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Colonial Language Engineering and the Fragmentation of Indian Unity

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine how India's colonial language policies systematically dismantled the pre-existing linguistic unity to establish colonial control. May it be the British policies, such as Macaulay's Minute (1835) and the English Education Act, or post-Independence power politics by parties like Congress, Left and a few regional parties, that replaced India's linguistic harmony with hierarchies and divisions that privileged English. These measures sidelined Indian tradition and caused socio-political divisions, which led to many divisions pre- and post-independence, as seen in the many regional language movements or Anti-Hindi movements, politics based on language and which led to needless linguistic conflict in various parts of the country. Unlike colonial divisions and policies, precolonial India always possessed unity, and it is due to a cohesive system among all Indian languages, substantiated by common aspects such as grammar, philosophical consistency derived from Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali and other Indian traditions. The paper advocates for a decolonial transformation in Indian linguistic thought, drawing upon Indian linguistic knowledge. This work advocates for the incorporation of Indian frameworks in linguistics, education, research and socio-political understanding to restore multilingual equity and reclaim India's intellectual sovereignty; several languages of India do not fragment the nation; rather, they exemplify a profound cultural unity that has evolved over centuries via social, cultural and traditional convergence.

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1.1.Introduction

The colonial projects in India strategically deployed migration and language policy to cement imperial control, using education to subordinate Indian languages and cultures. Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* of 1835, an instrument in this manoeuvre, advocated the elimination of the use of Sanskrit and other Indian languages because these "native" literatures were deemed inferior. Further, Macaulay's argument that "a single shelf of a good European library is worth more than the whole native literatures of India" and aimed to forge an intermediary class "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). In contrast, his personal letter to his father clearly states that the English education is an instrument to propagate the gospel among the Indian masses. The underlying objective was to instil Western epistemologies while attenuating Indian traditions. In support of this agenda, the English Education Act of 1835 redirected state funding from Sanskrit and other Indian languages to English-medium schools and colleges. Moreover, they introduced English as the formal language of bureaucracy, law and higher learning, with an aim to create a schism between the educated elite and the rest of society (Macaulay, 1835).

The Charter Act of 1813, which previously allocated ₹100,000 annually for promoting Indian literature, was effectively undermined by implementing Macaulay's policies, turning education into a tool for imperial control. This policy shift was linked with colonial migration, i.e. English-speaking administrators, clerks, missionaries, educators and teachers were brought in from Britain to train the new bureaucratic machinery (Mondal, 2022). The demographic infusion of Anglophone personnel reinforced linguistic hegemony, making English proficiency a prerequisite for socioeconomic and political mobility. Those lacking English fluency became excluded from administrative roles, court positions and upward social mobility, effectively institutionalising linguistic hierarchy. While the Charter Act initially adopted an Orientalist stance promoting classical learning, Macaulay's Minutes shifted imperial policy toward Anglicism and linguistic subjugation. This is corroborated by analyses that note how the Indian educational orientation was "halted" by Macaulay's resolution. The result was a double-structured education

system wherein English functioned as the medium of higher education, governance, and social ascendancy, most importantly imparting English values (Viswanathan, 1989). Further, critics of Macaulay noted that the policy not only marginalised the Indian knowledge system but also fomented societal division. Educated Indians, though a few, became a class unto themselves, estranged from local culture and language, amplifying colonial stratification (Brantlinger, 1988). But a noteworthy point is that this act of imposing language and creating differences, in fact, created a linguistic powerplay and played a significant role in nationalist mobilisation. Contrary to colonial assumptions, pre-colonial India displayed functional multilingualism. Sanskrit, Tamil and all Indian languages coexisted without institutional hierarchy or conflict. Education, jurisprudence and literary traditions flourished in multiple languages within shared space (Chew, 2012). This multicultural coherence is a colonial linguistic trick. The missionary efforts reflected an ideological strategy in the Indian educational policy then. As Viswanathan 1989 argues, colonial education acted as a cultural invasion. It embedded Western ways of knowing while marginalising Indian languages. (Ramanathan, 2014) points out that, even today, colonial language hierarchies still influence academic publishing and knowledge production in India. This ideological effort not only upheld English dominance but also created a divide-and-rule strategy that broke apart Indian linguistic unity. This fragmentation still affects contemporary India. It's important to remember that it was the Congress party that first declared Hindi as the official language of India after independence. They introduced the three-language formula, pushed for the wider use of Hindi across states, and expanded the Eighth Schedule to define which languages got official recognition. While English continued for administrative use, Congress clearly tried to make Hindi dominant, which sparked language tensions in many non-Hindi-speaking regions. Strangely enough, the same Congress, along with its allies, is now accusing the BJP of imposing Hindi. But unlike Congress's earlier top-down approach, the BJP today is saying something very different: that all Bharatiya languages are national languages, and none should be seen as inferior. BJP's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to strengthen the languages of India, especially in the early years of education, while also encouraging the revival of all Indian Languages at the same rate, not through imposition, but as a voluntary and culturally enriching option rooted in India's heritage (Gopalkrishnan, 2025). BJP leaders have also clearly stated that any Indian language, not just Hindi, should be seen as good enough to replace English in education and governance. The idea is not to impose, but to make sure English is no longer the only way to access

knowledge or success in India. Yet, regional parties like the DMK, TMC, and the Left, who once fiercely opposed Congress's language policies, are now silent about its past and only target the BJP, even when it is actually promoting linguistic equality and pride in Indian languages, not imposition. These internal political rifts are also the product of British divide and rule. The traces of these policies that enforced English as the elite language also established divisions based on language. The Barak Valley protests of 1961 were not simply a reaction to a language policy, they were the outcome of deeper historical tensions, mismanagement by the Congress party, and the legacy of colonial-era divisions, when the Assam government, under Congress leadership, passed the Assamese-only official language bill in 1960, it failed to account for the linguistic reality of regions like Barak Valley, where Bengali was the majority language. Instead of addressing these complexities with sensitivity, the Congress followed a familiar pattern of centralised control, echoing British colonial tactics of governing through identity-based divisions (Dutta & Pradhan, 1998). This was not the first time such lines had been drawn; earlier decisions by the British, such as merging Sylhet with Assam in 1874 and imposing Bengali in Assamese schools between 1836 and 1873, had already created lasting rifts between communities. The protest turned tragic on May 19, 1961, when 11 unarmed demonstrators were killed in police firing at Silchar railway station. What makes this particularly striking is that the same Congress party, which today speaks of protecting linguistic diversity, once attempted to enforce a singular language identity in a diverse state. Instead of promoting unity through mutual respect, it repeated a top-down, Western model of nation-building, reinforcing divisions rather than healing them. The Barak Valley agitation stands as a powerful reminder of how colonial fault lines were not only inherited but deepened by post-independence policies that failed to take a truly Indian approach to linguistic coexistence. (Basid, 2016; Dasgupta, 2021). A clear continuation of colonial language politics Nehru-era Assam Official Language Act of 1960; colonial-era migration, educational reengineering and ideology merged into an instrument of formidable divide-and-rule. English was elevated to a position of prestige and power while other native languages were deliberately marginalised and internal rifts were created. The bureaucratic requirement for English proficiency in courts and administration cemented English as social capital. Language policy in colonial India was not a neutral administrative measure but a calculated imperial strategy intertwined with migration and education. The promotion of English through Macaulay's *Minute* and the imposition of Bengali in Assam were facilitated by demographic shifts routed via British administrative deployment of

clerical and teaching personnel. These imposed hierarchies marginalised Indians, generated linguistic and ethnic tensions and created entrenched linguistic inequality. Though Indians persisted and revived, the colonial template of hierarchical language status remains visible in India's contemporary socio-political landscape.

1.2. Linguistic Engineering in Colonial India

Long before European colonialism took hold, India was home to an embedded culture of functional multilingualism. Languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Tamil, Prakrit, and various Indian languages were togheahter side by side, each occupying unique roles in administration, literature, religion, and commerce (Crowne, 2013; Pakendorf, et al., 2021). Linguistic diversity was not seen as a threat but as an asset. It has to be noted that people across India commonly moved across languages in daily life (Sahgal, 1991), engaging in code-switching and pragmatic bilingualism that reflected a social order grounded in inclusivity and context-based communication rather than rigid linguistic hierarchies (Gumperz, 1982). This linguistic multiplicity was a defining feature of Indian's identity, which can be even reflected today if observed closely, flexible, overlapping, and fundamentally integrative. However, this delicate equilibrium was deliberately disrupted with the territorial expansion of the British East India Company, particularly after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 (Baruah, 1983), which signalled the onset of full-scale colonial administration in northeast India. Language, which was once a medium for unity, was later engineered for the governance and domination of English, with the turning point when Thomas Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835) was implemented. replacing the traditional Indian knowledge systems as outdated and advocating instead for an education system rooted in English. The goal was to produce a class of Indians who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). This vision soon materialised through the English Education Act of 1835, and later, the far-reaching Wood's Despatch of 1854, which established English as the medium of higher learning, government communication, and bureaucratic recruitment (Savage, 1994; Ghosh, 1975; Annamalai, 2005). The colonial state was not simply imposing a new language; it was recalibrating the very architecture of social mobility and cultural legitimacy, now accessible primarily through English. Language policy also functioned through deliberate demographic manipulation. Nowhere was this clearer than in Assam, where in 1836, Bengali was declared the official language of courts and education, replacing both Assamese and

Persian. The administrative move favoured the migration of Bengali-speaking clerks and bureaucrats, sidelining the local Assamese elite and plunging Assamese language and literature into what has been called its Dark Age (Basid, 2016; Dasgupta, 2021). It was also due to the aftereffects of decades of cultural activism and backing from Baptist missionaries that led these conflicts to persist even today. Historians now understand such policies as linguistic colonisation, not simply the imposition of a foreign language, but the strategic use of language to enforce cultural subordination and bureaucratic dependency (Evans, 2002; Annamalai, 2005). In parallel, the Linguistic Survey of India (1894-1928), led by Grierson, attempted to categorise and fix Indian languages into rigid typologies. This effort may have appeared academic on the surface, but in practice, it reified linguistic boundaries, transforming what were once dynamic, hybridised language ecologies into segmented and hierarchical "mother tongues" tied to administrative and ethnic labels. The long shadows of this colonial linguistic reordering have continued to shape India's post-independence politics. The Anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu, first in the late 1930s and in 1965, were more than just reactions to curricular changes; they were deeply symbolic protests against the fear of linguistic erasure, resulting in Tamil Nadu institutionalising a Tamil-English bilingual policy that endures today (Forrester, 1966) and the same colonial impact even today the expressed by Tamil regional politics of Dravidian unity which was not the concept of India, in fact, Tamil literature well-travelled and received by many in Kashi, Kashmir and beyond (Singh, 2017). The Silchar language protests of 1961, where police shot and killed eleven even these movements were not one-time events; they were the continuation of colonial language hierarchies in new political settings. Language-based demands came back up in smaller groups like Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam around 2012 (Kolås, 2023). These arguments weren't just about school or signs; they were also about land rights, citizenship, and access to state resources, which was also a colonial game which was also supported by political parties without national interests for electoral benefits. The Indian language started to serve as both a sign of identity and a way to keep people out of the group here, as well as the colonial policies bearing fruit. Some Indian government aims to balance Hindi, English, and one regional or mother tongue, but this policy has not been carried out the same way in all states. For example, Tamil Nadu has openly said no to including Hindi and instead chosen a dual-language model for education. In contrast, several Hindi-speaking states have downplayed the third language component in various language policies that came during the course of 2009 to 2014 (Rao, 2013; Baldridge, 1996). More

recently, the National Education Policy 2020 has made gestures toward correcting colonial-era injustices. It emphasises mother-tongue instruction until at least Grade 5 and promotes the creation of language hubs to foster linguistic unity and digital accessibility (NEP, 2020). These initiatives are good in theory, even in practice, to ensure India grows to a global power, but they will only work if all politicians think of the national good rather than investment and political will, especially in multilingual states where language is made a sensitive power issue. It's important to remember that India's problems are not unique. For instance, after Sri Lanka became independent, the government promoted Sinhala over Tamil in official functions, which caused a long civil war and shows how linguistic majoritarianism can threaten national unity and peace, but these examples from around the world with regard to language debates took place because of the colonial engineering with vested interests (Sabaratnam, 1987). To note the split between India's language groups isn't based on old hatreds as propagated by Western narratives, but on the way colonial powers set up language hierarchies. Colonial officials made it harder for people to get an education, a job, or a high status by promoting English and suppressing Indian languages. Using demographic changes to enforce these hierarchies has left behind a messy history of linguistic and cultural divides. It will take more than just changing policies on paper to close these gaps. It also calls for a full decolonisation of India's linguistics, as the Language classification became a central colonial tool. Sir William Jones's comparative analysis of Sanskrit, Greek and Latin introduced Indian languages into Western philological frameworks, establishing early justification for European linguistic hierarchies (Cannon, 1992). Building on this, Robert Caldwell's (1875) *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Family* further subdivided Indian languages into newly defined families. By distinctly categorising Dravidian languages as separate from Indo-European "Aryan" languages, Caldwell's work solidified a north-south linguistic divide in colonial administration and scholarship (Solomon, 2022). Grierson's extensive *Linguistic Survey of India* (1894- 1928) formalised colonial language classification into exhaustive, bureaucratic records. Over 700 language varieties were documented using standardised grammar sketches, wordlists, and Indian narratives, imparting a scientific semblance to linguistic categorisation. However, as Majeed (2022) explains, the LSI functioned as a mechanism to enforce administrative order; mapping linguistic communities to control regions under colonial rule, thereby institutionalising language as a political and bureaucratic category. Parallels that come from divisive tools show that colonial language strategies often inadvertently produce enduring fault lines in postcolonial societies. The

history of India's language politics demonstrates that modern divisions are not ancient or organic but deliberately engineered under colonial rule. The British converted a dynamic multilingual ecosystem into a fragmented, competing identity landscape through systematic classification, governance and privileging specific languages. Correcting this legacy demands more than policy change; it requires decolonising and recognising all Indian languages as national languages and fostering accurate multilingual equity rooted in justice and cultural respect. Political, educational and administrative systems, active support for mother-tongue education, and the official recognition of multilingualism as a national strength instead of a weakness. A truly inclusive language policy like NEP that recognises and supports should become India's historical policy. In fact, the legacy of colonial education disrupted indigenous gurukul systems, which NEP 2020 now seeks to revive through integration with higher education institutions (Tiwari, 2024). Furthermore, the NEP2020 should not turn it into a single policy document, but instead build on it as the basis for India's shared civilisational future.

1.4. Deconstructing Colonial Linguistic Hierarchies

The Anti-Hindi protests in Tamil Nadu from 1937 to 1940 were a direct response to the presence of Hindi in local education systems. These protests were driven by a rising Dravidian identity supported by colonial narratives and Caldwell's divisive idea of language families, which talks about Dravida and non-Dravida, because of which people mobilised en masse and took extreme actions in Tamil Nadu. As a result, English and Tamil were able to coexist in administration and education, which perhaps fulfilled the political needs of individuals but not the nation as a whole. This sort of resistance echoed in various state-level language divisions, showing postcolonial identity politics through the lens of colonials. In a similar disposition, many states followed for socio-political and electoral gains various political parties without understanding that the colonial divisive politics triggered the same divisive mindset. Some more such conflicts can be note in the following table:

Year(s)	Region & Language(s) Involved	Conflict / Demand Description	Govt. led by	Linked to Colonial Engineering

1956	Nationwide - Multiple Languages	Reorganisation of states along linguistic lines	Jawaharlal Nehru (Congress)	Colonial censuses (e.g., Grierson) reinforced linguistic classifications and boundaries
1960	Maharashtra & Gujarat	Demand to divide Bombay State along linguistic lines	Jawaharlal Nehru (Congress)	Indirect - Colonial administrative boundaries ignored linguistic-cultural identities
1960	Assam – Assamese, Bengali	Assamese made official language; Bengali opposition	Jawaharlal Nehru (Congress)	Colonial imposition of Bengali in 1836 displaced Assamese, sowing seeds of conflict
1961	Barak Valley (Assam) - Bengali	Protest against the Assamese-only language policy	Jawaharlal Nehru (Congress)	Reflects colonial demographic reshaping and language imposition
1965	Tamil Nadu (Madras) - Tamil, Hindi	Mass protests against Hindi as sole national language	L.B. Shastri / Indira Gandhi (Congress)	Yes - Macaulay's English-first policy created resentment; Hindi-Urdu politics stem from colonial rule
1972-1987	Meghalaya - Khasi, Garo, Assamese	Demand for cultural-linguistic autonomy	Indira Gandhi / Rajiv Gandhi (Congress)	Indirect -Colonial provincial groupings (e.g., Assam) overlooked indigenous linguistic identity
1980s	Punjab - Punjabi, Hindi	Script/language tensions; assertion of Punjabi	Indira Gandhi / Rajiv Gandhi (Congress)	Indirect - Colonial divide (Gurmukhi vs. Urdu) contributed to postcolonial script politics
1986-1992	Goa -Konkani, Marathi	Debate over Konkani recognition and script (Roman vs. Devanagari)	Rajiv Gandhi / Narasimha Rao	Indirect - Portuguese colonial impact delayed the standardisation of Konkani
1990s	UP, Bihar, Jharkhand - Bhojpuri, Magahi	Demand for inclusion in the Eighth Schedule	P.V. Narasimha Rao	British linguists classified them as

				"dialects," denying literary legitimacy
2000s	Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh - Adivasi languages (Mundari, Kurukh)	Recognition in education, official domains	A.B. Vajpayee / Manmohan Singh	Tribal languages were sidelined as "non-literary" during colonial classifications
2012-2014	Assam (Kokrajhar, Barpeta) - Bodo, Bengali Muslims	Conflict over language, land, and resource access	Manmohan Singh (UPA)	British-era migrations and censuses constructed ethno-linguistic tensions

Table 1: The Table shows the Post-Independence Linguistic Movements in India: Political Leadership, which had its roots in Colonial Legacies.

These incidents tabulated exposed lingering tensions from colonial-era exclusions that became ingrained in state policy and identity politics. The Gokak agitation in Karnataka during the 1980s highlighted linguistic hierarchies that sparked political action, and many like above are the process of colonial engineering of language policies, which predicted disturbances in Indian for years by the colonial administrators. This is not the case alone post-independence; this is a case that started and continued since the East Indian company established:

Period	**Key Event / Policy**	**British Role**	**Long-Term Impact planned**
1765-1835	Early Company Rule (Bengal, Madras, Bombay)	The company used Persian, then gradually introduced English. Supported Christian missionary activity.	Persian displaced; early English-medium schools in presidency towns
1835	Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education	English declared superior; traditional systems sidelined	English treated as the gateway to jobs and elite status
1836	Bengali imposed in Assam	Administrative preference for Bengali-speaking people	Assamese marginalised, led to decades of protest
1854	Wood's Despatch (Magna Carta of English Education in India)	Formalised English as a medium for higher education	Indian languages removed from secondary/higher education

1860s-1920s	Language codification and census policies	Grierson's Linguistic Survey and colonial censuses solidified "language vs. dialect" distinctions	Fluid multilingual identities were turned into rigid ethnic labels
1871-1911	Hindi-Urdu divide (UP, Bihar, Punjab)	Urdu used in courts; Hindus demanded Hindi in the Devanagari script	Sparked communal language politics; fed into the Partition logic
1905	Partition of Bengal	Divided along religious and linguistic lines (Muslim-majority East, Hindu-majority West)	Language used as a tool of Divide and Rule
1910s-1930s	Rise of Dravidian linguistic identity	Anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindi sentiment in Madras Presidency	Led to the birth of Tamil nationalist politics and the anti-Hindi legacy

Table 2: The Table shows some the Colonial Foundations of Language Conflict in India: Pre-Independence Policies, Movements, and British Linguistic Engineering

Colonial language policies were biased by nature; they aimed to make loyal middlemen, break up groups, and improve government. British practices, such as promoting English, treating dialects as different languages, and making official language hierarchies (for example, putting Urdu above Hindi and Bengali above Assamese), changed India's language environment in a big way. During British control and after independence, there were a number of resistances geared up.

Furthermore, this policy also aimed at the research level to authenticate the thought process wherein Sir William Jones's statement in 1786 claimed that Sanskrit was "more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either." This marked a significant point in colonial India (Burrow, 2001). His comparative study, which was based on observed cognates like Sanskrit mātṛ- and Greek mētēr, Latin -mater, for mother and even other words, showed the connections among Indo-European languages, which again is a tool to say that all these languages are same roots and hence Sanskrit is not the language of India and an ancient language. It laid a foundation for historical linguistics (Burrow, 2001). Jones's view of Sanskrit is nevertheless firmly rooted in colonial perspectives. By comparing Sanskrit to Greek and Latin and raising Sanskrit's scholarly status, he placed it within European academic frameworks. This upheld Western intellectual dominance over Indian linguistic traditions (Yelle, 2012). Although Jones's

insights were innovative, they did not fully capture the complexity and dynamism of Indian linguistic thought. His approach reduced Sanskrit to a study subject instead of recognising it as a living tradition

Scholars like Burrow (2001) argue that, while acknowledging Sanskrit's significance, Jones's work ultimately reinforced Orientalist views that kept Indian scholarship marginal in global knowledge. This framing limited the transformative potential of Indian grammatical traditions, even as it validated Sanskrit as an ancient language worthy of attention. To genuinely decolonise linguistic thought, it is crucial to recognise the rich Indian grammatical traditions that existed alongside and even before European frameworks. Panini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, composed around the 5th century BCE, exemplifies India's significant contributions to linguistics. With nearly 4,000 rules, this work is one of the earliest and most sophisticated, anticipating modern computational models and formal language theories (Staal, 2005; Bhate & Kak, 1991) and Bhartrihari's Vākyapadīya represents a significant milestone in linguistic theory by concentrating on the cognitive processes that shape language formation and viewing the sentence as a complete semantic entity. Understanding the basics of Pāṇini's grammar has led to models that shed light on more general language patterns outside of Sanskrit. Pāṇini's is a complete framework for understanding how language works (Staal, 2005). Pāṇini's analysis showed to analyse multiple languages. More recently, these structures have been used for computational linguistics to identify root verbs (Das et al., 2020). Decolonising the field is essential for challenging the dominance of Western linguistic frameworks, recognising how geography, class, and race influence academic knowledge. Pāṇini's method is a unique alternative in the study and teaching of language that should be praised. Reflecting on William Jones's work, which valued Indian languages largely due to European support, can help examine entrenched hierarchies (Annamalai, 2005). The ideas of Pāṇini and Bhartrihari are particularly relevant today, as their insights on meaning and structure honour India's rich intellectual heritage while aligning with developments in cognitive and computational linguistics. Integrating Indian and Western grammatical systems in education can enhance students' appreciation of both cultures

1.5. Linguistic Unity in Precolonial Indian Kingdoms and the Colonial Imposition of Division

Throughout India's rich history, from the Mauryans to the Satavahanas, Chola, Kalinga, and other kingdoms, language was not a barrier, but rather a unity or social cohesion. Indeed, Indian rulers encouraged governance that included many languages through practical communication strategies and open administration. For instance, the Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) effectively used Prakrit in inscriptions and local administration while allowing other languages too. This showed an approach that strengthened the empire rather than divided it (Ollett, 2017). During the Satavahana dynasty, a single language wasn't necessary, as the rulers seamlessly used both Sanskrit, Prakrit and others in their literature, currency, and official documents. Consequently, the varied population cultivated a common identity (Ollett, 2017). During the Chola dynasty, Tamil and Sanskrit were commonly found in temple inscriptions and among merchant guilds, a period noted for its extensive marine trade and cultural ties to Southeast Asia and the use of many languages was common. Rather than employing language as a means to exclude others, they ensured it acted as a connection for trade and cultural exchange (Annamalai, 2005). The Kalinga dynasty issued edicts in Prakrit and other Indian languages, highlighting the importance of communication alongside linguistic superiority. The British altered India's linguistic landscape by imposing English and promoting selective languages in administration and education to divide(Evans, 2002; Annamalai, 2005). One instance of colonial powers using language as a means of control was the British choice to substitute Assamese with Bengali in the courts and schools of Assam in 1836. This action led to the emergence of divisions that had not been present before (Basid, 2016). Many such policies pushed Indian languages to the sidelines, prompting them to advocate for their linguistic rights for internal disturbance. The inclusive customs that characterised India's earlier kingdoms faced disruption when colonial rulers employed language as a means of establishing hierarchy and governance. The difference between precolonial and colonial language policies is not unique to India. Similar trends occurred across Africa under European colonial rule. In British West Africa, English became the language of administration and education, often sidelining Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and other local languages. This eroded local unity and governance (Jegede, 2024). French was similarly imposed in Francophone Africa, creating language barriers that continue to challenge governance after colonialism (Turke, et al., 2024). In South Africa, the Apartheid period's Bantu Education Act mandated Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. This sparked the 1976 Soweto Uprising, showing how language can be divisive when

used as a colonial tool (The Guardian, 2024). These examples highlight that colonial language policies worldwide turned language from a shared resource into a means of exclusion and division.

1.6. Linguistic Unity in India: Structural Cohesion Beyond Lexical Diversity

Indian languages have a variety of words and some surface-level changes, like how Hindi's "nāgar" evolved from Sanskrit "nagara." However, these differences are built on a remarkably unified structural base. This unity is best seen in the idea of the Indian Sprachbund, which describes that beyond different language families, such as Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burman, share deep grammatical, phonological, and semantic features due to long-term interactions. For example, retroflex consonants are widespread in Indian languages, which is a property that all of these families share. They mostly utilise a subject-object-verb (SOV) sentence structure and don't use prepositions, instead using postpositions. This was shown in Emeneau's first study as well. When it comes to morphology, regional languages always have patterns like reduplication, compound verbs, common sound patterns, and which are verb suffixes that demonstrate sequence or conditionality. This shows that the languages have comparable functions even though their vocabularies are different. Even when words shift, like the Sanskrit-derived "tadbhava" forms, they still follow regular phonological patterns and don't show that the language is breaking up. The change from Hindi's "dard" to Marathi's "darad" for pain, follows the same guidelines for adapting loanwords, which shows how loanwords are used in Indian languages. These changes show that there are common phonological systems instead of separate ones. It was common that Sanskrit words were transferred to other languages without changing their basic grammar, strengthening lexical unity even more. These words might be the same as their source (tatsama) or changed (tadbhava). Also, Indian languages use words from shared cultural and philosophical vocabularies on a semantic level. The definitions of words like "dharma," "karma," and "maya" are the same in many places. There is consistency in the way that different languages use terms and styles in literary forms like epics, poetic meters, and rhetorical figures, as well as in philosophies like Vedanta and Nyāya. This shows that there is intellectual coherence across India, where ideas and conversations were the bridge, not barriers. Also, common ways of forming words show structural unity. These language families all use strategies like compounding, honorific language, echo formations, and iterative forms. These patterns show that there are common cognitive and expressive norms, which means that Indian languages all have the same grammatical

base, even though they look different on the surface. In short, Indian languages have no different words and sounds, but their basic structure is very similar, and they all share a typological, morphological, semantic, and cultural framework. This proof goes against the idea that India's many languages undermine unity. Instead, it shows how languages change and thrive in a stable context. Indian languages are not really separate; they are deeply connected by systems that have been created by history, thought, and culture. Looking at the history of Indian languages, from colonial times, demonstrates that language has been used to divide people, depending on the political situation. A unified linguistic terrain was at the heart of India's history before colonisation. Empires like the Maurya, Satavahana, and Chola did not force people to use any one language (Nath, et al, 2025). Instead, they welcomed linguistic unity as a tool to bring together the government and promote cultural interchange. For example, Poets and intellectuals also moved between Sanskrit and many other indian languages, creating literary traditions that bridged language barriers and made people feel more connected to their culture. This open-minded approach is very different from the colonial era, when European language regulations built hierarchies that broke up India's linguistic landscape. The British colonial authority's choice to use English as the language of education and government, while selectively encouraging “regional languages”, was not just a way to run things; it was a planned way to divide the Indian people. These colonial measures still have an effect on identity politics today (Jolad & Doshi, 2021). In light of complicated historical events, it is important to look again at the ongoing importance of Indian Languages and Indian grammar traditions. These shared traditions are truly ment of Indian languages that are fundamentally unified, this is because of centuries of cultural and intellectual contact. Recognising this development in history makes it necessary for us to back language policies that honour regional identities while still promoting structural unity. The National Education Policy 2020, which stresses instruction in native languages and encourages the use of local languages in education and government, is a step in the right direction toward this goal. A good way to teach Indian languages is to mix traditional Indian grammar with modern linguistic ideas. India and its postcolonial cultures can bridge the language gaps left by colonialism by bringing back these shared traditions. This healing needs more than just changing legislation; it needs Indian ways of knowing to be brought back into mainstream scholarship. By focusing on Sangam Literature, Panini's grammar and Bhartrihari's semantic theories in linguistic studies,

scholars can challenge Eurocentric viewpoints and help make linguistic science more inclusive and relevant to the whole world.

1.7. Linguistic and Philosophical Unity Among Indian Languages

Indian literary and philosophical traditions from Sangam Tamil and classical Telugu to Sanskrit treatises like Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* demonstrate a deep-seated unity rooted in shared cultural concepts and linguistic structures. One of the most compelling examples is the pervasive understanding of the four *puruṣārthas*, *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*, across these traditions. This is eloquently captured in Valluvar's *Tirukkural*, which organises ethical wisdom into *aṟam/poruḷ/inbam/veedu*, corresponding to these Sanskrit concepts, affirming a shared moral architecture (Smith, 2020; Pruiksma, 2022). Valluvar's emphasis on universal ethics, devoid of sectarian prescriptions, highlights this text's philosophical resonance across religious traditions, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh alike, presenting moral conduct in universally applicable terms (Smith, 2020). At the heart of Indian philosophical linguistics lies Bhartrihari's assertion of Śabda-Brahman, where language is not merely a communicative tool but is ontologically identical with ultimate reality, *Brahman* (He, 2021). His formal exploration of language in the *Vākyapadīya*, divided into metaphysical (*Brahma-kāṇḍa*), sentence-level (*Vākya-kāṇḍa*) and word-level (*Pada-kāṇḍa*) inquiries, underscores a metaphysical cohesion shared with regional grammatical and philosophical traditions across India (He, 2021). Moreover, across India's 22 scheduled languages, phonological and grammatical features such as echo formations ("gatā-gatā"), SOV word order, converbs, and polite registers are structurally consistent (Emeneau, 1956; Sridhar, 2008). Shared philosophical vocabulary, terms like *guru*, *yoga*, *puja*, and *rasa*, further reinforce a lexico-cultural continuity across languages. These elements reflect a stable linguistic substrate that transcends regional or religious boundaries. Culturally, the shared philosophical content is evident in the presence of *ācamana* (liberation), *ahimsa* (non-harm), and *karma* across Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Telugu, Tamil, and Sanskrit texts, signifying a pan-Indian intellectual heritage. Classical Telugu drama and Tamil literary devices mirror Sanskrit dramaturgy, indicating not isolated artistic traditions but interconnected literary grammars. Despite divergent vocabularies and dialectal variations, these linguistic and philosophical congruities form the foundation of India's cultural unity. We can systematise these core commonalities in the following table:

Table: Shared Philosophical and Linguistic Features across 22 Indian Languages

Dimension	Example / Feature
Four Puruṣārthas	*dharma/artha/kāma/mokṣa* – Tamil *a̲ram/poruḷ/inbam/veedu*
Ethical Terminology	*ahimsa*, *karma*, *satya* - Urdu to Sanskrit
Philosophical Grammar	Bhartrihari's Śabda-Brahman & Paninian grammar
Literary Drama	Echo words, compounding (*gatā-gatā*, *nāṭya*)
Shared Vocabulary	*guru*, *yoga*, *puja*, *rasa*, *dharma*, etc.
Structural Consistency	SOV word order, postpositions, inflexions
Secular Ethical Voices	Tirukkural & Sangam poetry
Pan-Indic Philosophical Ideas	Concepts in Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Telugu, Assamese, and Meitei texts

This convergence suggests that Indian languages are not just a collection of isolated tongues but are lasting tools of a shared thought and cultural order. Their structural similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and sound protect the philosophical ideals that define Indian literary and spiritual traditions. Therefore, rather than showing division, the diversity of Indian languages highlights an underlying unity, a common worldview, expressive ability, and ethical vision that persist across geography, faith, and time. Indian languages may seem distinct at first glance, but they share deep similarities, especially in their philosophical and cultural underpinnings. Take, for

instance, the four life goals of dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa. These concepts resonate across various languages, including Tamil and Telugu, and can be found in classical texts. Valluvar's Tirukkural beautifully encapsulates these ideas in Tamil, while the epic narratives of Mahābhāratam and Ramāyaṇam in Telugu explore the same themes, portraying a unified worldview. Moreover, Bhartrihari's Vākyapadīya delves into the relationship between language, thought, and the cosmos, showing how interconnected these elements are. This connection is further emphasised by the Sphoṭa theory (Coward, 1980). which suggests a singular essence of meaning in language. In the realm of grammar, Tamil texts like the Tolkāppiyam bring attention to the spiritual and moral aspects of language, reinforcing the idea that Tamil and Sanskrit share significant similarities. Additionally, Indian classical drama, as discussed in the Nāṭyaśāstra, intertwines language, philosophy, and ethical considerations, highlighting a common way of thinking across different cultures. All of these points to a fascinating link among Indian languages that goes beyond mere words. Common syntactic patterns and honorific expressions in Indian languages also reinforce this linguistic unity, supporting both structure and purpose. Loanwords from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, or English are adopted using common sound and structure strategies (Nagarajan, 2014), further highlighting a shared structural base. Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all have philosophical texts that use the same words (karma, samsāra, nirvāṇa) to talk about similar moral problems. These texts are written in languages including Pāli, Prakrit, Ardha-Magadhi, and Punjabi. These traditions all have basic ideas about truth and morality (satya, ahimsa, sevā), which shows how ethics are connected across India's many languages. The several Indian languages have different words and ways of saying things, but they all follow the same grammatical rules, which include SOV word order, case marking, echo formations, and converbs. These traits are based on a common philosophical idea that runs through play, poetry, and religious writing. The structure and meaning of this foundation show that there is only one way to think and express oneself. So, instead of showing division, the many languages spoken in India show a deep unity that has grown over thousands of years, confirming a shared cultural and intellectual inheritance. Philosophical texts from the Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh traditions, written in languages like Pāli, Prakrit, Ardha-Magadhi, and Punjabi, use similar words (karma, samsāra, nirvāṇa), which shows that they have similar moral concerns. The main themes of truth and virtue (satya, ahimsa, sevā) run through various traditions, showing how different languages in India are connected by moral values. Even though Indian languages have different words and are spoken in

different ways, they all have the same grammatical structure, which includes SOV word order, case marking, echo formations, and so on. These traits make it easier for people to express their philosophical ideas together, as shown in drama, poetry, and religious literature. This basis shows up in both syntax and meaning, which shows how closely language and thought are linked. So, instead of showing division, the different languages spoken in India show a deep unity that has grown over thousands of years, highlighting a shared cultural and intellectual heritage.

Conclusion

Colonial language policies in India disrupted the organically evolved multilingual harmony that had long characterised the idea of India. These policies imposed a hierarchical framework in which English was prioritised, while Indian languages were relegated to almost no role. This restructuring not only marginalised Indian linguistic traditions but also fragmented the cultural and intellectual fabric that once held communities together. India's linguistic history reveals a deep unity, evident in shared grammatical frameworks, common philosophical thought, and cultural interconnectedness across regions. This unity is not rooted in uniformity, but in a profound structural and conceptual coherence that evolved over centuries. To restore and revitalise this rich heritage, it is essential to decolonise education, reintroduce Indian linguistic traditions, such as those of Pāṇini and Bhartrihari, Tolkappiyam and so on, and promote learning through Indian languages. The true identity of a nation is its knowledge system, which is valued, nurtured, and transmitted with dignity. This paper is aimed at highlighting aspects of the colonial divide and present-day continuation of the same, which need to be decolonised, and strengthening the structural integrity and intellectual depth of India's language and linguistic traditions, recognising them not as isolated tongues, but as interconnected expressions.

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