LANGUAGE POLITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ‘DIALECTS’: A CASE STUDY OF MAITHILI

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

In India there have been identity formations on the basis of language to an unprecedented scale during the anti colonial struggle and immediately after the first and second decades of independence. Since then, there has been a succession of linguistic movements which have sometimes seemed to be on the point of challenging the integrity of the country. It is this link between language movements and national identity that is responsible for the privileging of the Hindi vs. Urdu or Hindi vs. Hindustani or Hindi vs. English in the existing literature on language politics in India. There have been few studies of other existing languages, particularly those of north India. Going beyond the prevailing studies on the language politics in India, the present study attempts to explore the relationship between the formation of a “standard” language and that of a “dialect”. It examines the dynamic inter-relationships between Hindi and Maithili, which, for a very long time, has been classified as a ‘dialect’ of Hindi.

Language can be used in three senses – first, as a means of communication its role is vital in the growth of civilisation. Second, as a marker of group identity it has infinite power to form a new identity and to contest other imposing identities. And finally, it can be used as a conceptual category to understand the rise, growth and evolution of a particular linguistic community. Here I want to clarify that by using language in the third sense – as a conceptual category, I do not intend to take a philosophical or epistemological stand point. Instead it is to use it as a conceptual tool to understand making, remaking or unmaking of a linguistic community on the basis of the politics of language. In the present study I have used language mostly in the second sense - that is, language as a marker of group identity and social-political mobilisations on that basis. I have tried to use language in the third sense as well – as a conceptual category to understand the social and political evolution of the Maithili linguistic community and the movement.

The issue of differentiating a language from its ‘dialects’ is linguistically speaking based on two criteria. First, on the basis of the mutual intelligibility criterion ‘dialects’ are considered as mutually intelligible variants of one standard form of speech.
Second, a language is considered as independent form of speech if it has its own grammar and literary history. However, complexity in this distinction can be understood by the following examples; Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, despite the lack of mutual intelligibility, are both considered to be the dialects of Chinese, not only because they use the same written form but also because they are both member of the Chinese state. Norwegian and Danish speakers, although they can understand one another well, are seen to speak different languages because of different socio-political allegiances. These examples also show that how languages and its status are politically constituted. In the other words, politics is the constitutive element of a language.

In the present study I have explored the distinction between language and ‘dialects’ and have arrived at the conclusion that such distinction is not based on linguistic criteria per se. The historical and political conditions, consciousness of the speakers about their language, their organisations and the nature of leaderships all play an important role in the classification of one particular speech form as a language, while relegating other speech forms to the position of ‘dialects’ or minor languages. Here, I have taken Maithili as a case study for two reasons. First, for a very long period Maithili was classified as a ‘dialect’ of Hindi. Second, there have been social and political mobilisations on the basis of Maithili as well. And also, there has been consistent opposition to the classification of Maithili as a ‘dialect’ of Hindi. So, besides exploring the inherent tensions between language and ‘dialects’ relationships in India, particularly Hindi and its regional variants, often classified as its ‘dialects’, the case study of Maithili allows me to understand the growth and development of the Maithili linguistic community, its successes and failures, using language in the third sense – as a conceptual category.

The present study tries to explore the following questions – how was language based politics played out in the context of nation states in India in the process creating one major language and relegating many other existing languages to the position of ‘dialects’ or minor languages with special reference to Maithili? How did print, colonial rule and missionary efforts together bring about crucial changes in the linguistic economy of north India in nineteenth century? How did the process of
standardization and modernization of languages lead to the process of assimilation and differentiation? How does the politics of language help in the development of community consciousness? What are the dynamic processes by which people come to identify their interests with their language to build associations and to pursue those interests? How do linguistic communities evolve, develop and assert and also destabilize the language – dialects distinction?

The present work is an attempt to extend the works which have critically looked at the emergence of Hindi as the national language in India. These include Vasudha Dalmia’s *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* among others. However, the present work is different from these in that it explores the dynamics at work within Hindi heartland when Hindi was expanding its social and political base as a national language of India. Throughout the history of the Maithili movement what one finds is not just an opposition to Hindi’s claim of Maithili being its ‘dialect’ or the ambivalent relationship between the two. More appropriately we can see a double movement. The authority and power of Hindi was strengthening with the adoption and promotion of Hindi in the Maithili speaking region at the same time as the Maithili assertion was becoming more powerful with the making of a separate Maithili linguistic community.