

HINDI SHIKSHA SANGH – SOUTH AFRICA GAUTENG REGION: AN OVERVIEW

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, Indian indentured workers stepped onto South African soil. They were destined not to return to their motherland. They soon established roots in this new found land and in so doing, introduced a new dimension to the prevailing cultural environment. Ever since their arrival, history has recorded their struggle for rights, dignity and the freedom to live and grow in their own cultural environment. The fight for cultural survival has been a feature in the colonial history of many societies. Indian South Africans have had their fair share of this experience.

The maintenance of one's linguistic heritage is a pre-eminent aspect of any cultural struggle. The history of colonization is littered with stories of resistance to the imposition of a language foreign to one's own. In 1976 in Soweto, South Africa, students similarly rose up against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, with the slogan, "the language of the oppressor in the mouths of the oppressed is the language of slaves." That uprising changed forever the politics of South Africa.

The Indian indentured workers brought along with them their rich cultural heritage from the world's most ancient civilization that is India. The Hindi language came to be woven into the intricate tapestry that was emerging in the new South African society. The Hindi that came with these early settlers has survived to this day. Over the years, many a devotee of the language has lent a hand to ensure its survival. At the time of the first World Hindi Conference in South Africa in September 2012, and the ninth conference since inception, we paid homage to the many who gave of themselves to preserve our linguistic heritage in Gauteng, South Africa.

2. The "Old Transvaal" Gauteng

Indians trickled on to the Transvaal platteland in the late 1800's. They came as workers indentured to mining companies, farmers, businessmen and they also arrived as 'passenger Indians', to trade. They were not welcome in the land where gold had just

been discovered. All Indians who lived and worked in the Transvaal did so under permits issued by government. So under the cloud of servitude, living in a land with an unfriendly and hostile government, people lived from day-to-day, with the threat of repatriation a constant reminder of their uncertain status. Soon enough, Mahatma Gandhi was called to help Indians fight the injustices heaped upon them by the racist government. In spite of all this, life went on.

Hindi speakers, in time, and by force of social circumstances, came under the influence of Afrikaans. This was the language of the workplace, of government, of commerce and of society. The Afrikaans language and culture was the predominant culture of the province. In time, Afrikaans also became the language spoken in Hindi-speaking homes. Afrikaans combined with Hindi in the home. Words from both languages mixed uniquely in a development that virtually created something new. New “mixed” phrases in a clearly unique accent distinctly identified an Indian from the “Transvaal,” now Gauteng. The remarkable outcome of this mix was a mellifluous dialect that was unique in itself, and which maintained for many decades. The accent is still evident in pockets to this day. Even more remarkable was the people’s refusal to jettison their own language, Hindi, for that of the new world they found themselves in. Many a patriotic stalwart then emerged to play a role to preserve Hindi alive. Sung or unsung, we honor all of them. Their efforts have ensured that Hindi remains a feature of Indian social fabric to this day.

Information about personalities of the past is unrecorded and sparse. The little that we have been able to gather is recorded hereunder. Information about others will be gratefully received and dutifully recorded. This will help us complete the picture of a legacy that the Hindi speaking community can truly cherish.

3. Three Prominent Stalwarts

Swami Bhawani Dayal Sanyasi

One of the most prominent proponents of the Hindi language was Swami Bhawani Dayal Sanyasi who was born in Germiston, Johannesburg in September 1892. His enthusiasm for the Hindi language was evident from an early age. He learnt his Hindi from his parents and then in India. In time, he initiated Hindi schools in Johannesburg, Newcastle, Hattingspruit, Dannhauser, Glecoe and Ladysmith. He also organized Hindi literary conferences in Ladysmith and Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal. Together

with Hindi, he was keen on Hinduism and became a member of the Arya Samaj. He served the Hindu community with distinction as a sewak of the Samaj. In his later life, he continued with his spiritual work both in South Africa, Africa, India and other parts of the world.

Swami Shankaranand Sarawati

Swami ji, who was born in Jullunder, Punjab, in 1871, came to South Africa in 1912. He remained here for five years, performing many missionary works among Hindus. His mission was to spread Vedic knowledge. He saw an opportunity to teach Hindi and did this in several places including “Transvaal” and “KwaZulu-Natal.

Pt. Nardev Vedalankar

Pandit ji was born in 1913 and came to South Africa in 1948 as a Gujarati priest. He saw the Hindi speaking community divided in two schools of thought – Pauranic and Vedic. He then fostered the promotion of Hindi through which he succeeded in bringing both these groups together. His contribution to Hindi and other mother tongue languages in South Africa is immeasurable. He established the Hindi Shiksha Sangh – South Africa in 1948, a year after his arrival. He gave Hindi a character and introduced Hindi Grammar through classes and teacher training workshops that he conducted. He then introduced Dharma Shiksha study towards examinations and once one passed these series of examinations, he then prepared students to write the Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samiti, Wardha, India – Hindi Examinations from Prathma to Ratna levels. Today, the Hindi Shiksha Sangh prepares its own examinations and annually at an average of 700 students write these examinations. They are graded from Prathma to Kovid and Shikshan Padithi, teacher training course.

Some of the local stalwarts

Benoni, Springs and Germiston

Sri Ramkrishnan Jaghessar Lowton (1894 – 1962) headed this remarkable family. The family had settled in Benoni. From the earliest days, Ramakrishnan stamped his authority and got the family children learning Hindi. The first class started on the verandah of their home. Soon enough, other families in the community linked up with him. A thriving Hindi Patshala soon took root. Other members of the family carried on with the good work which continued for many years. The Lowton family, in time, became the “Hindi” teaching family of Benoni with Ranjeeth Lowton, Gopichand

Lowton, Butchee Lowton, Marjory Lowton and Saraswati Lowton keeping Hindi learning alive in Benoni and for over three decades.

Other members of the community who played a supportive role in providing facilities, encouraging and transporting children were at hand over the years to ensure the patshala's continuity. Names such as Sri Saldanha (of Portuguese extraction) of Boksburg, Parthap Singh, Iqbal Singh, Desraj Dass, Niranjana Bhoola, Mahendra Bhoola and Suren Rampershad, among others, easily come to mind. There may well be others whose names we have missed out, whose enthusiasm and contribution all helped to make Benoni a hotbed of Hindi education.

The Springs community was blessed with the presence of Pt. Gowrieshankar and Srm. Koosmi Maharaj both of whom were involved in the teaching of Hindi around the 1908's and 1990's. During this time – the community in Germiston, the birth place of Swami Bhawani Dayal, was diminishing because of the Group areas act. Pt. Mithoo Maharaj worked hard in Germiston to keep Hindi alive in the area.

Laudium and Midrand

Sri Ram Singh of Asiatic Bazaar taught Hindi in Pretoria in the 1950's and 1960's. Other contributors from Laudium include Pt. Hari Beharie Singh, Srm. Radha Singh, Srm. Radha Chikory and Sri Sisripat of Asiatic Bazaar. The Mooloo family, Hari Bhai Dina and Chandra Lutchman of Midrand.

The Pretoria Hindu School now Amity Internal College, opened its doors some years back and ensured that Hindi and other Indian languages were taught as part of the main school curriculum. Hindi was reborn and thrived and continues to do so at this school.

Lenasia, Kliptown and Fordsburg

Hindi and Hindu cultural education was spearheaded by the Sanathan Veda Dharma Sabha (SVDS) based in Lenasia. Under its auspices, Hindi education received attention from the Sabha's very earliest days. Many a committed teacher graced its classrooms including L P Ajoodha (Dami), Srm. Gurupersadh (Maaji), Srm. Chandrawil Das, Arm Amrita Ajoodha (Bhaneji), Srm. Goodall Budhan Ajoodha, Suku Bhai Singh, Srm. Rani Rampersadh, Pt. Maharaj and Srm. Roshnidevi Maharaj and others. A special word of honour must go to the late Suku Bhai Singh who, in his later years, worked

closely with the Gauteng Branch of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh to keep the teaching of Hindi alive in Lenasia. He was very committed to the propagation of Hindi and was a wonderful soul indeed, a true stalwart of the SVDS.

In Mayfair and Fordsburg, the Mayfair School of Music and Hindi established itself in recent years and still continues to function despite the untimely death of its founder Sri Rahiv Shrivastava. The good work continues to this day with Srm. Shiva Shrivastava, his wife, now holding the baton.

Other areas

Many other areas saw small Indian settlements develop. In all of them, cultural activity was not amiss. The Hindi Shiksha Sangh – Gauteng, would do everything possible to up structures to establish Hindi schools in those areas.

4. The Present

The current period from the year 2000 onward is characterized by the slow regeneration of Hindi learning in Lenasia, Laudium. Mayfair and Benoni with little patshalas making their appearance. Laudium was stimulated by the Pretoria Hindu School, Mayfair by its School of Music and Hindi, Benoni by its Hindi Patshalas, Lenasia by the SVDS, Randburg by the Randburg Hindu Society and Midrand by the Midrand Hindu Sewa Samaj. The Hindi Shiksha Sangh of South Africa brought these emerging patsalas together in 2005 to participate in a Hindi eisteddfod competition. Currently, in Lenasia at the Bharath Sharda Mandir School there are over hundred students studying Hindi. This is a full-time English medium school. At the following year's event, the Gauteng Branch of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh was launched in Lenasia. Sri Heeralall Sewnath and Sri Virjanand Garrib were asked to steer this ship as the organization's Joint regional Directors. Both of them ran small patshalas of our own and give leadership to the region.

Since then, we have succeeded in broadcasting the Hindi learning movement with the development of patshalas in the following areas:

Benoni, Springs, Robertsham, Lenasia, Randburg, Midrand, Edenvale, Azaadville and Honeydew. The Indian Cultural Centre (ICCR) in Johannesburg and in Laudium. Some of these classes are small, but consistent. We are pleased with this progress and now see a need to grow and consolidate these institutions. Hindi scholars from Durban who

have moved into the province, feel a need to make their contributions as teachers. This has been a welcome gesture that we have accepted with both hands.

The Uttar Bharath Sew Samaj and the ICCR both in Johannesburg are very supportive of our efforts.

5. Barriers to progress

- ◆ English is the predominant language in social, commercial and educational institutions. It has become the home language in all Hindi speaking homes;
- ◆ Our society is bombarded by the written and electronic media that strongly promotes the western way of life, culture and value systems. This has had a debilitating effect on our own culture and value systems, which people have come to regard as the norm. The apartheid system gave privilege to “whites”. Our people aspired to equate to their way of life. This hangover still persists;
- ◆ The electronic media delivers knowledge of world events instantaneously into our homes. The word has come together as never before, we get to see a lot of the bad that happens, not much of the good. World events and the impressions they leave behind affect attitudes, and change people’s ways of thinking. Exposure to all of this has made our youth directionless and distinctly disobedient. They would sooner imitate what is happening elsewhere, neglect their culture, adopt foreign value systems and in so doing, abandon or neglect that which is their own. The youth of Bharath are similarly afflicted. We are presently witnessing a transformation in Bharath that is looking ominous, portending a social tragedy of some magnitude, as it unfolds on our television screens;
- ◆ The previous apartheid government encouraged the learning of our own languages. Hindi was taught in schools. There was a Department of Eastern Languages at our University. The new government has taken away “our university, closed the Department of Eastern Languages, has discouraged the teaching of Indian languages in schools as it is not an official language of the country, and has neither engaged with us nor offered any alternative way of helping us preserve our own language. In the realm of language preservation and promotion, we are now more oppressed than we were under the apartheid. Ironically, the new South African Constitution requires government to “promote and ensure respect for Indian languages; and
- ◆ The broader Hindi speaking community of South Africa has over the years become listless and lethargic over the preservation of its language. Hindi speaking

community show little love, desire or commitment for their own language. This is not a happy state of affairs. One can never be “too busy” not to want to embrace our heritage and identity. Even general support can add so much strength and impetus to a movement.

6. Blessings

- ◆ The arrival of the ICCR and to South Africa has given impetus to many people to embrace their culture more intensely. This development will certainly restoring pride in the community and in time will reverse the negative trends alluded to above. Greater financial support from the Indian Government to organizations like the Hindi Shiksha Sangh will enable much greater strides to be made to grow Hindi in South Africa;
- ◆ The popularization of Hindi movies via television, the arrival of Indian television channels, increased cultural exchanges with Bharathmata, the implementation of The “Shared History” annual cultural programme between the Government of India and South Africa, has given Indian Culture prominence in the cultural milieu of South Africa. Many non-Hindi speaking South Africans now find resonance with Indian culture, Bollywood films, Indian Music and Hindi. In Gauteng certainly, many non-Hindi also take keen interest in other aspects of Indian culture;
- ◆ The recognition of India as a major economic power together with a healthy respect for its skills base, Hindi, and its culture to the forefront in international relations and understanding. Hindi is now formally taught in schools in the west and elsewhere. The learning of Hindi has extended to corporate personnel and their families. Even private schools in South Africa have begun to offer lessons in Hindi;
- ◆ Most of the Indian South Africans live along the coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The denial of jobs and opportunities to them by policies designed to favor Africans has caused a dispersion of Indians to other parts of South Africa. Their sudden immersion into unknown waters where members of their communities are few and far between has prompted a rethink of their values and identity. This rethink has already brought many a young to the doors of the Hindi class. Long may this trend continue?
- ◆ Economic liberation has enabled many Hindi-speaking South Africans to travel abroad and experience other cultures. Naturally, most of our people want to visit India. Exposure to the language and culture there has left many a traveler feeling

inadequate and exposed. This experience has certainly been good for Hindi as, many are now turning up o Hindi classes; and

- ◆ Hindi is a sweet and link language that lends itself easily to all who are exposed to it. It is ancient, mature and reflects the oldest civilization in the world. Hindi's acceptance among people of other cultures must find resonance among Hindi-speaking South Africans also. The time has come for South Africans to shake of this inertia, reignite our bellies and recapture the magic of Hindi which has been a gift to all of us, where ever we live.

7. Conclusions

- ◆ Problems pertaining to the promotion of Hindi in Gauteng are not unique to the region;
- ◆ The media in all its forms is inadequately exploited for the betterment of Hindi;
- ◆ Hindi is not forcefully represented at government level. Its profile in those forums is woefully low and needs to change. The Hindi Shiksha Sangh will need to be more aggressive in this regard. This organization must, sooner rather than later, become the government's point of reference for all matters in "Hindi";
- ◆ Indian socio-political institutions (South African) which should represent our community at government level are not proactive enough. The South African Hindu Maha Sabha, for example, by most showing its hand to the government in socio-political matters affecting the community, has by its inaction, left the community unrepresented and voiceless;
- ◆ Legislation exists to ensure that Hindi language gets equal treatment in democratic South Africa. The Pan South Africa Languages Board, which is entrusted with this responsibility, must be approached, informed and made to become our partner in the development of Hindi;
- ◆ We also urge countries like India, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and others where Hindi is a recognized language to lend support to South Africa in securing that Hindi becomes a recognized language.
- ◆ The Government of India, in particular, to set up a liaison with the Hindi Shiksha Sangh- South Africa so that they understand the trials and tribulations in promoting Hindi in South Africa and work out strategies through which the objective of Hindi Promotion maximizes in South Africa, the will is there, but we lack enthusiasm, workable programmes, communication initiatives, audio-visual aids for teachers and students, teaching capacity, teacher capacity building programmes, rapid use of

technology, community based Hindi language programmes, setting up of a language laboratory and making simple, readable Hindi written material.

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