

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**

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## **Language and Politics in Nepal**

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## **South Asians Respond in Similar Ways!**

That people in South Asia respond in so many similar ways was revealed once again by an interesting (some may call it a bizarre) episode in Nepal recently.

Groups of Nepalis, led by college students in several parts of Nepal, protested against their Vice-President elect taking the oath of office in Hindi. Mr. Parmananda Jha was elected as the Vice-President of Nepal in the recent election. He comes from the ethnic community of Madhesi comprising largely of people of Indian origin settled in the plains of Nepal for centuries.

## **Nepali Politics of Language and Ethnicity**

The relationship between the people of Indian origin, especially those from Bihar, Rajasthan, etc. who are settled in the plains of Nepal for centuries for various historical reasons and the people of Nepali origin (sometimes called hill community) have received some pointed attention in recent years.

Electoral politics and the emergence of democratic institutions have emboldened this Madhesi community to assert their democratic rights for wider participation in the political affairs of Nepal. It has also been conjectured that the Madhesi community is more pro-King than other groups. However, in recent years, Madhesis began to organize themselves into a distinct political force, with Hindi as their identity marker. Even as the Nepalis of India have rightfully organized themselves into a well-knit political and social force with their own distinct identity, and have made inroads into many parts of Northeast Indian states, Madhesis have also begun to assert their rights.

## **Taking Oath in Hindi Affects the National Pride in Nepal! But We all Respond Similarly!**

Mr. Parmananda Jha, who himself was once a judge of the Supreme Court of Nepal, also wore the “Indian” attire of *dhoti-huta* while taking the oath of office. This was seen as an offense to Nepali sentiments.

Just like in India, protesters saw to it that the transportation services were disturbed in many cities of Nepal. They ensured that the markets were also closed. Some vehicles with Indian number plates were damaged. There were marches in the streets and effigies of Mr. Paramanand Jha were burned. Many protesters and onlookers have also been injured

Young people of Madhesi community responded by holding demonstrations and engaged in activities listed above.

### **Electoral Politics and Politics of Language and Ethnicity**

It is also reported that those sympathizing with the Maoists originally started the protest against Mr. Parmanand Jha, as they were not able to get the votes of Madhesi legislators in their bid to get their own candidate elected to the offices of President and Vice-President. In fact, the deputy leader of the Moists declared in the Interim Parliament of Nepal that Mr. Jha had insulted his position by taking his oath in Hindi.

One of the arguments against Mr. Jha was that he took the oath in the official language of a neighboring country. However, a Madhesi people leader was reported as saying, “Hindi was the language of the Madhesis in Nepal. The Himalayan republic was home to people speaking various languages and to try to impose one language and one attire in the name of nationalism amounted to dictatorship. Nationalism does not lie in one's language and clothes.”

This argument is very similar to the arguments one often hears against the “imposition of Hindi” in India given by non-Hindi peoples, including scholars and leaders like Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Anna and Rajaji!

All these are our typical expressions for similar causes in South Asia.

### **Now the Matter is Before the Supreme Court!**

The latest news is that the matter has gone before the Supreme Court of Nepal for their judgment. The Supreme Court Judge asked Mr. Jha to explain why he took the oath in Hindi. The Court refused to bar Mr. Jha from performing his duties as Vice-President.

### **What is the Position in the Interim Constitution of Nepal?**

The Interim Constitution of Nepal promulgated in 2007 states in PART I, under 5:

Language of the Nation: (1) All the languages spoken as the mother tongue in Nepal are the national languages of Nepal.

(2) The Nepali Language in Devnagari script shall be the official language.

(3) Notwithstanding anything contained in clause (2), it shall not be deemed to have hindered to use the mother language in local bodies and offices. State shall translate the languages so used to an official working language and maintain record thereon.

## **We Need Statesmanship!**

Like in India, language issue has taken on ethnic and political overtones in Nepal. India has come a long way from the 1960/70s pro-Hindi and anti-Hindi politics of language to the current context wherein more number of people is willing to accommodate the linguistic interests of various groups. Strengthening of State Autonomy in such matters will help. Recent rumblings in Mumbai against North Indians add a new dimension to the situation in South Asia.

Both Hindi and Nepali speakers in India and Nepal need to see how they react in similar ways. Non-Hindi speakers of India will sympathize with the Hindi speakers of Nepal, as their plight somewhat resembles their own conditions of the past, if not the present. A complex situation, indeed, but with statesmanship and give and take such issues can be resolved.

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