are less likely to feel excluded or marginalised. For instance, the linguistic reorganisation of states in India helped address regional demands based on language and reduced the likelihood of secessionist movements. By aligning administrative boundaries with linguistic identities, Indian state was able to transform potential conflict into a basis for political inclusion and stability.

Secondly, with regards to India, the importance of flexibility is one which tends to be highlighted. Language policies must be adaptable to changing social and political conditions. The EU's more rigid institutional framework can limit its ability to respond effectively to linguistic diversity.

Thirdly, India's case tends to portray evidently that the aspect of decentralisation can strengthen unity. By allowing the various linguistic groups to exercise political authority within their regions, the state was able to integrate diversity into its structure. This contrasts with the EU's more centralised institutional constraints.

Finally, the Indian case highlights that language is not only an administrative concern but also a deeply symbolic one. Ignoring linguistic identities can create perceptions of exclusion, even where formal rights exist. In this sense, the European Union's challenge is not simply to manage multilingualism efficiently, but to ensure that linguistic diversity contributes to a shared sense of belonging rather than remaining purely a formal principle.

Areas of Cooperation between India and the EU

The management of linguistic diversity done by both the parties tends to offer a plethora of significant opportunities for cooperation between India and the EU. In this case, both polities can benefit from each other, through sharing/exchanging experiences and approaches to multilingual governance. Through India's experience with federal accommodation, it can provide insights into managing diversity at scale, while the EU's institutional frameworks can offer lessons in the formal recognition and rights-based approaches.

Moreover, the cooperation between the two parties could also extend to areas such as multilingual education, preservation of endangered languages and digital governance. Along the passage of time, both India and the EU navigate increasingly diverse societies, thus through

fostering collaboration in these areas, they can strengthen their capacity to address these shared challenges.

Conclusion

Linguistic diversity is often seen as a challenge to political unity, particularly in large and complex polities. However, this paper has depicted that diversity does not inherently lead to fragmentation; adding onto which the experiences of India and the European Union demonstrate that the key issue is not diversity itself, but how it is governed.

India's approach, which is based upon the aspects of recognition, flexibility and decentralisation, offers valuable insights for the EU. While the two polities operate in different contexts, the underlying lesson remains to be clear, as per which, political unity does not require linguistic uniformity and instead requires institutions that can accommodate diversity while maintaining cohesion. As global societies become increasingly diverse, this lesson becomes ever more relevant.

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