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Bharatendu Harish Chandra and Language Controversy in Colonial North India

Sumeet Tanwar

Ph. D Scholar,

Department of English,

University of Delhi.

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Abstract:

The article tends to map the historical context of the conflict between Hindi and Urdu by tracing its origin and the nature of its conflict, while focus will be laid on Bharatendu Harish Chandra, who often is believed to be the pioneer of modern Hindi literature in his present form. The positions taken and intervention made by Harish Chandra had foundational impact on this language controversy, that unfolded itself in the 19th century colonial India.

Keywords: Hindi, Urdu, Harish Chandra, North-western Province.

This Hindi–Urdu controversy was one of the most heated disputes of the 19th century to establish a single standard language in northern India. The roots of the controversy were seeding in 1837, when the British East India company replaced Persian with Urdu written in Arabic/Persian script as the official and court language in northern parts of the country. The Hindi literati began to assert its demand to recognize Hindi written in the Devnagari script as the official language in the decade of 1860's following the aftermath of the events of 1857. Babu Shiva Prasad of Benares was one of the early proponents of the Nagari script, wrote a Memorandum on court characters to

the British government in 1868 and accused the early Muslim rulers of India for forcing Indians to learn Persian and demanded the inclusion of Hindi/Nagari script as court language along with Urdu. Later in 1897, Madan Mohan Malaviya one of the important leaders of Indian Freedom struggle, published a collection of documents and statements titled Court character and primary education in Northwestern Provinces and Oudh in which, he made a compelling case for Hindi. (Cristopher King, 115) However, this demand did not go unchallenged, the advocates of Urdu on the other hand ridiculed Hindi/Nagari script of being slower in hand-writing skills against the faster Urdu script, moreover according to them, Hindi as a language lacked standardization and vocabulary. They also argued that the Urdu language originated in India, could also be spoken fluently by most of the people and disputed the assertion that official status of Urdu language and script is essential for the spread of education. (King, 117) In this context, speaking to Mr. Shakespeare, the governor of Banaras, after the language controversy heated up, Sir Syyed Ahmad Khan famously observed, "I am now convinced that the Hindus and Muslims could never become one nation as their religion and way of life was quite distinct from one and other." (Amrit Rai, 269)

In the last three decades of 19th century the controversy flared up several times in North-western provinces and Oudh. Outlining her analysis of the whole situation, Vasudha Dalmia in, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions Bharatendu Harish Chandra and Nineteenth Century Banaras* argues that, it was here the Banaras played an important role as the merchant spokesman of the newly forming middle class, which claimed to speak for the whole national and within that Harish Chandra occupied a special position as the leader of a renaissance movement in Hindi literature. (Dalmia, 146) However, in an article published on 15th October 1873 in Harishchandra Magazine titled "*Hindee Bhasha*" Harish Chandra, appreciates the change in government policy

for the court language in favor of Hindee.¹ The article hints towards the revolving Hindi-Urdu debate in the 19th century. Harish Chandra describes debate within the public sphere as,

The literary portion of the North-Western provinces of India may well be said to be divided into two factions in this civil war. The English press, also, should not be supposed to have been entirely a neutral spectator. Most of the Journals have taken one side or the other, as has appeared proper or expedient to them. The friends of Hindee pretend to be actuated by such a noble and patriotic feeling the cause of what they call an offspring of their original language itself, that any attempt, on the part of a Hindee at least, to question the propriety or soundness of their zeal, is sure to be regarded as little less than sacrilege and sin.” (Harish Chandra, 11)

The conviction that Hindi is the offspring of Sanskrit, the original language of Hindus and now should return to the original and that purity can only be achieved through the exclusion of Arabic and Persian words was at the heart of the new discourse on language. The discourse of returning to the original was so passionately undertaken that even questioning their propriety is nothing less than sin. The notion of Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan was taking its initial shape in the nineteenth century. Distancing himself from such leaders of this language debate, Bharatendu put forth the views of an ‘independent class,’ who regarded the claims of the contending parties (Hindi-Urdu) as groundless and maintain that the combatants wish to draw a distinction between the two registers of the same language, where there is no real difference and that the Hindi and Urdu languages are in fact identical. Hindi shorn of big and abstruse Sanskrit phraseology, is nothing more or less than

⁵ In 1872 colonial government release a circular encouraging the use of Nagari script in colonial offices.

the Urdu deprived of difficult Persian and Arabic words. Bhartendu agrees with them and writes that, “with this view I concur call it Hindee or Urdu as you may, is only simple vernacular, without pedantry, derived from the dead or foreign language, spoken by and intelligible, to the mass of the population of the north-western provinces”. (Harish Chandra, 11) He further states that, “there was no difference when the language of Urdu was first formed. The poetical or prose compositions of the earliest Delhi Authors one now regarded as works of Hindi written in Persian characters. Some of the later Urdu writers of Lucknow have scorned in their bombastic and high-flown languages at the writings of Meer Amman and his contemporaries, as uncouth and vulgar what are then the languages sought to substitute and the substituted?” (Harish Chandra, 11)

Rajendra Lal Mitra, the antiquarian researcher and friend of Harish Chandra defends Urdu against the ‘pedantic’ Maulvis, whom Mitra claimed, “(they) may string together endless series of adjectives and substantives and even adverbs, but they can never be put in concord without indenting on the service of hindvi verbs, Hindvi inflexions, Hindvi case-marks, Hindvi pronouns and Hindvi prepositions. Nothing could be more conclusive than this; the grammar of the Urdu is mistakably the same as that of the Hindvi, and it must follow, therefore, the Urdu is a Hindvi and an Aryan dialect”. (Amrit Rai, 7)

Raja Shiv Prasad Sitar-e-hind in *Urdu Sarf-o-nahv* published in 1875 attacked both, the Maulvi and the Pandit for committing the gross errors in determining the outlook of the language. According to Raja, the Maulvi, would use only pure Arabic and Persian words, barring the verbs and propositions, and the Pandit, on the other hand use only pure Sanskrit. He further comments that, “the comic part of the situation is that while the Maulvi and the Pandit correct one word or exile it from the language as foreign, the common people change the looks of hundred other foreign words and quietly take them into their homes.” (Rai, 270) However, the article titled *Common*

Hindustani, published in Harish Chandra Magazine, February 1874, attempts to tilt the debate in favor of Hindi by giving the status of common language of masses to Hindi, in the following words,

“If there is any language which deserves to be called common it is Hindi...The Urdu which has been adopted by the British government in northern India, is not the language of the people. Had the empire of the great Mogul lasted another century or two, it might have become so, but the baneful influence of the English officialism has made that practicable. The Mogul emperors though originally strangers and conquerors, soon merged into the people and became identified with their language and interests. The camp or Urdu language, the formation of which they encouraged was very different from modern Urdu as patronized by Englishmen and the hangers-on on English court. Their object was to make the Hindi the basis of a language for all India, with Persian and Arabic contributing to its structure, precisely in the same way as Greek and Latin have been taxed for the formation of English”. (Harish Chandra, 118)

However, to resolve this controversy the British government of India, prior to the recommendations of the Woods Dispatch, appointed a Commission under the chairmanship of W.W. Hunter. Hunter Commission which officially known as the Indian Education Commission, 1882. It was the first education commission in the history of modern India. The commission emphasized that, the primary education, essentially aimed for the masses and hence should be provided in the vernacular language. The task in front of the commission was first to identify the real vernacular language to make it the medium of instruction. Therefore, the commission invited testimonies from the Indian intelligentsia to testify in favor of Hindi or Urdu. In evidence to education commission Bharatendu, while declaring himself to be Hindi and Urdu poet, admits that

it is difficult to define the vernacular of the north-western province. (Hemant Sharma, 1056) Further in his testimony he, disassociate the ‘common vernacular’ from the claims of both Pandits and Maulvis and testified against the Hindi which was made to appear hard and different by Pandits on account of profuse use of Sanskrit words. His views on the purpose of language were as following: -

We want the pure simple vernacular understood by public and written in character familiar to majority. In books of science, of course, we are completed to use technicalities for which we cannot find equivalents in the vernacular; but in conversation, in books for family instructions, for children’ school I books, in court papers, in newspapers and public lecturers, we want that easy and colloquial language which can truly and correctly be called our mother tongue” (Sharma, 1568)

However contrary to his own claims to be a Hindi/Urdu poet, Bhartendu was the essentially a poet of Braj Bhasha rather than Hindi or Urdu. His role in the development of Hindi prose was obviously significant and he also has written poems in Khari Boli/Hindi, but most of his poetic compositions are in Braj bhasha. In another essay titled “*Hindi Bhasha*” he states that he tried to compose poem in Khariboli but failed. “For poetry Braj Bhasha is the best language considering that it was always the language of poetry in this part of the country” (Sharma, 1087) and it is the first branch of Hindi, while Khariboli is the second branch of Hindi, which is also called *Arya bhasha* or *Shudh Bhasha* is spoken under two different disguises all over the province. “When spoken with abundant use of Persian words and written in Persian character, is styled Urdu, and when free from such foreign mixture and written in Nagri character is termed Hindi.” (Sharma, 1088) Thus he concludes that there is no real difference between Urdu and Hindi and criticizes both Hindi and Urdu camps in following words.

If those who are fighting for Hindee wish to introduce and adopt for writing the current dialect of this part of the country, let them bear in mind, that there is no such dialect. There are, strictly speaking, as many languages as there are towns in the North-West provinces. The vernacular of one city perceptibly differs, and is distinguishable, from that of another. If they wish to bring in a language which is not really spoken but, in their opinion ought to be spoken, they will cause insurmountable difficulty and inconvenience by their recommendations let the partizans of each point out respectively the standard Hindee or the standard Urdoo". (Harish Chandra, 13)

However, Vasudha Dalmia has portrayed Harish Chandra, as one scion of a wealthy family, who used his immense popularity of a celebrated poet and someone speaking with the authority of Kasi, eventually paved the ground for Hindi to acquire the status of national language of north India in opposition to Urdu and hence nationalizing Hindi. In her words: -

"Firstly, Harish Chandra did not see Hindi as the creation of the British. Therefore, he discounted the contribution of the Munsis working for Fort Williams college and rejected the role of Laluji Lals immensely popular *Prem Sagar* in the creation of modern standards, Khariboli prose. Secondly though he himself had a definite bias towards Hindi as the linguistic and literary creation of the Hindus, he was looking for the consensus of sort, for a language which could understand widely and easily. In so far, he was not chauvinistic enough to deny all participation by Muslim writers in the process. Since Insa Allah Khan had maintained that he was writing in Hindvi and this was by the late nineteenth century equated with Hindi at large, Harish Chandra had no inhibitions in occupying him as Hindi writer but though Harish Chandra was seeking a pure, simple vernacular understood by the people, he had definite bias. The very

emotive power of the term ‘mother tongue’ betrayed her”. (148)

Bhartendu had a ‘Hindu’ bias though he was not chauvinistic, and was unable to recognize Hindi as the creation of the British, were the conclusions made by Vasudha Dalmiya. The history of Fort Williams College may have been unknown to Bharatendu, even then this ignorance does not determine his oblivious bias and emotiveness for a mother tongue. The importance of Bharatendu lies in the historical intervention he made in the language controversy of his times. Bharatendu certainly was arguing for a pure simple vernacular called mother tongue, but he was not artificially creating a language or modern standard for a language which could later claim the status of a nation language of Hindu’s alone. Rather, the purity of vernacular he was advocating for, was purity from the pedantry of both Pandits and Maulvis, purity from the interposition of unnecessary, Sanskrit and Persian words into the very mother tongue. According to him, “the constant war in which Maulvis and Pandits have engaged themselves has ruined the cause of true Hindi; our vernacular is neither the language of the Maulvis or that of the Pandits”. (Sharma, 1056) Bharatendu was in favor of a polyglossia kind of language in the Bakhtinian sense. Bharatendu also certainly would be aware of the bhakti poetic tradition of Kabir therefore he rejected the pedantry of both sorts, the Perso-Arabic as well as the Sanskrit. In that ongoing process of standardizing the Hindi, he was consistently maintaining a position, that the words of Persian and Arabic should not be rooted out.

Rajendra Lal Mitra, Raja Shiv Prasad along with Bharatendu, were resisting to the orthodoxy on the question of language. Colonial government or orientalist scholars were not creating or standardizing Hindi or Urdu through writing grammars in isolation but in fact they worked in close association with both Pandits and Maulvis. Dayanand Saraswati and Raja Ram Mohan Ray the great reformers of the 19th century, also resisted the orthodoxy consolidated by the colonial power

in association with the orthodox classes.

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