

IS HINDI A COMMON TONGUE?

(BY SWAMI VEDACHALAM)

"Man starts with language as God's perfect gift, which he only impairs and forfeits by sloth and sin"

—Archbishop Trench in his 'Study of Words'.
At present some Indian reformers endeavour their utmost to make Hindi the common tongue for the whole of India. Their special reason for doing so is, they declare, that, being spoken by a major portion of the Indian population Hindi alone would seem to hold out the brilliant prospect of bringing all the diverse people of India together and unifying them for any undertaking of their common welfare.

No doubt, if the reason they assign to their procedure be really sound, the study of Hindi may, in truth, produce the wholesome effect they predict. But unfortunately what they assert is not true but is deceptive. For, in fact, the language actually studied and used by educated people all over India is not Hindi but is English. The uncultured, rather the illiterate, masses whose number nearly amounts to 310 millions out of a total population of 315 millions, according to the Census of 1911, speak 230 languages all over India, Burma and some parts of Assam. If the last two countries be excluded, there are altogether 79 languages that are being spoken in the Indian Empire alone. Of these 79, the Dravidian languages are only 14; and of these, 11 are spoken in Southern India and Ceylon, 2 in the hills of Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas, and 1 in Baluchistan. Again, these 14 Dravidian languages, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kanarese are the only ones that are cultivated and have literatures of their own. Others: Kudagui, Tulu, Toda, Kotas, Kurukh, Malto, Gondi, Kanda, Kolami and Brahui are uncultivated and unwritten and have, therefore, no literature of any kind. All the other 65 languages are spoken by the people in Northern India, of which only a very few are written and have even begun to possess a certain amount of literature produced within the last three or four centuries and consisting mainly of works translated from the epics and the Puranas in Sanskrit.

Of the 65 North Indian languages Hindi is one, which is again split up into so many petty dialects as may be seen from the following quotation taken from Dr. F.E. Keay's excellent book on 'The History of Hindi Literature'.

"It is most important to understand clearly what we mean by Hindi, as the world is often used ambiguously. It is often, for instance, applied in a loose sense to the vernacular speech of the whole of North India between the Punjab and Sind on the West, and Bengal on the East. But the philological research of scholars, such as Sir George Grierson, have shown that there are really four chief languages in this namely Rajasthani, Western Hindi, and Bihari, each having a different parentage. Bihari really belongs to a group of languages of which Bengali is another member. Western Hindi is closely connected in origin with Punjabi. The word Hindi is also often used to denote modern literary High Hindi in contradistinction to Urdu; but both High Hindi and Urdu were, as will be shown below, deve-

loped from a dialect of Western Hindi."

This passage must suffice to open the eyes of those who blindly tell us as if Hindi had been the only language that is spoken by almost all the people of Northern India. Even the four chief languages specified above are not four indivisible units, but are mere complex bodies, each body being a composite of many dialects one differing from the other very widely. For instance, the term Rajasthani does not indicate a single homogeneous speech, but it signifies a group of tongues called Mewati, Marwari, Jai-puri, and Malvi which are dimly and distantly related to each other. Similarly Western Hindi consists of four principal dialects such as Bangaru, Braj Bhasha, Kanaui, and another nameless one which was spoken in the vicinity of Delhi and Meerut at the time of the Mohammedan invasion, and which was, after the settlement of the conquerors in Delhi, taken up by them as their camp language with a large infusion of Persian and Arabic words and was called by them 'Urdu', the literal meaning of the word Urdu being 'camp'. And the modern 'High Hindi' was created at the beginning of the 18th century A.D. by a certain brahmin scholar named Lallu Ji Lal out of Urdu by eliminating from it the Persian and Arabic words and introducing into it a large number of Sanskrit words. Before the time of Lallu Ji Lal many dialects of Hindi had been spoken in North India, but all of them being rough and uncultivated. Urdu alone was taken up as the refined speech and used among the polite and civilized communities. The first work in High Hindi was "Prem Sagar" which is a version of the tenth chapter of the Bhagavata Purana and it was begun by Lallu Ji Lal in 1804 and completed in 1810. From this it may be obvious that High Hindi had no literature before 1804 and that it was a mere spoken dialect among a people who were illiterate and unrefined.

And in the term Eastern Hindi are included the three dialects Avadhi, Bagheli, and Chhattisgarhi, of which the chief literary dialect is Avadhi spoken in Ayodhya or Oudh. A large collection of poems ascribed to Kabiradas are written in the Avadhi dialect. Kabir is said to have lived between 1440 A.D. and 1518 A.D. and to have been the pioneer of Hindi literature. And the Ramayana Tulsidas who died in 1624 A.D. is also written in this dialect. It must be noted that while the High Hindi created by Lallu Ji Lal is not used for poetical compositions but is used only for prose writings, the Avadhi or Braj Bhasha dialect is used much for poetry.

And lastly under the fourth subdivision of Hindi called Bihari are brought the three dialects named Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi and of these 'Maithili' is the chief literary dialect, and practically all the works which have come down to us are in this dialect. It is spoken in this region which formed the old kingdom of Mithila, that is, in Behar north

of the Ganges" And literary works came to be written in this dialect from the time of Vidyasathi Thakur who wrote two plays in it, in the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. Whether it is this Maithili dialect or the above mentioned Avadhi or High Hindi that is brought forward by our political reformers to be made the common language in Southern India, it is not quite clear.

From what has been shown above of the fourteen midland dialects which on account of the remotest affinity one bears to the other are commonly called 'Hindi', whilst in fact each and every one of them, being spoken only by a limited number of people, is confined to a particular area and is not understood by another people speaking another in another part of Northern India, it must be obvious that one, who acquires a knowledge one of dialect cannot, through that, hold intercourse with others who speak other widely differing dialects in other parts of Northern India.

While this is the case with the multitudinous groups of people in North India who severally speak not only fourteen dialects of Hindi but also sixty-four other languages connected and disconnected with each other, not caring to make any one of them the common speech of all, why should the people of the north alone who live thousands of miles away from the northerners holding no any very intimate intercourse with them except the slender one held by a few among them for purposes of commerce and political movements, be coerced to learn either Avadhi or Maithili spoken only by a limited number of people in the north? Will the knowledge of either of these or any other of the so called Hindi, enable a Dravidian to establish commercial, social or political connections between himself and the northern people? I doubt very much whether the advocates of Hindi paid their serious attention to these widely differing linguistic matters in North India. If any Indian people stand in greater need of a common language than others, it is the people of the north who are torn into numerous distinct groups and communities, owing to the great diversity of their speech and not these in the Dravidian tongue, say four or five, which are closely related to each other and are that account, mostly understood by all of them. Instead of endeavouring to bring unity among those who stand in great need of it, why should the reformers be so anxious as to strain after it with so much zeal in the south? In fact the cause lies deeper; and we shall proceed to inquire a little into it in the interest of truth.

Generally speaking, the people of the north are not so civilised as the people of the south, especially as the people of the Tamil country, nor is the illiteracy of the masses so great in the south as it is in the north. This fact has been pointed out by Mr. E.A. Gait in his learned article on 'The Population of India, in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. I. He says: "There are more persons able to read and write among those who speak Dravidian and Mongolian languages than among those whose vernaculars belong to the Aryan family" (p. 484).

A comparative study of the origin and growth of languages and of their literatures, as well

as of the duration of their existence, ought to disclose the varying degrees of civilisation which the people who belonged to them had attained. For languages and their literatures are indelibly stamped with the nature and character of the people who created them. Now, of all the languages that existed and still exist, only four have received cultivation and were enriched with literature. For instance, the Egyptian, or the Sumerian, the Babylonian or Chaldean, the Assyrian, the Persian, the Aryan, the Chinese, the Mexican and the Peruvian languages had been the early cultivated ones, but unfortunately they all died out long long ago. Even the Hebrew, the Greek and the Latin tongues which possess rich and valuable literatures had ceased to exist many centuries ago. Here in India although Sanskrit had never been a spoken language, its original speech the Aryan and its Prakrit forms including Pali, Magadhi and Sauraseni had all become extinct long before the tenth century of the Christian era.

But the very ancient language that still exists in its full vitality with its own rich and varied literature produced from 3500 B.C. down to this day, is Tamil. And the people who speak pure Tamil are at present more than twenty-one millions (Vide Caldwell's Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages 3rd ed: p.7) and their home is Southern India. Outside the limits of India they are soon settled in large numbers in Ceylon, Burma, Malay States, South and East Africa, Mauritius, Sey Chelles, and elsewhere. From the very earliest times the Tamils have been enterprising traders carrying on by land and sea commercial business to the extreme corners of this earth and spreading the elements of civilisation wherever they had their business transactions. The trading people were called in Tamil 'Vanikar,' and this term was corrupted into Panis' in the Rig Vedic language, and into Panis' in the ancient western tongues. That they had been already in possession of the whole of Northern India as the Punjab to Bengal at the time when the Aryan nomads entered India through the north western routes, is admitted by unbiased historians of recent times. For instance, Prof. Rapson says: "At the same time, there can be little doubt that Dravidian languages were actually flourishing in the western regions of Northern India at the period when languages of the Indo-European type were introduced by the Aryan invasions from the north-west. Dravidian characteristics have been traced alive in Vedic and Classical Sanskrit; in the Prakrits or early popular dialects, and in the modern vernaculars derived from them. The linguistic strata would thus appear to be arranged in the order—Austro, Dravidian, Indo-European. There is good ground, then, for supposing that, before the coming of the Indo-Aryans, speakers of the Dravidian languages predominated both in Northern and in Southern India. * * * No theory of their origin can be maintained which does not account for the existence of Brahui, the large island of Dravidian speech in the mountainous regions of distant Baluchistan which lie near the western routes into India." (To be continued).

*See his article on 'Ancient India' in 'The Cambridge History of India,' p. 42.