Introduction
Nation in the Vernacular

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people, Dispenser of India's destiny.

Thy name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sindhu, Gujarat and Maratha, Of the Dravida, Utkala and Bengal;

It echoes in the hills of the Vindhyas and Himalayas, mingles in the music of Yamuna and Ganga and is chanted by the waves of the Indian Ocean.

They pray for thy blessings and sing thy praise.

The saving of all people waits in thy hand,

Thou dispenser of India's destiny. Victory, victory, victory to thee.

In the National Anthem, India is portrayed as a collection of images, some geographical and some linguistic. Written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1911, this poem staked out linguistic regions long before they were officially formed. By juxtaposing language-based regions such as Punjab, Gujarat, Maratha, Utkala, and Banga with geographical features of the Indian landscape such as the mountains of Vindhyas and Himalayas, the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, and the Indian Ocean, the anthem endows these linguistic regions with a naturalness that can be belied by an attention to the history of how they came to be formed in modern India. Just as mountains, rivers, and oceans were seen as primeval features of the national landscape, so, too, were the territorial domains of these languages. Akhil Gupta has argued that in invoking these linguistic regions, the National Anthem also referenced the speakers, their culture, and social life.[1] In marking these fragments of the nation, the Anthem was therefore a site where difference in India was incorporated and domesticated even as such difference was assigned roles in the fortunes of the nation.

[1] Akhil Gupta, "The Song of the Non Aligned World: Transnational Identities and Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism", *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 63–79.

This neat schema produced a linguistically diverse but, at heart, a united India. What this neatness veils is the truly messy nature of the making of India, particularly from the linguistic and regional angles. Many tensions came to bear on this process: tensions between regional cultural nationalism and Indian unitary nationalism, tensions arising from claims and counterclaims for territory between regions, tensions between regional minorities and the majority linguistic groups and, finally, tensions between the adivasi and the caste Hindu, Indo-European language-speaking elites.

The province of Odisha serves as a particularly good site to see how these tensions and their resolution founded the Indian nation. Formed in 1936 as a linguistically defined province, Odisha constitutes a majority Hindu population with a large minority community of adivasis. The movement for the formation of a separate province of Odisha began in the mid-1860s amidst debates about the relative underdevelopment of the Odia language. This movement to amalgamate Odia-speaking areas from the Bengal and Madras Presidencies as well as the Central Provinces ran parallel to the increasingly popular Indian anticolonial movement. Therefore, the modern regional community of Odisha had to be imagined even as the Indian national community was being configured in the political, cultural, and literary spheres.

By tracking the history of Odia linguistic politics and situating it in the broader frame of colonialism and Indian nationalism, this book analyses two interlinking tensions that bear upon the making of regions in India. One, that contrary to governing anxiety about multilingualism often signaled by the refrain "our language problem," regional linguistic politics functioned to strengthen the hold of Indian nationalism. The goal of rescuing regional "mother tongues" from colonial neglect became fundamental to the deepening of Indian nationalism—the aspirations toward distinct regional self and shared national community went hand in hand. Two, that this celebratory narrative needs to be interrupted by a more cautionary approach to linguistic politics that illustrates how being placed within the logic of the nation made regional formations on linguistic basis into sites of hegemonic power, where those who did not fit into the neat linguistic framework of India were absorbed into regional communities as second-class citizens. Thus, not only are regional languages written into the making of the Indian nation, but also written in are the exclusions inevitably involved in the reification of regional Indian languages.

To do this, we need to uncover the labors performed by major Indian languages in the making of modern India, supported by a

Map 2. Political map of India ca. 1956.

better understanding of the term "vernacular" as it is applied to these languages. Through a history of the making of Odisha, this book proposes that we should supplement our histories of how language produces community with more critical histories of how language is used to mark territory and bolster regional political power.

Map 3. Political map of India 2018.

Any attempt to destabilize the sort of naturalized primeval linguistic argument that the National Anthem makes would require us to think about the formation of the linguistic region in a nonpositivist manner. This history will approach these questions by thinking about the contretemps of power, affect, and politics connected to major Indian languages that contribute to the making of regional and national community in India.

Rethinking "Vernacular": Language and its Sublimation in the Construction of Regional Territory

Often, in histories of linguistic nationalism in India, an invocation of the term "vernacular" carries with it a suggestion of powerlessness.[2] This connotation of vernacular as powerless draws from the two dominant paradigms for the understanding of this term in contemporary Indian scholarship.[3] In scholarship on early modern literary history of India, the vernacular is understood as a diminutive and local counterpart of more dominant cosmopolitan or classical languages such as Sanskrit or Latin.[4] Then again, in the study of linguistic politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term vernacular is used to mark the subalternity of Indian languages and their speakers in relation to the colonizing English language and its speakers.[5] Comparing vernacular languages to "civilizing" languages such as Sanskrit or "colonizing" languages, like English has defined contemporary Indian life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as less than either their own past or the colonized present. In this framework, the major Indian vernaculars appear besieged by a sense of decline from the classical past and inadequacy in relation to the present.[6] Although current scholars of regional vernacular languages explore the politicization of language in deeply nuanced ways, an a priori assumption about the powerlessness of the vernacular in general prevents

[2] I employ the term "nationalism" in the sense that Sumathi Ramaswamy uses it to understand linguistic politics in colonial Tamil Nadu. Ramaswamy explicitly configured linguistic politics in colonial India within the conceptual framework of nationalism and illustrated that even though such politics does not neatly map onto Western understanding of nationalism, linguistic politics could be understood as "nationalism but different." Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

[3] An example of such a discussion would be Rama Sundari Mantena's essay on colonial Telegu, in which she makes explicit reference to both paradigms in explaining her use of the term "vernacular." See Rama Sundari Mantena, "Vernacular Futures: Colonial Philology and the Idea of History in Nineteenth-Century South India", *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 42, no. 4 (2005): 513–34.

[4] The most prominent example of this school of thought is Sheldon Pollock's definition of the vernacular in Sheldon I. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

[5] The most authoritative statement of this paradigm can be found in Ranajit Guha's discussion of historiography in the vernacular in Ranajit Guha, "The Authority of the Vernacular Pasts", *Meanjin* 51, no. 2 (1992): 299–302.

[6] In his article on colonial translation, Michael Dodson has illustrated how colonial philologists imbued the Indian vernaculars with qualities of inadequacy and degeneration in relation to both English and Sanskrit. Through a brief reading of contemporary English discussions about the connections between language and civilization, Dodson demonstrated how such ascriptions reflected not just on the status of the vernacular itself but also involved a judgment on the civilizational status of the people who spoke it. See Michael. S. Dodson, "Translating Science, Translating Empire: The Power of Language in Colonial North India", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 4 (2005): 809–35.

them from asking more exacting questions about the representative power of the vernacular.[7]

Even as scholars historicize the making of vernacular mother tongues in India, there is little attention paid to the hegemonic power of language in the formation of modern Indian territorial and political alignments.[8] My reading of political rhetoric on community, history, and territory in the movement for the creation of a separate state of Odisha suggests that the vernacular became powerful precisely due to prevailing assumptions about its indigeneity and its ability to represent and speak for hitherto unrepresented groups along with elite groups.[9] The capacity of the vernacular to act as a broad-based site of representation is, as I shall illustrate, the product of justificatory strategies employed by movements for Odia linguistic regionalism in negotiations for territorial entitlements of new linguistic provinces. These justificatory strategies, in turn, hinged on arguing for the primacy of language as a basis of community while ensuring that such a claim did not exclude non-Odia speakers from definitions of the Odia community.

[7] Even as I question this investment for the purposes of understanding the role of vernacular languages in colonial and postcolonial Indian polity, I do recognize the political and ethical stakes in this stressing of powerlessness. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak mentions in her discussion of strategic essentialism, even though essentialism in academic writing can be ethically suspect, the strategic deployment of essentialism by groups such as the Subaltern Studies Collective to interrogate the structures of colonial power can serve a radical purpose. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Donna Landry, and Gerald M. MacLean, *The Spivak Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[8] Research on the politics of language has traced how the evocation of Indian vernacular languages as the locus of regional community in nineteenth and early twentieth century enabled the emergence of the earliest forms of anticolonial political radicalism in different parts of India. For instance, Farina Mir has illustrated how the colonial government's negligence of Punjabi in favor of Urdu sparked the emergence of an autonomous Punjabi public sphere in which more complex cultural negotiation between the Hindu and Muslim Punjabi-speaking public was possible. See Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010) . In her study of the politics of mother tongue in colonial Andhra Pradesh, Lisa Mitchell has illustrated how language emerged as a foundational category in the reorganization of South Indian public life. See Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother-Tongue* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[9] Like other major languages in India, literature in Odia emerged in the sixteenth century as part of radical critique of caste discrimination. This history of Odia as a non-elite language accessible to lower caste, adivasi and Muslim populations of the Odia-speaking areas was often referred to in the rhetoric of the movement for the formation of a separate province of Orissa. For the connections between early Odia literature and social critique, see Satya P. Mohanty, "Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: The Oriya Lakshmi Purana as Radical Pedagogy", in *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 3–21. The vision of early Odia literature as fundamentally populist has spilled into academic writings on the Odia literary history. See Mayadhar Mansingh, *History of Oriya Literature* (New Delh:, Sahitya Academy 1978), pp. 9–12, where he describes early Odia literature as "essentially proletarian."

The case of Odisha illustrates how this move was enacted through what I call the "sublimation" of language as the basis of regional territorial divisions. The changing definitions of Odia community and territorial limits of the proposed province illustrate how the foundational nature of language was sublimated through a shift in the definition of regional community from one based on shared language to one based on shared space even as the salience of language in the definition of regional community was maintained. At stake in this sublimation of shared language to shared space was the attempt of Odia leadership to claim tracts of land populated by a sizable non-Odia-speaking adivasi population. The history of the institutional life of the Odia language is also, then, a history of boundary formation in the new state of Odisha. Through a focus on the history of the demarcation of territorial limits of the emergent Odia province in the 1920s and 30s, this book reveals that when it came to the regional organization of Indian territory, the vernacular was anything but powerless.[10]

To truly understand the role of major vernacular languages in the shaping of modern India, we need to revise and expand our assumptions about the implications of the term "vernacular" in nineteenth and twentieth century political and official rhetoric.[11] While existing definitions of the term take into account the history of linguistic and literary development in early modern India as well as account for the status of the vernacular as the language of the oppressed, these paradigms cannot be borrowed and deployed in the study of regional linguistic politics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. Even as Sheldon Pollock's definition of the vernacular acknowledges the institutional status of the literary vernaculars in early modern India as fundamental to the emergence of regional polities, his notion of vernacular as a *language of place* cannot be directly applied to the modern period where the place-ness of

[10] This argument applies to the politics of language beyond the case of Odisha. As an edited volume on language and politics in India indicates, scholars are noting that dominant languages in Indian do play a role in extending regimes of power and authority. See Asha Sarangi (ed.), *Language and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). My understanding of the power of language is drawn from the discussion on language and power in Martin Pütz, Joshua Fishmann, and Joanne Van Neff Aertselaer, "*Along the Routes to Power": Explorations of Empowerment through Language* (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2006). In the context of language, Joshua Fishman defines power in this volume as "control over scarce resources" (p. 5).

[11] "Vernacular" here denotes the major literary vernaculars of India that came to serve as the basis of the linguistic reorganization of Indian territory. As Sheldon Pollock notes, these languages are not the same as those that are deemed vernacular in sociolinguistics. These are standardized, literary, and historically powerful languages that often formed the basis of premodern regional polities; Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* , p. 24.

language itself is being rigorously contested by the colonial state and various nonofficial pressure groups. Furthermore, even as languages like Odia, Telegu, Kannada, and Marathi functioned at a disadvantage in the linguistic economy of colonial India, these languages came to command profound institutional power as the colonial and postcolonial Indian state reconfigured Indian territory along linguistic lines.

Existing definitions of the term draw on either the translation of relevant Indian words or by reference to the Western origin of the term through a search for its etymological roots. In the first paradigm, best exemplified by Sheldon Pollock's famous treatment of the vernacular millennium, the meaning of the term is founded on Indian words pertaining to languages that are first called vernacular in the late eighteenth century by colonial philologists. Pollock has defined his use of the term by drawing on early references to the word *desi* or *of place*, which he notes has served as a "conceptual counterpart" to the cosmopolitan in Indian languages at the beginning of the vernacular millennium.[12] Through a discussion of early modern literary history, Pollock illustrates how the use of the term desi was embedded in contemporary efforts among local elites to demarcate their regional worlds from the broader cosmopolitan world in which languages such as Sanskrit and Persian operated.[13] Through a discussion of how translations of the Mahabharata into various Indian languages are deployed in the process of linking language, space, and political order, Pollock illustrates how the desi languages of India were being used to establish the spatial boundaries of regional political praxis. Even as he rightly hesitates to provide a definitive explanation of the term vernacular, Pollock insists on the relational nature of the vernacular. Ultimately, he argues that a vernacular language can only be vernacular in relation to a cosmopolitan language.[14] Therefore, in this framework, vernacular or desi languages were self-consciously local *languages of place* defined in opposition to cosmopolitan languages that transcended the local. As such, vernacular languages are understood as less than—in scope as well as power—cosmopolitan languages. And a fundamental feature of the vernacular is its "emplacement" in the local.

The second paradigm emerged from the postcolonial epistemological critique of imperial knowledge by the subaltern studies school of Indian historiography. In an effort to unravel the orientalist depictions of Indian languages as languages that are unable to sustain the progress of modernity, this paradigm made much of the nonmodernity of Indian languages. Rather than being a weakness, the nonmodernity of the Indian vernacular had the ability to house voices and ways of thinking that would have been

[12] Ibid, p. 22. [13] Ibid, pp. 380–97. [14] Ibid, p. 388.

drowned out by the increasing influence of colonial modernity. This paradigm takes the nonmodernity of these languages for granted—as though they escaped imperial intervention through the introduction of colonial philology or even European standards of literary criticism.[15] In some ways, these languages were able to sustain older traditions and idioms. However, that was not the vernacular that came to be empowered in colonial and postcolonial India.

In the second paradigm, best exemplified by Ranajit Guha's plea for the recognition of the authority of vernacular pasts, the etymology of the term is traced to its Latin root—*verna* or slave. Guha's influential treatment of the term is an exposition of both the Latin root of the word and its English use in the nineteenth century. Guha argues that the modern Indian understanding of the vernacular draws from the English use of the term, which is hinged on the indigeneity of the vernacular even as it remains marked by a trace of enslavement left behind by its Latin origins. In the Indian context, Guha poses, the "vernacular" became a pejorative term that served as a "distancing and supremacist sign which marked out its referents, indigenous languages and cultures, as categorically inferior to those of the West or of England in particular." As such this ascription of inferiority allowed it to uphold "in every invocation, the power, value and status of white civilization."[16] For Guha, every invocation of the term vernacular was an instance of the epistemological violence perpetrated by colonial disciplinary knowledge. An example of the postcolonial critique of colonialism and its instrumental knowledge of the colonized, Guha's reading of the vernacular is very influential in contemporary postcolonial scholarship on Indian vernacular languages, historiography, and linguistic politics. As an important volume of essays on regional historiography in India reveals, histories written in the vernacular are seen as representative of an authentic subaltern voice.[17]

[15] The impact of colonialism on the languages of the colonized has been extensively studied. See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Judith. T. Irvine, "Subjected Words: African Linguistics and the Colonial Encounter", *Language and Communication* 28, no. 4 (2008): 323–43; Judith T. Irvine, "The Family Romance of Colonial Linguistics", *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)* 5, no. 2 (1995): 139–53; Joseph Errington, *Linguistics in a Colonial World: A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Michael J. Franklin, *"Orientalist Jones": Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746–1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Javed Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018).

[16] Guha, "Authority of Vernacular Pasts", pp. 299–300.

[17] Aquil Raziuddin and Partha Chatterjee (eds.), *History in the Vernacular* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

In contrast to Pollock and Guha, this treatment of the institutional life of the vernacular in the making of modern Indian regional territory points to an expansion of our understanding of the term "vernacular," which would compensate for some of the intellectual pitfalls inherent in the central implications of these two paradigms—that the vernacular is local, powerless, and indigenous. Rather than taking these three features of vernacular languages for granted, one can trace how major Indian regional vernacular languages came to claim a status of indigeneity and radical, representative powerlessness. Attention to the emerging official recognition of these languages as the basis of regional territory can reveal that these languages were not always indigenous to the territory that they claimed. As the case of Odia will reveal, in the movement for the creation of Odisha, arguments about the powerlessness of the Odia language and its people in relation to other groups was coupled with a systematic production of a historiographical orthodoxy portraying the history of Odia as an ancient, independent, Indo-European vernacular that was indigenous to the areas being claimed as Odisha. This seemingly contradictory narrative about the status of the vernacular as both powerless and linguistically singular was driven by an equally paradoxical imperative to appear as minority in a bid to become the majority group in the proposed province. This deployment of a minority discourse rooted in liberal narratives of emancipation, the rhetoric of state protection of minority rights and the threat of homelessness, effectively produced Oriya as a historically independent vernacular *of the region* fallen on hard times.[18]

By focusing on the institutional life of language, I seek to elaborate on the repressive power of the vernacular. My argument here hinges on recognizing the dual lives of the regional vernaculars in India—the quotidian and the institutional. Therefore, it is not my contention that the major Indian vernaculars function only as powerful classificatory tools of colonial and postcolonial governmentality. Rather, I pose that we need to recognize that even as vernacular language use enables the kind of radical politics being valorized by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and others, it does so in parallel to its life as a hegemonic, institutional marker of identity recognized by the postcolonial Indian state. By "institutional," I mean the ability of language to demarcate regional boundaries and hence determine individual access to provincial state resources through

[18] My definition of liberal discourse of minority rights is borrowed from Amir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) p. 2. Mufti argues that liberal thought on the "question of minority existence" displays certain central tropes. They include, "assimilation, emancipation, separatism, conversion, the language of state protection and minority rights, uprooting, exile, and homelessness."