

## Hindi beyond Official Language status



**\*PRIYADARSHI DUTTA**

September 14 is observed as the Hindi Day. It was on this date in 1949 that the Constituent Assembly adopted Hindi in Devanagari script as the official language of the Indian union after a long and animated debate. Part XVII of the Constitution comprising Articles 343 to 351 deals with the subject. The Article 343 (1) declares the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script. But a reading of the Articles 343 (2) onwards reveal what a difficult and complicated terrain the official language issue had to navigate in a multi-lingual nation like India with its government institutions dominated by laws, rules and regulations set down in English.

It can at best be described as a compromise. All proceedings of the Supreme Court, High Courts, authoritative texts of all Bills and Acts introduced or passed in Parliament of state assemblies, all orders/rules/laws and regulations passed under the Constitution have to be in English (as in colonial India). Until the passage of the [Constitution \(Fifty Eighth\) Amendment Act](#) on February 17, 1987 no updated version of the Constitution (containing the amendments) could be issued in Hindi containing the amendments. For various reasons the performance of Hindi as an official language is far from satisfactory. That is why Hindi is no way in sight of replacing English in government even after 70 years. Our Constitution makers had allotted merely 15 years for this task.

The concept of official language (Raj Bhasha) pertains to various organs of the state viz. legislature, executive, judiciary and armed forces etc. However, the nation is larger than its government institutions. The mass mobilization that Mahatma Gandhi initiated in India happened outside institutions. His Non-Cooperation movement or opposition to Congress participating in elections under the Government of India Act, 1919 reveal his disapproval to the nation being dependent on its institutions. Gandhi was aware of the gulf between the state apparatus in colonial India and her teeming millions. He wanted to address the Indian nation rather than India, the state. One of the ways Gandhi did it was to use the language of the masses rather than English.

The language question was an integral part of Gandhi's *Swadeshi* campaign. He understood that people could be involved in the mission for *Swaraj* only through their languages. Therefore after his return from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi insisted on greater usage of Hindi (and other regional languages). His article in *Pratap* (Hindi) on May 28, 1917 advocated recognizing Hindi as the national language.

Therein he stated that most Indians, who knew neither Hindi nor English, would find the

former easier to learn. He said that it was only on account of cowardice that Indians had not started conducting their national business in Hindi. If Indians shed that cowardice, and cultivate faith in Hindi, then even the work of national and provincial councils could be conducted in that language.

It was in this article that Gandhi first mooted the idea of sending Hindi missionaries in south India. His idea crystallized in the form of Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha established in 1923. Gandhi's long speech at 2<sup>nd</sup> Gujarat Educational Conference at Bharuch on October 20, 1917 is considered a classic. Therein he paid tributes to the pioneering efforts of Swami Dayanand Saraswati in popularizing Hindi.

Swami Dayanand (1824-1883), like Gandhi, hailed from Gujarat. He used Sanskrit as the medium of religious disputation and preaching. He never bothered to learn Hindi even while spending decades in the Himalayas and northern India. But in 1873, while visiting Calcutta, he came across Keshub Chunder Sen of Brahmo Samaj. Sen advised him to use Hindi instead of Sanskrit to increase his reach amongst the masses. Interestingly neither Swami Dayanand nor Keshub Chunder Sen were native Hindi speakers. He heeded to the friendly advice and mastered Hindi thoroughly in a short time. He wrote his magnum opus *Satyarth Prakash* (1875) in Hindi. The Arya Samaj founded by him acted as a powerful agency to popularize Hindi.

Thus Gandhi took up the baton for Hindi where Swami Dayanand had left it. Whereas Dayanand's mission was religious, Gandhi's was national. Gandhi viewed Hindi as tool to 'de-colonize' the Indian mind. His mission to popularize Hindi found many takers in southern India.

G. Durgabai (1909-1981), who later became a member of Constituent Assembly, ran a popular Balika Hindi Pathshala at Kakinanda (Andhra Pradesh) as a teenage girl. The Balika Hindi Pathshala was visited by C.R. Das, Kasturba Gandhi, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Jamnalal Baja and C.F. Andrews. They could hardly believe that the Pathshala which imparted knowledge of Hindi to few hundred women was run by a teenager.

But the situation regarding Hindi had changed in south India by the time same Durgabai reached the Constituent Assembly. She felt that zealous propaganda in favour of Hindi by native Hindi speakers alienated others. What the volunteers had achieved, misguided zealots threatened to undo. Thus she says in her speech on September 14, 1949, "I am shocked to see this agitation against that enthusiasm of ours with which we took to Hindi in the early years of this century.....Sir, this overdone and misused propaganda on their part is responsible and would be responsible for losing the support of people who know and who are supporters on Hindi like me".

The dilemma captured by G. Durgabati in her speech has not lost relevance after 70 years. Non-Hindi speakers would be more amenable to Hindi through voluntary efforts rather than enforcing the legal status of the language. An increased literary and cultural interaction between Hindi and other Indian languages would help the cause of Hindi. Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's charisma has helped Hindi in an unobtrusive fashion. The aim would be to reach maximum people in a language they can understand.

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*\*The writer is an independent researcher and columnist based in New Delhi.*

*Views expressed in the article are his personal.*

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