

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

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

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## **A PEEK INTO SOME OF THE LINGUISTIC IDEAS OF EARLY GANDHI**

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### **EARLY GANDHI: A CHAMPION OF OVERSEAS INDIANS**

Our fascination with Gandhi began when we were yet children. Gandhi for us in south India was Gandhi *thaathaa* or Gandhi *ajja* (grandfather in Tamil and Kannada respectively). For generations, this fascination with the grandfather is bound to remain and energize Indian children. But, behind this “old man look,” with those glass rims, of course, there was a young and dynamic person, full of hope and vision already well formed, which would guide him and his followers until his tragic assassination and beyond.

Gandhi’s ideas hardly ever changed from those he held in his early life to his later, more celebrated roles in India. In particular, Gandhi’s ideas on language, language use and Indian languages were well formed and established in his early life. Truly, as Wordsworth wrote, “Child is the father of man.”

In this article we aim at analyzing a few of Gandhi’s early writings on the subject of language choice and language use for India and how such ideas continued to illumine his future civil obedience movements.

### **GANDHI’S EARLY CONTRIBUTIONS**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi arrived finally in India in 1915 from South Africa to settle down in India, a decision that proved to be a great blessing to our motherland. But

Gandhi was no stranger to India and to the emerging political scenario in India when he arrived in 1915. His fight for the rights of the Blacks and Asians in South Africa had already been well noticed, well recognized, and well admired by the leadership, and the rank and file of the Indian National Congress. In the Calcutta Congress of 1901 (the seventeenth Congress since the inception of this National Organization in 1885), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi moved a resolution as a petitioner on behalf of the British Indian population in South Africa.

The Indian National Congress from its inception had been interested in the well being of Indians abroad. This natural interest on the part of the Indian National Congress brought to light, session after session, the inhuman treatment meted out to the Blacks and indentured labor in the British Colonies and encouraged the Indian leaders to devote themselves to their cause.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's soul-stirring efforts in South Africa and his conduct of Passive Resistance struggle led Gokhale to declare in 1909 that passive resistance

is essentially defensive in its nature and it fights with moral and spiritual weapons. A passive resister resists tyranny by undergoing sufferings in his person. He pits soul force against brute force; he pits the divine in man against the brute in man; he pits suffering against oppression; he pits conscience against might; he pits faith against injustice; right against wrong (Sitaramayya 1935:79).

The 1910 Allahabad Congress expressed its appreciation of the struggle waged by the Indians in South Africa. The 1911 Congress congratulated Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the Transvaal Indian community. The 1913 Karachi Congress passed a resolution admiring the heroic endeavors of Mr. Gandhi and his followers and their unparalleled sacrifices in their struggle for the maintenance of the self-respect of India and the redress of Indian grievances. Thus, neither Gandhi nor his program of non-violent action, which was individual-based in character but involved groups of men and women dedicated to the cause of Indians in South Africa, was a stranger to Indian National Congress.

### **GANDHI NOT YET AN IMPORTANT FIGURE**

Perhaps none thought that what was accomplished in South Africa would be applicable to Indian affairs on Indian soil; and perhaps no one could predict that Gandhi would ultimately become the soul, heart and spirit of the freedom struggle, guiding the destiny of the nation within a few years. In fact, Gandhi could not get elected to the Subjects Committee of the AICC in 1916 Lucknow Congress, when he was treated as a candidate of the Moderates pitted against the candidates of the Nationalist group led by Tilak. It was Tilak who, recognizing the great contributions Gandhi had made towards Indian cause in South Africa, declared him elected to the Subjects Committee (Sitaramayya 1935).

## **GANDHI ON INDIAN LANGUAGES IN 1909**

Language became a very crucial mark of identity for Gandhi even before he arrived in India. He wrote that we could talk about our country there “should be born in our hearts a love and respect for our languages.” Nationalism and language loyalty of some sort thus became more or less synonymous in Gandhi’s approach.

Next in point of importance, according to his article published in London in 1909, is the question of Indians expressing “themselves to each other in a common language.” In 1909, he recognized this as “a possibility for the future.” However, he wrote that “everybody will agree that this language should be Indian in origin,” thus precluding English from this status. Even this, Gandhi would say, was “for the future.”

Then, what was it that he considered as immediate and relevant goal for the present? His prescription was that a Gujarati should feel proud of being an Indian while simultaneously feeling proud to be a Gujarati. He wrote, “Without such consciousness, we shall be neither here nor there.” An amazing position that took the linguistic and geopolitical realities of modern India that was evolving at the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century. This early Gandhi position would get somewhat modulated with greater emphasis on the “National Language,” and other Indian languages (the term regional was not yet used to refer to these major Indian languages) surrendering some of their importance to the “National Language.”

Next in importance in the thinking of early Gandhi was that “the people of one province [should] ... learn the languages of other provinces as well.”

Even in his early writings Gandhi repudiated the prescription of Lord Macaulay, while acknowledging that he once “was enamoured of the ideas expressed by Lord Macaulay on the education of Indians.” He recognized that many admired Macaulay’s prescription for Indian education. For example, at present the benefits that accrue to India and its elitist classes because of English education are acknowledged by many, even by those who wield political power both from the Left and the Right. Early Gandhi did not buy this argument.

Gandhi’s thoughts on the state of English education are very significant and valid even today.

“It is true that we are able to express some ideas more clearly in English, but that, too, is a matter of shame. It cannot be said that we know the English grammar and idiom well. While any Indian can learn the grammar and idiom of Gujarati and would hardly ever make a mistake in the use of the right tense, there is no end of mistakes in the writing of English. Faulty use of the idiom is particularly common. It is possible to have errors in pronunciation in Gujarati, but that does not mean that we do not know the language. Errors of pronunciation can be easily corrected.”

## **INSULTING MOTHER TONGUE**

Early Gandhi's focus on mother tongue continued throughout Gandhi's life. Mother tongue was precious in his sight for the acquisition of knowledge. But more than that true loyalty to mother tongue that gets reflected in its continued use in all domains of life including education and career was something early Gandhi heavily emphasized. He was very unhappy that Gujaratis used English as the medium of conversation among themselves. What would Gandhi do now if he is still around? No linguistic community is free from this pervasive speech habit of using English for interpersonal communication at will all the time. We cannot produce a sentence in any Indian language without using a few English words and phrases in Indian language sentences. Heavy code switching and code mixing mark Indian conversation, rather South Asian conversation.

Early Gandhi wrote:

“It is an unhappy state of affairs that Gujaratis should use English as the medium of conversation among themselves. We have impoverished our mother tongue because of our love for English. We demean ourselves by insulting our language. ... Can those who insult their mother tongue do any good to their country?”

## **PATRIOTISM AND LANGUAGE USE**

Early Gandhi stretched his demands on Indian language use to signal patriotism. In fact, he went on to declare, “... it would be no exaggeration to say that those who give up their language are traitors to their country and people.”

We do not think that Gandhi's position will be acceptable to those young men and women who make millions of rupees by their talents in IT using English as the medium. Most of these successful individuals and their families went in for total English medium in order to succeed in the competitive world. For him, however, it was a sin if one forgets his or her language.

Gandhi welcomed the trend he noticed among Indians settled abroad to organize Gujarati, Bengali, Urdu, and Marathi associations, etc. He declared it to be a good sign for the future. But he wrote linking such trends with the need to learn, use and preserve the Indian languages wherever Indians went, because “the character of a people is evident in its language.”

It is true that such associations do encourage retention of linguistic/ethnic identities. However, we must also point out that the ethnic associations that bear linguistic identities these days are more into preserving religious identities rather than fostering language competence in Indian mother tongues. In addition, the Indian Diaspora has also established caste associations overseas. Truly, then, the character of the Indian Diaspora is revealed through what associations they seek to develop. Religion and caste are drawn into the arena identity in addition to linguistic/ethnic identity in recent decades overseas.

## **A MATTER OF SHAME**

It appears that the English-educated Indians always wanted to show off their “inability” to read, write and speak their Indian mother tongue as a virtue. None seems to have traced the historical development of this speech attitude in favor of English. On the other hand, early nineteenth century mother tongue writers of English had expressed disparaging remarks about the quality of English spoken and written by the Indian nationals. The Indian tendency to pretend that they do not know their mother tongue adequately while claiming to have better competence in English should be seen related to such attitudes in the past towards claims of competence in Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic. Among the Tamils, such tendencies in favor of Sanskrit and disparagement of Tamil by mother tongue users of Tamil could be traced easily from the sixteenth century. An Indian goes abroad for a year or so, returns home, and says that he or she lost his skill in communicating through his or her mother tongue.

Gandhi wrote:

“I have those who know English well say that their knowledge is greater than that of Gujarati. This is a matter of shame for us. In fact, those of us who write and talk English neither speak nor write it correctly, and that is but natural.”

Gandhi does not agree with the excuses given by Indians that they or their children need to speak English constantly in order learn it: “One hears it said that a student who wishes to learn English must speak it constantly. Is this not merely an illusion? If when Gujaratis get together, they speak their own language, it does not follow that their knowledge of English is lessened. On the other hand, since we shall then be hearing only Englishmen speak their language, our ears will be trained to detect any flaws in it.”

## **FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY OF USE IN MASTERING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Although at first instance this argument seems to run counter to certain applied linguistics assumptions, one cannot deny the truth that motivation and aptitude, not necessarily constant and continuous speaking of the foreign language, will improve our performance in it. With better motivation and aptitude, even lessened practice should bring better results. Well-organized textbooks and classroom teaching, and purposeful exposure and use outside the classroom should help the learners of a foreign language. Our Indian worldview, unfortunately, focuses exclusively more on the constant and continuous use of English to perform better in it. And this has resulted in the erosion of skills in our own mother tongues, and we have become a nation of code-mixing and code-switching.

Read the following powerful statement of Gandhi in 1909:

“It is not impossible for students who go to England to find time there to read Gujarati books. Those who have to serve their country and do public work, will have to find time for their mother tongue. If English can only be learnt at the expense of the

mother tongue, it would be in the interest of the country that one does not learn English at all.”

## **NO ORDINARY LANGUAGE**

Gandhi was very much at home with the linguistic situation in Gujarat. He wrote,

“Gujarati, moreover, is no ordinary language. Poets like Narsinh Mehta, Akha Bhagat and Dayaram have sung in this language, which is spoken by Hindus, Muslims and Parsis and has, therefore, immense possibilities of development. A single idea can be expressed in three different ways. God is ‘*Khuda*’ to Parsis, ‘*Ishwara*’ to Hindus and ‘*Allah*’ to Muslims, whereas in English there is only one word.”

Gandhi focuses here on the synonyms that we have developed in our languages because of internal diversity of the population that speak these languages. While it is true these terms are apparently synonymous, they carry potentially different characteristics and functions. Internal divisions do not encourage substituting one for the other, as terms such as these carry very heavy communication load. We believe that Gandhi was carried away here by his ideal by which he wanted great amity and give and take between Indian religions. Later on his concept of Hindustani would exemplify his desire and ideal further. Unfortunately, a linguistic parallel fortifies religious divide in the case of Hindu and Urdu, and in the reluctant use of Hindustani.

## **AN ADVICE FOR THE NON-GUJARATIS WHOSE MOTHER TONGUE IS GUJARATI**

“The Gujarati of Muslims may have Arabic and Sheikh Saadi’s Persian influence. The Gujarati of Parsis may have Zoroastrian influence and the Gujarati of Hindus may have Sanskrit influence. Hindus and Muslims, of course, are divided among all Indian languages, but Parsis were a godsend to Gujarati. Gujarati can gain a great deal from their enterprise. Several Gujarati newspapers are in the hands of Parsis, and it is up to them to protect the future of the language; Gujarati is their mother tongue and they cannot leave it. It is, therefore, necessary that they do not murder it. Parsi writers are able to express beautiful ideas with simplicity; but they are the very enemies of pronunciation and spelling.”

“It is a point for consideration that Hindus, Muslims and Parsis are all of them standing separately. Muslims have not yet received any great measure of education because of which their influence on Gujarati is not very great. Hindus and Parsis will have to help in the educational development of Muslims. Gujarati will thereby gain immense support.”

“Further, I should like to say to those Indians who go abroad that they should follow the example of Englishmen and speak their own mother tongue. This is a duty, which will contribute to India’s progress. There is nothing very difficult in this course.”

## **TO CONCLUDE**

Early Gandhi's ideas on language loyalty and language use and the duties of writers and editors of Indian language newspapers are quite refreshing and revolutionary. Even though some of his ideas could be challenged from a purely linguistic point of view, these ideas have great application value. These ideas would develop further and would be offered almost as dogmatic principles for Indians to follow during the struggle for independence.

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