

MAITHILI LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS:
SOME BACKGROUND NOTES¹

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I. The Language and the Area

Maithili is a New Indo-Aryan (NIA) language written in the Devanāgarī² script. It is spoken by a total of about 21 million people in the eastern and northern regions of the Bihar state of north India and the southeastern plains, known as the Tarai, of Nepal. In the past, Maithili was regarded either as a dialect of Bengali (Beames 1872-79/reprint 1966: 84-85),³ or of Eastern Hindi (Hoernle 1880), or as one of the three dialects of a spurious language called 'Bihari' (Grierson 1883-87; 1885; 1903/ reprint 1968). Today, however, it is recognized as a distinct language and taught as such in the Indian universities of Calcutta, Bihar, Patna, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga and Benares, and the Tribhuvan University of Nepal. Demographically, Maithili is the second most widely spoken language of Nepal,⁴ and, according to the International P.E.N. (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) and the *Sahitya Akademi* (National Academy of Letters), the 16th largest language of India. As early an investigator as Grierson (1883a: 1) recognized the

¹This paper forms part of the 'Introduction' to Yadav (1979c).

²In the past, Maithili was written in the Mithilāksar script, which is akin to the Bengali writing system. No definite date can be determined as to when Maithili began to be written in the Devanāgarī script.

³This is an extrapolation, based on the fact that Beames treats Vidyāpati (1360 - 1448) - the greatest Maithili poet - as a Bengali poet.

⁴The first language is Nepali-which is also the national language.

distinctiveness of Maithili: "... for though, doubtless, Hindi and the dialects herein treated of may ultimately be traced up to a common parentage, this point of departure is so extremely distant, and the stems of these languages have developed and branched off so luxuriously in different directions, that they have nothing in common, but their roots."

II. A Brief Sketch of Important Works on Maithili

References to Maithili (then spelt *Mithelee* or *Mythili*) as a language date back to as early as 1801.⁵ However, serious interest in Maithili linguistics began in the early 1880's when Sir George Abraham Grierson and A.F. Rudolf Hoernle published a series of scholarly books and papers on Maithili. In 1880, Hoernle published a book entitled *A Comparative Grammar of the Gaudian Languages with Special Reference to Eastern Hindi*, in which he treated Maithili as a dialect of Eastern Hindi. Hoernle, however, did recognize the fact that Maithili exhibits more "unmistakable similarities" ('Introduction', 1880: viii) to Bengali and Nepali than to Hindi. He observed:

... Indeed I am doubtful, whether it is more correct to class the Maithili as a Bengali dialect rather than as an E(astern) H(indi) one. Thus in the formation of the past tense, Maithili agrees very closely with Bengali, while it differs widely from the E.H.

In 1881, Grierson published *An Introduction to the Maithili Language of North Bihar*, part I 'Grammar' (henceforth *Introduction*). The *Introduction* is the most complete synchronic description of Maithili to date. It is divided into four parts - part I deals with the alphabet and pronunciation; part II deals with nouns, adjectives and pronouns; part III discusses the verb in detail; and part IV discusses the 'indeclinables', i.e., adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. The description, however, is based heavily upon Maithili forms obtained from translations of Hindi and Sanskrit forms by "the Pundits, Village School Masters and educated Native Gentlemen of Northern Mithila..." (p.1). In 1882, Grierson published part II ('Chrestomathy and Vocabulary')

⁵H.T. Colebrooke (1901), as quoted in J. Mishra (1949: 39-40).

of the *Introduction*. The 'Vocabulary' is perhaps the earliest word-list of the Maithili language and contains all the words occurring in the *Chrestomathy* of the greatest Maithili poet, Vidyapati (1360-1448), besides "a large number of words collected by me in the country and in Court, and not hitherto found in dictionaries" ('Prefatory Note': 125). The major contribution of Grierson, however, lies in the very extensive dialectal survey of what he called Bihari, published during 1883-87 as the *Seven Grammars of the Dialects and Subdialects of the Bihari Language* (Part I, 'Introductory'; part II 'Bhojpuri Dialect'; part III 'Magadhi Dialect'; part IV 'Maithili-Bhojpuri Dialect'; part V 'South Maithili Dialect'; part VI 'South Maithili-Magadhi Dialect'; part VII 'South Maithili-Bangali Dialect'; and part VIII 'Maithili-Bangali Dialect'). During this period, there appeared Hoernle and Grierson's *A Comparative Dictionary of the Bihari Language* (part I 1885; part II 1889; only two parts published). A consummate summary of all the major findings was later published as 'Indo-European Family Eastern Group: Bihari and Oriya Languages' in Grierson's (1903/ reprint 1968) *Linguistic Survey of India* 5:2.

What is curious is that in spite of Grierson's tireless efforts to establish Maithili as a language separate from Bengali and Hindi, Kellog (1893) continues to treat Maithili as a dialect of Hindi. The importance of Kellog's work lies in the copious illustrations from Maithili, coupled with insightful philological notes.

In 1958, S. Jha's *The Formation of the Maithili Language* appeared. It is the most exhaustive diachronic description of Maithili. In it, Jha has undertaken to trace the history of Maithili from the Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) period and has laboured assiduously to assign Sanskrit etymologies to practically all forms of Maithili (for a contrary view, emphasizing the Santhali, i.e. Munda, influences on Maithili, see De Vresse, 1962).

In recent years, a number of Sanskrit grammars, masquerading as Maithili grammars, have been published in north India. A two volume history of Maithili literature has also been published by Mishra (1949, 1969a). In Nepal, linguists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics have recently published two papers on Maithili syntax, both written in the tagmemic framework (Davis

1973; Williams 1973), and a word-list (Trail 1973). *A Paryayavācī Śavdakos̄* (Dictionary of Synonyms) of 14 languages of Nepal, including Maithili, has also been published by the Royal Nepal Academy (B.S. 2030/ 1973-74).

Little has been published on the phonetics and phonology of Maithili. The only works that I have personal knowledge of are: Jha (1941, 1958); Ingemann and Yadav (1978) and Yadav (1976, 1979a, b, c, 1980).

III. A Note on the Term 'Bihari'

Since it is customary among western linguists to refer to Maithili as 'Bihari', a few words on this term are in order. The earliest usage of the term 'Bihari' (literally, the language of Bihar) is found in Grierson (1882 a:2), wherein he offers the following reasons for adopting this name to designate three dialects - Bhojpuri, Maithili and Magadhi [Magahi]:

1. It is a local name, like the names of other languages, as Bangali, Panjābī, & c.
2. The extension of the name to cover all the dialects of Eastern Hindūstān has a parallel in the case of Marāṭhī, which has been extended to cover the Dakhanī dialect of Berār, while it means literally only the dialect of the Marāṭhā country.
3. There is a historical propriety in the name, as the work Bihār is derived from the Buddhist *Viharas* or monasteries once so thickly spread over that region; and Bihārī in its most ancient form was the language of the early Jains and Buddhists.
4. Bihārī has a prescriptive right to the dignity of assuming a general character, for the only one of all the dialects of Eastern Hindustan which possesses any literature is Maithili, a dialect of north Bihar.

That the choice was unfortunate has been felt ever since. Most modern writers on Maithili (Mishra 1949: 55-57; 1969b: 270-71 and G. Jha 1974: 29-30) have resented it and have so indicated. What is most irksome is that Grierson would group Maithili and Bhojpuri together as dialects of a common Bihari while he himself

was so well aware of the two separate cultural and linguistic as well as literary traditions, and even said that Bhojpuri "belongs rather to the United Provinces than to Bihar, ... and all its associations and traditions point to the west and not to the east" (*Linguistic Survey of India* 5:2, 40). A similar view-point was expressed by Chatterji (1926: 99):

The Bhōjpurīyā [i.e., Bhojpuri] territory has always been under the influence of the West, and Western forms of speech, like Braj-Bhākā and Awadhī, and literary Hindūstānī (Hindī and Urdū) in later times, have been cultivated by poets and others who spoke Bhōjpurīyā at home.

Mishra (1969b: 270) sums up the popular sentiment of a modern Maithili writer in most forceful terms:

There never was in the past nor exists today a language called Bihari. There is no mention of it in any literature, any document or any record. There is not a single individual who speaks or writes in the Bihari language as defined by Grierson. It has no script, no literature, no actual existence. It is surely a creation of Grierson's mind and lives in philological works of scholars who thoughtlessly copy Grierson's classification.

IV. The Earliest Written Text of Maithili

The *Varna - Ratnākara* of Jyotirīsvara Kavisekharacārya (Chatterji and Misra, (eds) 1940) is the oldest written text of the Maithili language. It dates back to the early 14th century and is preserved in a Ms. written in 1507. It is a prose text written in the Mithilāksar⁶ script, which is closer to the Bengali writing system. The text is:

a sort of lexicon of vernaculars and Sanskrit terms, a repository of literary similes and conventions dealing with the various things in the world and ideas which are usually treated

⁶For a history of the origin and development of this script see R. Jha (1971).

in poetry. We have in it either bare lists of terms, or the similies and conventions are set in the framework of a number of descriptions.

(Chatterji and Misra, (eds.) 1940, 'Introduction' xxi)

Some Maithili scholars (Mishra 1949: 101-118; S. Jha 1958: 32-36) claim vigorously that the *Caryapadas* (circa 800-1100) are also written in some form of Old Maithili, while the eminent Bengali scholar Chatterji (1926) argues that the *Caryapadas* were written in Old Bengali. The argument continues, and the controversy rages on to include other Indian languages as well, as Chatterji (1949) observes:

The fact the *Caryapadas* have been claimed for Old Assamese, Old Oriyā, Old Maithili (and Old Magahi) as much as for Old Bengali, only demonstrates the close kinship of these languages to one another; they have even been claimed for "old Hindi" taking "Hindi" in a loose and popular sense. Dr. Jayakant Misra [Mishra], like Dr. Subhadra Jha, thinks the *Caryas* are in old Maithili. I still stick to my view, put forward in my *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (1926), that the *Caryas* - of course at a time when the divergences between Maithili and Bengali and Oriya and Assamese were not very prominent. ('Introduction' to Mishra 1949: x).

V. Genetic Classification

No two linguists agree on how exactly to classify the Indo-Aryan languages, showing the place of Maithili among them.

Prominent among those who have treated the problem are: Grierson (1883 a; 1918; 1919), Chatterji (1926), Mishra (1949), S. Jha (1958), G. Jha (1974) and Jeffers (1976).

The earliest classification of the NIA languages is that provided by Grierson (1883 a), who describes Maithili as a dialect of Bihari - a descendant of the Magadhī-derived Gaudian language, but quite distinct from the Hindi language (see Figure 1).

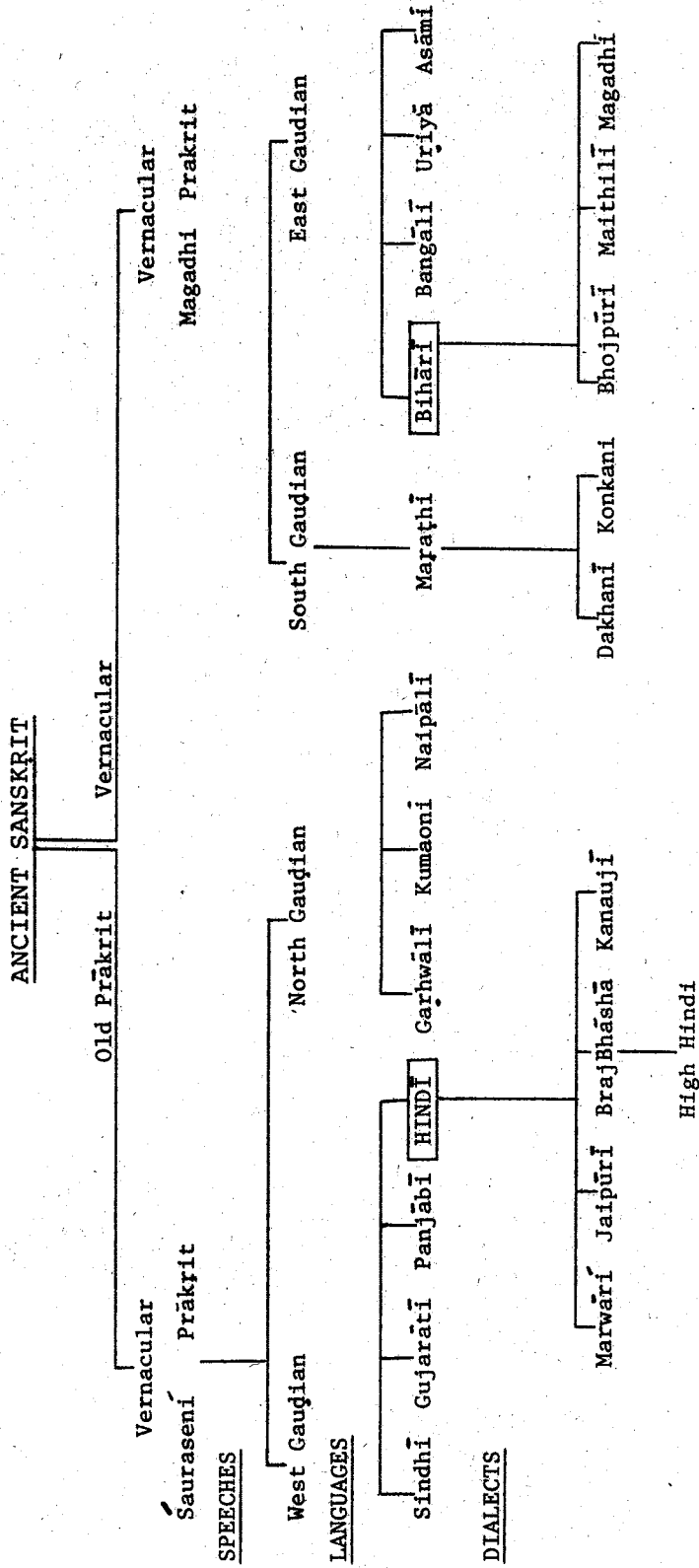


Fig. 1 Genetic classifications of NIA languages, according to Grierson (1883a)

Later, Grierson (1918, 1919; 1927) stipulated what is now known as the "inner group - outer group"⁷ theory of Aryan migration into India, and provided a slightly different grouping of the Indo-Aryan languages. He divided them into three main divisions, the grouping of which was "based on linguistic considerations and also coincides with the geographical distribution of various languages" (Grierson 1918: 49). See Figures 2 and 3.

Chatterji (1926), like Grierson (1883a) believes that Maithili belongs to the group of Māgadhi Apabhraṃsa (called Māgadhi Prākṛit by Grierson). He was also the first linguist to distinguish Maithili and Bhōjpurīyā (Bhojpuri) as belonging to two branches of the Magadhan subfamily (see Figure 4). Chatterji (1926) observes:

Bhōjpurīyā somewhat stands apart from its sister speeches, having come under the influence of its western neighbour Awadhī (Ardha-Maghadhi) from very early times. ... But the sharp distinction between Bhōjpurīyā and Maithilī-Magadhī in their conjugation would justify their relegation to two separate groups, at least for the modern age. ('Introduction', p. 92).

Most native Maithili scholars seem to go along with Chatterji's (1926) classification, with some minor modifications. Such a classification enables them to emphasize two main points, i.e., that Maithili is not a dialect of Hindi, and that Maithili is not a dialect of Bihari and hence ought to be grouped with Bhojpuri.

S. Jha's (1958) classification, which is often quoted in the Maithili language texts, is shown in Figure 5.

More recently, in a study based on the strict principles of historical and comparative linguistics, Jeffers (1976) has attempted

⁷ According to this theory, the modern Indo-Aryan vernaculars fall into two groups - the Inner and the Outer. The Inner group is constituted of languages like Western Hindi, Panjabi, Gujarati and Rajasthani, while the Outer group consists of languages like Sindhi, Marathi, Oriya, Bihari and Assamese. The two groups of languages exhibit fundamental phonetic, phonological and morphological differences. These differences are ascribed to separate invasions of groups of Aryans into India. It is argued that the Outer group of Aryans came to India first and settled in the Madhyadesa. i.e., Eastern Panjab and Western U.P. The Inner group of Aryans invaded later and pushed the Outer group out of their original homes, forcing them to move north, east and south. (See Chatterji [1926] for a contrary view).

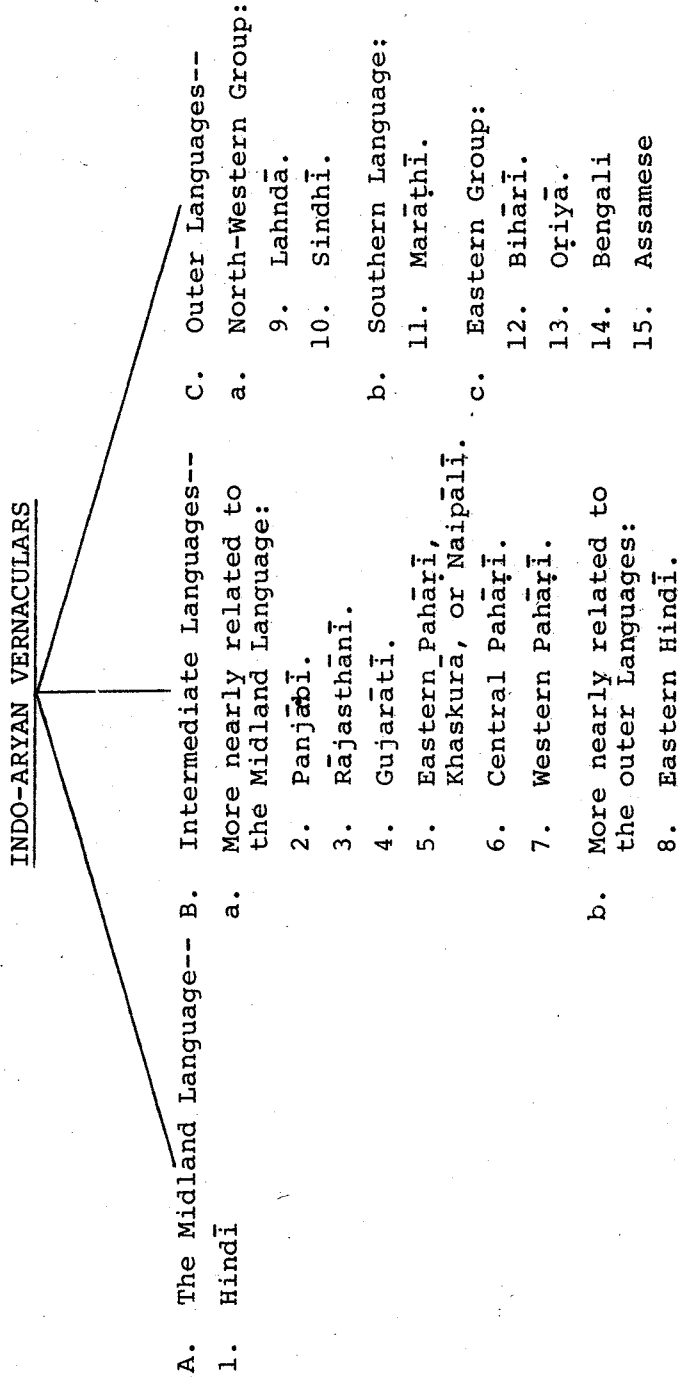


Fig. 2 Division of Indo-Aryan Vernaculars, based on Grierson (1918:49).

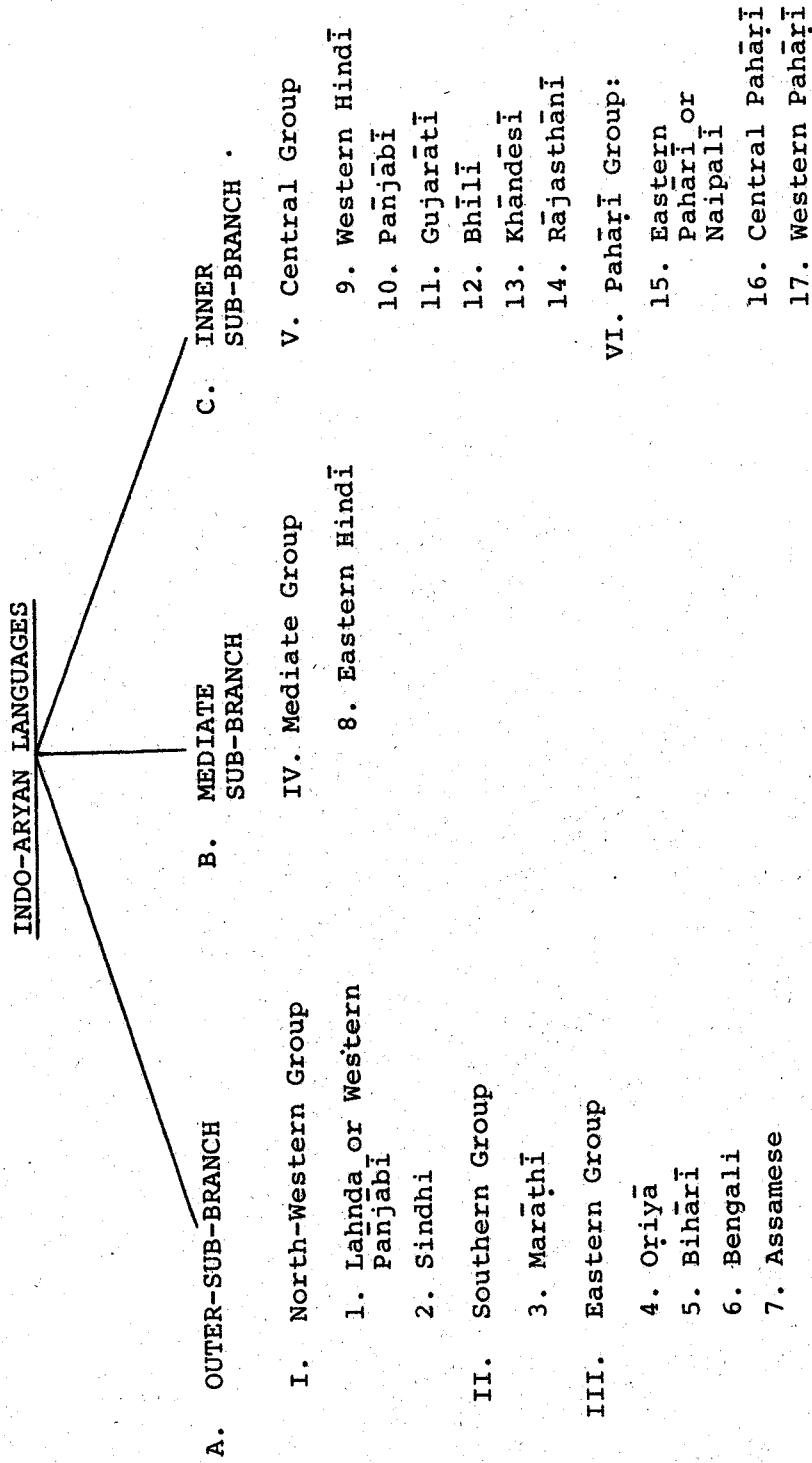


Fig. 3 Division of Indo-Aryan Languages, based on Grierson (1927:120).

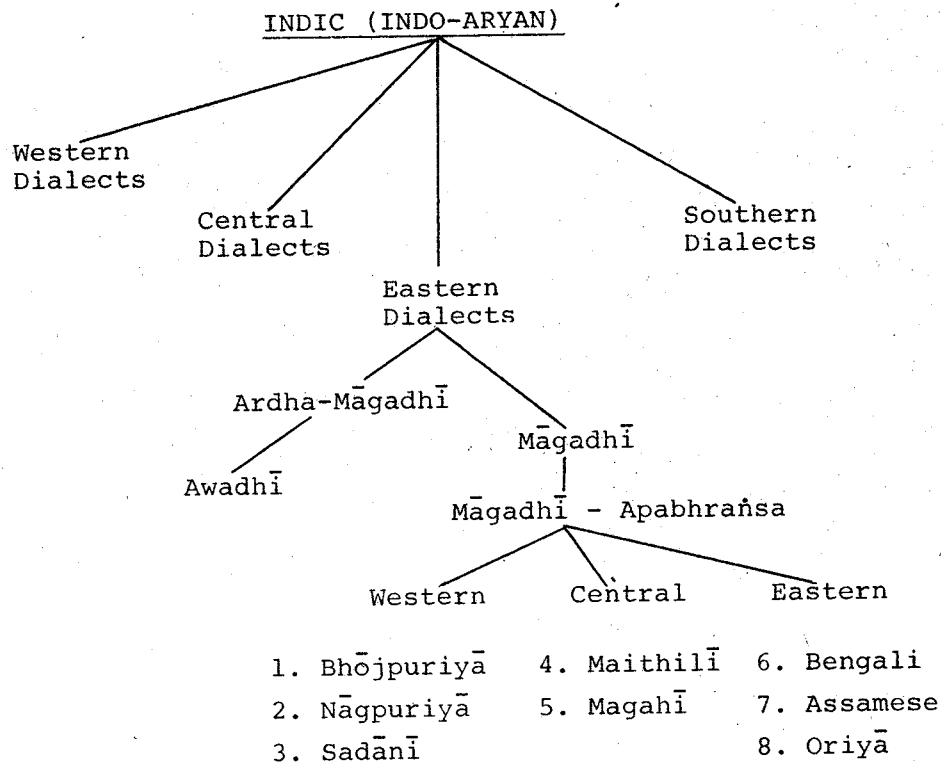


Fig. 4 Division of NIA languages, showing mainly the languages of North India; based on Chatterji (1926)

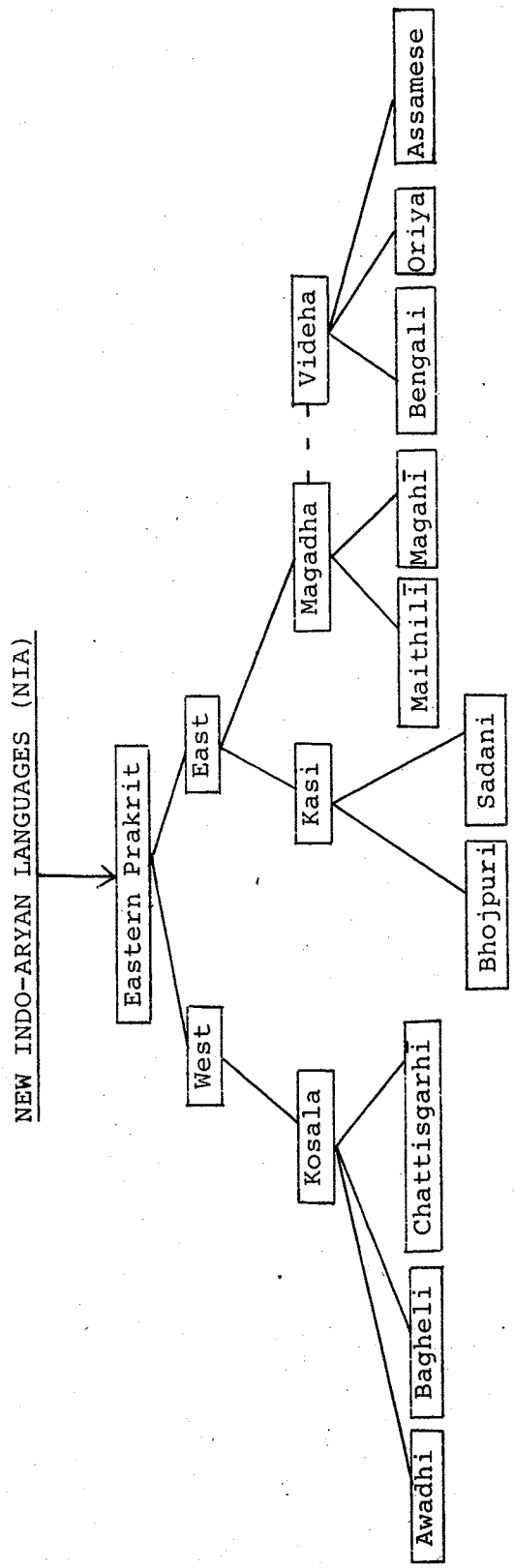


Fig. 5 Genetic relation of Maithili to other NIA languages of Eastern India, based on S. Jha (1958)

to establish the position of the "Bihar" languages (i.e. Maithili, Maghi and Bhojpuri) within the Indo-Aryan family. He concludes that:

... on the basis of the criterion of shared phonological innovation, Bihari cannot be considered a branch of the Eastern group of Indo-Aryan languages which includes Bengali, Assamese, and Oriya, as has traditionally been assumed. The only

phonological innovations which Bihari shows with languages in its geographic vicinity must be assumed to represent reflexes of phonological changes which affected a large MIA (Middle Indo-Aryan) dialect region which incorporated, at least, East and West Hindi, Bihari, and the Eastern languages (p. 224).

To sum up, it seems fair to conclude that it is quite possible that the genetic classification problems that have arisen stem from the fact that there exists a dialect chain, or continuum, and therefore, it is difficult, or least arbitrary, to treat the genetic classification of Maithili within the Stammbaum model.

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