Language as Identity in Colonial India

"The Indian awakening, our distinctive path to independence as Sengupta recalls, envisaged quilts of interwoven languages expressing a rich, multi-textured landscape. British rule used tools of colonial enumeration like the census to compartmentalize Indians into sharply separated languages and religions along Westphalian lines. Naive nationalistic unity-mongering today – Sengupta argues – inadvertently reinforces colonial compartmentalization, losing sight of that very landscape we must cherish and strengthen to achieve the uniquely Indian take-off we are destined for. A compelling argument."

—Prof. Probal Dasgupta, *Head, Linguistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata*

"Papia Sengupta draws our attention to a very serious concern as how non-recognition of linguistic identity can become a source of discrimination, violence, harassment and torture. It is this action of submerging the diversity and plurality that brings in chaos and disturbance in Indian society. Her book may serve as a wakeup call to the Indian administration which is happy to forget that the strongest ecosystems in the world are those which are most diverse."

—Prof. Anvita Abbi (Padma Shri), *Adjunct Professor, Simon Fraser University, B.C. Vancouver, Canada*

"Multilingualism has been a long-standing characteristic of Indian society, and its persistence during the post-colonial era is not surprising. What is surprising though is the transformation in the Indian sense of identity, the nation's self-perception, during the colonial period. Dr. Sengupta's well documented study reveals the sequential emergence of the linguistically embedded sense of identity brings home the new burden that language is brought to carry in the nation-India. A systematically presented argument, proposing a compelling thesis, this work is a must-read for every scholar interested in Indian nationalism and Indian multilingualism."

—Prof. G N Devy, Chair, *People's Linguistic Survey of India*

"Papia Sengupta's *Language as Identity in Colonial India* explores the consequences of linguistic policies from the early history of the East India Company to the present. It unfolds the multi-faceted effects of governmental action in refusing linguistic recognition, from small tribes to peoples across wide regions, which have inflicted psychological damage to individuals and economic inequality across states. This ambitious work analyzes the driving forces of language policies shaping the history and society of the Indian subcontinent."

—Samuel Cohn, *Professor of History, University of Glasgow; Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Advance Studies at Edinburgh, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*

Papia Sengupta

Language as Identity in Colonial India

Policies and Politics

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For Maa, Jayanta, Aparna and Sharmista

PREFACE

India is often held to be an ideal model of linguistic diversity management. The country has been organized territorially into units called states, based on the majority language spoken in the area. This is so celebrated that it has been termed by Niraja G. Jayal as, "indeed among the more successful experiments of institutional engineering in the history of modern India" (Jayal 2006, p. 47). The rise of the right wing, especially with its emphasis on making Sanskrit mandatory in school curriculums, raises doubts regarding the success of the languages model in India, but most political scientists seem skeptical about language becoming an issue of conflict; therefore no alarm is being raised.

Scholars take note of sub-nationalism and ethnic conflicts common to India without considering the role that language plays. This is surprising, as language has been at the forefront of movements demanding separate states in India from the 1950s onwards. This began with agitation for the formation of a Telugu majority state of Andhra in 1953; then there was violence over the division of the Bombay Presidency into the Gujarati-speaking area of Gujarat and Marathi majority Maharashtra, and agitations demanding the separation of Hindi-speaking Haryana from the rest of the Gurmukhi dominant areas of Punjab. The entire northeast faced serious violent uprisings, the solution to which was the carving out of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur from erstwhile Assam. Language was not only a factor in north and northeast India, but was central to the demand for a separate state of Himachal Pradesh. Three new states (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand) were formed in the year 2000 with language playing a role in the consolidation of the movements that

ultimately led to separate state formation. In 2003 the Bodoland Territorial Council Accord was signed by the Indian government, announcing the formation of the Bodo Autonomous Council. Among other demands there was provision for the establishment of a Bodo (language) university in Bodoland. These developments explain the inclusion of the Santhali, Manipuri and Bodo languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Presently Gorkhaland is simmering, and there is news of fresh agitation for a separate state of Tirpraland in Tripura.

Language has figured prominently in politics, education, economics and post-independence conflicts over distribution of resources and territories in India. Thus, the lack of interest in and publications on language issues and identity in India in the last two decades of the twentieth century, comes as a surprise. This book has emerged out of my concern regarding the role of language in identity formation and how linguistic identity affects one's well-being in an age where identity has taken center-stage in world politics. Language identity construction remains critical to debates on citizenship, belongingness and upward mobility in society and market, while being equally crucial in accessing basic human needs such as health, education, employment and social justice and rights. Language is not just an academic endeavor that needs to be studied, probed and analyzed, but it is a way of life. Living well depends on language, as not being able to communicate in the dominant language(s) of state can be detrimental to the socio-economic health of individuals and communities. Minority language speakers are often discriminated against owing to their lack of fluency in the official language of the state. This puts a question mark on language use in the education policy followed by the Indian state, which recognizes the language spoken by the majority as the official language. In turn this becomes the medium of instruction and of interview for public services, often leading to disadvantage for and discrimination against the indigenous linguistic communities. Language defines individual identity, and one's linguistic (dis)abilities often lead to a lack of prestige and confidence. Axel Honneth (1995, p. xii) claimed that "how we view ourselves is dependent on others," and that the majority may not assign status and equal respect to tribal languages, thereby affecting the personality development of individuals belonging to such linguistic communities. Language is a daily need, and day-to-day activities such as filing application forms for school admissions, opening bank accounts, sending money orders and utilizing judicial mechanisms, health

services and transport facilities cannot be enjoyed fully if written in a language unknown to individuals and communities.

Language in India: The Colonial Continuum

India became independent in 1947 but it continued to follow the colonial masters in many ways in terms of administrative machinery, legal codes and legislative practices. Post-colonial India continued with most administrative structures and legal codes as followed during colonial rule. The colonial policy of linguistic hierarchization prevalent during colonial times with English occupying the highest position in the language ladder, remained with the exception that Hindi and English both were recognized as official languages of the Indian Union. The identification of intellectual and political elites as speakers of major official languages still prevails in Indian politics. In contemporary India, the parliamentary right of members to address and ask questions in their own mother tongue is often not guaranteed owing to technical inadequacies in recruiting translators and interpreters. If parliamentarians are not guaranteed the right to speak in their mother tongue, imagine the plight of common citizens.

The dominance of English may have become a global phenomenon in recent years, but in India it existed even before independence. I am not anti-English or anti-any language and believe that the equality of all individuals and languages may be an idealistic dream, but we should not disown this dream and become players of market forces. Built into languages are meaning systems, values, the aspirations of people who speak them. Languages enfold in themselves the whole world for their speakers. While I take note of the arguments presented by scholars who critique language preservation and maintenance as high cost and too idealistic in today's world, which is dictated by economics, I simply pose the question whether, in the materialistic societies we live in, all human values should be weighed by a cost–benefit analysis. In addition, should powerful cultures and languages rule the whole of humanity in the name of efficiency and economic opportunities, thereby opposing all diversities of the human race? Are we moving toward a future where the poor will have no right to survive and sustain themselves?

Some Provocations

My interest in language and language-based identities as a source of discrimination grew out of certain events which shook me deeply. First, I came across news of a young child from Jharkhand who was beaten regularly by her mother for speaking her mother tongue. The rationale was that Hindi, the medium of instruction at school, was considered by the mother to be a prestige language and language of opportunity. She opined that if her daughter spoke her native tongue she would bring humiliation upon herself and that her economic opportunities would be adversely affected. Similarly, during my fieldwork in Belgaum I came across an elderly lady waiting for a bus at the bus station. When a bus arrived she got up and asked the conductor in Marathi about the route the bus took. I assumed she was illiterate, but on inquiring I discovered she was a qualified graduate who was educated in Marathi, her mother tongue. However, all the bus route numbers were written in Kannada, the official language of the state, which she couldn't read. This incident made me realize that not only education but knowledge of an official language is mandatory even for something as mundane as traveling by bus. This brings me to a central question: what is a language? From the Indian state's perspective languages spoken by under 10,000 people are not considered languages; they are mother tongues, and they are not mentioned in any public policy statements. The three-language formula followed by most states as the principle on which language education is based mentions mother-tongue education in primary classes, but the criterion for the recruitment of language teachers is based on the ratio of 1:40; that is, one teacher only if forty students opt for the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. This remains a substantial hurdle that is cited by most states as the reason for not granting mother-tongue education to all children: in general, parents opt for the official language as the medium of instruction, keeping in mind the economic opportunity rationale. These parents cannot be blamed for wanting a bright future for their children; but the downside is that many languages become extinct. This is partly because communities often choose the dominant language for education, in order to give future generations better opportunities, and partly, and more directly, because state policies elevate the dominant language at the cost of minority ones.

In a practice unique to India, languages are listed as scheduled and non-scheduled—according to their inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This is an arbitrary categorization that affects the

survival of many languages. The number of scheduled languages is currently (2017) twenty-two, and there are 100 non-scheduled languages. The non-scheduled languages are spoken by more than 10,000 people, but if this figure drops below 10,000 persons then the language's plight is clear. It is no longer mentioned in the decadal census nor in any other governmental document, thereby making it officially invisible. Most tribal languages fall into this category of non-recognized and uncounted languages. Such non-recognition remains a significant reason behind tribal poverty and illiteracy in India. The politics of recognition, Charles Taylor (1992, p. 25) rightly pointed out, begins with the demand for acknowledging the existence of cultural–linguistic communities. Non-recognition of these identities leads to ethnic-movements and violent agitations, and is the cause of malnutrition, infant mortality and impoverishment among India's indigenous population.

Linguistic fanaticism has grown in many parts of India. The Maharashtra Navnirman Sena issued a diktat to the traders of Mumbai to paint shops' signboards in Marathi. Non-compliance invited looting and burning. There have been violent incidents against people belonging to the northeastern states of India in Bangalore and other parts of India on the pretext that they are foreign and do not belong to India. The pan-Indian identity mooted by the national political parties is in friction with the sub-national and regional identities rooted in ethnicity, language and culture. The recent rise of the rhetoric of nationalism is intrinsically interwoven with knowledge of a language and religion. Modernity, as Sanjib Baruah (2001, p. xix) stated, "is not a historical but geographical term" wherein the mass slaughter of people speaking a particular language and belonging to a religious community is "a form of political expression." Such a situation demands urgent attention in order to delve into, probe and elucidate the relationship that language has with culture and identity, to express and elaborate the critical nature that language has in terms of nation and nationality and political gimmicks, without ignoring the fact that language plays an important role in political movements: these rise owing to discrimination and injustice that are faced because of one's cultural–linguistic affiliation.

A deeper understanding of present language problems in India demands revisiting colonial policies and politics, as contemporary language issues has their roots in the colonial period. The book aims to fulfill the gap which exists in contemporary literature in India. Few monographs have been dedicated principally to linguistic politics in colonial India, to closely examining the inseparable relation of language and identity construction

that is inherent to the development of nationalism. However, some major works on language development in different regions of India have been published by historians in the last two decades. Remarkable among them are Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue* (1997), Christopher R. King, *One Language and Two Scripts* (1999), Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty* (2000), Chitralekha Zutshi, *Language of Belonging* (2003), Martha Selby and Indira Vishwanathan (eds.), *Tamil Geographies* (2008) and Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotions and Politics in South India* (2009)[1]. A single work elaborating colonial language policy and its impact on identity construction in India is absent, however. I investigate here the following questions. How did the colonial policy elevate language from being a social marker to a political one? How did language play a critical role in the development of intellectual elites in India—this process falling into the same colonial trap created by the patriarchal beliefs of the colonizers? Why can the construction of different self(s) in India be attributed to developments in Indian historiography written in vernacular languages? This has relevance today, as most of the diverse social groupings in India emanated during the colonial period. How did scientific categorization by the colonial administrators lead to language becoming an integral identity marker? Language was a part of the nation-state design, and was carried forward as such by independent India's political leaders. Post-independence Indian politics witnessed the rise of regionalism and separatism, with language forming the core of most such movements. This could be why language has been neglected by political thinkers in Indian academia, as it was identified with separatism and regional fervor. Indeed, India underwent reorganization of her territory on a linguistic basis. I do not claim that this has resolved all issues, but argue that language is as integral to politics in India as religion, and scholars cannot afford to neglect this critical aspect of shaping politics.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to rethink language as an identity marker, not only at individual level but in the community and the nation. The work does not prescribe a formula but aims to initiate serious public debate on language and its use in public and private spaces in India. How can linguistic identity and its non-recognition become a source of discrimination, violence, harassment and torture? I believe the plausible answers can be found through democratic debate and deliberation, which remain the

most constructive means of reaching consensus through the voicing of a variety of opinions, while at the same time respecting the views of those who are not in agreement. Diversity and difference need to be respected, as people belong to different cultures, follow varied faiths and speak diverse languages. But humanity demands that diversity and difference are given due recognition as shaping identities that make humans human.

Chapter 1 begins with the theoretical underpinnings that link language to identity, drawing on different strands of philosophical thinking from ancient and modern times. I argue that linguistic identity is critical to human understanding as well as to conflicts about space and territoriality in the contemporary world. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the historical background of language during pre-colonial to colonial times in Bengal and other regions of India. Translations of Indian texts in English paved the way for British penetration into Indian society, transforming the East India Company from a trading company to a private ruling agency through the use of language, colonizing not just Indian markets but minds. This was to have a very long-term impact on the future of Indian thinking and knowledge production. Chapter 4 analyzes the East India Company's adoption of the surveying and data collection of Indian castes, languages and race as the initial steps to gain knowledge about the society. I discuss how the tools of data collection relating to language and religion in India, in the form of census and surveys conducted by British officials, became useful tools for the categorization and stratification of India's population. This chapter examines the role of newspapers, intellectual writings in the development of nationalistic fervor in India. It also looks at colonial policies on language and education, and their impact on the development of intellectual elites in India from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries.

Chapter 5 explores the evolution and development of multiple selves in India, showing how nationalism was not a mere culmination or coming together of different strands of regional aspirations but always had a plural flavor, showcasing plurality as inseparable from Indian identity. The development of education in the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the rise of feminist voices, subaltern cries and the marching songs of nationalists, as well as indigenous poetry, verses and storytelling. In addition, there was the unique experiment of a non-violent path, which took India to its desired destination of political independence from colonial rule. Chapter 6 scrutinizes how language was used both by the colonizers and the nationalists for their respective political endeavors. This chapter

elucidates India's linguistic journey from the perspective and understanding of language as politics. I discuss the centrality of language in post-independent India. The voices of members of the Constituent Assembly who were arguing for recognition of diverse Indian languages were dominated by arguments and nation-building narratives that prioritized national security and integrity. Such voices could not be suppressed for long when India faced movements that demanded linguistic reorganization of its territories from the early 1950s. Contrary to the fears of political leaders that linguistic reorganization would lead to the disintegration of the Indian Union, it is now celebrated as an institutional success that accommodated India's diversity. Furthermore, the subsequent reorganization of the northeast, which was not fully based on language difference, did not result in India's territorial disintegration either. These movements can be termed as demanding autonomy rather than secession. In the epilogue, I argue that India's integrity as a country is not threatened by a recognition of diversity and plurality, the hallmarks of Indianness, but by the potential dangers of submerging our great diversity of languages and cultures under the monistic view of nationalism rhetoric, which poses the greatest hurdle toward building a democratic multination state of India.

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Note

1. Jalal, Ayesha. 2001. *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; King, Christopher R. 1994. *One Language and Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Mitchell, Lisa. 2009. *Language, Emotions and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Ramaswamy, Sumathi. 1997. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Selby, Martha and Indira Vishwanathan (eds.). 2008. *Tamil Geographies: Cultural Construction of Place and Space in South India*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press; Zutshi, Chitralekha. 2003. *Language of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AICC   All India Congress Committee
APCR   All Parties Conference Report
CA   Constituent Assembly of India
EEIC   English East India Company
INC   Indian National Congress
SRC   States Reorganization Commission
VPA   Vernacular Press Act