



English Hegemony and Regional Language Resistance: Examining Linguistic Identity, Power, and Cultural Nationalism in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex interplay between English globalization and Indian regional languages through dual lenses of linguistic hegemony and resistance. While English's dominance creates hierarchies affecting education, media, and social mobility, regional language communities have mounted sustained resistance through cultural nationalism, language devotion movements, and policy advocacy. Drawing on postcolonial theory, language ecology frameworks, and sociolinguistic analysis, this study explores how English simultaneously functions as an instrument of opportunity and a force contributing to language shift. The research examines multiple dimensions: educational policies and their stratifying effects, digital divides and technological inequalities, economic gatekeeping through language requirements, and crucially, the resistance movements that have shaped language politics in India. Special attention is given to Tamil language devotion movements, anti-Hindi agitations, and the role of linguistic identity in regional political mobilization. Findings reveal that while English proficiency correlates with socioeconomic advancement, regional languages maintain vitality through deliberate acts of cultural assertion, institutional support, and grassroots mobilization. The study concludes that India's linguistic future depends on recognizing both the pragmatic value of English and the cultural-political significance of regional language movements in preserving multilingual democracy.

Keywords:- English Globalization, Indian Regional Languages, Language Devotion, Tamil Language Movements, Anti-Hindi Agitations, Language Policy

Introduction

India's linguistic landscape represents one of the world's most intricate language ecologies, encompassing constitutional recognition of 22 scheduled languages alongside hundreds of additional languages and dialects. This extraordinary diversity faces unprecedented pressures from English globalization, yet simultaneously demonstrates remarkable resilience through active resistance and cultural assertion. As Graddol observes, English functions as: “a language of opportunity and prestige in India, creating new hierarchies that often disadvantage speakers of regional languages” (Graddol 10). However, this observation captures only one dimension of a far more complex dynamic involving not merely

linguistic displacement but also vigorous counter-movements of language devotion and cultural nationalism.

The relationship between English and Indian languages cannot be understood through simple narratives of linguistic imperialism or inevitable language shift. Rather, as Ramaswamy demonstrates in her study of Tamil language movements, regional linguistic communities have developed what she terms "language devotion" intense emotional and political attachments that transform languages into objects of passionate allegiance (Ramaswamy 5). These movements have produced self-immolations for Tamil, decades-long anti-Hindi agitations, and the establishment of linguistic states, revealing that language politics in India involves fundamental questions of identity, power, and democratic representation.

This paper examines English's impact on Indian regional languages through an integrated framework that addresses both hegemonic pressures and resistance strategies. The central research questions investigate: How does English globalization affect the vitality, domains, and intergenerational transmission of regional languages? What forms of resistance have regional language communities mounted against linguistic hierarchies? How do language devotion movements intersect with broader struggles for political representation and cultural dignity? By analyzing educational policies, economic structures, technological infrastructures, and crucially language movements and cultural nationalism, this study provides a comprehensive account of contemporary language politics in India.

Theoretical Framework

Language Ecology and Linguistic Imperialism

Language ecology, as conceptualized by Mühlhäusler, provides a framework for understanding languages as existing within complex ecosystems characterized by interaction, competition, and mutual influence. He defines language ecology as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment" (Mühlhäusler 3). Within this framework, English's global dominance reshapes entire linguistic ecosystems, affecting resource allocation, prestige hierarchies, and functional domains. However, ecological perspectives also recognize that languages adapt, resist, and develop survival strategies within changing environments.

Phillipson's linguistic imperialism theory offers critical analysis of power dynamics inherent in English's global spread, arguing that: "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (Phillipson 47). Yet Phillipson's framework has been critiqued for potentially oversimplifying local agency. Canagarajah counters that many communities actively choose English for pragmatic reasons while simultaneously resisting cultural hegemony through various strategies of appropriation and resistance (Canagarajah 589). This dialectic between imposition and agency proves essential for understanding Indian language politics.

Language Devotion and Cultural Nationalism

Ramaswamy's concept of "language devotion" moves beyond conventional nationalist frameworks to capture the intense emotional, cultural, and political investments that speakers develop toward their languages. She argues that passions for Tamil "cannot be contained within a singular metanarrative of linguistic nationalism" but instead reflect complex imaginings of language as goddess, mother, and emblem of cultural identity (Ramaswamy 5). This framework illuminates how languages become objects of devotion that can inspire extraordinary sacrifice, including the self-immolations that marked Tamil language movements in the 1960s.

Brass provides complementary analysis of language politics in north India, demonstrating how "elite interests, popular passions, and social power" intersect in language

movements that profoundly shape political mobilization and intergroup relations (Brass 235). His work reveals that language conflicts involve not merely linguistic preferences but fundamental struggles over political power, economic resources, and cultural recognition. Language movements thus function simultaneously as vehicles for cultural preservation and instruments for political advancement.

Postcolonial Perspectives and Resistance

Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, emphasizes how colonial languages continue exerting influence long after formal colonialism ends, with "language becoming the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 7). However, postcolonial scholars also highlight acts of resistance, appropriation, and creative subversion through which formerly colonized peoples challenge linguistic hierarchies. In India, this manifests in complex negotiations where English is simultaneously adopted for instrumental purposes and resisted as a symbol of continued cultural domination.

Kachru's World Englishes framework positions India within the "Outer Circle," where English functions as an institutionalized second language with distinctive nativized features. He argues that "the nativization of English in the Outer Circle represents not linguistic deficit but creative adaptation" (Kachru 12). This perspective must be balanced against evidence of language shift affecting regional languages, while also acknowledging that language devotion movements demonstrate active resistance to English hegemony. The theoretical challenge lies in recognizing both structural linguistic inequalities and the agency of linguistic communities in shaping language outcomes.

Analysis: Domains of Impact and Resistance

Educational Language Policies and Practices

Education represents the primary domain where English's influence manifests most powerfully. India's three-language formula, introduced in 1968, theoretically promotes multilingualism through Hindi, English, and regional language instruction. However, implementation remains inconsistent, with increasing parental preference for English-medium schools reflecting what Mohanty describes as "anxiety about children's future opportunities in a globalized economy" (Mohanty 269). This shift produces profound consequences as regional languages lose prestige when excluded from higher education and technical fields.

Annamalai observes that: "when domains such as law, medicine, and engineering are taught exclusively in English, regional languages become marked as unsuitable for modern knowledge" (Annamalai 45). Research by Ramanathan demonstrates that students educated primarily in English often develop limited literacy in mother tongues, affecting engagement with regional literature and cultural texts (Ramanathan 187). This creates linguistic hierarchies where English proficiency becomes synonymous with education itself, while regional language competence is devalued as merely functional rather than intellectual.

Table 1 illustrates shifting patterns in medium of instruction across educational levels in urban India:

Educational Level	English Medium (%)	Regional Language Medium (%)	Bilingual (%)
Primary (Classes 1-5)	42	48	10
Secondary (Classes 6-10)	58	30	12
Higher Secondary (Classes 11-12)	71	20	9
Undergraduate	85	12	3
Postgraduate/Professional	96	3	1

Table 1. Medium of instruction distribution across educational levels in urban India (approximate percentages based on composite data from National Education Policy reports and sociolinguistic surveys).

The data reveals clear patterns: English dominance intensifies at higher educational levels while regional language instruction diminishes dramatically. By postgraduate levels, regional languages are nearly entirely displaced, with profound implications for knowledge production and regional languages' systematic exclusion from advanced learning domains.

Media, Technology, and Digital Divides

The digital revolution amplifies English's advantages while creating barriers for regional languages. Srinivasan reports that: “approximately 89% of Indian internet content is in English, despite only 10-15% of the population having functional English proficiency” (Srinivasan 234). This digital language gap creates information access barriers and reinforces perceptions that regional languages are unsuitable for technological contexts. However, recent developments in Unicode standardization and regional language computing have enabled greater digital presence for languages like Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali.

Challenges persist in natural language processing, voice recognition, and content creation tools, which remain more advanced for English. Kumar and Choudhury note that: “the lack of computational resources and corpus development for regional languages perpetuates their marginalization in digital spaces” (Choudhury 412). This technological inequality affects not only content consumption but also economic opportunities, as digital literacy increasingly means English literacy. Mass media presents similar patterns, with regional language television and newspapers maintaining strong audiences but prestige domains favoring English.

Economic Opportunities and Linguistic Gatekeeping

The correlation between English proficiency and economic opportunity functions as a primary driver of language shift. English dominates high-status employment sectors including information technology, international business, and professional services. LaDousa's ethnographic research demonstrates that: “Parents' educational choices are fundamentally shaped by perceptions that English proficiency is essential for their children's economic futures” (LaDousa 156). Studies by Chakraborty and Kapur indicate significant wage premiums for English-speaking workers, even controlling for education and experience (Chakraborty and Kapur 89).

However, this economic reality creates what Ramanathan terms “linguistic gatekeeping,” where English proficiency becomes a prerequisite for social mobility, effectively excluding those without access to quality English education (Ramanathan 201). The majority of India's population, particularly in rural areas and lower socioeconomic strata, has limited English proficiency yet faces increasing pressure to acquire it. This dynamic reinforces class stratification, with English functioning as both marker and mechanism of social distinction.

Intergenerational Transmission and Language Shift

Among the most concerning impacts of English globalization is its effect on intergenerational language transmission, particularly in urban middle-class families. Sircar and Chand reveal that: “An increasing number of urban parents use English as the primary language of communication with children, despite being native speakers of regional languages” (Sircar and Chand 178). This represents dramatic shifts from traditional patterns where regional languages served as mother tongues and primary socialization languages.

Children raised primarily in English often develop limited proficiency in heritage languages, affecting their ability to communicate with extended family and participate fully in regional linguistic communities. Vaish's Delhi research demonstrates that: “third-generation

urban families frequently exhibit heritage language erosion, where grandchildren cannot converse fluently with grandparents in the family's native language" (Vaish 267). UNESCO's language vitality framework identifies intergenerational transmission as critical for language endangerment, suggesting current trends pose genuine risks to some regional languages' long-term survival (UNESCO 8).

Language Devotion Movements and Cultural Resistance

Tamil Language Devotion and Anti-Hindi Agitations

The history of language resistance in India cannot be understood without examining Tamil language devotion movements, which represent one of the most intense language movements in modern history. Ramaswamy documents how, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Tamil speakers developed extraordinary emotional and political attachments to their language, imagining it as a goddess, mother, and embodiment of Dravidian cultural identity. This "language devotion" produced remarkable acts of sacrifice, including multiple self-immolations in the 1960s protesting Hindi imposition, with men declaring their willingness to die for Tamil's preservation (Ramaswamy 1-3).

The anti-Hindi agitations of 1937-1940 and 1964-1967 fundamentally shaped Indian language politics. When the Madras Presidency government, led by C. Rajagopalachari, introduced compulsory Hindi instruction in 1937, it triggered massive protests led by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) and the Self-Respect Movement. Brass notes that these movements involved "elite interests manipulating popular passions, but also genuine popular mobilization around linguistic identity" (Brass 156). The protests resulted in thousands of arrests, some deaths, and ultimately the withdrawal of the Hindi imposition policy, demonstrating that language movements could successfully challenge central government policies.

The 1964-1967 anti-Hindi agitations proved even more consequential. When the central government planned to phase out English as an official language in 1965, making Hindi the sole national language, Tamil Nadu erupted in protests. The intensity of resistance including self-immolations, strikes, and widespread civil disobedience forced the Indian government to amend the Official Languages Act, guaranteeing English's continued use for official purposes. This victory established precedents demonstrating that regional linguistic movements could constrain central language planning and preserve multilingual accommodation within Indian federalism.

Language Movements and Political Mobilization

Language devotion movements have profoundly shaped political mobilization throughout India. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) rose to power in 1967 largely through language-based mobilization, ending Congress dominance. The DMK's electoral success demonstrated that language could function as the basis for sustainable political movements challenging national parties. As Brass observes: "Language movements in India have been instruments of both cultural preservation and political empowerment, serving multiple agendas simultaneously" (Brass 248).

Beyond Tamil Nadu, language movements have shaped political landscapes across India. The demand for linguistic states, which led to the States Reorganization Act of 1956, reflected widespread sentiment that political boundaries should correspond with linguistic communities. While these reorganizations created new challenges, they also provided institutional frameworks for regional language preservation through state-level official language policies, regional language universities, and cultural institutions supporting linguistic heritage.

Contemporary language movements continue evolving. Recent debates over Hindi imposition in non-Hindi states reveal enduring sensitivities around linguistic hierarchy. Social media has enabled new forms of language activism, with hashtags like #TNSaysNoToHindi mobilizing resistance to perceived central government attempts to promote Hindi at regional languages' expense. These movements demonstrate that language devotion remains a potent political force capable of mobilizing mass sentiment and constraining language policy.

Institutional Resistance and Language Policy Advocacy

Regional language communities have developed institutional mechanisms for linguistic preservation and advocacy. State governments in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and other regions have established language academies, supported regional language publishing, and implemented preferential policies for regional language education. Tamil Nadu's policies requiring Tamil language knowledge for certain government positions exemplify institutional strategies for maintaining regional language relevance in official domains.

Universities dedicated to regional languages, such as Central Institute of Classical Tamil and various state language universities, serve as institutional bastions for linguistic scholarship and cultural preservation. These institutions conduct research on regional languages, train teachers, develop pedagogical materials, and advocate for language policies supporting multilingualism. While their resources pale compared to English-medium institutions, they represent significant investments in regional language futures.

Civil society organizations and literary associations continue playing crucial roles in language advocacy. Groups such as Tamil literary associations, Hindi Prachar Sabhas, and numerous state-level language organizations conduct classes, organize cultural events, publish literature, and lobby for policy changes. These grassroots efforts complement institutional initiatives, creating multilayered ecosystems supporting regional language vitality despite English hegemony's structural advantages.

Discussion: Hegemony, Resistance, and Linguistic Futures

The evidence presented reveals India's linguistic situation as characterized by simultaneous processes of hegemony and resistance. English undeniably provides access to global networks, economic opportunities, and international communication. For millions of Indians, English proficiency has enabled social mobility and participation in globalized sectors. However, these benefits emerge within contexts of structural inequality where English functions as what Ramanathan terms a "gatekeeper," systematically privileging certain populations while marginalizing others (Ramanathan 187).

Yet the narrative of inevitable English dominance and regional language decline proves inadequate when confronted with language devotion movements' history and persistence. Tamil language movements demonstrate that linguistic communities can mount effective resistance to imposed linguistic hierarchies, successfully challenging national language policies and preserving institutional spaces for regional languages. The anti-Hindi agitations' success in maintaining English alongside Hindi as an official language fundamentally altered India's linguistic landscape, preventing the monolingual future that many observers anticipated in the 1950s and 1960s.

The current trajectory suggests neither simple linguistic imperialism nor straightforward language maintenance but rather complex negotiations shaped by multiple factors: economic incentives favoring English, cultural attachments to regional languages, political mobilization around linguistic identity, and institutional arrangements accommodating (if imperfectly) multilingualism. As Brass notes: "language conflicts in India have been resolved through viable compromises that have profound consequences for empowerment and

disempowerment" (Brass 235). These compromises remain contested and require continuous renegotiation.

Regional languages retain considerable resilience, particularly in domains where language devotion movements have secured institutional protection: state-level governance, regional media, cultural production, and family communication. Languages like Tamil, with robust literary traditions, dedicated institutions, and political movements ensuring their continued relevance, have demonstrated ability to adapt while maintaining vitality. However, this vitality requires deliberate effort and cannot be assumed absent sustained institutional support and popular mobilization.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have significant implications for language policy, educational planning, cultural preservation, and democratic governance in India. First, educational policy must move beyond rhetorical commitment to multilingualism toward genuine implementation. This includes expanding regional language instruction in higher education, developing high-quality instructional materials in regional languages for technical subjects, and training teachers capable of delivering content effectively in multiple languages. The current pattern where English dominates higher education while regional languages are confined to primary levels is unsustainable for genuine multilingualism.

Second, economic structures must be reformed to value regional language proficiency alongside English. Government employment should more effectively implement language requirements favoring regional languages for state-level positions. Private sector employers might be incentivized to recognize multilingual capabilities as assets, particularly for roles serving regional markets. Creating economic value for regional language skills would counter current trends positioning them as sentimental or cultural rather than practical and valuable.

Third, technological infrastructure must be systematically developed for regional languages. This includes content creation, advanced computational tools, educational software, and accessibility features making digital spaces genuinely multilingual rather than English-dominant with minimal regional language presence. Public-private partnerships could accelerate development of these resources, ensuring regional languages maintain relevance in increasingly digital domains.

Fourth, lessons from language devotion movements must inform contemporary policy. The success of Tamil language movements demonstrates that linguistic communities can effectively mobilize for language preservation when they perceive genuine threats to linguistic identity. Rather than viewing such mobilization as divisive or problematic, policymakers should recognize it as democratic expression of cultural concerns deserving accommodation within India's federal structure. Language policy must balance national integration needs with respect for regional linguistic identities.

Fifth, civil society organizations and cultural institutions supporting regional languages require sustained funding and institutional backing. Language academies, literary associations, regional universities, and cultural organizations perform crucial roles in language maintenance that market forces alone cannot sustain. Just as nations invest in preserving historical monuments and cultural heritage, linguistic heritage requires similar commitment and resources.

Conclusion

The impact of English as a global language on Indian regional languages represents one of contemporary India's most significant sociolinguistic transformations, involving fundamental questions of identity, power, and democratic representation. This paper has analyzed both hegemonic pressures and resistance strategies, examining how English

globalization affects educational practices, media and technology, economic opportunities, intergenerational transmission, and crucially how language devotion movements have shaped language politics through cultural nationalism and political mobilization.

The evidence reveals patterns of language shift where English increasingly dominates prestige domains while regional languages face contracting spheres of use, particularly among urban educated populations. However, this process is neither complete nor irreversible. Regional languages retain considerable vitality in domains where language movements have secured institutional protection, and the history of anti-Hindi agitations demonstrates that linguistic communities can successfully resist imposed hierarchies when they mobilize effectively around language devotion.

The tension between global communication needs and local linguistic identity is not unique to India, but India's extraordinary linguistic diversity and robust history of language movements make the stakes particularly high. Balancing these competing demands requires moving beyond simplistic narratives portraying English and regional languages as necessarily in competition. Instead, paradigms recognizing complementary functions of different languages within multilingual repertoires, supported by institutional arrangements respecting language devotion while accommodating pragmatic English needs, offer more promising directions.

Language devotion movements provide crucial lessons for linguistic futures. They demonstrate that languages can inspire extraordinary allegiance and sacrifice, that linguistic communities can effectively mobilize for language preservation, and that language policy must accommodate regional sensitivities within democratic frameworks. The self-immolations for Tamil, decades of anti-Hindi protests, and continued language movements in various states reveal that language politics involves fundamental human attachments that rational-choice frameworks alone cannot explain.

Ultimately, the fate of Indian regional languages in an era of English globalization depends on choices made by policymakers, educators, parents, language activists, and communities. These choices shape not only which languages survive but also what kind of multilingual democracy India becomes one viewing linguistic diversity as obstacle to overcome or as heritage to preserve and resource to cultivate. The evidence suggests that with deliberate effort, equitable policies, genuine commitment to multilingualism, and respect for language devotion movements, India can maintain its linguistic richness while engaging productively with global communication networks. Such an outcome would benefit not only India but also global linguistic diversity, demonstrating that languages can thrive together through accommodation, respect, and institutional support rather than requiring one language's dominance at others' expense. The legacy of language devotion movements reminds us that this outcome, though requiring sustained commitment, remains achievable through democratic mobilization and policy innovation.

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