

A Plea for Hindi

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On January 26, 1950 India became a sovereign republic and the Constitution of free India came into force. Part XVII of the Constitution stipulated that Hindi in Devnagari script shall be the official language of India. Article 351 of the Constitution requires that the Government of India must develop Hindi, "so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all elements of a composite culture of India and to secure its enrichment by assimilating without interfering with its genius, the form, style and expressions used in Hindustani and in other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule, and by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages."

Hindi has not occupied its place accorded in the Constitution and English continues to be the official language of India. Hindi has become an object of controversy and even ridicule, in India and in the ethnic press in America. In the short article below, an attempt is made to put the matters in some perspective.

Why Hindi: A Brief History

From ancient times up to almost thirteenth century, Sanskrit was the language of the courts and the discourse among the scholars although it was not the language of the masses. However, its offsprings Pali, Prakrit, Apabhramsha and eventually Hindi, starting in the eighth century, became the medium of discourse for the saints who traveled all over India to spread their message. With the advent of Muslim rule, Persian was used for administrative purposes, but it never became the language of masses and Hindi continued to be the language of culture, and numerous Hindu and Muslims scholars, contributed to its richness.

After the collapse of Muslim empire and the emergence of British rule, Persian was replaced by English and in spite of vehement objections, Persianized Urdu in Arabic script was imposed as the language for the lower echelons of the administration.

Evolution of Hindi

Like any other language, the current form of Hindi has evolved from a mix of languages: Brij-Bhasha, Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Rajasthani - to name five. The aforesaid languages themselves, did not possess a linguistic homogeneity - they had considerable dialectical diversity. However, they were interrelated - it is not uncommon to find a poet being claimed as a poet in many languages - Mira Bai (ca. 1600) can be claimed as a poet of Gujarati, Rajasthani, and Hindi, her songs are sung even in Maharashtra and Bengal. Similarly, Vidyapati (ca. 1400) is claimed as a poet of Maithili, Bengali and Hindi.

The current form of Hindi - the progressive use of Sanskritized words - owes much to Bengali

tradition: Raja Rammohan Rai and Keshav Chandra Sen espoused the cause of Hindi, and later, Bhartendu Harishchandra, the father of modern Hindi, a prolific and versatile writer, translated many Bengali works in Hindi. Subsequent Hindi writers followed the Bengali tradition. This brought Hindi closer, not only to such languages as Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati, but to Dravidian languages as well.

It may be remarked that “before the advent of printing press, Sanskrit manuscript used to be written in provincial scripts. However, by process of mutual understanding among scholars, Sanskrit books all over India were printed in Nagari script.

Emphasis to use simple colloquial words in Hindi is not wrong, but to deliberately exclude the Sanskritised words can be counter-productive. While language is the medium of verbal communication, it is also a medium of scholarly discourse and one needs technical words. Sanskrit is a rich treasury for these words in the same way Latin and Greek were the primary source for the vocabulary for the European languages. It is for this reason, that the Indian constitution prescribed Sanskrit to be the primary source for enriching Hindi.

For more than a millennium, Hindi, *in one form or other*, has been the link language for the commerce and the cultural and religious discourse. It was this factor that our national leaders, including such luminaries as Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore from Bengal, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi from Gujarat, Bal Gangadhar Tilak from Maharashtra demanded that Hindi should be the language for the inter-state communication.

The Gandhian Paradigm

Mahatma Gandhi was the greatest proponent of the Indian languages. He strongly believed that education up to the highest standard must be imparted in the mother tongue. Education through English medium makes learning inaccessible to the masses and the educated become alienated from their culture, and fellow citizens. He wrote: “The foreign medium has made our children practically foreigners in their own land. ... If I had the powers of a despot, I would today stop the tuition of our boys and girls through foreign medium, and require all the teachers and professors on pain of dismissal to introduce the change forthwith. I would not wait for the preparation of the text books. They will follow the change. ... Among the many evils of the foreign rule this blighting imposition of a foreign medium upon the youth of the country will be counted by history as one of the greatest.”

Since India is a multilingual country, he emphasized the need of a common language for inter-state communication and he espoused the cause of Hindustani, the simple Hindi which contains commonly spoken words - whether they were of Sanskrit origin or Persian origin. His principal goal was to forge a united front to fight the devil of the foreign subjugation in all spheres of life - political, cultural and linguistic. He argued that the official language of India, Hindustani, be written, both, in Nagari and Arabic scripts. He thought this to be the best compromise so that two major communities

of India - Hindus and Muslim could live in peace. He predicted that ultimately, due to its simplicity and versatility, Nagari script will prevail. He recognized the importance of English as an international language and advocated that those dealing with affairs outside India must learn English and other foreign languages.

The Debate and Adoption Of Hindi

In the Indian constitution, Hindi in Devanagari script, was unanimously adopted as the official language of the Indian union. Practically all the leaders who made this possible hailed from non-Hindi states. During the proceedings in the Constituent Assembly, there was an intense debate between the proponents of Hindi, who were influenced by Gandhian paradigm wanted the replacement of English by Hindi as soon as possible and those, who wanted to retain English for an indefinite period. The extremists among the opponents argued: "Why should we give up a first class world language in preference to an ill-developed second class instrument." They were worried about an "incipient Hindi imperialism." In between the two positions, there were many moderates who took a pragmatic view and argued: Our goal must be the replacement of English by Hindi but the transition must be gradual for two main reasons, *one*, the persons from non-Hindi regions may have sufficient time to adjust to Hindi, and *two*, Hindi could develop and acquire precision and refinement thereby becoming a powerful vehicle of expression in all branches of knowledge. They argued that the evolution was better than revolution. Finally, a consensus emerged and a period of 15 years was considered sufficient to switch over from English to Hindi.

It was generally recognized, that acceptance of Hindi as the official language of India by the non-Hindi states was an act of sacrifice. Preparing Hindi to carry this tremendous responsibility was a monumental task of enormous complexity: Creating an institution is the first step, the follow up requires tenacity of purpose, relentless perseverance, and tact.

The heart of the framers of the Constitution was in the right place, and their vision was noble and achievable. It is a great tragedy that the change has not taken place. The continuation of English has hindered the development of Hindi, and other Indian languages. Like Hindi, they have not realized their potential, the masses have continued to be ruled by an elite group well versed in English whose interests do not always coincide with those of the masses at large.

Where do we go from here?

Forty five years have elapsed since the adoption of the Indian Constitution. It is three times the period envisaged in the Constitution for transition to Hindi, it has not happened; even the greatest optimist cannot predict with certainty that it will ever transpire, if the present conditions continue. Hindi was supposed to be an instrument of unity, it is becoming an instrument of division. The good-faith assurance given by every Prime Minister of India, that Hindi will not be imposed upon any state without their consent, has been turned into an instrument of obstruction by the vested interests: they

come from all regions of India, even from outside, they include bureaucrats and scholars who have command over English. Historically, the use of European languages like English and Italian for scholarly pursuits was sneered at by the masters of Latin and Greek, but we know now how powerful these languages have become, whereas Latin and Greek have remained stagnant.

What do we do? First of all, we have to look at different groups and institutions for whom Hindi is important and who are sensitive and sympathetic to the hopes and aspirations of the common man. Some examples are:

1) The persons belonging to Hindi states constitutes the single biggest group: it is forty percent of India, in terms of area and population. For this group, Hindi has a dual responsibility: *First*, it is their mother tongue, and it is in their interest to develop it into a modern language, capable of serving as the medium for the highest scholarship in all branches of knowledge, administration and justice. *Secondly*, they should see that Hindi is to be developed in such a way that it can be learnt easily by persons from non-Hindi states. The Constitutional provision on Hindi should not be viewed as a right, but a sacred responsibility to be discharged with utmost humility. They have to remember that the call to make Hindi the official language of India was given by leaders from the non-Hindi states and this should make the proponents of Hindi grateful, and responsible. What is applicable to persons from Hindi states in India is also relevant to the NRIs from Hindi states. They have to learn from their compatriots from other language groups - Bengali, Tamil, Marathi to name three; I have tremendous respect for them for their efforts directed to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage.

2) If the first group picks up the challenge of promoting Hindi, I am confident that our friends from non-Hindi states will join them and will support their mission. Like Rammohan Rai, Dayanand, Tilak and Gandhi, they would love to see that Hindi becomes the de facto official language of India. This movement can help Hindi to become a language of United Nations. If we come together and learn to work unitedly, I am confident that the momentum generated in this effort could play a significant role in securing a place for India in the Security Council of the United Nations.

The NRIs have built a vast number of temples and community centers, Hindi can be a cementing force and a great avenue of communication in the tradition of our saints of yester-years. They wandered bare-foot all over India. We are recent arrivals from India; our predecessors came to countries like Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius some 150 years ago. They have kept up their culture under very adverse conditions and many of them are encouraging their offspring to learn Hindi. We too can learn a lot from them about preserving our precious heritage.

It is time for action. To quote from Rudyard Kipling:

Gardens are not made
By singing - "Oh, how beautiful!" and
Sitting in the shade.