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THE POLITICS OF MONO-LINGUISM AND IDENTITY-FORMATION: INTERPRETING MAITHILI-HINDI TANGLE

Pankaj Kumar Jha

Under the impact of 'the age of liberalism the intelligentsia of the country came to believe that mono-linguism is the precondition for establishing a nation-state. Hence, any attempt at retardation of this ideology was bound to be opposed. A sustained movement was launched to replace English as the connecting language, and unite the country on the basis of a single language.¹ The movement for the creation of a separate state of Bihar during the early years of the twentieth century was launched to make the cause of Hindi stronger.² In this zeal the distinctive historical reality of the country was overlooked. Hence attempts of identity-formation by the Maithils on the basis of a distinctive cultural heritage³ was contravened. In this paper, this politics of making the country a mono-linguistic entity and thereby opposing all sub-national movements has been analysed particularly in the context of the Hindi-Maithili tussle during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

The recent inclusion of Maithili in the English Schedule of the Constitution has fulfilled the aspirations of the protagonists of the *Paag-Dupata*⁴ movement to a great extent. But it has revived some old controversies, as its inclusion means, in other words, giving a nod to the separate regional identity of the Maithils. The prime basis of this distinctive identity of Mithila was the language of the region, i.e. Maithili. However, this *lingua-franca* of Mithila has remained the centre of controversies from the last decades of the nineteenth century. The revivalist socio-religious movements of India have inaugurated a process of glorification of one's caste, religion, language, literature, etc. The people of Mithilanchal as well as the Maithili-speaking people residing outside Mithila were affected by these socio-cultural movements. As a consequence the Maithils were looking for a magnet-field which they found in Vidyapati the literateur *par excellence* of the fifteenth century. The Maithils sought to establish him as the centre of their independent identity. He became synonymous with the Maithili language.

The consideration of Vidyapati as the epicenter of Maithil renaissance and his writings as the medium of establishing the glorious past of Mithila, however, generated a lot of controversies. The people of neighbouring Bengal who were also experiencing the on-going

renaissance process⁵ tried to project Vidyapati as a writer whose medium of writing was Bangla, not Maithili. This controversy whether Vidyapati's writing was Bangla or Maithili was pregnant with deep consequences and a sustained attempt was made to project Vidyapati as a Bengali poet. Scholars like R.L. Mitra,⁶ N.G. Nyay Ratna,⁷ asserted that the language of the songs of Vidyapati was Bangla. Following their conclusions, the British scholar, John Beams went to the extent of constructing the genealogy of Vidyapati.⁸ These works prompted others to have a closer look at Vidyapati's literary compositions.

Bengal, being one of the earliest provinces to experience the influence of colonial culture, English education had a firm footage there. A sense of rationality had developed due to the new awakening. English education and a rational approach obligated other Bengali scholars to critically analyse the controversy regarding Vidyapati. Thus, R.K. Mukhopadhyay negating the stand of earlier scholars, came to the conclusion that Vidyapati's medium of writing was Maithili not Bengali.⁹ 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.¹⁰ These path-breaking researches inspired other Orientalists as well, the most important amongst them being G.A. Grierson who collected and published the songs of Vidyapati.¹¹ These discourses established Vidyapati not only as a Maithil poet but also as "the central symbol for building regional consciousness in Mithila."¹²

These contentions of Bengali scholars inspired several philologists the foremost being Grierson, to establish Maithili as a separate language from Bangla and even Hindi. G.A. Grierson in 1880 and 1881 along with A.E.R. Hoernle established the grammatical distinctiveness of Maithili from other dialects of both Hindi and Bangla.¹³ In fact, Grierson found ample similarities among three major mother tongues of Bihar: Maithili Magahi and Bhojapuri and classified these as dialects of a common language for which he coined the term Bihari. But in actuality there was no Bihari spoken language. So when he was referring to Bihari language, it was Maithili.¹⁴ About Maithili he writes, "Maithili is a language and not a dialect ... It differs from Hindi and Bengali both in grammar and is as much a distinct language from either of them as Marathi or Oriya."¹⁵

This recognition of Maithili as an independent language distinct from Hindi, however, had not gone undisputed. Scholars like J.H. Budden and S.H. Kellog classed Maithili as well as Magahi as 'colloquial dialects' of the eastern variety of Hindi.¹⁶ This attitude of identifying Maithili as a variant of Hindi and projecting the latter as the only language of Bihar continued even during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

All attempts were made to appropriate Vidyapati the symbol of resurgent Mithila, as a Hindi poet.¹⁷

This difficulty in recognizing Maithili as an independent regional modern Indian language “appears to lie in the confusion that prevailed among few ‘educated’ people or semi-educated fanatic enthusiasts of imaginary theories of classifying Indian languages in the late 19th century.”¹⁸ These English-educated Indians were inspired by some “spurious, ill-informed and unscientific assumption of the early days under the British when the Indian languages were being ‘discovered’ and classified by the foreigners... Maithili was a victim of this very school of thought during the last quarter of the 19th century.”¹⁹

This school of thought which considered mono-linguism as the pre-condition for nationhood was also instrumental in forming the basis for British policy on the medium of instruction in the schools of Bihar. Accordingly, in 1871 Hindi was introduced as the medium of education in the North Bihar schools rather than Maithili.²⁰ In spite of this recognition, Hindi during its long history never claimed Maithili as its part until the end of the nineteenth century. There was “no Hindi writer who cultivated Maithili or even knew anything about Maithili before the end of the 19th century when some ‘English’ educated Hindi speakers claim it as a part of Hindi...”²¹ On the other hand, “Hindi was always regarded by the Maithili-speakers as a separate language, as the great neighboring language of Madhyadesha (e.g. this is mentioned by Lochana in a Maithili anthology called *Ragatarangini* of c.1700 A.D.). The Maithili speakers themselves have never been under the illusion that Maithili is a part of Hindi or the language of the Madhyadesha. Not a single writer of Maithili during the 700 years of its history thinks or suggests that he is writing in Maithili as a part of Hindi literature.”²²

The claim of Hindi protagonists of Maithili as a part of Hindi was due to some mainstream historical developments. The last decade of the nineteenth century had the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the movement for creation of a separate province of Bihar, distinct from Bengal, on various grounds cultural, historical, geographical, sociological, ethnological, etc.²³ “Bihar for Biharis” was the inspiring slogan as the inhabitants of Bihar were facing discrimination at the hands of Bengalis in all respects. Thus, “it was brought to the notice of the people of Bihar that the union between Bihar and Bengal was an artificial one and that the economic and educational progress of the province was being retarded by this artificial unity; that the language of Bihar was not flourishing on account of the employment of Bengali teachers in Bihar schools; and that Biharis were discriminated in the public services against the people of Bengal; the Government was conscious of this

discrimination and also thought of separating Bihar from Bengal. In a word, the condition of Bihar was appalling and the artificial unity between the two provinces was mainly responsible for the mess."²⁴

This politics of regional identity formation was supplemented by the all-India movement against British empire. In tune with the nationalist ethos, Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh, the Raja of Darbhanga (1879-98), belonging to this school of English educated people,²⁵ was promoting Hindi at the cost of the regional language Maithili. The pro-Hindi movement raised the slogan of *Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan*. Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh accordingly, introduced the use of Hindi language in the Raj administration by passing an order on 14th July 1880.²⁶ He "rendered yeoman's service in this regard by instituting a number of annual prizes for best books in Hindi on different subjects."²⁷ More importantly, Devanagari script replaced the Mithilakshar. He established a printing press at Darbhanga which published many books in Maithili *but all in Devanagari script*.²⁸ This promotion of Hindi for bringing unity at all-India level continued during the reign of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh (1898-1930).²⁹

These two crucial historical developments of the period, i.e. the movement for the creation of a separate province of Bihar and the anti-imperialist struggle needed homogenous support. The Bihar movement of creating a mono-linguistic state required the support of the people of Bhojpur, Magadh and Mithila the three separate cultural zones, having few similarities except in respect of their mother-tongues.³⁰ Interestingly the protagonists of Bihar movement dominated by Magadh zone, chose Hindi as the medium of education, administration and political communication,³¹ perhaps due to the lack of a standard literary language of their own. Thus, Hindi which was not the mother tongue of any major population group became the connecting language. The fear of weakening of the movement compelled these protagonists to advocate the supremacy of Hindi over other languages. It was this psychological background that pressurized them to take the stance of opposing Maithili during the early years of the twentieth century.

This movement for a separate province of Bihar on a cultural basis, however, inspired the Maithils who were also during the period striving for establishing their own idiosyncratic identity. This urge for diffusing the Maithil culture got institutionalized first of all in the form of Mithila-Tatva-Vimarshani-Sabha, i.e. Mithila Researches, established in 1905 by the Maithil intelligentsia mainly associated with the court of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh.³² Simultaneously outside Mithila efforts were made to popularize the elements of Maithil culture by publishing language journals. The first journal the *Maithil-Hit-Sadhana*, a bilingual one both

in Hindi and Maithili³³ was published by Madhusudan Jha and Chandra Dutta Jha from Jaipur. In 1905 itself, another magazine, the *Mithila-Mod*, came to be published by Muralidhar Jha from Kashmi. *For the first five years this magazine was also a bilingual one in Hindi and Maithili.*³⁴ In this period in 1909 under the patronage of the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Rameshwar Singh, the publication of the *Mithila-Mihir* was started from Darbhanga, the heartland of Mithilanchal, for the betterment of Mithila and Maithili. *In spite of its declared aim, the magazine was a bilingual one in Hindi and Maithili.*³⁵

The publication of these magazines clearly demonstrates that neither the communitarian leaders like Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh and Maharaja Rameshwar Singh, nor the intelligentsia, were against the use of Hindi. The charges leveled against Maharaja Rameshwar Singh by Sachchidanand Sinha that he favoured Calcutta over Patna were baseless.³⁶ The evidence indicates that they were rather promoting the cause of Hindi at the cost of regional identity thereby supporting the cause of Bihar and Hindustan. But on the other hand, the Hindi promoters had no faith in the Maithils. They regarded the use of Maithili for furthering the cause of Mithila as most objectionable. In an article entitled 'Hindi Ki Upeksh' in the magazine *Bharat-Mitra* it was stated, "The Maithils have made a peculiar way for their progress. This year in the Maithil Conference a resolution has been passed suggesting that *vidya-prachar* (educational progress) among the Maithils should be undertaken only in Maithili as far as possible. Half of *Mithila-Mihir* is in Maithili. *In this situation it is not unfair to say that Maithils are pulling the legs of their other brothers*" (italics mine).³⁷ The article tries further to convince the reader that any reasonable person can understand that educational progress is not possible by writing such Maithili as it is written in the *Mithila-Mihir*, since except for verbs and declension it is not different from Hindi. Through this effort the aim of the Maithils for educational progress is nothing but an act of day-dreaming.³⁸

The opposition to Maithili by Hindi protagonists was increasing day by day. The atrocities of Hindi protagonists were very much active to soak up the very existence of Maithili. However, the aspirations of reestablishing the regional identity among the elite of Mithila compelled them to completely boycott Hindi at least in their publications. In order to free Maithili from the clutches of Hindi the editor of *Mithila-Mod* did not hesitate to exclude it from their magazine from the sixth year of its publication, i.e. from 1911, and made it an exclusively Maithili language magazine.³⁹ It also agitated vigorously for the exclusion of Hindi from the *Mithila Mihir*. Consequently the *Mithila Mihir* wholeheartedly supported the cause of Maithili by allotting more pages

to Maithili.⁴⁰

In one of its editorials *Mithila Mihir* remarks, "The *Bharat Mitra* is too much worried seeing Maithili articles in *Mithila Mihir*. It regards *Mithila Mihir* as an opponent of Hindi which attempts to disrupt the progress of Hindi... They write that by using Maithili in *Mithila Mihir* the Maithils are pulling legs of other brothers – it is a complete misunderstanding. Everybody knows that acquiring education in one's own mother tongue is easier. Maithili is the mother tongue of the Maithils. So what is wrong if the Maithils use Maithili for learning? How it will be called pulling the legs of others? If the Bengalis use Bangla and the Maharastrians use Marathi what losses the *Bharat Mitra* suffers? It will be a matter of great satisfaction if everybody develops his own mother tongue."⁴¹ The editorial further pinpoints the relation between Maithili and Hindi by remarking, "we never said that by using Maithili we are opposed to granting Hindi the status of national language. There is a great difference between a regional language and the national language. The thinking of *Mitra* that the acquisition of the status of the national language by Hindi will diminish the existence of several regional languages like Bangla, Gujarati, Marathi is baseless. Making progress by using Maithili by Maithils is not an act of day-dreaming."⁴²

These remarks of *Mithila-Mihir* suggest that as yet the sense of antagonism in the Maithils regarding Hindi was not acute. It has been clearly suggested that "we are not the opponents of Hindi..."⁴³ but the protagonists of Hindi were not ready to give Maithili its due place in the newly created state of Bihar due to the fear of retardation of the idea of mono-linguism. However, Maithili got established as a literary language worthy of study outside Bihar since, it was accorded the status of a modern Indian language and accepted as a subject for study up to M.A. in the Calcutta University in 1917.⁴⁴ In 1933 the Benaras Hindu University followed suit.⁴⁵

Inside Bihar, Maithili was facing serious problems. It was not recognized by 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, donated one lakh rupees to Patna University in 1929 and got a trust fund opened under the name of "Mithilesh Rameshwar Singh Maithili Chair", its aim being organization of the study and research in Maithili and the publication of Maithili books.⁴⁶ But the efforts of the Maithil exponents were vehemently opposed mainly on three grounds. It was stated that:

- i. Maithili is a part of Hindi and its progress will hamper latter's development;

- ii. The literature of Maithili is very poor and the Maithils of Champaran and Bhagalpur will face the same problem in learning Maithili as they will face in learning Hindi; and
- iii. Due to acceptance of Maithili, Mithila probably on the basis of lingual differentiation will endeavour for a separate province later on, or will be accommodated in Bengal due to similarities in script.⁴⁷

Thus, Maithili was opposed due to fear-psychosis. Once the province of Bihar was created, the elites of Bihar (particularly of Magadh zone) feared that since the accepted policy of the Indian National Congress is the creation of a province on linguistic basis, which was reiterated by the All Parties' Conference (1928), and the Government of India Act 1935 by considering provincial autonomy on linguistic basis, the Maithils in due course will strive for the creation of a separate Mithila state. They were realizing that in their demand for a separate statehood for Bihar they had cited the distinctive cultural background of Bihar. They also realized that Mithila had a long distinctive history, an independent language, its own script with its own grammar, its own dictionary, a long literary tradition above eight hundred years old, the oldest being the *Siddh-Sahitya-Charya Pad* and *Doha-Kosh*, Jyotirishwar's prose-piece, *Varnaratnakar* (thirteenth century) and Vidyapati (fourteenth century), and Maithili-speaking people spread over districts of Bihar and Nepal.⁴⁸ On these 'objective attributes' of a nation, Mithila was fit enough for a separate statehood. Under the fear of this kind of politics of identity-formation the Hindi promoters on the one hand made baseless charges on the Maithils, on the other excluded Maithili as a separate linguistic group like Bengali and Oriya as manifested in the Census reports of 1931 and 1941 where Maithili had not been mentioned. It was assimilated in the category of Bihari language.

These charges, however, infuriated the Maithils, resulting into their coming together for furthering their cause. Under pressure, sooner or later most of the demands of the Maithils like the establishment of Mithila Sahitya Parishad (1931),⁴⁹ establishment of Patna University Maithili Sahitya Parishad (1935),⁵⁰ acceptance of Maithili language by the Sanskrit Council (1938) which was under the Education Department of the Government of Bihar,⁵¹ acceptance of Maithili as an optional subject in the Patna University (1939),⁵² were fulfilled. But the opposition to Maithili continued. There were some people who "still feel a "pang of pain", "a strange feeling of parting away a treasure", "a disintegrating or retrograde disquiet" at the thought of Maithili being given a status of major regional language."⁵³ These people view that Maithili "has been dying a natural death, it is being gradually rightly or wrongly, willingly or unwillingly, even forcibly replaced by the National Language: Why

try to develop and enrich it and further weaken the unity and integrity of India?"⁵⁴ The Presidential Address of the Non-Local Language of the All-India Oriental Conference 1941 reads, "I put forward the suggestion in all humility that the people of Bihar should consider the plea for Hindi to replace English and the people of Assam should consider the advisability of having Bengali. I know the strength of sentiment in Mithila and Assam in favour of the mother tongue but whether Assam with 20 lacs of speakers of Assamese and Mithila with a small proportion of speakers of Maithili in comparison with the numerous speakers of other two dialects, Bhojpuri and Magadhi, in the province of Bihar, could press their claims with any practical advantage is for them to consider."⁵⁵

This negative attitude of Hindi chauvinists went a long way in developing the nascent idea of a separate province which first was aired in 1936 by the President of the Maithili Sahitya Parishad at Sitamarhi, "If non-Maithils speaking people of Bihar will not respect Maithili, if they will not cooperate and sympathise with us, what is the benefit from this province for us? Why should not we start the struggle for freedom?"⁵⁴ The demand for the formation of a Mithila state was formally made in 1940 in a resolution passed at the meeting of the All India Maithil Mahasabha,⁵⁷ and repeated on several occasions by the Maharaja of Darbhanga during his annual speeches of the Maithil Mahasabha meetings.⁵⁸ This movement grew day by day. A memorandum thematic of this was given to the Secretary of the Constituent Assembly of India in August 1947.⁵⁹ The All India Maithil Mahasabha presented a memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission in 1953.⁶⁰ A delegation for this purpose comprising Janaki Nandan Singh, a Congress M.L.A. and the President of Darbhanga District Board, and sixty-five other Congressmen was not permitted to attend the Calcutta session (1954) of All India Congress Committee.⁶¹ These efforts did not yield the desired result which indicates the inherent weakness of the politics of identity formation.

Thus to conclude, the opposition to Maithili by the Hindi promoters was due to the idea of establishing a mono-lingual nation. These people which included some Maithils as well understood that mono-linguism is the fundamental base for a nation-state. This thought was applied first when they were demanding a separate state of Bihar. After the creation of Bihar these people thought that the acceptance of bi-linguism will hinder establishing the idea of *Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan*. The acceptance of Maithili as a regional language will give impetus to the Maithil exponents for establishing their own regional identity. At the same time it will also instill inspirations among the supporters of Urdu in the state. Thus avoidance of bi-linguism was must for keeping fissiparous tendencies under check and establish national integration.

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