

## 6 The Genius of India: Linguistic Difference, Regionalism, and the Indian Nation

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There will be people who would cite the cases of Canada, Switzerland and South Africa. It is true that these cases of bilingual States exist. But it must not be forgotten that the genius of India is quite different from the genius of Canada, Switzerland and South Africa. The genius of India is to divide – the genius of Switzerland, South Africa and Canada is to unite.

B. R. Ambedkar<sup>1</sup>

B. R. Ambedkar's claim that the "*genius of India is to divide*" was at once despondent and hopeful. If left unchecked, this division that was the genius of India could bring the nation to the precipice of yet another catastrophic rupture like the partition of 1947.<sup>2</sup> And yet, for India to have a genius at all, she would have to be a singular entity. Rupture was not inevitable. India's inherent ability to divide could be harnessed through proper divisions, as Ambedkar would proceed to outline in his 1955 *Thoughts on Linguistic States*. Also invoked in the idea of genius is a notion of a positive quality of remarkable ability. If the genius of India is to divide, then Ambedkar was claiming that India was remarkably adept at dividing. What an uncanny thought!

Perhaps this claim is not as uncanny when we read it beside claims made by his contemporary, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru's celebration of "unity in diversity" has a similar tenor. It is both a celebratory and a defensive phrase. It carried within it the dynamism of threatened rupture. Nehru's unity is always threatened by the specter of diversity. And yet unity thrives. Why? Precisely *because* the genius of India is to divide.

Read together, these two ways of celebrating the diversity of India betray a shared project among the Indian political elite to establish the terms for balancing cultural, religious, and linguistic difference with the

<sup>1</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Printing Press, 1955), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> A very early version of the second section of this chapter was published in *Parallax* in (2012). See Pritipuspa Mishra, "The Mortality of Hindustani", *Parallax* 18, no. 3 (2012): 71–83.

demands of unitary nationalism. In this particular instance, Ambedkar was talking about the linguistic division of India into provinces. By the mid-1950s, when this text is written, the question of linguistic provinces had become crucial to the Indian populace and the postcolonial Indian state.

Such a claim to genius allows us to think about how India is divided and how the anxieties provoked by multilingualism in India are resolved in nationalist thought of the early to mid-twentieth century. Crucial to this resolution is the idea of the linguistic region. While this idea is founded on language it also transcends discussions of linguistic identity onto debates about languaged place – the region.

This chapter shows how this sublimation of language into place or region is institutionalized into the very imagination of India and how this allows both regional and national elites to bypass the question of regional minorities – particularly adivasi or tribal minorities who belong neither to the reigning linguistic nor caste community of the emergent states. This sublimation of language results in the ways in which the limits of regional space and community come to be defined once the reign of one particular language on a region is established.

By making the conversation about place or region, the question of linguistic difference drew on many other questions including finance, boundaries, and natural resources. It also necessarily created monoliths that the state could see as its units. The singularity of Odisha, Bengal, or Assam was already always established when conversations about linguistic difference could take place. In doing so, the question of minority rights could only be dismissed as an intrastate problem. In what follows, I recapitulate how, in the instance of the province of Odisha, the region imagines its relationship with its compatriots who make up the nation, and how the nation imagines its linguistic fragments. This is a history of incorporations of parts coming together to make a whole and of parts being added on to an existing whole. And central to this history is a preoccupation with the detritus of this process of incorporation – the figure of the adivasi.

### **Odisha Incorporated**

This section explores how the ideal and material life of the province was at play in the movement for the formation of Odisha. In the previous two chapters, I demonstrated how, in the period between 1920 and 1936, the proposed province came to be idealized as an inclusive regional space rather than an exclusive linguistic domain. However, after the province was incorporated in 1936 from various Odia-speaking districts of

neighboring provinces, concerns about employment, franchise, property rights, and education provoked a return to a profoundly monolingual definition of the region where allegiance to the Odia language came to be the primary alibi for regional belonging.

In these two previous chapters, we saw how the rhetoric of the movement for the creation of a separate linguistic province of Odisha produced Odia as a landed vernacular. In Chapter 1, we saw how, like many community movements bent on producing a territorial base for the community in India, the early politics of Odia linguistic regionalism was marked by a discourse of victimhood that often focused on the threatened status of the Odia language. The Odia language came to be understood as a subaltern tongue, locked in a battle for survival with more dominant languages such as Bengali or English. Consequently, the leadership of the movement often described the Odia people as a besieged group subjected to governmental neglect and exploitation by the neighboring Bengali-speaking people.<sup>3</sup>

However, this imagination of a besieged, victimized but exclusive language community was interrupted by anxieties about the possible exclusion of non-Odia-speaking groups in the proposed province – the domiciled Bengali population, who formed an influential urban minority, and the adivasis communities, who constituted almost a fourth of the total population of the province. In addition, the growing influence of anticolonial politics in the 1910s along with the Indian National Congress' support of regional aspirations for linguistic provinces meant that articulations of exclusive regional community identity had to be tempered with some commitment to national community building.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Such discussions about Odia backwardness abound both in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. For instance, as the proposals for the removal of Odia from schools in the Orissa division were floated in the 1860s, a slew of articles on the topic were printed in the weekly newspaper, *Utkal Dipika*. In March 1869, *Utkal Dipika* published a two-part article entitled “Utkala Bhasara Unnati Prati Byaghata” or “An Attack on the Development of the Odia Language,” which spoke of an assault on Odia culture by Bengali interest groups. See Sudhakar Pattnaik (ed.), *Sambada Patraru Odisara Katha, Part 1 (1856–1881)* (Cuttack: Grantha Mandir, 1972), pp. 531–6. Much later, as the colonial government invited memoranda and conducted interviews of influential Indians on the question of franchise and representation preceding the publication of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms, the founder of the Utkal Sammillani, Madhusudan Das, gave a speech at the Sammillani where he reiterated the Odia demand for a separate province by arguing that the Bengalis and Biharis were in fact “intermediary ruling races.” See Debendra Kumar Das (ed.), *Utkal Sammillani* (Rourkela: Pragati Utkal Sangha, 2005), p. 423. Similar language was repeated in the various memoranda that were sent to the Orissa Boundary Commission in 1931.

<sup>4</sup> In 1919, the Indian National Congress decided to reorganize its provincial branches on linguistic lines.

Concerns about the exclusive nature of the linguistic definition of community compelled the leaders of the organization to define the proposed province in historical and territorial terms rather than in linguistic terms. As the preceding discussion of the heterotopic production of Odia space and vernacular historical writing of the 1920s and 1930s illustrates, this new emphasis on shared space effected a sublimation of language as the basis of regional territory. As the discussion of my use of the term sublimation in the introduction established, there are two major features of this process. First, it is the sublimation of an unpopular drive to create a region based on exclusive ideas of linguistic community. This unpopular drive needed to be sublimated in order to facilitate the incorporation of Odisha in the larger community of Indian linguistic provinces. The sublimation of language as the basis of community was the price of incorporation. This leads to the second major feature of the process, that is, that the idea that sublimation was always inherently reversible as the drive towards an exclusive Odia identity is what founded the movement for the formation of Odisha. Hence when political conditions require it, the sublimation of language as the basis of regional community could be substantively undone even as the ostensive references to inclusivity remained in place.

Gopabandhu Das' pivotal speech at the 1919 Utkal Sammillani argued for a reinterpretation of contemporary understanding of regional community based on the acknowledgement of a unique ability of the Odia people to embrace religious, ethnic, and linguistic difference.<sup>5</sup> Often called the "Odia Gandhi," Das argued that, due to their allegiance to the Hindu cult of Jaganath, the Odia people had an exceptional understanding that "at the focus of nationalism is liberal humanism."<sup>6</sup> Das' claim that the Odia people have understood this observation because of their commitment to the Jaganath cult posed the province as exceptionally adept at being a national space. By alluding to the Jaganath cult and Puri, the site of one of the four most important places of Hindu pilgrimage in India, he was able to suggest that the region of Odisha was a space that allowed transcendence of cultural and ethnic difference. In Nilachal, the seat of the Jaganath cult, he argued: "[T]here is no distinction between big and small, raja and praja, Brahmin and Chandal, friend and foe or

<sup>5</sup> Utkal Sammillani was the primary Odia regional association that lobbied for the creation of a separate province of Odisha.

<sup>6</sup> Gopabandhu Das, *Desa Misrana Andolana*, Vol. 3, Gopabandhu Rachanabali (Collected Works of Gopabandhu Das) (Cuttack: Gopabandhu Janma Satabarshika Samiti, 1976), p. 16. In the explicit ideology of the cult (if not in its actual functioning), the deity Jaganath is considered to be the "master of the world" and hence accessible to people of all castes and creed. The cult is repeatedly used in Odia political rhetoric to symbolize a regional brotherhood borne out of a transcendence of social difference.

even Hindu and Buddhist. In the later Chaitanya age even the distinction between Muslim and Hindu was obscured. Because this seed of expansive humanism and pan Indian nationalism lies in Nilachal, over the ages devotees and great men have been attracted to Nilachal.”<sup>7</sup>

Who, then, belonged in this inclusive nation-space? Das suggested that there should be no distinction between those who inhabit Orissa and those who speak Oriya: “Whether they are from Bengal or Punjab, from Marwar or Madras, Hindu or Muslim, Aryan or Aboriginal, those who have assimilated their selfhood and interest with Orissa – Orissa is theirs and they are of Orissa.”<sup>8</sup> Das’ privileging of shared space over shared language underlined the centrality of the category of “Natural Orissa,” as the proposed province had come to be named in the movement. In the next two decades of the 1920s and 1930s, a new Odia historicism emerged where scholars tracked the ancient origins of the Odia-speaking people and marked out the boundaries of the kingdoms inhabited by them.<sup>9</sup> Through the organization of historical associations, the more prominent Odia nationalists produced a historical orthodoxy about the ancient past of the province of Odisha.

It is in this move from language to space through the writing of history that the sublimation of language as the basis of regional territory took place. As various histories of ancient Odisha written in the early twentieth century attest, the central impulse of history writing in this time was focused on explaining how historical “Natural Odisha” came to be a discrete geographical unit in ancient times. Such a history necessarily involved reconstructing the past of the Odia-speaking people and their historical experience of migration and miscegenation.<sup>10</sup> More than just narratives of the ancient Odia past, these histories were about the encounters between the Odia and the non-Odia. Who were the ancestors of the modern Odia-speaking people? Were they Aryan or non-Aryan? How do the modern Adivasi communities fit into the history of the Odia community? Historical orthodoxy of this period incorporated the twenty-six different adivasi communities of the area by recourse to the origin myth of the Jaganath cult. It is said that the original devotee of Jaganath was a Sabara tribal chieftain who hosted a traveling prince. The prince discovered the deity in the jungle and decided to settle with the Sabara

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 15.      <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>9</sup> For an exhaustive list of texts see Laxmikanta Mishra and Sitakanta Mishra, *Historians and Historiography of Orissa: A Study in Perception and Appropriation of Orissan History* (New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> One of the most explicit, if problematic, treatments of ancient Odia migration and miscegenation can be found in B. C. Majumdar, *Odisha in the Making* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1925), pp.16–18

community for some time. He married the daughter of the chieftain. The children of this marriage are said to be the modern-day adivasi community and are ritually pure enough to serve in the temple of Jaganath. This origin narrative allowed the Odia elite to both incorporate the adivasi population and yet maintain social difference.

Therefore, the sublimation of language as the basis of regional territory came about through a paradoxical narrative move. The shift from language to place was effected by a historiographical conflation of language and place. In historicizing “Natural Odisha” back to the ancient times, the leaders of the Odia movement were effectively attempting to trace the ancient origins of a people who spoke the Odia language. In order to argue for the creation of Odisha as a geographical entity, they historicized the category that marked the ancestors of the Odia-speaking people as separate from other communities: the Odia language. To historicize Odisha was to historicize Odia.

The rhetoric of Das’ iconic speech recurred in subsequent Odia political discourse of the 1930s and 40s. In the memoranda sent to the Orissa Boundary Commission in 1931 from various political, historical, and social associations of the Odia-speaking areas in Bengal, Bihar, and Madras, we find echoes and quotes from his discussion of shared space, unique Odia cosmopolitanism, and the shared history of Odias and adivasis. However, once the province was officially instituted in 1936, rhetorical borrowings from the speech shifted radically. Instead of the early emphasis on the inclusiveness of Das’ narrative, what came to be foregrounded was his discussion of shared interests and assimilation: “[T]hose who have assimilated their selfhood and interests with Orissa – Orissa is theirs and they are of Orissa.” Admission into Odisha required the immigrant to espouse the language and politicoeconomic interests of the province to the complete occlusion of her/his native language and community interests.

Discussions about domicile in the new province of Odisha provided an opportunity for the Odia political leadership to rethink the sublimation of language as the basis of regional community. Within debates about who could have access to resources provided by the Odisha state government, we find that the Odia leadership begin to qualify the narrative of inclusivity introduced by Gopabandhu Das. In the report of the Orissa Domicile Enquiry Committee of 1943, the president of the committee, Godavarish Misra, quoted Gobandhu’s 1919 speech. While speaking of Gopabandhu’s reference to “fellow countrymen from other parts of India who identify themselves with the prosperity of Orissa” could be considered as referring to Odias due to their allegiance to the state, Misra added a caveat to this inclusive claim by referencing the possibility of those who

would see themselves as outsiders and seek to exploit the resources of the state. In this vein, Misra argued that:

Orissa is not, either politically or economically, a cosmopolitan province such as towns like Calcutta and Bombay are, though in the sphere of religion it has ever embraced spiritual enthusiasts from all parts of the country.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Misra posits a separation between religious cosmopolitanism and more practical issues of political and economic cosmopolitanism. While upholding Gopabandhu Das' narrative of inclusive humanism of the Jaganath cult, Misra suggests that when it comes to economic and political rights the "sons of the soil" and the "genuine residents" should have absolute rights in Odisha. The rest of the report suggests that this claim for Odia rights is founded on a narrative of Odia underdevelopment and neglect in the years before a separate province of Odisha was formed. The central claim of the report was that a protectionist attitude had to be adopted to undo the damage of a century and a half of neglect of Odia interests. A concomitant discussion about the distinction between immigrants and minorities in the report reveals the grounds for the granting of a domicile certificate are expressly focused on cultural assimilation.<sup>12</sup> This shift undoes the careful cosmopolitanism of the 1920s where the Jaganath cult allowed for assimilation that enable the sustenance of cultural difference.

This is especially evident in the texts generated by the Orissa Domicile Certificate Enquiry Committee to figure out the requirements for granting the status of domicile to immigrants from other Indian provinces. Manned by prominent Odia politicians, the committee interviewed seventy-eight officials and representatives of political associations from different parts of Odisha and produced hundreds of pages of depositions. Respondents were often posed tough questions about what constituted assimilation and what level of language knowledge was mandatory. For instance, a Telegu-speaking official from the Ganjam district was interviewed in the following way.

*Question:* You have said that there should be no distinction between the domiciles and natives. It is also a fact that a domicile person is an emigrant. Now you say that there should be no distinction. Don't you think that the basic principle of emigration must be assimilation? Assimilation means he must march with the people of the province.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the Orissa Domicile Certificate Enquiry Committee, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> At one point, the report quotes Nehru's definition of successful immigration: "The very basis of immigration must be assimilation of the immigrants. If he remains alien and an outsider, he is a disruptive force in the body-politic", *Ibid*, p. 17.

*Answer:* I feel that the basic principle of emigration should be that the migrant should feel the province his own.

*Question:* What circumstances should be fulfilled before he can be considered to be merged in the other community – making the province his home, uniting his interest with the interest of the province . . . Merger in a major community making his interests equal in par with those of the majority.

*Question:* You should not claim the language to be recognized as the court language.

*Answer:* The economic interests of the majority of the people, the economic interests of the province being my interest does not mean that I should lose my language.<sup>13</sup>

Definitions of the Odia community had come full circle to the initial emphasis on language and community interests. While the requirement for assimilation into the language and political economic interests of the region were founded on a preexisting inclusive rhetoric, in reality, such questions could only alienate new entrants into the province.

### **Incorporating India**

Even as the meaning of regional and national community continued to be debated in provincial India, nationalist leaders of the early twentieth century had to resolve the seeming conflict between unitary nationalism and multi-lingual diversity. In what follows, I track the history of this effort beginning with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's efforts to create a symbiotic linguistic economy of regional mother tongues and a common Indian national vehicular language. I then show how Jawaharlal Nehru, who was to become the first prime minister of India, builds upon this newfound resolution between regional linguistic difference and the need for a national language to produce a contained and domesticated portrait of language diversity in India. Finally, through discussions and critique of the official efforts to institutionalize this tamed linguistic difference onto Indian territory, I discuss the costs of this neat division of India into rationalized linguistic zones. To do this, I examine Bhimrao Ambedkar's analysis of the proposals for territorial reorganization put forward by the States Reorganization Commission. As the leader of the depressed classes movement, the first law minister of India and the chairman of the Constituent Assembly in

<sup>13</sup> Deposition to the Orissa Domicile Certificate Enquiry Committee, Orissa State Archives no. 562, p. 168.



charge of crafting the Indian constitution, Ambedkar was uniquely placed to provide a critique of the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission from the perspective of the minorities. However, despite explicit efforts to make the minorities visible in the future linguistic state, Ambedkar is unable to expose the systematic incorporation of adivasi communities into large culturally dominant linguistic states.

*Bilingual Love: Gandhi's Linguistic Imaginary*

Long before he returned to India from South Africa, Gandhi spoke of a common language for the Indian people, a language of political community and populist agitation. Posed as an alternative to the “foreign” English, Hindustani was seen as an amalgam of the Hindu Hindi, Muslim Urdu, and much more. In his discussions about language, Gandhi proposed a new linguistic economy in India that would make English redundant. This economy of languages comprised regional mother tongues, which would form the basis of provincial politics, and a national language, which would allow regional parties to transcend the parochial. I explore Gandhi’s dual commitment to what Anne Berger has called the “vernacular and the vehicular” in language. In doing so, I suggest that Gandhi’s linguistic imaginary proposed an alternative relationship with regional mother tongues that allows for the simultaneous reign of the vernacular and vehicular.

In making my argument, I am drawing on Derrida’s critique of monolingualism in the postcolonial world. In his *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida argues that all culture is essentially colonial. Language, therefore, is never natural property. The mastery of language or the *having* of language is in itself a colonizing act. Because the master:

[...] cannot maintain any relations of property that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [*dire*] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as “his own.”<sup>14</sup>

And if language can never be natural property then inheritance of language is possible only by reappropriating it – an act that engenders “appropriative madness” or a “jealousy without appropriation.”<sup>15</sup> If we

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 24.

consider the case of language politics in India from within this problematic then the cultural politics of multiple mother tongues appears to be colonial in two senses. First, it is colonial because of the redefinition of the major postprakrit languages as vernacular by the new colonial elite. I have illustrated how the term “vernacular” is not appropriate in the context of modern India as it invokes properties of indigeneity, locality, and powerlessness that these languages did not necessarily possess.<sup>16</sup> In framing these languages as vernacular, colonial Orientalists bestowed on them qualities and deficiencies that would later drive the colonized “masters” of these languages to political movements of “appropriative jealousy.” And this is the second sense in which it is colonial.

In his dual commitment to the vernacular and the vehicular, Gandhi posed a radical critique of both colonial and Indian nationalist theories of language. Committed to producing a national economy of languages that would enable wider and more inclusive access to political activism in India, Gandhi eschewed language politics based on “appropriative jealousy.” Rather, he suggested that the commitment to the mother tongue enabled the individual’s access to other languages just as affect for the mother founds the self’s relationships with others.

When Gandhi joined Indian politics in 1915, he entered into a linguistic landscape populated by embodied mother tongues, a chimeral “national” language (Hindustani) and a chauvinistic pretender to the status of national language (Hindi). As I illustrated in Chapter 1, through a century and half of colonial linguistic experimentation and native activism, the major regional vernaculars had come to achieve curiously contradictory qualities. Colonial officials described them as lacking in vocabulary and hence unable to perform modern functions of education and communication. And yet the colonial state saw these vernaculars as the only languages, apart from English, through which the Indian people could be ruled and educated. By the 1910s, Indian vernaculars had discrete demographic constituencies and increasingly more discrete territorial domains. The Indian elite represented these languages as gendered mother tongues that were related and yet parallel to one another. The very weakness that rendered these languages premodern in the state’s eyes was also what called for nativist activism in the form of new literary production, lexical innovations, and standardization of vocabulary, grammar, and idiom. According to the native elite, even as these languages were weak, they were also the

<sup>16</sup> Pritipuspa Mishra, “Beyond Powerlessness: Institutional Life of the Vernacular in the Making of Modern Orissa”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 48 (2011): 531–70.

foundation of the modern regional community – the ground from which they could participate in the national community with dignity. In this economy of languages, India came to be constituted of monolingual subjects. On his entry into Indian politics, Gandhi had to contend with the jealously protected political domains of these languages.

Hindustani, in contrast, is a much harder language to pin down. Since the early years of British colonialism in India, Hindustani has had a variable existence. The earliest British mention of Hindustani can be found in George Hadley's grammar of the "vulgar dialect of the *Indostan* language" in 1772. In later years, the name came to signify a number of different linguistic realities that the new rulers encountered in their early years.<sup>17</sup> The name "Hindustani" simply signified the language of Hindustan or India.<sup>18</sup> By the 1930s and early 40s, the question of Hindustani animated nationalist discussions about the linguistic, legal, and educational future of India. Organizations like the Hindustani Prachar Sabha worked towards identifying Hindustani as the "largest common factor of languages spoken in Northern India" and attempted to build a compact vocabulary of the language by drawing on words from Hindi and Urdu.<sup>19</sup> However, we see that this language-in-making gradually disappeared from official documents as it failed to appear in the list of official languages of the 8th Schedule in the Indian constitution in 1950 and was ultimately dropped from the Indian census in 1971.<sup>20</sup>

Much of the blame for the disappearance of Hindustani could probably be laid at the door of lobbyists for Hindi. Posed as an alternative to Urdu and a solution for the anxiety of linguistic variety of India, the Hindi language was viewed by its supporters as a "robust" and masculine language that drew on "native" Sanskrit roots and Khari Boli, a language spoken in rural north India. By the 1910s, the question of popular language was becoming increasingly important as proposals for the introduction of wider franchise cited the gulf between the English-speaking political elite and the rural peasantry as the chief impediment to the success of responsible government. Language and self-rule or

<sup>17</sup> John Gilchrist's *A Grammar of the Hindustani Language* posed it as the language used all over India by both the literary elite and the illiterate masses. In 1800, he was appointed Professor of Hindustani at Fort William College in Calcutta where he worked towards establishing it as a "language of command." See Alok Rai, "The Persistence of Hindustani", *Annual of Urdu Studies* 20 (2005): 135–44 for a history of the ghostly life of Hindustani.

<sup>18</sup> Alok Rai, "The Persistence of Hindustani", 140.

<sup>19</sup> Mentioned in a note by the Bihar Urdu Committee in 1937 in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "A Welcome Move" [1937], in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 95 Vols, Vol. 72 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1958–1982): p. 209. Henceforth CWMG.

<sup>20</sup> David Lelyveld, "Colonial Knowledge", 679–80.

swarajya became intrinsically linked in subsequent nationalist politics. Throughout his political life in India, Gandhi campaigned for the use of Indian languages in politics and education. Education, he argued, should be imparted in the regional mother tongues to avoid the unnecessary burden of English learning. And nationalist politics should be conducted in a common Indian language – Hindustani.

In the Constituent Assembly debates during the late 1940s, a delegate questioned the efficacy of such a dual commitment to regional languages and a national language.<sup>21</sup> He posited: “I cannot understand how these things can go together [. . .] we cannot hope to have one language for the whole country and at the same time work for the enrichment in the regional languages.”<sup>22</sup> How did Gandhi resolve this contradiction in his thoughts? I suggest that the key to understanding how Gandhi sustained this commitment to the vernacular and the vehicular can be found in his approach to “mastery” and the “proper place” of language.

In his statements about the knowledge of and allegiance to languages, Gandhi displays a remarkably nonappropriative, unjealous approach. A few examples from his language statements:

I am interested in language as such. What I mean is that whatever language one may speak or write one’s pronunciation should be clear and the grammar perfect. I have not been able to reach this ideal in the case of any language. Gujarati being my mother tongue, naturally, I have love for it. But everyone knows how imperfect my Gujarati is. My grammar is weak, my spelling indifferent. What need I say about my Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani? Yet I have allowed myself to be the president of the Hindustani Prachar Sabha. (June 3, 1946)<sup>23</sup>

In spite of my great love for the English tongue and English people, I have failed to master that language up to now. I commit mistakes in spelling the English words and my English idioms have often been inaccurate, the English words I use are not always appropriate. How can I do otherwise? I learnt the English language not to become a scholar but to convey my thoughts. (January 18, 1934)<sup>24</sup>

[P]lease pick up at least an elementary knowledge of the Hindi language so that you may be enabled to get into the hearts of twenty crores of your brethren in India. Maybe, it is not a substitute for either English or Malayalam. Malayalam is your mother tongue. It is a sin not to know it and not to know it well. Only, if you have an all-India heart or an all-India will, Hindi could be learnt. (January 18, 1934)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The Constituent Assembly was responsible for the drafting of the Indian Constitution. It met for a little over three years from December 1946 to January 1950 and consisted of 207 delegates from different parts of India.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Granville Austin, ‘Language and the Constitution: A Half-Hearted Compromise’ in Asha Sarangi ed., *Language and Politics in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 2009), p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> CWMG, Vol. 91, p. 104. <sup>24</sup> CWMG, Vol. 63, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> CWMG, Vol. 63, p. 6. Here, by Hindi, Gandhi means Hindustani.

Taken together, these statements about language mastery are a radical critique of the prevailing notions of monolingual affect among Gandhi's contemporaries. Unlike the participants in linguistic cultural politics across India who insisted on the mastery of proper language, Gandhi suggests that good knowledge of language – mother tongue or otherwise – is aspirational rather than essential. As his commitment to the Hindustani Prachar Sabha suggests, lack of felicity in a language does not preclude an investment in it. By being interested in “language as such,” Gandhi sought to inhabit a tension between treating all languages as interchangeable (“*whatever* language one may speak . . . should be clear”) and the love for a specific language (“Gujarati being my mother tongue, naturally I have love for it”). However, as we see elsewhere in his oeuvre, some sort of love could also be extended to English, too. The only thing that sets Gujarati apart is its status as mother tongue – love for it is natural. Love for English or the commitment to learn Hindustani has to be an extension of this natural ability to love the mother tongue through the adoption of an “all-India heart or an all-India will.” Ultimately, his argument for an investment in multiple languages produces a palimpsest of linguistic affect with the mother tongue as the foundation.

When it came to the mother tongue, Gandhi built upon contemporary Indian notions of language-as-mother even as he departed from the exclusivity of such a commitment.<sup>26</sup> In one instance he argues that “disrespect to the mother tongue is as reprehensible as disrespect to one’s mother.”<sup>27</sup> This conflation of mother tongue and mother insists on an intimate relationship with the maternal language. As Anne Berger’s discussion of Abdelkebir Khatibi’s avowal of *langage maternel* reveals, such an investment in speech-as-maternal is inalienable because it carries in it “the trace of an initial, intimate, ineffaceable, and irreplaceable contact with the mother’s body.”<sup>28</sup> As in the case of Khatibi, this intimate connection remains intact despite spatial dislocation, as it is no longer linked to a land of origin. In Gandhi, such a connection allows him to carry his love for the mother tongue even as he transcends the region of Gujarat to inhabit the broader Indian nation. It also suggests the impossibility and undesirability of mastery over language as mother. Finally, it allows him to treat his commitment to his mother tongue as a foundational a priori that is not undermined by other linguistic investments. Just as the

<sup>26</sup> Language as mother is a formulation we find in the figure of Tamilay or Mother Tamil. Also in Odia linguistic politics, the language is called “Utkal Janani.” While *janani* means mother, it also makes specific reference to the act of giving birth. Janani literally means “the woman who gave birth to me.”

<sup>27</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 16, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Berger, “Politics of Language”, *Parallax* 18, no. 3 (2012):25.

relationship with the mother is both foundational and preparatory for all other human connections, the use of the mother tongue enables Gandhi to access other languages.

Hence, rather than a quest for appropriatory mastery, we find in Gandhi's discussions of mother tongue a recognition of the fundamental debt to her – or *matririn* as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it.<sup>29</sup> *Matririn* – according to Spivak – is a gift that cannot be and *is* not to be repaid. It constitutes both a debt to the mother and a debt of child rearing owed by her. Unlike the discourse of debt that justified linguistic activism in the politics of Hindi or Tamil, Gandhi's idea of debt accounts for both the labour of the speaker and that of the language. For instance, in Gandhian thought, the task of building a modern vocabulary for Indian mother tongues involves both the labour of the modern speakers of the tongue and the labour of the language itself to represent the lives of its speakers. Speaking of Gujarati he said:

A language takes its form from the character and life of those who speak it. We can say without hesitation that the people whose language does not reflect the qualities of courage, truthfulness and compassion are deficient in those virtues. Importing words expressive of courage or compassion from other tongues will not enrich or widen the content of a language nor make its speakers brave or kind [...] In our own mother tongue, we find a large number of words denoting an excess of meekness, because we have lived under subjections for many years. Similarly, no other language in the world has as many nautical terms as English. Supposing that an enterprising Gujarati writer were to render books on the subject from English to Gujarati, it would not add one whit to the range and power of our language, nor would it in any way increase our knowledge of ships. But as soon as we start building ships and raise a navy, the necessary technical phraseology will automatically establish itself.<sup>30</sup>

Through a focus on the disruptive moment of translation, this passage suggests that the impossible repayment of debt is conducted not through linguistic work (such as new literature, grammars or lexicons) but by action beyond the world of language. However, the placement of life before language, suggested by the way Gandhi supposes language will catch up with changing realities, appears to disrupt the notion of language as the originary mother. Or does it? His commitment to action that would eventually lead to the modernization (but not Westernization) of language is possible because the mother tongue is always foundational, always available to adjust to life of the child-speaker.

This passage also illustrates Gandhi's departure from the Orientalist condemnation of Indian languages as being "unfit" for modernity.

<sup>29</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Translation as Culture", *Parallax* 16 (2000): 15.

<sup>30</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 16, p. 73.

Rather, Gandhi argued, the lack of vocabulary was a reflection of actual lacks in the Indian economy and society. By juxtaposing a vocabulary of colonized meekness and that of British naval power, this passage recuperates an older notion of Indian *deshi* language as languages that evolved to reflect a changing world.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, Gandhi overturns the colonial narrative of linguistic lack even as he places the blame for this lack on the violence of colonialism.

Tied to his reluctance about mastery over language was Gandhi's insistence on the "proper place" of language. Speaking of the need to learn Hindi (Hindustani) along with one's own mother tongue, Gandhi said to his Malayalam-speaking audience: "Each is good in its own place and will serve its purpose accordingly. May I illustrate this point? Malayalam in the Punjab is useless, so is English for a Punjabi farmer. But if you speak to the Punjabi in Hindi, e.g., '*Salamalikum*,' he will smile at you and he will say, 'I know him'."<sup>32</sup> The notion of "proper place" recurs in much of Gandhi's writing. The Gujarati term often used in his writing on the "proper" was *thekaana*. Etymologically linked with *stān* or place, *thekaana* is a "place that is home or dwelling, including one within some hierarchy or order. A *thekaana* is not externally assigned; it is a destination that is a thing's or being's own. Objects cannot have a *thekaana*; only that can come home which has a proper."<sup>33</sup> Thus the proper place of language or its *thekaana* depends on what is home to it. The proper place of the mother tongue would be the home, school, the province, and the nation. However, even if it is at home in the nation, the mother tongue is implicated in a broader order of languages that the notion of *thekaana* implies – remember "Malayalam is useless in Punjab."

What then would be the proper place of Hindustani? As a language that shuttled between two languages, Hindi and Urdu, Hindustani was yet to be formed. To borrow a precolonial term, Gandhi's avowal of Hindustani posed it as a new *marga* language.<sup>34</sup> A new language of the road constantly shuttling, binding, traversing between homes of various Indian mother tongues. Even if it would someday be a "stately language, which will serve the crores of India," Hindustani was emphatically no mother tongue. Rather, as Gandhi's repeated references to the birth of the language suggests, it was to be an offspring of the nation. Hence, its only proper place was the nation rather than the home or the school. Its very

<sup>31</sup> See Mishra, "The Mortality of Hindustani", 73.

<sup>32</sup> CWMG. In this instance, by Hindi Gandhi actually means Hindustani.

<sup>33</sup> Ajay Skaria, "Only One Word, Properly Altered: Gandhi and the Question of the Prostitute", *Postcolonial Studies* 10 (2007): 224.

<sup>34</sup> *Marga* in the precolonial period designated vehicular languages such as Sanskrit and prakrit.

domestication was fundamentally nondomestic because it connected only public spaces. In doing so, Hindustani would replace English whose proper place was not the Indian nation. While this disavowal of English could be read as chauvinistic nativism, his treatment of the language suggests that in the orders of thekaana English simply belonged to a different home. It was, as Gandhi repeatedly called it, “an international language of commerce.” Its home was beyond the Indian nation.

As we see, for Gandhi there was no conflict in investing in his mother tongue and working towards the development of Hindustani. Thinking of mother tongue as mother enabled Gandhi to undo the dually colonial nature of Indian linguistic politics. He neither bought into the colonial discourse of linguistic lack and servitude that the term “vernacular” invoked, nor participated in a colonizing appropriative linguistic jealousy. By maneuvering out of the logic of colonialism, Gandhi was able, albeit for a short time, to imagine an Indian nation that was at once linguistically diverse and linguistically united without recourse to the language of colonialism itself: English.

Gandhi’s engagement with linguistic difference and the search for a common national language is perhaps the most sustained discussion of this kind in India. Even as his Hindustani project does not survive in official circles past the first few years after independence, Gandhi’s case for a palimpsest of linguistic affect for the vernacular as well as the vehicular provided a powerful alibi for the Indian National Congress to change its stance on linguistic provinces. In arguing that both the regional mother tongue and the national language have a *proper place*, Gandhi implicitly accepted the idea of linguistic regions and gave the demand for such regions some degree of legitimacy. To ask for a linguistic region was no longer an attack on the unity of the nation. Hence, in contrast to an earlier policy of noninterference in regional linguistic politics, Congress moved to enthusiastically support the regional movements for linguistic states from the 1920s onwards. Much of this enthusiasm was enabled by the vague and ideological nature of Gandhi’s linguistic imaginary. Without concrete discussions about boundaries, domiciles, jobs, economic viability, or the status of minority populations, this new comfort with linguistic difference could easily support various regional movements for linguistic states that were often at odds with one another.<sup>35</sup> Such fights, if acknowledged, would disrupt Indian unity.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, the fight between Andhra Pradesh and Odisha over the district of Ganjam or the fight between Bengal and Assam over Darjeeling.



*Manageable Difference: Nehru and the Politics of Language*

These divisive possibilities, borne out of the concrete realities of regional linguistic politics, would eventually plague Jawaharlal Nehru at the moment of independence. However, in the two decades before independence, Nehru would build upon Gandhi's vague linguistic imaginary to resolve the question of language in Indian politics. His own insistence on treating the question as a very simple quest for a national language was founded on an assumption that the regional languages and their domains were not sites of contestation and struggle. Rather they served as the basis of popular access to democratic politics.

Sanjay Seth argues that the vagueness in Nehru's *Discovery of India* about the inherent Indianness or Indian *geist* enabled him to "avoid possibilities which he considers dangerous."<sup>36</sup> If, at the end of his discovery of India, Nehru had described what he found in positive terms then it would have produced a nation that was too narrow to hold Indian diversity in it. Maintaining Indianness as a series of ahistorical and essential qualities – tolerance, inner urge or powerful impulse – allowed Nehru to craft a nation that would survive any particularity that could threaten its unity. This strategic deployment of vagueness is also evident in his take on the politics of language in India.

In his writing on the language issue, Nehru repeatedly denied that India had too many languages. In his 1937 essay, "The Question of Language," he contended that it is "the cry of the ignorant that India is a babel of tongues with hundreds and hundreds of languages."<sup>37</sup> In fact, he said, India has remarkably few languages considering her vast size. Later, in his 1944 *Discovery of India*, in an uncharacteristic indictment of scholarly consensus of his time, he argued that "the oft repeated story of India having five hundred or more languages, is a fiction of the mind of the philologist and the census commissioner who notes down every variation in dialect, and every petty hill-tongue on the Assam-Bengal border with Burma as a separate language, although sometime only a few hundred or a few thousand people speak it."<sup>38</sup> Such a claim is surprising when we

<sup>36</sup> Sanjay Seth, "Nationalism, National Identity and 'History': Nehru's Search for India", *Thesis Eleven* 32 (1992): 37–54.

<sup>37</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, "The Question of Language" in *The Unity of India* (New York: J. Day, 1942), p. 241. This essay draws heavily on Gandhi's arguments about Hindustani. It was written at Gandhi's behest to shore up support for Hindustani from opposing Hindi and Urdu camps when communal tension reached a high point. Gandhi read and commented on it repeatedly. Subsequently, Nehru sent it to Jinnah as a means of addressing the Hindi-Urdu controversy. For a history of the text, see Robert King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 169.

note that it was made almost three decades after Grierson's monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* was published. As his many references to philological concepts in the *Discovery of India* suggest, this charge of "fictional philology" could not really have been a product of his ignorance of contemporary scholarship on language. Rather, his comparison of the Indian case with the German one where the wily philologists had claimed that there were sixty languages suggests that something other than conservative ignorance is at play here.

As Partha Chatterjee has suggested, by the late 1930s, Nehru was already approaching questions of national unity as a future state leader.<sup>39</sup> The idea of Germany having sixty languages was preposterous to Nehru because of the prevailing understanding of Germany as the quintessential monoglot nation-state. His use of the German example implies that his insistence on fewer Indian languages was informed by his need to see how the future Indian state could harness differences. At issue here is not what is correct philological knowledge, but what the emergent nation-state should *see* – to borrow James Scott's phrase – as the primary linguistic categories that constitute India.<sup>40</sup> This explains his reluctance to acknowledge linguistic variety in India.

These debatable claims are then occluded by his repeated use of language lists that give the semblance of factuality and precision. Hence even as he appears to be wrong about the nature of linguistic diversity in India, he is emphatic in his claim that there are *precisely* fifteen languages in India. Not only this, his language lists are often posed within discussions about national unity:

It is fascinating to find how the Bengalis, the Marathas, the Gujaratis, the Tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the Assamese, the Canarese, the Malayalis, the Sindhis, the Punjabis, the Pathans, the Kasmiris, the Rajputs and the great central block comprising of the Hindustani speaking people, have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years ... and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian.<sup>41</sup>

The pictorial quality of this list is striking. It is not a list but a portrait or map of India – with a Hindustani heart surrounded by monolingual groups. Even though these language groups share an Indian quality, they are marked by their particularity. Despite his explicit liberal aspirations, such a list underlines the fact that the people of these language

<sup>39</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 63.

groups are not mutually interchangeable. The Indian citizen could not possibly be a universal liberal subject. She/he was always already languaged. However, by listing and linking these languages with each other and with national unity, Nehru was able to contain and domesticate linguistic difference. Not only were there strikingly few Indian languages, they were also no threat to national unity. Rather, they served as the basis of sociopolitical life in the regional India and were never at odds with all-India nationalism.<sup>42</sup>

What was lost in this simplification and domestication of linguistic difference? Clearly, many languages were written out of the Indian community. But along with the languages, their people were also written out. Nehru's fifteen languages could now represent adivasi communities that did not belong to them. By dividing Indian territory into these neat and discrete linguistic domains without any reference to conflicts within these domains, Nehru produced linguistic regions as empty spaces that could hold all other registers of difference – religious, caste, or even class. These fifteen languages trumped all other difference within these communities. In the categorical logic of the emergent Indian state, linguistic divisions were the most effective and safe means to divide the population.

Despite his unrealistic understanding of language variety in India, Nehru saw knowledge of language as a crucial precondition to the success of the Indian democratic state. These languages, he argued:

[A]re ancient languages with a rich inheritance, each spoken by many millions of persons, each tied up inextricably with the life and the culture and ideas of the masses as well as of the upper classes. It is axiomatic that the masses can only grow educationally and culturally through the medium of their own language. Therefore it is inevitable that we lay stress on the provincial languages and carry on most of our work through them. The use of any other language would result in isolating the educated few from the masses and retard the growth of the people.<sup>43</sup>

This commitment to regional languages that connected the masses and the elite also shaped how Nehru envisioned his chosen national vehicular language – Hindustani. Ideally, Hindustani was to be a “living language,” “a throbbing, vital thing” that has its “roots in the masses.” The location of this language was in the home or the market place.<sup>44</sup> If one looked for it in literary societies then one would find only Hindi and Urdu. A link language, Hindustani had to be founded on everyday experience because it had to “represent and mirror the life of the people as a whole and not that of a small group of people.” To ensure that everyone had access to the language, Nehru suggested that it be simplified into Basic Hindustani.

<sup>42</sup> Nehru, “The Question of Language”, p. 249. <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 243. <sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 249.

Much like Basic English, Basic Hindustani would have a really simple grammar and a very small vocabulary.

Ultimately, Nehru's thoughts on language hinged on his search for solutions to two fundamental problems in the building of the new nation. While he was concerned about domesticating potentially divisive linguistic difference, he was also addressing the problem of class difference—the distance between the masses and the elite. As I have shown in Chapter 3, the question of regional languages became important in the 1910s at the precise moment when the earliest efforts towards introducing popular franchise were being instituted. As the documents concerning the 1918 Montague-Chelmsford constitutional reforms illustrate, the colonial government posed the linguistic distance between the elite and the masses as a primary reason for limiting franchise to a smaller group of people. While doing so, the officials who put together the report on franchise argued that the Indian masses needed to be protected from the Indian elite precisely because the elite was out of touch with the masses. As I argued earlier, the decision to acknowledge provincial linguistic territorial demands within the Indian National Congress was compelled by this charge of elitism. Staking a selected number of regional vernaculars and a bizarre Hindustani as central to the praxis of democracy and development in India allowed Nehru to address both the problem of linguistic difference and the problem of class difference. Hence, for Nehru, both the regional vernaculars and Basic Hindustani were link languages essential to the Indian body politic. What is missing in Nehru's writings on language up to this point, however, is any acknowledgement that such linguistic populism is often implicated in operations of elite power. Such a critique of language would only come from B. R. Ambedkar in the 1950s.

Upon independence in 1947, Nehru retained his straightforward understanding of language politics in India. However, as the agitation for a linguistic state mounted and it became increasingly clear that language politics hid within it caste and class politics, Nehru was forced to reconsider his stand on regional languages. In his private correspondence of the 1950s, we see an acknowledgement that he was wrong to assume that language politics was simply about language.<sup>45</sup> Immediately after independence, he set up the Dhar Committee to look into the question of linguistic reorganization of the Indian provinces. The committee recommended that the question be deferred, as the nation had many challenges to face before any careful reorganization could happen. However,

<sup>45</sup> For details, see Robert King, "The Private Nehru", *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, pp. 140–86.

agitation for provincial reorganization continued. In 1952, Potti Sriramalu, a leader of the Andhra movement, died while on hunger strike as he demanded a separate province of Andhra Pradesh. This forced Nehru's hand and he had to begin the process by setting up the State Reorganization Committee.

*The Problem of Minorities: Ambedkar and the Reorganization of the Indian Provinces*

As a response to the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission, Ambedkar wrote what can only be called a "minority report." In his *Thoughts on Linguistic Provinces*, Ambedkar analyzed the plans for reorganization of the Indian states from a point of view that did not take the Nehruvian neatness of Indian difference for granted. As Anupama Rao has illustrated, his experience as the leader of the dalit movement made him uncomfortable with the nexus between language and caste power in regional India.<sup>46</sup> In his essay on the formation of the separate state of Maharashtra, he even goes so far as to say that regional language should not be the official language of the linguistic states as this could privilege a regional caste elite. From this discomfort emerged his reluctance to allow the concentration of power in a few large Indian states. To this end, he argued for more division of Indian territory to break up such concentrations and enable minorities to have greater representation within the provinces.

Based on the resolution passed in the Indian parliament in 1952, the States Reorganization Commission (SRC) was asked to balance linguistic grounds for state creation with consideration of the ultimate unity and security of the nation, cultural homogeneity, and financial viability.<sup>47</sup> The SRC recommended the formation of mostly monolingual states, which brought together all speakers of a language under a single administration – one language, one state. The only exceptions to this rule were the many large Hindi-speaking states in the north and the bilingual state of Maharashtra and Gujarat. Ambedkar opposed both these exceptions and further suggested that any large unilingual states should be divided to make smaller monolingual states – one state, one language. In the case of large

<sup>46</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), p. 42. "Dalit" was a term coined in western India to denote the untouchable community. Literally, the term means the oppressed. In official language of the colonial state, they were called either the scheduled castes or oppressed peoples.

<sup>47</sup> Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1955), p. 25.

northern Indian Hindi-speaking province, he argued that the northern provinces were so large in comparison to the “balkanized” southern states that all governmental power could be concentrated in the north.<sup>48</sup> By the same token, he warned that the mammoth size of the Maharashtra/Gujarat province would mean that the minorities in the provinces would either be “crushed” or “tyrannized and oppressed.”

In sharp contrast to Nehru, Ambedkar insisted that there was no place for idealism in plans for linguistic provinces – “Politics is nothing if not realistic.” The status of minorities in the Indian provinces had to be considered carefully and checks and balances had to be put in place to ensure that the tyranny of the majority was not encouraged. One of the checks would be to make the states smaller because this would decrease the magnitude of the numerical difference between the majority and minority populations. He argued that “a small stone of the consolidated majority placed on the chest of the minority may be borne. But the weight of a huge mountain it cannot bear. It will crush the minorities.”<sup>49</sup> A second safeguard for minority rights could be special provisions for representation of minorities in the legislature. However, the Indian constitution did not allow separate electorates. Hence, Ambedkar noted with much pathos: “The lambs are shorn of the wool. They are feeling the intensity of the cold. Some tempering of the wool is necessary.”<sup>50</sup> This is where Ambedkar’s optimistic understanding of India’s divisive genius comes in. When separate electorates are not possible then, he suggests, we divide the constituency itself so that more than one member is returned from each constituency, thus giving the minority greater representation.

As the central preoccupation of this chapter is the figure of the adivasi, Ambedkar’s use of the term “minority” is of particular interest to us. In his *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, Ambedkar uses this term to denote a specific minority group – the dalit. However, at no point in his minority critique of linguistic states does he mention the adivasi communities as minority. And, in doing so, he loses an opportunity to illustrate the dangers of forming linguistic provinces that would carry within them adivasi zones of exception. Why, unlike the dalit, could the adivasi not be described as a political minority within the context of the linguistic states?

In Anupama Rao’s fascinating history of Ambedkar’s formulation of dalit as a political minority, we see that he spent much of the 1930s in conceptualizing a unified dalit political identity and situating it within a discourse of minority rights that was hitherto only applied to religious

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp. 14–15.    <sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 35.    <sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

minorities. Ambedkar gave his constituency a “non-Hindu minority” status. This status drew not from an inherent feature of the untouchable community but from the everyday experience of being untouchable. Dalit came to signify the “existential horrors of stigmatized existence.”<sup>51</sup> Ambedkar demanded that the dalits be treated as a distinct political minority because they were “educationally backward, . . . economically very poor, socially enslaved.”<sup>52</sup> He had to seek a redefinition of the notion of minority because if a religious community were the only form of political constituency, then the dalits would be included in the Hindu constituency – the very group that has degraded and enslaved them.

An important feature of dalit as political minority was the spatiality of dalit life. In his arguments, Ambedkar pointed to the contradictory nature of dalit emplacement in Hindu society. While “every village had a Dalit ghetto,” they were also scattered across the country and could never hope to win political majority for themselves.

Perhaps this is where the life of the scheduled tribes differed. Defined by their historical emplacement in the hilly forest of India, which were consistently cordoned off from the plains by government decree, the adivasi could not be defined as a scattered minority population.<sup>53</sup> In the areas they inhabited, they were a demographic majority. For instance, the Koraput district of southern Odisha had almost a sixty percent adivasi majority. Also, as both Prathama Banerjee and Uday Chandra have argued, the ascription of a quality of primitivism to the Adivasi meant that their disagreements with Hindu society were never acknowledged as “political diversity.”<sup>54</sup> Assertions of adivasi political difference could not be seen as such. Thus as a result of their putative primitivism and territorial emplacement, the adivasi communities of eastern India could not be imagined as a political minority.

For the States Reorganization Commission, the inclusion of such areas within linguistic states was a matter of territorial rather than demographic inclusion. This is particularly explicit in the case of Jharkhand, the only adivasi province that was proposed to the States Reorganization Commission. The proposed province comprised of the mineral-rich Chota Nagpur plateau in south Bihar. While denying the demand on the grounds that the adivasi population of the proposed area was only one third of the total, the Committee report noted that: “The separation of

<sup>51</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, p. 122. <sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>53</sup> For a history of territorial exceptionalism of tribal India, see Uday Chandra, “Liberalism and its Other: The Politics of Primitivism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Law”, *Law and Society Review* 47 (2013): 135–68.

<sup>54</sup> See Prathama Banerjee, “Culture/Politics: The Irresoluble Double-Bind of the Indian Adivasi”, *Indian Historical Review* 33 (2003): 99–126.

South Bihar will affect the entire economy of the existing State. The plains are predominantly agricultural and Chota Nagpur Plateau provides as industrial balance.”<sup>55</sup>

The example of Ambedkar’s treatment of the question of linguistic states illustrates how even in a minority critique of the States Reorganization Commission, the adivasi could not figure. The incorporation of the adivasi into the India community via the linguistic states was rendered almost invisible. The preceding reading of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar illustrate how linguistic division of India was made possible through resolution of any conflict between commitments to regional mother tongues and the national vehicular language, the domestication of a truncated notion of linguistic diversity into the biography of Indian democracy and finally the occlusion of the adivasis’ incorporation into the linguistic states.

### **The Unincorporated: Adivasis in Linguistic States**

At the beginning of the parliamentary debates on the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission, the home minister of the Indian union made only a single veiled reference to the adivasi communities who were parceled in parts into various linguistic provinces:

There are I think 2 or 3 crores of people in our country who do not speak any of these 14 languages. Yet, they have a right to unfettered growth as much as those who have the privilege of belonging to these recognized linguistic groups.<sup>56</sup>

This enumeration rather than naming of adivasi communities, even as a category, is symptomatic of the broader discussion of adivasi areas within the debates pertaining to the States Reorganization Commission. By counting rather than *describing* them, this statement greatly simplifies the differences between the Adivasi and the caste populations of linguistic provinces. The only thing that distinguishes them from the more dominant communities around them is linguistic difference. Such sleight of hand veils the history of elite exploitation of adivasi communities and resources. It renders obscure histories of usury, overtaxation, land dispossession, forced migration, slavery, bodily, and sexual exploitation.<sup>57</sup> It also denies the long history of adivasi dissent against the very populations

<sup>55</sup> Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, p. 169.

<sup>56</sup> Government of India, *Lok Sabha Debates on the Report of the States Reorganization Commission (14th December to 23rd December 1955)*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1956), p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> For a history of tribal exploitation in Odisha and the networks of power involving native elite, princely states rules, and the colonial government, see Biswamoy Pati, *South Asia On the Margins* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).



that they are now placed adjacent to. This simplification is the key to understanding the mechanics of the inclusion of tribal communities into the linguistic provinces. Here, I treat selections from memoranda sent by various provincial governments and private lobbies to the States Reorganization Commission in order to illustrate how they made the case for the inclusion of adjacent adivasi areas into their own provinces.

Memoranda from the various regions with adivasi communities to the States Reorganization Commission illustrate how in claiming these areas the difference between the caste community and adivasi groups was simultaneously marked and obliterated. For instance, in a memorandum submitted by the Telegu-speaking Vishalandhra Mahasabha from Hyderabad, the claim to areas in southern Odisha inhabited by the “agency tribes” were made in the following terms:<sup>58</sup>

The agency tribes that are in that area are Telegu in character, customs, traditions and beliefs though they may have their own primitive language. They understand Telegu better than Oriya. Ever since their inclusion in the Orissa state the Andhras have been agitating intensely for their coming to their Andhra homeland.<sup>59</sup>

While it is unclear what the Telegu character would be, the reference to customs, traditions, and beliefs suggests that they were arguing for a community based on shared everyday life. Of course, this would deny the reality of independent adivasi faith systems that were outside the Hindu pantheon. In the absence of any details about actual names of the adivasi groups, ethnographic counterarguments about the actual belief systems of these communities cannot be posed. Also, in invoking their primitiveness, the memorandum situated the adivasi as a figure of incommensurable difference, an anachronistic presence that shared their everyday life with the Telegu people. They were both insiders and outsiders.

Another strategy of inclusion was the rhetoric of interests. For instance, the member of parliament for the Khurda district in Odisha argued for the inclusion of the Singbhum district in the state on the grounds that state government has done a “great deal in ameliorating the condition of the adivasi people in the course of the last seven years . . . This has naturally attracted the Hos and the Santhals of Singbhum district towards Odisha

<sup>58</sup> The agency tribes refer to the communities living in the Meriah Agency areas. In the mid nineteenth century, the colonial state marked off a part of southern Odisha and Ganjam as the separate agency in an effort to curb what was rumored to be the practice of human sacrifice. For details, see Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of the Human Being: British Rule and the Khonds of Orissa* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> The Vishalandhra Mahasabha, *Demand for the Vishalandhra State* (Vijayavada: Venkatrama & Co., 1955), p. 40.

and they confidently feel that their interests would be better looked after by the Government of Odisha than by any other province.”<sup>60</sup>

Finally, at the root of many such contentions are claims that the mainstream community and the adivasi community share a common historical past. Both historical and philological arguments are deployed to make such a case. For instance, the memorandum submitted by the government of West Bengal makes such a case for the inclusion of the district of Darjeeling. Countering Bihar’s claims to the district on the grounds that the majority language Nepali was a form of Hindi, the Bengal government’s argument tracks a detailed philological account of the languages spoken by the communities of the area. By illustrating that two groups of languages are spoken among these communities – the formal language Khaskura, which is an Indo-Aryan language drawn from the Sauraseni prakrits, and the colloquial language, which was often one of the Tibeto-Burman languages – they disproved the Bihari claim that the people of the area spoke some form of Hindi. In terms of history, the memoranda argued “significant history of the district starts only from 1836 with the British acquisition of this area. From that time onwards, the district has always been an administrative limb of Bengal.”<sup>61</sup>

What all these strategies have in common is a meticulous balance between arguments for incorporation and suggestions of distance. While the adivasi communities shared everyday life, interests and a common history, they were also primitive, dependent on the mainstream population and ahistorical before the contact. The adivasi was also seen as less than equal to the mainstream population of the linguistic provinces. Often these claims amount to arguments for trusteeship over adivasi life.

There are very few instances of adivasi counternarratives to such majoritarian claims in the Lok Sabha debates.<sup>62</sup> Jaipal Singh, the leader of the Adivasi Mahasabha and a strong proponent for the formation of the province to Jharkhand gave the most comprehensive statement at the Lok Sabha debates. In his statement he argued for consolidation of the Chota Nagpur plateau under a single administration as opposed to the area being scattered into “five giant” provinces that surround it. In making his argument, Singh attacked the discursive tools that had been deployed by neighboring states in their efforts to incorporate the adivasi population

<sup>60</sup> Government of India, *Lok Sabha Debates on the Report of the States Reorganization Commission, Vol. 1*, p. 843.

<sup>61</sup> Government of Bengal, *Memorandum (Supplementary) Before States Reorganization Commission* (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1954), p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> I have not been able to find the memoranda submitted by those lobbying for Jharkhand.

– historicity, enumeration, and development. Demanding that his colleagues not use “distorted history” to make their case, Singh exclaimed:

Do not vitiate historical facts. If you want to rewrite history you can do that; the history of the freedom movement is going to be written; you can make your own contribution to that.

But in independent India, the bluff of past history is not going to work.<sup>63</sup>

Here is an acknowledgment of the spurious historical narratives at play in the debate about adivasi regions. It could be argued that perhaps Singh was also pushing back against historiographical violence perpetrated on the Adivasi. Through a study of historical memory in the part of the Chota Nagpur plateau that was still part of Odisha, Ranabir Samaddar has shown how elite efforts to manage adivasi memory have wiped out histories of adivasi political self-determination.<sup>64</sup>

While history could not be trusted, neither could one depend on numbers gleaned from census reports:

[T]here has been this most undesirable endeavor by the political parties and various sections of communities to make the census reports not a mine of the most useful and scientific information but as something which will suit their own particular political requirements.<sup>65</sup>

This abuse of numbers compounded his charge against those who were opposing the formation of Jharkhand. Despite an investment in real historical facts and scientific census figures, Singh’s distrust of the discursive framework within which claims of inclusion have been made meant that he steered clear of arguments involving past history and census figures. Instead, he argued for adivasi humanity as a disrupted humanity. That the vivisection of the Chota Nagpur plateau into many parts had violently disrupted the humanity of the adivasi population and that the bringing together of these peoples will make them “feel that one-ness which is necessary to enable them to regain their lost nerve.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, greater attention to the disruption of adivasi humanity is required in the face of the celebration of development that makes invisible the tragedy of Adivasi lives:

Whether you talk of the D.V.C. or the Hirakud Dam or anything like that, let us not merely talk of the engineering feats. I want to know what happened to my people in the Hirakud project. It may be a marvelous feat of engineering but that is

<sup>63</sup> Government of India, *Lok Sabha Debates*, p. 730.

<sup>64</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, “Territory and People: The Disciplining of Historical Memory”, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 167–99.

<sup>65</sup> Government of India, *Lok Sabha Debates*, p. 719. <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 721.

not all for me. Similarly, the D.V.C. and the same also with the reorganization of States; and I maintain that nothing should be done to disrupt or disintegrate any of these areas, because, first of all, you are dealing with human beings and already the democratic process has expressed itself positively and unequivocally against any disintegration.<sup>67</sup>

By juxtaposing the large dams like the one built by the DVC (Damodar Valley Corporation) in Bengal and Hirakud Dam in northwestern Odisha with the States Reorganization Commission, Singh was demanding that the displacement and land dispossession of the adivasi communities be discussed in a unified and direct way. As the earlier discussions about the claims of incorporation illustrate, there was a consistent vagueness in the ways in which adivasi lives, customs, and interests were defined. We have learnt from our reading of Nehru that vagueness can be a powerful discursive tool. By asking his contemporaries to discuss his people as human beings and not as detritus of new Indian projects of unification and development, Singh was radically reformulating how adivasis could be talked about. He was rendering the invisible visible.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps we should ponder on what is at stake in doing such a skeptical history of the mysterious workings of the divisive genius of India. Claims like “the genius of India is to divide” or that India is blessed with “unity in diversity” veil both the positive and the negative features of the Indian nationalist project. Gandhi’s exciting plea for a palimpsest of linguistic affect is not the product of happy chance but the result of years of activism in the service of the ideal of multilingualism and a committed critique of monolingual jealousy. Nehru’s crafty management of difference is what enables the conditions of possibility for multilingual democratic nation-state and not some vague notion of an essential spirit of India. And, as the critiques of both Ambedkar and Jaipal Singh illustrate, this successful multilingual democracy that confounded global expectations by surviving difference was founded on the effacement of difference in the form of adivasi languages and lives.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pp. 728–9.