

One State, One People, Two Languages? Telugu, Urdu, and the Shift in Border Politics in India

Sandhya Kritika Narayanan
University of Michigan

1. Introduction

With the ratification of the Linguistic Reorganization Act of 1956, Telugu speaking regions of the Princely State of Hyderabad were merged with the recently created Telugu state of Andhra Pradesh. Since 1956, pro-Telangana activists and politicians who hail from the former Princely State of Hyderabad have fought to dissolve the merger that united all “Telugu” speaking regions and peoples into one state. Sixty years later, this merger was finally dissolved, with the creation of Telangana as the 29th state of India on June 2nd, 2014. Months leading to the officialization of Telangana filled blogs, social media, and news journals with details of the planning processes and debates to make the dream of an autonomous “Telangana” a reality. Language became one of the main hot button issues, resulting in many debates concerning how many languages and which languages would become the official languages of the new state.

In the end, it was decided that Telangana would have two official languages- Telugu and Urdu. Unlike other states, Telangana’s bilingual status promotes the equal recognition of Telugu and Urdu. Both languages are expected to be used in all state run governmental, institutional, and educational settings, which not only reflects an assumption of the pervasive bilingualism of many Telanganites, but also the official institutionalization of stable bilingualism between these two languages through educating future generations of Telanganites.

Telangana’s language policies at the official discursive level represents a shift away from the “one state, one language” policy that has governed the drawing of geopolitical borders in India since the 1956 Linguistic Reorganization Act. However, the officialization of two languages raises important question about the role of ideologies of linguistic nationalism and linguistic modernity. How are both languages seen to legitimize the autonomy of a new state in India, especially when the prevailing linguistic ideology within Indian nationalist discourse (at the level of the entire nation and at the individual level of different states) has been based on German Romantic philosophies and ideologies of “one nation, one people, one language”? How are speakers imagined to use both languages equally? And what is the linguistic and social relationship between Telugu and Urdu in Telangana that allows for the legitimation of a new border among the two “Telugu speaking” states?

This paper will present a preliminary analysis of the language ideologies present in discourses arguing for the need of an autonomous Telangana state for “Telanganites”. In presenting this analysis of social media and forums associated with news articles on the subject, I will conclude by questioning the theoretical emphasis on analyzing language ideologies of monolingual standards in modern nation-state building processes. Instead, I argue that the Telangana- a state where two languages are supposedly used equally- is a clear case against current approaches that analyze linguistic nationalisms through the monolingual nation-state paradigm.

2. Why only one language when you can have more?

The dual language policy of Telangana follows a long history of single language nationalist ideology that has dominated Indian politics for the past century. In many ways, one could argue that the preference of an ideology of “one language, one people, one state” itself is a consequence of India being a post-colonial state. The ideology traces back to the writings of Fichte and Herder in the late 18th century and early 19th century (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). Herder wrote that the essence of a people, the *volk* was their culture and language. Fichte makes a stronger (and more political assertion) and states that the unifying essence of a people lies in their language. A single language, therefore is necessary in order to define the spirit of a nation and unify all citizens under one common political identity. Although both philosophers were writing just as nationalist movements were gaining momentum in German speaking states at the end of the 18th century, the writings of both philosophers eventually formed the linguistic ideological core of nationalist and modernist projects (Errington, 2008; Silverstein, 2000).

The birth and development of ideologies of monolingual modern nation-states also coincided with projects of imperialism and empire building (Fabian, 1986; Pennycook, 1998; Viswanathan, 1989). Back in Europe, imperial nations were busy with projects of language standardization to create a standard monolingual national language. But in the colonies, these same powers were confronted with the challenge of dealing peoples who were highly multilingual but did not have a clear sense of defining themselves in terms of discrete ethnolinguistic groups (Irvine, 1993, 2008; Pugach, 2011). The Indian subcontinent was no exception; not only were subjects of the various Princely States and Kingdoms highly multilingual, they also engaged in varying practices of using different codes or linguistic mediums for different activities, an ideologized and heavily regimented practice in and of itself (King, 1994; Trautmann, 1997, 2006).

As the independence movement began to build in the early 20th century, ideologies of language use and linguistic identity also began to change. Most independence leaders at the time were fully aware of the multilingualism that was present in India (Sarangi, 2009). However, for the sake of creating a strong, viable, independent, and modern India, key independence leaders like Nehru and Gandhi advocated for the implementation of a single national standard language for the new nation-state (Brass, 2009; Chatterjee, 1993; Ramaswamy, 2009). Despite the fact that several of these leaders themselves were multilingual, many felt that the only way to truly unify a highly diverse India was through a single national language. But in expressing these sentiments, independence leaders had taken on the very ideology of a monolingual nationalism and unity that was also shared by European colonial powers.

Post-independence, the intensity of linguistic nationalist movements increased all over India in response to attempts of the national government to make Hindi the only official language of the Indian nation. Under this policy, Hindi would eventually become of the only language of everyday use in every region of India. This would be achieved through various educational programs and other institutional measures that would have

eventually phased out the learning and maintenance of other vernaculars in favor of Hindi. Some of the strongest opposition from this plan came from Tamil and Telugu language revivalists and nationalists in the Madras Presidency in the south (Mitchell, 2009; Ramaswamy, 1997). Revitalization and nationalist fervor among Telugu nationalists in particular reached a climax in 1954 when Telugu language leader and activist, Potti Sriramulu, fasted until his death, sparking violent riots and protests all through the Madras Presidency. To quell the violence, Nehru fulfilled Srimaalu's only request, to create a state that would be a home for all Telugu speakers, Andhra Pradesh.

1954 marked the creation of the first state within India based on the premise of linguistic and cultural unity and homogeneity. The event quickly snowballed as other linguistic nationalist movements for state level linguistic and cultural autonomy began to gain speed. By 1956, Nehru signed the Linguistic Reorganization Act of 1956, which set the standard that new states in India can be granted statehood and linguistic, cultural, and political unity based on a shared language. Over the past 60 years, India's linguistic politics has been dominated by carving up the subcontinent into states with their own official language and degrees of autonomy, making the modern nation-state look like a confederation of independent and linguistically diverse countries (Schwartzberg, 2009).

3. A tale of two languages in the history of Telangana

The presence and justification for promoting the centrality of Urdu can be traced to Telangana's long history as a major part of the Princely State of Hyderabad prior to its incorporation into Andhra Pradesh. Like many areas in the subcontinent during the colonial period, the Princely State was multilingual, being a home to speakers of varieties of what are labeled as Kannada, Marathi, and Telugu. Included in this multilingual milieu as well was the frequent use of Persian and Urdu among elites and government representatives (Katten, 2005).

After the incorporation of Telangana in Andhra Pradesh in 1956, the official status that Urdu occupied within the multilingual Hyderabad was reduced to make room for a Telugu only speaking state. This however did not completely erase the presence of Urdu from the linguistic practices of residents of Hyderabad or those in the Telangana region. Years of multilingual contact in the region resulted in a population of stable Telugu-Urdu bilinguals and the creation of an Urdu inflected Telugu that marked Hyderabad's and "Telanganites" as linguistically and morally inferior to high prestige varieties of Telugu, spoken predominantly in the southern regions of Andhra Pradesh. This variety of Telugu received many names, and was popularly labeled as "Thourakyandhram" or "Thurak Telugu" both meaning "Muslim Telugu" due to the large amounts of Urdu influenced borrowed words in the lexicon. More commonly however, "Thourakyandhram" is labeled as "Telugu slang" or "Hyderabad slang" in everyday conversation. Reference to this variety as slang, especially by those who command the prestigious varieties of Telugu including its standard, sometimes do not even consider these lowly varieties real Telugu. As one Telugu acquaintance of mine commented, "The Telugu today in Hyderabad is horrible. People are not speaking real Telugu at all; they just keep mixing it with Urdu."

These labels and metapragmatic evaluative statements reflect the long-standing devaluation of a variety that shared contact with a language that was formerly of high prestige. Blogs focusing on the importance of their Telangana variety comment on years of discrimination experienced from teachers and friends who commanded the high prestige standards. Speaking "bad Telugu" that was inflected with Urdu pronunciations and Urdu words became a shibboleth of being a lesser version of a standard Telugu speaker, and

became an index of being backwards, unmodern, and generally speaking, unfashionable in the many meanings of the word, as reflected in the following blog comments:

*“I have always found my Andhra friends, expressing their surprise at everything, connected with my Telangana identity. I might have belonged to another planet, for all they, know. I do not know whether it is really, because they are ignorant or they are trying to be plain, sarcastic.
Their questions are unending and so are their self-perpetuated myths.
The myths will go as follows, that-*

- 1. Telangana people’s language is labour class, and is unmentionable and unpardonable*
- 2. Telangana people are always drunk, and that is why, they ‘stay poor’.*
- 3. Telangana people are not educated, that is why, they are not eligible for jobs.*
- 4. Telangana people are lazy, that is why, they are unemployable.*
- 5. Telangana people will never study, that is why, they do not need educational institutions*
- 6. Telangana do not know how to cultivate crops, that is why, there is no agriculture.*
- 7. Telangana people are naive, so they follow KCR’s words blindly.*
- 8. Telangana people cannot read or write English, so the newspapers can write any nonsense and get away with it.”*

According to several blogs and social media forums, the deviation of the Telangana dialect from Standard Telugu was so extensive that it was prohibited from being used in the media and other public venues. If it was to be used in movies or television, it always became the language of the villain or joker as one blogger commented. Both of these character stereotypes fall within prevailing discourse of the Telangana dialect, namely that Telangana speakers and those who hail from the region in general are backwards, unmodern, and morally inferior to those who speak the pure Telugu of the southern regions of Andhra Pradesh.

Incorporation according to the laws of the 1956 Linguistic Reorganization Act precipitated an ideological fall of the prestige of Urdu from everyday life within Andhra Pradesh. As linguistic nationalism projects began to gain momentum within Andhra Pradesh, long standing ideologies of language that favored multilingualism and linguistic plurality were soon dominated by ideologies of linguistic purism. This ideological turn motivated linguistic standardization and purification projects which were aimed to create a perfect and pure Telugu variety that was rid of any trace or evidence of change or corruption that would have come from long histories of language contact and multilingualism. The Telangana variety containing a large Urdu vocabulary deviated greatly from the ideologized perfection and purity of standard Telugu, making it possible to indexically link the devaluation of the linguistic variety based on its imperfections with the devaluation of its speakers (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

4. It’s Telangana, Not Telugu!

Telangana today is home to two languages, Telugu and Urdu. Both of these names label ideologized bounded linguistic entities that have social purchase and recognition among linguists, anthropologists, and bureaucrats alike. But the use of these two linguistic labels among proud Telanganites elicit different ideologized statements

about the use and affiliation with either term. Many online blogs and Facebook posts admitted positive associations with Urdu; Urdu was after all the language of a more glorious and golden past linked with the Hyderabad Princely State. Urdu's use among Telanganites linked speakers with a grand literary and poetic tradition that elevated the status of the region and the recently nascent independent state. Similar proud associations are seen with recent songs written in Urdu singing the glory of an independent Telangana.

Affiliation with Telugu on the other hand resulted in statements of scorn towards the language and its speakers. In one opinion article that came out on "Mother Language Day", aptly named "*My mother language is Telangana, and not Andhra Telugu!*" the author describes her pride and adherence to Telangana as her mother tongue:

*"My parents were, hardly educated; they were self taught people, but they had so much of wisdom in bringing up their children and on the contrary, it was me, who as a child, and as, a first generation learner, tried to camouflage my dialect, to please all my Andhra friends and neighbours. Many of us, city bred Telangana people, might have done the same thing, but in the end our identity came calling on us and we managed to shed, this stifling, artificial cover, with which, we had enveloped ourselves for so long, to come out rejuvenated and with a renewed resolve, to fight, for the preservation of our identity, as Telangana people. Yes, my mother language is Telangana and not some borrowed, Andhra Telugu. I cannot help it, if our Andhra friends continue to transgress into another world, where these self perpetuated myths, might be of some consolation to them – when they face us.
Jai Telangana!"*

"Telugu" as a linguistic label itself evokes sentiments of discrimination and devaluation from many writers and bloggers who participate in these public online forums and social media sites. In line with feelings of discrimination are patterns of linguistic shift, where adults remember never learning their "mother language" or trying to cover up for their linguistic deficiencies by asking family members and close kin to also change their language as another blogger below notes:

"When I was a kid in school I used to ask my mom to change her language (she is from manukota(Mahbubabad). Now I am proud of my language"

Those who never learned the Telangana of their parents in their blogs and online posts express feelings of guilt, shame, pain and loss. Not being able to learn the language of one's ancestors takes on trope of linguistic death and shift, where individuals comment on the disconnect and hurt that came from not being able to speak or communicate with grandparents and elderly relatives.

Generational shifts in the learning, acquisition, and promotion of Telangana resulted in many projects to elevate the former "dialect of Telugu" into its own language. Some of these projects of linguistic boundary reinforcement can be seen in self-initiated efforts by proud Telangana speakers such as the creation of a Facebook page entitled "Telangana words and culture". As a public group, the page lists two informative descriptions in their group information section:

"Short Description: This is a page created with the intention of bringing back the glory of Telangana culture and language. For decades Telangana language has been treated as coarse language in movies, media and everywhere. Let's take pride in speaking our "language of people"

Long Description: Motive of this page is to remind the youth of the Telangana about some of the words that our parents and forefathers have been using. So please post Telangana words "with usage" if possible explain with photos and stuff. And unfortunately we have been ruled by monarchs and not made to innovate and start new businesses. So share your ideas for the development of our region's economy and hopefully you will find business partners here."

Despite the visionary call for linguistic and economic development, the Facebook page remained as a dictionary of sorts, listing vocabulary particular to Telangana, while also providing a space for members to ask each other with help to perfect their Telangana.

Other language boundary making projects took more institutional forms involving the efforts of politicians, linguistics, and educators. In the year leading up to the officialization of the state of Telangana, linguists met at the local university in Hyderabad to discuss changes to the current Telugu script to represent the linguistic needs of Telangana. These linguists decided that Telangana (or Telugu slang as it was reported in the article), did not need as many letters as were present in the current Standard Telugu syllabary (Rao, 2014). Reducing the number of letters therefore was one way to create a unique and bounded Telangana syllabary. Another article described how the Telangana government would sponsor the creation of a new set of social science and history textbooks written in the Telangana language, with many publishing literature and poetry in Telangana written by famous Telangana authors (Sreenivas, 2014). With these two literacy and language standardization projects, educational officials, linguists, and politicians hope that by creating a new generation that is literate in Telangana, the boundary between the two languages will be reinforced and ultimately strengthen claims for independence.

Although these efforts anticipate a future when Telangana will indeed be different than Andhra Telugu, they do not dismiss the centrality of Urdu in making and legitimizing a Telugu that Telanganites are proud to speak. The indivisibility between Telangana as the language and state from Urdu could be most strongly seen from conversations that ensured Urdu would be a second and equal language in the formation of a new Telangana. The most vocal proponents for a bilingual Telangana were mostly Muslim activist groups, many of whom were also key social actors in revitalizing the movement for an autonomous Telangana. Leading Muslim political organizations such as the Muslim Forum for Telangana (MFT) and Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) were vocal about the oppression of the Telangana language, and advocated for the need to make Urdu an official language of the future Telangana. During an MFT meeting in 2009, one MFT official stated,

"Urdu was the official language for 224 years i.e. from 1724 to 1948 under the Nizam (Princely State of Hyderabad) rule. After that Urdu is mixed in the Telangana language as pearls in a string"

Such a statement of the importance of Urdu in Telangana language and culture is striking given the metaphorical use of pearls. Hyderabad has always been famous for its pearls. Despite its landlocked position, Hyderabad pearls are known throughout the subcontinent and the world, attributing special processing methods to artisans and jewelers in Hyderabad. The metaphorical comparison to Hyderabad pearls also makes the Telangana language something that is brightened and made more precious with the mixture of Urdu. Like the indexical value attached to pearls, it is noble, exquisite, and native to the land; things that all Telanganites should be proud of.

5. Welcoming multilingualism and mixing in ideologies of linguistic nationalism

Telanganites are proud of both their languages. Although the second language may be called “Telugu” for now, Telanganites envision that this linguistic affiliation with the official language of the Andhra state will not be necessary in the future. The officialization of Urdu, along with the ideological promotion of the local dialect into an official and authoritative language will restore Telanganites linguistic and cultural past to the glory and illustrious position it previously had. Telangana will be recognized as a uniquely distinct language, severing its connections with Telugu just like Telangana the nation severed its political incorporation with Andhra Pradesh. And the institutionalization of a Telangana language along with compulsory education with Urdu will ensure a future where Telangana is not only spoken, but shares its position equally with Urdu. Unlike the relationship between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Telangana and Urdu was, still is, and forever will be a match made in heaven, remain as equal partners in the enterprise of legitimizing the linguistic borders between Telugu and Telangana, and the geopolitical border between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Inherent to this welcomed view of bilingualism is an understanding that a national standard, the linguistic icon of the nation and its people can be mixed. Both sides for and against the autonomy for an independent Telangana all recognized how this code itself is a hybridity of sorts between Urdu and Telugu. Portrayals can range from the metaphorical comparisons of the dialect with high quality pearls, to the more abominable and lowly depictions such as:

“Assalu ee telangana culture ante yemiti?? Nizam gaadi paalanalo, Urdhu chetha telugu ni rape chesthe vacchindhe telangana baaasha, anthena?? (Actually what is Telangana Culture? Under Nizam’s rule, when Telugu was raped by Urdu what we got is Telangana language, is it not?)”

From the purity of pearls to the violative and violent nature of rape, Telangana linguistically and culturally is characterized by hybridity and mixture. And while anti-Telanganites may disregard, devalue, dismiss, or find threatening the hybridity that is present in the Telangana language and culture, the potential for mixture and the welcoming of plurality, multilingualism, and multiculturalism is welcomed by Telanganites as making them different, unique, and unmistakably non-Andhra.

No place is more open for plurality than the cultural and political capital of Telangana, Hyderabad. Following in the same blog, the author continues to comment on this plurality saying:

“Sometimes I don’t even understand why you like Hyderabad. It has its own cosmopolitan culture into which you don’t fit into at all. You are fairly homogenous group and have absolutely no cosmopolitan character. All cosmopolitan cities inherit influences from various regions, various religions, and various languages, whereas you try to keep your language and culture pure protecting it from all outside influences. How does that make it cosmopolitan?”

In Hyderabad, we speak differently. We use the words like ‘Jaldi raa’ easily mixing Urdu and Telugu whenever we feel like. We take pride in such mixing. We are not ashamed of it. You find yourself strangers in this city and in this region when you try stick to your purist theories...

... We don’t want to overthrow the legacy of Nizam or the influence of Urdu on our language. We are quite happy with our language the way it is.

We play Holi and fly kites, we have our distinct ways of celebrating our festivals which are quite secular in nature. We have peerilu where both Hindus and Muslims participate in a joint celebration. The reason why Hyderabad has become famous and developed is mostly because of its openness in embracing all cultures and languages. It has embraced you as well without putting up a fight. However, your attempts to make it purely Telugu city are now rejected. Your attempts to monopolize it for only Telugu people are now rejected.”

The author here valorizes the lack of ideologized cultural, linguistic, and religious purity that is at heart of Andhra Pradesh nationalism. Furthermore, Telangana is cosmopolitan, which indexes a modern sensibility that is always present in the lifestyles and outlook of all Telanganites. Plurality is what makes Hyderabad special, which by proxy makes Telangana special and different than its Telugu only policy and hegemony. But even more important, openness in embracing and including “all cultures and languages” without having the need to linguistically or culturally define an official homogenous linguistic and cultural status for Telangana shows that Telangana is not living in the past, when ideologies of a pure, monolingual standard was central to linguistic nationalism in India.

More broadly however, the scalar cosmopolitanism that is represented through the official and equal status of Urdu and Telugu in Telangana shows a break from German Romantic ideologies of linguistic nationalism that dominated Indian politics since the turn of the 20th century. India’s geopolitical boundaries have been ideologized where for every discrete, bounded, and pure linguistic standard there exists an equally discrete, bounded, and homogenous group of speakers. This ideologized relationship is present in the Linguistic Organization Act of 1956, and has contributed to regional differences within the nation.

The equal balance between Urdu and Telugu departs greatly from this ideology, marking a shift in ideas about multilingualism, political autonomy, and the linguistic and cultural composition of a state’s citizens. Telangana is not a monolingual state, but a bilingual state. Equal status between Urdu and Telugu is represented at various societal levels, such as the presence of Urdu in the Telangana- Telugu dialect, to the cultural milieu where foods associated with the Islamic culinary traditions are hallmarks of the Hyderabad food scene. Furthermore, the equal presence between both languages erases the regional divide between north and south, and Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. Even though Telangana separated from a southern, Dravidian state, its patriots and advocates are not positioning themselves as exclusively northern nor southern, Aryan nor Dravidian.

6. Conclusions

Telangana is not the only state or even modern day nation with a bilingual or multilingual policy. Many countries on the African continent (Blommaert, 2014; Spitulnik, 1996), Switzerland, and even bilingual Paraguay (Hobsbawm, 1990; Rubin, 1968) which gives official recognition to both Spanish and Guarani are all cases where modern-day nation states do sanction and legitimize the presence of two or more languages. But within the history of a modern, independent India, Telangana’s self-promotion as a bilingual state departs from what has been the dominant linguistic ideological position for the making of a strong and incontestably autonomous nation or state. Although nationally India recognizes all of its regional languages, to this day the main official language of government the nation state remains Hindi; artifactual evidence that the “Hindi-only” linguistic status of the nation still exists in some form. The hegemonic, unmarked dominance of Hindi is still an issue within the subcontinent, and provides an opportunity

for discrimination or exclusion for those who do not have fluency or linguistic competency in the language. Therefore, despite the institutional legitimization of multiple languages, can we still see undercurrents of an ideology that prefers the use of one linguistic standard for all of its citizens over the others?

Further research into these cases is needed to see the degree to which a preferential ideology of one language over two or many is deeply entrenched in the linguistic practices of citizens and the policies and projects of governments and other institutions. In an effort to avoid over romanticization of multilingualism, these multilingual contexts need to be inspected more seriously and critically to see the ways that the existence of pervasive multilingualism is or is not undermined by the actual linguistic practices that citizens and institutions engage in.

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Sandhya K. Narayanan
 Department of Anthropology
 University of Michigan
 Ann Arbor, Michigan
 sandkn@umich.edu