

# 6

## Linguistic Roots — Mother Tongues of Indian Children in South Africa

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### Abstract

*‘Diaspora’ refers to historic mass dispersions of people with common roots, including ‘transnational community’ (people with a shared identity going beyond their national boundaries). Indians belonging to different communities form a sizeable segment in South Africa. Linguistic diversity has always been a defining feature of South Africa as the transnational flow of people is accompanied by a corresponding flow of languages. In fact, it is popularly known as the ‘Rainbow Nation’. This paper tries to analyse the issue of increasing levels of multilingualism and multiculturalism as a consequence of ongoing globalisation. It looks at the major challenges that the diasporic community living in South Africa faces. Specifically, the paper tries to examine a change in the country’s linguistic tapestry with the arrival of Indian diaspora, especially, policies of school education and their impact on the mother tongues of Indians living there, particularly, children.*

### INTRODUCTION

South Africa is amongst those British colonies, where a large number of Indians went as migrant labourers much before India’s Independence in the year 1947. The Indian population in South Africa comprises a heterogeneous community.

The Dutch traders or settlers brought the first batch of Indians

to South Africa as slaves in the seventeenth century (Worden, 2016). Dutch vessels plying to and fro India brought Indians and sold them as slaves here to do domestic chores and other petty works for Dutch settlers. These slaves were mainly from Bengal, Odisha and Bihar in the pre-Independence period. Also, 271 people arrived here from places near the Coromandel Coast like

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Nagapatnam, Trancquebar, Pulicat and Masulipatnam. Around 378 people came to the country as slaves from places near the Malabar Coast like the erstwhile regions of Goa, Bombay (now, Mumbai) and Surat in Gujarat (Bradlow, 1978)

A major clump of Indian contractual or indentured workforce arrived in South Africa in 1860–1911. These migrants were in the age group of 18–30 years (Bhana and Bhoola, 1990). They tended to sugarcane and *sisal* plantations of British settlers in the country.

The next batch that arrived in South Africa post-1880 was popularly referred to as 'Passenger Indians' as these people paid their fares as passengers to board South Africa-bound steamships. They were largely from erstwhile Gujarat, and included traders and skilled professionals like carpenters, artisans, tailors, etc.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGES FOR INDIANS**

Ever since the arrival of Indians in South Africa, they were grouped under a broad homogenous category called 'Indian Identity'. In the era of globalisation, transnational communities often feel their identities to be under threat, especially, in a multicultural society. Therefore, they feel the need to preserve and conserve their cultural and linguistic identity.

The race laws of South Africa impacted all aspects of life of the migrant Indian population. Therefore, the Indian community

united against these brutal laws and formed various political organisations to voice their angst and concerns, the most distinctive being the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) set up by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894 and the Transvaal and Cape Indian Congresses in the early twentieth century. Later, the Group Areas Act was promulgated on 7 July 1950. This Act empowered the Governor General to declare certain geographical areas for exclusive occupation of specific racial groups. Thus, the Indian ghetto was the result of the Group Areas Act 1950. This strengthened the Indian community. Irrespective of caste, class, religion and region, Indians have been living together in areas earmarked by the government in South Africa (Singh, 2016). Hence, in their own earmarked regions, people belonging to different races and communities are allowed to build places of worship like temples and mosques. Vernacular schools were also set up to keep their literature, culture and ethnic identities alive.

### **SCHOOL EDUCATION**

Ever since their arrival in South Africa, Indian immigrants led a life of rejection and restriction. But the Cape Town Agreement of 1927 turned out to be a major turning point for the provision of better education facilities for students belonging to Indian communities. After the Cape Town Agreement, more primary schools were opened for Indian children.

The Cape Town Agreement stressed the importance of English as the medium of instruction in higher and professional studies. However, the South African Indian Congress met at Kimberley to discuss a proposal to incorporate relevant Indian languages in the education system for community living in South Africa. There was considerable disagreement among the members on the issue. Inclusion of Indian languages in the curriculum by the Congress at the Cape Town Agreement would have been significant but the responsibility of promotion of Indian languages rested with the Indian cultural organisations.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Indians continued speaking their vernacular languages. In the 1950s, learning English became a priority for many in order to attain economic advancement. But children, who learned English at primary schools, did not, generally, use the language to converse with family members at home or friends in their Indian neighbourhoods. It was from the early 1960s that children started speaking in English at home and in the neighbourhood.

Indian languages were not even offered as school subjects in South Africa in the early 1960s. It was during this period that children attending primary schools had only passive knowledge of their mother tongues, i.e., vernacular languages.

Indian languages were, finally, introduced in mainstream curriculum as optional language subjects in the year 1984 under the House of Delegates.

However, the minimum requirement of 20 students per language in each grade was 'unrealistic'. Some schools, with a majority in Indian students, offered classes in vernacular languages.

### **INFLUENCE OF THE DOMINANT WESTERN CULTURE**

Until the 1950s, some of the prominent vernacular Indian languages in South Africa were Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. Language was a strong medium for conserving and preserving the Indian cultures. However, the Apartheid period in South Africa discouraged vernacular languages and English became the primary language. Moreover, post-1990s, the curriculum in government schools of South Africa was influenced by the western culture, history, literature, etc. These had an adverse impact on the Indian cultures, customs and traditions. They also alienated Indians from their own cultures and traditions.

### **REVIVING INDIAN LANGUAGES**

Several Indian organisations like the Hindi Shiksha Sangh, Tamil Federation, Gujarati Parishad, Andhra Maha Sabha (Telugu) and Bazme Adab (Urdu) made it their mission to promote vernacular languages in the country and revive the Indian cultures, tradition, arts and literature. Classes were, usually, held on part-time basis in schools, temples or community halls and were complementary to the day curriculum of English schools.

Free vernacular classes for adults were organised by Indian regional associations. Vernacular schools in the vicinity of Indian community areas were conducted from 3 pm to 5 pm, where the pupils were taught about sentence structure. They were also imparted basic lessons in religion and culture.

Meanwhile, different groups of the Indian community also joined the movement and took a number of initiatives for preserving, promoting and redefining their Indian identity (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011).

### **Contributions of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh**

Most Hindi speaking immigrants came from the Northern belt of India from States like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, etc. Therefore, promotion of Hindi language in South Africa was chiefly the responsibility of North Indian community organisations. Thus, determined efforts and initiatives were taken by various organisations to promote Hindi language and preserve the culture and traditions of the area.

In 1912, the Hindu Maha Sabha was formed to promote Hindi language. In 1925, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha came into being to promote Indian art and culture, and also vernacular languages. In 1948, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha collaborated with the Sanatan Dharma Sabha of South Africa to facilitate the working of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh (HSS). A conference was organised, in which 35 Hindi

*Patshalas* participated. Since then, HSS is the umbrella organisation, coordinating the teaching of Hindi and guiding institutions engaged in the promotion of Hindi as a language — both written and oral. The organisation also works to promote the rich Indian culture and traditions, especially, North Indian music, dance, drama, arts and literature.

### **Contributions of the South African Tamil Federation**

There were three South Indian groups that arrived in Natal, South Africa.

- The first group comprised labourers, who came from economically weaker sections of society and could speak only Tamil. They were not literate.
- The second group included people willing to work in hotels, offices and homes of 'White' masters as servants and caretakers. They knew little English and had the knowledge of Tamil — spoken and written.
- The third group consisted of free passengers, who knew basic English and Tamil — spoken and written.

Deprived of education, the first two groups decided to educate their children with the help of learned persons in the community. These *vattiyars* (teachers) commanded respect. They were the ones, who sowed the seeds of preserving and nurturing Tamil language and culture in children living in South Africa.

The South African Tamil Federation founded a Tamil school, which played a significant role in promoting and preserving the Tamil language, culture and religion by conducting programmes as regards to teaching the language, and promotion of Tamil culture among children and youth, hailing from Tamil Nadu, living in South Africa.

### **Contributions of the Andhra Maha Sabha**

People from the Andhra region of India came to South Africa as 'indentured labourers'. Their language was Telugu. However, they were considered same as Tamilians, and were, commonly, addressed as 'Madrasis' because of their common port of embarkation, i.e., Madras (Prabhakaran, 1992).

They realised that Telugu literacy was essential to preserve their culture and tradition in this foreign land. This led to the formation of Telugu *Patshalas* in Natal. It was on 14 May 1931 that the Andhra Maha Sabha was founded in South Africa with the objective to preserve and promote Telugu language and Andhra culture. The organisation aimed to cater to the social, cultural, spiritual and educational needs of the Telugu-speaking population living in the country by promoting its vernacular literature, arts, music, dance, etc. It also aimed to establish libraries and resource centres for its members and general public.

### **Contributions of the Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra**

Gujaratis, mainly belonging to the merchant class, from different parts of the State like Kutch, Kathiawad and Surat, to name a few, arrived in South Africa in the nineteenth century as 'Passenger Indians'.

Kathiawadis, a sub-group of the Gujarati community, who were smaller in number but economically strong. The Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj was founded in the year 1943. It was merged with the Surat Hindu Association and Saptah Mandir in 1993 to form the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra (Hansen, 2005). This organisation, primarily, serves the religious, linguistic and cultural needs of Gujarati Hindu community living in South Africa.

### **CONCLUSION**

All these efforts indicate the strong bond that Indians living in South Africa have with their mother tongues. The diaspora — comprising a mixed population of illiterate labourers, semi-skilled workers with basic literacy skills, merchants and traders, who knew a little English apart from their respective mother tongues — realised that their identity was closely related to their languages, which needed to be preserved and nurtured, especially, in an alien land. Much before they were permitted to start their own schools, they made attempts to preserve their respective languages by singing songs and rhymes dug out of childhood

memories. They also taught alphabet to their children in their native languages and introduced them to the vernacular literature and arts, apart from speaking their mother tongues at home, in religious ceremonies and functions. Besides, they encouraged their children not to disassociate themselves from their respective mother tongues and culture.

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