

The Hindi High

As a media-triggered Hindi revolution sweeps across the country, it is the desi appeal that is driving the market, selling slogans, shaping attitudes and linking the masses with classes

By Shefalee Vasudev

It is a *raapchik* phenomenon. It makes people smile because it baffles them. The rebirth of Hindi as the new power language and the Hindification of India has left the Indian brown sahibs baffled. For decades they were brought up to believe that *firangi* education, *angrezi* accent and western *nakhras* were the passport to social acceptance. Suddenly, it is the other way round. Hindi is no longer spoken by *dhakkans*. The new upper crust affliction is to have an HPOV (Hindi point of view). The Sanskrit idea of *Akshar Brahma* (the word is Lord Brahma, the god of creation) is now a reality.

It was TV that laid the foundation for the *dhaasupana* (strong impact) of India's national language. When Hindi news channels went 24 hours, MTV turned desi and Hindi soaps began their after-dinner brainwash, few realised that the language of babus and behenjies was in for its biggest makeover. The days when the Vividh Bharati generation was teased because it thought the Beatles were insects and Neil Diamond another name for Kohinoor are *khallas*. In fact, till fairly recently, it was infra dig to speak in Hindi slang at hip parties or buy Indi music cassettes. Ditto with Hindi movies. "We don't watch Hindi movies", is no longer the urban snob's punch line. Yash Chopra, and subsequently Karan Johar, altered the downmarket appeal of Bollywood. Savvy and successful actors dancing on the Alps and wearing DKNY are seen making love and war in Hindi. The *jadoo* has worked and Hindi is hip. It spells glamour, cheer and success.

Now even the social elite accepts that Hindi is the *lift kara de* language, with the HSTS (Hindi-speaking types) picking up the phones and placing the biggest orders—*hum ko yeh chahiye* (I want this). They have the

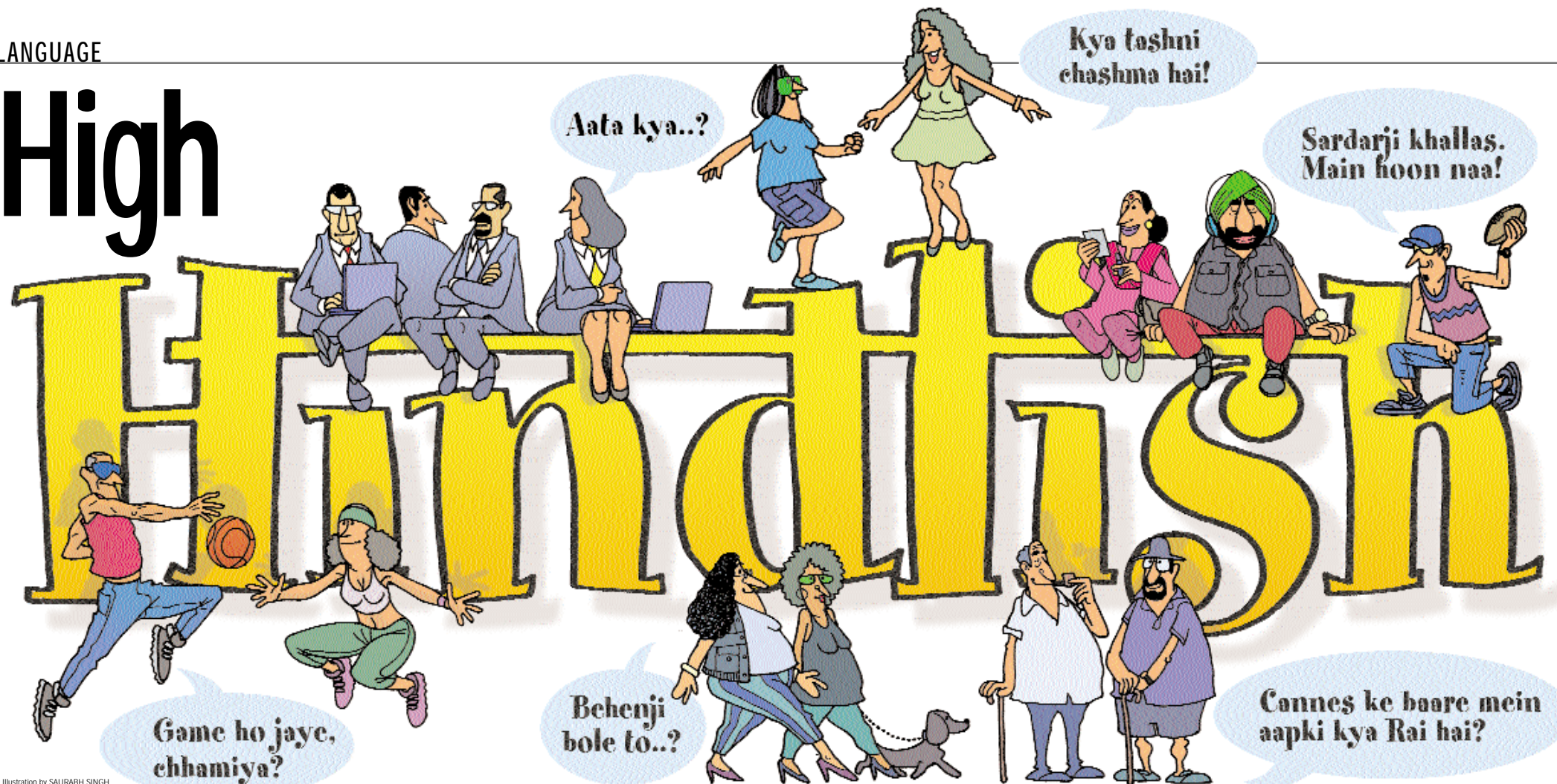


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

purchasing power. The language has become desirable as it sells. From the morning cup of tea (*chai ho to aisi*) to hoardings (*Mujhme hai woh baat*), from SMS messages (*aati kya?*) to TV commercials (*Thanda matlab Coca-Cola*), from Hindi Archies cards to children's cartoons and full-page ads in English publications that have slogans in Roman Hindi, from Hindi classes in finishing schools to Hindi folk songs blaring in discos, there is an entire Hindistan thriving out there.

"A surge in the use of Hindi in communication is a reflection of the confidence of new India," says Piyush Pandey, executive chairman and national creative director, Ogilvy & Mather Ltd, which has come out with a slang dictionary in which the maximum words are in Hindi (*see box*). "The recent media revolution and the resultant need to communicate with millions of Indians has brought back the suppressed respect for our language and culture," adds Pandey. His contemporary Prasoon Joshi, creative head, McCann-Erickson, and the man behind the popular *Thanda matlab Coca-Cola* ad featuring Aamir Khan, agrees. "For the coke ad, the mandate from the company was to connect with the rural market. But the way it worked its magic in all the metros came as the biggest revelation. It made me realise that India is changing. We are now comfortable with our own identity and culture," says Joshi.

Hindi's new avatar is not limited to the Hindi belt. A vernacular highbrow attitude is sweeping across India.

In sharp contrast to the anti-Hindi agitation in Chennai and the "Hindi *ozhige*" (away with Hindi) campaign when Hindi news had to be taken off air, Chennai today is one of the cities, besides Bangalore and Hyderabad, where Hindi films are doing better than ever. The subliminal cultural exercises, mostly unintended, by filmmakers like Mani Ratnam and musicians like A.R. Rahman and their bid to synthesise themes that draw from the experiences of the Hindi heartland into south Indian films, have prodded a path for change. Noted Dalit activist and Pondicherry-based political columnist Ravikumar concurs: "The generation that opposed the imposition of Hindi is history. The present generation, even in Tamil Nadu, feels handicapped if it does not know Hindi."

Predictably, Hindi words first became popular when the cuisine from the north, along with the ubiquitous mithai and halwa shops, went south. Now, Hyderabad has restaurants named Utsav and Angeethi and an eponymous national retail chain for the shoe brand, Mochi, with the Roman alphabets written in Devanagiri script. At Bangalore's upmarket nightclub Zero G, the weekly Bollywood night when non-stop Hindi film hits are played pulls in the maximum crowd.

Even the Gujaratis, caricatured for adulterating Hindi like no other community, are saying, "Hindi *saras hai* (Hindi

is good)." Recently, a gutka advertisement appeared on the front page of a leading Gujarati daily: "Taste *ekdum jhakas, yeh hai Shimla A Class*". Gujarati youth in self-confessed imitation of the acerbic Hindi-speaking radio anchors are sending fervent SMS messages in Roman Hindi instead of Roman Gujarati. The *tashni* (stylish) new Bollywood, racy radio and TV have not just made Hindi hot but have also redesigned the cosmetic DNA of the global Indian. As a reflection, the entire vernaculture has become dandy—kurta pyjama, lehnga choli, dhaabe *ka khana*, the Gujarati daandiya, religious tattoos or the remixed version of *Om Jai Jagdish Hare*. Little wonder then that the earthy *chaddi* (underwear) has found its way into the latest edition of the Oxford English dictionary along with words like *achha* (good), *natak* (drama), *bhadralok* (gentility) and *masti* (freaking out).

Pushing this trend are the three M's: media, marketing and money. That is, if you leave out *Munna Bhai MBBS*, which has made *tapori* Hindi—the language of the goons, the Bambiya *bhais*—a trendy option. Curiously, the man and the market have got mixed up. As a Bengali writer said in a recent interview, "English is the language of my intellect, Bengali the language of my emotion, and Hindi the language of my bazaar." Hindi icons on TV, films, theatre, radio and

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PIYUSH PANDEY, NATIONAL CREATIVE DIRECTOR, OGIIVY & MATHER LTD

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MRINAL PANDE, EDITOR, HINDUSTAN

music have made the language rousing and as Delhi-based management trainer Rajiv Khurana, one of the few English writers who pens a weekly Hindi column, says, “There is a Prabhu Chawla effect. *Seedhi Baat* on Aaj Tak has proved that instead of speaking Hindi like a pandit, if an anchor uses simple language, he can reach all the sections of society.” Provocative Hindi programmes on TV by experts who are also articulate in English have delivered a powerful punch. They have taken over a sub-culture and infused it with a hard-edged competitive ethos.

The snob value of English has been dented resulting in a strong me-too effect. Shiv Khera, motivator-at-large and author of the best-selling book *You Can Win*, admits in accented English that he began giving public speeches in Hindi three years ago, realising he could motivate many more people when he spoke in Hindi. Recently, in Ahmedabad, when he started speaking in English, the 30,000-strong crowd urged him to switch over to Hindi.

There is also a burgeoning market for Hindi ads, songs, software programmes and slogans. It probably started with the word “maha” in the 1990s: maha movie, maha sale, maha cola. Now the money that the maha bazaar is generating is not talking but yelling. “The change is not culture driven yet, but is being pushed by the market. Smart in-



vestors will ignore it at their own peril,” says Mrinal Pande, editor of *Hindustan*. She feels the popularity of Hindi can hardly be questioned as it jumps out of TV ratings and the National and Indian Readership Surveys—the top 10 TV programmes are in Hindi and the top 10 dailies have only one English publication at No. 10. CNBC, the business channel that targeted an elitist English-speaking audience, introduced Hindi slots on its prime-time bands and is set to come up with a Hindi channel.

A survey by Tara Nair, a scholar from Paris, on the growth of the Indian newspaper industry shows that in three decades the circulation of Hindi newspapers has overtaken that of vernacular languages and English. While Hindi newspaper circulation has jumped 29 per cent since 1964, that of English publications has fallen by 15 per cent. The largest publications in the country, true to the findings of earlier surveys, are regional language publications, not their more high-profile English counterparts. Khurana says that the 33 career counselling programmes in Hindi that he conducted for youth have been more successful than those in English. Raking in 500-1,600 participants, they were held in different states of India.

Obviously the youth are making conscious career choices that involve expertise in Hindi. Take Harsh Singh, 31, a popular Mumbai radio jockey. He faced competition from 9,000 applicants for his current job. For Singh, a

AD VENTURE

1. **Yeh dil maange more / Yeh pyaas hai badi (Pepsi):** The kite-flying Amitabh-Sachin combo packed great desi drama.

success in metros a big revelation.

2. **Wah Taj boliye (Brooke Bond tea):** Featuring tabla maestro Zakir Husain, it was one of the first loveable Hindi jingles.



Courtesy TV ADS INDEX



3. **Thanda matlab Coca-Cola / No**

tashan (Coke): Full marks to Aamir Khan. Conceptualiser Prasoon Joshi found its

4. **Yeh andar ki baat hai (Lux underwears):** Redone many times in the past with different models, it now features Sunny Deol's inside story.

5. **Mera wala cream (Nerolac paints):** The lady of the house wanted

cream colour in a shade that no shade card offered. Nerolac got it for her, in a man's turban.

HINDI SLANG DICTIONARY

TASHNI GUIDE TO JINCHAK HINDI

ABE SADME: A confused person.
ANDHERI RAAT: A dark complexioned person.
AGARBATTI: A very thin guy.
BAMBOO LAG GAYA: Something went terribly wrong.
BINA TERRACE KI BUILDING: Dumb person.
BHAPKA BHARI KATORA
KHALI: Someone who talks a lot but does nothing.
CHAATU: A boring person.
CHAMPAK: A foolish person.
CHAGGAN: Equivalent of tapori, unsavvy person.
CHHAMMIYA: Cool girl.
DAYSKI: Day scholar.
DEDH FUTIYA: Very short.

FULLTOO: Maximum.
GLOBAL GYAN: General knowledge.
GOCHI: Mistake.

HALWA TIGHT: To be in a tight situation.
HATA SAWAAN KI GHATA: Don't cloud the issue.
JINCHAK: Flashy.
JUGNU: Someone who works better at night.

KADUU: Sad stuff.
KANHAIYA: Casanova.
KELA HO GAYA: Screwed up.
KHOPCHA: A hangout that others don't know about.
LAL PARI: Country liquor.
MEETHA: Gay.
MUNNA MOBILE: Someone who flaunts his mobile.
PANDOO HAWALDAR: Someone who wears shorts.
RAAPCHIK: Major happening.
RAVAN: College principal.
SARUK: Someone who apes Shah Rukh Khan.
TASHNI: Style.
TU TERA, MAIN MERA (TTMM): Going Dutch.
UJDA CHAMAN: A sad person.
WIDHWA LOOK: Plain Jane.



theatre actor from Ludhiana, it was primarily his fluency in Hindi that got him the job. Employment opportunities for those who know Hindi have multiplied in the past few years. Earlier this month, when T.K. Banerji, vice-president of the India unit of Chinese giant Haier, the world's second largest consumer durables company, came to Gujarat to set up a sales network, he was keen on hiring people proficient in Hindi. "We look for two qualifications in sales people even in non-Hindi regions: a motorbike and knowledge of Hindi. Seventy per cent of our ad budget for the print media is for Hindi," he says.

The advertising industry, cold to the revenue earning potential of Hindi even till the late 1990s, is now buying big space in Hindi dailies. It is boom time for copywriters and advertising professionals. "Every other client, especially global brands, wants local flavour and language in the commercials," says Joshi. "Clients want Hindi even if it is the *Munna Bhai* kind," says Ahmedabad-based Pankaj Mudholkar, associate vice-president of ad firm Grey Worldwide. The *bhai* effect is cropping up everywhere, revealing how accommodating Hindi is. As a Delhi student says, "It's absolutely *mast* for

remixing. *Sab sahibon ko mamu bana diya* (It has fooled all the sahibs)." From the *sadhokadi* Hindi (Hindi of the sadhus), it has turned hybrid and is spoken with a vernacular script—chaste, anglicised, taporied, Punjabiied, Bengalified or Hindlished. It doesn't matter if one speaks Hindi with an English or a Malayali accent.

The image of the Hindi-speaking person too is breaking boundaries. It is no longer linked with those who wear saris and dhotis. *Chhamiyas* (cool girls) with streaked hair carrying Louis Vuitton bags who seem likely to address their dogs only in English suddenly quip, "*Idhar aao Mantri*" (Mantri being the pet's name). Even as the Hindi high floods everything from political and social discourse to infotainment, there is turbulence in its wild flow. But as Pande says, "It will soon be tamed, get its own boats and boatmen and become a navigable river. It will always remain a volatile catchment area for all that is vital and deep in India." Hindi is India, so it can't fade away. It can only evolve. In Hindi, "*Jis ki lathi, usi ki bhains*".



with Neeraj Mishra in Bhopal, Amarnath K. Menon in Hyderabad, Uday Mahurkar in Ahmedabad, Anjali Doshi in Mumbai, Nirmala Ravindran in Bangalore and Kavitha Muralidharan in Chennai