



Behari Sub-nationalism: Language as a tool in the Identity Construction

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic role of language in constructing a distinct Behari regional identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under colonial rule. Unlike the organic linguistic nationalism of Europe or Bengal, the multilingual landscape of Bihar encompassing Maithili, Magahi, and Bhojpuri. It was deliberately reshaped by an emerging educated middle class of Kayasthas, Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Muslim *ashrafs*. Marginalized within Bengal Presidency, this elite rejected philological realities documented by George A. Grierson, who classified Bihari dialects as distinct from Hindi and closer to Bengali-Odia. Instead, they adopted *Khari Boli* Hindi in Devanagari script as a unifying public vernacular, subordinating local tongues to challenge Bengali administrative and cultural hegemony.

The Hindi-Nagri movement marked the pivotal phase, transforming script politics from Persian dominance to Nagari adoption via Lieutenant-Governor George Campbell's vernacular push and the 1880 Bengal Resolution mandating its use in Patna and Bhagalpur courts. Newspapers like *Bihar Bandhu* (1872) and *Bihar Times* (1894), alongside presses such as *Khadag Vilas*, standardized Sanskritized Hindi, fostering a public sphere while relegating dialects to the domestic realm. Figures like Ayodhya Prasad Khatri radicalized the Hindi canon, advocating *Khari Boli* poetry to bridge Hindu-Muslim divides and align Bihar with the North-Western Provinces' Hindi heartland.

This linguistic maneuver countered Bengali claims of affinity, framed Bihar's "internal colonization," and justified separation demands in works like Mahesh Narayan and Sachchidananda Sinha's *The Partition of Bengal or the Separation of Bihar?* (1906). Educational disparities—Patna College's late founding (1863)—further propelled Hindi-medium advocacy for local autonomy. Culminating in Bihar's 1912 partition, this constructed identity prioritized political viability over cultural authenticity, sowing seeds of postcolonial linguistic alienation. The paper draws on archival resolutions, periodicals, and Grierson's surveys to illuminate elite agency in regional formation.

Keywords: Behari identity, Hindi-Nagri movement, language politics, colonial Bihar, regional consciousness, Khari Boli, Devanagari script

Introduction

The formation of a distinct regional identity in Bihar during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was not an accidental phenomenon but a complex socio-political process, of which issue of Language is one of the important constituents. Compared to the linguistic nationalism of Europe or even of the adjacent Bengal, where a uniform and homogenised language was the foundation of their cultural identity. The case of Bihar was strategic construction.

The new educated middle class in Bihar, which was mainly composed of *Kayastha*, *Bhumihar*, *Rajput* and the Muslim *ashrafi*, had created the exigency of sub-national identity that would be strong enough to challenge the administrative and cultural hegemony of Bengali Intelligentsia. The emerging educated youth of Bihar,

who were remained aloof from colonial spoil and marginalised as sub-colonial territory of Bengal, turned to unify language, not merely as a means of communication but an effective political tool.

Therefore, the creation of the “Behari” identity was closely connected with the Hindi-Nagri movement. Deliberately, it was a political choice to adopt the ‘Khari-boli’ hindi in Devanagari script as the provincial vernacular to subdue the linguistic diversity presented in the region in terms of *Maithili*, *Magahi* and *Bhojpuri* to speak in the uniform language. This chapter delves into the discussion of the fact that how Bihari educated elite had used the language politics to carve out a separate sphere of influence, navigating administrative necessities of the colonial state and internal contradiction of their own multi-lingual society.

The linguistic reality and colonial paradox

To understand the evolution of Identity construction of Bihar, the reader must have exposure of linguistic mapping of region in the nineteenth century. The territory comprising Bihar did not possess a uniform language. The region contained linguistic diversity entangled with their specific cultural practices. In the north and north east of Ganges, there was the land of *Mithila*, with its rich *Maithili* culture and language containing its own script that is ‘Tirhuta’. The region had its archaic literary tradition stretching back to the 14th century poet Vidyapati. On the west was the province of *Bhojpuri* which was a robust dialect of the region with eastern part of the North-Western provinces (modern Uttar Pradesh). The language in the middle parts of Patna, Gaya and Hazaribagh was *Magahi*.¹

The eminent physiologist and colonial administrator George A. Grierson, conducted the linguistic survey of India, termed the spoken language of the region as *Behari*. But simultaneously, he rigorously argued that these languages are philologically distinct from Hindi of the upper province. Grierson posit that the languages of Bihar, particularly *Maithili* and *Magahi* shared a closer morphological and grammatical lineage with Bengali and Odia than with western Hindi.²

Grierson, in his *Note on the dialects of Bihar* stated that Hindi is a foreign language to all who use it in Bihar asserting that the mother tongue of the masses was radically different from a standardised Hindi or Hindustani taught in school.³ This philological fact posed a contradiction to the new Bihari intelligentsia. If these new classes had adopted the linguistic diversity based on their local mother tongue that is *Maithili*, *Magahi* and others their ambition must had gone in vain. Moreover, acknowledging linguistic affinity with Bengali, as claimed by Grierson, could have emboldened the colonial Government and Bengali *Bhadralok* to argue for the continued administrative unity of Bihar with Bengal.⁴

Therefore, the Bihari identity constructed by educated elites of the province was not based on vernaculars spoken in their homes rather it was an adopted public language i.e., Hindi. This was strategic displacement. By adopting Hindi, the Bihari leadership attended two key political goals. First, they became distinctly different to the Bengali speakers producing a geographical border that remained somewhat permeable. Second, they join the huge and politically influential Hindi hinterland of North Western provinces finding allies in the fight against the dominance of Calcutta.⁵

The politics of script: The Hindi-Nagri movement

Competition of language in Bihar was initially presented not in the form of struggle between the Hindi and Bengali languages, but as a struggle between script and court language which is Nagari and Persian. For centuries, Persian was used as an administrative language and also as a record keeping language under the Mughal Government and early British East India company. Primarily, the *kayasth* community had mastered Persian to obtain their place as *Amla*(clerk) and *qanungoos*(revenue officers). However, In the middle of the nineteenth century, the continued use of Persian script was gradually perceived by the colonial state as a barrier to effective state rule and compulsory education.⁶

British administrators, notably, the Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Campbell (1871-1974) started to promote the use of vernacular of the people in place of Urdu language. Campbell felt that justice was incomprehensible to the Hindu peasant through the overuse of Arabic and Persian words in the courts.⁷ The Bihari educated class graft the scenario as an opportunity to displace the aristocratic Persian language.

The agitation to spread the devnagri script in the Bihari courts was the first systematic manifestation of Bihar sub nationalism. *Bihar Bandhu* a hindi newspaper that was started in 1872 by Keshav Ram Bhatta and Madan Mohan Bhatta in Patna became the mouthpiece of the movement. The *Bihar Bandhu* throughout its

column incessantly argued that the success of movement of Bihar depended on the use of nagari. On May 21 1876, the paper issued a declaration, which stated that “: "The Province of Behar may then be said to have been improved, when every inhabitant here shall become familiar with the Nagri character... neither the language nor character is difficult to acquire.”⁸

The agitation culminated in the historic resolution of government of Bengal of April 13 1880, by Sir Ashley Aden. The resolution mandated the exhaustive use of the Nagari or *kaithi* characters in the courts and offices of Patna division and parts of Bhagalpur division, effective from January 1st 1881.⁹ This order was very clear in terms of its exclusionary effect on employment: police officers and *Amla* are here by warned that unless they can read and write the nagri character by the above date, there will be required to vacate their offices”.¹⁰

This order became a turning point in its implementation. It was not only an orthographic shift, but it was a reorganisation of the labour market. The *Bihar Bandhu* rejoiced over the decision as a liberation from the foreign person script with its April 29 1880 "nav Nagari has been introduced... The government has issued a strict order".¹¹

The language movement, therefore acted as an instrument of newly emerging social class, that is the educated group of modern vernacular schools, to uproot the old scribal elites and the Bengali immigrants who were slower to adopt the Hindi-Nagari standard in Bihar.

Role of Press and Print Culture for Literary Construction

The imposition of the Hindi language needed something beyond the decree of the government, the language needed to be standardized. A standardized *Khari-Boli* had to be imparted among the general populace where dialects varied significantly in order to create a unified public sphere. The *Kharag Vilas* Press, started by Babu Ramdin Singh in 1880, became the engine of Hindi Renaissance in Bihar. This Press was backed by an ideological ambition under which it has published a vast range of school textbooks, literary journals, and religious texts in Devanagari, effectively making the identity of literate Bihari.¹² It has also published the luminary work of Bhartendu Harishchandra, who is considered as father of hindi literature. In support for role of Bihar in Hindi movement, Bhartendu gave the Kharag Vilas Press the exclusive right to publish his works in a letter dated September 23, 1882.¹³

This cooperation between the Bihari intelligentsia and Hindi literary world of Banaras played a vital part. It was an indicator that the state of Bihar was intellectually integrating with the Hindi heartland. The *Bihar Bandhu* and the *Khadga Vilas* Press operated in unison to cleanse the official language of the rustic dialect variations and advance the Sanskritised Hindi that was respectable. This linguistic standardization was necessary to create one of the modern identities; standardization enabled the Bihari elite to position themselves as civilized, cultivated, and distinct from the stereotype, frequently attributed to the region by Bengali *Bhadralok* and British alike.¹⁴

However, a selective deletion also included this standardization. The rich oral traditions of *Bhojpuri* and *Magahi* were moved into domestic sphere that was not worthy of high table of politics and administration. In their aspiration to achieve sub-national power, the educated class had basically chosen to become linguistic exiles in their own country with the standardized Hindi in the street being in most cases far apart the language they used with their mothers and wives.¹⁵

Ayodhya Prasad Khatri phenomenon: Redefining Modern Hindi

The Bihari intelligentsia was the main protagonist who played the radical role in defining the nature of language in the Hindi movement itself. The most prominent among them was Ayodhya Prasad Khatri of Muzaffarpur. As the Hindi establishment in the North-Western Provinces was still debating the superiority of *Braj Bhasa* (the traditional language of verse) as compared to *Khari Boli* (the new prose standard), Khatri initiated a fierce campaign for the complete substitution of *Braj Bhasa* by *Khari Boli* both in prose and verse.¹⁶

In 1887, Khatri issued *Khari Boli Ka Padya* (The Poetry of Khari Boli), a manifesto which challenged the orthodoxy of literature. Khatri countered the dichotomy between a language for reading (prose) and a distinct language for feeling (poetry) as it hinders in the nation-building. He identified five different styles of Hindi, namely:

- (1) *Theth* Hindi (Pure Vernacular),
- (2) *Panditji* Hindi (Sanskritised),

(3) *Munshiji* Hindi (Administrative/Persianized),

(4) *Maulvi Saheb* Hindi (Urdu), and

(5) Eurasian Hindi¹⁷

The utilitarian and modernist ambitions of the new Bihari middle class could be seen in the advocacy of Khatri for the so-called Munshi style that was a practical, robust and accessible Hindustani language. They were lawyers and government servants, teachers and their was the need for a language of power, law and science, not the emotional and pious language of Braj. The movement was an effort of Khatri to develop a language that could reconcile the gap between Hindu and a Muslim elite of Bihar who shared a common culture of Hindustani despite of the fact that they may have different scripts. According to scholar Shitikanth Mishra, “Khatriji desired that one group sacrifice the fascination for Braj Bhasa and the other to give up Persian script and both to agree to be at the level of Hindustani language style and Nagri script.”¹⁸

Despite the strong resistance of the traditionalists who were ridiculing his Khari Boli, which was crude, his vision prevailed. It is through this Bihari intervention that the standardised Hindi which is the official language of independent India owes its existence. To construct the Bihari identity, the movement initiated by Khatri played an important role in asserting the fact that Bihar was not a passive recipient of Hindi culture by Banaras, or Allahabad, but an active producer of that culture. It showed intellectual security which played a major part in the sub-nationalist claim.¹⁹

Confrontation with Bengali Hegemony

The confrontation of the ‘Behari’ identity was essentially a process of relation, one was becoming a Bihari because he was not a Bengali. The Bengali middle class had a hegemonic role in the late nineteenth century administration, education and legal profession in Bihar. Such hegemony was commonly followed by an ethnocentric culture that perceived Behari as intellectually inferior and culturally backward.²⁰

The battleground for struggle in this conflict of classes was centre to the issue of language. The Bengali intelligentsia in Bihar often advocated for the use of the Bengali language as the medium of instruction and simultaneously argued on the Bihari dialects being mere offshoots of the Bengali, on account of this fact justifying administrative unity of the region under Bengal Presidency. This was in turn opposed by Bihari educated class who were vehemently asserting the distinctness of Hindi. After legitimising Hindi as a vernacular of the region, they can counter Bengali hegemony in administration and other sector as foreigner and incompetent to govern or serve the people.²¹

This grievance was expressed by the Bihar Times, which was founded in 1894 by Sachchidananda Sinha, Mahesh Narayan, and Nand Kishore Lal with the use of sophisticated political logic. They claimed that the merger between Bihar and Bengal was not natural and accidental. They applied the theory of drain of wealth, popularised by nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji about Britain and India, to interpolate Bihar as an internal colonization of Bihar by Bengal. They claimed that the revenues of Bihar depleted to fund the institutions in Calcutta, while Bihar remained educationally starved.²²

The demand of separate province was put in a linguistic term. In his landmark booklet *The Partition of Bengal or the Separation of Bihar?* (1906), Mahesh Narayan and Sachchidananda Sinha argued that the British Raj was administratively inefficient by compelling the Hindi-speaking people of Bihar to be governed by Bengali speaker administration in Calcutta. They presented statistical data of the under-representation of Biharis in government employment, which they directly connected it with linguistic disadvantage.²³

The designed language division contributed to the anti-Bengali feeling that led to an unparalleled unity between Bihari Hindus and Muslims. The resentment of the Bengali hegemony by *Kayasth* community was shared by the Muslim *ashraf* of Bihar, speaking Urdu. The leaders of Bihar had meticulously obscured the Hindi-Urdu controversy, which was raging in adjacent in the United Provinces. Leaders such as Ali Imam and Mazharul Haque could be on the same platform as Sachchidananda Sinha by supporting the view of hindustani or rather Hindi/Urdu as the vernacular against Bengali. As Mazharul Haque famously stated at the Bihar Provincial Conference in 1908, “Whether we are Hindus or Muslims, we are in the same boat. We must sail or sink together.”²⁴ The shared language of anti- Bengali cemented the aspiration for sub- nationalism.

The Pedagogical Retardation and the Prescription of Vernacular Education

The origins of the linguistic assertion embedded in the severe educational disparity between Bengal and Bihar. Although the land of Bengal had spotted English education early during the nineteenth century (Hindu College was established in 1817), Bihar was much behind. Patna college was not established until 1863, nearly half a century later.²⁵ It means that that was much late, a generation of English-educated Bihari grew up in the 1890s, the colonial bureaucracy of the region was already saturated.

The educated middle class of Bihar got understood that they could never compete without a vernacular education system which would feed the higher education. The campaign to promote Hindi was therefore associated with the need to have educational autonomy. They called to establish a university in Patna (later, it was founded in 1917) so that Bihari students would not be forced to go Calcutta, where they were not only suffering financial hardship but also cultural isolation.²⁶

The *Bihar Bandhu* often emphasized on the condition of Bihari students at Calcutta, who were mocked because of their language and style of dressing. The shared experience of humiliation in metropolis came to be a powerful story in the creation of the Bihari identity. It is out of this exclusion that the Bihari was made. The movement of the language was not only the question of the cultural pride; it was the question of the survival of the new social stratum. This meant that their own children, protected against the disadvantage of a structural advantage in their own province, as they would be immune to the so-called unequal competition with the Bengalis, as they had made Hindi the medium of primary and secondary education in Bihar.²⁷

The Grierson Paradox: Dialect vs. Language

Another interesting aspect of identity construction was the conflict between scientific philology and political pragmatism. Although, Grierson in fond of with the Bihari dialects, he unintentionally made the political project complex. His classification of *Maithili*, *Magahi*, and *Bhojpuri* together as a separate language group of Bihari, which is distinct from Hindi, undermined the argument that Hindi was the native language of Bihar.²⁸

But the Bihari intelligentsia did not pay much attention or chose to make selective use of the findings of Grierson. They would present the fact that Bihari dialects were not in Bengali as evidenced by Grierson when arguing against Bengali. However, when they provided their own platform, they ignored the fact that there was a difference between Bihari and Hindi. They adopted sociological terms such as recursion- they applied the features of the standardized Hindi on the local dialects to form a unified language as history. In this way the poet Vidyapati who did not write in Hindi was absorbed into the nationalist discourse as a Hindi poet, forgetting the particularities of his language situation to the larger sub-national ambition.²⁹

It was political necessity that required this internal linguistic difference to be suppressed. The need to have a separate province of Bihar (which encompassed modern-day Jharkhand and Odisha at the beginning) would have lost its demographic relevance if the movement had been divided into *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, and *Magahi* sub-movements in the 1900s. The "Behari" identity needed to have a monolithic linguistic face to offer to the British Raj and Hindi gave that face.³⁰

Conclusion

The example of Bihari sub-nationalism provides an interesting analysis of how language can be manipulated by a rising social group. The Bihari sense of identity was not a natural extension of an already existing linguistic community; it was a created sense of solidarity created by the educated middle classes, the *Kayasth*, the landed gentry, and the Muslim *ashraf*, to ensure that their interests were met, material and political.

With the twofold pressures of Bengali administrative dominance and the need of efficiency by the colonial state, this was a very strategic decision on the part of this class to adopt Hindi (and Nagri script) as their provincial identity. By doing this, they deliberately avoided their own rich languages, *Maithili*, *Magahi* and *Bhojpuri* and sailed the rocky communal seas of the Hindi/Urdu divide. They also used the press, the *Bihar Bandhu* and *The Bihar Times* to normalize this identity, as well as to express a story of how Bengal had colonized itself internally.

This lingo play was effective. It furnished the intellectual and popular ground of the partition of Bihar and Bengal in 1912 which gave the new social stratum a province of its own to govern. Nonetheless, this was achieved at the expense. Though a politically viable move, the imposition of an official Hindi on top of the population created the germs of language disassociation in the future and the ultimate exclusion of the native languages of Bihar in the post-colonial period. The Bihari identity, which is based on the language perspective

is still a testimony to the strength of the educated community in determining the frontiers of the community and the region in contemporary India.

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