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# Language of power or “fringe language”?: English in postcolonial India, 1946–1968

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**Abstract:** India’s “official language controversy” spanned over two decades from 1946 to 1967, during which the proposal to replace English with Hindi met with resistance from various quarters. However, the inter-regional ethno-linguistic politics of India came together with the developmental vision for an industrialized postcolonial democracy to ensure its validation and continuance in as a co-official language of the republic. My analysis identifies a widespread perception, among supporters as well as detractors of English in India at the time, that the “international”/“foreign” credentials of the language made it an instrument of change across various regional, religious, caste, class, and ethnic communities. The language came to be reframed during this period due to the coming together of India’s colonial past and its distinct regional and community histories with the views of leading public figures. Perhaps most surprising, however, is the complex part played by a “hybrid” minority constituency in public debate: the mixed race Anglo-Indian community, in dissociating from the former “home” country of England re-defined itself and its relationship with the new republic, and ultimately served as a catalyst in reframing the language as not merely international or colonial, but as Indian.

**Keywords:** language politics, English in India, politics of English, Anglo-Indian, minority language

## 1 Introduction

An analysis of the controversy regarding India’s official language, at its peak between 1946 and 1968, provides valuable insights into the relative positions of Hindi and English within the landscape of Indian language ideology. Rich scholarship exists on the identity politics of language in India and the recent history of its relationship to political communities (Rao 1973; Mohanty 1982; Rao; 1988; King 1994; Kaviraj 1995; Ramaswamy 1997; Naregal 2002; Dalmia 2003; Mitchell 2009; Mir 2010; Trautmann 2006; Bose 2014). English in India has

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also received great attention but mostly in the contexts of linguistics (particularly with respect to questions of “World Englishes”), sociology, anthropology, and education (Kachru 1986; Ramanathan 2005; Kachru et al. 2008; Hundt and Sharma 2014; LaDousa 2014). However, only a few historical studies have undertaken the complex task of examining closely the discursive politics of English in the colonial and postcolonial state, in spite of its importance in terms of policy, national (and nationalistic) ideals, and center-state relations in the context of the official language issue (Viswanathan 1989; Seth 2007; Bharadwaj 2011; Chandra 2012; Sadana 2012). In this article, I discuss the persistent political ambivalence of the language, even several decades after India’s independence. This ambivalence is apparent in its constitutional status: technically, today it is the co-official language of India along with Hindi but only so long as the non-native-Hindi-speaking states do not sanction its removal. This odd constitutional status has cast it as “not-really-an-official-language”, simultaneously an insider and outsider; it embodies an awkward compromise between multiple national ideals and ground realities, making the official language controversy a powerful lens for examining the larger relationship between language, identity, and democratic goals in a multicultural context.

The socio-political persistence of the continuation of English as a co-official language in postcolonial India impels a re-examination of its history. I answer the inter-related questions of why, after over sixty-five years, English continues to be controversial, and what place it has in the Indian national imaginary in this article after briefly setting up the ideological context and the nuances of the controversy. I examine various materials that address the nationalist demand to eliminate English as the official language, including the Constituent Assembly debates of 1946–1950, newspaper and magazine articles, and speeches and correspondence of select public figures. To address this issue, I limit myself to the period between 1946, when the Constitutional Assembly was first set up, and 1968, when the new and amended Official Languages Act was adopted. The resulting analysis suggests that resistance to coupling national identity with a particular language played a critical role in establishing English in the region as a democratic and “neutral” medium. These desirable credentials evolved in large part from the fact that English was foreign, complicating its presence and arguable ubiquity in India. Divorced as it was from local cultural paradigms of caste, religion, and territory, English was framed by its defenders and champions as a “vigorous” and energetic pan-Indian language that provided an “open” window to the world (Nehru and Gopal 1980 [1949]). Most importantly, the framing of English within public discourse as the “mother tongue” of a miniscule ethnically-defined minority community – the Anglo-Indians – was vital in precluding its exclusion from a self-consciously multilingual, multi-

ethnic democracy, and in legitimizing its postcolonial credentials. This coupling however also simultaneously established it as a “fringe language” of India.

Finally, the case of English in India ultimately demonstrates the need to consider how local politics both shape and complicate the “global” and “transnational” credentials of a language (Sonntag 2000; Heller 2003; LaDousa 2005; 2014; Ayres 2008; Canagarajah 2012; Singh 2014). India’s official language controversy, though ostensibly about English and Hindi, serves as an important reminder about several aspects of the country and about language in general: that its different regions, religions and communities have varying histories, that language use and language learning implied (and continue to imply) different sorts of burdens to different populations even within the same region and with the same native language, that ideology and utility often overlap in complicated ways when linguistic identity is politicized, and – last but not least – that the expression of language-related anxieties are but symptomatic of other, larger, preoccupations.

## 2 Complex politics of language

The official language controversy during India’s transition from a colony to a republic had been in the making for many years. The need for a “national language” had formed an important part of the nationalist discourse on cultural pride and resistance to colonialism, with roots dating back to the 1870s (King 1994; Rai 2002).<sup>1</sup> Terminology and conceptualization, however, varied: the ideal language was variously termed a “link language”, a “lingua franca”, an “official language” and, perhaps most problematically, a “national language”. The potential native “national” languages proposed consisted chiefly of the Hindi-Urdu group of languages/dialects, and (more rarely) Sanskrit (Debates: Vol. 9, 1333–1334, 1352–1353).<sup>2</sup> A concerted political effort that promoted the principles of self-sufficiency and indigeneity, known as the Swadeshi movement, had taken hold by the 1910s, in the wake of which “Hindi” became an increasingly popular choice for “national language”. This “Hindi” however was essentializing and ambiguous as a tag, and referred less to the language as it was used and

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<sup>1</sup> Different historical figures are credited with introducing this idea in South Asia; the roles played by specific individuals in particular regions can be found in the cited literature.

<sup>2</sup> The Hindi/Urdu nomenclature was contested due to the differences in lexical sources and script, both of which had significant associations with the two major religious communities in the region. Urdu used the Persian script, while a government resolution recognized Nagari – the common script for Sanskrit – as the standard script for the “Hindu” register of Hindi in 1900.

more to a mythologized version with a glorious past and idealized present, and strong Hindu proclivities (King 1994; King 2001; Dalmia 2003; LaDousa 2007; Ahmad 2008; Lahiri 2016). English too was considered in the ongoing discussions due to its status as the inter-regional link language of the educated classes, but it was only occasionally endorsed because of how foreign it was to the largely unlettered masses.

The period when the idea of Hindi as a national language started to gain traction broadly coincided with the time that various regional languages saw significant epistemological transformations and became closely associated with community identity, and thereby politicized. Literary practices and print culture changed not only in Hindi but also in languages like Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, and Marathi, as did the ways in which the languages themselves were imagined (Kaviraj 1995; Ramaswamy 1997; Naregal 2002; Mitchell 2009; Mohanty 2011). Native languages came to be personified as “mothers”, “goddesses”, and even “courtesans”, and a highly gendered rhetoric in talking of language became commonplace (King 1992; Gupta 2001; Sarangi 2009). Caste politics also became a factor influencing language ideology, through the association of Sanskrit (and therefore also support for Hindi) with upper castes, complicating the ideological dynamics not only of “national” but also regional language (Annamalai 2004; Brass 2004; Mohanty 2010). Language thus came to be seen by both administrators and community leaders as an organizing principle in defining populations and reconsidering provincial boundaries. By the 1920s, different language nationalisms were well developed, with some linguistic communities even demanding recognition of their native regions as separate political units (Rao 1973; N. Mohanty 1982; Rao 1988; Trautmann 2006; Mir 2010; Bose 2014). The biggest native political organization, the Indian National Congress (INC), transformed from an elite to a populist group largely by responding to these changes and restructuring its grassroots operations on the basis of linguistic regions.

These changes across the subcontinent saw the generation of several contradictions that led to the continuing, if unenthusiastic, use of English by politicians, underlining the dissonance between political rhetoric and practical usage. Even as different linguistic communities transformed into distinct political communities, powerful political voices urged, even demanded, that the new groups subsume their identities within a more hegemonic construct of the nation. M. K. Gandhi, for instance, urged his audiences to embrace their native languages, but also trenchantly criticized any resistance or inability of non-Hindi speakers in learning Hindi. These criticisms were mostly directed towards people of the southern Madras province and the Bengal province in the east, whose “laziness” he upbraided for forcing him to use English to be understood (Gandhi 1968 [1925]). Attempts to propagate and use Hindi of a particular register and script by

religiously-tinged lobby groups also met with resistance from those who favored greater flexibility, both Hindus and Muslims, even in areas where Hindi was ostensibly the native tongue. English became the language of choice in such contexts too to check any possible escalation of tensions (Gandhi 1970 [1929]). The practical political choice of the foreign but “neutral” link language effectively undercut assertions of the greater claim of Hindi to a universally representative Indian-ness.

By the 1940s, three clear parallel language discourses existed simultaneously, sometimes even within the rhetoric of the same individuals, all of which contributed to the felt ambivalence about English that the constitutional crisis on language highlighted. One was that of the protection and cultivation of one’s native language. This notion had undeniably strengthened the various language nationalisms across the subcontinent, so much so that Gandhi (1967 [1924]) even declared it “a great instrument in [his] work” of bringing anti-colonial and community-building politics to the populace. It was also entangled with the second strand, namely the notion of creating and disseminating a national language. This strand had developed in response to the colonial encounter and the ideas of nation and nationality that were coming to be seen as axiomatic by the late nineteenth century, and had fervent supporters as well as opponents.<sup>3</sup> The growth of a narrowly defined Hindu nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries furthered the national language project. The religious overtones of the national language mission made the latter problematic practically from its inception by setting Hindi at the heart of various configurations of regional, religious, caste, and class domination. The third was what might be called the “democratic” discourse, which focused on the pedagogical and participatory aspects of language and was perhaps the most complex of the three. These debates focused on the rights of speakers of different native languages, on the challenges, burdens and imperatives of language learning, and on inclusivity and the ability of all citizens to participate in governance, democratic processes and development (Dasgupta 1970; Brass 2004; Ramanathan 2005; Rubdy 2008). However their perhaps inevitable engagement with questions of education and policy also meant that contending

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<sup>3</sup> However, one must point out that all the literature underlines the absence of consensus even among the supporters of the idea of a single national language. Those championing the cause of what scholars today call Hindi-Urdu disagreed vociferously as to whether “Hindi” or “Hindustani” be the national language. “Hindi” referred to a form of the language written in the Devanagiri script, which was to draw mostly from the Sanskrit lexicon, whereas “Hindustani” was perceived to be an inclusive form that could use either the Devanagiri or the Persian script, and draw from a variety of lexical sources including mainly Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic.

ideas of “nation”, independence and citizenship were articulated, as also disparate objectives of education and governance. The divergent identity politics of national and native languages and the specific details of the burdens and benefits of language as a commodity with use and exchange values ultimately exposed the fractured nature of the ostensibly overarching goal of postcolonial legislation, i.e. the empowerment of a diverse people.

### 3 The controversy and the reframing

The debate about English for official purposes in India in the first two decades after its independence was ostensibly about language. However, the concerns expressed by the various parties mainly dealt with the notions of nation and nation building, and repeatedly negotiated tensions between the universal and the local. The official language clause was one of the most controversial during the drafting process of the Indian constitution, which was to serve as the blueprint for the fledgling democracy. Though the lengthy document was prepared between 1946 and 1950, the language issue was deliberately left out of its earliest versions and knowingly pushed back during debates until it was finally addressed in September 1949, two months before it was officially approved. The obvious reluctance to table the issue stemmed from the tension between the prevailing views (spoken and unspoken) on language as both a tool of communication and as instrument of simultaneous integration and differentiation. The language issue had come to be coupled with identity beyond mere territorial differentiation: through associations with register and lexicon, it was also coupled with caste, class, and religion. The official language as finally named was Hindi, itself a contested step: the “official” tag was a step down from the title of “national language” desired by its most fervent advocates, nor was it the more ambiguous and thereby more inclusive signifier “Hindustani” desired by its more liberal supporters. English however was retained to be “used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before” the commencement of the constitution (*Constitution of India* 1949), an explicitly reluctant concession made in the face of resistance to a Hindi-only policy.

This reluctance to retain English was unsurprising at that particular historical juncture. The language had occupied a vexed place in Indian public discourse throughout the twentieth century. A direct legacy of colonial rule, nationalist rhetoric during the late colonial period frequently framed it as a counterpoint to an idealized Indian identity (Chand 1944; Ahmad 1941). In particular, many linguistic nationalists who advocated a “national life” (*The Bande Mataram* 1910) and any form of what is today called Hindi, considered

English an undesirable interloper in the landscape of Indian languages (Gandhi 1958). Access to the English language (or lack thereof) also operated in subtle ways throughout the colonial period to reinforce or reinvent existing normative power structures and institutions, particularly caste and gender, in part because of the educational systems from which it was inseparable in the subcontinent (Seth 2007; Chandra 2012). For instance, in the 1880s prominent public figures from Muslim and low caste communities exhorted the rest of their community to learn English to overcome both new and old disadvantages. In the case of Muslims, the vernaculars were seen as being inadequate to keep up in a world where English had especial purchase, and lower caste figures framed the language as the means to their liberation from caste-based oppression, even though the matter was more nuanced than such views admitted (Mohammad 1972: 82–96; Phule 1977). Yet because of its geographical breadth English continued to be used in public forums throughout the anti-colonial struggle: unlike native languages, which varied from region to region, the introduction of English education in colonial India had ensured that it was familiar to a large section of the (undeniably small) educated classes. Indeed, its proliferation was such that, by the middle of the twentieth century, some nationalists even deemed it the “language on which ... [they] built and achieved [their] freedom” (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949b: 1317).

Decolonization and impending democracy, however, made the issue of whether to officially retain or eliminate English very urgent in the 1940s. It was an immensely complex question that had at its heart symbolic as well as practical considerations for both the country and its citizenry. On one level, the matter of English as a possible official language was about the imagined national community; on another, it was about the physical linguistic community that could (or could not) participate in the dialogue of democracy. It was also an issue of various regionalisms and the associated dynamics of domination and resistance, and of the physical and socioeconomic mobility of populations affected by the hierarchy of languages as established by the government’s decision on whether or not to retain English. In 1967 the question was resolved, in the same way that it had been in 1949: by authorizing the continued use of English with certain qualifiers and reservations. The issue nonetheless continues to be resurrected repeatedly, including most recently in a series of heated public debates in 2014–2015.

In the remainder of this article I tease out the discourse surrounding English in the official language controversy, using the following materials to do so. My primary source of data is the *Constituent Assembly Debates: Official Report*, a twelve-volume transcript of the three-year discussions on the basis of which the Indian constitution was finalized. This record was brought out by the

Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and explicitly notes instances when languages other than English were used in the assembly. Hindi/Hindustani speeches are included in English translation, a deliberate choice following the decision to use English as the language in which the official constitution was to be written.<sup>4</sup> I treat these debates, and various correspondence and records of speeches as preserved in archives of personal papers at the National Archives of India and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library as well as other published material, as representing the publicly espoused views of the individuals in question at the time of their recording. Another major source I refer to is *The Review*, the monthly newsletter of the All India Anglo-Indian Association written by and for its members. Further, I use newspaper reports, pamphlets, and government documents to note developments relevant to my argument. All of these materials represent only a fraction of what was brought out during the controversy. As far as possible, I refer to views of public figures as consistent with the greater part of their public rhetoric and note any departures.

Historical records indicate that, at its most incendiary, the simultaneous embracing of Hindi and rejection of English as an official language was framed as an act of patriotism (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1946: 26–27).<sup>5</sup> This view essentially stated that not doing so was tantamount to a refusal to participate in the project of nation building. Popular discourse too has tended to frame the conflict in similar terms, leading to a persistent conflation of the two (Charusheela 2007).<sup>6</sup> The durability of the latter tendency can be traced to the “moderate” language ideology of high profile nationalists like Gandhi, who had advocated the replacement of English with Hindi/Hindustani and actively campaigned for such a change. The reasoning they offered combined all three strands of the language discourse described previously: Hindi/Hindustani was a native language of India, even if it was not everybody’s native language, and therefore had the provenance to be a truly “national” language; because it was Indian, the argument went, it was less foreign than English even to nearly the sixty percent of the population that did not include Hindi in their linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> Speeches in Indian languages other than Hindi-Hindustani used in the assembly are not recorded/transcribed because of the language capabilities of the recording clerks.

<sup>5</sup> For instance in *Constituent Assembly Debates* Vol. 1, 26–27, an assembly member declared in response to a directive to use English on the second day of debates that “People who do not know Hindustani have no right to stay in India ... They had better leave.”

<sup>6</sup> Charusheela’s “The diaspora at home”, for instance, provides a full poignant account of how this binary narrative of anti-Hindi = anti-national sentiments has left a legacy of derision represented by the epigrammatic “angrez chale gaye, angrezi chhod gaye” [the English left, they left English behind] that can be heard to this day.



repertoire (Census Commissioner 1952).<sup>7</sup> This contention neglected what the alternate language ideologies of the time made clear: that English was actually less foreign than Hindi in regions with earliest European contact, namely Bengal and the south, and that the complex caste structures of the Hindu community in the regions made the Hindi-as-official-language issue a matter of inter-regional as well as local casteist domination.

Thus, the “language problem”, as contemporary usage frequently deemed it, covered multiple aspects that all negotiated not only the place of the English language but also the postcolonial state’s relationship with itself and its constituent parts, and with the rest of the world (Arnold 1951; Gandhi 1964 [1916a; 1916b]; *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 1959a). What was to be named the official language of India? What was to be its script? How would numbers be written in official documents? These questions were contentious enough that the Constituent Assembly saw a record attendance of 210 members out of its total of 290 during deliberations over these questions (*The Hindu* 1949). The answers ultimately settled on were “Hindi” in the “Devnagari script”, with numbers in the “international form of Indian numerals”; English was retained, but only “for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of [the] constitution”, i.e., until 1965. Directives were issued that steps be taken to ensure “the progressive use of the Hindi language” and “restrictions on the use of the English language” within the said period (*Constitution* 1949; Rao et al. 2012 [1968] Volume 4: 873–874).

The response to the ratification of the controversial clauses was unenthusiastic, in large part due to the hugely divergent perspectives on Hindi. Supporters of Hindi were chagrined that English was to continue even for the proposed fifteen years and objected particularly to its position as the language of the courts and the constitution. The decision to retain English as the language of the legal apparatus was based on the view that no Indian language had the precision of terminology needed for points of law (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949b: 1320). The elitist associations of English were also a matter of some concern, as an assembly member noted: “I am afraid that in the next fifteen years the roots of English influence in this country would have become twice as

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7 The census enumeration of language in India is notoriously problematic. Data was gathered during different censuses under different rubrics including “parent tongue”, “mother tongue” and “language ordinarily used”. Even in instances where a single term was used, e.g. “mother tongue” in 1951, data was recorded in broad categories that arbitrarily elided linguistic differences. The 1951 census gave a figure of 149,944,311 speakers, or 42.01% of India’s population, for the language listed as “Hindi, Urdu, Hindustani, Punjabi”. This number was significant as it became the most frequently cited figure for Hindi speakers. This approach led to a hierarchy that recognizes some registers of speech as languages in their own right, classifies others as dialects, and denies any recognition to others still. See Abbi (2009) for more on this aspect.

strong as the English people were able to make in their rule extending over a period of hundred and fifty years. The effect of all this is that the reins of power would remain in the hands of the English-knowing classes” (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1950: 714).

Opponents of the Hindi-only proposal also reacted less than triumphantly, and their response reinforced the view that the question was a binary choice of either English or Hindi. The designation of Hindi as official language was undeniably a provincial victory, as even its supporters acknowledged. Representatives from the south noted that “the feeling of having obtained liberty, freedom and all that” was absent in their home states as the burden of learning another “foreign” language loomed before their citizens, who felt actively disadvantaged (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949b: 1372). The southern citizens’ sense of being disempowered and excluded from political participation was shared by many Constituent Assembly members themselves, who had protested against the “Hindi imperialism” manifest even during discussions of a post-imperial future for the country (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949a: 234–235). An assembly member from the south said, “Hindi is no more national to us than English”, but with the difference that “the hatred [...] for the English language has now gone” since learning it was not a matter of duress (*Constituent Assembly Debates* 1949b: 1372–1373, *Constituent Assembly Debates*; 1949a, 234–235). Hindi on the other hand had been viewed as an “imposition” in the south from the late 1930s, a decade before the deliberations, when the elected provincial government made teaching Hindi mandatory in educational institutions across the province: the subsequent widespread protests had led then to over a thousand arrests over the issue. English did not come under attack at the time even though various regional nationalisms of the late 1950s and 1960s did target it (Anthony 1953b; *The Hindu* 1967). The “practical” solution that was formally adopted was a three-language formula that envisioned an education system with some combination of English, Hindi and another regional language as part of the typical student curriculum.

Developments in the 1950s saw the realization of some of the prominent as well as the nascent aspects of late colonial language ideology, and the policy adopted. The limitations of the proposed three-language formula and the effective hierarchy of languages that the official language policy established became clear. The security of central government employment came with the possibility of being moved anywhere in the country, making English and Hindi the only languages that supported any significant trans-regional mobility. Not surprisingly, this very real constraint led to what Pennycook (2000) might call the “laissez faire liberal” support among the middle classes to a three-language formula consisting of English, Hindi and Sanskrit rather than the ideal English,

Hindi, and the local regional language/southern language. Open support eventually emerged in Hindi areas for a two-language formula – English and Hindi – over the recommended three (*The Mail* 1968; *Hitavada* 1968). The paucity of multilingual teacher training and resource materials also proved to be a significant barrier to implementing the three-language formula with any faithfulness and even the dissemination of Hindi in non-Hindi areas.

Further, “mother tongue” had already been a particularly powerful political phrase, informed as it was with the filial associations informing nationalist rhetoric; the 1950s saw it become the basis for negotiating internal boundaries as well as policies (States Reorganization Commission 1955; Education Commission 1966). Demands that domestic state lines recognize linguistic difference were fulfilled starting with the controversial carving out of the state of Andhra in 1953 and culminating in the States Reorganization Act of 1956. Various states started to undertake measures to “restrict the use of the English language” even if not so much to ensure “the progressive use of the Hindi language” (*Constitution of India* 1949). In Bombay, for instance, a 1953 order forbade the admission of non-Anglo-Indians into the English-medium Anglo-Indian schools, which would have eliminated approximately 60 % of the student body in such schools and made them economically unviable (Anthony 1953a). The same year saw the state government of Mysore moving towards requiring that Anglo-Indian schools initiate a transition from English to the local Kannada (Barrow 1953). The Anglo-Indian community leadership termed the post-independence pressures in different states to abandon English in favor of a more authentically Indian language as a “language vendetta” (Anthony 1969: 281). The resulting court battles fought by representatives of the Anglo-Indian community at the state and federal levels, though little known nowadays, were a landmark in the constitutional and linguistic history of India. The community claimed a constitutionally recognized minority status, with English as its “native language”, its “mother tongue” (Anthony 1954a). The final judgment of the highest court in the land ruled unequivocally that it was the fundamental right of a minority community to conserve its language, script and culture and that such a right implicitly also bestowed the right to educate the children of the community in its own language (Anthony 1954b). This was a judgment significant not only for Mysore but for the country as a whole, as other freedoms written into the constitution also meant that if citizens of other communities wished to educate their children in minority institutions, they were free to do so without the “police power of the State to determine the medium of instruction” restricting this ability to choose (Anthony 1969: 285–286).

The adjudication of the “Indian” credentials of English was critical for the pro-English lobby. Various political figures had suggested over the years that

English was no longer foreign. K. M. Munshi, a prominent political and literary figure from Gandhi's home state of Gujarat, had coined the phrase "Frankenstein of linguism" to refer critically to the aggressively communal spirit behind the various linguistic nationalisms; he declared that English was an Indian language by adoption, that "today English is ours" (Munshi 1967: 221). C. Rajagopalachari, Chief Minister of Madras state where anti-Hindi sentiments were strongest, had been reviled by Tamil nationalists as a blot on his community for his earlier support for the imposition of Hindi in his state; by the 1960s he asserted that English was a language "given to us by Goddess Saraswathi [the Hindu goddess of knowledge]" (Rao 1969: Appendix II: ii). Even India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1984 [1956] Volume 32: 116) grudgingly stated that "though English is not an Indian language, to some extent it has become a part of this country". But these statements about the Indian-ness of English only served to underline that it lacked an "authentic" Indian status unless irrevocably coupled with the Anglo-Indian community, which had shifted from emphasizing its hybrid roots to reinventing itself as a "nationalist minority" in the 1940s.

The Anglo-Indian community's reinvention of itself from the late 1940s onwards had a direct bearing on the discourse surrounding English and Hindi, evidenced by the fact that Anglo-Indian leaders were cited in public debates on language with a frequency disproportional to their numbers. From 1946 onwards, the community leadership had actively moved away from the earlier strategy of representing the Anglo-Indians as a "political dichotomy" and chose instead to reframe it as an Indian minority, a political construction that had acquired a lot of weight by this time. This was a strategic move: it tapped into the purchase that the term "minority" had already acquired due to its use by Sikhs, Parsis, tribal communities, etc. in the subcontinent. This shift was most explicitly signified in a memo to the British Cabinet Mission of 1946, in which Frank Anthony, leader of the All India Anglo-Indian Association (AIAIA), declared that the Anglo-Indian "mentality" had changed such that the "average Anglo-Indian [...] resents being lumped with the Europeans in the eyes of his fellow nationals;" instead, they were "ready to take their place in the front rank of Indian Nationalism" (All India Anglo-Indian Association 1946: 5). He repeated this point in a presidential address close to the eve of independence: "neither dress nor language form any preconditions of patriotism [...] we yield as a community to no one in our love for this country and in our desire to promote her real greatness" (Anthony 1947: 6).

Anthony's participation in the language debates was important in challenging claims of a singular authentic Indian identity, and proved critical in how it successfully negotiated the three different discourses mentioned in the previous

section, i.e., the sometimes conflicting claims of native language, nation and minority empowerment. Like many other advocates of the protection of minority rights, including the famous low-caste activist B. R. Ambedkar, he was a vocal supporter of Hindustani (the hybrid and most flexible register of the Hindi-Urdu continuum, cf. also Note 3) as the official language. He trenchantly criticized the threat posed by the intransigence, intolerance and “overweening arrogance” of the “menace of Hindi imperialism” and other “parochial and obscurantist” nationalisms to minorities and to national unity itself (Anthony 1969: 302, 264, 284). He countered the most fervent language zealots by pointing out that English, like Hindi-Urdu and even Sanskrit, was part of a larger tradition of linguistic change and exchange:

Foreignness is only question of degree. In a relative sense Urdu is a foreign language, as it was a language forged by conquerors who had come to India [...]. In a sense also Sanskrit is a foreign language because it was brought into the country, although thousands of years ago [...] English has become a part of the warp and woof of Indian thought, language, and culture. It has not been imposed on India. It was at the insistence of [Indian] liberals [...] that it became a part of the educational system.

(Anthony 1969: 294)

He also was an impassioned (and rare) opponent of linguistic states, on the grounds that “the greatest guarantee for a linguistic minority is not a linguistic state but a multi-lingual state”, and he invoked the geographically dispersed urban distribution of the Anglo-Indian community to cast it as the only ethnic minority that was not bound to a local or regional – i.e. territorial – identity within the subcontinent (Anthony 1969: 270).

This claim of the Anglo-Indian community to ubiquity mirrored that which was made for English by its supporters. The absence of links to physical place during a time when the fusion of language, identity, and place in political rhetoric was a source of conflict also made a virtue of the “placelessness” of English in India. At the same time that Hindi and other language nationalisms were reviled by opponents for their regional and cultural fanaticism, English was held up as a “link language”, as the bond and mortar of unity, and a truly “neutral” medium (*Amrita Bazar Patrika* 1959b). Critiques of the persistent “slave mentality” that supported the continuation of the language of the “hated foreign rulers” in post-imperial India were, in their turn, criticized for “forgetting that it was the most valuable legacy they had left behind” (Munshi 1967: 218). Indeed, one of the most recurring arguments made in favor of English was that of its non-national, non-purist character, which reframed its colonial genealogy as one of global connections. As early as 1949, Nehru identified English as his ideal in terms of openness and inclusivity:

What we must be clear about in our minds is the inner content of the language and the way it looks at the world, that is, whether it is restrictive, self-sufficient, isolationist and narrow, or whether it is the reverse of this. We must deliberately aim [...] at a language which is the latter and which has therefore a great capacity for growth. The English language, probably more than any other today, has this receptiveness, flexibility, and capacity for growth.

(Nehru and Gopal 1980 [1949]: 518)

K. M. Munshi (1967: 221) even suggested that its international character recalled the ideal of the *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, or the notion of the world as a family from Sanskrit scripture: “Now English is no longer the language of England but the instrument of the One World which the sages [in Hindu scriptures] envisaged long ago: ‘the world a family’.” The years that followed saw public discourse highlighting this aspect of English and the desirability for its retention. In this avatar, it transformed explicitly into not only a neutral interregional language and an international one that facilitated global contact, but also into the primary (and transnational) language of modern ideas and current science. The 1960s thus saw the sprouting of several organizations formed in defense of English, including the Committee for English, Supporters of English as Official Language of the Indian Union, and the Union Language Convention, which championed its transnational and interregional associations.<sup>8</sup> These groups, based mostly in the south and in Bengal, resisted the displacement of English by Hindi and sought to protect the former’s status as the first language of education and the second language of choice.

## 4 Conclusion

This analysis of the official language controversy as it actually unfolded between 1946 and 1968 makes clear that the issue in question was more than just deciding between Hindi and English. The resistance to not only Hindi but also English in southern and western states was a direct consequence of the multiple language nationalisms that evolved in response to colonial contact and in tandem with nationalist resistance. The rhetoric of “national” language proved to be extremely problematic given the multilingualism of India, with the result that the idea of “national language” had to contend with that of the more visceral notion of the “mother tongue” as well as the possibility of multiple “national languages”.

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<sup>8</sup> Evidence of these organizations can be found in various pamphlets from the 1960s that I collected.

The various shifts towards emphasizing local languages at the cost of Hindi as well as English underlined the extent to which ethno-regional identity came to be associated with language, but the more ferocious opposition to making Hindi the sole official language pointed to the magnitude of the question of second language in a multilingual milieu. Job opportunities, economic prospects and stability, and social and physical mobility were important considerations that no government, however nationalistic, could afford to neglect. Resource constraints in terms of government budgets and translation and training facilities were also significant.

Thus, to conclude, the combination of colonial history, language nationalism, socioeconomic considerations and the discourse of the mother tongue came together in establishing English as a paradoxical entity in perpetuity within Indian political discourse. Undeniably a language of power, even hegemony, its identification as the mother tongue of the minority Anglo-Indian community gave it a sanctity that constitutional procedure was committed to protecting. Its concomitant supranational and colonial associations ensured that, despite the assurance of protection, it was ineligible for the commitment made by the constitution's Eighth Schedule to protect and develop the officially recognized Indian languages. The two combined with the ideal of a single Indian official language to establish it in perpetuity as, to use Nehru's words, “one of the fringe languages of India” (Nehru 1984 [1956]: 117).

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