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Author(s): David Lelyveld

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Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani

DAVID LELYVELD

Columbia University

Towards the end of Paul Scott's *A Division of the Spoils*, the final novel of *The Raj Quartet*, and in the television series as well, Indian people make an appearance and commit acts of unmotivated and horrible violence. The British heroine comments, "Such a damn, bloody, senseless mess . . . the mess the *raj* had never been able to sort out."¹ Making sense, sorting out, was supposed to be the special vocation of British rule, yet here were all the seething, primordial conflicts rising to the surface again in the Hindu versus Muslim partition of India in 1947.

Some scholars who thought they had succeeded in liberating the study of modern India from its place as a sub-category of British imperial history, for example by studying Indian "conceptual systems" and doing research in Indian languages,² felt a similar exasperation: Here was the damn, bloody "raj" rising to the surface again. Having immersed themselves, especially the Americans, into an isolated concept of India—further isolated into particular Indian regions as dictated by the language they had studied—these scholars had helped to marginalize South Asia in significant arenas of European and American intellectual interest. But now Sara Layton's comment raised the question: What was the connection between British rule and the bloody mess—the wars over symbols of identity, linguistic or religious? If historians of India, like historians of the United States or of China, had a tendency toward scholarly involution, it was now time to restore a healthy respect for the importance of the larger world and the colonial state in the history of Indian society. It was important to take Indian perceptions and actions seri-

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¹ Paul Scott, *A Division of the Spoils* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), 616.

² The manifesto of the "conceptual systems" project was by David L. Szanton, "South and Southeast Asia: New Concerns of the Council," *Items* [newsletter of the Social Science Research Council], vol. 30:2 (June 1976), 13–17.

ously but also to locate ways, once again, in which the British presence had become relevant to changing Indian concepts of cultural identity.

The return of empire nostalgia in Britain and its respectful reception in the United States in the 1980s coincided in a curious way with a strong academic interest, especially among scholars of English literature, but also among anthropologists and a few historians, in what came to be known as “colonial discourse.” In the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and led by literary theorists of South Asian origin in the United States and Britain, there developed a formidable agenda of scholarly interest in the power of the colonizer’s ideological domination, even to the extent of calling into question the possibility of autonomous consciousness and agency of the colonized. From this perspective, the study of what Indians said in Indian languages smacked of renewed orientalism and failed to see the ways in which even acts of subaltern resistance were encompassed by the hegemony of British categories and concepts.³

In another realm of academic debate, among the area specialists brought to momentary prominence by Said’s polemic, the conflicts of what we now call ethnic groups had already been framed within two broad approaches: One emphasized the relative significance of institutions introduced under British rule; the other was concerned with identifying indigenous, primordial social constructs. For the so-called primordialists, unashamed orientalist at heart, the identities of religion, language, and caste define clearly bounded populations held together by perceived commonalities of culture, mutual loyalty, and practical interest. Whether or not these groups become locked in conflict or can be accommodated to each other, they are founded on a fundamental and prior separateness. Those who argue that British rule and modern politics provided the basis for social change emphasize the ways in which the colonial regime established the arenas of competition and defined the groups that were in a position to compete.⁴ Paul Brass and some of Anil Seal’s students, for example, were concerned with the way in which “elites” in India “manipulated” cultural symbols in order to advance the sorts of political and economic

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313; cf. Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 9:27–58. Important full-length studies of colonial discourse in the South Asian context are Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); and Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Sara Suleri argues that there is a powerful Indian presence that infiltrates and subverts even the most hegemonic British texts. See her book, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ For example, Francis Robinson, “Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 17 (1983), 185–203; and his “Islam and Muslim Separatism” in *Political Identity in South Asia*, David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp, eds. (London: Curzon Press, 1979), 78–112.

goals, the maximization of private interest, that characterized British institutions.⁵ But questions remain. Why did certain cultural symbols work? Why did particular cultural identities, as opposed to others, serve as the effective basis for social mobilization?

Such debates, of course, are not confined to South Asian or other colonial histories. Explanations of the history of languages have also tended to divide between those that are concerned with the kinds of change possible within an inherent structure and those that give greater weight to the social circumstances under which different languages or language varieties come into contact with each other. Linguists have taught us that languages are systems or, rather, systems of systems (phonology, morphology, syntax and so on). The introduction of a single word is an easier matter than the replacement of a basic grammatical rule. But what people learn to say or recognize is very much bound up with the circumstances in which they have learned it.⁶ Language use depends on the marking of particular linguistic features to communicate meaning, including ideologically relevant meanings, such as respect or solidarity. On this principle sociolinguists have rejected the notion of a language as an enclosed and uniform system. Languages change in most social situations because of linguistic variation, ranging from complex multilingualism to subtle differences of register and style.⁷ Linguistic competence requires the ability to know what is appropriate in a particular kind of encounter between particular kinds of people, the definition of social situation and role. The social history of languages can be approached as a study of how people learn these things and how they use them. These, however, are questions bound up with authority, including the authority of the state.

The political and social circumstances by which people came to bracket or divide Hindi and Urdu, to associate language with certain social roles and group identities—Hindi as Hindu, Urdu as Muslim—and by which further political processes contest or ratify this association are the subject of a larger historical project than can be addressed in a single essay.⁸ The present

⁵ See Paul R. Brass's contribution to "the Robinson-Brass debate" in his "Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity among the Muslims of South Asia," in Taylor and Yapp, *Political Identity*, 35–77, and his major work, *Religion, Language and Politics in Northern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). See also Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), the initial work of what was briefly known as "the Cambridge school" of South Asian history.

⁶ See Sarah Grey Thomason and Terrence Kaufman, *Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Linguistics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1–109.

⁷ Uriel Weinreich, William Labov, and Marvin Herzog, "Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change," in *Directions for Historical Linguistics*, W. Lehman and Y. Malkiel, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 97–195; Gillian Sankoff, *The Social Life of Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 29–46.

⁸ For my first attempts in this direction, see "Urdu as a Public Language," in *Systems of Communication and Interaction*, Peter Gaeffke and Susan Oleksiw, eds. (Philadelphia: South

fragment is concerned with the role of colonial knowledge, not by way of denying the rich and complex history of the ways in which Indians created their own languages and literatures but rather to understand how language was construed by the power of a foreign regime into bounded institutions and communities with defined roles in an overarching political structure. This colonial knowledge, itself contested ground with its own history in which Indians had much to say, was rooted in European intellectual practices and realized in state policy. One part of that history is the way in which the colonial establishment explored the possibility of identifying a language, Hindustani, that would subsume numerous linguistic varieties and their literatures into a single, standard language that could be located in dictionaries and grammar books, taught in schools, used for official purposes as well as for new and diffuse genres of communication throughout much, if not all, of India.

Eventually, by the early twentieth century, the definition of Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani was placed on the nationalist agenda, particularly by Gandhi.⁹ Language became a matter of national unity and the empowerment of the popular will. The bureaucratic, commercial, and military aspects of the British colonial regime had developed new technologies of communication and promoted a repertoire of linguistic competencies among a limited class of its subjects. At the higher levels the language of public business was English, but with the important exception of the military, the colonial state made no effort to promote an indigenous Indian language beyond the provincial level. The provincial level, however, was a very wide domain; and by the end of the nineteenth century the modern standard languages of India, including Hindi and Urdu, had been institutionalized in schools, courts, and government offices as well as in books, periodicals, and public meetings. Hindi, Urdu, or both, were official languages in the United Provinces, Bihar, the Central Provinces, Punjab, and many princely states, subsuming beneath them, at least for public purposes, numerous languages and linguistic varieties. That process was by no means finished, for access to the standard was severely limited, and the advocates of some languages, notably Punjabi, had rescued them from sub-standard oblivion.

Hindi and Urdu, however, occupied a special position both in relation to each other and, at least in the minds of some, in relation to all the languages of India as a possible national language. The advocates of one denied the very existence of the other, saw the other as a conspiracy to monopolize participation in the public life of India on the basis of religion. Although many of the

Asia Regional Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 1981); and "Eloquence and Authority in Urdu: Poetry, Oratory and Film," in *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, Katherine Ewing, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *Our Language Problem*, A. T. Hingorani, ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, n.d.)

languages of India had their Musalmāni varieties, in which texts were written in a script derived from Arabic, Persian, and Arabic words, poetic meters, and literary genres shared with the wider Islamic world, only Urdu achieved the status of a standard language in British India.¹⁰ Whether it was by definition Musalmāni or the confluence of all Indian history, whether it was Urdu or Hindustani, came to have much bearing on the definition of India as a national community and the place of Muslims within it.

HINDUSTANI AND THE COMMERCE IN LANGUAGES

In 1772, the same year that the directors of the East India Company directed Warren Hastings to “stand forth as diwan,” they received a book dedicated to them containing the first British study of an Indian language, George Hadley’s *Grammatical Remarks on the Practical and Vulgar Dialect of the Indostan Language, Commonly called Moors . . . the Whole Calculated for the Common Practice in Bengal*.¹¹ Although there had been a few earlier grammars going back to 1698 by Europeans, Hadley was not aware of them.¹² A subaltern (literally) in the company army, Hadley had attempted to learn “the corrupt dialect” in order to command his “Seapoys.” He discovered that contrary to popular belief, the dialect was not derived from Persian and did have a grammar.

The belated British discovery of India’s languages, as Bernard Cohn has shown, was an exercise in power.¹³ For over a century and a half, British traders and soldiers were content to rely on interpreters and some knowledge of Portuguese or Persian. They knew only that Hindustani was a jargon associated with Muslims and useful for giving orders to soldiers and servants. The British began serious study of Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindustani only after they had established direct political authority. But starting with William Jones, the British developed from their study of Indian languages not only a practical advantage but an ideology of languages as separate, autonomous objects in the world which could be classified, arranged and deployed as media of exchange. Different languages had different histories, the histories of the people who spoke or used them to create literatures; and these could be studied comparatively and used to make sense of the advantages that some

¹⁰ This was pointed out by Rajendralala Mitra in “On the Origins of the Hindvi Language and its Relation to the Urdu Dialect,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, vol. 33 (1865), 513–18. See David Shulman, “Muslim Popular Literature in Tamil: the Tamimancari Malai,” in *Islam in Asia*, Yohanar Friedmann, ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 174–207; Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 8–15.

¹¹ (Reprint ed. Mentson, England: The Scholar Press, 1967).

¹² See Tej K. Bhatia, *A History of the Hindi Grammatical Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 16–77.

¹³ Bernard Cohn, “The Command of Language and the Language of Command,” in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 276–329. I am of course heavily indebted to Cohn, but I will briefly go over the same ground to make some additional points.

nations had gained over others in the course of history.¹⁴ Just as it was beginning to wane as an exporter of textiles, India now became a rich field for philological enterprise.

It was in this entrepreneurial spirit that a Scottish physician, sometime indigo planter, determined to corner the vernacular market. John Gilchrist (1759–1841) arrived in Bombay in 1782 and secured a post as assistant surgeon in the company army. For two years he was posted at Fatehgarh, a small military outpost in the Mughal heartland, not far from Agra. There he decided that the language he had been learning, Hindustani, was not a jargon at all, but “the grand, popular and military language of all India.”¹⁵ With an admirable literature—Gilchrist had started with the *Kulliyāt* of Sauda—it had been misrepresented by Hadley and others, who were unaware, particularly in Bengal, of its higher uses. Gilchrist believed that he would be performing a highly useful service for the Europeans in India by composing a proper lexicon and grammar. In other words, there was a market. Persuading the Governor General in Council at Calcutta to stake him to a year’s leave, he raised a subscription to support his project, then grew a long black beard, put on Indian clothes, and travelled through the major cities of the Gangetic plane. He finally settled in Faizabad, a center of Urdu literature, where he gathered together “learned Hindoostanees,” both Hindu and Muslim, and employed them as paid informants.¹⁶

According to Gilchrist, the Indians he approached “stared with astonishment” when he asked if there were any indigenous dictionaries that he might consult and asked him in turn “if it was yet ever known in any country, that men had to consult vocabularies, and rudiments for their own vernacular speech.” Gilchrist then set about “to extract *viva voce* every known word in their voluminous tongue.” His method was strictly inductive. He assembled his informants and proceeded with them, “a, ab, abab, ababa, abach, abad, abada, abaf, etc etc . . . ringing the changes in this manner on every letter. One or two syllables commonly led the way to a numerous tribe of words.” In a few months he had compiled what he considered the full list.¹⁷

As soon as he had accomplished this task, Gilchrist discovered that a certain army captain already had a Hindustani–English dictionary in the press. Gilchrist managed to persuade Captain Kirkpatrick to go into partnership with him, then set about to prepare an English–Hindustani dictionary. He started with Samuel Johnson’s and, like him, used literary quotations supplied

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 294–300.

¹⁵ This is part of the lengthy subtitle of Gilchrist, *The Stranger’s Infallible East-Indian Guide*, third ed. (London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1820).

¹⁶ Quoted in M. Atique Siddiqi, *Origins of Modern Hindustani Literature* (Aligarh: Naya Kitab Garh, 1963), 49. See also Sadiq-ur-Rahman Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the “Language of Hindoostan”* (New Delhi: Rachna Prakashan, 1972), 37–43.

¹⁷ Siddiqi, *Origins*, 49–50.

by informants to accompany the translated words. However, Gilchrist's informants were less reliable because they kept straying beyond the boundaries of Hindustani:

my learned associates, were some of them with their mind's eye roaming for far-fetched expressions on the deserts of Arabia, others were beating each bush and scampering over every mountain of Persia, while the rest were groping to the dark intricate mines and caverns of Sanskrit lexicography.¹⁸

Gilchrist was determined to differentiate between Hindustani and these other languages on the grounds that he was attempting to locate the language that people spoke and thought in:

in every case where a native of Hindoostan wishes either to compose or to dictate anything to be translated from his own to another tongue, he constantly arranges his ideas and explains his meaning in Hindoostanee, before it be committed to writing as a Persian epistle, or a political document of any value.¹⁹

In India the use of Persian was "all art and ceremony, while the Hindoostanee, their native speech, is the genuine effusion of nature, and the heart." This was also true, Gilchrist said, for Hindus and Muslims: "Even the holy Bruhmun who knows Sanskrit . . . is seldom proficient enough to meditate therein because it is still more dead to the active economic purpose of a living medium, that presents itself . . . in the Hindoostanee."²⁰

Gilchrist did not, however, intend to purify the language. Instead, he considered Hindustani historically analogous to the accumulation of Saxon, Celtic, Latin, French, and other languages in English, which had all resulted from migrations and conquests.²¹ As with English, it was necessary to liberate the language and to advance its cause in opposition to the languages of priests and aristocrats. In particular, he considered Sanskrit "a cunning fabrication . . . by the insidious Bruhmuns."²² Gilchrist now saw his task as advancing the historical progress of Hindustani by discovering new uses for it. After he established a proprietary language school in Calcutta, he was appointed in 1800 professor of Hindustani at the newly established College of Fort William. During the next four years he brought together a staff of Indian literati to invent a Hindustani prose. Gilchrist had the books, which were initially intended to instruct company servants and were now required to study Indian languages, printed, some in Persian script, a few in the *nāgarī* script associated with Sanskrit. In all, as many as sixty books were published under Gilchrist's supervision.

Gilchrist tended to define Hindustani as a unified language that extended

¹⁸ Siddiqi, *Origins*, 63.

¹⁹ Gilchrist, *The Stranger's Infallible East-Indian Guide*, xiii–xiv.

²⁰ Siddiqi, *Origins*, 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²² Quoted in Kidwai, *Gilchrist*, 90–91.

over the whole of India. He identified three major varieties, depending upon the extent to which they used Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, or unmarked Hindi words. He did not explicitly divide the language variations on Hindu-Muslim lines, though he recognized that Brahmins, maulvis, and members of the Mughal ruling class would have varying lexical repertoires. He was prepared to publish in Persian script or nagari and also developed a system of Roman transliteration.²³

What is striking here is Gilchrist's sheer entrepreneurship. Anything but a bureaucrat, he was continually falling out with his supervisors during his relatively brief interludes of employment in the East India Company service. Instead, through most of his long career both in India and Britain, he sought investments and partnerships; hired informants, teachers and writers as employees; extracted raw linguistic material from a wide variety of sources; and sold his product, as best he could, to the general public. The cause of his schools and his books was advanced by advertizement.

Like so many philologists and lexicographers of his time, Gilchrist objectified the language, made it an object of study, developed new possibilities for its use and diffusion, especially printing. He demonstrated that the vernacular could be taught in school. When he was not working with language, he was growing indigo, usually with considerably more financial success. In all these respects, Gilchrist would seem to be the model representative of the print-capitalism that Benedict Anderson, following Febvre and Martin, associates with the rise of national communities and the nation state.²⁴ The difference, of course, is the colonial situation. For the audience, the clientele for all these efforts, was exclusively British, and mostly officers of the East India Company. If *Bāgh ō Bahār* and *Ārā'ish-i Mahfil* eventually achieved some popularity among an indigenous Indian public, that was much later, really only in the late nineteenth century, and of no profit to Gilchrist.²⁵ By that time the linguistic map had been drawn in ways that were quite at odds with Gilchrist's purposes.

Gilchrist was an active radical in politics, and his ideas about language were anti-authoritarian in the context of British thought.²⁶ In Britain, language was a profoundly contested issue. Figures such as Tom Paine and William Cobbett placed language at the center of their challenge to established authority. Aarsleff has shown that the comparative philology growing out of William Jones's enlightenment classicism had little influence in Britain

²³ Kidwai, *Gilchrist*, 89–96; Siddiqi, *Origins*, 153–55; Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College at Fort William* (New Delhi: Orion, 1978), 65, 82–84.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

²⁵ There is considerable controversy about the influence and popularity of the Fort William College publications. See Frances W. Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 21–22.

²⁶ John Borthwick Gilchrist, *Parliamentary Reform, on Constitutional Principles* (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1815); see also Kidwai, *Gilchrist*, 57.

until the middle of the nineteenth century. The figure that dominated the study of language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was John Horne Tooke, who devoted his scholarly career, when he was not being tried for sedition, to an idiosyncratic study of the etymological origins of words. He intended to undercut the mystification of philosophers and demonstrate that the language of the common people was valid and legitimate for exercising power.²⁷ Stokes and others have studied the ways in which radicalism in Britain became authoritarianism in India, but Gilchrist's project was certainly not that of the colonial state.²⁸

LANGUAGES AS "OBJECTS OF OFFICIAL REQUISITION"

By the middle of the nineteenth century, British authorities had formulated a very different analysis of the languages of India from those developed by their predecessors in Gilchrist's time. A summary of what was known and an agenda for future research can be found in the preface to *A Glossary of the Judicial and Revenue Terms . . . of British India*, published in 1855.²⁹ Its author, H. H. Wilson, was the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. According to Wilson there were two classes of Indian language: Hindustani (also known as Urdu) and all others. Hindustani, "an admixture of the original languages of the Mohammadan conquerors with those of the Hindus," was "loosely spread, and at considerable intervals, over the surface." Identified with Muslims, the language becomes "greatly corrupted" as the distance increases from the major "Mohammadan courts," Delhi, Lucknow, and Hyderabad. He notes that the language, used "after a fashion" in government offices, the army and among merchants, is unknown in rural areas. Thanks to Gilchrist and others there are excellent grammars, dictionaries, and other teaching materials.

The second class, "the different dialects of the Hindus," belong to clearly demarcated geographical regions, for which Wilson gives population estimates. The first and "the most direct offset from Sanskrit" is Hindi, "although the term is rather indefinite, being scarcely applicable to any single modification of the language spoken by the thirty millions of the Hindus of Hindustan." He goes on to mention the territorial identification of the "dialects" of Hindi but complains that no one has prepared an adequate dictionary or grammar. Then he turns to the other languages of India, listing the available books. He notes that the languages of the Madras presidency are not of "direct

²⁷ Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44–72; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 110–53.

²⁸ In addition to Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); see Lynn B. Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁹ (London: Wm. H. Allen and Co.)

descent” from Sanskrit but claims that they are “dependent” upon Sanskrit for their literature, religion and governmental institutions.

Given the purpose of the glossary, Wilson was chiefly concerned with languages that had become “objects of official requisition,” that is, those used by government and required for employment by civilian officers. He notes that Punjabi, Sindhi, the dialects of Assam, as well as Burmese, were now necessary as well. The list is remarkably congruent, in fact, with the official languages of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Noting that the previous study of the languages of India was largely the voluntary work of individuals, including missionaries, he argues that these studies ought now to be matters of urgent official concern.

The earlier grammars and dictionaries made it possible for the British government to replace Persian with vernacular languages at the lower levels of judicial and revenue administration in 1837, that is, to standardize and index terminology for official use and provide for its translation to the language of the ultimate ruling authority, English. For such purposes Hindustani was equated with Urdu, as opposed to any geographically defined dialect of Hindi and was given official status through large parts of north India. Written in the Persian script with a largely Persian and, via Persian, an Arabic vocabulary, Urdu stood at the shortest distance from the previous situation and was easily attainable by the same personnel. In the wake of this official transformation, the British government began to make its first significant efforts on behalf of vernacular education. The earliest controversies over Hindi versus Urdu apparently took place among the British because some officials were anxious to uproot the Mughal gentry by replacing Urdu with a still unformulated standard of Hindi.³

H. H. Wilson’s approach and agenda was brought to elaborate fruition at the end of the nineteenth century. In September, 1886, two official representatives of India, both British, presented a proposal to the Aryan section of the Seventh International Oriental Congress at Vienna for “a deliberate systematic survey of the languages of India, nearer and farther,” past and present. Noting that the government of the United States was at that very moment conducting a similar survey of the languages of North American Indians, the orientalist extended their enthusiastic support. G. A. Grierson (1851–1941), an official from India, then presented his research on “Bihari” to “show how radically the real language—the mother tongue of all classes, rich and poor, educated and uneducated alike in Bihar, differs from the so-called Hindi and Hindustani languages.” He himself had “attended at the birth” of Bihari, which persuaded him that further research would uncover new languages all over India, buried

³⁰ Christopher Rolland King, “The Nāgarī Prachārīnī Sabha (Society for the Promotion of the Nagari Script and Language) of Benares, 1893–1914: A Study in the Social and Political History of the Hindi Language” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1974).

beneath “the literary or Government language.” Grierson dismissed Hindustani, “a camp jargon,” which he differentiated from Urdu, the language of “Mussalman pedants,” and “Pundit-ridden” Hindi, both “mere inventions of the closet.” Someday, perhaps, the railway and the printing press might establish this official language as “the norm of half-conversation,” but for now it was an imposition. “Before a poor man can sue his neighbor in the court he has to learn a foreign language, or to trust to interpreters, who fleece him at every step.” It was therefore desirable for British officials to learn the local spoken languages.³¹

Grierson had already developed his methodology in Bihar. You get some “village Gurus,” give them some model sentences in Hindi, and have them write the corresponding words in their own “*bôle*.” They would have to be supervised by “a couple of sharp Sub-Inspectors of Schools.” Sir Monier Monier-Williams, Wilson’s successor as Boden Professor, proposed that each language and dialect be given a translation of the Sermon on the Mount. Later it was decided to use the Tale of the Prodigal Son instead, though there was some difficulty about the swine and the kine upsetting religious sensibilities. The fatted calf had to be turned into a goat.³² When all this was done, it would be possible to prepare a grammar and dictionary. He expected that the work for the whole of India would take three years.³³

The work took many more years than that because a reluctant government was at first disinclined to give Grierson the time, money, or power to carry it out; and his fellow scholar officials were less than supportive. F. S. Growse felt that the linguistic variation in the North-West Provinces and Oudh, approximately present-day Uttar Pradesh, was not all that significant and doubted whether it was worthwhile “to stereotype the essentially fluctuating and unsettled modes” of “rustic talk.” W. Crooke’s evaluations of the religious literature of local dialects “do not support the view that its disappearance would be a serious loss.”³⁴ But in the end with government and voluntary assistance, but often very much on his own, Grierson brought out the monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* (LSI). By 1902 the first volumes were ready to go to press. Volume IX, Part I, *Specimens of Western Hindi and Panjabi*, did not get published until 1916. In the LSI, “Western Hindi” was bracketed with Panjabi, Rajasthani with Gujarati; and “Eastern Hindi” was a separate category altogether, not to be confused with Bihari, which belonged with Oriya, Bengali, and Assamese.

³¹ GOI Home/Political 311–329, 1887; reprinted in R. A. Singh, “Inquiries into the Spoken Languages, of India, from Early Times to the Census of 1901,” *Census of India* (1961), vol. I, pt. XI–C(i).

³² GOI Home/Public A, 43–54, 1886, in R. A. Singh, *Inquiries*, 126; see also 267–71.

³³ GOI, Finance and Commerce/Bonuses and Honorariums 143, 1887, in Singh, *Inquiries*, 133.

³⁴ GOI Home/Public, 253–279 (KW N.P.), in Singh, *Inquiries*, 178–81.

Each language was a contained entity with a demarcated geographic identity determined by administrative headquarters. The exception was what Grierson now called “Literary Hindostani,” in its Urdu and Hindi versions and their varying literary styles. His attitude to these languages was hardly more positive than they had been twenty years before.³⁵ Grierson believed that every individual in a population had a single mother tongue, that it was possible to locate and count the speakers of each language and to represent them on maps and statistical charts. This was, of course, the work of the Census of India begun in 1881 with some provincial forerunners in the previous decade.³⁶ Grierson became involved with the census operations in 1901, and his analysis of India’s languages prevailed over the 1911 report.³⁷

Before that, census takers were somewhat less concerned with fine distinctions. In the 1891 report, J. A. Baines explained that whatever the census takers were told about the name of the language, those deemed within the scope of Hindi were simply classed as such, absorbing “varieties,” such as Braj, Bhojpuri and Maithili. One reason was that the boundaries among languages were unclear, and it was doubtful “whether the distinctions are recognized at all, otherwise than by grammarians.” Also, the census takers were usually not from the locality they were investigating and did not know what to make of the variety of language names they were given. In the North-West Provinces and Oudh, the language was officially known as Hindustani, “so it was not likely that any attempt would be made through the medium of the census to contravene this authoritative decision.” As for Urdu, Baines doubted that a distinction could be made “between the vernacular and the Persianized speech of the larger towns,” so it too was returned as Hindi or, in the North-West Provinces, Hindustani. South of the Vindhayas, however, the language that people called Deccani or Musalmani was reported in the census as Urdu.

In the tradition of von Humboldt, Baines declared that as a group the “Indic-Aryan” languages, Hindi and the rest, were the most “advanced” since they were “Inflectional or Synthetic.”³⁸ Herbert Risley, the director of the 1901 census, was a true believer in the relevance of biological evolution to language: “All languages may be regarded as true genera and species from which no hybrid progeny can arise.” While conceding an important analytic distinction between “race” and “language,” he argued that the two were

³⁵ *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. IX, Pt. I (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1916), 42–56. For a critique of the methodology of the *LSI*, see John J. Gumperz, *Language in Social Groups* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 1–11.

³⁶ Singh, *Inquiries*, 107–14.

³⁷ See Grierson, *The Linguistic Survey of India and the Census of 1911* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1919); and his *Index of Language Names* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Printing, 1920) and the General Reports in the 1901, 1911, and 1921 censuses.

³⁸ J. A. Baines, “General Report,” *Census of India, 1891* in Singh, *Inquiries*, 319–20.

related in significant ways. He pointed out “differences of phonetic capacity among the Indian races,” for example, in their ability to pronounce “v” as opposed to “w” or “s” as opposed to “sh”. The relation between linguistic shifts and migrations of racial groups were matters for serious “ethnological” research.³⁹

The census turned out to be an imperfect and controversial guide to the languages of India. Categories and data varied wildly every ten years as Indians came to consider the implications of their answers. Although the 1901 and 1911 censuses attempted to gather data according to Grierson’s classifications, the 1921 report contented itself with simpler aggregates. The report for Punjab and Delhi noted that large numbers of people listed as speaking Hindustani or Punjabi ten years before now said they spoke Hindi or Urdu. In addition some twenty-three language names were simply lumped together as Hindi. The number of people reporting themselves as speakers of Urdu went from less than half a million in 1911 to well over a million and a half in 1921. The report for the United Provinces only gave statistics for Hindustani. Although census officials dutifully calculated the number of speakers per square mile for each language category, they complained that they could not trust the responses they were receiving. In that year and in 1931 the Arya Samaj advised its followers to identify their language as “Arya Bhasha” and leave it at that.⁴⁰ By then, naming one’s language had become a kind of vote.

ALL-INDIA RADIO AND THE PARTITION OF HINDUSTANI

Early in 1947, just eight months before independence, the Finance Minister of the interim government wrote to the Home Minister, expressing alarm about the official policy concerning the vocabulary used in Hindustani newscasts on the radio. He demanded a full cabinet meeting to discuss the issue. The Finance Minister, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, was the ranking Muslim League member of the coalition government. The Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, was virtually the equal of Nehru in the Indian National Congress. Over the next six months, until the partition was finally decided, this question occupied a good deal of attention at the highest levels, including the last two viceroys, Wavell, and Mountbatten.⁴¹

The Muslim League position was most fully expressed by Ghazanfar Ali Khan, on behalf of Liaquat, in a letter to Patel: Urdu and Urdu alone is the

³⁹ Riskey, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1915), 8–10.

⁴⁰ L. Middleton and S. M. Jacob, *Report: Punjab and Delhi, Census of India, 1921*, vol. XV, pt. I (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1923), 310–2; Bernard S. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia” [1970], in his *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 250; see also my *Aligarh’s First Generation*, 9–16.

⁴¹ Durga Das, ed., *Sardar Patel’s Correspondence, 1945–50*, vol. IV (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1972), 60–91.

“common language” of both Muslims and Hindus in north India. Replacing it with Hindi, “even under the pseudonym of Hindustani,” is “an attempt to suppress those parts of Indian culture, which are not exclusively Hindu but in the making of which Muslims too have had a hand.” The only concessions that Ghazanfar Ali was willing to make was that the Urdu be “simple” and that some “Hindi” newscasts could be broadcast as well.⁴²

For some time a compromise was worked out. Depending on the station and the proportion of Hindus or Muslims in a given listening area, there would be a set proportion of Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani newscasts, differing only in the relative mix of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and unmarked words. This was to be determined by duly constituted advisory committees for each language.⁴³

These developments on the eve of partition marked the failure of a concerted effort over the previous ten years to formulate an acceptable lexicon that would bridge the gap between Hindi and Urdu. Vocabulary was the main issue. Although a few points of morphology and phonology marked a distinction, these were not part of the argument. Nor was there any question about syntax or larger issues of style. The dispute centered on the newscasts but was eventually broadened to include statistical tabulations of the extent to which poetry readings, radio dramas and talks, styled after the standard British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) fare that All-India Radio (AIR) provided, could be counted as one or the other. As a spoken medium, radio would not seem to raise the question of nagari versus Persian script, but it did. Because of strict censorship rules and the absence of recording technology, every word had to be written in advance. As a result radio texts were closely tied to established literary language.

Designs for All-India Radio were developed at the same time as the major constitutional reforms that brought popularly elected provincial governments, mostly under the Congress, in 1937. For this reason, British authorities were careful to keep control of broadcasting as a central power. All news broadcasts were prepared in English, translated into selected Indian languages, and transmitted from Delhi. That left little room for linguistic variation. But centralized control of language was also the result of a deliberate cultural policy promoted by Lord Reith of the BBC: that each language had a single standard of clarity and aesthetic perfection and that the business of broadcasting was to exemplify that standard. With certain specified exceptions, radio was designed for a literate audience.

The most important figure in the leadership of All-India Radio in the pre-independence years, especially with regard to language policy, was Ahmad

⁴² *Ibid.*, 68–71.

⁴³ The relevant records are in the archives of All-India Radio, New Delhi; see also H. R. Luthra, *Indian Broadcasting* (New Delhi: Publications Division), 255–73. I have discussed this at greater length in “Transmitters and Culture: The Colonial Roots of Indian Broadcasting,” *South Asia Research*, 10:1 (May 1990), 41–52.

Shah Bukhari (1898–1958), who became station director in Delhi in 1935, served as Director General from 1939 to 1947, then was ignominiously dismissed by Patel on the eve of partition. Bukhari's younger brother was also a high official in the radio service, along with a preponderance of former students and colleagues, both Hindu and Muslim, from Lahore, where Ahmad Shah had been a professor of English. He had studied in the late 1920s at Cambridge University under I. A. Richards and was a close follower of Richards and Ogden's philosophy of language and literature, including their campaign for Basic English, a would-be world language mounted on a vocabulary of 800 words. At Lahore, one of Bukhari's colleagues was the important British linguist, J. R. Firth. Firth's theory of linguistics questioned the possibility of analyzing a language rather than more restricted aspects of language use in "typical contexts" within a more general theory of culture and psychology. Language was a congeries of detachable phenomena. A distinguished phonetician, Firth developed the "All-India alphabet" for representing the sounds of every Indian language. Bukhari, also a well-known writer of humorous prose in Urdu, shared this notion of the fluidity of language and the possibility of molding its use for particular purposes.⁴⁴

The authorities of All-India Radio faced a continual barrage of protests about the details of language. Their policy was entirely consistent with the ideas of Gandhi, Nehru, and the Indian National Congress, but that did not protect them from parliamentary questions, budget resolutions, public meetings, petitions, and boycotts from all sides of the dispute. The advocates of Hindi were the most seriously dissatisfied, but every gesture of concession in their direction inspired an equally angry response from the Urdu side.

In 1940 Bukhari appointed S. H. Vatsyayan "Ageya" and Chaudhuri Hasan Hasrat, well-known writers in Hindi and Urdu respectively, to prepare an authoritative lexicon for Hindustani news broadcasts by listing English words in the original news copy from which the vernacular translations were prepared. The Hindi poet then made a list of Hindi equivalents, and the Urdu essayist set down his Urdu counterparts; then the two sat down and worked out a compromise based on what they considered most common, precise and, if possible, neutral. The lexicon took five years to complete and was then submitted to influential political and literary figures for comment.⁴⁵ By then Hindustani was already a lost cause, and separate Hindi and Urdu broadcasts were about to start.

⁴⁴ See correspondence between Bukhari and S. N. Aggarwal of the Hindustani Prachar Sabha, Wardha, in P(1)2–5/45, 1945 (AIR Archives). See also Richards and C. K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 10th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1966) and numerous other works; for Firth, see D. Terrence Langendoen, *The London School of Linguistics: A Study of the Linguistic Theories of B. Malinowski and J. R. Firth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 37–48. Bukhari's essays are collected in *Patraṣ ke Muzāmin* (Lahore: Maktaba-i Urdū-i Adab, n.d.); see also his brother's autobiography, *Zulfiqār 'Alī Bukhārī, Sarguzisht* (Karachi: Ma'arif, 1966).

⁴⁵ A. I. R. *Lexicon* (New Delhi: All-India Radio, 1946) [Library of Congress]; PZ–3/42 (Coll I), 1942; P(1)Z–2/46–II, 1946 (AIR Archives); interview with Vatsyayan in Bombay, 1982.

Having failed to establish a unified language, Bukhari and AIR's chief engineer, C. W. Goyder, conceived of another strategy in a plan for post-war broadcasting development. In 1944, they formulated "a scheme by which every person in India, wherever he is situated, is provided with a broadcast programme in his own language." By that time All-India Radio was broadcast from nine cities to about 90,000 licensed radio receivers. Relying on *The Linguistic Survey of India*, somewhat revised by S. K. Chatterji, as well as the 1931 and 1941 censuses, including a set of maps charting population densities and urban-rural distributions, Bukhari and Goyder set out to establish the most rational distribution of listening areas within the constraints of ninety-five possible wave lengths. On such a map there was no place for either Hindustani or Urdu.⁴⁶

HINDI, URDU AND THE FATE OF HINDUSTANI

The history of Hindustani can be enclosed between the dates of two lexicons—Gilchrist's, started in 1785, and All-India Radio's, completed in 1945. On either side of these dates there is a void which foreclosed the possibility of conceiving such an enterprise as establishing a finite body of words that could constitute a language called Hindustani. But the nature of this void is different at either end of this history. In the earlier period it is an inability to imagine one's everyday speech as a language alongside other languages, to be treated like the languages of sacred texts or imperial authority, to be defined as the language of a given population. By imposing that sort of model on the diverse linguistic actuality of a far-flung population, Gilchrist was shifting a piece of European intellectual history to a new field of observation—in the first instance, for the benefit of other Europeans. One might say the same thing about his method of grammatical analysis or his attempt to provide a standard system of transliteration. Gilchrist's enterprise was similar to that carried out by his contemporaries with respect to modern Greek, Norwegian, Hungarian, Czech, and Finnish. The difference, as he was well aware, was that this was not his language but his livelihood. The insiders, the native speakers, were paid informants, even when they set out to create a literature for Gilchrist's classroom and printing press. There was no Indian public for these books. The Indians themselves did not start to work on dictionaries for their own use until the late nineteenth century, and when they did so, they followed the style of Samuel Johnson, as opposed to the bilingual dictionaries that foreigners had prepared to aid in translation.

Gilchrist took the English words in Johnson's dictionary as his point of departure. The All-India Radio lexicographers also started with English words dictated by the exigencies of news bulletins in the style of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which were, in fact, pro-British World War II propagan-

⁴⁶ Directorate-General, All India Radio, "Basic Plan for the Development of Broadcasting in India" (first draft, November 1944; revised, September 1945) in Home-Public 179/1946 (National Archives of India).

da. In both cases an English prototype dictated the conceptualization of semantic fields. But the later lexicographers, unlike Gilchrist's informants, knew very well what a dictionary was supposed to be. Like Gilchrist, they were attempting to identify a "common speech"; but they realized that in an overwhelmingly illiterate society with immense linguistic variation, they were inventing a special, new dialect. Now, with a century and a half of colonialism behind them, they were highly conscious of the ways in which the choice of words marked ideology and social identity. They knew that their decisions had to be politically sensitive in a politically active society characterized by social movements, voluntary associations, and elected public assemblies. Whereas Gilchrist was desperate to peddle his dictionary piece by piece, the All-India Radio lexicographers operated with bureaucratic caution, afraid of provoking public protest. Their dictionary, printed but never published, was almost a state secret. The failure of their project to win acceptance was not out of apathy but was a sign, simply, of the partition of India.

Standing between these two lexicons are the great imperial social surveys, such as the census and the *Linguistic Survey*. They reflect a state preferring to keep order in a society that it considers inherently disunited. That is the typical sorting out of the British regime: not a search for markets, not really a desire to get Indians to do anything for the sake of some national goal. British rulers did not consider mobilization as their business, nor did they think that India as a whole was capable of it anyway. Those who considered Indian unity or autonomy as ultimately desirable realized the frailty of colonial legitimacy. Whatever advantage India was to its rulers in some world-wide scheme or in the conflicting class configurations of domestic British society, it was enough within India to keep order. That was a matter of allocating the little that the state provided according to what British theory about India considered its disparate social entities. Language and the means of communication were part of the goods to be allocated, a task for bureaucratic and scholarly analysis. It had to be done cautiously, and the advantages to the rulers were limited. A similar attitude has often characterized the successor states that Britain left behind.

The two lexicons, the census, the *Linguistic Survey*, and the conditions that made them possible but also finally unacceptable to the population whose speech they purported to describe do not explain the relation between religious and linguistic symbols; nor do they correlate to social and economic variables. Lexicons and surveys may have to do with constituting communities or ethnic groups, but other lexicons are possible. Symbols must be used to mark off political boundaries, create constituencies, and play the game of mobilization, but there are many possible symbols.⁴⁷ The highly contested terrain of language politics calls for a much more complex historical discussion in which,

⁴⁷ See Bernard S. Cohn, "Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History" [1967], in his *Anthropologist Among the Historians*, 100–35.

after all, the Indians formulated the particular usages and boundaries of their own languages. But the colonial analysis and presentation of Indian languages, at first entrepreneurial, later bureaucratic, intruded significantly by setting down methods of inquiry and their political implications and by framing the institutional forms and ideological constellations now taken for granted among most Indians with regard to language.

In post-colonial India the standard languages are established social facts, demarcated by the political boundaries of India's federal system of states. The great exception is Urdu. It is not only almost universally identified as a language for a regionally unspecified Muslim population but is also the would-be official, non-regional, language of a foreign country, Pakistan.⁴⁸ And, for all the widespread importance of standard Hindi as India's largest regional language and the enduring dominance of English among the privileged and powerful, the project of a national language has not advanced greatly from the period of British rule.

⁴⁸ See Aijaz Ahmad, "Some Reflections on Urdu," *Seminar* (No. 359), "Literature and Society" (July 1989), 23–29.