

# Linguistic Diversity in India: An Outlook

Vibhav Vasudeva

Ba.Llb. (Hons.) University Institute Of Legal Studies (Uils), Ava-Lodge Campus, H.P. University,  
Shimla -171004

## ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore quoted, “If God had so wished, he would have made all Indians speak with one language...the unity of India...always be unity in diversity”. Language is more than just a tool for communication; it preserves culture and imparts knowledge. Individuals express their deepest feelings and thoughts through their language. A nation without its own language lacks culture and civilization. Various languages in India are at risk of decline in the near future. This article emphasizes the significance of language in personal life and highlights the contributions of the esteemed linguistic scholar, the late Prof. Bh Krishnamurti, whose sole passion was language and linguistics. It explores the distribution of languages in India and presents data on the country's linguistic diversity, underscoring the importance of protecting and nurturing minority languages. The article delves into the Three Language Formula and discusses constitutional provisions and affirmative actions essential for safeguarding minority languages. It references key judgments from the Hon'ble Supreme Court and High Courts related to this matter. Additionally, the article reviews various reports and commissions dedicated to protecting linguistic minorities and examines the impact of linguistic diversity on the development of different regions in India.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Language, Minorities, Constitution, Reports, Commissions, Development, Three language formula.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Plato said: “Human language is a result of divine gift.” In his view, language is a potent medium of symbols, meanings, communication, and expression. It serves as a repository of culture and a system of knowledge. Language is seen as a source of power, a vital force, and an instrument of culture. It can be used for both domination and liberation.

It is rightly said that knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom. Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow.<sup>1</sup> Language is a social gift rather than a genetic one. Individuals express their inner feelings and thoughts through their language. Consequently, a nation without its own language lacks culture and civilization. Numerous aspects and elements of life originate from one's mother tongue. Language helps individuals and communities adapt to their environment by providing them with essential knowledge that has been accumulating and evolving over centuries. Mahatma Gandhi was of the view that “A language is an exact reflection of the character and the growth of its speakers.” Gandhi also argued that there was a cultural spirit in the languages of India that separated them from English.<sup>2</sup> Our language mirrors who we are, and if you suggest that our languages lack the

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Political Review (2013, September 2) Blood of the Soul <https://harvardpolitics.com/blood-of-the-soul>

<sup>2</sup> Lelyveld D. (2002, the Annual of Urdu Studies) Words as Deeds: Gandhi and Language [https://www.academia.edu/2252277/Words as deeds Gandhi and language](https://www.academia.edu/2252277/Words_as_deeds_Gandhi_and_language)

richness to convey profound thoughts, then perhaps it is best that we cease to exist. Nelson Mandela quoted, “if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2. LATE PROF. BH. KRISHNAMURTI: A SCHOLAR AND AN INDIAN LINGUISTIC

Bhadriraju Krishnamurti (19 June 1928 – 11 August 2012) was an Indian linguist known for his expertise in Dravidian languages. Born in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh, he served as the Vice Chancellor of Hyderabad Central University from 1986 to 1993. He also founded the Department of Linguistics at Osmania University, where he was a professor from 1962 to 1986. Krishnamurti studied under and closely worked with Murray Barnson Emeneau. He earned his A.M. and PhD degrees from the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 and 1957, respectively.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bhadriraju\\_krishnamurti.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bhadriraju_krishnamurti.jpg)

Krishnamurti made significant contributions to linguistics, particularly in the study of Dravidian languages, being among the pioneers to apply modern comparative linguistic theory to this field. His passion was solely devoted to language and linguistics. His magnum opus, “The Dravidian Languages,” is a landmark in Dravidian linguistics, while his 1961 thesis, “Telugu Verbal Bases,” provides a comprehensive account of comparative Dravidian phonology and derivational morphology of verbal bases in Dravidian languages from a Telugu perspective. His research focused on central issues in phonology, morphology, and syntax of Dravidian languages.

Krishnamurti's "Comparative Dravidian Linguistics: Current Perspectives" compiles twenty-one significant articles from 1955 to 1998, addressing numerous issues in Dravidian linguistics. His notable work, "The Dravidian Languages," was published by Cambridge University Press in 2003, summarizing his scholarly research over fifty years. After a brief stint at the University of California, Berkeley (1960–61), he returned to India to establish the Department of Linguistics at Osmania University, which later became India's first center for Advanced Studies in Linguistics.

Krishnamurti played a key role in creating the Telugu Dialect Dictionary of Occupational Vocabularies in Andhra Pradesh, resulting in numerous volumes covering different occupations and dialects. He was the first of two Indian scholars to become a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2004.

(Krishnamurti)

## 3. IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Language is essential for communication and interaction. It not only conveys facts and observations but

<sup>3</sup>Available at <https://www.socratic-method.com/quote-meanings/nelson-mandela-if-you-talk-to-a-man-in-a-language-he-understands-that-goes-to-his-head-if-you-talk-to-him-in-his-language-that-goes-to-his-heart>

also shapes attitudes and behavior. Hence, it is a crucial component of the cultural foundations necessary for societal development. Language significantly contributes to personality development by enhancing cognitive skills.

It is commonly believed that as society shifts towards English as the medium of education, people tend to move away from their mother tongue. The first language a baby learns from birth, known as the birth language, is crucial for various reasons.

- a) **Intellectual Development:** Research indicates that cognitive and intellectual development progresses more rapidly in individuals fluent in their mother tongue. Furthermore, students educated in their mother tongue tend to achieve greater academic success compared to those taught in a different language.
- b) **Cultural Connection:** Language is vital for preserving culture. Direct translations between languages often lose the original essence, making it important to know a language to fully understand a culture. The mother tongue helps individuals stay connected to their culture and heritage.
- c) **Second Language Learning:** A strong grasp of one's mother tongue facilitates learning new languages. Children who read in their mother tongue from a young age develop stronger literacy skills in other languages.
- d) **Commercial Benefits:** As businesses increasingly localize, the importance of mother tongues has grown significantly. Proficiency in your mother tongue is beneficial for entrepreneurship, as today's market offers numerous opportunities to monetize one's language skills.
- e) **Pride:** Mastery of one's mother tongue instills pride, boosts confidence, and enhances cultural identity awareness. It helps individuals connect more deeply with their cultural heritage.
- f) The mother tongue significantly shapes an individual's personality. However, with English often being the medium of education, parents tend to speak to their children in a second language. This can confuse children and make it challenging for them to master both their first and second languages. The mother tongue, being the language a child hears from birth, plays a crucial role in shaping emotions and thoughts. It is also essential for developing other skills such as critical thinking, second language acquisition, and literacy skills.

#### 4. THREE LANGUAGE FORMULA

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 endorses the three-language policy, but Tamil Nadu has rejected it, opting to retain its existing two-language policy. For the past 50 years, Tamil Nadu has adhered to the two-language formula, achieving significant social and economic progress.

##### **Historical Aspect of the Three-Language Formula:**

The three-language formula was first introduced in the National Education Policy of 1968 by the Indira Gandhi government. In Hindi-speaking states, the languages included were English, Hindi, and a modern Indian language. In non-Hindi-speaking states, the formula consisted of English, Hindi, and one Indian language. This approach was adopted to address the lack of uniformity in the teaching system across different regions. While Hindi was the primary medium of instruction in the north, regional languages and English were prevalent in other parts. However, this system led to confusion and challenges in inter-state communication. The three-language formula aimed to:

- Accommodate group identity
- Affirm national unity
- Increase administrative efficiency

In 1968, the three-language formula was implemented nationwide, except in Tamil Nadu, which adopted a two-language policy. The NPE 1986 did not alter the 1968 policy and reiterated the promotion of Hindi.

### **Progress of the Three-Language Formula:**

As education is a state subject, the implementation of the formula was left to the states. Only a few states adopted the formula in principle. In many Hindi-speaking states, Sanskrit replaced a modern language from South India, defeating the formula's purpose of promoting inter-state communication. Tamil Nadu continued with the two-language policy, using English and Tamil, and did not implement the three-language formula.

### **Three-Language Formula in NEP 2020:**

The NEP 2020 states that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother-tongue/local language/regional language. The three-language formula will continue to promote multilingualism and national unity. NEP 2020 emphasizes greater flexibility in the formula, with no language imposed on any state. States, regions, and students can choose their three languages, as long as at least two are native to India. The HRD Ministry of Education maintains that the three-language formula will be implemented in schools with flexibility, without imposing any language on states.

### **Expert Opinions on the Three-Language Policy:**

Sridhar Rajagopalan, Co-Founder and Chief Learning Officer at Educational Initiatives, believes this approach offers numerous benefits. Pedagogical research shows that children learn best in their mother tongue or local language during primary classes. While children should still learn English, it should not be the medium of instruction in primary years. The prevalent language in a child's surroundings should be the medium of instruction. In several European universities, Sanskrit is being explored as an esteemed academic discipline.

IIT Kharagpur Director VK Tewari stated that emphasizing primary education in regional languages and introducing Sanskrit, following the three-language formula, will greatly benefit rural areas. IFIM Business School Chairman Sanjay Padode is impressed by the recommendation of conducting foundational years in the mother tongue, believing it will help students learn basic concepts quickly without dealing with an unfamiliar language.

Aekta Nandwana Chanda, Technical Specialist in Education at ChildFund India, welcomed the promotion of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction till Class 5 but noted that teaching-learning materials are available in only a few standard languages. Therefore, investments in content for most languages, including tribal languages, are necessary.

## **5. THE DEBATE OVER LANGUAGE<sup>4</sup>**

The Haryana Government's groundbreaking decision to implement the use of the Hindi language in courts and tribunals subordinate to the Punjab and Haryana High Court has sparked a debate about its practicality. This decision is expected to bring significant changes to the state's lower judiciary. In the recent discussions about the language to be used in courts, some lawyers questioned the rationale behind this decision, arguing that it is discriminatory and violates Article 19(1)(g) of the Indian Constitution. They referred to Section 30 of the Advocates Act, 1961, which states that every advocate has the right to practice throughout India. They contended that due to language constraints, some lawyers may be unable to do so,

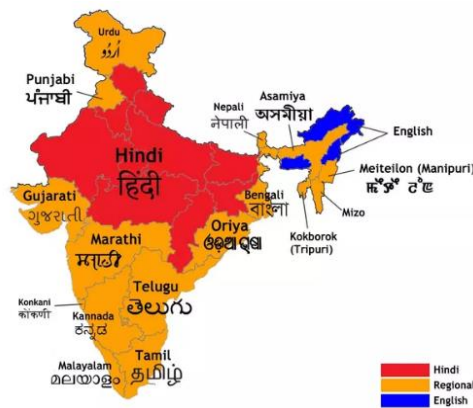
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<sup>4</sup> The Times Of India, Dated 19 December, 2022

as all law colleges teach in English and Hindi legal terminologies are not well-known. The case was withdrawn for being premature since no formal notification had been issued at that time.

The matter reached the Supreme Court in early June 2020, but the Court refused to intervene. The petitioners, who were lawyers, were questioned about their objections since around 80% of litigants do not understand English. The Supreme Court bench, comprising Chief Justice S.A. Bobde and Justices A.S. Bopanna and Hrishikesh Roy, observed that there was nothing wrong with using Hindi as the official language in subordinate courts in some states. They noted that even during British rule, evidence was recorded in vernacular languages. In May 2018, the Punjab and Haryana High Court, perhaps for the first time, provided a copy of a judgment in Hindi to a litigant who was sentenced to one-month imprisonment for posting objectionable content on his Facebook wall.

## 6. LANGUAGE DISTRIBUTION AND DIVERSITY IN INDIA



(<https://www.iasgyan.in//ig-uploads/images//image01173.png>)

India is often referred to as a ‘veritable tower of Babel’, and A.R. Desai describes it as “a museum of tongues.” Linguist Grierson noted in his “Linguistic Survey of India” that the country has 179 languages and 544 dialects. However, the 1971 census reported 1,652 languages spoken in India as mother tongues. Most of these languages are spoken in North India, but their distribution is uneven. While some languages are spoken by millions, others, particularly tribal languages, have less than one percent of the total population as speakers.

**India's languages fall into four main groups:**

1. The Indo-Aryan
2. The Dravidian
3. The Austric
4. The Sino-Tibetan

Languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Assamese, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati, Marathi, and Kashmiri belong to the Indo-Aryan family. The Dravidian group includes Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The Austric languages are spoken by tribes in Central India, while the Sino-Tibetan languages are spoken by tribes in North Eastern India.

At the time of India's independence in 1947, there were many princely states. Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, then Home Minister, played a crucial role in integrating these states into the Union of India. The Constitution of India was adopted on 20th November 1949 and came into effect on 26th January 1950,

defining the Union of India as comprising different states and Union territories. In 1950, states were reorganized based on language, resulting in each state's residents primarily speaking a particular language. The Constitution of India initially recognized 18 major languages, but today, it recognizes 22 major languages in the 8th Schedule. These languages belong to the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and European language families. Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Oriya, Punjabi, Bihari, Rajasthani, Assamese, Sanskrit, Sindhi, and Kashmiri are part of the Indo-Aryan family. The Dravidian family includes Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada. The European language family includes English, Portuguese, and French, spoken mainly in Goa and Pondicherry.

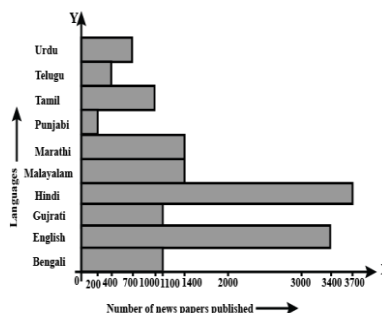
Hindi is the official language of India, while English remains an associate language. According to the 1991 census, Hindi is spoken by 247.85 million people, followed by Telugu (72.08 million) and Bengali (71.78 million). Other widely spoken languages include Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Bhojpuri, and Punjabi, each spoken by millions. Although Hindi is the national language, replacing English as the lingua franca poses challenges due to the country's multilingual nature.

Language issues have become a major threat to national integration. Linguistic tensions often manifest in bilingual border areas. For example, in Goa, there is a divide between Maratha and Konkani speakers, while in Belgaum, Marathi and Kannada speakers are in conflict. Assam faces issues between Bengali and Assamese speakers, and Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have conflicts among Urdu, Hindi, and Oriya speakers. There has been a demand to include English in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. Linguistic diversity poses a significant threat to the unity and existence of India.

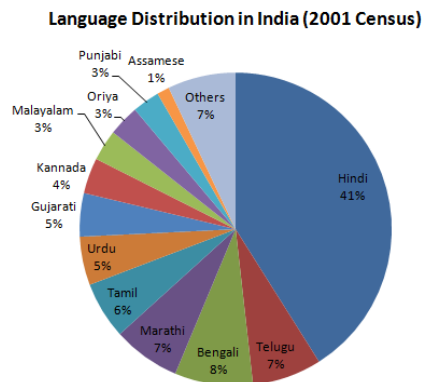
**Language Data in India:**

- 1961 census: 1,652 major languages
- 2011 census:
- 121 languages recognized by the government with at least 10,000 speakers
- 14 languages with at least 10 million speakers
- Currently:
- 87 languages used in print media
- 71 languages used in radio broadcasting
- 15 languages used for administration
- 47 languages used as media of instruction in schools

India's linguistic diversity is both a cultural asset and a challenge for national integration.



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<https://revisitingindia.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/graph.png>

## 7. THE PROTECTION OF LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

India is home to over 1,369 different languages, many of which face the real threat of disappearing in the near future. The 2011 census data on mother tongues revealed 19,569 languages, which after linguistic scrutiny and categorization, were rationalized to 1,369 mother tongues. However, nearly 400 of these languages are at risk of extinction within the next 50 years. This data underscores India's linguistic diversity and highlights the urgent need to protect and nurture languages spoken by minorities.

**P. Avinash Reddy** explores the available constitutional protections and the institutional threats faced by minority languages, suggesting that affirmative action might be crucial to safeguarding them

### A. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS:

Article 30(1) of the Indian Constitution grants linguistic minorities the fundamental right to establish and manage educational institutions of their choice. Conversely, Article 351 directs the Union to promote the use of Hindi across India to serve as a medium of expression among the diverse population. This directive can marginalize speakers of languages other than Hindi, and linguistic minorities often bear the brunt of it, especially as English is also promoted at the expense of local and regional languages.

Article 350A mandates that every state must provide primary education in the mother tongue and appoint a 'Special Officer' for linguistic minorities (Article 350B). This officer is responsible for investigating matters related to linguistic minorities and reporting them to the President. However, neither the Constitution nor any legislation explicitly defines what constitutes a linguistic minority.

It was in 1971, in the case of **DAV College etc. vs. State of Punjab**<sup>5</sup>, that the Supreme Court of India defined a linguistic minority as a minority that at least has a spoken language, regardless of having a script or not. Minority has to be determined in relation to particular legislation which is sought to be impugned. If it is a state law, then the minorities have to be determined in relation to state population.

In the case of **T.M.A Pai Foundation & Ors. vs. State of Karnataka**<sup>6</sup>, the Apex Court held that the status of linguistic minority is to be determined in the context of states and not India as a whole.

It has also been observed by the Indian Judiciary in **Association of Teachers in Anglo-Indian School vs. Association of Aids of Anglo-Indian School**<sup>7</sup> that only because English is one of the official languages of the State of West Bengal, the same does not mean that the Anglo- Indian community whose language is English, cannot be termed to be a minority community.

<sup>5</sup> AIR 1971 SC 1737

<sup>6</sup> AIR 2003 SC 355

<sup>7</sup> AIR 1995 Cal. 194

## B. COMMISSIONS:

According to the Report of **the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities**, the status of a linguistic minority is determined by numerical inferiority, non-dominant status within a state, and a distinct identity. The report highlights that exclusive adherence to a minority language can lead to socio-economic backwardness, which can be mitigated by learning the majority language.

However, the Commission should have focused on developing mechanisms and institutional structures to support linguistic minorities, preventing socio-economic disadvantage solely due to their language. Instead of addressing gaps in the education system that overlook the languages of linguistic minorities, the Commission suggests that these individuals and communities learn the majority language for survival. This reflects systematic state discrimination based on language. The state is responsible for ensuring equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of whether they belong to the majority or minority, but it clearly fails to do so.

In a 2006 workshop on linguistic minorities organized by **the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities**, it was recommended that the term "linguistic minority" be clearly defined. This definition should then be used to create a law that provides affirmative action based on socio-economic backwardness.

It is crucial to stress that merely knowing the majority language does not address the backwardness of linguistic minorities. This can only be achieved by incorporating minority languages into the education system. Doing so will help preserve these languages and their associated knowledge systems while making the learning process easier for students from linguistic minorities. The workshop's recommendations can be seen as half-hearted attempts to integrate minority languages into the education system. They do not propose any measures to ensure that the medium of education should be in the minority language for students belonging to specific linguistic minorities. This implies that the state is attempting to impose assimilation on linguistic minorities by not providing adequate support to integrate their language into the education system.

## C. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND LANGUAGE:

The most vulnerable among linguistic minorities are tribal communities. Despite the precarious state of their languages, there are few government schemes or mechanisms to integrate these languages into the education system. Most linguistic minorities in India belong to indigenous groups, allowing them to access reservations in Higher Education institutions under the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. However, this results in linguistic discrimination, as these students are taught in a majority language throughout primary and secondary education, leading to the assimilation of their languages and cultures. Many students from linguistic minorities drop out of school due to the unfamiliar medium of instruction, and those who continue do so at the expense of their own language.

**A High-Level Committee on the Socio-Economic, Health, and Educational Status of Tribal Communities** in India highlights that low literacy rates among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are due to poor educational infrastructure, inadequately trained teachers, the lack of instruction in tribal languages, and irrelevant curricula. The Draft National Policy on tribal groups acknowledges that the changing educational landscape can endanger many tribal languages and emphasizes the importance of mother-tongue education at the primary level.

It is evident that most students from indigenous linguistic minorities fail to benefit from affirmative action in Higher Education. The government must recognize these gaps in the education system and take steps to integrate linguistic minority languages into education. Affirmative action can only be effectively



utilized if the medium of instruction is the students' own language, with English or the majority regional language taught comprehensively as a second language. This approach will provide a meaningful education for these students while equipping them with a valuable second language.

## **8. IMPACT OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF VARIOUS REGIONS**

One of the biggest challenges of linguistic diversity in India is the lack of a common language. Although Hindi is the Union's official language, many states have their own official languages, creating communication barriers between people from different regions. It's not uncommon to see individuals struggling to communicate due to language differences.

Another issue is the limited education in regional languages. In many states, English is the primary medium of instruction, which is not the mother tongue of most students. This often leads to difficulties in understanding concepts and falling behind in studies. Additionally, it creates a barrier to education for those who are not fluent in English. Most schools in India teach in Hindi or English, making it challenging for children to learn and retain their native languages. As a result, many Indian languages are at risk of dying out as younger generations struggle to communicate fluently in them.

Linguistic diversity also poses significant challenges in the economic sector. Different regions in India speak various languages, making it difficult for businesses to communicate effectively across the country. This lack of communication may also result in misunderstandings, delays, and even loss of business. Politically, the multitude of languages makes it challenging for politicians to communicate effectively with the populace. This often results in politicians relying on divisive rhetoric to appeal to specific linguistic communities, leading to a fragmented political landscape.

Furthermore, linguistic diversity can lead to social inequality. Individuals who do not speak Hindi or English are often marginalized and discriminated against in both urban and rural areas. They may struggle to find jobs, receive education, and access basic services, further widening the gap between the rich and poor.

India's linguistic diversity is both fascinating and complex, reflecting the country's rich cultural heritage and history. While it presents challenges in terms of communication and unity, it also offers opportunities for learning, growth, and understanding. As India continues to develop, its linguistic diversity will undoubtedly remain a defining feature of its identity and culture.

To address the challenges posed by linguistic diversity, it is essential to focus on the standardization of languages, education in non-dominant languages, effective communication, political unity, and social equality. The use of different languages also creates issues in the job market. Many companies require proficiency in English, putting non-English speakers at a disadvantage. Additionally, companies often prefer to hire employees who can speak the local language, making it difficult for people from other states to find work.

Linguistic diversity also creates challenges in field of governance and administration. Crafting policies that cater to the needs of people from different linguistic backgrounds is difficult. Translating official documents into various languages is also costly and time-consuming.

### **MEASURES:**

There are several solutions to address these problems. One approach is to promote a common language that is widely spoken across the country. While Hindi is the most commonly spoken language in India,

English is also widely understood. Promoting these two languages as common languages can help bridge communication gaps and reduce language-based discrimination. Another solution is to encourage education in regional languages. This will not only help students grasp concepts better but also preserve regional languages and cultures. Technology can also support education by providing online resources in regional languages. To tackle the job market issue, language training programs can help non-English speakers improve their proficiency.

## 9. CONCLUSION

India's linguistic diversity is a fascinating and complex topic, reflecting the country's rich cultural heritage and history. While it can create challenges in terms of communication and unity, it also offers many opportunities for learning, growth, and understanding. As India continues to develop and evolve, its linguistic diversity will undoubtedly remain a defining feature of its identity and culture. While linguistic diversity is a sign of India's cultural richness, it also poses significant challenges. Addressing the standardization of languages, education in non-dominant languages, effective communication, political unity, and social equality are crucial to overcoming these issues. Despite the challenges, linguistic diversity adds to the richness and diversity of the country. By promoting a common language, supporting education in regional languages, and tackling job market issues, these challenges can be mitigated, leading to a more inclusive and prosperous India.

Linguistic diversity is a hallmark of India, a country with over 1.3 billion people and more than 22 official languages. India's complex linguistic landscape is shaped by centuries of migration, trade, conquest, and colonialism. This diversity is integral to the country's identity and plays a crucial role in shaping its culture, politics, and society. With more than 19,500 languages spoken across the country, India's linguistic diversity is truly remarkable. However, only a fraction of these languages are recognized by the Indian government as official languages. According to the Constitution of India, there are 22 official languages, including Hindi, English, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, and Punjabi.

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