Consolidation of India as a Nation (I)

A major problem, perhaps the most serious one, that India has faced since 1947 has been of national unity or consolidation of the nation. The problem is also sometimes referred to as national integration or the integration of Indian people as a political community.

Unity in Diversity

The Indian nation is the product of a historical process and has been therefore in the making for very long, at least some five centuries. The roots of India's nationhood lie deep in its history and also in its experience of the struggle for independence. Pre-colonial India had already acquired some elements of common existence and common consciousness. Despite its immense cultural diversity, certain strands of a common cultural heritage had developed over the centuries, knitting its people together and giving them a sense of oneness, even while inculcating tolerance of diversity and dissent. As the poet Rabindranath Tagore put it, the unity of India is the 'unity of spirit'. Elements of political, administrative and economic unity had developed especially under the Mughals. The politics of the rulers and their territorial ambitions often cut across regions and were, at their most ambitious, subcontinental in their reach. Also, despite backward means of transport and communication, a great deal of India-wide trade, specialization of production and credit networks developed, especially during the late medieval period. A feeling of Indianness, however vague, had come into being, as testified by the currency of the concepts of Bharat Varsha and Hindustan. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, the colonialization of the Indian economy, society and polity further strengthened the process of India's unification. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Indians were more and more sharing common economic and political interests and social and cultural development even though they continued to be differentiated by language and ethnicity.

The national movement, as seen in Chapter 3, played a pivotal role in welding Indians together politically and emotionally into a nation and integrating them into 'a common framework of political identity and loyalty'. The depth, duration and deep social penetration of this movement carried the feeling of unity and nationhood to the mass of the people.

The leaders of the national movement realized that the making of the nation was a prolonged and continuous process, and one which was open to continuous challenges and interruption, disruption and even reversal. One such disruption had already occurred in 1947. As founders of the republic, these leaders were therefore fully aware that after independence too the process of unifying India and national integration was to be carefully sustained, promoted and nurtured through ideological and political endeavours. In fact, the leaders of India after 1947 saw the preservation and consolidation of India's unity as their biggest challenge. As Nehru put it in 1952, 'the most important factor, the overriding factor, is the unity of India'.[1] To quote him again: 'Personally, I feel,' he said in 1957, 'that the biggest task of all is not only the economic development of India as a whole, but even more so the psychological and emotional integration

of the people of India.'[2]

India's complex diversity is legendary. It consists of a large number of linguistic, cultural and geographic-economic zones. It has followers of different religions, Hindus, Muslims, Christians. Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists and Jews, apart from tribals with myriad belief systems. In 1950, the Indian constitution recognized fourteen major languages, besides hundreds others, many of which were spoken by just a million persons. The 1961 Census listed 1,549 languages as mother tongues. The tribals, constituting over 6 per cent of the population, are dispersed all over India.

Given this diversity, the leaders of the national movement realized that the Indian nation had to be built on a very broad foundation. India could be unified and its segmentation overcome only by accepting this immense diversity and not counterposing it to the process of nation-in-the-making. The emergence of a strong national identity and the preservation of India's rich diversity were seen as simultaneous processes. Regional cultural identities would develop not in conflict with but as part of the all-India identity. This entire outlook was epitomized in Nehru's approach who wrote in early 1951: 'We have to remember always that India is a country with a variety of cultures, habits, customs and ways of living . . . It is very necessary, I think, for all of us to remember that this wonderful country of ours has infinite variety and there is absolutely no reason why we should try to regiment it after a single pattern. Indeed that is ultimately impossible.'[3] At the same time, the hope as well as the answer were there: 'But India is far greater, far richer and more varied than any part of it. We have to develop an outlook which embraces all this variety and considers it our very own.'[4] Thus, the differences in language, culture, religion and ethnicity were to be seen not as obstacles to be overcome, not as antithetical to national consolidation, but as positive features that were sources of strength to emerging nationhood. Consequently, the consolidation of independent India was to occur around the concept of 'unity in diversity'.

It was, however, recognized that the diversity of India could also be a source of weakness. Diversity could be used for divisive purposes and transformed into disruptive tendencies, such as communalism, casteism and linguistic or regional exclusiveness. The problem of integrating diverse loyalties was therefore quite real, especially as rapid social changes led to increase in the scale and number of social conflicts. The issues of jobs, educational opportunities, access to political power and share in the larger economic cake could and did fuel rivalries and conflicts based on religion, region, caste and language. Special efforts were necessary, different from those in other parts of the world, to carefully promote national unity. The broad strategy for national consolidation after 1947 involved territorial integration, mobilization of political and institutional resources, economic development and adoption of policies which would promote social justice, remove glaring inequalities and provide equal opportunities.

The leadership evolved a political institutional structure conducive to national consolidation. At the heart of this structure lay the inauguration of a democratic and civil libertarian polity. The argument was rejected that democracy and national integration were not compatible in the case of newly liberated and developing countries, and that an authoritarian political structure was needed to hold together such a diverse nation as India. On the contrary, precisely because India

was so diverse it needed democracy rather than force or coercion to bind it. Nehru repeatedly warned his countrymen that in India 'any reversal of democratic methods might lead to disruption and violence'. India, he underlined, could only be held together by a democratic structure with full freedom as also opportunity for the diverse socio-economic, cultural and political voices to express themselves.

The constitutional structure established in 1950 encompassed the demands of diversity as well as the requirements of unity. It provided for a federal structure with a strong Centre but also a great deal of autonomy for the states. The makers of the constitution kept in view the difference between decentralization and disintegration and between unity and integration and centralization. The constitutional structure was not only conducive to national integration but provided the basic framework within which the struggle against divisive forces could be carried on. The political leadership was to use elections both to promote national consolidation and to legitimize its policies of integration. The parliament was the institution where basic and ultimate power resided and which acted as the open arena where different political trends could express themselves as also contend for power. Invariably, the issues and problems, as also programmes and policies, debated there were all-India in scale. As Asoka Mehta put it, the parliament acted as the great unifier of the nation.

Also, political parties acted as a great integrating force. All the major post-1947 political parties —Socialist Party, Communist Party of India, Jan Sangh and later the Swatantra Party—were all-India in character and in their organization and ideology; they stood for the unity of the country. They strove for national goals and mobilized people on an all-India basis and on all-India issues even when their capacity to do so was limited to particular regions. All this was perhaps even more true of Congress in the post-independence years. It had a strong and large organization covering almost all parts of the country. It was able to maintain internal party coherence and unity, and was also willing to play the role of a cementing force in society and polity. It is important to remember that immediately after independence, with the rapid marginalization of the communal parties, the major divide in Indian politics and among the intelligentsia was on political and ideological grounds rather than on the basis of caste, religion or language. It is also significant that the major vocal social groups and classes—the bourgeoisie, the working class and the intelligentsia—were all-India in outlook and stood for national unity. Indian nationalism, both before and after independence, had little difficulty in coming to terms with the emerging class consciousness as also class organizations such as trade unions and Kisan Sabhas on one side and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) on the other. No section of Indian society or polity saw loyalty to a class or class organization as threatening national cohesion.

The role of the leadership and its manner of functioning in nation-making and national consolidation is quite important. The leaders of the national movement thought in national terms and were fully committed to national unity and consolidation, and this commitment was widely accepted. Further, the prominent leaders of independent India—Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad—were not associated with any one region, language, religion, or caste. This was also true of the prominent Opposition leaders such as Jayaprakash Narayan, J.B.

Kripalani, Rammanohar Lohia, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, B.T. Ranadive and Ajoy Ghosh.

A major asset of the Congress leadership was that it was well versed in accommodative politics. As brought out in Chapter 3, it had been able to keep united diverse political and ideological trends during the anti-imperialist struggle. Following this, after 1947, despite near-total political dominance, it was willing to conciliate and accommodate, to listen to and appease the Opposition parties and dissenting groups. In particular, it was quite sensitive to popular rumblings on linguistic or other cultural issues. Reacting strongly to violence, it responded, often sympathetically, to demands pressed through non-violent means and mass backing. Nehru, for example, was willing to persuade and accommodate the Communists once they gave up recourse to violence. Other political parties too, including the CPI, came to share after some time the same means, methods and values for resolving social conflicts, differing only in rhetoric.

The Indian army and administrative services were also a force for forging national unity. India developed after 1947 a national administrative service with recruitment to its top echelons, the IAS, the IPS, and other central services, taking place on the basis of individual merit, irrespective of caste or religion, from all regions and linguistic areas. These services were all-India in character and sentiment and all officers selected were given common training and owed allegiance to the central government, which also had the ultimate power to promote or discipline them. The central services, as also the state services, were basically nonpolitical and accepted the authority of the party which was voted to power by the people. Likewise, the army was a national force whose officers and ranks were recruited from all parts of the country.

The Indian economy, national market, and transport and communication networks were further unified after 1947. Industrial development was promoted on a national scale and dams, steel mills, fertilizer plants, cement factories, and heavy machinery and electric plants soon became symbols of national endeavour as well as national unity.

Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders saw economic development as essential for national consolidation. Soon after independence, the government set up a Planning Commission and took active measures for planned economic development. Though the government and the Planning Commission did not succeed in putting an end to regional economic disparities, they did avoid inequality in the distribution of economic resources among states. In general, the central government followed accommodative policies towards the states. Consequently, though there was constant grumbling and plenty of grievances there was no serious discontent in the states and regions on grounds of discrimination by the central government and therefore no separatist feelings on that account.

National integration also required policies which would promote social justice and greater social and economic equality. The national movement had also linked the process of nation-in-the-making with socio-economic changes in the interests of the oppressed and the deprived. Consolidation of the nation after independence had to be judged in terms of how it affected their lives. The entire Indian people and not merely the middle and upper classes had to benefit from the coming of independence and processes of economic development and political democracy.

The constitution laid the basis for reduction of social disparity by putting an end to any

discrimination on grounds of religion, caste or sex. Redeeming the national movement's major pledge to the depressed sections of society, it provided reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in educational institutions, employment and in the legislatures. Soon after 1947, a number of social reforms and welfare laws were passed. Landlordism was abolished and there was some redistribution of land. A law was passed making untouchability an offence. Unfortunately, no struggle against the hierarchical caste system followed, so that, on the one hand caste discrimination and oppression continued, on the other, casteism or the use of caste solidarity for electoral and other political purposes began to grow. The momentum of social reform was lost by the early 1950s. Removal of social oppression and social discrimination and exploitation, based on caste, religion, language or ethnicity, and of gross economic inequality has remained the weakest part of the agenda for national integration.

From the start, the founding fathers stood for secularism as the basis for the nation. Undaunted by Partition and the accompanying riots, they remained loyal to the secular vision of the national movement. They also dealt firmly with communal violence and on the whole succeeded in protecting the religious minorities.

Independent India's foreign policy served as another unifying force. The policy of non-alignment and anti-colonialism and Nehru's growing stature as a world figure contributed to a sense of national pride in India among all sections of people all over the country and irrespective of their political alignment.

At the moment of freedom, the need for unity was urgent but also present was the problem of integrating diverse loyalties. The strategies and approaches promoting integration required time but the people were in a hurry and there was plenty of scope for conflicts. Many observers, in fact, predicted growing disunity and even break-up of the country. In the next section and the following chapters we will study some of the areas of diversity which produced conflicts and the manner in which these differences were sought to be resolved.

The Language Problem

The language problem was the most divisive issue in the first twenty years of independent India, and it created the apprehension among many that the political and cultural unity of the country was in danger. People love their language; it is an integral part of culture.

Consequently, linguistic identity has been a strong force in all societies. This is even more true of a multilingual society like India's. Linguistic diversity would inevitably give birth to strong political currents around issues linked to language, such as educational and economic development, job and other economic opportunities and access to political power.

The Indian constitution recognizes twenty-two major languages, including English and Sanskrit. In addition, there are a myriad languages spoken by the tribals and others, with or without their own scripts. The model that independent India has adopted is not that of assimilation into, or suppression of, the many languages by one of them. This is in any case impossible in a democratic polity. The feasible option is to accept and live with this 'multiplicity' in a manner that

conflict situations do not emerge or persist for long.

The problem posed to national consolidation by linguistic diversity has taken two major forms. These are discussed here in two separate sections: (i) the dispute over official language of the union and (ii) the linguistic reorganization of the states.

The Official Language

The controversy on the language issue became most virulent when it took the form of opposition to Hindi and tended to create conflict between Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi-speaking regions of the country. The dispute was not over the question of a national language, that is one language which all Indians would adopt after some time, since the view that one national language was essential to an Indian national identity had already been rejected overwhelmingly by the secular majority of the national leadership. India was a multilingual country and it had to remain so. The Indian national movement had carried on its ideological and political work through the different Indian regional languages. Its demand then was for the replacement of English by the mother tongue as the medium for higher education, administration and courts in each linguistic area. Jawaharlal Nehru had clearly put across this view in 1937: 'Our great provincial languages . . . are ancient languages with a rich inheritance, each spoken by many millions of persons, each tied up inextricably with the life and culture and ideas of the masses as well as of the upper classes. It is axiomatic that the masses can only grow educationally and culturally through the medium of their own language. Therefore, it is inevitable that we lay stress on the provincial languages and carry on most of our work through them . . . Our system of education and public work must therefore be based on the provincial languages.'[5]

The issue of a national language was resolved when the constitution-makers virtually accepted all the major languages as 'languages of India' or India's national languages. But the matter could not end there, for the country's official work could not be carried on in so many languages. There had to be one common language in which the central government would carry on its work and maintain contact with the state governments. The question arose what would be this language of all-India communication? Or what would be India's official and link language? Only two candidates were available for the purpose: English and Hindi. The Constituent Assembly heatedly debated which one should be selected.

But, in fact, the choice had already been made in the pre-independence period by the leadership of the national movement, which was convinced that English would not continue to be the all-India medium of communication in free India. For example, even while appreciating the value of English as a world language, through which Indians could access world science and culture and modern Western ideas, Gandhiji was convinced that the genius of a people could not unfold nor could their culture flower in a foreign language. In fact, Gandhiji, during the 1920s emphasized that English is 'a language of international commerce, it is the language of diplomacy, it contains many a rich literary treasure, and it gives us an introduction to Western thought and culture'. But he argued English occupied in India 'an unnatural place due to our unequal relations with Englishmen'.[6] English 'has sapped the energy of the nation . . . it has

estranged them from the masses . . . The sooner therefore educated India shakes itself free from the hypnotic spell of the foreign medium, the better it would be for them and the people.'[7] And he wrote in 1946: 'I love the English tongue in its own place, but I am its inveterate opponent if it usurps a place which does not belong to it. English is today admittedly the world language. I would therefore accord it a place as a second, optional language.'[8] Nehru echoed these sentiments in his 1937 article on 'The Question of Language' and also during the Constituent Assembly debates.

Hindi or Hindustani, the other candidate for the status of the official or link language, had already played this role during the nationalist struggle, especially during the phase of mass mobilization. Hindi had been accepted by leaders from non-Hindi-speaking regions because it was considered to be the most widely spoken and understood language in the country. Lokamanya Tilak, Gandhiji, C. Rajagopalachari, Subhas Bose and Sardar Patel were some of Hindi's enthusiastic supporters. In its sessions and political work, the Congress had substituted Hindi and the provincial languages in place of English. In 1925, Congress amended its constitution to read: 'The proceedings of the Congress shall be conducted as far as possible in Hindustani. The English language or any provincial language may be used if the speaker is unable to speak Hindustani or whenever necessary. The proceedings of the Provincial Congress Committee shall ordinarily be conducted in the language of the Province concerned. Hindustani may also be used.'[9] Reflecting a national consensus, the Nehru Report had laid down in 1928 that Hindustani which might be written in the Devanagari or Urdu script would be the common language of India, but the use of English would be continued for some time. It is interesting that ultimately the constitution of free India was to adopt this stand, except for replacing Hindustani by Hindi. The real debate in the Constituent Assembly occurred over two questions: Would Hindi or Hindustani replace English? And what would be the time-frame for such a replacement to happen?

Sharp differences marked the initial debates as the problem of the official language was highly politicized from the beginning. The question of Hindi or Hindustani was soon resolved, though with a great deal of acrimony. Gandhiji and Nehru both supported Hindustani, written in the Devanagari or Urdu script. Though many supporters of Hindi disagreed, they had tended to accept the Gandhi–Nehru viewpoint. But once Partition was announced, these champions of Hindi were emboldened, especially as the protagonists of Pakistan had claimed Urdu as the language of Muslims and of Pakistan. The votaries of Hindi now branded Urdu 'as a symbol of secession'. They demanded that Hindi in the Devanagari script be made the national language. Their demand split the Congress party down the middle. In the end the Congress Legislative Party decided for Hindi against Hindustani by 78 to 77 votes, even though Nehru and Azad fought for Hindustani. The Hindi bloc was also forced to compromise: it accepted that Hindi would be the official and not the national language.

The issue of the time-frame for a shift from English to Hindi produced a divide between Hindi and non-Hindi areas. The spokespersons of Hindi areas were for the immediate switchover to Hindi, while those from non-Hindi areas advocated retention of English for a long if not indefinite period. In fact, they wanted the status quo to continue till a future parliament decided to shift to

Hindi as the official language. Nehru was for making Hindi the official language, but he was also in favour of English continuing as an additional official language, making the transition to Hindi gradual, and actively encouraging the knowledge of English because of its usefulness in the contemporary world.

The case for Hindi basically rested on the fact that it was the language of the largest number, though not of the majority, of the people of India; it was also understood at least in the urban areas of most of northern India from Bengal to Punjab and in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The critics of Hindi talked about it being less developed than other languages as a literary language and as a language of science and politics. But their main fear was that Hindi's adoption as the official language would place non-Hindi areas, especially South India, at a disadvantage in the educational and economic spheres, and particularly in competition for appointments in government and the public sector. Such opponents tended to argue that imposition of Hindi on non-Hindi areas would lead to their economic, political, social and cultural domination by Hindi areas.

The constitution-makers were aware that as the leaders of a multilingual country they could not ignore, or even give the impression of ignoring, the interests of any one linguistic area. A compromise was arrived at, though this led to the language provisions of the constitution becoming 'complicated, ambiguous and confusing in some respects'. The constitution provided that Hindi in Devanagari script with international numerals would be India's official language. English was to continue for use in all official purposes till 1965, when it would be replaced by Hindi. Hindi was to be introduced in a phased manner. After 1965 it would become the sole official language. However, parliament would have the power to provide for the use of English for specified purposes even after 1965. The constitution laid upon the government the duty to promote the spread and development of Hindi and provided for the appointment of a commission and a Joint Parliamentary Committee to review the progress in this respect. The state legislatures were to decide the matter of official language at the state level, though the official language of the Union would serve as the language of communication between the states and the Centre and between one state and another.

Implementation of the language provisions of the constitution proved to be a formidable task even though the Congress party was in power all over the country. The issue remained a subject of intense controversy, and became increasingly acrimonious with the passage of time, though for many years nobody challenged the provision that Hindi would eventually become the sole official language.

The constitution-makers had hoped that by 1965 the Hindi protagonists would overcome the weaknesses of Hindi, win the confidence of non-Hindi areas, and hold their hand for a longer period till such time they had done so. It was also hoped that with the rapid growth of education Hindi too would spread and resistance to Hindi would gradually weaken and even disappear. But, unfortunately, the spread of education was too slow to make an impact in this respect.

Moreover, the chances of Hindi's success as an official language were spoilt by the proponents of Hindi themselves. Instead of taking up a gradual, slow and moderate approach to gain acceptance of Hindi by non-Hindi areas and to rely on persuasion, the more fanatical among

them preferred imposition of Hindi through government action. Their zeal and enthusiasm tended to provoke a counter-movement. As Nehru told parliament in 1959, it was their overenthusiasm which came in the way of the spread and acceptance of Hindi for 'the way they approach this subject often irritates others, as it irritates me'.[10]

Hindi suffered from the lack of social science and scientific writing. In the 1950s, for example, there were hardly any academic journals in Hindi outside the literary field. Instead of developing Hindi as a means of communication in higher education, journalism, and so on, the Hindi leaders were more interested in making it the sole official language.

A major weakness of the Hindi protagonists was that, instead of developing a simple standard language which would get wide acceptance or at least popularize the colloquial Hindi as spoken and written in Hindi areas as also in many other parts of India, they tried to Sanskritize the language, replacing commonly understood words with newly manufactured, unwieldy and little understood ones in the name of the 'purity' of language, free of alien influences. This made it more and more difficult for non-Hindi speakers (or even Hindi speakers) to understand or learn the new version. All India Radio, which could have played an important role in popularizing Hindi, instead took to so Sanskritizing its Hindi news bulletins that many listeners would switch off their radios when the Hindi news was broadcast. Nehru, a Hindi speaker and writer, was to complain in 1958 that he was unable to understand the language in which his own Hindi speeches were being broadcast. But the purifiers of Hindi did not relent and resisted all attempts to simplify the Hindi of news broadcasts. This led many uncommitted persons to join the ranks of the opponents of Hindi.

Nehru and the majority of Indian leaders, however, remained committed to the transition to Hindi as the official language. They believed that, though the study of English was to be encouraged, English could not continue forever as India's official language. In the interests of national unity as also economic and political development they also realized that full transition to Hindi should not be time-bound and should await a politically more auspicious time when the willing consent of the non-Hindi areas could be obtained. The non-Hindi leaders also became less and less open to persuasion and their opposition to Hindi increased with time. One result of this alienation of non-Hindi-language groups was that they too were not open to rational arguments in favour of Hindi. Instead they veered towards an indefinite continuance of English.

Sharp differences on the official language issue surfaced during 1956–60, once again revealing the presence of disruptive tendencies. In 1956, the Report of the Official Language Commission, set up in 1955 in terms of a constitutional provision, recommended that Hindi should start progressively replacing English in various functions of the central government with effective change taking place in 1965. Its two members from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and P. Subbaroyan, however, dissented, accusing the members of the Commission of suffering from a pro-Hindi bias, and asked for the continuation of English. Ironically, Professor Chatterjee was in charge of the Hindi Pracharini Sabha in Bengal before independence. The Commission's report was reviewed by a special Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC). To implement the recommendations of the Committee, the President issued an order in April 1960 stating that after 1965 Hindi would be the principal official language but that

English would continue as the associate official language without any restriction being placed on its use. Hindi would also become an alternative medium for the Union Public Service Commission examinations after some time, but for the present it would be introduced in the examinations as a qualifying subject. In accordance with the President's directive, the central government took a series of steps to promote Hindi. These included the setting up of the Central Hindi Directorate, publication of standard works in Hindi or in Hindi translation in various fields, compulsory training of central government employees in Hindi, and translation of major texts of law into Hindi and promotion of their use by the courts.

All these measures aroused suspicion and anxiety in the non-Hindi areas and groups. Nor were the Hindi leaders satisfied. For example, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, an eminent linguist and a former staunch advocate and promoter of Hindi, stated in his dissenting note to the Report of the Official Language Commission that the outlook of the commission was one of the 'Hindi speakers who are to profit immediately and for a long time to come, if not forever'.[11] Similarly, in March 1958, C. Rajagopalachari, ex-president of the Hindi Pracharini Sabha in the South, declared that 'Hindi is as much foreign to the non-Hindi speaking people as English to the protagonists of Hindi'.[12] On the other hand, two major champions of Hindi, Purshottamdas Tandon and Seth Govind Das, accused the Joint Parliamentary Committee of being pro-English. Many of the Hindi leaders also attacked Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the Minister of Education, for dragging their feet in implementing the constitutional provisions and deliberately delaying the replacement of English. They insisted that the deadline for the changeover to Hindi laid down in the constitution must be rigidly observed. In 1957, Dr Lohia's Samyukta Socialist Party and the Jan Sangh launched a militant movement, which continued for nearly two years, for the immediate replacement of English by Hindi. One of the agitational methods adopted by the followers of Lohia on a large scale was to deface English signboards of shops and in other places.

Fully aware of the danger that the official language issue could pose to Indian polity, the leadership of the Congress took the grievances of the non-Hindi areas seriously and handled the issue with great care and caution. The attempt was to work for a compromise. Nehru, time and again made it clear that an official language could not and would not be imposed on any region of the country and that the pace of transition to Hindi would have to be determined keeping in view the wishes of the non-Hindi people. In this he was supported by the leaders of Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and Communist Party of India (CPI). PSP criticized Hindi extremism and said that it 'might severely strain the unity of a multilingual country like India'.[13]

The highlight of Nehru's approach was a major statement in parliament on 7 August 1959. To allay the fears of the non-Hindi people, he gave a definite assurance: 'I would have English as an alternate language as long as the people require it, and I would leave the decision not to the Hindi-knowing people, but to the non-Hindi-knowing people.' He also told the people of the South that 'if they do not want to learn Hindi, let them not learn Hindi'. He repeated this assurance in parliament on 4 September 1959.[14]

In pursuance of Nehru's assurances, though with delay caused by internal party pressures and

the India–China war, an Official Languages Act was passed in 1963. The object of the Act, Nehru declared, was 'to remove a restriction which had been placed by the Constitution on the use of English after a certain date, namely, 1965'.[15] But this purpose was not fully served as the assurances were not clearly articulated in the Act. The Act laid down that 'the English language may . . . continue to be used in addition to Hindi'. The non-Hindi groups criticized the use of the word 'may' in place of the word 'shall'. This made the Act ambiguous in their eyes; they did not regard it as a statutory guarantee. Many of them wanted a cast iron guarantee not because they distrusted Nehru but because they were worried about what would happen after Nehru, especially as the pressure from the Hindi leaders was also growing. The death of Nehru in June 1964 increased their apprehensions which were further fuelled by certain hasty steps taken and circulars issued by various ministries to prepare the ground for the changeover to Hindi in the coming year. For example, instructions were given that the central government's correspondence with the states would be in Hindi, though in the case of non-Hindi states an English translation would be appended.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, Nehru's successor as prime minister, was unfortunately not sensitive enough to the opinion of non-Hindi groups. Instead of taking effective steps to counter their fears of Hindi becoming the *sole* official language, he declared that he was considering making Hindi an alternative medium in public service examinations. This meant that while non-Hindi speakers could still compete in the all-India services in English, Hindi speakers would have the advantage of being able to use their mother tongue.

Many non-Hindi leaders in protest changed their line of approach to the problem of the official language. While previously they had wanted a slowing down of the replacement of English, now they started demanding that there should be no deadline fixed for the changeover. Some of the leaders went much further. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and C. Rajagopalachari, for example, demanded that the constitution should be amended and English should be made the official language of India.

As 26 January 1965 approached, a fear psychosis gripped the non-Hindi areas, especially Tamil Nadu, creating a strong anti-Hindi movement. On 17 January, the DMK organized the Madras State Anti-Hindi Conference which gave a call for observing 26 January as a day of mourning. Students, concerned for their careers and apprehensive that they would be outstripped by Hindi speakers in the all-India services, were the most active in organizing a widespread agitation and mobilizing public opinion. They raised and popularized the slogan: 'Hindi never, English ever.' They also demanded amendment of the constitution. The students' agitation soon developed into statewide unrest. The Congress leadership, though controlling both the state and the central governments, failed to gauge the depth of the popular feeling and the widespread character of the movement and instead of negotiating with the students, made an effort to repress it. Widespread rioting and violence followed in the early weeks of February leading to large-scale destruction of railways and other Union property. So strong was the anti-Hindi feeling that several Tamil youth, including four students, burned themselves to death in protest against the official language policy. Two Tamil ministers, C. Subramaniam and Alagesan, resigned from the Union cabinet. The agitation continued for about two months, taking a toll of over sixty lives through

police firings. The only eminent central leader to show concern for the agitators was Indira Gandhi, then Minister for Information and Broadcasting. At the height of the agitation she flew to Madras, 'rushed to the storm-centre of trouble', showed some sympathy for the agitators and thus became, after Nehru, the first northern leader to win the trust of the aggrieved Tamils as well as of the people of the South in general.

Efforts were made by the Jan Sangh and the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) to organize a counter-agitation in the Hindi areas against English, but they did not get much public support.

The agitation forced both the Madras and the Union governments and the Congress party to revise their stand. They now decided to yield to the intense public mood in the South, change their policy and accept the major demands of the agitators. The Congress Working Committee announced a series of steps which were to form the basis for a central enactment embodying concessions and which led to the withdrawal of the Hindi agitation. This enactment was delayed because of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, which silenced all dissension in the country.

With the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri in January 1966, Indira Gandhi became the prime minister. As she had already won the trust of the people of the South, they were convinced that a genuine effort would be made to resolve the long-festering dispute. Other favourable factors were the Jan Sangh's muting of their anti-English fervour and the SSP's acceptance of the basic features of the agreement worked out in 1965.

Despite facing economic problems and the weakening of the Congress's position in parliament in the 1967 elections, Indira Gandhi moved the bill to amend the 1963 Official Language Act on 27 November. The Lok Sabha adopted the bill, on 16 December 1967, by 205 to 41 votes. The Act gave an unambiguous legal fortification to Nehru's assurances of September 1959. It provided that the use of English as an associate language in addition to Hindi for the official work at the Centre and for communication between the Centre and non-Hindi states would continue as long as the non-Hindi states wanted it, giving them full veto powers on the question. A virtually indefinite policy of bilingualism was adopted. The parliament also adopted a policy resolution laying down that the public service examinations were to be conducted in Hindi and English and in all the regional languages with the proviso that the candidates should have additional knowledge of Hindi or English. The states were to adopt a three-language formula according to which in the non-Hindi areas, the mother tongue, Hindi and English or some other national language was to be taught in schools while in the Hindi areas a non-Hindi language, preferably a southern language, was to be taught as a compulsory subject.

The Government of India took another important step on the language question in July 1967. On the basis of the report of the Education Commission in 1966 it declared that Indian languages would ultimately become the medium of education in all subjects at the university level, though the time-frame for the changeover would be decided by each university to suit its convenience.

After many twists and turns, a great deal of debate and several agitations, small and big, and many compromises India had arrived at a widely accepted solution to the very difficult problem of the official and link language for the country. Since 1967, this problem has gradually disappeared from the political scene, demonstrating the capacity of the Indian political system to

deal with a contentious problem on a democratic basis, and in a manner that promoted national consolidation. Here was an issue which emotionally divided the people and which could have jeopardized the unity of the country, but to which a widely acceptable solution was found through negotiations and compromise. And it was not only the national leadership provided by the Congress, with some hiccups on the way, which came up to the mark; the Opposition parties too measured up when it came to the crunch. In the end, the DMK, in whose rise to power the language issue played an important role, also helped by cooling down the political temper in Tamil Nadu.

Of course, no political problem is solved for all times to come. Problem-solving in a nation as complex as India is bound to be a continuous process. But it is significant that Hindi has been making rapid progress in non-Hindi areas through education, trade, tourism, films, radio and television. The use of Hindi as an official language has also been growing though English is still dominant. Simultaneously, English, as a second language, has been spreading fast, including in the Hindi-speaking areas. A witness of this is the number of private English-medium schools, however poor in staff and other facilities, which now dot the countryside from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. The standards of spoken and written English have fallen but the English-knowing classes have multiplied manifold. Both English and Hindi are likely to grow as link languages just as regional languages are more and more occupying the official, educational and media space. The proof of the growth of Hindi, English and regional languages lies in the rapid growth of newspapers in all of them. In fact, English is not only likely to survive in India for all times to come, but it remains and is likely to grow as a language of communication between the intelligentsia all over the country, as a library language, and as the second language of the universities. Hindi, on the other hand, has so far failed to perform any of the three roles. Of course, the ideal of making Hindi the link language of the country remains. But the way in which the enthusiastic protagonists of Hindi promoted Hindi's cause, they pushed back the chances of this happening for a long time to come.