

TIF - The Making of India's Linguistic Landscape

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India's linguistic landscape is much too vast and diverse to neatly contain within one clean narrative. Various forces — not just linguistic — have shaped individual languages, leading up to the modern forms we use today.

Wanderers, Kings, Merchants: The Story of India through Its Languages. By Peggy Mohan. Penguin, 2021.

Indian languages have long occupied an uneasy position in Anglophone Indian discourse, idealised for embodying a certain Indianness that is beyond the reach of Indian English. At the same time, the linguistic character, literary traditions, and socio-political identities of these languages — essentially their very components — are scarcely examined in any real depth.

We attach a certain emotional value to the languages we speak but stop short of actively making efforts to understand how they work, beneath the contours of vocabulary and elegant phrasing. We speak these languages but do not respect them as linguistic entities that can be analysed, their moving parts named and described.

In a sense, this omission is unsurprising. Unlike history, linguistics has never found a place in the Indian public sphere, depriving us of a more analytical lens to view our languages through.

In *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants: The Story of India Through Its Languages*, linguist Peggy Mohan sets out on a journey to explore how India's linguistic landscape might have evolved into what it is today: a vast sea of language varieties, a diversity few countries can match. Of India's languages, 31 have over one million speakers, 22 of them have official status under the Constitution, and many trace their literary lineage back to medieval times.

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Underneath all this diversity are certain shared linguistic features across language families, hinting at close social contact between India's ancestral peoples. Features characteristic of one language family can enter members of another almost through osmosis, provided there is sufficient contact over generations. In fact, so many shared features exist, that linguists have even spoken of India as a larger linguistic area (Emeneau 1956). Just as one finds commonalities in culture, cuisine, and clothing across many of India's different regions, their languages too resemble one another in certain core aspects, forming some semblance of larger linguistic unity. However, this linguistic diffusion is rarely a simple process of give-and-take and processes of diffusion can affect different parts of speech differently (Thomason 2001).

Living markers of cultural identity

Wanderers, Kings, Merchants is structured as multiple chapters focusing on individual language communities in a certain era and region, each with its own inference and story, almost like a set of case studies. These chapters are thematically distinct, from Vedic Sanskrit to Delhi Sultanate era Hindavi to Nagamese and Indian English in modern times; but rely on a larger narrative to tie them together by drawing comparisons between these different stories: the narrative of migration and settlement as a process of putting down roots in the land, and becoming "Indian" by becoming part of its larger linguistic landscape.

Mohan's exploration of the Indian linguistic landscape is rooted in a deep reverence for the immense social value Indian languages hold, and the history hardcoded into them. (She herself is part Indo-Trinidadian, from a community that migrated from rural north India to the Caribbean around a century ago. Her PhD (in 1978) was on Trinidad Bhojpuri, a local variant of the language Indo-Trinidadians brought from India to their new home in the West Indies.)

It is no easy feat for a specialist to explain these linguistic concepts to a general audience, especially one completely unfamiliar with the subject at hand.

As the book progresses, the reader is presented with new ways to think of how languages work, and how languages are defined by their social context, just like their speakers. A basic familiarity with concepts, a necessity in such an endeavour, is imparted to the reader early on with admirable clarity. It is no easy feat for a specialist to explain these linguistic concepts to a general audience, especially one completely unfamiliar with the subject at hand. Diagrams supplement these explanations, and maps display the occurrence of specific features.

Through Mohan's writing, the drab abstractions of the science of language usage become living markers of cultural identity, a stark contrast from the dense, impenetrable language that characterises much of linguistic writing. Mohan's prose is rich in imagery and metaphor and gently guides the reader through her own journey, drawing them in with the gratifying joy of connecting the dots and seeing larger patterns around them, in places not readily apparent otherwise. As the narrative flits from place to place, stretching through one era and skipping through another, Mohan intersperses it with interludes of observations and her own life experiences, adding extra colour and context.

The book starts with arguably the most contentious topic in Indian language discourse: the origins of the Sanskrit language, following in the wake of prehistoric migrations to northwest South Asia from the Central

Asian steppes. Mohan examines a class of consonants called retroflex consonants, “produced with the tip of the tongue curled upwards” (as, for example, in Indian English ‘time’). These consonants are preserved in Vedic Sanskrit recitations, passed down orally over millennia by Brahmins, but are not found in Sanskrit’s cousins in ancient Greece or Iran. However, they are abundant in the Dravidian languages of modern peninsular India and are traceable back to the earliest stages of Dravidian (Krishnamurti 2003) — tantalising evidence of ancient language contact from Sanskrit’s early days.

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Using this as a springboard for examining the ways the linguistic and social collide, Mohan traces how retroflex consonants likely entered Vedic Sanskrit, as descendants of the mostly male Vedic-era settlers intermarried with local peoples over the centuries. This episode largely sets the tone for the rest of the book, with its focus on migration as a catalyst of significant linguistic change. The following chapters expand on this, highlighting historical junctures of social upheaval and change, and describing their linguistic situations.

However, the ambitious, all-encompassing sweep of the narrative is ultimately the book’s biggest weakness. India’s linguistic landscape, across both time and space, is much too vast and diverse to neatly contain within one clean narrative, much less one told in the form of a series of such brief episodes. In attempting to cover this sweeping expanse of time, space, and communities in a short book, Mohan ends up compromising on both depth and nuance.

While she draws from research findings, layers of speculation are added onto this kernel, connections that are more her own than established through research. In other words, the book jumps to convenient conclusions that fit its attempted narrative, rather than pursuing a line of inquiry and then shaping its arguments accordingly. Many connections drawn across chapters are tenuous, stretched out for the purpose of thematic cohesion, such as the strange assertion that the social contexts behind the emergence of both Nagamese and Malayalam are somehow comparable and analogous. This also has the unintended effect of lessening the impact of each individual episode, by de-emphasising what makes it unique.

The limitations of a single narrative

In not attempting to dig deeper, Mohan misses out on an entire body of ever-growing scholarship on how language identities, literary traditions, and shared communities across India emerged and took shape. While migration and acculturation were both extremely important social factors in shaping our languages, the role of conscious human agency in identity formation was critical as well.

Just as spoken languages continued to evolve as linguistic entities, their speakers sought to reshape the languages they speak in their own image.

For instance, historians of Indian literature like Sheldon Pollock and Velcheru Narayana Rao have written about how spoken languages were cultivated as literary forms by courts and popular poets, from the early medieval period onwards. In the early modern period, the revolutionary technology of printing allowed Indians to produce and consume texts on a mass scale, leading to the emergence of larger literary consciousnesses. Work by

scholars of modern language identity, including Janaki Nair and Lisa Mitchell, shows how linguistic nationalism in the 20th century led to the overlap between language communities and political identity, an ideology that informs Indian politics to this day.

Collectively, these works point to how, just as spoken languages continued to evolve as linguistic entities, their speakers sought to reshape the languages they speak in their own image. Different communities in different places and times did in response to their needs and aspirations. By flattening these equations and comparing different outcomes as part of a natural evolutionary process, different social contexts are shown as leading to the same inevitable patterns, in an almost deterministic manner.

Disappointingly, Mohan also does the reader a disservice in not being entirely thorough in her research. Numerous linguistic and historical specifics are inaccurate, leaving holes in arguments that rely on them for their factual basis. For instance, early into the book, she references the absence of voiced breathy stops — a class of consonants including *gh*, *dh*, and *bh*, a linguistically rare set of sounds found almost exclusively in Indo Aryan languages — in Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi as evidence of Dravidian influence, since Dravidian languages lack them.

Examining this claim, however, we find that Sindhi actually does have these sounds (Jain and Cardona 2007), and Balochi and Pashto never had them to begin with since they are not Indo Aryan languages (Masica 1993), but rather, Iranian languages. Immediately, Mohan's enticing argument, reduced from four languages to one, crumbles.

Mohan also uses modern labels when she speaks of historical linguistic entities, anachronistically linking the two.

Elsewhere, she mentions the work of researchers who dispute the authorship of certain Hindavi compositions popularly attributed to Delhi's Amir Khusro (1253-1325 CE) but waves these findings away. She then goes on to characterise the early Delhi Sultanate — a heavily militarised state locked in near-constant warfare — as a period of stability, as an explanation for why the language of vernacular compositions attributed to Khusro is not too distant from modern Urdu.

Mohan also uses modern labels when she speaks of historical linguistic entities, anachronistically linking the two. For example, in one chapter she identifies the language the Delhi Sultanate ruling elite would have spoken with modern standard Uzbek (codified only in early Soviet times). This is akin to using examples from modern American English while speaking of English of the 12th century, with the assumption that nothing has changed in the intervening centuries between Chaucer and JK Rowling. Naturally, this would result in inaccurate conclusions.

Nor are these isolated examples. Mohan's attempted larger narrative relies on these arguments to anchor itself, but many of them do not stand up to scrutiny, leaving it unsteady.

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On the other hand, chapters with subjects closer to Mohan's own academic experience, particularly Indian English and Nagamese, stand out as more solid. By examining how education policy and upward mobility in India

is largely centred around English, Mohan examines the immense social capital Indian English carries, especially as a means for India's elites to wall themselves off. She also looks at variations within Indian English, including the dialect of the Anglo Indians, India's original native English-speaking community. In the process of becoming an Indian language, retroflex consonants found their way into Indian English as well.

Mohan's examination of Nagamese casts light on an understudied language of one of India's easternmost regions, one mischaracterised as a mere pidgin, or a language form stripped of most grammatical complexity to a rudimentary form. Instead, Mohan makes a strong case for looking at Nagamese as an example of a new Indo-Aryan language growing into a community tongue in front of our very eyes, a story repeated over the course of centuries.

Conclusion

Very importantly, *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants* offers the reader a glimpse into why languages deserve closer attention. The book's arguments, including its less formed ones, point to the same truth: migration and acculturation have played a key role in what it means to be an Indian. It offers the reader a glimpse of the rich insights linguistics can offer us — if we choose to examine our languages for what they are.

At the same time, *Wanderers, Kings, Merchants* seems to focus more on painting an idealised, cohesive picture of the Indian linguistic landscape, than on devoting sufficient time and space to explore the various forces — not just linguistic — that have shaped individual languages, leading up to the modern forms we use today. Its insistence on one overarching narrative for such distinct moments in history is a thread that unravels on prodding.

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