

ARTICLES

Shadings of Languages: A Study of Maithili *Marsīya* in Nineteenth-Century Bihar

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The article will study the processes through which Maithili was identified primarily with the Maithil Brahmin/Hindu community. It argues that ascribing religious identities to language was a product of the British colonial method of organizing and classifying languages. Rather than perceiving colonial knowledge of language in its finality and fixity, it focuses on the stages through which religious identification of languages was concretized. Drawing upon George Abraham Grierson's work on Maithili, I show the contribution of singers, writers, and audiences of varied caste and religious identities in shaping Maithili language and culture. The essay locates Maithili *marsīya* within this multilingual society of Tirhut and proposes that the blending of the *marsīya* genre with Hindavi terms and themes was the creation of a long-standing early modern literary tradition that continued into modern times. These kinds of intermixing catered to the aesthetic of the elites as well as common people.

In 1882, George Abraham Grierson (1851–1941), a colonial linguist, recorded four compositions sung by boys in rural north Bihar (Grierson 1882, 20). These compositions were labeled within the *marsīya* (elegy) genre, which was suffused with Hindavi elements and written in *nāgarī* script (in which modern Hindi is also written). He called them Maithili *marsīyas*. These *marsīyas* were recorded as specimens of the vocabulary, grammar, and literature of Maithili spoken in northern Bihar. While *marsīyas* are laments commemorating the martyrdom of Hasan and Husain at the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, mostly associated with Shi'i Muslims, Maithili is identified with Hindu Maithil Brahmins. The coming together of the *marsīya* genre with Maithili language challenges the colonial method of classifying, categorizing, and arranging languages according to religious identities. The classification of Urdu and Hindi as the language of Muslims and Hindus, respectively, is one of the most evident examples of how religious identity became a defining feature of languages in South Asia. While early works on languages in colonial India mostly focused on the political and literary processes through which the division between Hindi and Urdu took place, some later works have focused on the shared boundaries between languages (Orsini 2012, 1–2; 2018, 1–3; Sengupta 2017, ix–xii; Mitchell 2009, 13–15).

This article will study the formation of Maithili as the language of Maithil Brahmins and address why and how it came to be associated with a Brahmin Hindu identity. I draw upon the works of anthropologists and sociologists to underline the political processes of making Maithili the language of Maithil Brahmins and engage with the works of political scientists who have mostly focused on the Maithili political movement. I argue that works on the political movements around Maithili have relied on the narratives of the Maithil

Brahmins who pivoted their politics on Grierson's purported "discovery" of Maithili. However, Grierson's position concerning Maithili was inconsistent, evolving, and ruptured. Through an analysis of Grierson's early work on Maithili, I highlight the contribution of lower-caste and Muslim communities in shaping Maithili language and culture. It was only in the twentieth century that they were categorically excluded from Maithil culture. This exclusion happened when religion became the primary basis for identifying languages.

The primary identification of language and religion happened in conjunction with the exclusion of Urdu as the language of Muslims. Contrary to Grierson's idea of perceiving Urdu as a "foreign" language due to its perceived relation with Muslims (Grierson 1881, 3), I show how Urdu was the medium in which regional histories of Mithila (then Tirhut) were written in the late nineteenth century. Finally, I locate Maithili *marsīyas* within this multilingual society of Tirhut, where both Maithili and Urdu were in use. I propose that the blending of the *marsīya* genre with Hindavi terms and themes was a product of a long-standing early modern literary tradition that continued into modern times and can largely be attributed to the *pīrs* (spiritual heads) of the Sufi tradition. They catered to the taste or aesthetic of the elites as well as common people (Phukan 2001, 38–42).

The Making of Maithili

Most works on Maithili have studied it as a language of Maithil Brahmins. The primary focus has been to assess the success or failure of the movement by Maithil Brahmins for recognition of Maithili as a separate language. While these writings have made significant contributions to our understanding of the Maithili language, they do not adequately interrogate the everyday and dominant definition of Maithili as a language primarily associated with Maithil Brahmins. I draw upon the works of anthropologists and sociologists to demonstrate that the exclusion of other communities was due to the centrality of genealogy and territory in defining the Maithili culture espoused by Maithil Brahmins.

One of the first works on Maithili was that of Paul R. Brass, a political scientist who worked extensively on ethnic politics and collective violence in South Asia. He studied the movement for the recognition of Maithili as an autonomous language. He argued that despite the existence of objective conditions, the Maithili movement remained largely unsuccessful (Brass 1974, 54). The reason, according to him, was the tendency of prominent Maithili figures to align themselves with national, ideological, and caste symbols rather than regional, linguistic, and cultural symbols. Further, the movement was predominantly supported by Maithil Brahmins, and a large section of the population, particularly the inhabitants of south Bihar, showed their allegiance and affinity toward the Hindi culture of the Banaras region (also known as Varanasi or Kashi) rather than Maithili (Brass 1974, 56).

This perspective on the absence of a mass-level Maithili consciousness has been contested by another political scientist, Mithilesh Jha, who has studied the Maithili movement in the twentieth century. Jha argues that it was not an elite movement, but rather a cultural and emotional movement evolving over a century (Jha 2019, 29–30). He traces the shaping of Mithila identity to histories written on Tirhut in Urdu in the late nineteenth century; without, however, explaining the role of Urdu in the shaping, Jha underlines the role of print media and sociocultural associations in the twentieth century. Along with some journals, associations like the Maithili Mahasabha were established by the *mahārāja* (“great king”) of Darbhanga named Rameshwar Singh in 1910. Singh was the head of the Maithil Brahmin dynasty that promoted the cause of Mithila (Jha 2019, 98–99). This cause gained momentum with the assertion of a geo-political identity in the twentieth century and the celebration of literary festivals such as *vidyāpati parvā*, the festival to commemorate the literary works of Vidyapati, a celebrated Maithili poet of the fifteenth century. These activities were undertaken to resist the appropriation of such figures by the Hindi literati and to expand the mass base of the movement (Jha 2019, 111–13). The initiatives led to the emergence of a section of the middle class in the 1920s that worked toward the translation of scientific texts into the Maithili language, the formation of a Maithili education community, and the standardization of the Maithili language. The recognition of Maithili in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution, as well as by the Sahitya Akademi in 1965, alongside the establishment of Mithila University, led to the recognition of Maithili as an independent and modern language and were some concrete achievements of this movement, which shows that it was not an unsuccessful movement after all (Jha 2019, 154–58, 186).

While Jha challenges Brass’s arguments by foregrounding the achievements of the Maithili movement, he does not address the reasons for its inability to turn into a mass movement. Brass touches upon the issue of the domination of Brahmins in defining Maithili but does not elaborate on the communities that were excluded and the reasons for their exclusion. In other words, those who were excluded and why they were not considered part of Maithili culture are questions that remain unanswered.

I draw from Richard Burghart, an anthropologist of Hindu religion working on the Maithili language and Mithila culture, among other things, to demonstrate how Maithil Brahmins excluded other communities and the role of these excluded communities in shaping the language and culture. He argues that Maithil Brahmins bolstered their claims of purity and exclusivity over the Maithili language through assertions of its existence in the ancient past (Burghart 1993, 761). These claims of cultural superiority began with patronage provided by the Darbhanga Maharaja. This system of giving titles and estate is said to have begun during the Mughal era with Mahesh Thakur, a priest, who is believed to have been granted this status and landholdings in the

twentieth century (Burghart 1993, 769–92). Even before the institution of a system of patronage, the origins of the Brahmin Maithil community can be traced back to the fourteenth century through a census conducted by the Tirhut king. This census, drawn from genealogical records known as *pañjī prabandha*, is like a ranking system of the Brahmins in north Bihar. The identity of the community was further guarded through practices of endogamy and the delimitation of the territory of the Brahmin community, which was assumed to have originated from a village (Pandey 2014, 18).

The Madhubani area of northeast Darbhanga is considered the center of Maithili culture by the Maithil Brahmins, where chaste Maithili is projected as a symbol of their status. According to Burghart, these claims of the literary chasteness of language are interlaced with ideas of refined cultural values and behavior. The shared boundaries of Maithili with other regional languages, such as Magahi and Bhojpuri, spoken by the so-called lower-caste communities, are pejoratively dismissed as a “corrupting” influence on the language or as “rustic” Maithili (Burghart 1993, 765–69).

This framework is useful in discerning why Maithili *marṣīya*, which is an intermixed genre, and lower-caste compositions do not find a place in later works on Maithili. Maithili *marṣīyas* drew from genres like *bārahmāsā*, which describe women’s longings for their husbands or lovers. The *bārahmāsā* can also be located within the literary tradition, where multiple genres are used to express emotions and describe seasons through a variety of motifs and themes (Phukan 2001, 54).

Due to intermixing, it is often difficult to demarcate boundaries between languages. Although by the late nineteenth century, languages were demarcated according to religion, caste, and geography, Burghart in his fieldwork in the Mithila region found that the boundaries of intelligibility or comprehensibility within the region could not be located. In other words, languages or dialects merged and blended as one moved from one region to another, and the inhabitants of the region understood the language in its variations (Burghart 1993, 769–72). Grierson had also noted that Maithili *marṣīyas* were good examples of the Muslim dialect spoken in the region, which did not differ from the spoken language of Hindus (Grierson 1882, 20).

Despite the existence of such intermixed genres, language became a symbol to assert Maithil Brahmin superiority over other caste groups. By the late nineteenth century, Maithil Brahmins and colonial ethnographers defined social groups through language, *varṇa* (“spiritual class”) hierarchies, and interrelated rituals. Nevertheless, the process of making language a marker of identity was not an uninterrupted or a linear process. Grierson, the colonial officer who played a crucial role in defining Maithili as a “pure” language of Maithil Brahmins, was often caught in the inconsistencies of his definition of language and literature in relation to Maithili.

Grierson and the Maithili Movement

The modern consciousness of Maithili can be traced back to Grierson and his compilation of the grammar and vocabulary of the Maithili language (Jha 2019 and Majeed 2020). He was one of the first colonial officers to take interest in Maithili and its history. Earlier, it was mostly seen in relation to other languages and cultures. His work on knowing and organizing languages started with his works on Kalidasa, an author and a playwright who composed poetry and plays in Sanskrit during the Gupta era (White 1936, 297–98). Grierson began working on Maithili after receiving complaints from the local officers about their inability to comprehend the “*gāōwāri boli*,” which was the language in which people spoke in different regions of Bihar (Pandey 2014, 7–8).

In his first books on the grammar of Maithili, it was defined in relation to Sanskrit, Hindi, and English. Forms in Hindi and Sanskrit grammar were circulated among headmasters, *paṇḍits* (religious heads), and other men to translate them into their native language (Grierson 1881, 1). Grierson states that Mr. Etherington’s 1870 *Grammar of Hindi* became the basis for defining Maithili. He says, “I have had it constantly by my side, and I have made its arrangements the skeleton which I clothed with Maithili forms” (Grierson 1881, 3). However, Grierson was also ambiguous about its relation to other languages, as he considered Maithili to be a spoken language that could not be compared to any other standard language.

He eventually did shape or define it according to Hindi and Sanskrit, despite believing that the people of north Bihar could neither speak nor understand either Hindi or Urdu. He argued that Maithili, like Hindi, was primarily identified with the script, which was of “*Hindui*” (= Hindavi) origins, and derived words through Prakrit forms and Sanskrit (Grierson 1881, 3). It appears that by relating Hindi and Sanskrit to Maithili, he associated Maithili with Hindu identity. Javed Majeed, a theorist of the political thought of South Asian intellectuals, has also made similar observations. He argued that Grierson conceptualized India through religious differences to establish Hindi’s status as an Indian language (Majeed 2022, 186). Conversely, Persian and Urdu were perceived as foreign languages. Therefore, when Grierson found that Muslims who resided in Mithila also spoke in Maithili, he concluded that they used it occasionally for religious purposes and under the influence of their Northwest Frontier brothers (Grierson 1881, 3), which is now known as Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹

¹ The North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) was so-called in British India from 1910 until 1947 and remained a territory of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan until it was officially renamed in 2010.

The religious demarcation used by Grierson also led to inconsistencies in the naming of languages. Grierson uses Hindavi instead of Nagari, which was arguably the early modern name of “Urdu” (Faruqi 2003, 806). The process of naming and defining the Maithili language and culture was fraught with all kinds of contradictions. Whereas the definition of Maithili in terms of grammar and origins was associated with Hindi and Sanskrit, these were written in the English language for the colonial officers so that they would be able to understand the rustic *gāōwārī boli* (“village dialect”) mentioned above. He says, “I hope that this grammar may be found useful to the officials who are brought into every day contact with the country” (Grierson 1881, 2). While it appears that the process of collection was determined by the need to run the empire by training the officials in local languages, Grierson also attempted to define Maithili in its terms, style, and function. He stated, “It is hoped, not only by myself, that the publication of a treatise like the present will fix a standard and to foster a literature which might arise in so racy and a fluent language” (Grierson 1881, 2).

His desire to fix a standard may have come from the influence of Maithil Brahmins, who played a crucial role in shaping Grierson’s ideas on Maithili. For Maithil Brahmins, Sanskrit was a sacred language, and they wanted to associate Maithili with it to alleviate the status of the former from a dialect or a spoken language (Majeed 2020, 9–18). However, Grierson did not entirely remove other speakers and their literature from his compilation of Maithili language and grammar. Along with *marsīyas*, he also included lower-caste contributions, which were ignored and devalued as “folk” literature within the Maithili tradition.

Maithili Beyond Maithil Brahmins

In the second part of his book on Maithili literature, along with the compositions of Vidyapati, he included Maithili *marsīyas* and a letter from Dumri Jha to Musammat Champabati (Grierson 1882, 1–40). The letter was followed by a fable of the king of “*Sālhes*,” celebrated by the Dussadh community in Bihar, who are located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and considered untouchable by the dominant caste groups such as Bhumihar and Rajputs. These dominant caste groups wield economic and social power in north India with their ownership of landholdings (Narayan 2009, 163; Sinha and Sinha 1967, 44).

Unlike the usual colonial proverb collections, where the voice of subversion of the oppressed groups is not recorded, we find that the subversive voice of the lower castes is covered extensively in Grierson’s account (Raheja 1996, 507–8). The fable of the king of Salhes upturns the prevalent stereotype associated with the Dussadh community, who were often employed as watchmen and labeled as “backward, uncultured, and slow” by dominant community members. The king of Salhes is shown as an intelligent and brave man who impressed the ruler with his cleverness and bravery. He proved his

mettle by catching a thief who had stolen valuables from the queen's house. He was accused and put under arrest but was then able to catch the real thief, nicknamed Chuhar Mal. The king of Salhes thus shows that, through hard work and intelligence, even the oppressed-caste community can earn respect and recognition in a society that looks down upon them due to caste-ordained rules of interaction. Over the years, this core narrative became layered with accretions, such as the ability of the king of Salhes to cure people and endow them with physical and even supernatural power (Narayan 2009, 164).² Along with men, lower-caste women are also seen in an active role in Grierson's fables (Grierson 1882, 22–24).³

Grierson records a composition by Faturi Lal, known as “a man [poet] of the people” (Grierson 1882, 24). He wrote a poem about the late nineteenth-century famine. However, Grierson is critical of Lal's style of poetry and does not consider it “pure Maithili” as it brings in Braj forms (Grierson 1882, 24). Although these compositions were ranked lower than Vidyapati's, which were exhibited “a neatness of expressions and conciseness worth of Martial” they were nevertheless considered a part of “Maithili literature.” Later works on Maithili either neglected these compositions or reduced them to the derogatory category of “folk.”

Even the lower-caste groups who could have identified themselves with Maithili identity, language, or culture by agreeing to be recorded and archived by a colonial officer were not included by Grierson in the revised version of his work on Maithili. In his second edition, he argued that “necessary conditions were so heavy and so important that the whole work had to be recast” (Grierson 1909, 1). In the introduction to the second edition, he stated that it was rewritten (*ibid.*). In the revised version, Grierson not only called Maithili a dialect of the “Bihari-language” but also did not include Maithili *marṣīyas* or other compositions by the lower-caste communities. The work on grammar was reprinted in 1909, but his chrestomathy and vocabulary, which contained compositions by lower-caste and Muslim *marṣīya* singers, were not. Another shift in 1909 was to argue that Muslims of Mithila either did not speak Maithili or if there was any resemblance or correlation with Maithili, it was either from another region or was corrupt. He observes, “The Musalmāns of Mithilā do not all speak Maithili. In Muzaffarpur and Champaran, they speak an altogether different dialect, closely allied to the language of Oudh. It is locally known as Shékhai or as Musalmān.” (Grierson 1909, xii). The other

2 These miraculous tales, when performed in open spaces in contemporary times since the twentieth century, have also earned the wrath of the dominant caste groups of Bihar. Along with challenging the stereotypes associated with caste, the representation associated with gender has especially upset the dominant caste groups in Bihar.

3 In the fable noted by Grierson, women are seeking alms by worshipping snakes during *bhādhō* in the rainy season. Alms are requested by stating that women who offer wheat will bear lovely sons as opposed to those who will give birth to an “ugly” son after offering cheap grain. The snake is depicted as the husband and wife in these narratives. Women are worshipping the snake through beetle and cloves as husbands. In another couplet the snake is shown as a divine figure sitting on a tank and sandalwood tree. The custom of snake worship has existed in Orissa and Bengal since at least medieval times. See Dimock (1962), for example.

variant was called the “*jōlaha bōlī*” of Darbhanga Muslims, which was considered “corrupted” because of the admission of Persian and Arabic words into its vocabulary (Grierson 1909, xii).

The concept of “purity” in defining Maithili was introduced in the 1909 publication. Pure Maithili was now identified with literature, which was produced by Brahmins from the Madhubani Division in Darbhanga and Madhubani districts. Grierson states, “Maithili is spoken in the greatest purity by the Brahmins of the north of the Darbhanga and Bhagalpur districts, and those of western Purnea” (Grierson 1909, xii). Further distance from this center was considered “corruption” from the “pure” and “neat” literature. This change can be understood through Javed Majeed’s analysis of the designs of the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI), which was a survey of languages and dialects of colonial India undertaken by Grierson in 1894. Majeed argues that in the LSI the process of naming languages was important, as it was through this that languages or dialects were used to define regions. Some languages were described as “original” or “native” languages, and others as “foreign” languages (Majeed 2020, 9). From Majeed’s analysis, it is evident that in the case of Maithili, the language and compositions of lower castes were eventually excluded as “corrupt,” and Muslims were labeled as “foreigners.” However, contrary to Grierson’s formulation, Urdu was part of the Maithili culture, as is clear from the vernacular histories written in Urdu.

Urdu and Mithila

Although Sanskrit and Maithili were used for literary production in Mithila, histories of Tirhut were written in Urdu, showing the spread of Urdu in terms of writing and readership in the region. Surprisingly, these histories do not find any mention in Grierson’s writings on the literature of Mithila, even though they were written in 1867. Grierson wanted to cultivate literature by recording the *gāōwārī boli*, or the oral dialect of the people, but literature already existed as the “histories” of the region. It can be argued that the process of compiling and historicizing Maithili language and literature excluded and negated Urdu because of the prevailing idea that it was only the language of Muslims. Even later works on Maithili deployed this colonialist framework of analysis, which Grierson was particularly instrumental in developing.

These linguistic genealogies are discussed here to show how the historians of Mithila or Tirhut perceived and represented Mithila culture in relation to Urdu and Persianate traditions. One could also ask what Maithili culture meant to these writers in terms of the representation of the Maithili language and the social lives of people residing in the Mithila region.

I will follow these questions through two widely available histories of Tirhut: Ajodhya Purshad’s *Riaz-i Tirhut* and Bihari Lal Firat’s *Tārīkh ul-Fitrat*. Ajodhya Purshad’s *Riaz-i Tirhut* was completed in 1867 and published in 1868. Five hundred copies of the first edition were sold out, showing the

immense popularity of this work. These histories of Tirhut were mostly written by members of the Khatri caste. The Khatri community, along with Brahmins and Kayasthas, was known for its knowledge of the Persianate literary tradition, particularly in North India, Bengal, and Hyderabad. They rose to prominence in the eighteenth-century regional states as the service class owing to their knowledge of regional scripts and languages, as well as their skill in documentation (Vendell 2020, 535–37).

The Khatri ancestors were known for writing histories since the seventh century (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2009, 394). Hailing from the Khatri caste himself, Purshad wrote *Riaz-i Tirhut* as a social history of Tirhut, in which different dynasties, customs, cultural practices, the environment, and the ecology of the region were all described and narrated. The influence of Indo-Persian culture is noticeable in his narration. Purshad mentions the Muslim saints of Tirhut and elaborates upon their role as teachers who gave sermons and guided religious activities. He provides a long list of the students of these scholars, along with that of Muslims and Hindus primarily from the Khatri caste (Gopal 2004, 7, 18–19). The Sufi saints of Bihar also played an important role in the promotion of spoken languages. How the usage of spoken languages by Sufi saints, along with Persian, acquired popularity, is discussed in the next section. Along with these saints, Purshad's discussion of *mushā'ira* (poetry symposium) also shows how such public activities can be seen as spaces where intercommunal interactions could have led to the mixing of languages (Gopal 2004, 19–20).

Similar kinds of interactive cultural activities in Tirhut were also recorded by Bihari Lal Fitrat in *Tārīkh ul-Fitrat*, which was written in 1883. The account of Fitrat, who was a prominent intellectual of Tirhut, shows clear imprints of Indo-Persianate culture. While writing in Urdu, he drew upon Persian and Urdu sources and accounts of marriage and genealogy (*pañji*) of Kayasthas and Brahmins (Gopal 2004, 31).

The interaction between these cultures is also evident in his representation of Tirhut. Fitrat mentions that the Ramayana was composed by Tulsidas, a famous Avadhi poet, during Akbar's reign and was later translated into Persian by his court poets and scholars (Gopal 2004, 40–41). Fitrat also elaborates upon the role of Muslim Sufi saints. Along with saints, numerous scholars of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic have been mentioned who engaged in various kinds of professions, including the academic, administrative, and health sectors (Gopal 2004, 54–55). Fitrat like Purshad also discusses the glory of Darbhanga Raj in terms of its lineage, lifestyle, and paraphernalia. This does not prevent him from elaborating upon the writers, cultures, and traditions of the Indo-Persianate cosmos (Gopal 2004, 44–48).

The question then arises whether these vernacular histories can be considered a part of Mithila culture and lives. Whereas they were reproduced by a group of Maithili scholars invested in recording and archiving Mithila culture in the

twentieth century, they—as argued in the earlier section of the essay—were not viewed as a significant part of the culture. I have mostly focused on these Urdu histories to show an alternative imagination of the Mithila culture that existed in the same era when Grierson began understanding and defining Maithili languages and cultures. A comparison between these two ways of recording and presenting histories and cultures shows the power of colonialist methods of categorizing and defining South Asian cultures. As apparent in Grierson’s later works on Maithili, his philological ideas and academic reputation were central to the modern representations of the Maithili language and literature. However, despite his reliance on a caste- and religion-focused framework for analyzing languages, he still found contradictory data from his fieldwork, where Muslims and lower castes were a crucial part of the local culture. The vernacular histories discussed here also suggest that Urdu was integrated with Mithila culture, and that Urdu *marṣīyas* noted and recorded during Grierson’s expedition could also have been an integral part of the same Mithila culture rather than coming from outside of it.

Locating Maithili *Marṣīya*

Marṣīya involves mourning during the first two months of the Islamic calendar in memory of the martyrdom of Imam Husain at the Battle of Karbala. Karbala was a war of succession between Imam Husain and the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid I (Hyder 2006, 3–4). Over the years, *marṣīyas* acquired different forms as they traveled to different parts of the world. Studies on *marṣīya* have pointed to its ability to adapt to local circumstances and to borrow from Indic traditions as the reasons for its widespread popularity. The borrowed elements are considered better equipped to express emotions of lament or loss and to represent female voices in the household. Such settings also intensify the lament of Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Mohammad and wife of Hazrat Ali, the father of Hasan and Husain (Oesterheld 2018, 192–93).

These elements brought the genre closer to common audiences, who connected better with the poetry due to its use of local idioms. This intermixture has been a product of a long-standing tradition of drawing from the *bārahmāsā* genre, which describes the emotions of a woman protagonist’s longing for her husband or lover and portrays her emotional states through metaphors of seasons, weather, and months. This tradition evolved in dialogue with South Asian epic traditions, including the ones prevalent in North India, as it sought to convey expressions of pain, loss, and longing in female voices. Elaborating upon the intent of these intermixed compositions, Shantanu Phukan, a religious studies scholar, argues that the use of Eastern dialects in a long narrative poem like *bikāt kahāni* (*bikāt* meaning “terrible,” which is a type of *bārahmāsā*) composed in 1636 CE was determined by aesthetic concerns rather than the modern notion of making these compositions palatable to common people’s tastes. He further argues that

these compositions were made for elite audiences, not common people, as suggested by Richard Eaton, who argues that these intermixtures were created by Sufi masters to spread their message among the masses (Phukan 2001, 54).

In the case of Maithili *marsīyas*, it may be asked whether this intermixture was a result of elite or popular concerns. The names of the original composers and performers were not recorded by Grierson. All that is known is that the genre was popular and was sung by poor and uneducated boys, who did not know how to read and write but had memorized *marsīyas* by rote (Grierson 1882, 20). Based on the structure of *marsīyas* intermixing with other Indic genres and forms, it is quite clear that they could not be a product of spontaneous experimentation that colonialist scholars viewed as “corrupt” or “impure.” The complexity of these compositions suggests that these poems evolved due to a long tradition of borrowing and using Hindavi words and genres. I will analyze some representative examples of such borrowings.

Out of the four *marsīyas* that Grierson had recorded, two depict women in domestic settings: (i) “In the court of the lady, there is a clump of sandal,” and (ii) “The lady bathed and sat in her court.” Here the female protagonist, like in the *bārahmāsā* tradition, is waiting: “O mother, what news can I give of the battle?” In the Perso-Arabic *marsīya* genre, the female protagonists wait for their sons and husbands to return from the battle. While these roles are preserved in the Maithili *marsīyas*, the female protagonists in Maithili deploy *bārahmāsā* themes, for example, the symbolism of the cuckoo as a harbinger of the monsoon. “In the forest, weepeth the cuckoo, in the forest the Fathima.” Here we notice the juxtaposition of a mother’s experience of waiting alongside that of a newlywed bride. “In the house weepeth the unfortunate bride. In one place weepeth the mother, in another weepeth Channa” (Grierson 1882, 21–22).

Although we do not know anything about the composer, the above intermixtures—as in the case of *bikāt kahāni* shown by Phukan, where women’s emotion is related to their longing for their male counterparts—suggest that Hindi aesthetic and poetic conventions have been followed. However, the prevalence of *marsīyas* in rural societies and their memorization by villagers suggest that these compositions were popular as well. I propose that the popularity of these *marsīyas* could be attributed to Sufi traditions where public activities such as ‘*urs*’ gatherings of followers of Sufi saints specifically on their death anniversaries, were perhaps the meeting ground where these *marsīyas* were recited, heard, and even rehearsed. For an understanding of these processions, accounts by writers on the cultural life of Bihar and Patna could be useful.

The Spread of *Marsīyas*

In his autobiography, written in the backdrop of twentieth-century Patna, Syed Badruddin Ahmad recounts that huge gatherings were seen around Sufi centers known as *khānqāhs* during ‘*urs*, a period for remembering and

mourning the death of a Sufi saint at his tomb. He mentions that the attendees consisted of local people who mourned the loss of the *pīr* (spiritual guide) in a *majlis* (meaning gathering or congregation) where people read aloud from books or recited what is known as *soz khwāni*, meaning emotional recitation, narrating the loss in the battle. Some argue that this practice started in Lucknow. Badruddin Ahmad further notes that it was as a result of *majālis* (plural of *majlis*) that the *qasbah* (small town developed around a market) of Phulwari Sharif (a township in Patna known for its *khānqāh*) expanded and merged into the city—by which he means Patna—due to the arrival of Sufi saints’ followers, shopkeepers, and local traders that went there to organize fairs (Ahmad 2003, 506–9).

Although Grierson’s study is focused on north Bihar, Hasan’s account could provide contextual information about Grierson’s observations regarding Maithili *marsīyas*. Grierson writes, “It is noteworthy that they also sung [*sic*] songs in Urdu, which they knew by rote, but could not understand. The boys were not educated: they did not how to read or write, and have never left their native village” (Grierson 1882, 20). The popularity of oral *marsīyas* in rural areas among local people has also been observed by another British surveyor, L. S. S. O’Malley. O’Malley notes:

The lower and uneducated classes of Muhammadan in the district are deeply infected with Hindu superstitions, especially those regarding sickness and diseases. . . . The most common among *them* is the adoration of departed Pirs or saints, of whom there are several in Patna, viz, the saints of Bihar, Jhethuli, and Maner. The *dargah* or the tombs of the Pirs are places of pilgrimage to which many persons resort for the cure of disease. . . . At Bihar there are *darghas* of Mallik Ibrahim Bayu and Hazrat Makhuddin Shah Sharif-ud-din the tomb of the latter being held in special veneration by the Muhammadans, who assemble there at *urs* or anniversary of the death of the saint on the 5th Shawwal. At Jhteuli the *dargah* of Shihab-ud-din Jagjaut and Shah Adam Sufi are also places of pilgrimage a fair being held there on the 21st Zikad. In Patna, there are also shrines of Shah Arzani, which is the site of another large gathering. At Maner again are the tombs of the famous saint Makhudm Yahia and of Shah Daulat and here two *melas* are held every year—one on the anniversary of saint’s death and the other in commemoration of the wedding of Ghazi Mian. . . . His untimely fate has led to his veneration, and in this district the annual fair in his honor is one of the greatest gatherings in the year. It is held on the banks of the tanks at Maner, and is resorted to chiefly by the lower orders of Hindus and Muhammadans. (O’Malley 1907, 70, emphasis added)

While there may have been continuity in terms of carrying forward the practice of drawing upon the Hindavi tradition, the role of Sufi cultures and *pīrs* in popularizing elegiac recitation cannot also be dismissed in its entirety.

Prominent literary figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also *pīrs* who composed poems in Persian and Urdu and conversed in regional dialects. But some of them also conducted literary activities in local dialects to widen the reach of their sermons (Eaton 1974, 118–20). Hasan Askari, a historian of the Sufi traditions in Bihar, narrates an incident during which Maneri, a Sufi *pīr* from Maner, a town in Bihar known after the famous saint Makhdoom Yahya Maneri, explained the purpose of using spoken languages and Hindavi in his sermons and gatherings:

Hindavi compositions are very forthright and frank in expressions. In purely Persian verses, there is a judicious blend of allusions and what can be fittingly expressed, whereas *Hindavi* employs very frank expressions. There is no limit to what it explicitly reveals. (Jackson 1986, vi–vii)

Maneri and other *pīrs* not only conducted gatherings in Hindavi but also wrote in these languages. Some *bayāz*, notebooks of Maneri, contain such compositions (Davāi 1947). A magazine published by the *khānqāh* Mujibiya explains the growth of the Urdu language at the religious center in the eighteenth century as follows:

Khānqāh provided the milieu for Urdu to develop. Earlier Urdu was used in day to day conversation . . . *pīrs* used to write in Persian and Arabic. Gatherings and performances were conducted in Persian. Although sermons were given in Urdu, Persian was still used in writing. However, when Urdu evolved as a literary language, it was used for poetry and writing. (Qadri 2013)

Through these accounts, one can infer that composing in local dialects existed and thus some composers may have written *marsīyas* in Maithili, which was acceptable and possibly even popular in villages as well. The ‘*urs*’ gatherings and the fairs that coalesced around them could have led to the diffusion of the vernacular recitative tradition from one place to another, in this case in northern Bihar where Maithili was spoken by both Hindus and Muslims. In fact, following O’Malley’s account, one could also probe Grierson’s claim that Maithili *marsīya* was sung by Muslim boys only. According to O’Malley, such performances were attended by both Muslims and lower-class Hindus. One can cautiously conclude, therefore, that these *marsīyas* could be read as examples of a continuing tradition of intermixing Persian with eastern dialects spoken in the Hindi heartland for varied reasons, including their aesthetic and popular appeal.

Conclusion

Marsīyas found in these colonial accounts are important sources that show their wide reach. However, by the late nineteenth century, these early modern traditions of borrowing from the Hindavi tradition had come to a halt. During this so-called modern phase, writers and poets began expunging local

words and phrases from Urdu compositions and canons to make them “neater” and more palatable to audiences that associated Urdu with an elite Muslim tradition (Oesterheld 2018, 201–2). The desire for “purifying” languages was thus accompanied by representative movements initiated within both Urdu and Maithili language circles to obtain official linguistic recognition from the state. Mixed registers like Maithili *marsīyas* that could unsettle identarian claims about languages led to their exclusion and eventual erasure from modern canons of language classification.

Outside these identity molds, Maithili *marsīyas* show the multilingual landscape of Bihar. It suggests that both Maithili and Urdu *marsīyas* were recited and sung there. The village boys could very likely have been bilingual speakers and performers of songs in both languages (or hybrid forms of them), who participated in codeswitching ‘*urs*’ gatherings, during which local languages, Hindavi, and Persian were aesthetically blended to suit the poetic sensibilities of various linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups. Summarily dismissed as “corrupt” and “impure,” these kinds of intermixing have been termed *bihārī rekhtā* by the linguist, poet, and literary scholar Akhtar Orenvi (1957, 81–98), who claims that these mixed languages of Bihar were an essential part of the Urdu literary tradition in the region. Another linguist, who trained at Aligarh Muslim University, named Mohammad J. Warsi, has coined the term Mithilanchal Urdu to refer to the Urdu-Maithili hybrid that is spoken in specific regions of northern Bihar, most notably Dharbanga, Samstipur, Begusarai, Madhubani, and Muzaffarpur. According to him, the syntax, morphology, and segmental phonology of Mithilanchal Urdu are different from both Maithili and Urdu (Warsi 2014).⁴ Warsi’s claim is not completely accepted by other linguists, however; some Maithili scholars who disagree with his views argue that the only definitively “Urdu” element in Maithili is *marsīya*.⁵ In conclusion, my contribution to this special issue has attempted to historicize these claims to argue that such debates are the ongoing results of the colonialist legacy that constantly tried to demarcate dialects and languages along religious lines, which would erase identarian fluidity to create strictly separate but artificial religious communities.

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⁴ *Āñcal* literally refers to the decorative end of a sari but can also refer border, periphery, or skirt. So, a rough translation would be Peripheral Maithil Urdu.

⁵ Personal communication with Urdu scholars from Bihar.

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