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Gandhi and His Hindustani

Ganpat Teli, M.Phil.

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Abstract

During the freedom movement of India, the complex and controversial of the National Language was raised. In this controversy Gandhi supported the concept of Hindustani. Gandhi's thoughts on languages are discussed in this paper. This article will try to look on other dimensions of his thoughts on languages as well. Gandhi accepts religion as a base to consolidate his views on language. However, Gandhi's concept was an expression of exclusion in some sense, as non-northern and non-Hindu and non-Muslims weren't part of it. In addition to these features, Gandhi's contradictions regarding thoughts on language will also be discussed.

Key Words: Gandhi, National Language, India, Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu, Colloquial, Sankrit, Nagari, Arabic, Persian, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, Hindu, Muslim.

M.K. Gandhi stepped into the Indian political scene in the initial decades of the last century and soon became the unquestioned leader of the Indian National Congress. He already had strong views on the question of National Language for India when he was not yet well recognized. These views were propagated by him for the linguistic unification of India. In the words of Granville Austin, "Gandhi placed the language issue at the heart of the independence movement" (Austin 2010: 47). In the course of his campaign for the unified national language, he chaired the annual sessions of *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* at Indore twice in 1918 and 1935 and delivered its presidential speeches. He also formed *Dakshin*

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Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha in 1918 (in 1946 'Hindi' was replaced with 'Hindustani'), *Rashtrabhasa Prachar Samiti* in 1936, *Hindustani Prachar Sabha* in 1942. He regularly monitored the programmes of Hindustani (Gandhi's use of the terms *Hindi*, *Hindi-Hindustani* and *Hindustani* was rather ambiguous. For convenience, *Hindustani* is used to represent Gandhi's advocated language in this paper.) propagation in the non-Hindi regions. In addition to this, he delivered many speeches and wrote many articles in an attempt to build a consensus in favour of Hindustani as the national language. Baldev Raj Nayar notes this fact of Gandhi's effort writes that "Even though other leaders from non-Hindi regions had advocated the cause of Hindi as the national or link language, it was Gandhi who took active steps for its propagation in the non-Hindi areas" (Nayar 1968). Not only Hindi but due to Gandhi's efforts, the issue of National Language came into mainstream debate. In words of Jyotirindra Das Gupta, "the most important advocate of a common Indian language designed to unify the national movement was Mahatma Gandhi." (Das Gupta 1970: 108)

Gandhi was favouring Hindustani as the unified national language of India. His concept of Hindustani faced challenges from the advocates of the camps of English, Hindi (Sanskritised Hindi), Urdu (Persianised Urdu) and other Indian languages, but Gandhi rejected these claims. For him, English was simply a language of administrators, so he emphasised upon the need for the administrators to learn local languages, not people to learn English: "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 1956: 17).

Hindi and Urdu are one and the same, according to Gandhi. Both the languages represent only Hindu and Muslim communities respectively. His stress was on the fusion of both Hindi and Urdu. In his words, "Hindustani, i.e., a correct mixture of Hindi and Urdu, is the national language" (ibid 149). For him, fusion of Hindi and Urdu reflects fusion of Hindu and Muslims. As for other Indian languages, he argued that these are provincial languages which could be used in their respective provinces, but for inter-provinces purposes Hindi/Hindustani should be used as the national language. In his second Indore speech Gandhi said, "I have always held that in no case whatsoever do we want to injure, much less suppress or destroy, the provincial languages. We want only that all should learn Hindi as common medium for inter-provincial intercourse" (ibid 38).

What is Hindustani?

Though the Hindustani was supported by prominent figures like Gandhi, it didn't have a monolithic definition and thus was used in variously various references (Rai 2001: 11-16; Rahman 2011: 31-41). Before the spread of the Hindi-Urdu controversy, *lingua-franca* of northern-central India was known as Hindustani. After the dispute of Hindi and Urdu gained momentum, Hindustani was also used for Hindi and Urdu separately and commonly. Gandhi himself has used this phrase in various contexts. However, Gandhi's popular definition of *Hindustani* is as follows:

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)

A point in this regard worth mentioning is that Gandhi was not consistent about the nomenclature of the said language. Initially he was using the term *Hindi*, then *Hindi-Hindustani* and later calling it *Hindustani*. He also exhibited contradictions and uncertainty in using the nomenclature. However, towards the end of his life, these contradictions and uncertainty were reduced considerably, especially after 1945 when he left *Sammelan*. In 1936, he said “Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu are different names for the same speech” (ibid 63) and in 1938 he said that “for the purpose of crystallizing Hindustani, Hindi and Urdu may be regarded as feeders” (ibid 88). Further in 1946 he clearly stated that, “neither Urdu nor Hindi is to be termed Hindustani. Though not in vogue today, Hindustani is a wise mixture of the two” (ibid 154-55). In another piece, he elaborated on the correlation between this trio: “Hindustani is spoken by both Hindus and Muslims. But it has now assumed two forms: Sanskritised Hindi and Persianised Urdu” (ibid 145).

Observing these fluctuations in Gandhi’s discourse pertaining to Hindustani, Granville Austin writes, “Gandhi, as we shall see, used the words *Hindi* and *Hindustani* at all different times for varied reasons, but he was always speaking of the same tongue, that is broad Hindustani written in both - Urdu and Devnagari - scripts” (Austin 2010: 48). Though, Gandhi himself shifted from ‘Hindi’ to ‘Hindustani’, he mentioned that the issue of nomenclature wasn’t of a prominent importance for him, important was the nature of the said language. However, contradiction and uncertainty are not restricted merely to the nomenclature and usage of the languages but has also proliferated into other aspects of Gandhi’s thought on the question of language. He was ambiguous and in the words of David Lelyveld, “typically vague about what language other than English he might have preferred to use ...” (Lelyveld 1993: 191). Peter Brock also noted ambiguity and said “some ambiguity undoubtedly existed in the mind of Mahatma” (Brock 1983: 204).

Colloquial and Sanskrit

This is a general notion that Gandhi was in favour of the colloquial form of language. In his first Indore speech in 1918 he said, “I have often said that Hindi is that language which is spoken in the North by both Hindus and Muslims and which is written either in the Nagari or the Persian script. This Hindi is neither too Sanskritized nor too Persianized. The sweetness which I find in the village Hindi is found neither in the speech of Muslims of Lucknow nor in that of the Hindu *pandits* of Prayag. The language which is easily understood by the masses is the best. All can easily follow the village Hindi” (Gandhi 1956: 9-10). As far as vocabulary was concerned, in his second Indore speech in 1935, Gandhi suggested, “all words which have become current coin in the language of the people should be freely accepted in our national language” (ibid 40). But, contrary to this, in a piece on languages of southern India he took a position in favour of Sanskrit vocabulary in the following words: “So far as South Indian languages are concerned it is only Hindi with large

number of Sanskrit words that can appeal to them, for they are already familiar with a certain number of Sanskrit words and the Sanskrit sound” (ibid 54).

This is notable that despite an impact of Sanskrit on Tamil and other Dravidian languages, strong resistance to the domination of the Sanskritisation process was noticed among those who had not been traditionally learning or allowed to learn Sanskrit. This led to de-Sanskritisation and created anti-Sanskrit sentiments. Observing this David Lelyveld rightly commented that, “ignoring anti-Sanskrit sentiment in Tamil Nadu, Gandhi argued that the common Sanskrit vocabulary would serve to bridge the languages of India together” (Lelyveld 2002:181).

However, in another instance of favouring Sanskrit, Gandhi mentioned in the context of *Gitanjali* by Rabindra Nath Tagore that, if *Gitanjali* was transliterated in Nagari script, people of the all regions would be able to comprehend it because “there is in it a vast number of words derived from Sanskrit and easily understood by the people of the other provinces” (Gandhi 1956: 43). 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” (Brass 2010: 210), Gandhi’s statement is in sharp contradiction to his vision of colloquialism.

Language and Religious Communities

Gandhi did have concerns about the unified language and harmonious relation between Hindu and Muslim communities and he perceived Hindustani as a better solution. In the words of William L. Richter, “He sought to unite Hindus and Muslims into one nation through use of composite Hindu-Urdu vocabulary and both scripts” (Richter 1971: 29). He was quite confident about this solution, as he wrote in 1948, “I may be alone today in my belief, but it is obvious that ultimately it is neither Sanskritised Hindi nor Persianised Urdu which will win. It is only Hindustani which will win ultimately” (Gandhi 1956: 186).

The notion that Hindi is a language of Hindus and Urdu of Muslims is a false perception and also, a root cause of Hindi-Urdu controversy. But, Gandhi got the wrong impression and approved the separation of Hindi-Urdu as the languages of Hindus and Muslims respectively. While defining Hindustani he used terms *Hindus and Muslims, etc., of the northern India*. He had also extensively used phrases such as *Urdu of Muslim brothers, Language of Muslims, Language spoken by Hindus*. This notion of Gandhi was extensively expressed in his writings and speeches. In another instance, 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 this debate in the opposite direction. He commented on the decision, “Independently of the Congress, Hindi and Urdu will continue to flourish. Hindi will be mostly confined to Hindus and Urdu to Muslims” (ibid 83).

The Script

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Gandhi had also carried the notion of religious association of the scripts. For him, this was more contested than the languages themselves. In fact, the Urdu-Hindi controversy itself initially started as script controversy between Persian and Nagari. He recognised Nagari as a script of the Hindus and Persian-Arabic as that of the Muslims and said in his first Indore speech, “There is no doubt difficulty in regard to scripts. As things are, Muslims will patronize the Arabic script while Hindus will mostly use the Nagari script” (ibid 10). Even if we avoid the mistake of placing Arabic script instead of Persian in this discourse, Gandhi’s notion of scripts’ association to the religious communities does appear sharp. Gandhi placed Arabic in consideration as the representative of Muslims, as popular Islamic religious texts were written in the Arabic. However, this is a fact that Persian language and script, instead of Arabic, were used in Mughal courts and as a counterpart in this controversy itself is a rejection of religious association of languages and scripts (Gupta 2011: 27).

Gandhi’s contradictions were also reflected in this regard. He himself recognised that many Hindus such as Tej Bahadur Sapru were great scholar of Urdu and he was also unhappy with the decision granting official status to the Hindi and Nagari in United Province (Gandhi 1956: 171). And in 1948 he also accepted that Nagari isn’t associated with all the Hindus, “we cannot forget that many Hindus and Sikhs are ignorant of the Nagari script” (ibid 182). But with the exception of a few instance of contradictions he exhibited a strong sense of association of Hindi-Urdu with Hindus and Muslims respectively. Even Gandhi’s stress upon Urdu was because of, as in the word of David Lelyveld, he considered that “it was a matter of religious importance to Muslims and it should be respected and nurtured for that reason” (Lelyveld 2002: 184).

However, Gandhi’s proposal of two scripts - Nagari and Persian - was just a temporary arrangement and “In the end, the script which is the easier of the two will prevail” (Gandhi 1956: 10). While presenting this pre-requisite, he wasn’t impartial. He was in favour of Nagari for national integration and many a times very explicitly expressed his favour for Nagari. He wrote in 1927, “It is my firm conviction that there should be one script for all the Indian languages, and that script can only be Devanagari ...” (ibid 25). Further in 1948, in his one of the last pieces on language he said, “It is no secret that among the various scripts I consider Nagari to be by far the best” (ibid 184).

This is also notable that Gandhi’s argument in favour of Nagari reflects its so-called association with the Hindu community. In the course of projecting Nagari as a unifying script, Gandhi wrote,

Before the acceptance of Devnagari script becomes a universal fact in India, Hindu India has got to be converted to the idea of one script for all the languages derived from Sanskrit and the Dravidian stock. ... If all these scripts could be replaced by Devnagari for all the practical and national purposes, it would mean a tremendous step forward. It will help to solidify Hindu India and bring the different provinces in closer touch (ibid 25-26).

Gandhi’s thoughts related to script also reflect contradictions. William L. Richter observed the contradictions in the following words: “There was also an apparent Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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contradiction in Gandhi's simultaneous advocacy of a common Devanagari script for the regional languages and two scripts for Hindustani" (Richter 1971: 31).

Heterogeneity and Unification

In the process of unification, Gandhi was keen in making the unified national language. Gandhi's attempt "harnessed linguistic self-determination to the independence movement" (Friedrich, 1962) and "only reflected the linguistic hegemony of the north" (Ahmad, 2006). Gandhi's definition of Hindustani could be analyzed in this way: National language is that which is spoken in the northern India by Hindus and Muslims only. Needless to say, this concept was very narrow, which excludes the people of the rest of the country.

While defining the national language Gandhi described five requirements for national language, as follows- "1. It should be easy to learn for government officials, 2. It should be capable of serving as medium of religious, economic, and political intercourse of throughout India, 3. It should be speech of the majority of the inhabitants of India, 4. It should be easy to learn for the whole country, 5. In choosing this language, considerations of temporary passing interests should not count" (Gandhi 1956: 3). Afterwards, he declared that, "We shall have to admit that it is Hindi" that has these characteristics (ibid 4) but he did not elaborate here how Hindi or Hindustani possessed these attributes.

Though, Gandhi did acknowledge the differences between Hindi and other languages and the varying levels of learning difficulties, especially to those who speak Dravidian languages (ibid 6), yet he imposed the responsibility and burden on Dravidians only. For instance, he asked the Kannada speakers in a public address, "Have you not energy enough to devote to a study of Hindi four hours each day for just one month? Do you think that is too much to devote this time to cultivate contact with 200 millions of your own countrymen?" (ibid 49)

Linguistic Hegemony

Gandhi argued that Hindustani is spoken by a majority of the people in this country. So, for the unified link language Gandhi asked the Dravidian inhabitants to learn Hindustani. (One could include the speakers of Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic languages also here.) Gandhi believed that speakers of Dravidian languages are lesser in numbers than Hindi, making it more logical for them to learn Hindi:

The Dravidians being in a minority, national economy suggests that they should learn the common language of the rest of the India than that the rest should learn Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese and Malayalam in order to be able to converse with Dravidian India. (ibid 18)

In this context, it is notable that India has vast linguistic heterogeneity, languages of four language families, Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic - were and are spoken here. Further, each and every family has its own internal diversities and among them many languages have classic linguistic and literary heritage. Even Hindi-region itself has linguistic diversity in the form of languages such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Brijbhasha,

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Maithili, and Santhali. But here, this heterogeneity and diversity were ignored and all non-Dravidian languages were defined under Hindi or Hindustani.

Gandhi and *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan*

As stated above, Gandhi was also associated with the *Sammelan* for a long period and he was also under the influence of the linguistic notion of *Sammelan*. This association continued till 1945. In 1942 he wrote about this: “I am proud of my connection with that body” (ibid 102) i.e., *Sammelan*. On the issue of opposing *Sammelan* he said, “I have been associated with the Sammelan since 1918 how can I deliberately oppose it? Moreover, there should be strong reasons if I were to oppose it. There is nothing of the kind” (ibid 111).

Gandhi drifted away from *Sammelan* later when he formed somewhat favourable opinion of Hindustani and started to stress upon both Hindi and Urdu as component of the Hindustani. This development caused a conflict between Gandhi’s position and the language policy of the *Sammelan*. *Sammelan* criticised Gandhi and his evolving thoughts on language and pushed forward its own notion of language. Gandhi also criticised *Sammelan*. In 1945, while expressing his displeasure over *Sammelan*’s position Gandhi stated that, “If the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan people insist that they will work only for the Sanskrit-ridden Hindi, the Sammelan ceases to exist for me” (ibid 123). In the same year, Gandhi resigned from the Sammelan.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that contradiction and ambiguity appeared in almost all the aspects of Gandhi’s thoughts on national language - whether it be the issue of name, form, script or any other dimensions of the language debate. Influence of the *Sammelan* on his linguistic thought was also reflected in his notion. Gandhi considered Urdu and Hindi as a language of Muslims and Hindus respectively. Gandhi’s proposal of Hindi or Hindustani as a unified language was also on the track of *Sammelan*, as it advocated linguistic hegemony of Northern-India over the rest of the country.

However, it is also noticeable that towards the last days of his life, Gandhi was arriving at a somewhat rational position, but this could not reach its logical culmination because of his marginalisation at the social and political fronts. He had tremendous influence on common people of the country but not on the power elites. Also, creation of an impartial Hindustani at least would have been able to prevent division of Hindi-Urdu and the grudge between Hindu-Muslim communities, which was intended by Gandhi.

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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
 India
ganpat.ac@gmail.com

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