



Language, Identity, and Social Cohesion in Multilingual India

Rinu Pauly

Assistant professor, Department of English, Don Bosco college, Thrissur, India.

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationship between language, identity formation, and social cohesion in the multilingual landscape of contemporary India. Drawing upon sociolinguistic theory, postcolonial criticism, and literary analysis, the study investigates how linguistic practices shape communal identities, mediate social hierarchies, and influence literary representations of belonging and exclusion. The paper argues that language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a transformative agent in constructing social realities, negotiating displacement, and articulating caste-based and regional identities in Indian fiction and public discourse. By synthesizing perspectives from sociolinguistics and contemporary Indian English literature, this study contributes to an integrated understanding of language as a site of social negotiation in a postcolonial, multilingual democracy.

Keywords:- Multilingualism, Identity, Social Cohesion, Indian English Literature, Sociolinguistics, Postcolonial Discourse

Introduction

India's linguistic diversity, encompassing over 19,500 languages and dialects according to the 2011 Census, presents both a remarkable cultural asset and a persistent challenge for national cohesion. The relationship between language and identity in the Indian context is shaped by colonial histories, constitutional provisions, regional politics, and the everyday negotiations of multilingual citizens. As the nation navigates the complexities of globalization, digital communication, and rising assertions of subnational identity, the question of how language mediates social reality assumes renewed urgency.

Scholars across disciplines have recognized that language is far more than a neutral medium of communication. It is, as Georgekutty argues, a "transformative power" that actively shapes "human interaction and community formation" (Georgekutty 3). This insight is particularly salient in the Indian context, where linguistic choices carry implications for caste identity, regional belonging, religious affiliation, and class status. The present study seeks to examine these dynamics through a dual lens: sociolinguistic theory, which illuminates the

structural and functional dimensions of multilingualism, and literary criticism, which reveals how writers represent and interrogate the politics of language.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section reviews the theoretical foundations linking language to identity and social cohesion. The second section examines multilingualism as a lived reality in India, focusing on code-switching, linguistic hierarchies, and the politics of language policy. The third section turns to contemporary Indian English literature to analyze how novelists engage with themes of displacement, caste, and linguistic identity. The concluding section synthesizes these threads and proposes directions for future research.

Theoretical Foundations: Language, Identity, and Social Reality

The relationship between language and identity has been a central concern of sociolinguistics since the foundational work of Labov, Fishman, and Gumperz. Labov's studies of linguistic variation in New York City demonstrated that phonological variables serve as markers of social class, while Fishman's concept of language loyalty illuminated the emotional and political investments communities make in their linguistic heritage (Fishman 44). Gumperz's work on conversational code-switching revealed how bilingual speakers strategically deploy different languages to signal solidarity, authority, or distance in social interactions (Gumperz 68).

More recently, the constructionist turn in sociolinguistics, influenced by the work of Bucholtz and Hall, has emphasized that identity is not a fixed attribute reflected by language but is actively constructed through linguistic practices (Bucholtz and Hall 586). This perspective resonates with poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, particularly those of Bhabha, who argues that identity is always in process, formed at the interstices of cultural difference and colonial legacy (Bhabha 2). In the Indian context, this means that language use is simultaneously an act of self-identification and a negotiation with structures of power including caste, class, religion, and region.

Georgekutty's examination of "linguistic mediation of social reality" provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. Georgekutty contends that language is not merely reflective of pre-existing social relations but is constitutive of them, arguing that "the transformative power of language" lies in its capacity to create, sustain, and alter patterns of human interaction and community formation (Georgekutty 2). This perspective informs the present study's approach to both sociolinguistic practices and literary representations of language in India.

Multilingualism as Lived Reality in Contemporary India

India's linguistic landscape is characterized by a complex ecology of languages that exist in hierarchical and often contested relationships. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognizes 22 official languages, yet the lived reality of multilingualism extends far beyond this formal framework. In urban centres such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru, residents routinely navigate three or more languages in their daily interactions, moving between English in professional contexts, Hindi or a regional language in domestic settings, and local vernaculars in neighbourhood exchanges (Mohanty 267).

This multilingual competence is not, however, distributed equally across the population. As Ramanathan has documented, access to English-medium education remains stratified by class and caste, creating what she terms a "linguistic divide" that maps onto and reinforces existing social inequalities (Ramanathan 89). The hierarchical positioning of English at the apex of India's linguistic order, followed by Hindi, regional languages, and tribal or minority languages at the bottom, reproduces colonial-era valuations of linguistic capital.

The politics of language policy in India, from the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s to the contemporary debates over the National Education Policy 2020, reveal the high stakes of

linguistic choices for social cohesion. Language policy is never merely administrative; it is, as Ricento observes, an exercise in the distribution of power and the construction of national identity (Ricento 12). In India, the question of which languages are taught, used in governance, and recognized in public life is inseparable from questions of which communities are included in or excluded from the national imaginary.

Code-switching practices among multilingual Indians offer a micro-level illustration of these macro-level dynamics. Sociolinguistic studies of Hindi-English code-switching in Indian media, education, and everyday conversation have shown that the strategic use of English serves to index modernity, cosmopolitanism, and upward mobility, while the use of vernacular languages signals authenticity, regional solidarity, and cultural rootedness (Kothari 156). These practices demonstrate that language choice in India is always a social act, a performance of identity that positions the speaker within multiple, overlapping systems of meaning.

Literary Representations: Displacement, Caste, and Linguistic Identity

Contemporary Indian English literature provides a rich archive for examining the intersections of language, identity, and social cohesion. Indian novelists writing in English occupy a distinctive position: they use the language of the former colonizer to narrate the experiences of a postcolonial nation, and in doing so, they inevitably confront the politics of linguistic choice. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Meena Kandasamy have made language itself a subject of their fiction, exploring how linguistic practices shape experiences of displacement, caste oppression, and communal belonging.

Amitav Ghosh's novels offer particularly compelling explorations of the relationship between language, migration, and identity. As Claris Annie John and Shepherd observe in their study of displacement in Ghosh's works, his fiction "maps the cartographies of exile" by tracing how displaced communities maintain, lose, and recreate linguistic and cultural identities across geographic boundaries (Claris Annie John and Shepherd 43). In *The Hungry Tide*, for instance, Ghosh juxtaposes Bengali, Hindi, English, and the creolized language of the Sundarbans settlers to reveal how linguistic plurality both sustains community and generates misunderstanding. The character of Piya, an American cetologist of Bengali origin who cannot speak Bengali, embodies the painful disjuncture between ethnic identity and linguistic competence that characterizes many diasporic subjects.

Ghosh's *Gun Island* extends this exploration to the context of climate migration, linking the displacement of Bangladeshi refugees in Italy to historical patterns of movement across the Indian Ocean world. The novel's multilingual texture, incorporating Bengali, Italian, and English, underscores Ghosh's conviction that linguistic diversity is inseparable from the experience of migration and that the loss of language is a form of displacement in itself. John and Shepherd's reading of Ghosh's "cartographies of exile" illuminates how his fiction challenges monolingual narratives of national belonging and proposes instead a vision of identity as constitutively multilingual and transnational (Claris Annie John and Shepherd 46).

The representation of caste in contemporary Indian fiction raises equally urgent questions about language and social identity. As Rautela argues, "the politics of representation" in caste-focused fiction involves not only the content of narratives but also the linguistic and formal choices through which caste experience is articulated (Rautela 57). Writers from Dalit communities, including Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, and Meena Kandasamy, have drawn attention to the ways in which dominant-caste literary conventions, including the privileging of Sanskritic vocabulary and classical literary forms, have historically excluded Dalit voices and experiences from the Indian literary canon.

Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, a novel based on the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit agricultural workers in Tamil Nadu, deploys a deliberately fragmented, polyphonic narrative form that challenges the smooth, omniscient voice of traditional realist fiction. By

incorporating multiple registers of Tamil and English, oral testimony, legal documents, and authorial commentary, Kandasamy's novel insists that the representation of caste violence requires a disruption of conventional linguistic and narrative forms. Rautela's observation that caste representation in contemporary Indian fiction is inseparable from "the politics of language and literary form" is powerfully confirmed by Kandasamy's formal innovations (Rautela 60).

Language and Social Cohesion: Challenges and Possibilities

The foregoing analysis suggests that the relationship between language and social cohesion in India is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, linguistic diversity is a source of cultural richness and a foundation for democratic pluralism. The Indian Constitution's recognition of multiple official languages, its protection of minority language rights under Article 29, and its provision for mother-tongue education under Article 350A reflect a constitutional commitment to linguistic pluralism as a precondition for social cohesion in a diverse democracy.

On the other hand, linguistic hierarchies, unequal access to dominant languages, and the stigmatization of minority and tribal languages continue to generate exclusion and resentment. The ongoing dominance of English in higher education, the judiciary, and corporate employment creates barriers for speakers of vernacular languages, while the promotion of Hindi as a national link language alienates speakers of Dravidian and northeastern languages. These tensions are not merely linguistic; they are, as Georgekutty's framework suggests, manifestations of deeper struggles over social reality, power, and belonging (Georgekutty 5).

Literary engagements with these tensions offer both diagnosis and possibility. By narrating the experiences of displaced, marginalized, and multilingual subjects, writers like Ghosh and Kandasamy make visible the linguistic dimensions of social inequality and challenge readers to imagine more inclusive forms of belonging. Their works suggest that social cohesion in a multilingual society depends not on the imposition of a single national language but on the cultivation of what Canagarajah terms "translingual practice": the ability to negotiate across linguistic differences with creativity, empathy, and mutual respect (Canagarajah 6).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that language is a central site for the construction and contestation of identity and social cohesion in multilingual India. Drawing upon sociolinguistic theory and literary analysis, the study has demonstrated that linguistic practices, from code-switching in everyday conversation to the formal innovations of contemporary fiction, are not merely reflections of pre-existing social realities but are active forces in shaping those realities. The transformative power of language, as theorized by Georgekutty, the cartographies of linguistic exile mapped by John and Shepherd in their reading of Ghosh, and the politics of caste representation analyzed by Rautela all point to the same conclusion: in India, language is never neutral, and the choices individuals and communities make about language are always choices about identity, belonging, and power.

Future research in this area would benefit from greater attention to the linguistic practices of India's tribal and Adivasi communities, whose languages face existential threats from deforestation, displacement, and the expansion of dominant languages. The intersection of digital technology and multilingualism, including the rise of vernacular-language social media platforms and the challenges of machine translation for low-resource languages, also presents fertile ground for interdisciplinary inquiry. Ultimately, the goal of such research should be not merely descriptive but transformative: to identify and promote linguistic practices that foster inclusion, equity, and cohesion in a society defined by its extraordinary diversity.

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