

Book review: Riho Isaka: Language, Identity, and Power in Modern India (Gujarat, c.1850-1960)

Mehta, Mona G.

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RIHO ISAKA, *Language, Identity, and Power in Modern India (Gujarat, c.1850–1960)*. Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press, 2023. 206 pages, 3 illustrations, £31.19. ISBN 978-1-0320-1106-6 (pb)

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a much-publicised discourse around the “Gujarat model” came to signify a regional genre of high economic growth combined with Hindu majoritarian politics in India. This discourse imprinted onto the public imagination the idea of a seemingly natural nexus between the region of Gujarat – a state in western India – and a unique cultural politics of economic development. This contemporary discourse is a carefully constructed narrative of the region, whose dynamics are closely tied to a longer history of region-making that goes back at least a hundred years. What were the forces that shaped the making of modern Gujarat as a distinct regional entity and federal unit within India? Riho Isaka’s book uses language as a lens through which to understand the history of this region from the colonial era to the formation of the state of Gujarat in 1960.

The six chapters of the book follow a broad historical chronology, beginning with an overview of the social history of precolonial and colonial Gujarati society and continuing with the emergence of educational institutions and linguistic societies; elite debates about Gujarati language; the role of Gandhi and the nationalist movement; and the political mobilisation that culminated in the creation of a separate state of Gujarat after Indian independence. Together they provide a compelling account of how Gujarat came to be imagined as a distinct linguistic region with concrete political boundaries in the present era. The idea of Gujarat as a region existed well before the advent of British colonial rule but its territorial boundaries remained largely vague, extending to the Bombay Presidency and many princely states. The region’s mercantile ethos was widely identified as a core element of Gujarati identity and prominent figures of the region claimed that Gujaratis were the “children of industry and enterprise” (Tripathi 1958, quoted on p. 4870 in Riho Isaka: *Gujarati Intellectuals and History Writing in the Colonial Period. Economic and Political Weekly*, 2002, pp. 4867–4872). This overarching mercantile tradition was seen to transcend the physical boundaries of the region and extend to a global community of Gujarati traders settled all over the world.

Despite its focus on Gujarat, the book offers critical insights beyond the region that shed light on how language played a central role in shaping modern Indian nationhood. The book builds on the constructivist insights of scholars of nationalism to show the multifarious, contingent and fragile processes of regional identity formation in the context of colonial rule and anti-colonial mobilisation. In contrast to the European idea of one language, one nation as a precondition of modern national identity, Isaka shows that the story of Indian nationalism unfolded quite differently. Faced with a diverse and fragmented linguistic land-

scape, Indians in different regions engaged in heated discussions about cultivating and reforming their mother tongues. These debates about the mother tongue happened in tandem with the colonial introduction of English and also drew on European ideas of national identity and modernity. Nonetheless, Gujaratis interpreted language reform in their own terms, which led to the simultaneous development of regionalism and nationalism (p. 6).

A key theme that runs through the book is the dominance of elites in articulating the linguistic identity of the region. Colonial education created a small class of English-educated Indians, who saw themselves as “mediators between the ruler and the ruled” (p. 48). They adopted a European approach to language that was reflected in the production of dictionaries and the setting up of literary associations such as the Gujarat Vernacular Society. Simultaneously they attempted to revive a “pure” mother tongue that tied into debates about the need to standardise the diverse tongues among the masses. These debates were dominated by upper-caste Hindu and Jain elites, who played the lead role in defining the standard Gujarati language, sidelining other communities, especially the Parsis and Muslims. Although Parsis had played a central role in the fields of education, administration, business and the printing press, their language was deemed “impure”. Similarly, other languages in the region, such as Kutchi and Dangi, were relegated to the status of “dialects” of Gujarati. However, the dominant idea of a pure Gujarati language did not go entirely unchallenged. Jhaverchand Meghani, a literary figure who was steeped in the study of folk literary traditions of the regions of Saurashtra and Kutch, criticised “standard Gujarati” as the tongue of those who belonged to central Gujarat, to the exclusion of other regions.

The chapter on nationalism and language discusses two prominent Gujarati leaders – Mohandas Gandhi and K. M. Munshi – whose distinct and often divergent views shaped the linguistic contours of independent India. Although both recognised the importance of Sanskrit as the “root” or “source” language of Gujarati, they ultimately disagreed on the primacy of Sanskrit with regard to Hindi and Hindustani. Munshi, a revered Gujarati literary figure, eminent lawyer and a key member of India’s constituent assembly, staunchly opposed the infusion of Persian words into Hindi, which was widely spoken in north India as “Hindustani”. He promoted a Sanskritised version of Hindi because he believed it was rooted in a longer cultural tradition of central India, where Indian culture was born and developed. In contrast, Gandhi saw the promotion of Hindustani as integral to promoting the syncretic Hindu-Muslim traditions and the unity of India. With the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, Hindustani had very few takers and Hindi ultimately emerged as the strongest contender for a national language. Gandhi’s inclusive vision influenced a generation of writers considered to be part of the Gandhi *yug* (“era”). Simultaneously, Gujarati society was awed by the likes of Munshi, who wrote of a glorious Hindu past that declined with the coming of “Muslim invaders”.

The last part of the book shows the contingent and unpredictable nexus between language and territorial nationalism as it unfolded in Gujarat. It wasn't until after independence that the idea of a separate linguistic province of Gujarat for Gujarati speakers became a political goal. The earlier standardisation of Gujarati language had not automatically generated or required a concrete physical territory of Gujarati speakers. For all of Munshi's staunch advocacy of his mother tongue Gujarati, he strongly distanced himself from the idea of "linguism", which he described as "intolerant nationalism" (p. 130) that lays claim to a fixed territory based on the language spoken in that area. The present-day states of Gujarat and Maharashtra were part of a united Bombay province of which Bombay city was also a part. Given the city's financial significance and the key role of Gujarati businesspeople in its economy, the plan to break up Bombay province into Gujarat and Maharashtra became tricky. Which state would Bombay city go to? Munshi had always stressed the impossibility of defining Gujarat in terms of territory, and defined Gujarati consciousness as "a local aspect of all-India consciousness" (p. 132). It is therefore ironic that terms like *Gujarat ni asmita* ("Gujarati pride") and *Maha Gujarat* ("greater Gujarat") coined by Munshi ultimately became the rallying call for the political movement to establish a separate linguistic state of Gujarat.

Language, Identity, and Power in Modern India will be essential for scholars interested in exploring how the diverse linguistic landscape of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gujarat continues to have far-reaching influence on the cultural politics of twenty-first century Gujarat. The book is rigorously researched and relies on extensive archival material in Gujarati, English and Hindi. It deftly combines archival research with insightful qualitative interviews and other materials. Given the immense relevance of the book's key themes beyond the regional specificity of western India, it could have reached out to a wider readership by locating this rich historical material within broader theoretical debates about language and anti-colonial nationalism at large.

Mona G. Mehta