

Hindi gains due to demographic shift

Hindi-speaking States make up 46% of population

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When the Centre launched its NIPUN Bharat scheme in July 2021 to improve foundational literacy and numeracy among primary school students, participants from non-Hindi speaking States complained that they were the ones left feeling illiterate as they could not understand either the speeches, nor the PowerPoint presentations on the scheme, all made in formal Hindi. Last August, Tamil Nadu delegates at a yoga and naturopathy training webinar claimed that the AYUSH Ministry Secretary told them if they wanted English to be



Equal treatment: Experts favour promotion of languages not included in the Eighth Schedule of Constitution. ■ GETTY IMAGES

used, they could leave.

These incidents that made the headlines over the last year may be only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to language-related frictions in a country that has 121 languages spoken by at least

10,000 people – along with over a thousand more which have fewer speakers – but which also restricts education and governance to a handful of languages.

According to the 2011 Census, Hindi and its variants are the only major languages to have gained mother tongue adherents over the last 40 years, growing from 36.99% of the population in 1971 to 43.63% by 2011. A large factor in this growth comes from demographic changes.

“Fertility rates are higher among the poor and among women with less education, who comprise a higher share of Hindi speakers,” said Centre for Policy Research senior fellow Partha Mukhopadhyay, who noted that the 10 States with the highest share of Hindi speak-

ers grew from 41.9% of India’s population in 1971 to 46.5% by 2011. He added that migration could be increasing the number of those whose mother tongue is Hindi even in non-Hindi speaking States.

“If a Hindi-speaking poor illiterate family migrates from Bihar to Kerala, they may have fewer children than a similar family in Bihar but they’ll have more than the average Malayalam-speaking family in Kerala. This will raise the share of Hindi speakers in other such ‘destination’ States too,” he said.

The Centre cites the Census’ mother tongue data to justify its stance on the languages used in governance. In March 2021, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam’s (DMK) Namakkal MP A.K.P. Chinraj raised a query in the Lok Sabha asking for the estimated

number of people from non-Hindi speaking States who would understand the Central government’s notifications and Acts.

The Home Ministry responded with Census data claiming that the Hindi-speaking population of Nagaland was 62,942, while the English-speaking population was 419. For Kerala, the figures were 51,928 and 4,471, respectively. However, these are in fact, the number of people who claimed Hindi and English as their mother tongues, not the number who can actually speak these languages. An analysis by *The Hindu* of the bilingualism and trilingualism data gathered for the first time in 2011 shows that 16% of Nagaland’s population said Hindi was among their top three spoken language choices, only half of the 33% who chose English. Similarly, in Kerala, 9% had Hindi among their top three languages, while 20% includ-

ed English on their list.

The 2021 Census, which has been indefinitely delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, will be the second to gather such data, and thus record for the first time the growth among actual speakers of a language, rather than those who claim it as their mother tongue. “So far, the Census data has not been about the knowledge of a language, but rather identity with a language,” said Ayesha Kidwai, a professor of linguistics and the politics of language at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. “Hindi is identified as a language of power. When Hindi is promoted, it is not a promotion of choice, but a promotion of power.” She noted that the choice of Hindi in the Census in fact subsumes 50 other choices, as variants like Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Magadhi and Chhattisgarhi – each of which has more than a crore speakers – are all clubbed under the Hindi um-

brella. In fact, only about 26% of the Indian population actually selected Hindi itself as their mother tongue. Almost 40% of those clubbed under the Hindi label actually chose one of the variants.

“These are not the languages used for instruction in schools, or in government offices, and so we are saying that they don’t count. In fact, these languages suffer more than regional languages like Tamil or Telugu who have their own State proponents and are included in the Eighth Schedule,” said Dr. Kidwai.

At the celebration of Hindi Divas last week, Home Minister Amit Shah emphasised that “Hindi is the friend of all Indian languages” and can only progress through coexistence. Even while increasingly shifting the daily routines of governance into Hindi, the Centre has in fact taken steps to incorporate powerful regional languages.