



Language Politics in Indian Media: A Systematic Literature Review of Cultural and Sociological Dimensions

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Abstract

India has more than 19,500 languages and dialects (Census of India, 2011), which reflects its cultural diversity but also creates social conflict. The colonial legacy of English continues to shape linguistic hierarchies, reinforcing inequality and complicating policy decisions after independence. Language politics in India is deeply rooted in history, culture, and power, and the media plays a central role in this process. Language is often used by the state to promote nationalism. The debate between Hindi and regional languages highlights the tension between national integration and regional identity. Media, in this context, acts both as a preserver of culture and as a force driving regionalism. Minority and tribal languages remain largely neglected, threatening cultural survival and widening inequality. Although digital platforms and AI create new opportunities for linguistic inclusion, they also risk reproducing existing biases. English-language media continues to cater mainly to elites, while regional media struggles with external pressures. Overall, the politics of language in Indian media is closely linked to democracy. Strengthening media literacy, safeguarding minority languages, and ensuring digital inclusion are essential steps toward building a more equal and culturally rich society.

Keywords

Language Politics, Indian Media, Linguistic Diversity, Cultural Identity, Digital Media.

Introduction

Language is not just a tool for communication but also an important creator of identity, a way to pass on culture, and a space where political struggles take place (Annamalai, 2001). According to the 2011 Census of India, more than 19,500 mother tongues were reported as spoken across the country. This enormous linguistic diversity strongly influences public life, especially in the media, where questions of language politics often shape representation and



access. Dominant languages like English and Hindi maintain power in Indian media by being framed as natural and superior (Gramsci, 1971). Media often strengthens these hierarchies by ignoring tribal and minority languages, which increases social inequality. Journalists and editors play an important role, some support the existing system, while others, especially in regional media, try to challenge it. Because civil society is an important place for ideological struggle, media becomes central to debates on language and identity. Gramsci's idea of counter-hegemony helps explain how digital platforms and local-language media can resist dominance and create more inclusive spaces. The media, as a key platform for public discussion, not only reflects but also shapes linguistic hierarchies. This makes it an important space for studying how language, power, and identity interact. This literature review brings together research to examine the cultural and social aspects of language politics in Indian media, looking at its historical background, current forms, and impact on democracy and diversity.

During British rule, English was made the language of administration and elite culture, creating a hierarchy among languages that still exists today (Khubchandani, 1983). After independence, policies like the Three-Language Formula and the promotion of Hindi as an official language aimed to balance national unity with respect for regional languages. However, these policies often led to conflict, such as the anti-Hindi protests in Tamil Nadu, which showed the deep emotional and political power of language (Mitchell, 2009). These historical experiences continue to shape media practices today, where language choices are closely tied to power and privilege.

Media institutions whether print, broadcast, or digital play a central role in reinforcing or questioning linguistic hierarchies. The strong presence of Hindi and English in national media often sidelines regional and tribal languages, deepening existing sociolinguistic inequalities (Sonntag, 2000). This reflects what scholars describe as "linguistic hegemony," a system where some languages are consistently valued over others, with consequences for education, employment, and social mobility (Dasgupta, 1993). For example, English-language media largely serve urban elites, while regional outlets provide crucial space for grassroots voices but remain financially fragile and dependent on both state and market pressures (Jeffrey, 2000). Political leaders often use language as a tool for propaganda and ideological control. The propaganda model by Herman and Chomsky (1988) help to explain how media language can be shaped to serve dominant interests. These strategies have also deepened existing conflict, such as the conflict between Hindi and regional languages, showing how language

can become a site of struggle over different ideas of the nation (Lelyveld, 1993).

Culturally, language in media acts both as a store of tradition and as a driver of identity politics. Regional media allow linguistic communities to protect and promote their heritage, but they can also encourage sub-nationalism and conflicts between groups. Many tribal and minority languages remain almost invisible in mainstream media, which puts India's linguistic diversity and social equality at risk (Mohanty, 2010). Digital platforms and new tools, such as AI-based translation offer the chance for greater inclusion, but they may also repeat existing biases if they are not developed with cultural and contextual care (Mohan, 2022). From a sociological perspective, language divisions in media reflect and reinforce wider caste and class hierarchies. Non-standard dialects and speech varieties are often treated as "inferior," which increases social exclusion (Rai, 2001). Media use patterns also show these divides: English language content is linked to social mobility, while regional and community-based media often struggle for recognition and resources (Jeffrey, 2000). The rise of digital media adds new opportunities for participation but also spreads misinformation and increases polarization (Sinha, 2021). This review uses a systematic approach to examine these complex dynamics, drawing on many studies to show the historical, cultural, and social factors shaping language politics in Indian media. By analyzing these themes, it aims to provide a clearer understanding of how language affects power, identity, and resistance in India.

Research Objectives

Objective 1: To examine how language politics appear and are reinforced in Indian media, focusing on cultural hierarchies, regional differences, and the social and linguistic factors that shape media content and audience response.

Objective 2: To explore the social effects of language divisions in media, looking at how media use, digital platforms, and language policies influence social inclusion, identity, and cultural representation in India.

Methodology

This study developed on the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, a qualitative research approach used to examine the complex relationship between language politics and media in India. The SLR process involves four key steps: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Moher et al., 2009). For this study, a systematic search of existing literature on language politics in India was conducted using key words -such as "language politics", "Indian

media’, ‘linguistic diversity’, ‘cultural identity’, ‘digital media’, ‘sociolinguistics’, and ‘democracy’. After the initial search, the results were carefully screened to select studies that had either a direct or indirect focus on language use in Indian media. The systematic review highlights several strong and connected themes in the study of language politics in Indian media. The identifies five key themes :

- (1) The lasting effects of historical and colonial legacies;
- (2) The political economy of linguistic dominance;
- (3) Media as a space for cultural identity and resistance;
- (4) The mixed impact of digital disruption; and
- (5) The sociological outcomes of stratification and exclusion.

(1) The lasting effects of historical and colonial legacies- Language is not only a way of communication but also a space where power, culture, and social differences are shaped. In India, with its vast linguistic diversity of more than 19,500 languages and dialects, the media plays an important role in highlighting and negotiating these differences (Annamalai, 2001; Singh, 2018). The present linguistic situation of Indian media has its roots in history, especially in the colonial period. During British rule, English was introduced as the main language of government, education, and elite communication. This created a lasting hierarchy in which English came to represent modernity, power, and social mobility, while many Indian languages were limited to household and cultural use (Khubchandani, 1983; Viswanathan, 1989). This was not only about administration but also about shaping how knowledge and ideas were produced as an influence that later shaped the media as well. After independence, India had to manage its vast linguistic diversity while also building a sense of national unity. Policies such as the Official Languages Act (1963) and the Three Language Formula were designed to promote Hindi as a national language, protect regional languages, and continue the use of English for administration and wider communication (Dasgupta, 1993). As a result, English retained its place as a neutral but elitist common language, producing a three-tier system of English– Hindi–Regional languages that continues to shape media industries (Mitchell, 2009; Jeffrey, 2000).

However, these efforts often led to conflict. The most notable example was the anti-Hindi protests in Tamil

Nadu, which forced the government to keep English as an associate official language permanently (Mitchell, 2009). Scholars point out that these policies had a direct impact on



media industries, resulting in a three-layered structure: English-language media at the top with national reach, Hindi media dominating the mainstream, and regional media serving specific linguistic states (Jeffrey, 2000). Research shows that the links between language and media in India are influenced by history, politics, identity, and digital change. The key argument is that Indian media does not simply reflect linguistic diversity in a neutral manner. Instead, it often gives more importance to dominant languages while sidelining others, which affects democracy, cultural survival, and social justice. The literature shows that colonial policies continue to shape India's media landscape in deep and lasting ways. However, these measures sparked political conflict, especially the opposition to Hindi in South India (Dasgupta, 1993). This historical background forms the foundation of contemporary debates on language politics in Indian media.

(2) The political economy of linguistic dominance: Media ownership in India is highly concentrated, with conglomerates like Times Group, Network18, and Zee dominating the market, and they mainly earn their revenues by advertising (Media Ownership Monitor, 2019; Sharma et al., 2025). Since advertisers mainly seek audiences with higher purchasing power which is in urban areas, these corporations prioritize publishing and broadcasting mostly in Hindi and English, the languages most associated with educated, middle-class consumers (Ciochetto, 2010; Kumar & Sarma, 2021). This commercial logic contributes to maintaining linguistic dominance in Indian media (Neyazi, 2020). It also reinforces the dominance of these languages and side-lines others, turning language choice into an outcome of economics and politics rather than cultural diversity. Scholars often apply Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model to India, highlighting how language is used by both the state and corporations to influence public opinion. Regional media outlets, which depend heavily on government advertising, face financial pressure that encourages self-censorship and alignment with state agendas. Overall, the literature emphasizes that media is not a neutral space but an active player in shaping linguistic markets that reflect and reinforce power. The way media is produced and distributed strongly shapes linguistic hierarchies in India. Large media companies, focused on profit through advertising and wider reach, mainly invest in Hindi and English. These languages attract urban, wealthy audiences and therefore generate the most revenue (Sonntag, 2000). As a result, Hindi and English gain dominant positions in media, while other languages are side-lined (Sinha, 2021). For example, even though India is linguistically diverse, Hindi newspapers and TV channels have the largest circulation and viewership, often defining the national news agenda (Jeffrey, 2000). Herman and Chomsky's



(1988) propaganda model is particularly relevant to India. Studies show that both state and corporate actors use language strategically to influence public opinion, promote nationalism, or silence opposition.

(3) Media as a space for cultural identity and resistance: The literature shows that media serves as both a space of cultural expression and a tool of resistance against dominant linguistic forces. Regional media industries in languages like Bengali, Telugu, Malayalam, and Tamil are widely seen as counterhegemonic, helping preserve linguistic heritage while strengthening sub-national identities (Pillai, 2016). These platforms foster community, belonging, and pride, offering an alternative to the dominance of Hindi and English. At the same time, the literature points to internal exclusions. Many tribal and minority languages, such as Santhali and Bodo, are almost absent from mainstream media, putting them at greater risk of decline and leaving their speakers marginalized (Mohanty, 2010). Even within regional media, nonstandard dialects linked to lower castes or rural groups are often stereotyped or ridiculed, reproducing social hierarchies through language (Rai, 2001). Thus, media emerges as a double-edged site, empowering cultural resistance while also reinforcing inequalities.

(4) The mixed impact of digital disruption-Digital media in India has both positive and negative effects on language. On the positive side, platforms like YouTube, blogs, and online news allow content in many Indian languages, helping communities express themselves and build connections (Mohan, 2022; Udupa, 2018; Sinha, 2021). Tribal and minority languages like Santhali, Bodo, or Manipuri now have some online presence, and Dalit-led media challenge dominant caste narratives (Mohanty, 2010; Pillai, 2016). On the negative side, English and Hindi still dominate the internet due to algorithms, better technology, and early user demographics (Mohan, 2022; Udupa, 2018). Minority languages often face technological barriers, and dialects linked to lower castes can be stigmatized (Rai, 2001). Digital platforms are also misused to spread misinformation and hate speech in regional languages, increasing social inequality and polarization (Udupa, 2018; Dasgupta, 1993; Annamalai, 2001). Overall, digital media can both empower minority voices and reinforce old hierarchies.

(5) The sociological outcomes of stratification and exclusion-The final theme highlights the social impact of language politics in media. Studies show that linguistic hierarchies in media directly contribute to wider social inequalities. For non-Hindi and non-English speakers, access to vital information on health, law, finance, and government schemes is often restricted,



deepening socio-economic disadvantage (Dasgupta, 1993; Annamalai, 2001). The literature also reveals a close link between language, caste, and class. English proficiency continues to signal elite status and is often necessary for well-paying jobs, reinforcing cycles of privilege (Annamalai, 2001). At the same time, Dalit and Bahujan dialects are frequently stigmatized in media, reproducing caste-based hierarchies and symbolic exclusion (Rai, 2001). Overall, media is seen not only as reflecting social divisions but also as actively reproducing them, making language politics central to questions of social justice and equity in India.

These five themes are closely connected rather than separate. The historical legacies of colonialism (Theme 1) created a linguistic hierarchy that today's media economy (Theme 2) continues to sustain. This dominance has led to cultural resistance through regional media (Theme 3), which is now being reshaped in complex ways by digital technologies (Theme 4). At the core are the sociological effects (Theme 5), where language politics influence access, equity, and identity in Indian democracy. Together, the literature shows that language politics in media is not a side issue but a central force in shaping modern India.

Key Findings and Discussion

This review shows that language politics in Indian media is an important but often neglected part of social power. Studies highlight that media does not simply reflect society; rather, it actively creates linguistic hierarchies, controls access to communication, and shapes identities. The impact of colonial history, the profit-driven nature of media industries, the growth of digital platforms, and persistent caste and class inequalities together make language a crucial arena of political and cultural conflict. Several important gaps remain in the existing literature.

First, more research is needed on how people consume regional and hyperlocal media, as well as the economic models that sustain them.

Second, the influence of AI and automation on linguistic diversity requires urgent study.

Third, there is very little study on the media practices of India's tribal communities, whose languages are at the highest risk of disappearing.

Future studies should also examine how media policies can support linguistic justice. Initiatives such as funding minority-language media, creating inclusive digital tools, and strengthening media literacy in multilingual contexts could help make India's media environment more democratic and diverse.



Furthermore, The main point found in the studies is that language dominance in India is strong and flexible. This dominance has two layers: first, English was pushed during colonial times, creating a permanent elite class; later, after independence, Hindi was promoted as the national language, forming another powerful layer. Today, media companies use this language system to make money. Their decision to publish in Hindi or English is not really about culture, it is a business choice to attract advertisers and rich audiences (Sonntag, 2000; Jeffrey, 2000). In this way, language becomes a product, and the power of Hindi and English looks like a natural result of the market, even though it was built by politics.

The study looks at an old debate in media studies that does globalization make all cultures the same, or does it create more differences? In India, both things are happening at the same time. On one side, Hindi and English media, backed by national and global markets, push everything toward sameness. On the other side, regional media is growing strongly, showing local identities and differences (Pillai, 2016). So, India's media is a mix of both partly united, partly divided, where global, national, and local languages all exist and compete together.

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model is useful, but it needs changes to fit India. The model assumes one national media elite, but India has many languages. The study shows that corporate and government interests do shape news (like bias in state-owned media). However, because India has different language-based media worlds, there is not one single 'manufactured consent' (Jaffrelot & Martelli, 2020). Instead, consent is built inside each language group, often leading to very different national stories. For example, a news item ignored in Hindi media may be given huge attention in Tamil or Bengali media.

Conclusion

The studies on language politics in Indian media show a system full of conflict and contradictions. Old language hierarchies, built during colonial times and strengthened after independence, are still powerful today. They are kept alive through market forces, corporate interests, and political strategies. At the same time, these hierarchies are challenged by local cultures, regional languages, and new technologies like digital and social media, which give space for different voices. This mix of control and resistance makes the picture very complex. A more balanced approach is required, bringing together history, politics, economics, culture, and voices from the grassroots. Only then can we fully see how language shapes democracy, identity, and social life in India. Media plays an important role in shaping and expressing cultural identity. The use of a particular language in news, films, or advertisements often



reflects ideas of belonging, authenticity, and social status (Annamalai, 2001). Regional language media such as Bengali, Tamil, or Malayalam films and news have been strong tools for expressing local identities and resisting uniform national culture (Pillai, 2016). The growth of regional cinema and television has also helped communities protect and revive their cultural traditions .

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