

Lokbhasha, not rajbhasha

Yogendra Yadav

Let's end this farce of Hindi as rajbhasha, the ceremonial official language of the Indian Union. This abdication cannot do any harm to Hindi; the child-monarch-for-ever status has neither served Hindi nor the country. This titular demotion might connect Hindi to bhashas, the various Indian languages that share her fate. At the very least, it would remove the diversion of "Hindi imposition" that prevents any serious conversation about the real linguistic apartheid, the imperialism of English. And who knows, this might well be a step towards swaraj in ideas.

Let's face it: The Hindi policy followed in the last 75 years has been counterproductive. Hindi does occupy a special space in the linguistic diversity of India by virtue of its sheer size. With over 60 crore (42 per cent of the current population) speakers under the umbrella of what the census categorises as Hindi, it is the world's fourth largest language, way bigger than any other Indian language. Hindi can serve as a bridge in our multilingual landscape, provided it retains and nurtures its multilingual roots with languages subsumed within it and branches that reach out to other Indian languages. Conversely, a Hindi disconnected from its roots and branches can de-link India. A Hindi that seeks to remain "pure", assumes a higher status and demands respect from everyone else is bound to become a vehicle of communalism, accentuate a cultural rift and weaken national unity. So far, the tokenism of rajbhasha status for Hindi has achieved the worst of both worlds. As a result, Hindi is like the proverbial sauteli ma (stepmother) to its own languages and a failed saas, the proverbial Indian mother-in-law, to other Indian languages, with little to command respect. The [BJP](#)'s latest Hindi push threatens to make matters worse.

In his poem 'Hamari Hindi', Raghuveer Sahay, the renowned poet, writer and editor, compared it to "duhaju ki nayi bibi" — the young, new wife of an old, wealthy widower — who "over-talks, over-sleeps and over-eats". Her loveless world, full of envy, petty bickering and aggrandisement, captured the empty gratification of being Hindi in post-independence India. This reminds you of Fanon's description of the pathology of the Black oppressed.

Little has changed in the 60 years since he penned this poem. If anything, the hegemony of English is now cast in stone. Hindi speakers with whatever means have joined the national exodus towards English-medium schools. The "middle-class" elite in the Hindi belt would not be caught dead reading a Hindi newspaper. Their home language is now a diglossia of Hindi and English. Everyday signs of Hindi's subordination are now the furniture of our social life. Advertisements of English speaking courses. Parents presenting their children to the guests in "doggy English". Youth desperate to impress their boy/girl friends in broken English. If English looks up, Hindi lacks.

It has not been possible to teach the fourth largest language in the world in its own heartland, let alone force others to do so. ASER surveys remind us that a majority of Hindi-speaking rural students in Class 5 cannot read a paragraph from the Hindi textbook meant for Class 2. Most graduates from Hindi-medium colleges cannot get their Hindi grammar or even spellings right. Hindi has not produced or sustained an intellectual culture that anyone can look up to. Hindi writers continue to produce world-class fiction and poetry, but an educated person from a Hindi state would not recognise the name of a living legend like Vinod Kumar Shukla. There are some exceptional journalists, but not one newspaper of calibre. Forget cutting-edge science, technology or social science, there are no quality textbooks in any academic discipline to meet the pressing need of millions of students who end up doing higher education in Hindi medium. The last Hindi magazine that could serve as a carrier of ideas was Dinmaan (incidentally, edited by Raghuveer Sahay), which folded half a century ago.

In a country where students are fined for speaking Hindi at school, any talk of Hindi hegemony cannot but be a cruel joke. Hegemony presupposes effective control and cultural legitimacy. Hindi has none. English is the language of the Indian ruling class. It enjoys the cultural clout, the money, the backing of a very powerful education industry. Its dominance is accepted and internalised by those over whom it rules. That is cultural hegemony.

It would also be wrong to speak of Hindi dominance, brute power without legitimacy, except in one context. Notwithstanding the brouhaha of Hindi supremacists, the fact is that Hindi has not been forced upon non-Hindi speakers the way Russian was forced upon non-Russians in the USSR or Mandarin in Tibet. Just as well, since a respect for linguistic diversity has saved the Indian republic. The point about dominance is true vis-a-vis Urdu and about three dozen languages that were subsumed within Hindi and could well have become separate languages in their own right. In all fairness, in this respect Hindi is no different from most of the languages of the Eighth Schedule, each of which has subsumed several others.

There is some truth to the charge of Hindi imposition. While the promotion of the rajbhasha has done little to empower Hindi, the ritual visits by the Rajbhasha Samiti and cosmetic insistence on Hindi billboards and name plates does cause heartburn for non-Hindi speakers. Of late, all Government of India initiatives and schemes carry Hindi or Sanskritic names, which must cause irritation. Hindi speakers make matters worse by claiming that Hindi is a “national language”, a claim with no support in law or the Constitution, and by harassing non-Hindi speakers in public or semi-public contexts. This formal title, without power or authority, has resulted in weak power in limited official domains, which has proved counterproductive.

Here, then, is a proposal. All the 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule should be given the status of official language. We do not need one national, official or link language. September 14 should be converted from Hindi Diwas into Bhasha Diwas, a day to celebrate all Indian languages. All Government of India attempts at Hindi promotion should be stopped. Bombay cinema, cricket commentary, TV news and soap opera have done more to promote Hindi than any official effort. Promotion of Hindi should be left to the governments of Hindi-speaking states and to voluntary efforts. Those who need a link language should choose it for themselves. If it wishes to be a link language, Hindi must allow itself to be polluted by other languages and permit multiple registers of “correct” Hindi.

Instead of Hindi promotion, we should have a national mission for promotion of bhashas. The old Lohiaite slogan of “Banish English” won’t work now. What we need is a “Build Bhashas” campaign. This would require large-scale, well-funded schemes to produce, translate or recreate children’s books, higher education textbooks and scientific resources in all these 22 languages. This should be accompanied by generous state support for creating institutions to protect and promote at least 100 non-Scheduled languages, the so-called “dialects”, carefully documented recently by the People’s Linguistic Survey of India. The starting point could be a national resolve, encoded in the Right to Education, to provide primary education to each child in her mother tongue, in any Scheduled or non-Scheduled language.

Hindi is a lokbhasha and it is best that it remains so. And once we have this issue out of the way, can we begin discussing linguisticism, just as we discuss racism, casteism and sexism?