

बहुत से विद्वानों का मत है कि जो सेना चंद्रगुप्त के साथ थी वह ग्रीकों की थी। यह बात बिल्कुल असंगत नहीं प्रतीत होती।

जयशंकर प्रसाद (चंद्रगुप्त)

Where the world has not its knowledge held high

सुवात्मान लेताया शकताः परतीके उनीहिए

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मदमूरी डालकुक्क सौंगे लुकुक्कुनतजा चित्तु हार्ल

India is home to 122 distinct languages of which Hindi can claim the greatest number of speakers.

3 LISTENING TO MOTHER

Maya Angelou has said that ‘the ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.’¹

This safe place – does it exist? I don’t know. What I do know is that the illusion must exist. For a person to give her loyalty to the land, to trust those who create and enforce laws, safety is a prerequisite. One essential aspect to this illusion is familiarity: systems functioning as we expect them to, people talking in tongues we understand.

When a friend posted on Facebook that Hindi was his mother while Urdu was his beloved, I understood at once what he meant. A mother tongue, simultaneously soothing and challenging with its elastic grace, is the topsoil of attachment. There are few things as affirming as being able to tap into cultural nuance through words: literature of course, but also dialect, inflection of tone, idiom, being able to interpret silences.

Conversely, there are few things as disorienting as being in a place where you lack the language. Anxiety had crept up on me the first few of times I was in south India where street signs were in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada: all unfamiliar scripts.

The anxiety was difficult to acknowledge since I was not in a foreign country. It was startling, too, for I had not yet started thinking of language as a chariot of power, though I myself inhabited two of the most powerful languages in the country.

Looking back, it is amazing that I should have been so clueless. Mine was the generation that grew up watching advertisements for the Rapidex English Speaking Course. It was ubiquitous: businesses promising English fluency in a matter of weeks. This was

intended as a supplement to regular schooling. Middle-class Indians scrambled to use every bit of influence they possessed to get their wards admitted to 'convents', schools established by English or French missionaries. Affluent parents who resented Christian cultural influences nevertheless strove for admission, and it became lucrative to append 'St' (saint) to any private school's name.

The college I attended was church-run and some of the nuns did not hide their despair at how many girls enrolled to improve their marital prospects. Matrimonial advertisements sometimes included 'convented' among the list of feminine virtues such as 'homely' and 'beautiful'. The word signalled a measure of discipline, a decent education and, of course, English.

Hindi scholar Francesca Orsini observed in a lecture on multilingual education that many Indians talked of their own language as a handicap. The most sought-after schools were those that could help kids overcome this handicap. Some insisted that students speak exclusively in English and petty fines were imposed to ensure obedience. School libraries stocked mainly English books.

Even in multilingual cities like Mumbai, which had aggressive movements for Marathi and against English and Hindi, the suburbs were plastered with advertisements offering 'English' through images of youths dressed in western suits, a laptop or file in their hands. Language was key to jobs.

It was assumed that most Indians would also inhabit a 'home' language, but this was not necessarily true. My own parents had to make a conscious decision not to speak English all the time. Mom says she didn't want us growing up not knowing the 'ka-ki of Hindi', that is, failing to use the correct gendered pronoun. Hindi was best picked up in infancy. And so, Hindi with some inflections of Urdu, or Hindustani as it was called, became my mother tongue. However, since my parents were bilingual, as were my aunts and uncles, English became an equal mother tongue, one that was nourished better through an unstinting supply of literature.

As a child, I failed to understand my classmates' struggles with grammar workbooks. I never had to reach for answers; the knowledge was fused with my bones. It was only after I moved to Mumbai that I confronted my first linguistic hurdle: I did not speak Marathi. Still, I didn't feel quite shut out since the Marathi script is nearly identical to Hindi. I also had a year of Gujarati in school and could read simple sentences. In this way, I always had partial access to the city.

However, in Mumbai, I could no longer take Hindi for granted and that's when I started to pay heed. I would overhear phone conversations and pick out an Avadhi or Purbia accent, and I discovered that listening brought quiet pleasure, like cracking one's knuckles or walking in the sand. The accent broke through my natural reserve. I found myself initiating conversations with strangers, even mock-arguing with vendors just for the pleasure of listening to them talk. There were clues to religion, class, caste and education embedded in accent, but once we got talking, we momentarily transcended our differences. For a little while, we stood on level ground.

Still, it wasn't until I started travelling in rural India that I realised how at home I was in my own language, how out of place in another, and what was at stake.

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There are twenty-two scheduled languages in India; that is, languages listed in the eighth schedule of the constitution. In addition to these, the government acknowledges 19,500 languages and dialects.² Of these, 122 are recognised as distinct languages.³ An independent study, the People's Linguistic Survey of India edited by Ganesh Devy, suggests that 780 languages and 68 scripts are currently in use.

The 2011 census shows that 44 per cent of India identifies as Hindi speaking, but only about 21 per cent, or 257 million Indians, call it a mother tongue.⁴ There are 49 languages embedded within the broad category of 'Hindi'. Ganesh Devy suggests there are at least 65 languages classified as 'variants',

although these are quite different. Someone like me, for instance, has very poor access to Bhojpuri as it is spoken in rural Azamgarh. I cannot sustain the simplest conversations.

In Uttar Pradesh, a state described as the 'Hindi heartland', the imposition of Hindi as a formal language has not been without pain. Bhojpuri and Braj did not wither away and fall off children's tongues like so much deadweight. They've often had to be whipped out of children, with teachers shaming or punishing students for talking like illiterates.⁵

The link between language recognition, language alienation and democratic values is profound. When I started reporting from villages in the 'Hindi belt' (states in north, central and western India where Hindi is the official language), I often needed the help of someone who has been in the formal school system long enough to interpret. This someone had to be willing to interpret, had to have a sufficient Hindi vocabulary to prevent misunderstandings, and also had to have the trust of others in the community. It was a very tall order. Yet this was the order of things, not only for visitors like me but for the state executive and administration. States like Rajasthan have been using Hindi as the sole official language although a significant chunk of their population does not consider it a mother tongue. What this translates into is the state talking to people who cannot talk back.

It is bewildering, even scary, to get a notice from the government or the municipality and not be able to fully comprehend it. These are matters of life and death – being asked for proof of citizenship, procurement of land, tax arrears, warnings to not venture into the forest or into the sea, information about free healthcare, supplementary diets, court summonses. Whoever controls language, controls everything.

Naturally, Hindi speakers have a lot vested in making it *the* language of India, though they have met with vociferous opposition. Soon after independence, a representative did not hesitate to say that, if Hindi were to be the sole official language, the Indian union would have to do without the south. A compromise was reached and the removal of English as an official language

was postponed until 1965. It was assumed that all of India would warm to Hindi and reject English as a colonial vestige. This did not happen, despite 'hectic mobilisations' as described in *Hindi Nationalism*.⁶ An aggressive 'Angrezi hatao' ('Remove English') campaign was matched by anti-Hindi protests. In Madras, there was rioting and arson, and dozens of people were killed by paramilitary forces before the central government backed down.

Other states also resisted the threat of sociopolitical dominance. Pushback came in the form of mandatory signage in regional languages like Marathi, Bengali and Kannada, and a refusal to use Hindi in state communication. In 2017, a conference attempted to unite non-Hindi states to fight 'Hindi chauvinism'⁷ and, in 2018, a Bengali advocacy group advocated against 'Hindi imperialism'.⁸

In other states, Hindi prevailed by denying 'language' status to potential challengers. In 1949, an Adivasi representative had asked that Mundari, Gondi and Oraon languages be included in the eighth schedule; they boasted over 4 million, 3 million and 1 million speakers respectively.⁹ The demand was turned down on the grounds that these languages lacked a written script. There were even attempts to deny Punjabi by calling it a dialect of Hindi, although it was written in three distinct scripts.

Language cannot fail to be a political tool in a federal system of governance and where states are organised along linguistic lines. Bhojpuri, for instance, is a mother tongue for 33 million 'Hindi' speakers, and an additional 6 million in the international diaspora.¹⁰ This is nearly twice the population of the Netherlands and half that of France. Its speakers demand full language status. Successive governments acknowledged the legitimacy of the demand but were slow to act on it because Bhojpuri is linked to a politically coherent region. There has been a long-standing demand for a trifurcation of Uttar Pradesh, by separating the east, west and central districts. If Bhojpuri is elevated to a language equal in status to Punjabi, the demand for a separate state will gather steam.

Adivasi activists have also begun to develop written scripts and compile dictionaries to preserve languages, and scripts may give political self-expression a leg up. The demand for Gondwana, a territorial homeland for Gond tribespeople in central India, emerged during the 1940s, but was denied. To this day, many Gonds don't use languages like Hindi or Marathi. Activists say it is rare to find journalists, government officials, even teachers who can speak Gondi. The language barrier leads to misunderstandings with the government, and primary education remains an uphill task.¹¹

'Officiating' languages complicate the texture of citizenship. In 2000, a new state called Chhattisgarh was finally carved out of central India, but it continued to use Hindi as the state language, even though Chhattisgarhi is a distinct language spoken by over 16 million people. The state has a significant ST population, over 30 per cent, and Hindi is not a mother tongue for any of the tribes. Twenty years have passed. The state website offers information mainly in Hindi, partially in English. There are no toggle buttons for Chhattisgarhi or Gondi.

The same year, parts of Uttar Pradesh were also carved out into a new state, Uttarakhand, which also continues to use Hindi on the grounds that it is understood widely. However, tribes that live in the Himalayan foothills struggle. Travelling in the region, I found that while they may understand what I'm saying, many people in rural hamlets are barely on nodding terms with Hindi. They pick it up in school but lose much of the vocabulary once they retreat into a life of farming, shepherding or labour. This is especially true for women. Yet, when Uttarakhand adopted a second official language, Sanskrit was chosen over and above the claims of languages like Garhwali or Kumaoni, spoken by millions of people in the state.¹²

Sanskrit is claimed as a mother tongue by just 24,821 Indians and is officially classified as 'N', where N stands for negligible.¹³

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In *Hindi Nationalism*, Alok Rai describes language as an intimate possession: something that one possesses in the same measure that one is possessed by, and which is 'tied up with the foundations of one's being'.¹⁴

Hindustani, a colloquial Hindi which was nearer Urdu, was indeed my possession. The Sanskrit-infused version of Hindi taught in school was a burden I bore reluctantly. It was as if the syllabus had been designed to test how far the envelope of comprehension could be pushed. The Hindi of movies, songs, friends, of contemporary poetry and fiction, was like a cosy room with a rug on the floor. Official Hindi was like sitting on a stone floor on cold winter nights.

The problem, as Rai puts it, is that Hindi has always been 'in a state of war'.¹⁵ Until the mid nineteenth century, the words *Hindi* and *Urdu* were used interchangeably, so slender was the difference. Urdu drew upon Braj, Sanskrit, Persian, dozens of 'tongues' that developed concurrently. It also moved up in the world - from a commoner's language, it became a literary language flourishing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In written form, it used Nastaliq, drawing on Persian, which was a court language in Delhi. Those who wanted jobs in administration, even at the lower clerical orders, had to learn the script.

Rai has compared the British decision to extirpate all signs and symbols of 'the old India' to the Nazi treatment of symbols of Jewish influence in Europe. 'The physical locations, the institutions and the relationships, the fabric that sustained and sheltered that world were ripped to shreds.'¹⁶ Key to that fabric was a common language. There had been demands from a section of Hindus who sought state jobs via the Nāgri script, and the government eventually recognised 'Hindi' as a language separate from Urdu. The two were soon locked in 'a bitter complementarity, each matching the extravagant excesses of the other'. Sanskrit was poured into the vessel of Hindi while Urdu-wallas injected more Persian.

In 1943, journalist Makhanlal Chaturvedi warned that forcing Sanskrit into Hindi not only destroyed its natural fluency,

it also lent ideological support to the demand for a separate homeland for Muslims.¹⁷ This was more or less how things played out. With a split tongue, the idea of two people, two nations became an easier sell.

The making of a new Hindi is what Rai calls 'a narrative of intimate destabilisation and dispossession'.¹⁸ It was a dispossession that severed me from my own cultural moorings. My grandfather was an Urdu writer. He could speak Bhojpuri since he was raised in a village, and was formally tutored in English, Urdu, Persian, Arabic. When he joined the freedom struggle and was jailed, he used the time to learn to read and write the Nāgri script. He even began to use some Sanskrit-inflected Hindi words in his poetry. Many of his generation learnt both scripts not just for professional reasons but also to improve cultural understanding and solidarity. However, the Partition of India undid all such efforts.

When it was created, Pakistan chose Urdu as a national language though none of its provinces had a majority of Urdu speakers. It was a refugee language. Meanwhile, in its homeland, Urdu met with greater distrust as the intimate possession of Pakistan. By the 1960s, Indian poet-film lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi complained – in metre and rhyme – that Urdu, while being nominally celebrated, was being treated as the enemy language. In 1967, a communal riot was instigated when the state of Bihar chose Urdu as its second official language, even though it was indeed the second most widely understood language. Anti-Urdu pamphlets were distributed at the time, describing the move as a challenge to the manhood of a new generation.¹⁹

My mother was not taught Urdu in school. She could read and write it, but only ever used Urdu to write letters to my grandmother, who couldn't read anything else. When I was in school, English and Hindi medium schools taught English and Hindi as two major languages. A third language was mandated but most schools chose Sanskrit. Many students, unable to appreciate a language far removed from both experience and aspiration, made up whiny rhymes. A popular one referenced the grammatical grid that we had to mug up:

*Lata, Latey, Lataani
Humko Sanskrit nahin aani
Aani bhi to bhool jaani
Master-ji se maar khaani*

Lata, Latey, Lataani
We will never learn Sanskrit
If we learn, we will forget
The schoolmaster will beat us

Marwari, Mewari, Bheeli, Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Braj – any of these would have been valuable for students who were trying to inhabit a culturally complex state like Rajasthan. However, the idea would not be entertained because these were not considered ‘languages’ at all. Urdu would have been useful because it would teach a new script, and would help heal the wounds of Partition. But schools would not teach it.

Sanskrit, on the other hand, saw concerted attempts at revival. Several universities have Sanskrit departments and there are universities devoted exclusively to it. Regardless of the lack of demand from students, the government has introduced a new law seeking to set up Sanskrit Central Universities. One MP has gone to the extent of declaring that speaking Sanskrit helps control diabetes and cholesterol.²⁰

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Language politics is knotted into origin politics. Origin myths decide who has first claim on bread and stone, cotton and salt. The question of who is from where, translates as who can dispossess whom.

Ancient rulers often claimed descent from the sun or the moon, or claimed a divine right to rule since divinity did not need to respect any geographic claims. Contemporary rulers, while they are not averse to drawing legitimacy from religion, fix their ‘origin’ claim in land – nations, provinces, cities – and language.

In India, the question of the origin of Vedic-Sanskritic ‘Aryans’ is fraught with drama. I used to wonder why it mattered that

ancient Aryans were proved to be immigrants: it was so far back in time that borders had little meaning. However, the Hindutva sense of belonging in India is contingent on being able to reject non-Aryan, non-Sanskrit values as non-Indian. Adherents to the religious-political ideology broadly described as 'Hindutva' point to the 'foreign' origins of Islam and Christianity, and use that to justify the denial of the cultural rights of Muslims and Christians.

They do not deny that forest- or cave-dwelling tribes are indigenous people or 'Adivasi', but the tribes can be persuaded to give up distinct cultural memories and adopt Vedic values. Social scientist M. N. Srinivas first used the word *Sanskritisation* with reference to scheduled castes and tribes adopting upper-caste cultural practices.²¹ This could mean turning vegetarian, praying to new deities, adopting Brahmanical customs like dowry, virgin brides and abstinent widows. The word *Sanskritisation* was used because these changes derive from prescriptive Sanskrit texts.

However, to accept that the Aryans were central Asian animal herders who came to the subcontinent at any point in history would mean that the Sanskritic claim is not much stronger than Turkic, Mongol or Persian claims: all are migrants, give or take a couple of millennia. A lot of energy has therefore been poured into establishing that the Rig Veda, the earliest of the liturgical Sanskrit texts, was composed within the borders of contemporary India.

The Rig Veda refers to the river Saraswati, the existence and location of which have been contested.²² Legend has it that three rivers – Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati – met at Prayag, a point of confluence in eastern Uttar Pradesh. The Saraswati, however, has not been seen for centuries. Scholars suggest that it was possibly confused with the Harahvaiti²³ or Haraxwati, which flowed in contemporary Afghanistan.²⁴

Attempts at positioning the Saraswati within India have gone quite far. A small underground aquifer was declared as evidence of a found 'river'.²⁵ Public money has been pumped into engineering a water body that can be seen to flow, so that it may be described as a river, however diminished.

Being able to claim that Sanskrit originated within the borders of India is important because Sanskrit is a liturgical language.²⁶ It is also the language that codified the varna or caste system, with its hierarchies and rules about access to knowledge and property.²⁷

Laws codified in the ancient Sanskrit texts prescribe not only unequal rights but also unequal punishments. The Dharmasutra of Gautama prescribes that molten tin or lac be poured into the ears of a Shudra found attempting to listen to a Vedic recitation, and if discovered trying to recite the Vedas, to have his tongue cut off, and if he were to memorise the Vedas, to have his body 'split asunder'.²⁸ In another text, the Manusmriti, there are clear instructions about Brahmins being treated as social-spiritual-intellectual superiors. Shudras, the fourth and lowest caste, were not meant to own property.

Dalits (the word can be translated as 'oppressed people') are also called scheduled castes, that is, they are mentioned in the constitution as being historically disadvantaged and therefore eligible for reserved seats in education and electoral constituencies. The Manusmriti states that there are only four castes, but mentions outcastes and *Chandals*. Since no social contact was permitted, it was not envisaged that any learning was possible for Dalits, even by accident.

What was written into law 2,000 years ago continues to be reflected in patterns of asset ownership. The top 10 per cent income bracket within upper-caste groups control 60 per cent of the nation's wealth.²⁹ Besides, a survey conducted by India's National Council of Applied Economic Research in association with the University of Maryland found that 27 per cent of Indians admitted to participating in some form of 'untouchability' such as refusing Dalits entry to their kitchen or not allowing them to use the same kitchen utensils. Reported crime against Dalits increased 44 per cent between 2010 and 2014, and fresh reports of violence emerge daily from all parts of the country.³⁰

Gujarati writer and activist Dalpat Chauhan has a short story called 'Home' where a character who lives on the 'untouchable'

street dreams of a brick house. He daren't build one, even though he has money. He must approach the village council and beg permission, to which the upper-caste response is, 'If they start living in brick houses, where will we live? In a house made of gold?'

The Dalit protagonist is thrown into a panic when he is given permission, after all, with the stipulation that the ceiling be so low, one can touch it by raising one's hand, no windows face the street, no niches or cupboards. He must hire a cart belonging to one of the upper castes and even give up his pet goat as an offering. The day the house is ready, before the family can move in, it is set on fire.

Ideas have a higher chance of survival if the language in which they are embodied survives. The overwhelming emphasis on Sanskrit rather than on other ancient languages like Pali, associated with Buddhist texts, is possibly an indication of which ideas are deemed worthy of perpetuation, and who benefits.

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One of the most telling instances of how discrimination works in the public space is the food culture in India. It is one of the few places in the world where eating meat is described as a negative or 'non', as in *I am non-vegetarian*.

This would be no surprise if an overwhelming majority of Indians were vegetarian, but the opposite is true. Even government data admits that 70 per cent of the country eats meat and eggs. Independent studies suggest the figure is closer to 80 per cent.³¹ Yet, some state governments refuse to serve eggs in the mid-day meals in schools. Meat is not supplied at all, although protein and mineral deficiencies are high. On the other hand, there have been reports from certain schools that meals were discarded because the cook belonged to a scheduled caste.³² Or, that upper-caste cooks were throwing food onto the plates of lower-caste children so as not to come in contact.³³

Scheduled tribes and castes, Muslims, Christians, some Buddhists are traditional meat-eaters. Only a few of the upper castes and Jains are 'pure' vegetarian, yet their culture dominates in government-controlled institutions as well as commercial and public spaces.

Where I grew up, in JK Puram, there were a few Jain families. The community is strictly vegetarian with additional taboos against root vegetables, onions and garlic (they are not vegan, however, and dairy products are consumed by all, including monks, who give up all possessions, even their clothing). Around Navratri, a nine-day religious festival, some Hindus also turn vegetarian. As a child, I remember being told by an adult – not a family member – that we must not eat eggs at this time and not leave onion peel outside the kitchen with the garbage, where anyone could see it. This was not management policy in the township. It was an attempt by a powerful minority to control others' food choices.

In Mumbai, every street corner sells a 'Bombay sandwich'. This is a vegetable sandwich. Many stalls also offer a 'Jain' version, minus onions. Jains form 0.36 per cent of the population. Most Indians, especially most Maharashtrians, eat meat. Yet I have never seen a sandwich stall that sells meat and eggs at the same stall as vegetarian sandwiches. I have never seen a vegan stall: the idea of dairy-free food in the public sphere is not just marginal, it is culturally risky. Veganism disrupts the popular rhetoric of cattle being indispensable, and of the consumption of milk making our relationship with bovines maternal rather than merely pastoral.

The oldest Sanskrit texts refer to the eating of beef. However, sometime between 300 BCE and 300 CE there was a shift; Sanskrit texts began to discourage the eating of cow meat.³⁴ Beef is banned in most Indian states today. Groups that continue to eat beef are among the poorest, least nourished, least equipped to assert cultural rights and, if they do so, are penalised. A college teacher was arrested for writing a Facebook post stating that Santhal Adivasis traditionally ate beef and have a right to continue doing so.³⁵

Meat, and by extension, meat-eaters, are expected to retreat from the public arena, or to occupy it gingerly. Political and quasi-political groups feel emboldened to force chicken shops to shut during Navratri, and the administration does nothing to stop them. The new metro rail system in Mumbai involves intense security checks – handbags through scanners and metal detectors – and guards ask passengers to leave if they happen to be carrying meat or fish, no matter how neatly packaged. I know, because I've been asked.

Beef bans have been in force for decades, but in some states the punishment for killing cattle is now more stringent than for assaulting or raping humans. Some politicians want to make it a capital offence. Muslims have been lynched for just transporting cattle, even if they have the requisite paperwork. Some were lynched on video, yet the culprits were acquitted by the court.³⁶

In my neighbourhood, a store that sold packaged and semi-processed meats stopped selling lamb, sticking only to chicken. I asked why. No answer was forthcoming. I wasn't really expecting one.

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Words shape relationships, including one's relationship with oneself. In an article titled 'What Hindi Keeps Hidden', Sagar, a journalist, wondered why his own sociopolitical awakening came so late, and concluded that the answer lay in the literature of a language infused with Sanskrit and Brahmanical impulses. For dominant castes, it was 'a tool to further their varchasv, or dominance'.³⁷

The dominant narrative is this: Sanskrit is the mother of all Indian languages. Those of us who grew up in India have heard this repeated often. Sanskrit is not presented as a classical or literary language but as a womb from which 'we' had emerged. And how can a mother be challenged, or abandoned?

The narrative continues thus: Hindi is a derivative of Sanskrit. Hindi is spoken by the largest number of Indians. It

must be *the* national language, cleansed of Persian or Turkic words even at the cost of dispossessing its own speakers.

Linguists of repute would disagree that Sanskrit is the 'mother' of all Indian languages. In fact, research suggests that Sanskrit originated in the vicinity of Syria, closer to the cradle of western monotheistic religions.³⁸ Such research is viciously contested though, for it doesn't fit the dominant narrative.

Urdu is the counter-narrative. It looks like Persian and Arabic, but its foundation is Sanskrit. However, unlike its sibling, it is homeless in the land of its birth. It is the second language of Uttar Pradesh but the intimate destabilisation involved in separating Hindi from Urdu means the latter isn't allowed out of its box, which is labelled 'Muslim'.

Middle- and upper-class Muslims who want a mainstream, viable education for their children send them to English or Hindi medium schools, most of which refuse to teach Urdu. Students at Urdu medium schools are almost exclusively Muslims who have little opportunity to interact with children of other faiths. Urdu newspapers are not subscribed to by English or Hindi medium schools and colleges. Urdu is missing from magazine stands at suburban railway stations, and from airport bookstores.

In recent years, scraps of Nastaliq – the name of an old railway station, the title of a Hindi film – began to catch me unawares, and brought me to the verge of tears. I would think of Grandma: how lost she must have felt despite living in the same country, even the same province in which she was born. She was not an immigrant. Yet, she couldn't read instructions at airports, the names of shops, the prices of things. She wouldn't have been able to read a restaurant menu.

She had her own bank account but depended on others to operate it although she *was* literate. I used to wonder why she never went to the bank herself but I envisage it now: not being able to read the forms she was expected to fill in, tellers getting impatient. How bewildered, how isolated she must have felt outside the house. Probably in the house too, given that she was the only one in our family who spoke no English.

Too late! I learnt to read and write Urdu too late for it to matter. Why did I bother at all?

I learnt partly because, after my grandparents died, I began to visit the graveyard and realised that I couldn't read names on headstones. Each visit, I was assailed by regret (so much left undone! unsaid!) and also a kind of shame about being alienated from my own language. For the first time, I began to think of Urdu as 'mine', not as intimate possession but as intimate loss.

Another rude awakening came one afternoon when I went pamphleteering in Delhi. I was part of a group working on changing attitudes to street sexual harassment. We carried posters and pamphlets in English and Hindi. A small crowd gathered, including bearded and white-capped men who seemed genuinely interested. One of them asked for a pamphlet in Urdu.

I was taken aback. It hadn't occurred to me that we should get pamphlets done in Nastaliq. Shamefully, it hadn't struck *me*, whose grandmother had never been able to read anything else. Pamphlets were printed in languages like Bangla or Kannada in other states. But for Urdu, in the heart of the country where this language had blossomed, we had nothing. I saw then how people are destabilised also through being left out of campaigns and the big conversations unfolding around them, through being made to feel as if they are irrelevant.

I began to learn Nastaliq, complaining bitterly all the while about how much instinct and foreknowledge it demands. I longed for the precision of Nāgri. But my desire to grow intimate with Urdu grew in proportion to the hostility it confronted. In Delhi, a wall art project was defaced because it included a couplet in Nastaliq. A mob had threatened to shoot the artists if they didn't paint it over.³⁹ Officials at Panjab University have twice attempted to designate Urdu a 'foreign' language.⁴⁰ The crowning insult came when two members of the Uttar Pradesh state assembly were denied permission to take their oath in Urdu.⁴¹ Another representative, a municipal councillor, was charged with 'malicious intent of outraging

religious sentiment' for taking his oath in Urdu, and was allegedly assaulted by other councillors.⁴²

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Urdu is claimed as a mother tongue by just over 4 per cent of India. The Muslim population is over 13 per cent.⁴³ Clearly, most Indian Muslims are not intimate with Urdu. The conflation of language with religion has damaged both.

Those who can still read it are assumed to be Muslim and treated as if they do not belong. On social media, I noticed a post from a young woman who was reading an Urdu booklet in the metro rail; a co-passenger had said things such as 'these people are Pakistanis'.⁴⁴

I was afraid of similar treatment in Mumbai after I started to learn Urdu. For a year, each time I felt the nip of fear in my heart, I documented it.

Got nervous reading a marsiya by Mir Anis. The thought crossed my mind that if someone gets suspicious, I can show them, because the book is bilingual and the facing page has the text in Devnagri font, along with word meanings.

Found myself worrying about the 'Ishq Urdu' (Love Urdu) badge that I've pinned on my bag. The word Urdu is written in Nastaliq. Turned my bag the other way while passing security at the metro station.

I was afraid to quote a line from an Urdu poem while doing political commentary. I wanted to respond to politicians doing their whirlwind religious tourism campaign by quoting: 'Aise sajdon se Allah milta nahin, har jagah sar jhukaane ka kya faayda' (You do not attain God by bowing your head at every step). I don't know if that would put me in some kind of box labelled 'Muslim' commentator, so I left it out.

Deleted WhatsApp messages, a lot of inspirational quotes in Urdu. I am travelling to Australia and I don't want to be questioned in case I'm picked out for a random check. Can't be seen with anything looking like Arabic.

I am afraid that if I tweet in Nastaliq, it will mark me out as more Muslim. Those who are watching will not comprehend and people are suspicious of, angry at, the things they cannot comprehend.

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When I was little, my grandmother had given me a silver *tabeez* (amulet) inscribed with a verse from the Quran, the Ayat al-Kursi. Grandma said it would keep fear at bay. None of my friends at school ever commented. Amulets were common across faiths. The only reason I stopped wearing it was because the clasp broke and then I put it away and forgot.

I wore it again the year Grandma was dying. I was on my way to see her but en route, I wore the *tabeez* as an artefact of love, not as an article of faith. Work was taking me through Gujarat, which had witnessed an anti-Muslim pogrom a few years before, in 2002. It was disorienting, how familiar this state felt, even though I had never lived here. I could negotiate the cities easier because I could read the text on signboards and walls. I could also read the subtext. There was hostility and sneers directed at '*miya-bhai*', a local term for Muslims. In the middle of a busy textile market, talking to shopkeepers about migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, I froze when I realised that the *tabeez* was still around my neck.

With a subtle gesture, I tucked it out of sight, lest the script give me away as one of 'those people'. People who had been shown their place. People whose homes had been burnt down. Women who had been raped.

The *tabeez* did not keep fear at bay. For years, I would look at it and the memory of my fear would return, and shame at having to hide a token of my grandmother's love. It took another decade for me to look up the translation of the Ayat al-Kursi. Once I knew what it said, I began to understand why people say that it makes you fearless. I don't wear it much but

if I do, I wear it visibly. Because, as much as home is a place of safety, it is also a place where you are visible.

To inhabit a script is to assert one's right to be read, not only by those who are familiar but also those who are not, and thus to be understood. Wherever this right is denied, it forebodes disaffection, even the fracturing of a homeland. Pakistan, for instance, resisted demands that Bangla, used in the eastern provinces, be treated on a par with Urdu. Linguistic hegemony, combined with the political hegemony practised by politicians and army generals in West Pakistan, eventually led to a war that ended with Bangladesh declaring its independence.

Within India too, linguistic conflicts have raged. In Assam, there was resentment of Bangla-speaking outsiders. Being a religious *and* linguistic minority attracts twice as much hostility, so Bengali-Assamese-Muslim was not an identity anyone was anxious to flaunt. It was worn quietly, defensively. Until now.

Nearly a third of the Assamese population is Muslim.⁴⁵ Many Bangla speakers chose to list Assamese as their mother tongue to strengthen their claims of belonging. In recent years, however, a new poetic subculture has emerged called *Miya* (or *Miyah*) poetry.

Miya was originally an Urdu word that meant 'gentleman', but it began to be used as a slur for Bengali Muslims, particularly those who are too poor to mask their identity through dress or education. A group of young Muslims began to write poetry that reclaimed the word. They wrote in multiple languages: English, Assamese and *Miya*, a Bangla dialect with Assamese infusions. Shalim Hussain, who has been translating and sharing the poems on social media, told an interviewer that each dialect offers a unique worldview. 'There are some things in the real world that standard English, Hindi or Assamese just cannot see. For example, the sound an earthworm makes while crawling through the mud.'⁴⁶

This assertion of their community's unique experience and pain caused an unexpected backlash. Police complaints were

filed against Miya poets, who were accused of posing a threat to national security. Newspapers suggested that Miya poetry was a blueprint for the destruction of the Assamese language; television channels debated whether or not the poetry was anti-Assamese.⁴⁷ A senior writer even described Miya as an ‘artificial’ dialect.

A lot of heartburn was on account of the poets writing Miya in the Assamese script. Commentators have pointed out that the crux of the debate was an expectation that language and literature must serve to preserve the dominant Axomiya (Assamese) way of life, and that any deviance is seen as treason.⁴⁸

Deviations of script pose a risk because, in rendering a different worldview into the dominant language, one can force a powerful group to re-examine itself: is it truly that which it claims to be? Is this who it *wants* to be? Is there another way of being?

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English and I are mutual possessions. Perhaps the memory of Sanskrit’s geometrical precision and its accompanying baggage of invisible rivers also lurks somewhere in my being. Hindustani was like a mother’s heartbeat in a foetal ear. Urdu was intimate loss.

Even after I recognised how this loss was effected, and what else I was losing through not learning the script, I held back from a full embrace. As long as it was intellectual or cognitive laziness, I could forgive myself, but once I recognised fear, the loss was no longer acceptable. A beloved needs acknowledgement and shelter, after all, not post-mortem guilt.

Finally, I began to read and write Nastaliq in public spaces. Finding a seat on the train, focusing on the intimate guesswork demanded by the script, fighting the temptation to look up to see if others were staring, setting aside my privileges – being English speaking, Hindi speaking, dressed carefully – that had kept me from being identified as ‘the other’, slowly, I am becoming the possession of my mother’s mother’s mother tongue.

