Bhojpurī

The fourth Bihari language, Bhojpurī, probably has a larger number of speakers, estimated at around 32 million by 1971 figures, and certainly has a much larger geographical extent than any other member of the Hindi family except Standard Hindi and Urdu. Nevertheless, until modern times it was almost completely ignored as a literary vehicle. Today there is literary activity in Bhojpurī but it is confined to a local audience with output divided between inexpensive collections of songs meant mostly for rural people and novels, plays, poetry, and stories meant for more serious literary consideration (Upādhyāy 1972:200-376). Since Standard Hindi, in addition to being the official language of India, is the state language of both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it does not seem very likely that there will be much variation in the status and use of Bhojpurī in the future. It will no doubt, however, continue to be the home language of most people living in the districts of Basti, Gorakhpur, Azamgarh, Deoriya (Devariyā), Balia, Gazipur, Varanasi, Mirzapur, and Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh and in Bhojpur, Gohtas, Siwan, Saran, Champaran, and Gopalganj in Bihar. Bhojpurī is also spoken in the strip of southern Nepal continguous with the Indian Bhojpurī-speaking districts (Lee n.d.).

During the last century and into the first two decades of the 20th century hundreds of thousands of Indian labourers settled under indenture schemes in countries outside of India. Since the largest single group of these workers, particularly in the mid 19th century when recruitment began, came from the BhojpurI area, it is natural that a lingua franca based on BhojpurI came to be the speech of the Indian communities in four overseas lands: Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, and Surinam. At the present time the form of BhojpurI spoken in Trinidad is moribund and the situation of BhojpurI in Guyana is not promising but the BhojpurI of Mauritius and that of Surinam are not only still healthy as spoken languages but have even seen the first stirrings of literary development, in spite of the disdain which many of their own speakers feel for them.

The following sentence from a formal speech serves as an excellent example of the use of the numeral classifier in modern educated Indian Bhojpuri usage (Upadhyay 1978:12):

Ajsekuch salpahilMarisasavaruBritishGainaiduTgotodayfrom some yearsbeforeMauritiusandBritishGuyanathesetwoCLFdesankepradhanmantrikeBhojpuribhailogcountriesofprimeministerofgreatofBhojpuribrotherpeople

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susobhit karat rahe. were adorning. Several years ago the high position of prime minister was filled by (our) fellow Bhojpurt people in both Mauritius and British Guyana.

Grierson's 19th century examples of Bhojpuri show the classifier as would be expected (Grierson 1884:100-108) but it does not appear in any of the Bhojpuri folksongs which he quotes (1884:109ff).

The numeral classifier is used in colloquial Mauritian Bhojpuri as in the quotation given below from a recipe. The orthography is an informal one that is based on French which is used when Mauritian Bhojpuri is written in Roman script. The quotation also gives an idea of the degree to which Mauritian Bhojpuri has borrowed vocabulary from the Creole of Mauritius (Usha Devi 1974).

doogo baré baré chouchou léké oobal ya bouille kar dihaja. two-CLF big big chouchou having-boil or boil do taken (Bhojpuri (Creole word) word) Take two good-sized chouchou² and bring them to a boil.

The Bhojpuri of Surinam, which is printed in a writing system based on Dutch spelling, also has the numeral classifier (Dihal 1976:2):

hattie howehe djaise ekgo ghar ke dewal. elephant is like one-CLF house of wall An elephant is like the wall of a house.

2. We are indebted to Philip Baker who is compiling a dictionary of Mauritian Creole for the identification of the chouchou as the fruit of the Sechium edulis.

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