

Rise of Hindi as an Adoptive Language

Friends,

In the middle of last month when I found invitation to this conference in my mail-box, it made me recall two things: an observation by a perceptive observer of the language scene and a newspaper report related to the findings of a study filed from Chennai dateline. The observation was interesting in the sense that it posed an enquiry into the tools of communication of a son or daughter born out of wedlock between a Tamil and a Bengali speaker? The observer himself provided the answer by guessing that since English is bound to be the first language of communication in that family, the offspring would be ending up learning Hindi rather than either Tamil or Bengali as second language. The newspaper report that I am talking about was related to the current scene in Tamilnadu where management students and other aspirants of private sector high end jobs are found inclined more towards learning Hindi in order to enhance their chances in fast expanding north, western and central Indian markets. Apart from these two things, I shall like to think about a recent incident. Two months ago during my presentation in the annual faculty workshop of CSDS when I was trying to make a point about re-examining the modernity of Hindi under the light of its recent social successes, one of my colleagues began to wonder about the fluency in Hindi attained by his Tamil parents. For him one of the possible reasons was the reach and influence of Hindi film lyrics and music. You can see that in all these three illustrations Tamilnadu figures prominently, and it says that the so called hegemonic designs of Hindi have sieged to scare other linguistic cultures.

I am not going to say that these illustrations are enough to establish the claim that Hindi has become the foremost adoptive language of this multi-lingual and multi-cultural country of continental proportions. In fact this word foremost seems to me a bit dicey and I want to save Hindi from such claims. Adoptability can not be defined as a linguistic

race in which Hindi is competing with other Indian languages. As Professor Uday Narayan Singh rightly pointed out yesterday that India has a potential of more than one adoptive language. I am interested in the demonstrating the process by which Hindi has strengthened itself and develop a certain degree of adoptability. To my mind these illustrations provide clear indication of two trends: one, other than and more than English, Hindi for various reasons is becoming the language of Indian cosmopolitanism and this cosmopolitanism is not the one which has remained confined to a microscopic English speaking community; and second, it is becoming the language of opportunities, the language of market. I am convinced that lots of scholarship can be generated around these indications. Surveys can be designed and launched to mobilize primary data and research can be done to gather secondary material from the corpus of literary history and from the discipline of linguistics.

I have underlined the need of research in this respect precisely because I consider India as a microcosm of the world in terms of multiplicity of languages and cultures. What is true of Europe is in fact truer of India and vice-a-versa. I fully go along with the EU idea of promoting a 'personal adoptive language' in a multilingual situation. What EU is trying to do now, we have been trying to do for last hundred years on Indian terrain. From very beginning Hindi remained in the centre of this huge effort. Earlier we used to define it in terms of the idea of link language and anti-colonial fervour gave it an anti-English colour too. The agenda and vocabulary of this endeavour has been now suitably modified, because the tremendous growth of Hindi has allowed it to transcend the replacement syndrome. I am happy to note that the impact of this great project is now beginning to show in the changed situation.

In a sense every language has an adoptability quotient inbuilt in it. It depends upon the forces of history and process of development to propel one language in the top adoptability bracket or to pull it down from the podium. Over years Hindi has reaped tremendous benefits from both these elements because it was well placed to do so. It would be interesting to mark the trajectory of a language that was born of the womb of Indian modernity. Hindi had to strive for creating an independent niche and made a

conscious effort for shaking off the overbearing influence of classical languages like Sanskrit or Persian. Precisely for that reason Hindi could attain the grammatical flexibility, and a vast assimilative corpus of words could become constitutive for it. The struggle was not easy. Relationship with Sanskrit and Persian was a double edged sword. More Sanskrit in Hindi could translate in better adoptability for it in Southern India and even in Bengal, but could have confined it to a sectarian *Brahminic* mode in Northern parts. A bit of more Persian and more local elements certainly would have made it a powerful vector of democratisation in the North, but its adoptability for other Indian cultures would have then been jeopardised. I think Gandhi understood this dilemma perfectly. Through the politics of Hindi Sahitya Sammelan he devised structure of Hindi movement accordingly to fulfil this double need.

This we know that no language can become adoptable without a solid literary reputation. In the early stages of its development Hindi's literary culture was severely hampered due to the fact that its early proponents refused to write poetry in *Kari Boli* or *Nayi Chal ki Hindi*. Almost every other Indian language enjoyed a head start situation vis-à-vis Hindi. Psychologically, newly emerging literati of Hindi were under the spell of Bengali due to its outstanding literary achievements, and for its pioneering presence in modern and national imagination. Although the proximity with Bengali played an important role in the Hindi's literary development, but in the later part of twentieth century, the story of Hindi can be constructed as a language that was trying to redefine its own modernity. This is the period in which Hindi's self-image and its modernity had grown from the anti-colonial one (that means from the idea of being a designated national language) and gradually redefined into an ongoing cosmopolitical framework. Today Hindi is a language of changed priorities, the recent example of which can be seen in a policy decision of Mayawati, the chief-minister of UP. From this year on, English will be taught from class one with Hindi firmly in the saddle as the medium of instruction in the largest province of the Hindi belt.

Hindi could reach the level of comfortable existence with English as well as other Indian language within five decades of independent India is a concrete reality whose origins should be traced in its inaugural moments. Here I can prefigure a whole era where elites of *janpadeeya bhashas* (languages of various cultural zones) trying to conceive a new language,

namely modern Hindi, which can fit in their needs of having a very large, single lingual-cultural community. These *janpadeeya* elites belonged to a nation in making and they somehow knew that they would not succeed without having a language of prose capable of working across various cultural regions for the express purpose of establishing a social dialogue among communities through journalistic, literary and political texts. They wanted to have a language that can go beyond Urdu and their own mother tongues, and, at the same time, exhibit finer properties of all these pre-existing linguistic structures. Accomplishing it was not an easy task. Hindi was nobody's mother tongue. It was not even the mother tongue of its greatest of proponents. I have a perception that perhaps mine is the first generation that without any political motivation can genuinely call Hindi as its mother tongue. Obviously, accidents were bound to occur and Hindi could reach its present juncture by only overcoming them and by getting sustenance from its own internal sources.

I see adoptability quotient in Hindi going up since early eighties when cumulative impact of increased literacy was beginning to be felt in Northern India. It was also a time when upward mobility of numerous lower and middle castes and ongoing politicisation of Hindi speaking areas was about to reach stage of criticality. A whole new generation of Hindi speakers and writers came to the fore. As Professor Rajini Kothari would have dubbed them, these 'new entrepreneurs of Hindi' filled the scene quickly and effectively in eighties as well as in nineties when market forces of global kind propelled the realm of media in the frenzy of expansion. Exponential burst of creative energy could be witnessed in journalism whose mode of writing news, analysis and features broke free from the limits imposed on it by the style more suited to literary discourse. Those days saw the emergence of a new persona of journalist, a politico-social creature thriving on news gathering and investigating exploits instead of his or her felicity in poetry or short stories. Scene in creative literature was not static either. A significant number of authors from dalit and women ranks were demanding their inclusion as equal partners in literary sphere, and unlike Marathi and other literary spheres they didn't have to struggle much for this recognition. Along with these interventions, substantial number of Muslims authors also made their presence felt with new issues and challenges. In the field of social sciences, where presence of Hindi was particularly weak, new initiatives started addressing the lack of discursive literature through creative application of translation and editing. Since required readership was already building up due to intense politicisation, the sale of Hindi books containing serious social sciences left no doubt in the success of this venture. Autonomous genre of journalism, dalit-women-Muslim-subaltern intervention, rise of social science publications and market-media propelled forms of

Hindi combined wonderfully well as an exciting phenomenon of post independent India. Mono-cultures of Hindi were giving way to an internal democracy befitting the plurality of close to half million odd people whose cultural identity has been linked with this language. Hindi couldn't have acquired the image of an adoptive language without becoming linguistic agent of this all-round democratisation.

Before concluding I would like to say a few words about this agenda of having a personal adoptive language. This idea would defeat itself if it tries to confine itself only to the language of international communication. Otherwise it can help in creating solid grounds for bilingualism and multilingualism. I see this term 'adoptive' as suffused with the idea of voluntarism that can be stimulated by pragmatism. If EU's agenda is to be evolved programmatically, we have to figure out the role of agents very carefully. When the issue of curriculum comes to fore, I wonder how the state is going to play its role in it. Even one wrong step can generate linguo-political upheavals. Apart from the state, the role of cultural groups, NGOs and other non-state actors also has to be carved out.

Now I think I should stop here.