The language Problem—A Solution

O L Chavarria-Aguilar

The Indian Constitution stipulates that Hindi, in the Devanagari script, is to be the Official Language of the Indian Union; that Hindi shall be used for all official purposes of the Union, in place of English, from 1965, fifteen year from the commencement of the Constitution itself.

Now it is usually a rather risky business to make predictions about language, but it is highly questionable whether Hindi will indeed be able to replace English within the time limit set. Fifteen years seems hardly a reasonable and realistic period of time in which to expect Hindi to accomplish the far from easy task of replacing English, even if only in the realm of official purposes of the Union. English has been the official language of India for a good two hundred years; its prestige is very great, and it cannot certainly be denied that that prestige, the use of and the demand for English has scarcely declined since 1947—much less since 1950, the year of commencement of the Constitution. In many states Hindi has officially been adopted, while in others deliberate steps to curtail the learning of English and otherwise to impair or render of secondary importance a knowledge of English have been taken. So far this does not seem to have had much effect upon the overall position of English. On the other hand, it cannot be said that the knowledge of or the prestige of Hindi has increased appreciably throughout India; certainly not to the extent that some would wish, nor to the extent that might lead even the most optimistic to regard the 1965 deadline as remotely possible of achievement.

India is still very much governed through the medium of the English language; English is today still the most important single language in India, despite all efforts to give that place to Hindi. And it is likely to remain so for a long time to come to judge by its continued prestige and pre-eminence and by the slow progress of Hindi in its evolution toward the status of a true national language. (It is interesting to note in this connection that quite recently, a high-ranking military person speaking on the new combined services academy at Khadakvasla, stressed the fact that the medium of instruction would be English for at least 15 or 20 years to come; and that this point was, in fact, made the basis for an appeal to Maharashtrians to join the academy for, it was Stated, English is much neglected in Bombay State.)

Rather, however, than dwell on the probability or the improbability of Hindi replacing English within the stipulated period, I should like in this brief essay to confine myself to an examination of the concept of national language, and to a discussion of some of its corollaries. The status, the conceived roles and functions of a national language are, 1 think, central to the present language problems in India; it is a question that has very particular bearing on the matter of Hindi and its position among and its relation to the other regional languages. It is also of significance in the matter of Hindi vs English.

NATIONAL LANGUAGE

What is, after all, a national language? What are the properties and functions of a language so designated? What are the circumstances out of which national languages arise? And why indeed are national languages felt to be so necessary an adjunct, and even sometimes a condition, of nations? It is not easy to find wholly satisfactory answers to these questions; almost any answer that can be elicited is totally or partially inapplicable to given situations, and this is particularly true in the Indian context. Is a national language the official administrative medium of a nation, the sole language officially employed within the national boundaries? Belgium and Switzerland have no national language in this sense. Is it the language that expresses the "genius" of a people? Switzerland has four, Belgium and Canada two each, and India at least fourteen or fifteen! Or is a national language more a symbol of national identity, of the community of aims and aspirations of a number of groups which constitute themselves a nation? Again, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, the Soviet Union, India, Pakistan and a number of other nations have no national language in this sense.

Language in the political, social and cultural contexts of a nation has two major functions. One is practical: the expression and intercommunication of thought; the means of conveying cultural and social items between individuals and groups of a single generation as well as from one generation to the next; the indispensable tool of political and social intercourse. The other function is symbolic; language is often the symbol of national identity, the rallying point of numerous individuals and groups, often with widely differing interests and orientational differences. In such nations there is a language which serves to identify these groups—and by which these frequently identify themselves—as a nation.

As we know it today and see it operating, about us, this second function of language is of comparatively recent origin—though none the less potent a force for not all that. It arose along with the modern concept of nations as rather jealous, distinct and rigidly defined political entities, and it has come increasingly to serve as a distinguishing feature (often the sole distinguishing feature) of sovereign political states. In this context, many nations have no particular language problems. The United States, the Scandinavian countries, the nations of Latin America and many others have but a single language—or but a single language of the geographical, not the political, states. In such cases there is little or no conflict of language ideologies or of language loyalties; the practical and symbolic functions of language are served by a single language. Other nations, bi- or multilingual, have evolved in such fashion as to render language differences within the national boundaries of less than secondary importance. Here the symbolic functions which elsewhere attach to language are embodied in some other common aspect of cultural or even of political heritage. Switzerland is perhaps the best example of this, while Canada is another.

PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF HINDI

Many language problems arise in the Indian context—where the picture is, it must be admitted, much more complicated than elsewhere existing in the world—because there seems to be no clear conception of the two distinct primary functions of language. And this is particularly true as regards the status, present and future, of Hindi and the purpose which this language is to serve in India. Among other things this gives rise to a good deal of antagonism against Hindi in many quarters, for it is felt that attempts are being made to give to Hindi a scope...
much broader than that to which its position of official language entitles it. This antagonism, in turn, becomes a barrier to the spread and acceptance of Hindi even in its rightful domain.

What role is Hindi intended to serve in India? Is it to be the language of purely administrative convenience; simply a handy tool to facilitate inter-provincial and centre-province communication? Or is a somewhat wider, more all-embracing role, a more symbolic function being sought for it? Is Hindi to be simply, as the Constitution of India has it, the language for official purposes of the Union? Or is it rather to be conceived of as the symbol of Indian nationality, a device syntonising the community of purpose, the oneness, of the many varying groups that make up the Indian Union?

A national language such as the Indian Constitution seems to call for is not only possible, it is, in addition, a highly necessary and desirable

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LIMITATIONS OF HINDI

Hindi simply cannot fulfill the symbolic functions of a national language in a nation linguistically so varied; nor can it be expected to be the culture language of more than those who claim it as their mother tongue, their regional language. India as a whole has many significant features of common cultural heritage which might better serve as the symbols of the unity, the Indianism, for the many groups that make up the nation. To ask Hindi to fulfill this function is a disservice to it and a slight to the other regional languages. Hindi may eventually become the full-fledged language of inter-provincial communication, official and non-official, but it would be foolish to expect almost thirty crores of people whose mother tongue is other than Hindi to identify themselves with the official language and to display it proudly as the symbol of their nationality. Hindi clothes do not indeed make the man—much less is Hindi going to make the Indian.

The function of Hindi as national language (for it must not be forgotten that Hindi is also an important regional language) must be conceived of solely in terms of inter-provincial communication, for official purposes of the Union. The spread and the development of Hindi, whether spontaneous or consciously guided by its speakers, in other spheres of activity should be considered apart from its status as official language—though, of course, in this capacity, Hindi is bound to benefit. The efforts of Government to extend the use and knowledge of Hindi, to gain its greater acceptance, must be limited to Hindi as the tool of governmental convenience. Otherwise the task before Government, far from easy as it is, becomes immeasurably and unnecessarily complicated. The problem is to give rise to ever more serious language conflicts. Much of the antagonism that exists against Hindi today is the result, not of the work of the numerous Hindi Prachar Samitis, Sabhas, Parishads and what have you, but of the conflicting attitudes, the vague, in consistent policies of Government as the apostle of Hindi. The apprehension with regard to the future status of Hindi is not without justification. For many the national language has assumed the guise and the terrorsomeness of a hogre, out to gobble up all the regional languages and to reign in India, not as primus inter pares, but as the sole Indian language. An exaggerated notion, no doubt, but the feeling is nevertheless there and there is some substance to it. And so long as it persists, the task of spreading Hindi will be made more difficult for there is always bound to be resistance to it.

HINDI AND ENGLISH

The biggest single hurdle that Hindi has to get over is, of course, the English language. So long as English continues to occupy the privileged position that it cannot be denied, it occupies today in India, Hindi will make relatively little headway. Hindi is not at present in a class with English; it does not have as much to offer, intellectually or economically, as does a knowledge of English. Any language, Hindi included, can have its development guided toward equal effectiveness with a rival. But there must be clearcut aims in view—there must be no equivocation as to what exactly is expected of the language. One simply cannot legislate the matter, as should no more than evident from the little relative progress that Hindi has thus far made and at present seems to be making. The ambivalent attitude toward Hindi current today is in large measure responsible for this slow progress. No one seems to know quite what is expected of Hindi, and too many have been taken for granted that anything is to be expected of it. Hindi as the expression of the thought of a certain segment of the Indian population can be expected to develop, in its own milieu, as the expanding and increasing needs of its speakers require, in those spheres in which the language is employed. This is the history of language development. The point to consider is, of course, the extent to which Hindi and, in fact, all the regional languages, are indeed employed. The Indian languages have suffered in the past; they have had their growth checked or impaired, because for the last two hundred years or so English has been almost the sole linguistic key to success in India. A knowledge of English in British India (and indeed today) could be expected to take an individual much farther up the ladder of success than any single one of the Indian languages. This was particularly true in Government and in education both of which were carried on, above the primary stages, in English. It was also true, though perhaps to a lesser degree, in commerce and industry. The feeling is still very much with us, even in the smallest of villages, where, above the taluka level, English was an essential to individual advancement, so that the regional languages, including Hindi, were neglected in favour of English and then development thus held back. Now that Hindi is to replace English as the only official language of the Union, there is a definite fear in many quarters that the regional languages will soon be as much at the mercy of Hindi as Hindi and they have so far been at a disadvantage because of the preferred status of English.

This fear is not without foundation—and it is certainly kept alive by the antics of many of the more fanatic Hindi protagonists. Furthermore, government policies, both state and central, subject as they are to confusion and lacking any concise notion as to the proper function and properties of the national language, only add to the fear that Hindi is indeed out to usurp the domains that are felt to belong rightly to the regional languages. Certain recent policies of the Government of Bombay State have certainly given a good deal of substance to this fear. And while it is hardly necessary to emphasize the unlikelihood that Hindi will ever completely supplant the other regional languages (no one thinks that Government and the saner pro-Hindi element intend that it should do so) it is certainly true that the fear of this arouses a good deal of anti-Hindi sentiment, thus hindering the development of Hindi even in what we might consider its proper sphere. Furthermore, the possibility is quite real that, given its ability to
displace English (a not undebatable proposition), the future status of Hindi as the national language and any over-emphasis as to its importance in the national scene are quite likely to affect adversely the development of the other regional languages, as all the Indian languages have up to now been affected by the pre-eminence of and the great emphasis upon English.

RELATIVE PRESTIGE OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE

Now it is very difficult to see how, if Hindi is indeed to become the de facto as well as the de jure national language of India, the regional languages can be expected to be on a completely equal footing with Hindi. As the national language (as defined by the Constitution and not as a symbolic device) Hindi will offer and enjoy advantages that the other Indian languages will not. A knowledge of Hindi will certainly offer possibilities of employment, if in nothing else, that the regional languages cannot hope to match. In the nature of things, the situation being hardly avoidable, this somewhat enhanced position of Hindi will simply have to be taken with as good grace as can be mustered.

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The relative prestige of Hindi and the disadvantages that might be the lot of the regional languages can, however, be considerably mitigated — or even reversed — in many spheres. Hindi will, of course, have a preferred place in education, for example — though to attempt to make it the medium of instruction in non-Hindi areas, where it is still a foreign language despite its being India’s second language, would be both unwise and short-sighted. Unless, however, every effort is made to see to it that the importance of Hindi is not unduly emphasised, we shall have much the same situation as we have today, with regard to English and the Indian languages, only it will be Hindi which will prosper at the expense of the other regional languages.

If Hindi is given preference in every field over the regional languages the development of these latter will clearly suffer as it did when English was the official language of India. In the field of Union Public Service, where the position of English is possibly the strongest, the relative importance of Hindi, when it eventually replaces English, can easily be equated with respect to the regional languages, and it is, in fact, precisely here where some equalisation will be most-required and where it can most readily be effected. All that is needed is a constructive and realistic attitude on the part of Government, and a clear understanding of the functions of the national language and of the limits of its proper domain.

**HINDI IN GOVERNMENT**

Hindi need not, indeed should not, be made the ‘open sesame’ to Union Public Service as was English during the British Raj. In all fairness to the inhabitants of non-Hindi regions and, in fact, in fairness to the nation itself, since she should be able without discrimination to draw on the entire population for service, Hindi should not only not be made a prerequisite to service in the Central Government service, but should not even be given any consideration for such service.

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Regardless of how Government decides to go about its job of language teacher, however, the scheme will in the long run pay handsome dividends. It is, for one, the only way of ensuring that candidates for Union Public Service will be selected on their knowledge and competence in Hindi or one of the other regional languages, in order to afford every single applicant, regardless of his competence, or lack there of, in Hindi.

To take such a view of things — and I cannot think of a more impartial view to take — will mean (1) that the qualifying examinations for government service, where required, must be given in the major regional languages, in order to afford every single applicant, regardless of his place of origin or his mother tongue, an equal opportunity, and (2) that the Government of India will perform find itself in the language teaching business.

Qualifying examinations, in the regional languages, should then be limited to the testing of general aptitudes and knowledge, and of the special requirements for specific posts; questions of language competence — particularly of competence in the national language — should be rigidly excluded except, of course, in the case of posts for language teachers or, in general, wherever competence in a given language is a necessary special qualification for employment. Once selection on this basis has been made, language competence examinations, specifically competence in Hindi, can be given. Selected candidates can then be sent for whatever language training it is deemed necessary they acquire. And this type of training should be given with the individual on full pay and allowances for his post, in order that there may be, even here, no discrimination between Hindi and non-Hindi speakers.

At this time too, by the way, speakers of Hindi can be sent for training, as required, in one or another of the regional languages. This measure would seem to be much more realistic than, for example, the attempt to force the burden of a second Indian language on secondary school students in Hindi regions, as has been frequently suggested. How many students who complete their secondary education ever feel the need of a second Indian language? Suggestions to require a second Indian language of Hindi speaking students are not based on the need of students, but are the product of spite, pure and simple, of a desire to penalise students whose another tongue is Hindi, simply because their tongue, or another of the regional languages, is as yet a foreign language.

The Union Government can readily accomplish its task as teacher of languages in one (or both) of two ways: either Government establishes a second language college or university or else it sends its selected candidates to the various regional universities for that training. Even in the latter event, however, it is most likely that Government will find itself directly committed, for it will undoubtedly have to subsidise some way the appropriate language training programmes. I do not think that there is as yet a university in India properly equipped to offer intensive and scientifically balanced courses in language.

Regardless of how Government decides to go about its job of language teacher, however, the scheme will in the long run pay handsome dividends. It is, for one, the only way of ensuring that candidates for Union Public Service will be selected on their knowledge and competence in Hindi or one of the other regional languages, in order to afford every single applicant, regardless of their ability to handle the national language. The nation will thus be potentially assured of being able to draw on the best qualified individuals for the services required, and not be restricted more or less to those who possess a knowledge, fortuitous or otherwise, of Hindi. There seems, moreover, to be no real alternative if the disabilities are to be minimised under which the regional languages would otherwise be compelled to labour. This will seem too, to lessen the possibility (indeed, the probability) of giving undue emphasis to Hindi as the key to success in government service. It will certainly lessen the antagonism against the national language and, by making Hindi less of a competitor with the other regional languages, or equalisation of the terms of competition, enhance the opportunities and incentives for the rapid development of these latter.
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**DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE**

Finally Government, as teacher of languages, whether directly or indirectly, will be in a much better position to undertake still another important task prescribed for it by the Constitution: the proper development of the national language. Here there must be absolute certainty on the part of Government as to the function and status, the true role, of the national language. At present this seems not to be a striking feature of official language policies.

Provided we understand clearly the functions and properties of Hindi as the national language, I should like respectfully to submit that it is incumbent upon Government to attempt the development of Hindi solely within the frame of reference provided by the Constitution, namely, for official purposes of the Indian Union. The proper function of Government, in connection with the development of the national language is, it seems to me, limited to Hindi as the tool of Union administration and no more. It is not the function of Government to concern itself with the development of Hindi as a literary vehicle, nor along any other lines with which Government is itself not directly concerned. Government's concern with Hindi exists only insofar as this is a necessary tool, for more efficient national administration. For the Government of India to extend its interest beyond this limit can lead only to eventual overemphasis on Hindi to the detriment of the other regional languages. It will lend, in effect, to placing Hindi on the pedestal at present occupied by English—a situation which, in view of the effects that the emphasis upon English has had on the development of all the Indian languages, Government would do well to avoid.

The development of Hindi as the means of literary, cultural, scientific expression of the people whose mother tongue it is, the development, in short, of Hindi as a regional language, is the proper function of those people who claim it as their mother tongue. And I am sure that these will not be wanting in zeal.

Unless it is fully intended to make of Hindi the symbolic as well as the practical national language of India, the symbol of the unity of aspirations, goals and interests of 365 millions of people speaking many, often widely differing, languages—and it should be obvious that this is manifestly an impossible role for any language, in India—the Union Government must make very clear its linguistic impartiality. The activities of the Union Government in the linguistic field should be limited to Hindi as the practical tool of more efficient central administration. Otherwise the cries of "Hindi Imperialism" will continue to be raised, and not without justification. For if Government, especially, insists on over-emphasising the importance of Hindi, the other regional languages will soon find themselves in a subordinate position to Hindi—and their development adversely affected thereby—in much the same way that all the Indian languages have for the past two hundred years been subordinate to English.
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