Consolidation of India as a Nation(II): The Linguistic Reorganization of the States

The reorganization of the states on the basis of language, a major aspect of national consolidation and integration, came to the fore almost immediately after independence. The boundaries of provinces in pre-1947 India had been drawn in a haphazard manner as the British conquest of India had proceeded for nearly a hundred years. No heed was paid to linguistic or cultural cohesion so that most of the provinces were multilingual and multicultural. The interspersed princely states had added a further element of heterogeneity.

The case for linguistic states as administrative units was very strong. Language is closely related to culture and therefore to the customs of people. Besides, the massive spread of education and growth of mass literacy can only occur through the medium of the mother tongue. Democracy can become real to the common people only when politics and administration are conducted through the language they can understand. But this language, the mother tongue, cannot be the medium of education or administration or judicial activity unless a state is formed on the basis of such a predominant language.

It is for this reason that, with the involvement of the masses in the national movement after 1919, Congress undertook political mobilization in the mother tongue and in 1921 amended its constitution and reorganized its regional branches on a linguistic basis. Since then, the Congress repeatedly committed itself to the redrawing of the provincial boundaries on linguistic lines. Just five days before he was assassinated, Gandhiji, while urging the people to 'discourage all fissiparous tendencies and feel and behave as Indians', also argued that 'the redistribution of provinces on a linguistic basis was necessary if provincial languages were to grow to their full height'.[1] It was therefore more or less universally assumed that free India would base its administrative boundaries on the linguistic principle.

But the national leadership had second thoughts on the subject immediately after independence. There were various reasons for this. Partition had created serious administrative, economic and political dislocation; and independence, coming immediately after the War, was accompanied by serious economic and law and order problems. Also there was the vexed Kashmir problem and a war-like situation vis-à-vis Pakistan. The leadership felt that the most important task for the present was to consolidate national unity; and any effort undertaken immediately to redraw the internal boundaries might dislocate administration and economic development, intensify regional and linguistic rivalries, unleash destructive forces, and damage the unity of the country. Speaking on the linguistic question, Nehru clearly stated on 27 November 1947: 'First things must come first and the first thing is the security and stability of India.'[2] Hence, while still committed to linguistic states, Nehru and other leaders accorded the task of redrawing India's administrative map a low priority. The task, they felt, could wait for some years.

The question of the linguistic reorganization of India was, however, raised quite early in the Constituent Assembly. It appointed in 1948 the Linguistic Provinces Commission, headed by Justice S.K. Dar, to enquire into the desirability of linguistic provinces. The Dar Commission

advised against the step at the time for it might threaten national unity and also be administratively inconvenient. Consequently, the Constituent Assembly decided not to incorporate the linguistic principle in the constitution. But public opinion was not satisfied, especially in the South, and the problem remained politically alive. To appease the vocal votaries of linguistic states, the Congress appointed a committee (JVP) in December 1948 consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya, president of the Congress, to examine the question afresh. This committee advised against the creation of linguistic states for the time being, emphasizing on unity, national security and economic development as the needs of the hour.

Yet, the Congress leadership would not oppose any popular demand. In the JVP report, as well as afterwards, the Congress leadership laid down that where the demand for a linguistic state was insistent and overwhelming and where other language groups involved were agreeable to it, a new state could be created. The JVP report was followed by popular movements for states' reorganization all over the country, which persisted with varying degrees of intensity till 1960. The demand for a separate Andhra state for the Telugu people was an example. The demand had been popular for nearly half a century and had the support of all political parties.

The JVP accepted that a strong case for the formation of Andhra out of the Madras Presidency existed, particularly as the leadership of Tamil Nadu was agreeable to it. But it did not concede the demand immediately, because the two sides could not agree on which state should take Madras city. The Andhra leaders were unwilling to concede Madras even though on linguistic as well as geographic grounds it belonged to Tamil Nadu.

On 19 October 1952, a popular freedom fighter, Patti Sriramalu, undertook a fast unto death over the demand for a separate Andhra and expired after fifty-eight days. His death was followed by three days of rioting, demonstrations, hartals and violence all over Andhra. The government immediately gave in and conceded the demand for a separate state of Andhra, which finally came into existence in October 1953. Simultaneously, Tamil Nadu was created as a Tamil-speaking state.

The success of the Andhra struggle encouraged other linguistic groups to agitate for their own state or for rectification of their boundaries on a linguistic basis. Nehru was not in favour at that time of continuing with the redrawing of India's internal administrative boundaries, but he was too much of a democrat to sternly and consistently oppose the demands. As Nehru's biographer, S. Gopal, has put it: 'He felt that it would be undemocratic to smother this sentiment which, on general grounds, he did not find objectionable. Indeed, a linguistic mosaic might well provide a firmer base for national unity. What concerned him were the timing, the agitation and violence with which linguistic provinces were being demanded and the harsh antagonism between various sections of the Indian people which underlay these demands.'[3]

To meet the demand halfway and to delay matters, Nehru appointed in August 1953 the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC), with Justice Fazl Ali, K.M. Panikkar and Hridaynath Kunzru as members, to examine 'objectively and dispassionately' the entire question of the reorganization of the states of the Union. Throughout the two years of its work, the Commission was faced with meetings, demonstrations, agitations and hunger strikes. Different linguistic groups clashed with

each other, verbally as well as sometimes physically. As the Commissioners reported in sorrow: 'It has been most distressing to us to witness . . . a kind of border warfare in certain areas in which old comrades-in-arms in the battle for freedom have pitted against one another in acrimonious controversy . . . Deliberate attempts to whip up popular frenzy by an appeal to parochial and communal sentiments; threats of large-scale migration; assertions such as that if a certain language group is not allowed to have an administrative unit of its own, its moral, material and even physical extinction would follow as an inevitable consequence; . . . all point to an acute lack of perspective and balance.'[4] The SRC submitted its report in October 1955. While laying down that due consideration should be given to administrative and economic factors, it recognized for the most part the linguistic principle and recommended redrawing of state boundaries on that basis. The Commission, however, opposed the splitting of Bombay and Punjab. Despite strong reaction to the report in many parts of the country, the SRC's recommendations were accepted, though with certain modifications, and were quickly implemented.

The States Reorganisation Act was passed by parliament in November 1956. It provided for fourteen states and six centrally administered territories. The Telangana area of Hyderabad state was transferred to Andhra; Kerala was created by merging the Malabar district of the old Madras Presidency with Travancore-Cochin. Certain Kannada-speaking areas of the states of Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad and Coorg were added to the Mysore state. Bombay state was enlarged by merging the states of Kutch and Saurashtra and the Marathi-speaking areas of Hyderabad with it.

The strongest reaction against the SRC's report and the States Reorganisation Act came from Maharashtra where widespread rioting broke out and eighty people were killed in Bombay city in police firings in January 1956. The Opposition parties supported by a wide spectrum of public opinion—students, farmers, workers, artists, businessmen—organized a powerful protest movement. Under pressure, the government decided in June 1956 to divide the Bombay state into two linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat with Bombay city forming a separate, centrally administered state. This move too was strongly opposed by the Maharashtrians. Nehru now vacillated and, unhappy at having hurt the feelings of the people of Maharashtra, reverted in July to the formation of bilingual, greater Bombay. This move was, however, opposed by the people of both Maharashtra and Gujarat. The broad-based Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad led the movements in the two parts of the state. In Maharashtra, even a large section of Congressmen joined the demand for a unilingual Maharashtra with Bombay as its capital; and C.D. Deshmukh, the Finance Minister in the central cabinet, resigned from his office on this question. The Gujaratis felt that they would be a minority in the new state. They too would not agree to give up Bombay city to Maharashtra. Violence and arson now spread to Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat. Sixteen persons were killed and 200 injured in police firings.

In view of the disagreement over Bombay city, the government stuck to its decision and passed the States Reorganisation Act in November 1956. But the matter could not rest there. In the 1957 elections the Bombay Congress scraped through with a slender majority. Popular agitation continued for nearly five years. As Congress president, Indira Gandhi reopened the question and was supported by the President, S. Radhakrishnan. The government finally agreed in May 1960 to bifurcate the state of Bombay into Maharashtra and Gujarat, with Bombay city being included in

Maharashtra, and Ahmedabad being made the capital of Gujarat.

The other state where an exception was made to the linguistic principle was Punjab. In 1956, the states of PEPSU had been merged with Punjab, which, however, remained a trilingual state having three language speakers—Punjabi, Hindi and Pahari—within its borders. In the Punjabi-speaking part of the state, there was a strong demand for carving out a separate Punjabi Suba (Punjabispeaking state). Unfortunately, the issue assumed communal overtones. The Sikh communalists, led by the Akali Dal, and the Hindu communalists, led by the Jan Sangh, used the linguistic issue to promote communal politics. While the Hindu communalists opposed the demand for a Punjabi Suba by denying that Punjabi was their mother tongue, the Sikh communalists put forward the demand as a Sikh demand for a Sikh state, claiming Punjabi written in Gurmukhi as a Sikh language. Even though the demand was supported by the Communist Party and a section of the Congress, it had got mixed up with religion. But Nehru, as also the majority of the Punjab Congressmen, felt that the demand for a Punjabi state was basically a communal demand for a Sikh-majority state 'dressed up as a language plea'. Nehru and the Congress leadership were clear that they would not accept any demand for the creation of a state on religious or communal grounds. The SRC had also refused to accept the demand for a separate Punjabi-speaking state on the ground that this would not solve either the language or the communal problem of Punjab. (The several powerful movements for a Punjabi state are discussed separately in the chapter on the Punjab crisis.) Finally, in 1966, Indira Gandhi agreed to the division of Punjab into two Punjabiand Hindi-speaking states of Punjab and Haryana, with the Paharispeaking district of Kangra and a part of the Hoshiarpur district being merged with Himachal Pradesh. Chandigarh, the newly built city and capital of united Punjab, was made a Union Territory and was to serve as the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana.

Thus, after more than ten years of continuous strife and popular struggles the linguistic reorganization of India was largely completed, making room for greater political participation by the people.

Events since 1956 have clearly shown that loyalty to a language was quite consistent with, and was rather complementary to, loyalty to the nation. By reorganizing the states on linguistic lines, the national leadership removed a major grievance which could have led to fissiparous tendencies. States reorganization is, therefore, 'best regarded as clearing the ground for national integration'.[5] Also, even though during the agitation for states' reorganization the language of warring camps was used, language has not subsequently defined the politics of the states.

Equally important, linguistic reorganization of the states has not in any manner adversely affected the federal structure of the Union or weakened or paralysed the Centre as many had feared. The central government wields as much authority as it did before. The states have also been cooperating with the Centre in planning and economic development. Hardly any person complains of discrimination in the raising or expending of resources on grounds of language. If anything, the national government has been strengthened by the creation of coherent state units. To quote W.H. Morris-Jones: 'The newly fashioned units, it is true, have a self-conscious coherence, but they are willing, thus equipped, to do business with the centre, to work as parts of a

whole that is India.'[6]

Thus, states' reorganization has not only not weakened the unity of the country but as a whole strengthened it, thereby disappointing the prophets of gloom and removing the apprehensions of the friendly. To quote the political scientist Rajni Kothari: 'In spite of the leadership's earlier reservations and ominous forebodings by sympathetic observers, the reorganization resulted in rationalizing the political map of India without seriously weakening its unity. If anything, its result has been functional, in as much as it removed what had been a major source of discord, and created homogeneous political units which could be administered through a medium that the vast majority of the population understood. Indeed it can be said with the benefit of hindsight that language, rather than being a force for division has proved a cementing and integrating influence.'[7]

States' reorganization did not, of course, resolve all the problems relating to linguistic conflicts. Disputes over boundaries between different states, linguistic minorities and economic issues such as sharing of waters, and power and surplus food still persist. Linguistic chauvinism also finds occasional expression. But the reorganization has removed a major factor affecting cohesion of the country.

Minority Languages

An important aspect of the language problem has been the status of minority languages. Unilingual states were not possible in whatever manner their boundaries were drawn. Consequently, a large number of linguistic minorities, that is, those who speak a language other than the main or the official language of the state, continue to exist in linguistically reorganized states. Overall nearly 18 per cent of India's population do not speak the official language of the states where they live as their mother tongue. There is of course a great deal of variation among the states on this count. According to the 1971 census, the percentages of linguistic minorities to total population ranged from 4 in Kerala to 34 in Karnataka, 3.9 in Assam to 44.5 in Jammu and Kashmir.

From the beginning, the important point to be decided upon was the status and rights of these minorities in their states. On the one hand, there was the question of their protection, for there was the ever-present danger of them being meted out unfair treatment, on the other, there was the need to promote their integration with the major language group of a state. A linguistic minority had to be given the confidence that it would not be discriminated against by the majority and that its language and culture would continue to exist and develop. At the same time, the majority had to be assured that meeting the needs of the linguistic minority would not generate separatist sentiments or demands and that the minorities would develop a degree of state loyalty.

To confront this problem certain Fundamental Rights were provided to the linguistic minorities in the constitution. For example, Article 30 states that 'all minorities, whether based an religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice' and, more important, 'that the state shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions,

discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language'. Article 347 lays down that on a demand being made on behalf of a minority, the President may direct that its language shall be officially recognized throughout the state or any part thereof for such purposes as he might specify. The official policy since 1956, sanctioned by a constitutional amendment in that year, has been to provide for instruction in the mother tongue in the primary and secondary classes wherever there is a sufficient number of children to form a class. The amendment also provides for the appointment of a Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities to investigate and report regularly on the implementation of these safeguards. On the whole, the central government has tended to play a very positive role in defence of the rights of the minorities, but the implementation of the minority safeguards is within the purview of the state governments and therefore differs from state to state. In general, despite some progress in several states, in most of them the position of the linguistic minorities has not been satisfactory. The constitutional safeguards have quite often been inadequately enforced. The Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities has in his reports regularly noted innumerable cases of discrimination against linguistic minorities in matters of schooling, admission to technical and medical institutions and employment in the state public services because of lack of proficiency in the official language of the state. However, a redeeming feature is that quite often facilities for primary education in the mother tongue of the minorities have been provided, though these may be inadequate in terms of competent teachers and textbooks. But even here the big exception is the all-round failure in the case of tribal minority languages.

Among the minority languages, Urdu is a special case. It is the largest minority tongue in India. Nearly 23.3 million people spoke Urdu in 1951. Urdu speakers constituted substantial percentages of the population in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) (10.5), Bihar (8.8), Maharashtra (7.2), Andhra Pradesh (7.5) and Karnataka (9). Moreover, an overwhelming majority of Muslims, India's largest religious minority, claimed Urdu as their mother tongue. Urdu is also recognized as one of India's national languages and is listed in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution.

While nearly all the major languages of India were also the official languages of one state or the other, Urdu was not the official language of any state except the small state of Jammu and Kashmir where the mother tongues were in any case Kashmiri, Dogri and Ladakhi. Consequently, Urdu did not get official support in any part of the country. On the contrary, it faced official discrimination and hostility both in U.P. and Bihar. We may briefly take up the case of U.P., though the position was no different in Bihar. The U.P. government decided early on to declare Hindi as the only official language of the state; the subterfuge was that Hindi and Urdu were not two separate languages and therefore there was no need to make Urdu a second official language! In practice, Urdu began to be abolished in many primary schools. Its use as a medium of instruction was also increasingly limited. For example, in 1979–80, only 3.69 per cent of primary school students received instruction in Urdu while the number of Urdu speakers in 1981 was 10.5 per cent. The Hindi protagonists also began to eliminate Urdu words from written Hindi. The neglect of Urdu in the state led the well-known left-wing Urdu critic S. Ehtesham

Husain, to complain: 'Urdu is being constantly termed as only an off-shoot or variety of Hindi, a foreign language, a language of the Muslims, an instrument of communal hatred and an enemy of Indian unity. All these contrary things are said in the same breath, to suppress it.'[8]

Urdu speakers, therefore, were persistent in demanding that Urdu should be recognized as the second official language in the states where it had a large presence, especially in U.P. and Bihar. The U.P. government was equally consistent and successful in opposing the demand; its main justification being that the SRC had recommended that at least 30 per cent population in a state should speak a language before it could be made the second official or regional language.

Jawaharlal Nehru, in particular, was very supportive of Urdu and critical of the anti-Urdu thinking and activities of a large number of persons, including Congressmen, in northern India. 'Urdu,' he told parliament, 'is an example of integration in India, not only of languages but of minds, literatures and cultures. It is cent per cent an Indian language.'[9] He pointed out that Urdu had 'enriched Indian culture and thought'.[10] He asked the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh to declare Urdu as a second official language in districts where it was widely used and in other areas to give it the full facilities of a minority language. But even when Nehru succeeded in persuading the Uttar Pradesh government to agree to take certain steps in this regard, they were nullified by laxity in their implementation. The Uttar Pradesh government refused to pass legislation giving legal sanctity to the rights granted to Urdu on the ground that such a step might lead to communal riots.

The governments of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka were more supportive of Urdu. In Andhra, Urdu has been recognized since 1968 as an additional language for the Telangana region. And in both the states, adequate facilities are provided for instruction through the medium of Urdu in the primary stage and for instruction in Urdu at the higher school stages.

Two other aspects of Urdu's position may be noted. First, unfortunately the question of Urdu has got entangled with the communal question. While many Muslims regard it as the language of their community as such, many Hindu communalists are hostile to it because of their anti-Muslim ideological position. Second, despite active hostility of many and official neglect, Urdu continues not only to exist but even grow in terms of literary output, journals and newspapers and especially as the language of films and television because of its inherent vigour and cultural roots among the Indian people.