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## Revisiting the Making of Hindi as a 'National' Language

Ganpat Teli, M.Phil.

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### Abstract

In the first quarter of last the century a consciousness building campaign was started among the literate people of north India. At that time as a result of a long lobbying process, Hindi language and Nagari Script had already been recognized the purpose of official usage. Thus, the leadership of this lobby started to demand a new status of the National Language for Hindi written in Nagari script. In the contest for the National Language status, Hindustani and Urdu languages were counterparts of Hindi. Supporters of both the languages – Hindi and Urdu – symbolized them with Hindu and Muslim community respectively. On the other side, Hindustani which was a colloquial language was supported by the camp of progressive writers and Gandhi.

Strong supporters of Hindi opposed the idea of Hindustani and advocated the usage of Sanskritized Hindi. They argued that Sanskrit is the pure and divine language of Hindus, so only Sanskritized Hindi can bear the cultural heritage of the community. They subscribed to the logic of *Devvani* and Mother Language. At the time of this debate the literacy level in India was very low. On other side, the supporters of Hindi were preparing a Language which was highly Sankritized, but did not belong to the common people, especially the marginalized groups of both Hindu and Muslim communities. This happened because Sanskrit language and its words were not used in large scale on a daily basis. The Sanskritized Hindi not only marginalized people of non-privileged social strata socially and economically, but also deprived them the opportunity to become a part of the knowledge process.

**Key Words:** India, Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu, Sankritization, Literacy, National Language, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Unification.

### Heterogeneity

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India is a land of heterogeneity; heterogeneity in geography, resources, demography, culture, language etc. Heterogeneity in the field of language is one of the major features of the country. In addition to the 22 Scheduled languages mentioned in the Indian Constitution, there are innumerable dialects spoken throughout the country. While, on the one hand, these diversities fill various colours in the collage of this multi-cultural country, on the other side history bears witness to many clashes, conflicts and disputes caused due to these diversities. In this context, language is no exception. With the emergence of the 'idea of India' in colonial period, language has become an issue of conflict and controversy.

The language problem in India emerged after the consolidation of the rule of the East India Company. Indians' involvement in the language dispute was a result of insecurity of employment and other gainful avenues. This involvement was defined on religious line according to the 'Divide and Rule' policy of the Company. Urdu, Arabic and Persian were assumed as the language and scripts of Muslims, and Sanskrit, Hindi and Nagari as of the Hindus. This development created a focal point of friction in Northern India: the tug-of-war between Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani for the position of the national or official language.

After consolidation of the rule, officers and staff of the Company needed the knowledge of the colony for the purpose of policy making. In this process, they started to explore India through various academic fields like history, archaeology, geography, anthropology, linguistics, etc. For the above mentioned purpose they set up College of Fort William in Calcutta, where John Borthwick Gilchrist was appointed professor of Hindustani. Gilchrist, in his work at Fort William, established differences between Hindi and Urdu and proposed Sanskritization of Hindi.

### **The Script Controversy**

This controversy had originally started in the form of a script controversy. After theorization of this discourse at the College of Fort William; in the year 1837, government recognized Hindustani written in Persian script to be used in the courts of (then) North-Western Province (later renamed as the United Provinces). This was done as per the new policy decision. The Company installed English as a Language of higher courts and local respective languages of particular provinces to be used in the lower courts. Strong opposition was raised against this decision by the Nagari supporters and they started lobbying for the acceptance of their demand of replacing Persian by Nagari script (King, 1994). A process of consensus-building was started amongst the literate people of provinces in favour of Nagari-Hindi.

In 1868 a memorandum given to the government by Raja Shiva Prasad Sitarehind was a historical event in this movement. This memorandum not only linked Nagari script with the Hindu community and its heritage but also provided logic to the Hindi and Nagari supporters of the successive generations (Rai, 2000: 39-40). In 1900, this lobby had won its battle in Bihar and United Provinces where Nagari script was accepted as the script to be used in the courts and offices by the colonial government (Rai, 2000: 17-18). However, another ensuing battle was yet to be won.

### **Swadeshi Movement**

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During the initial years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian Freedom Struggle was taking a concrete shape as the resistance against the colonial rule was becoming stronger. Various sporadic streams of resistance were merging together to form a larger force. The gap between resisting people and political leadership was reduced in a gradual manner. The *Swadeshi* Movement of Bengal was a glimpse of this new shape. This anti-British consciousness brought struggling people together, thus becoming a ground for unification. At this juncture, the idea of national symbols became important. These circumstances gave a new push to the issue of language and the Hindi-Nagari lobby started demanding the status of National Language or official language for Hindi with Nagari as its script.

### **Constitution of India**

After Independence, the Constituent Assembly of India on 14th September 1949 declared “the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devnagari script” (Language in India, [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) 2002).

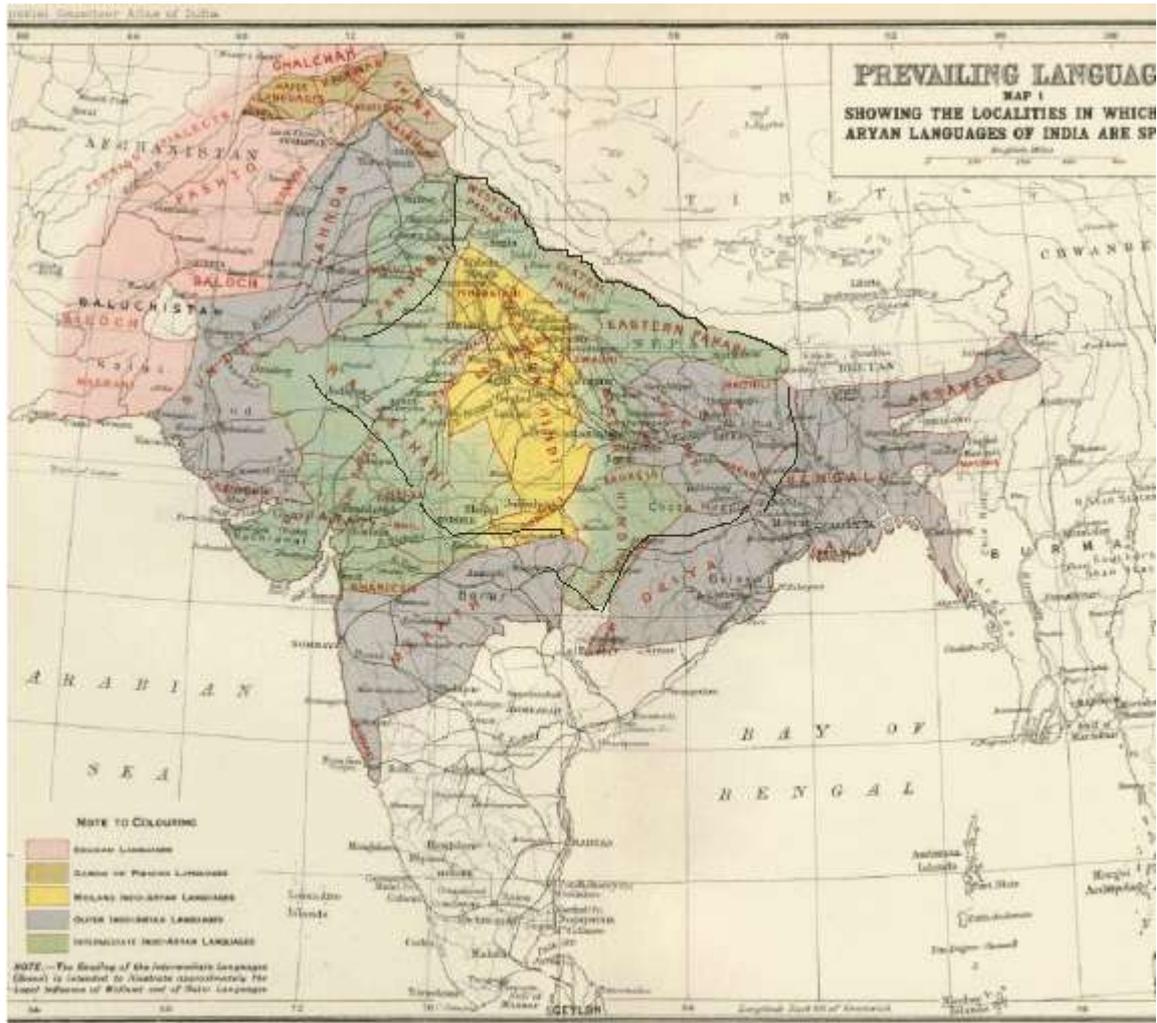
### **Streams of Language Controversy in Colonial India**

This language controversy pertaining to Hindi manifested itself in two streams in the colonial India – firstly, between Hindi and other Indian languages (especially Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu languages of Dravidian language family and Bangla). At another level, this controversy was an internal dispute between Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani.

In reality, Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani - all three streams shared a common constituency. At that time areas of the United Provinces, Bihar region of Bihar and Orissa, Rajputana, Central Province and Berar, Gwalior and central India were linguistically defined as linguistic region of the said languages - Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani. In this linguistic politics both the languages Urdu and Hindi were divided as languages of Muslims and Hindus, respectively. Both of these languages were contestants for the status of the national language. This was observed that this led to disharmonious relationship between the religious communities - Muslims and Hindus. Thus, in addition to Hindi and Urdu, a third concept was emphasised from the progressive and liberal section, i.e. Hindustani. These three streams favoured Sanskritized Hindi, Persianized Urdu and colloquial language respectively.

### **Defining Hindi Speaking Areas**

The above mentioned provinces and states which were defined as Hindi speaking areas themselves had great linguistic diversity. Various languages such as *Braj, Awadhi, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Malvi, Bagheli, Bundeli, Chhattisgarhi, Marwari, Magahi, Kannauji, Mewati, Dhundhari, Mewari, Santhali* were spoken there (See: the map) and where some of these languages had/have great literary heritage. Linguists divided these languages into five sections as sub-languages and dialects of Hindi– Eastern Hindi, Western Hindi, Pahari Hindi,



Map: Hindi Belt in 1931 (The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Atlas, 1931)

Bihari Hindi and Rajasthani Hindi (Varma, 1966: 42). All these languages were placed as subordinate to Hindi, and their heritage was adopted as the heritage of Hindi. However, while doing so, the contemporary trends were ignored.

### Projection of Nagari and Hindi as Symbols of Hinduism

In the process of lobbying, Nagari and Hindi were projected as the heritage of the Hindu religion and community and the rationale produced by the memorandum of 1868 by Shiva Prasad was repeated in support of their position. This relationship of Hindi and Hindu was mainly defined by using Sanskrit language as a prop. Thus, link between Sanskrit and Hindi was explored and Sanskritization of Hindi was initiated to justify this claim. In this process of Sanskritization they preferred Sanskrit vocabulary, instead of colloquial vocabulary. (However, on the other side, the process of Persianization of Urdu was also gaining momentum.)

### Spread of Sanskritization

This process of Sanskritization was a prevalent trend in Hindi academia. Even newspapers refrained themselves from using words from the colloquial language and many Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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personalities and institutions were busy in this gigantic task of Sanskritization. Mahaveer Prasad Dwivedi, editor of *Saraswati*, codified Sanskritized Hindi. Simultaneously, Ramchandra Shukla did it in the field of textbooks. Purushottam Das Tandon who commanded influential position in Indian National Congress, was leading *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*. Nagari Pracharini Sabha and Hindi Sahitya Sammelan both were founded for this purpose. Sampurnanand, Chandrabali Pandey, Niramal Kumari Sethi, Venkatesh Narayan Tiwari, Chakradhar Bhakhjola, Jagannath Prasad Shukla, Ravishankar Shukla, et al., were consistently writing in favour of Sanskritised Hindi under the banner of *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* and *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*.

### **The Issue of National Language around the World**

The issue of National language had been a part of history of many countries in the course of the consolidation of a unified national identity, particularly during the period of renaissance. Concept of nation state and nationalism were originally based on some kind of uniformity in the matter of race, ethnicity, culture, language, etc., but language was underlined as one of the most efficient elements in this regard. This concept of nation-state was satisfactorily applicable in the matters of small state. However, when applied to larger countries with heterogeneity in the demographic make-up, this concept proved inadequate in diluting the friction emerging out of identity politics.

During renaissance, European countries were also unified. In this process, a unified common language played a decisive role. For instance, in course of *risorgimento* (nineteenth century movement for Italian unification) in Italy, the question of national language had emerged. Peter Ives, while discussing *Gramsci's politics of language*, wrote that in Italy “the lack of national language, especially in comparison with France and England and to a lesser extent to Germany, was seen as a serious social and political problem” (Ives, 2004: 20). Thus intellectuals and activists supported and underlined the need of a common National language for the process of unification.

### **Two Different Positions Relating to Diversity of Languages**

Antonio Gramsci related the issue of national language to his legendary concept of hegemony. According to Gramsci, unified national language would advantage the peoples of Italy, but he emphasized that this language must be created by people themselves. He believed that linguistic pressures are exerted only from the bottom upwards, so he criticized those who:

Would like artificially to create *consequences* which as yet lack the necessary *conditions*, and since their activity is merely arbitrary, all they manage to do is waste the time and energy of those who take them seriously. They would like artificially to create a definitively inflexible language which will not admit changes in space and time. In this they come head on against the science of language, which teaches that language in and for itself is an expression of beauty more than a means of communication, and that the history of the fortunes and diffusion of a given language depends strictly on the complex social activity of the people who speak it. (Gramsci, 1985: 27)

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Gramsci's idea on national language was contrary to that of the Russian theorists Bakhtin, Volosinov and Medvedev. The trio was against the concept of unification, but this opposition was based on different linguistic and social-political realities. According to Peter Ives, "Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and Medvedev faced circumstances in which consolidation, unification, and organization had negative connotations connected to Stalinism; in contrast, Gramsci looked to organization and unification as positive attributes that could help overcome oppression. In his view, the solution to the setbacks he and the workers' movement encountered in the *Biennio Rosso* (A period of two years from 1919 to 1920 was a period of intense social conflicts in Italian history. This was followed by the rise of fascism.) was a more unified and well worked out organization" (2004: 57). Despite this difference both camps were in favour of vernacular materialism. Actually, Italy was a country with less diversity in comparison to heterogeneous Soviet Union. The difference in situations led them towards different conclusions.

### **Italy versus Soviet Union**

In Italy, it was experienced that a national language was necessary for the *Risorgimento*. The national language not only unifies the country but also helps in raising people's consciousness and spreading knowledge. For Gramsci, it was an important component of the progressive hegemony. Literacy is a fundamental condition for spread of any language. In Italy, in the course of *risorgimento* literacy rate was also raised. In 1861, about 75 per cent of Italian population was illiterate, but by 1911 the illiteracy rate had been reduced to about 40 per cent (Ives, 2004: 20). This growth in the literacy rate provided ground to the opening of a national language discourse.

### **Indian Situation: Limiting Language Choice Based on Low Literacy**

However, In India, the situation was different. When national language debate was gaining momentum, the literacy rate amongst the masses was very low. In 1901, only 5.35 per cent people were literate. In 1931, when row over national language was on its peak, only around 9.5 per cent of the Indian population was literate. The literacy growth rate was also very low. Between 1941 and 1951 it grew to only around 16.1 and 16.67 per cent respectively (see-Chart). In these circumstances, where very few people were literate, the course of national language was going to be a limited action, not a mass action. That time,

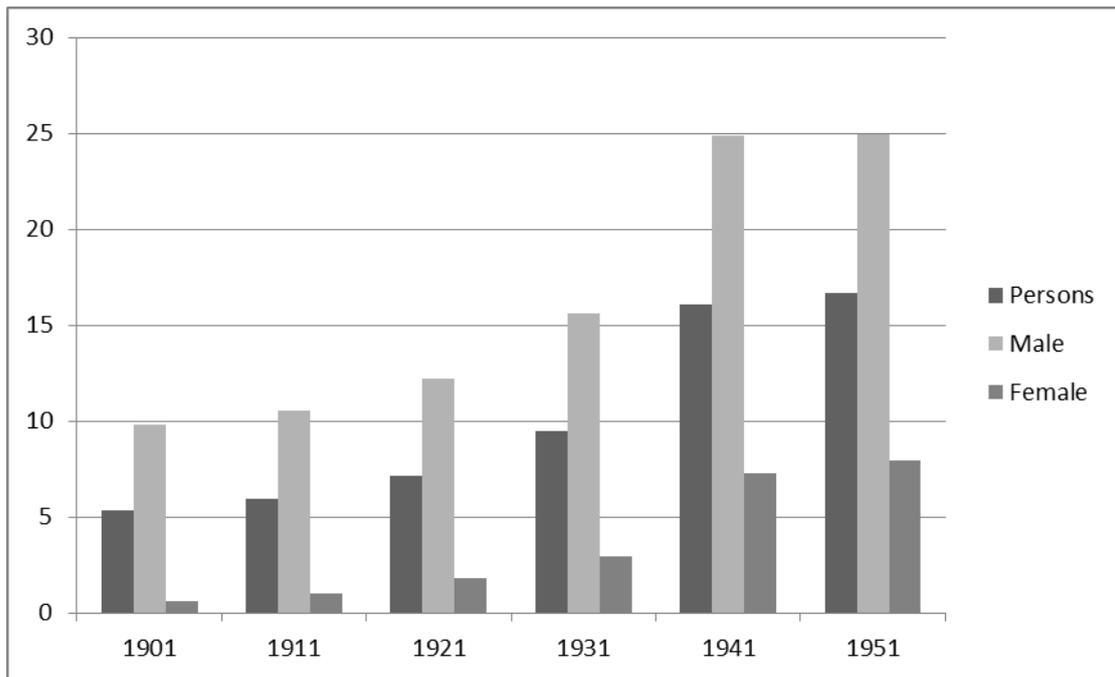


Chart: Growth of Crude literacy rate in India: (Chandramauli, 2011)

more than 80 percent people of the population weren't able to use that language. As mentioned earlier, due to the process of *Sanskritization*, usage of Hindi was restricted to a limited circle of literate people. The social composition of literates' community was not diverse because literacy spread only into upper social strata of the society and this section further divided into camps of different languages/dialects.

### Political Processes and Effects of Sanskritization and Persianization

The trends of *Sanskritization* of Hindi and *Persianization* of Urdu, were limiting both the languages in literary circle only, because both of them were not colloquial languages. The locals were used to speaking their native languages like *Khari Boli*, *Brij*, *Awadhi*, *Bhojpuri*, *Maithili*, etc. Hence, both these languages were not associated with the common people, but with the literate people because Sanskrit and Persian were not in colloquial usage.

The pro-Sanskritization lobby was preparing an artificial Hindi that was highly Sanskritized and only literates would be able to gain knowledge and information, restraining those who were illiterate from accessing information and knowledge. Regional languages, which were defined as sub-languages of Hindi were used for interaction amongst illiterate masses and these languages were also the medium of knowledge dissemination and information sharing for them.

Language is not an isolated element. It is a mode of communication that could be learnt but it has an organic relationship in the social milieu, in which knowledge and creativity naturally develops. That is why educationists emphasize that elementary education be given in mother tongue or first language, but pro-Sanskritization lobby pushed Hindi on an exactly opposite route, and excluded regional languages along with tribal languages from the realm of journalism, education and academic discourses. These regional and tribal languages were mother tongues of the people from the so-called 'Hindi speaking' belt, but instead of

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their own languages being encouraged, the usage of Sanskritized Hindi was promoted. Though, Sanskrit language and its vocabulary were not used by native people in their day-to-day communication, they had to learn it. Most children who attended school didn't have much of a background, and thus Sanskrit language became only a technical necessity of the school curriculum. This further became a hurdle in acquiring knowledge and education. In the case of primitive tribes, Census of India 1931 observed that "the primitive tribes ....many of them greatly handicapped in the acquisition of literacy by the fact that they are so-often given their primary education in a language which is not their own" (Hutton, 1933: 331). Census observed it only in the case of primitive tribes but this phenomenon was widely prevalent in other communities also.

### **Issue of Education via Mother Tongue**

On the issue of regional language and education in the mother tongue, the pro-Sanskritized lobby was fanatic. They deliberately rejected any possibility giving space to the local languages. At the Haridwar session of the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*, *Janpad* resolution was passed in favour of regional language and literature (Chaturvedi, 1944: 1) and Rahul Sankrityayan favoured education in the mother tongue (Chaturvedi, 1944: 15) but both initiatives were criticized in the course of strengthening Hindi. Pro-Sanskritization lobby advocated centralization and opposed any kind of decentralization. Even the convener of the *Janpad* Committee Chandrabali Pandey was against this plan and he criticized the spirit of the plan and said "I don't give any importance to decentralization, I am fundamentally against it. I appreciate centralization." (Pandey, 1944:79-80) Needless to say, the process of 'nationalizing' Hindi was not broad-based and inclusive in its nature.

### **Arya Samaj and Sanskritization**

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, Hindi and Urdu languages were regarded as languages of the Hindu and Muslim communities respectively. Division on the line of religion was drawn in during the initial phase of this lobbying on the issue of scripts. Supporter of Nagari and later Hindi had carried Hindu identity in the public space. This identity correlated with their position on language. Earlier *Arya Samaj* played a decisive role in Hindi *Prachar* and related the language with Hindu community by the process of Sanskritization. According to Krishna Kumar; in course of India's reconstruction, Hindi "acquired the title of 'Aryabhasha' in Arya Samaj parlance, its Sanskritized form became a part and parcel of the movement's vision of a reformed Hindu society in which Vedic ideals would be practiced" (Kumar, 2005: 136).

Later, *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* and *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* carried forward *Arya Samaj*'s position and arguments. Ravishankar Shukla, a writer of *Sammelan* wrote about the issue, "we should not forget that despite millions of things, at last the matter of Hindi and Urdu is a matter of Hindu and Muslims" (Shukla, 1947: 72). Both these institutions had their branches in different parts of the country for facilitating Hindi propagation and even rulers of princely states were also involved in the issue.

### **Divine Nature of Sanskrit**

In support of Sanskritised Hindi, the idea of divine nature of Sanskrit was invoked for

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Hindus while regarding it as the mother of Hindi language. In an editorial of literary magazine *Veena* this notion was expressed in the following words, “we are Aryans and Sanskrit has always been understood as our literary language” (1947: 516). Thus, using this argument Hindi was regarded as the elder sister of other Indian Languages (of course, excluding Urdu) and called for Hindi to be regarded as the national Language of India. This is a fact that during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Sanskrit was not a colloquial language. It might have been in usage hundreds of years ago, but it was not and is not the same in the present context. So, they declared that Sanskritized Hindi, a pure and divine language of Hindus, can only bear cultural heritage of the Hindu community.

This equation of Sanskrit and Hindi was also used as an argument in favour of Sanskritization of Hindi and its claim for the national language. *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, an organ of the *Nagari Pracharini Sabha*, emphasised the relationship of Sanskrit and Hindi, “Sanskrit was the real national language of India, but now it can’t hold that prestigious status. Thus the language of the land, which is ‘same as the Sanskrit’ and ‘successor of the primitive tradition as well as bearer of contemporary concern’- i.e. Hindi, is the only natural successor of Sanskrit” (1940: 298). On the same track, Kanhaiyalal Manikyalal Munshi, who himself belonged to Gujarat, strongly stood in favour of this Sanskritization of Hindi, believed, “the so-called Sanskritization of Hindi and other languages is not a forceful activity. That is a natural re-purification of languages after the end of the invasion of foreign words” (Munshi, 1999: 26). He further declared that Sanskritized Hindi is the genuine national language and “the misconception about over-Sanskritization is spread by contemporary communal problems” (Munshi, 1999: 26).

Simultaneously, Gandhi, writers of Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and other Hindustani supporters proposed and tried to implement colloquial vocabulary instead of Sanskritized and Persianized vocabulary. This effort of the Hindustani supporters was criticized by the pro-Sanskritization Hindi lobby. Ravi Shankar Shukla commented on efforts of Gandhi and his Wardha committee in the following words, “Pretty and melodious slogan such as ‘bridging the gap between Hindi-Urdu’ means nothing but only removing Sanskrit words from Hindi and replacing [these] with Arabic-Persian words” (Shukla, 1946: 17). And similarly, an editorial of *Sarswati* expressed its displeasure for favour of local dialects, “some comrades undertook the responsibility of study of local dialects and adopting this narrowed circle, they put barriers in progress of Hindi” (1941: 91-92).

### **No Consideration of the Prevalence of Large Number of Tribal Languages in India**

We already studied this tendency in the case of *Janpad Sammelan*. One point in this regard that should be mentioned here is that this lobby never dealt with tribal languages, which do not owe their origin to Sanskrit. Tribal languages have their own heritage and tradition. They belong to different language families, and thus did not fit in the logic of ‘all languages originated from Sanskrit and are therefore daughters of Sanskrit’.

At the same time *Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samiti* was founded by M.K. Gandhi. This *Samiti* worked mainly in the non-Hindi speaking belt with the aim of propagating *Rashtrabhasha* and Hindustani language. This institute carried forward Gandhi’s ideas on Language. Gandhi was in favour of Hindustani, which was defined by Gandhi in following words

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“Hindustani is the language which is spoken and understood and used by Hindus and Muslims both in cities and villages in North India and which is written and read both in the Nagari and Persian scripts and whose literary forms are today known as Hindi and Urdu.” (Gandhi, 1956: 113).

### **Inconsistency in Gandhi’s Stand**

But Gandhi was not consistent on his stand in this regard. Initially he was in favour of Hindi or Hindi-Hindustani and in later years he came to support just Hindustani. He had not only presided over the annual sessions of *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*, but also till 1945 he was a member of the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*. He resigned only after some of his followers questioned him over this duality of stand. However, he claimed that there wasn’t any contradiction between the ideologies of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan and Hindustani Prachar Sabha (Gandhi, 1956: 133-34). Hence, Gandhi’s intervention in the matter of national language was not very effective. Progressive Writers Association also made intervention in this debate but even the use of Hindustani was not a justified solution for the linguistic diversity of India, because the issue of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani concerned only northern India, and not the entire country. However, Hindustani used as an alternative would have been able to prevent the dispute between Hindus-Muslims, who were misusing languages for communal purposes; and masses would have benefitted.

### **Absence of Consistency in Arguments All Around**

There was one special trend we can see in this debate that most of the personalities engaged in the controversy didn’t have a monolithic consistent position. Usually they showed inconsistencies and contradictions. Even people belonging to the same organisation expressed different views on different occasions. Their views were fluctuating according to the situation. If there was a gathering of Hindustani people, they mellowed down their tone and if there was a gathering of Pro-Hindi group they spoke in favour of Sanskritised Hindi. Occasionally these people also favoured Dialects and sub-languages of Hindi. However, this doesn’t mean that they were not consistent on their task, but this trend was a reflection of their tactics.

### **Impact of Sanskritization on Literary Activities, Educational Institutions and Politics**

This pro-Sanskritization lobby had a considerable influence in the literary circles, educational institutes and politics. Many of these people had a strong relation with the Indian National Congress. Thus, they used various platforms to propagate Sanskritised Hindi. At one level, journals and magazines like *Saraswati*, *Sammelan Patrika*, *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, and *Hindi* were standardizing Sanskritized Hindi and also producing knowledge and information in the same form of language. Amongst other methods, Sanskritised Hindi was put into usage by institutions like Banaras Hindu University and Dayanand Anglo-Vaidik institutions. Textbooks were the main area where this practice of Sanskritization of Hindi was most prevalent (Kumar, 2005: 137-43). Leader of this lobby included personalities like Purushottan Das Tondon, Seth Govind Das, and K. M. Munshi who were also members of the Constituent Assembly of India. Because of this influence Sanskritized Hindi was institutionalized in literary and academic circles and got the status of official language in the Constitution of India.

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## Not Based on the Thrust or Quest for Knowledge

In India, the question of national language did not emerge as a result of the thrust for knowledge or renaissance but for the quest of political gain, i.e. status of national language or state language, which was going to provide not only a prestigious status but also gainful avenues and Sanskritized Hindi won the battle. This development led to unrest in other language regions. Anti-Hindi movement of southern India, especially in Madras, was a sheer expression of this unrest. On the other hand, Sanskritization of Hindi disabled majority of the people in education and other fields. This deprivation was even more for women and people belonging to the 'lower' and tribal castes, who already had extremely low literacy levels.

## Changing Scenario

However, now-a-days, the scenario is changing gradually. Due to political-economic development and community level efforts, these marginalized people are able to access education. Also, following the legacy of Progressive Writers Association (PWA), Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) and other organisations, a stream of literary personalities engaging themselves with the concern of common people has emerged. They have been using colloquial language, exploring indigenous dialects and culture through their literary and academic works. The use of Sanskritized Hindi in academic and creative writing is decreasing and has now limited to its use in government offices.

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## Colophon:

This is a revised version of the paper presented in *Researcher at work, National Students Conference on Literary and Culture Studies-2011*, organized by the Centre of Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad.

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Ganpat Teli, M.Phil.

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Ganpat Teli, M.Phil.  
Ph.D. Student  
Centre of Indian Language  
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)  
New Delhi-110067  
[ganpat.ac@gmail.com](mailto:ganpat.ac@gmail.com)