



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXX / 2019

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## **Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution**

**Edited by  
Michelguglielmo Torri  
Nicola Mocci  
Filippo Boni**

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**viella**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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*When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.*



A COLONIAL MONUMENT DE-CONSTRUCTED:  
MAJEED ON GRIERSON'S LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA

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Javed Majeed, *Nation and Region in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India*, London: Routledge, 2018, 230 pp., (ISBN 9780429439223).

Javed Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India*, London: Routledge, 2018, 266 pp., (ISBN 9780429439230).

Dubbed by its contemporaries «monumental», G.A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (LSI) was published between 1903 and 1928. It soon became one of the symbols of British colonialism in India, of its knowledge production endeavour, and of its supposed scientific modernity. It possibly remains the most comprehensive study of India's linguistic landscape ever undertaken till date. In the two volumes under review – *Nation and Region in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* and *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* – Javed Majeed proposes an analysis of the LSI with a view to unpack its underlying historical, epistemological and philosophical underpinnings.

Majeed analyses the content of the LSI, the methods and processes that brought it to light, and the aim his author(s), commissioning authorities, and myriad recipients attached to it. In this way, the LSI unravels and turns into a historical archive; a linguistics manifesto; a field where power relations between its British author, his Indians interlocutors, and the government are negotiated; and the portrait of a man – G.A. Grierson – and his multiple identities. Through his analysis of Grierson's *opus magnum* Majeed lies in front of the reader a LSI deconstructed according to the categories of «region», «nation», and «power», thus highlighting the frictions, contradictions and self-aware limitations concealed under its «monumentality».

*Colonialism and Knowledge* demonstrates that, as the master of a colonial project of knowledge production, Grierson was highly indebted to the contributions of his Indian collaborators. His deep engagement with Indians and India's languages brought him to believe in his ability to see things through Indian eyes. To understand the ways Grierson related to India and Indians, Majeed integrates the data provided by the Survey and the wide mail correspondence attached to it with a fine analysis of Grierson's «triple hyphenated identity»<sup>1</sup> that intersected his profession of linguist and his experience of physical illness. He demonstrates that Grierson came to oc-

1. *Colonialism and Knowledge*, p. 94.

cupy an in-between space, where his *Britishness* and *Indianness* contradicted and integrated each other and challenged colonial clear-cut notions of race, privilege, and power relations. Majeed also reveals Grierson's awareness of the existence of ambiguities and limitations in his Survey, thus complicating the LSI's positioning vis-à-vis colonial stereotypes of scientific certainty.

In *Nation and Region* we find Grierson engaged in a network of connections with the advocates of various linguistic groups, thus playing an important role in influencing the regionalization of many of India's linguistic identities. At the same time, Majeed points out that this «regionalising strand»<sup>2</sup> of the LSI appears to be clashing with Grierson's rejection of neat linguistic boundaries as envisioned by colonial and Indian nationalist mappings. In fact, Grierson believed that «Indian languages gradually merge into each other».<sup>3</sup> Against other European linguists, he also resisted the imperative to force Indian languages into Western paradigms which had been moulded based on European languages alone.

Majeed's discussion of Grierson's ideas of Aryanism and Semitism as they surface through the LSI provides a compelling section of the book. Grierson, who as a linguist focused on Indo-European languages, identified «Aryan» India with the zenith of Indian civilization; this, Majeed argues, brought him to conceive «Hindu», «Aryan», and «Indian» as almost synonyms, and to conceptualize Islam as a degenerative graft onto India's authentic essence. In this way, Majeed uncovers remarkable similarities between Grierson's language and that of Hindu nationalism. At the same time, he highlights that in Grierson's discourse Christianity aligns with Aryanism, while Hindutva conceives Christianity and Islam as equally foreign and polluting.

Throughout the volume, Majeed exposes these and more frictions internal to the LSI, inviting the reader «to think of the LSI as a project with many different strands and narratives, some of which were in tension with each other».<sup>4</sup>

Because the LSI soon established itself as a landmark study of India's languages, and because language has been a critical category in the politics of the subcontinent till date, the relevance and influence of the LSI extends well beyond the colonial period.

For example, Majeed demonstrates that the Census provided a major *trait d'union* between the LSI and post-coloniality. Grierson's study had considerable influence on the Census's understanding of India as a sum of linguistic regions. And, in turn, the institution of the Census cast a long shadow on Indian domestic politics: the internal reorganization of India on linguistic basis, and contemporary electoral and caste politics provide clear examples.

2. *Nation and Region*, p. 45.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Even in contemporary South Asia, Grierson's colonial exploration has remained a source of authority linguistic movements kept having recourse to, with a view to support their linguistic pleas and political goals. This is, for example, the case of Siraiki. Majeed reconstructs how Grierson single-mindedly sought to establish Siraiki's differentiation from Punjabi as «a separate and distinct language»,<sup>5</sup> consequently influencing the census authority's approach to the two languages. As a result, in contemporary Pakistan, the Saraiki movement has invoked Grierson's LSI to back its claim of Siraiki's separateness from Punjabi language, a claim instrumental to the achievement of political and economic separation of Siraikistan from the province of Punjab, based on allegations of internal colonialism. Thus, the LSI and Majeed's study of the same are important references for understanding not only colonial but also contemporary South Asian affairs.

As Majeed's analysis unfolds, the LSI gets contextualised within British and Indian events of its time, the then ongoing trends in colonial administration and linguistics research, as well as Grierson's personality and life. In this way, from the monolithic monument that it initially appeared to be, the LSI progressively acquires in the eyes of the reader the semblance of a labyrinth; but Majeed unpacks its complexity, making even the hardest passages accessible to the reader through a consistently structured and clear prose.

Because of the myriad angles through which they approach the LSI and Grierson's scholarship, *Nation and Region* and *Colonialism and Knowledge* are recommended readings for advanced students and researchers across disciplines. In particular, the two volumes are a must-read for those focusing on the history and politics of language and of the British Empire in South Asia, and their connected notions of race, civilization, and nationalism. Those studying and researching the institution of the Census and the role of language in the post-colonial politics of the subcontinent will find Majeed's multi-layered analysis of Grierson's «monumental» LSI equally beneficial and fascinating.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.