TRANSLATING LANGUAGE POLITICS AND CULTURE OF INDIA IN SELECT MAURITIAN WRITINGS

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Abstract: Language is a complex interconnection of identities, beliefs and social and cultural behaviour of individuals. India being a multicultural and multilingual country presents a potpourri of hundreds of languages and regional dialects that unfortunately do not possess great stature on the linguistic map of India. Indigenous languages faced more terrible fate during British colonization and colonial standardization. The same phenomenon was seen among the Indian migrants sent as indentured labourers to Mauritius. This paper investigates the role of language use in the postcolonial context of Mauritius in the modern context of standardization of language. It also focuses on the role of native language planning in the multilingual communities in Mauritius.

Keywords: Language, multiculturalism, postcolonial, identity, migration, indenture

Language is not merely a potpourri of words, but the bearer of culture and the driving force for the creation of realities, social relationships and ideologies in all world cultures. It is a social nucleus that is reflected through behaviour and utterance of an individual whereas informative in decoding the roots of the identity of an individual in the wide spectrum of social and linguistic communities. It is intricately associated with culture as a complex whole that is on flux as it requires constant negotiations. Language and culture are interconnected at various levels like that of expressions of gender, the development of cultural institutions, and in the transmission of knowledge, et cetera. All languages are equally good and bad but the linguistic map of India is rife with inequalities and the stratification shows that these inequalities are historically and socially constructed. Most of the linguistic history of India has been passed down through oral traditions in the form of proverbs, riddles, jokes, folksongs, folktales folk beliefs, et cetera.

Prof. G. N. Devy, in *The Being of Bhasha* (2008), one of his most seminal contributions to the Linguistic Survey of India, suggests that it is imperative to study the Indian literary and linguistic aesthetic through oral traditions in indigenous languages that do not have developed written literature. There are many languages spoken in India that form a body of documents having a rich history conveyed by the tongue. With mainstream languages being obstacles in the development of indigenous languages, many languages have not been included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. As it has been noted by Rita Kothari in her *Translating India* (2006), it is remarkable to note that more than four hundred odd languages are spoken in India whereas the census of India documents not more than 115. Further, the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution extends official recognition to only 18 out of these 115 that correspond to geographical boundaries and enjoy the distinct title of regional languages or dialects of particular linguistic states. However, the fact cannot be ignored that the oral, as well as written languages brushed aside as minor or as dialects, remain outside the power cluster prepared by the state and form another yet sometimes even bigger cluster. The post-Orientalist view and anti-colonial voice of Indian linguist, Professor A. K. Ramanujan opposed the homogenizing standardization of Indian languages and emphasized the immense linguistic, regional and diachronic diversity of the culture of the Indian subcontinent. Milton Singer's division of great and little traditions of language supports Ramanujan's idea that the cultural memories and truths of a community lay stronger in the *desi* or what he calls "kitchen-languages/mother-tongues" than *margi* or, the standardized "market languages/father-tongues" (qtd. in Dharwadker 91).

Bhojpuri is an Indo-European language belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch - a branch to which the overwhelming majority of the languages of Iran and Northern India belong. Indo-Iranian may further be divided into two main sub-branches: Iranian and Aryan (or Indo-Aryan, or Indian). The Nuristani languages form yet a third sub-branch, although the exact genetic affiliation of such languages continues to be subject to debate amongst researchers and scholars of linguistics. Whereas there is no disagreement in existing literature, concerning Bhojpuri as a language of the Aryan sub-branch of Indo-Iranian, further classification not only for Bhojpuri but for the Aryan sub-branch, in general, is highly controverted. It is not within the scope of the present discussion to enter into this debate, an excellent exposition of which has already been provided by C. Masica and R. Mesthrie. Yet another aspect of this debate regarding classification is integral to the present research, given that it directly impacts the relationship between Bhojpuri and Hindi. Simplifying the situation somewhat, it is nevertheless possible to suggest the

existence of a basic tripartite division amongst the main core of languages of the Aryan sub-branch excluding languages such as Romany and Sinhalese that represent migration away from the North Indian language continuum. This division coincides with the three attested, literary forms of Middle Aryan (or Middle Indic), known as Maharastri (Western Prakrit), Sauraseni (Central Prakrit) and Magadhi (Eastern Prakrit). From the Western Prakrit, modern Aryan languages such as Marathi developed; from Central Prakrit came to Hindi, Gujarati and the languages collectively referred to as Rajasthani; from the Eastern Prakrit descend the languages of north-eastern India, such as Oriya, Bengali, Assamese, and the 'Bihari languages, namely, Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri.

G.A. Grierson, in the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903), refers to the existence of a mediate group within Aryan, which effectively represents a transition between the languages descended from Sauraseni Prakrit and those descended from Magadhi Prakrit. This mediate group comprises languages often referred to as Eastern Hindi (Awadhi, Bagheli, Chhatisgarhi). The precise nature of the relationship between Bihari, Eastern Hindi and Western Hindi (to which Hindi belongs) is a matter that has been argued in detail for over a century. Grierson makes it clear that he believes Bihari belongs to the same group of languages as Oriya, Bengali and Assamese - and not to the mediate group, comprising Eastern Hindi. Other researchers such as R. L. Turner and G. Cardona have preferred to include Bihari in a group that includes both Western Hindi and Eastern Hindi (a so-called central group), with Oriya, Bengali and Assamese forming part of a distinct eastern group.

Grierson makes much of the fact that, in matters of conjugation, Bihari closely follows Bengali rather than Hindi; this would appear to provide the main justification for his views on classification. But, as Masica in *The Indo-Aryan Languages* (1991) lucidly expresses, there are difficulties inherent in the whole process of linguistic classification:

> Eastern Hindi, which was for Hoernle, Grierson, and also Chatterji not only a different language from Western Hindi but also a member of a different branch of Indo-Aryan, is put together with Western Hindi in more recent taxonomies (Turner, Katre, Nigam, Cardona, Zograph) - which at least has the merit of greater congruence with popular feelings: "Hindi" is "Hindi"... The criteria for these varied classifications are given in very few cases... In fairness to the scholars concerned, it must be acknowledged that spelling them out would involve an amount of philological detail inappropriate to the contexts in which such overall classifications are usually presented. The fact is that criteria do exist for all the above taxonomies and some others besides - and they conflict... A taxonomic decision thus appears to have to rest on giving priority to some criteria over others. (Masica 456)

At its most simple, an explanation as to whether Bhojpuri, being a Bihari language, should be regarded as more akin to Hindi or to Bengali, depends wholly on whether one chooses to accept Grierson's priority of criteria, that of others such as Turner, or favour an approach that - as Masica alludes to - takes heed of popular sentiment. Expressed bluntly, it could be argued that sifting and prioritizing various language criteria represents little else than a willingness to subscribe to a linguistic fiction and is not particularly meaningful in sociolinguistic locution. The term Bihari is no more a reality to speakers of Bhojpuri than is the preoccupation, amongst linguists, for allocating languages to notional groups.

Furthermore, determining the exact number of dialects within Bhojpuri must, of necessity, be seen within the context of the debate on genetic classification. S. Shukla in *Bhojpuri Grammar* (1981) refers to four dialects; Northern, Southern, Western and Nagpuria. This is broadly in agreement with Grierson, who nevertheless includes various sub-dialects. For Grierson, there is justification for the recognition of a Banarasi, sub-dialect within the Western standard Bhojpuri area, Sarwaria, Gorakhpuri and Madhesi as distinct language forms within the Northern standard area, and the Tharu Broken Dialect to the north of this area and on both sides of the Indo-Nepalese border. But, as with the issue of language grouping, it becomes necessary to introduce certain caveats into a discussion on dialects and standards.

In his commendably lucid publication, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century India* (1994), C. R. King refers to an incident in which a certain Dr Ballantyne, Principal of the English department of Benares College in 1847, asked his Indian students for the reasons why they displayed contempt for Hindi, their vernacular language. As he then points out:

> A dialogue ensued which made clear that the young men had neither a clear conception of what Ballantyne meant by Hindi nor any sense of loyalty to it. As the reply of their spokesman showed, the students had no awareness of Hindi in the sense of a standardized literary dialect: "We do not clearly understand what you Europeans mean by the term Hindi, for there are hundreds of dialects, all in our opinion equally entitled to the name, and there is here no standard as there is in Sanskrit. (King 90)

British colonization and standardization of English as the language of the bourgeois and literates increased the gap between what was conceived as the centre and what was marginalised as the peripheries. Experiences of colonialism have shaped the lives of More than seventy-five per cent of people in the present time across the globe. The political and economic dimensions of colonisation have always been some of the most favourite subjects to scrutiny. However, its tremendous influence on the perceptual frameworks of individuals is less explored. Language shift and language use are some of the most significant arenas that depict the huge shift created by colonization in the lives of the colonized communities/ countries. As stated earlier, the imperial system has installed a standardized metropolitan language system as a mandatory norm marginalizing all other variants as substandard, thus impure. Language is the order through which hegemony is established and the conceptions of truth, reality and order are perpetuated. However, the distinction between British English inherited from the empire and the English language of the post-colonial countries implies that there is a continuum between the linguistic practices in contemporary times. In practice, the study of the difference between standard and the vernacular/ creole languages talks about the struggle between a strong centre and a multitude of intersecting peripheries. Though the languages of these peripheries have been shaped by power struggles, they have been the genesis of tremendously exciting and innovative literature and cultures filled with the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional phraseology.

Linguists study language shift in a multicultural society in three different categories namely, monoglossic, diglossic and polyglossic. Monoglossic groups are those communities/ groups that use English as their native tongue. Diglossic language communities constitute a majority of the population speaking two or more languages but where English has been adopted as the language of trade and governance. The Polyglossic or poly-dialectical languages communities are slightly complex to study as here a multitude of dialects interweaves to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum as is the case with the Caribbean countries. The poly-dialectical linguistic culture of the Caribbean countries depicts that the various distinguishable dialects have a

major effect on the development of a native variety of languages. This theory of the evolution of local language focuses on the diversifications developed in the linguistic habits of language users than on the common grammatical standards and can be studied in the mechanism of the Creole spectrum.

In a paper entitled "Language Death or Language Suicide", N. Denison states that languages die, "not from loss or rules, but from loss of speakers" - an important statement of fact but not, of course, an explanation (21). If Denison's comment is accurate concerning language death, then it is also appropriate to a discussion of any language in the process of undergoing a shift with Bhojpuri in Mauritius one is dealing with a language that, if not immediately near death, is in steady decline. Mauritius, one of the most significant islands in the Indian Ocean, was uninhabited before the European settlers came in the seventeenth century and thus had no native language. The island bears one of the most significant histories of the creolization of language and culture as a result of colonization and settlement of foreign immigrants. This paper attempts to draw attention to the acceptance and standardization of Mauritian creole while emphasising the uniqueness of the process and contemporaneity of this phenomenon of language development. It also examines the postcolonial history of standardization of Mauritian creole after 1968, the year of Mauritian independence when, in the wake of the *laissez-faire* policy of the state regarding linguistic planning, the efforts to accept creole as a standard language was made only by native individuals and some non-government organizations. By investigating the role of language use in the postcolonial context of Mauritius in the modern context of standardization of language, this paper focuses on the role of native language planning in the multilingual communities in Mauritius.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o says in *Decolonising the Mind* (1981) that self-determination and self-regulation are connected to a real factor of self-definition of which the choice of language holds the primary position. Along the same line, the folk creativity of the subalterns in Mauritius enabled them to employ Bhojpuri- the language of their own choice and propagate a voice for their claims to formulate their identity. Abhimanyu Unnuth depicts this struggle of the Indian indentured labourers over the right to speak the vernacular language in his Hindi novel *Lal Pasina* (1977). Here the protagonist Kissan argues with Raymond Langlois, the colonial master:

> We want to be treated as human beings, replied Kissan in Bhojpuri.
> Speak French! I do not understand your barbaric language.
> We don't understand yours either, retorted Kissan. (qtd. in Kumari 82)

The master's contempt for the language of the Other shows the white man's burden to civilize those whom they thought were uncouth. Also, stripping the subaltern of their language and compelling them into accepting what the colonizers have designated as standard, allowed them to have better leverage on the subaltern. However, many poetic and literary creations like those by Brajendra 'Madhukar' Bhagat, the play titled *Pathhar ke Lor* (1997) by Sita Ramyead, an anthology of poetry titled *Mauritius ke Bhojpuri Kavita Sangrah* (2012) by G. Bissesur, a collection of short stories, plays and folktales by G. Bissesur and H. Soonder titled *Mauritius Bhojpuri Literature* (2017) among other hundreds of plays and songs of resistance equally assert the prevalence of Bhojpuri over other local and standardized languages that generally transcribes Bhojpuri way of culture and lifestyle.

Mauritian and foreign linguists like S. Bhuckroy, P. Stein and S. Oozeerally emphasised for decades that the Bhojpuri brought by relocated Indians was a dialect of Hindi. It was, however, Sarita Boodhoo, who in her article titled "Bhojpuri presence in Mauritius" reinstated that "Bhojpuri, in fact, is derived from Sanskrit and is older than Hindi" (31). She further draws attention to the fact that the Mauritian Bhojpuri in question is made up of several sister languages like Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, Braj, Bundelkhandi, Kannauji et cetera. It should also be noted that the Creolised Bhojpuri of Mauritius also borrows from the language of the labourers who came from the ports of Bombay and Madras. Jasbir Jain in *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice* (1998) states, Cultures travel, take root to get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia" (11). These language contacts resulted in the cross-fertilization of various languages from all these geographical regions and translate into a typically Mauritian language. This creolized Bhojpuri continued to grow stronger connections with stronger roots and at the same time expand by drawing on all the new components of the multilingual context. The intermingling of multiple languages spoken by the first generation of Indian indentured labourers belonging to different regions of the north and northeast India resulted in the mechanism of *koineisation*, or dialect mixing and levelling into a supra-regional linguistic form.

Mauritian Bhojpuri was the most commonly used language in the country in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Massive settlement of indentured labourers from India and the Indian subcontinent, especially from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Chota Nagpur regions had a deep impact on the demographic as well as the linguistic environment of the society. Bhojpuri, among other Indian languages, added to the already locally dominant languages like French and creolized English, thus significantly altering the linguistic scene of the island. It should be noted that initially, Mauritian Bhojpuri accommodated a large variety of dialects but gradually only two major registers remained in the language. The genteel version was called *mahinka, mehinka* or *mihinka,* which was the formal or refined version with more polished expressions. On the other hand, the colloquial version for the common use of everyday purposes was called *motia* or *boli* (Eisenlohr 75). The language contact, language mixing and language transfer created such a multilingual, multicultural and multidimensional context where cultural and linguistic confrontation seemed to be inevitable. W.T. Neerputh makes an important point that

> …the Bhojpuri spoken in Mauritius is by no means a standardized one. The older the speakers, particularly in the rural areas, the greater the number of original words and, of course, the newer the generation the larger the number of Creole words. One might even speak of a continuum as far as the lexis is concerned. On the other hand, it might also be possible to speak of acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal levels where the first one tends to keep the original vocabulary, drawing sometimes heavily on Hindi if needs be, and the basilectal relying more and more on Creole loan words. (Neerputh 2)

The Mauritian Bhojpuri is strikingly different from any of the other versions presented in terms of borrowed vocabulary. In the Western Bhojpuri text, there are a considerable number of words of Perso-Arabic origin: *asabab* for goods; *kharab* for bad or broken; *kul* for all; *mohataj* for needy; *sahar* for city, et cetera. In Standard Bhojpuri, by comparison, only a few words of Perso-Arabic origin are evident like *hissa* for share. Whilst in the Mauritian Bhojpuri language system one encounters the Perso-Arabic loan words like *daulat* for riches, and *garib* for poor, the borrowing is overwhelmingly from Creole and includes main verbs and an adjective as well as nouns. Most utterances in the Mauritian Bhojpuri demonstrate that both Creole nouns and verbs have been accommodated within the grammatical structure of Bhojpuri. This argues for a nativization of borrowed Creole verbs, not dissimilar to the process by which early modern English incorporated Anglo-Norman verbs into its grammatical structure.

R. Lass in *Old English: A Historical Linguistic Companion* (1994) provides an interesting insight into an aspect of this process, with the following comments regarding Old English:

> Loanwords can be identified in several ways. The easiest of course is when the loan is recent, and there is external evidence... In a textual tradition as old and incomplete as Old English, the problem can be more difficult, especially if the word itself is thoroughly 'nativized', i.e. shows no sign of its foreignness. But we often have... good phonological evidence: if for instance an OE form is very like a Latin one, but does not show the expected developments that it would if the two were independently inherited from PIE, we can identify it (a) as a loan, and (b) as one that came. (Lass 183-184)

Place names were one of the most significant areas where resistance against standardized language was exercised and linguistic power relations came into play. Though the colonized linguistic groups did not make any significant alteration in the official toponomy landscape, however, several phonetic distortions of the original place names can be identified in the Bhojpuri toponyms. The most significant of them all was the alternate name of Mauritius itself. Scholars like Unnuth and Indranth have noticed that the alternative names like *Maritch Deswa* or *Marich*, which probably have its proximity with Maurice, the French name for Mauritius, have their roots in the micro-episode of the creation of an island in the Indian Ocean mentioned in *Ramayana*. Other examples of linguistic modification of toponyms by the Bhojpuri-speaking community can be seen in the names like *Sahar* for the capital city Port Louis, *Nadiya Rempart* for Rivière du Rempart, *Mourya Pahar* for Pieter Both mountain, *Pari Talao* and *Ganga Talao* for Grand Bassin lake, et cetera. In addition to the toponyms, first names and nicknames also came up as significant information sources regarding linguistic power relations. For example, the modification of Raymond Langlois is Abhimanyu Unnuth's *Lal Pasina* as *Langarwa* (man with a limp), even if carved involuntarily, undermines the status and authority of the plantation master while endowing the subaltern with a voice that can withstand colonial power.

The creole of Mauritius, which has a socio-political history of European colonization, has been one of the most stigmatized languages of the world that has been shaped by the same racism that characterized slavery. Michael Degraff in his essay "Linguist's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Creole Exceptionalism" talks about the congruence between colonial creole languages and colonial race theories. He states,

> Slavery and race theories at the colonial inception of Creole studies would have made it impossible – or "unthinkable" – to consider Caribbean Creole languages on a genealogical or structural par with European languages. After all, Creoles were by and large perceived as languages created by slaves. In order to justify slavery, the Africans had to be equated to "lesser" human being belonging to a separate and inferior species, and it was inconceivable that these lesser humans could speak full-fledged human languages. (547)

Creole languages, it is true, generally lack the bulk of historiographic documentation devoted to European and other established literary languages. However, one cannot deny both the history and the conditions of slavery that saw the birth of Mauritian creole, as that of various creole languages, and the agency of its speakers in elaborating it over two centuries. The theory of creolization has been accepted as the explanation for the linguistic culture of the Caribbean nations. It suggests that the creolized variations of a language of any geographical region are not only the amalgamation of different dialects but a vivid overlapping of different ways of speaking between which the language users can move with utmost ease. This functional peculiarity gives the individual speakers to meet the paradoxical eligibility to be identified as peculiar stages of the language spectrum without being entirely discrete as language behaviours. The creole continuum thus reaffirms that language is nothing but human behaviour and works in the utilization mechanism rather than mere theoretical models. It is also an excellent example of a post-colonial linguistic understanding as here language is studied as a practice and reaffirms the marginal complexities of linguistic performativity.

The linguistic and cultural war is waged not only through political and administrative actions but through emotions, imagination and ideas also. Names of places and individuals, myths and narratives are some of the prominent spaces where the intangible capital is recorded and where it plays out. In addition, it is also required to analyse the social relevance of literary discourses focusing on the issues of oppression and marginalization that underpin the experiences of a linguistic community. This also investigates the power dynamics going on in different historical periods and has further shaped its sociolinguistic fabric. Indian indentured labourers and their descendants in Mauritius through memories of their original homeland and native language had created a new tongue and had reinvented traditions and customs, thereby already achieving an identity not prescribed by the colonizer. Indeed, the appearance of Mauritian literature in creole goes far beyond colonial control over languages, mainly in oral literature, in the wide range of folktales, songs, proverbs, and riddles, often constructed in binary opposition to the dominant, colonial culture thereby offering an alternative outlook and reception.

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