

NAITALI - SOUTH AFRICAN BHOJPURI

B. Rambilass

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Introduction

In the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century thousands of Indians left the shores of the motherland to seek a fortune in new lands. India was under the British Raj and the Indians were well known for their skill in the cultivation of sugar cane. A major reason for the recruitment of Indians was their preparedness to work in foreign lands, colonies of the British Raj, where the natives of the land were reluctant and not too enthusiastic about British designs to work the land. This lack of enthusiasm in furthering the economic interests of their British masters led to the general conception, engendered by the British, that the natives were lazy. It served to justify the need for indentured labour and of course offered eager Indians the chance to go to lands where, they were led to believe, the streets were lined with gold. The recruiting agents in India had a task at hand and that was to get as many labourers as possible to migrate so that the pecuniary interests of Britain may be well served. Poverty and other socio-economic factors made India a source of abundant labour supply. Of course there is no doubt that Indians were and are very enterprising. This coupled with the wile and guile of the Agents saw the migration of thousands of indentured labourers to such places as South Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad, British Guiana, and Fiji.

There are several books on the history, the trials and tribulations, of these indentured Indians who, because they came on an 'agreement', slowly, through their own distorted pronunciation of the word, became known as "GIRMITIYAS". These Indians were mainly from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and from Tamil Nadu in the south.

This paper concerns itself with the language of the North Indians which is predominantly Bhojpuri. Although all the people who came from the north did not necessarily speak this dialect, it nevertheless became the language of convenience since the majority spoke this language. It is now 133 years since Indians have settled in South Africa and a survey of the currency of Bhojpuri amongst the Indian South Africans reflects not only the state of the language but the degree to which the cultural values of the people have inadvertently been affected.

Socio-Linguistics

A study of the decline of Bhojpuri will show that it is a case typical of a minority language. It has been affected and overcome by the predominant culture and language i.e. Westernization and English. I am not an expert at socio-linguistics but a general knowledge of the field of study amply demonstrates how minority cultures gradually disintegrate, leaving only certain, external trappings that are semblances of the declining culture. In South Africa the number of people speaking any form of Hindi or Bhojpuri is negligible.

Research on Bhojpuri in South Africa has been pioneered by Dr Rajend Mesthrie and his work, because of its excellence, has been well received. He not only fulfills all the prescribed methodology of research in socio-linguistics but also makes an in-depth study of the intricacies and nuances of the language as it has been employed in its everyday usage by its speakers. The research makes a detailed study of the grammar and also includes a comparative study of South African Bhojpuri with strains of the dialect spoken elsewhere. The thesis has been published as a book titled 'Language in Indenture' and is an invaluable contribution to the study of Bhojpuri.

Bhojpuri to Naitālī

As stated earlier Bhojpuri is a dialect of Hindi. It has been both in South Africa and abroad the language of the general populace. The speakers were a labouring class belonging to the lower socio-economic rungs where strict adherence to grammar and literary etiquette are luxuries the community can ill afford. The language had to be functional in so far as it served the basic need of communication but this must never be taken to imply that it lost the vibrancy, colour and dynamism that are the natural texture of a folk language.

Thus the Bhojpuri in South Africa became subject to various degrees of change and simplification. Adaptation to the local environment served as a major factor in this process of evolution of the language. The Bhojpuri that emerged in South Africa therefore constitutes a mixture of the different dialects that were spoken in those parts of India that these settlers came from. Further, there was a borrowing of words from English and the local native African Languages.

South Africa consists of four provinces viz. Natal, Cape, Orange Free State, and Transvaal. The majority of Indians settled in Natal, as a result the city of Durban has always been predominantly Indian. As explained, the Bhojpuri spoken by Indians in Natal is a strain of Bhojpuri peculiar to this part of the world. Bhojpuri coined a special name *Natālī* for things unique to this community of Natal. This paper therefore proposes the name for *the* South African Bhojpuri be *Naitālī*.

Dakhini Naitali

It must also be noted that there was also another strain of Hindi that was spoken mainly by those Indian South Africans of indentured stock who came from the Madras Presidency. Many of the females worked in "Gujarati" homes as maids (*aiyyas*) where they were placed in an interesting linguistic dilemma. They were unable to speak Gujarati or English; the Gujarati women could not communicate in Tamil or English. Both parties struck a happy medium in "Hindi" but the Hindi spoken by the "Tamil" was, according to Dr Sitaram (Head of Department of Indian Languages, University of Durban Westville), a form of "Dakhini" - a dialect of Hindi commonly used in the southern part of India. This, Dr Sitaram contends, also accounts for the incorporation into Bhojpuri/Naitali of such words as *honā* meaning "want" as in *hamke kām honā* - "I want work". (The University of Durban Westville is now part of University of Kwa Zulu Natal and the Department of Indian Languages does not exist anymore.)

Usha Desai (now retired Professor) makes reference to the "Hindi" spoken by the Tamils in her research and refers to Swami Bhawani Dayal and Pt Nardev, two of the most prominent personalities involved in the promotion of Hindi in South Africa, who describe this form of Hindi as Naitali. With the improvement of the economic conditions of the Indentured Labourers this brand of Dakhini or Naitali slowly faded away. It was a language of convenience that facilitated the "house lady -aiyya" working relationship and with the absence of its use, it seems to have died a natural death leaving vestiges of its existence in Naitali-Bhojpuri.

Formal Hindi vis a vis Naitālī

At the turn of the century the religio-cultural scenario of the Indians in South Africa did not look at all promising. The Indians in Natal participated freely in the Muslim celebration of *Muharram*, better known as *Tajīya* and conversions to Christianity had begun. Recitals of the Ramayana were the prerogative of the few that could read Hindi. Dramatic performances of episodes from the epics were in vogue but these served more as entertainment, being performed mainly at weddings and other religious and traditional celebrations." At the same time in India, the Arya Samaj was flourishing - the movement was marked distinctly by its evangelistic zeal and a determination to implement a programme of reformation. Those in India who were aware of the plight of the Hindus in their land of adoption took advantage

of the missionary spirit of the Arya Samaj and encouraged the Samaj to send its ambassadors to these lands. The beginning of the twentieth century marks the arrival of the Arya Samaj in those parts of the world where Indians had settled."

Arya Samaj and Hindi

The Arya Samaj was also involved with the national struggle for independence in India and Hindi, as a language, was to serve for the purposes of national unity. Therefore the propagation of Hindi was a priority for the Arya Samaj and even features prominently in its Constitution. The role of promoting Hindi was also extended to those communities outside India. Thus the Arya Samaj has played a leading role in the promotion of formal Hindi in South Africa. Swami Bhawani Dayal Sannyasi pioneered the propagation of Hindi. The Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (S A), under the guidance of Pt Nardev Vedalankar established the Hindi Shiksha Sangh in 1948. This institution has done a tremendous amount of work in promoting and systematising the study of Hindi and the Sangh remains unrivalled amongst all the local bodies involved in the promotion of Indian Languages.

This emergence of formal Hindi and the prominence given to it made it prestigious or elitist. It became the mark of the cultured and well-bred. The local community began to feel embarrassed about the *Naitālī* they spoke. This dialect began to seem vulgar and carried the connotations of and associations with poverty. The community was now faced with the prospect of having to learn the 'proper' Hindi which was not its natural language, and forsake *Naitālī*, the language which was both natural and dear to it.

The consequences were disastrous: no literary contribution of any worth was made to the growth or development of *Naitālī*. It was seen as a boorish or vulgar form of Hindi. It did not then, nor does it now enjoy the status of being a regional dialect, a status that Bhojpuri enjoys in India. Very few people know the difference between Bhojpuri, *Naitālī* and Hindi. Rajend Mesthrie commences his work by stating that South African Bhojpuri is a dying language, a statement that reflects not only the state of the language but the cultural roots of its speakers.

While this may have not been a premeditated intention of those who promoted formal Hindi, we can safely say that it resulted in *Naitālī* being relegated to insignificance. At best there may be a few hundred that are able to speak *Naitālī* in any form. Apart from folk songs that form a part of the traditional cultural practice there is little else to show for the maintenance of this dialect. Let us then consider the growth of Hindi and its replacement of *Naitālī*?

The teaching of Hindi at state schools began a decade ago and there were some 80 schools that taught Hindi as a non-examination subject at primary school level. The history of the teaching of Hindi goes back several decades when it was an integral part of the community's culture. (Schools now only offer Hindi as an extra curricular subject where the demand exists.)

Hindi classes were conducted at private *pāṭhśālās* run mainly by Arya Samaj organisations. The Hindi Shiksha Sangh has undoubtedly been the single custodian of Hindi in South Africa. It is through the noble efforts of the Sangh that not only Hindi but the other Indian languages have come to be acknowledged and given their due recognition in South Africa. However in so far as keeping Hindi alive as a spoken language little has been achieved. There are a maximum of ten to fifteen people who can speak Hindi fluently." Being actively involved in the Sangh myself this has been a constant cause for concern. There is no lack of enthusiasm by the officials, the teachers or the community. On the contrary there is an overwhelming support for the language from all quarters. Presently the unfortunate situation is that neither Bhojpuri nor Hindi is spoken.

The painful question then is: Why has the promotion of Hindi as a spoken language been such a dismal failure? Why have all the sincere and untiring efforts reaped such little reward? This paper attempts to offer a solution to this problem in the hope that if there is a chance of any kind of survival it may be considered as a viable option. As mentioned earlier, the efforts at teaching Hindi, noble as they were, attempted to transplant into a community a language that was not natural and spontaneous to them. The community has responded favourably and earnestly but to no avail. Difficult though it may be, the inevitable has to be acknowledged. A whole new strategy has to be adopted.

Chutney

Recently South Africa saw the emergence of *chutney*, a brand of Bhojpuri folk songs. Suddenly something that was dismissed by the youth as old-fashioned became surprisingly popular. *Chutney* bands came into being, they became fashionable at weddings and were in such great demand that some of them even began charging exorbitant rates and demanded advanced bookings. The rhythm of these songs took on a western 'disco' style and tempo. The lyrics carried the traditional refrains with some adventurous additions which often bordered on the outrageous. Although very few, including the singers and performers, understood the lyrics this nonetheless proved no impediment to the growth of this genre of folk music. This resurgence and revival signals a ray of hope for the salvation of *Naitālī*. All *chutney* did was rekindle in the community a love for its real linguistic and cultural roots. In its own strange way a culture that was dying cried out so that someone may hear it and attempt to resuscitate it. It is the people's affiliation to this particular culture that has to be identified, acknowledged and then put to capital use. It is the *Naitālī language* and culture that the community relates to and will therefore be attracted to. In this culture that has evolved on the soil of South Africa lies their South African identity and the home of the community.

If *we are* able to nurture and rekindle an interest and pride in *Naitālī* then in it may also lie the future of formal Hindi. It is common knowledge that the two languages are closely related and even an elementary knowledge of the one facilitates the learning of the other. There is a strong temptation to draw an analogy with Mauritius since the circumstances are very much the same. However the fact that the Indians are in the majority in Mauritius, and they have had free access to the reservoir of expertise in India militates against any unqualified comparison. On the other hand it cannot be denied that the simultaneous growth of Hindi and Bhojpuri in Mauritius, can serve as an excellent model for South Africa.

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14. The 1995-96 "Durban and Surrounding Area" telephone directory published by Telkom, South Africa, has 9 Indian names spelt *NATALIE* of which one is a business address.
15. Interview with Dr Sitaram who has supervised a number of research projects dealing with Sociolinguistics relating to the Indian Languages in South Africa. Rajend Mesthrie in his "Language in Indenture" also refers to and offers an explanation for the somewhat inexplicable existence of "*honā*" in Bhojpuri.
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22. Information from the Department of Education, Natal, SA.
23. This figure, given by the author, is based on his active involvement in the Hindi Shiksha Sangh (SA).

Dr B Rambilass holds a PhD in Sanskrit-Vedic Studies. He served as Head of Sanskrit at the ex University of Durban Westville. He is the Founder and Director of the Westville Hindu School which is a registered main stream school offering Indian Cultural Studies on the School time table. He is the President of the Arya Samaj and Founder and Director of the School of Vedic Studies. He has initiated several social cohesion programmes like Project Tripti, the sinking of boreholes in rural schools, Arya Samaj Africa and the Ubuntu UbuHindu dialogue. He has several publications to his credit, won international awards and is acknowledged as a prominent cultural expert in South Africa.

