No More English Medium-
Hindi Medium:
Getting Hindi and English
Journalism on the Same Page

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Abstract
English-language media in India retains and exercises an outsized power that not only carries forward a colonial legacy, but also contributes to a balkanized media sphere. This manifesto argues for and imagines a way out of the entrenched language divides within Indian media, calling for at the very least a merger of English and Hindi language news media online. I argue that establishing parity between languages within newsrooms and on news websites will open a third space that unburdens English of some of its immense privilege in the production and distribution of news. Language is how we traverse the world, and multilingual news could speak to and for a wider group of Indians, transcending some boundaries and creating more common ground.

Keywords
India, English, language politics, third space, news media

It’s 25 years almost to the day that Babri Masjid was demolished, 25 years to the day when the foundational fiction of a secular India was systematically dismantled, brick by brick.

The pace of preparations in the weeks leading up to it was frenetic. Two lakh¹ Kar Sevaks poured into Ayodhya. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) handed them pickaxes, hammers, and rope, and then showed them how to raze a 15th century mosque to the ground. Just to be sure they were up to the task, they even did a little practice run on an 18th century dargah a few
days before the main event. The ever-obliging state, Congress-led for what it’s worth, absented itself, hiding behind the reassurances that this was to be a “symbolic” event.

Instead, in a decidedly material fashion on December 6th 1992, over six short hours, egged on by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders, armed and organized by the Sangh Parivar, the Kar Sevaks pushed and shoved and toppled one prevailing narrative of who we were, and ushered in a whole new one, one of a Hindu Rashtra.

25 years on, we all bear witness to the aftermath: Brand New Histories. Love Jihad. Beef Lynchings.

The writers of this new narrative of India had been at work for years, decades really. Occasionally they would irrupt into the national consciousness but mostly they tinkered and toiled on their myth-making away from the spotlight. The national press either missed them or misrepresented them. The very day of the demolition, the Times of India and the Indian Express reassuringly reported that the shrine would not be stormed, that the people assembling in Ayodhya, with their saffron headbands and demands for a temple to Ram, would make a ruckus but then sense would prevail. The center would hold.

But that was the national press, and by the national, of course, I mean the English press. Because the Hindi papers told a different story, one of the inevitability of the coming destruction. In fact, on the day of, they said the only protection the mosque could hope to have would have been from Lord Ram himself.

It wasn’t just that the Hindi papers knew what the English papers didn’t. It was that they had come to champion the cause of the Hindu nationalists, exaggerating or fabricating reports, stirring up communal frenzy. As the Ram Janmabhoomi movement gathered steam, Hindi newspapers became Hindu newspapers, locating a common enemy in the secular, liberal state, one that seemed to deny them indigenous culture in favor of high-minded modernity. Driven by their sense of exclusion, they asserted an essentialist identity marrying Hindi and Hindu. It was an insurrection against the reigning order, and the reigning order spoke English.
25 years on, we have not closed the distance between the Hindi and English publics. In fact, the dynamics that took a divided public and created an even more divided polity remain ever present. For those of us who raise cries of “not in my name”, we need to understand how we got here, reckon with the power of language and our specific language of power, so we can find new ways to tell stories about who we are and what India is.

**The Language of Power**

India was always going to have a language problem. That much was readily apparent all through the anti-colonial struggle. The European nationalisms that may have served as models for us had unifying languages in which they could craft a shared narrative of nationhood. How would we speak to each other, collectively tell our story, when we all spoke in different tongues? We had no language that could claim a majority of speakers. Hindi offered a plurality, but how would we cohere a sense of national identity for the remaining 60% of the country? And if it was going to be Hindi, which Hindi would reign supreme – the plainspoken colloquial Hindi that Gandhi preferred or the Sanskritized high-Hindi that the RSS advocated for? And what of Urdu, with its whiff of the Mughal empire? What place could it have? Gandhi and Tagore also famously tussled over the place of English in India, how it could serve the independence movement and then an independent nation. But it was Nehru’s narrative that won the day post-1947.

**English was the solution**

The idea of India that Nehru authored was one of a syncretic nation-state that had encountered and absorbed multiple empires, cultures and religions, like an ancient palimpsest. There was a mystical unity in our apparent diversity that wove together these plural strands in a beautiful tapestry. While the *Ek Chidiya, Anek Chidiya* story had great power against the British bird catcher we were going to defeat by working together, what then? What of governance?

The deal they struck, after much language politicking, was to allow separate linguistic identities in each of the states, and then technically, but only technically, Hindi would be how we spoke across states. But as a practical matter, the lure of English was too strong. The emphasis on central economic planning meant bureaucracy had a fundamental role to play in nation-building, and the elite bureaucrats in Delhi relied...
on English. Politically as well, retreating to English as the default allowed us to paper over a lot of divisions. The particularities of region, caste or religion, all of which had been central to the language debates, all could seem equally remote from an English perch.

It was a handy shortcut but not without its costs. While English shored up its position in an independent India, drawing on both its functional and symbolic power, the bilingualism of the nationalist movement began to wither away. In the lead up to the demolition of the masjid, English media, with its inherently limited reach and its technocratic approach to politics and policymaking, carried and conveyed the colonial legacy of subordination. In its status, substance and style, the gulf between English media and Hindi media widened, and in that chasm Hindi media and Hindu nationalists formed an alliance of the aggrieved.

**English media was national**

Carrying over its privileged position from the colonial era, English-language media retained its higher status. English newspapers reached a fraction of the population but were inherently “national”, while Hindi press, with a far wider reach, was relegated to the “regional” or “vernacular”. English media spoke to the elite within the state and the business class that depended on the patronage of the developmentalist state, and as such was entrenched and invested in the status quo, unable or unwilling to apprehend the change to come.

**English media was rational**

Religion proved tricky for English papers to cover. They were committed to a rational, critical discourse, concerned with planned economic progress – the stuff that mattered, the stuff which was going to transcend these irrational primordial differences. For editors and reporters in and of Delhi, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was something “out there” literally and figuratively. What did they make of Ram? They took solace in a historical approach. Did Ram exist? Where and when had he reigned? Had he, in fact, been born in Ayodhya? It was either a sociological inquiry or a matter of communal politics leading the masses astray, with no avenue to explore the lived religiosity that resonated with so many.
English media was professional

English language news served a critical-rational elite public, which meant they adopted the professional norms of Western journalism. They emphasized objectivity as a core value, the voice from nowhere, once again underlining their remove from the remainder of the country. They sought out the official source – the court rulings and the legal developments. They went to the official spokespersons for the BJP, who offered the moderate statements, and failed to capture the more extreme, and more accurate, rhetoric of the activist VHP leaders.\footnote{21}

Taken together, English media missed the magnitude of the threat, and clung to a belief in the existing liberal political order, even as it was being undone. English and the Hindi press presented different worlds, and operated in these worlds differently. While English media was state-centric, deriving its power and legitimacy from its proximity to the capital, Hindi media was socio-centric, deriving its legitimacy from a proximity to “the people”. Hindi news was not written at a remove. It could be objective, but it could also employ some dramatic flourish. Religion as a subject was close to life, and after all the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was a movement of the Hindi belt. Derisively described by English language journalists as “cunning small town businessmen in safari suits,” many Hindi journalists were not paid regularly and were expected to wheel and deal for the economic survival of their papers, which made them pay close attention to local power formations and learn how to work with(in) them.\footnote{22}

Enter the BJP and its supporters, who were able to make deft use of both English and Hindi language media. English media provided the foil. They welcomed any criticism because it offered a counterpoint to rally supporters against. And because English media saw the movement as a monolith, missing the nuances and divisions, their charges were easy to dismiss or disprove. Hindi media, they wooed – free lunches, political favors and a pride of place at events and rallies – and secured favorable coverage.\footnote{23}

Language Today

A quarter of a century later, much about our country and its media has changed. The neoliberal reforms of the early ’90s, together known as LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization), have created a cacophonous media environment.\footnote{24}
We’ve gone from our solitary government-run Doordarshan to, at last count, 800 TV channels, half of which are purportedly news. And we’re all familiar with the remarkable story of growth for India’s newspaper industry – over 90,000 newspapers and continued growth in vernacular languages.

So, what of the dynamic between the English and the vernacular media today? It is true that English and vernacular media do not exist independent of each other, but rather in relation to one another. In fact, the dynamics of commercialism, corporatization and a growing concentration of ownership are present across both regional and national media, vernacular and English media. And together, we are all in thrall to Brand India. If Hindi media could once claim to be “close to the people”, the people has come to mean something quite different. Rural India and poor Indians don’t feature much in our billboards and TV screens. The consumerist good life, championed by the urban middle class, propelled by a technology industry – that is the dream of New India regardless of language.

But access to that dream remains inequitable. Here we focus on language, but language of course does not stand divorced from the structures and strictures of oppression that compose India. That English media is also an upper-caste media, for instance, is neither happenstance nor without consequence.

Globalization continued what colonialism first wrought, the reification of English as the path to economic advancement, as the path to progress. And in the realm of media, it still incites an antagonism. In Bangalore, our most global of cities, it is present in the tension between “upmarket hi-fi English readers” set against the “common Kannada man”. Or consider for a moment, the invective around Lutyens’ media. The charge of Lutyens’ media is mobilized in a wide variety of ways. You can be corrupt. You can be a communist. You can be pseudo-secular. You can be a “presstitute”. The exact flavor may vary, but whomsoever is denounced as Lutyens’ media, you can bet they speak English. It is again a charge against the proximity to power that is encoded in the language itself.

**The Power of Language(s)**

What we talk about when we talk about language is fundamentally about who communicates, with whom, and how, and, by the same measure, who doesn’t. The
divisions in our media matter, because they impact who tells which stories to whom. In what may at first seem banal or benign, stories about airports – those are for the English folks\(^3\) – while stories about finding chutney in China – those are for the Hindi folks.\(^4\) (Never mind, for now, the many stories that don’t get told at all. That’s the subject of another contention, for another day.)

Because language is how you access the world, how you traverse space, it is also fundamentally about how you possess and wield power.\(^5\) And the undue power and privilege we accorded to English, and its pernicious effects on our polity, is undeniable. If we can acknowledge it, can we begin to address it? Of course, the conundrum of 1947 remains: how?

The solution I propose is about dismantling the lie at the heart of any essentialist ideology. Neither Hindi nor Hindu can make a convincing claim to all of India, just as exclusive claims to English have always rung suspect (and more than a little pretentious). We are not a monolingual public.\(^6\) If Nehru was right about anything, although that also gets more dangerous to say everyday too\(^7\), he was right about our stubborn plurality.

The solution to the world riven with divisions will not lie with a master language that would magically transcend the social distance between us. The only way we make progress on the unfinished promise of a multicultural India is if we grapple with the immense differences amongst us. English media has been laden with its own self-importance, and Hindi media burdened by its slight. I propose a third space, an interstitial of sorts, that would operate online.\(^8\) This wouldn’t be a space absent of difference, but one that foregrounds the differences and asks us to engage with them.

I want to start with online media because its embedded values align with the vision of a syncretic India, because it would be easy, and because I cannot see a reason not to.

Many digital outlets have English versions – the official versions – and then separate Hindi or Urdu versions. When any of these sites feature video content, the language can be an informal mishmash, reflective of the way we speak. But when we write, we unthinkingly follow the model of print, and then television. Why are Scroll\(^9\) and Satyagraha\(^10\) different websites with separate staff? Separate channels of production
are firstly founded on an erroneous assumption that the channels of reception will also be separate, and, secondly, they only serve to exacerbate the divides that do exist.

My vision is radically simple. Merge newsrooms and news products. Youth Ki Awaaz, a citizen journalism website, has already pioneered a workable model for this. They wanted to value people’s voices and didn’t see how you could do that without also valuing their language. So, Hindi and English stories appear side by side. Neither is the default setting.

For reporters, my vision means English and Hindi journalists would work together, able to cover more ground, talk to more people, different people, and examine issues and events from angles they do not possess alone. Perhaps in time, they would forge a new newsroom culture less tied to the provincial attitudes that plague us today.

For the readership, it means a single picture of the news of the day, written in Hindi or English, depending on the language the reporter prefers, or perhaps the language their sources prefer. Rather than report the same story twice, with markedly different sensibilities, write them once, but offer a translation into the other language.

It isn’t difficult. Well, at least not technically so.

Nor is it without precedent. When Gandhi and Tagore tussled over the place of English, they spoke to and from Gujarat and Bengal respectively, but also the wider intellectual world. Our Hindi poets taught English literature. Or perhaps we can think of Munshi Premchand, whose Godaan, the apogee of Hindi literature, was first outlined in English.

As it happens, it’s a novel about donating a cow.

Here is where I admit that this will not fix what is broken. In part, because less than a third of the country is even online and able to access my proposed digital third space. And, also, because what was broken was a lie to begin with, a utopian lie where a benevolent managerial state would transcend differences through economic progress, making the messy world of politics unnecessary. Language and politics, each separately and enmeshed as they inevitably are, are messy and unavoidable.
There won’t be an easy way out to find or forge an India that works. But this would be a first step, a move to start with what you can, your own profession, your own privilege. Like the man said, if we could change ourselves….⁵²

It is a small but urgent first step, in the face of a problem that looms larger every day.

When I think back to Babri Masjid, there are very few images of that day, and hardly any of the demolition itself. That day reporters were assaulted, their cameras smashed, their lives threatened. ⁵³ 25 years ago, the planners and the perpetrators wanted no evidence of their crime.⁵⁴ Today, the latest chapters of the Hindutva narrative are awash in evidence. Photos and videos of the brutality collected and shared by the brutalizers themselves.⁵⁵

And once again, in this climate of mounting intolerance and hate, language remains central to the notions of identity. In December 2017, in Uttar Pradesh a Muslim man newly elected as Comptroller wanted to take his oath of office in Urdu. After all, it is the second official language of the state after Hindi. For that temerity, he was threatened and beaten by a faction of the Hindu right, and then for good measure, arrested by the Aligarh police for “trying to outrage religious feelings”.⁵⁶

That’s our reality today.

Not least because, it has the support or the silent assent of the highest levels of power. Since the BJP rode the Modi wave into a majority government, it would be hard to argue that speech hasn’t been chilled. From arrests, to attacks, to assassinations, journalism in India is increasingly in peril.⁵⁷ Once again, though, it is necessary to disambiguate whose journalism it is that’s in peril. It is rarely national media that comes under threat. Journalists in Chhattisgarh are run out of town. Telugu channels have been yanked off the air. Malayalee journalists are not allowed into the Kerala High Court.⁵⁸

Multilingual news, because Hindi and English would only be a start, may seem woefully inadequate as a response, but it is simultaneously an attempt to address the balkanization of our politics and our media. Our digital third space wouldn’t just address the English-vernacular divide, but also the national-regional divide, allowing
us to map new relations within India. What happens there, in Tamil Nadu or Odisha, could be reframed as what happens here, in India.

The physical and social distance cannot be erased, but it can be negotiated. And a digital third space could be the beginnings of the process of building a new foundation for India, brick by brick. It won’t solve all our problems, but at least it’ll help us understand them.

References


Notes

1 200,000
3 On the day, one of the BJP leaders present exhorted the Kar Sevaks to “Ek Dhaka Aur do, Babri Masjid Tod Do”, which translates to “Give it one more push, break the mosque” but in rhyme.
8 *Aaj* headline on December 6th, *Viradhit Dhancha ka ab Ram ki Rakshwala* (Only Ram Can Protect the Disputed Structure Now) in Rajagopal, 2001
14 Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
16 Short animated film played on Doordarshan for many years about the importance of a united India, despite our differences. This was one of many such campaigns.
18 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 Arvind Rajagopal, Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India, 1 edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)


37 Lutyens Delhi refers to the planned, central part of New Delhi with government buildings and astronomical real estate.

38 Ibid.


45 “","https://yotubegrab.scroll.in.


49 The fervor around “cow protection” is a current iteration of the culture wars that has led to a number of deaths of Muslim.


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