



Language Identity and the Politics of Belonging in Contemporary India: A Study with Reference to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

In India, language has never been a neutral medium of communication. It has always been recognised as the site of identity formation, political contest and cultural belonging. This paper examines the relationship between language, regional identity and the politics of belonging in contemporary India. Two literary texts have been selected for research, namely Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). These texts demonstrate the conflict between the aspiration for a unified national linguistic identity and the assertion of regional linguistic belonging. It has always been deeply institutionalised and internalised into the very texture of Indian literature.

Keywords: Language identity, regional identity, Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy, Linguistic nationalism, Postcolonial India, Three-language formula, State reorganisation.

Introduction

In the colonial administration of British India, English became a language of governance, higher education and aspiration, as introduced by Macaulay's Minutes on Indian education (1835). This advocates that English is the language of that class of person who is Indian in blood and colour, English in taste. This policy had profound consequences for the relationship between language and identity in India, creating a lasting association between English and modernity.

Furthermore, at the time of Independence, the Constituent Assembly debated the national language question intensely. The Constitution of India designates Hindi written in the Devanagari script as the official language of the country under Article 343. However, Article 351 directed the state to promote the spread of Hindi and English. Nevertheless, the Official Languages Act of 1963 extended the use of English indefinitely. It was a compromise because southern states feared that Hindi would be forced on people who already had long-standing, rich literary traditions in their own languages.

Moreover, the State Organisation Act of 1956 reorganised India's internal boundaries and linguistic lines, creating lines that correspond to major language communities, for example, Maharashtra for Marathi speakers, Karnataka for Kannada speakers, Kerala for Malayalam speakers and so on. Thus, this reorganisation institutionalised the link between language and territorial belonging.

Even the Indian state has various moments that recognise danger. The 8th Schedule of the Constitution recognises 22 languages; it awards literary prizes in 24 languages. However, these institutional recognitions coexist with the powerful centre right, so forces of Hindi and English continue to attract linguistic capital and cultural prosperity.

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. According to the 2011 census, the country has 121 languages spoken by 10,000 or more speakers and 22 languages are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. G. N. Devy's survey for the People's Linguistic Survey of India (2013) found approximately 780 living languages in India. This extraordinary diversity has not existed peacefully; it has been managed and contested in line with political movements. It belongs to a language or linguistic community that sits at the heart of modern Indian nationhood.

The People's Linguistic Survey of India (Devy 2013) documented that between 1961 and 2011, approximately 220 languages disappeared from India. It is a rate of more than five thousand per year. In fact, this extension of linguistic diversity is intimately connected to hierarchies of linguistic capital, with English and Hindi dominating and expanding their domains as smaller regional languages lose status. However, it also found that nearly one-third of India's languages are under threat of extinction. Additionally, even when a language disappears, the entire world of belonging it sustains, its narrative, its jokes, its environment and its way of being also disappear.

The National Education Policy (2020) released by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, proposed that students study three languages, at least two of which should be native to India. The policy explicitly stated that no language would be imposed on the citizens. This ambiguous statement alarmed political leaders and non-Hindi-speaking states. Consequently, the Tamil Nadu Government formally rejected the three-language formula, stating that it was unnecessary because the state had already successfully implemented a two-language policy comprising Tamil and English. This same political movement is also familiar with the anti-Hindi agitation of 1937 and 1965. Therefore, this conflict continues to reveal the equally powerful demand for the recovery of regional linguistic identities.

However, literature is especially sensitive to this tension, even before politics formalises it. Many Indian writers, particularly those who chose to write in English, have long been aware of these linguistic tensions. They write in the language of the colonial power for communities whose consciousness was formed in another tongue. This paradox heightens literary tension and makes their narratives invaluable. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) represent this relationship between language and identity. These works are rooted in Kannada-speaking Karnataka and Malayalam-speaking Kerala and they interrogate how language shapes who one is, where one belongs and how one speaks one's truth.

This literary insight also has direct implications for contemporary policy debates. The controversy over the language formula and the ongoing resistance of southern states to Hindi imposition reflect the same structural tensions that Rao and Roy explore in their fiction.

Theoretical Framework

In the literary landscape, Raja Rao is a famous author of Indian English literature, known for works such as *Kanthapura*, published in 1938. It is set in the fictional town of *Kanthapura*. Most people in this village speak Kannada. The story highlights Gandhi's independence movement, which enters the village through the voice of the elderly woman narrator, Achakka. Basically, the novel is written in English; however, it is English radically transformed by the rhythm, syntax and narrative conventions of the Kannada oral tradition. Consequently, writers use a foreign language to convey their emotions and their traditions.

Even in his author's foreword, one of the most cited statements in Indian literary criticism, where Raja Rao wrote

We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as

Indians. We have come to see the vast world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (Rao, Foreword)

Raja Rao openly states that he refused the colonial demand that Indian writers in English conform to British linguistic norms. He also asserts an Indian linguistic identity which is neither pure colonial mimicry nor a retreat into nativist exclusivism. Further, it frames a linguistic problem as a creative opportunity. Hence, this opportunity gives us the chance to develop a new dialect, a new form of English that carries within it the cultural memory of another language. Furthermore, Rao asserts in the introduction, “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.” (Rao, Foreword)

The relationship between language and identity is well established in social linguistics and cultural theories. However, Franz Fanon, a critical theorist famous for his work, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), argued that to speak a language is to take on the weight of civilisation. Nevertheless, for colonised people, adopting the colonisers’ language creates a fundamental split in selfhood. To speak in the master tongue is to enable accepting the master’s world. In the Indian context, for example, English served as an administrative and prestigious language of the British Empire and continues to function as a marker of class and social mobility in independent India. Raja Rao also asserts in his foreword that “One of the difficulties a reader encounters in the presence of Indian literature in English is that of understanding the nature of the world projected by the text and, by implication, the strategies of discourse adopted by the writer to nativize the English language.” (Rao, Foreword)

However, the village of Kanthapura is present as a linguistically and culturally specific village. The narrator here uses Sanskrit- and Kannada-inflected names and sentences, as well as rhythm. The mimics of the oral Kannada storytelling characters are identified by their caste and regional affiliation and the novel's speech patterns also reflect these affiliations. The novel thus performs in the language of itself and it is an argument about the inseparability of linguistic identity and linguistic regional belonging. Further, in the lines of text,

He said Hindi would be the national language of India and though Kannada is good enough for our province, Hindi must become the national tongue and whenever he met a man in the street, he did not say 'How are you?' in Kannada, but took to the northern manner and said 'Ram-Ram.' (Rao 156)

The passage shows that the character sees Hindi as a symbol of Indian national identity and rejects English as a colonial language. This dedication to Hindi even creates a gap between him and his mother. The tension highlights the conflict between nationalism and local identity.

Even the arrival of the nationalistic movement is described in political, linguistic and cultural terms. Gandhi's message reaches the village through religious narratives and the idiom of the Harikatha, reflecting the South Indian form of devotional storytelling. The language of nationalism in Rao's novel is not an abstract political discourse but a vernacular idiom rooted in the region's specific cultural soil. Further, this effectively illustrates how national identities are constituted not by the possession of a simple language of culture, but by the translation of a shared aspiration into the diverse idioms of regional life.

Actually, Rao's choice was not a political one; as a writer who spent much of his life in France, Rao was actually aware of the power and dynamics of language. Hence, his choice to write in English and express himself in Kannada reflects that it is fluid and rejects the colonisers' language.

Another important novel for this research paper is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997. The novel won the Booker Prize in 1997. It is set in the fictional town of Ayemenem in Kerala in the 1960s and the 1990s. Basically, the novel follows the family of Pappachi, a Brahmin entomologist and his twin children, Rahel and Estha, as well as the caste-based love between Pappachi's wife and the untouchable carpenter Velutha. Arundhati writes this novel in English, but it is saturated with Malayalam words, phrases, rhythm, jokes, songs and idioms.

Where Raja Rao shaped English with the Kannada oral tradition, however, Roy's English is shaped by Malayalam and its compound words. Roy herself grew up in Kerala, speaking both English and Malayalam. Her bilingualism is reflected in the noble linguistic texture. *The God of Small Things* is set in Kerala and is a profound work made in Kerala using the language of a specific regional identity.

Novelist here shows how language marks the boundaries of belonging and extraordinary precision through characters who speak Malayalam and belong to the world of Ayemenem. On the other hand, characters who speak English are marked as outsiders or as people who have lost their roots. For example, the character Anglophile Chacko, who was educated at Oxford, was functionally mocked for his performative Englishness. His wife, Margaret, is perpetually an outsider in the world. The novel describes not merely because she is British but because she does not share the linguistic world of Ayemenem. She stated in the novel,

We are Prisoners of War,' Chacko said. 'Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter. (Roy 53)

This passage shows the impact of colonialism on identity. Chacko feels that colonial history has made people rootless and unable to belong fully to either Indian or Western culture. It reflects themes of hybridity, alienation and the search for belonging in postcolonial societies.

Roy also highlights the theme of untouchability through the character of Velutha and shows how social exclusion and the caste system impose social hierarchies on characters like Velutha. Even the hierarchies of caste in Kerala are encoded in linguistic practice: for example, in who may speak to whom, in what register and with what terms of address. Therefore, Roy's novel exposes this violence in linguistic hierarchy by showing how the transgression of caste boundaries is experienced. For example, when Ammu and Velutha love each other, they cross not only a social boundary but a linguistic one. The language of their love cannot be spoken in the public idiom of their society. Further, Roy also illustrates colonial hierarchy through Baby Kochamma's conversation.

That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines- "impositions" she called them-I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. (Roy 36)

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital introduced in *Language and Symbolic Power*, also aligns with this tension. It shows how social and economic advantages that accrue from competence in a high-status language are equally relevant. Nevertheless, in the Indian context, English functions as a primary form of linguistic capital for the elite professional classes and Hindi serves a similar function across the Hindi belt of northern India; regional languages, despite their cultural richness, are often positioned in a lower hierarchy.

Therefore, the connection between language, caste and belonging gives complexity to Roy's treatment of linguistic identity, as it goes beyond the debate on regional nationalism. It shows that within the regional language category of Malayalam, there are further hierarchies of linguistic belonging. Not all Malayalam speakers belong equally to the linguistic community. Malayalam is presumed to constitute. Moreover, the Dalit and untouchable characters in the novel have a different relationship to the Malayalam linguistic world than the upper-caste characters. They are inside it but not of it; speakers of the language, but do not fully participate in the culture of belonging to it because it is constructed.

The God of Small Things is set in part in 1993, a year that also reflects India's economic liberalisation. And the novel is alert to how liberalisation is transforming the linguistic landscape of Kerala. The old hierarchies of language, Sanskrit over Malayalam over the tribal language, English over all of them in the elite context and are complicated by new forces such as tourism, migration, wealth and economy. Hence, Roy's novel resists this linguistic complexity through its formal innovation and the text moves between the elevated literary English of a disruptive and Malayalam-infected English. This formal moment mirrors the lived reality of linguistic identity in contemporary Kerala, where most educated speakers move loosely between Malayalam and English, often within a single conversation. Moreover, this boundary between the two languages is more a zone of creative mixing than a sharp line.

Moreover, this linguistic hybridity of mixing English and Malayalam is called hybridity or code-switching in post-colonial literature; it is itself a form of identity assertion and refuses to be reduced to a single, purely one thing. The concept of hybridity given by the theorist Homi. K. Bhabha, in his foundational work, *The Location of Culture* in 1992. He asserts that hybridity is a space where the primary language and the colonial language interact to create new forms of cultural expression. This aligns in the novel, where the language shared by the characters cannot be purely Malayalam or purely English. Roy's novel embodies both and the reflection

is thematic in its exploration of identity. However, India is always multilayered and defined by the relationships among languages rather than by the purity of a single one.

After reading both *The Kanthapura* and *The God of Small Things*, we reflect on six decades of difference and both novels beautifully reflect the resistance of languages and the hierarchies of languages; Rao's text emerges from a moment when the primary linguistic antagonism was between English and Indian languages. However, Roy emerges from a moment when internal hierarchies of languages are developed, driven by the tension between Hindi and regional languages and between the upper caste and the linguistic world.

Hence, both novels beautifully reflect that language is not merely a tool of communication but the primary medium through which identity is formed: belonging and claim. Both novels demonstrate, through literary forms, that learning to speak a language is as much as inhabiting a world.

Conclusion

In nutshell, the paper has argued that language in India is political, not merely as a practice. It is a medium through which regional identities are asserted and national identity is contested. Through the lenses of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, we can beautifully trace the evolution of this politics from the colonial moment. When the primary movement is between English and the vernacular language and

Both Rao and Roy refuse an easy resolution to these tensions. Rao does not abandon English but transforms it. According to their article on negotiating, even Roy does not retreat into linguistic nativism but shows how Malayalam and English coexist and how both languages express their regional identities.

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