

ARTICLES

The "Indescribable Country": Locating Mithila between Bengal and the Hindi Heartland in Raghunandana Das's *Mithilānāṭaka*

Christopher L. Diamond, Ph.D.¹

¹ Australian National University

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This article examines the way multilingualism was employed by Raghunandana Das in his 1923 play, the "Drama of Mithila" (*mithilānāṭaka*), to shift Mithila (the region) and Maithili (the language) from its historically marginal position in the social geography of the newly emerging Indian nation. Since the late nineteenth century up to the present, Maithil authors and elites engaged in promoting their language and cultural region on a national stage found themselves disadvantaged and caught between the hegemony of the Hindi heartland and the political and cultural powerhouse of Bengal. In this context, Raghunandana Das's moralistic drama written in Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit renegotiates Maithili/Mithila's marginal status by emphasizing its engagement with multiple elite cultural milieux—the national, the Sanskritic/traditional, and the modern. For Das, this renegotiation works to leverage the region's credentials as an independent cultural sphere from which others might take influence.

Maithili, like many regional languages in South Asia, is situated at the peripheries of national culture, public life, and state affairs. In all these domains, Hindi, English, and the other formally recognized national languages take precedence. This dominance extends to popular and scholarly perceptions of where the metropolises and cultural margins are located within the nation. Geographically, the region Mithila lies directly between the Hindi- and Bengali-speaking spheres of influence. Accordingly, Maithili has been understood by scholars and the state of India as culturally between the two. At the same time, Hindi and Bengali scholars appropriated Maithili literary history and dismissed the importance of the language as a regional "dialect" to bolster their own claims to national relevance. How are we to understand the significance and position of Maithili in South Asian literary and social history from an "internal" perspective?

In this study, I suggest that for twentieth-century Maithili writers and activists, like Raghunandana Das, Mithila's then-contentious identity as an independent literary and cultural pole was defined and supported by its historical role as an intermediary between the hegemonically dominant Hindi and Bengali cultural spheres. At issue is not the fiercely debated political conundrum of whether Maithili should have received institutional recognition or promotion. In this article, rather, I examine Maithili through its own literary canon, where it is evident that in the modern period, since the emergence of the Maithili movement outlined below, regional identity and exceptionalism are reinforced and even formulated by linguistic and cultural

encounters with the “Hindi Belt” and Bengal.¹ To understand the ways by which promoters of Maithili attempted to construct an insular identity while paradoxically engaging with a type of cosmopolitanism, I will present a case study of Raghunandana Das’s 1923 play, the *Mithilānāṭaka* (Drama of Mithila). Though the *Mithilānāṭaka* is a drama in form, my analysis is primarily textual and does not consider aspects of performance other than what is implied by the text. This is because the plays of Maithili activists, like Raghunandana Das, were primarily circulated as written pieces in one of the many Maithili journals extant across North India. Only scant anecdotal evidence indicates plays such as the *Mithilānāṭaka* were ever performed for an audience until more recent times.²

Das’s drama embodies an insular-cosmopolitan paradox in two main ways. First, the *Mithilānāṭaka* is said to have inaugurated the tradition of literary drama in modern Maithili by several literary historians of the earliest phases of the modern Maithili dramatic tradition.³ It is also deeply bound to Sanskrit and early modern Hindi genres of allegorical social dramas. Second, the characters of the *Mithilānāṭaka* each embody Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit literary communities and interact, quarrel, and “play” with each other in informative ways. Das’s drama typifies the response of many elite Maithil author-activists working outside Mithila—namely, that Maithili language and identity form a distinct cultural unit that has always mediated between other spheres of cultural prestige. This Maithili literary and cultural heritage is also promoted as an integral constituent part of an emerging Indian nation by the authors of Das’s milieu and those that followed in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Maithili’s Historical and Contemporary Status

Maithili is an eastern Indo-Aryan language spoken in the ethno-cultural region of Mithila, also historically known as Tirhut. This region roughly corresponds to the northern half of the Indian state of Bihar and the bordering eastern Terai (lowland) region of Nepal. Most speakers are centered around the Madhubani and Darbhanga districts. In Nepal, Maithili speakers

1 The Hindi Belt, Hindi Heartland, or more pejoratively the “Cow Belt,” extends to most of the modern north-central, Indo-Gangetic plain states of India. In most reckonings, these states are said to include Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Bihar. In these regions, Modern Standard Hindi has prevailed over local languages like Braj Bhasha, Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, and Maithili. Similar sociopolitical factors also usually group this region together for many purposes (Shapiro 2003). The accuracy, effects, and details of this nomenclature and identity is the frequent cause of internal and external debate on the region, as can be seen in this very article vis-à-vis Hindi and Maithili.

2 During a lengthy conversation with the revered Maithili writer and scholar Govind Jha (1921–2023) and his son Nirmalendu Jha in 2018 in their home in Patna, we discussed the possibility of early twentieth-century Maithili proscenium plays being performed on popular stages for a general audience. The consensus after this conversation was that the closest to being performed that “academic” plays like the *Mithilānāṭaka* came was a sort of “table-reading” in which passionate Maithili authors and connoisseurs read the play in a dramatic fashion from the printed text.

3 The so-called “modern” tradition of Maithili literature, including a stream of drama, is in reference to both the sanitized and standardized register of modern Maithili language, but also to distinguish it from those genres and literary tropes of earlier antecedents from the courtly and devotional traditions from the early modern and medieval periods. In this regard, Das embodies both the traditionalist and modernist substrates of Maithili drama and is noted for his academic and activist interest in dramatic writing. His ability to stage plays was noted to be limited, especially when he tried to revive the medieval *kirtaniñā* style of devotional drama. See Chaudhary 1976, 183–85

represent the second largest linguistic group but are largely ignored by national political movements since the political heartland of Nepal, in the Kathmandu Valley, is removed geographically and culturally from the Maithili heartland in the lower plains (Yadav 2003, 523–24). This binational characteristic of the Maithili language and culture is important to consider when we speak of Mithila as a sociocultural region that often reacts in accordance with or counter to the modern nation state. It is very difficult to estimate the exact number of Maithili speakers since Hindi has been the language of education and media in Bihar since Independence, as has Nepali on the other side of the border. A primary reason for this difficulty is the fact that many lower-caste residents of Mithila who use Maithili as their primary language report their own language as Hindi. The most reasonable estimate is between twenty-one to twenty-five million speakers (Yadav 2003, 477).⁴

Early Twentieth-Century Maithili Literary Activism

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Maithili language movement was the primary force behind an emerging consciousness of Maithili regional cultural identity, rather than a solely religious or political movement. Although I do not delve here into the political dialectic that occurred both among different factions of the elite Maithili organizations and promoters and between Maithil activists and the national and state governments, it is important to note that the literary self-fashioning of previous decades, including the 1920s, were formative to these later political maneuvers. Political scientist Paul Brass wrote about the failed movement for state recognition of the Maithili language in comparison with the more successful endeavors of the Panjabi and Urdu language activists (Brass 1974, 51–116). The Maithili movement reached a new political turn after Indian independence in 1947, which resulted in a more forthright call for an independent state of Mithila by various groups of upper-caste Maithil Brahmins and Kayasths (Brass 1974, 52–54).

Paul Brass also effectively summarizes the three main reasons for the supposed collapse of the Maithili language movement in the mid-twentieth century. First, the claim of Maithil Brahmins and Kayasths of the uniqueness of Mithila as a cultural-linguistic region distinct from others appeals to its role as a preserver of orthodox Hindi and Sanskrit education (Brass 1974, 56). This is the same appeal that the larger Hindi-language and Indian nationalist movements made to upper-caste Hindu religiosity and ancient cultural heritage during the same period. The agendas and participants of the Maithili and Hindi movements largely overlapped and did not offer convincing enough alternatives as did those who supported Panjabi or Urdu (Brass 1974, 114). Second, the Maithili language movement was spearheaded by Brahmins who supported an orthodox and exclusionary adherence to the caste system,

⁴ For an additional discussion of the difficulty of defining who Maithili speakers are and subsequently estimating their numbers, see Jha 1994.

which is also reflected in the considerable resources they spent in preserving their own genealogical archives, known as the *pañjī* system.⁵ This alienated the Maithili language movement from the majority of Maithili speakers, who in Indian popular consciousness have been considered the poorest and most economically “backward” in all of India (Jha 2018, 256). Finally, there existed no popularly consumed vernacular Maithili language press in Bihar accessible to any broad, general readership. Due to the patronage of the Darbhanga Raj (themselves Brahmin zamindars), Hindi and Sanskrit rather than Maithili presses proliferated in Mithila, which made those printed materials far more accessible than traditional oral education or manuscript-scribal practices previously prevalent among Maithil Brahmins and Kayasths.

An additional effect of this was that early grammars and lexicons of Maithili that came to define the linguistic and cultural boundaries of the language in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to document all extant varieties of the language, without formulating a standard. The development of such a standard was an early goal of other modernizing traditions like Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali, which had more widespread and well-developed printing industries. As a result, standardized Maithili emerged through a re-envisioning of Maithili’s own long literary heritage and genres in the modern period. This was a, at least partial, motivating factor for figures, like Raghunandana Das in the *Mithilānāṭaka*, who saw their work as a means to develop a new standardized language and dramatic form for Modern Standard Maithili and the new Maithil public.

The official language policy of the Indian government is codified in three main documents: Schedule Eight of the Indian Constitution (1950), the Official Languages Act (1963), and the Official Languages rules (1973). Together, they establish the unique role of Hindi and English for use by the government and recognize the various minority languages that defined the modern states of India without proscribing official languages for the state governments. Maithili was officially recognized in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2008, when four additional languages were added to other officially recognized languages: Maithili, Bodo, Dogri, and Santhali. This act of the national parliament details that these languages are intended “to enrich” the national and state languages, though currently there is also a move to develop local legislative and judiciary materials in these languages (Constitution of India, 2008, Article 344.1, Article 351). However, the state of Bihar recognizes only Hindi as the official language with the “addition” of Urdu. Maithili is only recognized at the district level and thus holds little sway over state functions like education. In Nepal, Maithili speakers constitute the second largest mother tongue community after Nepali speakers. Maithili has been recognized on the national and provincial level in Nepal in previous

5 For more information on the *pañjī* record system used by Maithil Brahmins, see Brown 1988.

constitutions (for example, Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, Article 2063.1.5) and in the current multilingual “National languages” system of the current national constitution, distinct from the national “official language” of Nepali (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, Article 6). The border between India and Nepal is open to legal, unregulated human flow of Nepali and Indian nationals and the historical links between Mithila and the Kathmandu Valley play heavily in the historical imagination of modern Maithili litterateurs and promoters of the language (Mishra 1949, 1–38). Mithila and Maithili transcend a single modern nation state (much as do Panjab/Panjabi or Bengal/Bengali).

Raghunandana Das and the *Drama of Mithila*

Raghunandana Das’s 1923 play, the *Mithilānāṭaka*, translated here as the *Drama of Mithila*, is the perfect focal point for a discussion of the way twentieth-century, upper-caste Maithili language promoters situated themselves vis-à-vis their region, the nation, and larger language metropolises of Hindi and Bengali. A native of Madhubani, Das worked for many years as an accounting clerk for the Darbhanga Raj. Initially, he wrote in Braj Bhasha and Hindi, though many prominent early Maithili intellectuals encouraged him to switch to Maithili (Chaudhary 1976, 183–85). He, in turn, encouraged later generations to use Maithili as their primary language of literary and political expression (Jha 2018, 266). Das self-published *Mithilānāṭaka* in 1923, and an edited volume appeared in 1984 under the auspices of the Maithili Akademi in Patna, which included a second play by Das titled the *Dūtāṅgadavyāyoga* (One-act heroic play of Aṅgada the messenger) composed originally in 1933 (Dāsa 1984).

It seems that Das was an active participant in the middle period of the Maithili language movement, which spanned the period between World War I and Indian independence. Das’s articles appeared in the monthly, bilingual Maithili-Hindi journal known as the *Maithilā Prabhā* (1920–1926), which was published in Agra and Ajmer, then later in the *Maithilā Prabhākara* (1929–1930) that was out of Aligarh. These journals were oriented toward Maithils residing outside of Bihar, usually in large cities in the Hindi Belt, and reflected the firm belief of those active in the Maithili movement that Mithila constituted a distinct socio-ethnic region of South Asia. It became increasingly important for Maithili speakers living outside of Bihar, like Raghunandana Das, to claim Maithili identity independent of their place of residence (Mishra 1950, 18). Raghunandana Das also seemed to have been active in writing scholarly articles and in documenting the history of Maithili literature by editing and adding to Yadunatha Jha’s descriptive history of Maithili literature (Mishra 1950, 66). He is also credited as the author of a few other works in various genres: *Maithili Śikṣāvalī*, *Subhadrāharana* (ca. 1933–1944), *Vīrābālaka*, *Uttararāmacarita*, etc. (Mishra 1950, 80, 85, 91, 122).

Jayakanta Mishra describes the *Mithilānāṭaka* as the first “modern Maithili drama” on the basis that it was influenced by both Parsi theater and the historical tradition of *kirtaniñā* dramas (Mishra 1950, 119–20). Mishra also notes that drama was the last genre to be modernized in the twentieth century (Mishra 1950, 115). Mishra, being a literary historian interested in writing a complete history of Maithili language and literature, criticizes Das’s heavily Hindi-inflected Maithili. Das’s “impure” Maithili was inconvenient to the unified narrative Mishra was intent on writing. This same problem was faced by Hindi and Bengali literary scholars looking for origins and pedigrees more congruent with a European-derived sense of identity-based nationalism predicated on a distinct and unchanging linguistic heritage. Of course, like any other living language, modern standardized literary Maithili is still hardly standard in the current era.

“Modern,” in the context of Maithili literature (and to a certain extent the other vernaculars of North India), can generally be described as the new genres, dialects, and modes of literary critique that emerged from the middle of the nineteenth century in response to colonial critiques of South Asian “traditional” or “pre-colonial” literatures.⁶ The first attempts to develop a “modern” Maithili dramatic tradition included translations and transcreations of Sanskritic, mostly Puranic, stories. These stories had also been important during the medieval period in the Maithili dramatic tradition. The earliest dramas of the modern period continued this trend.

Plays by Jivana Jha on Puranic themes were published in the *Mithilā moda* (Joy of Mithila).⁷ This journal was established by Muralidhara Jha in conjunction with the *Maithilī Vivecana Samiti* in 1906.⁸ It was the central forum through which the Maithili literary community in Banaras communicated their work.⁹ Additionally, the Maithila Great Assembly (Maithila mahāsābha) was established in 1910. A powerful force for the patronage of Maithili literature and scholarship, this foundation was modeled on the Hindi and Nagari *sabhās* (assemblies) of Banaras. Besides the Madhubani-Darbhanga heartland of Mithila itself, the *mahāsabhā* was active in Jaipur, Mathura, Banaras, and Calcutta. Maithili scholars living in Banaras also worked in tandem with the Hindi language scholars and promoted the use of the *nāgarī* script in Mithila (Mishra 1976, 223).

6 For a discussion of this kind of generic transition in the better documented Hindi-Urdu tradition, see Orsini 2011.

7 Confusingly, this journal was also known as *MODA*. Despite the capitalization, it is not an acronym.

8 Muralidhara Jha wrote the forward to the original 1923 publication of *Mithilānāṭaka*.

9 For a fuller listing of the astonishing number of Maithili journals and newspapers active both outside and within Mithila, see Chaudhary 1976.

Genre and Tradition

Before the twentieth century, literate Maithili speakers primarily used the *mithilāksara* (or *tirhutīya*) script for artistic, literary, and ritual writing of the Maithili language. In appearance and derivation, this script is very similar to the Bengali-Assamese family of eastern Indic scripts. Since the early twentieth century and with the influence of Maithili promoters living in Banaras, Maithili began to adopt the *nāgarī* script for all ordinary purposes (Yadav 2003, 530–31). In the 1984 printed edition of the *Mithilānāṭaka*, Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit are all presented through *nāgarī*.

It is important to note that in addition to the general acceptance of rendering Maithili in *nāgarī* by the time of the play's composition, presenting all the languages in the text in the same script has two primary effects. The first is practical—Maithili and Mithila-resident Hindi-speakers are given access to the sounds, if not the knowledge, of Bengali and Sanskrit passages. The second is ideological—the national (Hindi), regional (Maithili and Bengali), and the classical (Sanskrit) languages of the linguistic landscape of twentieth-century Bihar are equalized and deliberately placed within a space of coexistence and interaction.

One could see the long history of presenting multilingual literary texts, especially dramatic texts, in South Asia through single, usually local, scripts being translated into a modern context in which contemporary, rival, spoken vernaculars like Maithili, Hindi, and Bengali speak together on the page in the same way that regionally named Prakrit languages featured in classical, so-called, Sanskrit dramas. The dynamics between the contemporary languages featured in the *Mithilānāṭaka* differ in the fact that asymmetric understanding and cross-speech are a feature of their juxtaposition to a much larger degree.

This usage of script underlies the fact that despite the *Mithilānāṭaka* being a *nāṭaka*, or performed play, this new modern breed of literary drama was primarily circulated both within and outside of Mithila through printed magazines and journals. While some plays were performed at the time, print remained the primary means of circulation restricted to the Maithili literate elite.¹⁰

Despite ostensibly being the product of literary elitism, the relationship between popular reception and elite authorship is important to consider. In his introduction to the original print of the *Mithilānāṭaka*, Muralidhara Jha, one of the first prominent Maithili prose writers of the period, mentions that Raghunandana Das's efforts are to create a type of play that is of the caliber of

¹⁰ Only in recent years have attempts been made to stage these dramas for public consumption in Bihar. The state of popularly performed drama and dance in Bihar in the first half of the twentieth century is little documented other than the genres of *nautankī* and Parsi theaters popular across most of North India.

the Sanskrit masters, but would nonetheless be understood by Maithili speakers, in accordance with their particular regional values (Dāsa 1984, “*kha*”). This impetus straddles the two desires of elite Maithili culture—to appeal to a Sanskritic-Brahmanical past and to emphasize the region’s ongoing exceptionalism among peer “Hindu” sociopolitical rivals. The *Mithilānāṭaka* is very deliberately not a piece of popular literature/drama and is more directly related to other literary dramatic traditions in both Sanskrit and medieval Maithili; that is, the *kirtaniñā nāṭakas* (Mishra 1976, 110–63). While relying on literary conventions and the style of these two literary dramatic traditions, authors like Raghunandana Das attempted to differentiate their newly emerging modern Maithili literary style by extricating the “song and dance” elements of those earlier genres. The new Maithili drama was prosaic and didactic, reacting to English literary norms and the already developed traditions of modern Hindi and Bengali theater. Jha also comments that the *Mithilānāṭaka* surpassed the “degraded” quality of the medieval *kirtaniñā nāṭakas*, which were produced up until the late nineteenth century (Dāsa 1984, “*kha*”). This “degraded quality” is described as being the result of incorrect language and an over-reliance on the stilted conventions of the genre.

Despite elite authors’ and literary critics’ claims to broader accessibility, it is hard to conceive of an audience of ordinary Maithili speakers who could understand much of the dialogue in this play. The *Mithilānāṭaka* features poetry and prose in Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit. Even the Maithili of most modern literature is highly Sanskritized and models itself on literary Hindi. This quality plays into the contemporary critique of the Maithili movement’s failure to move beyond the interests and concerns of elite Brahmins and Kayasths (Jha 2018, 100). To imagine how authors like Das or Jha could possibly see a broad appeal in a text like the *Mithilānāṭaka*, it is important to consider other auxiliary functions of language representation outside of the discourse of content. For the narrowly focused elites like Raghunandana Das and his colleagues, the sounds and political identities wrapped up in these languages, even when unintelligibly spoken, represent something tangible beyond the content of what is being said.

Raghunandana Das acknowledged two sources of inspiration for the *Mithilānāṭaka*. Das indicated that he drew upon the allegorical characters and plot in *Kaliyuga* from Shashinath Jha’s *Kalidharmaprakashika* (ca. 1911–1912) that centered around the ills plaguing modern Indian and Maithili societies. This play is no longer available and as such this study is unable to make use of it for historical comparison (Mishra 1950, 118). So, I have looked to other texts for comparison. While Raghunandana Das never explicitly mentions Bhāratendu Harishchandra’s *Bhāratadurdaśā*, the “pitiable plight of India” (1875), it seems highly likely that this was another major source of inspiration for the *Mithilānāṭaka*. Harishchandra’s play, written in Banaras nearly fifty years prior, features many of the same

allegorical characters and plotlines. In the older play’s case, the more cosmological Kaliyuga is replaced by a male embodiment of all of India’s modern woes—Bharatadurdeva. Both plays draw upon a tradition of Sanskrit allegorical plays.

The most prominent and influential example of this genre is Krishna Mishra’s *Prabodha-Candrodaya* (Rising moon of enlightenment) from approximately the eleventh century CE (Deka 1984). This late-period Sanskrit exemplar seems to have been the basis for early modern and modern forays into the genre of allegorical drama. The *Prabodha-Candrodaya* was directly translated and adapted many times in the late medieval and colonial periods into Braj Bhasha especially. The lack of “original materials” and reliance on conventional themes frustrated modernists like Harishchandra and Raghunandana Das. They sought to creatively use elements of Sanskrit dramatic traditions in new modern political languages like Hindi and Maithili, instead of merely translating the classics (Dalmia 1997, 277–78).

A brief comparison of the *Bhāratadurdaśā* and the *Mithilānāṭaka* will provide clarity on the reliance of the Maithili tradition upon the emergence of Hindi nationalism about a half-century earlier and to clarify some of the divergent choices made by Maithili nationalists like Raghunandana Das. Bhāratendu Harishchandra (1850–1885) is usually deemed the “father of modern Hindi literature.” Harishchandra was a prolific litterateur who reimagined the nature of Hindi poetry, drama, and scholarly prose using the new “modern standard Hindi,” based on the literarized version of the *khari bolī* dialect. Before the late nineteenth century, “Hindi” literature was dominated by verse written in other literary dialects like Braj Bhasha and Avadhi. The newly emerging Hindi movement was centered in Banaras and Allahabad. Both cities were, not coincidentally, also the main sites of vernacular printing and religious- and language-based cultural *sabhās*. Because of these same reasons, early Maithili literary activism was also centered in these urban sites in North India, outside of Mithila.

Given the new ethos of Hindi literature in this period, Harishchandra’s plays were allegorical, metaphorical, and didactic in nature.¹¹ Like the later Maithili nationalists, Harishchandra was active in literary criticism as well. He edited and directed magazines including the *Kavivacanasudhā* (1868–1885), the *Hariscandracandrikā* (1873–1885), the *Hariscandra-Patrikā*, and the *Bāl-Bodhini* (1874–1878). These circulated literary publications were the main venue for both literary publication and criticism in the emerging fields of modern Hindi and Maithili. Both plays considered in this study appeared in such publications. The literary and critical tracts of these magazines were

11 Some of Harishchandra’s other famous plays include *Satya-Hariscandra* (1875), *Nila Devī* (1888), *Andher Nagari* (1881), and *Premjoginī* (1876).

closely allied in theme and content. Harishchandra penned essays on a variety of topics relevant to his idea for a new formulation of national and Hindu traditions.

Among others, Harishchandra voiced his opinion about dramatic traditions’ relevance to a national Hindi-Hindu identity, in his case in an 1883 essay in the *Kavivacanasudhā* that was simply entitled “Drama” (*nāṭaka*). In this essay, Harishchandra bemoans the almost non-existent state of Hindi theater, which was considered a direct descendant of the Sanskrit plays of Kalidāsa and Bhavabhūti. The works of Shakespeare are also on the periphery of dramatic awareness of Harishchandra’s Banaras milieu by way of their influence on Bengali and other English-educated elites. Folk and popular theaters, while not entirely forgotten, are put aside in favor of fostering public moral education through the medium of staged and printed dramas in the new Hindi medium. This agenda continues with the Maithili language movement and the aims and ethos of a play like the *Mithilānāṭaka*.

After a classical-style prologue, the first two acts of *Bhāratadurdaśā*, rather ominously, take place in a cremation ground. We encounter a personified India (*bhārat*), weeping. Surprisingly, Bharat is a male figure, not the expected Mother India (*bhārat mātā*). This reflects a newly cultivated, robust, masculine nationalism. Bharat mourns the loss of his wealth, knowledge, pride, and righteousness at the hands of English interlopers. In the depths of his despair, Bharat entreats both Krishna and the Goddess to intervene. This is mirrored in the *Mithilānāṭaka*’s sixth act in which a wearied Mithila is brought back from her despairing by a moralizing Sita and the patriotic songs of ordinary Maithili people (Dāsa 1984, 59–62). After Bharat’s prayers are left unheeded, a frightened and trembling Bharat is approached by Shamelessness (*nirlajjatā*), who offers him a way out, through humiliating himself and begging. Harishchandra, ever the proponent of an independent and traditionalist India, clearly viewed this option as shameful.

The bulk of the Hindi drama takes place as a dialogue between Bhāratadurdeva, the dastardly designer of Bharat’s misfortune, and his chief lieutenant named General Destruction (*satyanāśa faujdārī*), who is meaningfully portrayed as half-Muslim and half-Christian in appearance, with a cruel expression, brandishing an unsheathed sword (Hariścandra 1953, 25).¹² The martial appearance and clothing reflects the two groups of “outsiders” who, in the play and Harishchandra’s imaginary, are held responsible for the current “degraded” state of the nation, namely medieval Muslim invaders and the colonial Christian British. Although Harishchandra was firmly a Hindu traditionalist and saw the aspirational Indian nation to be essentially Hindu, his portrayal of Bhāratadurdeva and his retinue is otherwise secular. The way

12 *Krūra ādhā kristānī ādhā musalamānī veśa, hāth meñ nañgī talvār lie* (Hariścandra 1953, 25).

he characterized the main villain of the play pulls from the visual symbols of what might indicate danger, subversion, and evil. The plight of India in this formulation is mainly one of material depletion, political disenfranchisement, and cultural degradation

Are! yahāñ kī yogyatā, vidyā, sabhyatā, udyog, udārtā, dhan, bal, mān, dr̥dhacittatā, satya, sab kahāñ gae? (Hariścandra 1953, 23)

Oh! Talent, knowledge, civility, industry, generosity, wealth, strength, respect, resolution of mind, and truth, where have they all gone?

Traits and treasures that have been stolen from India are those of wealth, respect, and appearance. The loss of these perennial qualities has an embedded anti-colonial critical subtext.

In the *Mithilānāṭaka* the embodied character of Mithila laments the loss of her wealth and treasures. Fame and glory are the main treasures lost by Mithila, and they are the product of her wisdom traditions and orthodox Hindu learning. In the sixth and last act of the play, Mithila appears distraught and decries the loss of her people, who despite her best efforts, have fallen prey to the vices of the “dark age” of *kali*.

Hāy! hamar din vidhātā kehan kainanhi! Kī calahurñ! Kī bhēlahurñ! Ek din samsārame hamar santānak vidyā, buddhi, dhan o kīrti ehi sabahika carcā katai nahi hoit chal. (Dāsa 1984, 59)

Alas! Oh, creator of the day, what sort of [evil] thing have you set on us! What have you set in motion! What has happened! One day, the very mention of my children, “Knowledge,” “Wisdom,” “Wealth,” and “Fame,” has ceased to exist in the world at all.

In comparison to the material concerns of Bharat in *Bhāratadurdaśā*, the misfortune that has befallen Mithila is spiritual and cultural. Her allegorical children are all traits that are valued and identified with an idealized Brahmanical piety and *sāttvik* (“pure”) character. Qualities of temperance, patience, and forbearance give way to their opposites.

Āba ta nirlajjatā, nirdayatā, nirutsāhatā, lolupatā, kapaṭatā, vaṃcakatā, ehi sabahika pracāra dekhi paḍaita achi. je chati o tāhime magna chati, jāhisarñ aur din din duḥkha badhaita achi. (Dāsa 1984, 59)

Nowadays, the promotion of shamelessness, brutality, dullness, gluttony, duplicity, and deceit are seen everywhere. Whoever is immersed in these [qualities], for them grief increases forevermore.

The vices described by Mother Mithila are the vices thought of as specifically contrary to the (alleged) good, though not exclusive, qualities of righteous Brahmins, who dominated the Maithili language movement.¹³ The *Mithilānāṭaka* attempts to mediate elitism and egalitarianism in the new modern Maithili identity by synthesizing the dominance of Maithil Brahmins with a portrayal of lower-caste Maithili speakers, who are shown to be more scholarly, pious, and learned than other Indians. This portrayal is also a warning. Unlike the nation of India, which had already succumbed to the vices of the modern era, Mother Mithila forewarns of a possible “fallen” future that has not yet taken place in Mithila.

Unlike the *Bhāratadurdaśā*, the *Mithilānāṭaka* describes a state that is immediately relevant to the current readers/audiences in early twentieth-century Mithila. The idea that Mithila was a refuge for Sanskrit learning and Hindu culture during the Islamic and British colonial periods continued to be common during the twentieth century. This is reflected in the *Mithilānāṭaka* in a scene in which two Maithils converse immediately after Kaliyuga hatches a conspiracy with his minions “Laziness” (*ālasya*), “Jealousy” (*īrṣyā*), et alia. (Dāsa 1984, 12). In this imaginary, Mithila is the bearer of the lost qualities of India.

Stuck Between Bengal and the “Hindi Heartland”

Let us now focus on a few scenes from the second act of the *Mithilānāṭaka* that best reflect the liminal nature of Maithili’s relationship with the modern “national” traditions of Hindi and Bengali. Center to periphery, center to center, or periphery to periphery—these encounters trouble any assumptions we might have of which language occupies which relational position. In this second act, we move from the allegorical to the “real,” to Mithila itself, or an idealized Mithila. First, we encounter a Bengali traveler, or *pathik*.¹⁴ Significantly, this is a term frequently used by the Bengali writer and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in his poetry. In fact, Tagore wrote in a Maithili-tinged register, known as Brajabuli, in many works, including in his “Bhanushringa’s String of Verses” (*Bhānuśṛṅger padāvalī*). This would not have been lost on Raghunandana Das or his audience, who lived during the height of Tagore’s fame, after he received the Nobel Prize in 1913.

The Bengali *pathik*, who remains nameless, speaks in pure modern Bengali. The Bengali dialogue is rendered in *nāgarī*, which makes the Bengali text accessible for most Maithili speakers.¹⁵ The following Bengali excerpt

13 For a discussion of the social structure of Maithil society and the position of Maithil Brahmins therein, see Burghart 1993.

14 *Gītābitān*, Song 201: *Āmi pathbbolā eka pathika ecechi* (Ṭhākura 2008).

15 Prior to the domination of the *nāgarī* script movements for Hindi, Maithili had been recorded in four separate scripts: *mithilākṣara* or *tirbutīya* script, *kaitbī*, *devanāgarī*, and Newari. Newari and *devanāgarī* were used in limited contexts at the margins of the Mithila region, in Nepal and Western Bihar. The *mithilākṣara* script was used for manuscripts. Currently, it is used for ceremonies and decoration. It is most

demonstrates the facility with which an educated Maithili author could command Bengali in addition to his own vernacular. Das juxtaposes this Bengali character, who is oriented toward the past, with the pragmatic and progress-focused Hindi scholar from Banaras, who will be introduced shortly as the Bengali bumbles down the road into Mithila. He is amazed at the rustic beauty of the countryside and by the piety of its inhabitants. He waxes on poetically:

*Āha! Ki bilakkhana deśa! Ki ramya palligrām! Grāme grāme
kata kata debāyatana! Dekhte ki bhaktibhāba bodha bocche.
Baṅga deśe kebala Śārādī o Sarasbatī pūjar samay grāme grāme
ye hulasthala badyādi śabdha sunā yāya. Mithilāy pratidin sei
rūpa hulasthala dekhitechī. Maithilāgana kemana karmakāṇḍī.
Bāstabikāi ki rūp pabitra bhūmi tāha āmi barnan karate
pāritechī nā. (Dāsa 1984, 15)*

Wow! What an indescribable place! What lovely little towns and hamlets! In every village there are many shrines for the gods. See what devotional mood is felt here! In Bengal, such a festival atmosphere and the sound of instruments is only heard in the villages during Sharada and Sarasvati *pūjās*. I have seen such a festival every day here in Mithila. How devoted to ritual are the people of Mithila! In truth, this is a holy land, just as I have described it, is it not?

The Bengali then continues to praise the holy land of Mithila and the goddess Sita, who was born there. This rustic, rural landscape, populated by Brahmins performing their age-old rituals and righteous peasants, is the image of Mithila that is remembered in Bengal and that is cultivated by pre-twentieth-century Maithili authors. This fanciful romanticism continues during the bumbling Bengali’s journey deeper into Mithila.

The Bengali first encounters two potters (*kumbhāras*) who are practicing devotional songs for an upcoming festival while going about their normal business. One potter begins to sing, in pure and mellifluous Sanskrit, a song of Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* (ca. twelfth century CE). The Bengali is taken aback by the sweetness of the song and the very fact that these humble potters know Sanskrit. The traveler attempts to speak with the potters in Bengali but quickly realizes that they do not understand him. What follows is a humorous scene in which the Bengali tries to address the two Maithili speakers in the “local speech,” which ends up being a bungled version of standard Hindi with all the usual Bengali tropes (lack of gender, mispronunciations, and

often found in the Brahmin genealogical records of Mithila and in wedding invitations. This script is almost identical to and is certainly mutually intelligible with the Bengali, Assamese, and Bishnupriya Manipuri scripts. However, due to a combination of the efforts of Maithili scholars, working in Banaras and within Mithila for the Hindi and *nāgarī* promotional organizations, such as the “Committee for the Promotion of the Nagari Script” (Nāgarī-pracārīṇī-sabhā), and for the recognition of Hindi as the official language of governance and education in Bihar, Maithili shifted towards using standard *devanāgarī* for literary and everyday purposes. This reoriented the Maithili reading public and the printing industry active in Bihar toward the Hindi-speaking West. After centuries of working closely in literary, culture, and politics, with the Bengali world, Maithili sought to align itself with the rising star of Hindi. See Yadav 2003, 523–46.

grammatical simplification, etc.). By this time, Mithila had drifted so far from Mother Bengal, that if her residents knew another contemporary language, it would be Hindi, not Bengali, as during the colonial period.

Miscommunication and subconscious slips reveal much during this interaction through which Raghunandana Das proves himself a deft satirist who makes full use of multilingual puns to make his point about the linguistic and social relationship of Maithili with its neighboring languages (Dāsa 1984, 16–17).

The Bengali then asks the potters, "What are you?" (*āpa ko hotā hai*) The potters confusedly reply, in correct although dialectical Hindi, that they are men of course! The Bengali clarifies that he is asking about their caste. The first potter starts reciting a Maithili riddle (*pihānī*), meant in critical jest:

brahmā racanā karaita jānū, biṣṇu cakradhārīsaum. Bābū saba paṇḍita kahi bajabathi, chuṭṭī katai begārīsaum. (Dāsa 1984, 16)

Brahma created the world, with the [help] of Vishnu, the bearer of the [potter's] wheel. O [Bengali] Bābu! Everyone could be called a *paṇḍit*, but where is the relief from labor?

The Bengali remains befuddled and asks the two *kumbhāras* to not speak in their own idiom (Maithili riddles). The potters then start to openly mock the poor Bengali by speaking in gibberish-sounding Maithili rhymes in response to his query of who they are:

Mudkaṭṭā mudjodā rājput! (Dāsa 1984, 17)

Head-cutting, head-joining Rajputs!

From this, the Bengali misunderstands that the two potters are in fact Rajputs. The potters, perhaps tired of their games with the Bengali, reveal that they are only potters, who fashion ceramics. They explain that just as Rajputs cut off their enemies' heads, similarly, they as potters cut lumps of (head-like) clay and slap them onto the potter's wheel. This action is only loosely equated to the action of Rajputs, but mostly it plays on the linguistic confusion of the Bengali. The Bengali remains convinced of the potters' status as Rajputs because he confuses their profession (*kumbhāra*, from the Sanskrit *kumbhakāra*), with their status (as he supposes) as princes (*kumāra*).

Eventually, the Bengali catches on. After the potters claimed that everyone is a *paṇḍita* in their own way, the traveler calls the two Maithils "potter-*paṇḍits*," almost in the modern English rendering of the word pundit. Despite the ridicule, the Bengali praises Mithila in Sanskrit:

*Dhanyā 'sti mithilā yatra kumbhakāro 'pi paṇḍitaḥ.*¹⁶

Blessed is Mithila, where even the potter is a scholar.

While defeated, it is not clear whether the Bengali is giving praise to the two potters for their linguistic mastery or their sly tongues.

Concluding their interaction, the Bengali asks where the “real” *paṇḍits* live, the ones who specialize in ritual performance along with scriptural study and production. The two potters, pointing in a seemingly random direction, direct the Bengali toward a nearby village. The potters depart in the opposite direction and congratulate themselves on fooling the poor Bengali traveler.

Meanwhile, the Bengali is met on the road by a *paṇḍit*. In a haughty and arrogant tone, the *paṇḍit* explains that he has come from Kashi (also known as Banaras or Varanasi), where he had heard about the Sanskrit learning of Mithila:

*Sunte rahe ki mithilāmeṁ saṁskṛtavidyā kī baṛī carcā hai
... islie pūrvasamaya ke vidyākendra mithilā ke paṇḍitoṁ se
milne ke lie yahāṁ āyā hūṁ. Bhalā jin praśnoṁ kā uttar honā
asambhav vicar rakḥā hai, dekheṁ, unkā nirṇay yahāṁ ke
paṇḍit sab kis rīti se karte haiṁ.* (Dāsa 1984, 18)

We kept hearing that in Mithila, there is a lot of discussion around Sanskrit learning . . . for this reason, I have come to meet with the scholars of Mithila in the old centers of learning. So, I have come to see in which manner the local scholars provide responses for those questions whose answers are impossible.

The scholar from Kashi is immediately cast in the role of an outsider and as the haughty Brahmin who has come to demonstrate the extent of his learning and the pre-eminence of his school of thought. In this case, the *paṇḍit* seeks to demonstrate the superior nature of Sanskrit learning offered in Banaras. He asks the Bengali traveler about his identity and origin. The Bengali answers that he has come to study the knowledge traditions of Mithila. The *paṇḍit* ridicules the Bengali for his language and demands that he speak in Hindi (“*jācī ācī? ham kuch nahīṁ samajhte*”¹⁷). He also demands to know if there are many scholars in Bengal. In this scene, Raghunandana Das is demonstrating his understanding of the chauvinist position of Hindi in relation to other regional languages of India, even one as prominent as Bengali. The *paṇḍit* continues to press the Bengali. He asks what he has heard about Mithila. The Bengali responds that it is widely known in Bengal that the study of *nyāya* (“logic”) was born in Mithila. This reflects on the shared intellectual heritage of Bengal and Mithila in the development of the “new logic” (*navya-nyāya*) school of philosophy and its educational tradition.

16 This seems to be a quotation from some other text as it is referenced multiple times by different characters and is in quotation marks in the printed text (Dāsa 1984, 17).

17 In mocking imitation of Bengali sounds: *jācī ācī* (“I don’t understand at all!” [Dāsa 1984, 18]).

In this characterization, the Bengali has come as a student-suppliant in search of the knowledge that has been traditionally available in Mithila. The *paṇḍit* from Kashi has come to demonstrate his own knowledge and superiority over a minority language-culture.¹⁸ This contrasting stance on Mithila plays out further as the *paṇḍit* admonishes the Bengali for his fantastical imagined understanding of Mithila’s cultural prowess:

Voh samay sab nahīṁ na Videha rājā ai, na janakpura rajdhānī hai. (Dāsa 1984, 19)

That time no longer remains. Neither does the king of Videha, nor the capital at Janakpur.

Videha refers to the semi-historical name of Mithila mentioned in the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Janakpur, the “City of King Janaka” (father of Sita), is the famed capital city of the region that was supposedly destroyed during the early Islamic invasions.¹⁹ The modern town of Janakpur serves as the cultural capital of Maithili speakers in Nepal, as Darbhanga serves the same purpose in India since the nineteenth century CE. By mentioning these mythical (and revered) memorialized images of Mithila, Raghunandana Das has invoked a heritage that appealed to both Maithili language activists and religious poets of Bengal. The cynical and pragmatic approach of the Kashi *paṇḍit* and the reverential wonderment of the Bengali traveler provide parallel and contrasting examples of how a very narrowly defined Maithil or Maithili might be imagined by their linguistic and cultural neighbors. Mithila is simultaneously a holy land because of the moral rectitude of its residents and because of the land’s status as the birthplace of Sita.

After becoming a bit frustrated with the *paṇḍit*, the Bengali decides to depart, entreating the scholar to remain open-minded about the wisdom of Mithila. After the Bengali departs, the Kashi *paṇḍit* is confronted by two panhandling swindlers a little way down the road. After a lengthy dialogue, seemingly a non sequitur, the two confront the *paṇḍit* about his willingness to shame and blaspheme an integral part of the land of his birth. Perhaps this is indicative of the pan-Indian importance emphasized by Maithil activists (Jha 2018, 149). It could also be a rhetorical move to suggest that every part of India is the motherland of some Indian, a compatriot; therefore, it should not be ridiculed in such a manner. In any case, through his characters, Raghunandana Das extols the virtues of the motherland and incites action from his fellow Maithils:

18 *Tum to yabāṁ śiṣya hone āye ho, ham to parīkṣak bokar uttare haiṁ*, which translates as follows: “You (ord.) have come here to be a student, [whereas] I (hon. plural) have descended as an inquisitor.” See Dāsa 1984, 16.

19 For a more detailed discussion on the “rediscovery” of the site of Sita’s birth by the adherents of the Ramanandi sect, see Burghart 1978.

Je nija deśaka unnatipriya, se uttama puruṣa kahābathi |
Tanu tyaagahuṁ mahimandalame, atisāya ādara pābathi ||
Madhyama jem jana nijakulapoṣaka, adhama tāhi kabi
gābathi |
Je nija deśa kulaka nimdā sunī, cuppahi kāla bitābathi || (Dāsa
 1984, 20)²⁰

Those who are devoted to the progress of their own country,
 will be called "the best of men."

Those who sacrifice their lives in this world, will attain high
 praise.

The "middling ones" are those who only take care of their own
 clan. The poet sings of the "lowest ones."

They are those who speak ill of their own nation and [only]
 remain silent and bide their [own] time.

In a critical tone, this passage ranks the men of the nation from the best to the lowest in order of devotion to the nation (or homeland), transforming a common trope of ranking religious devotees from the most exalted to the lowest rank.²¹ This is yet another link between the language of devotion in religion and political life. The highest ranked are those prepared to sacrifice themselves for the country (*bhārat/mithilā*). The moderately praiseworthy are those whose altruism is limited to their immediate kin. Those of the lowest sort think only of themselves and are worthy of derision. Das is ambiguous in identifying the country (*deśa*) with India or Mithila exclusively. He also does not specify whether *kula* could be expanded beyond its traditional sense of family-oriented kinship to modern "communities" (that is, Hindi speakers, Maithili speakers, Bengali speakers, and so forth). This would align with the rebuke faced by the *pandit* for being too parochial and for not including Mithila in his imagination of the greater Indian nation.

The next scene starts with a woodcutter entering the stage while singing a verse inspired by Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*.²² The *pandit* starts to praise the woodcutter and the general glory of Jayadeva. The woodcutter retorts in Sanskrit verse that the highest form of knowledge is the ability to expertly praise Krishna. In amazement, the *pandit* continues to praise the sweet and expert pronunciation of the woodcutter and the deftness of his answer (Dāsa 1984, 22). After a while, a man who collects fodder for cattle approaches, singing another song of the *Gita Govinda*. The two confirm each other's knowledge of the famous sayings and verses of Jayadeva and then proceed to

20 This line, mentioning development or upliftment as "*unnati*," is reminiscent of a *doha* (couplet) by Bharatendu: *nija bhāṣā unnati abai, saba unnati ko mūla* (the uplifting of one's own language, is the root of upliftment for all) and the larger poem from which it is taken, called simply *nija bhāṣā* ("one's own language"), which extols the virtues of working toward the development of one's language and the dangers of letting it degrade, especially in the colonial context of the poet's period.

21 *Deśa* in its typical understanding is more generic and emphasizes the physical geography of one's "country" or "land," but in this nationalist context, it can be understood as the equivalent of *nāṣṭra* or *nāṣṭya*, which are more political in their tones.

22 *Campakacarcitacampamudañcikeśarasukṛtunīram | madbukaranikarakatborakavaccayaparicitacāruśarīram*. See Dāsa (1984, 22) in reference to the *Gita Govinda*'s Song 4.

debate together in Sanskrit. The pandit from Kashi is amazed that in every locale of Mithila seemingly all sing famous Sanskrit verses. The grass-cutter confirms:

Adhyāpakā upādhyāyā byasamkhyā Mithilā bhuvi. (Dāsa 1984, 23)

There exist an uncountable number of teachers and scholars in Mithila.

After the pandit is satisfied with the exchange, he switches back to Hindi, which the grass-cutter has also mastered. The grass-cutter asks if the stranger is a *paṇḍit*. The scholar from Kashi, amused and without seeing the irony, answers that if he were anything other than a *paṇḍit*, would he be able to answer in such a learned way in Sanskrit? The woodcutter, observing this conversation, says that the grass-cutter is then comparably a *paṇḍit*. This confuses and enrages the visitor from Kashi. The woodcutter appeals to reason and in a sarcastic tone replies as follows:

*Rekhāganita kī paribhāṣā ke anusāra, āp aur vaha tulya haiṁ;
kyomkī āp saṁskṛta padya meṁ praśna kiya aur usne bhī
saṁskṛta padya hi meṁ uttar diya, islie donom tulya hue.*²³

According to the definition of geometry (or the “rule of transference”²⁴), you and he are equal; because you posed a question in Sanskrit verse and he gave you an answer in Sanskrit verse as well, you are both equal.

With an air of civility and politeness, the two Maithili laborers try to make the Kashi *paṇḍit* see the error of his arrogance, but to no avail. The woodcutter then illustrates the point that in Mithila, all, regardless of station, are learned in the letters. He describes an instance in which a farmer’s wife spontaneously upon hearing her husband sneeze recites a riddle in Sanskrit (Dāsa 1984, 27). He harkens to the literary history of Mithila, in which women, like the locally beloved queen Lakhimā,²⁵ were poets and patrons of Sanskrit learning. Here it seems that Raghunandana is trying to advocate for the Maithili and Sanskrit learning of Mithila as being part of a broader Indian heritage of which all Indians could claim a part. In Das’s narrative, this also extends to non-elite castes, occupations, and genders. This is particularly meaningful since the Maithili literary world and its closely allied political movement were dominated by wealthy Brahmin and Kayasth men (Jha 2018, 32, 100). This play speaks to a strain within the Maithili Nationalist movement that saw its survival in ecumenicism (Jha 2018, 32, 116).

²³ Dāsa 1984, 26.

²⁴ This is a system of logic in *jyotiṣa* (astrology) as well.

²⁵ Lakhimā Devi was the fifteenth-century wife of King Shivasinha and later queen in her own right. The queen and her husband are most famously remembered as the patrons of poet Vidyapati.

At a certain point, the woodcutter and grass-cutter become frustrated with the intransigence of the *paṇḍit* and leave him to puzzle over the farmer’s wife’s riddle as he searches for a suitable place to stay in a local *pāṭhasālā*, or Brahmanical school. The two Maithils tease him and point in a random direction, exclaiming that you will find such a place on any street in any village in Mithila. Finally rid of the uptight stranger, the two Maithils laugh about how foolish the Kashi *paṇḍit* appeared.

The Kashi *paṇḍit* considers that the once-famed learning traditions of Mithila have become contorted and silly (*bāsyāspad*). He therefore concludes that any notion of debate would be useless or even ridiculous, deciding instead to head straight home. The two Maithil laborers see him departing and think momentarily that this might make others wary of coming to Mithila, considering it preferable that Mithila remain consciously Maithili under the destructive influence of the current dark age (*Kaliyuga*).

Ī saba kaliyugaka prabhāva thikaika kī karabahaka. Pheri Mithilā mithile thikihi. (Dāsa 1984, 27)

This is all the influence of *Kaliyuga*, what should be done? So, let Mithila remain in Mithila.

This departing sentiment reflects the inverse of the author’s previous attempts at portraying an open and ecumenical Maithili nationalism. Das seems to warn his readers/audience that special attention needs to be paid to cultivating and preserving Maithili distinctiveness at the same moment as it is promoted to the status of nationalized heritage.

Conclusion

Raghunandana Das’s *Mithilānāṭaka* is an illustrative representation of the attitudes and orientations of the Maithili language movement in the twentieth century. This is especially true of this play because of the way it weaves the concerns of a nascent nationalist movement wrapped up in the Maithili language, with open engagement with other dominant language imaginaries (that is, the Hindi Belt, Bengal, and Brahmanical Sanskrit learning). From this play, we can recognize the way Maithili activists understood their own position within a larger South Asian linguo-cultural landscape. Both Hindi and Bengali have historical and contemporary relationships with Maithili. Bengal tends to imagine Mithila as a semi-mythic historical, religious, and scholastic/philosophical entity that exists in a romantic pastoral ideal. This blends the premodern literary ties of the two language regions with an emerging popular romanticism that infuses colonial and early twentieth-century Bengali literature. On the opposite geographic front, the Hindi Belt makes its imperial attitude toward Maithili (and other regional North Indian languages) obvious. Subsuming the much longer literary history of Maithili into its own pedigree of literary credentials bolstered Hindi’s claim at being a pan-Indian mode of political, cultural, and religious expression.

While recognizing these two forces at play in the much smaller Maithili-speaking world, Das engaged with several levels of discourse to promote Maithili's special status. He invoked the ancient past of Mithila (both Sanskrit and vernacular), played with stereotypes and miscommunication, and argued that Maithili was distinct from Hindi and Bengali, but also that Mithila was a unique sphere in which both cultural milieus have met in the past and present. Das, along with his other colleagues working outside of Mithila, sought to construct a version of Mithila, Maithili, and Maithil identity that was, out of necessity and prudence, not disengaged with what was happening in other language regions. Maithili identity was not to be solely based on the insular purity of Mithila and "her" scholars, but by the ability of modern Maithils to master and engage with multiple language-spheres in a way that speakers of more hegemonic metropole languages, like Hindi or Bengali, are unable and unwilling to do in the modern era.

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