Research Article

The Voice of *Mithila Mihir*: The Making of the Idea of Mithila

Devanand Kamat
PhD Scholar, Dr. B.R Ambedkar University, New Delhi
Email: Deva.nandkumar231@gmail.com

The demand for a separate Mithila has recently resurfaced. This is however also an older demand that first emerged in the 1940s. *Maithil* linguistic nationalism in the early decades of the 20th century played an essential role in contributing to the generation of a movement led by *Maithil* intellectuals, for whom the prestige and heritage of the Maithili language took precedence over all other concerns. To understand this process better, this paper peruses the literature on Mithila, *Maithil*, and Maithili that underlies the emergence of Maithili nationalism and the demand for a separate state. Many of these books were initially published through Maithili language and literary magazines. For instance, the *Mithila Tattva Vimarsha* published in 1949 was first released as a series of articles in the *Mithila Mihir* Magazine between 1912 to 1914. In this paper, I discuss questions of Maithili, *Maithil*, and Mithila in the way it emerged in the *Mithila Mihir.* This study, which draws on hitherto unavailable information from official and archival sources, fills a substantial gap in the literature on Mithila, historicizing the movement for the Mithila State in the context of the State Reorganisation Commission (henceforth SRC). This article also seeks to delve into why the demand for a separate Mithila failed. Though it is common to recount success stories of state-formation in the context of post-independence India, explaining why such demands failed, is also equally important.

Mithila, Maithili, Bihar, Panji, Darbhanga

Introduction

Maithili is the language spoken in Mithila, a geographical region of Bihar, and the word Maithil here refers to a particular community from Mithila that speaks the Maithili language and adheres to Maithili culture. However, there are debates regarding these terms, with there being divergences in the way different groups define them. Mithila is sometimes identified as north Bihar, based on ancient texts like the *Brihat Vishnu Purana, Yajnavalkya Smriti* (compiled between the 3rd and 9th centuries) and other literature like the *Ramayana* (Jha 2012: 2-4). George Abraham Grierson was the first in modern time, to delineate the extent of the Maithili-speaking region in his *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson 1903: 13-14). From the early medieval period, Mithila was identified as a region with its own separate language: Maithili. Maithili has also enjoyed an independent literary tradition and recognized script called the *Mithilakshar* or *Tirhuta*. Mithila also has another script called the *Kaithi* that is primarily used for judicial records. The earliest references to Mithila can be found in later Vedic texts, with four out of six strands of Indian philosophy having flourished in Mithila: namely, the *Mimansa, Nyaya, Sankhya,* and the *Vaishishik*. The region was eventually incorporated into the territories of the Mauryas and the Guptas.

A local Karnata dynasty arose in the region in the 11th century and Hari Singh Deva (1296-1324), the last ruler of this dynasty inaugurated the *Panji-prabandha* system of genealogical record keeping that is well-known for the Brahmins and Kayasthas of the region (information about a native's ancestors and village are used as a resource to fix appropriate marital relations from the same caste). The Karnata dynasty was followed by the Oinwar dynasty that more

prominently promoted the formation of Maithili literary legacy. Vidyapati (1360-1448), whose writings helped to shape the distinct cultural identities of Mithila, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, and Odisha, was supported by Shiva Simah, an Oiniwar dynasty ruler. Vidyapati, born in Mithila, is praised in high terms and is metaphorically called the *Maithil kokil* (cuckoo) to indicate the melodious nature of his poetry. His writings had a significant impact on the evolution of medieval Indian poetry, and he left a vast literary legacy that included compositions in both Sanskrit and Maithili. Though the bulk of his literary works are in Sanskrit, *Padavali*, his solo Maithili work, is a collection of approximately 945 songs that are a unique blend of sweetness, melodious rhythm, and vivid imagery. Vidyapati's songs predominantly concern human emotions, and the *Padavali* had a profound impact on both Bengali and Hindi poetry (Bandopadhyay 1977: 37-42). Moreover, Vidyapati's writings highlight the importance of moral conduct especially in legal matters, to be upheld by leaders and administrators. Therefore, Vidyapati was not just a poet; he was also a key figure in terms of political thought. His two works *Purushapariksha* and *Bibhagasara* are both treatises about political ideals, and in these works he suggests that the king was the final source of all law (Gupta 2020: 53). The end of the Oinwars and the advent of the Khandwala dynasty marked a significant transition in the history of Mithila. In 1557, Akbar provided a land grant to Mahesh Thakur, the first *zamindar* of the Khandwala dynasty in Mithila that led to the formation of an administrative body that came to be known as the Darbhanga Raj (Rorabacher 2016: 260). Subsequently, a letter from Aurangzeb to the Bengal *Subedar* Shaesta Khan in 1684 contained a *farman* (royal decree) that established Mahinath Thakur to be the landowner of the region. This *farman* conferred permanent land-ownership rights in the region to the Darbhanga Raj (ibid.: 269). It is not entirely clear when the term 'Darbhanga Raj' first came into use, especially since the term is not used either in Akbar's *farman* issued to Mahesh Thakur nor in Aurangzeb's *farman* to Mahinath Thakur. In the initial period, in Akbar's and Mahesh Thakur's time, the Darbhanga Raj fell under Mughal administration as Mahesh Thakur was an officer in the Mughal administration (c.f. Ansari 2008), working as Chaudhari (land-owner) and Qanungo (local dispenser of law).

After the conquest of Bengal and Bihar under British administration, the Darbhanga Raj was given the status of *zamindari* (fiefdom) under the permanent settlement. It was, moreover, a very large *zamindari* comprising substantial area: Mithila. Although Darbhanga Raj was never officially a Princely State, many of the characteristics of other Princely States were inherent within its practices. From time to time, the administrators of Darbhanga Raj assumed titles such as *Raja*, *Maharaja*, *Maharajadhiraja* (Brass 1975: 59), and Pankaj Kumar Jha (2006) describes how the Darbhanga Raj struggled with an identity crisis throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. During the colonial period, at the time of Raja Madhav Singh (1775-1807) and his successors, the administrators of the Darbhanga Raj were reduced to renters and this naturally led to the diminishing of their influence. To maintain their supremacy, the administrators of the Darbhanga Raj began to give away a significant amount of land-grants to Brahmins—a tradition that continued well into the 20th century. Shrotriya Brahmins were specially preferred, as it was a sub-group of Brahmins that the Darbhanga *Maharaja* himself belonged to, considered superior to the other sub-groups like Yogya, Panjibadha, and Jaibar Brahmins. The Darbhanga *Maharaja* could not afford to disregard Shrotriya Brahmins either even if wanted to, as they provided him important political backing in the region. From the 1940s onwards, the Darbhanga Raj maintained and upheld a unique Mithila-based identity that privileged its own intellectual history. Its sovereign concerns, as Hetukar Jha outlines (2007: 141-142), were reflected in the speech made by *Maharaja* Kameshwar Singh at the Constituent Assembly in 1947 in which he supported the cause of a separate Mithila sub-province. *Maithil* scholars and intellectual elites traditionally drew on the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of the *Maithil* identity, creating a powerful and self-legitimizing discourse—a dominant interpretation of how their heritage was directly drawn from ancient Mithila. This discursive

reconstruction in the early 20th century was defined by an imagination of Mithila, linked to the intellectual heritage of the Maithili language, Vidyapati's literary contributions, and to other scholars from ancient and medieval Mithila. As Jata Shanker Jha observes (1972: 133): "Since it occupied a glorious position in the realm of education and culture, it (Mithila) maintained an indifferent and somewhat disdainful attitude towards foreign languages." It is therefore not entirely surprising to see how late English education arrived in Mithila.

The popularity of the printing press and the inauguration of publications (mostly magazines) such as the *Maithil Hit Sadhan* (1905), the *Mithila Moda* (1906), and the *Mithila Mihir* (1909) in accompaniment with the formation of the *Maithil Mahasabha* in 1910 significantly propelled this conversation about heritage much ahead, towards celebrating a regional and intellectual tradition. Many books were published out of the Darbhanga Raj Press in the 19th and 20th centuries, which laid greater emphasis on the literary tradition of Mithila and the *Maithil* identity. The Darbhanga *Maharaja*, Rameshwar Singh founded the *Maithil Mahasabha* in 1910 in the wake of the identity crisis surrounding the status of the Darbhanga Raj, to promote Mithila, Maithili, and *Maithil* culture. The *Maithil Mahasabha* was to become the most powerful organisation of the Mithila region in the first half of the 20th century, its membership confined to *Maithil* Brahmins and Kayasthas. The vernacular magazine *Mithila Mihir* (published between 1909 and 1954) provides important and in-depth descriptions of the proceedings of the *Maithil Mahasabha*.

Language Dynamics, State Demand and Politics

The roots of language-oriented state formation in India can be historically traced to the nationalist movement from the interwar years—roughly, the 1920s. This time period was characterized by many lively public-sphere debates on language, state-formation, culture, caste, and class. It was a period when Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajagopalachari, Rajendra Prasad and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar were hotly debating provincial reorganisation. The Nagpur session of the Congress in 1920 formed an important milestone in this history, passing a resolution to establish 20 Congress committees based on language and culture. Since the committees recognized linguistic units like Madras, Karnataka, Andhra, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar, Kerala, Utkal, and some other linguistic regions (Sarangi and Pai 2011: 6), language became considered the basis of state reorganisation in the imagined future republic. But this was in contrast to British administration. Having previously divided the country to create provinces that met their political and economic, administrative purposes, the creation of Orissa in 1936 was the only instance in which the British government considered language as the basis of state formation. Nivedita Mohanty (1982), writing on the Orissa state movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, explains how the Chota Nagpur division, Bengal and Madras Presidencies, and Central Provinces were fused into various parts of Orissa. The *Utkal Sammelan* played a leading role in the Orissa movement that finally led to the creation of the Orissa state (Sarangi and Pai 2011: 22). Based on the Orissa experience, the Congress adopted the linguistic principle as a basis for state-formation in its election manifesto of 1945-1946. After independence, the political movements for various separate linguistic states re-emerged and the Constituent Assembly made space for a separate Linguistic Provincial Commission in 1948 that was known as the Dhar Commission. The Dhar Commission was especially given the task of examining the feasibility of creating states like Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra. Here, the Commission departed from older ideas of creating states based purely on linguistic distinction and took other aspects into consideration instead, like geographical cohesion, capacity for financial independence, future development prospects, and administrative convenience (Fazal Ali 1955: 15).

The SRC was established by the Government of India in December 1953 to look into the complexities of state rearrangement, following an intensified movement in Andhra in October 1953. The commission submitted its report in September 1955, primarily expressing concern about the security and unity of the nation. It gave equal importance to financial, economic, and administrative matters alongside questions of language and culture (ibid.: 264, also cf. Sajal Nag [2023] for how the SRC prioritised other principles apart from the linguistic). Instead of the creation of rigid linguistic provinces, the commission advocated multilingual provinces, with Sajal Nag further adding that the SRC did not support the demand for separate hill states in the Northeast. However, when the Northeastern states were formed in 1971, the ideology of making an ethnic homeland predominated, reflecting different principles than those recommended by the Commission (Sarangi and Pai 2011: 22-23). Though the demand for state reorganization based on separate linguistic units was already undergoing scholarly research in the colonial period, a fresh perspective that would examine this evolution within the larger Indian context was largely lacking. With this missing perspective in mind, scholars like Paul Brass, Marcus Franda, Hugh Gray, Ram Joshi, Baldev Raj Nayar, Balraj Puri, Lawrence Shrader, and Wayne Wilcox wrote *State Politics in India* in 1968 (edited by Myron Wiener) after a seminar on the subject held in 1961. This seminar was important because it initiated a detailed study of political processes of state-formation (Wiener 1968: 7). Wiener cited Joshi on the social, economic, and cultural aspects underlying the unification of Maharashtra: the coming together of Marathwada and Vidarbha with western Maharashtra, in which socio-economic reforms, lower-caste emancipation, equitable resource distribution, and cultural commonality, all played a crucial role (ibid.: 13-15).

If one were to step away from Maharashtra, one would see that the case of Bihar provides an entirely different picture. Unlike Maharashtra, there was an absence of uniting elements in Bihar. However, despite this absence of unifying elements, the state of Bihar remained integrated. And this was despite the fact that the Maithil intelligentsia had already identified sufficient grounds for the division of Bihar and Mithila: grounds that not only included linguistic disparity, but also the underfunding of Mithila in the Bihar government as found documented in the *Mithila Mihir*. Paul Brass discussed many objective bases for the demand for a separate Mithila state, taking into account its geographical extent, its linguistic uniqueness, its historical tradition, and its culture. He also highlighted various political factors that had played a role in the failure of a strongly developed *Maithil* identity that disallowed it from breaking away from Bihar (Brass 1975: 54-58). Why was Mithila unable to break away from Bihar? To answer this question, it is critical to first recognize the nature of political leadership and the involvement of the general public in the process of dividing and uniting any state. Mithilesh Kumar Jha (2018: 252), writing on the Maithili movement, analyses the important role of language based on 3 registers: communication, forming a group identity, and the formation of conceptual categories. Jha focuses on the politics of language in the Hindi heartland from the 19th century onwards, and on the various ways, language was used for social and political mobilisation by the regional elites of Mithila. He shows how Maithili speakers, even as they accepted Hindi as a national language, opposed efforts that would recognize Maithili as a dialect of Hindi.

The political movement to uphold the distinct identity of the Maithili language is witnessing a renaissance in recent times, with non-Brahmin and non-Kayastha castes challenging the Brahminical dominance of Mithila's language and culture (ibid.: 235). It is important to pay attention to this phenomenon of Brahminical dominance that can be dated to the early part of the 20th century, and in the following discussion, I will show how this Brahminical domination especially in the field of literature and regional thinking, influenced the politics of the demand for a separate Mithila state. I will finally examine how the *Mithila Mihir* played a role in the forming of *Maithil* society.

Mithila Mihir as a Source of Mithila and Maithili Movement

The Maithili movement that revolved around Maithili, and the distinct identity of Mithila and the *Maithil* community began in the early decades of the 20th century. To understand this history is greater detail, it is important to explore the various developments of Maithili literary culture during this period. Aadyacharan Jha stated in 1984 that the definition of the Maithili movement was not just about the planning of peaceful, non-violent, and fearless action towards the expansion of language and literature, but the active promotion of this literature through financial backing. Drawing from Jha, it can be argued that issues surrounding the writing of history or about historical figures or about language development were brought to the forefront by the Maithili intelligentsia through literature. The most significant contribution to this was made by the literary activities of *Mithila Mihir* that did not however explicitly declare its support to the Maithili movement till 1936. This changed significantly with the publication of a special issue of the magazine called the *Mithilank* that heralded a process in what Eric Hobsbawm calls the invention of tradition (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983 [2012]). Invention of tradition refers to rituals and norms that demonstrate a continuity from the past, even though traditions referred to, are not always as old as they are made out to be. These traditions are established both formally and informally, mainly adopted as a response to an emergent identity crisis. References to tradition are then either taken from history; or then, a sense of historicity is itself invented and created through repetitive performances of tradition. As outlined above, vernacular magazines like the *Mithilank* issue of the *Mithila Mihir* in 1936 became an important vehicle for reinventing *Maithil* tradition, and there were, after all, many other Maithili magazines in that early period that were busy with similar endeavours: the *Maithil Hit Sadhan* (1905-1909), the *Mithila Moda* (1905-1921), the *Maithili Sahitya Patra* (1936-39)*,* and the *Mithila* (1929). What is notable is that all these Maithili language magazines together published a sum total of 750 stories till 1954, and out of these 750 stories, over half were published exclusively in the *Mithila Mihir*. This demonstrated the publication's overarching and discursive significance (Laldas 2007: 109-110)*.* Parmeshwar Jha's history of Mithila in 1949 (published posthumously), *Mithila Tattva Vimarsha*, the first book on the history of Mithila written in the vernacular, in Maithili, was first published as a series of essays from 1912 to 1914 in the *Mithila Mihir*. Vernacular magazines like the *Mithila Mihir* made significant contributions to the growth of Maithili language and literature, and to the tradition of writing Mithila's history, contributing significantly to the Maithili heritage movement, and simultaneously, to the movement for a separate Mithila state.

The policies and ideologies that drive any magazine can be understood through the ideologies and policies of institution(s) that promote it. As already mentioned, the *Maithili Mahasabha* was formed in 1910 by the Darbhanga *Maharaja* Rameshwar Singh, and it was Darbhanga Raj that also patronized the *Mithila Mihir* founded in 1909. The *Maithil Mahasabha* was, moreover, a caste-based organization with the explicit goal of promoting Mithila, Maithili, and *Maithil* culture. These objectives were strongly interlinked with Shrotriya Brahminism in the region, with the Darbhanga *Maharaja* himself a Shrotriya Brahmin, pressured to protect community values, leadership, and identity. Chandra Nath Mishra Amar (1999: 5) quotes a letter written by the Darbhanga *Maharaja* Rameshwar Singh to the next Darbhanga *Maharaja* Kameshwar Singh (translation mine): "You are a prince, of course, but you must always remember that you are first the son of a Shrotriya Brahmin and only thereafter a prince." It can be surmised that the Darbhanga *Maharaja* was deeply imbricated with Shrotriya culture and saw himself as the protector of Shrotriya values, just as the *Mithila Mihir* and the *Maithil Mahasabha* were considered protectors of Brahmin and Kayastha culture. These two entities, the *Mahasabha* and its mouthpiece, the *Mihir*, rose to pre-eminence in tandem, on account of their patronage by the Darbhanga Raj. While the *Mahasabha* focused mainly on the development of *Maithil* Brahmins and the *Maithil* Karn-Kayastha identity, the *Mihir* raised issues about culture,

education, and the importance of identitarian politics, as presented in the proceedings and documents of the *Mahasabha*, dominated by Brahmins and Kayasthas. Therefore, the *Mihir* remained primarily embroiled in the interests of *Maithil* Brahmins and *Maithil* Kayasthas, as it expounded on the expansion of Maithili language and literature.

From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that not all issues of the *Mithila Mihir* from 1909 to 1954 are stored in one place. Only small portions are available, and these too are only partially accessible. The magazine is nevertheless quite important as historical source material on early writings on Mithila. According to Chandranath Mishra (1981: 288), the story behind the publication of the *Mihir* can be divided into 4 temporal phases: from 1909-1911, from 1911-1935, from 1936-1954, and from 1960-1981. He does not, however, provided a consistent set of arguments for why he divides the magazine in these 4 temporal phases. While the first phase marks a period when the *Mihir* was published monthly, the second phase marks a period when the *Mihir* was published weekly. The third phase is demarcated by its editorship under Surendra Jha Suman, and the fourth phase starts with the re-publication of the *Mihir* from 1960 onwards from Patna, instead of Darbhanga. It is important to note that there were many other kinds of changes that also took place in the *Mihir* in between these phases. The magazine gradually shifted beyond its primary focus on Maithili and Mithila, and began incorporating national issues within discussion topics: updates and demands for separate vernacular states across the country.

Mithila Mihir, *Maithil Mahasabha*, and *Maithil* identity

As outlined above, the *Maithil Mahasabha* was formed in 1910 by the Darbhanga Raj to develop Maithili, Mithila, and the *Maithil* identity. In the first phase of the *Maithil* movement, the *Mihir* worked as the mouth organ of the *Mahasabha*, and its archives can be described as an essential primary source for charting the history of the *Mahasabha*. The *Mihir* documents all seminar and conference proceedings and activities of the *Mahasabha*, and the chair of the *Mahasabha* in the beginning period was none other than the Darbhanga *Maharaja* himself. In the decades of the 1940s, the Darbhanga *Maharaja* even appeared at several of the conferences and his speeches were reported in the magazine. These conferences had different events and activities organized by sub-committees: i.e., the *Vishaynirdharni Samiti* (theme selection committee), *Kavi Sammelan* (poetic gatherings), *Vidtatv Parishad* (intellectual gatherings), *Gayak Sammelan* (singers gathering), etc. All these were reported in the *Mihir*, and the magazine also published declarations and proposals for future conferences. Except for the proceedings of the *Mahasabha*, the *Mihir* did not provide any detailed information on any other caste *sabha* activities of the time, and this suggests that the *Mahasabha* constituted the *Mihir*'s primary focus.

In the essay, *Mithila ki Kuchh Sansthayen* (a few institutions of Mithila) in the *Mithilank* issue of the *Mihir*, Devnarayan Chaudhary provides information on the caste-based nature of the *Mahasabha*. For instance, he states that the *Mahasabha* was a caste *sabha* whose membership was dominated by Brahmins and Karna-Kayasthas. Chaudhary notes that the objective of the *Mahasabha* was to expand education, develop Mithila and the Maithili identity, and alongside eradicate some social evils. While Chaudhary acknowledges the existence of other caste institutions like the *Rajput Sabha*, the *Bhumihar Brahman Sabha*, the *Vaishya Sabha*, the *Karna-Kayastha Sabha*, the *Yadav Banshiya Sabha*, the *Gop Sabha* etc., he does not provide any detail about these other organisations. Despite this imbalance created due to an absence of detail, he praises the *Mahasabha* for its donation to poor *Maithil* students.[1] Unlike Chaudhury, other writers in *Mihir* wrote more critically about the *Mahasabha*. In an essay

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[1] Devnarayan Chaudhary (1936). "Mithila ki Kuchh Sansthayen." Mithilank, *Mithila Mihir*, p. 175.

published in *Mihir* dated 06.11.1948 for instance, Pandit Shreekalikant Jha raised concerns about the *Mahasabha*'s narrow influence over local and migrant *Maithil* groups. He added that the *Mahasabha* had very little circulation, and the strongest part of its outreach was only confined to Darbhanga, Madhubani and its nearby areas. In everyday practice, very few people had any awareness of the *Mahasabha*'s activities and resolutions. Shreekalikant Jha urged the *Mahasabha* to unite and gather newly migrant *Maithil*s to raise funds in order to improve the living standards of the *Panjikar*s (professional genealogists who maintained the *Panji*).[2] *Panjikars* travelled from place to place, gathering family histories of clients and entering them into a document called the *Panji*, and the *Mihir* encouraged the system of *Panji-prabandha* because it preserved *Maithil* Brahmin and Karna-Kayastha genealogical records. Since the *Panji-prabandha* was considered foundational to the *Maithil* identity, the system also generated the idea that only Brahmins and Karna-Kayastha were properly *Maithil*. This meant that the *Mihir* to some extent reproduced and universalised this restrictive and exclusive *Maithil* identity.[3] The confined membership policy of the *Mahasabha* and its endorsement of the *Panji-prabandha* strengthened its Brahminical identity, especially as the *Mahasabha* used the term *Bandhugan* (brothers) to refer to *Maithil* Brahmins and Kayasthas. Jagdeeshanandan Singh, a speaker at the 37th session of the All India *Maithil Mahasabha* held in Darbhanga, addressed his *Maithil Bandhugan* through the instrument of the *Mithila Mihir*, and here, my focus lies on the use of *Bandhugan* that shows how the *Mahasabha*, and its mouth organ the *Mihir* encapsulated and endorsed the *Maithil* identity as a Brahmin and a Karna-Kayastha identity. Pankaj Kumar Jha (2003: 1198) similarly argues, "the functioning of the *Panji-prabandha* proved harmful as its impact gave way to orthodoxy and caste-purity based conservatism."

During the early decades of the 20th century, language became central to the assertion of *Maithil* identity in the *Mihir*. In an essay in *Mithilank* titled *Mithila-Maithil-Maithili*,[4] Umesh Mishra described ancient Mithila as a spiritual centre that was known for imparting Sanskrit education. According to Mishra, Maithili existed simultaneously with Sanskrit, with *Maithil* Pandits composing texts in Sanskrit and replacing difficult to understand Sanskrit words with Maithili words. To illustrate his point, Mishra pointed to the writings of Chandeshwar Thakur and Vachaspati, adding that the influence of Maithili was once prevalent over most parts of North India. But even before Umesh Mishra's exposition on the matter, there was a larger tendency (since the 1880s), of seeing present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh as Hindi-speaking regions, studied from the perspective of the Hindi-Urdu debate. In this process, the debate between Hindi and other regional languages like Maithili became marginalized. Mithilesh Kumar Jha (2018: 29) throws much-needed light on the matter, discussing the many complexities of linguistic politics, community identity, and the struggle for recognition in a tussle between Hindi and Maithili, analysed from a historical perspective. Vidyapathi's name surfaces repeatedly in the context of Maithili identity-formation at the end of the 1880s, when Bengal and Bihar were in a state of transition. Vidyapati's legacy became a much-discussed topic, as there was a misconception among scholars that Vidyapati was a Bengali poet. Pankaj Kumar Jha (2004: 853) cites the controversy on Vidyapati's linguistic belonging between R.L Mitra, N.G. Nyaya Ratna, John Beams, and R.K Mukhopadhyay. While R.L. Mitra and N.G. Nyaya Ratna believing that Vidyapati's poems were Bengali, R.K. Mukhopadhyay concluded that Vidyapati wrote in Maithili and not Bengali. This debate became further activated with the *Mihir* commencing anew under the editorship of Kusheshwar Kumar in 1929, published from Darbhanga. One of the main goals of the *Mihir* in its new avatar was to develop and exalt Maithili, and place it in a superior position to Bengali. The *Mihir* published a series of discussions at the time on Vidyapati and the medieval Bengali poet Chandi Das, presenting

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[2] See (06.11.1948). "Maithili-Mahasabha O Prachar Karya." *Mithila Mihir*, p.5.
[3] See (26.06.1948). "Akhil Bhartiya Maithil-Mahasabhak 37 Adhiveshan, Darbhanga." *Mithila Mihir*, p.4.
[4] Umesh Mishra (1936). "Mithila-Maithil-Maithili." Mithilank, *Mithila Mihir*, pp. 9-15.

arguments in favour of Vidyapati's superior influence over Chandi Das's poems—the first time such a long discussion on literary figures in Bengal and Mithila was taking place in the public sphere.[5] Apart from this, there were other discursive developments on Vidyapati's contributions that found mention in the *Mihir*. In 1937, a Bangla film was made on Vidyapati, in which the latter was portrayed as a migrant from Bengal to Mithila. The *Mihir* immediately published an article criticising the film, and asserting that the entire literary world already acknowledged Vidyapati's *Maithil* identity.[6]

Existing debates on Maithili with other vernacular regions had hitherto focused mainly on Bengal. But the *Mihir* discussed other languages and literatures of North India as well, like Bundelkhandi. In an essay titled *Maithili Sahitya* (Maithili Literature), Aadyacharan Jha, while discussing Bundelkhandi and its literature, wondered whether Maithili and Mithila's development could compete with the linguistic and literary development of Bundelkhandi. He was impressed with the Bundelkhandi magazine *Madhukar*, and speculated whether *Maithil* intellectuals could compete with it. He also stated that the *Madhukar* published a special issue, specifically examining the demand for a separate Bundelkhand province.[7] Notwithstanding the promotion of Maithili as grounds for a separate political identity led by the region's intellectuals, the language received little support within the region. While the principle reason for the creation of states based on language was accepted in the election manifesto of the Congress in 1945-1946; following independence in 1947, Maithili was still far from being accepted as a universal distinct language of the region. Non-Brahmins in the region did not fully associate with the language.

The Change in Articulation in the Demand for a Separate State (1947-1954)

With independence, there was an increase in demand for separate states, and these demands at the national level greatly influenced the *Mihir*. The *Maithil* intelligentsia of the time wrote variously, on the Partition of the Punjab in 1947 published in a column titled *Samyik Prashan* (contemporary questions), with the *Mihir* including discussions on the demands placed by Sikh leaders—of forming a new province by merging the 16 districts east of the Ravi river. In the same column (*Samyik Prashan*) writers noted that if public attitude did not change, and if circumstances in the Punjab remained tense; West Bengal would also be affected.[8] The *Mihir* thus became a medium and instrument of *Maithil* intellectuals to express their public sentiments and political opinions. After independence, the debates in the magazine also changed. Now, the demand for a separate Mithila appeared more frequently, along with other national-level debates. These national-level debates also revolved around the demands of separate state formation, for Gujarat, Hyderabad, Madras, and other parts. Most writers and scholars located their demand for a separate Mithila in a partial manner, linking it to ongoing disputes with Bihar. But the *Mihir* provides us with information that goes beyond this. Even though there was no mention of Mithila in the SRC Report, the *Mihir* fills a critical information gap about the politics surrounding the demand for a separate Mithila. For instance, a telegram was sent to the secretary of the Constituent Assembly on 12.07.1947 by Ganganand Sinha, the president of the Mithila Mandal Central Committee. In this telegram, Sinha identified the districts of Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnia, Santhal Parganas, and Champaran as Maithili areas. Further, he wrote (Jha 2007: 136):

> The Indian Nation has gained political power and in accordance with its repeated resolutions is going to constitute provinces on linguistic basis we place our claim

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[5] Shree Narendra Nath Das (1336 [1929] Vaishakha 20-25[May]). "Vidayapati O Chandidas." *Mithila*.

[6] Editorial (29.10.1937). "Vidyapatik Film Mein Bhayankar Bhram." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1

[7] Aadyacharan Jha (19.02.1944). "Maithili Sahitya." *Mithila Mihir*, p.11.

[8] Editorial (11.01.1947). "Samyik Prashan." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

for a separate province on those accepted principles and earnestly request the number of the sub-Committee and the Constituent Assembly to examine our claim along with those of other parts of India similarly situated.

A similar argument was extended by the Darbhanga *Maharaja* Kameshwar Singh in the Constituent Assembly on 25.08.1947: "like several other provinces the present province of Bihar also is not homogeneous either linguistically or culturally" (ibid.: 141). His demand for Mithila was mainly based on language, and although the *Maharaja* touched upon other aspects like history and culture, these were not his primary focus. He also demarcated the same districts that Ganganand Sinha had identified in his telegram, that included the Santhal Parganas in Mithila. During this period, there were significant debates in the Constituent Assembly regarding the feasibility of new states. As mentioned, the mandate of the Dhar Commission went beyond viewing language as the only basis of state formation. Instead, the Commission stressed on other issues like national security, geographical cohesion, capacity for financial independence, the future development plans of the state, and administrative convenience. Additionally, the J.V.P. Committee formed in December 1948, consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Pattabhi Sitaramayya, was the first Congress body to shift focus from the earlier idea of a state formation organized along linguistic lines. Instead, the J.V.P. Committee presented state formation as a concern based on more widespread public interests (Fazal Ali 1955: 16). There were moreover obvious flaws in the Maithili movement. An elite movement, the public was hardly at the centre of the Mithila demand. Though a memorandum was submitted by the leaders of the Mithila movement to the SRC demanding a separate state (by Janki Nandan Singh in 1954), there was no pressure from the public to form the region.

The *Mihir,* for its part, focused mostly only on linguistic issues, urging the *Maithil* people to speak in Maithili. In March 1947, Sitaram Mishra wrote that if the Bengalis could speak in Bangla, then why would the *Maithil* people shy away from speaking in Maithili? The author urged the *Maithil* people living outside Mithila to also promote Maithili.[9] Parallel with this in the Hindi literary sphere, there was an independent endeavour to include Maithili as a dialect of Hindi. A separate council for Hindi was constituted at the Allahabad University in 1947 with the objective of writing a comprehensive history of Hindi, organized into three volumes. Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bundeli, and Awadhi literature was to be included in the third volume. The council invited Umesh Mishra (1895–1967), then a professor at Allahabad University and renowned Maithili intellectual (followed by his son Jayakant Mishra who was also a very active contributor of the *Mihir*) to contribute to the volume. But Umesh Mishra refused outright. Writing in the *Mihir* (09.10.1947) on behalf of the Maithili language, he pledged his support to the recognition of a distinct and separate Maithili (Kumar 2018: 17).

The *Mihir* also called upon Bhojpuri-speaking people in the eastern United Provinces to engage in a separate Bhojpuri movement. Even though political concerns in the period after the Dhar Commission included other criteria as the considerations of state formation; language had in the meanwhile, also evolved into a primary tool that represented regional polity and culture. The *Mihir* thus urged Bhojpuri-speaking people to pressure their State Assembly to raise the demand for a separate state in the Constituent Assembly. The Maithili people moreover promised to support Bhojpuri aspirations.[10] The *Mihir* argued that the Bhojpuri demand would be strengthened, if it were to be made on linguistic terms, based on the distinct cultural and historical legacy of the region. On the other hand, even if they used the same criteria in their own arguments for a separate state, there was no surety that the *Maithil* would

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[9] Sitaram Mishra (29.03.1947). "Maithili Prachar Au Pravashi Maithili." *Mithila Mihir*, p.6.
[10] Editorial (22.03.1947). "Vividh Prasang." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

ever win their demand of a separate Mithila. While some saw the future of Mithila as constituting a gateway for new funds and increased economic opportunities, others were sceptical. Many among the *Maithil* still cherished Mithila's old identity, based on the heritage of ancestors—legendary figures like Janaka, Yajnavalkya, Kanad, and Raja Saleh. Ordinary people on the other hand doubted whether there was any benefit to be accrued from a separate Mithila. Lower and middle castes from Mithila region like the Keot, Dhanuk, Baniya, Rajput, Yadav, Malah, Mushad, Dusad, Chamar, etc. did not have sufficient education. The editors of the *Mihir* were thus confronted with new questions: if a separate state was created, would all castes get good education? There was an additional demand that dams be built on the Kamala, Koshi, and Gandak rivers to develop the region. There was a feeling that state funds were unevenly distributed—biases against Mithila from a Patna-centric point of view.[11]

While previously, the *Mihir* could afford to overlook political and economic factors, it now expanded its coverage. The *Mihir* now carried Maheshwar Prasad Singh's speech delivered in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian parliament), in which he raised the issue of a separate Mithila. Mithila, according to him, fulfilled all the criteria of state formation, whether economically, geographically, historically, or linguistically. Furthermore, Singh also pointed out that Mithila alone contributed 14 crore rupees to the exchequer of the Bihar government that received 30 crore rupees as state revenue.[12] The *Mihir* paid special attention to the political activities of Janaki Nandan Singh, an important political leader of the Mithila movement and an exponent of the Mithila state. On 22.01.1954, when 64 Congress workers including Janaki Nandan Singh (Member of Legislative Assembly from Asansol) were arrested under IPC 151 on their way to present their demands for a separate Mithila at the All-India Congress Committee in Kalyani, where the chairman Jawahar Lal Nehru was also present, this arrest was due to an apprehension about they breaching public peace. While Singh was soon released, he received support from different elite sections of Mithila: scholars, intellectuals, and political leaders.[13] Meanwhile, a resolution was passed at a *Mahasabha* meeting at Darbhanga, to promote the demand for a separate Mithila. This was perceived as necessary for the economic, social, and political development of the region and its people.[14]

Several proceedings of the Fazal Ali Commission (officially known as the SRC) and the principles of the central government surrounding state formation meanwhile debated whether the demand for a separate Mithila was anti-Congress, anti-government, and anti-national. *Maithil* intelligentsia argued that several countries in the world had a population smaller than Mithila. Mithila, on the other hand, had its own independent culture, history, and identity. They were moreover strongly opposed to being included in Magadh.[15] When the SRC was formed in December 1953, its purpose was to look into the demands of state formation, and in February 1954, the SRC invited different parties—people and organisations to present their state-formation demands. As mentioned, the memorandum on behalf of Mithila was presented by Janki Nandan Singh in 1954 and in the memorandum he reiterated how the "people demand the formation of the Mithila State" (Singh 1954: 55). But it is doubtful that the Mithila demand was really based on the will of the common people. As evident from the essays in the *Mihir*, mobilising people was still a primary concern for the Mithila movement. It can also be seen from Janaki Nandan Singh's memorandum that the demand for a separate Mithila underwent changes, especially as Ganganand Sinha and Kameshwar Singh included Santhal

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[11] Kanchinath Kiran (03.01.1953). "Mithila Prant." *Mithila Mihir*, p.3.

[12] See (1953). "Rajya-Parishad me Mithilaprantk Prashan Shree Maheshwar Prasad Narayan Singh Garjan." *Mithila Mihir*, p.2. Also cited in (01.08.1953). "Mithila Prantiya Sammelank Safal Samaroh-Bhashadhar par Prant Nirmank Prashang Mithilak Nyayochita Dava." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

[13] Editorial (23.01.1954). "Mithila Prant ke Mang Kaynihar 64 Congress Jan Griftaar." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

[14] See (16.01.1954). "Prithak Mithila Rajya." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

[15] See (23.01.1954). "Prithak Mithila Rajya Nirmank Maang." *Mithila Mihir,* p.7.

Parganas into Mithila. Though Janaki Nandan Singh did not emphasize the Santhal Parganas, he considered it to be a linguistic part of Mithila. However, his main focus was on the area north of the Ganges and east of the Gandak rivers, and he reiterated how this northern part was historically, linguistically, and culturally homogeneous (ibid.). But as already discussed, caste-based practices of promoting the *Panaji-prabandha* system in the *Maithil Mahasabha*, also obstructed the emergence of any uniform culture. The SRC submitted its report to the Government of India in September 1955, self-reflecting its deviation from the previously-held linguistic basis of state formation. The SRC identified four major factors requiring of consideration for a state: (i) the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India; (ii) linguistic and cultural homogeneity; (iii) financial, economic and administrative considerations; and (iv) the successful working of the national plan. As far as language was concerned, the SRC Report summarized its view as (Fazal Ali 1955: 45):

> After a full consideration of the problem in all its aspects, we have come to the conclusion that it is neither possible nor desirable to reorganise States on the basis of the single test of either language or culture, but that a balanced approach to the whole problem is necessary in the interests of our national unity.
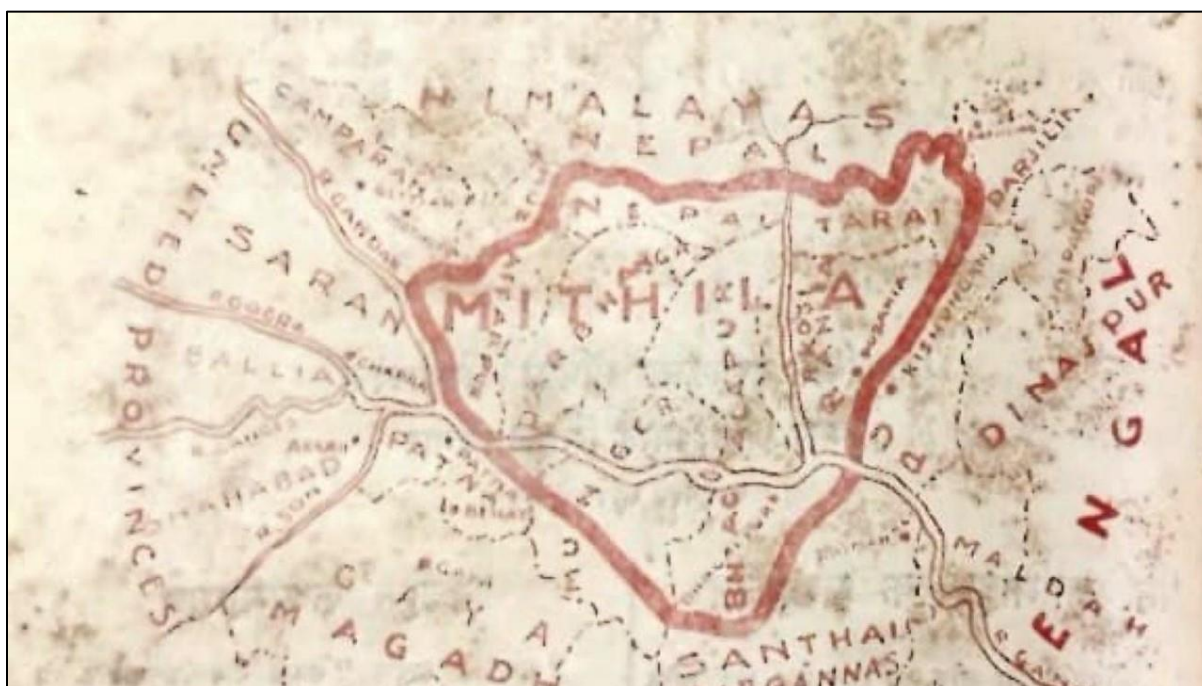

Image 2.1: The Outline of Mithila based on Language (source: [24.10.1948] *Mithila Mihir*, p. 28 / public domain).

Although the SRC did not specifically mention Mithila, one of its main concerns for Bihar was the division of Bihar into two parts, especially in relation to the formation of Jharkhand in south Bihar. This concern was complicated by the demand that Saraikela be included in Orissa, and problems about border disputes between Bengal and the northern regions of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Malda and West Dinajpur. The Commission was faced with the proposal of forming a separate Jharkhand after uniting the Chhota Nagpur region with the Santhal Parganas. Supporters of this view claimed that the tribal and indigenous peoples of the region were homogenous, based on their linguistic, cultural, and developmental needs. Opponents of this idea believed that the formation of Jharkhand would lead to the economic backwardness of both north and south Bihar. The SRC too came to believe that if Jharkhand were to be formed separately, then the centres of education in North Bihar such as Patna University and Bihar University would be separated from Jharkhand. The main concern for the Commission was the demand for a separate south Bihar, as the creation of Jharkhand would negatively impact

the economic development of both Jharkhand and Bihar. The areas of north Bihar that consisted of agricultural land was different from south Bihar that was industrial; the SRC believed that such a division would upset the balance of the state (ibid.: 168-171). Summarizing its recommendation in paragraph 629, the Commission stated that the "boundaries of the existing State of Bihar will remain unchanged" (ibid.: 171).

Although the SRC did not explicitly mention Mithila as North Bihar, partially accessible administrative archives of the time also do not provide any adequate picture of what the SRC's actual opinion about a separate Mithila was. Since the SRC was not in favour of separating Bihar into north and south, the formation of Mithila that would further divide north Bihar and take agricultural land away from it, made the formation of a separate Mithila a moot question. Neither did Mithila have its own university at the time—a situation similar to Jharkhand's. The *Mihir*, believing that a university was necessary for the development of Mithila, continued to demand a separate university for the region. Using an argument similar to the SRC's, the *Mihir* expressed the worry that since all notable educational institutions were located in southern Bihar (Patna), the people of Mithila would remain backward.[16]

It was not that linguistic and cultural bases for state formation were completely rejected; the Dhar Commission was mainly looking into the feasibility of state formation when making separate states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. These states did indeed become separate entities based on cultural and linguistic concerns between 1953 and 1960. But, as mentioned, they also had other unifying features that supported its feasibility. One of the most favourable factors that these ethno-linguistic state-formation movements gained from was that their languages were listed in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution. Thus, there was a perceptible difference in the recognition of language as an important factor for these three other state-formation movements, when compared to Maithili and Mithila. Although the demand for a separate Mithila remained unfulfilled, the *Mihir* presented its readers and contributors with a staunch basis for future developments in the direction of building a separate Maithili, *Maithil*, and Mithila identity and movement. While Maithili was officially mentioned in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution; when it came into force, it only had 14 languages. The Constitution currently includes 22 languages, and in 2003, Maithili was included in the 8th schedule through a constitutional amendment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the *Mithila Mihir* played a crucial role in developing the closely interlinked ideas of Maithili, *Maithil*, and Mithila. There is no other primary source material that is of parallel importance to the *Mihir* that can help us explore the rise of Mithila and Maithili. But the *Mihir* alone was not powerful enough to unite *Maithil* society in the time when it was operative. While the *Mihir* focused on the upliftment of Maithili as a separate linguistic entity, it did not pay much attention to other social, political, or economic aspects of the region. As far as the *Maithil* identity was concerned, the *Mihir* became a mouthpiece of the *Maithil Mahasabha* and thus, it prominently discussed issues related only to the *Maithil* Brahmins and *Maithil* Kayasthas, thereby reinforcing the notion that the *Maithil* identity was primarily Brahmin and Kayastha. This was also the main reason for its inability to unite *Maithil* society. As far as Mithila was concerned, the *Mihir* tried to revive the debate of Mithila's ancient identity. Intellectual icons like Vachaspati Mishra, Vidyapati, Janaki Nandan Singh, and Dharma were described as embodiments of Mithila's distinct heritage and identity. Because of contributions of the *Mihir*, the demand for a separate Mithila also remained preoccupied with linguistic heritage. However, the SRC did not underline the importance of Mithila and this failure of the

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[16] See (22.05.1948) "Mithila-Vishwavidyalayak Prashan." *Mithila Mihir*, p.1.

Mithila movement can also be discussed through the archives of the *Mihir*, helping us to conclude that the very basis of the *Maithil* identity was non-inclusive.

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