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Linguistic Diversity and Minority Language Policies in the Indian Subcontinent

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze and compare different forms of multilingualism in the Indian Subcontinent by examining how and to what extent linguistic minorities have been recognized in postcolonial contexts. It analyzes the ways in which language policies contribute, on the one hand, to building national identity while, on the other hand, they represent tools for inclusion or exclusion. The study focuses on four historical and institutional contexts across different regions of the studied area: the Bengali language movement, the Tamil movement in India, the Punjabi linguistic context in Pakistan, and the Sri Lankan multilingualism. The findings underline that, despite formal recognition of multilingualism, institutional policies tend to privilege a single dominant language. Power asymmetry between dominant and minority linguistic groups and a strategic use of language in nation-building processes emerge, in different forms, in each of the four cases. The study highlights how language plays a crucial role in the process of shaping national identity in newly formed states and suggests the importance of recognizing linguistic diversity in order to prevent marginalization and internal conflicts. Lastly, the policy implications section recommends the promotion of linguistic mutual understanding and tolerance through, among others, the integration of technology and education, cultural promotion and exchange. In this context, the use of non-native English forms as a potential transitional lingua franca can facilitate communication while supporting linguistic integration.

Keywords: Minority Languages, Language Policy, Indian Subcontinent, National Identity, Linguistic Diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Subcontinent has historically been characterized by a plurality of religions, ethnicities and languages. Language, in particular, has played a crucial role in shaping collective identity and policies across the region. Linguistic diversity and the emergence of language movements have often been crucial factors in processes of national identity formation. Rather than being a mere tool that allows communication, language has mostly represented a marker of belonging which has shaped inclusions, exclusions and power. This paper examines how language policies can play the role of both tools for inclusion and mechanisms of domination and how, in some cases, language movements have shaped national identity formation across the Indian Subcontinent.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do language policies in the Indian Subcontinent shape national identity formation?
2. To what extent do state language policies contribute to the inclusion or marginalization of linguistic minorities?
3. What are the recurrent patterns in language policies across the investigated cases?

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RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopts a qualitative comparative approach to explore four experiences of linguistic diversity in the Indian Subcontinent. For this study, the cases are examined through national language policies, legal frameworks, and relevant literature in history and sociolinguistics. The texts are analyzed through three analytical dimensions: the degree of institutionalization of the dominant language as a tool for state-building; the socio-economic marginalization of non-native speakers; and the role of popular resistance as a direct response to symbolic violence. First, the Bengali language movement is examined, as it represents one of the most significant moments in the history of language recognition in the area. The Bengali case represents both an example of national identity formation and a call for inclusion and the rise of social and political justice. To allow a wider scope the study also adopts a comparative perspective to analyze the experiences of linguistic diversity in Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka. Each case study is analyzed through the application of the three analytical dimensions, to ensure comparability across different socio-political contexts and to identify recurring patterns in language policy and minority recognition.

The mentioned cases were selected to allow a broader historical and geographical view of the Indian Subcontinent: they include eastern, northern, western, and southern regions with a common postcolonial setting.

The selected experiences allow a comparative analysis of how different paths have been taken to use language policies as a state-formation strategy: both from a historical and institutional point of view the study examines how language is strategic for decision-making processes, access to public services and justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fact that the concept of the nation is artificial is widely accepted among scholars and the essentialist interpretations that see it as a natural or timeless entity have been strongly criticized. In this context Anderson (1983) proposed instead the idea of the nation as an “imagined community” built through shared symbols. As suggested by Bourdieu (1991), the concept of national identity is conceived as the result of historical processes and political negotiations that establish a sense of belonging over time. From this perspective, language plays a central role, as it represents the means through which national belonging is designed, shared and normalized publicly (Anderson, 1983). Consequently, by imposing a dominant linguistic standard, the state effectively pursues a monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), institutionalizing power asymmetries between linguistic groups. Furthermore, as Bourdieu (1991) indicates, the emergence of a “linguistic market” leads to a situation where certain languages function as “symbolic capital”. In this hierarchy, the state’s privileged language becomes the primary resource for social mobility, while other languages are progressively marginalized. This explains why some groups might adopt the dominant language as their primary spoken language, in order to secure their socio-economic position, whereas others, feeling excluded, might engage in resistance to protect their imagined community (Anderson, 1983).The idea of a shared language has therefore been used in many national pride-building projects, especially in postcolonial and newly constituted states (Schiffman, 1996). Once again, Bourdieu (1991) underlines how linguistic standardization has often been promoted as a means to strengthen cohesion across diverse populations within a nation, through common education systems and administrative practices. At the same time, such processes end up privileging one or more languages while leaving others behind.

Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the institutional recognition of a common or

national language is closely tied to power relationships: language policies contribute to building and reinforcing linguistic hierarchies, where some languages acquire higher symbolic authority than others which are relegated to merely informal domains (Bourdieu, 1991). These hierarchies often go beyond linguistic and cultural matters, shaping the extent to which people can access political decisions, public services and social mobility. These dynamics often give rise to localized protests from linguistic minorities, such as the case of language movements.

Within this postcolonial context another important factor should be taken into account: the presence of colonial languages that frequently still play an important role from an administrative point of view, as well as serving as common means of communication, despite their connection with historical domination (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). As Schiffman (1996) underlines, this tension between linguistic decolonization and linguistic governance remains unresolved in many multilingual states, particularly in the Indian Subcontinent, complicating the management of linguistic diversity.

While there are several examples of extended research on individual language movements and policies in South Asia, fewer studies connect language policy, minority recognition, and national identity formation across multiple postcolonial contexts in the Indian Subcontinent. For this reason this study seeks to fill this gap through a comparative analysis within the area.

CASE STUDY

I. The Bangladeshi Language Movement

The Bangladeshi language movement is probably the most prominent language movement in the region, having played a crucial role in facilitating the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. The movement emerged within a historical context of political and territorial division in the former Pakistan, which consisted of West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and the more isolated and exploited East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Jahan, 1972; Umar, 2006). The newborn State of Pakistan consisted of the two mentioned territories, which did not share a border but were united primarily by their common faith in Islam.

In addition to the economic exploitation and socio-political neglect of East Pakistan by West Pakistan's elite, the question of the national language rapidly became a critical issue. The political elite strongly promoted Urdu as the national language to emphasize its connection to Arabic and Persian, languages traditionally associated with Islam (Rahman, 1996). However, the majority of the population in both East and West Pakistan did not speak Urdu fluently. For the Bengali population in particular, this imposition was perceived as a new form of domination (Rahman, 1996), replacing one colonial hierarchy with another. This hegemonic project became increasingly evident following multiple public speeches by the prime minister advocating the institutionalization of Urdu as the sole national language, combined with several attempts to replace the Bengali script with the Arabic one. This strategy is an example of what Bourdieu (1991) identifies as the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence. By delegitimizing the native script, the West Pakistani elite was not merely simplifying administration but also attempting to devalue the Bengalis' alphabet and identity, by imposing a single legitimate linguistic order and the dominance of Urdu. From a theoretical perspective, this forced the Bengali population into a state of cultural subordination, where their primary tool of social and intellectual expression was pictured as incompatible with the new national identity.

Meanwhile, intellectuals and students in Dhaka emphasized the necessity of granting Bengali equal status with Urdu in civil, legal, and social spheres (Umar, 2006). United by the struggle for political recognition, which was seen as essential to the socioeconomic and political

structure of Pakistan, they mobilized under the language movement to preserve and protect the Bengali language and culture against the dominance of a language that represented only a small, powerful elite rather than the majority of ordinary citizens.

The central government, however, strongly repressed East Pakistan's claims for autonomy by forbidding public demonstrations. Resiliently taking the risk, students in Dhaka continued to gather and protest, raising their voices against the central policies that led to the linguistic oppression of Bengali. On 21 February 1952 during an unauthorized but peaceful manifestation, the police opened fire and brutally killed demonstrators and students. The Bengali population, devastated by these abuses and atrocities committed against the defenseless civilian population, decided to commemorate these "martyrs for the language" as key figures in the Bangladeshi independence process, who are still celebrated today (Islam, 1978). In this sense, the language movement exemplifies a dimension of popular resistance where linguistic identity became the primary catalyst for national self-determination against institutional exclusion.

Over time, the political party Awami League, composed, among others, of members of the former language and student movements, progressively gained strength and visibility within the Bengali population. Initially, the Awami League, in addition to fighting for equal recognition of Bengali and Urdu, called for equal social and economic conditions between East and West Pakistan. As Jahan (1972) highlights, as these demands were systematically ignored by the central government, they gradually evolved into calls for greater autonomy. The turning point occurred with the Awami League's election victory in 1970. Faced with the West Pakistani elite's reluctance to hand over power to the newly elected representatives, demands for autonomy transformed into demands for independence. The situation escalated between 1970 and 1971 when, following a bloody war, Bangladesh achieved independence. In this sense, the Bengali movement is a paradigmatic example of popular resistance against symbolic violence within an imagined community: the reclamation of linguistic rights became the primary tool for challenging institutionalized power asymmetries.

II. The Tamil Movement

Tamil Nadu, the southern region of India, which is home to a majority of Tamil native speakers has historically witnessed the rise of the Tamil language movement (Ramaswamy, 1997). This movement originated in the 1960s, when Tamil speakers demanded the adoption of a two-language policy as an alternative to the three-language solution proposed by the Central Indian Government (King, 2001).

After independence, the linguistic framework envisioned by the Constituent Assembly shaped India with Hindi as the official language of the Union, English as a transitional tool for administration and global communication, and regional languages to preserve local culture and heritage. This vision is reflected in Articles 343 to 347 of the Constitution, where each State is granted the authority to adopt one or more languages for official purposes. These prescriptions establish a constitutional framework that recognizes India's linguistic plurality while allowing for differentiated language policies at the state level.

Nevertheless, based on this constitutional architecture, the implementation of the three-language policy was carried out by the Education Commission (1964-66) and National Policy on Education (1968), with the claimed aim of balancing national integration with the preservation of regional and linguistic diversity by promoting the study of a regional language, Hindi, and English (King, 2001). This policy framework exemplifies the institutionalization of

the dominant language: an attempt to standardize linguistic practices in the name of national integration. Nevertheless, in Tamil Nadu this process was not perceived as integration, but as a form of linguistic hegemony. In this context Anderson's (1983) imagined communities can be recognized: the policy is an attempt by the central Indian state to construct a unified national identity through a process of "official nationalism". For Tamil speakers, their language was already the main element of a distinct imagined community; from this perspective, the resistance to Hindi is a competing process of imagined community-building at the regional level. The resistance to Hindi, from this perspective, results as a defense of Tamil's collective identity against the threat of a uniform linguistic standard imposed by the central state.

The three-language solution has been and remains, criticized by Tamil speakers, who perceive it as an imposition by a dominant Hindi speaking elite over the Tamil-speaking population (Bourdieu, 1991; Ramaswamy, 1997). Tamil non-Hindi-speakers feared that they would not have equal access to employment and educational opportunities (King, 2001) compared to Hindi speakers. This concern is based on the perception that academic evaluation and competitive examinations conducted in Hindi would disadvantage non-native speakers, who might struggle to perform at the same level as native Hindi speakers despite comparable abilities.

Since 1965, the Tamil movement has advocated for a two-language solution, with English used as the common language of the Union and Tamil, in the case of Tamil Nadu, as the official language of the federal state (Biswas, 2025). The decision not to include Hindi among the languages taught is viewed as a more respectful approach, preserving Tamil cultural identity and heritage, reflecting the principle that "unity must be built by respecting diversity and not by forcing uniformity" (Biswas, 2025).

Although the Tamil movement originated in the 1960s, the issue remains relevant today. Since 1968, and even recently in 2020, the National Policy on Education (NPE) has strongly recommended the three-language formula. However, education is a concurrent subject shared between the central government and federal states, as stated by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment (1976), which includes it in the Concurrent List. For this reason the national government cannot impose this solution on Tamil Nadu. As a result of the political pressure of the language movement, Tamil Nadu adopted the two-language policy, recently reaffirmed in 2025 in the State Education Policy.

Nevertheless, over time, the central government has increasingly promoted the use of Hindi within central institutions and national examinations (King, 2001). This expansion has contributed to structurally unequal conditions, as Tamil speakers are often required to operate in a non-native language, while Hindi native speakers benefit from a comparative advantage in access to public employment, institutional, and political participation by speaking their mother tongue. The continued prioritization of Tamil in education reflects the strong impact of the Tamil Language Movement within the State. Promoting Tamil enables citizens of Tamil Nadu to sustain their cultural and linguistic heritage while participating in India's multilingual society. At the same time, some argue that disadvantaged children may face reduced opportunities by not learning an additional language, which could exacerbate social inequalities within the state. Additionally, some Hindi-speaking minorities in Tamil Nadu may be affected by the two-language policy, as they may not have access to instruction in their native language. From this perspective, Tamil Nadu's solution, while promoting linguistic equality for the Tamil majority, could inadvertently create inequities for Hindi-speaking minorities. From a comparative perspective, as in the case of Urdu in Bangladesh, this case reflects the

institutionalization of the dominant language, as well as the socio-economic marginalization of non-Hindi speakers. However, unlike East Pakistan, in Tamil Nadu forms of resistance emerge at a regional level rather than through direct confrontation with the central state.

III. The Punjabi language across India and Pakistan

According to some authors such as Khokhlova (2009), in the case of Punjab the language has not represented a primary tool for building a strong collective identity within the community. Indeed, religion, rather than language, has constituted the basis for the construction of self-identity in the Punjab area. The territory has historically been inhabited by various religious groups such as Sikhs (predominantly Punjabi speakers), Muslims and Hindus. Although between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries Punjab represented an independent state under Sikh rule, during that time too, Punjabi was not the state language, as Persian was mostly used (Talbot, 1996). Once British colonization took place, the geopolitical dynamics of the northern region of the Indian Subcontinent changed significantly. According to the same author, the reason for privileging religion over language lies in a colonial tendency of the British protectorate to establish alliances and build stronger ties with local communities based on religion rather than language or ethnic affiliation.

As for Punjab, although the Punjabi language had a wide literary heritage and a strong cultural tradition, the religious picture was fragmented into various religious communities. Subsequently, during British rule of the Indian Subcontinent the British colonizers strengthened ties with different religious communities at different moments, causing religion to become a primary means of cultural identification over language.

It is in this context that religious reform movements spread with the aim of defending Sikhism from the potential threat of Christianity and Hindu absorption, as many Sikhs had converted over time to these religions. These movements were, thus, more oriented toward emphasizing religious bonds among the people of Punjab rather than linguistic ones. Even in 1947, when the territory of former India was partitioned into India and Pakistan, Punjabi identity became strongly and politically tied to Sikh religious belief. Although, especially in Pakistan, a stronger status as a national language was accorded to Urdu, no strong, widespread, language movement emerged to support Punjabi recognition as a national language (Shackle, 1977). Unlike India, where linguistic diversity is constitutionally recognized and ideally preserved through a federal implementation structure, Pakistan adopted a more centralized language policy, directly marginalizing regional linguistic identities. This contrast highlights how different approaches to language policy reflect broader state-building strategies and power configurations. In this case in front of the institutionalization of Urdu this policy was not contested by the Punjabi elite, as they prioritized religious and political stability over linguistic recognition. According to Khokhlova's study, language movements generally arise among economically oppressed communities that experience social and economic marginalization. In the case of Punjab, language movements did not play a significant role in building Punjabi identity, considering that these communities have historically been granted a relatively high social status, integrating wealthy white-collar groups in both Pakistani and Indian society (Khokhlova, 2009). Contemporary social structures in Punjab are not strongly based on language: although, for example, Punjabi is available in some master's programs, most students from middle or higher social backgrounds prefer to pursue their studies either in Hindi or, more often, in English, as it is perceived as a language that can provide greater international opportunities.

On the other hand hand, Hussain's study (2020) defines Punjabi in Pakistan as a marginalized language, as a result of socio-economic discrepancies affecting Punjabi speakers in comparison

with Urdu or English speakers, underlining how dynamics of internalization of linguistic hierarchy can work. According to this author, although Punjabi is the most spoken language in Pakistan, it receives little institutional support for its promotion and diffusion, nor is it widely used in official institutions and public administrations, mostly due to the social and economic marginalization of its speakers

These two interpretations of Punjabi as either the language of a religious and socio-economically privileged elite or as a language associated with a rural and marginalized society, may appear contradictory. Nevertheless, a possible unitary vision of these two perspectives can be identified by considering the Punjabi dominant group as being primarily focused on preserving religious identity rather than linguistic rights, while lower Punjabi-speaking classes lack bargaining power to collectively advocate for language recognition. This may be one of the reasons why, unlike the Tamil and Bangladeshi cases, the Punjabi language movement has not emerged with the same intensity or visibility and continues to play a more marginal role in linguistic politics. On the contrary, the relative absence of a strong Punjabi language movement, in contrast to the Bengali experience, could also be considered an exemplification of the "linguistic market" concept suggested by Bourdieu (1991). Since the Punjabi elite already held a dominant position within the Pakistani state and military, they did not perceive the promotion of Urdu as a threat; instead, they adopted Urdu as a strategic symbolic element to maintain national cohesion. In this sense the Punjabi case shows a unique situation among the studied ones: the socio-economic marginalization of rural speakers did not translate into a popular resistance because the dominant classes utilized Urdu as strategic symbolic capital. In this case, Anderson's (1983) imagined community was built primarily on religious unity, a more effective marker of belonging than the linguistic one for the Punjabi population.
In conclusion, this case shows how the institutionalization of a dominant language, combined with other socio-economic dynamics, can prevent the emergence of popular resistance and alter the dynamics of language-based political mobilization.

4) Sri Lanka's struggles to achieve actual bilingualism

Linguistic diversity has characterized Sri Lanka since well before independence. Political debate over language issues began during the colonial period and continued until it was formally addressed through amendments to the Constitution (Perera, 2015; Spittel, 1970). The constitutional amendment led to equal recognition of both Sinhala and Tamil as official state languages, along with the right of citizens to use either language in public and private contexts without discrimination.

As underlined by Mukherjee and Bernaisch (2020), Sri Lanka is certainly a country characterized by a multitude of linguistic differences: English, a colonial legacy, is still widely used in some contexts as a *lingua franca* despite being heavily criticized as an element that continues to link the country to its colonial past of dependency on British influence.

According to the Minority Rights Group International Report (2024), especially coinciding with the geographical division between the north and south of the country, a linguistic division can be noted between the southern regions where Sinhala is predominantly spoken and those in the north where Tamil is widely spoken (by 28.5% of the total population). This state of affairs reflects not only linguistic differences but also, and above all, an ethnic and political division that has repeatedly been at the center of bloody battles and civil wars within the country. While the Sinhala represent an Indo-Aryan ethno-linguistic group that is predominantly Buddhist, Sri Lankan Tamils, are mainly Hindu, along with a distinct Muslim community that also uses Tamil as a primary language.

The British colonial rule and the creation of the Sri Lankan state have always been characterized by difficult relations between the various communities present in the country. As mentioned, these have often been characterized by clashes and mutual discrimination, with progressive pressure for the Sinhalization of the state, both linguistically and ethnically. These tensions have led, over the years, to the escalation of extremist positions and demands for independence and territorial divisions (Perera, 2015).

Some examples of Sinhalization can be seen during the early years of Sri Lanka's independence: Sinhalese political actors pressured Parliament to adopt the "Sinhala Only Bill", which declared Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka. The political propaganda for a Sinhala Only Bill represents a practice of legitimate symbolic violence aiming to push the linguistic identity of the Tamil minority out of the linguistic landscape of public affairs management. Political representatives and the Tamil-speaking population strenuously opposed this act through protests and motions until in 1987 Tamil was officially included as an official language alongside Sinhala, by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, establishing a legal framework aimed at linguistic parity.

Despite the constitutional recognition of Tamil, in real life differences and disparities in treatment between Tamil and Sinhala speakers still remain, as well as greater difficulties for Tamil speakers to access public services and jobs and to interact with the authorities in their language (Manogaran & Pfaffenberger, 1994).

Currently, according to Perera's study (2015), the number of Tamil-speaking public officials is very low, even in the northern and northeastern areas where Tamil is most commonly used. This leads to unequal treatment among citizens, inability to access justice and public services, and higher costs that Tamil speakers must directly cover for simultaneous translation services and transcription of documents into Sinhala. Very often, Tamil speakers are forced to contact and directly pay an official translator or, at best, rely on public officials who generally have very little knowledge of the language.

Despite the fact that the government has provided funds to implement more inclusive language policies; issued guidelines, and circulars to promote the use of Tamil in public institutions, Sinhala continues to be used as the exclusive language in almost all cases. Although Tamil and English courses have been organized for both public officials and citizens, the successful results have been very limited. On top of that, public officials were often not genuinely interested in learning the language, but rather in obtaining work permits or compensation (Perera, 2015). This gap between legal recognition and daily life in administrative practice is an example of Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic hierarchy, which highlights the socio-economic marginalization of Tamil speakers, despite formal institutional recognition. Although Tamil is constitutionally an official language, the state is not effectively implementing it in public services, reinforcing, through language, a power asymmetry. This situation exemplifies a hierarchical linguistic order, in which formal equality does not translate into equal access to symbolic and institutional resources. In this context, the linguistic barrier is not merely a technical issue, but a form of symbolic violence and systemic exclusion that prevents Tamil speakers from exercising their rights, maintaining their status of cultural and political subordination.
Both in the case of India and Sri Lanka, these countries explicitly recognize languages other than the majority ones, but then the actual implementation of policies to allow their daily use is very limited if not even opposed by elites and political-economic interests.
Moreover, in contrast to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Punjabi case in Pakistan show how, in some contexts, language policies, far from being a revolutionary and liberating force, can

intensify social divisions when aligned with majoritarian interests and the dynamics of the linguistic market. Sri Lanka's case simultaneously reflects the institutionalization of a dominant language and the socio-economic marginalization of minority speakers, while showing how limited forms of resistance can result in an environment of structural linguistic inequality.

Following the analysis of the four cases, it is possible to evince the political and sociological connection between language and the process of shaping of national identity. The four cases highlight different ways of using the national language and recognizing minority languages for political purposes, from another point of view, language often also constitutes a way to resist centralization tendencies, while in other contexts, the linguistic element leaves room for other identity markers such as religion.

Overall, the three analytical dimensions of institutionalization, marginalization, and resistance interact differently due to varying socio-historical contexts and factors, shaping distinct dynamics in a multilingual national landscape.

FINDINGS

Diversity is certainly one of the defining characteristics of the Indian Subcontinent. This diversity is reflected at socioeconomic, linguistic, and political levels. The existence of multilingualism therefore constitutes one of the subcontinent's major sociopolitical challenges, which has emerged repeatedly and has been managed differently during the postcolonial period by the various states analyzed, according to their characteristics and social context. These patterns can be interpreted through Bourdieu's concept of linguistic hierarchy and market and Anderson's notion of imagined communities, which help explain how language policies evolve and how they can be used both as instruments of symbolic power and as tools for constructing collective identity.

Following the comparative analysis of the four cases, it can be seen that the relationship between language and national identity is always present, even if it varies from case to case. Overall, the findings suggest that language policies in postcolonial multilingual states of the subcontinent are not mere tools of communication, but play a crucial role in shaping inclusion, exclusion, and the boundaries of national identity. For instance, while in Bangladesh language was a factor of resistance and unification, in Sri Lanka and Pakistan it often reinforced exclusionary dynamics and power asymmetries. Further, it is emphasized how the linguistic factor can integrate and interact with other dynamics, as in the case of the Punjabi population and the religious element, relegating language to a secondary role as an identity marker. Furthermore, with regard to the case of the explicit recognition of minority languages, in all cases it is clear that, despite legislative pronouncements, the provisions are often not actually implemented.

In all the analyzed cases of newly independent states characterized by linguistic plurality, the response of central governments, regardless of whether multilingualism was formally recognized, has de facto consistently prioritized a single language, with the stated aim of strengthening national identity and fostering a sense of belonging among the population.

However, following an in-depth analysis of the socio-political contexts and the resulting analysis of language policies, what emerges is an ambivalent situation in which, on the one hand, privileging one language over others can be a vehicle for increasing a sense of belonging, while on the other hand, it ends up marginalizing speakers of other languages within the country.

This is particularly evident in the case of Pakistan and the use of Urdu as the national language, privileged over Punjabi.

In the case of Tamil Nadu, this context highlights potential difficulties in implementing a two-

language policy, but also highlights its potential importance for the state's residents from various perspectives. On the one hand, the two-language policy is certainly essential for preserving the identity, history, and culture of Tamil speakers, representing an act of resistance against the hegemony of a centrally established dominant language. On the other hand hand, however, the inability to speak Hindi could constitute a disadvantage, especially for the poorest social classes who might be unable to access opportunities outside of Tamil Nadu: in fact, Hindi continues to be the most widely spoken language, even compared to English. At the same time, the exclusion of Hindi from Tamil Nadu's two-language policy could result in a violation of the linguistic rights of Hindi-speaking minorities in the state.

This shows how linguistic minorities often find themselves forced to manage tensions between two distinct tendencies: on the one hand, the tendency toward assimilation, whereby the system makes learning the national (or dominant) language a necessary priority for access to education, employment, and social mobility; on the other hand, the system's tendency to marginalize linguistic minorities, thus creating a sense of exclusion that, consequently, increases pressure for autonomy or independence.

A striking example is Bangladesh, where social, economic, and political tensions, characterized, among other things, by linguistic exclusion, degenerated into bloody protests and even a war of independence. This case highlights the potential consequences of neglecting linguistic justice to blindly pursue national cohesion.

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, there is a further controversial reflection that needs to be developed regarding the role of English. While the dilemma of distancing oneself from the symbolic language of colonialism or using it as a *lingua franca* is highlighted, at the same time the question arises of how to ensure that the new national language do not become a new instrument of domination and supremacy of one population over the other.

As mentioned, the English language plays an ambivalent role in the Indian Subcontinent: it can be considered in its role as a *lingua franca* that allows for mutual intelligibility between the various populations of the region as well as at the international level. However,

continuing to use and recognize as an official language what represents centuries of colonial domination could certainly contribute to symbolically perpetuating an idea of inequality and hierarchy represented by an external influence. As Poudel (2022) affirms, “the English language was instrumental for linguistic and cultural assimilation of these people speaking diverse languages against the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of the region”. Overall, the findings highlight that the governance of linguistic diversity in postcolonial contexts remains a deeply political process, where the recognition and implementation of language policies mediate access to power and rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It is important to start from the assumption that, despite sharing many common historical and cultural elements, the Indian Subcontinent is generally characterized by profound linguistic and legal diversity. It is therefore difficult to present a single solution that fits all the analyzed cases. However, precisely because of the diverse historical and cultural characteristics of the subcontinent, it is important to promote education and mutual cultural awareness so that various populations can come into contact with one another, broadening their perspectives on the value and uniqueness of the various languages and the traditions they embody. This will allow for greater recognition, acceptance, and respect for others and their distinctive characteristics, primarily their language. Greater institutional promotion facilitating better coexistence between

the various linguistic groups is crucial to achieving better access to public life in one's own language and reducing tensions at the ethno-linguistic level.

Considering all four cases analyzed, the Sri Lankan case, where the equality of Sinhala and Tamil has been recognized at a constitutional level, is certainly an excellent attempt at the legal recognition of fundamental human rights despite the fact that significant critical issues remain with regard to the effectiveness of the enunciated right. On the one hand, there is the difficulty, in practice, of implementing these policies; on the other hand, there is the complex question of the role of English. English represents a burdensome colonial legacy and, at the same time, a potential tool for social cohesion and mutual recognition, as well as greater dynamism and international trade opportunities.

Alongside these general questions, which apply to all four scenarios, there are a number of other specific issues, closely linked to the social context of each of the countries studied. In the case of Punjabi and Tamil speakers, promoting linguistic diversity should be based on a holistic approach that includes solutions at institutional, technological, and cultural level. With regard to this last mentioned level, for example, it would be important to promote minority art and literature across the country through festivals and events that allow all citizens to become familiar with minority languages, thus strengthening a sense of recognition and appreciation, and fostering greater social cohesion among the various populations speaking different languages. Alongside the cultural level, there is also the educational one: promoting diverse cultures and languages in schools and ensuring access to quality education, including in minority languages, can be crucial. To achieve this goal, in addition to curricular teaching, the use of multimedia platforms for language learning can be useful: support for digital and technological resources, such as online dictionaries and educational applications provides practical tools for learning and preserving minority languages, particularly in rural or underserved areas.

As for school textbooks, these should ensure equal representation of all cultures and languages present, as a more inclusive solution also in the classroom. Furthermore in both academic and professional settings, interregional exchanges could be funded for both students and public servants to deepen interaction between different languages and cultures, enhance linguistic skills, or introduce them to minority languages. An example of this type of activity could be the “Erasmus+” program in Europe, which every year allows students and workers to undertake periods of study, work, and internships in other European countries to experience their culture and learn their language.

With particular reference to public officials, especially those working in areas where minority languages are the most widely spoken, it is fundamental to ensure linguistic training that allows them to interact and operate fluently in the minority language. Since the role of public officials is strategic in ensuring that all citizens have equal access to public services and justice, it is important that their linguistic preparation is strong and verifiable, not merely a formal recognition. To promote genuine engagement in learning minority languages, financial incentives and job promotions can certainly be helpful, but these rewards should be strictly linked to the achievement of verifiable language proficiency outcomes, assessed through transparent evaluation.

Moreover, it is essential that language proficiency does not remain a mere formal certification, but be demonstrated through actual use in daily life, which may include the obligation for public servants to interact with users in the minority language when requested, contribute to the translation of public documents, and make administrative acts available also in the acquired

languages. Finally, it could be useful to strengthen the presence and use of minority languages in the media and in official contexts and discourses, to ensure a greater sense of belonging and inclusion on the part of minorities as well. Implementing these solutions could strengthen institutional credibility, access to public services, and a greater degree of effective rights for minority language communities, preventing their recognition from being a mere theoretical statement. These types of policies would also help strengthen social cohesion and tolerance, and avoid internal tensions that could otherwise lead to violent escalations.

The last issue to be addressed is the one concerning English: this could constitute a temporary solution as a *lingua franca* in a transition period while working towards achieving the goal of real mutual recognition and respect within the framework of a truly multilingual state, respectful of all the languages spoken on the territory. Considering Poudel's studies (2022), an element to take into account in this context is the "non-native varieties" of English, born from the interaction between English and local languages (such as Indian English). “These varieties differ from native English in phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns and link multicultural communities across diverse linguistic and cultural spaces” and give life to real forms of expression which, far from being a simple use of the colonial language, reflect and represent local culture and traditions, transforming the colonizer's language into something of its own, original and authentically local. As underlined by Mukherjee (2020) “Contemporary Indian English is profiled as a semi-autonomous variety dynamically negotiating the need for local identity construction of its speakers with that for global intelligibility.” These non-native varieties of English, having acquired their own original elements: idioms, concepts, historical and cultural references, could therefore be a temporary, contra-hegemonic and decolonial response to a broader recognition of linguistic diversity in the various territories analyzed.

Based on Poudel's study (2022) non-native forms of English could be implemented as a temporary *lingua franca*, a neutral ground, both in classrooms and in institutions to allow mutual communication between speakers of different languages, avoiding discrimination and guaranteeing access to public services and underlining the elements that unite the various populations of the territory, as a common front against colonial hegemony.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study offers important insights that can contribute to an overview of the state of relations between linguistic groups in the Indian Subcontinent, it is also necessary to recognize potential limitations and future research paths. First, it would be useful to integrate primary data, both qualitative (such as semi-structured interviews and localized focus groups) and quantitative, including updated statistics on the number of speakers of various languages, while also evaluating the historical evolution of such data. Furthermore, the comparative approach, while certainly useful in this case, may not be the only possible or most appropriate one, as some peculiarities specific to each social and linguistic group may not be captured without a more hermeneutic analysis focused exclusively on a single community. A micro-level perspective could reveal socio-cultural nuances that a macro-comparative study might inevitably overlook. This element should be taken into account, especially considering that the number of cases chosen as examples for comparative analysis allows only a partial overview that does not represent the entire linguistic situation in the subcontinent, which is characterized by considerable linguistic diversity and a very large number of languages spoken throughout the territory.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the limitation regarding the language of the sources used, namely, sources available exclusively in English. It could prove crucial in subsequent studies

to also use sources directly in the languages of the linguistic groups analyzed, precisely in order to provide a first-hand perspective on the materials produced by the studied communities. These limitations suggest that in future research a mixed-method approach could be taken to conduct a more localized analysis, in order to further validate and detail the comparative findings presented in this study.

As previously mentioned, the sociocultural, linguistic, and historical diversity of the Indian Subcontinent makes it difficult to propose a single policy that applies to all cases. However, it is recommended that both government institutions and citizens take a step toward a genuine recognition and respect for linguistic minorities through education and culture, that are open to the discovery of others and their linguistic and cultural peculiarities.

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