

The 1965 Anti-Hindi imposition agitation in Madras State: When Hindi as sole official language approached

1. Introduction

For multilingual nations or areas, the language that a person or community chooses can serve as both a political manifestation of what they are and an essential tool for determining where their national political boundaries lie.

India is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with language issues frequently associated with ethnicity and religion. Hindi was supposed to be the national language when the official status of English was about to be eliminated. However, there were protests from non-Hindi-speaking regions, particularly Tamil Nadu, who perceived it as a kind of linguistic authoritarianism and a violation of the rights of speakers of other languages motivated by cultural nationalism and political objectives.

The Anti-Hindi movement in Madras State dates back to the 1930s and involved many violent protest movements over the following 40 years or so. An oral dispute between students and Congress officials on January 25, 1965, on the eve of the upcoming constitution that should have given Hindi the only official language, served as a trigger for the full-fledged anti-Hindi imposition agitation in Madras.

In this paper, the 1965 anti-Hindi imposition movement in Madras State is seen as a critical juncture, and what distinguishes it from other similar events over the years will be investigated. Moreover, how can they gain the potential remedies are going to be considered within it.

2. Theoretical framework

It is vital to introduce the theoretical foundation upon which the study is founded before moving on.

2.1. Protest vibration in conflict

Vibration is usually considered “as contingently reproducing those ruptures” when the critical junctures are triggered by some political protests in social movements (Della Porta 559). The anti-Hindi imposition movement in Tamil Nadu first erupted in 1937, and there was a wave of protests whenever Hindi was officially promoted in the years that followed. As Della Porta mentioned that “protest shocks then reverberate in a number of cognate events that often reproduce the model of the first one (Della Porta 562).” The issue of language in Madras is closely linked to identity politics. The half-century-long aftermath (protests) may further exacerbate related issues.

Additionally, it is a highly controversial event that “Researchers have therefore reflected on protests as momentous events, in particular by looking at contentious politics as triggering an intensification of the perception of time (Della Porta 559).”

2.2. The role of memorials

A significant number of people have perished as a result of the more than 50 years fight against the imposition of Hindi in Tamil states, which has gone much beyond a slogan. Modi government is aggressively promoting Hindi, despite it is clear that there is opposition to Hindi in the southern Indian provinces. It indicated that the urgent necessity for India, a linguistically diverse nation, to resolve linguistic disputes. Judy and Victoria pointed that, “Memorialization [...] becomes a means of examining the past. In this process, the past can be reinterpreted to address a wide range of political or social needs [...] (4).” It might be possible to effectively diffuse this strong linguistic sentiment in this situation by including this case or several other cases of Hindi imposition movements into the memorial to address relevant problem.

3. Analysis

3.1. As a symbolic episode in a series of conflicts

When violent anti-Hindi-imposed protests broke out in Tamil State in 1965, only two

years had passed since the government's last compromise. During British India, Hindi was given a sense of national independence and unity against British colonization. However, under the "divide and rule" strategy of the British governors, Hindi became an identity marker and gradually became associated with the Hindu identity.

It is worth noting that government efforts to make Hindi mandatory in schools were what initially ignited the anti-Hindi imposition protests in Madras. "These initiatives were seen as an effort to oppress the Dravidian identity by imposing the Aryan language (316)", Amit argued in his article. Since in South India, particularly in Madras, the province is primarily influenced by the Dravidian race rather than Brahminism, which is dominated by Aryans. Moreover, keeping the usage of English means that there will be more Tamil citizens who can serve in government owing to the improved degree of English education and economic development. The obstacle for them would be having to give up English then acquire the new language, Hindi.

The coming of the English expiration date set out in the Constitution has significantly intensified the strain on the South. Indeed, the anti-Hindi imposition protests of 1965 may have triggered a critical juncture that was both contingent and established.

"In Madurai, as across the state of Madras, students started preparing for the protests [...] a large group of students took out a procession towards Thilagar *thidal*, where they planned to burn Part XVII of the Indian Constitution which contained the provisions and articles associated with Hindi becoming the sole official language (Sriram 134)."

As Collier and Munck (4) synthesized, "Some scholars view the uncertainty of outcomes and substantial degrees of freedom in actor choices as a defining feature of critical junctures (Della Porta 563)." The accidental is that no one foresaw the scale and subsequent development of the conflict. It was established that the South Indian people had been on the verge of exploding with long-standing vendetta, which could translate into direct action with the support of the Dravidian parties.

According to Kenneth Roberts has characterized critical junctures as periods

of “crisis or strain that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve (65).” The government was indeed unprepared for an agitation of this scale, which eventually evolved into protests against the Congress Party. Two years later, the local party Dravidian Progressive Federation (DMK) defeated the Tamilnad Congress Party for the first time in 1967 elections, and it also advocated for the 1967 language amendment to “virtual indefinite policy of bilingualism (Chandra 96).”

3.2. Memorials might be one of the solutions in conflict

The uprising lasted more than five months, in which countless people were killed and injured, radicals set themselves on fire, students were shot and died, strikes and so on. This violent protest, resulting in too much bloodshed and caused numerous financial losses, which has also left a lasting impression on the hearts of those who witnessed and suffered it.

Sriram interviewed with a Tamil writer E. Ra. Murugan Ramaswamy, who was a 12-year-old student at the time of the riots (141). He gave a very vivid narrative of his own involvement in the burning of Hindi texts, his wrath at the shooting of fellow student by the police, and his hatred of the agitation’s handling by Bhaktavatsalam, the Chief Minister of Madras at that time, etc (141-142). Sriram believed that “Ramaswamy’s words illustrated, for me, the nature of children’s memories, the deep imprints that incidents of violence and forcefulness leave on them and how the residue of the resentment remains within their system for years (141).” Similarly, Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxte mentioned that “remembering is a basic human instinct, and memory cannot be imprisoned—it will usually come out in one form or another. The challenge is to find ways to harness memory to learn lessons from the past in an effort to avoid repeating it (4).”

In this context, the intervention of commemorative activities or the building of monuments may be able to dispel the suppressed public emotions to a certain extent. For instance, the report referred “connecting memorialization to other transitional justice initiatives” might be useful to this linguistic conflict (Judy and

Victoria 9). Because the anti-Hindi imposition conflict involved multiple constitutional and language act amendments. It means that help “the public to better understand aspects of the conflict that were previously hidden or repressed” by documentary evidences like relevant Constitutional files, posters, oral histories in that time and truth-telling (9-10).

With the flow of time, a lot of memories have been vague. This method of remembrance calls for an immediate resolution of the language issue at the national level and may also act as a wake-up call to the general public to get involved in discovering a way out.

4. Discussion

During the protests, radical students and people, motivated by the DMK, proposed to change 26th, January Republic Day into a “day of mourning” as a way to protest the expiration of the English constitutional protection. Duncan B argued that “The tragedy of the Madras agitation [...] the outbreak of violent protest is a sign that communication has broken down (28).” The riots were mostly launched by the DMK, although there are signs that they were also alarmed about the uncontrollable developments that proceeded. To some extent, they miscalculated the level of the wrath from students. What we mentioned above is about the unexpected extent and backlash of this protest.

Furthermore, the consequences of this case are not “government concessions-protests stop” as it was before. To begin with, the neighboring states of Andhra Pradesh, Mysore, and Kerala were significantly impacted by this agitation in Tamil Nadu. Also, some student representatives from Tamil Nadu formed an anti-Hindi agitation council after the unrest and “called upon students to campaign against Congress in the 1967 General Elections.” In this way, “the agitation has certainly alienated a considerable section of the student population from the Congress Party [...] the position of Congress in Madras State is not now as secure as once it was (Duncan B 35).”

5. Conclusion

The primary focus of this paper is on the characteristics and potential solution of the Madras State anti-Hindi imposition movement of 1965. As an essential component of the whole Tamil Nadu anti-Hindi imposition struggle, it is viewed as a vibrating event interwoven by contingency and inevitability. The subsequent waves eventually contributed to the DMK party (the backbone of the opposition to Hindi) defeating the Congress party in the 1967 elections and holding actual political power. After that, "The Congress was routed and has since remained a marginal force in Tamilnadu politics, without managing to capture power at the state level even once (Sriram 136)." Moreover, "The agitations also resulted in the passage of Official Languages Act of 1963 and its amendment in 1967, thereby solidifying the use of English as an official language (Sriram 137)."

Besides, it further presented a suggestion that a commemoration connected to other transitional justice initiatives help to gradually dissolve such an overwhelming and unexpected language emotions. However, Duncan B argued that "the Madras agitation is over, but not forgotten. But the language crisis of which it was one expression remains a chronic affliction of Indian politics (36)."

6. List of references

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