

ROBERT NEEDHAM CUST AND THE LANGUAGE MAP OF INDIA

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

Abstract:

Robert Needham Cust was a man of two disciplines. He was a linguist and a geographer. Working in various capacities in the colonial administration, he produced knowledge of Indian languages. He argued that Punjabi was a different language which was till then seen as a dialect of Hindustani/Hindi. His best work was *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies* published in 1878. In this work, Cust used his wide knowledge of Indian languages and geography. In this work, he produced a linguistic map of India which was unique of that kind. In the map, Cust not only depicted various languages in their particular regions but also used the information on language family which was fast evolving after the emergence of the concept of Indo-European language.

Key Words: Cust, Cartography, Language Map, Punjabi, Hindustani

ROBERT NEEDHAM CUST AND THE LANGUAGE MAP OF INDIA

From the late 18th to late 19th century, a good deal of knowledge of Indian languages was produced by colonial administrators. Armed with this knowledge, the colonialists further used it in enumerating the speakers of different languages. Linguistic censuses and surveys were planned. On the basis of this knowledge, language maps were also created. Whereas censuses and surveys provided the primary data for various Indian languages upon which the politics of language was subsequently built, maps by demarcating various language regions, provided visual instruments of linguistic-identity formations. The regions, now, could be identified by the language predominantly spoken in the area.

Among the works of the earliest linguistic cartographers, that of Robert Needham Cust was arguably the most influential. After completing his graduate study, Cust joined the elite Indian Civil Services. He left Dover in September 1842 and landed in Calcutta on 24 March 1843.

ⁱ Although he joined civil services, his interest lay in language studies. At Eton and Haileybury, his 'first love' was language study. It has been claimed that he mastered twelve languages before coming to India.ⁱⁱ It was for the pursuit of language studies that Cust took early retirement in 1867 and engaged in research. He published most of his works after his retirement. His first publication was in 1870 in which Cust outlined the land-revenue procedures for Punjab, the land of his longest stay in India.ⁱⁱⁱ The second and most important was *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies* published in 1878. The *Sketch of Modern Languages* shows a unique blend of Cust's knowledge of cartography and Indian languages. He made language maps to show different language speaking areas. The pre-existing scholarship on the historical relationship of languages and various language families, which had been flourishing since William Jones's path-breaking work, were successfully incorporated by him in his studies. Cust's language maps were in consonance with language families. The maps produced in the book were unique with no precedents. The various language families were shown by different colours. Judith T. Irvine, while criticising Cust's approach, praises his work in these words:

Although languages had certainly been surveyed and mapped before, Cust's maps of India and Africa^{iv} were innovative at the time when he published them. Their large scale, their level of detail – considerable for the large scale map – and their explicit link with language-family classifications of the most up-to-date linguistic science, were unusual. They won him substantial international reputation among linguistics and geographers of the day.^v

In contrast to his maps of Africa, he produced without any first-hand knowledge of African people and languages; his work on India shows his deep knowledge of Indian languages and their distribution area. Cust had studied Sanskrit, Persian and Hindustani at Haileybury College, London, and Bengali at Fort William College, Calcutta.^{vi} He had also acquired knowledge of Punjabi while working in Punjab. Indeed, Cust himself did a comprehensive linguistic survey to produce the book. For gathering primary information on languages and preparing language maps, Cust relied on missionaries,^{vii} civil servants, scholars, travellers and anyone else who could provide information about a language spoken in a particular region.^{viii} His own administrative assignment in Punjab made him committed, somehow, in favour of that language: while his maps depicted large north Indian part as 'Hindi', the north-west part of India was shown as 'Punjabi'.^{ix}

Cust's India map was a departure from previous language maps of India. The earliest language maps of India were made by the Serampore missionaries. The missionaries' map, which was drawn and engraved by J. Walker, was based on 'its [Indian] various languages are spoken according to the best information compiled for the seventh Memoir of Translations conducted by the Serampore Missionaries.' An important way in which Cust's India maps differed from the Serampore missionaries' maps was their use of language-family in the place of vernaculars. In the Serampore missionaries' map, various regions of India were depicted in terms of dialects spoken there. On the other hand, the maps prepared by Cust divided India into major language areas. These language-regions were further divided into smaller regions presumably representing the branches of major languages to show their relation as a family. This pattern was further developed by Cust in his Africa map. '[T]he Africa book and its map represent putative linguistic relationship more systematically. ... The chapters organize the material by language-family, with headings and sub-headings for branches and particular languages. ... a large fold-out language map depicts the families, sub-families, and major languages; in the Africa map, their names are printed in different typefaces according to their hierarchy of classification. In both maps [Indian and African] the major language families, as Cust envisioned them, are shown in different colors.'^x Hence, whereas the large north Indian part in the missionaries' map was shown as 'Bikaneera, Marwar, Hurriana, Bruj, Bundelkhund, Mugudha', etc.,^{xi} in Cust's map it was clearly shown as 'Hindi'. However, John Beames, a philologist, used 'Hindee' and 'Hindustani' both terms to depict the north Indian major language in his language map, prepared in 1867.^{xii} The difference of opinion in naming the language – Hindi or Hindustani – spoken in the major part of north India reflects an ambiguity among the colonial philologist. This ambiguity of name, style and form of the language can be seen in the administrators as well. Interestingly, in the Beames map, the areas in which two languages overlap each other were shown with mixed colours. In contrast, Cust's map depicted clear frontiers of various languages. Nevertheless, Cust used the word 'Hindustani' in his text and termed it the *lingua franca*. But he considered it essentially a dialect of Hindi.^{xiii} Therefore, on his map, he could not identify any particular territory for Hindustani. Cust's non-recognition of Hindustani on his map was contrary to the colonial policy of recognition of Hindustani as an official language. This omission needs some explanation. This omission was related to his partiality towards Punjabi as a

distinct language. In his text, Cust accepted Punjabi as 'the Western branch of Hindi Language', but mapped a distinct region for it. In 1862, Cust had argued the case of Punjabi against Hindustani as the language of judicial administration in the north-west frontier. Indeed, he addressed a petition to the Punjab government called 'Cust Rule'.^{xiv} It is not important for the purpose of the present study to argue whether Punjabi was a language of the area to merit its inclusion in the map as representing a distinct language area. What is important is to highlight the interpretative ambiguities in the colonial identification of languages, their variant forms, names and regional distribution. Colonial administrators, as shown by Farina Mir, remained reluctant to accept Cust's argument in framing the language policy of Punjab. Again, the case of Punjabi over Hindustani could not be argued without imagining plural forms of Punjabi. Farina Mir in her excellent work, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*, reminds us that before the partition of Punjab most of the Punjabi literature was published in the Indo-Persian script rather than the Gurumukhi script. She also suggests that it was the missionaries first and then their successor colonial administrators and intellectuals who identified Punjabi only with the Gurumukhi script.^{xv} It is a classic case of faulty and reductionist colonial interpretation in which a language was identified with a specific religion. The Cust's exercise of identifying and distinguishing between Punjabi and Hindustani and privileging one over the other as the linguistic marker of a region on a map is a case of colonial assumption of certain languages as strictly monolithic and geographically delimited, and of colonial oversight of the fluid, pluralistic and dynamic nature of languages with multiple forms that resist rigid classification and labelling.

Cust's maps introduced another innovation. The maps clearly demarked the boundaries of various languages. However, such a clear demarcation of boundaries was not possible. There were places in which two or more language-speaking communities lived together. Cust himself accepted that 'a large portion of Telugu-speakers have intruded themselves within the Tamil Language-Field, and there are some in the independent territory of Mysore'.^{xvi} Judith Irvine blames Cust's language maps for 'downplay[ing] any representation of political units as distinct from the languages and populations they might be taken to imply.' She further argues that 'the Cust-style language map fits well with the belief that political community derives from, or should derive from, linguistic and ethnic community, and that language is somehow more essential, and prior to, any particular kind

of social formation'.^{xvii} She concludes that 'this kind of language maps erased multilingualism, constructed linguistic differences as absolute'.^{xviii}

Cust's work, however, encouraged detailed linguistic surveys of India. In the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, in 1898, he described a collaborative project with George Grierson and proposed a much more detailed survey of the languages of British India. He, along with Grierson, had participated in the Congress of Orientalists, held in Vienna in 1886. Both impressed upon 'the Government of India the importance of preparing a detailed survey'.^{xix} The twin plans of collecting data and securing specimens of speeches were, hence, mooted. But Cust's advancing age was at odds with his enthusiasm, and he believed in and relied on Grierson's capabilities and scholarship. In a few years, he handed over to Grierson all his linguistic material on India.^{xx}

I still hope, that my valued friend Mr. Grierson, of H.M. Indian Civil Service, will, in 1903, after the expiration of a quarter of a century, complete and publish an enlarge and corrected edition of my Sketch; and I have arranged, that the accumulated addition information, entered in my interleaved copy, should after my death be made over to Mr. Grierson, to add to his own collections, for he is out and out the best informed scholar in this branch of Linguistic knowledge of the present epoch.^{xxi}

ⁱ H. J. M. Milne, "Diaries of Robert Needham Cust" in *The British Museum Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (The British Museum: March, 1941), p. 7. URL <http://www.jstore.org/stable/4422188>.

ⁱⁱ Robert Eric Frykenberg, "Robert Needham Cust, 1821-1909: A personal Biography by Peter Penner" reviewed article in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Indiana University Press: Winter, 1987), p. 259. URL <http://www.jstore.org/stable/3827636>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, p. 254.

^{iv} On Africa Robert Needham Cust published *Modern Languages of Africa* in two volumes in 1883.

^v Judith T. Irvine, "Language Field: Robert Needham Cust's Language Map of South Asia, 1878" in Cynthia Talbot, ed., *Knowing India: Colonial and Modern Constructions of the Past* (Yoda Press: New Delhi, 2011), p. 33.

^{vi} Judith Irvine, "Language Field", p. 33.

^{vii} Robert Needham Cust did not mention any missionary map citing presidents of his work. Farina Mir reproduces the oldest Indian map constructed by Serampur missionaries. Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, p. 409.

^{viii} Judith T. Irvine, "Language Field: Robert Needham Cust's Language Map of South Asia, 1878" in Cynthia Talbot, ed., *Knowing India: Colonial and Modern Constructions of the Past* (Yoda Press: New Delhi, 2011), p. 34.

^{ix} Irvine, "Language Field", p.35..

^x Irvine, "Language Field", p. 35.

^{xi} See the Serampure Missionaries Map in Appendix I.

^{xii} See the Map of John Beames in Appendix I.

^{xiii} Irvine, "Language Field", p. 51, n. 13.

^{xiv} Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2010), p. 43.

^{xv} Farina Mir observes that it was the Serampure missionaries who 'only published Punjabi in the Gurumukhi script even though it was possible to record the language in Indo-Persian script, a practice that was clearly quite common based on existing Punjabi manuscripts. But the missionaries singularly associated Punjabi with the Gurumukhi script and Sikhs'. Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, p.43. See also Mir produced Appendix A. Colonial-Era Hir-Ranjha Texts consulted, pp. 196- 202 and Appendix C. Punjabi Books Published Prior to 1867, p. 207.

^{xvi} Cited in Irvine, "Language Field", p. 37.

^{xvii} Irvine, "Language Field", p. 47.

^{xviii} Irvine, "Language Field", p. 38.

^{xix} Robert Needham Cust, "Detail Survey of the Languages and Dialects Spoken in Certain Portions of British India" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (Cambridge University Press: Jan., 1898), pp. 35-41. URL <http://www.jstore.org/stable/25207932>.

^{xx} Irvine, "Language Field", p. 48.

^{xxi} Cust, "Detail Survey of the Languages and Dialects", p. 35.