

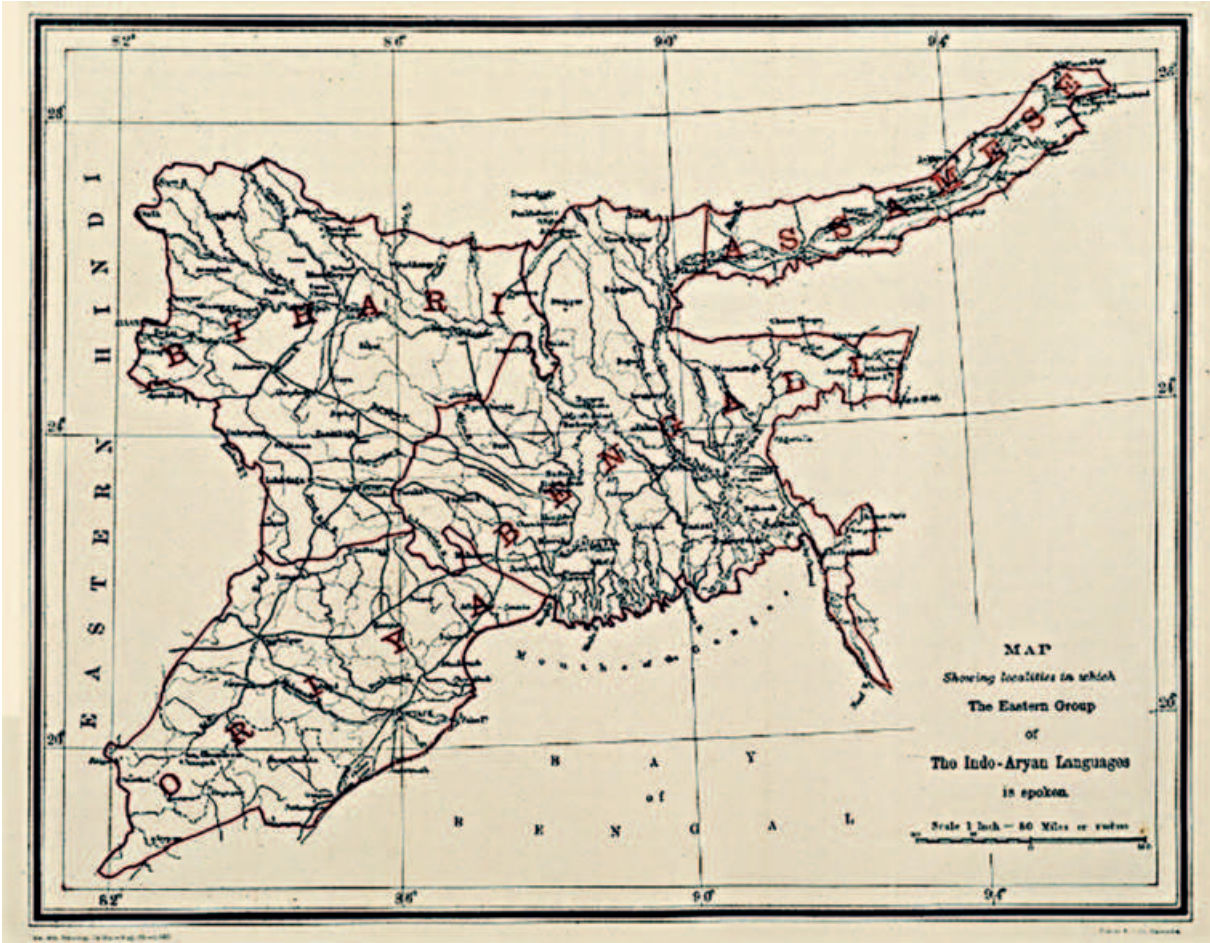
GEORGE ABRAHAM GRIERSON’S THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA (1894-1928)

# The mountains and hills of South Asia’s LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS

For Grierson, discriminating between languages and dialects was like trying to define the differences between mountains and hills. As he put it: “One has no hesitation in saying that Everest is a mountain, and Holborn Hill [in London], a hill, but between these two the dividing line cannot be accurately drawn. Moreover, we often talk of the ‘Darjiling Hills’ which are over 7,500 feet high, while everyone calls Snowden [in Wales] with its poor 3,500 feet, a mountain”.

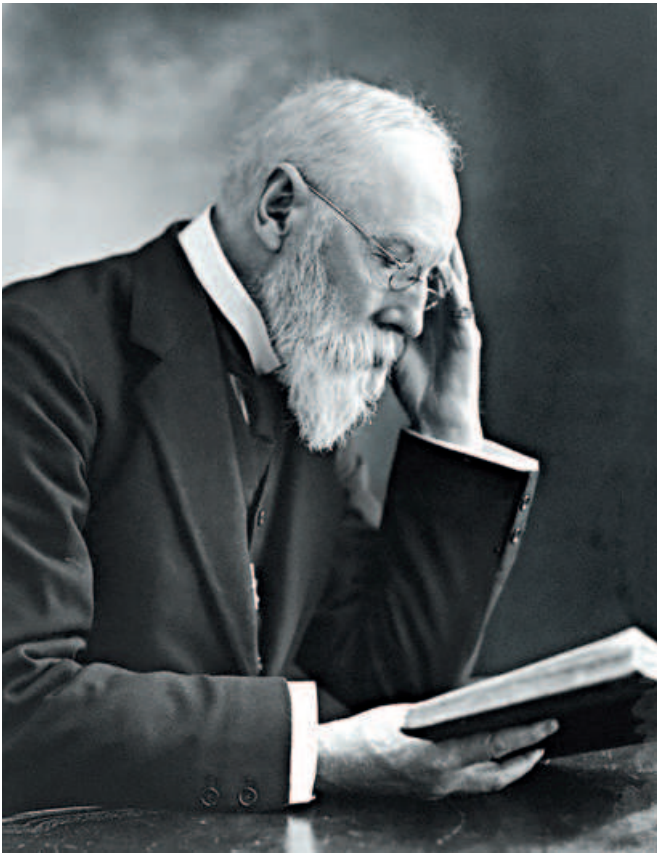
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South Asia is one of the most intensely multilingual regions in the world. It covers over 5 million square kilometres, has a population of approximately 1.9 billion (around 25% of the world's population), and is home to five families of languages (the Indo-European, Iranian, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic or Munda, and Tibeto-Burman). Some 80% of its population are mother tongue speakers of Indo-European languages, spoken by around one-fifth of humankind. However, because of the difficulties of distinguishing languages from dialects, we cannot be confident about the exact number of languages and dialects that are spoken in South Asia. The 1991 Census in India, for example, counted 114 languages out of 10, 400 language names collected by its enumerators, while the 2001 Census counted 122 languages from a much smaller set of 6661 language names. This problem was encountered earlier by George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941) in his massive *Linguistic Survey of India* [LSI], whose 21 volumes were published in Calcutta between 1901 and 1928. In his Introductory volume (1927), Grierson discussed how difficult it was to arrive at a



A map from the Linguistic Survey of India depicting specimens of Bengali and Assamese languages.

and Development of the Bengali Language (1927, two volumes). In addition, Indians were explicit in appreciating Grierson and the Survey's contribution to scholarship on their languages. The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, for example, elected Grierson as an honorary member in 1929 in recognition of his services to the Bengali language and its literature. Similarly, the Maithili Sahitya Parishad, established in 1931, referred in glowing terms to Grierson's books on Maithili and the Survey's treatment of it. In his correspondence it is clear Grierson lent his support to initiatives by Indians to get less-studied languages recognised as subjects in the curricula of universities. However, in the published volumes and his letters Grierson repeatedly called attention to its shortcomings, the provisional and uncertain nature of its knowledge, and his own ignorance. This sense of the Survey's provisional nature also extended to its language maps, which Grierson described in the Introductory volume as "conventional methods of showing definitely a state of things which is in essence indefinite". It would be wrong to be cynical about how Grierson felt humbled by India's multilingualism, which is repeatedly expressed in his



George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941)

Grierson's monumental Survey addressed some key issues the successor states to the British Raj have had to grapple with, such as how to specify the boundaries between languages, how to evaluate regional languages culturally and politically, and how to define the relationship between these languages and trans-regional languages which aspire to be 'national'.

reliable figure for Indian languages and dialects. The total number of languages that was reported to him was 231 and 774 dialects, but because some languages were reported under different names, and because of the difficulties of distinguishing between dialects and languages, he tentatively settled on 179 languages and 544 dialects. In contrast, the 1921 Census gave a figure of 188 languages and the number of dialects as unknown. For Grierson, discriminating between languages and dialects was like trying to define the differences between mountains and hills. As he put it: "One has no hesitation in saying that Everest is a mountain, and Holborn Hill [in London], a hill, but between these two the dividing line cannot be accurately drawn. Moreover, we often talk of the 'Darjiling Hills' which are over 7,500 feet high, while everyone calls Snowden [in Wales] with its poor 3,500 feet, a mountain". So, who was Grierson and why is his Linguistic Survey of India important? Grierson was born in Ireland in 1851, and read mathematics at Trinity College Dublin. During his probationary years in the Indian Civil Service, he studied Sanskrit and Hindustani (as it was called then), and after passing the exams in 1871 he was posted to the Bengal Presidency. Before taking up the Survey, he wrote books on Bihari languages and literature, and on its rural life, but even after being appointed as an officer 'On Special Duty with the Linguistic Survey' in May 1898, he continued with other important work. His *A Dictionary of the Kashmiri Language* (1916-32), and his translation of Vidyapati Thakur's (c. 1352-1448) Maithili

*Purusa-Pariksa* as *The Test of Man* (1935) deserve special mention here. Grierson floated the idea of the Survey at a meeting of linguists of Oriental languages in Vienna in 1886. They recommended it to the Indian Government, but the idea was apparently first suggested to him by his tutor at Trinity College Dublin, Robert Atkinson, who was Professor of Oriental Languages there. The Survey's 21 volumes cover 723 linguistic varieties. It provides information for 268 varieties of the major South Asian language families through its grammars, word lists, and bibliographies for each language and dialect. It also made gramophone recordings of the main languages and dialects. Moreover, this was the first time the linguistic geography of the subcontinent was comprehensively mapped. The Survey addressed two readerships: colonial officials who needed to know more about the languages and dialects in their districts, and linguists studying Indian languages and dialects. In fact, Grierson's correspondence in the British library in London shows he had strong connections with academics in India, Europe, and north America. The Survey's academic importance is reflected in the fact that it continues to be a major reference work for any discussion

South Asia continue to grapple with the tensions and overlaps between these two versions of identity. Grierson also referred to the rights and entitlements of languages in the Survey's volumes, which is another issue the nation states in South Asia have had to deal with. In fact, some activists today (such as those demanding a separate Siraiki province in Pakistan) use the Survey to bolster their claims for language recognition by the state, but this was also true at the time of the Survey itself. For example, there are some letters in the 1920s and 1930s from Asamiya activists to Grierson, who used the Survey to reinforce their claim that Assamese (as it was called then) was a separate language from Bengali, not a dialect of it, and hence it had its own separate literary traditions. They based their claims on Grierson's argument in volume 5, part 1 of the Survey (1903), that "Assamese is entitled to claim an independent existence as the speech of a distinct nationality", its literature is a "national product", and it had "won for itself the right of a separate, independent existence" from Bengali. The Survey, then, had an impact on the relations between speakers of different and sometimes closely related languages in the subcontinent, who frequently used

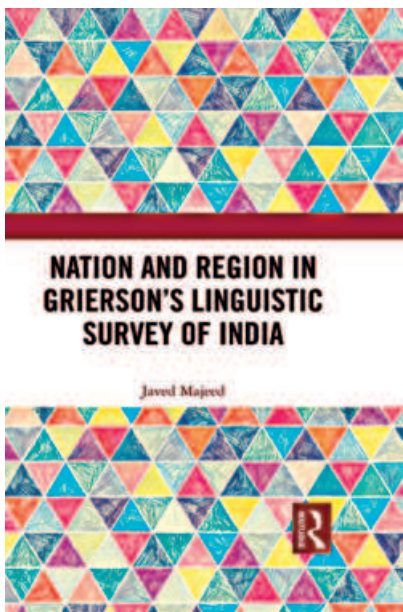
words from what he called "Hindu literature". His focus was very much on Kashmiri pandit learning and Kashmiri Shaivism, defined against local syncretistic culture and what he saw as Muslim India. Similarly, while Grierson was careful to differentiate Hindi into three groups of dialects (Bihari, Eastern Hindi, and Western Hindi), his understanding of India as defined by Hindu-Muslim religious differences influenced his characterisation of Hindi as a Hindu and hence for him a native Indian language, and Urdu as a Muslim and therefore a foreign and "Semitic" language. There are clear indications in his letters that he thought of medieval Indian history in terms of a conflict between Muslims and Hindus as two entirely separate communities, and he often referred to Hindi as the expression of an oppressed Hindu nationality. In the Survey's published volumes and in his correspondence, he depicted Indian Islam in such sensationalist terms as "satanic", "massacres", "plunder", "horrors", "oppression", "foreign oppression", "persecution", "invasion" and "lust". Grierson had close links and an extensive correspondence with organisations committed to the advancement of Hindi such as the Nagari Pracharini Sabha, which often expressed hostility towards Urdu as a symbol of Muslim India, as well as with some Indian figures who leaned towards Hindu nationalism. He ignored Hindi and Urdu's shared history as a composite linguistic and literary culture and the range of literary genres which blurred the distinction between a Hindu-oriented Hindi and a Muslim-oriented Urdu. Here Grierson's origins as a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish elite may have played a role in his views. He kept abreast of developments in Ireland, and the increasing bitterness of the sectarian divide between the Catholics and Protestants there could have further inclined him towards the idea of a religious divide as the defining feature of modern India. Be that as it may, it would be wrong to see the Survey as part of a crude colonial divide and rule policy alone. As a massive project, with 21 volumes and some 800 unpublished files, there were many sides to it. Indians played a key role in the Survey gathering data for it and in discussing its findings and categorisations. Unlike some colonial officials, Grierson fully acknowledged the contributions his Indian interlocutors made to the Survey. He frequently exchanged published papers and books with his Indian correspondents, and there are also many expressions of warm friendship towards Indians in his letters. One example of this is in his extensive correspondence with the famous Bengali linguist, S.K. Chatterji (1890-1977), who discussed key aspects of the Survey's findings with Grierson. Grierson commented on Chatterji's SOAS PhD thesis, and he wrote the Preface to the seminal book that came out of this, Chatterji's famous *The Origin*



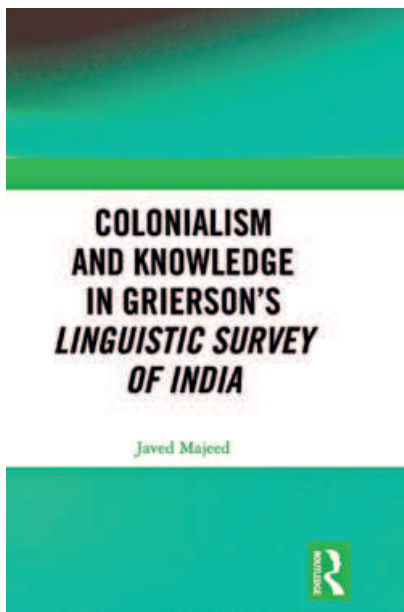
The book cover of "The Linguistic Survey of India, Volume 5, Part 1" (1903)

correspondence. Moreover, the huge task of undertaking the Survey with little support (financial or otherwise) from the colonial government came at a high personal cost in terms of frequent bouts of depression and periodic losses of eyesight. This lack of official support often meant Grierson had to pressure over-worked officials, who saw the LSI as an irksome addition to their regular duties, to send him data. In part, this strain was also caused by the fact that for health reasons Grierson moved to England in 1899, and he retired from the ICS in 1903. For 25 of his 30 years as superintendent of the Survey, he was overseeing it from Camberley in Surrey where his residence was, without being paid any salary. This necessitated a huge amount of correspondence with a range of officials and non-officials in India, Europe, Britain, and the US, which considerably added to the stresses of being Superintendent. As mentioned above, the Survey is still used as a base reference point for any discussion of Indian languages. The knowledge it conveys through its skeletal grammars, translations, vocabulary lists, gramophone recordings of speakers, and its focus on dialectal variation, remains invaluable. We need to weigh its communalising aspects against its production of knowledge about South Asian languages and dialects and the mapping of its linguistic geography. Hence, as South Asians while we cannot uncritically accept the Survey because of its communalising and politically divisive effects in the case of some languages, we also cannot reject it out of hand as simply a colonial exercise of divide and rule.

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Book covers of two works by Javed Majeed.



of the classification of Indian languages, and it has influenced almost all subsequent studies of the subcontinent's languages. But these are not the only reasons why Grierson's monumental Survey remains important. It addressed some key issues the successor states to the British Raj have had to grapple with, such as how to specify the boundaries between languages, how to evaluate regional languages culturally and politically, and how to define the relationship between these languages and trans-regional languages which aspire to be 'national'. Like many colonial officials, Grierson saw India as a group of nations, and we find two versions of nationality in the Survey, one religion-based and the other language-based. The states of

for their own political purposes. As mentioned above, the other version of nationality in the Survey is a religion-based one. Grierson's communalized understanding of Indian society is clear in his approach to Kashmiri and Hindi-Urdu. Grierson gave a lead to studies of the Kashmiri language, as is evident from his *Dictionary* (mentioned above), and his role as co-editor of *Lalla-Vakyani* (1920) and *Hatim's Tales* (1923). However, for Grierson only upper caste and Hindu Kashmiri culture was authentically Kashmiri. He had close connections with Kashmiri pandits, and often intervened on their behalf with the local and colonial governments. In one of his letters, he described how he excluded Persian words from his *Dictionary*, confining himself to