

1817—1967

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The history of the Hindu College which was founded one hundred and fifty years ago has been told many times over, and we all know of the services rendered by the first founders—David Hare and Edward Hyde East, Maharaja Tejchandra Bahadur and Gopemohun Tagore, and last (and first), Baidyanath Mukhopadhyay. About Rammohan Roy, possibly the greatest product of English Education in India, the embers of controversy are not yet laid to rest. It is not necessary to examine the part which Rammohan played or did not play in the actual work of establishing this mighty institution, which has grown, as Secretary Baidyanath Mukhopadhyay prophesied, into a big *bur* tree that has cast its branches far and wide. But Rammohan was easily the most distinguished and most uncompromising exponent of the ideals that were embodied in the Hindu College.

In those days the British educationists were sharply divided into two camps: those who wanted to engraft western education on Indian soil, the Anglicists, and those who pleaded for the resuscitation of Sanskrit culture, the Orientalists. In 1823, Rammohan Roy wrote his historic letter to Lord Amherst, then Governor-General, making a fervid protest against the proposal to establish a new Sanskrit School in Calcutta. 'If it had been intended', said Rammohan, 'to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen which was best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner the Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness if such had been the policy of the British Legislature'. Rammohan had a brief to plead and he overstated the case against Sanskrit, but these words have a

terrible relevancy at the present moment when the Hindu College, through its successor the Presidency College, is celebrating the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its birth. Substitute 'Hindi' and 'regional languages' for Sanskrit and you will have a picture of the grave of ignorance parochial fanaticism and political opportunism are digging for us.

Rammohan wanted 'European gentlemen of talents and education to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences, which the natives of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of every other part of the world'. Rammohan did not state, even if he might have foreseen, another result that flowed from instruction of Indians in Western literature, philosophy and science, that this instruction would give them not merely knowledge but also political and cultural unity. And now when one hundred and fifty years after the establishment of the Hindu College we are trying to undo the work of Rammohan and other pioneers, we are paving the way back not only to ignorance but also to disintegration. You cannot hide this hard reality behind a cloud of phrases any more than you can get rid of provincialism by calling provinces 'states'.

The mischief started many, many years ago when the intrepid, freedom-fighting young barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi laid down that Indians in South Africa should draft their resolutions, memoranda in Hindi or Gujarati and by no means in English; here we have the inception of what is now being passed off as the adoption of a national language for communication and of regional languages for education. The irony was almost Sophoclean. The man who was making his first great fight for freedom, who came rightly to be regarded afterwards as the Father of the

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Nation, sowed here the first seeds of dissension and disintegration. Gandhiji's leadership of the Congress gave an impetus to the demand for the linguistic redistribution of provinces, which became aggressively clamorous after independence. The controversy is unending, because in such a matter you can never decide by argument whom Belgaum should belong to or who should annex Chandigarh. I sometimes feel that the British were short-sighted in trying to divide India on the basis of two major religions. That carried them only for even less than two hundred years. If they had foreseen the linguistic squabbles that have followed in the wake of their departure, they would have decided on linguistic division and might have continued not for two hundred but for two thousand years!

It is said — and rightly said — that the Muslim League fanned the flames of communal passion, and religious frenzy ran so high that partition seemed to be the only way out of an intolerable imbroglio. But foreign commentators think that one of the minor causes of Muslim discontent was the increasing imposition of Hindi, specially after the assumption of office by the Congress in the thirties. When Chaudhuri Khalequzzaman, one time acting President of the Congress, finally left for Pakistan, he gave as his reason his inability to learn Hindi in old age! It would be easy to say that foreign observers are cock-eyed or that Chaudhuri Khalequzzaman spoke with his tongue in his cheek. But such complacency is not common sense.

It is often argued that you cannot have proper national sentiment unless you have a national language, and Hindi is the only acceptable language which should drive out English, and then only we shall be true Indians. But non-Hindi-speaking people living in the Hindi regions know what this true Indianism is. It is a stark truth that the new Imperialism is as aggressive as the old and much worse, because here the emperors are not a handful of British merchants and Civil servants but innumerable fanatics who are as

power-loving as they are pig-headed. It is a retrograde movement also because Hindi is a less forceful language than English and has a much poorer literature. 'Babu' Hindi is held in greater contempt than was 'Babu English' at one time, and the intransigence of the South is only a symptom of a disease sown by the North. If following Rammohan Roy and the founders of Hindu College we had stuck to English, we might have been less fervid patriots than Sri Morarji Desai or Seth Govinda Das, but the unity of India would have been saved.

These new nationalists, who would swear by Rammanohar Lohia rather than by Rammohan Roy, try to give a sop to local patriotism by emphasizing the importance of the regional languages. The cultivation of Indian languages is a laudable move to which there cannot be the remotest objection but when language becomes a pawn in a political game, the results can be and have been both comic and pathetic. The language riots that led to the bifurcation of the old Bombay Presidency, the upsurge of Shiva Sena, the interminable disputes based mainly on language with which good old Punjab is being torn now, the militant claims made by champions of Urdu challenged equally militantly by the custodians of Hindi — all these carry their own commentary. Only those who are prisoners of shibboleths and slogans do not see the writing on the wall. Those who are interested in enfeebling and disorganizing the established order see the writing, but they know that if they can sow the wind, the harvest of the whirlwind will bring grist to their mill.

I have said that the picture has both its comic and tragic sides. Once upon a time Mahatmaji and Sirdar Vallabhbhai Patel were engaged in conversation in Gujarati in the presence of one of Mahatmaji's most esteemed disciples from Bengal, who demurred on the ground that he did not follow the dialogue because he did not know Gujarati. Mahatmaji, who was surprised at this ignorance, said that political workers should be acquainted with other Indian languages besides Hindi

and the language of their region — a tall order at which the great Harinath De would have quailed ! When Mahatmaji was touring in the interior of Dacca district, I believe in the twenties, he insisted that all addresses presented to him must be written in Bengali, and he gave his reply in Hindi. There were such meetings at Baherak and Phursail, villages in Bikrampore, not far from my own ancestral home. I can visualize with amusement the large gathering sitting before the great man in spell-bound silence and not understanding a word of what he spoke. If he had addressed the meeting in English, a sizable minority in that educated area would have been able to follow him. This was more than forty years ago; it was not of much significance then, but such narrowness has acquired a comic and pathetic meaning now. The tragic side is most lurid in contemporary Assam. Taking a cue from Hindi imperialists, the little emperors there first thought of driving out the Bengali-speaking people — the present posters say that Indians should leave Assam — and also of imposing Assamese on the hill people, who, I heard, even named the language after a political leader, at one time Chief Minister of Assam. You can find various causes for the secessionist tendencies in the hill areas — ethnological, anthropological, geographical, historical or religious — and you can lay the blame on foreign missionaries or foreign powers keen on stirring trouble in border areas. But it started soon after 1947 with the attempts made to force Assamese on the hill areas, and it is not without significance that Nagaland is the first region to opt boldly for English. The tragic wheel is coming full circle. The Assamese now face the prospect of their land being thinned to a narrow strip of land which is scarcely viable without the areas inhabited by the harried Bengalis.

The Government of India, which is subject to many pressures and pulls and can seldom arrive at a decision, is now thinking of instruction in various languages — the regional languages for regionalism, Hindi for nationalism, English for internationalism, and very soon we shall have Sanskrit for spiritualism.

The reasons advanced are not merely political but also academic. It is argued that if instruction is imparted through the regional language, standards of education are bound to improve. This is what has happened in all countries and must happen here too. An eminent scientist, whose opinion carries weight even if it is without substance, says that instruction in science can be given in the regional languages even in the present state of their development. But he has not shown the way by writing scientific text books in his own language. We can be thankful to him for enunciating a new ethical concept that precept is better than example and only wish that his penchant for propaganda were matched by patience for writing the appropriate books. This argument about raising standards was advanced by the sponsors of the eleven year school programme, but the recent tendency to go back to the twelve year course reflects the disillusionment that has come with experience. The Union Minister of Education says with a chuckle that a large number of Indian Universities have already switched over to the regional language as the medium of instruction. But he has not answered the further question whether this regionalization has improved standards. I may refer to a piece of news item that is worth pondering. Bengali became the medium of instruction and examination in the Matriculation Examination of Calcutta University, I think, about three decades ago. After this there has been a progressive change — I use the word advisedly — in standards, and the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education has now quietly, without discussion and possibly without consulting its own members, reduced the pass marks by 20. There can be no doubt about the trend of the change I have just spoken of, and who will deny that the change in medium has encouraged rather than retarded the other causes of deterioration? Some universities in Northern India have made English optional, some others are trying to do it lip service by retaining it only for one year and giving a failed candidate six chances — a worse travesty of academic discipline than total abolition. When we have got through the period of five

years, which is being proposed and retracted with the same facility with which politicians cross and recross the floor, and when the eighteen crores now allotted have run down the drain, it will be necessary to make a further decrease in pass marks or a further increase in the annual supply of grace marks. This is improvement of standards with a vengeance !

From this Babel of tongues and this cockpit of warring linguistic tribes it is refreshing to turn to 1817 when the founders of the Hindu College affirmed without hesitation or ambiguity that the path of true education in India is the path of Western science and philosophy and literature, to be traversed through the medium of English.



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