

## A twist in the tongue

Dr. Herman Van Olphen gives native Hindi speakers a run for their money

Photo: V. Sudershan



### *Gift of grammar* Dr Herman Van Olphen

He might speak accented Hindi, but he knows the language better than those born to it. His pure Hindi comes as a bit of a shocker, not only because he is American, but because no one in India speaks with quite such a scholarly ring. Dr. Herman Van Olphen started studying Hindi in 1963 and became a scholar in the subject by doing a PhD in linguistics.

He has a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit and Urdu as well. Currently he is the director of the “Hindi Urdu Flagship” undergraduate program at the University of Texas in the U.S.

In New Delhi in connection with the project, Van Olphen says, “Opting for Hindi as a subject was completely co-incidental. Hindi is not that difficult a language. It has all the potential to be a global language since it is very much like Urdu. In fact, Hindi and Urdu are siblings. As India has a huge population, including NRIs, and a large section of the world’s population speaks Urdu, it has a great future.”

His favourite writer is Krishna Baldev Vaid, whom he knows personally. Authors such as Prem Chand and Rajendra Yadav also interest him.

### **Bollywood lover**

Can anyone interested in Hindi be unaffected by the great audiovisual phenomenon of Bollywood? Not surprisingly, Van Olphen is fascinated by Hindi films.

His favourites include *Mughal -e-Azam*, *Zanjeer*, *Teesri Kasam* and, recently, *Cheeni Kum*.

Commenting on the changing use of Hindi in commercial cinema, he says, “Initially, Hindi was used a lot. Movies such as *Mughal -e-Azam* used pure Urdu dialogues. A little bit of English has always existed in most Hindi movies. Now, the dialogues have become easy. There is no poetry in them.”

In short, an easier form of Hindi is being used, he comments.

Van Olphen says that sometimes he uses Hindi songs such as “Mere Sapnon ki Raani Kab Aaegi Tu” to explain tenses to his students in the U.S.

### An author

The professor has authored Hindi textbooks and grammar books, and works on Hindi linguistics and articles in newspapers.

From 1990 to 1998, he was associated with the American Institute of Indian Studies’ Advanced Hindi Language Program, for which he formulated the post graduate curriculum.

Van Olphen has also trained teachers. Full of enthusiasm, he is keen to write more books on Hindi grammar.

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