

# The Three Language Formula Revisited: ‘Hindi Imposition’ Stokes Protests

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## Summary

*The release of the 2019 Draft National Education Policy on 31 May 2019, which recommended the compulsory learning of Hindi in non-Hindi speaking states, foreshadows a key cultural element of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s nationalist agenda. There were immediate objections in South India, with Tamil Nadu-based Dravidian parties spotlighting the move as a blatant act of ‘Hindi imposition.’ The controversial reference was withdrawn, but the 2019 Union Budget has allocated Rs 50 crore (S\$ 9.5 million) for the support of the appointment of Hindi teachers in non-Hindi states, demonstrating that the Hindi agenda of the BJP is very much alive. The recent statement by Union Home Minister Amit Shah on 14 September 2019 that Hindi, as the most spoken language in India, should do the work of uniting India has only added fuel to the fire.*

## Introduction

In the 2019 Indian general elections the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a historic mandate. The BJP’s victory could be read as [the triumph of a culturally homogenous Hindu India over the secular and pluralistic ‘Idea of India’](#) championed by Congress as well as the federalist ideal of power-sharing pursued by regional political parties.

During the elections, the BJP discredited the Congress as [‘false secularists’](#) and ‘English-speaking elites,’ who have stymied national unity and growth by promoting a policy of minority appeasement, which has undermined cultural pride and addressing the country’s substantive needs. Political scientist K.K. Kailash argues that following the BJP’s dismantling of India’s secular-pluralist national project, [an assault on the regional and state parties might be next](#). Hindi, reportedly spoken by [43 per cent of the population](#) and concentrated in the cow belt, the BJP’s stronghold, is one tool by which the BJP is attempting its strategy of national integration, while potentially expanding its vote base in non-Hindi speaking states.

The three-language formula (first outlined in the National Policy of Education in 1968) aims to promote [‘multilingualism’ and ‘national harmony.’](#) The idea is to make citizens adept in three languages—English, their mother tongue and Hindi—from preschool to Class 12.

But language is associated with regional identities, and some fear that the BJP’s bid to replace English with Hindi as India’s pan-Indian link language is a hegemonic act [forcing India into the BJP’s Hindu nationalist mould](#). Unsurprisingly, the draft elicited a vehement backlash a day after its release. MK Stalin, chief of the DMK, which first came into power in Tamil Nadu on the back of anti-Hindi agitations and assertions of Tamil pride, stated that

while his party opposes no language, [“Hindi is not in the blood of the people of Tamil Nadu.”](#) He added that any attempt to impose Hindi would be met with strong opposition against the BJP government at the Centre.

## The History

Soon after Indian independence, India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, facing linguistic demands, had agreed to state reorganization along linguistic lines. To forestall possible secessions, the three-language formula was adopted as a kind of compromise: the South would learn Hindi, while the North would learn a regional language.

But the policy has been criticized, because [it was never properly implemented](#): funds remained scarce, different states interpreted the formula differently, and the Centre turned a blind eye, preserving the status quo. English remained the uncontroversial, neutral language of statecraft. Today, Tamil Nadu has a ‘Two-Language Formula’ of English and Tamil, while in Uttar Pradesh, students frequently opt for Sanskrit over one of the regional languages. In the South it is believed that English is a route to jobs and [serves as a bulwark against northern domination](#); to many, Hindi’s elevation to national language would make them [second-class citizens](#) within their own country. At the same time, thanks to Bollywood films and migration from north India, [Hindi has over time become more popular in the South](#).

## The Hindi Controversy

Fast forward to when Narendra Modi took office in 2014. [The Hindi language controversy reemerged](#) when dignitaries were instructed to give speeches in Hindi and officials requested to prioritise Hindi on government websites and social media. Following the BJP’s return to power in May 2019, it proceeded to demote English and elevate Hindi as part of a larger strategy to appear more democratically attuned. In the [2019 Draft Education Policy](#), English was denigrated as the language of “colonists” and the “economic elite”—part of an overarching ‘power structure of language’ that has contributed to the “marginalization of large sections of society.”

Although the BJP won a popular mandate in 2019, [its performance in the Southern states was poor](#). The South is economically more advanced than the North. Consequently, the BJP’s nationalist siren call, wedding Hindi cultural pride with promises of development, rings hollow. Increasing inter-state migration of Hindi speakers southward for jobs, the South’s resentment at having to subsidise their poorer northern neighbours and the North’s demographic explosion ([which could lead to a reapportionment of parliamentary seats in the future](#)), leads some South Indians to fear that such acts of ‘Hindi imposition’ could relegate them to permanent minority status in a majoritarian political environment where minorities are already becoming increasingly marginalised.

In Modi’s victory speech to parliament after the 2019 election, he announced that for the country to progress, [national ambitions and regional aspirations](#) must cooperate. But the BJP’s vision of the ‘nation’—and Hindi’s role in it—are not universally shared. The strong reaction to Shah’s recent statement on Hindi uniting India was evidence of this. In fact, Shah

was forced to clarify that he was not asking for imposing Hindi over regional languages but learning Hindi as a second language after one's mother tongue. Thus, the BJP's policy of pushing Hindi in non-Hindi speaking states could come at a considerable political cost. Indeed, the BJP might be better off letting Bollywood and economics do the work of popularising Hindi in South India.

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