

Hindi Schools 1950s in Guyana By Vidur Dindayal

I am glad that I had a grounding in Hindi when I was a child in Guyana. That was at Rosignol Hindi School. It opened a door for me to enjoy many things Indo Guyanese.



Rosignol Hindi School. 1943.

We do not speak Hindi and other ancestral languages. We lost these, partly because of disuse over time and partly because they were not taught at school. This was unlike Dutch Guiana where in addition to Dutch, other languages -Hindi, English and even Spanish were taught at school.

Despite the loss, Indo Guyanese have been in touch with Hindi through Hindi films, and religious ceremonies which were mostly in Hindi. Although we did not understand the dialogues in Hindi films, we followed the stories and enjoyed the songs. Good films were popular and sold out up and down the country. The film songs were known by heart and so most of their meanings. Not knowing to speak the language did not lessen our enjoyment of the films.

It soon dawned on my parents' generation and their elders that the old languages were going to be lost forever, so they opened up Hindi schools for youngsters to attend in the evenings. These were often attached to temples. Our Hindi School also served as a temple. In fact the Hindi School was like a community centre. We children did our best at Hindi School, but did not get very far beyond the basics. There were no compelling reasons to keep it up. Hindi was not needed in everyday life, at home, outside the home or at work.

Hindi Schools Sammeylan

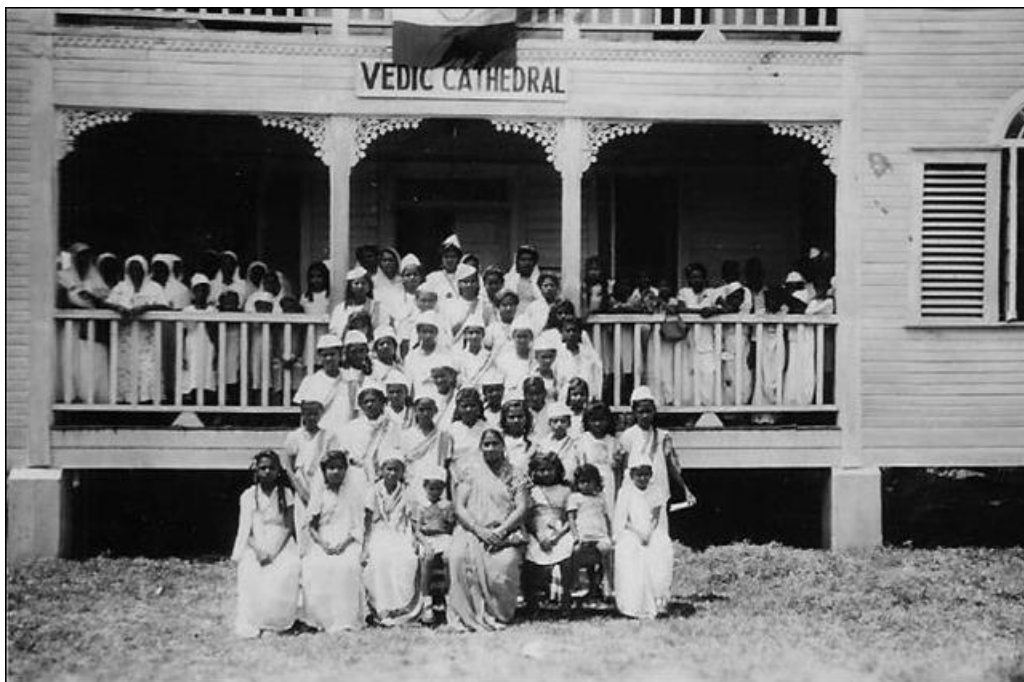
Around '49 my father and colleagues spearheaded the Hindi Schools Sammeylan (Convention) which became an annual event. It was to encourage Hindi Schools, to give them something to work for. We were teenagers then but we got involved in all the organisational work on the Sammeylan, because there were many exciting things to do. For a start, we were in charge of the public address system, microphone, speakers, background and intermission music. This meant taking a heavy wet cell battery along, plus gramophone and records for the music.

One of the stars of the event was the young Hindi School teacher, Pandit Ramlall of Skeldon. He had all the attributes one admires in a good teacher, plus he was warm and friendly, smart, and fluent in speaking Hindi, a fresh breeze. My father looked to him as another son, and I have regarded him as an elder brother ever since. His students always shone at the Sammeylan.

The programme for the day was packed. Star students of Hindi Schools from all over the country competed with one another in many fields -in reading Hindi from scripts put before them, translation of Hindi into English and vice versa, reciting Ramayan Chowpayees, reading Shlokas, solo singing and group singing of bhajans. The MC was another young stalwart from Albion always impeccably dressed in a light brown suit. He was Brother Trebeni Mohabir. His day job was junior accountant at Albion Sugar estate. He later rose to become Admin manager at Plantation Blairmont.

The Sammeylan had a festive sprit. It was a gathering of the cream of the society, the celebrated and not so well known pandits and young and old Hindu educators of the day. Among them were senior Pandits: Brijbassi, Parmanand, Ganesh, Ramcharran, Gajadhar Singh, Ramnath, Birbal Singh Chandrasheker, Harrichand, an endless roll call of the reverred at the time.

The first Hindi Schools Sammeylan was held at the Palladium Cinema at Skeldon. Pt Ramratti Singh and Shri Jagessar Sawh and others of the local community were the hosts. Sumptuous bhojan was prepared and everyone feasted to the full. The proceedings ended with prize giving to the winning students. The second was held at Globe cinema in New Amsterdam. Major Ivor Smith, one time OAG (Officer Administering the Government) was Guest Speaker. Another was held at Bush Lot, West Coat Berbice, where Pandit Harri Prashad was Special Guest. The prestigious suburb of Greater Georgetown is named after him. The Guest Speaker was Ruby Samlalsingh, newly appointed to a top position in public relations at the Sugar Producers Association. In her pep talk to students, she counselled them to 'Hitch your wagon to the stars. If you don't get there you would not be far off. Aiming for a mere pass can lead to disappointment.' In Georgetown, the Guest Speaker was the newly elected Mayor Lionel Luckhoo. This was at the Vedic Cathedral at Durban Street. Those were the days.



Vedic Cathedral. Durban Street. Georgetown

Shlokas and Ramayan Chowpayees.

Among many unforgettable Shlokas the students chanted at the Sammeylans were these: *Yadā-yadā hi dharmasya, glānir bhavati bhārata, abhyutthānam adharmasya, tadā 'tmānam sṛjāmyaham.* Whenever, O Bharat, righteousness is in decay and unrighteousness prevails, I manifest myself.

Om, Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, Sarve santu nirāmayāḥ, Sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantū, Mā kashchit duḥkha bhāgbhavet. May all be prosperous and happy, May all be free from illness, May all see what is spiritually uplifting, May no one suffer.

Om Asato Maa Sad-Gamaya, Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya, Mrtyor-Maa Amrtam Gamaya. Lord lead me O Lord, from the Unreal to Reality, from the Darkness of Ignorance to the Light of Knowledge, and from the fear of Death to Knowledge of the Immortal self.

One of many Ramayan Chowpaees recited was Lord Rama's counsel to his brothers about the qualities that distinguish a good person from the bad. The first lines:

Karao kripnidhi ek dithaaee, Mai sewak tumha jan sukhdaee, Santanha kai, mahimaa raghuraee, Bahu bidhi bayd puraanaaha gaaee..... The Doha: *Taate sur seesanha chadut jag ballabh srikhand, Anal daahi peetat dhanahi parsu badan yah dand:* The conduct of saints and the wicked is similar to that of sandal wood and the axe. The axe cuts down a sandalwood tree, while the tree in return perfumes the axe with its fragrance. For this reason sandal wood paste finds its way to the heads of gods and is loved worldwide, while the axe has its steel edge heated in fire and beaten with a hammer as punishment.

Hindi Films, Songs and Quotations.

Hindi films are a treasure trove of timeless dialogues, and songs. From old films to the latest. From *Bombay ki Beti, Jhoola, Kismet, Rattan, Safar, Shaheed, Shabnam, Chandralekha, Albela, Barsaat, Andaz, Deedar, Mother India, to Aradhana, Namakharam, Aap Ki Kasam, Bobby, Sholay, Ham Appke Hain kown, Amar Akbar Anthony, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Bajrangi Bhaijaan,* and hundreds more.

Kabhi yaad karke gali paar karke chali aana, meaning roughly, 'Remember me sometimes and come across to my yard', was the super hit song from the film *Safar* screened just after the war. It drew crowds to Hindi films as never before. *Kabhi Yaad*, was so popular that it was the call name of our local carpenter and drum man. He was known as *Kabhi Yaar* from Skeldon to Parika. I did not know his real name. *Shaheed's Watan ki raah* became a house-hold song, so did all the songs from *Shabnam*. People knew the words by heart.

Sohani Raat from film *Dulari* has been the most timeless of all songs. In three funerals I have attended so far, *Suhani Raat* was played. At lots of get togethers, this and *Dil me chhupaa ke pyaar ka toofan le chale* from *Aan* are sure to be sung. I have fun with this cheeky song, from film *Phagun, Ek pardesi mera dil le gaya,*- A stranger took my heart away. When I feel sad I would listen to *Aayega aane waala* from film *Mahal*; more spiritual I listen to the bhajan *Tere mandir ka hoon deepak jal rahaa*- Dear Lord, I am a small lamp, glowing in your sanctuary. This song from the recent film *Dangal* opens up a well of tears. *Naina jo saanjhe khwaab dekhte the, naina bichhad ke aaj ro diye hain yun* - Eyes which used to share the same dreams, those eyes are crying on being separated.

Memorable quotations from Hindi film are also haunting. Here are bits of dialogue of deep meaning, starting with the film name.

Bharat Milap. Prem Adib: *Bhawna se kartabya ucha hai.* Duty is higher than emotion.

Devdas. Dilip Kumar: *Kaun kambakht bardaasht karne ko peeta hai? Main toh peeta hoon ke bas saans le saku.* Which cursed suffering is the reason for drinking, I drink just so that I can breathe.

Mother India. Sunil Dutt: *Tu mujhe nahin maar sakti. Tu meri maa hai,* You will not kill me. You are my mother. Nargis: *Mein pehle ek aurat hoon.* I am firstly a woman.

Pakeezah. Raj Kumar to Meena Kumari: *Aapke paon dekhe, bahut haseen hai. Inhe zameen par mat utariyega, maile ho jayenge.* I have seen your feet. They are beautiful. Please do not put them down on the ground. They will be soiled.

Deewar. Amitabh Bachchan: *Aaj mere paas gaadi hai, bungla hai, paisa hai... tumhare paas kya hai?* Shashi Kapoor: *Mere paas, mere paas... Maa hai...*

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai. Shahrukh Khan: *Hum ek baar jeete hai, ek baar marte hai, shaadi bhi ek baar hoti hai ... aur pyar ek baar hi hota hai.* We live once, we die once, we get married once ... and love also happens only once.

Hindi poetry reading is truly enjoyable. Understanding the words and phrases is a treat. I could listen all day to the choice words and dwell forever blissfully on their meaning. Another treat is hearing a simple talk in Hindi. Some words have such a nice sound, like this random selection: *shiromani* - eminent person, *abhinandan*- greeting, *awashya* - certainly, *anumatti* - permission, *dulaar*-love, *neel* -blue *kamal*- lotus, *komal*- tender, *eeshwer*- God, *mela*- fair, *chandan*- sandal wood. A greater treat for me is listening to old Hindi songs, film, geet, and ghazals, by the singing greats among them: Shamshad Begum, Geeta Roy, Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi, Mukesh, Talat Mahmood, Manna Dey, Kishore Kumar, Pankaj Mallick, K.L. Saigal, C.H.Atma, Jagjit Singh and so many others. Letting the words and music seep into my soul I enjoy moments that must be truly heavenly.

Knowing another language - benefits and enjoyment

It is nice to know another language. It is like having another skill. It is a window into another world. Generally my friends from India know at least three languages, their own provincial language, be it Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil or other, English and Hindi. I find many English friends can also converse in French. I heard that the foreign languages in demand in business staff are Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish. In the UK, in Wales where the Welsh language is widely spoken, the authorities are backing its learning and use for its substantial cultural and economic benefits. They say that speaking two or more languages is good for the brain.

I like to listen to spoken Hindi, and able to understand enjoy the dialogues in Hindi films and understand the meanings of the songs. When we sing Hindi songs, or bhajans or when we do hawan and recite mantras, I like to know the correct words and the meanings. A most important thing I am grateful for learning at my Hindi School at Rosignol was the basic alphabet Ka, Kha, Ga, Gha, in the devanagari script. That is the key. When I hear a Hindi word I do not recognise, I can look it up in the Hindi/English dictionary, and voila! If I did not know the script. I would be lost. So praise be! Long live Hindi Schools.

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Vidur Dindayal

Vidur Dindayal was born in Guyana and currently resides in the UK. He published *Guyanese Achievers USA & Canada: A Celebration*. A collaboration between Vidur Dindayal and the Guyanese diaspora *Guyanese Achievers, USA and Canada* celebrates the academics, actors, doctors, educators, entrepreneurs, and others who, by demonstrating inventiveness and persistence, have been recognized as exemplars of Guyanese achievement in North America.

