

Book Review

Majeed, Javed., *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India*

Routledge 2018, 226pp

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George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941) was one of those officer-scholars of the British empire whose achievements are best described by the term 'monumental'. It is not possible to do serious historical work upon the languages of South Asia without reading his Linguistic Survey of India (LSI), published between 1899 to 1927 in 21 volumes. It covers 268 major South Asian languages including their variants. Indeed, if all the varieties are counted, the total comes to 723. The LSI has had tremendous impact on linguistic research in South Asia, on subsequent census reports and on education. In Pakistan, where linguistic research of a historical nature is less in evidence than in India, five of its volumes, dealing with the languages of Pakistan, have been published as Linguistic Survey of Pakistan (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, n.d). While not itself used by many researchers, it nevertheless became the paradigmatic prototype of linguistic surveys undertaken in Pakistan. Thus, when the National Institute of Pakistan Studies at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad facilitated a team from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) to carry out a survey of the languages of northern Pakistan, the model before it was Grierson's LSI. Indeed, I and my colleagues were increasingly impressed by what Grierson had achieved as the five volumes of the Socio-Linguistic Survey of Northern Pakistan took shape before our eyes in the 1990s.

Given the immense significance of the LSI it is rather surprising nobody had undertaken an exhaustive study of it earlier. The reason why this has not happened becomes clear when one reads Javed Majeed's two volumes under review. The sheer enormity of the labour—the 21 volumes by themselves and the even more voluminous correspondence of Grierson to say nothing of other contemporary and later texts—is such that one wonders how Javed Majeed undertook this daunting task. That he did and produced what will prove to be a milestone in linguistic history is a modern-day miracle

for which the only adequate response would be to take off one's hat in salutation. But let us now come to the themes the author engages with in his own—once again one can think of no other word but 'monumental'—study of Grierson's LSI.

The first volume, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India*, deals with the nature of the production of knowledge during the colonial era in India. Grierson was, after all, a civil servant, a member of the Indian Civil Service, whose avowed *raison d'être* was to serve the empire in order to strengthen and consolidate it. His methodology was to send out questionnaires to district officers, again civil servants like himself, to get translations of a text in the language of their area and to answer other questions such as what the natives called their mother tongue. However, Grierson's own point of view, the lens he brought to bear on his analysis of languages, was not rigidly official. He exercised a certain autonomy of thought. An important point of departure from the colonial narrative was the supremacist discourse implicit in the colonial project itself. As Javed Majeed puts it 'he did not fully subscribe to such a supremacist discourse, and, in fact, on one occasion he was seen by senior officials as providing support to Indian nationalism in his work' (p. 70). Grierson's complex subject position, on which the author spends a whole chapter (no. 3) in this volume, is by itself a fascinating study. He was by birth a 'cross-border' figure: as Majeed points out, he came from Anglo-Irish roots. He was also 'Indian', initially on a scholarly level, but Grierson had also 'gone native' in the sense that his own understanding of Indian (especially Hindu) linguistic scholarship was such that he could not but critique the mostly obtuse and ill-informed British attempts to locate all knowledge within their own community. His obsessive concern with the correct pronunciation of Indian languages, which presumably the district officers did not understand nor cared for, is part of his attempt to internalise the norms of

Hindu linguistic scholarship for a deeper understanding of Indian languages. Similarly, Grierson also underlined the inadequacy of the Roman script to transcribe the sounds of the Indian languages accurately. Even the International Phonetic Alphabet, Javed Majeed points out, would not have resolved the difficulties and, of course, it would have been unreadable for the general reader. The sounds themselves, as recorded by the technology of the gramophone, were meant to give the British user of Indian languages an authentic ‘correct’ pronunciation. This, however, did not happen not only because they were difficult to imitate but more so because they were often unintelligible and had to be referred back to the written word—the same which needed the recorded sound in the first place. In short, as chapters 6 and 7 point out in detail, the method of knowledge-production in the LSI is composite rather than of one master-author; tentative rather than masterly and self-reflexive rather than full of colonial authority. Perhaps this is best expressed by Javed Majeed when he says ‘at least at one level, Grierson was humbled by India and he was not afraid to show it’ (p. 233). So, the LSI is not in the model of the language of command; it is in the tentative model of the world of the modest scholar.

In the second book, *Nation and Region* in Grierson’s *Linguistic Survey of India*, the author goes deeper into the question of the implications of Grierson’s being, as it were, ‘humbled by India’. Firstly, while Grierson named many Indian amateur linguists who had helped him in his project to survey Indian languages, he played a major role in giving prominence to linguistic and regional identities. This, however, was a complex process and Grierson mapped languages in ways which conflicted with the cartography of the colonial state in India. So, while the maps of British India divided the Subcontinent into discrete units based on political or historical considerations, the language maps complicated those discrete units by presenting linguistic units instead. In the same way, while the colonial state gave authoritative Anglicised names to languages (Bengali instead of Bangla etc.), Grierson complicated this process of naming by writing local names in addition to the official ones of the same languages. So, the LSI both encourages regional crystallisation and complicates it. This insight leads Javed Majeed to a very crucial point—Grierson’s politics and, more importantly, the language politics of India. The most relevant chapter (no. 5) for this question is about Grierson’s perception of the ‘Indian nation’. As mentioned earlier, Grierson had ‘gone native’ in some important aspects of his world view. And one of these was his belief that the Aryan was the quintessential Indian and all others—especially the Semitic—were foreign. Further, the Aryan was Hindu and the Semitic was Muslim. Surprisingly, Grierson, despite his formidable learning, did not mention that it was Persian, not Arabic, which was the cultural language of elite Muslims in India and that Persian was Indo-European not Semitic. Moreover, most Muslims were, in fact, converts from Hinduism, so just as Aryan as their Hindu counterparts. Nor does Grierson give much significance to the fact that the Aryans too were foreigners in India and that the indigenous people had been

ignored in all dominant narratives. But in these matters Grierson does not go into subtle complexities. In short, for Grierson, Indian languages and linguistics were essentially derived from Hindu, Sanskritic sources and not Dravidian or Semitic (Arabic) ones. This made Grierson a strong supporter of Hindi rather than Urdu and, in the matter of scripts, the Brahmi-based scripts rather than those derived from Arabic. Javed Majeed explains these proclivities of Grierson on the theory that ‘his hostility to one part of Ireland may have translated into hostility against one version of India and his openness to another more circumscribed image of it’ (p. 208). This theory needs substantiation by case studies of other characters with divided loyalties such as G.W. Leitner, T.E. Lawrence, Bernard Shaw and others. And if this turns out to be sufficiently substantiated, it will give us a fresh insight into understanding complex, ‘border line’ characters in history. This may be Javed Majeed’s next project.

As I mentioned in the beginning, Javed Majeed’s work on Grierson is as incredible as Grierson’s own achievement. It is significant because it is a pioneering work on colonial epistemology and how personality and personal ideology complicate grand narratives. Moreover, it is the only study so far on the different themes of linguistic history and dialectology—the relationship between varieties of languages and the question of linguistic mapping itself; the power to confer names on languages; the relationship of script to linguistic and social identities; the emergence and hardening of ethno-linguistic and communal identities in India and so on—as well as on the politics and history of India. His use of sources is impressive. Every claim he makes is backed by unpublished and printed sources, most of which have never been used before. The archive generated by the LSI, and it is a huge archive, has been thoroughly mastered, digested and used judiciously to create a narrative which is at once authoritative and definitive. And yet, the books are readable and interesting not only for scholars of linguistic history but also for students of colonial history, education and politics. Indeed, I recommend it to all those who want to understand the nature of knowledge production, identity construction and South Asian studies in general.