

# The Politics of Language: Ethnic Identity, Cultural Survival and National Integration

Dr. Parvez Shahid Ali\*  
PG Department of Political Science  
Ranchi University, Ranchi  
Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1307-9147

---

## Abstract

Language plays a central role in shaping ethnic identity, ensuring cultural survival, and fostering national integration. In multilingual societies, particularly in countries such as India, language politics becomes both a medium of unity and a source of conflict. This paper explores the interplay between language and politics through a theoretical framework, emphasizing how linguistic identities influence socio-political relations. It argues that while language strengthens cultural belonging, it can also fragment national unity when politicized. Drawing upon secondary data from Census of India reports, UNESCO studies, and scholarly contributions, this paper highlights how states, institutions, and communities negotiate language-based identity and policies.

Three key dimensions are discussed: (i) language as an ethnic identity marker, (ii) language as a tool of cultural survival and heritage preservation, and (iii) language as an instrument of national integration. The paper illustrates India's linguistic federalism, where the recognition of 22 scheduled languages reflects democratic accommodation of diversity, yet also reveals tensions such as the Hindi–non-Hindi debates and regional linguistic movements.

Charts, tables, and photographs are used to illustrate patterns of linguistic diversity, state formation, and cultural vitality. The findings indicate that national integration requires balancing linguistic pluralism with a unifying political framework. The paper concludes with policy suggestions, emphasizing inclusive language policies, multilingual education, and promotion of intercultural dialogue. By recognizing language as both a resource and a challenge, societies can move toward integration without eroding ethnic and cultural distinctiveness.

**Keywords:** Language Politics, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Survival, National Integration, Multilingualism

---

Date of Submission: 12-02-2026

Date of acceptance: 27-02-2026

---

## I. Introduction

Language is more than a tool of communication; it is a carrier of history, culture, and identity. In the globalized world, language assumes political significance, shaping nation-building processes and determining the contours of ethnic relations. The politics of language lies at the intersection of sociology, anthropology, and political science, influencing debates on ethnicity, culture, and integration.

In multilingual societies, language is often linked to identity politics. It provides individuals and groups with a sense of belonging, solidarity, and recognition. Simultaneously, it generates tensions when one language is perceived as dominant, marginalizing others. In India, for instance, linguistic politics has shaped the federal structure. The reorganization of states on linguistic lines in 1956 was a landmark political experiment, recognizing that regional identities are deeply tied to language.

The concept of ethnic identity cannot be separated from language. Ethnic groups often use language as a symbol of resistance against cultural homogenization. For example, the Tamil movement in India, the Basque movement in Spain, or Quebec's French identity in Canada, demonstrate how language sustains ethnic distinctiveness. At the same time, these movements often pose challenges to national integration.

Cultural survival depends significantly on language, since oral traditions, literature, folklore, and rituals are transmitted across generations through linguistic expression. UNESCO's reports on endangered languages reveal that when a language dies, a cultural world disappears with it. Thus, the politics of language is not merely about communication but about cultural preservation and human rights.

The dilemma for policymakers lies in reconciling linguistic diversity with national unity. Should states adopt one national language to ensure integration, or should they embrace multilingualism? India offers a unique case study where linguistic pluralism is constitutionally protected, but integration is promoted through a common political framework. The challenges of Hindi imposition, English dominance, and regional linguistic aspirations highlight the complexity of the issue.

This paper therefore examines the politics of language through three key dimensions: (i) language as ethnic identity, (ii) language as cultural survival, and (iii) language as national integration. The focus remains theoretical, supported by secondary data, comparative insights, and illustrations from India and beyond.

### Objectives

1. To analyze the role of language in shaping ethnic identity and cultural survival.
2. To examine the relationship between linguistic diversity and national integration in multilingual societies.
3. To propose policy suggestions for balancing linguistic pluralism with national unity.

### Hypotheses

1. Language is a central marker of ethnic identity, and its politicization intensifies ethnic consciousness.
2. Preservation of language is essential for cultural survival in diverse societies.
3. Multilingual policies enhance national integration more effectively than monolingual or assimilationist approaches.

## II. Review of Literature

The relationship between language and politics has been widely studied by scholars from different disciplines. Anderson (1983) in *Imagined Communities* argued that nations are socially constructed through shared symbols, with language being a critical medium. Similarly, Fishman (1999) emphasized the role of language in ethnic identity formation, suggesting that linguistic revival movements strengthen cultural pride.

In the Indian context, Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1969) highlighted how linguistic diversity shaped Indian civilization, while Rajendra Singh (2005) explored bilingualism and language contact in South Asia. Paul Brass (1991) provided an influential analysis of how language movements in India, particularly in Punjab and Tamil Nadu, were central to political mobilization.

UNESCO reports (2009, 2011) underline the crisis of endangered languages, estimating that nearly half of the world's 6,000 languages may disappear by the end of the 21st century. Crystal (2000) also emphasized how loss of language results in cultural impoverishment.

Indian authors have contributed significantly to this discourse. Braj B. Kachru (1986) explored the three circles of English in India, arguing that English became both an instrument of colonial legacy and modern opportunity. G.N. Devy (2018) through the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* documented more than 700 Indian languages, many of which are endangered. Amartya Sen (2005) in *The Argumentative Indian* argued for the coexistence of multiple languages as part of India's pluralist heritage. Udaya Narayana Singh (2011) discussed language rights and multilingual education, while Anvita Abbi (2017) studied endangered tribal languages of India.

Thus, the literature indicates that language functions both as a unifying and divisive force. Theoretical debates suggest two models: the assimilationist model (promoting one dominant language for unity) and the pluralist model (embracing multilingualism for inclusivity). The Indian experience demonstrates that linguistic pluralism, despite its challenges, ensures cultural survival while enabling national integration.

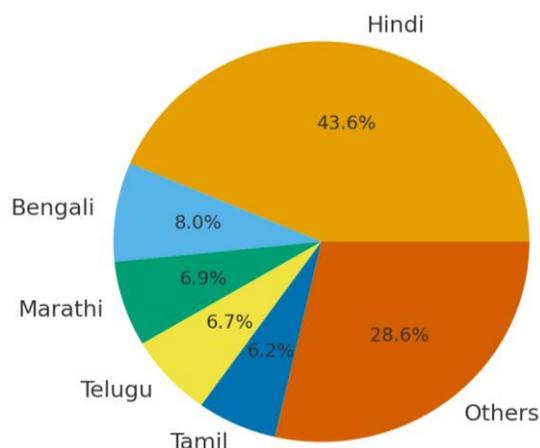
## III. Research Methodology

- Research Design: Theoretical and analytical; based on secondary data.
- Population & Sampling: Not empirical; relies on existing studies, Census of India (2011) data, and UNESCO reports.
- Data Collection: Secondary sources – government reports, scholarly books, journal articles.
- Data Analysis: Thematic and comparative analysis, focusing on ethnic identity, cultural survival, and national integration.

S.No	Language	Speakers (millions, 2011)	% of Population
1	Hindi	528	43.6%
2	Bengali	97	8.0%
3	Marathi	83	6.9%
4	Telugu	81	6.7%
5	Tamil	75	6.2%

Contribution of Major Indian languages (Census 2011)

Statistical Table of population by Language



This Pie chart is showing the proportion and percentage contribution of different languages as per census 2011

#### IV. Conclusion

The politics of language is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it preserves ethnic identity and ensures cultural survival. On the other, it generates challenges for national integration. India's linguistic pluralism demonstrates that integration does not mean homogenization but coexistence. A democratic state must recognize linguistic rights while fostering a shared civic identity.

#### V. Suggestions

Multilingual education should be promoted to balance local, and national languages Documentation of endangered languages should be strengthen through linguistic surveys. Cultural festivals and inter- linguistic dialogue should be encouraged to foster national integration. Language policies that protect minority languages should be developed while promoting national unity. For language preservation technology (digital archives, AI translation) should be used.

#### References

- [1]. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- [2]. Brass, P. (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. Sage.
- [3]. Chatterji, S.K. (1969). *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*. Bengal Publishers.
- [4]. Crystal, D. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5]. Devy, G.N. (2018). *The Language Loss of the World*. Orient BlackSwan.
- [6]. Fishman, J. (1999). *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. Oxford University Press.
- [7]. Kachru, B.B. (1986). *The Alchemy of English*. Oxford University Press.
- [8]. Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian*. Penguin.
- [9]. Singh, R. (2005). *The Yearbook of South Asian Languages*. Sage.
- [10]. Singh, U.N. (2011). *Language Policy and Education in India*. Concept Publishing.
- [11]. Abbi, A. (2017). *Endangered Languages of the Andaman Islands*. Routledge.
- [12]. UNESCO (2009). *Atlas of World's Languages in Danger*. UNESCO Publishing.
- [13]. Census of India (2011). *Language Tables*. Government of India.
- [14]. Brass, P. (2005). *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.
- [15]. Annamalai, E. (2001). *Managing Multilingualism in India*. Sage.