

[A Word About...Words](#)

Category : [August 1988](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1988

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There's a barely bearable drought in India and a crop-killing summer stalking America. The U.S. Navy has visited high-tech sorrow upon an innocent plane in the Persian Gulf whose 290 passengers included five Indian adults and four children. Other sundry afflictions and plagues prowl the planet, evoking images of Death's God, Yama, astride his slow-but-never-bogged-down waterbuffalo.

It is a time to take refuge in Shakespeare and Faust and Vyasa and Valmiki. Not in their epic writings, in their occupation - words. Yes, words. When the world is absent of good things, it is awash in words. Droughts that desiccate cornfields are as life-giving water sprinkled upon the journalist's alpha-numeric furrows, filling his 20MB silos to overflowing. Disaster which deprives this man of his meager lot turns and bestows the ill-gotten gains upon that man who is chosen to report it for the rest of us. Being free, words do not suffer in an inflationary economy. Lacking calories, they are not fattening in any quantity. Rich or poor, stout or sleek, you may enjoy as many as you like and give them unsparingly to your friends. How many other things can you say that about?

To demonstrate the postulation that words are almost limitless, consider how I (by professional ethic no less than intractable habit) procrastinated until the latter days of our 4-week production cycle to slyly discern the latest Hindu happening or the perfect controversy - gleaned from the still-warm Laserwriter galleys - as an editorial topic, only then proceeding, like any enlightened journalist, to swaddle the nascent notion in eloquent elucidation, cogent commentary, illuminating insight and, most importantly, synthesis, thus making Hindu news a process of learning and cognition and not a mere recitation of events, whereupon...You get the idea. I began this meditation on words this morning, hours before the issue you hold was going to press and several days into a fast. An observant reader will appreciate this last fact.

There is a serious issue unfolding here which the persevering will soon discern. It

has to do with Hinduism's successful transmission outside of India and beyond tight linguistic boundaries which often restrain its progress. Such transmission is primarily through words, though it could-be argued that more visual media will be the medium of the future. For now, it is books that carry our culture and scripture to far shores, and books are words. When I speak of words, most of our readers will think of English words. English is the world's primary language, right? Query: What percentage of the human family speaks English? I casually asked our staff this question, receiving educated responses that ranged from 10% to 72% to "What does that have to do with anything?" In fact, only 400 million people speak English as a first language. That's only 8% of humanity, one soul out of thirteen. Roughly speaking (there is surprisingly little research in this area, as we discovered in talking to professors in the U.S.), another 400 million use English as a second language-India would probably provide the lion's share of this number. Even at 8%, English is second only to Chinese (with a billion speakers or 20% of humanity) in the extent of its use. Spanish is third and French, which once ruled the linguistic seas, is fourth and diminishing.

If Hindus are to be effective promulgators of our tradition, then we must eventually translate its wisdom and ways into at least the 100 or 200 major languages (the Bible is now in 1700 or more). It's a giant task, but one we may undertake slowly, methodically. In this we would do well to study the means and methods of our Christian brothers, who have so mastered the missionary arts. Our purpose, of course, must ever remain non-intrusive, for Hinduism by philosophy and by practice is not an aggressive or dogmatic force. Still, there will be a few in all language groups who will seek the Sanatana Dharma, who will find solace in its serene manner and deep comprehension of life. To reach them will require that we use their language, not ours. And that will require a concerted, well-financed, centrally-orchestrated effort, and all the technology we can assemble. One harbinger of good news in this area is a bit of very hush-hush information we heard from an immensely accomplished Japanese acquaintance (we will call him Mr. K.) who visited our Garden Island facilities two weeks ago. Mr. K. is founder and president of two large Japanese computer companies. He has just received a billion-yen contract from his government to research and develop a fifth-generation computer that will translate Japanese into English and English into Japanese with near-perfect accuracy. With such software, it will be possible for us to import Hindu scriptures, literature, academic works and other books into Japanese (and later into most major languages) and, presto-chango, have a sensible - though not too literate - rendition.

Part of the reason such technology will be especially helpful for disseminating Hindu dharma across the human landscape is that there are nearly 3,000 languages in use today, of which something less than 100 are used in India (20 are

Indo Aryan, 20 Dravidian and 16 Munda). So, we have a situation where Hinduism, to be reached by most of the human race, must be translated into hundreds of other tongues. The task is made even more onerous by the fact that it is not contained in one place, but is disbursed in, say, 15 major language archives. A daunting task, but one with immense potential for the future.

It is interesting in this context to note that according to a 1980 census of India's then 694 million peoples, the language group break-down (keeping in mind many of these actually speak English as a first language) was in the following order:

Hindi (24%) 167 million

Marathi (9%) 62.5 million

Bengali (7.9%) 55 million

Telugu (7.6%) 53 million

Tamil (5.4%) 37.5 million

Kanarese (4.9%) 34 million

Gujarati (4.7%) 32.5 million

Rajasthani (4.5%) 31 million

Urdu (4.3%) 30 million

Punjabi (4%) 28 million

Oriya (3.9%) 27 million

Malayali (3.6%) 25 million

Bihari (2.6%) 18 million

Assamese (.8%) 5.5 million

Kashmiri (.6%) 4.2 million

No doubt you have observed that there is a plethora of numbers in this commentary on words, something that has never happened to this space before. It was not the intention to strike a left brain/right brain balance for readers of different persuasions. Our purpose was simply this: should any readers wish to further reflect on the Hindu language challenge that lies ahead, or even sally forth to engage the task, solid statistics may prove useful. Here's another one. Did you know there are about 275,000 words in the English language, and roughly 180,000 in our Sanskrit-English dictionary? Enough numbers! Let us return to words.