The Opinion

India's Republic Day: language & the nation

On 26 January 2013, India will celebrate her 64th Republic Day, which commemorates not the birth of the nation (August 1947), but the coming into being of its Constitution (January 1950). The annual Republic Day parade held on Delhi's Rajpath – a veritable delight to children and adults alike – follows a similar pattern but varied routine from year to year. It has two main recurring themes, namely, India's 'unity in diversity', and its national pride in the armed forces.

Rituparna Roy

FROM THE PRIME MINISTER'S HOMAGE to martyred soldiers at the *Amar Jawan Jyoti* (instituted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi after India's second war with Pakistan in 1972), to the awarding of bravery medals to the endless stream of naval/army regiments, and of course the display of the latest weapons – the Republic Day parade is a remarkable showcase of India's military power. These particular displays are followed by tableaus that highlight the special attractions of India's different states, as well as central government initiatives for the well-being of the country.

There is little, if anything, of the elaborate programme that reflects the workings of the Indian Constitution – except, that is, the commentary. It is such an obvious and unobtrusive part of the celebrations that it goes virtually unnoticed; but actually, the commentary, in itself, represents an issue long battled over during the compiling of the Constitution. Language.

The entire commentary of the televised event of the Republic Day celebrations is bilingual; it is given in both English and Hindi, the two official languages of India, in such a way that people who speak just one of the languages will not miss a thing. And yet, millions of Indians are left out nevertheless. Not everyone speaks one of the two 'official' languages; English is still predominantly the language of official India and its elite and (ever expanding) middle classes, whilst Hindi (despite the efforts of the central government) is, to a great extent, still confined to northern India. But this was (in the words of Granville Austin) "the half-hearted compromise" that India's Constituent Assembly reached after a prolonged and heated debate on the language issue, from 1 August to 14 September 1949.

The Constituent Assembly was a 308-member body elected by the elected members of the provincial assemblies of colonial India, which, from November 1946 to November 1949, was engaged in creating what eventually became the 'longest constitution for the largest democracy' in the world. It was an extraordinary feat as India's founding fathers were involved in the impossible task of both governing the country *and* drafting a Constitution.

The Constitution was adopted on 26 November 1949 and it came into effect on 26 January 1950. The date, 26 January, was chosen for a very special reason; it harks back to India's first Independence Resolution, passed by the Congress at Lahore in 1929. Unfortunately, the two basic principles of that resolution – the unity of India and full independence (or 'Purna Swaraj') from British rule – could not be attained in 1947. For not only was India partitioned when she finally gained her freedom (entailing a total reversal of all that the Indian National Congress had stood for), but her leaders also accepted 'Dominion Status' at the time, a status it retained till the Constitution came into effect in 1950.

Unity was, however, still very high on the Constituent Assembly's agenda while it was framing the constitution – not only because of the harrowing experience of Partition, but also because of the tough time that the fledgling state was having in integrating the erstwhile Princely States into the new Indian Union (these had not been part of British India). This is an important instance of how the Indian Constitution developed, not only following the precedents of some of the major democracies/republics of the world (UK, USA, France, Ireland), but also in response to the national contingencies of the times.

The language issue was actually part of independent India's desperate attempt at unity. India needed a common tongue; a national language that would bolster the unity of the new nation. But there were a dozen major regional languages in India, each with its own script, none of which were spoken by a majority of the population. English was the official language of India in 1946 and had also been the language of the national movement, but after independence it became an unacceptable language for many, as it had been the conqueror's. Indians cannot be really free in a foreign language, it was argued. The need of the hour was an Indian language for Indians, and a strong case was made for Hindustani by a section of the Assembly members representing north and central India, as it was spoken by about 45 percent of India's population at the time.

The more passionate of its advocates demanded that Hindi should not only be the 'national' language, but should, as soon as possible, also replace English both as the official language at the centre, as well as the second language of the provinces. In opposition to their views were a group of moderates, who were willing to let Hindi be the 'official' language of the Union because it catered to the largest number of Indians, but insisted that it was simply the first among equals, with the other regional languages also given national status. And they wanted English to be replaced by Hindi only very slowly, if at all.

Members of these two groups also fell out with each other with regard to the definition of Hindi itself. Hindustani, as spoken in 1946 was a mix of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and words from other Indian languages, as well as English. The conservatives/extremists wanted Hindi to be purged of its foreign elements and retain only its Sanskrit roots. The moderates however were more in line with Gandhi's thoughts:

> *— This Hindustani [Gandhi wrote] should be neither Sanskritized Hindi nor Persianised Urdu, but a happy combination of both. It should also freely admit words wherever necessary from the different regional languages and also assimilate words from foreign languages, provided that they can mix well and easily with our national language. Thus our national language must develop into a rich and powerful instrument capable of expressing the whole gamut of human thoughts and feelings. To confine oneself exclusively to Hindi or Urdu would be a crime against intelligence and the spirit of patriotism.*

The moderates were also sensitive to the apprehensions of the regional language speakers regarding the status of their language, and to the implications of making Hindi compulsory for the civil services. A compromise was thus reached – the Munshi-Ayyangar Formula, as it came to be called (after the chief members who gave it shape). It was decided that Hindi would be the 'official language of the Union' and would also be used for inter-provincial communication. For an initial period of fifteen years, however, English was to continue to serve as the official language. After this time, Hindi would supplant English unless Parliament legislated otherwise. The provincial governments could choose one of their regional languages, or English, for the conduct of their own affairs. The major regional languages were listed in a schedule to the Constitution – "for psychological reasons and to give these languages status" and to "protect them from being ignored or wiped out by the Hindi-wallahs." The fierce controversies over Hindi were put to rest by, once again, following a golden median. Hindi was to draw "primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages", but it would also aim to serve "as an expression of the composite culture of India" by assimilating "the forms, style, and expressions used in Hindustani" and in the other major languages of India.

It is interesting that since the coming into force of the Constitution, Hindi did not replace English as the official language of the Indian Union, but co-existed with it; and the use of English after 1965 was provided for by the Official Languages Act of 1963.

In retrospect, it is easy to see why language assumed such overwhelming importance in the Assembly debates. Like fundamental rights, it touched everyone, and it was tied up with the cultural pride of distinct linguistic groups within India, and ultimately to India's unity as a nation.

The coexistence of Hindi and English is now a fact of national life in India – and we see its practice officially validated every 26 January. Republic Day is a good example of what India's Constitution-makers aimed for.

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Above: The Border security force contingent during republic day parade, New Delhi, India. Courtesy Creative Commons/Flickr.

Below right: An Indian Agni-II intermediate range ballistic missile on a road-mobile launcher, displayed at the Republic Day Parade on New Delhi's Rajpath. Courtesy Creative Commons /Flickr.