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From Identity to Instrument: Linguistic Politics of Marathi Identity in Maharashtra (1966–Present)

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ABSTRACT

Language in Maharashtra has evolved from a marker of cultural identity into a powerful instrument of political mobilization. Within the broader framework of Indian federalism, regionalism and identity politics, this study examines how Marathi is used to construct political narratives, shape public opinion and redefine regional identity. The origins of contemporary linguistic politics can be traced to the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement and the formation of Maharashtra in 1960, which formalized Marathi identity and generated expectations of social and economic mobility among Marathi speakers. However, the gap between symbolic recognition and material opportunities, particularly in Mumbai, created conditions for the politicization of Marathi identity. Adopting a qualitative approach and discourse analysis of political speeches, party manifestos, media narratives and political campaigns, the study examines Shiv Sena and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), with particular attention to Bal Thackeray and Raj Thackeray. The findings indicate that language is used to construct "us–them" distinctions and portray Marathi speakers as economically disadvantaged and culturally vulnerable. Linguistic mobilization cannot be explained by migration or demographic change alone; rather, economic insecurity, labour-market transformation, employment competition and perceived threats have been politically transformed into identity-based grievances. The study further identifies a shift from Bal Thackeray's emotionally charged rhetoric to Raj Thackeray's media-oriented and confrontational style, demonstrating the adaptability of linguistic politics to changing communication technologies and social contexts.

INTRODUCTION

India is a polity for whom language is an important cultural and political identity. In a milieu where languages are incredibly diverse, local languages can be the basis for collectively and collectively they can be used for political mobilisation. In this sense, one can see the situation in Maharashtra where the once in archaic sense a force of unity, Marathi, plays a strategic role. History of the language politics in Maharashtra begins from the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that led to formation of state in 1960. This was a culturally emotional demand for a united Marathi state. The creation of the state of Maharashtra symbolically affirmed the Marathi language and people and opened up possibilities for socio-economic progress. However, in the post-creation period there was a disproportionate relationship between symbolic recognition and material advancement, particularly in urban areas, like Mumbai.

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With the emergence of Mumbai as a global city there was a heavy infusion of migration from across India, resulting in a demographic shift in the city. This led to a contestation for employment opportunities, infrastructure and services. W69hile immigration was not the sole cause of the riot, it led to a perception among some of the Marathi-speaking population that their "way of life" and/or culture was under threat. These fears were the basis for political mobilisation. In 1966, the emergence of Shiv Sena brought a new language politicisation. Stressing the "Marathi Manoos", it defined language as having to be protected from out-siders. This policy was reiterated and redefined by the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) with its "battle-cry" media mobilisation. These parties constructed discourses of inclusion and exclusion in public campaigns, speeches and symbols. This research explores the politicisation of language in Maharashtra. It explores the role of historical, social, and economic factors, as well as political discourse in the evolution of linguistic politics. In so doing, it aims to explain how language still shapes political action, regional and social identities in present-day Maharashtra.

Theoretical and Historical Context

The historical evolution of language identity in India, which has been strategically deployed as a major platform of political mobilisation, especially in Maharashtra (Brass, 2004). In the years following independence, India was confronted with the dilemma of nation-building with the intervention of a pluralist social order marked by linguistic, cultural and regional diversity. At this stage, language emerged as an important point of political contention as different communities started to assert their linguistic identities vis-à-vis the Indian state (Ambedkar, 1948). This laid the groundwork for the state linguistic reorganisation of the 1950s, which radically transformed India's federal system and cemented language as a foundation for political identity (Godsmark, 2013). A major result of this period was the creation of Maharashtra in 1960. The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that created it was not only a political but a popular movement based on cultural identity, historical legacy and recognition (Godsmark, 2013).

The Marathi language came to symbolise this collective identity, evoking the legacy of historical heroes like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Maratha pride (Kulkarni, 2014). But, while the creation of Maharashtra was a symbolic win, it also raised expectations for socio-economic mobilisation among Marathi-speakers. These were evident in Mumbai, the capital and financial hub of the state. Mumbai's historical importance in trade, industry and demographic migration, both colonial and post-colonial, has helped to make it a cosmopolitan city. This diversity played a role in Mumbai's economic development, but also led to greater competition over employment opportunities, housing and other resources (Gaikwad & Nellis, 2017). The Marathi-speaking community, particularly the urban lower middle and working classes, felt a growing sense of disadvantage. While a linguistic state had been demanded, many felt they were not a part of the new economic opportunities that required a higher level of education and a different form of linguistic capital (such as proficiency in English).

The symbolic-political and material realities of this situation played a critical role in the emergence of linguistic politics. Against this backdrop of socio-economic and political conditions, Shiv Sena was born in 1966 with Bal Thackeray as its leader. The party politicised the status of Marathi by converting economic disputes (such as unemployment and competition over employment) into issues of regional and linguistic identity (Katzenstein, 1973). Shiv Sena's political identity centred on the idea of the "Marathi Manoos" - a group of rights-bearing people (Gupta, 1980). Linguistic politics in Maharashtra have evolved over time, influenced by economic and political factors. The shift from industrial to service sector employment, the growth of the informal economy, and the opening of the Indian economy in the 1990s led to increased competition and anxiety. The resurgence of nativist politics can be seen with the founding of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) party in 2006 by Raj Thackeray. Although remaining focused on Marathi identity, MNS pursued a more mediatised and "theatrical" style of politics (Katzenstein, Mehta, & Thakkar, 1997). Academic studies indicate that linguistic politics in Maharashtra cannot be attributed to demographic factors like migration. The literature of Weiner (1978) and Katzenstein (1973) suggests that the impact of migration is seen only in the context of narratives of competition, exclusion and injustice. Likewise, theories of ethnic competition foreshadow how socio-economic inequalities and occupational divisions are framed as ethnic competition, which can be mobilised for political gain (Mitra, 1995). Therefore, this study's background highlights that linguistic politics is a complex issue influenced by history, socio-economic change and politics. It shows how language, apart from being a means of identity, is also a means of political mobilization

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and is shaped and redefined in the changing context. The paper examines how linguistic politics in Maharashtra impacts the everyday lived experiences and inter-community relations among non-Marathi-speaking minorities, particularly in multilingual urban spaces such as Mumbai, and how inclusive policy frameworks and language-rights protections can mitigate the exclusionary tendencies of linguistic politics while sustaining Marathi regional identity.

Problem Statement

The creation of Maharashtra in 1960 fulfilled the demand for a Marathi linguistic state, but linguistic recognition did not translate uniformly into economic, political and social opportunities. The persistence of linguistic politics cannot be explained by migration alone. Economic restructuring, particularly Mumbai's shift from manufacturing to services, created employment insecurity and relative deprivation among sections of Marathi-speaking working and lower-middle classes. Political actors, especially the Shiv Sena and MNS, reframed these grievances through Marathi Manoos and sons of the soil discourses. The problem is to understand how socio-economic conditions, political mobilisation and changing discourses sustain linguistic politics and affect democracy, inclusion and social cohesion.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to understand the growth of language politics in the state, examine the politicization of Marathi identity, analyse the influence of political actors on language-related issues, and evaluate the social, political, and economic implications of linguistic activism.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and exploratory approach to analyse how language in Maharashtra functions as a political construct and shapes identity, political narratives, and mobilisation. Qualitative research is appropriate because it enables a deeper understanding of meanings, perceptions, and discursive practices rather than statistical interpretation. Discourse analysis forms the main research method to explore how political leaders, political parties and media construct their identities of inclusion and exclusion as well as identity through language. This study focuses on the growth of political issues of language identity in Maharashtra since 1966 to date. It employs a comparative case study approach to explore the rise of the political discourse related to language and identity in Maharashtra through the case of two right wing political groups: Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). The focus is on the political rhetoric of Bal Thackeray and Raj Thackeray in order to analyze the generational changes in political language in Maharashtra (Purandare, 2012). Secondary data including archival speeches of political leaders, policy documents and statements such as election manifestos, newspaper articles, television debates and scholarly studies on political issues of migration and linguistic identity in India will form the primary source of the data (Weiner, 1978; Katzenstein, 1973; Palshikar, 2004). These will help in understanding political rhetoric, tone, political issues and perception of regional identity. This study is based on the assumption that language is not only a reflection of social and political reality but also an instrument for shaping perceptions about these realities (Friedrich, 1962; Hansen, 2001).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analytical Framework of Linguistic Politics

The historical evolution of language identity in India has seen language strategically deployed as a major platform of political mobilization, especially in Maharashtra (Brass, 2004). In the years following independence, India was confronted with the dilemma of nation-building with the intervention of a pluralist social order marked by linguistic, cultural and regional diversity. At this stage, language emerged as an important point of political contention as different communities started to assert their linguistic identities vis-à-vis the Indian state (Ambedkar, 1948). This laid the groundwork for the state linguistic reorganization of the 1950s, which radically transformed India's federal system and cemented language as a foundation for political identity (Godsmark, 2013). A major result of this period was the creation of Maharashtra in 1960. The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that created it was not only a political but a popular movement based on cultural identity, historical legacy and recognition (Godsmark, 2013). The Marathi language came to symbolize this collective identity, evoking the legacy of historical heroes like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

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and Maratha pride (Kulkarni, 2014). But, while the creation of Maharashtra was a symbolic win, it also raised expectations for socio-economic mobilization among Marathi-speakers. These were evident in Mumbai, the capital and financial hub of the state. Mumbai's historical importance in trade, industry and demographic migration, both colonial and post-colonial, has helped to make it a cosmopolitan city.

This diversity played a role in Mumbai's economic development, but also led to greater competition over employment opportunities, housing and other resources (Gaikwad & Nellis, 2017). The Marathi-speaking community, particularly the urban lower middle and working classes, felt a growing sense of disadvantage. While a linguistic state had been demanded, many felt they were not a part of the new economic opportunities that required a higher level of education and a different form of linguistic capital (such as proficiency in English). The symbolic-political and material realities of this situation played a critical role in the emergence of linguistic politics. Against this backdrop of socio-economic and political conditions, Shiv Sena was born in 1966 with Bal Thackeray as its leader. The party politicized the status of Marathi by converting economic disputes (such as unemployment and competition over employment) into issues of regional and linguistic identity (Katzenstein, 1973). Shiv Sena's political identity centred on the idea of the "Marathi Manoos" - a group of rights-bearing people (Gupta, 1980). Linguistic politics in Maharashtra have evolved over time, influenced by economic and political factors. The shift from industrial to service sector employment, the growth of the informal economy, and the opening of the Indian economy in the 1990s led to increased competition and anxiety. The resurgence of nativist politics can be seen with the founding of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) party in 2006 by Raj Thackeray. Although remaining focused on Marathi identity, MNS pursued a more mediates and "theatrical" style of politics (Katzenstein, Mehta, & Thakkar, 1997).

Academic studies indicate that linguistic politics in Maharashtra cannot be attributed to demographic factors like migration. The literature of Weiner (1978) and Katzenstein (1973) suggests that the impact of migration is seen only in the context of narratives of competition, exclusion and injustice. Likewise, theories of ethnic competition foreshadow how socio-economic inequalities and occupational divisions are framed as ethnic competition, which can be mobilized for political gain (Mitra, 1995). Therefore, this study's background highlights that linguistic politics is a complex issue influenced by history, socio-economic change and politics. It shows how language, apart from being a means of identity, is also a means of political mobilization and is shaped and redefined in the changing context (Chandras, 2019**).** Therefore, the paper makes an attempt to understand the growth of language politics in the state, examine the politicization of Marathi identity, analyse the influence of political actors on language-related issues, and evaluate the social, political, and economic implications of linguistic activism.

Understanding and analysing the linguistic politics in Maharashtra

Linguistic politics in Maharashtra reflects the interaction of identity, economic change and political mobilisation. The creation of Maharashtra in 1960 created symbolic linguistic recognition, but unequal socio-economic opportunities generated grievances, particularly among sections of the Marathi working and lower-middle classes. Political organisations such as the Shiv Sena and MNS transformed these grievances into Marathi Manoos and sons of the soil narratives. Linguistic politics therefore operates culturally, economically and institutionally, while its rhetoric has adapted to changing media and technology. At the same time, it strengthens regional identity but can also produce exclusion. Thus, linguistic politics remains a dynamic and adaptable political resource (Mitra, 1995).

Linguistic Politics and the Everyday Experiences of Non-Marathi Communities in Maharashtra

Linguistic politics in Maharashtra have had an immense impact on the lives of communities speaking languages other than Marathi, especially in Mumbai, where linguistic diversity exists due to immigration and industrial activities. The history of this political phenomenon goes back to the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement of the 1950s, which was campaigning for a Marathi-speaking state. It is noteworthy that the formation of the state of Maharashtra took place on 1 May 1960. Marathi language and culture played crucial roles in this process since Marathi language became one of the main foundations of the newly-formed state of Maharashtra. (McDonald, 1968). The situation became particularly important in Mumbai during the 1960s. Mumbai had developed as a major commercial and industrial centre and attracted migrants from different parts of India. Communities speaking Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Urdu and

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other languages became part of the city's social and economic structure. However, competition for employment and access to economic opportunities created perceptions of disadvantage among sections of the Marathi-speaking working and lower-middle classes. In 1966, Bal Thackeray founded the Shiv Sena, initially presenting itself as a movement concerned with the interests of the Marathi Manoos. The party argued that Marathi-speaking people should receive greater opportunities in employment and public life. Consequently, migrants who were identified as non-Marathi, particularly those from South India, increasingly became targets of political criticism during the late 1960s and 1970s (Gupta, 1982).

The 1960s Shiv Sena mobilization in Mumbai illustrates how linguistic identity could affect everyday employment experiences. Campaigns by the party focused on the domination of South Indians within certain occupational spheres and positions. This was to create an environment in which some non-Marathi-speaking people might be considered competitors and not just co-residents. It was in this way that language took on significance within issues of employment and economic possibilities. Thus, the division between Marathi speakers and non-Marathi speakers was more than linguistic; it might take on social and economic connotations (Morkhandikar, 1967). There was a shift in the political significance of the language issue in the 1980s and 1990s. As Shiv Sena began to fuse Marathi regionalism and Hindutva after aligning itself with the BJP party, there was a change in its political significance, which now went beyond the use of language for political ends (Hansen, 1996). There were also changes in the structure of the Mumbai economy during the period. The declining importance of textile production, especially as a result of the 1982–83 textile mill strike and later economic liberalization of 1991 affected employment patterns. Informal and service sector employment gave rise to new areas of competition where language still had political significance (Lele, 1995). Marathi linguistic identity was re-emphasized through the emergence of another group called Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) founded by Raj Thackeray in 2006. The MNS brought back the Marathi Manoos slogan but used modern forms of political communication and media. MNS attacks and protests against the people from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 2008 brought out the connection between linguistic identity and employment, migration, and politics. Such an event changed the feeling of safety and belonging among Hindi speaking migrant communities in Mumbai and elsewhere in Maharashtra (Shaban, 2018). It is not necessary that linguistic politics always generate lasting hostilities between the communities. Mumbai is a cosmopolitan city, which is highly multilingual. Economic interdependence and interaction usually promote accommodation and multilingualism. There have also been studies which show that attitude toward immigrants is shaped by the perception of economic competition and majority/minority dynamics, and not by migration alone, in the case of Mumbai (Gaikwad & Nellis, 2017). This has had a double effect. While, on one side, linguistic politics has reinforced Marathi cultural pride and regional consciousness, on the other side, when political elites paint immigrants and non-Marathi-speaking individuals as rivals or outsiders, language identity results in social boundaries and exclusion. Hence, through the formation of Maharashtra in 1960, the rise of the Shiv Sena in 1966, the economic changes during the 1980s and 1990s, and the rebirth of language politics through the MNS in 2006 onwards, language politics has continued to be linked to the lived experience of people in Maharashtra. While the significance of language politics is certainly linked to the existence of different languages, its importance is also linked to the process whereby political actors use linguistic differences to ask questions about belonging, deserving access to opportunity, and being outsiders.

Role of Inclusive Policy Frameworks and Language Rights Protections in Maharashtra

Maharashtra needs an approach of “Marathi promotion with linguistic protection”, balancing regional identity with the rights of its multilingual population. Since its formation in 1960, Marathi has remained central to regional identity, while communities speaking Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and other languages have also contributed to the state. The Constitutional provisions under Articles 14, 15, 29 and 30, along with the Eighth Schedule, protect equality and linguistic rights. The Maharashtra Official Languages Act, 1964 supports Marathi in administration, but essential public services should remain accessible to non-Marathi speakers. Education should promote Marathi while respecting children's mother tongues, consistent with NEP 2020. Employment policies may require Marathi where functionally necessary but should avoid discriminatory restrictions. Public institutions should encourage multilingual participation and representation, while Marathi literature, culture and history can be promoted without portraying other

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communities as outsiders. Thus, policy should shift linguistic politics from an "insider–outsider" framework towards cultural recognition, equal citizenship, inclusion and social cohesion.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes significantly to the understanding of language politics, nation-building and regionalism in India, particularly in the state of Maharashtra. In examining the shift of Marathi from cultural to political status, it integrates the historical, social and discursive levels, thus providing a comprehensive view of the role of language in politics. Theoretically, it contributes to discussion of identity politics, by revealing that language is not a deterministic category, but it is being constructed and re-constructed in the political discourse. The production and reproduction of language as a mobilising category is a phenomenon not expressed in existing studies as a cultural or administrative category, but is clearly shown in this work. Continuing with the amalgamation of discourse analysis, group competition and political economy theories, it also adds to the field in offering a holistic view, contradicting the uni-dimensional explanations in terms of migration/population. It highlights the reality that language politics is created through the interaction of structural and political factors; this contribution, therefore, adds to the theories of identity creation and mobilisation. Moreover, the study adds to the knowledge of discourse as an integral component of political processes. It exemplifies how language is being used strategically to demarcate 'insiders' from 'outsiders' and socio-economic issues are being discussed in a political emotional manner through the political discourse of politicians such as Bal and Raj Thackeray. This highlights the importance of framing in shaping the public opinion and political action and contributes to the current literature on political communication and populist movements. The study offers an empirical knowledge of the political dynamics of language in Maharashtra through the years. The study also provides a generational cohort analysis of political leaders and an analysis of the shifting nature of political parties like Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and provides insights into the reaction of linguistic mobilisation in different socio-economic and technological situations. This longitudinal research approach complements research that concentrates on particular periods of time or processes of linguistic politics.

Research is relevant for policy making and governance, insofar as it points to the importance of language politics for social harmony and civic participation. It shows that a mobilisation in the name of language can enhance regional identity and spur political participation, but can also marginalise and fragment politically within the region. This analysis is important because it points to this potential and gives another look into the concept of identity politics in a diverse society such as India. Moreover, the study has wider relevance in the context of the political dynamics of language and regionalism in India in general. It plays its role in the debate over federalism and regionalism and national integration, through its portrayal of local identifications and their impact on regional and national politics. Lastly, the research makes an important contribution, as it brings together both a theoretical and empirical perspective to contribute to the deeper understanding of linguistic politics as a cultural and political phenomenon. It is not only scholarly enlightening, but also useful for policy analysts, scholars and citizens who have an interest in studying the nature of identity and politics in contemporary India.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic politics associated with Maharashtra's evolution is not only due to demographic changes like migration but also to the confluence of various historical, socio-economic and political factors. The creation of Maharashtra on 1 May 1960 marked a significant symbolic milestone for the Marathi-speaking population and paved the way for Marathi to become an important regional identity. But the symbolic nature of this accomplishment and the socio-economic aspirations of the people led to the feelings of relative deprivation among some groups of the Marathi people, especially in urban areas like Mumbai. The context of the emergence of linguistic mobilization was important for these conditions. This was a pivotal moment in the evolution with the founding of Shiv Sena in 1966, and as economic issues over employment, migration and competition became more common they were increasingly expressed in the language of Marathi identity and the Marathi Manoos. This was amply proved by the emergence of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in 2006, led by Raj Thackeray that continued to exert political influence over the course of the century. The political relevance of linguistic identity and its ability to adjust to social and technological changes was further demonstrated by the emergence of Maharashtra Navnirman

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Sena (MNS) in 2006 under the leadership of Raj Thackeray. Raj Thackeray's shift to media-based and symbolic political language from the emotionally charged speech of Bal Thackeray is a testament to the ways in which political actors constantly redefine linguistic problems and rally public opinion. Migration or demographic change will not suffice to explain linguistic politics. Political interpretation and representation is very important in shaping economic and social changes into perceptions of competition, insecurity and cultural threat. This politicisation can impact on the daily lives of non-Marathi speaking minorities, especially in multilingual cities like Mumbai, related to work, social inclusion and public interaction and cultural acceptance. Linguistic mobilization can help to reinforce cultural identity and political engagement and foster Marathi cultural pride but its exclusionary aspects can generate insider–outsider dynamics and lead to mistrust, discrimination and conflict between communities. Linguistic politics is thus integrative and divisive. Linguistic politics, on the other hand, does not lead to exclusion of regional identity and pluralism. The establishment of inclusive policy frameworks and language-rights protections can strike a balance between maintaining Marathi identity and equal citizenship rights for non-Marathi-speaking communities. Exclusion can be minimised in the absence of the weakening of Marathi as the main language of the state of Maharashtra through constitution protection, multilingual education, non-discrimination in employment practices, and accessible public services and recognition of minority languages. It is not, then, the question of whether linguistic identity should remain or should go, but whether it should be the basis for social or economic exclusion. Overall, language has shifted from being a cultural identity marker to a political tool whose use is strategically influenced by historical events, economic grievances, political entrepreneurship and forms of communication. To craft governance and policy strategies that can maintain the regional identity and yet foster a spirit of equality, inter-community relations and social cohesion in India's pluralistic democracy one needs to grasp this transformation.

Ethical Consideration

The study is based entirely on secondary data drawn from publicly available academic literature, books, research articles, government documents, policy frameworks, and other relevant documentary sources. Therefore, no human participants were involved and formal ethical approval was not required. All concepts, analysis, interpretations, and arguments presented in the study are the original work of the author. ChatGPT was used only for grammatical correction and language refinement; intellectual ownership, interpretation, and analytical responsibility remain solely with the author. Proper citation and academic integrity have been maintained throughout the study.

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Nil

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are derived from publicly available and properly cited secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government documents, constitutional and legal provisions, policy documents, and other scholarly literature relating to linguistic politics, Marathi identity, language rights, migration, and regional politics in Maharashtra. All documentary sources used in the analysis are appropriately cited within the paper and included in the reference list. The study does not involve primary data collection or human participants; therefore, the analysis is based entirely on accessible documentary and scholarly sources. Additional materials or information used in the analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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