LANGUAGE AND NATION : THE CASE OF MAITHILI AND MITHILA IN THE FIRST HALF OF TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): PANKAJ KUMAR JHA

Source: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1996, Vol. 57 (1996), pp. 581-590

Published by: Indian History Congress

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44133363

LANGUAGE AND NATION : THE CASE OF MAITHILI AND MITHILA IN THE FIRST HALF OF TWENTIETH CENTURY.

PANKAJ KUMAR JHA   (LM 01119)

Language along with other constitutive elements as "geographical contiguity, ethnicity, common legacy, economic network remain important components in nationality formation. But "the phenomenon of 'linguism' and linguistic chauvinism" are so complex and intricate in their origins and operations that very few studies or analyses of the political role of linguism have been carried out"[2]. As a result many language movements, especially unsuccessful ones, continue to be ignored by the historians. In an attempt to understand and unravel the different intricacies of language movement that engulfed Mithila, this paper tries to analyse the dawning, descent as well as different dimensions of the Maithili movement in the first half of the present century.

The Maithili language movement has its seeds rooted in the controversy regarding Vidyapati - a poet of 15th century who became synonymous with Maithili language later on. This controversy about whether Vidyapati's medium of writing was Bangala or Maithili was pregnant with deep consequences and a sustained attempt was made to project Vidyapati as a Bengali poet. Scholers like R.I. Mitra[3] and R.G. Nyayaratna[4] asserted that the language of the songs of Vidyapati was Bengali. Following them, the British scholar John Beams went to the extent of constructing Vidyapati's genealogy as well[5]. These works prompted others to have a closer look at Vidyapati's literary compositions. Thus it was R.K. Mukhopadhyay who first came to the conclusion that Vidyapati's medium of writing was Maithili not Bengali[6]. His conclusions were so authentic that even John Beams changed his earlier stand and started advocating through his writings that Vidyapati was a Maithil poet[7]. These path-breaking researches inspired other Orientalists, the most important amongst them being G.A. Grierson who collected and published the songs of Vidyapati[8]. These discourses established Vidyapati not only as a Maithil poet but also as "the central symbol for building regional consciousness in Mithila"[9].

These intellectual endeavours of the non-Maithils generated

consciousness among the Maithils, both the residents as well as the non-residents. This alongwith the presence of the champion of Oriental studies, i.e. G.A. Grierson, in Mithila with several native scholars[10] paved the way for the establishment of institutions aiming at researching ancient Maithil culture and publishing the Maithili literature. This new sense for exploring and expanding the Maithil horizon was the outcome of several other historical developments in the region[11] as well.

This urge for diffusing Maithil culture got institutionalised first of all in the form of 'Mithila-Tatva-Vimarshani-Sabha'. i.e. Mithila Researches[12], established in 1905, by the Maithili intelligentsia[13] mainly associated with the court of Rameshwar Singh, the Maharaja of Darbhanga. The aim of the sabha was well-diversified. These are :

Furtherance of Sanskrit learning, research of Maithili or Sanskrit books popular in Mithila and their publication, writing authentic history about Mithila, Maithil litteratures and other outstanding personalities of Mithila, Archaeological study of historical places of Mithila and their renovation as far as possible and promoting other development works prevalent in Mithila[14]. In spite of having the blessings, both financial and moral, of the Maharaja and services of a galaxy of scholars the sabha failed to make a wide appeal. Though many pioneering works were completed under its banner, gradually it decayed and ultimately got the nomenclature of 'Murda-Club'. i.e. the Dead Club[15].

Simultaneously, outside Mithila efforts were made to popularise the elements of Maithil culture by publishing language journals. The first journal of Maithili , the *Maithil - Hit - Sedhana* (1905), a bilingual one, both in Hindi and Maithili, was published by Madhusudan Jha and Chandra Dutta Jha from Jaipur[16]. Since it considered the absence of modern education as the cause of socio-cultural backwardness it "aimed to publish elementary works of permanent value in different branches of learning such as hygiene, philosophy, grammar, arithmatic and geography along with songs, poems, notes on the merits and defects of the people of Mithila and comments on current topics"[17]. Moreover, the magazine never missed the opportunity to point out even Maharaja Bahadur's duties[18].

In 1905 itself, another magazine, the *Mithila Moda* came to be published by Muralidhar Jha from Kashi. In many respects, it was the continuation of the *Maithil-Hit-Sadhana*. but it was more

exhortive and asertive. The purposes of the magazine included "preservance of Mithila's glorious past and status, preservance of mother-tongue, preserving Maithili script, education through mother-tongue, place of Maithili in the university, collection of old literature, creation of new literature" and many more[19]. It was this urge that led to the publication of so many works[20]. Moreover, the editor was not hesitant to exclude Hindi from the magazine when there was an ideological clash between Hindi and Maithili in the beginning of present century.

This period is also important from another angle. In 1910, under the patronage of Maharaja of Darbhanga, the publication of *Mithila-Mihir* was started form Darbhanga - the heartland of Mithila. Though it was also a bilingual magazine (in Hindi and Maithili), it was the first magazine published from Mithilanchal for the betterment of Mithila and the Maithili. Along with the magazines, short stories[21] and novels[22] in Maithili were also published.

All these literary activities bore fruit in 1917 when Maithili was accepted for study upto M.A. as a modern Indian language sub- ject in the Calcutta University mainly due to the encourgement given by the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University[23]. In 1933, Benaras Hindu University followed suit. Kanchi Nath Jha 'Kiran' while elaborating the whole episode[24] clarifies that the accep- tance of Maithili in Benaras Hindu University was mainly due to the grace of its founding father, Madan Mohan Malaviya. Thus, Maithili became established as a literary language worthy of study outside Mithila.

It is worthwhile to note here that the achievement of the Maithili language movement so far, was especially due to the goodwill of some well-wishers of that time and also due to the changes in the intellectual climate which had played a historical role. The public pressure manifesting in the writings of magazines might have had casual relation with these achievements, since any betterment of an alien language in the outlying areas is not possible unless there is a movement for it in its core area.

Inside Mithila, however, the scene was very gloomy. Maithili was facing severe opposition from Hindi chauvinists under the notion that Maithili was not an independepent language but a dialect of Hindi. This notion was dominant right from 1871 when Hindi rather than Maithili was introduced as the medium of instruction in north Bihar schools by the Britishers. These Hindi

chauvinists also found inspiration from G.A. Grierson's coining of the term 'Bihari language'[25] and his conclusion that Maithili, Magadhi and Bhojpuri - the three mother tongues of Bihar, were the dialects of this Bihari language[26]. Continuing the thread, J.H. Budden argued in 1881 against the view that Maithili or any other dialect of North India should be treated as anything other than 'provincial forms' of Hindi[27]. Likewise S.H. Kellogg in his *Hindi Grammar* classed Maithili as well as Magadhi as 'Colloquial dialects' of the eastern variety of Hindi[28]. This attitude of mixing Maithili with Hindi and making Hindi the homogenetic language of Bihar continued even during the first few decades of the present century. Efforts were made to appropriate Vidyapati, the symbol of Maithili identity, as a Hindi poet[29]. Kaka Kalelkar, in a meeting at Darbhanga, echoed this sentiment and said that it was Hindi, not Maithili that was the language of Bihar[30].

Besides the non-Maihilis, the activities of even some Maithilis adversely affected the cause of Maithili. It is said that Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh, Raja of Darbhanga (1879-1898) did a lot for Maithili but the Raja in echoing the nationalist ethos promoted Hindi. In order to bring unity of India the nationalist movement was in favour of Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan. Hence the promotion of regional identity was taken as a negative development *vis-a-vis* the national movement. Lakshmeshwar Singh introduced the use of Hindi language in the Raj administration by passing an order on 14th July 1880[31]. More damaging was the replacement of 'Mithilakshara' by Devanagari. He established a printing press at Darbhanga which, of course, published many books of Maithili but all in Devanagari script. Maithili language lost it script resulting in the crisis of its separate identity as a language.

The process of undermining the Maithil identity continued even during the reign of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh (1898-1930) though in a different way. He established the Maithil Mahasabha - the first organisation of the Maithilis in Mithilanchal in 1910[32]. In its 10 point programme passed in its very first session held at Madhubani, at present a district in North Bihar, the Maithil Mahasabha accorded top priority to 'Maithilik Satvaraksha' (preservance of Maithil identity) and 'Mithila-Maithil-Maithilik Hitasadhana' (furtherance of the cause of Mithila. the Maithil and Maithili)[33]. But in spite of these cherished desires, the Mahasabha did more harm to the Maithil society by considering only

Maithil Brahmanas and Maithil Karna Kayasthas as Maithils[34].
This resulted in the fragmentation of the Maithil society even at
the level or identity consciousness. The non-Brahmanas and the
non-Karna Kayasthas in spite of being the inhabitants of Mithila
started to feel themselves alienated. As a matter of fact, caste and
language were tagged together which proved suicidal for this
cause in the coming years.

In order to free Maithili from the clutches of Hindi, the editors
of *Mithila-Moda.* made it an exclusively Maithili language
magazine from 1911. Not only that, the magazine "agitated
vigorously for exclusion of Hindi from *Mithila Mihir*.[35] the journal
published from Darbhanga. Consequently *Mithila-Mihir.* in its
editorial of 20.5.1911, whole-heartedly supported the cause of
Maithili[36]. This was followed by the publication of journals ex-
clusively in Maithili, like *Shri Maithili* (1925) and *Mithila* (1929).

On the other hand, the Maithili exponents sought to remove
the charge of caste parochialism of the Maithili movement in
order to broaden the social base of the movement. The *Mithila-
Moda* writes, "Only by being Maithil, one's language is
Maithili"[37]. A similar sentiment is echoed in the *Mithila*. "Maithili
is the mother tongue of not only of the Maithil Brahmanas and
Karna-Kayasthas but also those like Shakaldvipi Brahmanas (a
sub-caste of Brahmana), Bhumihars, Rajputs, Vaisyas. Sudras,
the whole Hindu society and Muslims, Christians, Bengalis, Mar-
waris, Britishers ..... living in Mithila"[38], an opinion which was
frequently repeated in later issues.

These developments, symptomatic of the changing attitudes in
Mithila, led to a movement aimed at securing recognition for
Maithili from the Government of Bihar. A demand was made for
the inclusion of Maithili in the academic curriculum of Patna
University. Kameshwar Singh, the Raja of Darbhanga, gave one
lakh rupee to Patna University in 1929 and got a trust fund
opened under the name of 'Mithilesh Rameshwar Singh Maithili
Chair'[39], its aim being organisation of the study and research in
Maithili and publication of Maithili books. But the efforts of the
Maithili exponents were vehemently opposed mainly on three
grounds :

(a) Maithili is a part of Hindi and its development will hamper
latter's development.

(b) The literature of Maithili is very poor and the Maithils of

Champaran and Bhagalpur will face same problem in learning Maithili as they will face in learning Hindi, and

(c) Due to acceptance of Maithili, Mithila probably. on the basis of language differences will endeavour to get separate province later on, or will be accomodated in Bengal due to similarities in scripts[40].

This opposition unified Maithili students at Patna, Here an association was formed to coordinate their activities. Similarly at Muzaffarpur, 'Maithil Chatra Samiti'[41] was founded. In their article Bhuwaneshwar Jha and Pandit Ramanath Jha produced 5 point programme before the whole society which reflected the sentiments of the intelligentsia as well as unrest among the students. These were :

(a) Establishment of Maithili Sahitya Parishad in Darbhanga. Its purpose would be to inspire the Maithil litterateure to provide books to the Parishad for publication

(b) Resolutions should be produced by the Maithil Mahasabha before the Government for recognition of Maithili in Patna University

(c) If needed, a deputation through Maithil Mahasabha should meet the Minister of Education and the Vice-Chancellor, Patna University for recognition of Maithili

(d) To propagate these demands, common forum should be created at different places and requests should be made to the Government for the fulfilment of above mentioned demands. Efforts should be made in Darbhanga District Board for providing primary education to Maithili, even in one school to know its result and

(e) Establishment of Maithil organisations at each and every town so that the cause of Maithili might be advanced and pressed, otherwise, Maithili-speaking people would loose its identity and would become a laughing stock[42].

The pressure of Maithil protagonists was such that sooner many issues were settled. First of all, the Maithili Sahitya Parisad was established at Darbhanga on 5-4-1931,[43] on the occassion of the Maithil Mahasabha's meeting. Likewise students and other Maithili-loving people were organised in different towns[44]. Not only that, Maithili language was accepted on 2nd July 1938 by the Sanskrit Council[45] which was under Education Department of Bihar Government. In 1935, Patna University Maithili Sahitya

Parishad was established[46]. To top it all, Maithili was accepted as an optional subject in Patna University in 1939, though in matriculation Examination only[47].

The vital phase of Maithili language movement started after this recognition of the language by the Government. Though the Maithili language movement started due to controversy regarding Vidyapati and his language, in due course it prompted the Maithils to search their linguistic and cultural identity. In doing so, they not only established Maithili as a separate language but also felt that separate identity of the Maithilis was not possible without demanding creation of a separate Mithila State.

In formulating such a proposition, the mainstream historical development had its own role to play. In his quest for arousing the enthusiasm of the Indian masses for the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi used vernaculars as the medium of communication with the masses. Accordingly he set out on the task of reorganising the Congress on linguistic basis - a principle which was finally accepted at Nagpur Session (1920) of Indian National Congress. This session proved to be of historical significance, for, henceforth, the Congress became committed to the principle of formulation of administrative units on lingual basis. In 1928, the All Parties Conference reiterated the same principle[48]. The Government of India Act 1935 which along with other provisions talked about 'provincial autonomy' also proved helpful in shaping the ideas of the Maithil protagonists.

Thus the tough attitude of Hindi Chauvinists and the lingustic policy adopted by the Indian National Congress went a long way in encouraging the Maithilis for demanding a separate Mithila State. This idea is reflected in the speeches delivered by Baldev Misra in the meeting of Maithili Sahitya Parishad in 1936 at Sitamarhi. He said : "If non-Maithili speaking people of Bihar will not respect Maithili, if they will not keep cooperation and sympathy with us, what is the benefit from this province for us ? Why not we shall go for struggle for freedom"[49] This faint idea about separate province became stronger day by day. The demand for the formation of a Mithila State was formally made in 1940 in a resolution passed at the meeting of the Maithil Mahasabha at Darbhanga50. This demand was repeated on several occassions by the Maharaja of Darbhanga during his annual speeches at the Maithil Mahasabha meetings. This demand was also supported by the Maithil Mondal of Banaras in 1947[51].

NOTES

1. Sajal Basu : *Regional Movements. Politics of Language. Ethnicity-Identity*. New Delhi. 1992. 25.

2. P.C. Mathur : Language and Nation-Building to India". in Satish Chandra. K.C. Pande. P.C. Mathur (ed.) : *Regionalism and National Integration*. Ajmer. 1976. 111.

3. R.L. Mitra : 'Bangabhashar Utpatti (1858-59)'. in Virendra Srivastava (ed.) : *Vidyapati : Anushilan Avam Mulyankan*. Patna. 1973. 235.

4. R.C. Nyay Ratna. 'Bangla Bhasha Ao Sahitya Vishaya Prastava (1872)'. in Virendra Srivastava (ed.). *op.cit..* 236.

5. John Beams. 'The Early Vaishnav Poets of Bengal'. *Indian Antiquary*. Vol. II. Feb.1873. 37. The writer is of the view that Vidyapati was the son of Brahmana Bhawanand Roy of Barantol Village. His original name was Vasant Roy.

6. R.K. Mukhopadhyay. 'Bangadarshan (1875)' inVirendra Srivastava (ed.). *op.cit..* 237.

7. John Beams. 'On the Age and Country of Bidyapati'. *Indian Antiquary*. vol. II. Oct.1875. 299.

8. G.A. Grierson. 'An Introduction to the Maithili language of North Bihar Containing a Grammer. Charestomathy. and Vocabulary'. in *J.A.S.B.* Vols. 49 & 51. part. 1. 1881-82.

9. Paul R. Brass : *Language. Religion and Politics in North India*. New Delhi. 1974. 56.

10. Maithili Translation of *Linguistic Survey of India*. Vol. V. of G.A. Grierson. by Kulanand Mishra and Mohan Bharadvaj. Patna. 1978 3. The scholars were Kavishwar Chanda Jha. Mahamahopadhyaya Parmeshwar Jha. Pundit Babujan Jha. Pundit Bhana Jha. Pundit Hali Jha. etc.

11. Pankaj K. Jha. 'Attempted Homogenity and Resultant Pragmentation : The Background and Nature of Maithil Mahasabha'. paper presented to the 56th Session of Indian History Congress. Calcutta. 1995.

12. Bhim Nath Jha : *Darbhanga Me Maithili Sanstha*. Darbhanga. 1937. 2.

13. Pundit Chandra Nath Mishra : 'Amar'. *Maithili Patrakaritak Itihas*. Patna. 1969. 44.

14. *Ibid.* 43-44.

15. Bhim Nath Jha. *op.cit..* 2.

16. Pundit Chandra Nath Mishra. 'Amar'. *op.cit..* 29.

17. Jayakant Mishra : *A History of Maithili Literature*. New Delhi. 1976. 229.

18. Pundit Chandra Nath Mishra. 'Amar'. *op.cit.*. 32.

19. *Ibid*. 32.

20. *Ibid*. 20.

21. Ram Dev Jha. 'Maithilik Adya Katha'. in Mohan Bharadwaj (ed.) : *Maithalika Aalochana*. Darbhanga. 1992. 4. According to the author. the first short story in Maithili was 'Mohini-Mohan' written by Jivanath Mishra in 1907-8.

22. *Ibid*. 3. According to the author. Sri Janardan Jha. Janseedan wrote 'Sarvasva' in 1912 and 'Nirdayi Sasu' in 1914. both published in *Mithila-Mihir*. the journal published from Darbhanga.

23. Pundit Varaja Mohan Thakur. 'Calcutta Visvavidyalaya Me Maithilik Swikriti Kona Bhel ?'. in Govind Jha (ed.) : *Viswavidyalaya Me Maithilik Pravesh*. Patna. 1970.

24. Kanchi Nath Jha. 'Kiran'. 'Hum Kavi Kona Banalanhu?' in Mohan Bharadwaj (ed.) : *Halchal*. 2nd issue of 3rd year. Patna. 1989. 5-8.

25. G.A. Grierson : *Linguistic Survey of India*. Vol. V. pt. II. Calcutta. 1902. 1-4.

26. Quoted in Paul R. Brass. *op.cit.*. 68.

27. Quoted in *ibid*. 2.

28. *Ibid*. 63.

29. Braja Nandan Sahay : *Maithil Kokil Vidyapati*. Arrah. 1903.

30. Subhadra Jha. 'Maithili Andolan : Jena Hamara Bujhal Aachi' : in *Vrita Aa Paridhi*. Patna. 1978. 14.

31. Jayadeva Mishra : *Makers of Indian Literature : Chanda Jha*. New Delhi. 1981. 22.

32. Pankaj Kumar Jha. *op.cit.*

33. By-laws of Maithil Mahasabha. Unfortunately we have no by-laws of 1910. the available by-laws are an amended version of the original passed in 1937.

34. *Ibid*.

35. Pundit Chandra Nath Mishra. 'Amar'. *op.cit.*. 51-54.

36. *Ibid*. 55-56.

37. *Ibid*. 60.

38. *Mithila* (ed.). Shri Kusheshwar Kumar and Sri Bhola Lal Das. Laheriyasarai (Darbhanga). 1929. year I. Issue-I. 4 (editorial).

39. Sudhakar Jha, Shastri. 'Patna Viswavidyalaya Me Maithilik Swikriti Kona Bhel ?'. in Govind Jha (ed.) : *Viswavidyalaya Me Maithilik Pravesh*. Patna. 1970. 13.

40. Pundit Bhuwaneshwar Jha and Pundit Ram Nath Jha. 'Bihar Me Mithilabhashak Sthan'. *Mithila*. 1929. year I. Issue I. 18.

41. Subhadra Jha. *op.cit.*. 16.

42. Pundit Bhuwaneshwar Jha and Pundit Ramanath Jha. *op.cit.*. 18-19.

43. Bhola Lal Das : *Sansamaran* (Patna Viswavidyalaya Me Maithilik Pravesh). Patna. 1980. 42.

44. Bhim Nath Jha. *op.cit.*

45. Bhola Lal Das. *op.cit.*. 67.

46. Sudhakar Jha Shastri. *op.cit.*. 14.

47. Bhola Lal Das. *op.cit.*. 87. He writes that in 1941. Maithili was not only accepted for I.A.. but even course-books were published and an independent Maithili board was established.

48. P.C. Mathur. *op.cit.*. 118.

49. Pundit Chandra Nath Mishra. 'Amar'. *op.cit.*. 88.

50. *Mithila Mihir*. January 1942.

51. *Mithila Mihir*. 7 November 1947.

❀❀❀