
UNIT 6 LANGUAGE AND RELIGION*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- give an account of religious and linguistic diversity in India;
- explain the interface of language and religion in the medieval period;
- understand how pluralism of religion and language were addressed in colonial period;
- explain the relationship of constitution with India's plurality; and
- elaborate on how language plays a role in reorganising state boundaries.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we take a look at yet another aspect of India's plural culture which is its religious and language diversity. India is a land of diverse religions. While some of the religions are well organised with a definitive philosophy and orientations, many may lack such structures. Still, all the religions practiced in India have their distinct sets of religious customs, sacred beliefs and taboos. Apart from many indigenous tribal religions that continue to survive in India, the country is also the land of origin for many significant religions of the world, viz. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

In this collage of religious pluralism, one religion that remains the most predominant, is Hinduism. The roots of the Hindu religion can be traced back to the early Vedic period, wherein Sanskrit was the most prominent language of religious behaviour. However, what we know as classical Hinduism today is basically a product of interaction of the Vedic Hindu thought with the non-Aryan cultures and its politicisation in the medieval and the modern epochs.

Today, regionalism, ethnicity and modernity have a bearing upon the interplay between language and religion. So, for example; while the wedding rituals can

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be conducted in Sanskrit, the event of blessing the newlyweds by the relatives can be done in Hindi or any other regional languages, while the wedding invitation can still be written in English.

6.2 INDIA: THE LAND OF RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC PLURALISM

In Sociology, pluralism may refer to the diversity of religious and linguistic traditions within the same cultural or social space. The Indian context of religious pluralism is shaped by the co-existence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, etc. across the length and breadth of the country. Hinduism is the oldest of all living great religions not only of India but across the World. To read more about Hinduism, Hindu and its modern-day derivative Hindutva, you can refer to the Box 1. given below. In the process of social evolution and change, several other religions either originated from India or penetrated into it from outside. While the debates concerning the origin or arrival and a subsequent chronology of religions in India, is a vast topic beyond the purview of this unit, a brief discussion of the same is essential to draw a sketch of religious pluralism in India.

The sixth century B.C. was marked by religious turmoil, resulting from the rigid and complicated practices that had marred Hinduism, like Brahminical exclusivity of religious ceremonies and caste system. Owing to the resultant unrest among the common masses, many sects arose. The most prominent among them were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which emerged in India around 800-600 B.C.E. This makes these the oldest religions being practiced in India after Hinduism.

Box 1: Hindu, Hinduism and *Hindutva*

In linguistic usage, the term Hindu originated with a geographical connotation, in order to refer to the people inhabiting land on the east of the river Sindhu (or Indus in Greek). But, with the advent of Islam in India, the term was used to indicate a religious group contrasting to the Muslim community. Continuing with this approach, even today a Hindu is identified on religious basis. Hinduism is a philosophy concerning religious and cultural practices of the Hindus. It includes Pre-Dravidian, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan religious elements in its fold. The followers of Hinduism believe in ultimate force, which they call as *Brahman*, along with the doctrine of *Dharma* (Duty), *Karma* (good deeds), immortality of *Aatman* (Soul), cycles of rebirth, and *Moksha* (Salvation). With Hinduism, the multiple ways of conceptualising God can be broadly classified as *Nirgun Bhakti* (devotion to a formless God) and *Sagun Bhakti* (devotion to a God in definitive form). These alternative paths of devotion are represented by the various sects of Hinduism, viz. The Saiva, the Sakta, the Lingayat, the Satnami, the Arya Samaj, the Kabirpanthi etc. On the other hand, the term Hindutva, as coined by V. D. Savarkar in his pamphlet '*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*' (1923), refers to a political ideology that differentiates everything indigenously Indian from anything that is not, especially in the domain of religion.

Almost six centuries later, Christianity arrived in India. It touched the West coast in the first century of the Christian Era with the arrival of the Syrian Christians.

Later on, much before the Muslim conquest of the country, Islam reached the Western coast of India with the Arab traders. Sikhism is the newest of all religions practiced in India, today. It originated from the pre-independence state of Punjab in around 1500 C.E. with the preaching of Guru Nanak. However, of all these religions, Hinduism continues to be the religion of the majority, as is also evident by the census data of 2011, provided in the table below.

Religion	Estimated Population	Percentage
Hindu	96.62 Crores	79.80
Muslim	17.22 Crores	14.23
Christian	2.78 Crores	2.30
Sikh	2.08 Crores	1.72
Buddhist	84.43 Lakhs	0.70
Jain	44.52 Lakhs	0.37
Other Religion	79.38 Lakhs	0.66
Not Stated	28.67 Lakhs	0.24

Source: Census, 2011

Not just religion, India is remarkably diversified also on the basis of languages. In fact, the linguistic pluralism in the country is just as complex to understand as its religious pluralism. Like there are many sects and other syncretic alternatives to a given religion, similarly there are variations to all significant languages of India, based on region, ethnicity and the language family to which they belong. For instance: The census of India, 2011 mark out some 57 regional and other variations of Hindi language. The languages of India can be classified into four major families – Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic. Of these, Indo-Aryan covers the widest area of the country and is spoken by the largest proportion of its population, especially in the North, East and West. The root language of this family is Sanskrit and its principal spoken languages include Hindi, Bengali, Bihari, Pahari, Gujarati, Bhili, Rajasthani, Konkani, Marathi, Oriya, Assamese, and Punjabi. In the south of India, languages from Dravidian family are predominant, like Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Toda, Telugu, Kodagri, and Badaga. In Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and the Himalayan regions of Jammu and Kashmir languages from the Tibeto-Burman family are used, while the population in Meghalaya and some parts Orissa and Bihar uses Austro-Asiatic languages, like Samthali, Bhandari, Koku, Ho, and Savara. For understanding the language classification based on geographical patterns in India, you can also refer to the map below.

Activity 1

Conduct a brief survey of the religious orientation of at least 10 households in your neighbourhood. Ask them about the religion they practice, its beliefs and practices, their significant festivals, pilgrimage centres, and their religiously sanctioned everyday behaviour. Compare this, if possible, with other students at your study centre. This would help you bring out a picture of religious pluralism in your locality.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Name four major religions of the world that originated from India.
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- ii) Which are the major religions that are practiced by a large chunk of population in India, but did not originate in the country?
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- iii) Which are the four significant language families to which the languages of India belong?
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6.3 LANGUAGE-RELIGION INTERFACE: MEDIEVAL CONTEXT

With the medieval period came a major shift in the language-religion interface in India. Till then, all the major religions were usually expressed in their single language, respectively. For instance: Sanskrit was the language of Hinduism, Ardhamagadhi of Jainism and Pali of Buddhism. Each of these languages had the power to completely express their respective religions. However, in the medieval period, mystics and saints from various parts of the country (like Jnaneshwar from Maharashtra, Basavanna from Karnataka, Nammalvar from Tamil Nadu, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Nanak and Kabir from North India) started arguing for the legitimacy of vernacular languages for the expression of religion, challenging the hegemony of classical religious languages. They started writing their religious poetries in vernacular languages specific to their regions, like Tamil, Marathi, Awadhi, Rajasthani, etc. These saints were the reformists who on one hand liberated religion and religious practices from the hold of single classical languages, often the possession of the elite; also raised the status of vernacular languages in the context of religious conduct, opening the access to religion for the masses.

With this even the scriptures were made accessible to the masses in the language they spoke. For example: Jain scriptures were translated into Kannada and Hindi. The impetus for the translation of religious texts into vernacular languages came from many reasons – a) in order to make them accessible for the common masses who usually were not literate in the classical languages, which were used mostly by the elites of their respective religion, like: Brahmins within Hinduism could receive a formal training in Sanskrit, whereas the lower castes were devoid of it; b) the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries had started escalating their activities in India of converting the local population into Christianity. Thus, converting the canonical religious texts into the language of the masses became a pressing need.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Name the mystics and saints, along with their corresponding regions, who played a significant role in taking religious scriptures to the masses in their vernacular language.

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- ii) What were the major social factor prompting translation of religious texts into vernacular languages?

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6.4 BRITISH INDIA AND LANGUAGE

Ignoring the vast linguistic diversity of India, its colonial masters took a keen interest in educating its people in English language for reasons more than one. Indians educated in English language would have meant low-wage labourers for their clerical jobs. This would have in turn reduced their expenditure on administration. English language was also expected to generate a class of British-loyal Indians. Thus, language was used as a tool to aid their political and economic authority over the country. They gave government jobs to only those who knew English language. Thus, compelling Indians to opt for English education. This created and strengthened the class divide between the rich city dwellers and the poor within Indian population as well as regional disparities as some regions

were more under British influence than others. But most Indians remained loyal to their mother tongues even if they used English as an official language outside the home. Moreover because women did not go to school or get higher education, especially in English, the home language remained and still largely remains the mother tongue. Due to this, the colonial dream of making English their national language could never materialise. The many languages spoken in the country were tied to their regional affinities and had strong social sentiments attached to them. The religious rituals were also conducted in native languages and the texts such as the Ramayana were read in the mother tongue also. The trend has more or less continued even till today. For instance: An English speaking Muslim from West Bengal may want to be identified as a Bengali first and prefer to use his/her regional dialect to assert the peculiarity of his/her identity even in some neutral inclusive public space.

On the other hand, in the case of religion, the British took advantage of the existing religious pluralism. Especially, in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857 by the *sepoys* of British army, the colonial rulers realised that if they wished to continue their rule over India, then they had to break the country from within on religious lines. They adopted the policy based on Roman maxim, ‘*Divide et Impera*’ (Divide and Rule). Even though the revolt was a result of several political, social, religious and economic factors, the unity that Hindu and Muslim *sepoys* showcased in what is considered the immediate military cause of the revolt was alarming for the British. In what was an eye opener for the colonial rulers, both Hindu and Muslim *sepoys* refused to use the cartridges of the new Enfield rifle, which were greased with cow and pig fats.

To break this unity became their primary concern. Soon after in 1905, they divided Bengal, which was then the epicentre of freedom struggle in India, on religious lines. While East Bengal became a Muslim majority state, West Bengal had majority Hindus. Then in 1909, they introduced separate electorate for Muslims through Morley Minto Act, which was a step towards breaking the religious unity and taking the advantage of religious pluralism in India. At another level, the British started giving preference to Sikhs over Hindus and Muslims for their army jobs, giving rise to the notions of Sikhs as the martial race of India. This partiality towards the Sikh was because of the support they had given to the British in the 1857 uprising. They also created the myth of martial races creating the Gorkha identity out of the hill men who were loyal to them. The British sowed the seeds of discord between the major religious communities, especially the Hindus and Muslims as it was the only way they could get control over the various Indian principalities by playing them against each other.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) What are the reasons that made British introduce English language education in India?

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ii) What are the various measures adopted by British to practice Divide and Rule in India?

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iii) Which out of the following were fashioned as the martial race of India by the British?

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| - Hindus | - Sikhs |
| - Muslims | - Buddhists |

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6.5 THE CONSTITUTION AND INDIA'S PLURALITY

The term religion is nowhere defined within the Indian Constitution, as part of a vision to constitute India as a secular state, as was envisaged by 42nd Amendment Act of the Constitution in 1976, which inserted the term 'secular' in the preamble of the Constitution. But even then, the term secular remains undefined in the preamble or in the Constitution. Even though Forty-fifth Amendment Bill of the Constitution (1978) attempted to define the term by appropriating it with the expression 'Republic' in the Article 366 (1), it remained unaccepted by the Council of States. It suggested that the expression 'Republic' be qualified as Secular, in which there is an equal respect for all religions. However, this amendment was not accepted by the Council of States.

Box 2: Secular, Secularism and Secularisation

The term 'secular' is derived from the Latin root *Saeculum*, which means century or age. *Saeculum* was the time of ordinary historical succession as opposed to the sacred time. The Government as an institution in *Saeculum* was in contrast to the Church. Borrowing from this, the term 'Secular' used to indicate the institutions, like state, economy, judiciary, etc. which together constitute a world separated from religion. The term 'Secularism', on the other hand, was coined by a Socialist, George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, as a bi-product of Enlightenment and Renaissance of the nineteenth century. Inspired by the notions of individual dignity as asserted by Renaissance and the supremacy of science and reason as highlighted by Enlightenment, he proposed Secularism to counter the supernaturalism and irrationalism that had corrupted the Christian theology, by re-affirming the dignity of an individual and autonomy of a secular life. Out of the commonly accepted, two definitions of Secularism, one is people-centric, and the other is State-centric. The people-centric definition signifies the separation of religion from economy, education, politics, culture and social life. On the other hand, State-centric definition envisages the need to keep the State neutral of all religions. In the West, when secularism was no longer an active movement, the attention was directed at the secularisation of the institutions. By Secularisation, it was meant that social institutions gained autonomy and the religious consciousness declined. Secularisation was characterised by urbanisation, pluralism, tolerance and pragmatism. Thus, with the process of Secularisation declines the social relevance of religion.

The Constitution of India is resolute to strengthen religious pluralism in the country by guaranteeing equal freedom to all religions. Article 25-30 written in the Part III of the Constitution provide the Indian population with the right to freely practice, propagate and profess any religion. It also gives a right to the religious organisations to establish and maintain institutions for charitable and religious purposes. One of these articles (Article 27) exempts taxation on money generated through religious practices or on activities the proceeds of which are appropriated for religious purposes. A special emphasis in these articles remain on one hand keeping the state-recognised educational institutions away from religious instructions and propagation, and on the other hand on preserving and protecting the cultural and educational rights of the religious and linguistic minorities.

Not just religion, the Constitution of India also acts as a safeguard to the linguistic diversity of the country as well. It specifies 22 languages in the Part A of Eighth schedule as Scheduled languages of India and 99 languages in its Part B are specified as Non-Scheduled languages. The speaker strength of 22 scheduled languages, according to the Census report of 2011 are given in the table below.

This is the list of the 22 scheduled languages that the government of India officially promotes. When the list was first drafted in 1950, it contained only 14 languages. In the past 50 years, however, eight more languages have been added to the list, as a response to the demands of the corresponding linguistic groups. Maithili, Santhal, Konkani and Sindhi are among the languages added subsequently. In India, beyond its scheduled languages, even the individual states have their own list of official languages. But, the real treasure of rich linguistic diversity in

India lies beyond these portals of state patronage, as each state is a treasure-box of multiple local languages.

Check Your Progress 4

i) Which articles of the Constitution guarantee equal freedom to all religions? Write briefly about them.

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ii) There are how many scheduled and non-scheduled languages mentioned in Indian Constitution, and which one of those have the highest speaker strength?

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iii) When was the first Indian state to be re-organised on linguistic basis? Tick the right answer:

- a) 1947 b) 1953 c) 1956 d) 1960

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ACTIVITY 2

Make a list of 99 non-scheduled languages of India and observe the linguistic diversity of the country. If possible, compare your list with your fellows at your study centre.

6.6 LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF REORGANISING STATE BOUNDARIES

Linguistic diversity has always remained an important concern in India, right from the time of its independence. At the time, 571 princely states were merged together to form 27 states in a temporary arrangement, backed by historical and political considerations, rather than on cultural or linguistic account. Below is an indicative map of linguistic diversity and not a complete picture of the variety of languages found in India.



On the basis of India's linguistic diversity, there still remained a need to reorganise the states on permanent basis. Considering this, in 1948, the newly formed government constituted S. K. Dhar Commission to look into the matter. But, dismissing the idea of linguistic reorganisation of the state, the Commission suggested to reorganise states on the basis of administrative convenience. Unconvinced with the findings of the Commission, in the same year itself the government formed JVP Committee with Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya as its members. The committee too rejected the immediacy of reorganisation of states on linguistic basis. In 1953, however, succumbing to the demands and prolonged agitation of the Telugu-speaking people, the government created first linguistic state of Andhra.

Later, in 1956 on the recommendations of the Fazl Ali Commission, the Nehru government divided the country into 14 states and 6 union territories, under the State Reorganisation Act. The states were Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The six union territories were Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands, Manipur and Tripura.

In 1960 again, following agitation and violence, the state of Bombay was divided to create Gujarat and Maharashtra. For Nagas, Nagaland was created in 1963. And in 1966, based on the Shah Commission report, the Parliament passed Punjab Reorganisation Act and Haryana and Himachal Pradesh as a Union Territory were carved out of Punjab. In these, Haryana got the Punjabi-speaking population. Following the pressing demands of the Uttarakhand movement, at the core of which lied the Pahari identity, with Kumaoni and Garhwali languages of their own, totally distinct from the rest of Uttar Pradesh, the state of Uttarakhand was carved out of UP in 2000. Similarly boundaries were drawn in the same year to create Jharkhand out of Bihar and Chhattisgarh out of Madhya Pradesh. And, the most recently in 2014 Telangana was created from Andhra Pradesh. This is the brief trajectory of reorganisation of states on linguistic, along with other administrative, political, historical and cultural grounds.

Check Your Progress 5

i) When was the first state created on linguistic grounds in Independent India?

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ii) Name the 14 states and 6 union territories after the first linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956?

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iii) Which is the last state created on the linguistic and cultural grounds in India?

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6.7 LET US SUM UP

India is land of diversified religions and languages. The co-existence of various religions and languages lie at the core of religious and linguistic pluralism in India. Language has historically played the most significant role in shaping the religious consciousness of people in India, especially in the medieval period. In the colonial period, the rulers had to suffer many blows owing to their over exploitation of religious pluralism on one hand and under-estimation of linguistic diversity on the other. Subsequently, in the independent India, Constitution acts as a safeguard to both religious and linguistic pluralism as it ensure equal freedom to all the religions and recognition for all significant languages of the country. In the modern times, language has played a crucial role in the reorganisation of the state boundaries. Thus, religion and language have been intrinsically woven into the consciousness of Indian population, who despite all political, social and cultural complexities around the two, remain free to mould the two to their convenient use.

6.8 REFERENCES

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6.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.
- ii) Islam and Christianity.
- iii) Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic.
- iv) Indo-Aryan.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Jnaneshwar from Maharashtra, Basavanna from Karnataka, Nammalvar from Tamil Nadu, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Nanak and Kabir from North India.
- ii) The impetus for the translation of religious texts into vernacular languages came from many reasons - a) in order to make them accessible for the common masses who usually were not literate in the classical languages, which were used mostly by the elites of their respective religion, like: Brahmins within Hinduism could receive a formal training in Sanskrit, whereas the lower castes were devoid of it; b) the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries had started escalating their activities in India of converting the local population into Christianity. Thus, converting the canonical religious texts into the language of the masses became a pressing need.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) The colonial masters took a keen interest in educating its people in English language for reasons more than one. Indians educated in English language would have meant low-wage labourers for their clerical jobs. This would have in turn reduced their expenditure on administration. English language was also expected to generate a class of British-loyal Indians. Thus, language was used as a tool to aid their political and economic authority over the country. They gave government jobs to only those who knew English language.
- ii) In 1905, they divided Bengal, which was then the epicentre of freedom struggle in India, on religious lines. While East Bengal became a Muslim majority state, West Bengal had majority Hindus. Then in 1909, they introduced separate electorate for Muslims through Morley Minto Act, which was a step towards breaking the religious unity and taking the advantage of religious pluralism in India. At another level, British starting filling in Sikhs over Hindus and Muslims for their army jobs, giving rise to the notions of Sikhs as the martial race of India.

iii) Sikhs

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Article 25-30 written in the Part III of the Constitution provide the Indian population with the right to freely practice, propagate and profess any religion. It also gives a right to the religious organisations to establish and maintain institutions for charitable and religious purposes. One of these articles (Article 27) exempts taxation on money generated through religious practices or on activities the proceeds of which are appropriated for religious purposes. A special emphasis in these articles remain on one hand keeping the state-recognised educational institutions away from religious instructions and propagation, and on the other hand on preserving and protecting the cultural and educational rights of the religious and linguistic minorities.
- ii) Scheduled Languages - 22, Non-Scheduled Language - 99, Hindi

iii) 1956

Check Your Progress 5

- i) 1953
- ii) The states were Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The six union territories were Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands, Manipur and Tripura.
- iii) Telangana (2014)

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