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In Search of a National Language: Literary Nationalism, Script Controversy and Nationalist Discourse in Colonial Northern India

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Abstract:

There is a general consensus among historians that Languages do not evolve naturally. Rather, it is constructed, protected and promoted by particular groups of individuals with the aim of keeping their socio-cultural identities alive. This in turn help them in projecting themselves as a unique and distinct community. Certainly, as languages cannot remain alive for greater length of time, unless they are in particular written forms. Thus, languages acquire a new fixity only when it is printed through a particular script. The development of nationalism in late nineteenth century Northern India also brought to the centre stage of national discussion the question of national language. Thus, the paper highlights how the search of national language promoted the language nationalism and controversy between two languages—Hindi and Urdu, and their script. While Hindi and Urdu eventually became the representatives of Hindus and Muslims respectively, Hindi took a lead because of its wide base and political support. The paper also mentions how Kaithi, an equally popular and prominent script, was side-lined and ignored in the whole debate on the language nationalism in India.

Keywords: Nationalism, language, script

1. Introduction

The linkage between the region and nation, literature and literacy, canonicity and criticism language and Identity has been the characteristic of modern society. Language is not simply a medium of communication but it evolved as a tool for organising people under one umbrella during the emergence of nationalism. It became the question of identity, power and political confrontation among different strata of society. Further it gave birth to the endless controversy between Official language and people's language.ⁱ

In India language controversy was a by-product of colonial policy, multi lingual Indians responses and elite interests. The late 19th century discussion on determining national language and script progressively took the shape of creating national literature and identity by the 1920s. However, this transformation was not as simple. In this course of changing stances emerging bourgeoisie-middle class, changing modes of production, political power, and colonial contravention in the wake of World War created a new pathway for literature and language. United Provinces, Bihar and other parts of northern India became the centre of all this transformation, complexity and controversy regarding language, script and politics.

2. Language Nationalism and Theoretical Aspect

Language movements and the politics of language are inherently and necessarily associated with the modern state and modern politics. Symbolic linguistic aspects of power, domination and global political economy has suggested a link between language and the material world.ⁱⁱ The rise of modern nation-state cannot be understood without taking into account the historical reconstruction of languages and their uses as a marker of difference. Several linguistic practices were prescribed and legitimized to enforce the process of social, cultural and political differentiation among people belonging to distinct racial and cultural communities. In India, regional identities based on language affiliation can at times marginalize the dominant caste identities and can thus create Para-communities of those speaking the same language or a dominant speech of the region.

Any form of public recognition of a language, should serve three distinctive interest of 'communication', 'symbolic affirmation' and 'identify promotion' of various language groups in a multilingual society.ⁱⁱⁱ Asha Sarangi (Language and politics in India: Themes in Politics, 2010) explained that modern states have used the "modus operandi" of market to create symbols and forms to institutionalize the national language and to delegitimize the patois, creoles, pidgins and common non-standard language. Because it is the state which controls, promotes and even propagates an intricate system of language and paroles of written and spoken forms, and corrects the pronunciation of the language through the variety of official sanctions and cultural practice.

At the same time, language question is directly related to group and community rights and identities. It is a question of rights, representations, and resources drawn on the social and political privileges and powers enjoyed by some languages and their users over

others. At times, the problematic of the politics of language has been viewed in the broader context of “elite competition” and different language movements were seen as political strategies pursued by emerging elites in multinational states whose goal was to replace the existing established elites at the centre of political power. When culturally reified structures collide with the process of modernization and social reform in the attainment of political ends, cultural nationalism shows its regressive aspect. The requirements of a modern state and the aspiration of the masses are hardly compatible with a nostalgic retreat into culture.^{iv} This is very relevant in anti-colonial struggles where a culturally imagined unification worked side by side with mass mobilization. We have to go through with idea of language nationalism in colonial respects because in nation-state this was a basic tool for national movement example as in Ireland, Italy, Germany, and even in India. However the structure and consequence of language nationalism in these countries were different to each other.

Nation is derived from Latin word ‘natio’. Natio was used in the middle ages particularly to distinguish communities of foreigners at the newly formed universities. After the ‘middle ages’ nation was initially used in Germany and France to designate the ruling classes, in opposition to the *volk* or people. The concept of ‘nation’ took more abstract meaning and clearer political ascription from the sixteenth century. The use of the word to mean the “whole people of a country” was in evidence from the early seventeenth century. As Raymond William suggested, ‘realm’, kingdom’ and ‘country’ continued to be more common until the late eighteenth century.^v Unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers like Marx or Webbers. This ‘emptiness’ easily gives rise, among cosmopolitan and poly-lingual intellectuals, to a certain condescension. “Nationalism is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”^{vi}

The nation-constructing process in multicultural societies always begins with a single central symbol, which may be either language, or religion, or color, or any other cultural or ethnic marker, whichever serves simultaneously to separate one group to another and is at same time politically convenient. Language politics and language movements, in north India above all, took second place though they development simultaneously alongside politicized religious movements.^{vii} The distinction between nationalism and nationism has been made by Fishman (1968) to explain different senses of the term nationalism and to show the relation-ship between language and nationalism in order to understand the language problems of developing nations. According to Fishman the term nationalism pertains simultaneously to nation and to nationality which may be reconsidered as corresponding to politico-geographic entity and socio cultural integration. It does not concern us here whether the distinction adequately accounts for the different senses of nationalism. What is significant is that it neither clarifies the relationship between language and nationalism nor provides an understanding of language problems of developing nations. Furthermore, it has served an ideological function in projecting the role of the ex-colonial language. He divides all developing nations into three types, and in each case argues the need for a Language of Wider Communication to foster nationalism. Type A nations require such a language or the ex-colonial language because they have no "great tradition;" type B nations require it because they have one "great tradition" which is not developed enough; and type C nations (which includes India) require it because they have several "great traditions" which are in competition with one another and hence require the ex-colonial language to overcome the rivalry between them. Thus, irrespective of his earlier assumption that nationism may divert attention from the mother-tongue principle, Fishman has given more importance to it, which makes the ex-colonial language indispensable to the unity of developing nations.^{viii}

Eric Hobsbawm gives a full picture in his milestone book “Nation and Nationalism Since 1780” that language plays an important role in nationalism. He makes three phases to show development of national movement. The Nineteenth century phase ‘A’ was purely cultural, literary and folkloric and no particular political or even national implications. In phase ‘B’ we find a body of pioneers and militants of ‘the national idea’ and the beginnings of political campaigning for this idea. But most important and for colonised country the third phase ‘C’ when – and not before – nationalist programmes acquire mass support. This mass support is result of growing consciousness that nationalist always claim that they represent. Benedict Anderson^{ix} shows the most important role of print behind this consciousness.

3. The Indian Case

In India like any colonial country nationalism was possible only after the introduction of English education in 1835 but it took shape after 1854 Charles Woods’ Dispatch where vernacular language gained some importance. That means vernacular languages played a main role in creating consciousness and “belonging togetherness”. But Indian national movement could not handle this vernacular controversy in North India. The reason behind this was the policy of Congress which used language conflict and the related identity issues as a tool for acquiring control over the freedom movement and Britisher’s policy made the situation worse. Hindi–Urdu conflict was the result of national language issues which provide a background for further differentiation between Hindu and Muslims on issue of language and identity. Partha Chatterjee discussed Indian nationalism as a derivative discourse. He divided derivative discourse in three stage “moment of departure”, “moment of manoeuvre” and moment of arrival”.^x In literary field we can see the development of novel, short stories and others western ideology which were introduced in Indian vernacular literature in the last decades of 19th century. In moment of departure, the awareness and acceptance of an essential cultural difference between east and west is peculiar phenomena and in spite of materialistic and spiritualistic debate nationalist accepted the western way of thought. Because of introduction of English education, English literature in the form of novels, plays, histories, poetry, grammars, biographies were made available in India in order to expedite Macaulay's educational strategy after 1835. Between 1850 and 1864, the import of British books and printed matters by India increased by 120 percent.^{xi}

At the same time, literary development in colonial India mostly depended on regulations and liberty of press. The 1830s inaugurated a new era of liberal policy under Governor General Lord William Bentinck and subsequently Charles Metcalfe. The Ordinance of 1823 which controlled and restricted the freedom of press was replaced by liberal Act IX of 1835. Later to counter act the seditious

potential of the press, Lord Canning hastily enacted the so called 'Gagging Act' in June 1857, reintroducing the licence system and renewing the strict censorship provisions of the Adam regulations of 1823. The Government was given discretionary powers to grant and revoke licences at any time and to prohibit the publication of any newspaper, book, or printed pamphlet. However it was lifted after a year.

The policy adopted by the government soon after the Mutiny of 1857 gave printers almost complete freedom. As a result, the domestic book trade flourished. Rather than restoring to the law, the colonial state increasingly relied on a new kind of mechanism to retain control over the activities of Indian Publishers. Government patronage became the single most important means of rewarding "loyal" editors and publishers, particularly those who collaborated in the colonial scheme of disseminating 'useful' literature. Withdrawal of patronage, on the other hand, proved an equally effective means of control. Legislation during the period was largely supportive of the growth of regional – language printing and regulation rather than restrictive kind. This is clearly evident in the most important law of the period, the "Regulation of Printing Press and Newspaper Act XXV of 1867 (renamed 'Press and Registration of Books Act' after its amendment in 1890).^{xii}

The significance of the 'Regulation of printing Press and Newspaper act XXV' of 1867 lies not only in its provision of an elaborate legal frame work for the production and registration of books. It led to the first systematic attempt at a quantitative and qualitative registration of all literary and non – literary printed publications in Indian languages. Starting from 1868, the scheme initially took the form of "Quarterly Publication Lists" compiled separately for each province.^{xiii}

As in metropolitan Britain, book registration and copyright protection in colonial India derived from mechanisms originally developed to control the press. Copyright legislation in India dates back to the Indian copyright Act of 1847 (Act XX of 1847), which was to affirm the application to India of the law obtaining in the British dominions, notably the copyright Act 1842 and the international copyright Act of 1844. Copyright Act fixed the term of Copyright at forty two years from the date of publication. These colonial policy however constructed and regulated the fate of Indian literature but the nationalist discourse and provincial politics also effected Indian literature mainly through the question of national language and the search of script.

4. Search of National Language and Literary Controversy

The language question is obviously related to group and community rights and identities. It is a question of rights, representations, and resources drawn on the social and political privileges and powers enjoyed by some languages and their users. The massive Linguistic Survey of India listed 179 languages while the 1921 Census of India recorded 188 languages.^{xiv} The concept of a national language was initially introduced by the British and applied to the Indian situation. In the complex linguistic situation in the country, the British perception initiated a process which, in the case of Hindustani, quickly lay to a split and to the creation of Hindi and Urdu, as the national languages of Hindus and Muslims respectively and to their subsequent development as two autonomous print languages. The term "national language" is unavoidable, though it is ambiguous. In its general sense it corresponds to the idea of "nation". In a more restricted and specific sense it refers to communication at the central government level. Hindi as the national language denoted this usage at the all-India level and contrasted with the use of regional languages as national languages. In nationalist terms, language and literature were the means to define and communicate the agenda for progress, and the strength of literature showed the strength of nation. Hindi was singled out as bearer of peculiar values of Hindi tradition and the means to reach out to and unite the whole population. Early efforts at the self-definition of Hindi implied in fact a threefold process of separation from Urdu, standardization and historicisation.

The rivalry between Hindi and Urdu led to the development of their respective language associations. Nagari Pracharini Sabha, founded in 1893, developed into a vigorous organization by associating itself increasingly with the prominent leaders of the national movement who promoted the cause of Hindi as a national language. Another Hindi language association, the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, was founded in 1910. It primarily engaged in educational activities and developed an extensive network of examinations in different provinces of India, thus playing a significant role in the popularization and spread of Hindi. Mahatma Gandhi established Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha and Rashtira Bhasha Prachar Samiti in 1918 and 1936 respectively, both of which made a substantial contribution to the spread of Hindi in the southern Indian states. Thus the Hindi language associations have consolidated the position of Hindi, enhanced its national stature, and promoted its development and spread.

Banaras is long framed in India as a centre of Hindu learning and religious pilgrimage. In early nineteenth century the city had also become a major centre of Hindi literature. Bhartendu Harishchandra and Raja Shiv Prasad were only two of the most eminent literary figures of the second half of the century to live in Banaras. In last phase of 19th century Sanskritized Hindi appeared as an important symbol of Hindu nationalism. This is evident from the foundation of Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Banaras in 1893. After 1894, Madan Mohan Malaviya, in particular, concentrated for the promotion of the Nagari script and spent three years on writing over court character and primary education in the North Western Provinces and Oudh. At the same time, several of the lectures of the cow protection movement, who had previously propagated the Congress message in his campaigns, disappeared from view with the subsidence of the Gaurakshini Sabhas.^{xv} The majority of the members of Nagari Pracharini Sabha of Banaras came from the eastern part of the North Western Provinces and Oudh. It remained the single most influential force for Hindi until the eve of World War I. By 1914 Banaras had become the major centre for Hindu – heritage languages, well ahead of Allahabad in Hindi and in Sanskrit–Hindi publications, and far ahead of any other centre of Sanskrit, while Lucknow led in Islamic – heritage. Premchand, a renowned literary figure, shifted from Urdu to Hindi literary writing.

After the War a gradual decline in membership of Sabha started and it allowed the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (society for Hindi literature) of Allahabad to become the premier Hindi institution. This shift from Banaras to Allahabad also roughly coincided with a shift in the scope of the controversy between Hindi and Urdu from the provincial to the national level.^{xvi} This shift was the result of

provincial Congress politics. In Banaras, the existence of a much larger and self – conscious Bengali community of more recent immigration ensured that the swadeshi and boycott movements would soon find an echo.

But in Allahabad, there were no market stir before October 1906; all India political leaders began to make their way to the town. After Tilak's visit, a new, unreliable, but powerful element of student radicalism became a force in the politics of Allahabad.^{xvii} The development of Allahabad as a seat of literature and journalism started during the last years of the nineteenth century. By then, Allahabad had already become a centre of administration, commerce and political activity. Major contribution to the growth of Allahabad as a literary centre was made by the journal *Saraswati*, started by the Indian Press of Allahabad in 1900. Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who became its editor in 1903 and remained till 1921 made it a unique medium of literary expression. Its readership was constituted by the heterogeneous citizenry of the urban centres consisting of educated elements from landed or money lending castes, families of men employed in government offices and professionals in law, medicine, and teaching. Though these groups belonged mostly to the upper castes, we call them heterogeneous to highlight the fact that they included families rooted in the countryside as well as families supported by the urban employment.

4.1. The Forgotten Script

Nationalism as a historical reality is not entirely homogenous, and its axis shifts according to the political demands and exigencies of different periods.^{xviii} Prominence of Hindi and of the Nagari script increased partly as the expression of a Hindu nationalism. However, the Nagari Pracharini Sabha claim that 'Devnagari' was most popular script in northern India was far from reality. Kaithi script was most popular among the literary professionals. Even, Urdu was also used to be written in Kaithi script (see the Figure1). Kaithi was the traditional script of the Bhojpuri and Magahi languages, and the popular script of the Awadhi and Maithili languages. At present, these languages are written in Devanagari. Kaithi script was also used to write Urdu or the "Hindustani" lingua franca, although now the Perso-Arabic script is associated with Urdu.

The first impetus of growth was the standardization of written Kaithi in 1875 by the government of North Western Provinces and Oudh for the purpose of adapting the script for use in formal education. The second was the selection of Kaithi by the government of Bihar as the official script of the courts and administrative offices of the Bihar districts in 1880. Thereafter, Kaithi replaced the Persian script as the writing system of record in the judicial courts of Bihar. Additionally, on account of the rate of literacy in Kaithi, the governments of Bihar and North Western Provinces and Oudh advocated Kaithi as the medium of written instruction in their primary schools. Believing Kaithi to be the most widespread script in the province, as evidenced by the flourishing condition of the indigenous school teaching, the government ordered the creation of a font Kaithi type and by 1881 had prescribed Kaithi for primary vernacular schools.^{xix}

However, the Kaithi was also a Nagari script. The term Nagari is also polysemic and refers to the western script family that that evolved from the Gupta Brahmi script, the other two being the northern-western Sharada and the eastern Gaudi, or proto-Bengali, the ancestor of Kaithi. The scripts that descended from the Nagari script may be considered to be of the $n^{-}agar^{-}1$ class. Therefore, since Kaithi is descended from the Nagari branch of Gupta, it is accurate to state that the $kaith^{-}1$ class of scripts are a subtype of the $n^{-}agar^{-}1$ class, or that Kaithi is a Nagari script just as Devanagari is a Nagari script.^{xx}(see, Figure1 and Figure2).

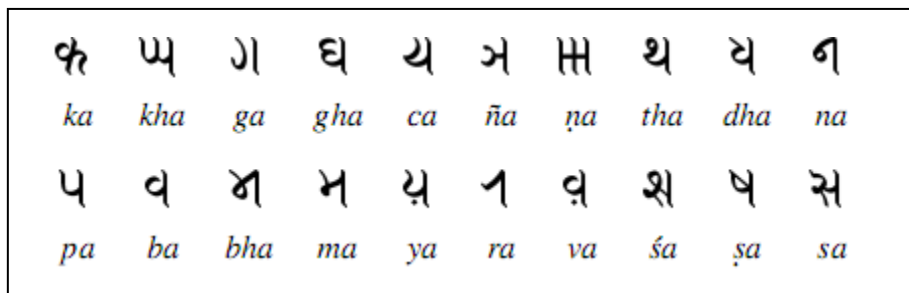


Figure1: Kaithi Script

The decline of Kaithi is generally attributed to the socio-political conditions of colonial India. In 1893, the Government of Bengal bowed to pressure from advocates of Devanagari and cancelled its earlier dictate regarding the exclusive use of Kaithi, but by 1894, the government reversed its decision and restored the official position of Kaithi on the grounds that there were insufficient numbers of professionals fluent in Devanagari, the majority of whom knew only Kaithi. The political characterisation of scripts in north India led to the decline of Kaithi. In the early 20th century, organizations such as the Nagari Pracharini Sabha advocated the exclusive use of Hindi in Devanagari over regional languages and scripts. Thus, the linkage of Hindi exclusively with Devanagari was a phenomenon that owed its origins primarily to the politics and sentiments of the past century. The Nagari Pracharini Sabha was largely successful in explaining Devanagari as the dominant script. The District Gazetteer of Purnea of 1963 stated that while the Devanagari script was widely used and the Kaithi script was declining in its use

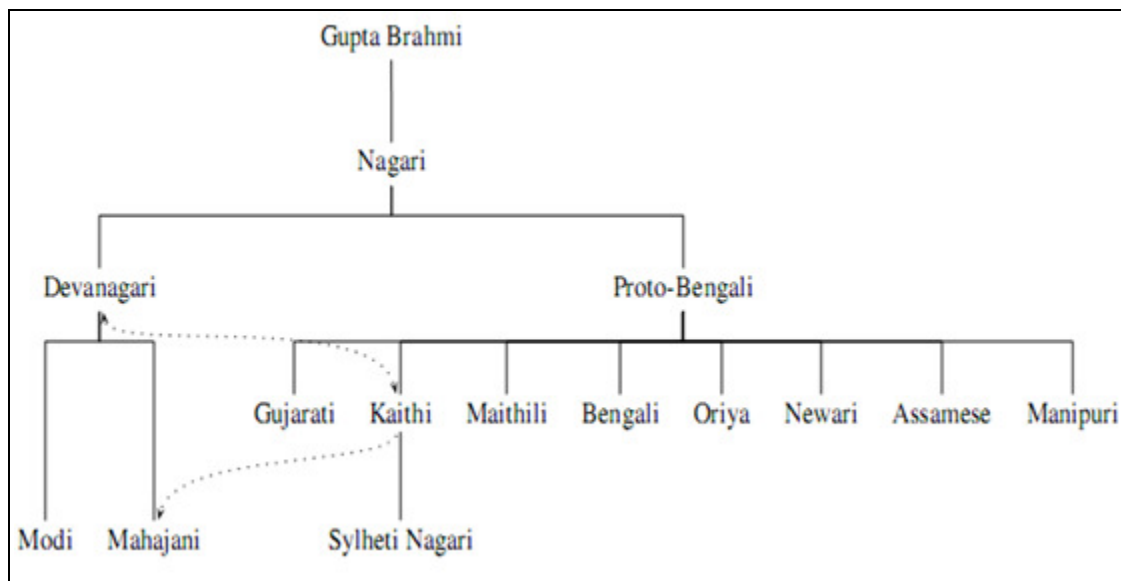


Figure 2: Relationship of Kaithi to Selected Nagari-based Scripts

Source: Anshuman Pandey, 'Proposal to Encode the Kaithi Script', see, <http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2007/07199-kaithi.pdf>, accessed on 10th February 2015

5. Conclusion

The introduction of English education and thereafter growing nationalism had an impact on language politics. It is clear that the search of national Language took the shape of controversy among Hindi and Urdu language in the form of Hindu and Muslim representation respectively. Hindi claimed full-fledged literary, social and official status and distinguished itself from Urdu. Meanwhile a more popular Kaithi script was forgotten because of the lack of political support that Hindi had enjoyed.

6. Acknowledgement

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