# THE IDEA OF A LINGUISTIC 'NATION': CONCEPTUALIZING LITERARY PERSPECTIVES OF CLASSICAL LANGUAGES AND VERNACULARS

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**Abstract:**

In the following paper, I wish to work upon the idea of perceiving a nation constructed on the basis of its linguistic identity and in this process, unravel the events, structures and processes which shaped the contours of a nation. The nation, time and again can be defined as a multifarious term having a plethora of connotations and in this context can be defined as an overarching category or as a fragmented entity. However, in our scope of discussion I would try to explore whether, languages being one of the most significant idioms of culture are instrumental in fulfilling the criteria of nationhood of particular polities across time and space. Abiding by the scholarships of Vinay Dharwadker and David Lelyveld, I would like to portray how Orientalism as an Imperial ideology was decisive in orientating the course of indigenous literatures and how colonial cartographic exercises emerging as a tool of colonial sociology marked the extensive geographical landscapes of the different languages. Similarly, I also seek to find satisfactory answers to the following question; Do Languages Make a Nation? In my bid to characterize the inception and genesis of the indigenous languages I want to pinpoint at the complexities arising out of Francesca Orsini's binary model of Classical Languages as opposed to the lower vernaculars and eventually contextualize their presence in Grierson's model of a literary Hindustan where the nation can be perceived as an organic whole. Contrarily, in my attempt to put forward the case of conceptualization of nations through the prism of literary identities, I try to make systematic efforts to depict through case studies as to how the affinities of Oriya, Bengali and Tamil nations are fostered by their linguistic affiliations. Eventually, I would also like to come up with some recent Parliamentary interventions of the post-colonial period which would help us to evaluate the scope of this topic more articulately. Finally, after producing an overview of a unified 'Literary Hindustan', I would like to conclude by assessing the scenario of the preceding decades through pinpointing at the nuances where with the dissemination of print technologies, literary cultures have been highly successful in creating a separate geographical sphere of entertainment for themselves being dominated by fictional narratives, thereby catering the tastes of all the sections of the society.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Geographical Landscapes, Vernacularization, Linguistic Nationalism, Print Technologies

**Introduction:**

The present study seeks to highlight one of the most significant dimensions of Indian polity and that is nothing but the mental exercise of churning out the complex yet engaging relationship between the elements of national integration and the 'language' problem. It is generally agreed that the issue of national integration, being essentially psychological in nature, depends on a number of variables which are responsible for generating a sense of belonging together- a sense of oneness and indeed, in this process, factors like tradition, loyalty, social commitment and historical antecedents become visible. Henceforth, by and large, it somewhat becomes evident that this piece of work tries to establish the notions of a unique idea

of a unified "linguistic nation" based on theories integral to disciplines like political sociology, comparative politics, regional geography, selected genres of ethno-history and all other broad areas pertaining to social bases of Indian politics. The idea is to deliberate on the question as to if the notion of India or Bharat, in pre-colonial India can be placed under the overarching rubric of any one particular language, or a lingua franca across diverse temporal scales and can be conceived as a nation per se. However, as we move forward in this paper, by going beyond the confines of academic rhetorical understanding of a nation, let us delve deeper within the dynamics of Orientalist framework and perceive as to how, the huge reservoir of Indian literature was scientifically approached and nurtured by the colonial masters and try to chalk out the intricacies lying behind the ideas of forging of an inseparable connection between languages and national identities.

**Socio-Historical Background:**

It was during the second half of the eighteenth century that the literary cultures of modern South Asia started to attract the ire of the colonizers and therefore the task of unfolding the rich treasures of the cradle of civilization was entrusted upon the Orientalist Scholars as a British colonial enterprise. According to Edward Said, Orientalism can be defined simply as a corporate institution which portrayed a western style of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the Orient. Said's general insights into Orientalism and Ronald Inden's specific suggestions regarding South Asia need to be extended to a phenomenon that has not yet been subjected to a sustained critique of this kind, namely, the longstanding British, European and North American engagement with Indian literatures and literary histories, which occupy such a prominent place in the orientalist enterprise.[1] With the institutionalization of such endeavors, scholars like William Jones and David Hare provided a very wide conception of what constitutes literature and re-defined the contours of ancient Sanskrit Literature by classifying them on the basis of existing texts including the *Manusmriti* and the *Bhagavad Geeta* and thereby focused on the specified region from where the concerned piece of literature was discovered. The content of the huge ambit of literary works not only incorporated different forms of prose and poetry but also covered the chores of mundane aspects of daily life including history, science, mythology, drama and so on.[2] Thus, if we are to abide by Sheldon Pollock's argument of what he prefers to call the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis", it somewhat becomes clear that in spite of the nuances arising out of the divergent tastes and preferences of the citizens, it was arguably the cultural heritage or traditional norms associated with the overarching Sanskrit Culture which weaved together the idea of a nation in ancient times.

Similarly, as we were engaging with the parameters of a more popular language or a *lingua franca* having its impact on a particular linguistic space, mention must be made of Persian, which used to be the official language of the Mughal court. Definitely, things might have been existing back then on an authoritarian level but as we have moved forward in the age of modern-day democracy, for the record, Hindi has evolved as a 'national' language over the years and not as an official language despite vehement regional oppositions. Nevertheless, coming back to our original scope of discussion, we cannot deny the fact that one of the origins of the powerful link between nation and literature lies in the discourse of the British Orientalists dealing with Indian literature and thereby, helping to lay the groundwork for the tradition of national literary histories that became a worldwide phenomenon in the twentieth century, particularly after the breakup of the empire.[3] Interestingly, native resistance has always been a matter of scholarly deliberation

in face of imperialist atrocious enterprises given the traditional prominence of learning indigenous languages in educational institutions, but the much spoken off Anglicist-Orientalist controversy and the eventual spread of western education in the 1830's helped the formation of a devoted aristocratic class serving the administrative apparatus of the British Raj in South Asia.

## Genesis of Colonial Taxonomic Agencies and Evolution of Regional Dialects:

With the fastening of British stronghold on Indian soil, we get to witness the establishment of a number of institutionalized agencies conducting cartographic surveys in order to cover for the unexplored territorial landscapes. With the profession of map making becoming a trend following the activities of James Rennell, the concerned royal authorities ordered for setting up of the Linguistic Survey of India which would demarcate the different languages and associated regional territories where they have spread their sphere of influence. It was in this context in 1888 that George Abraham Grierson came up with his "The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan" where he produces through his very selection, presentation and authorial comments, a historiographical framework, and also demarcates for the first time a literary space for north Indian vernacular writings, establishing in his discourse geographically determinable centers and peripheries within a region called 'Hindustan'.[4] He engaged himself in analyzing the folklores, songs and epics of Hindustan besides primarily focusing on enthralling topics such as the inter-relationship between Hinduism and Christianity as well as the gradual genesis of Sanskrit plays. As he delved deep into the genre of comparative literature, he made a systematic comparison between Malik Muhammad and Milton and went to the extent of claiming that the *Rama Charita Manas* was the Bible of Millions of people and its creator, Tulsidas was nothing short of an apostle. However, reading through the chronologically arranged bibliography of his publications, we can see his progress, commencing with investigations on the Bengali Rangpur dialect after he had been stationed in that region, then continuing with the description and analysis of *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, *Magadhi* and some sub-dialects of the "Bihari Language" during his 'Bihari period', which according to Thomas and Turner started after Grierson's transfer to Bhagalpur in 1877.[5] Ira Sarma points out that serving the purpose of 'oriental empiricism', although the Linguistic Survey of India does roughly map out language and dialect areas, her works were accordingly criticized by David Lelyveld on the grounds that 'each language was a contained entity with a demarcated geographic identity-'as determined from administrative headquarters'.[6] Thus, Histories of Literature, as Sheldon Pollock claims, 'are, like all histories, political stories, with particular relevance to the self-understanding of communities, regions and nations.'[7]

## Significance of Performing Arts in the Age of Vernacularization:

Over here, mention must be made of the famous literary historian Francesca Orsini, who through her theoretical discourse inaugurated the idea of oral-performative practices, by which we mean that the content of a particular text may get altered from time to time across different spaces and locations where it was performed as a drama or something of that sort for popular entertainment. The first histories of north Indian literatures, written in the colonial and nationalist periods, were involved in crystallizing communities around language and cultural identity and similarly, literary works in Urdu and Hindi also, operating in this multilingual milieu, quickly established boundaries, a canon, selective affiliations and, of course, significant exclusions.[8] She is of the opinion that Hindi literary tradition appeared as a consequence to be formed exclusively by devotional and courtly poetry and as pointed out by Imre Bagha, the criteria for inclusion

were quite inconsistent since the language seems to follow a pre-ordained cultural logic based on script, genre, topic or poetic language.[9] Perceiving the dynamic fifteenth century as an age marking the flourish of widespread vernacular literature, Orsini discusses in some considerable detail, the dissemination of *Hindavi* Sufi romantic genres spreading across the Hindi regional belts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Madhya Pradesh or of the folklorist traditions in Urdu. So, as we are claiming that eventually, north India became the politically non-homogenous yet a fairly well connected linguistic and cultural region, we encounter a terminology called 'multiple diglossias' which means that there were several written/ High languages- Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and a general spoken vernacular written in either Persian, *Kaithi*, or *Devanagari* scripts; a simplified form of Persian seems to have been the spoken lingua franca, while individuals and groups also maintained their own spoken languages like *Turki* or *Pashtu* for generations.[10] Finally, while there is enough evidence of the process of *vernacularization*, this does not mean that a mono-lingual vernacular literary culture replaced the multiple diglossias and on the contrary, given the continuing and in fact expanding role and status of Persian as a necessary requirement for administrative jobs and elite culture, the symbolic role of Sanskrit, and the persistent heteroglossia that rendered 'rough and ready bilingualism' a must for anyone engaged in trade, the army, religion and performance, literary culture in North India witnessed a parallel growth in Persian and the vernacular from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.[11] Now, let us have a look as to how, transcending beyond the landscape of North India, how far languages have been decisive in forging national identities in regions of Eastern and South India.

**Cultural Distinctiveness of archaic Tamil Literary Cultures:**

Writing on the legend of Valluvar, Stuart Blackburn opines that literary histories are definitely more tangible or accessible than ethnology or material cultures of archaeology and they are nothing but culturally constructed narratives through which the past is re-visualized in the light of recent contemporary events. Situating his contentious classic '*Tirukkural*' within a global grid of sociological imagination, the author Valluvar or Tiruvalluvar tries to weave a narrative which ties to explain the wider politics of getting the work acclaimed as the oldest extant Tamil literature besides placing it at the center of the debates about the history of Tamil and its status vis-a-vis Sanskrit literature, mainly because of its antiquity.[12] The reality was, in fact, as Blackburn tries to show, much more complicated: a colonial intervention in a long-standing debate about the status of Tamil in terms of Sanskrit and Brahminical learning, and about the social relations between the Brahmins and the Untouchables- especially when the author himself hailed from the Paraiyar or the low caste untouchable community.[13] Devoid of any religious underpinnings, the text is quite pragmatic in its content and qualifies as a book crafted to uplift one's moral code of conduct. Nourished with certain scholarly commentaries, it can clearly attain the same status in the reservoir of Tamil literature as did the Vedas in Sanskrit; European and Tamil interpretations of the Valluvar legend converge in a fortuitous alliance between the foreigner's perception of a corrupt but 'perfect' civilization and the Tamil's pursuit of a literary history that would rescue a pure language from its Sanskrit accretions.[14] And hence, if the 'High Languages', as Orsini classifies them, like Sanskrit or Persian, are believed to have curated a cosmopolis at their respective time periods of flourish, then the so-called non- Aryan vernacular Tamil literature having the rich cultural reserves of Sangam epics like the *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* or even, the *Tirukkural* deserve to get equal attention and treatment in prospects of their literary value. Therefore, it needs to be discussed as to if only the politics of the binary of Aryan and non-Aryan divide is solely responsible for demeaning the antiquarian literary value of the vast corpus of Tamil literature which

has been able to exert its sphere of influence throughout human history.

**Comparative Case Studies from the Repertoire of Bengali and Oriya Linguistic Traditions:**

On a different note, the land of Bengal in itself can be claimed to be a hub of literary cultures when it comes to the domain of nationalist literatures getting written in the nineteenth century and Dipesh Chakrabarty makes us aware of the politics of identity in Bengal when he does a fair bit of research on Dinesh Chandra Sen contributing significantly to the imagining of the landscape of Bengal as a nation through the prism of indigenous language and literature. Dinesh Chandra Sen's almost exclusive identification of Bengali Literature with the Hindu Heritage, his idealization of many patriarchal and Brahmanical precepts, and his search for a pure Bengali essence bereft of all foreign influence will today arouse the legitimate ire of contemporary critics.[15] Chakrabarty stated that the inherent romanticism expressed from his writings bore a perceived connection between identity and aesthetic activity in the realms of art, music, literature and language. The impact of the publication of Sen's book '*Bangabhasha o Sahitya*' was so wide that the educated Bengali literati became overwhelmed in pride on the discovery of Ancient Bengali Literature, thereby reorienting the archaic identity of the Bengali people and Dr. Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay exclaimed that people who were searching for the roots of the distinctiveness and for pride in the Bengali way of life welcomed him as the true historian of Bengali literature.[16] Literature, thus turning out to be innately political, appeared with a gulf of national spirit which was expected to act as an antidote to all the mundane interests that otherwise divided the Bengali people - the Hindus from the Muslims, the lower castes from the upper castes, and the elite from the masses.[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty recalls Rabindranath Tagore once delivering in a lecture on national literature in an annual meeting of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad that the word '*Sahitya*' or literature has been itself derived from the term '*sahit*' or being with and thus the word suggests the idea of being together. No deep intimacies between human beings, between the past and the present, or between the distant and the near can be forged by means other than those of literature and Sen's sense of history actually offered some anecdotal evidence of a spiritual bond between the educated elite and the non-literate masses enabled by the shared pleasures of folk literature.[18]

If we further take up the case of Orissa, unsurprisingly the scenario is not something different as pointed out by Satya Mohanty when he discusses about the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* and its significant position in the history of Oriya literature. From late antiquity into the late medieval period, when Hindu society expanded its reach through new agrarian settlements and incorporation of the indigenous tribal populations, the puranas were a genre to domesticate and assimilate the new groups into the Brahmanic ideological universe and it was in this hegemonic context that Balaram Das composed his *Lakshmi Purana*.[19] Analyzing some of the features of the pedagogical poem, Mohanty tries to zoom at the wider effect of these genres of literature and trace how they can yield insights about radical social and cultural values. The piece not only covers all the aspects of modern life- rituals and festivals but also provides a brief overview of the egalitarian ethics existing among the diverse castes and classes which evidently becomes clear from the tracts that Brahmins and Chandalas are allowed to eat and feed together almost every other day. Looking into the content of the work, since it has been created partly from the viewpoint of a feminist bias, women are portrayed to have come together in this text to question unjustified authority, and when Lord Jagannath and his brother are humiliated and taught a lesson, the critique is directed primarily at their arbitrary and hypocritical use of patriarchal power.[20] What we end up with in this Oriya *purana* is a goddess, who at the

same time, is a composite of all traditional images and themes as well as a vernacularized goddess, an audacious local appropriation of a Vedic deity for local socio-political purposes, reconceived in the regional and local cultural idiom and made radical and universal.[21]

The reason for picking up case studies from Bengali and Oriya oral folklorist traditions and putting them up in a comparative grid indicates toward the fact that both have been contributing significantly in the growth of regional identities and fostered a sense of linguistic nationalism during the phase of freedom struggle from the yoke of colonial rule. As a matter of fact, undivided tracts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa have been projecting itself as a large geographic entity since the later medieval times. Over here, while we do not really face the western concepts of civic nationalism marked with the ties of an association based civil society (*Gesellschaft*), real bonds based on familial relations and marked by a sense of personal belongingness (*Gemeinschaft*) become more prominent especially during the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Another reason behind the forging of social ties based on regional linguistic identities lay in the fact that both the languages were borne out of Indo-Aryan linguistic stock and the concerned polities conjointly were part of one larger regional unit which did not project their *Samajik* identities to be overtly distinct despite minute gaps in cultural patterns and sartorial lifestyles.

**Assessment:**

From our recently concluded discussions, it becomes crystal clear as to how languages, being an integral part of the cultural edifices of a nation are detrimental in shaping the respective national identities. In this context, mention must be made of the States Re-organization Act of 1956 passed in the Indian Parliament whereby the territorial extent of the states of Bombay and Mysore were majorly modified and restructured based on the linguistic demography of Marathi and Kannada speaking people. Nevertheless, even if although we are not yet able to comprehend India as a state post-independence, embracing any one particular language, we get the example of Bangladesh emerging as a post-colonial state based on its linguistic identity in the recent past. However, interestingly enough, we observe and celebrate the International Mother Language Day worldwide on 21st of February every year to promote awareness pertaining to linguistic and cultural diversities as well as to promote multilingualism- an event which has been acknowledged globally by the United Nations Organization.

Nonetheless, let us have a close and brief view in order to understand how the different languages and literary pieces, operating within their own, distinct regional belts, or in separate zones, reached out to the common mass with the advancement and progress of print technologies. This, in the process, turned the reading of literature produced in the nineteenth century into a means of popular entertainment leading to the extension of the reach of the concerned language to far reaches. While Benedict Anderson's arguments about the emergence of standardized print vernaculars at the expense of other varieties is pertinent to Urdu and particularly Hindi in the nineteenth century, but neither script could claim complete dominance.[22] The traffic between the scripts emerging out of the Hindi-Urdu controversy as Francesca Orsini argues enhanced commercial publishing thereby partly mirroring the already existing elements of linguistic and poetic hybridity in oral entertainment forms.[23] However, whereas "popular literature" and its audiences have been sometimes viewed as heroically resisting reformist concerns, we should consider commercial publishing as an exclusive enterprise that followed its own imperatives of entertainment and profit.[24]

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10. Ibid., 231.
11. Ibid., 232.
12. Blackburn, Corruption and Redemption, 452.
13. Ibid.
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