

A LANGUAGE WITHOUT A STATE: EARLY HISTORIES OF MAITHILI LITERATURE

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When we consider the more familiar case of India's new national language, Hindi, in relation to its so-called dialects such as Awadhi, Brajbhasha, and Maithili, we are confronted with the curious image of a thirty-year-old mother combing the hair of her sixty-year-old daughters.

—SITANSHU YASHASCHANDRA

The first comprehensive history of Maithili literature was written by Jayakanta Mishra (1922-2009), a professor of English at Allahabad University, in two volumes in 1949 and 1950, respectively. Much before the publication of this history, George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941), an ICS officer posted in Bihar, had first attempted to compile all the available specimens of Maithili literature in a book titled *Maithili Chrestomathy* (1882).¹ This essay analyses Jayakanta Mishra's *History* in dialogue with Grierson's *Chrestomathy*, as I argue that the first history of Maithili literature was the culmination of the process of exploration of literary specimens initiated by Grierson, with the stated objective of establishing the identity of Maithili as an independent modern Indian language. This journey from *Chrestomathy* to *History*, or from Grierson to Mishra, helps us understand not only the changes Maithili underwent in more than sixty years but also comprehend the centrality of the language-dialect debate in the history of Maithili literature. A rich literary corpus of Maithili created a strong ground for its partial success, not in the form of Mithila getting the status of a separate state, but in the official recognition by the Sahitya Akademi in 1965 and by the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. A proper examination of Maithili literary history is bound to remain inseparable from the study of language, for the first history of Maithili literature was avowedly written with the objective of validating the distinctive identity of Maithili. An attempt to examine the question as to what took the Akademi more than fifteen and

the Indian Constitution more than fifty years after Independence to accord literary and official-linguistic recognition respectively to a language, which had more than a six hundred-year long tradition of 'written' literature, takes us back to some of the debates originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A Tripartite Contestation: Hindi, Bengali and Maithili

In an article titled "Kavirāj Govindadās Jha" published in "Mithilank" (1936), the special issue of the Maithili periodical *Mithila Mihir*; Narendranath Das reflects on the cultural appropriation of the seventeenth century Maithili poet Govindadās by Bengali literary historians:

As Bengalis under some illusion turned Vidyapati into a Bengali poet by inventing his Bengali parents, finding his imaginary birth place in Bengal, and even calling his patron, the Oinwar dynasty ruler Shiv Singh, a Bengali zamindar, so all the stories related to the life of Govindadās were fabricated in Bengali literature. (Das 1936, p. 38. Translation mine)

The author here extends his gratitude to Nagendranath Gupta for debunking the myth that Vidyapati was the only eminent poet in Maithili literature, for Gupta discovered Govindadās while compiling Vidyapati's *padavali* in Mithila (p.39). The issue of cultural appropriation of the major poets of Maithili literature by the Bengali and Hindi literary historians was raised by Amarnath Jha in the foreword to Jayakanta Mishra's *History of Maithili Literature* (1949). Jha argued that out of the three major literary icons of Maithili—Vidyapati, Govindadas, and Jyotirisvara—the first two were appropriated by the supporters of either Bengali or Hindi. He maintained further that on the one hand, the foremost literary figure of Maithili, Vidyapati "had been claimed for many years to be a Bengali poet and is now being claimed with even less justification to be a poet of Hindi", and on the other, Govindadās was also "thought at one time to be Bengali poet, though the kind attentions of Hindi scholars have not yet been turned to him" (Mishra 1949, p. ii).

The controversy arising from the cultural appropriation of various Maithili literary icons by Bengali and Hindi historians stems from the fact that Maithili was often called a dialect of either Bengali or Hindi. In an article published in the "Mithilank", the editor argued that outside Mithila, Maithili was often called a "dialect of Eastern Hindi", and Mithila a "colony of Bengal" whereas some also called Maithili merely "Bengal kā joothan" [leftover of Bengal] (Mithilank 1936, p. 166).²

Whether the local languages of Bihar—Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi—are dialects or independent languages has been one of the central and recurring questions to understand the Maithili linguistic and literary culture. This debate has equally preoccupied European philologists, administrators and the local intelligentsia of Bihar in both pre-Independence and post-Independence periods, ever since language became an object of study for the orientalists in South Asia. The earliest attempts to produce a complete history of Maithili literature did not remain unaffected by this dispute. In 1947, a Council for Hindi was constituted at Allahabad University, which proposed to bring out a comprehensive history of Hindi literature in three volumes. The council decided to include Awadhi, Marwari, Bundeli, Bhojpuri and Maithili literature in its third volume. When Mahamahopadhyaya Umesh Mishra (1895-1967), a professor of Sanskrit at Allahabad University and a renowned Maithili intellectual, was asked to contribute an article on Maithili literature for the volume, he refused outrightly and resisted any attempt made by the Hindi intellectuals to absorb and assimilate the history of Maithili literature into Hindi literary history. Citing the status of Maithili as an independent literary language, he argued that its history could have been included in a volume dedicated to modern Indian languages, but not in a book on the history of Hindi literature (Brass 1975, p. 70). Speaking on behalf of the Maithili language he wrote on 9 October 1947 in the Maithili periodical *Mithila Mihir* that the proposed history of Hindi literature shows the unwillingness of the Hindi-speaking people to acknowledge Maithili as a separate language. He further appealed to the readers of *Mithila Mihir* to ensure that Maithili is not to be associated with Hindi under any circumstances. He also requested other Maithili scholars not to ever contribute anything on Maithili literature to Hindi books (cited in Brass, p. 70). Thus, he saw the incorporation of Maithili literary history into history of Hindi literature as an act of absorption and assimilation of the Maithili language and resisted the Hindi coup in the contestation between Hindi and Maithili. The dispute over the writing of Maithili literary history was almost resolved two years later, when Umesh Mishra's son, Jayakanta Mishra, carried forward his father's legacy by producing a comprehensive history of Maithili literature in 1949.

Umesh Mishra had expressed his desire to include the literary history of Maithili under a volume on modern Indian Languages, but the biggest impediment to Maithili getting official recognition as a distinct language was its erroneous identification in the colonial

imagination either as a dialect of Bengali or Hindi or its construction as a *ganwāri boli* [language of peasants]. In a letter written in September 1934, Bholā Lal Das, one of the pioneers of Maithili journalism and founder of Maithili Sahitya Parishad, Laheriasarai, appealed to George Abraham Grierson, who was living in England after his retirement from the Indian Civil Services, to help him revive “the dying Maithili culture” (letter cited in Jha 2013, p. 196).

Das lamented that due to “serious misconception regarding this language and literature” (p. 196), prevalent mainly among the colonial officials and the intelligentsia, some officials continued to reject it as a dialect, notwithstanding Grierson’s assertion made in his various works, including his *Linguistic Survey* (1903), *Grammar* (1881) and “A Plea for the People’s Tongue” (1880), that Maithili is not a dialect but a language. Questions of misconception, omission, exclusion, marginalization, *dialectization*, and above all misidentification are central to the examination of the history of the Maithili language and literature. The classification of Maithili as a dialect of either Bengali or Hindi continued in post-Independence period as well, not only in various Census reports³ but also in an institution like Sahitya Akademi till 1965, when Maithili was eventually accorded the status of a distinct modern Indian language. Jayakanta Mishra in his passionate speech entitled “The Case of Maithili” delivered before the Akademi in 1963 contended that the difficulty in officially recognizing Maithili as an independent modern Indian language stemmed from the “imaginary theories of classifying Indian languages in the late 19th century” and the confusion “prevailed among a few English educated people.” For Mishra, this anomaly was still apparent in the way the Sahitya Akademi regarded Maithili Classics “as belonging simultaneously to both Hindi and Bengali” (Mishra 1963, p. 4.).

Jayakanta Mishra in his book *A History of Maithili Literature* (1949) and George Abraham Grierson in *Maithili Chrestomathy* (1882), respond to the language-dialect debate with two different but interrelated sets of concerns, and attempt to establish the identity of Maithili as a language, a lifelong preoccupation of Mishra. The question why the first history of Maithili literature was published in 1949 with the proclaimed objective of asserting the identity of Maithili as a language in its own right can be answered in the context of the renewal of the demand for separate provinces on linguistic grounds in various parts of India immediately after Independence. Although the Congress had supported the linguistic provinces in free India as early as 1917, Nehru was a little reluctant to enforce

linguistic redistribution, given the depressing atmosphere of violence unleashed by the partition (Guha 2007, p. 180). However, Gandhi always supported the subject of linguistic states in principle. Speaking on the issue of the formation of states on linguistic grounds, Mahatma Gandhi said in a prayer meeting held on 25 January 1948 that “there should be as many provinces in the country as there are major languages”, referring to what the Congress party had decided some twenty years ago (Cited in Guha 2007, p. 182). The demand for the formation of a separate state of Mithila was first formally made in a resolution passed at a meeting of the Maithil Mahasabha in 1940 and reiterated by the Darbhanga Maharaja in various meetings of the Maithil Mahasabha (Brass p 53). Paul Brass, in his fascinating work *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (1975), has analysed the reasons for the failure of the Maithili movement in getting a separate state on linguistic grounds. During the 1940s, demand for a separate state for the Maithili speaking tracts of Mithila was repeatedly raised and therefore Maithili’s claim for the status of a modern Indian language, with a rich literary heritage reinforced by the first history of Maithili literature, was a significant exercise in the history of the Maithili language.

Grierson’s *Chrestomathy*

The first anthology of ‘all’ the existing materials available in Maithili literature was brought out by George Abraham Grierson in 1882 in his *Maithili Chrestomathy and Vocabulary*. His original plan was to publish this *Chrestomathy*, along with, what he had originally titled as *An Introduction to the Maithili Language of North Bihar Containing a Grammar, Chrestomathy, and Vocabulary* in 1880 but owing to the delay in printing, *Grammar* was published first in 1881, followed by *Chrestomathy and Vocabulary* together in 1882.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Greeks had the usefulness of knowledge in mind when they created *chrestomathy* from their adjective *chrēstos*, which means “useful,” and the verb *manthanein*, which means “to learn”. Grierson must have had the usefulness of knowledge in mind, for he had primarily written his *Grammar* and *Chrestomathy* for the British officials. However, what I suggest here is that Grierson’s work was written partly with a desire to make colonial officials aware of Maithili and partly due to his love for Vidyapati’s verses, which have been included in his *Chrestomathy*.

Expressing his love for Maithili, Grierson wrote in 1934, in response to a letter from Bhola Lal Das, that “he has admired [Maithili] ever

since, some sixty years ago he first came across the beautiful poems of Vidyapati” (Jha 2013, p 205). He had shown a similar kind of admiration for Maithili in another letter written earlier in 1933 from Camberley, England to the Maharaja of Darbhanga Kameshwar Singh praising “Vidyapati’s literary powers” and informing the Maharaja of his translation of Vidyapati’s *Purusha Pariksha* into English (p. 182).

Grierson begins his bilingual *Chrestomathy* (in Maithili along with his English translation) with the claim that: “This reading book contains all the Maithili literature I have been able to collect” (Grierson 1882, p. 1). He had selected seven examples of the Maithili language and literature prevalent among various castes and religious sects of Mithila. These specimens, which appear in this very order in the anthology, include a letter written by a Durmil Jha to a *musammāt* (widow); song of King Salhes, which was popular among the so called ‘lower castes’ of the region; Marsiā, sung by the Muslims of the region during Muharram for commemorating the death of the brothers Hassan and Husain; Nāg songs, sung by the lower class women of the region, who during the rainy season beg from door to door singing in honour of Snake god; songs of 1873-74 famine, popularly known as Kavitā akālī, composed by one Fatūrī Lāl, in a language that was a mixture of Maithili and Braj; poems of the fourteenth century poet Vidyāpati, the names of whose ancestors and descendants have been listed in order to validate his historicity; and Vaishnava poems of a contemporary poet Harshnath.

Grierson’s anthology, thus, in its all-inclusive model not only captures the continuity between the medieval fourteenth century Maithili poet Vidyapati and his own contemporary Harshnath, [both composed erotic love poetry in the Vaishnav tradition] but also the heterogeneity of Maithili. This eclectic tradition of Maithili is apparent in the book in folk songs and tales, which were popular among the ‘lower’ caste, Muslims, ‘lower class’ women and in contemporary tales of famine. The famine tales praised the concerted rescue efforts of the British Raj and the Darbhanga Raj during the Bihar famine of 1873-74.

Mishra’s *History*

The pursuit of literary specimens of Maithili was carried forward by Jayakanta Mishra in the first full-fledged history of Maithili literature, which was originally written for his D.Phil at Allahabad University under the supervision of Amarnath Jha. Before I go on to interpret this literary history in dialogue with Grierson’s work, I have

very briefly analysed the content of this history, including the major genres, poets, playwrights and novelists. Mishra in his book divides the entire Maithili literary history into three parts: Early Maithili Literature (1300-1600), Middle Maithili Literature (1600-1860) and New Maithili Literature (1860 to the present day). Early Maithili literature was represented primarily by Vidyapati's poetry, lyrics called *Nacāri* and *Mahesavāni* sung in praise of Lord Shiva. Other prolific poets included Vidyapati's contemporaries and successors like Chandrakala, Amrtakara, Bikhari Mishra, and Lakshminatha (between c. 1400-1527), who mainly composed love poems for the pleasure of the court in imitation of Vidyapati (Mishra 1949, p 199). The middle period was known for *Kirtaniya* plays, which were composed of songs alone, and were popularized by playwrights like Ramadasa Jha, Devananda, and Umapati Upadhyaya during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Mithila and Nepal. If Vidyapati and his predecessor Jyotirisvara have been celebrated as the major poet and prose author respectively by Mishra in early Maithili literature, in the modern period Chanda Jha (1831-1907) and Harimohan Jha (1908-84) occupy the same position as poet and novelist respectively. Mishra names an entire age after Chanda Jha, who was the court poet of the Maharaja Lakshminshawar Singh of Darbhanga and famous for composing *Mithilabhasha Ramayana* (1898) and translating Vidyapati's *Purusha-Pariksha* (1889) from Sanskrit into Maithili. Although novels like Rasabiharilaladasa's *Sumati* (1918), Janardan Jha's *Shashikala* (1915) and Punyananda Jha's *Mithila-Darpan* (1914), were written before the advent of Harimohan Jha on the literary scene, he is the most widely read novelist of Mithila today, as Mishra argues. His *Kanyadan* (1930-33) and *Dviragamana* (1943), were widely appreciated for presenting the conflict between tradition and modernity, the old and the new in a humorous fashion (Mishra 1950, p. 37).

To resume the act of reading Grierson and Mishra together, it would be worthwhile to mention here that the supporters of Maithili pay homage to Grierson by often drawing on his extensive research done on Maithili in order to defend it against those who reject its claim as an independent language, whereas its opponents maintain a strategic silence on Grierson's work. Mishra, too, pays tribute to Grierson by quoting from his *Grammar* and carrying forward some of the questions raised by him. He begins the preface with a sentence from Grierson's *Maithili Grammar* which reiterates the inclusive model of the Maithili language and emphasizes that Maithili is the mother tongue of "all the Hindus and Muhammadans, who inhabit

the great plain which is bounded on the North and South by the Himalayas and the Ganges, and on the East and West by the Kosi and the Gandak respectively” (Mishra 1949, Preface p. xiii).

The above-mentioned statement that Mishra cites from Grierson not only focusses on the territorial unity of the Mithila region but also defines Maithili as an inclusive language. One of the accusations that has been levelled against Maithili and its supporters is that it is the language of upper castes, in particular that of Brahmins and Kayasthas. The opening sentence puts an end to all possibilities of any form of exclusion based upon caste and religion in the first history of Maithili literature by reiterating Grierson’s statement that Maithili is the mother tongue of “all the Hindus and Muhammadans.”

On the opening page of the preface to his book, Mishra cites another extract from Grierson in order to discuss his objective behind writing this history. The second quote, which has been extensively appropriated and cited by the Maithili enthusiasts, helps him establish the identity of Maithili as an independent language. Citing from Grierson, he maintains “Maithili is a language and not a dialect” and argues further that “it differs from both Hindi and Bengali, both in vocabulary and in grammar, and is as much a distinct language from either of them as Marathi or Uriya” (Mishra 1949, p. xiii). In fact, not only does Mishra revisit this question but also argues that in order to prove Grierson’s assertion that “Maithili is a language, and not a dialect”, he decided to produce this literary history. In other words, the desire to prove the authenticity and independence of Maithili as a language, was the driving force behind the production of the first history of Maithili literature. Mishra expresses his desire to prove Grierson’s claim and carry forward his legacy in these terms: “My primary aim in writing a History of Maithili Literature in the following pages has been to investigate and to establish the truth of the great philologist and scholar” (Mishra 1949, p. xiv).

Mishra’s history of Maithili literature responds to two significant debates, which are at the heart of the Maithili linguistic and literary culture: one is the association of Maithili with the so-called upper castes of the region; and the other is the language dialect controversy. In fact, any secondary work done on Maithili cannot avoid responding to these two central questions. My intention behind analysing Mishra’s preface is to examine the ways in which he responds to these two questions. On the opening page of his preface, he not only attempts to answer them but also tries to find evidence to substantiate Grierson’s claim about the inclusive model of Maithili on the one hand, and its independent existence, on the other.

Expressing his dissatisfaction with existing scholarship on the Maithili language and literature and its representation, he observes that this language has been “much neglected, vilified, and misrepresented during the last two generations”. (Mishra, p xiii). If Mishra finds fault with the last two generations for misrepresenting Maithili, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, who wrote the introduction to this book, leaves the onus of nourishing Maithili on the next two generations by contending that “the next two generations will decide the fate of Maithili for ever” (Mishra 1949, Introduction p. v).

The act of writing a literary history then becomes a step towards defending Maithili against those who challenged its independent existence on the grounds of absence of a rich literary corpus. The discovery and compilation of a rich literary heritage were important exercises, as both the local scholars and the Orientalists had acknowledged that unlike Bhojpuri and Magahi, Maithili had a written literature.⁴ Any analysis of Maithili literary history, thus, is inseparable from the study of the language, for history of literature here is being written with the objective of validating the authenticity and distinctive identity of the language. Thus Mishra “investigate[s] and establish[es]” Grierson’s claim by compiling and analysing a corpus of Maithili literature that he procured from his visit to various libraries of India, Nepal and the personal collection of local intellectuals. He also drew heavily on the regional histories produced earlier, such as Shyam Narayan Sinha’s *History of Tirhut* (1922) and Parameshvara Jha’s *Mithilatattvavimarsha* (1949). The active pursuit of a rich literary heritage of Maithili becomes an important exercise for both Grierson and Mishra in order to prove the distinctiveness of Maithili, as Grierson in order to distinguish a language from a dialect does not take into account the test of the mutual unintelligibility but includes the two other factors of “nationality and literature”. Grierson argues elsewhere that despite having a common grammatical form and vocabulary, Assamese is not called a dialect of Bengali because of its rich literary heritage and separate nationality. (Grierson *LSI*, 1903 Introduction, p. 24.)

In drawing the comparison between Grierson’s anthology and Mishra’s *History of Maithili Literature*, my primary objective is to see how the first history of Maithili literature not only accomplishes Grierson’s incomplete task and builds upon the sources available in this anthology but also excludes many of them. The first five specimens of Maithili collected by Grierson, which were popular among the ‘lower caste’ and lower class women, hardly find space (except the Marcia songs) in Mishra’s literary history. Although

he briefly mentions Maithili folk literature, in particular, the long romantic tales in verse called *Gita-kathas* (popular ballads), he seldom mentions the popular tales collected by Grierson.

The two poets common in both Grierson's anthology and Mishra's literary history are Vidyapati and Harshnath. Although Jayakanta Mishra dwells on Vidyapati at length, he calls *Varna-Ratnakar* (c.1324) "first entirely undisputed work which stands at the head of Maithili Literature" (Mishra 1950, p 119). *Varna-Ratnakar* was discovered by Pandit Haraprasad Shastri in the last decade of the nineteenth century and has ever since played a crucial role in the canon formation of Maithili literature. This fourteenth century prose work written in the genre of *varnan* or description, is divided into seven chapters, each of which provides detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects, including Nāyaka, Nāyika, pimp, prostitute, palace, seasons, Bhata (bard) and several others. There is no denying that there exists a big gap of almost more than sixty-five years between the publication of Grierson's anthology and Mishra's history, and during this gap Maithili underwent immense transformation with the advent of Maithili print, rise of modern Maithili prose, discovery and the subsequent publication of old Maithili manuscripts, and above all the institutionalization of Maithili literary studies in several universities of India, including those of Calcutta, Patna and Banaras. The inclusion of Maithili as a main subject in several universities of India gave a new impetus to the publication of books in Maithili for pedagogic purposes. Therefore unlike Grierson who was faced with a dearth of literary samples while compiling his anthology, Mishra could engage in inclusion, exclusion and expansion accessing a wide range of literary pieces.

The dearth of literary materials may have forced Grierson to include not only songs and poems, both oral and written, but also a letter written by a widow in Maithili. One of the important departures that we see in Mishra, as a consequence of the expansion of the Maithili literary canon, is the split between the written and the folk, which did not exist in Grierson's *Chrestomathy*. Grierson in organizing a wide range of genres of Maithili literature did not create any split between the high literature and the low literature, between the love poetry of Vidyapati and the popular songs of 'lower' class and caste. The love poetry of Vidyapati and Harshnath, in fact, appear at the end of *Chrestomathy* notwithstanding the fact that Grierson collects them first and praises these polished verses for neatness of expression. His effusive praise for these verses is not predicated on the perceived hierarchies between genres but reflects his attempt to

distinguish the real Vidyapati of Mithila from the pseudo-Vidyapatis of Bengal, who lacked the refinement of the former⁵.

Expansion of Canon

Immediately after the publication of his literary history, Mishra came up with another work called *An Introduction to the Folk Literature of Mithila* (1950), which along with the earlier published history made the history of Maithili literature a complete work, as the latter addressed the problem of exclusion of some genres. What distinguishes this work on folk literature from the previous *History* is that those specimens of folk which Grierson had included in his anthology and which were excluded by Mishra from his literary history in 1949, resurface in this 1950 text. If Mishra had acknowledged the contribution of Grierson's *Grammar* in enabling him to produce his literary history, here he accepts the contribution of *Chrestomathy*. Acknowledging Grierson's contribution to the folk-lore of Mithila, Mishra writes: "Sir George Grierson is known to have been the first scholar who tried to collect Maithila [sic] folklore in such works as *Bihar Peasant Life*, *Maithili Chrestomathy*, *Bihari Grammars* and *Dina Bhadraka Git* and *Nebaraka Git*" (Mishra 1950, p.2). Although Grierson had included not only folk literature of Maithili but also the written works of Vidyapati and a contemporary poet Harshnath, Mishra refers mainly to folk literature because Grierson in the absence of printed books available in Maithili perceived it primarily as a *boli* [spoken language]. Grierson has captured this major problem that he encountered in the introduction to his *Grammar and Chrestomathy*: "Maithili is a *boli* in the literal sense of the word. Beyond a history of Krishna and the songs of Vidyapati Thakur I know of no literary work which it possesses. It is emphatically a spoken language" He had also expected that his current work will attempt to "fix a standard" for the language and "foster a literature" (Grierson 1882, p. 2). Mishra not only acknowledges Grierson in his work on folk literature and includes the oral compositions that Grierson had compiled but expands the list further and includes the religious tales called *Vratkathas*, which were widely popular and considered sacred among women.

In Mishra, unlike Grierson, we can clearly see the split between the folk and the written, despite his awareness of the difficulties in drawing a line between these two branches of literature. Referring to the difficulties involved in drawing the line between the high and the folk literature in the context of Maithili, Mishra writes:

It is very difficult to point out the differences between the Literature proper and the folk literature of a Vernacular. For the very fact that something is composed in a vernacular is often taken to mean that it is not composed in the literary medium of the learned. From this point of view all vernacular literatures are folk literatures, literature of the common folk. (Mishra 1950, p. 1)

Mishra's intriguing claim about all vernacular literatures being folk literatures would have been an appropriate one had he said this about the condition of the Maithili language and literature of Grierson's times. By the 1950s, the status of Maithili had undergone titanic transformation with the expansion of its canon. It seems to me therefore, that the above mentioned analysis would be an anachronistic reading of Maithili.

If one forgets the author here for a second and looks at the methodology employed by both Grierson and Mishra, one will be tempted to say that the former is the author of these sentences, not the latter. It is ironic that Mishra, who had earlier created separate categories for folk literature and literature proper without mentioning any such theoretical division, discusses the difficulties involved in separating them. For him, as argued earlier, it could become possible to make this division due to the abundance of written and oral materials in the public domain in the 1940s, which was not the case during Grierson's times. If Grierson laments the unavailability of Maithili literature in the public domain and expresses his desire to transform the status of Maithili, Mishra had no such problem of paucity of materials for either his history of literature or his work on folk lores.

Reflecting upon the abundance and variety of folk literature in Mithila, Mishra contends that although he has tried in the present work to demonstrate the "variety and literary richness of Maithili folk-poetry", it has not been possible for him "to do full justice" to the "enormous material at our disposal in such a brief space" (Mishra 1950, p.3). To locate this dichotomy between the folk and the written is not to suggest that he rejects the importance of folk literature; rather his work on folk can be read in dialogue with his literary history as these two works put together complete his project. Reading them together also helps one address the historical and administrative inaccuracies in calling Maithili either a peasant dialect or a dialect of Hindi, as folk is brought back to the centre of literary attention after the publication of this work. Reading Mishra's History and his work on folk literature in dialogue with Grierson's *Chrestomathy* helps us understand the kind of transformation that the Maithili language

and literature underwent in a span of almost sixty to seventy years. From Grierson's complaint that "beyond a history of Krishna and the songs of Vidyapati Thakur I know of no literary work" to Mishra's claim of having an "enormous material at our disposal", Maithili traversed a long journey with the advent of colonial modernity and the rise of a modern Maithili literary culture. Although Grierson and Mishra were being driven by two different sets of concerns while producing their works, Mishra not only completed the task that Grierson had started by exploring the rich corpus of Maithili literature but also responded to the most important question of the dialect versus language, which Grierson was one of the earliest colonial officials to answer with a sympathetic viewpoint for the languages and literatures of Bihar.

Notwithstanding Mishra's attempts to explore the rich literary tradition of Maithili in his *History of Maithili literature* and a lifelong desire to substantiate Grierson's claim that Maithili is a language, it took Maithili more than fifty years after Independence to get constitutional recognition. Mishra's literary history was preceded by his contemporary Ramakanta Jha's *Maithili Sahityaka Itihasa*, which was never printed, and its manuscript remained with its author at the time of publication of Mishra's history in 1949 (quoted in Mishra p.68). The first comprehensive history of Maithili literature, then, was the outcome of a three-stage transition: first, the literary consciousness of the Maithili community was expressed within the early regional histories; second, the availability of Grierson's *Chrestomathy*, and third, the eventual 1949 history of Maithili literature.

Mishra's literary history has been followed by other histories like those of Shrikrishnakant Mishra's *Maithili Sahityak Itihasa* (1955), Radhakrishna Chaudhary's *A Survey of Maithili Literature* (1974), Durganath Jha 'Shreesh's *Maithili Sahityak Itihas* (1983), Devkanta Jha's *History of Modern Maithili Literature* (2004) and a few others; but Grierson's *Chrestomathy* and Mishra's *History of Maithili Literature* represent two significant historical junctures in the biography of Maithili and are widely cited and appreciated for their attempts at producing the rich literary heritage of Maithili.

Although Grierson had attempted to establish its identity as a distinctive language, the claim of Maithili as an independent language was almost muffled in the colonial period by the Hindi juggernaut and the ongoing Hindi-Urdu conflict. Maithili's misidentification either as a dialect of Bengali or Hindi played a major role in undermining its status as a separate language for long. In the colonial period Oriya was also claimed by the Bengali scholars as a

dialect of Bengali but unlike Maithili, it did not lose its script with the advent of the printing press and could establish its claim as a distinct language. In post-Independence period this controversy resurfaced but the problem of the anachronistic reading of linguistic history, in calling a six hundred-year old language a dialect of a relatively new umbrella-language Hindi, was almost settled after the distinctiveness of Maithili was acknowledged by the Sahitya Akademi and the Indian Constitution.

Notes

1. In the early 'regional' histories of Mithila written since the 1880s we come across cursory mentions of the literary tradition of Maithili. For instance, Bihari Lal Fitrat's *Aina-i-Tirhut* (1882) written in Urdu, Ras Biharilal Das's *Mithila Darpan* (1915) in Hindi, Shyamnarayan Singh's *History of Tirhut* (1922) in English, and Parameshwar Jha's *Mithilatattvavimarsha* (written between 1910-1918 and published in 1949) in Maithili briefly catalogue and describe Maithili authors.
2. The article ironically titled "Gonujha ki Nasdani" [Gonujha's Snuffbox] was published in the form of letter to the editor under the fictional name of a legendary figure of Mithila called Gonu Jha. However, given the length and serious content of the article, one can assume that it was written by the editor, as the essay in its satirical reflections bemoaned the difficulties in finding readers for Maithili periodicals both in and outside Mithila, where Maithili was looked down upon as the leftover of Bengali.
3. The confusion over the issue of language and dialect continued to plague the Indian officials even after Independence as late as the *Census of India 1961*. In this census, under the section "Languages of Bihar", while there are separate entries on Bengali and Oriya and the number of speakers in each language, the entry on Maithili says: "Please see Hindi". The other two languages Bhojpur and Magahi have been dropped all together. See, *Census of India 1961, Vol 1, Para II C. 'Language Tables'*, p viii.
4. See, Grierson, *Grammar*, Introduction, p xiii. Grierson for the sake of convenience classifies Maithili as a dialect of non-existent and imaginary standard language Bihari, which should not be confused with Hindi. He maintains that "Maithili is the only one of the Bihari dialects which has a literary history". The other two Bihari dialects, according to Grierson, are Bhojpur and Magahi.
5. Grierson suggests that for Bengalis, Vidyapati's verses, were hard to grasp. His verses therefore were twisted or either expanded or shortened and rendered into a "bastard language," which was neither Bengali nor Maithili initially and gradually it became closer to Bengali. Once this hybrid language was developed a host of imitators came up, who composed songs in the name of Vidyapati, but the compositions of these Vidyapatis lacked the "polish and felicity of expression" of the original. See Grierson, *Chrestomathy*, p 34.

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