

Can Hindi unite India?

PARLEY

Discarding diversity for a purely majoritarian reason will be disastrous

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's statement last week that Hindi can unite the country once again evoked sharp disapproval from political parties, especially in south India. Mr. Shah later clarified that he meant Hindi as a second language. G.N. Devy and Yogendra Yadav speak on the perils of monolingualism in a country as linguistically diverse as India in a conversation moderated by Anuradha Raman. Edited excerpts:

Is Hindi everyone's language?

G.N. Devy: The name 'Shah' is of Persian origin. Our languages are interlinked and we have many languages in the country. The 2011 Census listed 1,369 'mother tongues' in the country. Hindi is only one among them.

So, even in a majority of Hindi-speaking States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, what is spoken is not Hindi as we understand it?

GND: I will go back to the Census data. When the languages were enumerated, Hindi subsumed Bhojpuri, which is spoken by a little over five crore people. The Census has put Bhojpuri as a subset of Hindi. So, it may be true that Hindi is spoken by a large number of people in India, but it is equally true that it is not spoken by a majority of Indians. And I don't think thinking in numerical terms alone is correct. It does not matter how many speak Hindi. The issue that Mr. Shah was talking about was what connects the country. His argument is not sound. What connects the country is the Constitution, which has made space for 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule. It upholds the language diversity principle. How can Mr. Shah say that one particular language of the 22 languages should be brought forward to connect Indians? What connects Indians is the Constitution, our history and some epoch-making phenomena, whether it is the Buddha, the Bhakti movement or the freedom struggle. So, Mr. Shah's comment is not historically sensible, nor is it constitutionally right.

And it is linguistically untenable. When a language tries to expand beyond its semantic-carrying capacity, it starts breaking up. It happened to Latin in the past. It happened to Sanskrit. And it is now happening to English as well. So, if Mr. Shah is genuinely interested in preserving the Hindi language, he should let the Hindi speakers alone. The government should not interfere with the linguistic behaviour or choices of people.

Yogendra Yadav: I will take off from where Professor Devy stopped. To be fair, I think Mr. Shah knows that Hindi is not everyone's language. In his speech and formal statement, he talks about India's multilingualism. He seems to be encouraging people to use Hindi. To begin with, it looks like a benign gesture coming from a non-Hindi speaker. The real problem is his belief that notwithstanding this multiplicity, we need one language to unite the country and that language can only be Hindi. I suspect this is his genuine belief and not something put out for political expediency. That to me is an attempt to copy a failed idea. 'One nation, one language, one culture' is a 19th century European idea that failed to create unity. Instead, it caused a lot of bloodshed in the world. Just when the world is moving away from this preposterous idea, our rulers wish to copy it. This is the real curse of the colonised mind. Our tragedy was not just that we were colonised, but also that we were colonised by linguistically challenged islanders who could not think beyond one language. This idea is not in tune with our history, culture and civilisation. We are a multilingual society. Speaking more than one language comes naturally to us.

Yes, many leaders in the national movement visualised a special role for Hindi. Most of them supported Hindusthani, a mixed language, not the pure Hindi being pushed today. But all of them were clear that it could not be imposed.

Professor Devy, you had written that levels of migration were low when Indian States were created on a linguistic basis. For the last seven decades, you have observed that there have been large inter-

State migrations, perhaps creating the need for a common linguistic vehicle for communication, education and governance. Hindi would emerge at the top of the pack if one were to choose among languages. Is that not so?

GND: We started creating linguistic States in 1956. Today nearly 35% of people are migrating daily for work. In such a situation, we have to conceptualise a new form of language identity for our States. Our cities must be recognised as multilingual entities. This will help us in unhooking the education policy for some large metropolises. The current practice of clubbing together multilingual spaces with monolingual habitats is not fair to the large cities today. For instance, in Maharashtra, one may argue that a child should be instructed only in Marathi. This is a good argument for a linguistic State. But it is not a good idea to impose this universally in Mumbai as well. So, the language choice of citizens should be widened and not narrowed by the state. If there is a mechanical and monolithic idea of unity followed by any entity, such an entity generally generates great hostility beyond its immediate borders. If India were to remain obsessed with this kind of a deeply flawed idea of nationalism, Indians will never have a happy relationship with their neighbours.

A united nation has to have space for diversity. India is united in its diversity. Diversity is a great philosophical idea and should never be seen as a cultural burden. We cannot discard it for a purely majoritarian reason. Any idea of one link language, whether Hindi or English, will be economically disastrous for India. It will slow down migration

and reduce the ease of capital flow. It will not be wrong to say that all these emotive issues thrown in the country's face by the current dispensation keep diverting attention away from the economy, which has hit an alarming low.

Is it time to rethink the three-language policy?

YY: There are no two opinions on what is good from the point of pedagogy. When a child goes to school, her initial language of instruction should be as close to the language spoken by her mother or home language. If it is Konkani or Bhojpuri, the primary schools must use that as a medium of instruction. Then, gradually, the child should be shifted to the State's official language, say, Marathi or Kannada. English can and should be taught from the beginning as a language but not as a medium of instruction. Those who need higher-level skills in English for higher or technical education should be given that, but everyone need not be burdened with that. Hindi should be introduced in non-Hindi-speaking States from an early stage and the Hindi-speaking States should introduce a non-Hindi Indian language. That was the three-language formula. For a country like ours, this was a reasonable solution worked out by all Chief Ministers and backed by educationists in the Kothari Commission.

Sadly, the formula was sabotaged

from two ends. While most non-Hindi speaking States did introduce Hindi, unfortunately the Hindi-speaking States bypassed the requirement to teach a non-Hindi language (preferably a South Indian language, said the original formulation). Instead of learning Tamil or Telugu – languages that are older and richer than Hindi – they fulfilled the third language requirement with perfunctory Sanskrit. What was a move to encourage national integration began to look like an imposition of Hindi.

The other violation was that our elites started shifting to English-only education with perfunctory knowledge of an Indian language. The three-language formula exists just on paper now. While Mr. Shah's remarks have triggered a debate about a possible Hindi imposition, we have all slipped into collective amnesia about the reality of English imposition. I feel depressed when I see rural children boarding the bus to go to an 'English medium school' as neither the students, nor the parents and not even the teachers know any English. This is pedagogic barbarity.

Mr. Devy, you had written about how a child learns one language. Is it possible for a child to learn other languages too?

GND: I agree with Dr. Yadav's views. When a child learns a language she forms a world view. Every language has a unique world view. If the child is confused with a lot of languages in infancy, her cognitive facilities will not develop in a natural way. It is not healthy for a child to be victimised during the preschool years with many languages. But a child needs to cope with the world. Learning new languages in middle school widens her horizon. Everyone needs access to the outside world other than their own linguistic zone and, therefore, the need for learning one of the world languages. The three-language formula is a sound formula, but it is not the three-language determined by the Government of India but chosen by the parents of the child.

Let us look at where the linguistic disaster has happened in our country. All tribal languages are rapidly disappearing. That is because there are not enough livelihood opportunities in those languages. Live-

hood possibilities for tribals are diminishing; languages are not encouraged and people are getting assimilated in some larger language. This may appeal to some rabid pseudo-nationalists. But there is a huge loss entailed in the process, both economically and culturally. So far we have not monetised the loss caused. If we do that, the results would be shocking. Language diversity is a great economic proposition. India is uniquely gifted in that out of the world's 6,000 languages, we have close to 10% of the spoken languages. Our pride will get dented if we had only one language or become only a bilingual nation. I think the English speakers and the Hindi speakers are relatively privileged than those who speak tribal languages. All of us have the collective responsibility to think about this and worry about the less privileged languages. Therefore, the Home Minister, who is in charge of the Indian language policy, must ensure diversity. That will bring about unity in the country.

Language freedom is a hugely emotive issue. Every 15 days, if an emotive issue keeps dividing the country, soon there will be no country left to divide any further. In the 1970s, West Pakistan and East Pakistan were separated on the language issue. So, how much more close does Mr. Shah want to drive India to becoming like Pakistan?

Is this a diversionary tactic to divide the country?

YY: I think that the BJP is unlikely to push the language divide in the same manner in which it has pushed the communal divide. The BJP needs to grow in south India. With Hindi chauvinism, it cannot walk into south India. But the basic mindset with which the BJP works, and it has now spread to other parties including the Congress, is that you need sameness in order to become a nation. The BJP will keep pushing this agenda in one form or another – today Hindi, tomorrow NRC, and then Kashmir.

GND: I just want to ask you a question about the 'Make in India' slogan: how is it said in Hindi? There may be semantic areas where English works but Hindi fails and vice versa. We need both; we need all Indian languages. Together they make our nation.



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G.N. Devy is Chairman, People's Linguistic Survey of India



Yogendra Yadav is an academic and the national president of Swaraj India



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Being mindful of diversity

There is no congruence between Amit Shah's desired outcome and the incentives to learn Hindi

PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

Home Minister Amit Shah recently asserted that the nationwide adoption of Hindi is the only way India can be united. Among the non sequestrans routinely dished out by our politicians this must rank very high indeed. In this case there is also the issue of 'incentive compatibility', which pertains to congruence between the desired outcome and the incentives individuals face. The attempt to impose Hindi on the entire country by the Congress in 1965 had led to parts of the country literally burning, with instances of self-immolation in erstwhile Madras State. It left a deep scar on the people of southern India who saw the thrust as an attempted cultural cleansing no less. They are unlikely to forget this episode in a hurry, but this is not the only reason why they would reject the Home Minister's homily.

Crass majoritarianism

The people of southern India hold strongly to the idea that they are Dravidian language speakers. Hindi belongs to the group of Indo-European languages and is no less foreign in their reckoning than English is to them. This view is independent of the fast-growing evidence from population genetics that Indo-European language speakers are very likely the most recent migrants into the subcontinent. It is not dependent on an assertion that the Dravidians themselves are the 'original inhabitants' of this land. It is also independent of any fondness for English. It is based purely on the principle that privileging any one Indian language would be discriminatory. Privileging one on grounds that it is spoken by the largest number is no more than crass majoritarianism.

We find in history many instances of the adoption of the language of societies that are the object of admiration by the natives. Thus, French was the language of the Tsarist court in Russia because of the political, cultural and scientific advances made in France. For Hindi to be adopted by the people of southern India today they must hold a similar view of the society of their northern cousins.

While there may have been some of this during the national movement, as its pre-eminent leaders came from the north, there is little to commend the region to them today. Uttar Pradesh is perceived as an area of backwardness with mob lynching erupting on the watch of a complicit state. Why would the culture of such a region be the object of desire elsewhere in the country?

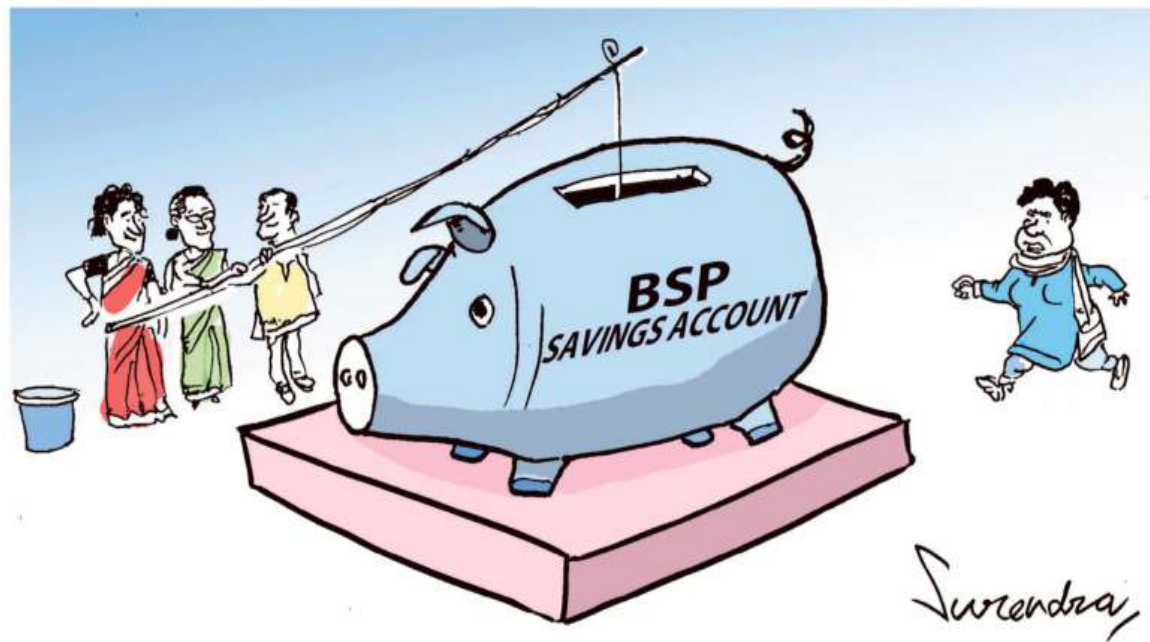
Finally, there is the economics. Some young researchers at one of our IITs recently employed machine learning techniques to identify the skills that determine wages in five large slums of Bengaluru. Of close to one hundred skills they considered, 'knowledge of English' and 'Internet access' turned out to be the most significant. Gender, caste and knowledge of Hindi did not matter.

Already connected

It is a fallacy to imagine that we need a common language to feel connected. Indians already feel connected due to a shared history of several millennia. In an extraordinary phase of history India had the ruler Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty trying to unify the peoples of his far-flung kingdom through ideals. Ashoka's edicts range from the advice that you should respect the dharma of fellow citizens to being compassionate towards sentient beings. The language used in the edicts found in the eastern part of the subcontinent is a type of Magadhi, likely the language of Ashoka's court; the language used in the edicts found in the western part of India is closer to Sanskrit; and a bilingual edict in Afghanistan is written in Aramaic and Greek. Ashoka was clearly aware of the bigger prize and had not allowed himself to be held back by narrow linguistic nationalism.

Now, two millennia later, Mr. Shah could unite India via the Internet, and if Jammu and Kashmir is to be considered "an integral part" it cannot be left out either. He may dispense with the rock carvings but would yet have to be mindful of the linguistic diversity.

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NOTEBOOK

The gift curse in business journalism

The practice has taken subtle forms, but it is still unethical

K. BHARAT KUMAR

"Isn't it enough?" the timid voice asked. The public relations executive on the phone had just offered me my first 'gift coupon' as a journalist and was incredulous when I refused. At the peak of the initial public offering season in the mid-90s, given that it wasn't uncommon for corporates to extend high-priced dining, dining and gifting privileges to business journalists, publishing houses had to bring out written guidelines for staff. The dictat was that journalists must not accept anything more than a pen or a notepad at media conferences and a box of sweets during the festive season.

As I aged in the profession, I got used to seeing boxes of 'gifts' stacked up near the exit at business press conferences. PR executives sent some journalists on their way with just a

goodbye and others with the surreptitious passing on of a box. Journalists who had no qualms in accepting gifts quietly did so.

What took the cake was when one scribe lectured me on the 'necessity' of the habit. An electronics major had ferried us to the foundation stone-laying ceremony of a factory in Karnataka that ultimately never came up. A tape recorder was the 'token of appreciation' passed around. A senior journalist noticed some of us refusing the gift and took us to task. "You should not have declined. The PR person will take home the gadget meant for you and his records will show you have accepted it. You must not encourage such bad practices," he said.

Nowadays, gifting has taken more subtle forms. For instance, the PR person arranging a meeting could offer a ride from your office

or house to the meeting venue. Of course, these same folks then get cornered by journalists who ask for a cab, use it to attend the meeting, and then retain the car through the day.

Corporate honchos who have the best of intentions do not realise when they cross the line. After my interview with the CEO of a popular broadband provider, I told him I rated their complaint resolution mechanism very highly as a customer. The CEO immediately offered to upgrade my tariff plan. I refused. He argued that I was already a paying customer and that an upgrade wouldn't cross the line of ethics. I had to explain that an upgrade meant a higher tariff which he would have charged a non-journalist client. He piped down.

This is not to tar all PR and corporate folks with the same brush. Many have set more stringent rules for

themselves than media houses have. One PR person told me, "I notice you bring your own pens to press conferences. Good. If you didn't have such ethics, I wouldn't have felt comfortable letting you meet my clients."

Then there are times when you commit a gaffe yourself. At the end of a conversation with the CEO of a car-maker, journalists were offered a model of the car. We refused but the PR person insisted. To avoid unending "please" and "no's", I said I would take it as it was not expensive. I didn't quite understand the PR person's confused expression till I got home. What I'd thought would be a toy car, like the ones you see in pavement shops, was a sophisticated model costing several thousands of rupees. I called the PR person and arranged for it to be delivered back to the showroom.

When Dewan Rama Rao established for the first time the Legislative Council of Travancore, he had hardly any idea that the Council would ever attain its present development. In these days there was no attempt to more than imitate the models introduced in British India. The administrative system of Travancore was devised in order to secure order and efficiency. The Legislative Council, when first established, was modeled on the Council of the Madras Presidency with limited functions. It was but a Council in name intended merely to register the will of the executive. The discussion of the Budget, interpellations and resolutions, were not thought of nor was there an expression of any popular ambition to participate in the serious business of the State.

Although the new Legislative Council sanctioned under the new regulation consists of so many as 24 members, the constitution of the Council has not been materially advanced. There is no more power or privilege conceded to the people than before, only a larger number of representatives will be admitted to the Council.

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 20, 1969

SC's ruling on original jurisdiction

A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court has held that the terms of Article 131 of the Constitution dealing with original jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in any dispute between the Union Government and a State Government excluded the idea of a private citizen, a firm or a corporation as a disputant either alone or even along with a State or with the Government of India "in the category of a party to the dispute". Mr. Justice Mitter (who disposed of a number of connected miscellaneous petitions) held that nine suits – filed by the State of Bihar (as plaintiff) in the Supreme Court (under Article 131 of the Constitution) against the Union of India (as first defendant) and the Hindustan Steel Limited and the Indian and Iron Steel Limited (these two companies, as second defendant), in the suits concerned, claiming damages for alleged short delivery of iron and steel ordered by the plaintiff-State to the various sites in the State in connection with construction work of Gandak project – were not maintainable in the Supreme Court, as being outside the scope of Article 131.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 20, 1919.

Travancore's new Council.

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