

Pride in many tongues, not just one : Goans dismanttle Amit Shah's English jibe

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remark about English speakers "soon feeling ashamed" has struck a nerve across India's diverse linguistic landscape. In Goa, educators, historians, and civil society voices are pushing back, calling the statement regressive and divisive. **ANIL KUMAR MISHRA** asks them why

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent remark — that those who speak English in India will soon "feel ashamed" — has stirred a hornet's nest, particularly among educators, historians, political commentators, and civil society voices who warn of the dangerous implications of language-based polarisation. Shah made the statement during the launch of a book by former IAS officer Ashutosh Agnihotri, and a video clip of the event, shared by a news agency on social media, has since gone viral.

"In this country, those who speak English will soon feel ashamed — the creation of such a society is not far away," Shah said in the clip, adding, "I believe that the languages of our country are the jewels of our culture. Without our languages, we cease to be truly Indian."

His remarks, delivered in Hindi, have provoked strong reactions across the board — not for their call to preserve native languages, but for the attempt to vilify English, a language that, for better or worse, has become a key instrument of communication, education, commerce and social mobility in India.

A few days after he was roasted by netizens and the Opposition for his remarks, Shah tried to clarify his stance while speaking at an event Centre's official language department in Delhi. Calling Hindi a 'sakhi' (friend) of English, Shah said, "There is no opposition to any language, nor should there be any opposition to a foreign language. But there must be a desire to take pride in one's own language — to speak it, to think in it, and to celebrate it," he said.

However, partly reiterating his earlier remarks, Shah suggested that unless Indians took pride in and spoke their own languages, they could not rid themselves of a slave mentality — effectively equating the use of English with mental subjugation.

Taken together, the responses reflect a growing concern: that a deliberate attempt is being made to stir linguistic nationalism at the cost of logic, inclusivity, and progress. At a time when India is competing for space in a rapidly globalising world, voices from Goa and beyond are urging leaders to rise above ideological myopia and recognise the value of India's multilingual identity — including English.

English as a bridge, not a barrier

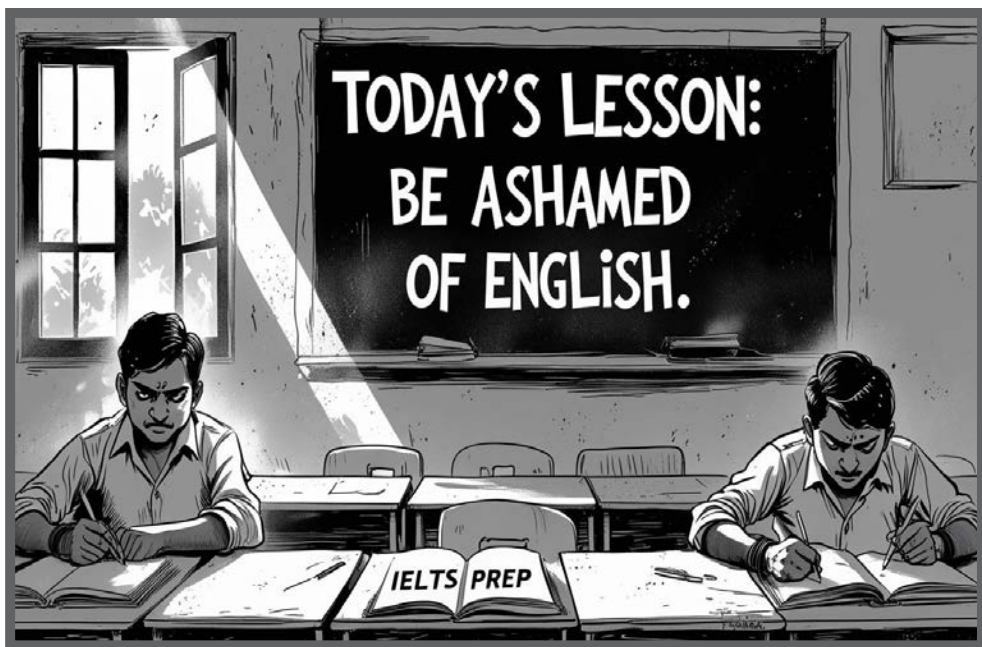
Prajal Sakhardande, noted Goan historian, author and academic, offered a nuanced response. While strongly in favour of preserving regional languages, he said it was unwise to turn English into a cultural villain.

"While we should be proud of our mother tongues and Indian languages, one cannot lose sight of the fact that English is now a global language — irrespective of its colonial and imperial hangover," he told *O Herald*. "In fact, we need to know as many languages of the world as possible. English connects us to the world."

Sakhardande, who teaches history at Dhempe College in Miramar, said he was deeply rooted in his mother tongue, yet recognised the value of English in building global understanding and connections. "Of course, we should study and speak our native languages. But that does not mean I can connect globally with diverse people in my mother tongue. We cannot be foolhardy in these matters."

"Language should connect, not divide"

Echoing this sentiment, Jack Sukhija, president of the Travel and Tourism As-



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English is now a global language, irrespective of its colonial and imperial hangover." English connects us to the world. We cannot be foolhardy in these matters. Being proud of our mother tongues doesn't mean we villainise English.

— Prajal Sakhardande, historian

India does not need less English — it needs more multilingualism. We're not speaking the master's tongue. We are speaking back to the master — by God. English doesn't make any Indian less Indian. It makes them more prepared, more connected in a globalised world. The challenge isn't the language we speak — it's when ideology limits access to opportunity. Let Shah first ask his own party leaders to bring their foreign-educated children back to learn Indian languages

— Trajano D'Mello, political analyst

sociation of Goa (TTAG) criticised Shah's comment as divisive and shortsighted.

"We should respect all languages as language is a tool of communication. It connects different communities and by doing so it promotes peace and harmony. It is important that we speak our regional languages and keep them alive. However, to do so at the cost of denigrating English is sheer madness," he said.

Sukhija noted that English remains the most effective lingua franca in India, particularly in the fields of tourism, IT, and international trade. "It is the language that connects North and South India. Globally, it is the accepted language of business and commerce. One of the reasons we have become an IT and business services powerhouse over the last 30 years is our competitive advantage in speaking English. It would be sheer folly to throw that away."

"Language fanaticism has no place in a multilingual India"

Veteran lawyer and former legislator Uday Bhembre minced no words in calling out what he sees as "language fanaticism."

"There are Indian languages, and nobody opposes them. The thought, right

India is not uncultural or unilingual. It is multilingual — and should remain so. You are dependent on English. You cannot avoid it. It's almost an international language today. Acquiring a language is an asset. There is no shame in knowing more. Goans have historically written in 14 languages. That diversity is our strength

— Uday Bhembre, lawyer and former Margao MLA

Language is a tool of communication. It connects communities and promotes peace. Denigrating English is sheer madness. It is the language that connects North and South India — and a pillar of our success in global business

— Jack Sukhija, president Travel and Tourism Association of Goa

The more languages one knows, the more knowledge one has access to. No language should be belittled or eliminated. Each has its own richness. We lost access to large parts of Goan heritage by shunning Portuguese — our history, music, and even property papers are in that language

— Dr Sabina Martins, educationist

from the framing of the Constitution, is that languages are vehicles of culture. India is not uncultural or unilingual. It is multilingual. Therefore, we should preserve and develop all languages so that different seeds of Indian culture are preserved," he said.

Recalling the debates in the Constituent Assembly, Bhembre said there had been efforts to declare Hindi the national language, but these had been resisted for good reason. "It was decided that we should preserve all Indian languages. But that does not come in the way of English. You use English for commercial purposes or higher education. Unless you come to a stage like Japan or China or Israel, such a statement is a foolish one."

He added: "You are dependent upon English. You cannot avoid it. It is almost an international language today."

"In Goa, English is embedded in the system"

Bhembre pointed to Goa as a prime example of the complex linguistic landscape of India.

"In Goa, primary education is imparted in the mother tongue. But as you go high-

er up, all high schools are through English medium. Colleges and universities? Again, everything is in English. The whole commerce and industry runs in English. So how can you say that English is not important or that one should feel ashamed of it?" he asked.

"Acquiring a language is an asset," he declared Bhembre, who grew up studying in Marathi and Portuguese, said he remained proud of every language he had picked up, even if fluency was no longer his strength. "I know one more language. I can read, understand. I think this is an asset. So knowing or using English should not be a cause for any kind of shame. The thinking is wrong. It is like going backward, not forward."

"English doesn't make you less Indian"

Political analyst Trajano D'Mello called Shah's statement "regressive" and suggested that it fits within a broader ideological project to restrict access to opportunity.

"The statement of the Home Minister reflects the agenda of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to keep the backward where they are and, in the name of nationalism, not allow them to progress," he argued. "Shah should first direct all his ministers and leaders who have their children getting educated in foreign countries — particularly in English — to bring them back and ask them to learn only Indian languages."

He continued: "India does not need less English. It needs more multilingualism. English doesn't make any Indian less Indian. Rather, it makes Indians more prepared and more connected in a globalised world."

Quoting Savitribai Phule, one of India's first feminists and educators, Trajano reminded listeners of the language's role in dismantling feudal and casteist structures:

"In such a dismal time of ours, Come Mother English, this is your hour, Throw off the yoke of redundant belief, Break open the door, walk out in relief."

He also cited former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who once said:

"Our English is also good, and the country is proud of it. That's why our people are doing so well in technology, whereas China has to send their people abroad to learn the language."

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India's first Education Minister, had said:

"English was a foreign language. We were greatly handicapped by having it as our medium of instruction. But we were also greatly benefited in one way — all the educated people in the country thought and expressed themselves in the same language. It cemented national unity."

Trajano concluded: "The Home Minister would do well to take a leaf from these leaders — Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Savitribai Phule."

"Every language is a window to knowledge"

Eminent educationist Dr Sabina Martins weighed in with a broader perspective, noting that every language offers access to a different world of information.

"The more languages one masters, the more knowledgeable a person becomes,

For a country with 22 officially recognised languages and hundreds more spoken across its vast regions, the real challenge isn't in choosing one over the other — it is in nurturing all, and recognising that the ability to speak more than one language is not a threat to identity but a mark of intellectual and cultural strength

“Millions of Indians each speak more Indian languages — in addition to English — than him (Amit Shah) — Jairam Ramesh, Congress leader



“In India, 97 per cent people use one of the 22 constitutionally recognised languages as their mother tongue. 19,500 languages and dialects are used as mother tongues. This is the 'unity in diversity' of our great nation.

Amit Shah, PM Narendra Modi and gang will never understand this — Derek O'Brien, TMC MP



“Every language of India has soul, culture, knowledge. We have to cherish them — and at the same time teach English to every child. This is the path to an India that competes with the world, that gives every child an equal opportunity. The BJP-RSS don't want poor kids of India to learn English — because they don't want you to ask questions, move ahead, and attain equality — Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in LS



“The only thing to be ashamed of is imposing your will on the people and trying to destroy the pluralism of India — K Kanimozhi, DMK MP



as they have access to more information. No language should be belittled or considered superior. No language should be forced on people or eliminated from usage. Each one has its uniqueness and richness," she said.

Dr Martins also highlighted how post-colonial reactions in Goa led to a self-defeating shunning of Portuguese — a language in which vast amounts of Goan history, legal documents, and cultural texts are written.

"The anti-Portuguese movement to liberate Goa also led to the shunning of the Portuguese language. Most of our history, laws, documents, property papers, literature, music, lyrics, engineering and architectural drawings are in Portuguese. We were not taught the language and were dissuaded from learning it. As a result, we know much less about our heritage. For everything, we have to run to translators."

A dangerous road

Taken together, the responses reflect a growing concern: that a deliberate attempt is being made to stir linguistic nationalism at the cost of logic, inclusivity, and progress. At a time when India is competing for space in a rapidly globalising world, voices from Goa and beyond are urging leaders to rise above ideological myopia and recognise the value of India's multilingual identity — including English.

For a country with 22 officially recognised languages and hundreds more spoken across its vast regions, the real challenge isn't in choosing one over the other — it is in nurturing all, and recognising that the ability to speak more than one language is not a threat to identity but a mark of intellectual and cultural strength.

As Uday Bhembre said: "There is no conflict at all. You use your own language where you want to use it. But wherever it is necessary, you have to use English. That situation should be understood — and respected."