

MULTILINGUALISM in India

By Jessica Chandras



A sign at the border with Pakistan in the state of Punjab featuring the same message written in three different languages (Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, and English) and four different scripts from the top down: Devanagari (Hindi), Punjabi, Roman (English), and Perso-Arabic (Urdu). Source: © Hemis/Alamy.

With a growing population of just over 1.3 billion people, India is an incredibly diverse country in many ways. This article will focus specifically on contemporary linguistic diversity in India, first with an overview of India as a multilingual country just before and after Independence in 1947 and then through a brief outline of impacts of multilingualism on business and schools, as well as digital, visual, and print media.

India is home to many native languages, and it is also common that people speak and understand more than one language or dialect, which can entail the use of different scripts as well. India's 2011 census documents that 121 languages are spoken as mother tongues, which is defined as the first language a person learns and uses.¹ Of these languages, the Constitution of India recognizes twenty-two of them as official or "scheduled" languages. Articles 344(1) and 351 of the Constitution of India, titled the Eighth Schedule, recognizes the following languages as official languages of states of India: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.²

Six languages also hold the title of classical languages (Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu), which are determined to have a history of recorded use for more than 1,500 years and a rich body of literature. Furthermore, for a contemporary language to also be a classical language, it must be an original language and cannot be a variety, such as a dialect, stemming from another language. Just as there are many people who wish for their mother tongues to be recognized as official, scheduled languages, there are also efforts to add Indian languages to the list of classical languages. Once a language has the official status of a classical language, the Ministry of Education

organizes international awards for scholars of those languages, sets up language studies centers, and grants funding to universities to promote the study of the language. Interestingly, the Constitution of India lists no national language for the country as a whole.

Of the official, scheduled languages, Modern Standard Hindi—as an umbrella term for a family of languages—has the most mother tongue speakers, with around 528 million speakers, or 44 percent of India's population, followed by Bengali with around 97 million speakers, or 8 percent of the population. Marathi has around 83 million speakers, or 7 percent of the population, and Telugu speakers number around 81 million, or almost 6 percent of the population. Speakers who list the remaining official languages as their mother tongues also number between 2 and 4 percent of the population, as recorded in the 2011 census. It is interesting to note that due to India's large population, native speakers of these regional Indian languages often outnumber native speakers of other major world languages such as Korean—with 77.2 million native speakers—and Italian—with 67 million native speakers—as of 2020.³

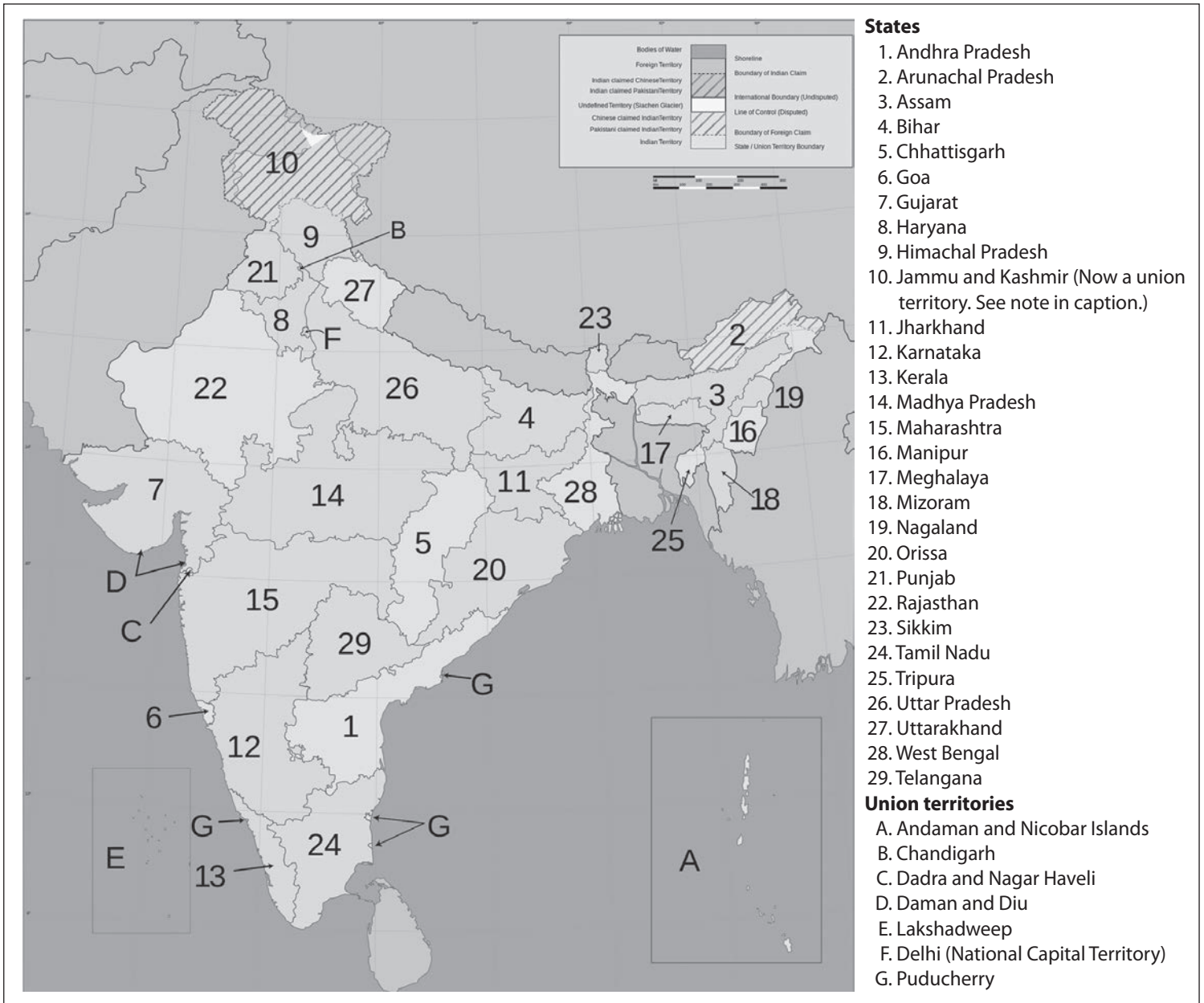
Languages in India are categorized into language families based on their different linguistic origins, which often include different scripts as well. The main language families include Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, and Sino-Tibetan. Bodo is the Sino-Tibetan language spoken in northeastern Indian states with the most speakers (1.4 million). Languages considered to be mother tongues or regional languages in the south of India have grammatical structures and scripts with Dravidian roots, and languages used in the central and northern regions of India are part of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Many central and northern Indian languages use scripts derived from the Nagari script. Contemporary variations of Hindi use the Devanagari script, and scripts used in Gujarati, Punjabi, and Marathi use Nagari-derived scripts or versions of Devanagari that include some differences in their alphabets.

The 22 scheduled languages of the Republic of India

Language	Family	Speakers (in millions, 2011)	Official Recognition in State(s)
Assamese	Indo-Aryan, Eastern	15.3	Assam
Bengali	Indo-Aryan, Eastern	97.2	West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, and, Jharkhand
Bodo	Tibeto-Burman	1.48	Assam
Dogri	Indo-Aryan, Northwestern	2.6	Jammu and Kashmir
Gujarati	Indo-Aryan, Western	55.5	Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, and Gujarat
Hindi	Indo-Aryan	528	Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bihar, Dadra and Nagar Haveli Daman and Diu, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh
Kannada	Dravidian	43.7	Karnataka
Kashmiri	Indo-Aryan, Dardic	6.8	Jammu and Kashmir
Konkani	Indo-Aryan, Southern	2.25	Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, and Goa
Maithili	Indo-Aryan, Eastern	13.6	Jharkhand
Malayalam	Dravidian	34.8	Kerala, Lakshadweep, and Puducherry
Manipuri	Tibeto-Burman	1.8	Manipur
Marathi	Indo-Aryan, Southern	83	Maharashtra
Nepali	Indo-Aryan, Northern	2.9	Sikkim and West Bengal
Odia	Indo-Aryan, Eastern	37.5	Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal
Punjabi	Indo-Aryan, Northwestern	33.1	Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, and West Bengal
Sanskrit	Indo-Aryan	0.02	Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand
Santali	Austroasiatic	7.3	Jharkhand
Sindhi	Indo-Aryan, Northwestern	2.7	Sindhi is not official in any states or union territories
Tamil	Dravidian	69	Tamil Nadu and Puducherry
Telugu	Dravidian	81.1	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Puducherry
Urdu	Indo-Aryan, Central	50.7	Jammu and Kashmir, Telangana, Jharkhand, Delhi, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal

The Eighth Schedule to the Indian Constitution contains a list of twenty-two scheduled languages. This table lists the twenty-two scheduled languages of the Republic of India set out in the Eighth Schedule as of May 2008, together with the regions where they are widely spoken and used as the state's official language. However, states are not mandated to choose their official languages from the scheduled languages. Sindhi is not official in any states or union territories even though it is official in the Eighth Schedule. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y2cb8wrt>.

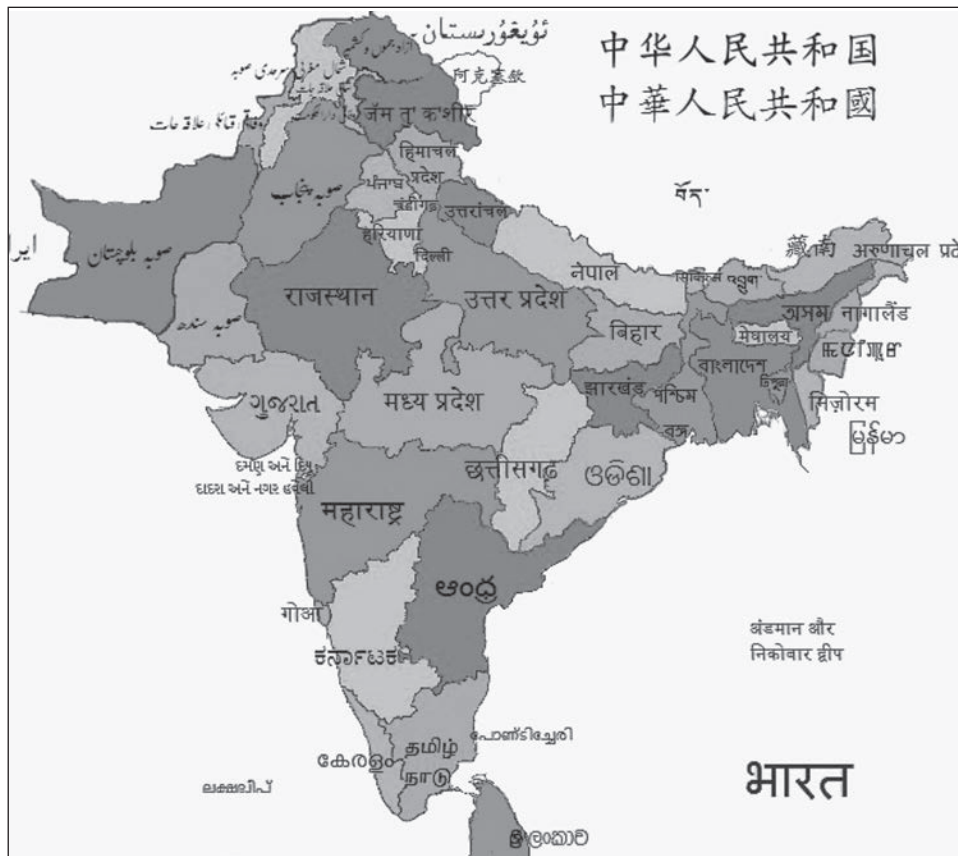
States and Territories of India



India consists of twenty-eight states and eight union territories. All states, and the two union territories of Puducherry and Delhi (National Capital Territory), have elected legislatures and governments patterned on the Westminster model (three arms of government: the executive, the legislature, and an independent judiciary). The other five union territories are directly ruled by the central government through appointed administrators. In 1956, under the States Reorganization Act, states were formed on a linguistic basis. Note: Jammu and Kashmir became a union territory in 2019. The map was made before this year when Jammu and Kashmir was an Indian state. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yyv7be5j>.

Similarly, Modern Standard Hindi and Urdu are grammatically identical, though they often differ in some vocabulary and their use of scripts, as Urdu uses a modified form of the Perso–Arabic script. As Hindi and Urdu are often considered to be one language with two scripts, a common belief is that the distinction among speaking and writing Hindi and Urdu falls along a religious divide between Hindus and Muslims, where Hindus are listed as Hindi speakers and Muslims as Urdu speakers in government documents such as the census.⁴ However, in practice, the distinction between Hindi and Urdu speakers is much more fluid and complex, as linguistic boundaries rely more on geographic location and speech community.

Another aspect of India's multilingualism is that each mother tongue, or regional language, roughly belongs to one or more states. India's twenty-eight states have been largely organized along linguistic lines since the 1950s, just after Independence, with the formation of the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh in 1953 for Telugu speakers. Andhra Pradesh was created after prolonged protests and strikes by Telugu speakers, which included the prominent activist Potti Sreeramulu fasting for the creation of a Telugu state until his death in 1952.⁵ A new state was finally created in 1953 by dividing the Tamil- and Telugu-speaking regions in what, under the British, was called the Madras



Indian state names in the script of each state's regional language (Note: the map's creator is Japanese hence the Kanji in the top right). Source: *New World Encyclopedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/y5jtgaoy>.

Presidency. Immediately after Independence, the country retained similar political divisions it had under colonial rule, which newly independent Indians felt did not accurately represent them in the new government. The state reorganization movement for Andhra Pradesh culminated in the government-organized Dhar commission, which was ordered to investigate reordering additional Indian state borders along the lines of linguistic communities, or groups of people who speak the same language. The commission produced the State Reorganization Act of 1956, which called for states to be formed to represent linguistic groups rather than to stay the way the country was divided over the course of British rule.

Following the division of the state of Andhra Pradesh and the orders of the State Reorganization Act of 1956, the states of Kerala, Mysore, and Madras were formed. (In 1969, Madras was renamed Tamil Nadu, and in 1973, Mysore was renamed Karnataka.) In 1956 as well, the princely state of Hyderabad was divided between Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. Just as the state of Andhra Pradesh was formed after prolonged protests for the rights of Telugu speakers, the Province of Bombay was also divided between Marathi and Gujarati speakers in 1960 into the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The bustling port city of Bombay, later renamed Mumbai in 1995, became part of the state of Maharashtra. Large reorganization efforts along the lines of language and religious communities continued with the 1966 reorganization of Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) and Punjab into three new states, Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh; and India's northeastern region also underwent a linguistic and communal reorganization into different states between the years of 1963 and 1987.

Multilingualism in India has therefore played a key role in the country's contemporary politics. State boundaries were drawn along the lines of language groups, even though regions remain linguistically diverse, because languages in India can be an important way of defining one's identity. Many people in different Indian regions in cultural and religious groups retain distinct identities that set them apart from other communities through language. As India is culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse, language is one way people maintain group identities. Identity politics have also made mother tongues an object and mode of political struggle. Authors of the State Reorganization Act felt that democratic participation would grow if local populaces could access information and participate in government programs in their mother tongues. Language is a basis of identity and is why, when state boundaries were being redrawn after Independence in 1947, languages and the areas in which they were spoken were utmost factors of importance in where the boundaries of new Indian states would be.

The Hindi Belt



The "Hindi Belt" further identified as languages distinct from Modern Standard Hindi. Source: Basic map at *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y422o2ac>. Modifications by Willa Davis.

Today, there are twenty-eight states in India and eight union territories, or areas directly governed by the federal government, and each state has at least one official language and many have two, in addition to English. In this way, with unique languages and scripts attributed to each state, India often seems like a collection of distinct countries due to the cultural and linguistic differences between states. Due to this vast diversity in languages and the way language is closely tied to identity, sometimes there are also struggles along religious and political lines that play out through language. Hindu nationalists engage in movements to spread the use of Hindi and Sanskrit as a means to spread the Hindu religion as well. Some have also felt that the distinct regional languages of states should indicate that people who do not speak those languages from birth should not be allowed to reside and work in states where they do not belong to the linguistic community. This was the message of the conservative party, the Shiv Sena, in Maharashtra.

English as an Indian Language

Adding to the complexity of the history of languages in South Asia, the English language was also integrated into the social fabric of the region insofar as it played a key role as a unifying language in the Constitution among north and south India at the time of Independence in 1947. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), also known by the name Mahatma, which means “Great Soul,” was a famous activist who led many Indians in peaceful protests against British rule. Gandhi and his supporters made concessions for the English language to remain in use in the new nation. They found English incredibly useful for unifying the country despite their support for Hindustani, the name for the mix of Hindi and Urdu commonly used in the northern regions of India, as the national language. Paradoxically for Gandhi and his supporters, English represented a dividing force that emphasized the distance between educated Indian elites, who were more aligned with British colonizers, and non-English-speaking, often-uneducated masses. Gandhi maintained that to have a successful Independence movement was to govern through Indian ways, including through Indian regional languages. During the late colonial period, Gandhi addressed audiences from 1916 to 1928 over English linguistic colonization in education. He called for education in regional languages, stating, “The question of vernaculars as media of instruction is of national importance,” and he criticized how “English-educated Indians are the sole custodians of public and patriotic work”; he also said the “neglect of the vernaculars means national suicide.”⁶ However, the question of a national unifying language at Independence was a complicated one, as Gandhi’s call for Hindustani to wholly replace English was also rejected. Hindustani, later known as a variety of Hindi and Urdu, is not commonly spoken across all of India, and it is considered a northern Indian regional language since it is distinct from the language families and scripts used in south India. English, therefore, served as a utilitarian language to connect disparate and diverse areas of the newly unified country, as it still does today. Now, Indian English, with a unique vocabulary and accent, is a recognized variety of English in the world.

Ultimately, the English language was written into India’s new Constitution as a language to help with the new country’s transition from a British colonial subject to independent governance. Specifically, the 1949 original Constitution of India states that “business in Parliament shall be transacted in Hindi or in English” in Article 210, Article 343 states that “the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script” and “for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement: provided that the president may, during the said period, by order authorize the use of the Hindi language in addition to the English language.”⁷ The intention of including English as a language for official government purposes along with Hindi was that English would be shed as the new nation matured.

In 1963, the impending transition away from English brought about similar concerns over the need for a unifying language, which were voiced at the time of Independence. Parliament enacted the Official Languages Act of 1963 to continue the use of English and section 3 of the act extended the implementation of English for official purposes along with Hindi.⁸ India decided to keep English as a unifying language to connect parts of the country where Modern Standard Hindi is not commonly spoken, such as in the southern Indian states with different scripts and language roots. While English is also a legacy of the British in India, it remains a tool and window through which to gain wider knowledge and understanding of the country. English also connects India with other English-speaking regions of the world.

Multilingualism in Daily Life

As there are many languages in India, many Indians can speak, read, and/or write in multiple languages, and multilingualism therefore is a part of daily life. Challenges and advantages of linguistic diversity affect the everyday lives of Indians in terms of businesses, educational institutions, and media. Due to the widespread use of English in India, the country is home to many international companies where English is commonly used for work. As English fluency often means higher socioeconomic status in India, middle- and upper-class Indians who have greater access to English have



Newspapers in different languages and scripts. Source: Scroll.in at <https://tinyurl.com/y6l74zks>.

relative ease when working, studying, traveling, and immigrating to areas of the world where English is a lingua franca, or common language.

English is used in many office settings, especially in the international businesses and multinational corporations housed in India. Businesses in Indian cities hire employees from all over the country, and English is a common language among people with different mother tongues. In shops and supermarkets, many labels are written in English in the Roman script.

Other than English in business and commerce, many people also use Modern Standard Hindi as a common language, especially in the northern regions of India. In many of these places, mixing two or more languages or language varieties together when speaking is a prevalent practice known as “code-switching.”

Example of code-switching in conversation:

Waiter: *Aur chahiye?*

(Do you want anything else?) [Hindi]

Man: *Don coffee pahije*

(We want two coffees) [Marathi]

Code-switching as a practice is distinct from commonly used English words that have been subsumed into other Indian languages, which are called “loan” or “borrowed” words.⁹ While English and forms of code-switching are incorporated into Indian corporate culture, many people find themselves facing barriers to communication in these settings if they are not fluent in English or Hindi.

Example of loan words:

Teacher to the class: OK, all of you, open like this. *Saglyana asa ghya aani*, first page *oguda*, first page *war kay lihile?*

(Everyone take it like this and open to the first page. On the first page, what is written?)

[English and Marathi]

The merits of multilingual education have dominated the field of education policy since the colonial period in India. Education in India is delivered in many different languages, but two languages are the most popular: English and Hindi. Additionally, many schools have instruction in students’ mother tongues or the regional state language as well. A plan for trilingual learning, called the three-language formula (TLF), was adopted into education policy by the Ministry of Education in 1968 and has been in discussion in parliament since 1948, just after Independence. The three-language formula requires schoolchildren to “(a) study and to receive content area instruction for twelve years in their mother tongue or the regional (state) language (which for some children will be one and the same); (b) study Hindi or English for ten to twelve years; and (c) study a modern Indian language (i.e., any one of the “scheduled” languages) or a foreign language for three to five years.” However, implementation of the TLF varies widely across the country today, with many English-language schools teaching limited English or only using English books and classroom materials. The idealized linguistic model presented in the 1968 TLF policy is meant to prepare students to be trilingual should

students choose to enter the predominantly English-language higher education system and/or a globalized workforce. Proponents of multilingual education in India call attention to the importance of the three-language formula in adequately preparing primary and secondary school students for the linguistic demands of higher education, while also maintaining the rich linguistic heritage of India.

Even outside of education and business, Indians encounter English and multiple other Indian regional languages in media every day. They are especially likely to speak or read English in their daily lives if they are among the middle and upper socioeconomic classes, as increased English fluency aligns closely with socioeconomic class. There are many print media publications such as newspapers and magazines in English. Each city has at least one local English-language publication, and major print and online national publications can be found in Hindi and English. Each state's news media publications are most commonly consumed in regional languages.

Visual media as well caters to regional language-speaking audiences, where local news broadcasts will be in the regional language and national news segments or specific programs will take place in Hindi. It is also becoming increasingly common for English to be used as part of code-switching practices in visual media, though English-only Indian broadcasts may be available at certain times or through special subscriptions or satellite television programming. In India, many regions have local film industries as well, where movies and television shows are produced in regional languages. Bollywood, the largest film industry in India, is located in Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra and produces films in Hindi. Bollywood movies are popular all over the world and can be viewed with subtitles for non-Hindi-speaking audiences. Interestingly, as of yet, no mainstream visual entertainment media industry in India makes English-only film or television productions, unlike in news and online digital media. It cannot be emphasized enough that as access and proliferation of English varies substantially along socioeconomic class lines, access to English in business, education, and media is linked to international capital and has a great capacity to increase one's economic and social position.

Conclusion

As a multilingual country, India's diversity has proven to be both a strength and a challenge to unifying the nation. Hopefully, this essay illustrates how multiple languages have shaped policies from education to the political boundaries of states, and, stemming from a colonial footprint and global pressures for greater use of English in international networks, the high demand for the use of English in India.

One can see there is a careful balance to multilingualism in India. English and languages like Hindi are deemed necessary for interaction in national and international communities beyond state and national borders, while mother tongues or regional languages are also made relevant through local state governments, institutions, and cultural identity. In this way, the cultivation and practices of multilingualism in India lends itself to more than just a preservation of unique, regional identities but has great impact on how Indians interact with fellow Indians and much of the world. Multilingualism in India defines the nation within global and national networks and communities for business, education, and media. As language plays an important part in our daily interactions, multilingualism and linguistic diversity in India have shaped the country and unique cultural practices and policies within it. ■

NOTES

1. "2011 Census Data," Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, <https://tinyurl.com/y66egqfl>.
2. See the Eighth Schedule of The Constitution of India, 1949
3. *Ethnologue, Languages of the World*. Web archive (1992) at the Library of Congress at <https://tinyurl.com/y6s2yjd3>.
4. Christopher Rolland King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in the Nineteenth Century North India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994).
5. Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
6. M. K. Gandhi 1917 as cited in *Speeches and Writings of M. K. Gandhi* 1922, <https://tinyurl.com/ybxaft9e>, 307.
7. Articles 210 and 243 of The Constitution of India, 1949
8. Official Languages Act, 1963, section 3
9. Harold F. Schiffman and Michael C. Shapiro, *Language and Society in South Asia* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981).

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