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## The Persistence of Hindustani\*

THE ghost of Hindustani continues to haunt the language debate in our country. Whenever the matter of Hindi and Urdu is discussed, it has been observed, tempers fray and voices rise—and then, inevitably, the name of Hindustani is brought up as a pacific compromise. It has been playing this role, *unsuccessfully*, for a long time now. This essay is an attempt to see whether this ghost can finally be laid to rest, if only to free ourselves to attend to the real issues for which the name can only be, after all, but a nominal solution.

A ghostly continuity implies a prior unghostly existence, but with Hindustani, its being appears to have been, at best, ectoplasmic from the very outset, always hovering on the edge of existence and, indeed, frequently falling off altogether. Thus, on 9 November 1948, in the Constituent Assembly, Ghanshyam Singh Gupta reported:

I was in search of simple Hindustani. I could not find it in the constitutional proceedings, I could not find it in the law books.... The official proceedings of this House are published in 3 languages: English, Hindi and Urdu. I read English, I read Hindi and I got read [*sic*] Urdu with the idea that I might be able to find what they call simple Hindustani. I could not find it. Urdu was Urdu and Hindi was Hindi. There was no such thing as simple Hindustani.... It is only in the bazaar that I could find simple Hindustani. When we cannot have simple Hindustani even in the elementary school books, how can our laws be made in it?

(CAD VII, 358).

Ironically, the very volumes that record these momentous debates de-

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scribe the vernacular in which both Seth Govind Das and Maulānā Ḥasrat Mōhānī, among others, addressed the Assembly as “Hindustani,” but at the end of these debates, when the “Schedule” of Indian languages is being drawn up, the list of 14 languages does not include this same Hindustani! (It is an alphabetical listing, starting with Assamese and ending with Urdu at number 13. Sanskrit, an evident afterthought, figures as number 10A!) (CAD x, 1491). Like another famous ghost, Hindustani too might have something important to tell us.

Scholars of nationalism distinguish between two broad kinds: the first of these may be characterized as geographical-territorial; the second, associated primarily with the name of the nineteenth-century German thinker Herder, is cultural-linguistic. There is a further distinction to be found in the literature—that between patriotism and nationalism proper. Thus, patriotism is the affective commitment to a particular place and its ways of being; and nationalism, on this account the bad sister, so to speak, is the assertion of the *superiority* of one’s own particular “nation” against other competing “nations.” These “nations” may be, and often are, found (discovered/invented) within the same geographical-territorial domain. Then again, these categories are both fluid and overlapping, and there is the residual and inescapable ambiguity of the term “nation” itself—is it something “given” or something “achieved”?—which renders this terrain both intellectually and politically treacherous. With that proviso, therefore...

The inherent “naturalness” of the Indian landmass lends itself easily to illusions of divine ordination. After all, one has only to look at the rhythmic elegance of the Indian subcontinental landmass—clearly demarcated from the rest of Asia by high mountain ranges and, somewhat messily, by the northwestern deserts; washed by three seas, by the dark waters of the Bay of Bengal and the blue waters of the Arabian Sea—to fall prey to some version of the thought that God “*intended*” India. Variations on this theme may be found all the way from the Vishnupurana to modern times. From this purely aesthetic point of view, the violence of Partition was more than merely physical—it rent asunder that which God had, manifestly, formed.

In the course of history, however, this, and such, “naturalness” has had little persuasive appeal, except for those who are its beneficiaries. Thus, our colonial masters, for instance, were unlikely to abandon the colonial enterprise of “civilizing” India merely on the aesthetic grounds

that their presence here was an intrusion into something that was already sufficient and complete. Even as God rested, satisfied with his handiwork, having pared his fingernails, the mischievous Brits stole in. In other words, the geographical-territorial version of nationalism had to be supplemented, during the course of the Independence struggle, by other linguistic and cultural forms, which drew on more immediate loyalties, and therefore commanded greater mobilizational force. Thus, the emergence of the freedom movement is also the period during which different cultural and linguistic regions begin to acquire a self-conscious regional awareness. The tension between the regional and the supra-regional—if not yet, or always, or consensually, “national”—is familiar to all students of the evolution of our modern being. The inherent and exhilarating (and sometimes infuriating) diversity of India lends itself to being configured in different ways in order to yield different “unities,” different and competing “ideas of India.”

But for all that cacophony and contention, there was general agreement on the idea that there must be *one* national language—and after the first flirtations with polite “memorandum” nationalism, it was realized that the communicational-mobilizational needs of the movement required that this national language be one that would be accessible to the broad masses of the Indian people. Gandhi is often credited with the political initiation of this idea, but forms of this are to be found much before Gandhi’s advent into Indian politics, in the writings of sundry forward-looking thinkers, particularly from Bengal. Thus, Purushottam Das Tandon, the Hindi ideologue, speaking on 14 September 1949, reminded the Constituent Assembly:

We have been speaking of a national language for years and years. It is not a new subject before the House. It was in the 19th century that this idea of a national language took shape in Bengal, not in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) or Bihar....

Lakshmi Kant Maitra, representing Bengal, grumbled: “We have been amply rewarded for all that!” (CAD ix, 1450).

The fact is that for all the unanimity on the question of the desirability of having *one* national language, the question of what that language would be often came close to wrecking the constitution-making process altogether. One can only imagine what went into the making of the exasperation that T. T. Krishnamachari voiced: “Has anybody in the House given one moment of thought to those of us in this House who have been

merely gaping unintelligently because we could not understand what is being said?" Krishnamachari was assured by a Kannadiga friend that "there was not much substance in the Hindi speeches that have been made," but he went on nevertheless to

convey a warning on behalf of the people of the South ... there are already elements in South India who want separation and it is up to us to tax the maximum strength we have to keeping those elements down, and my honourable friends in U.P. do not help us in any way by flogging their idea "Hindi Imperialism" to the maximum extent possible. Sir, it is up to my friends in U.P. to have a whole-India; it is up to them to have a Hindi-India....

(CAD VII, 235)

Although the Hindi of Seth Govind Das and "Rajarshi" Purushottam Das Tandon was vociferously urged upon the Constituent Assembly as the inescapable instrument of national unity, it soon revealed itself as a threat to such unity. The wise people who were running the Constituent Assembly managed to save the situation by deferring the question of language until the very end, when most of the Constitution was in the bag already, and members were reluctant to abandon the whole project, or start all over again.

However, the universally and consensually acceptable "national" language, prior to the convening of the Constituent Assembly, was not Hindi but Hindustani. There, as we have remarked already, it continued to lead its ghostly existence, hovering between being and non-being. G. A. Grierson, in his monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* (1916), declared that "Hindustani is so well-known a language that it would be a waste of space to give more than the merest sketch of its grammar" (Vol. 9, part 1, 50). Only a few decades later, people doubted whether it existed at all. To be fair to him, what Govind Das said is that "the question of Hindustani ... exists no more" (CAD VI, 222). However, irrespective of whether it is exaggerated reports of a demise that we are dealing with, or life after death, the fact of the matter is that "the question of Hindustani" refuses to lie down and stay dead, so to speak.

It isn't only Hindi fanatics who have denied the existence of anything such as Hindustani—like the Gupta who went looking for simple Hindustani and failed to find it. There are the liberal Hindi protagonists who see, in the very name of Hindustani, the insinuation that their Hindi is distinct from the people's language—thus, for them, Hindustani is en-

compassed in Hindi. Likewise, for a liberal Urdu scholar like S. R. Faruqi, Hindustani does not exist, except as the index of a malign attempt to confine the name of Urdu to the “high” Urdu register, heavy with Arabo-Persian borrowings, and deny Urdu’s claim to the people’s language, which Faruqi also calls Urdu. Thus, while the hybrid linguistic *domain* of Hindustani is anathema to the purists on both sides, its *name* is denied by liberal Hindi- and Urdu-wallahs who are both eager to annex the domain.

It might be interesting, at this point, to look at the evolution of the name Hindustani. The colonial origins of the name are well-known. It seemed entirely logical for the colonizers to assume that the people of the place that they had conquered—Hindustan—should have a language that could be called Hindustani. Apparently, the name “Hindustani” was not unknown even before the advent of the British—although, obviously, only outsiders could feel the need to name the unknown language(s) of the strangers whom they encountered in the land of Hind. Thus, there are sundry occurrences in sixteenth and seventeenth century Persian texts (Faruqi 2001, 30). But the name of Hindustani never caught on among the locals, as it were. Indeed, Gilchrist, writing in the late eighteenth century, went on to say that he would use the name Hindustani, in preference to all other names “of the popular speech of the country ... *whether the people here constantly do so or not*” (in *ibid.*, 32; emphasis added). The interesting question here concerns the limits of colonial knowledge, and also the limits of the effectiveness of colonial knowledge—and, indeed, colonial ignorance (see Lelyveld 1994). Thus, the ascription of a unity, albeit false—and a misnomer—on the intercommunicating languages and dialects of the people, *particularly as this translated into administrative practice and publishing activity*, could hardly be without effect. Thus, the colonial authorization of the name of “Hindustani” was bound to be something akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy, with an ambiguous impact on the *fact* or real existence of Hindustani, as a language-system that enabled at least contigual communication even in precolonial times, particularly in alliance with modern communication technologies. Gilchrist cites the famous Orientalist H. T. Colebrooke on the existence of an

elegant language which is used in every part of Hindoostan and the dukhin, which is the common vehicle of intercourse among all well-educated natives and among the illiterate also, in many provinces of India; and which is almost everywhere intelligible to some among the inhabitants of every village....

(Rai 2000, 13)

This language, which could be called Urdu and Hindi, can only be Hindustani, capacious and tolerant as it spans the range from the speech of “well-educated natives” down to the demotic dialects of diverse peoples.

The *name* of Hindustani, however, remained confined to colonial usage, in the main. Until we come to the latter half of the nineteenth century, that is. Once it became crucial for the emergent Hindi-Hindu *savarna* proto-élite, in the period after 1857, to make space for themselves in the colonial administration<sup>1</sup> the shared and overlapping linguistic space had to be divided and split up. Then, the name “Hindustani” could mean either that overlapping part of the continuum which was common to both Hindi and Urdu—which was no fun at all if one was thinking of making space for oneself in the zero-sum game of the colonial administration; or “Hindustani” could mean that part of the continuum which was *neither* Hindi nor Urdu—in which case it disappeared altogether, as it did for Mr. Ghanshyam Gupta. As the politics of dissension gathered steam, and—mixing metaphors madly—snowballed and ramified, “Hindustani” came to denominate the terminological compromise which was advocated by Gandhi, among others. However, compromise was the last thing anybody had on their minds at that time, and “Hindustani” left both of the combatants dissatisfied and suspicious: each saw the *name* as a Trojan horse for the other side—even as it sought, with manifest contradiction, both to distance itself from, and to claim, also for its democratic legitimacy, the common terrain! In this kind of force-field, Gandhi’s compromise formulation “Hindi *or* Hindustani” was doomed to failure. That “or” could connote either alterity or identity. It could mean either that Hindi was the *same* as Hindustani, so the mullah was up in arms, or that Hindustani was an *alternative* to Hindi, so the pandit, quite as pugnacious, would have none of it.

Census data offers a comic, and also tragic, illustration of the fate of Hindustani in our troubled times. Thus, between 1931 and 1951, the numbers of people claiming Hindustani as their mother tongue in U.P. declined by 86.4 percent, and by 98.5 percent in the period 1951–1961. Similar catastrophic declines—disappearing millions!—reflect little more than the communalization of linguistic identities. Comparable figures are reported from Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh (Khubchandani 2002, n.p.). Hindustani isn’t the only language-description to have gotten caught up in the politics of identity. Thus, in the 1941 census for Punjab, language statistics were not collected because it turned out that there were no Punjabi

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<sup>1</sup>It’s a long story, see Rai 2000 or King 1994.

speakers there at all: the Muslims claimed Urdu as their mother tongue and all the others claimed Hindi! (Sardar Hukam Singh in CAD ix, 1440). The 1971 census still recognized Hindustani, albeit grouping it under Hindi, but subsequent censuses have eliminated Hindustani altogether. The terminological difficulty is so acute that one is tempted to abandon the name altogether—except that there is something valuable in the *idea* of Hindustani that continues to haunt us; as opposed to the reality of it, which is at best ambiguous.

There is a further wrinkle that must be factored into our thinking about Hindustani in terms of cultural recovery. As far as the colonial origins, or adoption, of the name are concerned, that is *at worst* an indication of pacific intent, an attempt to deny and hopefully reverse, by means of a nominal initiative, the emerging linguistic divide between Hindi and Urdu, the gathering, spiraling extremisms—a far cry indeed from the “divide and rule” strategy too easily discerned by semiliterate nationalists. But in his great 1879 *Dictionary of Hindustani*, Fallon cites this usage by way of illustrating the meaning of “bḥučča” or yokel: “*Kaisā bḥučča hai, Hindustānī nabīñ jāntā.*” I suspect that there is a whole, still unraveling, social history packed into that remark. Of course it is important to understand the hostility that the name of Hindustani provoked among the Hindi protagonists in terms of the greed and envy of a hungry proto-élite. But there is something else there also, and that has to do with the social profile of Hindustani. As the Fallon quote indicates, Hindustani was the language of urbanity: it was the language of the socially dominant Avadh élite. The Oxford English Dictionary (Second edition) identifies Hindustani as “the language of the Muslim conquerors of Hindustan, being a form of Hindi with a large admixture of Arabic, Persian, and other foreign elements; also called Urdu...” S. R. Faruqi is rightly critical of this identification with the “Muslim conquerors” (2001, 40), after all, they came from different places and used different languages, but the association of Hindustani with urbanity and contiguity to feudal power structures is less easily dispelled. The Avadh élite comprised both Muslims and Hindus, and while its social position implied that it, and therefore its language, was associated with education and modernity and a shared (composite) culture, it was also, inevitably, associated with social privilege. And the hostility which that privilege provoked in the upstart Hindi proto-élite—relatively rustic, excluded from the feudal-aristocratic world of the Avadh élite—was easily extended to the whole cultural package. It is entirely understandable that the Hindi counter-élite, politicking for a place in the sun, against the already ensconced Avadh élite, had no love for this cul-

tural package. But when the politics gathered pace, it turns out, neither did significant sections of the Avadh élite, i.e., those who powered the Muslim League (see Jalal and Seal 1981). The conflation of Hindustani with Urdu, and then of Urdu with Muslim, was the retrospectively ineluctable consequence of this political dialectic.

Of course it would be unfair to saddle Hindustani with the entire poisonous history. Hindustani was also the language of popular mobilization, of affective communication, then and now. Much of the poetry of the freedom movement, in this part of the country, is in a language that can be identified as Hindustani: it is also, be it said, often the work of people who are beneficiaries of privilege—but so must every other movement be in a society in which merely to rise above a bare, animal existence is already an indication of privilege. The fact that Hindustani was imbricated, but not complicit, with the Avadh feudal order meant that a whole range of cultural possibilities could be represented as being tainted, even as it enabled the Hindi counter-élite—primarily upper-caste and conservative, even reactionary—to pretend to a democratic, popular legitimacy whose consequences are all around us even today.

Summing up in his account of the constitutional debate apropos, Granville Austin remarks: Partition killed Hindustani (1966, 302). The implied antithesis between the two explains the continued lure, the ghostly persistence of Hindustani as something that might assist in the process of recovery from the cultural consequences of Partition. But the chances don't look too good. In a recent paper, Hindustani was described, sensitively, as not quite a language, but rather a zone of "anxiety" between Hindi and Urdu (Hasnain and Rajyashree 2002, n.p.) This is a pity because a large part of the power and delight of Hindustani consists precisely in the way it enables the skilled user to play with polymorphous perversity, so to speak, over the entire range, from fairly *tatsama* Sanskrit all the way to fluent Persian and guttural Arabic, providing cross-border frissons to a genuinely multilingual community. Classical examples might start with the multilingual puzzles of Amīr Khusrau, but other examples abound, right down to our own times. The de-legitimizing of this glorious linguistic domain—particularly in the pedagogical apparatuses of the State—chokes this play and renders the anxious victim-learners dull, pompous and pedestrian. Unbending, inhumane politics is the inevitable corollary. On the recoil from all this, Hindustani presents itself—on the ramparts, at the hour of the wolf—as a utopian symbol, a point of desire, something light, bright and distant from our sphere of sorrow (to coin a phrase!). However ...

Hamlet, beware! I yield to none in my love for this *my* language. And I have often been tempted by the thought—something of an occupational hazard for wordsmiths—that some kind of linguistic initiative might provide the trigger for change, a revolution made by poets. More realistically, however, I suggest that the yearning for Hindustani is a kind of symptom of our political condition, a revulsion against the purist, intolerant attitudes that inform the politics of the Hindu Right. Like a litmus paper, this recurrent yearning can, at best, *register* change, and perhaps the hope for change, but the transformation itself will have to happen in the real, material world. Sensitive observers realize that the stalemate between the English élite and the Hindi élite that purports to challenge it holds us all hostage. The fact that the privileged speak for “secularism” and the intolerant and communal speak for “democracy” poisons our necessary public discourse about *both* of these vital ideas. It is at this point that the possibility of Hindustani presents itself, as the natural vehicle of popular democracy as well as of secularism. □

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