

*Bahut Julum*  
**Reflections on the Use of Fiji Hindi.**

Brij V. Lal

At the recent Wellington launch of my edited collection, *Bitter-Sweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience*,<sup>1</sup> marking the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Indian people to Fiji, I alluded in my speech to a short story I had in the book. In Fiji Hindi, it is called *Maarit*. We do not have to write in English all the time, I said. Fiji Hindi, I continued, has such an expressive cultural and emotional range, capable of conveying complex thoughts and emotions in direct and effective ways. I included this sentence as a retort to those who - and there are many in Fiji and overseas - think Fiji Hindi has no redeeming value, is an embarrassment, a broken language from a dark era best left to the fading pages of a mercifully forgotten history.

But Fiji Hindi is a unique language, a product of a particular historical, cultural and social experience. Its form and evolution over the course of a century reflect the confluence of several currents of Fiji's history. It is principally a mixture of Bhojpuri and Avadhi,<sup>2</sup> the main languages of

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<sup>1</sup>. Published by Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2004. The launch took place on 14 September 2004 at the Victoria University of Wellington.

<sup>2</sup>. Avadhi has a more pronounced presence in Fiji because a large number of migrants came from Avadhi speaking districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Bhojpuri is the predominant language of Bihar and the adjacent districts Uttar Pradesh (such as Ballia, Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Benaras). Avadhi dominates in Alla-

northeast India which furnished the bulk of the Indian indentured immigrants. It has also incorporated words and phrases from several South Indian languages. English and Fijian also contribute to the special character of Fiji Hindi. It is our mother tongue. It comes to us naturally. We use it effortlessly to communicate with each other.

I remind the audience of some phrases which we Indo-Fijians have developed, which only we can fully understand. 'I will give you just a few examples to show you what I mean'. I see faces in the audience looking at me intently, with a hint of a faint smile, waiting to hear what 'outrageous' things I might say. There is a palpable expectation of mirth in the air. When we are really having fun, a good time, we say *Bada chun pakdis*. A few muffled titters at the back. I continue. When we say someone is a really nice fellow, willing to go along with things, we say *Bada qito fallah hai*. When someone is lazy, we say *Bada budesa admi hai*. The titters become louder, eyes laughing. We say *Sab set hai* when we mean everything is fine (even if it is not), just to fend off further discussion. *Ek dam behaal*, everything is wonderful. When we refer to someone as being under the weather, out of sorts, we say *Ek dam kuduk murgi ke rakam baitha hai*. Decorum and restraint have gone out the window now: Indo-Fijians in the audience are chuckling uproariously, uninhibited. The subject has touched a deep chord among many of them.

At dinner at a fine Indian restaurant that night, with the best reds and whites on the table, we speak nothing but Fiji Hindi. It is an emotional moment of reunion. We are speaking the language of our childhood, of our special memories, evoking a shared past, derived from indenture and from living in Fiji, that unites us as a distinct group of people. My talk earlier in the evening is cited as the authorisation to speak only in Fiji Hindi. No one demurs. A distinguished Indo-Fijian, long a resident of New Zealand, calls some one *Murgi chor*. That is quintessential Fiji Hindi. It literally means poultry (petty) thief, though it often is harmlessly aimed at a soccer referee who you think has given a wrong decision against your team. Others join in. *Patra se kat banao*, someone says, have a little to drink, *mekim liklik spark*, as the phrase is in *Tok Pisin*. *Bahut julum*, very good, wonderful.<sup>3</sup> *Khoob jamaa*, it all jelled together very well, as in a party. *Us ke chuaais*, he had the better of him.

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habad, Jaunpur, Partapgarch, Sultanpur, Basti, Gonda, Bahraich and other such districts.

<sup>3</sup> The origin of *Julum* remains a mystery. In standard Hindi, it means crime, although Dr Gyanesh Kudaiysa informs me that it also means - or can mean - excess as in excessive landlord oppression of peasants.

*Had kar diha pyare*, you have done very well. *Okar dehin men jaise dahi laga*, a very lazy person. *Ek dam gaadar hai*, lazy like a bat. *Khoobe haakis*, told real tall tales. *Ek dam paani pee lihis*, someone who will not spill the beans no matter what. *Kaato to khoon nahi*, someone who is very angry. *Chaal dekhaais*, someone showing off their true colours. *Din maaro*, wasting time. *Pura jad se pullai batao*, relate everything from the beginning to the end. *Maaro goli*, forget about it. *Muh fullais*, being glum. *Suwar ke baccha*, son of a pig. *Pura jhakki* or *Asli nut*, a complete idiot. *Nice Bola* refers to an attractive lass. Someone tells a story about an Australian Indo-Fijian boy outside the Kalyan Video Centre in Labasa saying to an attractive Indo-Fijian girl, *Ek dam gorgeous*. Misunderstanding the English word, the girl turns around and says, *Gojar tumhar baap*. *Gojar* (centipede!) your father (your face). So it goes. A memorable occasion when grown up men (the women were bemused by our childishness), pillars of society, holders of important positions, let their hair down (whatever is left of it), recover their innocence, become boys again for a moment.

As I listened and laughed, my mind wondered back to words which we used as children but which have almost vanished from our common vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> I doubt if many of today's children would know that *kakkus* means latrine, *chachundar*, a women of loose morals, a flirt,<sup>5</sup> *chaplus*, a flatterer, *behuda*, uncouth, *kilkaari*, a hoot, *ghacchu*, a wimp, *mandraye*, hanging around, *mehra*, effeminate, an eunuch, *gawanr*, a simpleton, a country bumpkin, *kuppi*, funnel, *adhaur*, hibiscus flower, *khissa*, story, *saakis*, cinema. I thought of English words which we had 'Indianised': *gwan*, go on, as when we are shooing an animal away, *haama* and *nila*, hammer and nails, *ketchim*, catch him, as when commanding a dog, *lokum*, lock >em as in jail, *kantaap*, cane top, *phulawa*, plough, *service* referring to bus transport, *chun*, from tune, meaning having fun, *bilaadi suwar*, bloody swine, *kasera*, cassava. And I thought of Fijian words which

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<sup>4</sup> For two scholarly introductions, see Rodney Moag, *Fiji Hindi: Basic Course and Reference Grammar* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), and Jeff Siegel, *Language Contact in a Plantation Environment: A sociolinguistic history of Fiji* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Siegel's more popular introduction to Fiji Hindi is in *Say it in Fiji Hindi* (Sydney: Pacific Publications). For an earlier introduction to the use of standard Hindi, see A. W. McMillan, *Hindustani Handbook* (Suva: Government Printer, 1931). There is no mention of Fiji Hindi in the text.

<sup>5</sup> In India, I have been told by speakers of both Avadhi and Bhojpuri that the word means a small rat.

had so imperceptively crept into our daily language: *tavale*, brother-in-law, *leqa*, difficulty, *budesa*, lazy, *butaraki*, fisting someone, *mamagi*, miserly, *lamu*, a coward, *takia*, a small outrigger canoe, *kerekere*, borrowing. Fiji Hindi spoken a generation ago has changed considerably because of migration and modernity, I realised.<sup>6</sup> Not surprising, I know, but sadness-inducing nonetheless when a part of your heritage vanishes beyond recall.

On my way back to Canberra, I pondered why is it that so many of our own people deride a language that is so integrally a part of us, so uniquely ours, are apologetic about it as nothing more than Broken Hindi. In rejecting Fiji Hindi as a hilly-billy language, are we also not denying our past, indeed, a part of ourselves? I realise that I am not innocent in this. I read, write and speak Hindi, have even published a book in it.<sup>7</sup> In my public address to our people, I speak in proper Hindi or English, but never in Fiji Hindi. I realise, as I reflect, that in some subconscious way, I myself have imbibed the popular prejudice against Fiji Hindi. People like me, opinion makers and cultural figures in the community, are a part of the problem.

The overarching dominance of, and preference for, Hindi in public discourse is due to many reasons. A particular consciousness of our past played an important role. For nearly a century and more, we had a decidedly negative view of our foundational historical experience, *girmit*. We thought of it, when we thought about the past at all, as a period of darkness, of moral and cultural collapse, when our women were molested at will by those in authority, our religious strictures violated, when we were nothing but beasts of burden, and believed the worst that we were told about our history and heritage, that we were descended from the flotsam and jetsam of Indian society. The truth, as revising historiography reminds us, was far more complex, lending itself to a variety of readings, though the popular rendition of *girmit* as slavery prevailed, and often used to remind the colonial officialdom of the sacrifices the Indo-Fijians had made to the development of Fiji. Hindi was a 'proper' language, not a 'fractured' one, the language of the books, of important people. Its use was 'ennobling' for a people from humble backgrounds. It gave them a sense of belonging to something grand. It bound the people together. It

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<sup>6</sup> The Fiji Hindi used in Subramani's *Dauka Puran* (New Delhi: Star Publications, 2001), set in rural Vanua Levu around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is very different to the Hindi spoken now.

<sup>7</sup> *Bhut Len ki Katha*. The Story of the Haunted Line (New Delhi: Saraswati Press, 1994). With Yogendra Yadav.

united the community by not privileging one of the competing provincial languages over the others. Those who may have had difficulty accepting *Avadhi* or *Bhojpuri* as the language of the community could not reasonably dispute the place of Hindi. So Hindi was both an unifier and a pacifier.

It was also a part of the process of *sanskritisation* that the freed labourers used to 're-make' themselves and their society. They may have come from humble, non-literate backgrounds, from a society where social status was divinely preordained and rigidly enforced, the result of one's karma in previous life. The dialect one spoke could easily disclose one's identity, to one's disadvantage if one came from the lower strata of society. But speaking Hindi, or at least acknowledging its pre-eminence in the public domain erased the social and cultural distinctions. The truth often was that most people could not - many today cannot - speak the language, but symbolic acknowledgement was important. The adoption of sanskritised names after gods and goddesses - Ram Prasad, Ram Krishna, Shiv Dayal, Dharam Raji, Ram Dulari - was part of the same process, as also was the gradual jettisoning of ritual practices of the lower castes (such as animal sacrifice).

Education, when it came, reinforced the pre-eminence of Hindi. The post-war generation of Indo-Fijian children grew up the *pothis* of Pandit Ami Chandra. The Indian cultural elite, who were predominantly Hindi speakers even entreated with the colonial government that Hindi and English should be the main languages of instruction and learning in Indo-Fijian primary schools. Muslims wanted Urdu for their children and the South Indians pleaded for the recognition of Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu, but to little avail. The Hindi elite objected to the recognition of other languages on the grounds that they caused fragmentation and division in the community. It did not need to be said that the privileging of Hindi also advantaged them. There were schools in some parts of Fiji which refused admission to children from South Indian families because they could not speak Hindi fluently and because it was thought that their presence might somehow lower the standards in the schools. The Hindi cultural elite captured the radio where sanskritised Hindi became the medium of broadcasting. Newspapers and films reinforced the dominance of Hindi.

There can be no denying that the use of Hindi connected the Indo-Fijians to other worlds and other experiences. It gave them a sense of completeness: the sahibs could decry their history, but they had to acknowledge Hindi as one of the great languages of mankind. We accorded

respect to those who spoke the language fluently, could read and write it. A knowledge of Hindi was a *sine qua non* for education. We expected our leaders to address us in proper Hindi, a public address in Fiji Hindi being unthinkable - it is unthinkable even now. Even if you could not speak it fluently, you were expected to try. A western-educated person, like myself, it was understood, could not be expected to be fluent in the language, but his stature in public estimation would increase immensely if he could speak Hindi. 'He is educated, but he has not forgotten his culture,' is what people would say. A 'cultured' Indo-Fijian could not be complete without a knowledge of the language.

Yet, in private, the same speakers who speak proper Hindi on the stage choose to talk in Fiji Hindi off it. It is as if proper Hindi is required for public performance; the real business of life is conducted in Fiji Hindi, the language of spontaneous communication, the language of the heart. It is used everywhere: on the shop floor, in the cane field, in the market place, in homes. Its idioms and metaphors are familiar. It is a great leveller of hierarchy.

And yet we continue to deny cultural value to Fiji Hindi. When Subramani's Fiji-Hindi novel, *Dauka Puran*, appeared in 2002, the Hindi elite howled abuse at it and questioned the author's motive in writing it in the language, the insinuation being that the author, a South Indian, was poking fun at a language, Hindi, he did not understand. His deed was an affront to the majority of the Indo-Fijian population which apparently preferred proper Hindi. My own view is that Hindi should continue to be taught in schools because it is - or will soon become - an international language. It is culturally important too, for it is the language of the popular media, of the Bollywood cinema. But it should not be done at the expense of Fiji Hindi. This is a special language, a product of a particular set of historical circumstances. It deserves to be studied and taught too, for it provides a fascinating insight into the social and cultural evolution of the Indo-Fijian community.

Above all else, it is our mother tongue. It is our unique contribution to the global community of languages. *Konchi bola?* Yes, it is our special contribution to the human heritage.

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