



Language, Script And Cultural Politics In Twentieth-Century Mithila

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Abstract- This article examines the political and cultural processes through which Maithili was negotiated as a distinct linguistic identity in twentieth-century Mithila. Drawing on periodicals, literary debates and public interventions produced within the emerging print culture, the paper analyses how language became a site of collective self-definition and political contestation. Three interrelated arenas are explored: debates over script and the symbolic revival of Mithilakshar, shifting negotiations between Maithili and Hindi within provincial and national imaginaries, and efforts to regulate linguistic respectability through discourses of purity, vulgarity and cultural refinement.

The article argues that these debates were not merely technical questions of grammar or orthography but reflected deeper struggles over cultural authority, social hierarchy and regional belonging in a rapidly transforming colonial and postcolonial public sphere. While early twentieth-century actors often framed Maithili's claims defensively against the expanding dominance of Hindi, post-independence discussions reveal new strategies of inclusion, mobilization and cultural legitimation. By situating Maithili within broader processes of vernacular modernization and linguistic standardization in South Asia, the paper highlights how regional language movements simultaneously articulated aspirations for autonomy, respectability and participation in the national political order.

Keywords- Maithili; vernacular politics; script and print culture; Hindi; linguistic identity; Bihar

Introduction

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed profound transformations in the ways Indian languages were classified, standardized and mobilized within emerging political and cultural arenas. The expansion of print, the institutionalization of education, and the growing salience of nationalist politics reshaped how linguistic communities imagined their collective identities and articulated claims to cultural legitimacy. In this context, regional languages were increasingly required to define their boundaries, demonstrate internal coherence, and justify their public value within a crowded and competitive linguistic field.

Maithili, spoken across the Mithila region of north Bihar and adjoining areas, became deeply entangled in these processes. Long embedded within multilingual literary practices and overlapping script traditions, Maithili entered the twentieth century facing new pressures to stabilize its written form, assert autonomy from dominant linguistic formations, and negotiate its place within provincial and national hierarchies. Debates surrounding script choice, literary respectability and linguistic affiliation acquired political significance as language became a medium through which social authority, cultural prestige and regional belonging were contested.

This article examines these debates through three interconnected domains: the symbolic reactivation of Mithilakshar within discussions on linguistic distinctiveness; the shifting relationship between Maithili and Hindi within educational, literary and administrative arenas; and the regulation of linguistic propriety through anxieties surrounding vulgarity, purity and moral respectability. Rather than treating these as isolated controversies, the paper situates them within the broader dynamics of vernacular modernization and the formation of regional public cultures in colonial and early postcolonial India. By doing so, it seeks to illuminate how linguistic politics in Mithila reflected wider struggles over cultural authority and political imagination in twentieth-century north India.

Script, Print and Linguistic Boundary Making

Debates over whether Maithili constituted an independent language or a regional variant of Hindi brought renewed attention to the question of script in the early twentieth century. Mithilakshar, the script historically associated with Maithili manuscript culture, had gradually receded from official usage with the expansion of print and administrative standardization. Its renewed invocation in public debates was closely tied to efforts to articulate Maithili as a distinct linguistic entity rather than as a subordinate dialectal form. Script, in this sense, became a symbolic marker through which linguistic autonomy and cultural legitimacy were negotiated.¹

The increasing use of Devanagari in printed Maithili texts further intensified these debates. For proponents of Hindi, the adoption of Devanagari was read as tacit acceptance of Hindi's linguistic dominance, reinforcing claims that Maithili lacked an independent written tradition.² As a result, orthographic choices acquired political significance and became recurring points of contestation among writers, editors and activists. These discussions unfolded within a rapidly expanding but socially narrow print sphere. Early periodicals such as *Mithila Mod*, *Mithila Mihir* and *Maithil Hit Sadan* appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century, followed by journals including *Mithila*, *Bharati* and *Vaidehi*. Editorial production was largely concentrated among upper-caste male contributors, primarily Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas, with occasional participation from intellectuals outside the region. Financial fragility and limited readership constrained circulation, as editors themselves acknowledged. While certain Maithili literary works reached wider audiences through oral reading practices, the polemical orientation of many journals restricted their social reach, particularly among women and lower caste groups.

One of the ways of remembering Mithilakshar was by lamenting its decline in the new print age and going back to a nostalgic golden past. In the article "*Maithili Lipi*" by Jiv Nath Ray, this tone of lament is visible. He pointed out that in the time of Gautam Buddha, 64 scripts existed and Maithili known as Vaidehi was one of them. He argued that in the non-print age the Maithili script had quite a few advantages over Devanagari. He lamented: 'while earlier the Maithili, Bengali, and Assamese script were almost the same, the Bengalese quickly modified their script to suit the print, while the Maithils did not do any such thing. The result of this was that the Maithili script was replaced by the Devanagari script' (Ray 1935: 27).

By 1930s, a clear desire was expressed by few to go back to *Mithilakshar*. The idea behind might have been to save Maithili from the hegemony of Hindi. Thus, Awadh Lal Jha wrote in the column '*Jha ji ki Patrika*' of *Bharati*, a column that brought out issues of the time in a screeching sarcastic style. He wrote: 'Editor ji! When you raised the question of using Tirhutiya (Mithila script) in the general meeting related to Urdu, everybody laughed at you. Please don't bring a proposal from the 18th century. Now no one is going to cry in Mithila for Mithilakshara' (Jha 1930: 138). For him, the question of Mithilakshar was one related to the Maithil: 'If Maithils are the majority in Tirhuta, so be they. Musalmans have Urdu, Kayasthas have Kaithi, Bengalis have Bangla, English have Roman, the general have the independence to use Devnagari' (Jha 1930: 138).

For Awadh Lal Jha and other Mithilakshar enthusiasts, Mithilakshar now became synonymous to Maithili in response to Devnagari being claimed by the Hindiwallahs. He wrote: 'Maithils are not going to be as conservative to open the question of Maithili and create distress... even for nationalism's sake, Mithilakshar should be overlooked.... In nationalism's view, this will be a proof of (Maithils') great kindness and affability (Jha 1930: 138). Thus, he mocked the Maithil community for trying to be nationalists by giving up the Mithilakshar.

Another place where the question of language, dialect, and script got debated was in the university. Jha further wrote: 'Bihar province is a special one. Here, the language which has the least speakers gets acceptance before. If the language is an uncivilized one, that's even better (for it). That is the reason that Maithili has been hitting her head in Patna University for the last 15- 20 years but it's the Sontari language which gets acceptance accidentally. So what if it does not have a script (of its own)... and uses Roman script'(Jha 1930: 138). The Roman script was seen as associated with the English language. The fact that Sontari was written in Roman was seen as a good enough reason to call it uncivilized and inferior to Maithili.

He further argued that Maithili too is becoming uncivilized and according to him the reason behind this happening is that the place of mother language is being taken over by the national language Hindi or English, the language of Rajas and Maharajas. The sarcasm in his tone of writing is amply visible when he talked about Maithili being written in Roman. He mocks the letting go of Maithili in favour of Hindi and English and letting go of *mithilakshar*. Thus, one of the themes that got linked to the question of the script was the inferior or uncivilized status of the language:

The raja- maharaja's are even more special. Their children's mother language is being transformed into dhatri- bhasa. Then there is the credit of caste/community. Musalmans are leaving Maithili and getting education in Urdu. Rajput, bhumihaar, western kayasthas etc think of their mother language as inferior despite residing in this country. You will yourself see that the coming generations will embrace Hindi and English and Maithili will be left as the language of the uncivilized mushar and batar who are far away from education. Hence when Maithili becomes equivalent to sontari, without speaking anything, it will get acceptance owing to the kindness of some Macpherson sahib. Mithilakshar won't be an issue then. In the roman script, Maithili will flourish fast. (Jha 1930: 139).

In 1940, Amaranth Jha in his 'Note of dissent from the Bihar Education reorganization committee' referred to Rajendra Prasad's stand on Maithili: 'Dr Rajendra Prasad refers to Maithili as a form of Hindi and speaks of Hindi as the written language of Bihar' (Mishra 1941:677-679). Jha refuted Prasad by pointing out that Maithili has had a separate script namely Mithilakshar and that made it independent of the Devanagari script. This was telling of how the Devanagari script had been hegemonized by the Hindi enthusiasts in the 1940's. So much so that even those fighting against Hindi's domination operated within the same framework of accepting Devanagari as synonymous with Hindi. Any language written in the Nagari script was seen as Hindi. Magazines like Mithila and Bharati raised the issue again and again in the 1930s and 40s and sometimes even brought up the question of going back to writing in Mithilakshar, which was also known as the Tirhuti script.

Negotiating Hindi: Accommodation and Resistance

The relationship between Maithili and Hindi in the early twentieth century was characterized less by outright opposition than by a continual process of negotiation. Many Maithili intellectuals welcomed the expansion of Hindi as a vehicle of wider communication, education and political participation, while simultaneously seeking to preserve Maithili as the primary language of domestic, cultural and regional life. Tensions emerged when the growing institutional authority of Hindi began to encroach upon spaces historically occupied by Maithili, particularly when claims were advanced that Maithili constituted merely a dialectal variant of Hindi rather than a language in its own right.

These anxieties are visible in contemporary commentaries that framed linguistic relations through metaphors of proximity, kinship and displacement. Expressions of grievance often reflected a sense of cultural marginalization rather than rejection of Hindi itself. Advocates sought a bilingual accommodation in which Hindi could function as a wider national medium without eroding the symbolic and social value of Maithili. It was within this fragile equilibrium that disputes over linguistic hierarchy, literary legitimacy and public usage intensified across journals, pamphlets and institutional forums.

The following discussions illustrate how these tensions unfolded in print culture and public debate, revealing both accommodationist strategies and moments of sharp resistance as Maithili speakers sought to define the terms of linguistic coexistence.

You think over it: the earlier the residents of Mithila referred to *mithilakshar swadeshakhar* (the script of one's nation) to glorify their nation... ved and vedangas and other books have been taken away by the south and west and then it's your work to threaten us regularly. Where should we go? Should we not speak in our language? You should have considered my mistakes as minor and yet treated me with affection, that my younger brother has come near me. Instead, you disrespected me, and this is not appropriate. Now we won't look or listen to nagari-sagari (Jha 1909: 162).

The position for Maithili demanded by Maithili supporters, and the accompanying disenchantment is starkly visible in the above-stated quote of Bodhkrishna Jha. Most of the times, Maithili supporters were enthusiastic about the introduction of Hindi in Mithila. But they did not want to do that at the expense of Maithili. Mostly they advocated a position for both languages side by side with Maithili as mother language and Hindi as the national language. Disagreements started when Hindi started eating up the space of Maithili and Hindi speakers began claiming Maithili as a dialect of Hindi.

Chanda Jha in his Mithila Bhasa Ramayana wrote the preface in Hindi, and the whole book was in Maithili.³ Bihari Lal Fitrat in Aina-i-Tirhut in Urdu in 1925 wrote of Maithili spoken by commoners as a form of 'Gawari Hindi' and the one spoken by literates as 'Sanskritized Hindi' (Fitrat (1925) 2001: 56).⁴ *Maithili Tatvavimarsa* by Parmanand Jha written in 1919 spoke of Hindi as the language of the province (Jha (1919) 1977: 19-20). These examples point to the strong connection of emerging print Maithili with Hindi which was already being seen as the unifying force of a country with several languages. The confusion in the relationship of Maithili with Hindi had started with the beginning of the twentieth century, and Maithili was often seen as a dialect of Hindi. Maithili supporters enthusiastically opposed this.

Bhola Lal Das, for example, refuted the claims of Maithili being called the dialect of Hindi. First of all, he pointed out that, there is no recognized distinction between a language and a dialect. 'Just as it is difficult to characterize a mountain and a hill, and name does not denote the size of a hill, Maithili will remain more important, superior and elder to many Indian languages. Further, Hindi and Maithili developed at the same time, and hence the relationship of mother and daughter cannot be accepted between them' (Das 1935: 93).

In his article 'Pratisvikar' in the year 1916 Mithila Mod, vaisakh-jyestha edition, a critic wrote that the reason he wanted to praise the book Maithil Hitsikha was because it 'made clear the fact that the nice thought of making Hindi better/well known in Mithila had finally come up' (Critic 1910: 121). That this article spoke of the social evils prevalent in Maithil society in the face of other castes and communities of India reforming themselves, among other things, might not be just a coincidence. What it pointed to was a constant recurring tension over the place of Maithili and Hindi in modern print Mithila. Those who wanted to endorse the idea of India as a nation within and outside Mithila saw the Maithil identity as a threat to a pan Indian national identity. They rejected Maithili which was seen as the biggest contributor as well as a carrier of Maithil identity. This debate was to continue till the late 1950s even when the context of such arguments changed over time.⁵

Hindi was seen as an instrument for bringing progress and awakening to Mithila, which was also closely connected with making it "national". The new nation was being envisaged as "modern": modernity, which would leave behind social and cultural evils such as feudal practices. Only Hindi was seen as being able to bring such development to Mithila *desh*. Either, Maithili was to stay as a part of Hindi and re-emerge as "modern" or disappear entirely. This kind of conception of Maithili and Hindi was documented aptly in the column of 'tradition-modern' in the journal Mithila Mod, which was a column through which the evils and blessings of modernity were discussed and debated. It took up the case of Maithili-Hindi in one of the editions. 'Tradition- there should be a debate one day on whether Hindi should be publicized in the country (Mithila) or Maithili. Modern- what's your philosophy?' (*Mithila Mod* 1909: 14). After a long debate, modernity agreed with tradition that Maithili should be promoted in Mithila and not Hindi: 'if you are a well-wisher of the country, reduce Hindi and increase the use of Maithili. Increase the use of Sanskrit words, and if you don't find beautiful Sanskrit words, increase the use of Arabi, Parsi and English words. There is no fault in doing this' (*Mithila Mod* 1909: 14). Thus, the increasing use of Hindi was closely scrutinised by Maithili speakers.

The fact that the book *Maithil Hit Siksha* was written in Hindi generated tensions in Maithil society and not all appreciated the fact that it was in Hindi. Another reviewer in the same issue, addressing himself as ‘one Maithil, in the hope of kindness from the writer of the book’ asked the question that if ‘all the subjects in the book are about the Maithil society then what has been achieved by abandoning Maithili in favour of Nagari (Hindi)?’ (*Mithila Mod* 1909: 135).⁶ He asked: ‘While in Bengal province, high-quality books on all subjects were published in Bengali, Maithils are ashamed to even express their internal issues in their mother language (which is the mother of Bang Bhasa and the Nebar language of Nepal)’ (*Mithila Mod* 1909: 135). The point worth noting is that he was not criticizing Hindi or saying it was a language not worth using, he was only debating its use in a particular specific context. The general tone of acceptance of Hindi remained visible here as well. The question raised and discussed again and again by Maithils was what space should and could be accorded to Maithili in modern Mithila. Another possibility might be that the writer might well have been displeased with the use of Hindi in any context, yet he could not go as far as to sharply criticise any use of Hindi for fear of a backlash.

Linked to this was the question of a mother tongue. A community’s status was being debated by those who favoured Maithili as their mother language and others who refuse to accept it even as a language. Hence, Bodhkrishna Jha in his article “Mule Kutharpatah” sharply criticized Jai Narayan Lal for his article in Vihar- Bandhu where the latter wrote of *Mithila- bhasa* as a spoken language. He wrote that ‘despite Hindi being prevalent everywhere (in Mithila), you people are so adamant to make people call it their mother-language that no one can point the finger at this’ (Jha 1909: 161). He further pointed out that ‘only to publicize Hindi, they all (Maithils) are introducing some Hindi in their monthly magazines so that at least the uncultured Maithil brothers would at least learn the way of reading newspapers but unfortunately instead of being enthused we are being reproached for our efforts’ (Jha 1909: 161).⁷ Thus, the Maithili supporters distanced Maithili from Hindi even when accepting the superiority of Hindi. They agreed that Hindi was necessary but they wanted to be able to set the terms on which Hindi would be accepted in the province of Mithila.⁸

Hence, when the first advertisement of Maithil Mahasabha, the organization dedicated to social reform in Mithila, came in 1910, it did not go unnoticed that the advertisement appeared in Hindi. A Maithili enthusiast wrote: ‘With regret, I have to say that seeing the first advertisement of this conference in Hindi, I doubted if the organizers have rejected Maithil rules and rituals and are adamant at destroying it... Hindi’s usefulness and acceptability and all (India) feature are welcome, but for a social purpose, we should use a social language. For a universal subject, Hindi is appropriate, but for a social subject, Maithili should be used’ (*Mithila Mod* 1910: 14).

Linked to the Maithili-Hindi debate were the questions of accent, grammar, vulgarity, and purity. From the time they endorsed Hindi, the Maithils recognized that they spoke unpure Bihari Hindi, which the Hindi elites would never accept as proper. The Maithils recognized this again and again. Murlidhar Jha, in 1910, wrote in *Mithila Mod*:

dear hindi pracharak maithil brothers, I am not against Hindi. But if wearing coat and pants... I can’t speak Hindi properly and will be made fun of by the Hindi disciples (sevaks)... till the general public does not get an idea what is Hindi, or how to speak it, what is lost by not knowing it, and the people knowing it are cunning... till then we must not publicize Hindi and not at least by destroying Mithila bhasa, the mother language. (*Mithila Mod* 1910: 3).

Thus, even the opposition of Hindi accepted the necessity of knowing and speaking Hindi. Even with a hint of sarcasm, Murlidhar Jha admitted that Hindi could not be rejected outright in Mithila.

Maithili and Hindi in post-independent India

The question of the pure/unpure Hindi of Mithila remained firmly entrenched in post-independent India as well. Baidyanath Mishra Yatri raised the problem in 1953: ‘what is the condition of Hindi in Mithila?’. He writes that: the condition is that even after mugging up for ten years in schools and colleges, our tongues are not able to respect Hindi’ (Yatri 2003: 458). Even after ‘getting the crutches of Govt’s support, the rashtra-bhasa is not able to get to people’s tongues’ (Yatri 2003: 458). He further says that ‘if we write up the Hindi as it is spoken in the north of Ganga, the elites of Hindi society will start shouting- “the idiot Bihari is distorting my language, his tongue must be corrected”’ (Yatri 2003: 458).⁹

In the years immediately after independence, there was a movement for the formation of linguistic states. At this time the rejection of the demand for a separate Mithila state based on a linguistic identity created anger. Laxmipati Singh argued that ‘quarter to 2 crore Maithili speakers won’t consider themselves independent unless they get an independent university established in Mithilanchal; because without cultural independence, the so-called political independence is worse and more painful than slavery’ (Singh (1948) 2012: 145). He further quoted, ‘I hope at least now the Maithil society will use its resources as much as it can to save its cultural identity... I am waiting to see what all comforts Maithil society gets in this democratic age.’ (Singh (1948) 2012: 145).

When the demand for a Mithila sub-state within Bihar was rejected at the time of independence, a movement for the formation of Mithila state outside Bihar started. A newspaper report on an all-party gathering held at Darbhanga recorded the mood of the time. An MP, Maheshwarprasad Narayan Singh argued that ‘for the same reason that Bihar got separated from Bengal, it was necessary now to separate Mithila from Bihar. The amount of exploitation that Mithila is facing from Magadh is a lot more than the exploitation that it faced as a part of Bengal’ (*Mithila* 1953:19th January). The exploitation was seen as the lack of development efforts and educational institutions.

Andhra was in the forefront of such movements, and Andhra Pradesh was the first state to be formed on the basis of the linguistic movement, it was separated from the Madras State in 1953 (Mitchell: 2010). On 19 January 1953, an article by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was published in the weekly newspaper *Mithila*, echoed Yatri’s argument in ‘Maithili and Hindi’ where he had argued in favour of the development of national language and culture being based on regional development. Radhakrishnan was quoted from the 7th Andhra Saraswat Parishad: ‘with the development of provincial language and culture, national language and culture too will flourish. The reason behind this being the co-operation (required) between the country’s national and provincial life. Provincial languages complete the national language. If Indian civilization is a language, then different provincial languages are its many *boli* (spoken forms)’ (*Mithila* 1953:19th January).¹⁰ Thus, for some, the development of regional languages was to be promoted defensively. Regional languages had to be promoted as only that could lead to the development of the national language Hindi. However, the Hindi enthusiasts attempt to establish Hindi led to mass mobilization and considerable clashes in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu over the language question. (Dasgupta: 1970, King: 1998).

Cultural Regulation, Vulgarly and Linguistic Respectability

Colonial linguistic classification introduced new hierarchies of refinement and propriety into vernacular cultures. George A. Grierson, for instance, understood the task of linguistic survey and codification as one of elevating “vulgar” tongues into “polite” forms through the discipline of print (Grierson 1909: x). Such assumptions drew upon metropolitan ideas of linguistic standardization while intersecting with older South Asian distinctions between classical and popular languages. The expansion of print culture thus intensified normative debates about linguistic purity, respectability and moral legitimacy.

These concerns were not entirely new within Maithili intellectual traditions. As early as the fifteenth century, Vidyapati’s compositions in Maithili attracted criticism from Sanskrit-oriented elites who regarded vernacular expression as culturally inferior. Vidyapati’s defence of the expressive capacity of the “country’s language” became a durable symbolic resource for later activists seeking to counter accusations of vulgarity (Thakur 1975). By the early twentieth century, figures such as Nagendra Nath Gupta explicitly sought to recover Maithili’s cultural legitimacy by challenging the association of vernacular expression with obscenity and by asserting parity with classical literary traditions (Searchlight 1935).

Colonial linguistic science further sharpened these hierarchies. In the Linguistic Survey, Grierson privileged the speech of upper-caste Brahmins as the most “pure” form of Maithili while treating Persian–Arabic influence as evidence of corruption, thereby reproducing existing caste and communal biases within scholarly classification (Grierson [1903] 1968: 13–14). This process of standardization implicitly marginalized Muslim speech practices and reinforced social hierarchies through linguistic authority. At the same time, comparable purification projects were visible in other linguistic contexts, both within India and in Europe, where efforts to stabilize vernaculars often entailed the regulation of popular cultural forms and the suppression of erotic or informal expression.

Within Maithili debates, these dynamics intersected with broader attempts to render the language morally respectable and culturally elevated. Interpretations of Vidyapati's devotional poetry increasingly emphasized allegorical and spiritual meanings, allowing erotic imagery to be re-signified as religious expression rather than moral transgression. Such reinterpretations enabled activists to reconcile aesthetic richness with emerging standards of propriety, thereby aligning Maithili with modern expectations of literary respectability while retaining its symbolic depth.

The codification of a modern vernacular language into its most standard form to unacceptably corrupted dialects began with the Linguistic Survey Grierson: 'Maithili is spoken in its greatest purity by the Brahmins of Darbhanga... the true julaha boli... spoken by the Musalmans of Darbhanga... is a form of Maithili... corrupted by the admission of Persian and Arabic words to its vocabulary' The British government picked up selectively from the biases prevalent in traditional Indian society. They ended up privileging the dialect spoken by the Brahmins. Hence the Maithili spoken by the Brahmins of Darbhanga became the most standard one for the British. On the other hand, Persian and Arabic words were despised as corrupt ones. The othering of Muslims through emphasizing the impurity of their language had a caste and class angle as well, as they were the ones occupying the lowest rungs of society. It was a strikingly different case, from the Lakhnavi Jubaan (spoken language) of the Muslims elites of UP, which was seen as a very polite language.

The early twentieth century evolution of the Maithili language saw a distancing from Persian- Arabic influences.¹¹ That this was a new change is visible from the fact that Ganganath Jha noted in his article 'Adhogati' that earlier boys of affluent families were taught Persian and that he too was taught Persian in his childhood. This would undoubtedly have caused a free flow of Persian words in the Maithili vocabulary. However, he also pointed out that this practice is extinct now (Jha 1909: 20). A very sharp attempt was made, in the early 20th century, in most of the languages of north India towards Sanskritization.

Thus, Amarnath Jha, son of Ganganath Jha, in his address to the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan of 1941 can be seen pointing out that Hindi and all other North Indian Regional languages (and Dravida languages as well to an extent) were derived from Sanskrit and Urdu was derived from Persian. He argued that it would not be fair to call Hindi Hindustani (Jha 1975).¹² Suniti Kumar Chatterjee can be seen pointing to similar issues in his classification of languages in *The Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, and so does Subhadra Jha in his thesis written in 1935 and published later in 1958, *The formation of Maithili Language* (Chatterjee 1926, Jha 1958).¹³ When the famous Mithila Natak was put to print, the editor, also the son of the writer, claimed to the non-truth of the allegations that the play had Persian- Arabic inspiration. He suggested that the composition, on the other hand, was probably inspired by Bhartendu Harishchandra's play *Bharat-Durdasha*. (Das 1910).¹⁴

However, post-independence, we see claims to the Arabic- Persian heritage being made in case of Maithili. Probably with the rejection of a separate Mithila state at the time of independence and with no recognition to Maithili in the 8th schedule, a need for greater mobilization was felt. That was visible in Laxmipati Singh's call for recognizing Mithila as the land of all residing here and not just of Maithil Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas (Singh (1948) 2012: 145). Similarly, a call for wider heritage was made to garner the support of the Muslims living in Mithila. Dinesh Jha in his book *Maiithili Sahityak Alochanatmak Itihas*, which came out in 1970's wrote a chapter titled 'Maithili me prachalit farsi- arabi shabdawali' (Persian- Arabic words used in Maithili). He pointed out that 'a language can be called rich only if it has a large vocabulary. For that it needed to develop constantly and take words from other languages, as the English language has done' (Jha 1976: 25). Dinesh Jha went on to claim that this speciality of English is present in Maithili as well. Hence Persian- Arabic words can be seen in Maithili, and he even gives a list of 174 such words (Jha 1976: 25).

This engagement with Persian- Arabic vocabulary has to be explained in the context of the growing distancing from Muslims. Embracing Persian words did not mean embracing Islam. Jha argued that the 'Musalmans could not destroy the religious fort of Mithila, but they forced Maithils to speak their language, resulting in the Persian- Arabic words being absorbed in Maithili' (Jha 1976: 27).¹⁵ Also interesting is the fact that he did not place it in opposition to sanskritization but explained it by referring to Sanskrit. He argued that accepting foreign influence is not a sign of weakness or impurity. Even Sanskrit, according to him, which was the considered the purest of all languages and the language of God too is not

free from foreign elements. In fact, the day it stopped taking foreign words, its influence area started getting limited.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Maithili weekly newspaper Mithila had a columnist Shamsuddin Iliyas regularly contributing to it. Another author Fazlul Rehman Hashmi also wrote a lot in this period. He gave the quote 'Maithili for all' which can be read as an attempt to claim a space and a right over the language from the dominant Hindus. It was as an attempt for the inclusion of not just Persian words but of a whole community in the social space of the language Maithili. Yatri can be seen supporting this claim by giving his quote: 'Hindu is a Maithil Muslim is a Maithil so why do you fight, Maithili is everyone's language' Dinesh Jha gave an account of 3-4 poems by Muslim writers on similar lines. Shabbir Ahmad Jakhmi wrote: I am a resident of Mithila and Maithili is my language' (Jha 1976: 326). Mohammad Nazim Rizwi wrote another long poem emphasizing he was a Maithil: I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, I am a Maithil, Maithili is my life' (Jha 1976: 327).

However, it was true that Sanskritic traditions remained celebrated in Mithila as against the Maithili language and when the British ethnographers first came to Mithila they did not find Vidyapati. Manbodh was the renowned poet there. Ramanath Jha argued that it was after seeing that the Bengalis were so interested in Vidyapati that the interest of the Maithils in reclaiming him began. He, however, noted that it would be unwise to say that Maithils completely forgot Vidyapati as the women of Mithila sang his songs on all auspicious occasions. In fact, they inserted his name in any and every song that they sang. According to Ramanath Jha, since the women could not read the erotic Sanskrit texts due to lack of knowledge of Sanskrit, it was to take care of their pleasures as well as to educate them that Vidyapati composed the Radha- Krishna songs, even when he was not a Vaishnava (Bharadwaj 2014: 128).

Ramanath Jha accepted the erotic component of kavyas. He said: 'If poetry is the heart's natural emotion's portrayal, then what can be more natural than the human heart's attraction, meeting and separation of man from the woman and vice-versa' (Bharadwaj 2014: 127). He argued that it was poetry which taught Maithil Pandits *kamshastra* when they entered the married stage in their lives. In the undated article from the late 1950's, to counter the claims of vulgarity, he gave two arguments: 'that poets like Kalidasa's Sanskrit works are full of sexual details, why don't people solve the meaning of Sanskrit texts before accusing Vidyapati of vulgarity' (Bharadwaj 2014: 127). Secondly, he argued that accepting the purpose of Vidyapati's songs as educative solved the question of vulgar and non-vulgar, *shleel* and *ashleel*, for Maithili as well as Sanskrit texts. He argued that even with a fear of (being accused of) vulgarity, they (Maithils) would never allow the necessary education to not take place (Bharadwaj 2014: 127). Hence, Vidyapati's poems served an important and necessary function in Maithil society.

However, Ramanath Jha also did not altogether deny the symbolic element, which might be a pointer to the strong purification drive aimed at purging the erotic that was taking place. In fact, he justified the *sringar ras* of Sanskrit texts and accepted Radha as the soul (*atma*). This kind of explanation was presented by Nagendra Nath Gupta as well. The vulgar /erotic/religious compromise proved to be another site for the constitution of norms. To claim the status of respectable vernacular language, 'vulgar' songs could no longer be accepted as such. The 'vulgar' had to be discussed, debated and justified. The Radha- Krishna songs were to be glorified: 'The mere fact that these songs moved Chaitanya, who became a Sanyasin and took a vow of celibacy while he was quite a young man, to the raptures of religious exaltation, proves their essentially religious spirit' (*Searchlight* 1935: February 6).

The response at de- eroticisation was also probably a response to the colonial accusations. John Beams in 'Early Vaishnava Poets of Bengal' in *Indian Antiquary* wrote that 'the poems are filled with gross forms of love' (Beams 1873). Grierson noted in *An Introduction to the Maithili Dialect*: "The local custom has been to write the body of a play in Sanskrit, but the songs in the vernacular" (Grierson 1909: xiv). In the pre-British period, before the emergence of print, the vernacular and the classical served different purposes for the communities that used them. While Sanskrit or Persian were seen as languages for doing serious scholarly work, the vernacular was seen as fit for conversations in everyday life. This kind of separate function for the classical and vernacular can be linked to the main text of a play being considered the main text and therefore being composed in Sanskrit. The songs, on the other hand, used to make the play lighter and more entertaining and were in Maithili. It was also related to assigning a status of high language to the Sanskrit and placing Maithili at a low vernacular position. This was what was being contested as vernaculars such as Maithili became the site of respectability of a community.

In case of Maithili, Gupta repeatedly pointed out: ‘These poems are allegorical and afford glimpses of deep spiritual suggestion’ (*Searchlight* 1935: February 6). The ‘spiritual suggestion’ was supposed to raise the same emotions in Maithils today, as the songs of Vidyapati awakened in the Vaishnavas. They must be ready to give up their lives for ‘devotion’ to Maithili and its upliftment as a respectable language. Nagendranath Gupta quoted Grierson who too believed in the representation of Radha as the soul and hence the ‘vulgar’ as the ‘devotional’: ‘Sir John Grierson, who... is a linguist of some note said: - ‘as a general rule... Radha represents the soul, the messenger... and Krishna, of course, the deity. The glowing stanzas of Vidyapati are read by the devout Hindu with as little of... human sensuousness as the Song of Solomon is by the Christian priest’ (*Searchlight* 1935: February 6). Since the colonial state and its officials also accepted the religiosity of the songs of Vidyapati, there could be no doubt about it now. The activist followed Grierson and referred to Solomon as well: ‘In the song of Solomon the virgin seeking her lover is not fair... further on, she says, “our bed is green”’ (*Searchlight* 1935: February 6).

Once it was fully justified that the figure of Krishna, was not an ordinary everyday person, and his activities were symbolic of religiosity instead of vulgarity, it was confirmed that Maithil songs as well as Maithili, could be pure and devotional devoid of the sexual-vulgar element. Hence, Gupta could use the trope of bhakti/love to the divine with full confidence to claim an even higher status for the language. The figure of Radha was used to describe the ideal devotee (of the God as well as the language).

Conclusion

The debates examined in this article reveal how the formation of Maithili as a modern linguistic identity unfolded through intersecting struggles over political belonging, cultural authority and symbolic representation. Questions of script, linguistic status, moral respectability and literary legitimacy did not operate independently but reinforced one another within a rapidly expanding vernacular public culture. The symbolic elevation of Mithilakshar, the contested relationship with Hindi, and the shifting boundaries between the “vulgar” and the “respectable” together shaped the terms through which Maithili could be imagined as a legitimate public language.

Rather than following a linear or consensual trajectory, these processes were marked by internal differentiation, competing social interests and changing institutional contexts. Linguistic identity emerged as a negotiated field in which claims to autonomy coexisted with accommodation, purification and strategic inclusion. Seen in this light, Maithili’s linguistic self-fashioning was not simply a quest for recognition but a broader engagement with questions of authority, moral legitimacy and regional belonging in late colonial and early postcolonial north India.

¹ While earlier there was no strong linkage of language with script, the coming of print culture highlighted the use of a particular script. In the 19th century, Sanskrit was written both in Mithilakshar and Nagari. When Nagari was adopted, as the script by Maithili, it was done as a nationalist act by the Darbhanga Maharaj in late 19th century. However, when Maithili faced the accusation of being a dialect of Hindi, the debate about the importance of Mithilakshar for Maithili began.

² To see how adoption of Devanagari in all of India was being resented, refer to Shyamcharan Ganguli, ‘The Undesirability Devanagari being Adopted as the Common Script for All India’ in *Modern Review*, Volume XXIII, Issue 4, 1918, pp. 425-435. To see other discussions on the question of a common script of India, refer to J.N. Ramanathan, ‘The Problem of a Common Script’ in *Indian Review*, Volume XXV, Issue 10, 1924, p. 621; T.G. Aravamuthan, ‘A Common Script for India’ in *East & West*, Volume X, Issue 113, 1911, pp. 268-273; Saroda Mitra, ‘A Common Script for India’ in *Indian Review*, Volume XV, Issue 3, 1914, pp. v- vi; V. Aiyar, ‘A Common Script for India’ in *Indian Review*, Volume XII, Issue 1, 1911, pp. 41-47; and Joseph Taylor, ‘A Common Script For India’ in *Modern Review*, Volume XXIX, Issue 2, 1921.

³ The copy of Mithila Bhasa Ramayan that I have does not contain the preface in Hindi. It has been removed over the years which shows the politics of Maithili supporters over this period. However that the preface of the original work of Chanda Jha was written in Hindi has been informed to me by late Prof Hetukar Jha in an interview in Patna on 08.02.2016.

⁴ In 1886, in Grierson’s understanding, ‘the book Hindi of the present day, did not exist till the English conquest. Early in the present century it was manufactured by order of Government, out of Urdu, by the substitution of Sanskrit for Arabic and Persian words....Nowhere is it a vernacular, and it is radically different from the language of Bihar. At the same time, it is closely connected, through its parent Urdu with Braj Bhasha, and hence is well suited to be the literary language, as it has really become,

of North-Western India.' He wrote this in an article 'Some Bhojpuri Folk Songs' published in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, Vol. 18, No. 2, April, 1886, pp. 207-267

⁵ After independence, the demand for states on a linguistic basis began very vigorously. Later in 1953, Ram Lochan Sharma reiterated the same view when he argued that Maithili represented feudalism.

⁶ Trilochan Jha, at a provincial conference of the Maithil Mahasabha, held at Kashi, also argued that while Hindi should be accepted, Maithili should be used to discuss social issues. *Mithila Mod*, Udgar - 32, pp. 161 – 162.

⁷ On the question of Hindi and Maithili, also see Amarnath Jha and Umesh Mishra who argued that Maithili was the mother language and Hindi could not replace Maithili in homes. See the address of Amarnath Jha to the Maithili Sahitya Parishad in 1930 and Umesh Mishra, 'An Account of All India Maithili Writers Conference' Umesh Mishra Abhibhasan Samagra (ed.) Panchanan Mishra, Purnea: Virendra Mohan Thakur, p. 139.

⁸ There was also a debate going on simultaneously in the Bharat desh over the national language. While some preferred Hindi, others advocated for Hindustani. However Hindi won and Hindustani was later seen as covering an 'anxious zone' between Hindi and Urdu. Refer to Alok Rai, 'The Persistence of Hindustani' in Geeti Sen (ed.) *India: A National Culture?* in New Delhi: Sage Publications and India International Centre, 2003, pp.70-79; and Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, New Delhi : Orient Longman, 2000.

⁹ However, the position of Hindi as a national language was itself under threat. This might probably explain the hegemonic attitude of Hindi supporters who were themselves facing threat from all countours. In an article titled 'Sanskrit as the National Language of India' published in *Modern Review*, Volume LXXXIII, Issue 1, 1948, p 61, Amarendramohan Tarkatirtha pointed out that the position of Hindi as the national language was unacceptable to the people of Eastern India and South India. Hindustani, English and Urdu too were unacceptable. Instead the glorious language Sanskrit (which was falsely being regarded as dead language by some,) should be advanced as the national language of India.

¹⁰ This view of different provincial languages being parts of one national language was presented quite a lot of times in the nationalist environment of pre and post- independence. Refer to Umesh Mishra, 'An Account of All India Maithili Writers Conference' Umesh Mishra Abhibhasan Samagra (ed.) Panchanan Mishra, Purnea: Virendra Mohan Thakur, p. 139.

¹¹ The background to this development must be seen in the growing distance between the two communities. Official Reports in *The Indian Quarterly Register*, Volume I, Issue I, 1926, Calcutta: The Annual Register Office noted that there was increasing tension and ill- feeling between the two communities. The Government was in a constant state of anxiety over this matter, though Bihar and Orissa were no different than any other province.

¹² In another article titled 'A National Language- Hindustani, Hindi or Urdu' in *Modern Review* , Volume LXVII, Issue 3, 1940, pp. 325-332, the author who gave his name as Professor Murlidhar argued vigorously how Hindustani or Urdu was not the national language of India. Though he did not present any argument in favour of Hindi, but it seemed that he implicitly supported the claim of Hindi as the national language of India. He pitied that the the Mulsims of India did not consider India as their motherland and rejected the theory that Muslims were a separate nation.

¹³ Also refer to Umesh Mishra, 'Maithili Sahitya Parishad 6th Conference 1936' in *Umesh Mishra Abhibhasan Samagra* (ed.) Panchanan Mishra, pp. 38-50.

¹⁴ That such tendencies continued till date is visible as Rabindra Nath Thakur, a famous poet of Maithili from Purnea, in late 70s would claim in his preface of the songs that he tried to stay away from Persian- Arabic as far as he could.

¹⁵ Radhakrishna Chowdhary wrote an article 'Early History of Mithila' in *The Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Volume XXXVIII, Issue II, 1952, pp. 350-356 where he began by saying that 'While certain eastern tracts remained outside the pale of the Aryan civilisation, the full Aryanhood of the people of Videha is readily accepted.' By pointing at the Aryanhood of Mithila, what was being brought into notice was the distance that Mithila had from Muslim culture.

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