

Tamil Nadu lost nothing by not teaching Hindi – that’s an important lesson on Indian federalism

The state’s social and economic success five decades since the anti-Hindi agitation shows that language pragmatism goes both ways.

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Mar 19, 2025 · 09:00 am

In essence, the battle of words between Tamil Nadu and the Bharatiya Janata Party-headed central government over the three-language formula is a confrontation between Hindutva and Dravidianism masquerading as a dispute about federalism.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin and leaders of other political parties in the state have opposed the requirement of the New Education Policy 2020 that students learn three languages in school, at least two of which are native to India. They contend that this is an attempt to impose Hindi on the state.

They assert that the two-language formula in Tamil Nadu, by which students learn Tamil and English, is pragmatic and has a successful track record. At the heart of their opposition is the Dravidian ideology that the residents of India’s southern states are culturally different from their compatriots in the Hindi-speaking North.

The Tamil language is the ideological fulcrum around which Dravidianism revolves. Tamil literature considers itself as more than a language. Its self-image is that of a culture.

Attempts to introduce Hindi in schools in Tamil Nadu have been made since 1937, emanating at that time from parts of the Congress leadership. But it is worth recalling that during that period, Hindi was the symbol of anti-colonial protest. Nonetheless, it was resisted firmly in Tamil Nadu.

In 1967, amid discussions about the National Education Policy, the anti-Hindi plank was crucial in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam’s electoral victory. This time around, the push for the three-language formula is coming from the BJP-ruled central government as an assertion of its overarching political dominance. Hindi fits well into the BJP’s Hindutva project, which has geographical and cultural antecedents in the Hindi-speaking North Indian region. A descendant

of Sanskrit, Hindi is deeply rooted in the canonical Hinduism of the Indo-Gangetic plain.

As in Hindutva, in Dravidian politics too, Hindi is viewed as the direct offspring of Sanskrit. The distance between Tamil and Sanskrit in linguistic structure and the perceived historical slighting of Tamil by Sanskrit and the southern region by the North are at the core of this anti-Hindi sentiment.

Intrinsic to Dravidianism is the opposition to the structures of caste. In Tamil Nadu, Brahmins who were traditionally custodians of Sanskrit, were seen as migrants from the North. This contributed to the antipathy towards Hindi.

As the Sanskrit cosmopolis expanded to southern India, Tamil and Sanskrit interacted with each other in a complex web, with mutual exchange, competition, accommodation and regard. There were also perhaps conflicts, although we need firmer historical data on this matter.

Nonetheless, as the composite culture of India evolved – and not just through harmony – Tamil stood its ground. The major temples of Tamil Nadu, bastions of canonical Hinduism, include both Sanskrit and Tamil prayers, a status not easily conferred on vernaculars in other regions.

Only under colonialism, the romance of European orientalisks with Sanskrit and the increasing Brahmin dominance in administration and professions, was there a dent in Tamil primacy. Dravidianism built its argument on this premise.

But after it became a political movement in the 1920s, a phase of polemics inevitably set in. Populist interpretations of Tamil's primordiality ignored historical fact, the anti-caste ideology was diluted in practice, leading to caste violence between members of the Other Backward Classes and Dalits, creating polarities between North and South that disregarded the processes of exchange and accommodation that was prevalent in the subcontinent, across regions. But that phase is fading somewhat.

To those unfamiliar with the biography of the Tamil language, the Tamil Nadu government's argument against the three-language formula sounds petulant and unwarrantedly political. After all, the New Education Policy does not name Hindi as one of the languages that must be taught. It apparently leaves the choice to the states.

However, Tamil Nadu, as the state's Deputy Chief Minister, Udayanidhi Stalin explained, believes that the Centre aims to use the New Education Policy "as a backdoor entry for Hindi".

Five decades after the last anti-Hindi agitation, Tamil Nadu is a well-integrated part of India with two official languages. The other Dravidian languages are part of its popular culture, as is Hindi. Tamil Nadu has managed pretty well all these years with Tamil and English.

The state is ranked high among Indian states on many parameters, including education. According to the Union government's Performance Grading Index in 2019-2020, the state was among the [top five achievers](#) on key educational parameters such as access, governance and equity.

There is no reason to believe Hindi not being a compulsory subject has in any way hurt the performance of students in Tamil Nadu. Students who wish to learn Hindi may and do join schools in the state that follow the Central Board for Secondary Education or private educational institutions.

There are many Tamils in Tamil Nadu who have a working knowledge of Hindi, often through Hindi films and songs. Those who have business dealings in North India or have relocated there, learn Hindi. At that level, there is no anti-Hindi sentiment. The Tamil experience demonstrates that the best way to spread Hindi is not to enforce it: popular culture and commerce will do the job.

In recent years, Dravidian governments have modulated ideology and embraced pragmatism in matters of faith and belief. Today, there is no need for Tamil to stand tall by belittling Sanskrit or casting Hindi as a gobbler of other languages.

State leaders can be forgiven their hyperbolic language in an election-eve year. Tamil, after all, is an emotive issue. Even the BJP, which is struggling to make an electoral dent in the state, has attempted to tap into Tamil pride.

In 2023, the Hindutva party attempted to appeal to this constituency by installing in the new Parliament a sengol – a scepter symbolic of the transfer of royal power for the Cholas, an ancient dynasty that ruled over this region.

The Constitution did not designate any national language for India. That is a powerful indication not just of the diversity of national identities but of the right to choose how to practice them. Not making Hindi a compulsory school subject would in no way lessen Tamil Nadu's commitment to the nation. India's unity and

identity are not dependent on the entire population knowing one particular language.

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