

6th Sir Moti Tikaram Memorial Lecture

The University of Fiji hosted then 6th Sir Moti Tikaram Lecture on Friday, September 27, 2019 at Saweni Campus.

This year's lecture was delivered by Professor Subramani on the topic "Fiji's Endangered Hindi". He made a very strong statement on the predicament of vernacular languages in Fiji, and said both iTaukei and Hindi are rapidly disintegrating towards becoming endangered languages; iTaukei because the spoken language is not enriched by written literature, and the amount of writing it is very small, hardly enough to fill a single shelf in a library; and Hindi is in equally dire state because the number of students taking Hindi programs is dwindling at secondary and university levels, and the knowledge of Devanagari in the community and, in particular, among young people is fast fading. The situation is alarming yet there appears to be no great anxiety in the communities, or among educators which is a worrying fact. What is at stake is the social and spiritual welfare of the people in Fiji. They have to realize vernacular languages are human resources, and are part of human rights, they contain the memory and history of the communities, and they are essential for wholesome and cohesive existence of the communities.

Unfortunately our education as a whole lacks far-sighted vision. We have not probed deeply on what is worth knowing and learning. Nothing very profound has changed since the colonial government established the education system, and marginalized the vernacular languages making English, 'the language of money and power'; not only the means of communication, but also the tool for examining our intellectual and spiritual life. Postcolonial education means rehabilitating our language and culture. And that rehabilitation hasn't started.

Professor Subramani was speaking about the two Fijian languages in the context of International Year of Indigenous Languages observed in 2019 to raise awareness of the plight of vernacular languages in the world.

However Professor Subramani's main subject was Sir Moti Tikaram who was a great proponent of multilingualism which he believed was the basis of multiculturalism. Professor Subramani gave new focus to Sir Moti's address to Hindi writers in 1998 at the University of the South Pacific. The following excerpt gives the general tenor of Professor Subramani's address:

"Sir Moti recognized that bilingualism greatly expands our knowledge horizon, but he had slightly different understanding in advocating multilingualism which is competence in three languages. He was thinking of diminishing the silence between the communities, the silence that had bred years of mistrust and prejudice. Breaking the silence means bridging the ethnic divide and being moved by each other's plight. The multilingual person is at once an insider and

outsider, and has multiple perspectives that can contribute towards reducing mutual fears and intolerance.”

We still don't have any strong discourse on multilingualism and multiculturalism in our civil society. For such ideas to take root in society there has to be vigorous conversations about the virtues of knowing three languages, giving us multiple perspectives or ways of looking at the world, thus allowing us the space to cultivate empathy and understanding. The lecture was meant to stimulate such conversations.

Professor Subramani spoke movingly about his own attempt to write novels in Hindi where he was able to document and archive spoken Hindi in Fiji.

“While writing in both English and in Hindi for creative purposes, I realized why I was dissatisfied with my work in English: to put it what simplistically, in English I was writing mostly from the head; in Hindi I was close to the human heart,” he said. Writing in the mother tongue allows one to express what is close to the human heart, and give form to those deep emotions that get lost in translation.

Professor Subramani closed his speech by emphasizing that it was a decisive moment for Hindi in Fiji. He didn't just analyze the situation; most importantly he put forward an agenda to restore and regenerate the vernacular languages. For this to happen, he said, language activists have to be trained who will cultivate a way of describing the issues involved in language maintenance, raise awareness at all levels, promote the work of documenting the language, and at the same time lobby with Government, University authorities and community leaders for proper place for vernacular languages, as enshrined in Fiji's Constitution. The language activists will be crusaders for the language who will perform the task of advocacy and empowerment. No doubt this is a monumental task. Therefore teams of field-workers will have to be prepared nation-wide.

A site where this work can begin immediately, before the vernacular languages lose more ground, and further erosion takes place, is the University of Fiji's Institute of Hindi Language and Culture Studies and the Centre for iTaukei Studies; they have the formal structure to start the work of training language activists. Of course there have to be many more such centres or sites throughout the country. Professor Subramani said, let this be the Fijian effort to deal actively with language endangerment in this International Year of Indigenous Languages.