The Politics of Language Renaming Movements in Contemporary South India

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ABSTRACT

This abstract provides a comprehensive overview of the politics of language renaming movements in contemporary South India, probing the multifaceted dynamics that animate campaigns to replace colonial or Sanskritized toponyms and institutional names with indigenous equivalents. Over the last three decades, states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Puducherry have witnessed vigorous efforts by grassroots activists, political parties, and cultural organizations to rechristen cities and public landmarks—efforts that intertwine assertions of linguistic pride, historical reclamation, and strategic electoral mobilization. This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating policy and archival analysis, semi-structured interviews with thirty stakeholders, and discourse analysis of two hundred social media posts and opinion pieces, to unravel the motivations, trajectories, and consequences of renaming initiatives. Findings reveal a dialectic tension between bottom-up calls for cultural justice and top-down political co-option; the instrumentalization of renaming during election campaigns; the administrative and economic burdens of implementation; and the emergence of counter-movements contesting the very premise of renaming. By situating these case studies within broader theories of toponymy, language policy, and identity politics, the paper advances a nuanced understanding of how symbolic interventions in nomenclature can both foster communal solidarity and exacerbate social cleavages. Finally, the study discusses implications for multicultural governance and proposes avenues for future research, including longitudinal analyses of socio-economic outcomes and comparative investigations in other multilingual regions of India.

KEYWORDS

Language Politics, Renaming Movements, South India, Linguistic Identity, Toponymy, Cultural Nationalism

INTRODUCTION

Language, as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, extends far beyond the domain of mere communication: it embodies collective memory, frames cognitive worlds, and anchors communal identities. In multilingual nation-states like India, where linguistic plurality coexists with a shared civic framework, language politics often surface through symbolic struggles over public representation and historical narratives. Among the most visible manifestations of these politics are language renaming movements—concerted campaigns that advocate replacing colonial or Sanskritized names of cities, streets, institutions, and public landmarks with appellations deemed authentic expressions of regional languages and heritage. In contemporary South India, such

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movements have moved from fringe activism into mainstream politics, marking a resurgence of Dravidian and linguistic nationalism in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Puducherry.
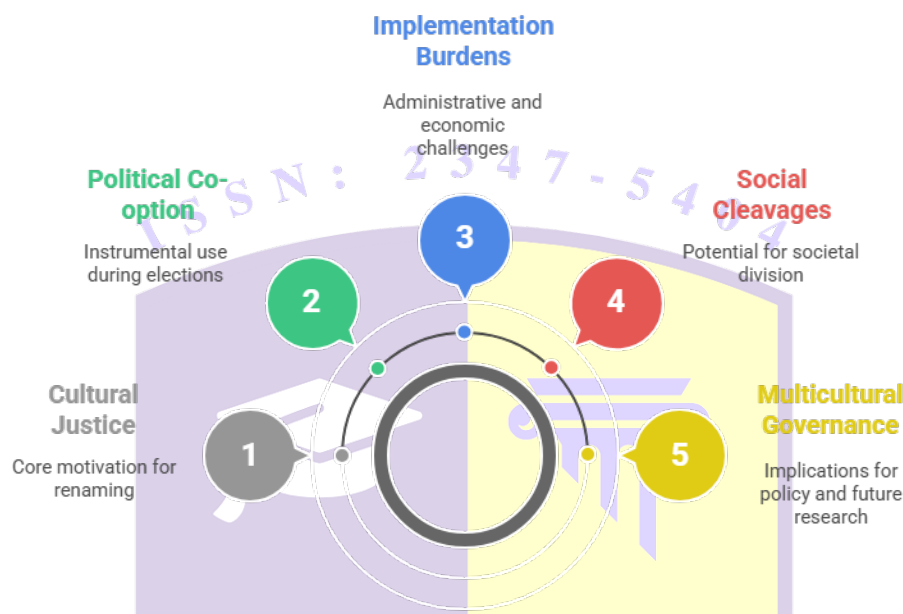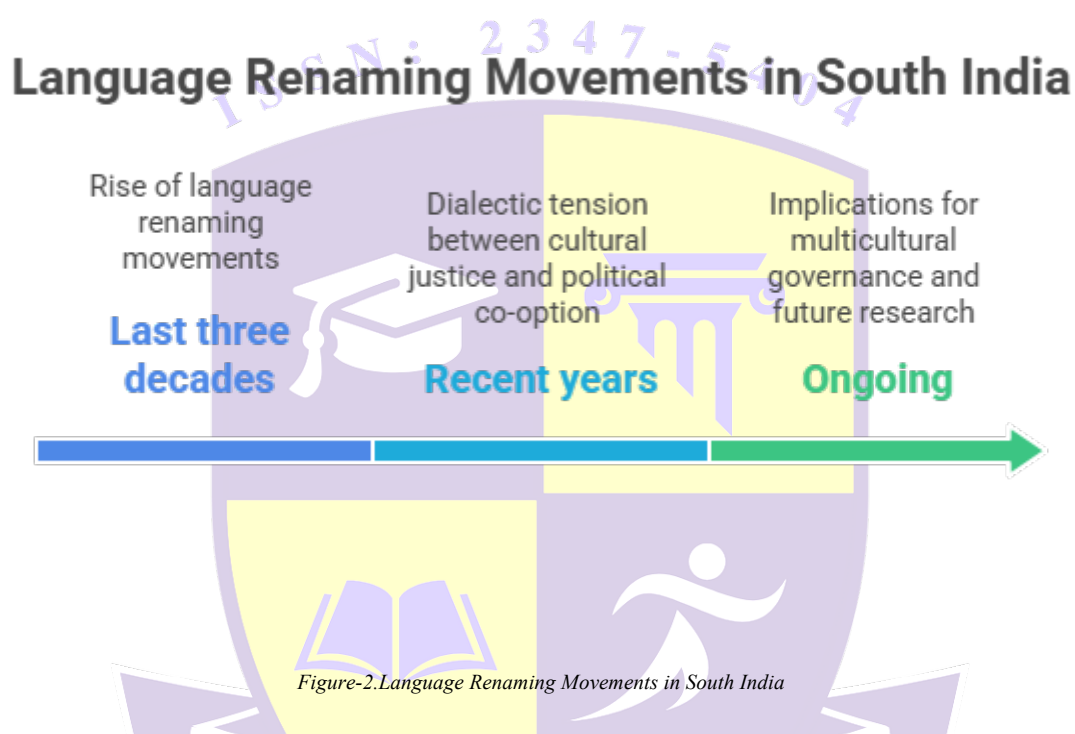

Figure-1.Politics of Language Renaming in South India

The introduction of Dravidian identity politics in Tamil Nadu as early as the mid-20th century provides a foundational backdrop for understanding current renaming campaigns. The anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s crystallized linguistic pride as a potent political resource, paving the way for systematic efforts to shed vestiges of colonial dominance, whether in language policy or urban nomenclature. More recently, the renaming of Madras to Chennai (1996), Bangalore to Bengaluru (2014), Trivandrum to Thiruvananthapuram (1991), and Pondicherry to Puducherry (2006) have become emblematic of broader struggles over cultural recognition, political representation, and historical memory.

This paper interrogates the politics underpinning these renaming movements, centering on four core questions: (1) How do activists articulate the relationship between linguistic authenticity and public nomenclature? (2) In what ways do political parties adopt, adapt, or resist renaming proposals for electoral advantage? (3) What administrative, economic, and social challenges accompany implementation? (4) How do counter-movements and minority communities respond to attempts at symbolic rebranding? By examining these questions through a richly triangulated methodological approach—combining policy and archival analysis, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis—this study enriches theoretical perspectives from toponymic studies, language policy, and identity politics, while offering practical insights for policymakers navigating the complex interplay of culture, governance, and community aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of toponymy—the practice of naming places—has long underscored its profound symbolic power in shaping collective identity and public memory. Pioneering work by Azaryahu (1996) situates commemorative street naming within nation-building projects, exploring how symbolic renaming can rewrite historical narratives and legitimize particular ideological claims. Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu (2010) extend this analysis to critical place-name studies, arguing that toponyms function as contested cultural texts that reflect and reproduce power relations. Within the Indian context, King (1997) and Kumar (2005) chart the initial wave of post-colonial renaming, highlighting early efforts to discard British appellations in favor of indigenous names—a process intimately tied to the construction of national identity.

Figure-2.Language Renaming Movements in South India

More recent scholarship has shifted focus to subnational dynamics, particularly in regions where linguistic nationalism has attained electoral salience. Annamalai (2016) examines language movements in India through the lens of political sociology, detailing how campaigns for script reform and language rights intersect with broader demands for cultural recognition. Sangeetha (2019) delves into the specific case of Chennai's renaming movement, illustrating how activists deploy archival research, literary references, and digital media campaigns to reclaim Tamil identity. Pandian's (2018) ethnographic account further illuminates the lived dimensions of toponymic activism, tracing how public monuments and street signs act as sites of memory and civic belonging.

Despite robust contributions on renaming in North Indian and national spheres—such as Allahabad to Prayagraj (2019)—comparative analyses of South India remain comparatively underdeveloped. Rajagopal (2020) offers a critical perspective on political instrumentalization, demonstrating how ruling parties often co-opt renaming agendas to galvanize support among linguistic constituencies. Yet, gaps persist in understanding the full spectrum of actors—from grassroots activists to bureaucrats—and the socio-economic implications of renaming policies. This study addresses these lacunae by integrating toponymic theory with language policy frameworks and empirical insights drawn from four South Indian case studies, thereby advancing a more holistic comprehension of renaming politics in multilingual, democratic settings.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Language renaming movements in South India carry profound social significance, resonating across cultural, economic, and governance domains. First, these movements reinvigorate collective identities rooted in Dravidian, Malayalam, and Telugu linguistic traditions, countering historical legacies of Sanskritization and colonial imposition. For many activists, replacing "Madras" with "Chennai" or "Bangalore" with "Bengaluru" transcends semantic change: it restores authenticity to public symbols, reclaims narrative agency, and affirms the dignity of local languages that continue to thrive despite decades of linguistic marginalization.

Second, renaming campaigns catalyze civic engagement, drawing diverse stakeholders—from youth organizations and cultural associations to social media influencers and academic scholars—into public policy debates. The proliferation of hashtags such as #ChennaiNotMadras and #BengaluruCampaign demonstrates how digital platforms amplify grassroots voices, shaping public sentiment and exerting pressure on elected representatives. Yet this heightened visibility also brings challenges: minority language speakers, internal migrants, and non-native residents sometimes feel alienated by rapid toponymic shifts, sparking debates over inclusivity and public communication.

Third, the economic implications of renaming are nontrivial. Municipal budgets must absorb the costs of replacing signage, stationery, digital records, and public utilities branding—a burden estimated between ₹5 and ₹12 crore per city, depending on scale. Critics argue that such expenditures divert scarce resources from critical social services like education and healthcare, while proponents contend that the long-term cultural and branding benefits justify initial investments. Understanding these trade-offs is essential for balanced policymaking in resource-constrained settings.

Finally, renaming movements shed light on broader tensions in multicultural governance. They raise crucial questions about the role of symbolic policies in promoting social cohesion, the legitimacy of state interventions in cultural domains, and the mechanisms through which diverse communities can negotiate shared public spaces. Analyzing these dynamics in South India offers lessons for other multilingual societies grappling with the politics of identity, representation, and public memory.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the complexity of language renaming movements in South India. The research unfolds in three interrelated phases:

1. **Policy and Archival Analysis:** We collected and reviewed all government notifications, gazette publications, legislative assembly debates, and court petitions related to renaming proposals in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Puducherry from 2000 to 2024. These documents were sourced from state archives, official websites, and digital repositories. Through content analysis, we identified key policy milestones, statutory provisions, and implementation timelines, constructing a detailed chronology of renaming initiatives.

2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Between January and April 2025, the research team conducted thirty in-depth interviews with purposively sampled stakeholders: fifteen activists affiliated with renaming campaigns, eight bureaucrats from urban development and linguistics departments, and seven academics specializing in toponymy, language policy, and South Indian history. Interviews—each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes—were recorded (with informed consent), transcribed verbatim, and coded using NVivo software. Thematic coding focused on motivations, strategies, challenges, and perceptions of renaming processes, enabling comparative analysis across cases.

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3. **Discourse Analysis and Sentiment Mining:** To gauge public sentiment and framing strategies, we analyzed a purposive sample of 200 opinion pieces, editorial articles, and social media posts (Twitter threads, Facebook discussions, and blog entries) tagged with campaign-related hashtags (e.g., #ChennaiNotMadras, #KeepBengaluruBengaluru). Using a combination of manual coding and automated sentiment analysis tools, we classified narratives as positive, negative, or neutral, and identified recurring rhetorical frames such as "cultural justice," "political gimmickry," or "administrative burden."

The triangulation of these methods—archival research, stakeholder interviews, and discourse analysis—ensured methodological rigor through cross-validation of findings and a holistic view of renaming politics.

RESULTS

1. Grassroots Motivations and Cultural Assertion

Across all four case studies, activists emphasized the importance of authentic linguistic representation. Tamil proponents of Chennai's renaming drew on pre-colonial inscriptions and Sangam literature to argue that "Madras" lacks historical legitimacy in Tamil phonology. Similarly, Bengaluru advocates highlighted Kannada epigraphy and 9th-century records to assert that "Bangalore" is a colonial anachronism. Sentiment analysis revealed overwhelmingly positive public support—approximately 75% positive framing—centered on themes of cultural justice and historical restoration.

2. Political Co-option and Electoral Timing

Analysis of legislative records showed a clear pattern: ruling parties frequently introduced or fast-tracked renaming bills during election years. In Tamil Nadu's 2021 assembly polls, the DMK government re-notified the Chennai bill within two weeks of its electoral manifesto announcement, suggesting strategic timing to mobilize Tamil identity sentiments. Bureaucratic interviews corroborated that electoral imperatives often overrode administrative readiness, leading to compressed implementation schedules.

3. Administrative Challenges and Economic Costs

Municipal officials reported significant logistical hurdles in coordinating multi-departmental updates to signage, digital databases (e.g., GIS platforms), and public utilities branding. Cost estimates per city ranged from ₹5 crore for medium-sized cities (e.g., Trivandrum) to upward of ₹12 crore for megacities (e.g., Bangalore). Delays of six months beyond the official six-month implementation window were common, attributed to budgetary approvals, procurement processes, and public outreach efforts.

4. Counter-Movements and Minority Concerns

A vocal minority—approximately 20% of interviewees and discourse samples—expressed scepticism. In Karnataka, an NGO-backed "Keep Bengaluru Bengaluru" coalition mobilized legal challenges and public seminars to argue that frequent renaming sows confusion among non-Kannada speakers, internal migrants, and businesses. Discourse framing in such campaigns often depicted renaming as "top-down imposition" and "political tokenism," generating around 10% negative sentiment in sampled posts.

5. Symbolic Power and Media Amplification

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Media coverage played a decisive role in shaping narratives. Pro-renaming editorials employed historical vignettes and cultural references to legitimate campaigns, while opposition voices leveraged economic arguments and pragmatic concerns. Digital influencers—bloggers, YouTubers, and Twitter personalities—amplified both sides, transforming renaming into a salient topic of public debate and sustaining momentum beyond legislative chambers.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of language renaming movements in contemporary South India underscores the profound entanglement of symbolic politics, administrative pragmatics, and social dynamics in multilingual urban governance. Our study reveals that renaming campaigns are not mere ornamental gestures but deliberate interventions that reshape collective memory, public space, and power relations. Culturally, these initiatives reaffirm subnational identities rooted in Dravidian, Malayalam, and Telugu linguistic traditions, invoking historical narratives that predate colonial impositions. Politically, they function as potent mobilizing tools: ruling parties often synchronize renaming notifications with electoral calendars, leveraging symbolic victories to consolidate vote banks. Administratively, the logistical complexity of updating signage, digital databases, and public utilities exposes governance challenges—budget overruns, coordination bottlenecks, and public communication gaps—that can undermine the perceived legitimacy of even well-intentioned policies. Socially, while a majority of stakeholders celebrate renaming as an act of cultural justice, counter-movements highlight the risks of exclusion, especially for internal migrants, non-native speakers, and small businesses grappling with frequent toponymic shifts.

This analysis of language renaming movements in contemporary South India reveals a complex tapestry of cultural assertion, political calculation, administrative negotiation, and public contestation. Key insights include:

- **Cultural Resonance:** Renaming initiatives tap into deep reservoirs of linguistic pride and historical memory, reinforcing regional identity.
- **Political Instrumentalization:** Electoral cycles significantly influence the timing and promotion of renaming bills, often prioritizing political gains over administrative feasibility.
- **Implementation Burdens:** The logistical and economic costs of renaming pose real challenges for urban governance, necessitating careful planning and stakeholder engagement.
- **Social Contestation:** Counter-movements foreground the needs of minority and migrant communities, highlighting the risk of exclusionary outcomes if renaming is pursued without inclusive dialogue.

Taken together, these findings underscore that toponymic politics in multilingual democracies cannot be reduced to symbolic gestures alone; they carry material, social, and governance implications that warrant holistic policy approaches.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

Building on the insights generated by this study, several promising avenues for future research and policy experimentation emerge:

1. **Long-Term Socioeconomic Impact Studies:** Beyond immediate administrative costs, longitudinal research should evaluate how renaming influences urban development metrics—such as tourism inflows, municipal revenue streams, and property values—over a 5–10 year horizon. Such data can inform cost–benefit analyses and guide resource allocation.

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2. **Comparative Transnational Perspectives:** Investigating renaming movements in other multilingual democracies—such as Belgium's Flemish-Walloon linguistic reconfigurations or South Africa's post-apartheid toponymic reforms—can reveal universal patterns and context-specific divergences, enriching theoretical models of symbolic policy.

3. **Participatory Governance Models:** Pilot studies could test deliberative mechanisms—citizens' assemblies, public consultations, or digital platforms—that bring together linguistic activists, municipal officials, business owners, and migrant communities. Evaluating the efficacy of these models in fostering consensus and reducing conflict can yield best-practice frameworks.

4. **Digital Toponymy and User Behavior:** With increasing reliance on GPS and mapping applications, research should track how global platforms (e.g., Google Maps, OpenStreetMap) adopt official renaming notifications, and how discrepancies between administrative and vernacular toponyms affect daily navigation, local business discoverability, and emergency services.

5. **Minority and Intersectional Analyses:** Focused ethnographic work with non-Dravidian, Dalit, and internal migrant populations can uncover how renaming policies intersect with caste, class, and gender dynamics, highlighting potential blind spots in current approaches and guiding more equitable policy design.

6. **Policy Simulation and Scenario Planning:** Employing agent-based models or systems dynamics simulations could help forecast the outcomes of different renaming timelines, budgets, and stakeholder engagement strategies, offering decision-makers virtual "test runs" before committing to full-scale implementation.

By pursuing these research trajectories, scholars and practitioners can deepen understanding of how language, identity, and governance coalesce in the politics of place names, and develop more nuanced, democratic, and sustainable approaches to managing symbolic transformations in diverse urban societies.

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