

Survival of Hindi in the Caribbean, the Guyana Experience

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Bhai ovr Behano Namaste! Mera naam Varshnie Udho Singh hai. I am the Organizing Secretary of the Guyana Hindi Prachar Sabha (GHPS).

I bring you greetings from your Bhai ovr Behano in Guyana, who are devoted Hindi Premi.

It is a great honour for me to be in Mauritius and address this esteemed gathering of Hindi lovers and I am eternally grateful to the Government of India & Mauritius and the World Hindi Secretariat; Gulshanji and his dedicated team for creating this opportunity for us to connect as the foot soldiers of Hindi. I must mention having attended many conferences of Hindi, this has been my favorite, it is very well organized and what is so great is the amount of young people who are active, no easy feat I can tell you, this is again testimony to Gulshanji and his team.

This year marked 176 years since the first Indian immigrants arrived on the shores of Guyana. To clear up any confusion, Guyana is the gateway to South America and the Caribbean, located between my neighbours Suriname, Venezuela and above Brazil. That 2 out of the 9 conferences have been held in our region of South America and the Caribbean, we hope conveys the interest and enthusiasm our brothers and sisters have for this essential part of our heritage.

In Guyana our forefathers came to the Caribbean with barely 3 things, their religions, languages and cultures; Hindi, Sanatan Dharam and love for family. It was a very strong foundation that saw them through the hard days of slavery at the hands of their colonial masters. It was a foundation that through carelessness we neglected to build on securely with concrete and steel, using instead mere straws.

Indian immigration started in Guyana on 5 May 1838 with Indians coming from all parts of India. They came to Guyana as indentured labourers which was a fancy word for slaves. Some came initially on a 5 year bond with a contractual arrangement for a return passage to India. Some were misled and some even kidnapped from the land of their birth.

They travelled for many days by boat in abysmal conditions, many died and only the strongest survived. From different regions of India they were unified as "Jahajis" by their common uncertain fate. They were mostly uneducated, spoke different languages, but they all had a variable understanding of Hindi. They retained their religions, cultures, family values and conviction to improve their lot. These qualities have remained intact up to now.

The Hindi language continued to be the language of communication amongst the Indian for a long time to come. Many had the desire to return to their motherland and after the period of indentureship was over but the sugar planters made it difficult to do so.

Hindi language was taught in makeshift Mandirs and Logees during the early period of indentureship under the guidance of a knowledgeable person among the Indians. Later it shifted to bottom house schools (informal night schools under the common stilt type houses). My Ajee had such a school under her house and was a teacher.

It was not until 1876 when primary education was made compulsory that the Indians started to send their sons to school. Sadly the education of girls was never given priority by the parents or the authorities until the 1950's. The school curriculum of the period leading up to the 1950's included Hindi as a school subject and thus teachers were required to teach it. The Teacher's Certificate examination at that time had Hindi as an optional subject. Hindi was vibrant until the late 60's and 70's.

The present day situation is that Hindi education is left mainly to socio-cultural organizations like the G.H.P.S., to take the initiative and responsibility. Hindi is no longer taught in schools apart from 4-5 in the whole country.

In 1954, independent India, gave us the gift of Hindi and Cultural teachers through the ICCR, (Indian Council of cultural Relations). We were blessed to have teachers like, dynamic freedom fighter Shree Dr Kaka Sahib Kalilkar, Babu Mahatam Singh, then Shrimatee Amma Ratnamayee Devi Dixit, who transformed the cultural jungle in Guyana into a beautiful landscaped garden of Hindi and Culture.

The G.H.P.S. was established by Shree Mahatam Singh in 1954. Both he and his predecessor Amma, along with my Ajee, father and a host of vibrant youths spread Hindi through teaching. They went village to village from one end of Guyana to the other; training unpaid voluntary teachers and establishing Hindi classes.

Preparing students for overseas Hindi Examinations by Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha, Madras 17. Many students, including non-Indians, successfully wrote the Prathamik, Madhyama and Rashtrabhasha examinations. Many assisted the propagation of Hindi in those days from 1954 to the early 1970's.

Political turmoil aimed at destroying Indians and their culture forced a mass migration. Many of our Hindi loving teachers migrated and Hindi suffered. Those who remained in Guyana had to give priority to survival under a destructive dictatorship. Very few teachers and students remained so for over 2 generations, Hindi suffered further.

G.H.P.S. remained and continued their village to village activities throughout this turbulent period and continues to fulfill their mandate to this present day; which my generation is fortunate to enjoy.

My Pitaji Beni Singh is 83 years young! And along with a few other Senior Hindi Premi, I am the youngest, have made Hindi their life's work. Part of my life's work is to help my Pitaji and his team to realize their dreams with securing Hindi and building the G.H.P.S. HQ in Shantineketen style to teach Hindi and true culture before their eyes close.

Today the G.H.P.S. unpaid volunteers go to every village to train teachers and establish Hindi classes. We provide books, charts, past exam papers, syllabus, we offer 5 levels of examinations every August;

1. Bal Bodh 1
2. Bal Bodh 2
3. Prarambha
4. Pravesh
5. Shabdavali (for nursery school children)

Modern day society, culture and politicians have given Hindi a backseat in terms of priority. On one hand they say Hindi should be a world language, but are not investing in teaching the diaspora who are begging to be taught, in particular Guyana.

The answer to this Hi Tech world challenges are in the Ramayana. To be able to access the deeper meaning we need Hindi. Our forefathers knew this and used this knowledge successfully to produce outstanding human beings, by living what they read, every day of their lives. They passed down their knowledge to their children. We too wish to teach our children, to ensure the rich legacy of knowledge continues, but we don't know enough Hindi.

At birth we were given Hindi names, as young children, we were taught Hindi by our grandparents or parents. We did not see the relevance too much at the time but it made them happy. Once we were older and more experienced, we could appreciate the knowledge as there is much false interpretation of what our scriptures say.

In my family we used to read the Tulsicrit Ramayana from cover to cover in pure Hindi. We had an excellent grasp of the meaning and language. Learning Hindi actually helps you with English grammatically and does not cause academic suffering in any way. Romanized pro-

nunciation does not come close to the real McCoy, as we found out by trying to use it to help us when we forgot letters in the alphabet.

We soon found out that the language used in the Ramayana was different to that used in movies and that people did not use that beautiful poetical language in ordinary conversation.

One of our greatest regrets and disadvantages that I see now is that we did not practice speaking Hindi outside of Ramayana reading. This is a commonplace situation in Guyana and the Caribbean, where people know to read and write but can't speak the language to have an ordinary conversation

The Hindi lessons provided at the Mandir level were based on Hindi text books such as Baitaal Pachese, Prem Sagar, Nathuram's Pahli, Doosrie and Teeserie Pustak and Baal Shiksha. In addition excerpts from the Ramayana are used for normal and ethical lessons. These are expanded in Ramayana Kathas and at various yajnas.

The Present Situation vis-à-vis Hindi Education are:

1. At present in Guyana amongst the majority of the population there is the misconception that there is no economic value to learning Hindi unless you wish to become a Pandit. India is a global economy and Hindi has as much value as a second language as Spanish, French, German which are compulsory and surpasses those languages in terms of the spiritual and cultural benefit.
2. Many Hindi words are embedded in the local parlance
3. Pujas are conducted using Hindi and Sanskrit invocations
4. Parents continue to give their children Hindi names
5. There is a love by our nation and region for Hindi films, soaps, especially religious ones
6. Hindi songs are popular with our nation and region
7. Hindi is spoken only by a few persons in our nation and region

Our Knowledge of Hindi In Guyana:

We can read Hindi (a little), we can write Hindi (a little), we know a little about swar, we know a little Vyanjan, we know a little of Matra or barah khari (vowel signs), Adha Akshar (1/2 letters, 2-4 letter words, simple present tense (vartman kaal), the AA, AY, EE rule, TA, TAY, TEE rule, simple present tense e.g. Mai Hindi sikhtee hu, simple past tense e.g. Way

Hindi sikhtay tay, Simple future tense e.g. Hamaray baal bachay Hindi sikhengay, imperative (Vidhi) e.g. Tu ja – thou goest, Tum jaow – you go, Aap Jaeay – you please go.

We can recite prayers (Sandya, Havan) and sing from memory (Ramayan, Hanuman Chalisa, Bhajans) in Hindi and Sanskrit, but we have completely lost the art of speaking Hindi and understanding the real essence of our scriptures.

The Challenge is How to Propagate Hindi in a Non-Hindi Speaking Environment?

1. In February 2014, we kept a meeting of socio cultural organizations in Guyana, with the view to discussing the future of Hindi and passed 3 resolutions:

- 1) That Hindi be included on the national curriculum at all levels from Nursery to University
- 2) That the Government of Guyana take responsibility for the training of teachers
- 3) That the Government of Guyana ensures Hindi is offered as a CXC subject (CXC is the Caribbean equivalent of O'Levels)

We circulated a letter to society at large with a copy of the Resolutions and a questionnaire to see how they felt about Hindi and the Resolutions. Guyana is a land of 6 Races and all without exception gave a positive response.

This made us consider the fact that for Hindi to be protected for the generations to follow we needed to appeal not only to our Indian brethren but to our entire Nation. This is essential for the success of our mission.\

We consulted a linguistic and Communications expert, Dr Rovin Deodat, who generously donated his time to help us create a professional approach to achieving National Desire For Hindi; using modern methods, multi and social media he devised a 4 phased position paper and awareness activities into a time framed schedule.

We have found that children attend Hindi classes when they are young and as they mature their parents stop them because they need to concentrate on the 10-15 CXC subjects they seem compelled to have to write to be recognized for academic excellence. Hindi suffers.

Our Muslim brethren ensure their children exams or not, attend Masjid and learn Urdu and/or Arabic, they are encouraged on religious grounds and it appears to work as the children have knowledge and visible grasp of their languages.

In Guyana we need a holistic approach using all media, human and other resources available, of which there are not much. We are working to create new and young and exciting Hindi lessons to be broadcast on TV, radio etc 15 minute lessons covering from the alphabet to basic sentences, with 10 minute Bol Chaal, which will be reproduced on radio and printed in news papers etc Like my sister from New Zealand said we wish to let youths know Hindi is cool or fashionable !

Just like people tune into watch their favourite soaps, like Jodha and Akbar, Chotee Bahu etc the nation can tune into learning Hindi.

We also have a school and community workshop campaign under way to show people the ease with which Hindi can be learnt to speak and to make them aware of the importance of Hindi.

We will also launch quizzes, essay, poetry competitions with prizes to keep Hindi in the hearts and minds of the nation.

It may not sound like much at this stage, but broad based consultation and understanding of our youth and nation has led us to the feeling that this is the way forward for us.

Also in getting the nation's attention and whetting their appetite for Hindi, we will need to train teachers to be able to keep more classes, eventually in all 10 of our regions in Guyana

The law in Guyana provides that if there is a teacher who knows Hindi already teaching in any school, that school must provide and support in terms of the timetable to for the teacher to keep Hindi classes.

This is a bonus for us since all our volunteers work free in their spare time, to have to pay for a venue would kill Hindi classes right there. It would be good to be able to offer a modest financial payment to help teachers with things like transportation costs, copying materials, books etc

In training teachers and inspiring the nation to embrace Hindi, we feel our Government will acknowledge our efforts and lend their much needed support.

Recommendations: We are humbly requesting all the resources listed below by way of donation, template etc to help us on our mission

1. There is a need for flexible English speaking teachers, who know and can teach Hindi to come to Guyana etc for at least a 3-4 year period and teach us to read, write and particularly speak Hindi.

The G.H.P.S will do all the groundwork and make all the preparations for the teachers to function, accommodation, food, transportation, but we can't afford to pay you.

2. We need the latest and most effective and intensive scientific methods of teaching Hindi both spoken and written

3. There is a need to have a series of special graded text books for the Hindi language written for persons not necessarily familiar with the language, but want to learn it.

We found useful Samuchee Hindi Shiksha books 1-4 by the late Shree Veda Mitra and Hindi Rachna 1&2 (Grammar). We know there are others we have not seen or heard of yet and are open to suggestions and donations.

4. The creation of an International Fund provided by supporters of Hindi and Culture, to assist lovers of Hindi to purchase books, pay for teachers, provide learning aids/software etc so we can help ourselves and help others

5. The textbooks must attempt to integrate Nagri script and translation simultaneously

6. The textbooks must carry a key to pronunciation of Nagri script and translation simultaneously

7. The use of abridgements of Indian classical and historical texts should form a significant component of the new text books.

8. Nursery picture books, junior and beyond Hindi dictionaries with pictures should be compiled to go along with the new text books,

9. Learn Hindi/ Bol Chaal, Audio cassettes, CD's, DVD's, YouTube lectures, Hindi teaching websites and Hindi Software etc should be made available free to all who wish to learn and teach Hindi and we are asking for these

10. We also need our religious texts like the Ramcharit Manas, The Bhagvad Gita, Mahabharata, Vedas etc translated and made available to us, especially large print for the Seniors who love Hindi but can't see small writing.

11. GHPS got a letter from the India High Commission asking for recommendation of youths to go to India for 3 weeks for a culture immersion type experience, not a mention of Hindi was made, which is a wasted opportunity. Our response was to please include Hindi in the experience.

12. We need Hindi lessons and story books in Amar Chitra Katha style,

13. We would like to see Hindi Lessons and Classical/Religious/Historical Texts on CD, DVD made available free to those who wish to learn and teach

14. We badly want Hindi to be spoken by the diaspora particularly Guyana, within 5 years and are planning the work schedule.

In short the sweetness of Hindi has left our lives, we recognized this since Hindi teachers stopped coming to Guyana. Yet we have not been in slumber, we have been working tirelessly to keep Hindi alive.

The G.H.P.S. has attended 5 out of the 9 conferences, the level is way above our head and we have learnt nothing.

In attending this conference in Mauritius and connecting to genuine Hindi Premi, Gulshanji and his team and all the organizers at MGI, I feel for the first time I am in the right place with the right people and am confident our dreams for Hindi will be fulfilled.

I only wish my Pitaji Beni was here, being amongst all of you would make tears well in his eyes and his heart swell with pride to learn of all the good work you are doing and keep his inferno of passion for Hindi burning brightly.

The World Hindi Conference is aimed at advanced students and masters of Hindi, not beginners like us. If Hindi is to be a major world language, it will need to be taught worldwide. When learning a new language you will need to start from the beginning, the basics. Why not reflect this in the conference?

We had asked that for the 10th and every Conference to follow, special teaching sessions be included for novices, in workshop format. Using modern methods and techniques to teach beginners to read, write and speak Hindi. We have been calling for this recognition and inclusion in the World Hindi Conference for many years, at all levels and forum without success.

If the WHC is not the right forum, then let MGI, Mauritius take the lead and with the Government of India and the Government of Mauritius and the WHS, let us continue with the Inter-national Conference as often as is economically viable and let us build on the expected concrete foundation we long to be created here.

We are on bended knees with clasped hands and all humility, begging the Government of India & Mauritius and this conference to help us with the tools we need, so we can have Hindi as a spoken language in our lifetime.

Hindi is not just a language to us, it's our life, if Hindi dies, as Indians we die, if we die humanity will suffer.

Bohut Dhanyabaad ! Jai Hind ! Hindi Maa Ki Jai Ho !

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