



RAJAJI'S LANGUAGE POLICY IN 1937 AND 1965 : A CASE OF POLITICAL PARADOXES

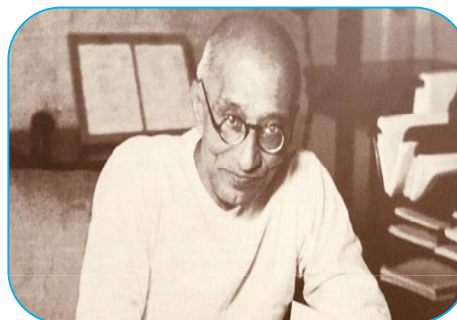
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ABSTRACT:

The attempts to make Hindi as the official language of India are over a century old. Even prior to independence there was struggle to propagate Hindi and surpass English as the official language. In 1938 the first popular and widely known anti-Hindi protests began in the erstwhile Madras Presidency and the then Congress leader and Premier Rajaji was adamant in executing the government order of making Hindi compulsory. During his tenure as Madras Premier in 1937 Rajaji made Hindi compulsory in all schools, a move that led to the first anti-Hindi agitation. In this agitation the anti-Brahmanical stand of the Justice Party headed by E.V.Ramasamy was well exposed. The continuous agitation of Justices made the Governor, Lord Erskine to withdraw this unpopular government order in 1940



The latter half of the paper discusses the Anti-Hindi agitations of 1965 in the Madras State under the stewardship of the newly formed D.M.K. and C.N Annadurai who ensured that the Tamil identity and language were glorified to the extent of making it a divine language and to arouse the Tamil nationalist passions among the masses. Strangely Rajaji in this period was found to be battling against Hindi quite contrary to his earlier stand. He joined hands with the Dravidian party and his newly created Swatantra Party was in need of support and an electoral base. It was a case of survival and also propagating his own ideals which no longer found a place in the Congress Manifesto. However, after independence in the 1960s he strongly objected to the imposition of Hindi. This dichotomy or the two sides to his personality was both his strength and weakness.

KEY WORDS: Rajaji ,Anti-Hindi agitations, language policy, Tamil nationalism, Swatantra party, Dravidian parties.

INTRODUCTION:

India is certainly one of the largest multilingual nations in the world with a very large population of over one billion speaking more than a thousand varied languages and dialects. India is one of the unique countries in the world that has the legacy of diversity of languages having their origins in Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asian and Tibeto-Burman language families. Pluralism and Multilingualism is the way of life in India as people in different parts of the country speak more than one language from their birth and learn additional languages during their lifetime.

The issue of language and linguistic policies has been one of the major factors affecting the demarcation of Indian states and their reorganisation on lines of language and ethnicity. The Indian

leaders however while making the Constitution decided that Hindi, with the Devanagari script, would be the most prominent language and would promote regional communication and unify the numerous cultures of India. Many of the arguments in favour of Hindi was that it would serve as a link language to enhance people-to-people contact in such a geographically diverse country especially because it is spoken by a vast majority of the population and that it would serve as a symbol of national identity and promote India's multiculturalism, tolerance and pluralism at global platforms. Some other advocates of Hindi as an official language have also indicated that a large number of ancient Indian texts were either in Hindi or Sanskrit and used the Devanagari script.

There has been a strong antithesis to this argument and several points of view have been raised specifically fearing the threat of cultural oppression and discrimination against other regional languages. The adoption of Hindi as an official or sole language of communication and administration would drastically heighten the North-South divide within India. There has always been the conception that imposing Hindi or Sanskrit would discriminate against the Dravidian languages and also reinforce the superiority of Brahminism over the others. Those masses speaking other vernacular languages of specific regions would face the threat of losing several opportunities especially in public employment and economic welfare in general.

Above all, the adoption and imposition of Hindi is against constitutional principles and it is against the basic idea of federalism in India. India does not have any national language and the federal States are free to decide their own official languages. Also, the idea of trying to create a 'one nation, one language policy' is certainly against the philosophy of 'unity in diversity'.

The language issue has for long been the bone of contention between the Centre and the States and the formation of regional parties especially the in the south has turned the issue into a very complex one. The Southern states led by Tamil Nadu and Dravidian parties have always been at the helm of Anti- Hindi Agitations beginning from 1937.

The Anti-Hindi agitation in the then Madras Presidency was very hectic from 1937-40 and was a series of protests that took place in various parts of the Madras Presidency of the British Raj . The agitation began in 1937 to oppose the introduction of compulsory teaching of Hindi in the schools of the Madras Presidency. For a while, Rajaji headed the Government of the Indian National Congress in Madras .

Rajagopalachari was a multi-faceted personality. He was fearlessness, purified in public life , man of self-respect and always thinking for progress. His foresight , diplomacy will power attracted many prominent Congress leaders like Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel towards his counselling of political affairs. Due to his extraordinary skill, political insight, able leadership, constant thinking, decision making, prudence and cleverness, all the Congress leaders continued to respect and trust him.

Even though he came out of the Congress, he did not feel for it. Because he was associated with the Gandhian ideals until his last days. He was one among the prominent individuals living on Gandhian principles. His political life was symbolised by the purity of values, a from fearlessness and free thinking. Rajagopalachari was a man of conviction in Dharma and he considered it as his way of life. It was his wisdom, tact and strong will that made many high-profile Congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel respect him and hold him in high regard. Rajaji had a vision for the nation and on several instances he differed from the mainstream Congress policies. Rajaji also was a man of contradictions and inherent paradoxes and he would sway from one standpoint to another based on his circumstances and rationale defined by the political context in every decade. While the means justified the ends for Gandhi, the ends justified the means for Rajaji At the dawn of the Twentieth Century when the Indian Nationalist Movement gained momentum concerted efforts were undertaken to adopt Hindi or Hindustani as a common language to unite various linguistic groups against the British Government. In 1918, the *Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha* (Institution for the Propagation of Hindi in South India) was launched by Gandhi . By 1925, the I.N.C. adopted o *Hindustani* in place of English for conducting its official proceedings. The prominent leaders of the independence movement like Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru supported the promotion of *Hindustani* and the Congress

wanted to propagate and illustrate the importance of learning of *Hindustani* in Provinces of India where Hindi is not a mother tongue .

In the 1937 elections, the I.N.C. won in the Madras Presidency and Rajaji became the Premier on 14th July 1937. Being a staunch follower of Gandhi and a supporter of all of the Congress party's ideals he obviously became a supporter of propagating Hindi in South India. His ideas on the language issue were already evident when his article appeared in the newspaper *Swadesamitran* in May 1937 wherein he had openly supported the need for everyone to be acquainted with Hindi and that even a South Indian needed to know Hindi to carry on business or seek employment.¹ According to his view, the Government employment opportunity was restricted. All of the people could not get such opportunities.. Therefore, everyone had seek other jobs. For seeking private jobs to carry out business, the working knowledge of Hindi is needful. Learning Hindi alone, it was possible for the south Indian to get job opportunity and respect among the fellows of the nation.

Having established the Congress rule in Madras, on 11th August 1937 within a month of coming to power Rajaji announced his aim of introducing Hindi language teaching in secondary schools and in furtherance of the same intention he issued a policy statement to execute his idea.

In the early 1930s there was very strong support and pro-Hindi lobbying by many organisations like *Hindustani Seva Dal* and *Hindustani Hitashi Sabha* which had convinced many Justice Party dominated local governments to make Hindi as compulsory subject in schools. E.V R also known as Periyar and the then opposition Justice Party led by A. T. Panneerselvam strongly opposed the move. An Anti-Hindi conference was organised on 4th October 1937 to protest the announcement.²

To give action to the implementation of Hindi in the Madras Presidency, Rajaji promulgated a government order On 21st April 1938 and this order made the learning of Hindi compulsory in 125 secondary schools there. This act of Rajaji and his determination was looked upon by Hindi's opponents as an attempt to destroy Tamil language and culture and promote Hindi. The opposition led by Justice Party started state-wide protests against Rajaji and imposition of Hindi. The agitation was marked by protest marches, anti-Hindi conferences, observing an anti-Hindi day on 1st July and 3rd December 1938, fasts against government policies, black flag demonstrations and picketing of government offices and institutions. The agitations soon started spreading all over the state especially in the southern districts of the Madras Presidency like Ramnad, Tirunelveli, and also in central and northern districts like Salem, Tanjore and North Arcot.

The anti-Hindi agitation was fully supported by Periyar's Self-Respect Movement and the Justice Party which was led by senior and well-established leaders like Kurma Venkata Reddy Naidu and Panneerselvam. The more militant agitators led by Periyar derived their influence from social activism and politics of agitation. Finally, Periyar was chosen as the President of the Justice Party when he was in prison for this anti-Hindi agitation.

The passion for retaining Tamil as the major language and the stubbornness to oppose the demands of the Congress party and the elite Brahminist tendencies made Periyar emerge as the leader of the Justice Party and he was able to draw the support of many other like minded protestors and ardent Tamil supporters like Maraimalai Adigal, Somasundara Bharathi, K. Appadurai, Mudiyanasan, K. A. P. Viswanatham and Ilakkuvanar.

In December 1937, Tamil Saivite scholars were among the first to announce their opposition to the Hindi teaching in the *Saiva Sidhandha Mahajana Sabha* conference held at Vellore.³

Surprisingly there were some Brahmin protestors who joined the agitation and the Tamil speaking Muslims in the Madras Presidency supported the agitation in contrast to the Urdu speaking Muslims, who supported the propagation of Hindi. P. Kalifulla, a Muslim League member from Tiruchirappalli Constituency in the Legislative Assembly, declared that he was a Rowther and his mother tongue was Tamil and not Urdu. He did not shame for it and was proud to say a Tamil speaking man. So, considering Hindi as the common language of India was not right at any way.⁴

Thereby it was evident that the Tamil identity and passion for the mother tongue was far more powerful than their religious or caste denominations.⁵ In fact the linguistic fervour and Tamil

nationalism was so high that it caused a rift between the Tamil and Urdu speaking Muslims of the South.⁶

The struggle for reinstating the Tamil language was ably funded by the financial support of wealthy landlords and rich industrialists like W. P. A. Soundarapandian Nadar who was a prominent member of the Nadar Mahajan Sangam and G. D. Naidu from Coimbatore and popularly referred to as the 'Edison of India' for his engineering skills and inventions. The entire struggle was spreading like wildfire to all parts of the state and witnessed support across all classes and communities.

Pointing out the popular support to the agitation and its widespread impact, Lord Erskine who was the then Governor of Madras wrote to Viceroy Linlithgow in July 1938 that compulsory Hindi was the reason of great disturbance in the Madras Province and was definitely against the aspirations of the mass of the population."⁷

The resistance to Rajaji's order gained momentum and the Justice Party along with the other supporting organisation such as the Muslim League, launched marches throughout the various districts and it was flagged off by Periyar and Khaliffullah. The marchers who called themselves '*Tamilar Padai*' (Army of the Tamils) started from Tiruchirappalli on 1st August 1938. The brigade was led by Kumarasamy Pillai and Moovalur Ramamirtham. Over the next forty two days, the marching contingent of protestors covered nearly 234 villages and over sixty towns. They addressed 87 public meetings and received widespread coverage in the newspapers as well. They reached Madras on 11th September 1938 and were arrested for picketing government offices. In little towns and villages, the march witnessed with the raising anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans.

The protests were violent at some places and met with stiff resistance and use of force. One of the main protestors Thalamuthu was detained in early March 1939 for picketing the Hindu Theological High School in Madras and was imprisoned. He fell ill on 6th March and died on 11th March 1939. Similarly tragedy struck another agitator by name Natarajan who was arrested on 5th December 1938 and died in January 1939. Their deaths were glorified by the fellow protestors who were angered by the indifference shown towards their deaths by Rajaji and his government. Their funeral processions in Madras were attended by hundreds of mourners and passionate and fiery speeches denouncing the government were made. C.N. Annadurai openly claimed that Natarajan's name and deeds should be inscribed in gold in the history of the world. The agitators glorified and praised their sacrifices and claimed that both of the martyrs had refused any concessions of an early release in exchange for ending their protests. Such was the passion of the Tamils for their language which they regarded as the most ancient and sacred. On many occasions the Tamil language was elevated to the status of a 'Goddess' or 'Female Deity' and often referred to as '*Tamizh Thaa*'.⁸

Rajaji being a Brahmin himself also contributed to the protests on account of his single mindedness to impose Hindi and it also led to an overall perception that the step was mooted by Brahmin-dominated Tamil Nadu Congress party to appease the "Hindi Imperialists" from the North. Thus, there was an Anti-Brahmin undertone that combined with the Anti Hindi agitation that added complex dimensions to the struggle.

Rajaji's choice of using Sanskrit words in translating a Physics textbook into Tamil also added fuel to the fire and was condemned as conspiracy by the Brahmin community to deny Tamil its status and credibility. Rajaji was branded as an enemy of Tamil language and many vernacular newspapers carried cartoons depicting Rajaji hurling a dagger at '*Tamil Thai*' and disrobing her. On their processions, the anti-Hindi agitators upheld many banners condemning Rajaji and his deeds in the Hindi issue. On August 1938, Pavalar Balasundaram in an anti-Hindi meeting, openly accused the Brahmin community for daggering '*Tamil Thai*'. When Rajaji criticised the death of anti-Hindi agitator Natarajan in the Assembly, it was expressed that the Aryans laughing while Tamils the lamenting for their hero. Rajaji complained that the agitators were describing their opponents 'by caste, by their sacred thread, by the tuft of the hair on their head'.⁹

The ruling Congress party itself was divided on this issue and leaders like Sarvepalli Radhkrishnan and Satyamurthi were against such an obstinate and narrow approach of Rajaji and especially concerned by the use of police force and criminal action against the protestors. They

suggested alternatives rather than compulsory imposition of Hindi and wanted the parents of the students to have a choice or reason to allow or withhold the child from learning Hindi.

These actions only further hardened the resolve of Rajaji and he issued another Government Order in 1938 wherein he clarified that it was essential for the students to learn Hindi and that Hindi would be compulsory only in the sense that attendance in such classes would be compulsory. The students should not take Hindi as a substitute for Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil, or Kannada but in addition to one of these languages, they should learn Hindi only.

Rajaji was very stubborn and did not yield to the demands of the agitators. He criticised them for their bias and hatred for Aryan and termed them as Anti Aryans and Anti -Congress. His high handed behaviour also angered the British Governor Lord Erskine and he labelled Rajaji as being too dominating and oppressive and ruled like a despot and not a political party leader. Over 1000 protestors were arrested and many denied bail and prominent Dravidian leaders like Periyar and Annadurai were imprisoned for several months and also fined heavily for inciting the agitators and also for encouraging women to join the protests.

On 29th October 1939, Rajaji's Congress Government resigned protesting against the involvement of India in the Second World War. Madras provincial government was placed under Governor's rule. On 31st October, Periyar suspended the agitation and asked the Governor to withdraw the compulsory Hindi order. Erskine, the Governor of issued a press communiqué. On 21 February 1940. Accordingly, the Madras Government withdrew the order of compulsory Hindi learning in schools and made Hindi an optional one.

There were several political changes that took place in post- Independence India and many nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Patel and others had passed away. Rajaji and Nehru along with the other senior congress leaders were the beacons of a newly independent India and the nation was on the brink of a new era. The most important task of drawing up the Indian Constitution had begun and the Congress party was finding its feet as the major and largest national party.

The official language issue was settled at that point in time but was to raise its head once again in the 1960s when the Union Government once again firmed up its stand on imposition of Hindi. The Congress party was resolute in advancing the cause of Hindi and the President of India had also given his assent to the bill. On 26th January 1965 was the date fixed for switching over to Hindi as the official language of India.

At this juncture however Rajaji was on the other side battling against the move quite in contrast to his earlier stand in 1937 when he himself was responsible for passing Government orders making Hindi compulsory. Several questions arose on the double standards adopted by Rajaji and it can be attributed probably to the fact that he had drifted away from the Congress in the previous decade.

Rajaji's dislike of Nehru's policy of leaning towards Socialism and the Communist party had led to a rift between the congress leadership and personally between the two leaders as well. Rajaji was extremely critical of the Leftist tendencies exhibited by the Congress leadership. and the Avadi Resolution of 1955 and the Nagpur Resolution of 1959 paved the way for separation of their paths.

Nehru and Rajaji shared a very close bond and in fact in 1950 Rajaji was Nehru's initial choice for President. But this candidature was opposed by a group of powerful north Indian politicians and Rajendra Prasad became the President. Rajaji was immediately inducted into Nehru's cabinet as Minister without portfolio. In the issues between Nehru and Patel, Rajaji played a key role to solve them. After the death of Patel, Rajaji became Home Minister.

As Home Minister, Rajaji differed with the Prime Minister on several issues particularly the threats to Congress and its principles. He pointed to the Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian communists as major threats to the Congress party. Rajaji was very uncomfortable with Nehru's vision of a creating a Socialistic pattern of society in India as well as Nehru's fascination with the Soviet Union. Owing to growing differences with the Congress leadership, the following year he quit the government and returned to Madras, where he became the Chief Minister in 1952.

The period between 1950 to 1960 was a decade of turbulence for Rajaji and his place in the Congress leadership. He realised that Nehru was turning a deaf ear to his economic and political

recommendations for India and this led to a complete breaking away between the two. Rajaji felt that the I.N.C. had lost its way and was now governed by Socialist and Protectionist principles which were not to his liking.

The Swatantra Party founded by Rajaji in 1959 was a Right wing conservative party and it was primarily a reactionary response to Nehruvian policies especially government control over the private sector. In this context, Rajaji harshly criticized the bureaucracy and called it 'license-permit Raj'. By using this term, he attacked Nehru's complicated system of permissions and licenses.

Rajaji's Swatantra party began to prepare for elections and as a natural development Rajaji chose to align with the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu and decided to oppose the centre's move to impose Hindi once again in South India. The anti-Hindi agitation laid the seeds for the dominance of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu politics, reimagining the Union-state paradigm on relative rights and governance.¹⁰

The central government's efforts to impose Hindi as the sole official language after 1965 met with resistance in the erstwhile Madras State and the agitation gained momentum with students out on the streets as the day of the switchover to Hindi neared. On 25th January, riots broke out in Madurai sparked off by a minor altercation between agitating students and workers of the ruling Congress and it soon spread across the state and continued for two months.

The newly formed Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.) a breakaway from the Dravida Kazhagam (D.K.) gathered the support of the youth and relied on awakening the self-respect of Tamils, and kept the situation on tenterhooks for the Centre. The D.M.K. leveraged on eulogising and deifying the Tamil language and the Tamil ethnic identity and glorified the past of the Tamil Country and won the hearts of the masses. The D.M.K. surpassed the D.K. its parent party in entrenching itself amidst the masses through its cultural and linguistic association and not just on social reform as preached by the former Dravidian parties. The D.M.K. succeeded in arousing Tamil Nationalism and was able to awaken the passion for Tamil language and culture and literature. The D.M.K. leaders were able to bring out the linguistic consciousness and convert it into a political force. Tamil Nadu, therefore, became a hotbed of Anti-Hindi Agitations in the 1960s.¹¹

Finally it was Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's assurance that English would continue as the official language as long as the non-Hindi speaking states wanted. That assurance led to the end of the agitation. But political convulsions continued and enabled the D.M.K. to come to power in the assembly poll of 1967, trouncing the Congress, which never recovered after the loss.¹² The Elections of 1967 was a watershed in the history of the party politics in Madras State especially in the aftermath of the language riots and food crisis and it would seal the fate of the Congress party in South Indian politics.

Being the shrewd and clever statesman, Rajaji chose to align with the dominant forces in the Madras State at that time as his only goal was to defeat the Congress party. Everyone was eagerly awaiting Rajaji's next move, as by this time his only aim was to humiliate the Congress.¹³

The D.M.K. led front comprised the Swatantra Party, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Praja Socialist Party, Samyukta Socialist Party, Tamil Nadu Toilers Party, Republican Party of India and the Indian Union Muslim League. This opposition coalition was forged by Rajaji with the sole purpose of defeating the Kamaraj led Congress in Madras State. Rajaji's personal hostility to Kamaraj and his opposition to the Congress party were the main reasons behind Swatantra's alliance with D.M.K. The electoral alliance between D.M.K., Swatantra Party and Muslim League was materialised in 1964 when the civic elections were held throughout Madras State. In the 1964 election campaign Rajaji said that both the D.M.K. and Muslim League were my children and it was his main duty bound to nurse them to attain strength and stature.¹⁴

There was a lot of suspicion about Rajaji's efforts to forge an alliance with the D.M.K. and although he provoked Annadurai to openly oppose the Congress and Communist parties on account of his previous links and longstanding support for the Congress. However this time Rajaji was very keen to make a coalition with the D.M.K. and other regional forces and quite in contrast to his views on Hindi as an official language in 1937 this time he was of the opinion that by now it was well known that Hindi

was not the language of the majority of the population . Even though it was the language of the majority of the people, it was not right on the part of the majority to compel the minority to accept Hindi.¹⁵

In order to justify his reversal of stand on the Hindi issue, Rajaji also made his observation in his *Swarajya* dated January 1968. Accordingly, after a genuine and strenuous effort on his part more than half a century ago to devise an improvement and expansion of the Tamil language for these purposes. he came finally to the conclusion that it would be a waste of national effort.¹⁶

The contradictory approach of Rajaji on the imposition of Hindi as official language from 1937 to 1965 has been seen as an evolution in party politics and the changes that occurred in the priorities of the Congress party and also the changing perceptions of Rajaji over Nehru's Leftist leanings leading him to form his own Right wing conservative party. Also it was to a large extent driven by the increasing need for the newly formed Swatantra Party to forge a coalition in Dravidian politics.

The gradual evolution of Rajaji's ideals and the drifting away from the Congress can be seen as his desire to implement his ideals and vision for a non-Socialist pattern of economic development of India and he also wished to ensure the electoral success of his Swatantra Party. Although he gathered support for the party not just in Tamil Nadu but all over India in States like Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. It was Madras State where he found some grounding. By now he was convinced that some of his earlier efforts at being a Hindi enthusiast and trying to impose a language that was unfamiliar to the Tamil region would be a futile effort and he rather rationalise and accept the reasons and justifications that Hindi was just another regional language and could not be imposed as an official language in a multi lingual democratic space Any attempt to tamper with the sentiments and linguistic passions would bear grave consequence and threaten the social and secular fabric of democratic politics in a developing nation. It was a lesson learnt from experience that it would be disastrous to impose a particular language in a country like India and a more mellowed and inclusive approach would be required to justify the need for the co-existence of different languages.

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