

# What R N Ravi's criticism of linguistic states misses

*Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi has criticised the linguistic division of states. But language was not the only basis of reorganisation in 1956. Scholars have long argued that linguistic states helped ensure India's unity.*

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Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi. (File Photo)

Amid a recent resurgence of language politics in the country, Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi on Tuesday stirred up a fresh row by criticising the linguistic division of states which, he said, had turned a large section of the populace into “second-class citizens”.

“Within a decade of our Independence, there had to be a linguistic reorganisation of Bharat... When we created linguistic states, a large population became second-class citizens...,” Ravi

said at an event in [Gandhinagar](#).

Scholars have long argued, however, that the linguistic organisation of states has been critical in ensuring India's continued unity and integrity. Here's a brief history.

### Before first reorganisation

The British had administered India with two systems running in parallel — a system of direct control in its provinces, and a system of indirect control across 565 princely states. The provincial boundaries India inherited in 1947, were thus products of colonial administrative exigencies and the historical process of integration of erstwhile principalities and kingdoms into the Empire.

The Constitution, which came into force on January 26, 1950, declared India to be a "Union of States". The country, at the time, was divided into 28 states, falling under four categories.

\* There were nine Part A states (governors' provinces in British India), which were ruled by elected legislatures. These were: Assam, Bihar, Bombay, East Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

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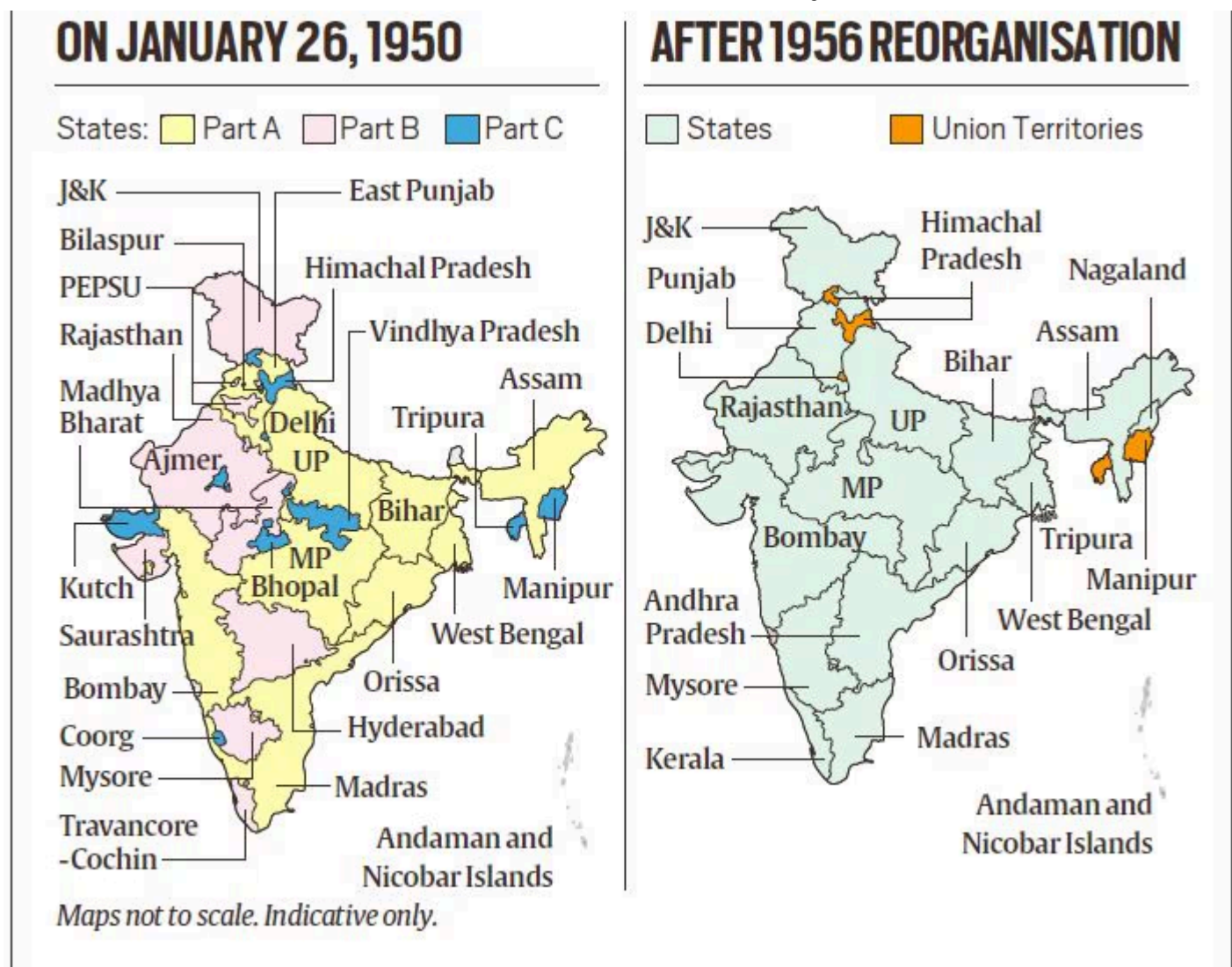
### **Read | 'Linguistic division of states after Independence has created second-class citizens': Tamil Nadu Governor Ravi**

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\* There were eight Part B states (former princely states or group of princely states), which were ruled by elected legislatures and a rajpramukh. These were: [Hyderabad](#), [Jammu & Kashmir](#), Madhya Bharat, Mysore, Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), Rajasthan, Saurashtra, and Travancore-Cochin.

\* The ten Part C states included both the former chief commissioners' provinces and some princely states, and were governed by a chief commissioner appointed by the President. These were: Ajmer, [Bhopal](#), Bilaspur, Coorg State, [Delhi](#), Himachal Pradesh, Kutch, Manipur, Tripura, and Vindhya Pradesh.

\* There was only one Part D state, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which was governed by a lieutenant governor appointed by the President.



## The reorganisation of 1956

Pre-Independence, the Congress had supported the formation of linguistic provinces. But after witnessing Partition, New Delhi was not too keen on immediately creating further linguistic divisions. The so-called JVP committee set up in 1949, comprising Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, head of the States Ministry Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Congress president Pattabhi Sittaramaya, cautioned against the “disintegrative effects of reorganisation”.

But by the early 1950s, there was momentum in many regions for the creation of linguistic states. On October 19, 1952, Potti Sriramulu, a 51-year-old railway engineer, went on a hunger strike demanding the creation of a Telugu-speaking Andhra state. His death, after a 58-day-long fast, triggered widespread public outcry and protests. Two days later, on December 17, Nehru announced the creation of Andhra, which would officially become a state on October 1, 1953.

The creation of Andhra opened a floodgate of demands for linguistic statehood. Less than three months after the state officially came into being, the Centre set up the States

## Reorganisation Commission (SRC) under Justice Fazl Ali.

“The greater development of political consciousness among the people and the growing importance of the great regional languages led gradually to demands for the formation of certain States on a linguistic basis. Each such separate problem was however closely interrelated with other problems, and any formation of a new state necessarily affected a number of other States. It thus became increasingly difficult to consider any such problem in isolation...,” the Centre said in its resolution to create the SRC.

Justice Ali submitted a 267-page report on September 30, 1955. Based on the SRC's recommendations, the political map of India was redrawn to comprise 14 states and six Union Territories (UTs).

### Language not the only criteria

In its December 1953 resolution on the SRC in Parliament, the Centre had made clear that language would not be the only criterion for the reorganisation of states.

“The language and culture of an area have an undoubted importance as they represent a pattern of living which is common in that area... in considering a reorganisation of States, however, there are other important factors which have also to be borne in mind. The first essential consideration is the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India. Financial, economic and administrative considerations are almost equally important, not only from the point of view of each State, but for the whole nation,” it had said.

The final report too reflected this sentiment.

“...After a full consideration of the problem in all its aspects, we have come to the conclusion that it is neither possible nor desirable to reorganise States on the basis of the single test of either language or culture, but that a balanced approach to the whole problem is necessary in the interests of our national unity,” the SRC report stated.

Notably, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the forerunner of the [BJP](#), reacted to the SRC report by saying that it was “satisfied that the Commission had rejected the suggestion of creating states merely based on language” and demanded the “quick implementation of the recommendations”.

In fact, most of the criticism directed at the SRC and the Centre was that it was not doing enough to recognise linguistic demands.



For instance, the SRC recommended the creation of a bilingual Bombay state that stretched from Kutch in the northwest to Vidarbha in the east and bordered Goa in the south. This was in spite of their being vibrant movements, which could be traced to well before Independence, for both a Marathi- and a Gujarati-speaking state.

On the other hand, the Centre rejected the SRC's recommendation of bifurcating the Punjabi- and Hindi-speaking regions of Punjab, primarily to strengthen the border state that had already been split by the Partition less than a decade ago.

Bombay and Punjab thus saw continued protests, often violent, for linguistic division. While the Centre would eventually cave to these demands — Bombay State was split into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960, and united Punjab was split into Punjab and Haryana, with certain Hindi-speaking areas merged with Himachal Pradesh, then a UT — Nehru more than once expressed his displeasure with the principle of unilingualism.

“We do not stand for this principle of unilingualism. We may have a unilingual State... but basically we stand for something different from that... Language should not be confused with the boundaries of a State. It may be that sometimes the boundaries may be linguistic... [But] we can never function in this country unless we cooperate with each other, unless the Tamil cooperates with the Telugu and the Kannada, the Malayalee and the Marathi and the Gujarati and the Bengali and the Punjabi and so on,” he famously said on August 10, 1956, while the State Reorganisation Bill was being debated.

### A success story

Historian Ramachandra Guha wrote in *India After Gandhi* (2007): “Some Western observers... believed that [the] profusion of tongues would be the undoing of India... Linguistic states they regarded as a grievous error... that would further divide the states from each other [and] heighten the impulse toward secession”.

But quite the opposite has happened. As Guha put it, “the sustenance of linguistic pluralism has worked to tame and domesticate secessionist tendencies.” This is in stark contrast to India's immediate neighbours Pakistan and Sri Lanka where the imposition of a single language has been a cause for division and deadly conflict rather than unity.

The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) report of 2008 stated: “The resolution of linguistic conflicts was one of the major achievements after Independence... Continuance of a common language has provided the basis for administrative unity and efficiency within the State. Interestingly, the three major movements for secession in independent India,

namely those in Nagaland, in Punjab in the 1980s, and in Kashmir, were organised around the issue of historical ethnicity, religion and territory and not around language”.

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