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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Linguistic Federalism at 66 — Why Maharashtra-Gujarat's 1960 Bifurcation Still Shapes Indian Federalism

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

When the Bombay Reorganisation Act came into force on May 1, 1960, India's leadership had learned something critical from the previous twelve years: linguistic identity in a multi-lingual country could not be suppressed without consequence. The 1948 Dhar Commission had argued against linguistic states. The 1948 JVP Committee (Nehru, Patel, Pattabhi Sitaramayya) had reluctantly accepted the principle. The 1953 death of Potti Sriramulu after a 56-day fast for Andhra had forced the creation of India's first linguistic state. The 1956 States Reorganisation Act, based on the Fazl Ali Commission's report, had finally codified linguistic reorganisation as policy.

The 1960 Bombay split was the closing chapter of this learning curve. Sixty-six years later, that learning remains foundational. India's linguistic federalism is among the world's most successful political accommodations — and it is being tested again in 2026 by debates over Hindi imposition, delimitation, and Bengali identity.

WHAT 1960 SETTLED

The Bombay Reorganisation Act 1960 settled four questions that had previously been unresolved:

- 1. Language as a legitimate basis for state boundaries.** Before 1956, the principle was contested. After 1960, it was operational. India's states would be drawn primarily along linguistic lines.
- 2. Bombay city's identity.** The 1960 Act allocated Bombay city to Maharashtra. This was a major political event — Marathi-speakers viewed it as recognition of their majority status; Gujarati commercial interests adapted to operating in a Marathi-identified city.
- 3. The mechanism of state creation.** Article 3 was demonstrated to be a workable instrument. Parliament could redraw state boundaries with state legislative consultation (not consent) and simple majority. This procedural clarity would enable future reorganisations (Punjab 1966, Northeast 1971-72, Telangana 2014, J&K 2019).

4. The relationship between mass mobilisation and constitutional reform. The Samyukta Maharashtra and Mahagujarat movements demonstrated that organised mass agitation could force constitutional reorganisation. This created both political opportunity and political risk for subsequent linguistic claims.

WHY LINGUISTIC FEDERALISM WORKED

India's linguistic federalism has succeeded despite predictions of failure for three structural reasons:

1. State boundaries are politically empowering, not just administrative. A linguistic state has its own assembly, executive, civil service, public sector, and budget. Linguistic identity gets translated into substantive political power. This channels linguistic energy into democratic participation rather than separatist mobilisation.

2. Co-existence is enforced through constitutional structure. The [Eighth Schedule](#) recognises 22 languages. The Three-Language Formula (school education) accommodates Hindi, English, and regional languages. Article 343 makes Hindi the official language but Article 344 mandates the development of regional languages. The constitutional machinery is designed for co-existence, not imposition.

3. Cross-linguistic political coalitions remain viable. National parties operate across linguistic states. Migration creates inter-state populations. Trade and economic integration require linguistic accommodation. The pressures for cross-linguistic cooperation balance the pressures for linguistic separateness.

WHERE LINGUISTIC FEDERALISM IS TESTED IN 2026

Three contemporary tests of India's linguistic federal architecture:

1. Delimitation and southern under-representation. Census 2027 + post-delimitation seat redistribution will likely reduce the relative representation of southern (and Bengali-speaking) states. This has prompted concerns from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and West Bengal that population control success will be electorally penalised. The 1960 settlement assumed that linguistic states would have proportionate national representation; delimitation may rebalance this.

2. Hindi imposition concerns. The Three-Language Formula in NEP 2020 has been read by some southern states (notably Tamil Nadu, where DMK has historically opposed Hindi imposition since the 1937 Madras Presidency anti-Hindi agitation) as Hindi imposition by another name. The 1960 settlement assumed regional languages would be protected; whether this assumption holds in 2026 is genuinely contested.

3. Bengali identity in Assam and West Bengal. The NRC process in Assam, the citizenship questions raised by CAA 2019, and West Bengal's contested 2026 election all touch on the linguistic-cultural identity questions that the 1960 settlement did not anticipate. The post-Independence Bengali population in Assam (and elsewhere) creates linguistic identity questions outside the original linguistic-states framework.

WHAT 1960 CANNOT DO

The 1960 settlement does not solve everything:

- It does not address inter-state water disputes (Cauvery, Krishna, Mahanadi, Sutlej-Yamuna)
- It does not address language hierarchies within states (Konkani in Maharashtra; Bhojpuri in UP/Bihar)
- It does not address the linguistic-economic geography of post-1991 reforms (English-language services economy concentrated in metros; regional language industries marginal)

But it provides the constitutional architecture within which these contemporary questions are negotiated. The architecture remains, sixty-six years on, India's most successful political innovation.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Polity	Article 3; states reorganisation; linguistic federalism; centre-state relations
GS1 — Modern History	Linguistic states movement; Potti Sriramulu; Fazl Ali Commission; Dhar Commission
GS2 — Governance	Eighth Schedule; Three-Language Formula; constitutional accommodation

Mains Keywords: Bombay Reorganisation Act 1960, Article 3, States Reorganisation Act 1956, Fazl Ali Commission, Dhar Commission, Potti Sriramulu, linguistic federalism, Eighth Schedule, Three-Language Formula, NEP 2020 language

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Bombay Reorganisation Act	1960 (effective May 1)
States Reorganisation Act	1956 (Fazl Ali Commission)
Dhar Commission	1948 — opposed linguistic reorganisation
JVP Committee	1948 — Nehru, Patel, Pattabhi Sitaramayya
First linguistic state	Andhra Pradesh (1953)
Article 3	Parliament's power to redraw state boundaries
Eighth Schedule	22 languages
Article 343	Hindi as official language
Article 344	Development of other languages
Three-Language Formula	Originated in Kothari Commission (1964-66); reaffirmed in NEP 2020

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