From a Symbol of Colonial Conquest to the *Scripta Franca*: The Roman Script for South Asian Languages

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Introduction

On 13 August 2015, it was revealed that Rahul Gandhi, at that time vice-president of the Indian National Congress (INC), used notes in Hindi written in Roman script and not Modern Nāgarī[1] for one of his speeches in the Lok Sabhā, the lower house of the Indian parliament. Apart from criticising his supposed inability to deliver a fluent speech in Hindi and doubting that he had even made the notes himself, some media outlets (cf., e.g., India TV 2015; Zee News 2015) and many Internet users, for instance on Twitter[2], mocked his use of Roman script: "Reads in Roman, writes in Italics[3]. Genetics is a wonderful thing" (Brakoo 2015), "So our dear leader or shall one say the darling of a section of MSM[4] 2, like his Mamma, can't read Nagari script" (Tiwari 2015), or "Reads in Roman & writes in Italics. True son of Italy! [+ laughing emoji]" (Yagyaseni 2015), to quote just a few. Even though the Roman script is omnipresent in In-

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[1] According to the Indian constitution, Devanagari in English (Government of India 2007: 212) and Devanāgarī in Hindi (Bhārat Sarˈkār 2015: 243). While the term Devanāgarī is the official denomination for this script (also according to the International Organization for Standardization), I prefer the term Modern Nāgarī, which clearly distinguishes between its preforms used in manuscripts, e.g. Nāgarī and Nandināgarī, and their standardised variants developed for printing. See also Brandt & Sohoni 2018: 8 for a discussion on the terms Devanāgarī and Modern Nāgarī.

[2] Most Twitter users reacted to the tweet by Gaurav C. Sawant (Figure 1), an employee of India Today (Sawant 2015).

[3] The notes were in capital letters and not italics. The term "italics" is seemingly used here to mock the fact that Rahul Gandhi's mother Sonia Gandhi is of Italian origin.

[4] MSM seemingly stands for "mainstream media".

dia, where it is, among other things, used for English (the official language of the Indian union besides Hindi), some people clearly see Rahul Gandhi's use of it for Hindi as evidence that he is more Italian than Indian, an accusation which is linked to the fact that his mother Sonia Gandhi is of Italian origin. Only 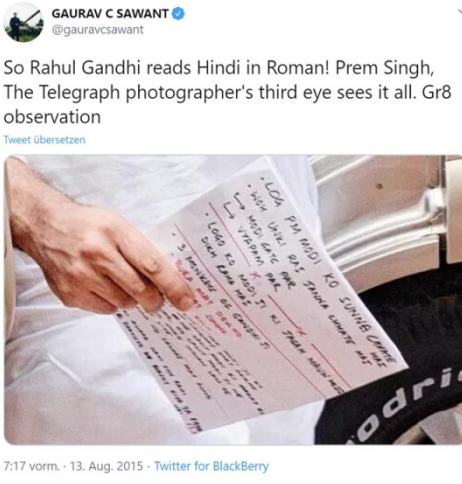a few Twitter users pointed out that the use of the Roman script for Hindi is nothing new, being very common in the past, for instance in the Indian National Army (Tripathi 2015), and nowadays in social media such as Twitter (Das 2015).

Figure 1: One of the many tweets mocking Rahul Gandhi's use of the Roman script (Screenshot).

However, the fact that an Indian politician simply using the Roman script for Hindi is worth a headline and provokes a critical echo in social media illustrates the political potential of the Roman script in contemporary South Asia. Thus, this article will discuss the manifold roles and the communicative and symbolic value of this script in South Asia, especially in India, in the past and present, and the reasons why it is used for South Asian languages to this day. In this context, it is also necessary to illustrate the influence of developments in the field of language and script politics initiated by Europeans during colonial times.

The Beginnings of the Roman Script in South Asia

There are several factors that led to the Roman script being used in South Asia. The most important is doubtless related to the spread of European languages outside of Europe, for instance during the establishment of European settlements and colonialism in South Asia from the end of the 15th century, with the Portuguese Vasco da Gama reaching the Malabar Coast in May 1498. While the various European colonial powers – the British, Danish, Dutch, French, and Portuguese – had different language policies, the introduction of European languages such as English and Portuguese as a medium of administration and education has left a deep

impact in many ways in certain South Asian regions. The fact that, for instance, English is indispensable for administration, education and economy in current South Asian states contributes to the omnipresence of the Roman script in public space and its general acceptance. However, its usage for South Asian languages is, not without reason, often directly linked to the establishment of colonial rule, such as in the case of Konkani in Portuguese dominated Goa.

In Goa, Jesuits introduced Catholicism, the printing press and the Roman script for Konkani in the wake of the establishment of Portuguese political power in this region. In the long run, the nexus between colonial political rule, Christian missionary activities and a new technology, i.e. the printing press, was hence crucial for the emergence of Konkani literature written in the Roman script. Goa was a Portuguese colony between 1510 and 1961, and Jesuits brought the first printing press to the region as early as 1556 (SarDessai 2000: 15), although the first book which contained Konkani in Roman script was printed 'only' in 1622: *Doutrina Christam em Lingoa Bramana Canarim* by the English Jesuit Thomas Stephens (c. 1549–1619) (ibid.: 40). Stephens was also responsible for the first Konkani grammar – *Arte da Lingoa Canarim* – which was edited and expanded by other Jesuits and printed posthumously in 1640 (ibid.: 41f.).

However, even before the printing press could reach South Asia, another South Asian language was printed in Roman script – in Lisbon in 1554: *Cartilha ẽ Lingoa Tamul e Portugues*, a catechism in Tamil and Portuguese (both in Roman script) written by the Tamil Christians Vincente de Nazareth, Jorge Carvalho and Thoma da Cruz (Zvelebil 1992: 151f.). But only a few years later, the Portuguese Jesuit Henrique Henriques (1520–1600), a missionary in the Portuguese-controlled coastal area in the southeast which is now part of the Indian union state of Tamil Nadu, realised that the Christian mission might be more successful not only in the local language but also in its script. Therefore, in 1578, he published the first printed work in any South Asian script, the catechism *Tampirāṉ vaṇakkam* in Tamil in the so-called Tamil script (ibid.: 151), only 24 years after the first Tamil print publication in Roman script. By that time, the so-called Goa Inquisition (1560–1820) had started, mainly targeting converts to Catholicism who were suspected of still secretly practising rituals of their previous religion, but also aimed at members of other religious communities (cf., e.g., Saraiva 2001: 342–353).

One of the main measures of the Goa Inquisition was to control the production of publications in order to suppress any kind of criticism of Catholicism and counter-missionary activities. As a result, Konkani pub-

lications – in Roman or any other script – were prohibited from 1684 onwards (SarDessai 2000: 17) and printing in South Asian languages in general, but especially in other parts of Portuguese-controlled South Asia, suffered a setback. The Portuguese language was enforced in institutions of administration and education, which were predominantly in the hands of the Catholic church (Botelho 2007: 45–53), and it was only in the 19th century that a dynamic Konkani literature could emerge, "[t]hanks to the growing emigration of Goan Catholics to other parts of India especially to Poona and Bombay" (SarDessai 2000: 101ff.). Until then, Hindus in Goa had turned to Marathi and Sanskrit as literary languages, while Christians were exclusively trained in Portuguese (and sometimes Latin), as a result of which Hindu Konkani speakers tend to write their language in Modern Nāgarī and Christians in Roman script to this day. Furthermore, Konkani was and at times still is written in other scripts: in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script by Muslims, in the so-called Kannada script by Konkani speakers living in Karnataka and in the so-called Malayalam script in Kerala (cf. Sarangi 2018). Thus, the Portuguese colonial rulers and their Catholic clergy simply added another script to historically multiscriptal Konkani, which since 1987 has officially only been written in Modern Nāgarī. This state's attempt to enforce monoscriptality is currently vehemently challenged by Konkani speakers who prefer the Roman script for their language (cf., e.g., Times of India 2007). However, this circumstance – the monoscriptality of languages in contemporary South Asia and the dominance of specific scripts – goes back to colonial times when Europeans heavily contributed to the standardisation and homogenisation of vernacular languages and scripts.

The Printing of South Asian Languages in Local Scripts

In those cases, Christian missionaries, who were in many cases also linguists, studied South Asian languages in order to create grammars, dictionaries, textbooks, and/or translations of the Bible. One of these missionaries was the first Protestant missionary in South Asia, the German Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719), a former student of the Pietist theologian and educationist August Herrmann Francke (1663–1727) at the university in Halle an der Saale, Germany. Ziegenbalg and his colleague Heinrich Plütschau (1676–1752) were appointed by the Danish King Frederick IV (1671–1730) in 1705 to spread Christianity among the local population in Tranquebar, a Danish East India Company colony situated on the east coast in the south. Apart from studying the Tamil

language in detail and working on a grammar and a dictionary, Ziegenbalg also carried out translations, for instance rendering the New Testament into Tamil by 1711.[5] In order to reproduce this first Protestant Bible in a South Asian language (in its respective script, the so-called Tamil script) as well as other publications, such as textbooks for schools run by the Protestant missionaries, he asked his supporters and friends in Europe for a printing press (Jeyaraj 2006: 186). By September 1712, a printing press with Tamil and Roman types (the latter also for printing English, German, and Portuguese publications) sent from Halle an der Saale, Germany, reached Tranquebar and Ziegenbalg could print his translation of the entire New Testament in Tamil, in the so-called Tamil script, in July 1715 (ibid.: 188).

Retrospectively, Ziegenbalg's establishment of the press for printing Tamil in its script can be considered one of his most important achievements in South Asia: the beginning of the (re-)emergence of printing in vernacular languages in their scripts. While Ziegenbalg and Plütschau still had to learn Portuguese, the prevailing *lingua franca* among Europeans and Catholic locals in Portuguese-dominated South Asia at that time, Ziegenbalg was seemingly convinced, like Henrique Henriques almost 150 years earlier, that the Christian mission might be more successful in the local language, an approach which most missionaries followed from then on (ibid.: 62–67).[6] Christian missionaries thus became (and often still are) experts in the local languages and the driving force behind the standardisation of South Asian languages and their respective scripts.[7]

This was also the case for the British Baptist missionary William Carey (1761–1834) and the Serampore Mission Press, which he established in Danish-controlled Bengal in 1800. The Eastern Nāgarī or so-called Bengali script had already been published for the first time in 1778, in *A Gram-*

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[5] See, for instance, Jeyaraj 2006 for a comprehensive account on Ziegenbalg and his missionary activities in Tranquebar.

[6] One decisive element behind this approach was also the realisation that the Christian mission was less successful among members of the local elites than among the lower socio-economic strata. The mission in local languages was hence inevitable.

[7] A prime example in this regard is the US-American organisation SIL International (www.sil.org), established in 1934 and previously known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which has contributed widely to the standardisation and preservation of minority languages and whose main aim is to translate the Bible into these languages.

mar of the Bengal Language by the British orientalist and East India Company employee Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (Kopf 1969: 20), but Carey and other foreign Baptists, with the help of local craftsmen and intellectuals, were one of the main driving forces behind Bengali literature being printed in its script (cf., e.g., Ross 1999: 40–73). They were even responsible for the first newspaper in Bengali, the weekly *Samācār Darpaṇ* (1818–1852), and thus vanguards of the vibrant Bengali printing culture in the 19th century (Ahmed 1965: 79–85), an important factor in the so-called Bengal Renaissance and the emerging Bengali and Indian nationalism (Bayly 1996: 241f.).[8]

Figure 2: Serampore College in today's Indian union state West Bengal, established by William Carey and other missionaries in 1818 (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

Even though the main aims of the Serampore Mission Press and the Serampore College (Figure 2), established in 1818, were to promote Christianity among the local population and to translate and print the Bible in as many South Asian languages as possible, Carey and his local and foreign colleagues also published grammars, dictionaries and textbooks for other South Asian languages, and literary works in their original lan-

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[8] See, for instance, Kopf 1969 for an intriguing study on how British Orientalism (including the Serampore Mission Press) influenced the so-called Bengal Renaissance.

guage, including Sanskrit (e.g. *Hitopadeśa* and *Rāmāyaṇa*). But it was the translations of the Bible into modern South Asian languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Telugu, etc. that contributed particularly to "the development of these languages as vehicles of education" (Daniel 2013: 40).

The Standardisation and Fixation of Languages and Scripts

There is no doubt that these printing activities ushered in by European missionaries, orientalists, and colonisers, their contribution to the shift from manuscript to print culture in South Asia, and the introduction of mass education and printed teaching materials during the 19th century contributed not only to the standardisation of South Asian languages and their scripts, but also to the emergence of script as an important factor for identity politics in modern South Asia. That occurred at a time when, in the wake of the spread of printing in South Asia, languages previously written in several scripts were tied to only one specific script. Important examples include Bhojpuri (previously also written in Kaithī), Maithili (previously also written in Tirʹhutā), and Marathi (previously also written in Moṛī), which are today almost exclusively written in Modern Nāgarī. In other cases, too, the multiscriptality of languages was overlooked or ignored and specific scripts given precedence – such as the so-called Tamil script for Tamil, which was previously also written in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script; then referred to as Arwī (cf., e.g., Tschacher 2018).

Additionally, many scripts used for more than one language were ascribed to only one; as a rule, that with the highest number of speakers, such as Eastern Nāgarī being ascribed to Bengali, although it was and still is used for many other languages, for instance Assamese.[9] The International Organization for Standardization plays a controversial role in this process – for instance, listing Eastern Nāgarī only as "Bengali (Bangla)" (International Organization for Standardization 2020). Ultimately, the classification, standardisation and homogenisation of written languages in colonial times were the most important steps for ethnolinguistic identi-

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[9] Other languages which are written in Eastern Nāgarī to this day include Bishnupriya, Chakma, Garo, Meitei and Santali. However, the long literary tradition of Assamese in this script has contributed particularly to a demand by Assamese script activists to call it "Assamese script" (Brandt & Sohoni 2018: 7f.).

ty politics and subnationalism in contemporary South Asia, similar to the rise of language-based nationalism in 19th century Europe (Anderson 2016). Yet, in contrast to Europe, script too became an important cornerstone for identity politics among many ethnolinguistic and religious groups, and even among whole states in modern South Asia.[10]

The Emergence of Script Politics in Modern South Asia

The prime example in this regard goes back to the classification of some scripts as 'foreign', such as the Perso-Arabic script, and others as 'local' and 'authentic', such as the Nāgarī script, which culminated in the fixation of Hindi as we know it today, i.e. Modern Standard Hindi in its script.[11] Since Hindi, the language also known as Dakhanī, Hindavī, Hindustānī, Rextā, and Urdū, emerged in and around the geopolitical centres of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and Moghul Empire (1526–1857) as an amalgam of the local tongue (often referred to as Khaṛī Bolī) and Perso-Arabic vocabulary (due to the omnipresence of the Persian language, the official language of the Muslim rulers), for several centuries it was almost exclusively written – by both Hindus and Muslims – in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script (also referred to as Nastaʿlīq). Only in the 19th century, when Islam and almost everything related to Islamicate South Asia was identified as 'foreign' and not 'authentically' Indian, did local Hindu activists campaign for a more 'authentic' script for this language, which henceforth was to be exclusively referred to as Hindi.[12]

The choice of Nāgarī as *the* 'authentic' Indian script doubtless also goes back to the preference for Nāgarī when printing Sanskrit texts among most European orientalists, such as German Indologists, even though Sanskrit was and still is written in various other scripts (cf., e.g., Grünendahl 2001). The reproduction and increasing spread of Sanskrit texts with religious content in this script with the help of the new technology, the printing press, contributed to the current perception of the

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[10] While the Perso-Arabic script enjoys a high symbolic value in Pakistan, and Modern Nāgarī in India, for Dhivehi, the official language of the Maldives, the unique Thaana script is used.

[11] See, for instance, Brandt 2016 for a comprehensive overview on the separation of Hindi and Urdu. See also Rahul Peter Das' enlightening article "Defining Hindi: An Introductory Overview" (Das 2014), which illustrates the difficulties of defining Hindi in the past and present.

[12] See, for instance, King 1994 for a detailed account of the Hindi movement.

Nāgarī and its official name in the Indian constitution – Devanagari/Devanāgarī.[13] And even though predecessors of Modern Nāgarī and closely related scripts, such as Nandināgarī in the south, were indeed widespread all over South Asia, especially for Sanskrit texts, the exclusive association of this script, first, with Sanskrit and then with the potential national language of the future independent India – Hindi (Figure 3) – not only relegated all other scripts to the status of regional, subnational or even foreign scripts (such as the Perso-Arabic and Roman scripts) but gave Hindi a Hindu veneer which is taken for granted by so-called Hindi and Hindu nationalists in modern India.

Figure 3: Hindi and English on a truck of the India Post (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

Unsurprisingly, when people today criticise Hindi in Roman script and glorify Modern Nāgarī (in such cases obviously referred to as Devanagari/Devanāgarī) they are rarely aware that *both* scripts only gained their current status due to the developments initiated by Europeans in the 19th century.

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[13] The addition of the Sanskrit term *deva* ("god") to *nāgarī*, i.e. "Nāgarī of the gods", in the 19th century is doubtlessly an attempt to give this script a divine aura in contrast to other South Asian scripts. See also Brandt & Sohoni 2018: 8 on this topic.

The Roman Script for South Asian Languages

While, hence, some Europeans contributed heavily to the standardisation and homogenisation of South Asian scripts and their socio-political role today, others were instrumental in the rise of the Roman script for South Asian languages. Apart from already being used for foreign languages of administration such as English and Portuguese, and local languages such as Konkani and Tamil, the Roman script was subsequently also adopted by European linguists and British administrators for other South Asian languages which already had a literary tradition in other scripts. Retrospectively, in many cases, the Roman script was seemingly chosen for pragmatic reasons. On the one hand, while the emergence of printing technology facilitated the cost-effective reproduction and spread of the written word, the manufacturing of letters for new, i.e. South Asian scripts, was a challenge in many ways, and also expensive.[14] On the other hand, the high diversity of South Asian scripts made a comparison of South Asian languages, and languages in general, difficult (cf., e.g., Jones 1787).

The latter case refers especially to grammars, dictionaries, textbooks, linguistic studies, and administrative accounts of the colonised population. In such works, the Roman script was used for individual words, short sentences or quotes in South Asian languages in a running text otherwise written in English or any other European language. Here, another reason must be kept in mind: even today, it is at times difficult to mix different scripts in one text for technical reasons. Furthermore, depending on the readership, not everyone could read every script. And obviously, administrative accounts such as Herbert Hope Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (Risley 1981) were first and foremost meant as a means of understanding and better ruling the colonised population (cf., e.g., Pels & Salemink 1999; Dirks 2001) and not displaying local languages and scripts accurately.

Moreover, linguists also preferred the Roman script as many languages were written in more than one script and, instead of choosing one

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[14] There are various reasons why the manufacturing of letters for South Asian scripts was a challenge: for instance, most South Asian scripts have more characters than the Roman script and in many cases also a high number of ligatures. Not every script can easily be transformed into print. Furthermore, the transition from manuscript to print culture demands the standardisation of the script in general (number of characters, etc.) and of each single letter.

or the other or printing the publication in several scripts (which would have been time-consuming and costly), the Roman script was a welcome compromise. A good example of this is the *Pali-English Dictionary*, edited by Thomas William Rhys Davids and William Stede and published for the first time in four volumes between 1921 and 1925 (Davids & Stede 1994): Pali is written in a host of scripts, depending mainly on the region and time and including the Brāhmī, Burmese, Khmer, Mon, Nāgarī, Sinhala and Thai scripts. The publication of a dictionary in all those scripts was indeed a challenge and the choice of the Roman script doubtless only a logical step given these scholars' background, the technical possibilities at the time and the high communicative value of the Roman script.

Moreover, the Roman script and the International Phonetic Alphabet (based on the Roman script) still enable languages to be compared today, offering greater transparency than if they were reproduced in different scripts. For linguists, scripts are often solely an inconvenient accessory that can change its appearance, while the grammar, vocabulary, etc. are considered to be the essence of the language. But in order to reproduce and compare this essence in a written form as accurately as possible, various systems of transcribing, phonetically representing, and transliterating South Asian languages into the Roman script were developed, for instance the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) and the so-called Hunterian System, based on William Jones's (Jones 1787).

However, there were also several attempts to introduce the Roman script for South Asian languages officially. One of the first was made by the British colonial administrator Charles Trevelyan (1807–1886), who gathered a good number of supporters among his fellow countrymen but also faced opposition by other British linguists, such as James Prinsep (Kurzon 2010: 65f.). The debate was kindled when Joseph Thompson proposed a dictionary for Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani exclusively in the Roman script, later published under the name *An English and Oordoo School Dictionary in Roman Characters* (Thompson 1834; Figure 4).[15] The arguments during this debate for and against the Roman script for South Asian languages in general and for Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani in particular are well documented in the publication "The Application of the Roman Alphabet to All the Oriental Languages" (Trevelyan et al. 1834) and

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[15] Especially in the case of Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani, publications were often in the Roman script, e.g. Nathaniel Brice's *A Romanized Hindūstānī and English Dictionary*, published for the first time in 1880 (Brice 2005).

range mainly from the communicative value of the Roman script to the symbolic value of local scripts.
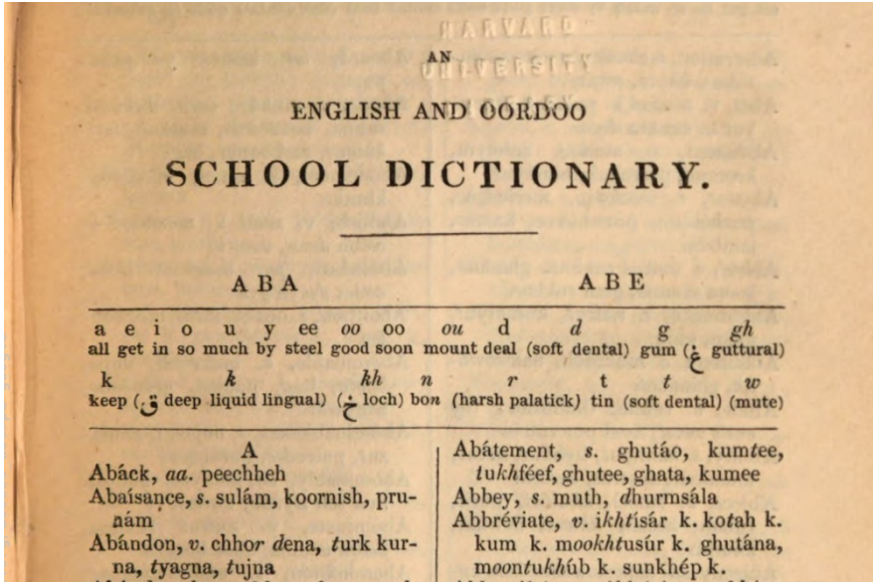

Figure 4: Phonetic explanations on page 1 of the 1845 edition of Charles Trevelan's An English and Oordoo School Dictionary in Roman Characters.

Others followed suit. Thus, several decades later, George Abraham Grierson, a civil servant in British India, responsible for the *Linguistic Survey of India* (published between 1898 and 1928 in eleven volumes), and *the* authority for documenting and classifying languages in British-dominated South Asia in the 20th century, also associated the Roman script with modernisation and favoured this script at least as a second option for all languages throughout British India. Apart from transliterating South Asian languages into Roman script, apparently to make a linguistic comparison between them easier, Grierson also tried to introduce the Roman script into official documents when he worked as a collector, at times comparing this measure with the Mughal Empire and the introduction of the Perso-Arabic script for local languages during that time (Majeed 2019: 111). Obviously, this attitude generates critique today; for instance, Javed Majeed comments on the Romanisation of South Asian languages in the *Linguistic Survey of India* (LSI) (ibid.: 110f.):

> To a certain extent, the LSI is a culmination of British imperial schemes to
> convert Indian languages to a Roman system, in which the latter is an icon

for civilisational superiority and the unifying framework of British rule. Just as British rule can govern India's multiple religious, caste and language communities, so the Roman script can transcend and frame its welter of scripts and tongues.

The Roman Script for Languages without a Written Literary Tradition

This critique could also be extended to activities by Christian missionaries (from various European countries and the USA) among the so-called 'tribal' population in South Asia. While Christian missionaries such as Henrique Henriques, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and William Carey were pioneers in printing South Asian languages in local scripts, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, missionaries targeting ethnolinguistic groups without a written literary tradition still followed their approach by studying the groups' languages in detail and producing religious texts in those languages, but predominantly in the Roman script. On the one hand, due to the lack of any written literary tradition, there was no specific script missionaries could fall back on. On the other hand, instead of opting for any South Asian script, the use of the Roman script for printing those languages was obviously more cost-effective and made it easier for subsequent missionaries from abroad to learn the languages. Today, many of these languages are still written in the Roman script, such as Bodo, Garo, Ho, Mizo and Santali, while in most cases other South Asian scripts are used for them additionally, also officially, and some now even possess unique scripts, mostly invented in the 20th century.

Ultimately, the introduction of the written word (in Roman script or any other) and mass education among these ethnolinguistic groups, often labelled 'tribes', produced formally educated elites among these previously oral societies who realised the symbolic value of script for identity politics and facilitated the invention of scripts for their languages. The prime example in this regard is the invention of the Ol script, the Ol Chiki, for Santali, created by the Santali scholar Raghunath Murmu in pre-independent India (cf. Choksi 2018: 99–103). While Santali was first printed in the Roman script (ibid.: 96f.), it is nowadays also reproduced in scripts used for the dominant languages of administration and education in the regions Santalis inhabit: in the scripts otherwise also used for Bengali (Figure 5), Hindi and Oriya. However, the Roman script is still in use, especially among Christian Santals. The Santali language's visual divide along regional and religious borders is today one of the main rea-

sons why Santal activists campaign for the Ol Chiki, although Santals from the lower social strata are, according to my interviews, very well aware that teaching Santali in a unique script to their children might alienate them even more from the socio-economic competition on the ground (cf. also Lotz 2004: 136f.).
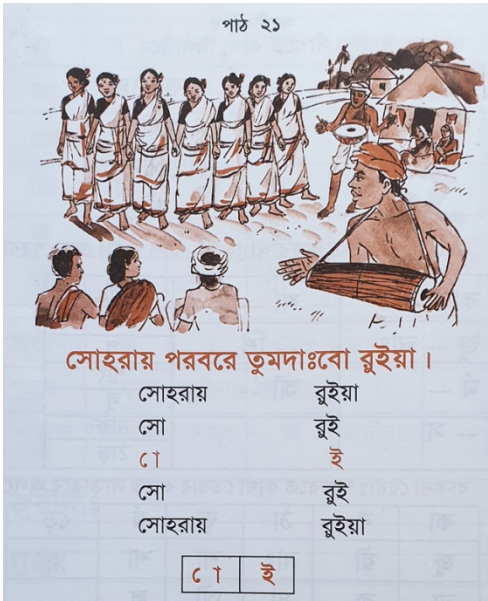

Figure 5: Textbook for Santali in Eastern Nāgarī from Bangladesh (Rah'mān 2001: 50).

However, apart from the attempt to give Santali a homogeneous look, visually unite Santali speakers and create a literary body that Santals from all regions can access, the Ol Chiki also symbolises many Santal activists' demand for their culture to be recognised as equal, i.e. as a "high culture", a proper "nation", instead of others looking down on them as an "uncivilised tribe"[16] without a unique written literary tradition (cf. Brandt 2014: 88f.). After all, the often exclusive fixation of a particular script to a language in South Asia during colonial times contrib-

uted in many cases to the idea that a nation has not only one language but also one script. Therefore, it is understandable that activists among Santals and other ethnolinguistic groups, either with a long or short written literary tradition, lobby for their recently invented, rediscovered, or revived unique scripts and try to shake off scripts associated with other groups, such as Bengalis. In the case of Santali, according to my interviews with Ol Chiki activists in Bangladesh and Calcutta (West Bengal), the 'Bengali' script symbolises the cultural, political and socio-economic dominance of the Bengali mainstream population, while the Roman script is a symbol of Christianity and strongly associated with the loss of their 'authentic' religion and culture in general. The abandonment of

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[16] On the current negative connotation of the term "tribe" see, for instance, Brandt 2018a: 158f.

'borrowed' or 'enforced' scripts is – not just in this case, but in many others – an extremely significant step for the self-assertion of many ethnolinguistic groups in contemporary South Asia (cf., e.g., Brandt 2018b).

Interestingly, in the case of the Bodo script movement in Assam in the 1970s, the Roman script was favoured by Bodo nationalists, also non-Christians, over Eastern Nāgarī, in this case associated with Assamese domination, and Modern Nāgarī, identified with Hindi hegemony (cf. Prabhakar 1974; Sarmah 2014).[17] Especially among ethnolinguistic minorities who lack a unique script,[18] the Roman script has become a welcome alternative to scripts identified with other South Asian ethnolinguistic groups.

In Manipur, too, and even among Meitei Mayek script activists, the Roman script enjoys a more neutral reputation. This was made evident,

Figure 6: Sign for the Roman script matyrs on a wall at the office of the Boro Sāhitya Sabhā in Guwahati (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

for instance, by its usage in the office of the militant script organisation MEELAL (Meetei Erol Eyek Loinasillon Apunba Lup), which was responsible for the State Central Library fire in 2005. When I visited their office in Imphal in 2014, the Meitei term "Luchingpurel MEELAL" (in

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[17] The demand and protests for an official implementation of the Roman script for Bodo was violently crushed by the Assamese state in 1974. Fifteen protesters were killed, whom Bodos, including the members of the Boro Sāhitya Sabhā I was able to interview in Guwahati in 2016, refer today as "script martyrs" (Figure 6).

[18] However, the urge for a unique script among ethnolinguistic minorities seems to be growing, as recent attempts to identify the so-called Deodhai script as the 'authentic' Bodo script illustrate.

English: "MEELAL top leader/chief") was written in Roman script above the entrance of the MEELAL chairperson's room. Obviously, even these militant script activists[19] were aware that not everyone can read Meitei Mayek yet, but instead of using Eastern Nāgarī, for them a symbol of centuries-old Bengali hegemony, they seem to have fewer problems with the Roman script, even though MEELAL officially rejects it.[20]

Figure 7: Signboard in Meitei (in Meitei Mayek), English and Hindi at the Manipur State Museum in Imphal (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

The Roman Script as the National Script of India

A host of conflicts has already been created by the conundrum of phenomena mentioned above: multiscriptality in contemporary South Asia (e.g. Hindi/Urdu, Konkani, Punjabi, Santali, Sindhi, etc.); the exclusive allocation of scripts to only one language, even though it is also used for

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[19] The violent act of burning the State Central Library in 2005, which led to the destruction of thousands of Meitei books and manuscripts written in Eastern Nāgarī, was proudly confirmed by MEELAL members when I talked to them in 2014.

[20] See Brandt 2018b for more details on the Meitei Mayek movement, the official implementation of this script and its omnipresence (cf. Figure 7) in contemporary Manipur.

other languages (e.g. the so-called Bengali, Gujarati, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu scripts, etc.); scripts' function as important identity markers for modern states (e.g. the Perso-Arabic script in Pakistan and Modern Nāgarī in India) or ethnic and religious (e.g. Gurmukhi for Sikhs and Modern Nāgarī for Hindus) groups; as well as the numerous current script revivals (e.g. the Tibetan script for Balti, the Chakma script for Chakma, the Meitei Mayek for Meitei, the Tigalari script for Tulu, etc.) and inventions in the 20th and 21st century (e.g. for Gondi, Ho, Mru, Sora, Wancho, and the Tani Lipi for various languages in Arunachal Pradesh, etc.). At times, these conflicts have even engendered fear and violence (as is the case for Meitei Mayek). Nonetheless, during British colonial times, the idea that there could be a national script for all languages was still prevalent among some intellectuals.

Some even thought that the Roman script could have this kind of integrating role. For instance, the Bengali linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji (cf. Chatterji 1935), who at times worked closely with Grierson (cf. Pattanayak 2001: 66f.), and the civil servant Alma Latiff (cf. Majeed 2019: 118) advocated the Roman script as the official script for all languages, aware that India's plurality of scripts might be an obstacle for national integration after its independence.[21]

Two British linguists, Daniel Jones (1881–1967), the famous phonetician and father of the so-called Received Pronunciation, and John Rupert Firth (1890–1960), also favoured the Roman script as the national script for India. In order to facilitate the precise rendering of the phonemes of all Indian languages in the Roman script, Firth had developed a variant of the Roman script which was intended to be applied to all Indian languages so that speakers could also easily learn to read other languages. In contrast to other linguists and philologists of South Asian languages, Jones and Firth were strictly against diacritics for various reasons. Among other things, Jones was convinced that "every written word should have a definite and distinct form" and that "accents and other marks" cause inaccuracies so that the "outlines [of words] are to some extent blurred" (all Jones 1942: 10). Furthermore, "diacritical marks […] interfere with ease of writing" (ibid.: 10f.) and "often get omitted in writ-

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[21] Interestingly, when Pakistan was confronted with the disintegration of East Pakistan, partly due to the dominant role of Bengali and its script in that part of the state, Ayub Khan suggested in 1958 writing all languages in the Roman script for the sake of national integration (cf., e.g., Ayres 2009: 45; Kurzon 2010: 71ff.).

ing, and confusion consequently arises" (ibid.: 11). For this very reason, Firth had developed additional letters mainly based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). For instance, instead of writing the retroflex consonants with a dot, e.g. *ṭa* and *ḍa*, he suggested the letters ʈ and ɖ (e.g. ibid.: 12). Apart from Hindustani, Firth had already applied this system to Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Telugu (ibid.: 12–16), while Jones, in collaboration with H. S. Perera, developed it for Sinhalese and claimed that the system for Bengali was in preparation (ibid.: 13).

That these endeavours were also supported by locals is evident from the fact that Prafulla Chandra Bhanj Deo, the last Maharaja of the princely state Bastar and, according to Daniel Jones, "the originator of the movement", appreciated "all feasible steps in the direction of introducing a unified alphabet for India", and supported Jones's publication financially (Jones 1942: foreword on the back of the front cover). However, some local politicians preferred vernacular scripts as the potential national script; for instance, Veer Savarkar favoured Modern Nāgarī (which he called "Nagari") as the "national script of Hindudom" (Sharma 2008: 48). Moreover, even though Bal Gangadhar Tilak also said in a speech at a Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā Conference in Benares in 1905 that "the Devanagari alphabet is the best suited to represent the different sounds we all use" (Tilak 1922: 31), he suggested creating a common script based on various local scripts for the sake of national integration (ibid.: 27–33).[22] He also had a strong opinion regarding the Roman script (ibid.: 31):

> The Roman alphabet, and therefore Roman character, is very defective and entirely unsuited to express the sounds used by us. It has been found to be defective even by English grammarians. Thus while sometimes a single letter has three or four sounds, sometimes a single sound is represented by two or three letters. Add to it the difficulty of finding Roman characters or letters that would exactly represent the sounds in our languages without the use of any diacritic marks and the ridiculousness of the suggestion would be patent to all.

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[22] Today, there are still similar initiatives, such as the one by scholars at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Madras who have developed a script called "Bharati" which they want to apply to all Indian languages for the sake of national integration (cf., e.g., www.bharatiscript.com or www.omniglot.com/ conscripts/bharati.htm).

Tilak's perception that the Roman script is not suited to South Asian languages is, among other things, seemingly based on the erroneous and still widespread notion that each character inherently has to represent only one specific phoneme. The fact that in English the diverging pronunciation of single letters seems to be confusing, especially for non-native language users, could presumably be solved by a spelling reform. But in general, any letter or symbol can be identified with any phoneme and even several phonemes. Notably, the Roman script, which is used for most European languages (cf., e.g., Figure 8) and almost countless non-European ones, is the best example in this regard. Nevertheless, Tilak is

Figure 8: The Roman script for various European languages and Urdu and Hindi at the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

right in stating that this might be difficult without additional diacritic marks or new characters which would indeed make it easier to differentiate between similar phonemes, for instance between dental and retroflex consonants. Hence, it is true that Modern Nāgarī, just like many other autochthonous South Asian scripts, consists of more letters than the Roman script and thus seems to render the phonemes more distinctively. But, just as native English speakers do not fail to pronounce written English properly (whatever "properly" means for the diverse variations of the language), neither do Hindi speakers, for instance, have any problems correctly pronouncing colloquial Hindi written in Roman script without any diacritics. Only for non-native speakers who do not have a fluent command of a language is a script whose characters represent more than one phoneme a challenge.

The Roman Script as the Only Official Script for Hindi/Urdu

While the idea of an all-India national script was discussed only by a minority, other politicians considered the Roman script at least as an official option for the potential national language or the *lingua franca*, i.e. Hindi/Urdu. For example, Subhas Chandra Bose was well-known as an advocate for the Roman script, and, in his address as the newly elected president of the Indian National Congress at its 51st session in Haripura in February 1938, he made his stance very clear (Bose 1995: 15f.):

> To promote national unity we shall have to develop our lingua franca and a common script. […] So far as our lingua franca is concerned, I am inclined to think that the distinction between Hindi and Urdu is an artificial one. The most natural lingua franca would be a mixture of the two, such as is spoken in daily life in large portions of the country and this common language may be written in either of the two scripts. Nagari or Urdu[23]. I am aware that there are people in India who strongly favour either of the two scripts to the exclusion of the other. Our policy, however, should not be one of exclusion. We should allow the fullest latitude to use either script. At the same time, I am inclined to think that the ultimate solution, and the best solution would be the adoption of a script that would bring us into line with the rest of the world. Perhaps, some of our country-men will gape with horror when they hear of the adoption of the Roman script, but I would beg them to consider this problem from the scientific and historical point of view. If we do that, we shall realise at once that there is nothing sacrosanct in a script. The Nagari script, as we know it today, has passed through several phases of evolution. Besides, most of the major provinces of India have their own script and there is the Urdu script which is used largely by the Urdu-speaking public in India and by both Muslims and Hindus in provinces like the Punjab and Sind. In view of diversity, the choice of a uniform script for the whole of India should be made in a thoroughly scientific and impartial spirit, free from bias of every kind. I confess that there was a time when I felt that it would be antinational to adopt a foreign script. But my visit to Turkey in 1934 was responsible for converting me. I then realised for the first time what a great advantage it was to have the same script as the rest of the world. So far as our masses are concerned, since more than 90 per cent are illiterate and are not familiar with any script, it will not matter to them which script we in-

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[23] Bose is obviously referring to the variant of the Perso-Arabic script used for Urdu as "Urdu".

troduce when they are educated. The Roman script will, moreover, facili-
tate their learning a European language. I am quite aware how unpopular
the immediate adoption of the Roman script would be in our country.
Nevertheless, I would beg my countrymen to consider what would be the
wisest solution in the long run.

Bose's elaborations amply demonstrate that he favoured scripts' commu-
nicative value over any symbolic value they had, and was convinced of
the integrating and unifying role of the Roman script for an independent
India. His script agenda was pragmatic and typical of socialist visions of
modernity during that time, in which the prosperity of the state and each
of its citizens was more important than adherence to symbols of cultural
identity. Unsurprisingly, the Progressive Writers' Association, an associa-
tion of socialist writers, suggested in its first manifesto (published in the
Left Review in 1936) that the potential national language Hindustani
should officially also only be written in the Roman script (cf., e.g., Majeed
2019: 118; Rockwell 2004: 70). Otherwise, Bose's idea of exclusively
adopting the Roman script for a simplified form of Hindi/Urdu was too
radical for most politicians, and after Bose left for Nazi Germany and
then Japan to revive the Indian National Army there – which, as is well
known, used Hindi/Urdu in Roman script – voices like his vanished
from the public sphere.[24]

The Roman Script as a Third Option for Hindi/Urdu

In opposition to the camps along religious lines which lobbied either for
Modern Nāgarī or the Perso-Arabic script and advocated a clear distinc-
tion between Hindi and Urdu, some members of the Indian National
Congress, such as Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s, were in favour of Hin-
dustani (denoting Hindi/Urdu and/or a simplified form thereof) written

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[24] Interestingly, the official language of Indonesia, Indonesian, a standardised
variant of Malay, is written in Roman script, even though the script can also be
highly associated with the language of the former colonial power there – Dutch.
Moreover, similarly to Hindi, Indonesian is spoken as a first language only by a
minority, but seems to be accepted more widely than Hindi in India. However,
a comparison between Indonesian and Hindi and their roles as official lan-
guages is far more complicated and demands more research. Vietnamese is an-
other example of a national/official language in Asia which is today written in
a variant of the Roman script.

in both scripts for the sake of communal harmony (cf. Lelyveld 2001). Additionally, there were also intellectuals and politicians who considered the Roman script as a third option. For instance, in 1928, the Urdu writer Sajjad Hyder Yildirim (anglicised also Sajjad Haider Yaldram) presented a proposal to the Hindustani Academy to print Hindustani publications not only in Modern Nāgarī and the Perso-Arabic script but also in the Roman script to reach more people; people who understand Hindustani orally but were not able to read one script or the other (Husain 1992: 62–65). According to Khushwant Singh, other supporters of the Roman script as a third option were Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Humayan Kabir, and many others[25] (Singh 2016: 160). However, some of them seemingly did not have a clear or single position on this issue throughout their lifetime, such as Nehru, while Mahatma Gandhi rejected the Roman script for Hindi/Urdu (Jeffrey 2000: 25). Later, during the process of drafting the Indian constitution in 1947, the various voices which had, in previous decades, been raised in favour of writing Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani in three scripts were no longer considered.

Minocher Rustom "Minoo" Masani (1905–1998), representing the Indian National Congress, was one of the few members of the Constituent Assembly of India who still lobbied for the Roman script and objected to the fact that only Modern Nāgarī and the Perso-Arabic script were considered for the future national language. Also Masani favoured the Roman script for the sake of national integration (Masani 1967: 161):

> While those who have received English education may form a small part of our population, the fact remains that lakhs of Indians *are* familiar with the Roman script and those of them, particularly in the South, who are not familiar at the same time with the *Nagari* or Persian script would find it easier to learn the national language and use it if they were able to do so through the Roman script. These considerations apply with special force to members of small minorities like the Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians

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[25] It is not clear how far the other people listed by Khushwant Singh supported the Roman script (Singh 2016: 160): "Other supporters of the Roman script included Dr Zakir Husain, C. Subramaniam, Sardar Hukam Singh, Frank Anthony, Dr P. Subharoyan, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Professor K. Swaminathan, Dr C. Deshmukh and M. C. Setalvad." It is known that, as noted above, Suniti Kumar Chatterji advocated the Roman script as the national script of India, i.e. for all languages (see above), while in-depth research is needed in all other cases.

and Jews who know the Roman script alone. So too the Indian Army has so far been successfully imparted training and education through the medium of "Roman Urdu", which means Hindustani in the Roman script. That is a salutary practice which has made it possible for mixed regiments to be taught the national language without distinction of religion or province.

The rest is history: neither was Minoo Masani's dissent considered, nor was the Perso-Arabic script granted official status for the national language. After all, there is no national language in India, and Hindi (not Hindustani) written exclusively in Modern Nāgarī (except for the numbers)[26] is, besides English, 'only' the official language of the Indian union.[27] Furthermore, in the Indian Army, Hindustani written in Roman script was officially abolished in 1951 (Jeffrey 2000: 25). However, Khushwant Singh had his own opinion on this lost chance to establish a script for Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani which might have been accepted in this form in all regions of India (Singh 2016: 160f.):

Figure 9: Multiscriptal signboard at the Bara Imambara in present-day Lucknow (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

In short, most thinking nationalists supported Roman; only a few cranky chauvinists opposed it. So, dear bhasha-wallahs [i.e. "language national-

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[26] According to the Indian constitution (Government of India 2007: 212): "The form of numerals to be used for the official purposes of the Union shall be the international form of Indian numerals", i.e. the numerals which are otherwise commonly referred to as "Arabic numerals".

[27] Today in India, the Perso-Arabic script can often be seen solely in Muslim-majority areas, historical buildings of Islamicate origin (Figure 9) or Islamic institutions such as mosques.

ists", "vernacularists", etc.], make peace with Angrezi [i.e. "English"]. Drape her in a Banares brocade sari as you would if your son brought home a foreign daughter-in-law. But don't waste your energies fighting against her because she has come 'till death do us part'.

Figure 10: A signboard in the Shree Govindajee Temple in Imphal, Manipur, written in English and Meitei (officially: Manipuri). The latter is written in Meitei Mayek (on top) and Eastern Nāgarī (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

In fact, when English was enshrined in the Indian constitution as the official language of the union (besides Hindi) in 1949, it was meant to have this role for only 15 years. Hindi was supposed to be the sole official language of the union from 1965 onwards. But, due to vehement protest from South Indian union states, especially Tamil Nadu, and their antipathy towards Hindi and its hegemonic status in India, English remains one of the two official languages at the federal level and is widely used all over India, not only for administrative purposes (cf., e.g., Figure 10). Indeed, English has come to stay in South Asia, but especially in India. Apart from it having official status in India, this is most visible in the various spheres in which English plays a dominant role: inside the judiciary system, in higher education, in research institutions, in the various sectors of business, industry and trade, the communication and media sector, in advertisement of all forms, museums, cultural institutions, the Internet, etc.[28]

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[28] See, for instance, Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy 2006 for an overview of the use of English in India in the past and present. See also Pingali 2009 on Indian English.

The Roman Script – The *Scripta Franca* of Contemporary South Asia

And also the Roman script has come to stay. While, for many people in South Asia, it doubtless still has the symbolic value of foreign domination, European colonialism and the Christian mission, at the same time it can, nonetheless, be considered the *scripta franca* of South Asia; the only script that can be read across state, linguistic and religious borders.

This is owing to several factors: first, due to the important role of English as a *lingua franca* in contemporary South Asia and the fact that it is a mandatory subject in schools, at least every formally educated person in South Asia can read the Roman script, even those who do not have a good command of spoken English. Second, new technologies, devices such as computers, mobile phones and their respective software and, above all, the Internet are very important factors. Comparable to the emergence and spread of the printing press, the usability of new media and communication technologies is dominated by the regions of their origin and market orientation. Thus, even in countries where English does not enjoy an official status, people learn English in order to use new technologies. For example, social networks are generally used by many people to network both locally and globally, which often makes the choice of English (and the Roman script) as the language of communication on the Internet a voluntary one. Moreover, due to the unavailability of digital fonts for mobile phone text messages or in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, in some cases people are forced to use either another language or their mother language in another script. In the South Asian context, the obvious choice is then often the Roman script, the *scripta franca* of the subcontinent. Even though nowadays the scripts of all major South Asian languages are certified by the International Organization of Standardization, included in the Unicode Standard and hence available for computing and the Internet (Baums 2016: 800), we still witness the Roman script being used for those languages. This leads us to the third factor: while the current technology might still not permit the straightforward usage of some scripts and fonts,[29] speakers of various South Asian languages, institutions, companies, etc. seem to be aware that they might reach more people not only in social media but also out-

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[29] For instance, even today there are technical problems displaying especially ligatures in social networks, for instance Facebook, even for widely used scripts such as Eastern Nāgarī.

side the Internet when they voluntarily write their language in Roman script. Even though the Roman script might still have the symbolic value of being foreign to South Asia, its high communicative value seemingly outweighs its negative symbolic value on the ground (cf., e.g., Figure 11).

Figure 11: A shop signboard in Old Delhi, written in English in Roman script, Perso-Arabic script and Modern Nāgarī; an evidence that not only the Roman script but also English in other scripts is omnipresent in South Asia (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

For example, in India, where the languages listed in the eighth schedule of the constitution alone are written in 13 different scripts,[30] the Roman script is the only script that can reach the masses in all regions. This is even truer for languages which are written in more than one script and for wide-spread languages, especially when they are spoken only as a second or third language. For both cases, Hindi and Urdu are the prime example.

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[30] These are Eastern Nāgarī (e.g. for Assamese and Bengali), Modern Nāgarī (e.g. Bodo, Dogri, Hindi, Konkani, Maithili, Marathi, Nepali, and Sanskrit), the Perso-Arabic script (e.g. Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Urdu) and the Roman script (e.g. unofficially for Konkani and Santali), Gurmukhi for Punjabi, Meitei Mayek for Meitei (officially: Manipuri), Ol Chiki for Santali, and the so-called Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Tamil, and Telugu scripts for the languages of those names.

The Roman Script for Hindi/Urdu in Contemporary South Asia

Both Hindi and Urdu enjoy special status in the two biggest South Asian states, Hindi as an official language (besides English) at the federal level in India, and Urdu as the national and official language of Pakistan (also besides English). Since they are basically two registers of the same language, varying only in script and vocabulary on formal levels, speakers of Hindi and Urdu have no problems to understand each other orally in everyday situations. But the highly diverging scripts make them difficult to understand for readers capable of reading only one of the two scripts. Furthermore, Hindi/Urdu is widely understood in South Asia even beyond the borders of India and Pakistan, for in-

Figure 12: Hindi/Urdu written in Roman script in an advertisement in South-Central Delhi (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

stance in Bangladesh and Nepal. Among other things, the popularity of so-called Bollywood films and TV programmes in Hindi is the main reason for this circumstance. But since many people in South Asia who listen to and/or speak Hindi/Urdu as a second or even third language use neither Modern Nāgarī nor the Perso-Arabic script for their first language, they cannot read the official forms of Hindi and Urdu. Thus, for the very reason that the Roman script can be read by at least every formally educated person in South Asia, the Roman script is still applied for Hindi/Urdu, especially in India: in advertisement (Figure 12) of any kind and on product packaging, on the Internet, in social media, on Bollywood posters and DVDs, and even for film scripts (Sadana 2012: 46), due to the fact that many people involved in the Hindi film industry (actors, technicians, producers, etc.) are not (very) familiar with Modern Nāgarī.

Although the three-language formula is supposed to ensure that every citizen of India learns Hindi at school,[31] most children are primarily familiar with their first language (at home) and then with English or the language of the majority population (Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, etc.) in their respective region (if they belong to an ethnolinguistic minority), for instance as the medium of instruction in school. And even though Hindi in its oral form might be omnipresent in their daily life (as the language of popular films, TV serials, songs, etc.), for most Indian children, Hindi in its written form is just another subject at school which some children do well in and others do not. Their reading and writing skills, in particular, might also depend on the script used for
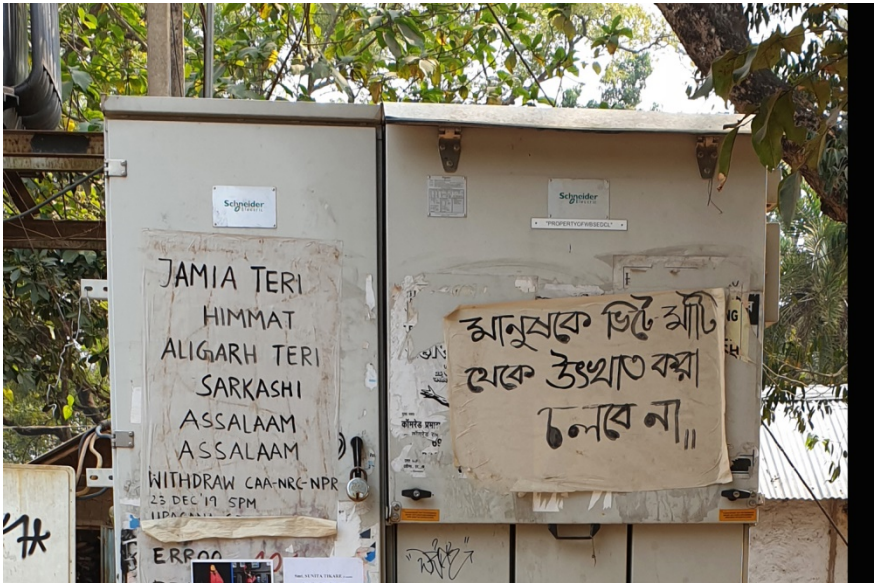

Figure 13: Protest messages in public space in Santiniketan, West Bengal, written in Hindi/Urdu in Roman script (to the left) and in Bengali in Eastern Nāgarī (to the right) (Photograph by Carmen Brandt).

their first language. For instance, Marathi children have to learn only Modern Nāgarī and the Roman script (for English), while Bengali or Oriya children also have to acquire the script for their first language. It seems natural, considering the important role of English on the national

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[31] Since 1968, Tamil Nadu has been excluded from this policy: students do not have to learn Hindi at school (Ramaswamy 1997: 168f.)

and international levels, that the written forms of their first language and/or English are paid more attention than Hindi and Modern Nāgarī. Unfortunately, studies on this topic are a *desideratum* and we can only speculate on this issue. But the omnipresence of Hindi/Urdu written in Roman script in India supports the assumption that it is also aimed at people who understand Hindi/Urdu but not in their respective scripts (cf., e.g., Figure 13).

It is hence not surprising that the demand, first voiced before India's independence in 1947, to implement the Roman script officially for this language can still (or again) be heard (cf., e.g., Chaudhary 2010; Daniyal 2015). One of its most prominent advocates is the Indian author Chetan Bhagat, who proclaimed on his blog *The Underage Optimist*, hosted by the *Times of India*, that Hindi could withstand English if it were officially written in Roman script (Bhagat 2015). Among other things, he argues (ibid.):

> We can save Hindi by legitimizing the Roman Hindi script. This will also have a unifying effect on the nation as it will bring English and Hindi speakers closer. It will also allow other regional languages to become more linked to each other and to English, by virtue of a common script.

As the above survey has shown, his proposition and arguments are nothing new but even today seem to represent only a minority opinion and are far from being implemented officially – while, in reality and ironically, Hindi/Urdu is widely used and understood in Roman script.

Conclusion

The discrepancy between the actual role of the Roman script for modern South Asian languages and its official role is striking, especially in India. Similarly to the English language, which was only intended to function as India's official language besides Hindi at the federal level for 15 years, the Roman script is still omnipresent for South Asian languages. If English can be considered a *lingua franca* of South Asia, then the Roman script can doubtlessly be referred to as the *scripta franca* of South Asia, the only script which can be read across state borders by formally educated speakers of all South Asian languages. However, the script's association with European languages such as English, the official language of the former dominant colonial power, makes it difficult to grant it official status for South Asian languages. This refers, first and foremost, to Hindi/Urdu, Bodo and Konkani, though many other South Asian languages

such as Garo, Ho, Khasi, Mizo or Santali are also still taught and published in Roman script. Particularly in the case of India, the Roman script is identified as 'foreign' by many people, as the criticism of its use for Hindi by Rahul Gandhi shows. This criticism is seemingly also nurtured by the current perception that languages must be exclusively written in only one specific script, a notion which can be traced back to the 19th century, when the standardisation of languages and their scripts was in full swing. Ultimately, these standardisation processes initiated by Europeans contributed to scripts' current role in identity politics in contemporary South Asia as much as the European colonial rulers contributed to the spread of the Roman script in South Asia. However, the exclusive association of many languages with only one specific script and the classification of scripts into 'authentic' and 'foreign' have in many cases eventuated in today's paradoxical status of the Roman script for South Asian languages, particularly in the case of Hindi/Urdu: unofficially, the Roman script is widely used for this language, while at the same time politicians who are caught red-handed using it can be accused of being more foreign than Indian. The contradiction between the symbolic value of the Roman script and its communicative value in South Asia is hence one of the most intriguing cases in the field of script politics.

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