

### 3. Before and After Independence

The language question in the decades leading up to Independence was dominated by the issues of the broader nationalist debate, in which the confrontation between the Indians and the British was accompanied by communal rivalries between Hindu and Muslim. Although all nationalist parties were agreed on the desirability of replacing English after Independence, much energy was consequently devoted during the 1930s and 1940s to arguing the respective merits of Hindi, Urdu, and the compromise Hindustani as its natural successor.

In the event, there were to be no absolute winners on either side of the new frontiers established by the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. English, though formally demoted in status, has continued to be the natural language of the elite in both countries. Hindi, although greatly encouraged by its post-independence promotion as the national language of India and cementing its hold in the states of the North, has yet to achieve the total supremacy envisaged for it by its most committed proponents. Urdu, while gaining new status in Pakistan, found its position *vis-à-vis* Hindi much weakened in India. And while Hindustani has received no official patronage, it actually continues to command the greatest popularity of all, as the *de facto* language of the mass media. The fact that the influence of the language of a Bombay blockbuster movie can easily outweigh and undo that exerted by the innumerable agencies set up to promote the higher registers of Hindi in India or Urdu in Pakistan needs to be borne in mind when reading the following account of linguistic politics over the past decades; also to be remembered is the ironic reality that the question of script, while necessarily central to the question of language in the Hindi-Urdu context, does not actually touch the illiterate majority of the speakers of the two languages.

#### 31. *The Urdu-Hindi-Hindustani Debate*

By the time that the All-India National Congress was finally transformed into a genuine mass movement under Gandhi's leadership after the First World War, the Hindi cause was sufficiently developed and the language had achieved sufficient official recognition in the populous provinces of U.P. and Bihar to make it an increasingly serious rival to Urdu. For a while, the Congress commanded wide support across the communal divide, aided in part by the fact that the nationalist leadership was itself often more at home in English than in any Indian language: Nehru and Jinnah are the outstanding examples of such Anglicized nationalists. For such men, the adoption of Hindustani in 1925 as the language of Congress, however politically desirable, must have felt as unfamiliar as the donning of the homespun cotton cloth which Gandhi introduced as the Congress uniform. Nor must it be forgotten that, even after Jinnah's assumption of the leadership of the Muslim League in 1935 and his increasingly successful promotion of it as the major party of the Muslims, there were always Muslims in the Congress leadership, many of whom, such as Abul Kalam Azad (14), were rewarded with senior positions after 1947.

Nevertheless, the two extremes of the political spectrum came to be dominated more and more by the Hindu demand for Hindi as the national language, matched by the Muslim demand for the separate retention of Urdu, each community seeing in its language the quintessence of its cultural identity — not to speak of a continuing practical usefulness in the case of Urdu. At this stage, it is important to remember, the possibility of Partition had not arisen, and it was the choice of an indigenous all-India language to replace English that was at issue.

Gandhi, himself a native-speaker of Gujarati educated in English, was insistent that the answer to the language problem lay in a compromise between Hindu and Muslim interests. His advocacy of a middle-of-the-road Hindustani seems at first glance to have been eminently reasonable, as it exploited the already widely current lingua franca without offering offence to either side. It certainly appealed to such influential Gandhians as the author Premchand (d. 1936), the Hindu Kayasth who was the only writer to have achieved an equally great reputation in both languages — first in Urdu and then in Hindi (15). But in fact Gandhi's Hindustani was culturally neither fish nor fowl but a compromise whose political usefulness depended on its convenience as a rallying-cry in the fight against the imperialism of the British and their language: it offered no offence but at the same time invited no committed enthusiasm from any substantial section of the population. Most important of all, the question of script was entirely begged by the Hindustani camp: Gandhi's bland assumption that ultimate acceptance of Nagari would present no real problem to the Muslim minority seems in retrospect to have been hopelessly naive.

By the 1940s, as the political divide between Hindus and Muslims became even deeper, Gandhi's Hindustani was already coming to be seen as a non-starter. Hindi-promoting organizations which had previously felt constrained to give the compromise language some support under Gandhi's lead now abandoned even this lip-service (16). And even the Communists, whose expressly non-communal concern with the Indian masses provided the Marxist inspiration behind the Progressive movement that then dominated both Hindi and Urdu literature, were able to suggest only that Hindi and Urdu should be given equal recognition (18).

In retrospect, much of the Urdu-Hindi-Hindustani debate may seem largely academic. But, although overtaken in the real world by the traumatic events and consequences of the Partition of 1947, the arguments then advanced can still prove illuminating in considering the tangled relationship of the twins. Perhaps they might have lived as Siamese twins after all: but the surgery effected by the abrupt departure of the British was to ensure that they would develop quite separately.

### 32. *Hindi in India*

Doubts about the appropriateness of introducing Sanskritized Hindi as the national language continued to be voiced after Independence, notably by Nehru, the Anglicized scion of a distinguished family of Kashmiri Pandits — a group who share with the Kayasths a cross-communal combination of Hindu religion with Persian culture. The draft Constitution of 1948 left the issue unresolved, and the debate rumbled on inside and outside Parliament

for another year, with the old question of script and in particular the choice between Nagari and Arabic numerals proving to be sticking-points. The Constitution finally provided that Hindi in the Nagari script (but favouring Arabic numerals) was to be the official language of the Union, but also that English would continue to be used for official purposes for fifteen years, Hindi being used in parallel in certain circumstances. As a precaution, the possibility of English being used beyond the fifteen-year period was also allowed for.

Thus for the first time in its history, Hindi had been promoted to the status of national language: but both intrinsic linguistic factors and the wider political issues inevitable in such a linguistically diverse federal state as the Republic of India have inhibited a full assumption of that role. Intrinsically, although ever more careful guidelines for the correct usage of Hindi have been prescribed (17), the translation into Hindi of English-language statutes and official papers demanded the coining of tens of thousands of neologisms in the areas of technical and administrative vocabulary: but although a copious supply of words, largely drawn from the inexhaustible resources of the Sanskrit lexicon, have been readily provided by official bodies, it has proved less easy to induce their effective currency.

Modern Sanskritized Hindi, as promulgated by Central government, thus continues to reflect the artificiality which imbued its idealistic creation in the nineteenth century. Although there can be no doubt that it has — at least in its less rebarbatively Sanskritized forms — gradually achieved a much wider level of acceptance in the four decades since Independence, it has yet finally to overcome its traditional rivals, whether English or Urdu: and the very strength of its official promotion has encouraged a backlash effect from speakers of other Indian languages (particularly in the South, where opposition to the imposition of Hindi has been at its most virulent), who feel their interests to be threatened. It can be of little surprise that decades of official propagation of Hindi have seen only partial success, for real changes in language use cannot be achieved through the training of stenographers or the passing of recommendations as to office procedure. The real power for bringing about changes in language use lies with the mass media, especially the cinema, whose colossal influence either on the big screen or nowadays through video encourages the continued use of a natural and honest mixture of linguistic registers, thereby helping to preserve the centuries-old status quo of an eclectic Hindustani. The 'Hindi' film owes just as much to Urdu as it does to Hindi in its dialogue and songs, and many of its greatest stars come from backgrounds which reflect this mixture (21).

Moreover, at the national level, Hindi continues to have to assume a somewhat subordinate role in relation to English. The dominance of English in the public sector, enshrined in the Official Languages Act of 1963, derives from its triple status as the major contemporary language of world communication, its continuing attractiveness to the Indian elite (whose education at the Doon School and similar establishments involves only fairly elementary competence in Hindi) and its convenience as a language shared, however thinly, by all parts of the country while

belonging to no part of it in particular. Six northern states (U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh) and the Union Territory of Delhi have Hindi as their official language: and the obvious advantages to be derived from this head start in the competition for government jobs if Hindi were to be made the exclusive central language of India have always been apparent to the often more prosperous citizens of the peripheral states. English therefore continues to be a symbol of their security as equal citizens. India is at present governed by the so-called 'three-language formula', which recommends teaching at secondary level in (a) Hindi, (b) a regional language (preferably a Dravidian one if the regional language is itself Hindi), and (c) English. But this largely remains an abstract ideal, with most states having adapted the formula to their own ends.

Nevertheless, at the crucial state level which controls the education system and consequently the basic language of literacy (even if this remains well below 50%), Hindi has secured a powerful success in its own bloc, and the production of ever-greater numbers of Hindi-educated secondary school graduates is matched by the success with which modern Hindi is seen to be the natural heir of such intrinsically diverse forms of NIA as Braj, Avadhi and Rajasthani, whose once proud status as major literary languages in their own right has now been reduced to that of 'dialects' of Hindi.

The often poisonous heritage of the intimate association between communal politics and language in India has, however, ensured the rival survival of languages often far more closely related to modern Hindi than such NIA variants as those just mentioned. In their truncated Panjab, the Sikhs have secured the establishment of Panjabi as a language quite separate from Hindi. And while the depletion of Muslim influence entailed by the migrations which followed from Partition has destroyed the former power-base of Urdu-speakers in the cities and towns of U.P. and Bihar, the recognition officially accorded to Urdu as an official language of India by the Constitution continues to assure its role as a focus of loyalty for the country's largest religious minority.

### 33. *Urdu in India and Pakistan*

The ferocious communal violence of 1947, which led to such tragic losses of life and homes for all the major religious communities of what was formerly northern India, resulted in the effective destruction of the Urdu-speaking Muslim middle-class of U.P. and Bihar as a major political force. Many chose or were forced to emigrate either to West or to East Pakistan, and those who remained have been compelled to come to terms with their destiny as citizens of Indian states in which the long-fought struggle between Hindi and Urdu has resulted in the former's conclusive triumph. Of course, both in these states and in other outliers of the formerly Muslim-dominated urban realm, notably the city of Hyderabad and its environs in the former domain of the Nizams, now the capital of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh, Muslim institutions continue to thrive and Urdu continues to be cultivated. But the security which derived from past imperial privileges is irrevocably lost, and even the Urdu of the

younger generation has more than a touch of the Sanskritic influence of their Hindi schooling in terms of natural choice of vocabulary. Somewhat bizarrely, Urdu survives as a state language only in Kashmir. The still-contested legitimacy of Kashmir's accession to the Indian Union, which has so bedevilled subsequent relations between India and Pakistan, has served to preserve Urdu in India as the official language of the only state with a Muslim majority, even if most of them speak Kashmiri, an IA language about as remote from the norms of Hindi-Urdu as it would be possible to conceive.

In Pakistan, by contrast, the cause of Urdu — further fuelled by the emigration of so many Urdu-speakers to the new Islamic homeland — found the most enthusiastic initial welcome. But this keenness to make Urdu the national language of the new country in the same way as Hindus in India were attempting to replace English with Hindi soon foundered on the linguistic realities so conveniently removed from the hurriedly drafted terms of the Radcliffe Commission, which was appointed to draw the Partition line exclusively on the basis of communal majorities, district by district. Quite as proud of their premier Bengali culture as their Hindu cousins across the border in West Bengal, the inhabitants of East Pakistan soon made it clear that their accession to a South Asian Islamic state by no means implied their abdication of their Bengali heritage in favour of Urdu.

The authoritarian regime of Ayub Khan (1958–69) attempted to achieve a balance of interests between the divided wings of Pakistan by amalgamating the linguistically diverse provinces of the West into the so-called 'One Unit' where Urdu was given supremacy on an equal basis with Bengali as the natural language of the monolingual East wing, with the customary *de facto* preservation of the status of English (albeit on a narrower basis than in India). This uneasy compromise was destroyed by the revolt in the East which led to the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, and to the secession of Bangladesh as an independent state.

Within the surviving western wing of Pakistan, Urdu has continued to be officially fostered, although the level of encouragement given to it has been determined by the different calculations made by the various conformations of the regimes which have governed the country. At the regional level, the numerical predominance of the Panjab, whose inhabitants mostly speak some variety of Panjabi but are now some of the most enthusiastic adherents of Urdu as a cultural language, is balanced by the latent hostility to Urdu felt by the inhabitants of the smaller provinces, notably Sind whose largest city, Karachi, became home to the largest concentration of Urdu-speakers in South Asia as a consequence of Partition (22). The ideology which brought Pakistan into being as an Islamic state has thus yet to be supplemented by a shared cultural understanding capable of doing justice to its intrinsic linguistic diversity, in spite of the efforts of its anti-Indian philologists (24).