

Mahatma Gandhi and the Question of National Language

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Abstract:

National language is a clear indicator that represents the national identity of a country. At the same time language is also a very sensitive issue. It is a part of a nation and a person's heritage. It has the potential to unite and at times divide the people into hostile groups. To understand and penetrate deep into a community, one must be able to speak and understand the language of the community. Fluency in the national language will surely enable the person to fully understand that community's particular nuances and cultural aspects.

National language is a driving force behind unity of the nation's people, and makes them distinct from other nations – provided one accords due respect to one's own language. Giving respect to one's national language would imply that it should be one's primary language, as well as the preferred medium of communication at every level. One may know as many languages as one can absorb, but use one's own language at every level. History proves that every great leader tried his best to strengthen the national language to further the process of national integration. National language is a driving force behind national unity. Yet in spite of Hindi having such a large number of speakers in India English has become the symbol of the elite.

The present paper attempts to study Gandhi's ideas about the national language and how his ideas evolved during his lifetime. The paper also looks at the obstacles which obstructed the adoption Hindi or Hindustani as the national language.

Key Words: National Language, Link Language, official Language, National Integration, National identity, Nation's heritage, Hindustani, Disparate communities, Indispensable vulnerabilities,

Beside a boundary, a name, a flag, or a currency, what gives a country a distinct identity and makes it respectable as a unique nation is its national language. National language is a clear indicator that represents the national identity of a country. At the same time language is also a very sensitive issue. It is a part of a nation and a person's heritage. It has the potential to unite and at times divide the people into hostile groups. To understand and penetrate deep into a community, one must be able to speak and understand the language of the community. Fluency in the national language will surely enable the person to fully understand that community's particular nuances and cultural aspects.

National language is a driving force behind unity of the nation's people, and makes them distinct from other nations – provided one accords due respect to one's own language. Giving respect to one's national language would imply that it should be one's primary language, as well as the preferred medium of communication at every level. One may know as many languages as one can absorb, but use one's own language at every level. History proves that every great leader tried his best to strengthen the national language to further the process of national integration. National language is a driving force behind national unity. Yet in spite of Hindi having such a large number of speakers in India English has become the symbol

of the elite. Religion may be a powerful binding factor but one can gauge the importance of a national language by the fact that a language movement is considered to have laid the foundation for the separation of one part of Pakistan into Bangladesh. ^[1]

Every year on Hindi Divas (14th September), prominent leaders appeal to the people of India to accept Hindi as the common and unifying language of the country. And all through the year not many bother to talk about it or follow it up with concrete action to match those words. At times these words are instantly met with resistance and loud opposition from different regional leaders and the bogey of the threat of 'imposition of Hindi' looms large on the political horizon. ^[2] This has become an annual phenomenon and the possibility of India having a national language acceptable to all Indians seems to be a distant dream.

In India, One of Gandhi's most enduring crusades throughout his public life, next only to his attempts to root out untouchability, was to consecrate Hindi as the national language of India. While this might raise the hackles of non-Hindi speakers now, it is necessary to understand his stand in its proper context as well as unpack what he meant when he used the term "Hindi". Gandhi's objection to English was that it was alienating and created a gulf between those who knew English (largely the privileged class) and those who didn't (the vast majority). And when English was the language of government, as was the case then, the distance between the rulers and the ruled was unbridgeable and resulted in a situation where communication and mutual understanding were poor. ^[3] This was a fatal flaw, in Gandhi's view, and sufficient cause to limit the use of English. Hindi, which in any case was known to north Indians and could, in Gandhi's view, be learnt by south Indians, would probably not suffer from the limitations of English and hence would be suitable to be the national language. ^[4]

The debate over Hindi as the national language is not new. Mahatma Gandhi had also discussed it at length more than 100 years ago. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps the first person in India's freedom struggle who raised the question of a language for a nation striving for independence from Colonial rule. He was of the opinion that a dumb nation not having its own language could not possibly demand freedom from the shackles of an alien regime. He was quite perceptive about it and raised this question in his work 'Hind Swaraj' in 1909. It is also worth noting that even though the number of Hindi speaking population in South Africa was around 1/3rd of the indentured labour among the Indian diaspora with overwhelmingly non-Hindi speakers, Gandhi adopted Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi spoken in Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh) as the lingua franca amongst them. ^[5] It need to be noted that the only Hindi or Hindustani speaking minority in Western India and more so in South India were largely Muslims who used Hindustani as their standard tongue other than their mother tongue which was largely Gujrati of Kathiawadi variety. This perhaps became the very template for Mahatma's espousal for Hindi which in fact at that moment in India and in diaspora was just another name for spoken Hindustani. Gandhi was perhaps convinced that if Muslims right from south to north could adopt Hindi or Hindustani as their standard tongue and diaspora conditions induced the overwhelmingly non-Hindi speaking majority to readily accept one dialect variant of Hindi or Hindustani as their sole lingua franca then why this experiment couldn't be repeated in mainland India. Probably, this play of languages in South African diaspora constructed Mahatma's view on Indian languages.

The case for a national language occupied an important place among Gandhi's ideals. Gandhi was in favour of a national language, but what remains unclear and needs further investigation is what he meant by a "national language," whether it was a lingua franca, a link language or a language of the nation. This is because he used the terms "national", "link", and "common" language as synonyms in his writings. His enthusiasm for a national language stemmed from and reflected his vision of bringing together disparate communities under the umbrella of the Indian National Congress, which was spearheading the freedom struggle. As a member of the Second South African Delegation - Mother Tongue and National Language, he wrote in 1909 as: "Love and respect for our languages are essential before we call our country our own. A common language is a possibility for the future, and it is necessary for the people of one province to learn the language of others..." ^[6]

To affirm that Gandhi had a clear vision on linguistic diversity of India and a need for a common language would be incorrect as his views evolved over time. But, what remained consistent was that the national language of India would be a language spoken by Hindus and Muslims of the country, which he termed as ‘‘Hindustani.’’

At the second Gujarat Educational Conference on 20 October 1917, as the President he addressed the audience on the question whether English could become the national language, and enlisted significant indicators for a language to become a national language. They were:

- i. it should be easy to learn for the government officials;
- ii. capable of serving as a medium of religious; economic and political intercourse throughout India;
- iii. should be the speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India;
- iv. easy to learn for the whole country and
- v. in choosing this language considerations of temporary or passing interest should not count. ^[7]

He admitted that it was Hindi which fulfilled all the five requirements. Citing historical evolution of languages and their progress through the ages, Gandhi said that Hindi is spoken throughout India. ‘‘Muslims speak Urdu and they are found in large numbers in every province. Thus Hindi has already established itself as the national language of India. We have been using it for such a long time. The birth of Urdu itself is due to this fact. Muslim kings could not make Persian or Arabic the national language. They accepted the Hindi grammar; only they used more Persian words in their speech and employed the Urdu script for writing. But they could not carry intercourse with the masses through a foreign tongue. Similar is the case with the English rulers. Those who have any knowledge how they deal with the *sipahes* in the army know that for this purpose they have coined Hindi or Urdu terms.’’ ^[8]

He also stressed how our love for the English language in preference over our mother tongue has caused a deep chasm between the educated and the politically-minded classes and the masses. In the process, languages of India have suffered impoverishment. In the Constructive Programme, he wrote, ‘‘There are no equivalents for scientific terms. The result has been disastrous. The masses remain cut off from the modern mind. We are too near our own times to correctly measure the disservice caused to India by this neglect of its languages.’’ ^[9]

Gandhiji also explained what he meant by Hindi. His explanation about what he meant by Hindi is insightful: ‘‘I call that language Hindi which Hindus and Muslims in the North [India] speak and which is written either in the Devanagari or Urdu script.’’ ^[10] He also went on to reiterate that Hindi and Urdu were not two different languages, but the same language. The difference, he believed, was falsely propagated by the educated classes, wherein the educated Hindus had Sanskritised Hindi and the educated Muslims Persianised Urdu with an intention that others could not follow them. As regards the script, he was certain that Hindus would write in Devanagari and Muslims in Urdu script. ^[11]

Gandhi’s emphasis on Hindustani, which eventually led to the Indian National Congress’ amendment of its constitution to make Hindi as its language of communication in 1925 Kanpur session, saw sharp criticism from no less than Annie Besant who had served as its president. Besant remarked that the Congress had become provincial rather than a national assembly as its proceedings were being held in Hindustani. His indifference towards English cannot be misconstrued as hatred towards it. In fact, he termed it as a ‘‘world language’’ and was ‘‘necessary for acquisition of modern knowledge of the world.’’ He lamented how undue emphasis on English has led to a neglect of our mother tongues. ‘‘English is the language of international commerce, is the language of diplomacy, and it contains many a rich literary treasure, it gives us an introduction to western thought and culture. For a few of us, therefore, knowledge of English is necessary.

They can carry on the departments of national commerce and international diplomacy, and for giving to the nation the best of western literature, thought and science. That would be the legitimate use of English, whereas. Today English has usurped the dearest place in our hearts and dethroned our mother tongues.” [12]

Gandhi was convinced that a common language could be instrumental in forging harmonious relationship between the Hindus and Muslims at a time when the country was torn apart by animosity between the two large communities due to the divide-and-rule politics being adopted by the then British administration. In line with his conviction, the Indian National Congress officially recognised Hindustani as its working language in its 1925 Kanpur Session resulting in the amendment of the Congress’ Constitution which read:

This Congress resolves that Article XXXIII of the Constitution be amended as follows: “the proceedings of the Congress shall be conducted as far as possible in Hindustani. The English language or any provincial language may be used if the speaker is unable to speak Hindustani or whenever necessary. Proceedings of the Provincial Congress Committee shall ordinarily be conducted in the language of the Province concerned. Hindustani may also be used.” [13]

The Hindi Sahitya Sammelan’s acceptance of Hindi-Hindustani as the common language for interprovincial intercourse gave him the assurance that he had given full scope to both Hindus and Muslims to identify themselves with an effort to enrich the common language. [14] However, the acceptance of Hindi-Hindustani as the common language by the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan soon took another turn, with its members pitching for the Sanskritised version of Hindi as the national language. This not only led to Gandhi’s resignation from the organisation, but also resulted in him floating the Hindustani Prachar Sabha on 2 May 1942 to advance what he believed in. He said, “If the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan people insist that they will work only for the Sanskrit-ridden Hindi, the Sammelan ceases to exist for me. The language of the villagers is one; it cannot be two. The Hindi people want me to boast Hindi and never mention a word of Urdu. But how can I, a Satyagrahi with faith in non-violence, do such a thing?” [15] As a Satyagrahi, he believed in universal love and wanted both languages to prosper for the good of the country. [16]

Given the circumstances and the period in which he was operating, Gandhi had the responsibility to bring on board all Indians irrespective of their religion and regional affiliations, thereby prioritising the cause in favour of a national language. Gandhi’s insistence on Hindustani was not acceptable to the diverse cultural-linguistic members of the Constituent Assembly it was unlikely that any language enforced upon Indians will be tolerated.

To choose a particular language and give it a pride of place as the national language in a multi-lingual country has its own set of problems. European states are that way very uniquely placed as compared to India. In India, the quest for a national language was a derivative of the Indian national movement for freedom. So it was neither an organic literary movement nor a livelihood movement. It has an uncanny resemblance with the Koine movement. [17] Father Bernolak (A Roman Catholic priest) chose Koine to serve as the common language of the Slovaks, but it could not take off after temporary survival in the initial period as Slovak intellectuals who found the newly crafted language too Czeck to their liking and eventually turned to their own language and a separate linguistic and national identity. The Gandhian plan of installing a Rastrabhasa got spiked due to the rigidity of the Hindi lobby as well as a similar rigid stance adopted by the Urdu lobby.

An unequal nation struggling for liberation from a colonial government had indispensable vulnerabilities which could not be very conveniently reconciled. There wasn’t enough space to manoeuvre in a multilingual country with rich, competing as well rivalling languages. Unlike Gandhi and Nehru the language activists were in hurry with a non-accommodative attitude and wanted to ramrod the voices of the non-Hindi regions. They were not free of the narrow limits of literary prejudices as they did not have the

national vision either the perseverance with a heavy cultural baggage from the past and capacity for delving into the extremely complex task of a new nation-building, So a feeble acceptance around national language, which was worked out by Gandhi and Nehru soon lost its momentum. [18]

Partition of the country in 1947 destroyed the possibility of introducing Hindustani. Pakistan declared Urdu as its national language and Gandhiji seemed to have clearly underestimated the multilingual identity of India as the main theatre of national movement moved to the Hindustani speaking heartland where Gandhian politics got more currency compared to South India. [19] Ironically, in South India where the language issue had never been a contentious issue during the national movement against the colonial masters came in full force in the decades following independence. In the mid-sixties, it turned into an equation of Rastrabhasa versus national integration. The wheel seemed to turn a full circle when in 1968, almost 20 years after the death of Mahatma, Annadurai the popular Dravidian leader and chief minister of Tamilnadu threatened to secede from Indian union, Hindi was one of the questions in his conceptualisation of Dravid identity. [20]

In 1967, to guarantee the indefinite use of Hindi and English as official languages, the Congress Government headed by Mrs Indira Gandhi amended the Official Languages Act. In 1968, the Ministry of Education, in consultation with the states formulated the three language formula for language learning. [21]

In 1968 the Ministry of Education of the Government of India in consultation with the states formulated the three-language formula for language learning. The formula as enunciated in the 1968 National Policy Resolution which provided for the study of Hindi, English and modern Indian language (preferably one of the southern languages) in the Hindi speaking states and Hindi, English and Regional language in the non-Hindi speaking States. The formula was formulated in response to demands from non-Hindi speaking states of the South, such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and mainly Tamil Nadu.

Recently the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has come up with the revised draft of National Education Policy (NEP) 2019, which suggests giving flexibility over choice of language under the three language model in schools after protests over Hindi imposition in non-Hindi speaking states. The revised draft mentions that since the modular Board examinations for language proficiency will indeed test only for basic proficiency in each language, such a change in choice in Grade 6 would certainly be feasible if the student so desires and would in such cases be supported by teachers and the schooling system. The revised draft further adds that the additional choices of languages would therefore be offered in middle school for this purpose of choice and flexibility. This revised draft has come after much hue and cry over Hindi imposition in schools in the non-Hindi speaking states, Tamil Nadu being one. [22]

Hindi or Hindustani is no more a fundamental issue in contemporary India. They were fiercely debated in the Constituent Assembly proceedings. It goes without saying that any attempt to impose one language (Hindi) across the country is bound to raise furore and hostile reactions from many quarters. The experience of the recent decades when there hasn't been any overt attempts to keep the burden of national integration on one single language has also gone to show that we would do better by retaining our multi-lingual working model than trying to have an enforced-unity. Probably, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi would have preferred this arrangement.

The key imperative is that along with Hindi all the other Indian languages must also come out of the shadow of English. Changes in the school curriculum need to be accompanied by the systematic creation of a pool of competent translators, so that Indians can read the best in all the languages of the country. If this is achieved, it would be enough of a revolution, for once the people develop love and respect for what is their own, the rest- including the project of the national language-will follow.

Notes and References:

1. The newly crafted State of Pakistan declared Urdu as their national language but within four years a full fledged Bengali language movement against the imposition of Urdu as national language

developed and by 1971 Pakistan disintegrated as a consequence of the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language in a largely multilingual Pakistan. The glue of religion could not save Pakistan from breaking down. Dipak Malik, Mahatma Gandhi and the Contentious Issue of Languages in India, 19 Feb 2019. <https://elinepa.org/mahatma-gandhi-and-the-contentious-issue-of-languages-in-india/>

2. This appeal is usually accompanied by the added information that prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had wanted that Indians should accept Hindi as the official language and that it would never be imposed at the cost of any other language. Hindi was a language of co-existence. Leaders on these occasions emphasize that “India is a country of different languages and every language has its importance but it is very important to have a language of the whole country which should become the identity of India globally.” Home Minister Mr Amit Shah’s views on tweeter on the eve of Hindi Diwas “Hindi Imposition: Examining Gandhi’s Views on Common Language for India.” <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/hindi-imposition-examining-gandhis-views-on-common-language>.
3. “Our love of the English language in preference to our mother tongue has caused a deep chasm between the educated and the politically minded classes and the masses. We flounder when we make a vain attempt to express abstruse thoughts in the mother tongue...The result has been disastrous...”Cited in Varma, Pavam K, Becoming Indian, Allen Lane, New Delhi, 2010, p.66.
4. Karthik Venkatesh ‘Mahatma Gandhi and the Language Games’ in Live Mint, 21 Sep 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/mahatma-gandhi-and-the-language-games-1568967396027.html>.
5. Gandhi himself spoke Gujarati-Kathiawadi, an Indo-European group of language. There was a small section of Gujarati merchants which patronised Gandhi but they were not opposed to the adoption of Hindustani as the lingua franca of the diaspora community. Gandhi had come to South Africa to primarily monitor and assist the legal problems of his client Dada Abdullah and company. Dada Abdullah himself was a rich Gujrati-Kathiawadi businessman.
6. Deshmukh, C.D. (1972): Hindustani: Rastrabhasha or Lingua Franca? Bombay;Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Research Centre, Hindustani Prachar Sabha, p.2.
7. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956): Thoughts on National Language, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishers, p. 4. India of My Dreams, www.mkgandhi.org, p.171, (Compiled by R K Prabhu, Printed and published by Jitendra T Desai, Navajivan Mudranalaya, Ahmedabad).
8. India of My Dreams, op.cit., p.173. (From Gandhiji’s Presidential address at the Second Gujarat Educational Conference held at Bharuch on 20th October 1917)
9. Constructive Programme, pp.19-20. India of my Dreams, Chapter 51 on Provincial Languages, p.174.
10. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956): Thoughts on National Language, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishers, p. 5.
11. Ibid.
12. Young India, 2-2-1921.
13. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956), op.cit, p.22.
14. The Hindi Sahitya Sammelan’s meet was held in Nagpur in 1936. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956), op.cit, pp.78-79.
15. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956), op.cit, p.125. The objective of the newly formed Hindustani Prachar Sabha was to promote and propagate Hindustani among Indians.
16. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1956), op.cit, p.124. Often excessive zeal of the propagandists of Hindi alienated many of their fellow citizens whose mother tongue was not Hindi and made the implementation of the language policy difficult. Varma, Pavan K, op.cit., p. 69.
17. Peter Brock, Mahatma Gandhi as a Linguistic Nationalist, Mayur Publications: Bhubaneswar, 2005, p. 61. Koine is a later form of Greek which means ‘common’ or ‘shared’ spoken in Eastern

Mediterranean countries from 7th century BCE. It is a language developed from contact between the dialects of the same language over a large region.

18. Malik Dipak, op.cit.
19. The intention of the constitution makers was crystal clear. English was to be progressively phased out to make way for Hindi as the national language. Article 351 laid out the policy guidelines framework through which this was to be achieved. Varma, Pavan K, op.cit., p.68.
20. After independence Hindi was adopted as the official language of India with English continuing as an associate official language for a period of 15 years, after which (1965) Hindi would become the sole official language. Efforts by the Government of India to make Hindi the sole official language was not acceptable to many in the non-Hindi speaking states. Varma, Pavan K, op.cit., p.69.
21. The Three Language Formula provided for the study of Hindi, English and Modern Indian Language (MIL) in the Hindi-speaking states and Hindi, English and regional language in the non-Hindi speaking states.
22. <https://www.manifestias.com/2019/06/13/language-issues-in-post-independence-of-india/>, Language Issues in Post-Independence of India, 13 June 2019,

