

Words as Deeds: Gandhi and Language

A HALF CENTURY after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination at the hands of a member of an ideological movement dedicated to an anti-Muslim construction of the Indian nation, the political wing of that movement finally achieved sufficient electoral success to become the leading coalition partner of an Indian government and to bring South Asia to the threshold of nuclear holocaust. This may be an appropriate time to reflect, once again, on the figure of Gandhi, what he said and did as well as what people have made of him, as a way of understanding some of the central issues of modern South Asian history.

In recent years the relationship between what Gandhi said and what others understood him to say has been examined with considerable subtlety and imagination. Shahid Amin, first in his now classic *Subaltern Studies* article, then in his fine book on Chauri Chaura, finally gave substance to all the talk of Gandhi as a mobilizer of widespread popular resistance to British rule by showing how Gandhi's message of democratic empowerment was understood in ways that swept aside a good many of its finer nuances, such as non-violence. That Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns stimulated violence is nothing new: it was continually pointed out at the time, not only by British authorities and conservative Indians, but even more insistently by Gandhi himself. What Amin documents, however, is the perspective of people who found in Gandhi a liberation from established authority. In one vivid scene, Amin describes crowds of people in the middle of the night at the Kumshi railway station, eight miles from Chauri Chaura, demanding that Gandhi present himself, though he was fast asleep. What happened when they finally got him up was what Amin

calls a “slanging match” with a very angry Mahatma.¹

The significance of such an event is not merely a matter of miscommunication, however; it is, in fact, the breakdown of established lines of dominance and maybe the beginning of a new self-conscious social collectivity. Amin doesn’t tell us much about the “slanging match,” but what he does tell us is enough to suggest that Gandhi and his unruly devotees, however much they differed, were able to speak something like the same language. And the crowd was not wholly wrong in perceiving in Gandhi the rejection of the established authority of the British regime and an affirmation of what they were: the rural, as we now say, “subaltern” the people of India.

Gandhi, however, had his own notions of authority; it was his task to educate, discipline and control what he freely called the “mob.” That others were able to appropriate Gandhi’s powerfully mobilizing presence for a far less radical project, as Partha Chatterjee argues, was also, for better and for worse, part of the making of the Indian nation-state.

“My language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations.”² Chatterjee uses this quotation as the epigraph to his chapter on Gandhi in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. What I want to consider here, in a very preliminary way, are questions about Gandhi’s language or languages as well as what Gandhi said about language. It is remarkable that questions of language—speaking, listening, reading and writing—have hardly ever been taken up in any detail in all the vast literature on Gandhi. For such questions, the problem of what language to use on what occasion, who should be authorized to speak, who was in a position to hear, were explicitly matters of long-standing concern in Gandhi’s life and thought and have had, I would argue, a direct relevance to an evaluation of the significance of Gandhi’s role in overturning British rule and in creating modern India.

Hind Swaraj, probably the central text in Gandhian thought, was written, it has been said—I am not qualified to judge—in a somewhat

¹Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 167.

²Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed, 1986), p. 85.

nonstandard Gujarati in 1908,³ when Gandhi was still an expatriate. It is a comprehensive rejection, as Chatterjee says, not only of industrial society but of civil society altogether, including newspapers, parliaments and the whole apparatus, as it existed then, of modern communications. The vision of society, particularly Indian society, which Gandhi presented in that work and which he held to throughout his life was one of strong local communities, a subsistence economy, and a weak state.

Yet as early as *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi sets out a notion of a national linguistic order consisting of “provincial languages” and “a universal language for India[, ...] Hindi, with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagari characters.”⁴ In later years, Gandhi spoke frequently of the need to enforce compulsory study of Hindi throughout India, to establish it as the *rashtra bhasha*, the state language of a united India, leaving English to a limited role in international communications.⁵ As a major formulator of India’s national linguistic order, Gandhi seems to be making space for a surprisingly far-reaching measure of bureaucratic uniformity of the sort examined by the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu:

[O]nly when the making of the ‘nation’, an entirely abstract group based on law, creates new usages does it become necessary to forge a *standard* language, impersonal and anonymous like the official uses it has to serve.... The *normalized* language is capable of functioning outside the constraints and without the assistance of the situation, and is suitable for transmitting and decoding by any sender and receiver, who may know nothing of one another. Hence it concurs with the demands of bureaucratic predictability.⁶

There is, then, a striking disjunction between Gandhi’s decentralized, pre-industrial utopia and his insistence on a political structure of national and provincial languages, the basis, more or less, of what emerged after independence as India’s linguistic states and so-called three language for-

³Sitansu Yashachandra, “Towards Hind Svaraj: An Interpretation of the Rise of Prose in Nineteenth Century Gujarati Literature,” *Social Scientist*, 23:10–12 (Oct.–Dec. 1995), p. 40.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁵[Anand T. Hingorani, ed.] Gandhi, M.K. *Our Language Problem* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), pp. 53–55.

⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trs. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 48.

mula. But it couldn't have been otherwise because, as Bourdieu points out, any language that "makes itself heard by an entire group is an authorized language." The business of Gandhi, after all, was to mobilize a population to break with established authority, and that, in Bourdieu's terms, was a matter of constructing a new language by means of "the labour of enunciation," "the labour of dramatization."⁷ By performing such labors, Gandhi was harnessing far-flung points of discontent and rebelliousness in a vast land to constitute new categories and social spaces for the exercise of authority. This is, of course, Chatterjee's argument about the role Gandhi played, for all his personal ambivalence, in constituting the Indian nation-state.

The context in *Hind Swaraj* of Gandhi's brief mention of Hindi and what he called provincial languages—at a time, of course, when no Indian province had been defined on the basis of language—was his rejection of the purported benefits of English education and the entire role of the English language in British India. Imperfectly educated in English, Indians had to continually defer to British authorities, British ideas and British institutions. That Indians communicated with each other in English and took their quarrels to British courts in English were marks of the humiliation of colonial rule and sources of organized social enmity, as between Hindus and Muslims. But it was not the British who were to blame. "It is we, the English-knowing Indians, that have enslaved India."⁸ To break the bonds of British rule and, even more importantly, of British cultural and psychological domination, it was necessary to reject the English language as a language of the state, the schools and even private communication among Indians.

The central point of *Hind Swaraj* is that Indian self-rule must be more than what later came to be called a transfer of power from British to Indian officials or, as Gandhi put it, "English rule without the English." Yet Gandhi seems to suggest here, as elsewhere, that Hindi or a combination of Hindi, Urdu, and "provincial languages" would occupy the public, official and educational niches already established for English. Indians would no longer have to defer to British rulers or British ideas, but Gandhi leaves open the possibility of a political order that would merely translate the colonial systems from one language to another.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁸M.K. Gandhi, *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1965), p. 184.

I will try to sketch an outline, then, of Gandhi's role in the creation of the linguistic order of the modern Indian state by examining, first, Gandhi's own linguistic practice—his “enunciative labor,” if you please—then his ideas about the languages of India, and finally the organizations and policies that he advocated and participated in.

Gandhi's Language

It is significant that Gandhi's major writings—*Hind Swaraj*, his autobiography, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, his lectures on the Gita—are all in Gujarati. He tells us in his autobiography that he studied in the English medium from the Fourth standard and there was little or no formal space in the curriculum for Gujarati after that. He did, however, study Sanskrit in school, though he was briefly tempted to switch to Persian because it would have been so much easier. But the bulk of his education was in English, and one of the repeated refrains in his writings on language was how difficult, time consuming and ultimately frustrating it was to learn that language. He came to realize the futility of perfecting his command of English when, along with his French and his dancing lessons, he studied English elocution in London with a Mr. Bell. “Mr. Bell rang my bell,” he says in his autobiography. I suspect the phrase gains something in translation.

In any case, Gandhi's Gujarati was no doubt heavily influenced by his English. He used English texts as models, notably in his rendering of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*; often the English versions are pervaded with little knots of embedded quotations and idiomatic expressions—“a consummation devoutly to be wished,” “the unkindest cut of all,” or for that matter, “Mr. Bell rang my bell,”—that raise suspicions about what came first, the English or the Gujarati. But these are matters that others would have to study.

What is clear is that it was Gandhi's intention to break the spell of English on India. It was a theme he returned to again and again, even as he continued to use English for a significant portion of his own writings, publications, and speeches. When he returned to India from South Africa in 1915, his first address to a welcoming party was in Gujarati and it was primarily about why Gujaratis should not speak English to each other. His first major public address after the year of silence that Gokhale had mandated for him, at the inauguration of Banaras Hindu University (BHU), denounced the language that it was delivered in, English, and

called upon Indians to speak Indian languages.⁹

In the course of his life, Gandhi spent a great deal of time trying to learn the rudiments of several Indian languages, including the scripts. It is not clear to me whether he had any significant multilingual exposure in his childhood in Porbhandar and Rajkot, though there are scattered references to Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas* and Surdas, texts in literary Avadhi and Braj respectively. On his return from London as well as in an interval during his South African period, Gandhi spent a number of months in Bombay, and it is reasonable to suspect that he picked up some colloquial Hindustani there. But Gandhi's major exposure to Indian languages was in South Africa. It was there that he started his career as a writer of Gujarati, and, he later said, that he learned to speak what he variously referred to as Hindi or Hindustani, if only in a rudimentary form, with others who knew it no better than he did. On shipboard between South Africa and India, he joined an Englishman in hiring an Urdu teacher from steerage, though the Englishman made more progress than he did. He also worked on learning some Tamil from a British primer. Later at Tolstoy farm, he used this knowledge to teach Tamil and Urdu script to children in the school, though it should also be noted that he terminated the Tamil and Hindi editions of the *Indian Opinion*, when he became editor, continuing to publish it in Gujarati and English. In later years, Gandhi continued to study Hindi, Urdu and, to some extent, Tamil whenever he had a chance, mostly in jail.

On the basis of these experiences, Gandhi maintained that a North Indian could learn Hindi in just a few months. It would take a South Indian somewhat longer but, in any case, far less time than the many hard, laborious years it takes to learn English. In his speaking and correspondence, he attempted to use Gujarati with other Gujaratis—though probably not with Jinnah. Increasingly, he relied on Hindi-Hindustani whenever he could, and complained when circumstances required him to speak or write to Indians in English. When he spoke or wrote in Hindi, he often apologized for the imperfections it contained. He was well aware that there were standards of Urdu and Hindi, exemplified in speeches by such figures as Hasrat Mohani or Madan Mohan Malaviya, which were

⁹David Lelyveld, "The Fate of Hindustani: Colonial Knowledge and the Project of a National Language," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 189–91.

beyond him. He insisted that it was preferable to speak the language poorly than to speak English, but he still aspired to learning to speak the standard language. The criteria for defining the standard language was a matter he considered of central political importance.

Policies and Organizations

Soon after returning to India, Gandhi took up language issues with renewed attention. His BHU address in 1916 was preceded by one to the Nagarini Prachar Sabha, the organization which is the centerpiece of Christopher King's valuable book and which was at the forefront of promoting the use and official recognition of the *devanagari* rather than the Urdu script. In that brief speech, he apologized for his poor command of Hindi, learned in South Africa, but supported the cause of the organization. Two years later, in a presidential address to the other major Hindi organization, the Hindi Sahitya Samelan, he was better prepared and more careful, arguing, as he had in *Hind Swaraj*, that the term "Hindi" must be conceived to include Urdu and that the Urdu script also deserved recognition. In these speeches, Gandhi argues that the work of national leadership requires people to speak Hindi rather than English, because, as he said in the BHU speech, only then could they "speak to the heart of the people."

One way of interpreting what Gandhi said in 1916 is that he was not calling for a universal knowledge of Hindi, but rather a trickle down of knowledge and political persuasion from English to Indian languages, a policy not really all that different from Macaulay's overly quoted "Minute on Education." The English language creates too great a barrier between an educated leadership and the public. Hindi is more accessible than English, he claimed, because its grammar and vocabulary are closer to the other languages of north India, and its vocabulary, if not its grammar, is closer to the languages of the south. Using Hindi rather than English, then, was a matter of efficiency: it was easier to learn.

But Gandhi also argued that there was a cultural spirit in the languages of India that separated them from English: "Our languages [*sic*] is a reflection of ourselves, and if you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thought, then I say that the sooner we are wiped out of

existence, the better for us.”¹⁰ The argument for cultural self-sufficiency, for not deferring to Britain for authoritative speech, raises, however, the question of the sources of authority in an independent India.

In 1920, in the wake of the Rowlatt satyagraha and the onset of the Khilafat Movement, Gandhi became the unquestioned leader of the Indian National Congress. At the Nagpur Congress, the discussion was all about non-cooperation, but along with that, and without extensive discussion, came a new constitution for the organization that, among other things, reflected Gandhi’s ideas about language. Although three years earlier the Congress had recognized provincial organizations for Andhra and Sind (neither of them political entities in British India) based, more or less, on linguistic criteria, the idea of linguistic provinces had not inspired widespread discussion or significant support. Now, however, the local and provincial subdivisions of the Congress, which were to be much more active and ongoing under Gandhi’s leadership, were totally redefined along linguistic lines, virtually the same lines that were to become the basis for independent India many years later with the States Reorganization Act of 1956.¹¹

Gandhi continued to reiterate his opposition to the role of English as a language of authority in India, as “a permanent bar between the masses and the English-educated classes.”¹² But, of course, English continued to be used in the deliberations of the Congress, and Gandhi himself published an English periodical, *Harijan*, alongside his Gujarati one, *Navajivan*, and the short-lived Hindi-Urdu *Harijansevak*—a three language formula operation in itself. In his 1935 speech, once again to the Hindi Sahitya Samelan (HSS), he stated the matter clearly: the ultimate linguistic order of India should be “to use the language of the province in the province, to use Hindi for all-India purposes and to use English for international purposes.”¹³

The recognition of linguistic provinces, reiterated in the Nehru Report of 1927, was consistent with Gandhi’s own advocacy and devotion to Gujarati, even as he supported Hindi or Hindustani as the national

¹⁰M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958–), vol. 13, p. 211.

¹¹S.V. Desika Char, ed., *Readings in the Constitutional History of India, 1757–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 543–44.

¹²Hingorani, p. 42.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 35.

language, the language that would take the place of English for communication among Indians of different linguistic backgrounds. In that spirit, Gandhi campaigned most vigorously for Hindi in the south, establishing in 1927 the Hindi Prachar Sabha, a network of teachers and a body of instructional materials aimed at teaching Hindi to speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, all in the name of patriotism and national service. Ignoring anti-Sanskrit sentiment in Tamilnadu, Gandhi argued that the common Sanskrit vocabulary would serve to bind the languages of India together. At the same time, Gandhi advocated that all Indian languages be written in the same script, *devanagari*, in order to make them easier to learn.

The one exception to Gandhi's notion of the unity of Indian languages and the desirability of a common script was his consistent concession to the legitimacy of Urdu's separate script and, to some extent, its Persian and Arabic vocabulary. Gandhi's definition of Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu and their interrelatedness varied from time to time and from setting to setting, and is closely bound up with his abiding concern about the relationship of Muslims to the Indian nation. In *Hindi Swaraj*, he appears to think of Hindi as a single language that can be written in either *devanagari* or Persian script, the latter a concession to Muslim sensitivities. In 1917 Gandhi defined Hindi as "that language which Hindus and Muslims in the North speak and which is written either in the Devanagari or Urdu script."¹⁴ The difference between Hindi and Urdu, he then said, was merely a matter of the script. He dismissed the distinctions of lexicon—Hindi as "Sanskritized" and Urdu as "Persianized"—as trivial, of interest only to a few among "the educated classes," not to the "masses." Some years later, in 1937, Nehru, in an essay on language written with Gandhi's guidance elaborated this argument as follows:

Most of our present troubles are due to highly artificial literary languages cut off from the masses. [But if writers] think in terms of a mass audience ..., [t]his will result automatically in a simplification of language.... Language which is to make appeal to the masses must deal with the problems of those masses.¹⁵

¹⁴In *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵Nehru, cf. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 66.

There is no recognition here that there might exist significant linguistic variation aside from class or religion, or that “simplification” might also restrict the range of what people might want to say—when they are not speaking English.

As for script, Gandhi conceded in his 1917 speech that “for the present, Muslims will certainly use the Urdu script and Hindus will mostly write in Devanagari.”¹⁶ He recognizes here that among Hindus there was some significant identification with Urdu. He says, however, that once there is mutual trust and harmony among Hindus and Muslims, the matter of selecting an appropriate script will be decided on practical and scientific grounds.¹⁷ In fact, Gandhi believed that ultimately *devanagari* would become the universal Indian script, but he was careful to mute that idea in most of his public statements on the issue.

In his presidential address to the (HSS) in 1918, Gandhi stated that the term Hindi subsumed Urdu and that those who advocate the advance of the language should welcome the enrichment that Urdu might bring to it. By the mid-1930’s Gandhi had formulated an idea of Hindi vs. Hindustani as the difference between a literary standard language and a language for oral communication, thus alienating a significant constituency of Urdu supporters.¹⁸ Then he shifted to the term “Hindi-Hindustani” to indicate that he advocated a language that freely used words of Persian or Arabic or, for that matter, any other origin, and to disassociate himself from those in the HSS who sought to purge Hindi of any marked Urdu words while opening the language freely to unmodified Sanskrit ones. Finally, in 1942, Gandhi decided that the term Hindi had become irretrievably bound up with hostility to Urdu, so he shifted entirely to “Hindustani,” forming a new organization, the Hindustani Prachar Sabha (HPS), and resigning, after much private and public negotiation, from the HSS.¹⁹ The HPS devoted itself to preparing teaching materials in a “Basic Hindustani,” a concept first put forward by Nehru in his 1937 essay. It was to be modeled on something called “Basic English,” an 800 word package that C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards had devised as a universal language. The Quit India Campaign and subsequent imprisonment of the Congress leadership interrupted the project, but it was briefly revived

¹⁶Hingorani, p. 9.

¹⁷Hingorani, p. 9.

¹⁸Saiyid Mu‘īnu ‘r-Raḥmān, *Zikr-e ‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaḡ* (Lahore, 1975), pp. 64–65.

¹⁹Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 75.

in 1945 before being swept away by the partition.²⁰

The purpose of Gandhi's campaign for Hindustani was to stop what he claimed was an increasing differentiation between Hindi and Urdu, both of which he defined as "diseases" of the cities. As before, Gandhi claimed that there was a single unified "dehati," that is, rural, language, spoken by both Hindus and Muslims. As a national language, Hindustani should be learned in both scripts, though now he suggested that the language could also be learned in the scripts of other regions.²¹

Gandhi's position on script and Hindustani was entirely motivated by his concerns about Muslim-Hindu relations. Here he was torn between a desire to recognize the otherness of Muslims in a plural India and a desire to incorporate them into his vision of a monolithic India. In 1920, Gandhi had made a huge personal commitment to the Khilafat Movement entirely on the basis of its religious importance to Muslims. If it is important to our brothers and fellow countrymen, he argued, that in itself is sufficient reason to support the cause. His attitude toward Urdu script was similar: it was a matter of religious importance to Muslims and should be respected and nurtured for that reason. Hindus should learn Urdu in order to appreciate the culture of their Muslim neighbors. Eventually, however, the two streams, Hindi and Urdu, would flow together, restored to what Gandhi claimed was their prior unity: "The source of the river of language lies in the Himalayas of the people."²² "Ultimately, when our hearts have become one, ... we shall reach a common language with a common script, whilst we shall retain provincial languages for provincial use."²³

I have argued that Gandhi sought to establish a new linguistic order to eliminate the dominance of English. Robert King has shown how Nehru handled the language issues, holding back for a time and then conceding on the issue of provincial languages, keeping the door open for the continued use of English but basically resisting the more vociferous attempts to impose compulsory language regimes upon India. Now, on reflection, fifty years after independence, the grand disputes about lan-

²⁰Sayyid Hāshim Faridābādī, *Tārīkh-e Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū* (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū Pākistān, 1953), p. 162.

²¹Ravi Shankar Shukla, *Lingua Franca for India (Hind)* (Lucknow: Oudh Publishing House [1945]), pp. 60–75.

²²Hingorani, p. 14.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 52.

guage have largely died down and the result has been something fairly close to what both Gandhi and Nehru had in mind. The standardized regional languages of India are in place at the state levels. What of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani? If the guardians of a more Hindustani-ized *shudh* Hindi are somewhat more relaxed now, it is because Urdu has virtually no official function and little educational recognition in contemporary India. In old Delhi's Urdu bazaar, on the steps of the Jumma Masjid, in the *maktab* at the Fatehpuri *masjid*, even Islamic texts are increasingly being sold and studied in *devanagari*. And English? You don't have to read the *New Yorker* to know that it is still there and not going away, and that it is the mark of class privilege. At least it isn't British anymore. Nor is it, by the way, American. "It is not that I am making a fetish of language," Gandhi said in 1937. "It is not that I would refuse to have Swaraj if I could have it at the cost of our language, as indeed I should refuse to have it at the cost of Truth and Non-Violence."²⁴ He would not be pleased at the continued hegemony of English in significant sectors of Indian life, but then there is much in contemporary India that he would find far more appalling. □

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.