



# *Policies & Perspectives*



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

## Conflicts in the Name of Language

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Four months ago, DMK leader MK Stalin warned of a “new anti-Hindi agitation” in case the Union Government replaced the markings on national highway milestones in Tamil Nadu, from English to Hindi. He claimed the Government’s move demonstrated “bringing Hindi through the backdoor in the State” and showed that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Centre “did not respect the sentiments of Tamils”. He saw in the National Highway Authority of India’s action in having the ‘national’ official language signages on milestones as the “imposition of Hindi”. Not to be left behind, other Tamil Nadu leaders joined the bandwagon. PMK founder S Ramadoss threatened to launch a “massive agitation”, and MDMO leader Vaiko condemned the action in no less stringent ways. Meanwhile, some Tamil enthusiasts got busy smearing the Hindi names on the national highway milestones in the State. The AIADMK regime has, until now, maintained a balanced position. Let’s for a moment ignore the fact that no Tamil signage on the milestones was sought to be replaced by Hindi, and move on.

More recently, a few days back, pro-Kannada activists in Bangalore began street protests against the use of Hindi at Metro stations’ signages. There was no exclusion of either English or the local language, but a mere addition of Hindi, but even this was reason enough for the overzealous agitators to go around the cosmopolitan metropolis and insist that Hindi should not be used at public places. Thus, from Metro stations, the demand spread to malls and gymnasiums and elsewhere. A self-appointed guardian of the Kannada language, the Kannada Rakshana Vedike (KRV), has taken the lead in seeking to coerce the State Government into shutting out Hindi, and its people have fanned out across the city to adopt pressure tactics. But it need not waste its energy — the Congress Government led by Siddaramaiah already believes that the BJP-led Centre is attempting to “impose Hindi” on non-Hindi speaking States. Here too, never mind the fact that the Metro was launched six years ago, and that Hindi signages have been there for all these years. A new Metro route, which was inaugurated recently, too had the Hindi signages along with Kannada and English.

This brings us to the question: What has prompted the sudden outburst of fury in both Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, even if on a limited scale in geographical terms? What could have been the immediate trigger? After all, rationally speaking, Hindi signages along national highways would help travelers from across the country in their journeys. Similarly, Hindi names at Bangalore Metro stations are of immense use to the thousands of commuters who are from outside Karnataka and do not understand Kannada. But rational thoughts do not matter. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK is seeking to exploit the troubles within the ruling AIADMK, and any issue — however old and worn-out — will do to grab public attention and further its cause. Besides, as the newly-minted leader of his party and ever-mindful of family challenges to his position, Stalin is eager to take up ‘causes’ that appeal to the Dravidian mind — and what better can there be than Hindi-bashing! An Assembly election is due in neighbouring Karnataka, and pro-Kannada activists such as the KRV understand the value of striking when the iron is hot. They know this is the right time to pressure the Government, and



*when that pressure comes in the form of a linguistic sentiment, it's near impossible for any public functionary of the State to resist it. Besides, not just the ruling party but also those others aligned against it would find it difficult to oppose the pro-Kannada demand — in whatever warped form it gets presented.*

*The potency of language chauvinism in the country cannot be underestimated. But before one gets to its contemporary manifestations, it will help to understand that political science theorists have for many decades held language as an important, even critical, component of an individual's identity — and by extension the identity of the nation (or State) he is part of. Indeed, the nuanced difference between a state (not to be confused with State as with capital S) and a nation has, among other elements, that of language. Writer-thinker, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a German philosopher who further developed the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, placed great emphasis on common linkages such as language and said a separate nation exists where a separate language exists. He remarked, "Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature itself, long before any human art being, they understand each other and have the power to make themselves understood more and more clearly." The eminent linguist, Edward Sapir, said that "the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiar potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language". Thus, language helps build cultural kinship.*

*When India became a Union of States, the States were formed on a linguistic basis. There were other considerations too, such as geographical proximity, but language remained a primary reason. Linguistics became an essential guiding principle simply because the country had several languages — strong enough individually in spoken, written and literature forms — and they had to be assimilated in much the same way as the various princely states were in a united India. Thus came to be created the so-called Hindi belt, the Dravidian belt, the Kannada belt, the Telugu belt, and so on. English and Hindi became the link languages. It was expected that the arrangement would satisfy all and that regional languages would enjoy the pride of place alongside the two link languages. But this idea of harmony was to be challenged within a little over a decade of independence, with the south showing the way. The anti-Hindi agitation of the 1960s in Tamil Nadu shook the edifice of linguistic togetherness and laid the ground for a level of distrust that continues to prevail to this day. But what happened in the 1960s was itself a continuation of an earlier campaign.*

*The anti-Hindi agitation began in what was then the Madras Presidency back in 1937. It drew in larger sections of the society — from students to politicians to lay people — in opposition to the introduction of Hindi as a compulsory language in schools. The state Congress regime headed by C Rajagopalachari had taken the decision. The protests began as a political tool by the opposition leaders such as EV Ramasamy Periyar who was to become the leading light of the Dravidian movement. The agitation went on for close to three years. The state crackdown was swift and, some would say, brutal, leading to a simmering discontent that continue to simmer even after the movement was brought under control. Eventually, in 1940, the British annulled the decision of compulsory use of Hindi in schools, after the Rajagopalachari regime quit. The very creation of Tamil Nadu came with the understanding that Hindi would not be 'imposed'*



*on the people of the State.*

*The second round of protests, this time with greater violent intensity, began in the mid-sixties. The backdrop to this was the adoption of Hindi as the official language, with English being the 'associate' language, by the Constitution of India. The subject was hotly contested in the Constituent Assembly before the Constitution of India came into effect from January 26, 1950. However, the DMK, which came into being on Dravidian and anti-Hindi sentiments, continued with its opposition. In a bid to address the Tamil pride and allay fears, Jawaharlal Nehru's Government enacted the Official Languages Act in 1963, which ensured the continued use of English beyond 1965 — the cut-off year the Constitution had mentioned, to thereafter have Hindi as the sole official language of the nation.*

*But even this assurance and the legislation did not satisfy the DMK. As 1965 approached, the anti-Hindi agitation grew in might in Madras State, and a full-scale riot erupted all over. Arson, looting, police firings etc. became the norm over the next three months. Lives were lost — according to official estimates, at least 70 people died (although unofficial estimates put the figure higher). It was only after a categorical assurance from Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri that English would continue to be the official language that the protests were withdrawn and normalcy returned. However, the DMK derived the political benefit it wanted, and rode to power in the 1967 Assembly election, defeating the Congress which was projected as the party that had sought to 'impose' Hindi on the Dravidian land. In fact, the Congress never recovered from the setback, not even after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi amended the Official Languages Act to provide for the indefinite use of English, along with Hindi, as an official language. Given this background, the use of Hindi along with English should not have raised the hackles of the people of Tamil Nadu recently — since the status quo which satisfied the people and political parties of Tamil Nadu, has been maintained.*

*The other major language flare-up happened in the unlikeliest of places in the mid-1980s — in Goa. A section of the political class, the Church and several organisations joined hands to demand 'official language' status for Konkani, to ensure that Marathi, which was widely spoken, and used in religious proceedings, did not gain at the cost of the local language. Many political careers were made through this agitation, both of Congress leaders and sundry others. One suggestion, that both Konkani and Marathi be given the official language status, was unacceptable to the pro-Konkani camp. Eventually, Marathi got an 'equal' but not 'official' status. The agitation took on violent, and often farcical forms. Two newspapers took diametrically opposite stands and came to be identified with the camps they supported. One was an English daily, Herald, which had spun out of a Portuguese paper and was barely three years old. The other was a Marathi daily, Gomantak, which campaigned for the use of Marathi too as the official language. At one point, the situation had become so scary that people thought twice before being seen with the Gomantak in the presence of pro-Konkani groups — and vice versa! In the end, both the dailies flourished on the strength of the agitation. While the Marathi paper had already been established, the Herald fully exploited the circumstance and gained ground at the expense of its rivals in the State. Indeed, such was the momentum it gained during the*



*language protests that it continues to remain influential to date.*

*There was a bit of recent history to the agitation. Soon after Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule in end-1961, a strong movement for its amalgamation into Maharashtra gained ground. The argument was that since Goa was culturally and linguistically so close to the bigger State, its absorption would be not just be seamless but also natural. Regional outfits such as the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) were supportive of the idea (though the MGP later reconciled to a separate entity for Goa). By extension, support for Marathi over Konkani too became evident. This naturally resulted in a backlash and the consolidation of forces which wanted Goa to remain separate and for Konkani to get the due it had not received so far despite being the spoken language of the State, regardless of caste, community or religious affiliations of the people. The prosperity of Marathi publications and the lack of Konkani ones, also became a cause of concern. As if these were not enough, there was controversy over the written script for Konkani: One section promoted Devanagari and the other, Roman. Through some funny logic, the use of Devanagari was seen by some as a compromise to the Marathi forces, and thus they promoted the Roman script. There is one irony in the story. The pro-Marathi MGP came to power in the first Assembly election held after Liberation, defeating the Congress. But during the language agitation, the Congress Government in the State led by Pratapsingh Rane was seen to be inclined towards Marathi. It must be remembered, though, that the language agitation in Goa was very different from that in Tamil Nadu, since it was not against Hindi. Thus, no State — not even the southern ones — has seen anti-Hindi protests of the kind that Tamil Nadu had. In Maharashtra, the various pro-Marathi-manooos agitations which the Shiv Sena launched over the last few decades, were more to extract a kind of allegiance to Marathi culture from non-Maharashtrians, rather than an anti-Hindi drive.*

*The recent violent confrontation in the Hills of West Bengal over the demand for a separate Gorkhaland State too has its immediate beginnings in language — in the perception that the Mamata Banerjee Government of the State had sought to impose the Bengali language among the people in the Hills, through an order that made the learning of Bengali compulsory in schools which came under the State education board's jurisdiction. The Government had to withdraw the notification and clarify that it had no intention to 'impose' Bengali, but the damage had been done, and the Hill region in West Bengal continues to be in serious turmoil.*

*In the end, it may be said that while language conflicts can be considered normal in a country such as India, which has dozens of recognised languages and many more of dialects, these disputes must not assume proportions which seek to divide people into exclusivist linguistic mindsets in the name of preserving unique cultural identities.*

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## About VIF

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