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Mahatma Gandhi's Perspective on Language and its Contemporary Relevance

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi's approach to both Politics and Language is 'inclusive' in its orientation. During the National freedom movement, language had a direct relevance in evaluation of the significance of Gandhi's role in overturning British rule. He promoted the notion of nation with a linguistic order consisting of 'Hindustani' as the part of his 'three-language' formula. This had a neutralizing effect on the communal crisis and controversial national language issue. This became a milieu of unification among the various camps of language; Sanskritised Hindi, Persianised Urdu and other provincial languages. His views on language draw a parallel with his ideology on faith, religion and democracy. Gandhi's language edifice was a counter-balance to the English courts and occidental education system in Colonial India. Though his model falls apart and there exist different status of two ingredient languages of 'Hindustani', the concept of harmony in heterogeneity is still a major tenet of contemporary relevance.

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Gandhi's approach to both Politics and Language is 'inclusive' in its orientation. During the National freedom movement, language had a direct relevance in evaluation of the significance of Gandhi's role in overturning British rule. He promoted the notion of nation with a linguistic order consisting of 'Hindustani' as the part of his 'three-language' formula. This had a neutralizing effect on the communal crisis and controversial national language issue. This became a milieu of unification among the various camps of language; Sanskritised Hindi, Persianised Urdu and other provincial languages. His views on language draw a parallel with his ideology on faith, religion and democracy. Gandhi's language edifice was a counter-balance to the English courts and occidental education system in Colonial India. Though his model falls apart and there exist different status of two ingredient languages of 'Hindustani', the concept of harmony in heterogeneity is still a major tenet of contemporary relevance.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In modern India, philosophy, education and politics mark three legendary figures Swami Vivekanand, Madan Mohan Malviya and Mahatma Gandhi respectively. Language was firstly raised by Mahatma Gandhi as an issue on

the agenda list of the National Freedom Movement. A nation devoid of its own language cannot strive for independence from Colonial rule. Remarkably, Gandhi is known for his assimilating nature towards society and language. Twenty-one years as an Indian Diaspora in South Africa, Gandhi worked for abolition of Immigration laws, ditching Western clothes to initiate Swadeshi movement and induced acceptance of one dialect variant of Hindi as the sole lingua franca. This made the non-Hindi speaking community in South Africa to accept Hindustani as a unified language in mini India that was developed in South Africa by the indentured laborers. During his stay in Johannesburg, Gandhi commenced the publication of newspaper 'Indian Opinion'.

He was patronized as a Gujrati-Kathiawari native speaker as he had come to South Africa to monitor and assist the legal problems of his client Dada Abdullah and company. By his experience in South Africa, he was convinced that Muslims from North to South can adopt Hindustani in mainland India. His paper got published in 'Natal Mercury' which made him stay abroad for a while, working for the immigrants. Later, he moved to India and forcefully participated in making India a free land.

As Gandhi says, 'My language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations. (Epigraph of Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*'). Language remains to be the long-standing concern in Gandhian philosophy and acts a significant tool overturning British rule in India. He advocated the Nation of Linguistic order consisting of the 'Provincial languages' and a

'Universal language' of Hindi with the options of writing it in Persian or Nagari characters. Counting on his literary pieces- *The story of My Experiments with truth; Satyagraha in South Africa; Hind Swaraj; Lectures on Gita* offer a critical approach towards analyzing the various folds of society in which language played an essential role. He preferred English as a clerical language with restricted usage by folks.

His first encounter with English speaking was at elocution in London 'Mr. Bell rang my bell'. On personal ground, Gandhi had multilingual exposure at Rajkot. He was a Gujarati writer in South Africa, picked up Hindustani at Mumbai, learned Tamil by teaching a Brit and acquainted with Urdu Scripts on board on his way to India. When he became the editor of *Indian Opinion*, he shifted the publication to Gujarati and Hindi language. 3

Hindustani as a nomenclature is not new to Indian society. It was used by Shahjahan in '*Badshahnama*' as tareek-farishte (general language). The context for which the term Hindustani was propounded was propounded entirely new as he wanted it to neutralize the effect of communal hatred between Hindus and Muslims. In 1917, he was invited to the Gujarati Educational conference where he again raised the question of a national language. He chaired the sessions of *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* at Indore twice in 1918 and 1935 and delivered its presidential speeches. In 1918, Hindi was replaced by Hindustani from *Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha* and *Rashtrabhasa* term was replaced by Hindustani in *Hindustani Prachar Sabha* in 1942.

During his speech at Indore session Gandhi said that crores of men should learn a foreign tongue for the convenience of a few hundreds of officials is the height of absurdity...Nobody disputes the necessity of a common medium. But it cannot be English. The officials have to recognize the vernaculars. Gandhi propagated the idea of using English as the link language between the Indians and the Brits whereas Hindi as the common

medium for inter-provincial intercourse. Baldev Raj Nayar hailed Gandhi as a Language-activist by saying, "Even though other leaders from non-Hindi regions advocated the cause of Hindi as the National or link language, it was Gandhi who took active steps for its propagations in non-Hindi areas."¹ (Nayar 6)

The amalgamation of two languages as Hindustani was not accepted by all in the initial phase. Raja Lakshman Singh favored Sanskrit based Hindi and Raja Shiva Prasad Sitare opined Urdu. That was tending to withstand Gandhi's effect- Kasht was replaced by takleef, Nivedan was replaced by Guzarish and Avsar was replaced by Mauka. Hindustani dialect has potential to fulfill the image of a secular Nation with harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims. Extreme forms of language were discarded by Gandhi's school of thought. At the inauguration of BHU (Banaras Hindu University), he denounced the language that was delivered in, English and called upon Indians to speak Indian languages.² (Lelyveld 189-91)

Truth and Non-violence were the pillars of his philosophy which takes us back to the *Pranami Sampradayah* to which Gandhi's mother was associated. People from all sects gathered in Pranami Sampradayah to share the middle path of truth, non-violence and brotherhood. Gandhi picked up the formula of fasting or vrat from Swami Mahaveer Jain. He protested against the exploitative norms of British Government by fasting in a non-violent manner. He also associated himself with *Young India, Harijan Sewak, Indian Home Rule, and Harijan Bandhu*. In his magnum opus *Hind Swaraj* he wrote that 'Hindu Sanskriti, Muslims Persian, Arabic Hindi must be known by all.' By this statement he made

¹ Nayar, Baldev Raj (1968): 'Hindi as link Language', *Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 3.Pg.6*

² David Leyveld, 'The fate of Hindustani: Colonial Knowledge and the Project of a National Language' in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, University of Pennsylvania Press, pg. 189-91.

all the combinations of religion and language legitimate in every sense.

On the other hand, English language creates too great a barrier between an educated leadership and the public. Hindi is more accessible than English, he claimed, because of its grammar and vocabulary are closer to the other languages of North India, and its vocabulary, if not its grammar, is closer to the other languages of the south. Gandhi also argued that there was a cultural spirit in the languages of India that separated them from English; 'Our languages is a reflection of ourselves, and if you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thought, then I say that sooner we are wiped out of existence, the better for us.'³

In 1927, Gandhi campaigned for Hindi in South, establishing the Hindi Prachar Sabha, a network of teachers and a body of instructional material aimed at teaching Hindi to speakers of Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, all in the name of patriotism and national service. Gandhi's definition of Hindustani changed from time to time, setting to setting concerning the relationship of Muslims to the Indian nation by concession to the legitimacy of Urdu script and vocabulary. This is notable that despite an impact of Sanskrit on Tamil and the other Dravidian languages, strong resistance to the domination of the Sanskritisation process was noticed among those who had been traditionally learning or allowed to learn Sanskrit. This led to de-Sanskritization and created anti-Sanskrit sentiments, 'ignoring anti-Sanskrit sentiment in Tamil Nadu, Gandhi argued that the common Sanskrit vocabulary would serve to bridge the languages of India together.' Even if we avoid Gandhi's non-recognition of the 'forms of diglossia' which in the words of Paul R. Brass 'have arisen in all major language regions of India, but Tamil is generally used as the classic example in South Asia'⁴

³ M.K. Gandhi, *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publication Division, pg.543-44.

⁴ Brass, Paul R. 'Elite Interest, Popular Passion and Social Power' in *Language and Politics in India*, Oxford University press, pg. 183-217.

When Hindustani was declared as the language of Congress, adherents of Hindustani should have observed this as a victory over religious symbolism of Hindi and Urdu, but Gandhi took it as 'Hindi and Urdu shall continue to flourish independently'. His contradictions were reflected as he himself recognized many Hindus like Tej Bahadur Sapru, a great scholar of Urdu was unhappy with the decision of granting official status to the Hindi and Nagari in the United Province. This was mainly due to alienating a significant constituency of Urdu supporters. Gandhi has formulated 'Hindi-Hindustani' to indicate that he is inclined towards freely using words of Persian or Arabic.

He also claimed the sweet village language or Dehati, that is the rural language spoken by both Hindus and Muslims. 'As a national language Hindustani should be learned in both scripts, though not suggested that language could be learned in the scripts of other regions.'⁵ Gandhi understood well the necessity of Hindu-Muslim Unity in the context of freedom struggle to thwart the design of 'Divide and Rule'. So he devised an accommodative non-western module of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhav' instead of Secular Republic. In his *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi was in denunciation of the Western World, Modern Industrialization and civilization deficits of the Western world affecting Indian Society.

There is an array of eminent writers of Hindustani Literature in India and one of them is John Borthwick Gilchrist, Principal of Fort William College in Calcutta. He compiled and authored *An English-Hindustani Dictionary*, *A Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language* and *The Oriental Linguist*. Such efforts for establishing Hindustani language were in process

⁵ Ravi Shankar Shukla, *Lingua Franca for India* (Hindi), Oudh Publishing House, pg. 60-75.

but it could not stand upright because Urdu could not be successfully hailed as an ingredient language in the newly unified language. Dr. Rahi Masoom Raza says that 'Rajasthani, Brij, Bundeli language do not share the same affinity as Urdu.' Talking about the present status of the two ingredient languages, Hindi is designated as the state language in the Indian Constitution (Article 343) whereas Urdu is still a co-state language. In today's literary world, Urdu newspapers, Urdu Organizations and separate Urdu Departments in Varsities are instances of different status for different languages, though Urdu is still not a State language of any twenty nine states in India.

It is certainly questionable that in contemporary scenario, even in post colonial world English rules over the regional languages because of its interference on scientific and technological grounds. Likewise, Brazil's national language Portuguese is now British Guyana and National language of Trinidad and Tobago is now English by eradicating Hindi which was taken over there by the Indian diasporic community.

Indian history never saw such an upsurge of faith, unity in action, united will, community feeling and social development, without any expense as in the Gandhian age from the grass root level. This idea is applicable to the language structure and its propagation. He himself was a means of communication for the people between British and the Indians, as he has formed conceptions about the motherland and her people, their needs and mindset.

Bhavani Prasad Mishra writes in his memoir about Gandhi stating that once he was invited in a function where a beautiful rangoli was made by the students with an image of Indian map and Gandhi in it as the central character but to our surprise, this does not fascinated Mahatma Gandhi and he advised the children not to waste rice in rangoli making and stressed on the importance of grains for poverty stricken areas of Nagpur and Pune. Beside judicious usage of means, Gandhi emphasized on the *purity of means*. He always advised to accept help by

sacred resources and this is still relevant in the age of NGOs and black money laundering. Apart from language, Gandhi's ideology of Seva (Service) and Satyagraha (Satya/Truth to be compelled) are still the strongest pillars of humanity.

As a paradox, many writers feel that Indian Writing in English discovered some of its most compelling themes during the Gandhian era. M.K. Naik comments that 'Indian Writing in English Literature of the Gandhian era was inevitably influenced by the epoch-making developments in Indian life.'⁶ However, in the process of inclusive thinking Gandhi argued that most of the Indian population speaks Hindustani including Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic languages also. In the process of unification, he was keen in making the unified national language. Gandhi's attempt 'harnessed linguistic self-determination to the independence movement'.⁷ (Freidrich 62).

Gandhi's views on language draw a parallel with his ideology on faith, religion and democracy. Gandhi's language edifice was a counter-balance to the English courts and occidental education system in Colonial India. Though his model falls apart and there exist different status of two ingredient languages of 'Hindustani', the concept of *harmony in heterogeneity* exists. Influence of Sahitya Sammelan on his linguistic order is also reflected in his thoughts. Gandhi's model of language could have reached a logical status but it was marginalized by the vote seeking political parties, widening the gap between Indian Muslims and Hindus. But this cannot be denied that his conception of inclusive growth and indigenous development is the base of modernization in India.

⁶ Naik Dr. M. K, *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1982.

⁷ Friedric, Paul. 'Language and Politics in India', *Dedalus*, vol.91.

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