



---

## **GEORGE ABRAHAM GRIERSON AND THE DIVISIVE ROLE OF THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA**

**Ilyas Husain, Assistant Professor**  
**Department of History, Motilal Nehru College (Morning)**  
**University of Delhi**

**Key Words:** Grierson, Linguistic Survey, Hindi, Bihari Hindi, Hindustani

**Abstract:**

The first Linguistic Survey of India was a grand exercise to enumerate various Indian languages. However, the Survey was a departure from the previous linguistic works. While most linguists from J. B. Gilchrist to R. N. Cust agreed that there was a *lingua franca* in north India. This language was, however, sometimes called Hindustani and sometimes Hindi. Grierson divided the language into three categories – Bihari, Eastern Hindi and Western Hindi. This idea of Grierson was proposed when Indian nationalists were struggling to promote the idea of a national language in India.

## **GEORGE ABRAHAM GRIERSON AND THE DIVISIVE ROLE OF THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA**

George A. Grierson is considered another linguist of colonial India. Turner described him as a linguist ‘in the tradition of Sir William Jones, who has given the idea of a primaeval Indo-European language.

<sup>i</sup> Hence Grierson’s work must be seen as the culmination of colonial studies on Indian languages. He learned mathematics at Trinity College. At the college, he also exhibited his interest in Indian languages. After completing his education, Grierson joined Indian Civil Services in 1873 and was posted in Bihar. In 1896, he became the Additional Commissioner of Patna. Due to his long appointments in Bihar, Grierson closely came in contact with various spoken languages of the region. He concluded that Hindi, which was an official language in Bihar, was not the spoken



---

language of Bihar. We know that in 1837 Lord Auckland issued a resolution. With this resolution, Persian was removed from the local administration and courts. Instead of Persian, the Company Raj decided to use local vernacular languages for administration. In a large part of north India, from Bihar to Punjab, Hindustani in Indo-Persian script was adopted as the vernacular of the region. After 1857, a demand was made that Hindustani was not the spoken vernacular of Bihar. Newly educated Bengali intelligentsia and administrators played an important role in making such demands.<sup>ii</sup> Bihar was a part of the Bengal Presidency. Therefore, the demand was accepted and Hindi in Nagari became the local vernacular of Bihar in 1867. Grierson's stay in Bihar, in various administrative positions, influenced his views about the spoken language of Bihar. He concluded that very diverse forms of the language were spoken. This practical experience influenced his study which was published in the form of the Linguistic Survey of India. He conceived the idea that India was linguistically much more divided than it had been presumed earlier. He developed a strong belief that 'there are parts of India which seem to have had each a special Tower of Babel of its own'.<sup>iii</sup> He published his first article 'Notes on Rangpur Dialect' in 1877, in which he described the local language and culture of the people of Rangpur.<sup>iv</sup> His later works focused on the various spoken languages of Bihar.

In 1894, the project of the Linguistic Survey of India was approved by the Government of India. It was the biggest exercise of the Raj to obtain detailed knowledge about Indian languages. In 1898, Grierson was appointed as the Director of the Survey with a special duty to provide direction to the whole exercise. The first task was to prepare an exhaustive list of all languages and dialects, spoken in every district. The second was to collect specimens of all these forms of speech.<sup>v</sup> Then, a careful examination and editing was required to reach a conclusion and to decide the name of the language, linguistic family and sub-family. In itself, the Linguistic Survey of India was a grand and very extensive exercise of the colonial state, the first of its kind. The Survey was planned for a massive part of colonial India. From east to west it covered a vast area from Assam to Baluchistan. In the north, it covered the area from Kashmir to Deccan, including the Konkan region. However, the provinces of Burma and Madras, and the princely states of Mysore and Hyderabad were excluded.<sup>vi</sup>



---

The results of the Survey were published in eleven massive volumes having nineteen parts. The Survey was carried out for thirty years from 1898 to 1928. The findings of the Survey were published from 1903 to 1928. Meanwhile, Grierson also contributed a chapter, ‘Languages of India’, to the Indian Census Report 1921. It is noteworthy that the censuses of India and the Survey were comparatively similar exercises in terms of sheer scale. Whereas censuses dealt only with already known languages of colonial India, the Survey was more extensive and covered spoken dialects also in its ambit.<sup>vii</sup>

The multi-volume *Linguistic Survey of India* runs into about 8,000 pages with information on 179 languages and 544 dialects. These languages and dialects were classified into four distinct language families – the Austric family, the Tibeto-Chinese family, the Dravidian family and the Indo-European family. Some unclassified languages, too, were noted. The mutual unintelligibility of languages was claimed to be the basis of separating them from each other. Nevertheless, mutual unintelligibility was not always a principle put in practice. Grierson, while differentiating various north Indian languages, admitted that ‘mutual intelligibility [or unintelligibility] cannot always be [the] deciding factor, for the consideration [of this factor] is obscured by the fact that between Bengal and Punjab every individual who has received the very slightest education is bilingual.’<sup>viii</sup> If mutual unintelligibility was used as a sole principle, it would be difficult to propose the presence of a large number of languages in north India, as we will observe below in the paper. It was also difficult to claim whether a spoken form might be called a language or a dialect. Indeed, while applying the general rule of unintelligibility, Grierson accepted that the terms ‘language’ and ‘dialects’ could only be used in a very loose way:

In the course of the Survey, it has sometimes been difficult to decide where a given form of speech is to be looked upon as an independent language, or as a dialect of some other definite form of speech. In practice, it has been found that it is sometimes impossible to decide the question in a manner which will gain universal acceptance. The two words ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ are, in this respect, like ‘mountain’ and ‘hill’.<sup>ix</sup>



---

To decide on which family and sub-family a dialect belonged to was also a difficult task. At the frontier of two languages, the spoken dialect may show characteristics of both languages. To decide the grouping of a dialect, hence, was not always scientific but mostly a hypothetical exercise. Grierson recalled many such instances in which the grouping of dialects was difficult. In the introduction, he cited a very interesting example from the Survey itself:

While I was working at Eastern Hindi Dr. Sten Konow was simultaneously working at Marathi. Each working independently, we finally met at the junction point where the curious mixed dialect called Hal<sup>^</sup>bi is spoken. From the point of view of Eastern Hindi, I considered that it was a form of Marathi. On the other hand, Dr. Konow, looking at it through Marathi spectacles, maintained that it was a form of Eastern Hindi. As the last word remained with me, the dialect appeared in the Marathi volume of the Survey, but if it had been put into the volumes for Eastern Hindi, I could not have said that it was wrongly placed.<sup>x</sup>

Besides these classifications, not always scientific but discretionary, the most controversial part of the Survey was on Hindustani or Hindi which had often been seen as the *lingua franca* by other colonial philologists. While accepting the fact that from Punjab to Bengal any person, with very little literacy, could understand and express himself in the language, Grierson argued against it:

It is thus commonly said, and believed, that throughout the Gangetic Valley, between Bengal and the Punjab, there is one language, and one only, Hindi, with numerous local dialects. From one point of view this is correct, and cannot be denied. Hindi or Hindustani is everywhere the language of administration, and is the only medium of instruction in the rural schools...

And yet, when these numerous so-called dialects of this 'Hindi' are examined by the philologist, and when he attempted to group and classify, he is at once confronted by radical differences of idiom and construction. ...To look upon all these as dialects of a single language is as philologically impossible, as it would be, say, to describe German as dialect of English; and hence, in the Linguistic Survey, they have been sorted out,

---



---

according to their grammatical system, into three groups, each of which is given the dignity of language, - Bihari, Eastern Hindi, and Western Hindi.<sup>xi</sup>

Grierson's argument for the division of the presumed *lingua franca* was criticised by nationalist leaders. The argument based on grammatical differences even did not remain uncontested. The Report on the Census of the United Province for 1921 was critical of these observations. The Report stated that 'the difference between speaking to a villager of Gorakhpur and to a junglesman of Jhansi is precisely the difference between speaking to a peasant of Devon and to a crofter of Aberdeen.'<sup>xii</sup> Grierson did not accept such criticism and remained glued to his idea of three languages rather than accept them as various forms of one *lingua franca*. Grierson's observations were seen as a divisive tactic of the colonial state by the nationalists who, under the leadership of Gandhi, were struggling to promote Hindustani as the national language of India. Amazingly, Grierson in the Survey described Hindustani as a dialect of Western Hindi.<sup>xiii</sup> The written forms of Hindustani, in the Survey, were described with their varieties. Thus, Urdu, Rekhta, Dakhini and Hindi were called various 'forms of Hindustani'.

Grierson's arguments on Hindustani were certainly tinged with his biases and opposition to the view that India could have a national language. Hence, he declared India a country of many tongues. Grierson concluded that 'there are parts of India that recall the confusion in the Land of Shinar where the tower of old was built, in which almost each petty group of tribal villages has its own separate language'.<sup>xiv</sup> Grierson's rejection of Hindustani as the *lingua franca* of north India and his focus on India's linguistic diversity had a close relationship with the divisive policies of the colonial state. The Survey was an attempt to demonstrate that India was linguistically divided and hence did not constitute a nation.

---

<sup>i</sup> R. L. Turner, "Sir George A. Grierson" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 4, (Cambridge University Press: Oct., 1941), p. 383. URL <http://www.jstore.org/stable/25221815>.

<sup>ii</sup> Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*,



---

<sup>iii</sup> G. A. Grierson, com. & ed., *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. I (Part I) Introductory (Low Price Publications: Delhi, 1927), p. 21.

<sup>iv</sup> Turner, “Sir George A. Grierson”, p. 383.

<sup>v</sup> E. A. G. [Name of reviewer], “Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. I, Part I by George Abraham Grierson” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 2,(Cambridge University Press: April, 1929), P. 348. URL <http://www.jstore.org/stable/25193895>.

<sup>vi</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. I (Part I), p.47.

<sup>vii</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 25.

<sup>viii</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 22-23.

<sup>ix</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 22.

<sup>x</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 31.

<sup>xi</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 23.

<sup>xii</sup> Cited by Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 23.

<sup>xiii</sup> According to Grierson’s estimate, Hindustani had 18,639,169 speakers within total of 38,013,927 speakers of Western Hindi. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 162.

<sup>xiv</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1 Part I Introductory, p. 193.