

Language Politics and Regional Television in India

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Abstract- Regional television in India sits at the crossroads of culture, identity, and power. As a multilingual nation with deep linguistic diversity, India's regional TV channels are not merely entertainment platforms—they are cultural storytellers, political arenas, and vehicles of identity assertion. This paper explores how language politics shapes the creation, distribution, and reception of regional television content, influencing both audience behaviour and cultural representation. It examines how linguistic pride, regional aspirations, and political mobilisation find expression in news programming, soap operas, reality shows, and regional OTT extensions. The study also highlights the tensions between Hindi dominance and linguistic federalism, bringing out how regional channels negotiate visibility and market competition in a media landscape still influenced by centralised narratives. Through case studies and audience insights, this research uncovers how regional television becomes a site where language is used to include, empower, exclude, or negotiate identity. Ultimately, the paper argues that the evolution of regional television is inseparable from India's ongoing debates on language rights, cultural autonomy, and media decentralisation.

Keywords: Language and identity, Regional media, Television culture, Linguistic politics, Indian communication, Cultural representation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of language politics and regional television in India has evolved across multiple scholarly traditions, bringing together insights from media studies, sociolinguistics, political science, and cultural anthropology. Researchers consistently emphasize that Indian television is more than a communication tool—it is a powerful cultural institution that shapes

linguistic identities and mediates regional aspirations. The literature reveals how language becomes a marker of identity, a site of political struggle, and a strategic tool for media industries seeking to reach increasingly segmented audiences.

Early scholarship on Indian television largely focused on the role of Doordarshan, which dominated the national broadcast space for decades. Writers such as Arvind Rajagopal noted how television under state control promoted national integration and linguistic standardization, often privileging Hindi as the “neutral” or “national” medium. This created a legacy in which regional languages were seen either as cultural artefacts or as markers of local identity rather than engines of mainstream media power. With the liberalization of the 1990s, scholars observed a dramatic shift: regional television channels emerged as powerful players, and language became central to market differentiation. Media researchers argue that liberalization democratized the screen for regional cultures, making television a key platform for linguistic assertion.

Several sociolinguistic studies highlight that India's linguistic diversity is inherently political. Language has historically been tied to regional movements, electoral mobilization, and state formation—from the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu to the linguistic reorganization of states in the 1950s. Literature on media and identity, especially by scholars like Stuart Hall, provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how representation constructs cultural belonging. Applied to India, these frameworks show how regional television reinforces collective identity by embedding local language, symbols, accents, and narratives into everyday media consumption.

Studies on regional TV genres—such as soap operas, reality shows, and regional news—illustrate how

linguistic nuances shape audience engagement. Scholars researching Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, and Tamil channels emphasize that viewers value authenticity, cultural specificity, and linguistic relatability. This explains the success of region-specific storytelling formats and dubbing practices. However, dubbing is also controversial: literature shows that while it expands reach, it sometimes triggers linguistic anxieties or resistance, as seen in the debates around dubbed content in Karnataka and Maharashtra. Such tensions underscore the persistent negotiation between cultural preservation and market expansion.

Political communication scholars deeply examine the role of language in regional news broadcasting. Studies reveal that regional news channels often reflect and amplify linguistic pride, political nationalism, or sub-nationalism. For instance, research on Telugu and Tamil news channels shows how linguistic framing influences political identity, electoral discourses, and perceptions of governance. Scholars also highlight the politicization of language through editorial choices, anchors' linguistic style, and use of vernacular idioms that connect with regional audiences. A recurring theme is that regional news channels become spaces where political actors articulate identity-based narratives, leveraging linguistic sentiment to mobilize public opinion.

The literature on media economics provides another layer of understanding. Researchers note that regional television today is among the fastest-growing segments of the Indian media market. Increased advertising revenue, the expansion of regional OTT platforms, and the rise of hyper-local content have strengthened the business case for linguistic media. Industry reports and academic studies converge on the idea that language is not merely cultural capital but also economic capital. The rise of channels such as Asianet, Sun TV, and ETV demonstrates how regional networks build linguistic loyalty to secure commercial dominance. Scholars argue that media conglomerates strategically use regional language offerings to expand their footprint while aligning with local audiences' linguistic pride. Another thematic stream in the literature centers on globalization and cultural hybridity. Scholars examine how regional television blends global formats with local language content. For

example, reality shows like *Bigg Boss* or *India's Got Talent*, when produced in regional languages, are viewed as hybrid products—global in structure but locally rooted in language. This hybridization is seen as both a cultural bridge and a site of political contestation, where global influences coexist with regional identity claims. The literature suggests that such hybrid formats allow regional audiences to experience global modernity without relinquishing their linguistic identity.

Digital transformation has become a recent focal area in academic work. Researchers studying regional OTT platforms—such as Hoichoi (Bengali), Aha (Telugu), Planet Marathi, and Neestream (Malayalam)—observe a revival of regional storytelling driven by on-demand digital viewing. Literature highlights that these platforms have expanded the market for content creators working in smaller languages, enabling diverse narratives that traditional television might overlook. Scholars also note that digital regional content increasingly addresses political identity, historical memory, and social issues, reinforcing the link between language and mediated citizenship.

Furthermore, critical scholarship points out that language politics in regional television is also about exclusion and marginalization. Minority languages like Tulu, Bodo, or Santhali remain underrepresented despite constitutional recognition. Studies indicate that television networks prioritize languages with larger markets, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. This gap in representation raises important questions about cultural rights and media justice. Scholars argue that equitable media representation must go beyond commercially dominant languages to ensure linguistic diversity in the national media ecosystem. Finally, the literature consistently acknowledges the audience as an active participant. Audience studies on regional television show how viewers use language-based media to negotiate identity, nostalgia, belonging, and cultural pride. Whether it is the emotional attachment to mother tongue, the reaffirmation of regional heritage, or resistance to linguistic homogenization, audience reception studies affirm that regional television is deeply intertwined with the everyday politics of language.

Taken together, the scholarship establishes that language politics is not peripheral but central to the evolution of regional television in India. The literature demonstrates that language influences content production, audience reception, political messaging, media economics, and cultural representation. It also highlights the dynamic negotiations between national and regional identities, global and local influences, and commercial interests and cultural rights. By synthesizing these perspectives, this research situates regional television as a vital site where linguistic identity is continuously shaped, contested, and celebrated in India's diverse media landscape.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars studying India's political and cultural history have long highlighted the importance of language as a tool of power. Paul Brass points to the central role of language in shaping political identity, while Sudipta Kaviraj argues that language often becomes a vehicle for imagining communities. In the field of media studies, Arvind Rajagopal shows how television influences public attitudes and collective behaviour.

Research on regional broadcasting suggests that viewers prefer content rooted in their linguistic environment because it feels authentic and relatable. Studies note that regional channels help preserve cultural memory, introduce local narratives, and strengthen the emotional bond between viewers and their language. At the same time, some scholars warn that these channels occasionally repeat stereotypes or reinforce narrow cultural boundaries.

Although language politics and television have been studied independently, their overlap how language becomes a political and cultural tool on regional television still requires closer attention. This gap is where the present study positions itself.

III. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

This section synthesizes insights from secondary data, audience studies, TRP patterns, and media reports. The analysis reveals four major themes: linguistic identity assertion, political framing, market dynamics, and digital transformation.

Rise of Linguistic Identity in Regional Television

Across India's linguistic regions—Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada—regional television channels have become strong vehicles of identity expression. TRP data from BARC (2018–2024) shows that regional GECs consistently outperform Hindi GECs in their respective states. For example, Sun TV (Tamil) and Asianet (Malayalam) remained top channels with market shares above 35 percent in their regions. This suggests that audiences prefer content rooted in their own languages and cultural rhythms.

Audience interviews from previous studies indicate that television is not just entertainment but a reaffirmation of “who we are.” Dramas with local dialects, festivals, and folklore are perceived as more relatable than standardized Hindi narratives. Language is functioning not only as a communication tool but also as a cultural anchor that cements community belonging. Regional channels succeed because they linguistically and emotionally mirror their audience.

Political Messaging and Linguistic Framing

The analysis of news bulletins from six regional channels—ABP Ananda (Bengali), TV9 Telugu, Jaya TV (Tamil), ETV Kannada, Zee Marathi, and News18 Assam—indicates that linguistic framing influences political identity formation.

Common patterns include:

- Use of native idioms and cultural metaphors in political reporting
- Narratives of regional pride during elections
- Selective emphasis on state-specific issues (e.g., linguistic rights, local governance, federal disputes)

This suggests that regional news is a site where politicians and parties strategically use language to mobilize sentiment.

Market Dynamics and Commercial Linguistic Strategy

Media conglomerates (e.g., Sun Network, Zee, Star India, Viacom18) have expanded aggressively into regional markets. Industry reports show that between 2015 and 2024, the regional TV advertising market grew at nearly double the rate of Hindi TV advertising.

Reasons:

- Higher viewer loyalty in regional-language households
- Lower production cost of regional content
- Local advertisers prefer mother-tongue channels for emotional connection

For example, Marathi and Bengali channels have seen rising ad investments from jewelry, education, and FMCG sectors; Tamil and Telugu markets attract automobile and real estate advertisers.

Interpretation:

Language is monetized as cultural capital, proving that regional linguistic identity has strong economic value.

OTT Platforms and Digital Language Reinvention

Regional OTT platforms such as Hoichoi (Bengali), Aha (Telugu), Planet Marathi, NeeStream (Malayalam), and Chaupal (Punjabi) are reshaping digital consumption.

Key trends:

- Younger audiences shift towards regional digital originals
- OTT enables deeper treatment of linguistic themes (e.g., dialect-based storytelling)
- Revival of marginalized dialects (like Sylheti, Malwani, Bhojpuri variants)

Data from KPMG reports (2022–2024) shows that regional OTT consumption grew by over 50%, surpassing Hindi content growth.

Insight:

Digital media has not diluted linguistic identity; instead, it has amplified it by enabling niche linguistic audiences.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that language politics in regional television is not merely a cultural phenomenon—it is deeply intertwined with identity, power, economics, and digital citizenship.

Language as Identity and Symbolic Power

Regional television is now a stage where linguistic pride is enacted daily. Viewers interpret their language not just as communication but as heritage. This aligns

with theories by Stuart Hall and Benedict Anderson, where language helps construct imagined communities. Television, by speaking the “language of the people,” strengthens regional belonging.

Media as a Political Actor

The analysis shows that regional news channels often reinforce political narratives that emphasize linguistic autonomy or regional grievances. This creates a mediated form of linguistic nationalism, which can be constructive (asserting cultural rights) but may also intensify identity-based polarization. Media companies have realized that “language sells.” The commodification of language has created both opportunities (diverse content) and challenges (market bias toward large linguistic groups). This commercialization sometimes sidelines smaller languages lacking large markets.

Hybridization Through Digital Platforms

Regional OTT platforms represent a new phase where global formats blend with local linguistic expression. This hybridization is expanding creativity but also raising tensions around censorship, cultural preservation, and linguistic purity. India’s linguistic diversity is not a barrier but an engine of creativity. Regional television strengthens India’s cultural federalism by preserving local worldviews while participating in national narratives.

CONCLUSION

Regional television in India is far more than a linguistic entertainment medium—it is a living archive of regional identity, political expression, and cultural continuity. The analysis shows that language politics shapes how regional TV content is produced, framed, consumed, and commercialized. As India’s media landscape becomes increasingly decentralized, regional television asserts its cultural and political significance by giving voice to diverse linguistic communities.

The rise of regional OTT platforms further deepens this impact by allowing linguistic storytelling that transcends the limitations of traditional broadcasting. These platforms have revived dialects, empowered local creators, and fostered new linguistic micro-communities.

However, challenges remain. Smaller linguistic groups continue to be marginalized, and political manipulation of language-based narratives can shape public opinion in troubling ways. Balancing economic interests with cultural responsibility will be crucial. Ultimately, regional television offers a dynamic space where India's linguistic plurality flourishes. It strengthens cultural federalism, democratizes representation, and negotiates India's linguistic future in a rapidly evolving media ecosystem. Language politics, therefore, is not a secondary influence—it is central to understanding the past, present, and future of regional media in India.

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