city. And since we had managed to get hold of Devil's Cub, this was an imperative. That meant we were not really interested in editions. In fact, we quite disliked editions. There was a time when some American editions of Wodehouse came to Bombay with quite different titles. We were delighted only to go home and find we had been swindled. Brinkley Manor turned out to be Right Ho, Jeeves but by then we quite different titles. We were delighted when some American editions of Wodehouse came to Bombay with really interested in editions. In fact, we time when some American editions of Wodehouse came to Bombay with really interested in editions. In fact, we.

The books therefore look like books, they don’t look like an army. For a while, Arshad Nizam did look a little like that but I soon grew embarrassed by them because I had not managed to read them. They are very tedious, if you want the truth.

For a while, the Durrels are still around, so are the Wodehouses. Many of the stories start and then encircle others. A young man sets out and he meets with misfortune and he comes to a village where there are three barbers and the first barber tells him about how he went to a certain city where he met three seamstresses and the first seamstress tells her story... all very fine and good but as soon as the first seamstress has told her story, you’re back with the second seamstress and then the third and you think, ‘Okay now’ but no, you’re back with the young man and the three barbers and it’s the turn of the second barber and he meets three djinns and so on... I could never keep track and when you’ve returned to the original young man who set out and met with misfortune, you couldn’t give a toss. The Wedding Guest got away lightly, you’d think.

There are times when a new edition comes out. Someone brings out all the old Wodehouses in a new ‘look’ and I wonder if I should. Then I look at my prizes and each one tells me of how I won them. In Calcutta which was — with Bombay — one of the two most multilingual cities in the country. Calcutta may have been the home of Bangla but, as a non-Bengali kid, I had no sense that you could not get by without knowing ‘Bungali’, as we non-Bong speakers called it. My mother taught Gujarati in a college and my father was a well-known Gujarati writer, so there was a lot of value put on the language in our house and among my parents’ Gujarati friends.

Speaking mostly Gujarati at home, I nevertheless picked up lots of Bangla just outside the home, as one also picked up what one thought of as Hindi between home, street and school. For me, English came a limping fourth after the primary trio of tongues, until, that is, I discovered the narrative pleasures contained within Enid Blyton and P.G. Wodehouse and British comics about World War II. Despite not being from a Westernised background, my English zoomed well past the other languages.

Target of derision

It was only later I realised that the Hindi I spoke wasn’t really Hindi but the typical Calcutta dialect of Bihari-Marwari flecked with Bangla constructions, or what I now think of as Biharwari. Similarly, it was my involvement with a Bengali girl in my early 20s that brought home the fact that my so-called Bengali fluency was anything but, that I’d been managing in the kind of pidgin-argot half-Bungla that a lot of non-Bengalis deployed, sometimes for their entire lives in the city.

In my early years, it was Gujarati that was the minority language under siege from Bangla and Hindi, with the usual jokes about “shu chhe, saaru chhe, danda le ke maaru chhe”. In the boarding school in Rajastan, to which I shifted after Class VIII, it was the Bangla vs Calculators supposedly spoke that was the target of derision, as also the Bihawari Hindi I spoke. In college in the U.S., not only were all my non-English languages rendered irrelevant to the point of non-existence, my quite adequate Indian English too often raised eyebrows. Now, as an ‘Indian writer writing in English’, I once again find myself having to defend ‘my’ language and justify my use of it. Why do I write in English? Because it is a fully paid-up member of the group of Indian languages and has been for over a century, that’s why.

So, when the HRD Minister has the temerity to demand that all communication be made to him in Hindi, I feel a double or even a triple anger. One, why should someone be making official communications in Hindi when their mother tongue might be Telugu, Odia, Kutchi or Khari?

Why do I write in English? Because it is a fully paid-up member of the group of Indian languages and has been for over a century, that’s why.

Two, my chosen Indian language is English, which has the advantage of being understood across so many linguistic barriers in our country, it is spoken and understood by more people than ever before; why shouldn’t English continue to be the main language linking North and South, East and West? Third, Hindi is but one important language of this country and the official, ersatz-Sanskritised Hindi so loved by the BJP-RSS is a minority language even in the cluster of Hindi-Hindustani-Urdu, not to mention the larger family that includes Punjabi, Sindhi, Awadhi, Braj, Bhojpuri, Maithili, and other connected languages. Why should this triple-minority Hindi rule over all the others?

Political misuse

There is also a fourth anger and worry to be added to the first three, and it has to do with the damage a language suffers when it is put to political misuse by an ideology or a regime. After World War II, not just Germany and Germans but the German language itself was ostracised for a while. It didn’t matter that this was the beautiful tongue of Goethe and Rilke, of great Jewish writers such as Heine and Kafka. The fact that between 1925 and 1945 the German language had become the vehicle for the most odious ideas of racism and genocide meant that internationally German was labelled as ‘harsh’, ‘guttural’ and ‘ugly’, as a language meant solely for evil military command and to exact the mass massacre of innocents. There is a real danger that this might happen to Hindi or to certain sectors of it in a few years, when it is seen as having been the vehicle for the worst regressive religious majoritarianism, as the alibi language for lies and political lynchings, as the language via which our republic was brought to ruin. Just as we have to resist the imposition of Hindi across India, resist the entwining of poisonous language and poisonous ideas that a certain kind of Hindi currently represents, so must we try and minimise and undo the deep harm that is being inflicted on Hindi itself.

Ruchir Joshi is a writer, filmmaker and columnist.

**PASSING BITE**

**Is Hindi going the German way?**

Between 1925 and 1945, the German language had become the vehicle for the most odious ideas of racism and genocide

I grew up during the second and third decades of Independence in Calcutta which was — with Bombay — one of the two most multilingual cities in the country. Calcutta may have been the home of Bangla but, as a non-Bengali kid, I had no sense that you could not get by without knowing ‘Bungali’, as we non-Bong speakers called it. My mother taught Gujarati in a college and my father was a well-known Gujarati writer, so there was a lot of value put on the language in our house and among my parents’ Gujarati friends.

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