

## “THE MAGIC OF THREE

- Even the appearance of imposing a language is a big mistake ” *by S L Rao*

My mother tongue is Kannada. For the benefit of most North Indians many of who are ignorant of the South, it is a language that was the basis for the formation of the linguistic state of Karnataka. I have lived for long in Mumbai (Marathi language), Madras where the language is Tamil, in Hyderabad where it is Telugu and in Delhi. I speak Kannada, Marathi, Tamil and Hindi. I could read and write in three out of the four, but disuse has made my skills rusty. I know many South Indians (and people from the East and West of India as well), who live and work in parts of India where the local language is different from their mother tongue. Most of them make a conscious effort to at least speak the local language. If they settle down in the North after retirement, they and their children have the local language. I have rarely met North Indians (counting here those from J&K, Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, H.P., Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh), who also migrate for work and some for retirement to the South, who can speak the local language. Their spouses might pick up the necessary words to instruct servants. The poor labour migrant is better. He/she learns to speak in the local language if in the place for long enough. Central service officers learn to be fluent in the language of their cadre state. So it is possible, with some effort, even for North Indians to learn another Indian language.

This preamble might explain the strength of feeling against the imposition of Hindi (“Hindi imperialism”), for government work, now government social media, public examinations, English television news channels, public addresses by Constitutional authorities like the Prime Minister, etc. There is a sense of discrimination among those whose mother tongue is not Hindi when they are expected to understand and read Hindi. This gets aggravated when similar requirements for knowing any other Indian language do not apply to North Indians.

In a multi lingual country, a language that links all is essential. At one time it was attempted by the Hindi speaking majority (led by Purshottamdas Tandon a Congressman from U.P.), to make that link language Hindi. In the process, the young Republic was almost split, as resistance to such imposition developed, especially in Tamil Nadu. For some time there was a real threat of secession from the Union (dissipated after the formation of linguistic states in 1955). The feeling is that an unfair advantage is being given to those whose mother tongue is Hindi. The Hindi protagonists argue that theirs are mostly undeveloped parts of India, and that making Hindi the national link language will somewhat redress their lack of development, which they attribute to English. This is an disgraceful reflection on the leadership of those states.

The resistance to Hindi particularly in South India, has raised its head whenever Hindi was sought to be imposed in the last 75 years or so. In 1938, when the teaching of Hindi was made compulsory by the then Congress government in the then Madras Presidency secondary schools, it was strenuously opposed. The anti-Hindi lobby led by EV Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar), led it. He was founder of the “self-respect” movement (that led to better lives for the lower castes in

Tamil Nadu and to their accession to political power under the DK, DMK and AIDMK). The resistance and protest engulfed most Tamils.

After 1947, the Central Government urged the State governments to adopt Hindi as an official language. The anti-Hindi lobby in Tamil Nadu revived their agitation against this imposition.

In 1965, a riot in Madurai between the pro-Hindi and anti-Hindi agitators spread to other parts of Tamil Nadu, continuing for two months. Violence claimed at least 500 lives. The three-language policy (local language, Hindi and English) was scrapped and Hindi eliminated from the curriculum. Tamil Nadu experienced similar anti-Hindi protests in 1963, 1967 and 1986.

While there was not similar strong public outcry in other non-Hindi states, there was considerable anger at imposition of Hindi. "Hindi imperialism" is best recognized in the behavior of two political leaders. Kamraj in 1963 after the death of then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, was pressed to take over as Prime Minister of India. As a political leader he must have been tempted. But he declined because he did not speak Hindi (or English). In contrast in 2014, the victorious BJP has made Rajnath Singh as the Deputy to the Prime Minister. He invariably speaks in Hindi. (Those who do not understand him, be damned!). The English news on national television since the BJP's ascent, increasingly has debates where speakers use a form of Hindi, many times archaic. There is rarely an attempt to translate for those who may not understand.

There is need for a national link language. English is doing this job and is also useful in getting jobs in India and overseas. The world has moved to English. India's economic advantage over many others is that so many know English. Comparison with countries like Germany and Japan are irrelevant. These countries have a single language.

Hindi is becoming used increasingly in India. Hindi films are popular all over the country. Their effect has been to promote Hindi all over India. Even Tamil Nadu has revived teaching Hindi in many places, as it had done before and after independence when the "Hindi Pracharak Samitis" were in many places. It is the sense of compulsion that is the problem and a feeling of being discriminated against. Some suggestions given here might help.

We should not abandon English but in fact improve the quality of its teaching in all schools over the country. Public examinations like the UPSC which holds the central services examinations or the banking officers' examinations, and other similar ones, should have a compulsory paper on a language other than the mother tongue for all participants. Respondents in Hindi or a mother tongue who qualify in the examination may be given special coaching in English before they are confirmed in service. Similarly all Hindi states (North India as defined earlier) must make a third language other than Hindi and English compulsory in all school. This could ease the sense of discrimination that is prevalent in non-Hindi states and improve national unity. The media and political leaders have a major responsibility. English news channels must compulsorily translate statements and interviews that are in Hindi, into English. This is not often done and when it is the translation appears on the screen and is not verbally expressed. It must be given in verbally spoken English, not merely written. Central government examinations must test for spoken English by all participants, perhaps after some coaching.

Mother tongue as the medium of instruction is a good principle for the very young. However, India does need three languages, English, Hindi and a local language. This should apply to all parts of India. It cannot be achieved just by decree. It needs massive investment in teachers and in training them.

The Prime Minister may be more comfortable in Hindi than in English. It is not merely a question of his comfort. He and his Ministers must make themselves understood by all Indians. This is vital if Mr Modi is to be accepted as Prime Minister of all Indians and not merely Hindi speaking ones. For all Indians to develop the feeling of oneness, even the appearance of imposing Hindi is a bad mistake.

Language is an extremely emotive subject and must be handled with great delicacy.

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