

# CSS @ 50 Years

(1969-2019)

Lecture Series : IV

## Language Issue in India: A Look at the Constituent Assembly Debates

Paramjit S. Judge



**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES, SURAT**

**2020**



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the Constituent Assembly Debates**

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## PREFACE

On the momentous as well as emotional occasion of completing 50 years of its voyage (1969-2019) Centre for Social Studies, Surat (CSS) has planned series of activities. We have started with Lecture Series; CSS@50 Years. The first of the lecture was delivered by Prof. E. V. Ramakrishnan; the second by Prof. Vibhutipen Patel; and the third by Prof. D. Rajasekhar. All the three are published.

Founded in 1969 as Centre for Regional Development Studies by founding director late Prof. I P Desai, CSS is an autonomous research institute recognized by MHRD of central Govt., and receiving financial support from ICSSR, New Delhi and Govt. of Gujarat. Though the faculty strength has remained small over a period of time, they have been representing variety of disciplines of social sciences as CSS has adopted interdisciplinary research approach. Apart from its primary engagement in research, CSS has also been active in holding seminars on various subjects, organising training courses for mainly teachers and researchers as well as publication of books based on research and other academic pursuits of faculty and other scholars. So far CSS has published 185 books, both in Gujarati and English, 19 selected bibliographies and 37 Occasional/Working papers on important themes. The institute has been publishing quarterly journal in Gujarati ARTHAT since 1981 providing social sciences literature on various subjects to Gujarati readership and also a medium to publish articles for scholars and teachers. Till date CSS has organised 107 national and international seminars and dialogues. The institute regularly holds lectures under its 'Colloquia' initiative in which scholars and others present their research papers and ideas. Till date CSS has organized more than 400 lectures. We have founded I P Desai memorial lecture series to commemorate our founding director under which so far 28 lectures have been organised, being delivered by renowned social scientists and which are also published. In all CSS has organised 50 training programmes including, on 'Application of Computer-SPSS in Social Science Research' - which were held continuously for 25 years as well as on courses on 'Research Methodology' and 'Capacity Building', interacting with more than 1000 scholars and teachers from all over the country. We also have interacted with another more than 200 scholars pursuing their Ph.D. and M.Phil. under our 'Guidance and Consultancy Programme'. In terms of research, the key areas that CSS has been mainly focusing are; issues and problems of marginal communities such as tribals, dalits, working sections, women, minority groups and others, sects and religion, migration, rural transformation, social conflicts, movements, riots and violence, urban society, literature and social consciousness, human resource development (education and health), coastal studies, environmental issues, social impact assessment of projects, land and credit markets, governance, social justice and civil society. Theoretical contributions of CSS have been well-recognised in the field of social stratification, agrarian relations, social movements, sociology of education, issues related with dalits, tribes and development studies. The purpose of Centre's research since inception is not only to contribute to theoretical knowledge but also to assist in policy formulations and implementation on issues pertaining to social development. Institute has accomplished more than 300 research projects till date.

For the CSS@50 Years Lecture Series the larger theme of "Social Change and Social Movement" is chosen in accordance with CSS central focus in terms of academic pursuit. In the IVth lecture of the series, which was held on 29 November, 2019; Prof. Paramjit Singh Judge has addressed Language Issue in India keeping in focus the Constituent Assembly debates.

Paramjit starts with a lamentation that language as an issue in India has never occupied deserving space in the intellectual and social science discourses. But nevertheless, the language issue has been overriding other issue at empirical level and the Indian government's initiation to introduce Hindi as the language of Indian state is always met with strong reactions. Constituent Assembly (CA) debates need to be studied to understand language issue. Independent India's leadership was gravely concerned about English taking roots in various spheres of public life during colonial rule. But the issue of national language, though discussed

thoroughly and passionately by the CA, was difficult to resolve. The CA focused on unity, homogeneity and mono-culture for creating a homogeneous national identity. The objective of the debate was also to protect regional – linguistic identities. The divide between North and South loomed large over discussion. During the intense debate several contending points were raised such as on functionality of Hindi as national language, on script, numerals, positing Sanskrit as national language, continuance of English in administrative sphere for some time. Point of decision of Pakistan to have Urdu as national language was also featured. Hindi's limitation in compare to other languages in terms of structure and literature were also indicated.

Matter of people's opinion was also raised by members from South and East. The suggestions was made that Hindi in Devanagari script might become official language, but not as a national language. Division among members occurred not on party lines, but cultural spheres. Hindustani as a national language, with Roman numerals was also suggested.

Nehru invoked Gandhi for his support to Hindi as national language, and also misrepresented about Gandhi's favour of 'Hindustani' as of 'Hindi'. While accepting importance of English, Nehru denied categorically it to be as national language as it was not a language of masses. Arguments were made against Hindi being language of majority. The debate also underscored the point that the language question was also linked with religion. At one point, members demanded referendum on language issue. Maulana Azad admitted that no national language could replace English at that time, and unless consensus was reached, issue should not be pushed through. However, he emphasised that national language should be from North India and it should be inclusive. Debate pertaining to list of regional languages also created heat. It was opined that the national language had to be composed and took shape from all the different languages. Paramjit Singh observed that likewise political reservation provision, use of English could also not be discontinued after 15 years as per constitutional provision. Later, states have been reorganised on the basis of language. At present too, attempt at formalising the use of Hindi arouses passion. Paramjit Singh ended with a comment that popularisation of Hindi is due to popular cinema, in which language used is close to Hindustani.

I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to ICSSR, New Delhi and the Government of Gujarat for supporting CSS during this long span. I am also grateful to members of our Board of Governors for guiding and steering us, as well as our former and present colleagues, including our administrative staff, who have collectively contributed significantly and immensely to take CSS up to this point of achievement. And how can I forget a vast circle of our friends and well-wishers; scholars from different institutes not only from India but also from abroad, from neighbouring university campus and colleges of different parts; also from other institutes and universities across the country; those organizations with whom we have done collaborative research endeavours; our activist friends who have shared their grass-root experiences to make our research earthy and concerned members of civil society who have been meeting us and attending CSS events regularly and encouraging us. I express deep gratitude towards them all.

And finally, I am immensely grateful to Prof. Paramjit Singh Judge, who had worked at CSS previously, for accepting our invitation and delivering a thought-provoking lecture on a very relevant theme. CSS also expresses gratitude toward Prof. Rakesh Desai, Head, Post-graduate dept. of English language, VNSGU, Surat for chairing the lecture. I also express gratefulness to my colleagues at CSS-faculty as well as administrative, for extending support in organising the event and in publishing this lecture.

June 2020

Kiran Desai

# Language Issue in India: A Look at the Constituent Assembly Debates

**Paramjit S. Judge**

Indian social scientists and intellectuals have mainly concentrated on secularism, communalism, nationalism, and caste as the major concerns of the Indian society. Liberalism, religious extremism, and socialism with all their varieties have been the major ideological cores of the way these issues have been debated and discussed for the last fifty years or so. Language as an issue in India has never occupied the kind of space in the intellectual and social science discourses which it deserved. I begin by pointing out that in India the language issue overrides and has overridden all other divisions based on ideology at the empirical level<sup>1</sup>. The moment the language issue resurfaces, a function of one set of the Indian ruling class, the reaction is immediate and sometimes violent. We have had instances of self-immolations in Tamil Nadu on the language issue. Interestingly, as and when it has surfaced during the last thirty years or so, the reaction has been so powerful that it has disappeared without any trace. It happens only when the Indian government initiates an action to introduce Hindi as the language of the Indian State.

To make sense of the language issue in India, the best path is to go back to the Constituent Assembly (1999)<sup>2</sup> debates. English, as the common language all over the country for various administrative, judicial and academic purposes, had struck roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dislodging English from its privileged position was essential for the leaders of the independent country to initiate the process of nation-building. However, if English were to be removed from its

privileged position, then the identification and acceptance of an Indian language was a matter that offered tremendous challenges. Three issues began to reverberate right from the beginning of the meetings of the Constituent Assembly and remained postponed till the end. These were: name of the nation-state/country, national anthem, and national language. Interestingly, only the issue of national language was debated by the Constituent Assembly thoroughly and passionately. The significance of the debate on national language lies in the way the members imagined India as a nation, articulated regional and linguistic identities and sought to build unity of purpose to lay the foundations of modern India.

In the Constituent Assembly, the debate on language did also involve the question of script, for the members were awfully aware of the significance of script in creating a homogeneous national identity. For the first time in the debates in the Constituent Assembly, unity instead of diversity, homogeneity instead of heterogeneity, mono-culture instead of plurality, was on the agenda. Therefore, the objective of the debate was not only to arrive at a compromise language formula, but also to protect regional-linguistic identities. The divide between North and South was known and the fate of English was inseparably linked with how far the members from South India could resist the pro-Hindi majority from the North.

### **Search for Consensus**

The debate on the language question as a Part-XIV-A of the Draft Constitution began on 12 September 1949<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, N. Gopaldaswami Ayyangar from Madras (though he had spent some time in North India) rose to move his resolution. He informed the House that there had



been a series of discussions among the members in small groups and pointed out that there was unanimity among them with regard to the view that the language of the country should be a substitute to English. He said;

The decision to substitute Hindi in the long run for the English language having been taken, we had to take also two subsidiary decisions which were involved in that one decision. Now the subsidiary decisions were that we could not afford to give up the English language at once. We had to keep the English language going for a number of years until Hindi could establish for itself a place, not merely because it is an Indian language, but because as a language it would be an efficient instrument for all that we have to say and do in future and until Hindi established itself in the position, namely that for a period of about fifteen years English should continue to be used for all the purposes for which it is being used today and will be used at the commencement of the Constitution.

All these lines spoken had not only the historical significance, but also had symbolic importance, for the amendment was proposed by a member from Madras Presidency where anti-Hindi feelings were strong. Ayyangar identified various challenges associated with the adoption of Hindi as the national language: (i) question of numerals, (ii) issue of language of states and communication between states and between centre and states, (iii) language used in legislatures and High Courts and Supreme Court, and (iv) whether Hindi could develop a capacity to absorb ideas. He suggested thus;

..... Our basic policy should be that the common language of India for Union purposes should be the Hindi language and the script adopted should be the Devanagari script. It is also a part of this basic policy

that the numerals to be used for all official Union purposes should be what have been described to be the All-India forms of Indian numerals.....We consider that to the same extent the Hindi language and the Devanagari script for letters in that language should form a permanent feature of the common language of this country, to the same extent should the international forms of Indian numerals be part of this basic policy.

Ayyangar then moved on to identify various problems in replacing English by Hindi at the various levels of administration and legislatures. The contents of the amendment proposed were quite comprehensive and consisted of four chapters. The first chapter of the proposed amendment covered the recommendation to have Hindi in Devanagari script and to keep English for fifteen years, and to keep the international numerals. However, it also recommended that the President might appoint a commission to make it sure that Hindi was progressively used and the use of English was to be discouraged. The second chapter dealt with regional languages in which it provided for autonomy to each of the states to enact law to adopt any language to be used in the state for official purposes. Interestingly, Chapter III entitled 'Language of Supreme Court and High Courts, etc.', was important in the sense that it clearly acknowledged the incapability of Hindi Language, as it existed at the time, in handling technical use of the various aspects of Law.

Chapter IV, under the title 'Special Directives', of the proposed amendment consisted of two clauses. Following were the provisions suggested:

301 H. Every person shall be entitled to submit a representation for the redress of any grievance to

any officer or authority of the Union or a State in any of the languages or in the State, as the case may be.

301 I. It shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of Hindi and to develop the language so as to serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India and to secure its enrichments by assimilating without interfering with its genius, the forms, style and expressions used in Hindustani and in other languages of India, and drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages<sup>4</sup>.

Hermeneutics of the above mentioned clauses were quite obvious. Without negating Persian, and Pali and Prakrit, the proposal was to remind the Hindu ancient past through the Sanskritic tradition. Seth Govind Das – the major exponent of Hindi – was the first to speak and express his happiness. He spoke in Hindustani and strongly argued against the adoption of international numerals. Seth Govind Das began his defence after it became clear that the national language would be Hindi.

### **Ethnicity and Communalism Override Secular Ideologies**

It was important to note that the Constituent Assembly with the leadership which was predominantly from North India was more worried about the reaction of the members from South India. In this regard, the controversy and contestations over national language were leading towards North-South divide. It was natural because despite the status of Hindi as the language spoken by the majority of the people in India, there was no consensus over the issue. The relationship between religion and language could be

vaguely established in terms of the original language of the sacred text of each religious community. Extrapolating it to make religion and language coterminous was a serious attempt at communalising the issue of language even after the partition of the country on communal lines.

Naziruddin Ahmad, a Sanskrit scholar made it clear that Hindi could not be established as the national language immediately due to which it was necessary that English should continue for some time. However, he argued that the selection of the national language should be based on two conditions. First, the people must be made literate in their own language. Secondly, there must be the re-grouping of the states on a linguistic basis. When he was asked to specify his stand whether Sanskrit could be the national language, Ahmad was non-committal, but in the process, he referred to C. Narayana Menon (a Professor from Banaras), and told the House that Hindi "is the most erratic. It has hands and feet proceeding in all directions like an octopus. The script is not smooth and rounded and the language is not capable of being speedily or easily written. Sir, this ease in writing is also one of the factors to be considered in the modern language".

On 12 September 1949 – the day the debate on national language began – it was quite clear that the members did not have any unanimity on the issue, though the member who moved the historic amendment hailed from South India. Various issues that came up for discussion were as follows:

1. Hindi in Devanagari script should be the national language, but English should remain in operation for fifteen years.
2. International form of numerals should be adopted.
3. Those who disagreed with the above argued that (i) English should remain as it is, (ii) Hindustani should be

the national language which could be written either in Devanagari or Persian script, and (iii) Sanskrit should be made the national language.

4. There was an agreement on the question of language, but there was disagreement on the issue of numerals.
5. Some members indicated that the language question had been communalised.
6. There was a clear-cut North-South divide on the question of language.
7. The most remarkable aspect of the debate was the tacit acceptance of the fact that Hindi as a national language was not sufficiently equipped with terms, and technical and legal expressions to handle all aspects of the running of the state apparatus.

When the debate resumed next day, on Tuesday, September 13, 1949, Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, while accepting the suggestion that English should continue for fifteen years, argued for Sanskrit to be accepted as the national language and told the House that the best example to emulate is that of Israel where Hebrew had been recognised as the official language. Frank Anthony from Central Province (C.P.) & Berar proposed an amendment which provided for replacing Devanagari script by the Roman script. Anthony made two interesting remarks which suggested how things had changed during more than a century's British rule. He said;

..... If India is to achieve real unity, a real sense of Indian nationality, then every one of us must accept this premise that we must have a national language, English is my mother tongue. Because I am an Indian, because English is my mother tongue. I maintain that English is an Indian language.

The second point he made was that there were views that if you spoke against Hindi, then communal feelings would flare up. Qazi Syed Karimuddin was the next speaker who speculated that Pakistan's decision to have Urdu as the national language might have been triggered by the fact that India had declared Hindi in Devanagari script as the national language. His speculation was based on too many notions of the existing state of affairs. It was becoming obvious to most of the members that the partition of the country had significant bearings on the way the Indian nation was being defined (not imagined) and its evidence was the decision to end all kinds of separate electoral systems. The decision to declare Urdu by Pakistan as the official language could have been in accordance with the perception of the leaders that Urdu and Muslim were coterminous and the only part of Pakistan which might have objected to it (and as it turned out to be) could be the Bangla-speaking area. The implications of such a decision of Pakistan in India were difficult to assess at that time.

The location of Hindi as a language was first indicated by N. V. Gadgil from Bombay, when he pointed out that Hindi was a provincial language and some other languages in India were richer in literature than Hindi. He was of the view that there was no Indian who would vote for English, but subsequent developments showed that he failed to assess the stronghold of English in India, though he was not the only one with this perception. Gadgil made an important point that the language issue could not be decided through votes, but it required consensus. In this context, T A. Ramalingam Chettiar - a lawyer from Madras and still remembered in Tamil Nadu for his comments on the issue of language - hit the nail on the head thus;

This is a very difficult question for us from the South to solve. It probably means life and death for the South unless it is going to be handled in the way in which it ought to be done. Well, Sir, for us coming from the South to go back and face our people with any decision you are going to make here, you will see what it will mean.

Chettiar's speech carried two interrelated matters. The first was the divide between the North and the South on the question of Hindi and as he said little later, some of the South Indian languages were better developed than Hindi. Secondly, in democracies, people's opinion carried lot of weight and the leaders could not make decision by sacrificing their political careers.

When Chettiar pointed out the superiority of some South Indian languages, the President of the Constituent Assembly intervened and told the House that members should abstain from comparing literatures of different languages. N. G. Ranga from Madras objected to the President's comment and when the latter insisted on maintaining the decorum in the House, Ranga told him that he was not reasonable. Chettiar continued to emphasise that Hindi was not the greatest of Indian languages. He added that Hindi in Devanagari script might become official language, but could not be recognised as national language. He said, "When a man has to come two thousand miles and do his things here, he naturally feels that he is not in his own land". However, Satish Chandra Samanta from West Bengal was candid enough to propose that Bengali should be accepted as the national language.

Opposition of members from the South and non-acceptance from the members from the East did not make the North Indian supporters of Hindi hostile towards them. Algu Ram

Shastri from United Provinces delivered a long speech extolling the virtues of Sanskrit but at the same time underlining its becoming extinct as a spoken language. He pointed out that Sanskrit was the mother of all Indian languages with so many common words among them. Hindi was one such language. Shastri was followed by Syama Prasad Mookerjee<sup>5</sup> from West Bengal. He began his speech by emphasising the multilingual character of the Indian subcontinent and opined that "If we dig into the past, we will find that it has not been possible for anybody to force the acceptance of one language by all the people in this country". He pointed out that achieving 'unity in diversity' was possible only by involving people and getting their consent, for it could not be achieved through coercion. Such an objective required a favourable environment. He expressed his personal view by stating that Sanskrit should be the national language owing to its greatness and richness, but also pointed out that he loved his mother tongue. He then argued for Hindi thus;

Why do we accept Hindi? Not that it is necessarily the best of Indian languages. It is for the main reason that that is the one language which is understood by the largest single majority in this country today. If 14 crores of the people out of 32 crores today understand a particular language, and it is also capable of progressive development, we say, let us accept that language for the purpose of the whole of India, but do it in such a way that in the interim period it may not result in deterioration of our official conduct of business or administration and at no time retard true advancement of India and her other great languages.



Mookerjee was the last speaker in the morning session of the Constituent Assembly. When the session resumed in the afternoon, the form and content of the discussion remained unaffected by what was being argued earlier, suggesting that on the language issues, the members had already taken their positions and were prepared to fight for what they thought was appropriate. P. C. Chacko from Travancore and Cochin insisted that English should continue for a fixed period and the matter pertaining to national language should be decided upon developing a consensus and by the parliament. He said;

After having seen a sort of fanaticism in action in the matter of a comparatively smaller question of the numerals and after having heard a section of the people of this House speak as if all that mattered in life was the Devanagari system of numerals, I feel that it would be better for us to leave the decision on this question to soberer men. We can hope that our posterity will be more tolerant and wiser and hence may be able to find an agreed solution for this problem. Our intolerance has already divided India. Let us not divide it again.

Divisions among members on language issue had not occurred along party lines. The question of language implicated identity in a cultural sense. Hindi as a language could not claim to be the most developed language. P. Subbarayan, who was chief minister of Madras Presidency during the British rule and then the Union Minister of Transport and Communication in Nehru's Cabinet among other things and had a law degree from England, proposed the amendment that the national language should be Hindustani in the Roman script, which, he stressed, was the 'acceptable solution'. Then he commented, "What is all this

nonsense about numerals, I say. Do you want to be archaic and go back to things which have been forgotten for a long time?" Subbarayan's speech created stir in the House and there was an exchange of sharp words between him and Pandit Balkrishna Sharma. It seemed that the President also got unhappy with him. Subbarayan showed his aggression by telling the pro-Hindi lobby that;

I am reminded of the other Tamil proverb which says, if a man comes and asks for a little place on the verandah and if you grant it, he will next ask for entry into the house itself. That is the position of most of you gentlemen, today.

He then narrated the effect of introduction of Hindi in Madras and told the House that there was strong opposition to the introduction of Hindi. At this moment, the members of the House started speaking at once, but order was restored quickly. The most memorable part of the speech of Subbarayan should be quoted here thus;

I will give information for the edification of my colleagues from the United Provinces. The Congress Bulletin is published both in English and in Hindi. If you compare the number of subscribers for these two editions you will be surprised. Only 1/40 of those who subscribe for the English edition, subscribe for the Hindi edition. This shows that in spite of Gandhiji's attempts and in spite of everything that has been done, we have not been able to make even those who seem to be jealous of Hindi language buy the Hindi edition of the Congress Bulletin.

He further proposed an amendment that 'English should be added as the fourteenth language in the Schedule'. Kuladhar Chaliha from Assam characterised the speech of Subbarayan as the most rational speech. He supported Ayyangar's

amendment because he thought that as a compromise solution, it was good for India.

### **Nehru Intervenes Sans Desired Effect**

Nehru delivered a long speech combining the issue of language with various dimensions of personal and collective living. He made it clear that he was supporting Ayyangar's proposed amendment amongst cheers. After making his position clear with regard to language, he began his discourse on the question of language. Let us begin with one of the best specimens of this discourse thus;

Language is a most intimate thing. It is perhaps the most important thing which society has evolved, out of which other things have taken growth. Now language is a very big thing. It makes us aware of ourselves. First, when language is developed it makes us aware of our neighbour, it makes us aware of our society, it makes us aware of other societies also. It is unifying factor and it is also a factor promoting disunity. It is an integrating factor and it is a disintegrating factor as between two languages, as between two countries. So it has both these aspects and when therefore you think in terms of a common language here you have to think of both those facts.

After stating his position with regard to the significance of language in uniting and disuniting people, Nehru invoked Gandhi to support his contention and he argued why Hindi could be the uniting and integrating language in India.

While invoking Gandhi, Nehru identified three crucial aspects of the language meant for India as a nation<sup>6</sup>. First, despite its greatness English could not be the language of the

country, because a foreign language should not be the language of the people. Secondly, as a corollary to the first argument, the national language must be the language of the people. Finally, the language should represent the composite culture of the country. Gandhi used the word 'Hindustani' in a broad sense of the term. After making it clear that Gandhi used the expression 'Hindustani', it was important for Nehru to interpolate the argument to establish that what Gandhi said Hindustani was in fact Hindi. Instead of making logical claims, he took the help of his charisma and focused on Ayyangar's proposed amendment and said, "Now, we stand on the threshold of many things and this Resolution itself is the beginning of what might be termed as a linguistic revolution in India, a very big revolution of far-reaching effects, and we have to be careful that we give it the right direction.... Men shape a language, but then that language itself shapes those men and society". Nehru rejected Sanskrit as the possible or probable choice as the national language. By the content of subsequent speech of Nehru, it appeared that he had come well prepared to deliver that speech to make a case for Hindi. It is important to have some degree of familiarity with his sense of history and culture in a larger context thus;

... Till very recently – in fact, I would say a generation ago – French was the recognised as diplomatic and cultural language of Europe and large parts of the earth's surface. .... Nobody objected to French. No Englishman, or Russian, or German or Pole objected to French. So all those other languages were growing and today it might be said that English is perhaps replacing French from that proud place of diplomatic eminence.

Before French, in Europe the language of diplomacy was Latin just as in India the language of culture,

and diplomacy for a vast period of time was Sanskrit..... After Sanskrit Persian became the language of culture and diplomacy in India and over large parts of Asia.

After giving the reasonably coherent and historically accurate picture of the history of languages, he shifted his focus on English as the language of the colonial masters and made it clear whatever might be the richness and advantages of English, it was not the language of the masses. He agreed with some of the earlier speakers that English would continue to be most important in the affairs of the world in times to come and was unsure whether it would be possible to completely oust English. Importantly, Nehru expressed his displeasure to the enthusiastic and aggressive supporters of Hindi in the House as well as outside and tried to convey to them what democracy was really about. He said;

Is your approach going to be a democratic approach or what might be termed as authoritarian approach? I venture to put this question to the enthusiasts for Hindi, because in some of the speeches I have listened here and elsewhere there is very much a tone of authoritarianism, very much a tone of the Hindi-speaking area being the centre of things in India, the centre of gravity and others being just the fringes of India. That is not only an incorrect approach, but it is a dangerous approach. If you consider the question with wisdom, this approach will do more injury to the development of the Hindi language than the other approach. You just cannot force any language down the people or group who resist that.

He then moved on to express his views on the issue of Hindi versus Hindustani and he made it clear that the word Hindi was better and could be used as an inclusive language. He

supported international form of numerals explaining that if we did not do that, we might land ourselves in trouble. He concluded his speech with the following words:

What sort of India do we want? Do we want a modern India – with its roots steeped in the past certainly in so far as it inspires us – do we want a modern India with modern science and all the rest of it, or do we want to live in some ancient age, in some other age which has no relation to the present? You have to choose between the two. It is a question of approach. You have to choose whether you look forward or backward.

Nehru had many memorable moments and speeches in the Constituent Assembly, but it seems that after his Independence Day speech in the Assembly when he said “We had tryst with destiny”, his concluding remarks in his speech on the language issue could be considered historic. He was unambiguous in his position with regard to India’s future which according to him should be modern, for past and ancient India was worthy of remembering but not emulating. The present India had to look forward to future with the help of modern science. Could Hindi become the pedestal of launching the dream of modernity, of modern India? Nehru believed that it was possible, but the national language, Hindi, had to become the language of masses and should be democratically accepted by all Indians.

The charisma of Nehru failed to impress the diehard supporters as well as opponents of Hindi. Still two important interventions were to occur in the form of Azad and Vira. But it was Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla from C. P. & Berar – was to be the first chief minister of Madhya Pradesh - who spoke after Nehru completed his speech. Despite his commitment

to Hindi, he pointed out various problems of working in Hindi due to paucity of translation of technical and scientific words.

On the morning of 14 September 1949, G. Durgabai from Madras was the first speaker to express her views and she argued for Hindustani which was Hindi and Urdu combined. While referring to Gandhi, she said, "The official language of India should be only that which is commonly understood and easily spoken and learnt". After giving her opinion, she gave interesting information thus;

Long before the Pandits of Hindi Sahitya Sammelan realised the importance of having national language for India, we all in the South obeyed the call of Mahatma Gandhi and carried on Hindi propaganda in the South. We started schools and conducted classes in Hindi. Thus with great inconvenience we dedicated ourselves very long ago to the propagation and learning of Hindi.

Durgabai was mentioning the efforts of the Dakshina Bharat Hindi Parcharak Sabha of which she was a part. She said that the Hindi-speaking people should compulsorily learn any one of the provincial languages. Shankarao Deo from Bombay commented that Gopalswami Ayyangar's amendment was a compromise formula and it did not guarantee total success. Ravi Shankar Shukla intervened and told Deo that the amendment was not a compromise. Deo began with the core of what was causing a degree of narcissism among the members of the Constituent Assembly when he apparently responded to Shukla's interruption. He said, "I would request my friends from the South as well as from the North not to look at this question from an emotional or sentimental point of view." It becomes clear that the debate on language was arousing passions among the members and Hindi as the national/official language of

the country was not acceptable to all. One of the arguments being used in support of Hindi was that it was spoken by a majority of the Indians. Deo tried to situate the contention in its rightful place when he commented;

After all, what is the claim that is now being put forward? The claim is that this language is spoken by a majority – I am not sure about that even I know when I go to Rajen Babu and people from Bihar come to him they do not speak Hindi. If I am not wrong, neither Tandonji speaks Hindi at home. So when you say that Hindi which is spoken by the majority of the country I doubt it. I can only concede that it is perhaps understood by the majority, and that too, not the present high-flown Sanskritised Hindi which is understood by Pandits only.

Deo's long speech had not yet been concluded. He had already identified the problems in the case of Hindi as the national language. Notwithstanding passion and sentiments bordering on extremism and fundamentalism, the support to Hindi as a language spoken by majority faced two major issues. First, since Deo almost demolished the assertion that Hindi was spoken by a majority in the country, the criterion could be the number of people understanding a particular language. Secondly, as a corollary to his assertion, he advocated that to suit the composite culture of India, the language should evolve in such a way so that each culture found expression in that language. He reminded that our forefathers accepted 'English for its superiority', as 'it opened a new world for the people of India'. At the same time, he made it clear that there was also an economic dimension of language and added, "And if today Hindi is so much valued and people prefer it to any other language, it is not because it is superior to other languages but it is a means to get a job". Deo's concluded with the remark that,



“I admit that the amendment of the Honourable Shri Gopaldaswami Ayyangar is not an ideal one; still it is the only formula on which unanimity is possible”.

Hukam Singh, who had earlier supported Hindi in Devanagari script, changed his stance to Hindustani in Roman script when he rose to speak after Deo concluded his speech. He said that he was doing so after watching the fanaticism and intolerance of the supporters of Hindi in Devanagari script. He reminisced the pre-partition times when there was a strong contest between Hindi and Urdu to become national language. He then identified six points to support his contention. These were: (a) Hindustani in Roman script is already in use in the armed forces and it is convenient to learn, (b) the people familiar with Roman script are large in size, (c) Devanagari script is tedious even for printing, (d) Roman script could be modified to suit the purpose and it will also be convenient for railway time tables and telegraph codes, (e) it will connect India with the outside world, and (f) it will help in ending conflict between North and South. He went on to take the question of language little further by linking it with religion and defining it in terms of communalism. He said;

Communalism has not been correctly defined anywhere, but a convenient definition may be that whatever is said and done by majority in a democratic country or at least in India is pure nationalism and whatever is said by a minority community is communalism. This is also the basis on which we are proceeding. As there were fears in the minds of the minority that Punjabi might be swept away altogether, they advocated its adoption as one of their demands to the majority community, but I fear that just as the protagonists of Hindi have done a disservice to that language so have the Sikhs by

taking up the cause of Punjabi done it a great disservice because this demand has been dubbed as a communal demand.

He then described the situation in Punjab where the language issue was getting inseparably connected with religion. He stressed, "I might make it clear that now after Partition no minority can be communal".

It was thus clear that the language question was not only the matter of North-South divide, but also linked with religion, making the matter more complicated than it was thought. Jaipal Singh, from Bihar, joined all those who strongly opposed the fanaticism of Hindi supporters after suggesting that Mundari, Gondi and Oraon (all tribal languages) should be added to the list of languages. He also pointed out;

Devanagari script has given headache to all the producers of printing machinery. In the time you can print something like fifteen thousand copies or twenty thousand copies in English, you cannot print even one-tenth of this number in Devanagari.

### **Twist in the Tale: Tandon, Azad and Vira**

Amidst ambivalent reaction to Hindi in Devanagari script, Purshottam Das Tandon from United Provinces rose to speak. He was logical and reasonable in the presentation of argument in favour of Hindi in Devanagari script, but he provoked many members in the process. What he said could be understood as an exercise in semantics and semiotics of language. Let us see how it happened. First, he used the expression "Hindi provinces" to argue that since Hindi was the official language in United Provinces, it was quite possible that by the time fifteen years are completed, the

much needed terminology would be available for others to adopt.

Maulana Hasrat Mohani lost no time in asking Tandon, "What do you mean by Hindi provinces?"

Tandon replied, "I am referring to those provinces which have adopted Hindi as their language; for example, the United Provinces has formally adopted Hindi as its language: so has Bihar . . ."

Maulana interrupted him, "The United Provinces is either an Urdu province or a Hindustani province. It cannot be a Hindi-speaking province".

Tandon told Maulana that he did not want to get into controversy and then he shifted to the issue of numerals and said, "I know that our Madras friends want to change the Hindi numerals".

Many members shouted, "Bengal also"<sup>7</sup>.

Tandon responded, "If I am wrong you can correct me; but I never heard that from my Bengal friends".

Many members snapped back, "Bombay also. As a matter of fact, all non-Hindi speaking people".

Tandon responded again, "My submission is that it is not correct. . . . I ask Mr Shankarrao Deo and Dr.Ambedkar, who are sitting here to tell me whether the people of Maharashtra are going to accept it".

Ambedkar kept quiet but Deo responded, "I say that whatever stand I take the Maharashtrians will take that stand too".

Tandon was insistent, "From my knowledge of Maharashtra I submit, because the script is the same, that if there is referendum there, the people of Maharashtra will not accept the so-called international numerals".

Many members said in one voice, "If there is a referendum in India Hindi will go!"

Tandon said, "I would beg of honourable Members to interrupt me one by one and not many at a time. I shall be happy to hear Shanakrrao Deo and Dr.Ambedkar".

Instead Dr.Sayama Prasad Mookerjee intervened, "Why not refer to a referendum".

Tandon kept on speaking in an argumentative style, provoking many members. Maulana Mohani repeated his demand for referendum in United Provinces. The President clarified that the Constituent Assembly's function was to make Constitution and not to organise referendum. He further added that the Constituent Assembly represented and reflected the will of people. Interestingly, there was nothing new in Tandon's arguments and the posterity would remember him as one of the major exponents of Hindi as the national language. The message was loud and clear that the fate of the language to be the national language would be decided through a majority vote. Still two important personalities were to speak, namely Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Raghu Vira.

Azad, despite his reputation as a major Muslim leader in the Congress, seldom spoke in the Constituent Assembly. He was not vocal on the issue of minority rights and privileges. He did not intervene when the Constituent Assembly decided

to withdraw provision of reservation for religious minorities as moved by Sardar Patel. Vira was hardly known through any eloquent intervention in debates. Vira was well educated with masters from London and PhD from Leiden, Netherlands. He was an indologist and linguist. He began as a Congress activist but died as the leader of the Jan Sangh.

Azad's speech could be divided into two parts. The first part is devoted to the decisions taken by the drafting committee with regard to language, because he was the member of the committee. In the second part of the speech, Azad expressed his personal views on language. He began by informing that the members of the Committee began with the objective of removing English from its position in administration and education. It was thought that it would be done in five years. However, the members belonging to the South and Bengal argued that more time was required and he agreed with them. He expressed his unanimity with Ayyangar's amendment that fifteen years were required to erase English from the position it was holding. Azad then identified two problems and challenges faced in order to remove English. First, there was no national language which could immediately replace English. Secondly, there was no common language in India. He candidly admitted the divide between the South and the North on the question of language. He made it clear that there was a need for consensus and the matter should not unnecessarily be pushed through. Since the University Commission had been constituted, it was important that the changes should be introduced without affecting the student capability. States should have waited for the recommendations of the Commission before introducing changes in the medium of language. On the issue of the national language, he said;

So far as language is concerned, this has been admitted on all hands that the language spoken in Northern India can only be made the Lingua Franca, but it has got three names – Urdu, Hindi and Hindustani. Now the point of dispute is as to what name should be given to it. Naturally, with different names are associated different forms and styles of the language; so in reality it is not a quarrel about names but about the form or style. I want to give you a brief resume of the points of difference in these three names.

The general framework or setup of the language spoken all over Northern India is one and the same, but in its literary style it has got two names – a style resplendent with Persian is called Urdu and a style leaning towards Sanskrit is known as Hindi. The term “Hindustani” has developed a wider connotation: it embraces all forms of the language spoken in Northern India. It includes ‘Hindi’ as well as ‘Urdu’ and even more than that. It includes each and every shade of the spoken language of the North. It does not exclude any. It covers all.

Azad’s message was loud and clear: whatever name you give to the national language, it should have two things. First, it should be one of the languages spoken in North India and secondly, it should be inclusive. He also insisted that the international numerals are primarily of Indian origin.

Vira was the last member to speak on the issue. It is quite possible that seen as an expert in linguistics, he was trying to settle the issue of language in a manner favourable to Hindi. Interestingly, he spoke largely in opposition to Azad. Whereas, Azad talked about commonalities, Vira showed differences thus;

In the beginning the difference between Hindi and Urdu literature was not great..... While they [Urdu writers] took the grammar and construction of the language from India, the literary inspiration and other factors were taken from Arabic and Persian.

So, the tradition was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century whereby Urdu became the repository of Persian and Arabic words and culture. There was a reaction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and hence developed the Hindi literature which had for its basis and structure the same language which was the basis of Urdu but whose literary tradition was native to the soil. This difference kept on developing and developing until today we find two literatures, which though they had the same basis have developed differently.

After this, he kept on underlining how there were two different traditions and both had become divergent with the passage of time. Vira might have continued for long had he not been interrupted at the lunch time. When Vira was asked how much time he would take, he said that he would take half an hour. At that moment, the President closed the debate and when the Assembly re-assembled at five o'clock, the President asked Vira to complete his speech in two minutes. It is in the fitness of the things to quote the last lines he spoke on the subject of language thus;

I join other Members of the House in expressing our great satisfaction that a satisfactory arrangement has been reached between the different view-points on the question of the numerals. Now discussion may be concluded in a friendly manner. This is a matter in which I should congratulate the House. As there is no controversy now, the discussion may be closed.

After the motion for closure was moved, Maulana Mohani expressed his disgust with the attitude of the Prime Minister and policy of appeasement of Maulana Azad. Finally, the language issue was considered decided and chapter on language seemed closed. It did not happen in that way, partly due to the protocol in matters of deciding the matter through votes. Before N. Gopaldaswami Ayyangar could respond to all other amendments and issues moved and raised in the House, Mohamed Ismail pointed out that the amendment which he had put forward had not been debated, for he was not asked to speak. When he was allowed to speak, he moved that Hindustani with Devanagari and Urdu scripts should be the official language and the international form of numerals should remain in use. He quoted Gandhi to support his contention. He also pointed out that Tamil was a rich language and among the oldest spoken in India and the Tamilians were prudent enough not to insist on one of the ancient languages of India as the official language.

Ayyangar was invited by the President to reply to the whole debate. He did not seem to be in the mood to respond with a long speech, which was evident from his opening statement thus;

Sir, we are in a happy mood just at the moment and I do not want to mar this happy mood by anything like a long speech from me. I have formally, as mover of the major amendment, to accept the amendments to that amendment which have been moved by my honourable Friend Mr. Munshi. I accept them *in toto*.



After his short speech, the rest was just a formality and Amendment No. 65 with certain amendments accepted by Ayyangar was passed to be put as new Part XIV-A of the Constitution.

The historic day of 14 September 1949 would remain as one of the most important days in the history of not only the Constituent Assembly but also of India. The day's debates were over, but still remaining was the speech of the President who in earlier debates never felt motivated/compelled to deliver a speech. His were the final words on the matter and it would be of interest to know what Rajendra Prasad thought of the language question. He said that "I think we have adopted a Chapter for our Constitution which will have very far reaching consequences in building up the country as a whole". After pointing out the richness of Sanskrit literature, he admitted that it was not used for administrative purposes. He then talked about Hindi thus;

I do not claim to be scholar of Hindi or any other language. I do not claim to have made any contribution to literature but this much I can say as a layman that it is not possible today to foresee what form this language, which we have adopted as the language of administration of the union, is going to take in future. As it is, Hindi has undergone change in past so many many occasions and we have several styles of it, we have had literature written in Braj Bhasha. Khari Boli is now the prevalent style in Hindi. I think its contact with all the other languages in the country will give it opportunities for further development. I have no doubt that Hindi will benefit rather than lose by absorbing as much as it can of the best that is to be found in other languages of the country.

For him, it was an achievement of unification of the country and then he recalled his association with the propagation of Hindi in South India which was initiated by Gandhi in 1918. He concluded his speech by saying;

If in place of English we have adopted an Indian language, it is bound to bring us closer together, particularly because our traditions are same, our culture is the same, and everything that goes to make our civilisation is the same. . . . . I hope posterity will bless us for this.

### **Third Reading: Language Issue Resurfaces**

When the final and the third reading of the draft constitution started on 18 November 1949, none might have expected that members would raise the language issue again. The same day, Gokulbhai Daulatram Bhatt rose to speak and he told the House that when the language question had come for discussion in the House, he was not present and he was advised by some of his colleagues not to raise the issue afterwards. He said;

.....if Gujarati, Marathi and such other languages can all be considered regional languages there is no reason why Rajasthani which is similar to them and is spoken by one and a half crore of people could not be considered as a regional language.

This was the first manifestation of regional linguistic identity in the country and much more was to actually follow later on. On 23 November, Balwant Sinha Mehta lamented that "Rajasthani has not found a place in the schedule of regional languages". Ironically, during the debate on language question, there was silence on the issue of regional languages excepting few comments. His feelings were

endorsed by Manikya Lal Verma on 24, November 1949 and he illustrated with examples of the Rajasthani language which, according to him, was full of heroism.

H. J. Khandekar on 21 November 1949, made it clear that if Hindi was to become the national language, then it should be such that every Indian could understand it. His comment created commotion in the House. Similarly, on the same day, Jaspat Roy Kapoor evoked Gandhi to make his point;

We have adopted Hindi as the national language, a language which is to be composed of all the languages and which has to take shape from all the different languages of the country.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

No doubt, the debate and decision on national language was one of the major events in the history of postcolonial India. Language being associated with national identity was an important issue for the people and leaders of India. In the Constitution of India, Official Language has been covered under Part XVII of the Constitution; and Articles 343 to 351 pertain to language issues. It is important to cite Clause 3 of Article 343, which states;

(3) Notwithstanding anything in this article, Parliament may by law provide for the use, after the said period of fifteen years, of --- (a) the English language, or (b) the Devanagari form of numerals for such purposes as may be specified in the law.

The fate of two constitutional provisions could be predicted right from the time the Constitution was being finalised. The first pertained to the matter of reservation in legislatures and Lok Sabha which was meant for ten years, but could be

extended further by the parliament. The second was the discontinuation of English after fifteen years, but its use could be allowed by the parliament. Ironically, both the political reservations and the use of English still continue and any effort to create compulsion for the use of Hindi is met with tremendous resistance from many corners and classes of India. Subsequent developments with regard to language implicated numerous issues. One of them pertained to the linguistic reorganisation of the states which was a matter of policy and an outcome of the enactment of the parliament. Formation of states on the basis of common language could be seen as an attempt towards uniformity instead of diversity. However, the language issue was turned into communal matter with the identification of a particular language with a religious community in certain cases. It was an unintended consequence of taking up language issue in the reorganisation of states. Communal overtones with regard to language could be observed in various speeches in the Constituent Assembly. Despite the fact that Hindi is understood in most of India, any attempt at formalising the use of Hindi still arouses passion. The popularisation of Hindi in India has not been the result of a political act, but the popular cinema. The language used in Indian cinema is close to Hindustani, and due to common grammar of Hindi and Urdu, there is no strict boundary between the two in the world of entertainment. However, the protagonists of Hindi have not learnt from this fact and are still pushing Sanskritised Hindi as the lingua franca. In this regard, the only rational and courageous voice to identify the problem was Hukam Singh.

## Notes

1. This paper is predominantly based on a chapter in my work: Paramjit S. Judge.2019. *Making of Modern India: A Sociological Study of Postcolonial Modernity*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
2. *Constituent Assembly Debates, Volumes I- XII*. 1999. New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat. (Third Reprint). (It is important to mention that all quotations and references from the debates of the Constituent Assembly have been mentioned in terms of the dates instead of page numbers).
3. It looks strange that the discussion on the issue of language took place so late. Seth Govind Das in his first speech in the Constituent Assembly in December 1946 had raised the issue of national language. It became clear only when the discussion began that it was one of the most contentious issues debated in the Constituent Assembly.
4. Under Schedule VII-A following languages (regional) were recommended: 1. Assamese, 2. Bengali, 3. Canarese, 4. Gujarati, 5. Hindi, 6. Kashmiri, 7. Malayalam, 8. Marathi, 9. Oriya, 10. Punjabi, 11. Tamil, 12. Telugu, and 13. Urdu.
5. Syama Prasad Mookerjee founded the Bhartiya Jana Sangh with the active cooperation of Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1951 after his disagreement with Nehru on inviting the Pakistani leader. He was a member of the Congress at the time of debates of the Constituent Assembly.
6. In this speech, Nehru used the signifier Father of the Nation for Gandhi.
7. Both Madras and Bengal provinces were covering large areas which were later on divided into many states after the linguistic organisation of the states.

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**Prof. Paramjit Singh Judge**, is currently the president of Indian Sociological Society and is serving at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar as Professor of Sociology where he has been working since last 32 years. He was faculty member of CSS during 1985 to 1988. Prof. Pramjit Singh has been bestowed on fellowships and honour such as Dr.Ambedkar National Fellow of ICSSR, fellowships of Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute as well as British Commonwealth fellowship. He has authored 11 books, co-authored 3 books, edited 3 and co-edited four volumes. Some of the titles of the books he has authored are: "Writing Social Science: A Personal experience", "Making of Modern India: Sociological Exploration into Postcolonial Indian Modernity", "Changing Dalits: Exploration Across Time", "Religion, Identity and Nationhood: The Sikh Militant Movement" and "Social Change Through Land Reforms". While working at CSS he authored series of reports on Rehabilitation and Resettlement of displaced people of Sardar Savovar Project. He has written around 80 research articles which are published in several edited volumes and reputed international and national journals. He has reviewed around 50 books. Prof. Parmjit Singh was editor of *Guru Nanak Journal of Society* and is currently managing editor of *Sociological Bulletin*. His live interest in society is also reflected through his popular writings in magazines and newspapers on topical issues. Similarly, sensitive and creative side of Prof. Paramjit Singh is revealed in the five Punjabi novels he has authored. He has guided 12 Ph.D. scholars.