

## DEBATE

# A Debate Between Alok Rai and Shahid Amin Regarding Hindi\*

[Alok Rai's *Hindi Nationalism* was released earlier this year in Orient Longman's "Tracts for the Times" series. Engaging and erudite, the book traces the decline of Hindi from its glory days to the stilted, bureaucratic, homogenized language that it has become today. Rai attributes this decline to the politicization of Hindi by communalists and sectarians who are increasingly being perceived as the "owners" of the new Hindi.

Hindi has, over the years, been used to counter the perceived or real "threat" posed by first Urdu and then English. En route it has been hijacked to serve the agendas of various factions, notably the upper castes. This has resulted in its degradation into an artificial language, a sort of "high Hindi" that is far removed from common speech, Rai explains.

He explores the history of Hindi—from the first indications of linguistic polarization that arose during the Raj to the connotations of chauvinism that have come to be linked with Hindi in the post-independence era with the rise of the "one nation" theory where Hindi was touted as the language of the unified Hindustan.

In the following discussion, historian Shahid Amin and Alok Rai debate the finer points of the book: Why does Rai fight shy of the term "Hindustani"? Has he been soft on official Urduwallahs? Why is there an air of "fatedness" about the argument?—"every decision regarding Hindi seems to lead towards 1947 and Pakistan." Does Rai really believe that "somebody who is able to distinguish between two words, one *jaleel* [*jali*] and the other *zaleel* [*zali*], is being élitist?" And when did Hindi lose the intellectual ambition to appropriate the world?]

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\* Alok Rai and Shahid Amin wish to thank Palash Mehrotra for taping this debate and for taking the trouble to transcribe it.

**Part I: "I'm trying to counter the Babhani takeover of the Hindi belt."**

**S H A H I D A M I N :** You have titled your book *Hindi Nationalism*. Curiously, there has been a lot of discussion of nationalism from various perspectives, but there is supposed to be only one unitary history of Hindi. I find that paradoxical. As far as Hindi was concerned, you were either for Hindi or against Hindi but there could be no discussion from within Hindi. Hindi had no history whereas nationalism, which really defined us, had by the 1970s begun to have different histories. So what does this signify? What does this tell us about the way Hindi and nationalism have been related?

There have been two different moments. The period of questioning of nationalism has not coincided with the questioning of Hindi. Nationalism began to be questioned post-Naxalbari, while Hindi is only being questioned now when Indians writing in English have made certain advances. In your book, you write basically as a disappointed bilingual enthusiast, not just as a disappointed enthusiast. So this is one set of questions.

Secondly, someone might get up and say who are you to criticize Hindi? You are looking at Hindi from the viewpoint of somebody who doesn't have a stake only in Hindi. Is that a valid position?

**A L O K R A I :** Yes, it can be the position of those who feel the need to distance themselves from the way in which Hindi has been defined in the first half of the twentieth century.

**S A :** And it is not that one is anti-Hindi or anti-national but one is trying to understand what is constitutive of the larger claims being made both by Hindi and nationalism.

**A R :** I don't know how clearly it comes through in the book, but it was certainly part of my intention to create a distinction between what I call "Hindi" and the nationalism that corresponds to that, and what I think of as a possible nationalism, which uses the language or languages of the people. I believe that as long as "Hindi" represents or is perceived to rep-

resent the language of the people, our nationalism is in deep trouble. People are being represented fraudulently. I am trying to make a distinction between, as it were, Hindi nationalism and “Hindi” nationalism. Hindi nationalism may be a utopian thing in the sense that it doesn’t exist. Right now it exists as a kind of unfulfilled possibility. It’s a kind of mass nationalism which can actually mobilize people who are at the moment not represented, except by those who presume to speak in their name. To be very blunt, and I have been blunt in the book also, there is a kind of Sanskritizing upper caste which is responsible for this. This *savarna* Sanskritizing élite which speaks in the name of the people is unchallenged because the challenge cannot come from English. The challenge can only come from below. The challenge can only come in the name of the people.

**S A :** I’ll come to that later but let me just dwell a bit longer on the title of the book: *Hindi Nationalism*. When you say Hindi nationalism, you don’t wish to suggest Hindi and the issue of nationalism.

**A R :** No.

**S A :** If not, then would there be a space for a Hindustani nationalism? You say that you don’t want to use the term Hindustani since it has connotations of élitism and privilege.

**A R :** Shahid, the sense in which I mean Hindi nationalism is actually very close to Hindustani nationalism. I have shied clear of the term Hindustani because it has got so encrusted with a particular politics that it would constantly need to be footnoted. In fact, the idea that I have is precisely this, of a shared common language, and therefore it might have been easier in some sense to talk about Hindustani nationalism and Hindi nationalism rather than Hindi nationalism and “Hindi” nationalism. Except for what has happened to the term Hindustani....

**S A :** Tell me, what has happened to the term Hindustani which has tethered it to a kind of politics that you will find unacceptable? I want to push you on that. So when you talk about Hindustani music it’s all right. Take

the use of the term “Hindustani” in that famous Mukesh song:

*Āhōrō kal kī bātēn*  
*Kal kī bāt purānī*  
*Naʿē d̤hañg sē likhēñgē mil kē naʿī kabānī*  
*Ham Hindustānī.*

That you do not have problems with. But when the term Hindustani is applied to language, you feel that it has a baggage. Doesn't this baggage really attach more to Urdu than to Hindustani?

**A R :** Shahid, I don't think we really have a difference, I'm not saying don't push me....

**S A :** I quote you from page 113: “Because of its origins in a specific regional politics the defence of ‘Hindustani’ had become identified with a status quoist defence of privilege.” This is one of the reasons you don't want to use the term. But this Hindustani or this Urdu also produced a Josh Malihabadi, also produced a Majaz, also produced a Kaifi Azmi. So to say that language was rooted in a defense of privilege ... I find that troubling because it appears in a book which otherwise hits out against official Hindi.

I just got an e-mail from Professor C. M. Naim from Chicago—he has translated the autobiography of the eighteenth-century Mughal poet Mir Muḥammad Taqī “Mir”—and he suggested that you have been a bit soft on official Urduwallahs. Naim Sahib may have a point, but in a way it doesn't matter because you have been very hard on non-official Hindustani. How would you react to that? I want to push you on that because this is a term I for one would not easily let go because it also allows you to contest this alliterative haiku that is Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan. What I am doing is making Hindustan into Hindustani and cutting that natural connection between Hindu and Hindustan. I thought Hindustani gives us that mileage purely in a semantic battle.

**A R :** Does it? I don't think there's a difference. The linguistic domain that I am seeking to describe by the term Hindi is identical with the linguistic domain described by Hindustani. It's merely the term I have a problem with and I think the problem is simply that it's unavailable in contempo-

rary discourse, that the term Hindustani doesn't seem to cross the threshold of 1950. The Constitution kills it.

**S A :** The Constituent Assembly kills it.

**A R :** I was worried that the term might complicate the argument. I needed to free myself, as it were, to say what I wanted to say. But you have a problem with the defense of privilege also.

**S A :** I do, I do. What you are implying is that a language, which appears in the hands of some people as a defense of privilege at a particular point of time, doesn't provide any wherewithal for experimentation, for using privileged positions, which a lot of us are born into, to then make an argument which is really an attack on privilege. You look at Majaz ...

**A R :** The whole tradition of nationalist poetry would be practically invisible without the tradition of the Urdu poets. Definitely.

**S A :** If you had made a purely political argument that Schedule VIII of the Constitution doesn't mention Hindustani, that the Constituent Assembly killed it; Pakistan is there, India is here; it's like a linguistic Line of Control (LoC) at the international border ... I would have been happy. But that's not the way you frame it. You insist that Urdu is the language of privilege of the élite, and now even Hindustani is that; you are therefore not left with anything except that which you don't like.

**A R :** Defense of privilege is something I would hope to stick to. The way in which Hindi was opposed, the whole idea by which Nagari was opposed, was shot through with arrogance, and that arrogance has been an extremely important factor in the shaping of a linguistic identity.

There is a deeper reason which must be considered. Due to its origins in a specific regional politics, the defense of Hindustani has become identified with a status-quoist defense of privilege. In the Constituent Assembly debates for instance, it is very clear that the Hindiwallah seeks to speak in the name of people who are out of power. Now this to me is a very dangerous claim.

**S A :** Specious and disingenuous. Look at the way the whole move about Hindi was organized outside of the Constituent Assembly when the Constituent Assembly was seized by the matter. This I would say is the pre-history of December 6, where the State is complicit in saying that India is the land of Hindus and this leads not to a qualification—there are other people as well—but becomes a natural statement. What happens in the Constituent Assembly in 1947–49 and outside are the beginnings of linguistic majoritarianism, a “*kyā kar lōgē*” attitude.

**A R :** The linguistic majoritarianism, which I fear as much as you do, cannot really be countered so long as the opposition to it remains associated with what is, in that context, the voice of privilege. Hindustani is obviously a shifting category, it either means one thing or another, and insofar as the Urduwallahs have not shed that history of arrogance, if today they speak in defense of Hindustani, then that baggage of arrogance travels.

**S A :** Tell me how does that happen? Tell me how Manto did not shed the arrogance with which Sir Syed Ahmad Khan addressed the Education Commission of 1880 on the language issue (that annoyed Babu Harishchandra). Tell me how Sahir, who actually rewrote his lyrics for Hindi films, is guilty of arrogance? Also, not everybody who wrote in Urdu threw his lot in with Pakistan. I have a problem because at several places you imply that the debate between Urdu and Hindi in some respects prefigures Pakistan. Now, this really does take all contingency away from the way the two countries came about. Is it part of a polemic?

**A R :** Obviously I am wary of that and say that there seems to be an air of fatedness. I am not saying it is so inexorably.

**S A :** So I have written in the marginal notes to your book: too dramatic, every decision regarding Hindi leads towards 1947 and Pakistan.

**A R :** Shahid, what I am trying to understand is this: when Maulana Hifzur Rahman is told in the Constituent Assembly by R. V. Dhulekar, “Today if you speak Hindustani it will not be heard. You will be misrepresented, you will be misheard. Wait two or three years, and you will have your

Urdu language.” In his mind Urdu and Hindustani are identical, so “wait two or three years and you will have your Urdu language and Persian script. Today let him not try to oppose this because our nation—the nation which has undergone several sufferings—is not in a mood to hear him.” What I am doing is trying to understand this sense of cultural hurt and the consequences of that sense of hurt....

**S A :** For those who are hurt or those who are ...

**A R :** For all of us. We are suffering under a politics which flows from this generalized sense of cultural humiliation. To me it is important to understand this feeling of hurt; to not lose sight of that, and to, as it were, bring it out in the open.

**S A :** I would say that these are declaratory statements made in the Constituent Assembly for posterity. What is interesting for a person like me is that I couldn't learn Urdu in school. I could have learned Urdu in school if I had enrolled in an Anglo-Arabic school, where I would have played football and visited the Jama Masjid with my father, maybe read the Qur'ān. Because I belonged to the mainstream, I could not learn Urdu in school. There is then a way in which if we understand this moment of initial hurt, it still doesn't fully explicate the kind of politics that emerges. It's like saying: “Because of 1947 India should not have gone for a secular constitution. But Nehru stood in the way.” But that's what distinguishes India from Pakistan, and that was responsible for my father not going to Pakistan. So if there was an original hurt, it is very difficult to work out at what moment this original hurt is constructed and the way it is put forward. One moment for the construction of this hurt is the 1880s and the 1890s.

**A R :** But Shahid doesn't it have to do with the culture of Avadh and Allahabad and so on. To my mind, to be able to use Urdu with *shīn qāf durust* is still to me a higher culture. I still cannot, and I speak for myself, actually treat with respect someone who cannot use *shīn qāf* correctly. Now, to me, it is a kind of cultural élitism, obviously not acquired consciously but I have imbibed it from my environment.

**S A :** So you think that somebody who is able to distinguish between two words, one *jalīl* and the other *zalīl*, is being élitist? I want to push this point. After all there are so many sounds in Sanskrit. Firaq Gorakhpuri has written eloquently about the way Sanskritic terms are peasantized, or shall we say humanized. There was a term I heard as a boy: when somebody was running around trying desperately to get some work done my grandmother would say, “*Arrē ū tō barā dhavā ī mačhāyē hūyē hai.*” “*Dhavā ī*” is from the Sanskrit “*dhav*” (“to run”). It has come into Bhojpuri and is now also spoken by cultured Muslim women (*shurfā*). So there is a way in which terms acquire meaning and pass into daily language. *Kharīd* is popular but *farōkht* (“to sell”) is not. *Kharīdār*, millions of people will know but *farōkht kiyā* has not passed into popular usage. There is a way in which certain terms, even if they are of a pair, emerge and become popular. To say that certain sounds are by definition élitist—those who are able to produce guttural sounds are less peasant and those who are able to utter dental sibilants are élitist—I find that a difficult proposition.

**A R :** I don’t think I am going to enunciate a principle on this.

**S A :** Let me carry on. Because this whole issue of the adamant position adopted by the Hindi alphabet, where every dot that is put below a letter is seen as a mark of excrescence or a pock mark, a concession to foreign Farsi things, while with every dot that’s put on top, the *chandrabinḍu*, the more Sanskritic you get. You yourself have cited Madan Mohan Malaviya’s major polemic of the 1880s on primary education and court character. You also rightly make the perceptive remark that the genius of Madan Mohan Malaviya lay in his widening this issue of the recognition of Hindi as a language to be used in court and saying, “Look, primary education benefited people to learn to read and write in this script.” The pamphlet says that, after all, he is talking about court language and that the language you speak in court cannot be changed overnight. If there are words in Urdu, as there are bound to be, we’ll put a *bindī*, we’ll put a dot under “*ja*” and it will become “*za*.” In 1930, Malaviya in his weekly nationalist newspaper, *Abhyudaya*, writes an editorial called “*Hindī Mēñ Bindī Kyōñ*”: Why should we use the *bindī* in Hindi because it’s a different time

and a different politics.

The ultimate irony is that till the day he died, Zail Singh, the President of India, could never get his name written properly in Hindi. They would never put a *bindī* under “*ja*,” it would always be “Jail Singh,” even in a magazine like *Sushma*, which is a Hindi version of *Shama*<sup>5</sup>; an Urdu magazine brought out by Yunus and Idris Dehlvi. The Dehlvis popularized a certain kind of Urdu by producing the first *Stardust*-like magazine. When he brought out a Hindi edition he had to drop the *bindī* under “*ja*.” *Sushma* would never write “Zail Singh,” it only wrote “Jail Singh.” I have written a little bit in Hindi and every time it comes back from the printer all the *bindīs* have systematically been taken off. Once I said very provocatively “*Hindī mēñ bindī lagānē kē liyē kyā mujhē Pākistān jānā parēgā?*” I have to do it here ... Hindi has to be more accommodating.

**A R :** Obviously I don’t disagree with you. All I am trying to do is to understand the kind of cultural politics that led to this absurd stubbornness. You rightly quote someone like Malaviya who takes one kind of position at one point, who is perfectly happy with it, but over a period of half a century certain things congeal, certain attitudes congeal, and I am just trying to understand what goes into it. Some of it is certainly a case of people who have hitherto been socially disadvantaged sensing political power and a cultural opportunity to assert themselves. I am not defending that, but I am trying to understand it. There is a difference.

**S A :** I am sure there is.

**A R :** And I use myself as a kind of a cultural sensor and therefore, I am also aware, that if someone says “*Susma*”—which is not Hindi-Urdu but Hindi itself—there is something within me which recoils. Someone says “*Ham bajār sē kāgaj kharīd lāyēñgē,*” there is something in me which recoils and I ask myself what is it? I am not conscious of trying to assert a social privilege but I recognize it as some sort of leftover of social privilege. So someone who says “*Bajār sē kāgaj kharīd lā’ō*” is somehow less than someone who says “*Bāzār sē kāgāz kharīd lā’ō.*”

**S A :** I perfectly understand your desire to come to terms with the dis-

tance that Malaviya travels between 1885 and 1930. I'd like to talk about the present. Take the example of *Madhyakaleen Bharat*, a multi-volume Hindi translation of scholarly articles on medieval India edited by Irfan Habib and brought out by a reputable Hindi publisher. They have systematically deleted, even from the sources, all diacritical marks which will give words a Farsi sound. Which is indeed quite ironic. So by definition we cannot even read original Farsi phrases properly in Hindi script because of some arbitrary notion of longstanding hurt that must now find typographical expression. We are committing a kind of vandalism which is not very different from the one faced by the makers of *Fire and Water*.

**A R :** I agree entirely. All I am saying is that this vandalism I would define as a neurotic symptom and seek to get rid of it by understanding it historically, by getting to its roots. This typographic revenge for historical hurt is a neurotic symptom; I have also described "Hindi" as a neurotic formation. And knowing this history is also in some sense to move towards overcoming that history.

**S A :** I want to move now to this very venerable figure called "Bābāʿ-e Urdū," Maulvī ʿAbdu'l-Ḥaḡ, the grandfather of Urdu, but now we have *bābā's* Urdu or *babalog's* Urdu. And that again is quite interesting. On the one hand you have got the typographical revenge of the Hindiwallahs, these people are orthographically challenged, as it were. On the other hand is the attempt by the élite to appropriate the finer things of Urdu and make them available through translations, transcriptions and so on. One is in the walled city in its Urdu habitat, and the other talks about Urdu in the Habitat Center. Now what does this tell us about the age of bilingualism, especially in North India?

Why I say this is because I definitely feel, at least for those of us coming from the Hindustani belt as compared to Calcutta or Bombay, that we didn't have that clutch of bilingual intellectuals. In fact the tragedy was that if you knew Hindi very well you knew everything else that was written in Hindi; Ram Bilas Sharma is a classic example of that. So we did not really have bilingual intellectuals who could, with equal felicity, write an article on history or anthropology, first in Hindi and then in English, as they did, and still do, in Calcutta. Now, interestingly, the bilingualism that

is coming about is devoid of any creative use of the two languages in North India. The exceptions that prove the rule are a Mrinal Pande or a Krishna Kumar. Does that suggest something about the cultural politics and the kinds of élites that are important in northern India compared to Bengal or whatever?

**A R :** Obviously, the chasm that has appeared in Hindustan between a vernacular élite and an English élite is much deeper than I would imagine in Bengal. That the vernacular élite in Hindustan has remained confined within its history ...

**S A :** ... which has been both anti-Urdu and anti-English. The vernacular élite in Bengal has produced a much more, to my understanding, Sanskritic Bengali because the problem with the vernacular élite in North India is that it was trying to standardize both a language and a history.

**A R :** This is so because the vernacular élite which invents modern Sanskritized Bangla is not really throwing up a challenge from the outside. They are already inside. The kind of Hindi élite which forms is, in fact, formed of people who are looking enviously at positions of power, seeking to appropriate those positions of power, and indeed politically succeeding in appropriating those positions of power; but they are still deprived of, and know that they are deprived of the cultural capital. There is this kind of split which explains the limitedness of the vernacular élite of Hindustan. They come out of a much more vicious, a much more bitter history.

“Hindi” is laden with neurosis. In fact very little literary creation happens in “Hindi.” The literary creation happens in a much more relaxed manner. Writers like Krishna Sobti don’t use “Hindi.” Of course, in Hindi the production of knowledge was an area the absence of which was noted a century back and various programs were initiated to fill the shortcoming. Some good work was done. If you are looking at early *Saraswati*, one notices that there is in fact a desire to produce knowledge, so you have articles on painting, on modern art and on Latin American politics. All of that characterized Hindi in its early stages. At some point, as it were, this ambition to take on the world gets narrowed down to actually fight-

ing a bitter regional battle. At some point, when one moves from Hindi to “Hindi,” the intellectual ambition is narrowed down.

**S A :** Would you also agree that the lack of translations into “Hindi” can be seen as an indication of the weakness of this official Hindi? You go back to the Delhi Translation Society of the 1840s or when you have the development of a national élite or even a Communist élite, what you do first is translate everything into Hindi or Urdu. That happened with Hindi in the 1880s and the 1920s, when translations were done from Bangla. You don’t get the desire anymore to say that we are a big market, everything that is important in anything must be translated into Hindi, because unless you do that, how do you read Turgenev? This is not part of a nationalist project, but what I am saying is that somewhere or other we need to have this desire which was there earlier on ...

**A R :** ... an intellectual ambition to appropriate the world. “Hindi,” instead of the cultural labor or the accumulation of cultural capital which can result in these things, has been worked through a certain kind of politics. Indeed, Hindi’s claim to be a Vishwa Bhasha—made time to time at the Vishwa Hindi Sammelan—also rests on a kind of numerical claim that Hindi is capable of and should become one of the languages of the United Nations because there are so many nominal speakers of Hindi. Rather than, as it were, taking on the world and becoming strong enough to be recognized as that, it has sought to be worked through a kind of politics.

## Part 2: The Day Hindi Died

[In Part 2 Palash Krishna Mehrotra joins Alok Rai and Shahid Amin for a wide-ranging debate about Hindi as taught in India’s schools, as used by our writers ... and our air-hostesses. Also raised and addressed are the questions: Why was the process of Sanskritizing different for different languages? When Hindi intellectuals do start doing history and sociology in Hindi, would they find themselves in alliance with their colleagues in the Hindi departments or engaged in a struggle against them? Rai also points out that the old name of Nagari (the script in which Hindi is written) was in fact

Babhani, the script of the Brahmans. The initial battle for an “Indian” script for Hindustani was between Kaithi and Babhani, and Babhani won. As he argues, “What I am trying to counter is the Babhani takeover of the politics of the Hindi belt. It’s obviously not possible to wind the clock back and go back to Kaithi script, but you can go forward with this history by recognizing what happened and understanding the politics which went into the making of this dominant script.”]

**A R :** The claim I have heard made often enough is that now is not the time to create divisions in the ranks. Once “Hindi” is established, then we can go into this history of contention and fight the legitimate claims of this or that constituent of it.

**S A :** Of course, a way of doing Hindi which is not high Hindi can’t be a constituent of “Hindi.” A Hindi that borrows consciously from, say, Bhojpuri or even shurfa Hindustani cannot become a constituent of “Hindi.”

**A R :** Well, this is the kind of fudging that goes on....

**S A :** I can also say that, look Hindi is victorious. I will never be able to write in Urdu because, even if I do, the audience in Urdu will not be very large. So I shall write Hindi in ways you might not like: “Well, this is not what Hindi is” and I’ll say, be prepared for this because this is the Indian nation-state encouraging diversity.

**A R :** But that encouragement of diversity is within invisible and often unstated limits; but those limits are very much there, and, in fact, so long as Braj, Avadhi, Maithili or Bhojpuri is content to acknowledge the constitutional superiority of Manak Hindi, there is no problem. But the day it makes a claim for its own traditions, Hindi becomes endangered.

**P A L A S H   K R I S H N A   M E H R O T R A :** Could you explain that a bit?

**A R :** The entire politics that went into the claim for including Maithili in the list of languages in which the Sahitya Academi gives awards is a good example. Hindiwallahs were extremely perturbed because the fiction had been maintained for the last several decades that Maithili was just a dialect

of Hindi. The moment this history of how the dialects came to be subsumed under Manak or “Standard” Hindi was revealed, all that history of contention spilled out into the open. And it’s not a history they wanted coming out, which is why they kept it so closely under wraps.

**P K M :** How successful have Hindiwallahs been in trying to impose boundaries as to what a language should be? Do Hindi writers feel this burden as well? Enough authors have chosen to write in a more colloquial Hindi. If crucial markers of civilization like literature haven’t been harmed, then how deep is the damage caused by “Hindi”?

**A R :** It’s difficult to say. The question is a good one in the sense that there is both success and failure. I think you are perfectly right to say that the imposition of this Manak Hindi has been far from completely successful. As a matter of fact this is acknowledged in my book. The violence done by Manak Hindi on the people’s Hindi has not been as successful as Hindiwallahs themselves are wont to suggest in their poetic and emphatic moods: you can never actually stamp out the grass. It persists in little corners; it springs back to life. This is something that is obviously there, that literary people have not accepted the dominion of this Manak Hindi which is, as it were, devoid of emotions and sterile.

On the other hand, this has occupied the high ground in our educational apparatus. It has therefore distorted at a very general level people’s sense of themselves, their language and their history. Therefore, even though a Hindi writer, in exercising his creativity, is free to neglect the domination of “Hindi,” the audience that he writes for is still subject to the dominion of Manak Hindi which comes to them with all the weight of the educational apparatus. So I do not for a moment suggest that everybody who writes Hindi writes this kind of Manak Hindi.

**P K M :** There’s been this criticism of the subaltern set: isn’t it absurd people’s history is not being written in Hindi?

**S A :** I read somewhere about a circular going around in some banks in Chennai: if it is Tuesday then you have to use Hindi. There is this claim made for Hindi being the natural language of representation of at least

North Indian reality. The problem is that over the last fifty years the newer ways of understanding our society, the concepts, the narratives, haven't really originated in Hindi. Whether it is "Sanskritization," or "subaltern," or "dominant caste," or "vote-bank," "minority appeasement," etc., they all emerge out of an effort by academics to engage with Indian reality. And this engagement hasn't taken place in Hindi. Because of that, they have a particularly interesting or difficult problem. When people like me try, after a very long period of time, to write history in Hindi, there seems to be no reference point. I have to really craft a language of history which is written in Hindi. It's not that having written history in English, now, when I start doing it in Hindi there are these ready-made models waiting for me. I must now try to come back as the prodigal son. If more and more people who come from the Hindi belt start doing social science or history in Hindi, we'll have a very interesting conflict, perhaps between those who are trying to develop disciplines in Hindi, and those who use Hindi as a disciplinary tool itself.

**A R :** It might be interesting to ask how much intellectual energy there is within the Hindi departments as opposed to the Hindi belt. And when Hindi intellectuals do start doing history and sociology in Hindi, would they find themselves in alliance with their colleagues in the Hindi departments or engaged in a struggle against them? To my mind there is so much hypocrisy and violence written into this official Hindi, the language is unable, till it sheds this baggage, to actually free itself to ask these important questions. I think that is the reason why important questions are, despite the fact of the enormous numbers and the enormous political energy in the area, not being raised in a serious academic form.

Take a Hindiwallah who insists on his right to use Hindi. Once I was at a film symposium and there were people from both North and South India. The language they were speaking was a kind of mix of Hindi and English. And we were rubbing along with some understanding and some loss. Then one of the local Hindi *patrakars* stood up and began to make a speech about how his rights were being denied and so on. He wanted to speak in Hindi and his entire expectation was that he would be denied that right; he would be told: you can't because there are people present from elsewhere. As it happened, I was chairing that session and I said:

please speak in Hindi. He had nothing to say and kept quiet after that. All he wished to do was to insist on his right to speak in Hindi. So there is a further problem of what you are going to say in the language once it is granted to you. That problem has not been addressed simply because the Hindiwallah has invented an enemy who holds him back. He is always shadow-fighting with this guy who has denied him the right to speak.

**S A :** Alok, who are you addressing in this book? Are you trying to wean the Hindiwallah back to some kind of a position where a more intelligible dialogue can take place? Presumably the Hindiwallah is going to say: I don't read English. Or are you saying that, since this is part of the "Tracts for the Times" series, what is feared today is Hindi nationalism running amok as it were.

**A R :** Thank-you. I think that is really the crux of it. I am addressing the Hindiwallah because I think that the political situation in which all of us—Hindiwallah, Englishwallah, everything-elsewallah—are stuck has something to do with the fact that the democratic impulse of the Hindi belt is being constantly perverted. To me it is profoundly important to liberate those democratic energies of the Hindi belt and I believe that can only be done through Hindi. No matter how liberal, enlightened and progressive people like us who use English are, as a matter of fact it will always be possible to paint us into an élitist corner. It is only the Hindiwallah who can release those energies, but the Hindiwallah cannot do it so long as he is carrying this historical baggage. As far as I am concerned, my real audience is the Hindiwallah. Even though I have written in English, I would still be addressing the Hindiwallah.

**S A :** This reminds me of that famous dialogue of Gabbar Singh in *Sholay* where he says: "*Gabbar sē tumhēñ širf ēk ādmī bačā saktā hai, aur vō Gabbar khud hai.*" So are you saying that only Hindiwallahs can save us from the other Hindiwallahs?

**A R :** Absolutely, that is it. And that is why I think the question of Hindi is so important. Because even though, in some sense, it is certainly possible for metropolitan élités to pretend that Hindi is a non-issue—that it's over,

that in the age of globalization who needs Hindi anymore?—for me it is a profoundly important political question because those energies, which a certain kind of Hindi can misrepresent and pervert, and a certain kind of people’s Hindi I believe represents, will continue to be important in the political space. I think it is important that it be addressed because I think what we are suffering from is a perversion....

**P K M :** What makes it possible for the latter Hindi to masquerade as the bearer of and representative of the energies which the earlier Hindi represents?

**A R :** Basically, in the transformation of Hindi from Bhartendu to the 1930s and 1940s emergence of Rajbhasha Hindi, something happens to Hindi. And this latter Hindi, not Bhartendu’s Hindi but the one that emerges in the 1930s and 1940s, basically “*schooli* Hindi,” becomes the vehicle of a certain kind of identity. This was so because of the continuity of the names Hindi and “Hindi” which I have tried to address in my writing by wrapping the latter thing in quotation marks. Because of the superficial similarity and continuity in names it was possible for the latter Hindi to masquerade as the bearer of and representative of the energies which the earlier Hindi represents. When Gandhi came and talked about Hindi becoming the language of the national movement, he was speaking about one kind of Hindi. When Tandon in 1945 said: “I am sorry, I cannot stop you from leaving the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan—something has happened to Hindi.”<sup>1</sup> There is another Hindi that has taken its place. Something has changed in the nature of Hindi. In effect, this is when the exclusivist interpretation of Hindi starts; a fact masked very well because the same name is used to describe the language at two ends of this historical continuum.

**S A :** What you are saying in your book is an important political question: how is Hindi taught in schools? That’s where a particular way of knowing the language or not knowing the language is ...

**A R :** ... is instilled into the minds of generations and it isn’t only language

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<sup>1</sup>See *Sammelan Patrika*, 55(3–4) (Gandhi-Tandon Ank), Shaka Samvat 1891, 25.

which is instilled. Instilled is a version of history, a cultural agenda, its worldviews, the outlines of possible futures. Hindi becomes the code for a kind of politics and that is why the Hindi issue is important even though the gifted people, creative people, literary people will always be free. Meanwhile the perversion of young minds continues unabated.

**P K M :** We used to get marks cut for using Urdu words in an Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) school. More than that, I studied Nirmal Verma in English translation.

**S A :** One can look at this from another interesting angle—in a “good” private school the Hindi teacher is an outsider. She or he comes only to teach Hindi and not anything else, while the geography teacher might be doubling as something else. Similarly, an English teacher is not just an English teacher. There is a way in which there is something coming from the outside, which belongs to us, which has not been fully accommodated and yet represents the large masses from whom everyone is alienated. When the masses speak Hindi everybody runs away. The way Hindi is taught and approached in middle school is a very complex situation given “globalization” and so on, than it was when we were studying. The pressure to like English was less, but then although Hindi was a bit on the outside, it was also on the inside to some extent.

Now, your average smart middle-class Delhi school-going child (not government school-going) would be less competent in Hindi today than she would be even ten years ago. And yet the agenda of Hindi in school hasn’t actually addressed this change in the situation and stubbornly remains the same.

**A R :** I think what is going to happen, and this is speculative really, is that a change in the external situation of Hindi will be masked by the fact that there was an earlier paranoia and this is only going to be deepened by the current paranoia. The earlier paranoia was that Hindi was being held back by its enemies. Hindi’s history is a history of how it has been denied its rightful status by Urdu, English, etc. And now, the world itself seems to have turned against Hindi. Therefore the actual change in the situation and the kind of responses that we might require as a nation, are some-

thing that the Hindiwallahs will not be equipped to understand, simply because, to them, it will be part of a long history of denial. I find it significant that all the international channels that have come into this country have actually started addressing the Hindi audience very directly and the language they are using is completely different from Manak Hindi.

**P K M :** You call the language of Zee TV “grotesque Hindi.”

**A R :** But to their credit, all of them are making an attempt to get away from the historical baggage and actually begin to speak to the people. It will be a tragedy if it is only the multinational television agency which is going to speak to the people....

**S A :** Whereas the airline hostesses don't speak in this Hindi, they speak in Manak Hindi.

**P K M :** And this is even if you are not flying Indian airlines.

**S A :** Anyone who speaks Hindi over 30,000 feet speaks in a very peculiar way. And there is something happening there, why must such ...

**P K M :** Rarified Hindi ...

**S A :** How can rarified Hindi be so stultified?

**A R :** I'll tell you why it's stultified, because of its sources of sustenance. It's an attempt to sound like Sanskrit. That is the tragedy of it. They are trying to make good on the claim of being the *jeshtha putri* of Sanskrit which is a linguistically fraudulent claim.

**P K M :** The gap between the grammars of the two languages is enormous.

**A R :** On the other hand, in order to make good on the claim, the language needs to go through all kinds of contortions to sound like Sanskrit. Obviously, while going through those contortions all life gets squeezed

out of it and you get this absurd kind of sound which you hear with particular clarity at 30,000 feet, but which you hear no doubt on the ground as well.

**P K M :** Which brings us to the fact that a lot of other languages have also gone through this process of Sanskritizing and then there has been a challenge from within the language. That hasn't happened with Hindi? Is it because we have the largest number of illiterate people among the population in the Hindi belt, so those in control haven't really been challenged?

**A R :** I don't know how the demography of it works, but clearly the Sanskritizing phase in various languages, whether you speak of Bangla or Marathi, has happened in very different cultural and demographic contexts. So that the Sanskritizing of Bangla by the landowning Bhadraklok was a different process from the way in which Hindi was Sanskritized by the upwardly mobile, newly-educated intelligentsia of the Hindi belt. And obviously the latter process was bound to be contentious in a way the process in Bengal was not.

**S A :** I just wanted to point out that the word for illicit sexual relationship in rustic Bengali, as also used by Nazam ul Islam, the great Bengali poet, is *aashnai* [āshnāʔī]. I would bet my last silver Hindi rupee that it would never be used in Hindi. So that there is a way in which in Bangla you are able to get away with both a Sanskritic or even a Persianized spin with a certain panache that is historically just not possible with Hindi.

I think the significance of Alok's book is that it gives a very readable and complex view of something as natural as a mother tongue, a nationalist mother tongue. There is no space left after the two. And I wonder whether the feeling that Hindi has no history is analogous to the kind of journalistic nonsense that we hear that Hindus have no sense of history. These irresponsible statements are made by the same person.

**A R :** For me the only underlying truth about those statements is that they are attempts to deny the history there is. It's a kind of willful amnesia. And to me the interesting point is what motivates this desire to forget? What

are we trying to repress? And pursuing the psychoanalytical metaphor which I use in the book: the path to health lies through confronting that which you are trying to repress. All this hurt and social anxiety are comprehensible but must be faced. And to pretend that it didn't happen and to subsume all of it in the myths of antiquity of ancient origins only deepens the problem. The problem doesn't go away.

**P K M :** You keep saying we need to understand Hindi's history. Two key points struck me about this history: Kaithi and Khatri's alternative.

**A R :** Kaithi is not a language but a script. And the interesting question really is: what happens to Kaithi? Today obviously Kaithi is a non-starter.

**P K M :** It's importance lay in that it was an alternative script to Nagari.

**A R :** And it was a very real alternative, there were in fact more schools using Kaithi than there were using Nagari. How is it that a particular minority variant of the script actually prevails? In my account I relate it to a kind of caste politics of the Hindi belt. And I was rather pleased to discover that Badrinarain Upadhyaya (author of *Premghan*) declared in one of the Sahitya Sammelans that the old name of Nagari was in fact Babhani, the script of the Brahmans. So the conflict was between Kaithi and Babhani, and Babhani won. What I am trying to counter is the Babhani takeover of the politics of the Hindi belt. It's obviously not possible to wind the clock back and go back to Kaithi, but you can go forward with this history, by recognizing what happened, and understanding the politics which went into the making of this dominant script.

**P K M :** Khatri too had his alternative which was also very moderate for the time.

**A R :** Khatri was making a claim for Khari Boli. It was a very specific kind of debate because it was actually about the language of poetry and the language of prose. Khatri was making the claim that whereas Khari Boli was universally used as a language of prose, Khari Boli should actually be used as a language of poetry. So in favor of Khari Boli, he made the claim

that unlike Braj this was actually close to the language of all the people. It was something that could be written both in the Urdu script and the Nagari script, and therefore it would be suitable. Khatri completely missed the point that the whole impulse of the script movement was precisely to create a demand, which would be acceptable to only a few people. The script demand was of its essence, of its intrinsic and necessary nature, a divisive demand; it was a demand for a claim against some people, so this demand for a Khari Boli was a non-starter, even though ten years later all of it was accepted, but in these ten years Khari Boli itself has been transformed: a new Sanskritized variant “Hindi” has “emerged,” if that is quite the word. □

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