

# 14 Situating language, recognising multilingualism

## Linguistic identities and mother tongue attachment in Northeast India and the region

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The language policy of post-colonial India was born in conflict, controversy and compromise. While some commentators have portrayed this intricate balancing to be an effective, albeit unstable, equilibrium, others have been less forgiving. This chapter addresses language politics, policy and identity through the Indian Northeast, with a particular focus on Sikkim, but also touching on Nepal and Bhutan.

Many of the region's 45 million inhabitants are rapidly shifting from speaking traditionally unwritten and increasingly endangered Tibeto-Burman vernaculars to regional (Assamese, Nepali), national (Hindi) and international (English) Indo-European languages of prestige that carry with them the promise of economic benefits and digital access. Communities that were once plurilingual are at risk of becoming functionally bilingual, with the move from *boli* (oral speech forms) to *bhasa* (written languages) appearing to be one of replacement rather than one of addition.

This transformation is the focus of this chapter and warrants careful analysis. In particular, I address the following questions: How are linguistic identities changing as an ever more mobile workforce is incentivised to learn English? What is the functional role of traditional ethnic languages in inter-ethnic relationships and relations between people and the state? Do 'heritage' or ancestral mother tongues risk becoming markers of fetishised attachment and nostalgic belonging as they cease to be communicative vernaculars of daily conversation? And what are the consequences of including more languages in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India that mandates official language use for communities who call India's Northeast their home?

### Language and the framing of modern India

Given the increasingly regular waves of ethnic and linguistic claims asserted by Northeast Indian communities, Granville Austin's 1966 monograph on the framing of the Indian Constitution is worth revisiting. In the course

of a 40-page chapter on language, Austin works his way around to a more positive reading of the deliberations that went into framing India's modern language policy: the 'nation's most delicate problem' (1966: 270).

While Austin first dismisses the prolonged discussions held from 1 August to 14 September 1949 in India's Constituent Assembly over the role and status of Hindi and English as a 'half-hearted compromise' (*ibid.*: 268), by the end of his contribution he sees a 'more positive side' (*ibid.*: 307), praising the Indian Constitution for how it makes 'clear what the national ideal is, and then, realistically, compromises, laying down how the nation is to function, linguistically speaking, until the ideal is achieved' (*ibid.*: 307).

Half a century ago, the leaders of an independent India held strongly divergent positions on how the nation should work as a linguistic whole, and these differences were vocally aired through the constitution drafting process. The issue, as encapsulated by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, chairman of the West Bengal Legislative Council and member of the Official Language Commission, in his 'Minority Report' contained within the larger *Report of the Official Language Commission*, was that 'people in non-Hindi areas agreed to accept Hindi . . . because they had an uneasy feeling that India lacked that linguistic unity which was thought to be so vital for a free people' (1956: 282), and that English, while certainly useful, was simply not compatible with Indian nationalism. Rather like fundamental rights, linguistic policy 'touched everyone . . . problems of language were an everyday affair' (Austin 1966: 268). In his 1955 *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar makes clear just how central these deliberations on official language policy were: 'There was no article which proved more controversial than Article 115 which deals with the [language] question. No article produced more opposition. No article, more heat.'

Nehru was characteristically insightful about the potential of language to evince strong feelings, noting that when linguistic norms were challenged, conservative reflexes were inevitable: 'Scratch a separatist in language and you will invariably find that he is a communalist and very often a political reactionary' (from Nehru: *Unity of India*, 1948: 248; cited in Austin 1966: 273). Quite characteristically, Gandhi's vision was altogether more hopeful and expansive. The often-cited paragraph that follows warrants reproducing in full, as it offers a helpful frame for the following discussion:

This Hindustani should be neither Sanskritized Hindi nor Persianised Urdu, but a happy combination of both. It should also freely admit words wherever necessary from the different regional languages and also assimilate words from foreign languages, provided that they can mix well and easily with our national language. Thus our national

language must develop into a rich and powerful instrument capable of expressing the whole gamut of human thoughts and feelings. To confine oneself exclusively to Hindi or Urdu would be a crime against intelligence and the spirit of patriotism.<sup>1</sup>

We may pause to consider whether the contemporary speech of so many educated and urban Indians – in which English, Hindi and regional Indian languages intermix with freedom and comfort within one sentence – may have achieved the blending to which Gandhi aspired. Is ‘Hinglish’, that ‘wonderful language that combines English and Hindi noun and verb forms in a single sentence’ (Brass 2004: 361), an embodiment of Gandhi’s dream – a South Asian ‘Esperanto’ – therefore to be lauded as a success, or rather a sign of confusion, semi-lingualism and a damning illustration of the consequences of linguistic fragmentation? As noted by Austin, India has until recently ‘produced very little feeling of linguistic nationalism. It was not, and is not, generally speaking, un-Indian to speak English’ (1966: 306). The problem ‘has been and is, rather, one of sub-national sentiment and sub-national competition, which often takes the form of linguistic rivalries’ (*ibid.*: 306). And it is to these rivalries, through enumeration, recognition and scheduling, that we now turn.

### **The politics of linguistic surveys**

The fits and starts that have bedevilled the new Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) are a powerful illustration of the enduring political valence of language in India. Originally designed as a much-needed update to the first LSI – conducted between 1894 and 1928 and released in published form over a period of almost 30 years by George Abraham Grierson – the new LSI was designed to be an ‘ongoing research project’ of the Government of India, Office of the Registrar General, India, Language Division, authorised in the Sixth Five Year Plan (Pattanayak 2009: i) and subsequently ‘initiated in 1984’ (Chandramouli 2009: vi). While there was little movement on the linguistic survey through the 1980s and 1990s, increased official activity in the 2000s resulted in a slew of newspaper reports. Srivasta (2006) described the new LSI as a ‘gigantic exercise involving at least 10,000 language and linguistic experts’, slated to take ‘10 years at the cost of Rs. 280 crore’ and set to involve ‘nearly 100 universities’.

With the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore at the helm, the new LSI was to be an ambitious, governmental exercise, leveraging decadal census data, technology and a large army of linguists to examine every speech form in the nation. Professor Udaya Narayana

Singh, director of the institute, informed the popular news website Rediff.com that ‘the CIIL will kick off the National Linguistic Survey in April 2007 and target completion by 2017’ (Sahay 2006). Official support for the initiative is located in Volume II of the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012), which speaks of a ‘New Linguistic Survey (NLSI) of India [that] will be undertaken during the Eleventh Plan as a CS [Central Sector Scheme]’ (Paragraph 1.3.77, page 35), without mentioning that the survey had been sanctioned five plans (25 years) ago. The prominent billing in the Eleventh Plan confirms that central resources would be allocated to see it through. Presciently, the Eleventh Plan also suggests that the NLSI not only ‘focus on 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule . . . but . . . also pay special attention to the top 15 Non-Scheduled languages’, proposing that a ‘new scheme for the preservation and development of languages not covered by the Eighth Schedule, namely, the Bharat Bhasha Vikas Yojana<sup>2</sup> would be taken up’ (Paragraphs 1.3.78 and 1.3.79, page 35).

These official statements contain important insights that warrant further reflection. First, while the first post-independence Indian Language Commission believed that ‘there is no particular distinction bestowed on a language because it is named in Schedule VIII’ (*Report of the Official Language Commission*, p. 186, cited in Austin 1966: 297), the contemporary reality is quite different. The scheduling of languages has ‘set off power struggles among linguistic communities, to the detriment of the weak’ (Dasgupta 2011). While the Eighth Schedule, currently an expandable list of 22 scheduled languages, ‘obliges the state to help the languages prosper and make official documents available in them . . . the development of non-scheduled languages, on the other hand, requires no such obligation’ (Dasgupta 2011).

It is now apparent that the scheduling – and thereby privileging – of certain languages is to the detriment of other non-scheduled languages: the vitality of the latter is eclipsed by the very process that promotes the recognition of the former. In the cover story of the Indian edition of *GEO* in January 2011, Debarshi Dasgupta makes this case most compellingly:

The divide between major and minor languages and the official sidelining of the latter which is enshrined in the VIII schedule of the Indian Constitution – has also set off power struggles among linguistic communities, to the detriment of the weak.

[The] Schedule, currently an expandable list of 22 scheduled languages, obliges the state to help the languages prosper and make official documents available in them. The development of non-scheduled languages on the other hand, requires no such obligation.

Writing on the Northeast, Pauthang Haokip notes that minority tribal speech forms in Manipur are under pressure from regionally dominant (and Scheduled) languages, rather than by Hindi or English:

The languages which are more vulnerable to language shift are the old Kuki groups. It is interesting to note that in most instances the direction in which these languages shift is towards the other neighbouring language(s) who speak(s) more or less similar language(s), though in some instances the shift is towards Manipuri.

(2011: 57–58)

Second, the realisation articulated in the Eleventh Plan that language use and linguistic diversity is not only something objectively ‘out there’ to be enumerated and documented, but rather a socio-cultural resource to be nurtured reflects a deepening insight on the part of the Indian Planning Commission. I view the decision to de-couple description and documentation (the survey) from programmatic support and development (the Bharat Bhasha Vikas Yojana) as an attempt to depoliticise the whole enumerative initiative.

As time went on, the price tag of the new linguistic survey continued to soar, with SASNET reporting in November 2007 that the operational costs of conducting the new LSI were estimated to be around Rs 600 crore (over US \$110 million).<sup>3</sup> While some survey findings were released and published – principally on Rajasthan, Orissa, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Sikkim (to which we will return in due course) – the *Times of India* reported in 2010 that the LSI had been ‘abandoned’ (Chaturvedi 2010). The new director of the CIIL, Rajesh Sachdeva, even spoke of the government developing ‘cold feet’ about conducting the linguistic survey, out of concern that the findings could be explosive and divisive, and wary of being accused of fomenting disagreement through language (Malekar 2010). The much-anticipated Bharat Bhasha Vikas Yojana, to be established within the wider ambit of CIIL and administratively distinct from (although developed in parallel with) the Linguistic Survey, was also languishing. The concept note was stuck on a desk in Delhi, pending final approval from the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The new LSI had been quietly and discretely buried, despite public recognition and announcements in the national press.

### **By the people, of the people, for the people?**

Almost immediately, out of ashes of the aborted governmental survey rose the People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI). Spearheaded by Ganesh Devy, a charismatic activist and linguist, and Founding Trustee of the

Bhasha Research and Publication Centre (BRPC), and funded by the Sir Jamsedji Tata Trust in Mumbai and initiated in 2010, the PLSI describes itself as ‘rooted in people’s perception of language’ and ‘carried out by scholars, writers and activists in partnership with members of different speech communities’.<sup>4</sup>

Devy is an impassioned advocate for the protection and revitalisation of India’s endangered languages. Decrying the government’s neglect of indigenous speech forms as wanton *phonocide* in recent UNESCO briefings, Devy has grand ambitions for a Language Forest (or *Bhasha-Van*) at the 10-acre Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, Gujarat. There, according to a newspaper report, he imagines that the ‘trees, when they grow, will be fitted with bio-sensors and every time a visitor passes a tree in the *Bhasha-Van*, it will speak or sing in an Indian language’ (Malekar 2010). In the same article, Devy explains to the journalist that ‘we have decided to conduct a linguistic survey of India on behalf of the people. It will not be an official exercise. . . . Ours will not be a survey really’ (*ibid.*). His aim, somewhat paradoxically perhaps for a self-proclaimed ‘people’s survey’, was to rectify the census record by counting languages rather than speakers (or people). From Devy’s perspective, the decadal census of India leaves much to be desired as the important data have remained unexamined and under-collected: the census enumerates only speakers of languages rather than the names of the speech forms themselves, it restricts its interest to languages listed in and recognised by the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India and it has not ‘disclosed languages that are spoken by less than 10,000 people’ (Pathak 2013). As has become clear, Devy is not alone in arguing that the distinction between scheduled and unscheduled language is deleterious for the latter, both in terms of visibility but more importantly, through the constraints on resources to support under-recognised speech forms.

The findings of the PLSI, which are explicitly not meant to be comprehensive but rather, according to their website, ‘a quick, non-hierarchical, public consultation and appraisal, intended as an aid to cultural impact assessment of development, and as an acknowledgement of the self-respect and sense of identity of all, especially, endangered speech communities of India’ are being released in waves.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Government of India publications that are commonly disseminated for free online, the PLSI is working with commercial publishers in relevant states and the published volumes are not currently widely available.

While methodologically distinct from one another, the aborted new LSI and the ongoing PLSI share a fascination with the linguistic landscape of the Indian Northeast. At least in part, this may be accounted for by the sheer linguistic diversity of the eight states that make up the region: Devy invokes Arunachal Pradesh as the Indian state with the highest number of

languages – 66 distinct speech forms – and Haokip notes that ‘out of 100 non-scheduled languages mentioned in the Census of India, 2001, around 55 languages are spoken in the Northeast’ (2011: 25). But the emphasis on the Northeast may also reflect an enduring central Indian preoccupation with the tribal frontier that appears to be undiminished. To whatever end, both the LSI and the PLSI have focussed much of their early attention on conducting fieldwork in the Indian Northeast. Before turning to the socio-linguistic make-up of Sikkim, about which there are now considerable data in the public domain, I will reflect for a moment on how issues surrounding linguistic surveys relate to India’s northern neighbour, Nepal.

### **Is Nepal still India in the making?**

Scholars and citizens alike often characterise India as a nation of ‘big government’. Whether through employment, education, development or tribal affairs, the central government of India dominates: it is the ever-present primary conduit through which resources flow. In such imaginings, India is regularly contrasted to Nepal, a nation where the state’s capacity to deliver basic services remains woefully inadequate (and receded further during the decade-long conflict that lasted from 1996 to 2006) and a place where NGOs and INGOs occupy an unusually large seat at the national table. In Nepal, NGOs and INGOs are supported by foreign development dollars and employ some of the best and brightest minds in the country. These non-state actors are involved in implementing even the most basic national infrastructure: roads, schools and hospitals. How, then, can we make sense of this unusual inversion? The LSI has been abandoned by the Union Government and effectively handed over to an activist NGO in Vadodara, Gujarat, while the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LinSuN) has been entrusted to the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University – Nepal’s flagship state institution of learning – with government backing.

Recognising that the identity of indigenous and minority communities is intimately connected with vitality of their languages and the endurance of their cultural traditions, the National Planning Commission (NPC) of the Government of Nepal commissioned the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University to conduct a linguistic survey of Nepal. The Commission earmarked a provisional budget for the survey for a period of seven years (2009–2016) and mandated (LinSuN) to ‘build a foundation for the linguistic rights of the citizens of multiethnic and multilingual Nepal so that they will be included without linguistic discrimination’.<sup>6</sup> LinSuN’s programme is at once ambitious and traditional, and guided by a number of interconnected objectives: to prepare a sociolinguistic profile of the languages of Nepal including a mapping of languages and dialects; to

produce a basic description of at least ten languages, including a working orthography, a grammar, a trilingual glossary and publications of folk tales; to develop and maintain a complete database of the languages of Nepal including sociolinguistic information, grammatical information, oral and written texts and vocabulary; to describe the use of mother tongues in education (formal and non-formal) to better understand the development needed for mother tongue curricula in the national educational system; and to produce high-quality written and electronic publications for each of its major research activities. Like the new LSI, however, the LinSuN has been dogged by administrative, political and financial challenges since its inception and results have been uneven.

Linguistic surveys are political tools. It may be that the Government of India is loath to re-open a can of worms that has remained conveniently closed for generations, while the Government of Nepal is in the middle of a moment of historical restructuring through which the administrative lines of the nation may be radically redrawn. Harkening back to Sylvain Lévi, who so provocatively suggested that Nepal was India in the making (*'Le Népal, c'est L'Inde qui se fait'*, Lévi 1905: 128), we may see in Nepal's current (and first ever) linguistic survey some of the classificatory dynamics that compelled Grierson to conduct his original survey a century ago, the findings of which have haunted the Indian state ever since.

Has India effectively washed its hands of the challenge of conducting an official linguistic survey because it knows – through painful experience – that linguistic surveys are not enumerative tools in which governments can safely engage? When Debi Prasanna Pattanayak reflects that 'states have boundaries whereas languages don't', he may be musing on the challenges faced by the LSI as much as he is noting that speech forms do not follow administrative divisions.<sup>7</sup> There is also, after years of government involvement, a growing sense across Indian civil society that languages may be better off when not interfered with by the state (whether through literacy programmes, mechanisms of official recognition or formal 'upliftment' initiatives). Now that Nepal is engaged in its first ever comprehensive national linguistic survey, the survey team may want to take head of India's ambivalence and learn from the experiences of their southern neighbour.

### **Over-studied and under-understood: the language landscape of Sikkim**

As India's second smallest and least populous state, Sikkim has attracted a considerable amount of linguistic attention, far out of proportion to its size. With a population of only 607,688 inhabitants according to the



provisional results of the 2011 census, Sikkim accounts for only 0.05 per cent of India's total population. According to the 2001 census, STs make up one-fifth (20.61%) of the Sikkimese population, with scheduled castes comprising a further 5 per cent. Starting in 1995 and ending in 2000, the LSI had been cumulatively gathering data on the languages spoken in Sikkim. The data collection was followed by an updating and verification exercise in 2008. Two volumes on the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim were released by the Language Division of the Office of the Registrar General in November 2009 and March 2011, respectively.

Revealingly, the first volume does not include a description of Nepali, even though this is acknowledged to be 'the first populous language of Sikkim' (Chandramouli 2009: vi), and focuses instead on Sikkim's Tibeto-Burman languages used by ever-dwindling numbers of speakers. Debi Prasanna Pattanayak correctly notes that the 'peculiarity of the linguistic composition of the state lies in the existence of Nepali' (2009: ii). Nepali is not only the 'only language of Indo-Aryan family' spoken in the state, and widely used by all ethno-linguistic communities, but 'being the most populous language as well as the language used for education, administration etc., Nepali has emerged as the superposed language of the state' (2009: ii). The relative absence of Nepali from the written record in his publication is all the more revealing given that the Sikkim Official Language Act – passed by the governor of the state on 17 October 1977 – even adopted Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha as 'the languages to be used for the official purposes of the State of Sikkim'.

The enumerators and drafters of LSI's Sikkim volumes were clearly mindful of the political nature and implications of their work. Reflecting on linguistic states and the worry that drawing 'state maps on the basis of language' gives the 'false impression that each state is monolingual' (2011: 3), Pattanayak goes so far as to suggest that there is 'no language policy and planning in any of the States' (*ibid.*: 2), a strange abdication of responsibility (and indictment on decades of involvement) for one of India's most prominent linguists and the first ever director of the CIIL in Mysore until his retirement. The issue, according to Ganesh Devy, is not one of planning or policy, but rather of interference: 'where literacy has gone up, . . . local languages have dwindled because of the imposition of the state's official language' (cited in Dasgupta 2011).

Indigeneity, specifically autochthonous inhabitation and the settlement pattern of Sikkim, is an ongoing trope in the two-volume government publication on the languages of Sikkim. The scholarly collective that authored the many chapters appear united in one position: the source of Sikkim's ethnolinguistic diversity is primarily of external origin, the result of waves

of in-migration to the state. Consider this statement by Kakali Mukherjee, author of the Introduction to Volume II:

While the Lepchas are the original inhabitants of the state, the Bhutias are the migrants from Tibet into Sikkim in seventeenth century and the Nepalese started migration into Sikkim from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This diversity primarily, has arisen from the cultures brought in Sikkim by the immigrant communities, namely Nepalese and Bhutias.

(2011: 11–12)

Mukherjee's presentation of population movements and 'origination' differs considerably from the political position articulated by the Bhutia-Lepcha block in Sikkim who put chronology to one side in the interest of a generally more united indigenous position. Not only is the Limbu community – widely held to be one of Sikkim's core ethno-linguistic groupings alongside the Bhutia and Lepcha – absent from Mukherjee's description, but the presentation of diversity as being external in origin and a result of incoming population migrations is at odds with many contemporary ethno-political imaginings. I note this not as a critique of Mukherjee, whose position is perfectly defensible, but rather as a reflection on the complexity of overlaying linguistic, cultural and political frames of reference, and deriving claims of antiquity, residence and indigeneity from them. To their credit, though, the LSI-Sikkim survey team was careful to address some of the criticisms raised by Ganesh Devy and others of the decadal census that does so little to tabulate non-scheduled languages. To that end, the enumerators collected data on 'Rai' (really a group of languages rather than a single speech form), Tamang, Gurung, Newari, Mangari and Sunwar, all of which now have Sikkim-wide recognition but no visibility at the central government level.

Overlapping with the government surveying initiative, from September 2005 to November 2006, I directed the first phase of a modern linguistic survey of Sikkim on language use in education through the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and in close partnership with the Department of Human Resource Development (formerly Education) of the Government of Sikkim. Together with the research team, I visited most of the government and private secondary schools across the state to administer an extensive questionnaire to the senior students.<sup>8</sup>

While many of my findings dovetail with the results of the governmental LSI-Sikkim survey, there are some noteworthy differences. While I certainly agree with the LSI authors that many of Sikkim's inhabitants 'have shifted from their indigenous languages to regional language [*sic*], i.e. Nepali, in

spite of maintaining a separate ethnic identity' (Office of the Registrar General 2009: 17), and that ethnic and linguistic identities are related but quite distinct, I take issue with the singularity of their conclusion, namely, that 'especially the young section . . . are indifferent to their respective mother tongues' (2009: 18). The situation is more complex than this simple statement would lead us to believe.<sup>9</sup>

### **One tribe, one language, one identity?**

As Paul Friedrich noted half a century ago in his writing on India, 'Linguistic problems tend to emerge as a symbolic reflex of almost any other conflict' (1962: 546). In other words, languages are not usually in and of themselves the issue, but rather a convenient, and seemingly bounded outlet for complaints about the unequal distribution of resources, often exacerbated by differential access to government benefits. More recent scholarship on the language politics of the Indian Northeast confirms that little has changed since Friedrich's time: 'ethnic tensions are often directed on a linguistic basis', writes Haokip (2011: vii). Just as they are conduits for the transmission of culture, then, the indigenous languages of India are also vehicles for the transmission of grievances and discontent.

In the course of his long career, Paul Brass has regularly drawn attention to the political and non-linguistic (or para-linguistic) nature of Indian language movements and effectively shown that 'language is not necessarily the primary form of ethnic affiliation or, to be more precise, it is not necessarily the central affiliation' (Brass 2004: 354). Yet, having noted that 'in their initial and developing stages, language movements are everywhere vehicles for the pursuit of economic advancement' (2004: 360), Brass acknowledges that the choices to use a certain dialect or language over another, 'as well as its form and style, constitute political as well as "linguistic acts"' (2004: 361).

On a related note, I view the collapsing of ethnicity and language into one category to be a 'political act', whether unknowingly blended or wilfully undertaken for strategic and instrumental ends. I have for some time (see Turin 2006) articulated concerns about the recklessness with which scholars and officials alike label ethnic groups who historically spoke languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family as 'Tibeto-Burman', irrespective of their contemporary language practice. After all, we do not refer to African Americans as Niger-Congo-ese just because some of their ancestors spoke Yoruba. In other words, one's forefather's mother tongue should not – necessarily – impact contemporary ethnic labelling. Yet the terms 'Tibeto-Burman ethnic group' and 'Tibeto-Burmese people' are still regularly used as erroneous and lazy short cuts for an array of standardised

characteristics believed to be shared by various contemporary communities: being more egalitarian, consuming alcohol and meat, practising shamanism and animism and generally not adhering to one of the ‘great’ religious traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism which surround them.

While the classification of languages as Tibeto-Burman (versus Austro-Asiatic or Indo-Aryan) is precise, the use of linguistic terminologies and models of classification to label ethnic groups is not, and perpetuates the very same kind of fuzzy – and even dangerous – thinking that fuses ethnicity together with language, tying the fate of one to the success and endurance of the other. The source for this terminological collapsing lies in part with the decennial Indian census that has perpetuated lasting confusion by not enumerating ethnicity (with the exception of ST, SC and OBC) and opted rather for language – specifically ‘mother tongue’ – as a metonym and shortcut for ethnicity. The result of this unhappy ethnic and linguistic merger is an enduring belief in the one-to-one correspondence between a distinct, bounded (albeit historically constructed and mutable) ethnic community and their ancestral speech form, whether or not they speak it. Haokip spends a good number of pages in his socio-linguistic survey of the Indian Northeast trying to make sense of this puzzle:

Many North-Easterners do not differentiate between language and tribe. To them, each tribe is presumed to have its own language, and each language is presumed to be spoken by just one tribe. This presumption comes about because of the fact that by tradition tribes and languages are called by the same names.

(2011: 6)

Just as some economists are troubled by the ‘discovery’ that not all humans act in economically rational ways all of the time, Haokip is concerned about the transparently incorrect, yet strangely enduring, view that language and ethnicity are functionally coterminous, and sets out to ‘dispel the often misunderstood concept among the Northeasterners that language boundary corresponds to tribe boundary’ (2011: vii). Along with other observers, Haokip notes the mutability of ethnic and linguistic affiliation, but fails to probe deeper, seeing the shifts themselves as the problem rather than indicative of the politicised nature of ethno-linguistic belonging in the Northeast:

So long as people remain under the membership of one tribe they regard themselves as speaking the language of that tribe. But, the moment they are recognised as separate tribe they will regard themselves to be speaking a separate language.

(2011: 56)

We should not be surprised, then, that when ‘people talked about ethnic affiliation of the group, they talked as if they have shifted their language as well’ (Haokip 2011: 56). There is no reason that communities should be expected to define or categorise themselves based upon externally imposed linguistic criteria that have a lot to say about grammar but nothing to say about belonging. We need to be more mindful of the shifting nature of language identity practices and linguistic belonging. While language affiliations are attributed on the basis of grammar and vocabulary, linguistic *identities* must be understood to be as changeable as ethnic affiliations. In some cases, people change the language that they speak – just as they do their habits and habitus – other times they continue to speak the same language as before, but change what they call it. The distinctions between autonoms, exonyms, glossonyms and loconyms are particularly helpful for scholars involved in classificatory questions (cf. Matisoff *et al.* 1996).

The scheduling of languages in India and the uneven development of the nation’s speech forms has resulted in a linguistic caste system in which, to cite an unnamed leader quoted in Friedrich, ‘the strength of a language is as large or as poor as its literature’ (1962: 552). Haokip is spot on when he notes that ‘whatever is spoken by a “tribe” is likely to be called a “language”, and whatever is spoken by a “sub-tribe” is a “dialect”’ (2011: 6), as in India, officially recognised tribes must – almost by definition – speak officially recognised languages, simply as a result of their scheduled classification. The oft-cited saying that a language is a ‘dialect with an army, a navy and a flag’ needs to be reconfigured somewhat for the Indian Northeast. In this linguistically diverse sub-Himalayan region, I would rather propose that a language is increasingly a dialect with a library and preferably its own specific font and orthographical tradition.

Un-Scheduled, un-enumerated communities are widely perceived to speak *bolis* (dialects, oral speech forms) rather than *bhasas* (languages with written traditions and texts). These orally transmitted speech forms are increasingly at risk not because of encroachments made by Hindi and English, but rather under pressure from the regional dominance of state-supported languages such as Manipuri, Nepali and Assamese that have become compulsory subjects and sometimes even the medium of instruction in government schools. Interestingly, in the current political context of contemporary India, the term ‘mother tongue’ has a specific set of meanings, increasingly unrelated to the idea of a first or primary language, or an arterial language that one has learned from birth. Answering Question 10 of the standard Household Schedule of the decennial Indian census on ‘mother tongue’ is for many communities a chance to stake a claim to heritage, representation and cultural belonging, and less about their speech practice and use of an everyday vernacular.

Taking a psycho-dynamic approach, Brass goes further, arguing that the ‘passionate attachment’ to a mother tongue is ‘not to the language but to the self’, a ‘metaphorical displacement’ in which the ‘language of the body and of the mother and of the mother’s body. . . [come] to stand in for the self and the group’ (2004: 365). Drawing on Pollock, Brass argues that the ‘talk of mother-tongue and mother’s milk . . . is the talk of language and blood, of separation and difference, of self-glorification and other-disparagement’ (2004: 366). Whether one wishes to go this far or not, it is apparent that the category of ‘mother tongue’ is open-ended, political and somewhat counter-intuitive. As I discovered through my work in Sikkim, one does not have to speak a language in order to claim it as a ‘mother tongue’, exploding conventional linguistic understandings of competence, practice and transmission.

The category of ‘mother tongue’ – in all of its linguistic and political incarnations – has come under greater scrutiny of late with the emergence of the ‘father tongue hypothesis’. Historical linguist and Himalayan language expert George van Driem introduced his ‘father tongue hypothesis’ in 2002 in response to an emerging picture of sexual dimorphism in linguistic prehistory.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on genetic studies in the Greater Himalayan region as illustrations, van Driem proposes that ‘some languages appear to be mother tongues, whereas others show up as father tongues’ in the understanding that ‘at many times and in many places in prehistory, the father tongue may have been the guiding mechanism in language shift’ (2012: 198). To be clear, this is not a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Mothers are still acknowledged to have a primary role in the transmission of language; the issue now becomes whose language they are transmitting: ‘The dynamics of a process whereby mothers passed on the language of their spouses to their offspring also has major implications for our understanding of language change’ (van Driem 2012: 198).

## **Multilingualism and linguistic pluralism**

India’s intriguing approach to the ‘mother tongue’ question may have much to do with its legendary linguistic pluralism. While certainly contested, and always political, Brass and others argue that language is not at ‘the centre of the group conflict and violence that are endemic’ (2004: 370), a statement with which I would tend to agree. While the inequality on which this ‘interlinguistic balance’ is predicated – ‘a base of mass illiteracy in most languages and a consequent demarcation of opportunities for power’ (Brass 2004: 371) – remains troubling, shifts in ‘political hegemony can lead very rapidly to linguistic change’ and have done throughout India’s history (Friedrich 1962: 552). Nationally mandated multilingualism, in which citizens

use different languages in different contexts with different people each day, is no new beast: the 16th-century Spanish King Charles (and Holy Roman Emperor) was rumoured to have said: 'I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men and German to horses'.

India and its citizens remain resolutely plurilingual. Many observers have argued that this multilingualism 'should be regarded as a goal and a form of knowledge' (Friedrich 1962: 558) and recognised and promoted as a unique feature of India's linguistic landscape. In the 'Suggestions and Recommendations' that grew out of a 'Seminar-cum-Workshop'<sup>11</sup> on Language Education Policy in Arunachal Pradesh, the participants pursued linguistic as well as social arguments: not only should the famed three-language formula (Hindi, English and a local or regional language) be developed further with 'cognitively rich local-based textbooks' (*Report* 2012: 3) in the mother tongue, but the importance of local languages should be reflected in equal pay:

The participants unanimously felt that when the government is able to appoint Hindi teachers all over the country why there should be any difficulty in appointing mother tongue teachers in the same footing with Hindi teachers. . . . Therefore, it is recommended that mother tongue teachers may be paid with full salary on par with Hindi teachers.

(*ibid.*: 6)

Movements for language rights and linguistic representation, then, are as much about economics, social capital and resourcing as they are about speech forms.

### **Meanwhile, in neighbouring Bhutan . . .**

Having invoked Nepal in the context of national language surveys, and given Bhutan's geopolitical position on the fringes of the India Northeast, it would seem remiss to conclude a discussion on linguistic identities in the region without touching on a series of recent reports from the kingdom. While Bhutan's linguistic terrain is diverse and the country is home to around 19 distinct speech forms, its language policy remains surprisingly clear-cut. According to Item 8 of Article 1 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, enacted on 18 July 2008, by the Royal Government, 'Dzongkha is the National Language of Bhutan'. While the 'State shall endeavour to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country', including 'language' (Item 1, Article 4, 'Culture'), and there is a provision against all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of language (Item 15, Article 7, 'Fundamental Rights'), no official status is

accorded to any of Bhutan's other languages, and English and Nepali are not even mentioned in the constitution.

In this, the Bhutanese authorities have apparently committed themselves to pursuing a policy of linguistic assimilation, prioritising the use and development of (and competence in) Dzongkha over other languages spoken within Bhutan's boundaries, all in the name of national unity, integration and state building. But even well-intentioned programmes of this nature often fail to connect with speech communities and cause tension and division. Reporting on Bhutan's 2013 elections, articles indicate that the national language policy caused difficulties on the ground. Not only were candidates 'already opting out of common forums that are conducted in national language, citing the electorate's inability to understand them', some aspiring members of the house were even struggling 'to read their campaign speeches'.<sup>12</sup> While Bhutan's chief election commissioner Dasho Kuenzang Wangdi is quoted as stating that 'Dzongkha is the language of the Parliament and if someone aspires to be a member, he or she has to be conversant in Dzongkha', the article notes that the promotion of Dzongkha over other local speech forms has alienated both voters and candidates: 'Interrupting us, voters tell us to speak in Sharshopkha or Lhotshamkha, because they hardly understand Dzongkha, and don't get our message', says candidate Pelzang Wangchuk.

Revealingly, a few politicians took the bull by the horns, and – risking official sanction – started to speak local languages on the campaign trail. When two candidates spoke Sharshopkha at a public event, it was significantly newsworthy for the *Kuensel* to report it under the banner of 'Breaking the language barrier'.<sup>13</sup> One of the comments posted online in response to the article serves as a powerful conclusion to this brief discussion on the identity politics of language in the Indian Northeast and the wider region:

I think its a good approach from the candidates' side to speak in local dialect, but if we look at long run, this is not a good sign. Candidates in future may ask the pamphlets to be printed in Nepali, Hindi and so on. . .

## Conclusion

The role of language in shaping discussions of ethnicity and belonging across India's Northeast remains under-studied and under-theorised. All too often, the default position taken by scholars and communities alike is of a one-to-one correlation between an apparently bounded (but essentially fluid) community and their speech form. Such a collapsing of ethnic and linguistic categories is often intentional, as the result can serve political, strategic and instrumental goals that relate to state-sponsored projects of



recognition and assumed benefit. At other times, the conflation of cultural belonging and linguistic affinity is entirely unintended, but predicated on a specious and originary or nativist belief that one people necessarily, *ipso facto*, speak one language. These unspoken assumptions need to be spoken and aired, and in the process, subjected to rigorous analysis.

Despite high levels of linguistic diversity and a burgeoning number of language documentation projects that are active across the region – whether governmental or activist – the politics of language *and* the language of politics in the Indian Northeast and neighbouring nations are overdue for rigorous analysis as expressions of cultural heritage, public displays of identity politics and statements of state-making. In a modest way, this chapter – based on two decades of ongoing fieldwork in northern South Asia and the Himalayan belt – aims to rebalance the discussion, noting that the Indian Northeast remains as linguistically heterogeneous as it is historically multilingual.

## Notes

- \* A full version of this chapter was presented at the conference entitled ‘Negotiating Ethnicity: Politics and Display of Cultural Identities in North-east India’ held between 4 and 6 July 2013 in Vienna, Austria. I am grateful to the participants of the conference and editors of this volume for their comments and editorial guidance. Needless to say, errors, omissions and opinions are all my own. Earlier iterations of some of the ideas advanced in this chapter were first presented at the First Himalayan Studies Conference organised by the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) at Macalester College, Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, held between 28 and 30 October 2011. This chapter was entitled ‘Mother Tongues and Multilingualism: Reflections on Linguistic Belonging in Sikkim’ and was presented in a session chaired and organised by Sarah Besky.
- 1 From Harijansevak of 12 October 1947: see Gandhi Thoughts, p. 174 as quoted in Austin (1966: 272).
  - 2 There appears to be no official English translation of the ‘Bharat Bhasha Vikas Yojana’. A working approximation might be ‘Development Scheme for Indian Languages’ or ‘Development Program for the Languages of India’.
  - 3 See the Swedish South Asian Studies Network, [www.sasnet.lu.se/sasnet/visit-central-institute-indian-languages-ciil-mysore-thursday-29-november-2007](http://www.sasnet.lu.se/sasnet/visit-central-institute-indian-languages-ciil-mysore-thursday-29-november-2007) [Accessed on November 29, 2015].
  - 4 The People’s Linguistic Survey of India, Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, What Is PLSI. See <http://peopleslinguisticsurvey.org/aboutus.aspx?page=PLSI> [Accessed on December 4, 2015].
  - 5 *ibid.*
  - 6 Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Linguistic Survey of Nepal. See [http://cdltu.edu.np/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=60](http://cdltu.edu.np/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=60) [Accessed on November 29, 2015].
  - 7 November 2009 Foreword to Volume 1 of the Linguistic Survey of India-Sikkim, page ix.

- 8 The preliminary results of these 16,500 completed survey forms were presented for the first time at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Jubilee Conference in October 2008 and subsequently published in Turin (2012).
- 9 Making sense of these two distinct datasets – and the different questions that they raise – has much to do with understanding the agency (in terms of both organisation and affective intervention) of the individuals and institutions involved.
- 10 In a paper presented at the 17th conference of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association, held at the Academia Sinica, 9–15 September 2002.
- 11 The ‘Seminar-cum-Workshop’ on Language Education Policy in Arunachal Pradesh was organised by the Arunachal State Council of Educational Research & Training (SCERT) in collaboration with CIIL in December 2012.
- 12 From the *Kuensel Online*: [www.kuenselonline.com/language-and-politics/](http://www.kuenselonline.com/language-and-politics/) [Accessed on November 23, 2015].
- 13 Ugyen Dorji and Mingbo Drukpa were reported as speaking in Sharshopkha for 20 minutes on a visit to the Jigme Namgyel Polytechnic common forum in Dewathang on 20 June 2013, see [www.kuenselonline.com/breaking-the-language-barrier/](http://www.kuenselonline.com/breaking-the-language-barrier/).

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