

**THE POLITICAL SITUATION AS A FACTOR IN SHIFT AND MAINTENANCE  
OF THE TELUGU LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA  
(A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY)**

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**DEFINITION OF THE TERMS "SOCIOLINGUISTICS", "LANGUAGE SHIFT"  
AND "LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE"**

According to Hymes (1972 :14), sociolinguistics is "the study of language in relation to social conditions". However, to Pride (1970 : 22), "it is not simply an amalgamation of linguistics and sociology but it embraces, in principle, every aspect of the structure and use of language that relates to its social and cultural functions". Bright (1975 : 11) simply defines the term sociolinguistics as a subject which "deals with the relationship between language and society".

Fishman defines sociolinguistics as (1970 : 4) :

the study of the characteristics of language variety, the characteristics of their functions, and the characteristics of their speakers as these three constantly interact, change, and change one another within a speech community.

After careful consideration of these statements, sociolinguistics could simply be regarded as the study of language in the matrix of the social and cultural behaviour of a community.

Prominent sociolinguists have discussed "Language Maintenance" and "Language Shift" (LMLS) (Fishman, Fasold, Dorian, Gal) of minority language groups in foreign environments. Before discussing the actual language shift or maintenance of the Andhra community from Telugu to English, the term "Language shift" needs to be defined clearly.

Fasold (1984 : 207) defines "language shift" simply as "the process of a community giving up a language completely in favour

of another one". He further states that "when the shift occurs, the community has collectively chosen a new language where an old one was used before". Similarly Weinreich (1979 : 68) defines it as "the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another".

According to Hauptfleisch (1983 : 5) language shift should also imply not only a shift in language identity but also in the value system of a particular group. However, here it is not clear whether he meant spiritual or cultural value system. According to Fasold (1984 : 207) " Language Shift" and "Language Maintenance" are two sides of the same coin and are both "really the long-term, collective results of language choice" of a group of people. He also states that (1984 : 214) "the choice made by the members of a particular speech community, reflecting their cultural values, add up to shift or maintenance in that community".

The term "language maintenance" refers to the extent to which an individual, or a group of individuals or a whole community, as immigrants, continue to use their EMT in a foreign environment.

Although there are no specific sets of predictable causes for the language shift or maintenance of a speech community, the sociolinguists roughly group them as follows: economic changes; status; demography, and institutional support (Mesthrie : to appear in Pergamon Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics). However, there are many other causes underlying the shift and maintenance of the Telugu language in South Africa. In order to understand the language shift of the Telugu language, it is necessary to see such shift within the framework of sociolinguistic phenomena.

#### LANGUAGE SHIFT - A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PHENOMENON

Various sociolinguists have identified several factors that facilitate or accelerate language shift (Fishman, Fasold, Gal,

Vasikile and others). Causes for language shift are always numerous and some times interrelated and varies from one situation to the other. Language shift occurs when a new language is acquired by a community with the concomitant loss of its erstwhile primary language (Mesthrie : Pergamon Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics). When members of a community emigrate from one place to another or from one country to another where they are exposed to a new language, which has more speakers, social status or political status than that of their own mother tongue, the people usually shift their language to the dominant language of the new environment.

Situations like military conquest, changes in the national boundary (Gal 1979 : 3) or emigration from one country to another (Fishman : 1971) can all create ethnic-linguistic minorities which are prone to language shift. Once viable and active speech communities when deprived of their traditional land, resettle in new land (such as the Norwegians in the United States) with other groups who might not always share their same language (unlike Srilankan Tamils settled in Tamilnadu, India) as minority groups. These minority groups, lacking political and economic power or a separate identity of their own, often undergo language shift.

However, according to Gal (1979 : 3), language shift sometimes does not occur in an immigrant situation. It seems that she does not agree with the general idea that language shift occurs because of factors such as urbanization, industrialization, loss of isolation and above all the end of group identity because she states that the language shift still occurs even with 'group identity' or 'group loyalty'. She argues that the process of language shift should be seen within the framework of linguistic variation (Gal 1979 : 3).

Thompson states (1974 : 58) that the immigrants' mother tongue disappears because "they do not transfer it from one generation to the next". For example, it is natural in the United States,

Australia, and Canada for English to become the mother tongue (MT) for the descendants of immigrants in a matter of a few generations (Lieberson and Curry 1971 : 134).

To conclude, language shift denotes that the main language of the place or country where the immigrants settled permanently exerts a decisive influence on the immigrants' mother tongue. This language shift, however, occurs only in a minority language group like the Andhras in South Africa. Telugu, with its sixty million speakers in India (1990 census), is a minority language in South Africa not only because of the small population of the Andhra community, but also because of the government policy towards the Indian languages in South Africa.

#### **THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA AS A FACTOR IN LANGUAGE SHIFT**

##### **1. THE POLITICAL SANCTIONS INSTITUTED BY INDIA AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA**

The political situation in South Africa after the Second World War also contributed to the erosion of the Telugu language locally. Various oppressive laws were enacted to suppress the Indians in South Africa.

The Indian Government, which gained its independence from the British yoke in 1947, took up the matter of the segregation of the Indians, along with the issue of the ill-treatment of Indians in South Africa, with the United Nations Organizations (U.N.O) and openly opposed South African political discriminations. The Smuts Government (1939-1948) refused to comply with the directions given by the U.N.O and walked out of the U.N.O.

With the National Party coming to power in South Africa in 1948 a new, much-hated and widely opposed system of segregation called "Apartheid" was introduced in the Union of South Africa. This was meant to segregate the so called non-whites from the whites. Then India, along with the Afro-Asian Bloc, strongly condemned

the Apartheid system of the South African Government. In order to demonstrate its opposition to the unjust political situation in South Africa, the Indian Government imposed political, economic and cultural boycotts against the South African Government in 1948. From 1948 up to the present (1991) the Indian Government has maintained its trade, as well as cultural boycotts against South Africa very rigorously.

The intention of the Indian Government in imposing this boycott against South Africa, is not to punish the Indians in South Africa but to help the millions of South Africans by bringing pressure on the White Government to remove the various Apartheid laws. However, the Indians in South Africa suffered religiously because of the ban on Indian trade with South Africa, and Indian goods did not flow freely into the South African market. Religious items like various Pooja materials, religious books, and other religious literature were not imported to South Africa. Similarly, the importation of the priests and teachers ceased.

Cultural items such as sarees, Indian male dress such as Photi and Turbans, language books, language audio-visual tapes, films, literature and others were not exported to South Africa.

The injecting of new blood into the community by marital alliance was stopped because both the Indian and South African Governments did not permit Indians to enter South Africa. Many Andhra brides who were married to South African Andhras had problems in joining their grooms soon after their marriage because of the visa problems created by both Indian and South African Governments. The community became hesitant to bring brides from India because of the visa problem.

The importation of teachers, which was common before 1945, was completely stopped because of the sanctions imposed by the Indian Government. Those who were able to come to South Africa from

India were given only a temporary visa, which could be later extended by the South African Government, because of the political tensions between India and South Africa.

Because of these sanctions the Andhra Community was also adversely affected. After the death of Pandit Varadacharyulu, the only qualified Telugu teacher brought from India, the University of Durban-Westville could not obtain the services of any qualified lecturers from India to teach Telugu. Also, the Andhras were unable to bring academics or any "Andhra Celebrities" to South Africa after the imposition of sanctions by the Indian Government.

## **2. THE GROUP AREAS ACT ENACTED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT**

Between the years 1860 to 1950, the Indian community in South Africa were well settled, being firmly established economically, and religio-culturally. At the time of their arrival in South Africa, most of the Andhras had settled according to their castes and near to other linguistic groups, and thus created close-knit socio-cultural units. For example, the Puntans Hill pioneer Andhra settlers were mostly the Gavaras. The Andhras established their religious and cultural institutions, Patasalas, and schools.

The "Ghetto Act" (1947) passed by the Smuts Government and the "Group Areas Act" (1950), passed by the Malan Government both had very serious effects on the Indian community. The "Ghetto Act" was intended to place the Indians into confined areas in every town and village and, since they had no vote, to allow them to stagnate in the neglected 'ghettoes'" (Singh, J.N - Sunday Tribune : March 1991).

The Group Areas Acts, Act 41 of 1950 and Act 77 of 1957, uprooted and dismantled the well-established Indian community. A Group Areas Board was appointed to report to the Government on the

allocation of full group areas in the various towns and villages for members of different racial groups (Horrell 1963 : 24). This Act had two aspects of segregation for the Indians. Firstly, by the Pegging Act of 1943 (Trading and Occupation of Land Act) the forerunner of the Group Areas Act, land demarcation occurred and the Indians were prohibited from buying land outside the so-called "Indian area". The second aspect of this Act was that the Indians were asked to vacate the areas where they had settled which they had developed well over the previous ninety years.

The Indians living in areas like Sydenham, Mayville, Sherwood, Cato Manor, Rossburgh, Riverside, Bellair, Hillary and Rosebank were given between one to three months' notice to vacate these areas. The Andhras were living in small pockets in these areas. However, the strong Andhra settlements in areas like Sea View, Stella Hill, Clairwood and Puntans Hill were also severely affected, as these were declared "White Areas". Of those, the Puntans Hill area was less adversely affected than the others.

According to Singh (Sunday Tribune:1991) the principle behind this law was "to make the conditions under which Indians lived so unbearable that they would leave South Africa". The entire country was demarcated as White, Coloured, Indian and Black areas. All the central, industrialised, urban and well-developed areas were declared white and coloured areas, while the hilly, barren, under-developed areas were allocated to Indians and Blacks.

In most cases the Andhras (Indians) were given one month's notice to vacate their large ancestral homes and given small, new houses in the areas like Chatsworth and Phoenix as compensation. The compensation paid for the homes taken from the Indians was very low, and they were actually compelled to accept whatever compensation was offered. Horrell (1963 : 27) adopted the view that those subjected to forced removal often benefitted, because "housing schemes are provided for people in the lower income

groups, often of better quality than the accommodation they had occupied".

However, according to Schlemmer (1967 : 19):

the properties are usually valued long before the families are required to move. In some cases market values of properties presently being vacated were assigned as long ago as 1958. The owners are therefore paid out at prices far below what the current market values would be if they were able to sell to other Indians.

His statement corroborates the writer's views on compensation. Similarly, the experience of some Andhras who recall how their families were uprooted by the Group Areas Act supports the writer's views.

This uprooting also affected the Telugu patasalas (vernacular schools) of the Andhra community. Naidoo (Interview : Naidoo, P : 1991), who was a resident at Bellair before the Group Areas Act, states that her family was also uprooted and forced to live in Chatsworth. She narrates her experience of how she used to attend the Telugu patasala in Bellair along with thirty other Andhras and how that school was shut down because of the dismantling effects of the Group Areas Act. Similarly, the Pathmajurani Andhra Sabha patasala, which had more than 250 students at one stage, was forced to close due to the dispersal of the Andhras from the Clairwood area. The Stella Hill Andhra patasala and the Sea View Andhra patasala were also closed due to the uprooting of the Andhra community by the Group Areas Act.

The Andhras, being the lowest income group amongst the Indians in South Africa (Kuper 1960 : 60), did not have enough funds to rebuild or extend their new homes. According to the 1951 census the per capita income of the Andhras was £ 33.25 and the Annual mean Income was £ 144.95. Since they were unable to rebuild their own homes, they could not think of building or organising new patasalas, cultural centres or temples in their new areas.

It took at least another twenty years to accomplish the rebuilding or developing their own homes and institutions in Chatsworth, Phoenix, Mobeni Heights and Umhlatuzana Township. During these twenty years of re-settlement the language efficiency of the Andhras deteriorated because of the new unexpected problems created by the Group Areas Act.

Many Indians claim that they were arguably the most severely affected race group because no other group was subjected to the disruption caused by the Group Areas Act in the manner that the Indians were, in the sense that they were compelled to leave religio-culturally well established areas for new areas which were not of their choice. However, this claim is debatable because many Africans feel the same way.

When the government allocated homes to the Indians no efforts were made to resettle people. There were no attempts to preserve or co-locate established groups and communities. This disregard for social units produced alienation and the disintegration of group identity. As Chetty (Interview : Chetty, R : 1991) states, if offered a choice, the Andhras would have chosen an Andhra as a neighbour wherever possible. However, this choice was denied them.

#### BREAKDOWN OF THE JOINT FAMILY SYSTEM AS A RESULT OF THE GROUP AREAS ACT

One of the common features of Hindu Andhras in India is the maintenance of a joint family system (UmmadiKutumbamu). The immigrant Andhras, like other Indians in South Africa, maintained a joint family system for many decades. The joint family system traditionally means a family consisting of a male head, his wife, unmarried younger brothers, sisters and children, married sons and daughters-in-law and grand children. In such families, naturally, the grand children are more exposed to their MT due to their continuous interaction with the various members, and follow their religio-cultural traits.

However, in the South African Indian context, several factors both internally and externally, influenced the breakdown of the joint family system. External forces such as the socio-political and economic situation in South Africa have undermined the traditional joint family system. Internally, the present younger generation Andhras, influenced by various reasons, preferred the nuclear family system to a joint family system.

According to Schlemmer (1967 :20):

The process of resettlement of Indian families in Municipal housing schemes has serious implications for these traditional ways of life. It is obvious from the description of the municipal houses that they are intended as single family residence only..... it seems likely that the new housing patterns will hasten the change in the Indian middle-class family from the extended to the Western "nuclear family" pattern.

The small "match-box" homes provided by the Government indirectly led to the breakdown of the joint family system. The Andhras, who used to live in a joint family system, were, due to the Group Areas Act, forced to leave their parents upon marriage. Thus, the grandchildren were deprived of their chance to learn their mother tongue from the older generation.

The response given to the question "Do you think that the Group Areas Act has militated against the preservation of the Telugu language and Andhra culture in South Africa?", is tabled below.

TABLE 1

DO YOU THINK THAT THE GROUP AREAS ACT HAS MILITATED AGAINST THE PRESERVATION OF THE TELUGU LANGUAGE AND ANDHRA CULTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA?

| D.N.A | YES | NO    | TOTAL |
|-------|-----|-------|-------|
| 24.7% | 50% | 25.3% | 100%  |

D.N.A = Did not answer

This table shows that 50% of the Andhras responded positively to the question, 24.7% did not answer, probably because they are not certain and only 25.3% replied negatively. The responses of 50% of the Andhras indicate that they believe that the Group Areas Act has affected the maintenance of the Telugu language and Andhra culture in South Africa. Thus, it can be concluded that the political situation in South Africa to some extent eroded the Telugu language and Andhra Culture.

The response given to the question "do you think that the breakdown of the joint family system has influenced the erosion of the Telugu language and Andhra culture in South Africa?" is tabled below.

TABLE 2

DO YOU THINK THAT THE BREAKDOWN OF JOINT FAMILY SYSTEM HAS INFLUENCED THE EROSION OF THE TELUGU LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA?

| D.N.A | YES   | NO    | TOTAL |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 38.4% | 44.5% | 17.1% | 100%  |

This table shows that 44.5% of the respondents agree, 38.4% did not answer because they are uncertain, and only 17.1% of the respondents think that the breakdown of the joint family system did not affect the erosion of the language and culture in South Africa.

During empirical research some Andhras stated that the joint family system is not important in preserving the Indian languages and Indian culture and state that language erosion is not caused by the breakdown of the joint family system in South Africa.

However, sociolinguistic research shows that language maintenance is achieved through the joint family system where the adult members of the family communicate with children in the EMT and insist that they maintain their language and culture. Once the

extended Andhra families were disrupted and the members dispersed, the younger generation did not have the opportunity to communicate regularly in Telugu with the elder family members and were thus deprived of their chance to learn their EMT in their own family environment.

The Telugu language is the language of the minority of the Indians in South Africa, hence one expects it to be an obsolescent language because of some of the reasons mentioned above. However, Telugu is not obsolete in South Africa although it has eroded considerably.

There are some families who use Telugu as a medium of communication in their homes. There are people who can express themselves eloquently in the Telugu language. There are some Andhras, who, when angry, "can scold or curse in Telugu". There are still some Andhras who can recite from the Telugu *Ramayanam*, Telugu Bible, Sumathi Satakam, Vemana Satakam, Krishna Satakam, and there are some who can "spin various riddles" in Telugu and challenge others. There are some young Andhras, who, though unable to speak the language, learnt or are learning how to read and write Telugu. Even though the Telugu language has changed (Language Change) through its contact with various other languages, it still remains Telugu, tinged with a South African "flavour".

Having been brought to South Africa by the Andhras over one hundred and thirty years ago, and being a minority language in South Africa with limited cultural contacts with the Indian subcontinent, how did the Telugu language, like the other Indian languages, survive in South Africa?

The chief factor governing the maintenance of the Telugu language is the "language loyalty" demonstrated by a small group of "custodians", and their efforts in keeping the language alive. There are various other factors which exerted a positive

influence on the maintenance of the Telugu language in South Africa.

We can conclude here that the case of the immigrant Andhras in the South African situation may be an exception to the common norm where, by the second generation, the immigrants are absorbed by the dominant host culture; resulting in language and cultural shift (Pandit, 1972 : 89). After 1985 the case of the Andhras in South Africa displays an upward swing in their interest towards the retention of their EMT and the researcher, as an outsider, contends that this may be attributed to the "Apartheid" laws enacted by the Government of South Africa and to the political situation in South Africa.

The Apartheid system, though politically undesirable, indirectly prevented the Indians (which includes the Andhras) from merging with the dominant African culture and politically dominant western culture. The writer feels that due to Apartheid, the Andhras, along with other Indians, could not socially identify with the whites despite having adopted English. They remained members of a minority group viz. Indian group. Although it looks unbelievable, it means that Apartheid to some extent contributed to the maintenance of the Telugu language and Andhra culture in South Africa.

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