

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AMONG THE EAST INDIAN SURINAMESE

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Why is it that to this day many East Indian Surinamese still speak a language of East Indian basis, called Sarnami? The East Indians have long been a minority in Surinam,¹ and only in about 1965 they came to be the largest ethnic group in that country, the Creoles from that time onwards being the second-largest group. The official language in Surinam was and still is Dutch, the former colonial language, and its lingua franca is Sranantongo, an English-based Creole language. So why have most Surinamese of East Indian descent not dropped their own language in favour of Sranantongo or Dutch? It is a question well worth asking, because the East Indians in, for example, the neighbouring country Guyana did give up their own language. In this article some circumstances will be discussed which may have contributed to this maintenance, which is an aspect of alternative, East Indian culture in the Caribbean.

The East Indians came to Surinam as indentured labourers in the period 1873-1916. Their arrival was a consequence of the abolishment of slavery in the Netherlands in 1863. In 1834 the British colony Mauritius had started to contract East Indian labourers, soon to be followed by, among other countries, Trinidad and Guyana. Surinam started rather late in this respect, to be followed by Fiji only, in 1879. In a period of 44 years some 34,000 labourers came to Surinam, and only about one-third returned to India after their contract had expired. In 1971 their descendants numbered more than 140,000, which was 37% of the total population (as against the Creoles, 31%) (Moerland, 1984:35). The majority of these labourers came from North India and spoke mutually related regional Indian languages like Avadhi, Bhojpuri, and Magahi. In Surinam these languages developed into one common language, nowadays called Sarnami,² which is supposed to have been in existence from about 1900 onwards and in Surinam has replaced all Indian regional languages. In North India itself the language called Hindi became in the late 19th century the cultural standard language for Hindus and thus,

¹In 1921 the Creoles comprised 42% of the total population and the East Indians 23%. In 1950 these percentages were 36 and 31 respectively (MOERLAND 1984:35).

²On Sarnami see KISHNA 1984 and DAMSTEEGT 1988.

because contacts with India were frequent, Hindi came to be a prestige language for the Hindus in Surinam. For the Muslims (about 20% of the Surinamese East Indians) Urdu holds that position. It has the same grammar as Hindi, but differs from it in script and vocabulary. To this day Hindi (Urdu) is the language which according to the majority of the Hindus (Muslims) in Surinam should be spoken and written on all formal occasions focused on East Indians. That is the reason why parents tend to send their children to evening or weekend classes where Hindi is taught. Though most of them do not know Hindi well, they tend to look down upon Sarnami, which according to them "has no grammar", and is a boorish language. A small group, however, is now active in promoting the use of Sarnami for all purposes and giving that language more prestige, and though it does not meet with much approval (rather the contrary), there has been, for example, since some ten years a steady flow of literary texts in Sarnami. And in any case Sarnami is widely spoken and understood, in Surinam as well as among East Indian Surinamese immigrants in the Netherlands. In Mauritius and Fiji, too, the descendants of the East Indian indentured labourers still speak their own languages (which are related to Sarnami), whereas in Guyana, Trinidad and Guadeloupe, to mention three other examples, most East Indians speak almost only a Creole language and occasionally the colonial language, viz. English or French.³ Since the social conditions in these countries were more or less alike, as far as East Indians are concerned (they are a comparatively isolated group first, engaged in agriculture, and only from about 1920 onwards show an increasing upward mobility), it is an intriguing question why in some countries the Indic language has been maintained, whereas in others it has been dropped.

There are a number of sociolinguistic factors which may explain language maintenance or shift but are not applicable to this case, because they occur similarly in countries where the East Indians have given up their languages *and* in those where these languages have been maintained. Factors like, for example, the positive self-image of the indentured labourers, their initial idea of returning to India, or the lack of command of the languages used in the colonies (Creole languages, English, French, Dutch), might have explained language maintenance. Others might have been held responsible for language shift, for example, the general lack of economic value of the East Indian languages in these countries, the absence of prestige of the Indic spoken languages among the East Indian themselves, or the possibility of expressing a separate identity by means other

³Surinam: see note 2; Mauritius: BARZ 1980:5ff.; Fiji: MOAG 1977:v.; Trinidad: MOHAN 1978:29 and DURBIN 1973:1292; Guyana: GAMBHIR 1981:4,322; SMITH 1962:109,136; Guadeloupe: SINGARAVELOU 1975:139f.

than language (such as religion, dress, or food). They do not, however, apply here, as observed above. Living in villages or settlements (almost) entirely inhabited by East Indians, which would appear to contribute to language maintenance (Löber 1976:116f; Domingue 1971:19 f.), has not been a decisive factor either.⁴ Nor, as we know from Mauritius and Fiji, the fact that in Surinam the indentured labourers were confronted with Dutch rather than English, a language they had already heard spoken in India. Finally, in all six countries under discussion a majority of the indentured labourers (at least 70-75%) came from either North or South India,⁵ and there has been no serious rivalry between North and South Indian languages (which belong to entirely separate families) which might have led to the extinction of both.⁶

One factor which may lead to language shift is of a demographic character, viz. the number of immigrants as compared to the other inhabitants of the country in question. This factor may well have played a role in Guadeloupe,⁷ where the East Indians apparently never have been a numerically significant group of the population and some twenty years ago (census of 1967) comprised only about 8% of the total population (Singaravelou, 1975: 86), which is far less than in the other countries mentioned above. Nor are there significant settlements in Guadeloupe inhabited (almost) exclusively by East Indians (*ibid.*). These facts have brought about an integration of the immigrants into the society of Guadeloupe which is said to have started soon after their arrival (Singaravelou, 1975:139ff). The East Indians were in huge numbers converted to the dominant Roman Catholic faith (which they adhere to superficially) and gave up their languages in favour of Creole – it is seen more often that East Indians converted to Christianity give up their own languages and adopt Creole (Domingue 1971:17; Durbin 1978:37). Such facts did not play a role in Guyana and Trinidad, however, where the East Indians were numerically significant and have not often been converted to Christianity, but yet have given up their own languages. So only part of the problem has been solved so far.

⁴Not much is known, unfortunately, about the way of life in East Indian settlements in Surinam (cf. DE KLERK 1953:163 f.).

⁵Only in Guadeloupe the majority of the indentured labourers came from South India (SINGARAVELOU 1975:51). In the other countries under discussion, the majority came from North India.

⁶In the five colonies where the majority of the labourers came from North India (see note 5), the South Indian languages have gradually been lost.

⁷Thus SINGARAVELOU 1975:145 (and 50). Unfortunately, it is not indicated on p. 50 what percentage of the total population the number of about 22,000 East Indians in 1883, for example, comprised. The other reasons mentioned (*ibid.*, p.145 ff.) are less pertinent.

Education is a significant factor in language shift or maintenance, and in a discussion of education in former colonies the role of the mission always has to be taken into account. We shall turn to these subjects now, discussing the Surinamese situation in some detail and comparing it to that in the other countries concerned.

In Surinam the Moravian brotherhood, which had been active there since 1735, actively engaged in missionary work among the East Indians. Like missionaries everywhere, they experienced the need to use the language of the people whom they wanted to convert. At first, missionary work among the East Indians was carried out by East Indian Christians like Sriman Singh, who had been converted in India (Legêne 1928:4ff). It is stated that Sriman Singh addressed the East Indians "in their own language" (id.: 9), and thus it is not certain whether he spoke regional Indian languages to them, or something like Sarnami, or Hindustani (a North Indian lingua franca), or Hindi. It is not improbable, however, that he used Hindi, because the East Indians tended to look down upon their spoken languages including Sarnami, and had Hindi (Urdu) as their prestige language. Somewhat later the Moravian church decided to send one of their missionaries to Berlin for studying Hindi, after which he arrived in Surinam in 1901.⁸ The custom of using Hindi in much missionary work among the East Indians continues almost unchanged to this day. In 1923, for example, a Moravian missionary who had recently arrived from work in India in order to work in Surinam, wrote in his yearly report⁹ about translating a number of church texts into Hindi, adding that he had prepared a Hindi coursebook in German for the use of his fellow brothers. Other Moravian missionaries, too, were active in translating, for example, hymns, while texts imported from India were also used. Later, however, some of the missionaries somewhat came to regret the use of the prestige language Hindi. In 1954 it is noted in an internal yearly report of the Moravian church in Surinam¹⁰ that a cautious start has been made with preaching in "the local dialect" (by which Sarnami is meant) instead of Hindi. This decision, which has provoked some criticism of East Indian Surinamese, has been taken because the East Indians appear to understand Hindi not well enough. However, preaching in Sarnami takes

⁸Thus LEGÈNE 1928:10, and other sources. BENJAMINS-SNELLEMAN (1914-17:181) is an exception in stating that a European missionary belonging to the Moravian church and speaking Hindi worked among the East Indians from 1891 onwards.

⁹Rijksarchief Utrecht, ZZG (Zeister Zendingsgenootschap) 986, yearly report of 1923:(17f).

¹⁰Rijksarchief Utrecht, ZZG 986, yearly report of 1954: 11. I am grateful to the board of the Zeister Zendings-genootschap for their kind permission to consult these archives.

place among women and children only, it is stated in the report, because the missionaries do not yet want to give up the prestige language when addressing men. It shows how strong feelings against any formal use of Sarnami are among most East Indian Surinamese. That is also the reason why the Moravian missionaries used mostly Hindi rather than Sarnami, besides Dutch, in writings addressing the East Indians. Only in the nineteenthcenturies the missionaries of the America-based Summer Institute of Linguistics started with extensive religious and educative publications in Sarnami.

In order to support the preaching in Hindi the Moravian brothers gave lessons in reading and writing Hindi and religious tuition in Hindi in several Moravian schools throughout the country, and in some schools the same in Urdu, too (*Ons Suriname* 1931/1:12). In 1905 a Moravian school especially for East Indian children had been opened at the capital Paramaribo. In 1908 brother Wenzel, the missionary who had arrived in 1901, writes in a publication that the pupils are taught through the Dutch language, but that reading and writing Hindi is among the subjects taught, while they also learn Christian songs in Hindi (Wenzel 1908:4). In 1916 a Moravian orphanage for East Indian children was opened at Alkmaar, and a school at the same place in 1929, where the children were taught Dutch and Hindi or, in some cases, Urdu (*Ons Suriname* 1931/1:15). In the yearly report of 1933, published in *Ons Suriname* (1934/7,8:107), it is observed that even children of the orphanage who have already finished school, still receive Hindi lessons. However, notwithstanding all their efforts the Moravian brothers were hardly successful in converting East Indians.¹¹

The same that has been said here about the Moravian mission applies to the Roman Catholic mission, which made more converts.¹² Since 1903 the Roman Catholic church, too, had missionaries who worked among the Surinamese East Indians exclusively. In 1916 there are two Roman Catholic schools for East Indian children, and in these schools as well as other Roman Catholic ones the East Indian pupils were given religious tuition in Hindi (*Een Halve Eeuw ...*: 48f; cf. De Klerk 1953:217ff).¹³

¹¹In about 1916 the Moravian church counted some 150 East Indian converts (BENJAMINS-SNELLEMAN 1914-17:182), in 1933: 500 (STEINBERG 1933:293), in 1972: 800 (BRUIJNING-VOORHOEVE 1977:186).

¹²According to the Census of 1964 there were 4021 Roman Catholic East Indians. According to the accounts of the church itself, their number was in that year 6417 (ABBENHUIS 1966:table 8).

¹³The attitude of the Roman Catholic church towards East Indians is also seen in a speech given in 1914 at the occasion of opening a new building of a Roman Catholic institute for East Indian boys. In that speech it is said that the East Indians should keep the "good" elements of their culture and that western

Even as recently as 1954 Hindi lessons were considered an important means to persuade parents to send their children to some school. In the abovementioned Moravian report of that year it is stated (p.16) that a Roman Catholic school in a locality in Surinam tries to draw pupils away from the Moravian missionschool in the same locality (where Hindi lessons had been terminated) by providing Hindi lessons.

Thus, though in principle they held the opinion that the East Indians should learn the colonial language (cf. Samaroo 1975:46), for practical reasons the missionaries paid attention to the languages of the East Indians in Surinam. Nevertheless, the education they gave does not seem to have been a decisive factor in language maintenance, because in other countries, too, missionaries used and taught East Indian languages. In the Caribbean the Canadian Presbyterians have been very active among the East Indians, in Trinidad from 1868 onwards (Brereton 1979:185), in Guyana from 1885 onwards (Samaroo 1987:109).

In some colonies, like Guyana (Rauf 1974:101), primary education was left entirely to the mission. In Surinam, however, primary education was also given in government schools, from 1867 onwards (Adhin 1973:85). In 1876 education was made compulsory for children aged 7-12 years, and Dutch became the language of teaching, whereas until that year education was often given through Sranantongo (Benjamins-Snelleman 1914-17:520). In 1878 compulsory education was extended to the East Indian children (Adhin 1973:91). In a report published in 1880 a Dutch official notes that teachers were surprised when, at the end of the week, East Indian parents came and asked money from the teachers for the "work" done by their children. He connects this phenomenon with the fact that in India missionaries occasionally paid some money to East Indian girls for attending school (KV 1880, bijlage G 1:8).¹⁴ Even so it appears that some children obtained good results. In another report of the same year (KV 1880, bijlage L:3) a visit to a plantation is described, where a small group of East Indian boys runs after the official. He sends them off to school and later on talks to the teacher. During that interview it appears that a few boys who during some months had received education in Dutch had done quite well. In the report the opinion is brought forward that East Indian children should be encouraged to learn Dutch, in order to stimulate their parents to settle in Surinam. The government, however,

civilisation should be brought to them gradually. They should learn Dutch besides their own language. This speech is quoted by VERNOOLIJ (1974:56), who notes the contrast between this policy and the Roman Catholic missionary work among the Creoles, whose culture was not acknowledged.

¹⁴THEMEN (1935:72) notes similar incidents on Moravian schools, and explains them as a compensation which the parents ask because their children have not been able to work.

apparently does not support the idea of teaching Dutch, and in 1890 it is decided that so-called "coolie schools" will be opened, where East Indian children will be taught by East Indian teachers "in the languages of their homecountry" (KV 1891, bijlage C:11f, "in hunne landstalen"; De Klerk 1953:129ff). Several reasons can be mentioned for this decision. It was thought that such teaching would stimulate the East Indians to send their children to school, and that it was not proper to teach Dutch to children of British citizens who might decide to return to India.¹⁵ In 1890 two such schools were opened, on two plantations. The report on education of that year (KV 1891, bijlage F 1:18) mentions that in one school the children were taught in "the Urdu and Nagari languages", while in the other the lessons were given in "Urdu". In other schools, opened later, lessons were also given in "Urdu and Nagari", or "Urdu" or "Nagari". Though in fact Nagari is the name of a script, viz. the script in which Sanskrit, Hindi and some other North Indian languages are written, Hindi is apparently meant by this term.¹⁶ Education was thus given in the prestige languages of the East Indians. In 1906, when it had become clear that many East Indians were settling in Surinam, all these schools were closed and East Indian children were from then on to be taught through Dutch, but for a number of years East Indians acted as assistant teachers in schools where East Indian children were taught. They were to assist the regular teachers because of the children's difficulties with the Dutch language, and they were to give lessons "in languages of Hindustan" (KV 1907, bijlage G1:21, "Hindostansche talen"). Their assistance was not much appreciated by the Dutch regular teachers, however, who doubted its effectivity (*Rapport S.O.G.*, 1920). In 1929, when many East Indians had settled in Surinam and East Indian children were no longer considered British citizens, an end was put to the institution of assistant teachers. From then on the East Indian children were to be educated in Dutch only, notwithstanding protests from some East Indian Surinamese. Hindi lessons were still allowed, but only when added to the regular program (De Klerk, 1953: 187).

The Dutch government thus joined the missionaries in their attention to the languages of the East Indians in education. However, both government and missionaries complained in these initial years about the small number of East Indian children attending schools, and the education in

¹⁵McNEILL and CHIMMAN LAL mention in 1914 that teaching "Hindustani" has "gratifying results as regards the attendance at the schools", adding that parents "who have not finally decided to settle in the Colony naturally regard Dutch as an even less attractive medium of instruction than English" (*Vittreksel*. . .:39).

¹⁶According to McGREGOR (1974:66) Hindi was in the 19th century also known as "the Nagri language".

itself does not appear to be an adequate explanation of the language maintenance in Surinam. But it does show that the government, like the missionaries, was ready to pay attention to the East Indians as a separate group. Since the East Indians were British instead of Dutch citizens, until 1927 as far as the East Indians born in Surinam are concerned (De Klerk 1953:184ff), this attitude of the government is not surprising, though it did run against the principle of assimilation applied to the Creole population which in 1863 had become Dutch citizens. Quite probably the population of Surinam felt more or less the same towards the East Indian immigrants as the inhabitants of Trinidad and Guyana did, but for legal reasons the governmental attitude was different from that in those two countries, to which we shall now turn our attention.

The immigration of East Indians into Guyana started in 1838 and that into Trinidad in 1845, and these were countries belonging to the British empire. The East Indians could not claim a special status here, nor did the British in these countries show any interest in the East Indians apart from their capacity for labour, and thus no positive initiatives were taken towards the East Indians. The dominant culture in these countries was British and Christian, and the East Indians were in fact regarded as barbarians, whom the British felt they had to civilize (Brereton 1979: 186ff; Samaroo 1985:79f). In Trinidad, which went through a period of anglicisation in the 1840s and 1850s, Governor Keate, who in 1857 supported the establishment of an orphanage school for East Indians, expressed the hope that the East Indians, when properly trained, would become "a local Indian population, but English, in education and feeling and having no home associations beyond the limits of the colony" (Weller, 1968:75). Such was also the official policy of the British government, which aimed at an integration of the East Indians into the colonial societies (Samaroo 1985:80f). For this purpose the English language and culture were to be taught, and because of their civilizing effect (Despres 1967:125f). The education should, however, primarily inspire the pupils with discipline for labour, and not lead the East Indians away from agriculture, and was therefore of an industrial character. In fact, as observed by Samaroo (1975:44f), the government of Trinidad paid little attention to the schooling of the East Indians. They were allowed to attend the Ward Schools, but they hardly did so and were not pressed to do so (Wood 1986:230f). Only when in 1871 the Canadian Presby missionaries started separate East Indian schools (where English and Hindi were taught), East Indian children began to receive education. And the government was happy to leave their education to the missionaries. Only in 1888 Governor Robinson drew attention to the neglect by the government of the East Indian children, and wrote: "Their position is so peculiar as to warrant special treatment" (Samaroo 1975:45), whereafter in 1890 the establishment of

schools especially for East Indian children, where English as well as their own language was to be taught, was made possible. Until that time the identity of the East Indians as a separate group deserving special attention was not officially acknowledged by the government. And in Guyana the situation probably was not much different. The opinion of Kirke (1898:217ff), a retired Sheriff in Guyana, about the East Indians is quite the same as that described above with regard to the British in Trinidad. And it is significant that in Guyana education was left entirely to the initiative of missionaries, who only in 1885 started to work among East Indians.

Fiji was another British colony, but there the situation was quite different from that in Trinidad and Guyana. The British had accepted the Fijian offer of cession rather reluctantly in 1874, and regarded it their duty to protect the Fijian way of life. This policy implied that the East Indians were treated as a strictly separate group, though for other reasons than in Surinam. This attitude is quite clear in the educational policy in Fiji. In 1898 missionary groups opened schools for East Indians, while at the same time some East Indian organisations established their own schools, but only from 1916 onwards, when the government started its own East Indian schools and aided other ones, education of the East Indians began to develop properly. The language of instruction in these schools was Hindi (Mayer 1963:29f, 44f). And on small plantations Fijian was used by overseers, but on the large ones, where two-thirds of the East Indians came to work, Hindustani was spoken (Siegel 1987:148ff).

The situation in Mauritius, also a British colony, differed from that in Trinidad and Guyana in two respects. First, in 1861, 27 years after the start of the immigration, about two-thirds of the Mauritian population consisted of East Indians (Benedict 1965:17). Compare this to the figures in Guyana, where in 1869 (31 years after the start of the immigration) only 22% of the total population was East Indian (Nath 1950:203). And in Trinidad in 1871 25% consisted of East Indians (Wood 1986:158). That could be part of the reason why the East Indian languages had a better chance of survival in Mauritius than in Trinidad or Guyana. Secondly, Mauritius had been in British hands since 1810 only, when it was captured from the French. The English promised at that time not to suppress the French language or Roman Catholicism (Asgarally 1986:136). The British hold over the island was never so strong as in their other colonies, while French people still present who might have wished to promote the French language and culture, were not backed by the British government.¹⁷

¹⁷As for education in Mauritius, East Indian schools (partly private, partly governmental) existed from the 1860s onwards, and instruction was given through Indian languages in order to teach English and French on an elemen-

It would seem, then, that in those countries where, for whatever reason, the government at least in an early period paid special attention to the East Indian immigrants as a separate group, the East Indian languages had a chance of survival. The attention given by the governments to the East Indians has been shown here in the aspect of education. The education in or through Indian languages in itself, however, does not explain the language maintenance in these countries. It would rather seem to be the entire atmosphere in a given society, which in some cases did, in others did not respect the East Indian identity.¹⁸

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tary level. The government vernacular schools were, however, closed in 1881, and at the close of the century "mixed schools" (attended by both Indian and Creole children) were becoming common (RAMYEAD 1985: 18ff). Philip Baker (London) has kindly drawn my attention to this and a few other points.

¹⁸As observed by BARZ (1988), the recent existence of written literature in Sarnami, Mauritian Bhojpuri, and Fiji Hindi may well contribute in future to a possible survival of these languages.

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