

# Linguistic minorities and strategic mobilisation in eastern India: Bengali-Biharis during the era of linguistic territorialism (1935–57)

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*This article analyses how linguistic minorities in the province of Bihar navigated the era of linguistic territorialism, when mainstream political organisations and figures within India largely agreed that specific linguistic communities ‘belonged’ in particular regions. Indian scholarship has tended to focus on the mechanisms that brought about the linguistic reorganisation of states in India, therefore, concentrating largely on the ways in which territory and language became intrinsically connected. This article will examine the link of language and belonging with regard to a ‘community’, which demanded that states remain linguistically and culturally heterogenous. It focuses on the section of Biharis that identified Bengali as their ‘mother-tongue’ and tracks the transformation of Bengali politics within the province/state during the transition from colonial rule to independence. It explores the ways in which narratives of historical Bengali settlement were deployed for different reasons across this period, and argues that Bengalis in Bihar conceptualised the ordering of the Indian nation in a way that was inherently different from mainstream understandings of how the country should be ordered during this period. Bengali-Bihari figures and publications deployed rhetoric that attached much greater value to territorial belonging than to linguistic or cultural belonging. This article demonstrates that contrary to common assumptions, there were large groups of people who conceptualised India not just as a linguistically heterogenous nation, but one that consisted of linguistically heterogenous states that protected minority linguistic communities.*

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## Introduction

To many living in colonial India, the independent era was to be, among other things, the beginning of a new period during which states would be reorganised by language. This meant that the large polyglot presidencies and princely states would be broken up to form linguistically homogenous ‘homelands’ within India. The ruling Congress party had long been committed to the reorganisation of states

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along linguistic lines. However, due to the brutal experience of partition, the linguistic reorganisation of states was put on hold for fear of separatism. Shortly after independence, vociferous demand for linguistic states forced the Indian government to begin the process of the reorganisation of states. The bulk of historiography on linguistic reorganisation has understandably focused on the mechanisms that encouraged specific groups to demand ‘homelands’ with linguistic homogeneity, and on how they formulated their identities in relation to language and belonging in a specific territory. However, given histories of migration within India as well as the presence of populations whose ‘mother-tongue’ was not that of the majority within a circumscribed area, there were large numbers of people who did not necessarily conflate their ‘homeland’ with the language they spoke. These groups often came out against linguistic reorganisation, claiming that it would lead to greater intolerance within India.

These communities have often been overlooked or have had their histories folded into larger histories of their co-linguists in provinces that are deemed to be their true linguistic homelands. This article analyses how one of the linguistic minorities in the province (and later state) of Bihar navigated this era of linguistic territorialism, and the different ways they mobilised, made claims upon the state, and expressed their conceptions of how the Indian nation as a whole should be ordered. It demonstrates how Bengali-Bihari claims of historical settlement in the province as well as demands to be protected as a ‘Bihari minority’ evolved during the transition from colonial rule to independence. It also traces shifts in the reasons why these claims were made. It will use sources in Hindi, Bengali and English from the legislative assemblies of Bihar, Bengali organisations in the province and from a variety of newspapers published in Bihar and Bengal. In the end, the article explores the changes in strategies used by linguistic minorities to navigate a period when narratives conflating linguistic affinity and territorial belonging were being widely propounded.

Language itself was not necessarily a fixed category of identity and the way in which minority linguistic groups presented themselves politically changed with time and circumstances. Indeed, there was a distinct transformation in the ways in which various non-border Bengali organisations and figures made claims to rights within the state of Bihar. The colonial period saw many organisations and figures that represented Bengalis claiming minority status for the community, and expressing sympathy for the plight of Bengalis in the border regions. They portrayed the Bengali-speaking people of the province as victims of a Hindi-ising policy of the Government of Bihar and claimed that the latter aimed to eventually destroy their language and culture. There was significant pushback against the requirement of Bengalis in Bihar to provide the government with proof of domicile in the province, as other Biharis did not have to. It was members and organisations related to the groups of non-border Bengalis who were particularly vehement in their criticism of the government before independence, and the bulk of their claims centred around their ‘identity’ as a ‘minority’ within the larger

Bihari community. However, after independence many of these same Bengali organisations and figures strongly supported the government's language policies and its claims to territory using their 'identities' of Bengali-Biharis as the basis of these claims. These Bengalis and Bengali organisations also strongly opposed the ceding of any of Bihar's territory to Bengal during the period of linguistic reorganisation and supported the scheme to merge the states of Bengal and Bihar. As the regions these non-border Bengalis settled in were likely not going to be amalgamated with Bengal, marking the space they inhabited within Bihari social and political structures was urgent. In order to defend the Government of Bihar's position regarding linguistic redistribution, the arguments that had previously been used to protest against the government were now deployed in favour of it.

Given Bihar's linguistic diversity, the ways in which linguistic minorities conceptualised their belonging within the state have been analysed in some depth. The Maithili movement and Maithili speakers have received particular attention from scholars.<sup>1</sup> Encounters between the various linguistic groups in Bihar, particularly in the nineteenth century, have also been examined.<sup>2</sup> Urdu was made the official second language of Bihar in 1980, and the Hindi-Urdu politics in Bihar appear to be quite different from that of Uttar Pradesh. There are several studies done on the ways in which the language developed as site of political contestation both in the colonial and independent eras.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, as Jharkhand was only separated from Bihar in the early twenty-first century, the politics of Adivasi groups who spoke a variety of languages have been examined.<sup>4</sup> Many of the Adivasi languages such as Mundari, Ho and Santhali, have also been explored in this context.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite receiving significant attention from both national and local politicians as well as from bureaucrats during the late colonial and early independent era, there has been little exploration of the politics of Bengali speakers in Bihar during this period. Bengal had administrative control over large swathes of

<sup>1</sup> See Brass' chapter on the Maithili movement in, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, which discusses why the Maithili movement did not successfully translate into a movement for a separate Maithil state. See also Jha's work, *Language Politics and the Public Sphere in North India* for details on the ambiguous relationship between Hindi and Maithili.

<sup>2</sup> Kumar, 'A Marginalised Voice in the History of Hindi' deals with language in Bihar in the nineteenth century, wherein he examines the 'encounter' between speakers of Bhojpuri, Maithili and Magahi and supporters of Hindi, as well as the distinctive relationship between proponents of Urdu and Hindi in Bihar that, unlike its neighbouring United Provinces/Uttar Pradesh (UP), was not necessarily marked with the same levels of hostility in the colonial era.

<sup>3</sup> See Patel, *Communalism and the Intelligentsia in Bihar* for an analysis of the politics of Urdu in the colonial era. See Sajjad, 'Language as a Tool of Minority Politics' and Sonntag, 'The Political Saliency of Language in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh' for explorations of Urdu in the post-colonial context in Bihar.

<sup>4</sup> See Corbridge, 'The Continuing Struggle for India's Jharkhand' for details on 'Jharkhandi subnationalism'.

<sup>5</sup> See, Mahapatra, 'Munda Languages in the Census'; Mohan, 'Patterns of Language Use among the Tribal Communities of Jharkhand' and Nanda, 'Cultural Nationalism in a Multi-National Context'.

eastern India through most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a large proportion of the administrative services in Bihar were run by people who identified with the Bengali community.<sup>6</sup> After its separation from the province of Bengal in 1912, the Government of Bihar put in place increasingly strict rules around the requirement of domicile certificates for ‘non-Biharis’. These regulations were highly unpopular with Bengalis who had settled in what was now the separate territory of Bihar as it required them to prove their residence in the province despite the fact that many had ancestors who had been settled in the province for several centuries.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, this article contributes to the rich historiography on the politics of linguistic groups in Bihar by investigating the views of the section of Biharis that considered Bengali to be their ‘mother-tongue’ and examines the basis upon which they made their claims to rights in the province/state of Bihar.

Several South Asian countries grappled with language issues after the end of colonial rule. The creation of a separate country of Bangladesh in 1971 (which also drew upon the long history of Bengali language movement) might be among the most well-known moments of assertion of language-based identity in South Asia. Yet, an array of linguistic movements flourished during the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The notion that physical and linguistic borders should align was a relatively recent development in the twentieth century. One may or may not agree with Robert King’s assertion that it was only after the Treaty of Versailles divided European territories based on ‘ethnicity’ that nationality began to attach itself to language.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, after the close of the First World War the notion rapidly gained traction and by the middle of the twentieth century language rather than physical geographic features (such as mountain ranges and rivers) was regarded as the best way to divide up populations. This is evident in M. K. Gandhi’s support of the reorganisation of Provincial Congress Committees along linguistic lines rather than along the borders of provinces.<sup>10</sup> Equally significant is Jawaharlal Nehru’s (reluctant) support of Hindi

<sup>6</sup> See Gopal, *Mapping Bihar* and Mukherjee, ‘New province, old capital: Making Patna Pataliputra’ for the ways in which Bihar as a province was constructed and ‘Bihari’ histories were developed. The province of Bihar as it came into being in the early twentieth century was not a historical inevitability, with sections of the province—such as the Mithila region in North Bihar—regarded as a separate geo-cultural and political zone through the ancient and medieval eras. However, in the early part of the twentieth century, colonial officials based in Bihar along with Bihari elites (both Hindu and Muslim) made active efforts to connect the ancient empires based in Pataliputra to the region of Bihar, developing specifically ‘Bihari’ histories. These elite Biharis also had complicated relationships with Bengal and Bihar’s position within the province, often implying that Bihari interests were not being fully addressed due to the fact that Bengal proper and the Bengali language received the bulk of infrastructure both in terms of administration and education.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Memo sent to undersecretary’, pp. 62–63.

<sup>8</sup> See Philip Oldenburg, ‘A Place Insufficiently Imagined’.

<sup>9</sup> King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*.

<sup>10</sup> See Adeney, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict Regulation in India and Pakistan*, on the pragmatism demonstrated by the Congress when reordering their organisation along linguistic lines in order to accommodate the diversity within their organisation.

as the sole official language of India, albeit with a 15-year transition period to ensure that inhabitants of non-Hindi-speaking states did not feel overly disadvantaged, and to prevent the administrative difficulties that would have accompanied an immediate switch from English to Hindi.<sup>11</sup> As Asha Sarangi and Sudha Pai indicated, the division of the Congress units along linguistic lines allowed the elevation of regional leaders, who would later go on to demand the linguistic redrawing of borders, in part due to widely accepted understandings of belonging, but also because it allowed them to consolidate their position within a single linguistic community, rather than having to appeal to the multilingual (and often multicultural) populations held within the boundaries of British provinces.<sup>12</sup>

Analyses of twentieth-century language movements often discuss the inherent connections between language and territory developed by the proponents of these movements. Sumathi Ramaswamy, in her exploration of Tamil movement in South India, emphasises the significance of renaming (the province of) Madras in the late 1960s and the support it received across the state. The name settled on—Tamil Nadu—literally translated to ‘the land of Tamil’.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Oliver Godsmark explicitly identifies the Marathi movement for a separate state of Maharashtra as one aimed at creating a ‘new province’ to ‘mark out an exclusive domain for Marathi speakers ... to which they would intrinsically belong, and in which their particular interests would be best served’.<sup>14</sup> In her book on the Andhra demand for a separate Telugu-speaking state—often considered the first language movement in independent India—Lisa Mitchell notes the importance given to creating a separate territory for Telugu speakers, where they would not be marginalised by Tamil speakers.<sup>15</sup>

Most scholars acknowledge that there was no historical inevitability to the development of these kinds of ‘regionalisms’ which were centred around language. As Bernard Cohn noted, the assumption that regionalism arises due to the natural connection of speakers of a certain language as well as the efficiency of having speakers of a certain language under a single administration ignored the fact that in most provinces and states in India, the ‘presence of a significant number of speakers’ of a language ‘other’ than that of ‘a dominant language within a circumscribed area’ was not rare.<sup>16</sup> Mitchell concurred, suggesting that ‘emotional attachments to language, far from being naturally inherent in speakers’ relationship to words, were historically situated’.<sup>17</sup> She also suggested that given the nature of demands upon which

<sup>11</sup> See Das Gupta, *Language Conflict and National Development* for analyses of national language policy in India.

<sup>12</sup> Sarangi and Pai, eds., *Interrogating Reorganisation of States*.

<sup>13</sup> Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*.

<sup>14</sup> Godsmark, *Citizenship, Community and Democracy in India*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India*.

<sup>16</sup> Cohn, *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India*, p. 214.

the creation of newer states had been based, the ‘legitimacy’ of language as a foundational category had, to some extent, begun to erode.<sup>18</sup>

Also playing a significant part in the story of Bengalis in Bihar were the contestations around the idea of Hindi as a national language. There is a large body of literature available on the Hindi language movement, with particular focus on the politics surrounding Hindi and Urdu in Uttar Pradesh (called the United Provinces during the British era), which tends to emphasise the anti-Urdu bent of the Hindi-language movement in the early twentieth century. Scholars often argue that Hindi played an important role in the ways in which politicians conceptualised India as a nation, as the propagation of the language symbolised an attempt to return to the past glories of ‘Hindu’ India before the advent of Muslim ‘invaders’. Therefore, animosity towards Urdu was an obvious product of these ideologies, as was the desire to make Hindi as ‘pure’ and de-Persianised—which meant as Sanskritised—as possible.<sup>19</sup> Hindi was central to the claims made by several politicians in Bihar. These claims were made as part of an attempt to retain territories (in the process of linguistic organisation) by showing that these were primarily Hindi-speaking.

The transformation of Bengali-Bihari claims during the transition from colonial rule to independence did not only demonstrate conceptions of the ordering of the Indian state that were different from mainstream understandings but were also reflective of the shifting attitudes to claims made on the basis of minority rights. As Rochana Bajpai demonstrated, minority identities were consolidated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were strongly influenced by the British practices of enumeration. She also showed how constitution-making in the post-colonial era in India was largely marked by a ‘retrenchment’ with regards to minority group rights.<sup>20</sup> While the constitution did continue to ostensibly protect the right of linguistic minorities to ‘conserve’ their ‘language, script, and culture’, the experiences of partition, and consequently, the negative association with minority demands led Bengalis in Bihar to stop using this category as the basis for their claims.<sup>21</sup> The Bengalis in Bihar who were not settled in the border regions began to vehemently declare their support for the Bihar Congress and the language policies of the government, most likely so that concerns regarding their ‘loyalty’ were not raised.

These aspects of Bengali negotiations with the Congress and claims of belonging are mirrored in the ways in which Muslims in Hyderabad navigated the early independent era, emerging in large part out of the necessity of declaring their loyalty, which was suspect due to demands from West Bengal for territory and the demand for Pakistan as well. Taylor Sherman’s analysis of Muslim conceptions and claims

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> King, *One Language, Two Scripts*; Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics* and Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940* for more details on Hindi language movements in UP and the development of anti-Muslim sentiment within nationalist discourse.

<sup>20</sup> Bajpai, *Debating Difference*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

of belonging in Hyderabad after the departure of the British from the subcontinent indicates that some sections of the Muslim population in Hyderabad suggested it was politically necessary to align themselves with ‘those in power’ (the Congress), in order to ‘secure a future for Muslims’ in the state.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, rather than associating themselves with ‘minority’ politics and acting as spokesmen for ‘Muslim interests’, Congress Muslim candidates in Hyderabad restricted themselves to dealing with broad ‘questions of democracy and development’, and some Muslims chastised explicitly Muslim organisations for involving themselves in politics, regardless of the stance taken by these organisations.<sup>23</sup> Muslim ‘minority politics’ were undoubtedly regarded with unique suspicion due to the view that they had resulted in the creation of Pakistan.

These observations set up significant and comparable contexts for this article’s exploration of the ways in which claims made on the basis of ‘minority rights’ shifted during the transition from colonial rule to independence. This article seeks to provide a different perspective on a period of South Asian history that was marked by the conflation of language and territory. Given the high incidence of internal migration within India today, it is important to trace the ways in which linguistic minorities historically made claims upon the state and mobilised themselves to demand specific rights.

### **Bengali-Biharis During the Period of Colonial Constitutional Reform (1935–39)**

The issues between Bengali speakers in Bihar and their Hindi- and Urdu-speaking counterparts simmered for most of the early twentieth century, with Bengalis claiming discrimination against their community (due to the strict rules regarding domicile certificates) and other Biharis bemoaning the preponderance of Bengalis in service. In order to cement their position within Bihari society, Bengalis in the province began making explicit claims of belonging based on historical settlement in the province. The tensions between the Bengali speakers and other Biharis continued to rise through the first Congress ministry (elected in 1937 after the constitutional changes brought about by the Government of India Act), which resulted in an inquiry conducted by the Congress, led by senior Bihari Congressman Rajendra Prasad. Nonetheless, this period of late colonial rule was significant in the development of specific rhetoric regarding Bengali narratives of belonging in Bihar to bolster their claims.

Relations between the Bengali community and the Congress quickly deteriorated after the election when it became clear that Congress leaders and newspapers produced under the party’s aegis were largely unsympathetic to Bengali demands to abolish domicile certificates.<sup>24</sup> The Congress in Bihar was dominated by the same class of

<sup>22</sup> Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India*, p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Congress Contemporary on the Warpath’, *The Behar Herald* (henceforth *TBH*), 10 February 1937, p. 2.

elite Hindi speakers (Kayasths, Bhumiya and Rajputs) who had objected to the preponderance of Bengalis in services throughout the previous decades, and largely opposed Bengali demands.<sup>25</sup> As Bengalis in Bihar were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Congress Party, they turned to the government to protect their interests. The Government of India Act of 1935 was greeted with ambivalence. Particularly galling to many Indian politicians were the powers given to governors of provinces, which allowed them to veto decisions taken by elected representatives in the provincial assemblies. One of the prerogatives given to the governors was the ability to override any legislation deemed to be harmful to minorities within the provinces.<sup>26</sup>

In April 1937, in an address presented to the Governor of Bihar, Maurice Hallett, the Bengali Association of Gaya identified Bengalis as a vulnerable minority and relied on the Government of India Act to claim that as ‘the Crown’s representative’, the Governor had a ‘special responsibility’ to ‘protect minorities’.<sup>27</sup> Given the multiplicity of Bihar’s linguistic groups, Bengalis in the Gaya organisation presented their linguistic group as another, inherently Bihari minority that deserved protection. The address went on to object to the domicile laws stating, ‘the rules as to the grant of certificate of domicile in this province have of late become more stringent than absolutely necessary and the procedure extremely harassing and sometimes frustrating the very object for which the certificate is applied’.<sup>28</sup>

The formation of Bihar was accompanied by a strong focus on the ancient glories of the province which included the dissemination of histories surrounding the imperial Guptas and Mauryas.<sup>29</sup> Bengali-Biharis particularly emphasised the connection between Bengalis and Bihar that was rooted in an ancient past, stating, ‘The connection of the Bengalies as a race with the area now constituted as the Province of Bihar dates back from long before the days of the Mohammedan conquest. The stone inscription in some of the temples here, the traditions current and the pages of history bear this fact amply out’.<sup>30</sup> This claim of an ancient connection was at odds with narratives presented by certain sections of the Hindi-speaking elite who rarely included Bengalis in their historical narratives of Bihar’s past apart from discussing the ways in which Bengal had oppressed the region.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Damodaran, *Broken Promises*.

<sup>26</sup> *The Government of India Act, 1935*, [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1935/2/pdfs/ukpga\\_19350002\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1935/2/pdfs/ukpga_19350002_en.pdf) (Accessed on 23 May 2023), p. 194.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Address to be presented to His Excellency the Governor by the Bengali Settlers Association, Gaya, *Appointments Department*, Proceeding B, File Number 2M/86/37, June 1937, BSA, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> See Chakravarty, ‘Provincial Pasts and National Histories’, for an analysis of the significance of the development of ‘Bihari’ histories after the separation of the territory from Bengal.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Address to be presented to His Excellency the Governor by the Bengali Settlers Association, Gaya’, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> See Sinha, ‘The Present Financial Condition of Behar and Orissa’, p. 395, for comments of a renowned Bihari politician on the impact of Bengali rule on Bihar.



The Bengali Settler's Association of Gaya also requested that all appointments to government service be made through a competitive process and suggested that, as 'Bengalies in Bihar depend mostly on service and some of the learned professions only such as law and medicine', the fact that they were not receiving jobs due to their heritage was unfair to the community. They stated that 'efficiency' should be 'the only passport to service' and indicated that these policies were representative of the 'provincialism and communalism' that was 'more or less in evidence' in the province and 'even the system of recruitment to services under the Government' was 'based in some measure at least upon considerations of one or the other or of both'.<sup>32</sup> The language used with regards to 'provincialism and communalism' reflected nationalist rhetoric, usually utilised by representatives of the Congress Party (especially Gandhi and Nehru who often railed against the evils of both). Despite Bengali-Bihari dissatisfaction with the Congress, those who claimed to represent the community continued to place Bengali-Bihari demands within the mainstream discourse of Indian nationalism.

These issues between Bengali-Biharis and other sections of the Bihari population considered to be true 'natives' to the region simmered for several decades. On 13 February 1938, the Bengali Association of Bihar was founded in Patna, under the leadership of a Bihari-Bengali and ex-judge of the Patna High Court, P. R. Das. This association would become one of the main organisations claiming to represent Bengali-Biharis in the province, especially those Bengalis who did not live in the border regions. Although the views of the Bengali Association and *The Behar Herald* were not always identical, in 1938 both the newspaper and the Association fulminated against what they viewed as blatant discrimination against Bengalis in the province, especially with regards to matters around proof of domicile. These issues were deemed so significant that at the Congress Working Committee meeting in February 1938 in Wardha, the High Command decided to launch an investigation into the matter. Issues between those who claimed to be 'true' inhabitants of the region and those considered 'outsiders' grew across India, most famously in Hyderabad, where tensions between *Mulkis* and non-*Mulkis*—those claiming to be historic natives of Hyderabad and those considered to be more recent immigrants from British India—had existed for several decades.<sup>33</sup> Given the fact that there was a great deal of migration between provinces the Congress deemed it necessary to intervene, viewing the Bihar case as useful for setting a precedent as to how to deal with these issues. As a Bihari and a senior Congressman, Rajendra Prasad was regarded as most suitable to lead the investigation into the 'Bengali-Bihari issue' as it came to be known.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Leonard, 'Hyderabad: The Mulki-Non-Mulki Conflict'.

<sup>34</sup> 'Indian Political Notes: Congress High Command at Work', p. 10.

P. R. Das, as the leader of the Bengali Association, was invited to give evidence. He wrote several letters to the Congress high command claiming that the Government of India Act did 'not permit any Provincial Government to make any discrimination whatever as between a Bengali and a Bihari'. In a letter written to the then General Secretary of the Congress, J. B. Kripalani, on 3 April 1938, he detailed numerous cases of Bengalis in Bihar losing opportunities for employment because they had to apply for domicile certificates that took a long time to get approved. Das also alluded to Congress ideals, stating that the 'Indian National Congress has always kept in view that there was one India, one people and one nation and that no distinction whatever can be made between one person or another solely on provincial grounds'.<sup>35</sup> In a second letter, written the next day, he added to his claim that Bengalis of Bihar belonged historically in the province, and asserted that 'Bengalis living in Chota Nagpur are natives of Chota Nagpur and it would be most unjust to call upon them to take out domicile certificates or make any discrimination between Biharis and these Bengalis'.<sup>36</sup> Although he suggested that this region as well as the Santhal Parganas had been a part of Bengal since the time of Akbar, he demanded that they be treated as true inhabitants of Bihar and not outsiders (which the requirement for a domicile certificate implied they were).<sup>37</sup>

This claim of Bengali belonging to the Santhal Parganas and Chhota Nagpur was vehemently denied by *The Searchlight*, a newspaper that was widely recognised to be a mouthpiece of the Congress in the province. A number of articles published in that newspaper asserted that Bengalis were outsiders who had settled in the border regions and had imposed their language on the Bihari inhabitants of the province. Controversy arose around the medium of education in Jharia (a town in the Dhanbad district), with declarations that Bengalis were attempting to 'Bengalicise an admittedly Hindusthani area'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the article published accusations that Bengalis 'hated ... to the utmost' Kurmis in the Manbhum district (a border area that was part of the Purulia subdivision and considered to be largely Bengali-speaking) and had given them 'no facility for education'.<sup>39</sup> The article, by continually referring to Bengalis in that area as 'settlers', heavily implied that they were oppressing the true inhabitants of the area. Interestingly, considering the increasing tensions between Urdu and Hindi speakers across the country, the author of the article stated that Bengalis had 'proclaimed their war on Hindi and Urdu, the lingua franca of India, recognised as such by the Indian National Congress'. Mainstream organisations in

<sup>35</sup> 'From P. R. Das to J. B. Kripalani, General Secretary of the Indian National Congress', 3 April 1938; *Gandhi, M. K. (Pyarelal) XV Instalment*; 'Letters to Mahadev Desai from P. R. Das', p. 5. There are numerous separate documents within the file; the page number refers where the quotation is located within the larger file.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> 'Bengalee Offensive I', *The Searchlight*, 8 December 1938, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> 'Manbhum Kurmis Demand Hindi', p. 3.

Bihar (unlike other regions in the 'Hindi-belt') appear to have folded Muslims into their political coalition, clearly demarcating these upper-caste Bengalis as outsiders despite elite Hindus who controlled these organisations sharing the same religion.<sup>40</sup> Despite these statements from the *Searchlight* and *The Behar Herald's* condemnation of them, *The Behar Herald* nevertheless strongly opposed linguistic reorganisation, claiming that this would contribute to 'communal and separatist tendencies'.<sup>41</sup> This was despite the Congress Working Committee passing a resolution supporting linguistic reorganisation in October 1937.

The investigation into the 'Bengali-Bihari issue' was completed by early October 1938 and the report was presented at the Congress Working Committee session in Bardoli on 13 January 1939. While the report did indicate that Bengalis were a distinct community in Bihar, stating that 'Bengalis in Bihar speak a different language and insist on having Bengali schools', it nevertheless conceded that the necessity of procuring domicile certificates for Bengali-Biharis was unjust.<sup>42</sup> Prasad's report, therefore, recommended the abolition of the system that made domicile certificate mandatory for Bengalis of Bihar stating that '[T]here should be no distinction between Biharis properly so called and Bengali speaking residents of the province, whether natural born or domiciled'.<sup>43</sup> It also stated that while 'All non-Hindustani speaking students should on national grounds be required to acquire at a suitable stage a working knowledge of Hindustani for interprovincial dealings and national work', in regions where Bengali was the predominant spoken language 'the medium of instruction in primary schools [should] be Bengali'.<sup>44</sup>

Despite strong opposition to the report from certain Adivasi figures and from the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Bengalis in Bihar largely expressed satisfaction with the report and even the border districts appeared to accept its conclusions.<sup>45</sup> P. R. Das released a statement that described the conclusions drawn by the report as 'entirely satisfactory' and added that he had 'every reason to think ... the Bengali-Bihari controversy will be a thing of the past'.<sup>46</sup> The Bengali Association later officially ratified his position by passing resolutions demanding the immediate implementation of Prasad's recommendations during a meeting of its Executive Committee in October 1939.<sup>47</sup> Prasad's conclusions even received support from

<sup>40</sup> 'From Pattabhi Sitaramayya to the General Secretary of the AICC'.

<sup>41</sup> 'Provincialism and Linguistic Provinces', p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> 'Report on the Bengali-Bihari issue', p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> See letter from 'Jaipal Singh to Rajendra Prasad', p. 9, for Singh's opinion on the resolution of the Bengali-Bihari issue. Also, see '*Bangali-Bihari somasyar somadhane Congress jatiyatabadi mol*', p. 7 (translated from Bengali) for the response from the Bengal PCC which largely focused on warning the Congress Ministry in Bihar against discriminating against Bengalis.

<sup>46</sup> 'Entirely Satisfactory: Mr P. R. Das's Statement', *The Searchlight*, 15 January 1939, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> 'A report of the proceedings of a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Bengali Association, Bihar', *TBH*, 10 October 1939, p. 14.

Bengalis in the border region of Manbhum where the Congress swept local elections in March.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the lack of speed in implementing the recommendations of the report exasperated several prominent Bengalis in the province, including Jimutbahan Sen, the sole Bengali member of the cabinet. In a letter to Rajendra Prasad written on 9 May 1939, Sen urged Prasad to quickly implement the policies laid out in the report, suggesting that despite their recent success in the election, the Congress in the Manbhum region would be 'reduced to a false position if the Congress Government' did 'not give effect to the award given by the Congress on the Bengali-Bihari issue'.<sup>49</sup> This frustration with the Government of Bihar and pro-Hindi figures in general was reflected in an article published in *The Behar Herald* which claimed that a Sub-Divisional Officer in Manbhum was forcing schools in the area to replace Bengali with Hindi as the medium of education. The article strongly condemned this, especially due to the fact that Prasad's report had promised that education in the mother-tongue would be available to all inhabitants of Bihar.<sup>50</sup>

However, this issue would quickly become side-lined. By November 1939, Congress ministries resigned in protest at the Viceroy's declaration of war on behalf of India. The tensions between Bengali-Biharis and their elite Hindi and Urdu-speaking counterparts continued to simmer despite the dramatic events of the next few years that included the continuing war, the Quit India movement, another provincial election in 1946, the declaration of independence and the partition. Through the 1930s, Bengalis in Bihar had demonstrated that they were more than willing to chastise the Congress for policies they believed would harm their community. The years after independence, however, witnessed a significant shift as the experience of partition and the increasing likelihood of linguistic reorganisation meant that Bengalis in the non-border regions grew wary of putting forth opinions that might indicate their lack of loyalty towards Bihar.

### **A Period of Transition: Bengali-Bihari Navigation of Early Claims Regarding Language in Eastern India (1945–52)**

After the end of the war, it became evident that India would gain independence sooner rather than later. Given the Congress's overwhelming popularity and their success in the 1936–37 elections, it was viewed as inevitable that they would take the reins of power after the departure of the British. However, the Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah also gained significant support, and based their campaign on the demand for Pakistan, a separate country for Muslims. The political mobilisation that accompanied these developments had a significant impact on Bihar. While leaders from the Independent Muslim Party (the party that had won the majority of the Muslim seats in Bihar in 1937) opposed partition, the 1946 elections saw

<sup>48</sup> 'Jila-Board Nirbaachon', p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> 'From Jimutbahan Sen to Rajendra Prasad'.

<sup>50</sup> 'Notes and Comments: Hindi Propaganda in Manbhum', p. 5.

them swept aside in Muslim electorates in the province, and the League emerged victorious. Bihar had been one of the few Muslim-minority provinces where the League had struggled to gain a foothold but the increasing communalisation of the Congress in the province (evidenced by the growing anti-Muslim rhetoric in *The Searchlight*) and the relative lack of funds available to anti-partition Muslims in the province as compared to the League led to a Muslim League victory in the Muslim electorates, which bolstered their claim to represent Indian Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

The election of 1945–46 was widely held to be a sort of referendum on the Pakistan issue, with the Muslim League attempting to demonstrate through its success that most Indian Muslims supported the idea of Pakistan. However, it was an opportunity for some sections of the Bengali population in Bihar to raise their issues with governance in Bihar and the Congress. In the lead up to the elections, an article in *The Behar Herald* alleged that Congressmen, while preaching non-violence, were encouraging attacks on their political opponents. The article stated that the ‘non-violence of the Congress’ was ‘only against the powerful and mighty’, while they used ‘lathis’ against the ‘Communists, Radical Democrats, Hindu Mahasabhaites, and Ambedkarites’ who were ‘numerically insignificant’.<sup>52</sup> In an article written about the state of politics in Calcutta, the article suggested that the Congress had left Bengal to the mercies of the ‘Herbert-Nazimuddin regime’ and given ‘no aid’ to Bengalis.<sup>53</sup>

However, this sentiment was not universally supported by Bengalis in the province of Bihar, and P. R. Das—who remained the leader of the Bengali Association—strongly opposed the anti-Congress stance taken by the article. In a letter to the editor, Das noted that while he had his ‘own quarrels with the Bihar Congress party’, these would not stand in the ‘way of giving wholehearted support to the Congress at the coming elections’.<sup>54</sup> P. R. Das’s assertion gestures to the complex relationship between the Bengali community in Bihar and the Congress as well as the relative lack of cohesion in Bengali-Bihari politics. Nevertheless, Das continued to object to the lack of progress made in implementing the recommendations of Rajendra Prasad’s 1939 report. He stated in a letter to the Premier of Bihar that the Bengali community in Bihar should not be considered a distinct entity apart from the Hindi-speaking residents of the province and that the Bengali-Bihari community ‘raised its voices of strong protest against the irksome and vexatious rules of domicile prevalent in this province’.<sup>55</sup> The letter further claimed that although domicile certificates had ostensibly been abolished, a memo circulated in March 1947 proved that

<sup>51</sup> See Sajjad, *Muslim Politics in Bihar* for details on the political positions taken by Muslim parties in Bihar and the relationships between these parties and the Congress.

<sup>52</sup> ‘The Philosophy of the Bully’, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Calcutta in the Grip of the Congress’, *TBH*, 18 December 1945, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> ‘A Letter from Mr P. R. Das’, *TBH*, 18 December 1945, p. 164.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Letter from P. R. Das Esqr., President of Bengali Association, Bihar to the Hon’ble Prime Minister, Government of Bihar’, pp. 47–48.

domicile certificates were still being used. This memo stated that although ‘No one’ would ‘henceforth be required to file a domicile certificate with his application for appointment or for admission in Government institutions’, nevertheless ‘the appointing authority may at his discretion make an enquiry in such cases and anyone who wishes to avoid this enquiry should obtain a certificate of domicile beforehand’.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the main issue raised by Bengalis in the province had, in effect, not yet been solved.

The experience of partition further transformed Bengali politics in the province. The brutal nature of partition meant that any ‘fissiparous’ tendencies were immediately greeted with suspicion. In 1948, the Linguistic Provinces Commission led by S. K. Dhar was set up to investigate the desirability of the reorganisation of states. The findings were given to the JVP Committee (Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya) who then produced a series of recommendations. While their report indicated that there was ‘some advantage in imparting education, in working the Legislature, and in administration if a large majority speak the same language’, the commission was unwilling to recommend reorganisation as it would ‘bring into existence provinces with a sub-national bias at a time when nationalism’ was ‘yet in its infancy’ and was ‘not in a position to bear any strain’.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the recently partitioned Indian section of Bengal (West Bengal) continued to make vehement demands for all Bengali-speaking territory (as well as other territories where it was less clear what the dominant language was) to be amalgamated with West Bengal.<sup>58</sup> The government, influential politicians and various organisations in that province claimed that West Bengal was entitled to parts of Bihar’s territory, not only due to the fact that there were sections of Bihar where the Bengali language was predominant but also due to the need to house large numbers of refugees flooding into the state from East Bengal after partition.<sup>59</sup>

Due to this, Bengalis in Bihar were viewed with suspicion by some of their Bihar counterparts, who on occasion alleged that Bengali-Biharis supported these claims from West Bengal. Given this atmosphere, to bolster their claims of being truly ‘Bihari’, Bengalis in the province began to express their support for policies viewed as important to the ‘typical’ Bihari, such as elevating the position of Hindi, both to the state language of Bihar as well as the national language of India. On 5 March 1948, a Congress MLA Hari Nath Mishra put forth a resolution

<sup>56</sup> ‘Extracts from Memo no. 1619 of the 13th of March 1947’, in PB No. 4 Bihar, Serial no. 1787, pp. 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Report of Linguistic Provinces Commission* (Government of India Press: New Delhi, 1948), pp. 29–28.

<sup>58</sup> See Franda, *West Bengal and the Federalising Process in India* for an analysis of West Bengal and its demands in the early period of independence.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Memo sent to Pattabhi Sitaramayya 12/10/1949 from B. C. Roy regarding main points urged before the Working Committee and its meeting on 4th October 1949’, pp. 47–48.

to make Hindi the official language in Bihar. Although he conceded that there were several languages spoken in the province, he claimed that ‘all the people of Bihar’ could ‘understand and speak Hindi without trouble’ and that ‘Hindi is one such language which brings together the dissimilar parts of the province in an organised manner’.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, he suggested that all civil servants, both national and provincial, learn Hindi by 15 August 1948. He also made claims regarding the histories of Bihar, stating that an examination of ‘old records’ would prove that no matter who ruled, ‘Hindus or ... Muslims, Bengalis or Santhali or Maithili or Bhojpuri speakers’ the ‘Hindi language written in the Nagari script’ was found.<sup>61</sup>

In rebuke to the implication that as the mother-tongue of Bengali-Biharis was not Hindi, they were not truly Biharis, Bengali MLA Lambodar Mukherjee who represented the constituency of Dumka located in the Santhal Parganas declared his strong support for Mishra’s suggestion. Mukherjee, speaking in Hindi, claimed that ‘Hindi becoming the official language was not just a matter of necessity but a matter of *dharm*’.<sup>62</sup> *Dharm* loosely and popularly translates to religion, but it would appear that he was using the word in the etymological (Sanskrit) sense to denote moving along a more righteous and truer path. He suggested that to properly eradicate British influences, Hindi had to be made the official language. Nevertheless, he did warn the Bihar government against changing the court language in regions where Bengali was the main spoken language, stating,

I also know that in ... Arrah court the judgments could not be given in Bengali, but judgments would have to be given in Hindi. If we did not do this, then no one would listen to our judgments. Similarly, in the Jamtara court we must give our judgments in Bengali and the government must understand this. If the government doesn’t listen to this, then they are not worthy of ruling.<sup>63</sup>

This statement was representative of the complexity in the relationship between many Bengali-Bihari commentators at the time towards the Bihar Congress. There were clear statements of loyalty to Congress aims, but also attempts to secure the rights of Bengalis in the province.

Their relationship came under greater stress after Srish Chandra Banerjee, the MLA who represented the Bengali-speaking border constituency of Baghmundi, voiced demands for greater support for Bengali education in March 1949.<sup>64</sup> This resulted in a furious reaction from pro-Hindi MLAs such as the editor of

<sup>60</sup> ‘Introduction of Hindi as the State Language’, 5 March 1948, *Bihar Legislative Assembly (BLA) Debates 1948*, <http://archives.biharvidhanmandal.in/jspui/handle/123456789/9470> (Accessed on 15th May 2021), p. 16. Legislative Assembly debates were conducted in both Hindi and English in Bihar during this period. All translations into English are mine.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>64</sup> ‘*Sarkar ki Shiksha Neeti*’, 24 March 1949, p. 58.

*The Searchlight* Murali Manohar Prasad who declared that the matter of language in Manbhum was a 'serious question' related to both 'matters of the Indian Union' and Bihar's 'autonomy'.<sup>65</sup> He went on to imply that Bengalis had imposed the language on the region, stating that during the time when 'Bengal and Bihar were one' residents of Manbhum 'were compelled to speak Bengali' as Bengalis 'left no possible path' for them to learn Hindi.<sup>66</sup> He proclaimed that by 'referring to the 80 per cent of people who speak Bengali', Banerjee 'rubbed salt in the wound'.<sup>67</sup> He went on to assert that 'to keep Bihar united' it was 'necessary to learn Hindi in every district'. He ended his speech rather threateningly by suggesting if it had been 'any other government' they would have 'shot these agitators' who were working against the Hindi language.<sup>68</sup> The rhetoric produced an equally sharp reaction from Lambodar Mukherjee who declared that 'every boy has the right to study in his own mother-tongue' and 'if any government claims this should be stopped then I say that this government will become infamous'.<sup>69</sup> While asserting their identity as Biharis during this period, the Bengalis of Bihar were nonetheless willing to express their outrage when the fate of Bengali language in the province was threatened.

Over the next decade, the relationship of Bengalis to what was considered mainstream Bihar politics would change. The hostile rhetoric employed by various political figures in Bihar towards Bengalis alienated the community, especially in the border areas such as Manbhum where Bengali was primarily spoken. There were a series of satyagrahas in these areas that demanded better treatment for Bengalis. Leading politicians severed their links with the Congress, and formed a new party, the Lok Sevak Sangh.<sup>70</sup> This departure of senior Congress politicians from the Manbhum region resulted in significant setbacks to the Congress campaign of 1952 in that area. While the Congress swept the elections in Bihar, they found Manbhum and other parts of the Chhota Nagpur plateau far more inhospitable than the rest of the state.<sup>71</sup> This rejection of the Congress in these regions was emblematic of the divergence between the politics of Bengalis in the areas who were likely to be transferred to West Bengal, and Bengalis in the rest of Bihar who continued to support the Congress. While Bengalis across Bihar had previously expressed sympathy for Bengalis in border areas, Bengalis from non-border regions stopped raising issues regarding education and court languages in predominantly Bengali-speaking areas of the state.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>69</sup> 'Sarkar ki Shiksha Neeti cont.', 25 March 1949, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> 'Letter from Srish Chandra Banerjee, Member of Bihar Legislative Assembly to President of Central PB, All-India Congress Committee', p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> 'Election report', p. 94.



### **The Reorganisation of States: Conflict and Negotiation Between Bihar and Bengal and Its Impact on Bengalis in Bihar (1952–57)**

In 1952 India held its first election based on universal franchise. December of that year witnessed the movement for a state of Andhra (fuelled by the assertion of the independent status of Telugu language) reach its climax, which forced the Indian government to reorganise states along linguistic lines. A States' Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was formed to make recommendations regarding the redistribution of territories. Both Bihar and West Bengal made several claims to territory and produced accompanying narratives to strengthen their respective cases. After it became clear that linguistic reorganisation would occur, both states made a variety of claims on the territory of the other. Bengal claimed large sections of Chhota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas while Bihar demanded northern areas of West Bengal, including Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.<sup>72</sup>

The famously pro-Hindi Congress MLA, and future speaker of the Assembly, Lakshmi Narayan Sudhanshu quickly put forth a resolution against West Bengal's claims, which received widespread support in the Bihar Assembly. He stated that Bengal's claims on the land were based on more recent histories of the 'British era and the Mughal reign', but if one were to examine histories before that they would find that 'Bengal's map was not in this form'.<sup>73</sup> He pointed to the histories of ancient empires that ruled from Pataliputra and claimed that Bengal did not have the same historicity as during this same period it consisted of 'small-small kingdoms' situated 'mostly around Dhaka'. This, he implied, undercut any Bengali claims to territories in the region, as their ascendancy was a recent phenomenon, while Bihar's claims had deeper historical roots.<sup>74</sup>

His resolution received the strong support of Bengali Congress MLA Nirapada Mukherjee who represented the constituency of Monghyr (later, Munger) and reiterated the claims of Bengali belonging in Bihar. He strongly objected to the demands of the Bengali government, suggesting their demand was 'the outcome of their expansionist policy to improve their own condition at the cost of others'.<sup>75</sup> He stated that 'no protection was needed from West Bengal' and that Bengalis in Bihar had long been productive members of the state. He referred to 'eminent Bengali writers' from Bihar such as 'Sarat Chandra Chatterjee reared in Bhagalpur, Sri Balachandra Mukherjee, better known as 'Banafool', of the same city, and Saradindu Banerjee of Monghyr'

<sup>72</sup> *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission* (henceforth SRC) 1955, [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/State%20Reorganisation%20Commisison%20Report%20of%201955\\_270614.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/State%20Reorganisation%20Commisison%20Report%20of%201955_270614.pdf), pp. 171–82.

<sup>73</sup> 'Bengal Bihar Boundary Issues cont.', 12 May 1953, *BLA Debates 1953*, <http://archives.biharvidhanmandal.in/jspui/handle/123456789/169574> (accessed on 26 June 2021), p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> 'Bengal Bihar Boundary Issues cont.', 15 May 1953, *BLA Debates 1953*, <http://archives.biharvidhanmandal.in/jspui/handle/123456789/171030>, p. 6.

who 'did not require protection from Bengal'.<sup>76</sup> This argument was similar to the one developed in the colonial era, which made claims regarding long histories of Bengalis in Bihar. However, while those arguments had primarily been used to object to government policies, this one was used to support the government.

Despite decades of assertions by Bengalis in Bihar that they were being discriminated against, the hostility displayed against Bengalis encouraged them to disown the actions of their co-linguists in border regions and in West Bengal, while supporting the claims made by Hindi-speaking Bihari politicians. This became even more pronounced after the release of the States Reorganisation Report, published on 30 September 1955, and sent to the Lok Sabha and various state Assemblies for debate. The claims from West Bengal were deemed largely unrealistic, with the Commission stating that the linguistic makeup of large parts of the regions they demanded was not sufficiently Bengali-speaking for transfer. The Commission recommended Bihar retain most of the industrial and mineral-rich regions, including Rajmahal, Dhalbhum and Singhbhum.<sup>77</sup> However, the news was not all good for the Government of Bihar. Their claims to Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda, West Dinajpur, Sundargarh, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj in West Bengal were rejected.<sup>78</sup> While it was considerably less than what had been demanded by the West Bengal Government, around 3812 sq. mi holding a population of 1.7 million was recommended for transfer to West Bengal. Dhanbad and its coal would remain in the state, but many in Bihar saw the loss of the mineral rich subdistrict of Manbhum as a blow to Bihar. Additionally, to facilitate more efficient administration of West Bengal, some of the Urdu-speaking region east of the Mahananda River in Purnea (largely Muslim, and a part of Kishanganj) was also to be transferred out of Bihar. This would unite the two non-contiguous sections of West Bengal, and ensure that only a single state would share a border with Pakistan.<sup>79</sup>

The recommendations of the report proved to be relatively unpopular in both states. In Bihar, Amiyo Kumar Ghosh, the Bengali Congress MLA representing Daltonganj (which was located in Chhota Nagpur and multilingual, but not bordering West Bengal), put forth an amendment to 'reject the recommendations of the Commission for the transfer of parts of Manbhum Sadr Subdivision and parts of the Purnea district from Bihar to West Bengal, and to declare that no part of Bihar shall be transferred to it from any other state'.<sup>80</sup> He also indicated that the Commission had not adequately investigated the desires of the people of the regions that were to be transferred and stated that in the parts that will be given to

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>77</sup> *Report of the SRC*, p. 180.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>80</sup> 'Discussions on the Report of the States Reorganisation Commission', 25 November 1955, *BLA Debates 1955*, <http://archives.biharvidhanmandal.in/jspui/handle/123456789/170177> (Accessed on 10 October 2021), p. 5.

Bengal in both Purnea and Manbhum, all the inhabitants' 'kinship' (he used the word *sambandh* which can also loosely be translated to relationship) was 'with Bihar' regardless of whether they were Bengali speakers or not.<sup>81</sup> This use of the term 'kinship' or 'relationship' rather than alluding to histories of Bengali settlement presented a new dimension to the narratives deployed by Bengalis in order to support their positions within the state. It presented Bengali-Biharis as more 'fundamentally' Bihari rather than being outsiders who migrated into Bihar.

He also claimed that of the 55% of Bengali speakers in the Manbhum Sadr, not all were Bengali but 'Bihari Adivasis' and that 'since these people live on the border the language of the other side becomes predominant for a variety of reasons'.<sup>82</sup> Although there was a large Adivasi population in Manbhum, given the parameters for redistribution under the States' Reorganisation Commission, it was unlikely this argument would be effective. The Commission noted that the Purulia region 'had the largest concentration of Bengali-speaking people outside the Bengal region'.<sup>83</sup> The ambiguity in Ghosh's language with the use of the phrase 'variety of reasons' allowed him to reconcile the narratives of Bengalis in Bihar as inherently Bihari—which had been presented since the 1930s by Bengali organisations—with narratives developed by Hindi politicians of Bengalis introducing their language to the region. There is no explicit blame placed on Bengalis in his rhetoric, but there is, nevertheless, the suggestion that several sections of the Bengali population in Bihar were truly more Bihari than Bengali. His rhetoric also served to decouple language and territory, with suggestions that all speakers of a specific language did not necessarily belong to the same community.

This shift towards the use of markedly more conciliatory rhetoric from Bengalis in non-border regions was reflected in the change of tone in articles in *The Behar Herald*. There was a specific emphasis on the importance of ensuring that Hindi became the predominant language in India. In an article published in November 1955, the author applauded Rajendra Prasad's suggestions that 'marks obtained in Hindi in all all-India competitive examinations should be counted in fixing the candidate's position in the list of successful candidates' for government service and that the promotion of Government servants should depend on their attaining proficiency in Hindi'.<sup>84</sup> The author claimed that this would 'deprive Southerners from the undue advantages they have been getting [for] so long because of their better knowledge of English'.<sup>85</sup> This, ironically, echoed the criticism that had previously been directed at Bengalis by their Hindi-speaking counterparts in the province. However, it was evident that most Bengalis in Bihar, particularly those in areas unlikely to transfer to West Bengal, began expressing opinions more in

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, p. 179.

<sup>84</sup> 'Helpful Suggestions', p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

line with mainstream politics in Bihar. The Bengali-Biharis' passionate support for Bihar's claims with regards to the redistribution of territories, while possibly due to true belief in the validity of the demands, also demonstrated a fear regarding their position in the state.

On 23 January 1956, a month after the Lok Sabha debate on the findings of the SRC, in an unexpected turn of events—given the heightened tensions between the states—the Chief Ministers of Bihar and Bengal released a joint statement in Delhi, calling for the merger of their states.

Recent developments in parts of India in regard to the proposals for the reorganisation of the States have caused us and many others profound dismay. Provincial and linguistic feels have been roused to such a pitch that separatist tendencies are imperilling the unity of India.<sup>86</sup>

They went on to suggest that the best solution for their two states was a merger as 'neither the Report nor the Government of India's decision' had 'given satisfaction to the people either of West Bengal or Bihar'.<sup>87</sup> They stressed that as bordering states there had 'to be close cooperation between the two for their mutual advantage' and claimed that there would be little disruption as it 'was not very long ago that Bengal and Bihar were parts of one State'.<sup>88</sup>

This plan was certainly not overwhelmingly popular in either state, which was proved by the subsequent Assembly debates in both Bihar and West Bengal, respectively. Some members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly raised the possibility of Biharis outnumbering them in the new combined state and imposing their 'culture' on West Bengal.<sup>89</sup> Biharis on the other hand suggested that Bengalis would take Bihar jobs due to their higher levels of education.<sup>90</sup> Despite significant qualms from lawmakers in both West Bengal and Bihar's Legislative Assemblies, the merger plan was approved in both Bihar<sup>91</sup> and West Bengal.<sup>92</sup> However, Bengali-Biharis strongly supported the merger plan. An article in *The Behar Herald* praised Sinha and Roy for thinking 'of the good of India rather than their own States'.<sup>93</sup> Another article berated those who criticised the merger on the basis that Bengalis were 'intellectually superior to Biharees', stating that while this

<sup>86</sup> 'Joint Statement of the Chief Ministers of West Bengal and Bihar', p. 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> For debate in West Bengal and the mixed responses to the merger see: 'Response to Governor's Speech', pp. 1–454.

<sup>90</sup> For debate in Bihar and the similarly ambivalent response see: 'Discussion on the Resolution Regarding the Union of the States of Bihar and West Bengal', pp. 28–50. And, 'Discussion on the Resolution Regarding the Union of the States of Bihar and West Bengal (continued)', pp. 18–50.

<sup>91</sup> 'Discussion on the Resolution Regarding the Union of the States of Bihar and West Bengal continued', p. 50.

<sup>92</sup> 'Response to Governor's Speech'.

<sup>93</sup> 'Too Good to Come True', p. 1.

was the case in the early twentieth century, Biharis and Bengalis now had equal access to education and that as they were ‘racially the same people’, there was no question of the two populations having different intellectual capabilities.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the strong support for the merger from Bengali-Biharis, the difficulties in actually developing a plan that would be acceptable to both West Bengal and Bihar meant that the merger was quickly abandoned. It was determined that the transfer of territories from Bihar to Bengal would happen largely along the lines of the recommendations made by the SRC. Bengali-Biharis, while continuing to assert that the merger would have been ideal, returned to opposing the transfer of any territories to Bengal. *The Behar Herald* placed the blame squarely on West Bengal for abandoning the merger plan. In an article published in May 1956, it suggested that this could lead to ‘a rising wave of crime and satyagrahas’, and therefore demanded the ‘ceding of Darjeeling and Kuch Bihar’ as ‘compensation’.<sup>95</sup> Sushama Sen, a Congress Member of Parliament from Bhagalpur South also expressed support for the merger, bemoaning the hostility between representatives of Bihar and Bengal. She stated,

Coming from Bengal as I do, having been born and bred in Bengal and then having stayed in Bihar for forty years—and all my work lies in that area—I find it is very painful indeed for me to hear the charges which are levelled against Bihar and Bengal.<sup>96</sup>

Although she did state that the ‘best solution would have been the merger’, she also objected to the transfer of some territories from Bihar to Bengal.<sup>97</sup> These statements, echoed by a wide range of Bengali-Biharis, indicate that Bengalis in the non-border regions of Bihar expressed strong identification with the state they inhabited rather than their ostensible linguistic homeland. This support for the merger from several Bengali-Bihari figures was representative of the strategies deployed by this community in order to ensure their protection within the state of Bihar. These involved strong support for more linguistically heterogenous states, while simultaneously supporting the claims put forth by the Government of Bihar. Successful claims by the Government of Bihar would have resulted in a more linguistically heterogenous state than the one envisaged by the States Reorganisation Commission and these statements of support also served to demonstrate to their Hindi-speaking counterparts that they were not ‘fifth columnists’ for West Bengal.

### **Conclusion**

This article has analysed the ways in which a group settled away from their linguistic homeland navigated the rapidly changing political landscape during the transition

<sup>94</sup> ‘Inferiority Complex’, p. 217.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Our Reactions to Non-Union’, p. 372.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories Bill) 1956’, 17 August 1956, *Lok Sabha Debates 1956*, Vol. 7, No. 24 (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1956), p. 3639.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

to independence. Bengalis in non-border regions of Bihar, while not a homogenous group, largely claimed their belonging in the state on the basis of long histories of settlement. This position, however, came to be articulated in complex, various and occasionally paradoxical ways by the Bengali-speaking Biharis and those who claimed to represent them. The history of these shifts interestingly paralleled that of Tamils in Sri Lanka who pointed to long histories of settlement within the region (particularly in the Jaffna Kingdom) to bolster their claims to belonging in the country, which in turn supported their objections to the Sinhala-only rules put in place by the government after independence.<sup>98</sup> Linguistic minorities also strongly objected to linguistic reorganisation and implied that linguistically homogenous states would have a detrimental impact on the lives of minorities. Several members of the Sindhi community in the state of Bombay refused to support the creation of separate Marathi and Gujarati states as this would increase ‘provincial’ attitudes, which they feared would translate into prejudice against those who were not members of the majority community.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, there are parallels that can be drawn between Bengali-Biharis and other communities in South Asia, living outside their ostensible linguistic and cultural homelands.

There was also a distinct transformation in the way the Bengali-speaking populace of Bihar made their demands during the colonial rule and later after independence. This mirrored the shifts in the political conduct of many other minority communities (not necessarily solely linguistic ones) in South Asia during the same period. While Bengalis in Bihar did not have to face institutional violence against their community like Muslims in Hyderabad had to after the ‘police action’ of 1948,<sup>100</sup> Bengali-Biharis in the non-border regions reiterated their loyalty in similar ways probably with the intention to ensure they had some representation within the political structures of the state. Large sections of Muslims in Hyderabad did this by reaffirming their support for secularism and Bengalis in Bihar did this by continually claiming that Bengalis were and always had been a part of Bihar society. The growth in the legitimacy of the rather recent idea that language and territory were necessarily related contributed to the changing ways in which belonging was expressed in this part of the world.

Internal migration in India has always been widespread and it is likely that some of the patterns examined here were and are being repeated across the country. While negotiations of belonging by Tamils in Sri Lanka have been explored in

<sup>98</sup> See Sivasundaram, ‘Ethnicity, Indigeneity, and Migration in the Advent of British Rule to Sri Lanka’ for detail on British influence on the differentiation between Tamils (or Malabars as they were categorised by the British) and Sinhala-speaking Sri Lankans. See Siriweera, ‘Recent Developments in Sinhala-Tamil Relations’ for more details of Tamil objections to the Sinhala only policy put in place after the departure of the British from Sri Lanka.

<sup>99</sup> See Falzon, ‘Bombay, Our Cultural Heart’ and Uttara Shahani, ‘Language Without a Land’ for more detail on Sindhi language politics in India.

<sup>100</sup> Purushotham, ‘Internal Violence’, p. 436.

depth, the Madras Presidency encompassed territories that are now a part of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala and Orissa. Similarly, the Bombay Presidency, while not as large as the Bengal one, also housed a variety of different linguistic communities within it. It is unlikely, therefore, that the division of the Bengal Presidency was the only one that created these complexities in identity. Bengalis in Bihar attempted to navigate a period where language and territory became increasingly conflated by making claims on the basis of both their 'Bengali' and 'Bihari' identities and deploying narratives of Bengali 'belonging' in the province for a variety of different, and on occasion, contradictory reasons.

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