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Language Policy and Omlah Corruption in Colonial Central India

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interactions between a class of legal-linguistic intermediaries known as omlahs, the British Raj, and a Central Indian tribal community, the Gonds, in nineteenth-century British India. Omlahs, as this article shows, emerged as powerful cultural-legal brokers in the nineteenth century through practices of revenue-farming, through liaising with British judges, and by impeding processes by which Gonds were to be settled and their oral custom turned into textualised law. The East India Company and later the Raj sought to settle Gonds into agricultural tracts throughout the nineteenth century, however, efforts to reform or eliminate omlahs all but failed. In surveying these processes, this article examines broader strategies of administrative control and fiscal management, showing how officials like Robert Cust developed linguistic surveys and vernacular education programmes to circumvent intermediary corruption. Omlahs were central to both tribal settlement and legal administration in Central India. British officials increasingly accused them of corruption. This article argues that these fiscal concerns made language a key tool of administrative efficiency rather than cultural policy.

KEYWORDS

Intermediaries; fiscal crisis; corruption; language policy; empire

Introduction

A few decades after the British Crown assumed control of India from the East India Company in 1857, it began to show a growing urgency in curbing corruption and boosting trade revenue. The Crown began doing so by taking cognisance of the corruption of a class of legal-linguistic intermediaries known as *omlahs* – a term deriving from Arabic *‘amala*, which is itself the plural of *‘āmil* (‘agent/worker/officer’). Publications issued by the British House of Commons as well as other independent publications such as the *Oriental*

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Herald and the *Dublin University Magazine* back in England had vehemently stated that these *omlahs* were corrupt. These publications had maintained that these *omlahs* were so corrupt that, as an administrative class, they often killed Indians;¹ and, further, that they controlled regional British officials in small mofussil towns who, because of their lack of knowledge of local customs and language of the regions which they administered – as these magazines alleged – worked at the behest of the *omlah*.² As judicial clerks, *omlahs* were described as ‘sharp’ and ‘shrewd men’, who often gained ascendancy over local ‘soft’ British judges in India through flattery and cleverness.³

Corruption by intermediaries was a widespread problem in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial India. Thomas Munro, a late eighteenth-century Company administrator, is recorded as having said, ‘If we are to have corruption, it is better that it should be among the natives than among ourselves, because the natives will throw the blame of the evil upon their countrymen [but] they will retain their high opinion of our superior integrity’.⁴ This rather often thinly veiled hyperbole might have easily been dismissed as a figment of nineteenth-century British enlightenment discourse⁵ were it not for the fact that the records on the *omlah* problem were so ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, and records of their corruption and acts of cruelty are so extensive as to also be found in certain Mughal texts. This disadvantaging of unlettered populations through their monopoly over the language of law in the nineteenth century seems to have been ubiquitous enough to have invited the censure of both the East India Company (EIC) and Crown administrators.

This corruption assumed a different character when it came to the settlement of a certain tribe in the central Indian plains, known as the Gonds, by the late nineteenth century. Gonds are an ethnolinguistic group who inhabit the plains of the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh in central India, but who once existed across the rather more porous boundaries of nineteenth-century British India – an area once referred to as the Central Indian provinces. Gonds had simultaneously been made the object of conversion by proselytising protestant missionaries under the British East India Company (BEIC),⁶ as well as the subject of reform in an increasingly carceral system implemented throughout the second half of the nineteenth century under the British Raj. By the early to mid-nineteenth century, Gonds, much like other regional tribes in South Asia, had taken to raiding British goods caravans to sustain themselves.

The shortfall in revenue from trade the Crown faced in the later nineteenth century, leakages to trade due to disturbances caused by unsettled Gonds and the monopoly that *omlahs* held over the mechanisms to settle these Gonds conspired to create conditions by which the Raj sought to use language as a site of administrative intervention in order to circumvent the office of the *omlah*.⁷ The Crown’s attempts at settling Gonds into agricultural tracts had all but failed by

the 1870s, and a large part of the problem was the *omlah*. The *omlah* came to accumulate power in the nineteenth century.

One might ask why intermediaries exist *at all*.⁸ This might seem too broad a question to provide an answer for in any meaningful terms given the existence of a rich body of work dealing with the subject⁹ of cultural-economic brokers and intermediaries produced in recent years. Disaggregated from particular moments in world history, Sanjay Subrahmanyam observes that the intermediary exists ‘because transactions exist’.¹⁰ But the mere existence of transactions in any given society is not enough to ensure the creation of a class of intermediaries. Rather, these transactions must be of a certain type, namely, the *go-between* must be created as a result of a ‘transactional friction’.¹¹ The ‘frictional’ component gives rise to intermediaries who are ‘thus the third party in a transaction where the two other parties – the principals of the transaction if one will, and who may be individuals or larger entities – are themselves incapable of completing it in the absence of mediation’.¹²

Drawing on Ana Tsing’s use of the concept, this friction in nineteenth-century British India arose from the inaccessibility the British faced in translating custom – and here particularly ‘tribal’ oral custom into law.¹³ Much of this distance between the existence of a textualised legal order, legal translation practices¹⁴ practiced by East India Company and Crown judges and the non-existence of texts among Gonds (as well as other tribal groups) allowed for the intermediation of *omlahs* who were able to intervene as a third party in this system of transactions taking place between the Crown and the Gonds. Further, this friction arose from an increase in financial transactions¹⁵ towards the mid-nineteenth century through which the Crown sought to make up for a shortfall in American cotton and further integrate local Indian Indigo markets into a global system. Attempts at translating¹⁶ and integrating local populations into a colonial system of administrative control¹⁷ as more and more territory came both under the Company’s, and eventually the Crown’s control.

This article argues that British language policy emerged not from orientalist scholarship or cultural superiority, but from concrete fiscal crises caused by intermediary corruption. This administrative crisis emerged from what can be understood as ‘transactional friction’ – the inability of British officials to complete legal and revenue transactions directly with tribal populations due to linguistic and cultural barriers. The distance between the Crown’s legal order and the non-existence of written legal traditions among groups like the Gonds created space for *omlah* intermediation that intensified with increased financial transactions as the Crown sought to compensate for American cotton shortfalls and integrate local indigo markets into global systems.

Rather than viewing corruption as an impediment to colonial rule, this article shows how accusations of intermediary corruption became productive for the colonial state, justifying both expanded bureaucratic control and new

forms of linguistic standardisation. The Crown's language policies were not driven by abstract cultural superiority, but by concrete fiscal crises caused by omlah corruption – and this corruption was actually essential to colonial revenue operations.

Central Indian State Formation and Tribal Displacement

Throughout the eighteenth century, the declining Mughal Empire gave way to autonomous regional polities – as Muzaffar Alam has shown – that became increasingly independent from imperial control.¹⁸ The Marathas (an eastern rival power located near Gujarat) began making inroads into the Mughal Empire at the time of the crisis of the crumbling Mughal Empire in Delhi, from around 1741.¹⁹ One of the largest *subas* (provinces) to be arrested from the Mughals by the Marathas was the province of Malwa. The northernmost outer rim of Malwa is located fifty miles from Agra and the southern tip is bound by the Vindhya hill range. The region was settled mostly by traders and cultivators operating under the rule of the Maratha confederacy; the region was also home to a large group of Central Indian Tribes, the largest of whom were the Bhils and Gonds.

The Malwa plateau at the time was a large, revenue-rich, oval tableland that had been integrated into the Mughal Empire during Akbar's reign (around 1562) and was producing around Rs. 10,000,000 in revenue by 1707 (~ US\$ 250 million).²⁰ Despite its integration in the mid-to-late sixteenth century into the Mughal administration, Malwa was mostly settled in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.²¹ From the 1720s, the Marathas had counted on roving bands to wrestle lands from the Mughal Empire in addition to levying their own taxes on areas brought under their control. And in parleys with the Mughals at the Delhi court, they would claim that a quarter of all Mughal revenue from Malwa be given to them.

The Malwa plateau changed hands a number of times throughout the eighteenth century and alternately became part of the Mughal Empire and a vassal of Maratha Confederacy through the late eighteenth century. What was a protracted process that took place over the course of half a century involving various people, tactics and processes, has been described in the most succinct manner possible.²² Much of this protracted process would, however, lead to the formation of successor states – states that began thriving in the face of the collapse of the Mughal Empire which was being weakened both by these continuous incursions by other powers, the practice of military fiscalism undertaken by these other powers, and the diminishing tax revenues they saw throughout the eighteenth century.

Such state-making processes had wide-ranging effects on three particular regions, namely, Malwa, Khandesh, and Berar (or what in British reports has been designated as Central India). More so, it had significant political and

economic effects on the tribal populations that resided in these central Indian planes. It particularly affected two tribal groups – the Bhils and the Gonds (as well as several other smaller tribal groups such as the Sontals, Koles and Konds). The largest of these groups – the Gonds – inhabited the plateau of Malwa, Khandesh and parts of Central India, and it is the Gonds and their interactions with the service class that concerns us in this article.

British failure to integrate the Gonds economically heightened their reliance on intermediaries like the omlah. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the largest of these tribal groups – the Gonds – were left un-integrated into the economies of these eighteenth-century successor states. By the early years of the nineteenth century, at the time of the BEIC's territorial expansion into Eastern India, the Gonds along with other Central Indian Tribes had taken to raiding British goods caravans to sustain themselves.

Company and Crown-period chronicles and documentation of oral folk traditions suggest that the Gonds had much more power and a wider reach and spread than did other Central Indian Tribes, such as the Bhils.²³ The Gond Kingdom had stretched from modern day Chandrapur in Maharashtra to Adilabad in modern day Andhra Pradesh included above within the area of Berar – a region referred to as Chanda in Ostell's map provided in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Ostell's new general atlas: containing distinct maps of all the principal states and kingdoms.

Note: Ostell's New General Atlas: Containing Distinct Maps of All the Principal States and Kingdoms (London: Cradock and Joy, 1814).

Gond Rajas had ruled the area of Chanda and Berar for around 400 years, from the middle of the fourteenth till about the middle of the eighteenth century and were eventually used by the Colonial State to negotiate between other tribes who inhabited the plains and the hills. The area they occupied was popularly known as Gondwana.²⁴ The regions these kingdoms occupied lay on the route through which Mughal armies would pass from the North of India to Berar and eventually into the Deccan plateau.²⁵

Gond Rajas had been known to embrace any of the available larger temporal idioms of rule – whether it be Brahminical or Islamic – in order to gain in land and add to their kingdoms. The sources of their rule come from folkloric elements as well as canonical records.²⁶ Gond *tarvels* (warriors) had nonetheless enjoyed prosperity under the auspices of the Mughals. They had been given the rights to hold land and collect revenue (*zamīndārīs*) under the regnal period of two Mughal emperors – Jahāngīr and Shāhjahān in the seventeenth century – and had been encouraged to farm and settle into agriculture tracts under Mughal control.²⁷

The Gond Kingdom of Chanda was seized from the Mughals and subordinated under the Maratha General Raghoji Bhonsle in 1749, and in turn was eventually ceded by the Marathas to the British in 1818 during the Anglo-Maratha Wars. The Anglo-Maratha Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were advantageous to the Gond Rajas. Eventually, raiding proved an important negotiating tactic between Gond and the British to get the Company to notice the detrimental effects that the wars of territorial expansion had on Gond populations.²⁸

Much of the period from the 1800s till the 1860s consisted of raids by Gonds (often times joining forces with Afghani origin *rohillas*) into British territories. The Land Revenue Settlement Report Chanda issued in 1852 records a number of instances of plundering one of which reads, ‘plundering revived in spite of military parties, posted thickly over the district, and as late as 1852, a government treasure escort was attacked and robbed by the Gonds on the Mool road, not sixteen miles from Chanda’.²⁹ Much of the raiding had in one way or another been encouraged by the Marathas united with the Gonds against the British. While much of this raiding was at the behest of the Marathas, this is also to say that the unstable conditions of the early nineteenth century had left large Gondi populations absolutely impoverished. Furthermore, while once integrated into local economies, from the 1820 to the 1860s, Gonds as well as other Central Indian Tribes were left impoverished. This raiding of British goods caravans and the impoverishment of Gonds had proved to be two sides of the same coin.

Under the BEIC in 1849, Gonds were further left impoverished through land acts passed under the Company. Central Indian Tribal powers of Gond Chieftain *jāgirdārs* or landholders to grant lands themselves to their progeny, or to other Tribal members had been limited through *rubkārs*. *Rubkārs* were legal

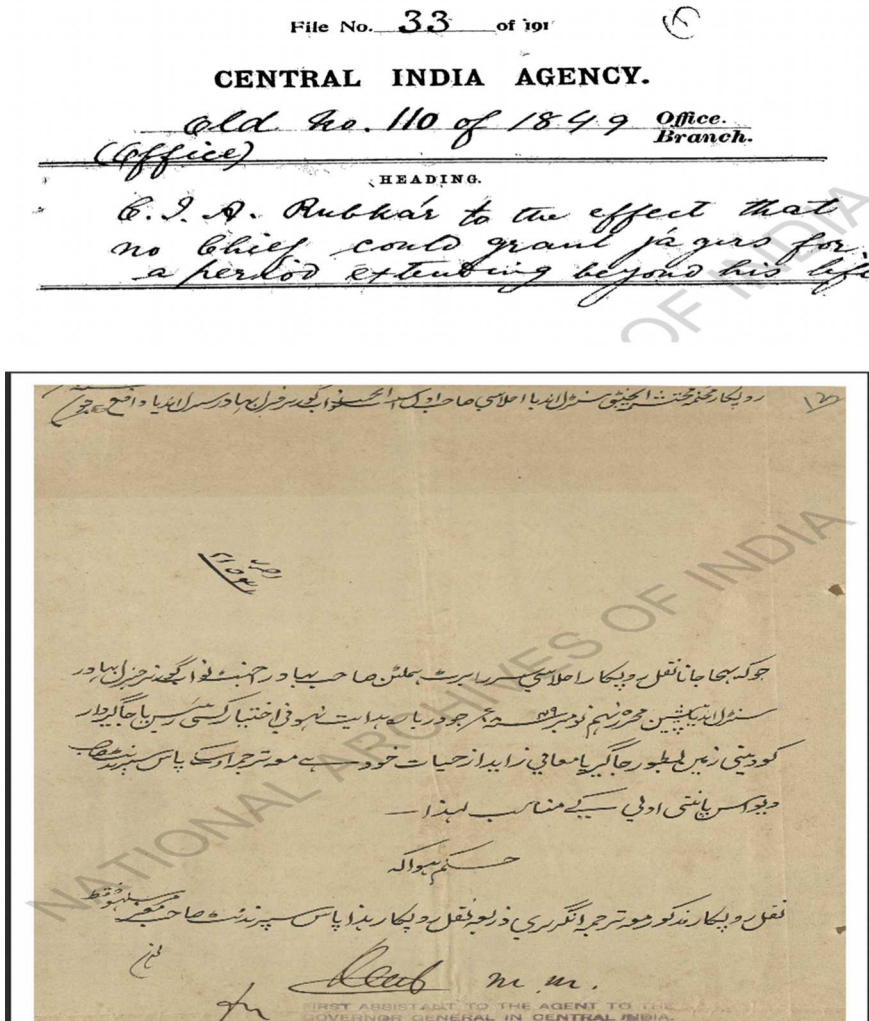


Figure 2. 1849 Rubkar (English orders often issued in Central India) to the effect that a Gond chief's powers to granting land beyond their lifetime were to be curtailed.

instruments issued by the British Administration in Central India, and the series of *rubkars* issued in the 1860s had circumscribed the power of Gond Chief landholders to granting land to their progeny to the duration of their own lifetimes and not in perpetuity (see Figure 2); the *rubkars* further curtailed powers of Gond chiefs to grant land to other tribal chieftains as had been the dominant practice in the region.³⁰ By the 1860s and 1870s, British policy under the Crown signified a shift from BEIC policies and was geared towards re-integrating Gonds through access to schools, courts, and land-tenure to settle them.

The increasing integration of Indian cotton and indigo into overseas markets due to the American civil war in the mid-nineteenth century had also meant that large tracts of Central Indian tribes had to be settled into farming tracts,

and their depredations were to be curtailed. Towards the latter half of the 1860s, the British however pursued a different strategy and attempted settling the Gond Rajas into peasant settlements while also simultaneously attempting to introduce education through local school systems into the region.³¹ The attempt was double-edged – to not only police the Gonds through other Central Indian Tribes under British control – through the system of the *jaglya* (Bhil Corps) – but also to educate them. The efficiency of Crown administration lay in the fact that settling the Bhils into a police institution to police the Gonds was one of the measures taken to both administer the vast central plains and settle the Gonds into agricultural tracts. Subaltern historiography might attest to the fact that from the 1820s till the 1880s, Gonds appear at the interstices of institutions such as police and law and schooling.³² Around the 1870s, these institutional axes also provided an impetus towards mapping Gondi language.

This is also where we must turn to the larger structural and administrative problem of the *omlah* – legal-linguistic intermediaries who were employed to settle tribes and to collect revenue on property. While there were attempts to introduce education and law, and reintroduce land-tenures among the Gonds, that challenge that stood in the way of such integration were the *omlah*. In order to secure land-tenures after the 1870s, the office of the *omlah*, officers under the British Crown felt the need to do away with or at least diminish the powers that *Omlahs* had through considerations regarding the introduction of Anglophone legal cultures and the English language.

Omlahs – Origins, Mughal Legacy, and Their Role in the Nineteenth Century

Omlahs were legal-linguistic intermediaries who appear more prominently at the margins of British colonial legal culture throughout the nineteenth century. However, the office of the *omlah* (an anglicisation, or corruption of ‘*ummāl*’) had developed from the Mughal office of the ‘*amildār*’. While traditionally modelled on the function and arts of the Persian *munshi*³³ or secretary, ‘*amildārs*’ had a vaster hold over matters such as law, justice and revenue. ‘*Amildārs*’ were an influential group for they not only collected land revenue, but they also often demanded (and were granted) a large share of such revenue.³⁴

The position of the ‘*amildār*’, throughout Mughal administrative units and largely during the first half of the nineteenth century, were transmitted from father to son, or largely within members of the same family. Several ‘*amildārs*’ not only belonged to the inner circle of Mughal polity but were often seen accruing land revenue equalling those of semi-autonomous regional Mughal courts.³⁵

The ‘*amil* system had in some sense begun under Sher Shah Suri’s³⁶ reign in which each *parganah* or administrative subdivision was assigned a *shiqqdār* or revenue collector who also maintained law and order and worked with a *munsif* or *amin*. For a brief period of time under Akbar’s reign, these *shiqqdars* were packaged into a new office known as the *karori*. These officials were given a great amount of freedom in their assessment and revenue collection techniques³⁷ and, much like *munshis* or state-secretaries, trained in the arts of assessment and calculation or *siyāq*.³⁸

The sixteenth century chronicle *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* by ‘Abd al-Qādir Badauni records these *karoris* as having been assigned to various sorts of *parganahs*, whether dry, hilly, riverine, forested, irrigated, inhabited, or peopled, so as to bring as much land under cultivation as possible into the *khālisa* or crown-controlled land, and in order to replenish the royal treasury.³⁹ However, what began as an attempt at increasing revenue turned into a rather dark experiment. *karoris* often kidnapped and sold wives and children of farmers.⁴⁰ Even though the name *karori* stuck to the ‘*amil*, the functions somewhat changed throughout the next few years as ‘*amils* would take to the practice of revenue farming.⁴¹

Within the Mughal system, these revenue collectors were required to collect revenue from peasants, deposit this in the royal treasury and provide the peasants with a receipt.⁴² Alternately, the ‘*amildār* or the *amalguzār* were expected to carry out all the duties of a *kōtwāl* (police official) where none was appointed and additionally guard travel and caravan routes. While the office of the ‘*amildār* had remained stable for the most part during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the eighteenth century, the functions of the ‘*amildār* had changed during the formation of the successor states of Awadh, Punjab, Bengal and Hyderabad.⁴³

While the primary role of *omlahs* during the Mughal period had therefore been to assess and collect revenue, their function under the EIC and the Crown changed to include liaising with British judges in cases involving settlements and transactions. Even though the office did not quite change – meaning that *omlahs* retained their main function as revenue-farmers – the function of these legal linguistic intermediaries came to include a certain amount of ‘friction’⁴⁴ that arose out of the inability of both EIC and Crown functionaries to liaise directly with farmers, tribal groups, and villagers.

When it comes to charges of corruption, malfeasance, bigotry,⁴⁵ degeneracy,⁴⁶ or charges of disturbance within British Colonialism’s own historiography, all these charges must be read against the grain. Whether we examine the cases and charges of corruption of Sirāj ud-Daulāh by William Henry Sleeman in British Awadh,⁴⁷ or the documentation of Santhals in Bengal during the Santhal *hools*,⁴⁸ there is ample evidence to show us that both Company and Crown administrators were invested in painting a picture of ‘a “degenerate” Oriental society’ to legitimise their own rule. And it goes without saying that this colonial conceit is not to be done away with, and that one must always

remain utterly wary when it comes to taking such charges seriously. Studies of the intellectual rhetoric of British India and the ideas of a superior English chauvinism therefore do have their place in Indian historiography.

However, one can also further argue that there was truth to charges of systematic corruption by legal-linguistic intermediaries levied by British administrators both during the Crown and Company periods. These charges of corruption were levied within the structure of an increasingly fluid and available financial capital.⁴⁹ There was more money to be made by certain classes who benefitted from the system of advances that both the Company and Crown put in place in order to keep the sale of cotton and indigo fluid enough within an international system of trade that involved cotton mills in Manchester.⁵⁰

Corruption that was enabled by the increasing need to create profit margins, the risk and volatility of overseas trade produced particularly by the American civil war and the shortage of Southern cotton⁵¹ and the management of various economic actors therefore provided conditions for a bullish need to integrate Indian markets, the settlement of large tribal groups into agricultural tracts, and the increase of production of cotton, tea, and indigo in the nineteenth century. The structure of financial capital was therefore an important reason for the changing nature of British administration and the increasing charges of corruption; the *omlah* remained a figure who was embroiled at the centre of such charges of corruption.

The records are not clear on this front, but it seems to be the case that one part of the function of the '*amildār*' was folded into that of the local court as the office of the *omlah* as early as 1795. From 1795 till about the 1840s, the office of the '*amildār*' was exclusively a police function and, generally, the office of the '*amildār*' continued to exist beyond the 1800s and was not completely collapsed into the now anglicised office of the *omlah*, meaning that one finds mention of both posts used simultaneously in Company records.

As late as 1855, the role of the *omlah* had been systemised in various revenue codes – most famously in James Henry Young's *Revenue Handbook*,⁵²

An officer of Government in the financial department, especially a collector of revenue on the part of the Government, or of the farmer of the revenue, also himself a farmer of, or contractor for, the revenue under the native system, and invested with supreme authority, both civil and military, in the districts which he farmed, as is still the case in several native states, especially Oude and Hyderabad. In the early settlement of Benares by the Government of Bengal the '*amil*' was intrusted with the joint power of *Hakim* or magistrate, and *Tehsildar* or collector, and was responsible for the realization of a fixed amount of revenue, being precluded from levying any excess on the Government demand. (Reg. ii. 1795)

The '*amildār*'s police function in Central India was at least partially parcelled and regionalised into the *jaglya* – or the Bhil corps and partially parcelled into the function of the *omlah* – who eventually became the sole official revenue-

revenue collector. Even though the office of the *omlah* in pre-1857 records were separated into four separate offices – those of the *serishtadar*, *peshkar*, *moharrir* and the *towjee-navīs* – post-1857 records usually show a collapsing of the office into one function and one person.

While pre-1857 Company records show much marginal concern for the corruption of the *Omlah*, it is in the post-1858 administrative records of the Crown that the *omlah* is marked out for corruption.⁵³ In Company records, *omlahs* are mentioned as being officers kept in office as against ‘natives’, and conducting business in a ‘foreign language’.

Despite the uneven control the Company came to exert over the breadth of India, this nonetheless remained the case in the south as well, where, as Bhavani Raman has noted, *dubashi* brokerage in the south allowed for territorial expansion, as opposed to impeding it. *Dubashis* were linguistic intermediaries who were usually conversant in the languages required to carry out two sides of a transaction. However, they also acted as creditors to Company men⁵⁴ – and in the south, this particularly became true of the *cutcherry* or local court and clerk offices staffed with employees who had family and kinship ties to each other.

In the early Company years, administrators armed with utilitarian ideas were wary of breaking pre-existing patrimonial ties. In early nineteenth-century South India, this also meant that the Company coopted many pre-existing powerful scribal classes of Deshastha and Niyogi Brahmins. Niyogi Brahmins, as Bhavani Raman has explored, had already been used as powerful mediators in the Maratha Confederacy; but they had also formed a powerful contingent around various other local rulers, and their offices.⁵⁵

In addition to these powerful contingencies formed around local rulers, scribes often practiced in-group and caste solidarity, further allowing the fostering of corruption. While allegations of corruption against local scribes by the British may have indeed been genuine – although somewhat caricatured as a fundamental aspect of ‘asiatick’ life – allegations of corruption were nonetheless used to subordinate revenue officers.⁵⁶ This subordination, ironically, was paired with a separation of recording-keeping functions based on the languages scribes were able to use. In the south, around Madras city, this meant that scribes in *cutcherrie* offices were conversant in Persian and Modi scripts, but also in Persian, Tamil and Telugu.⁵⁷

Further, Philip Wagoner has explored the ways in which many of the Persiate offices of the *munshīs*, *mutasaddīs* and the *gumastās* had been adopted into local Company administration, and the ubiquity of forms and linguistic idioms in which these offices functioned. While in the north, these offices were mostly staffed with *kayasthas* from among the Hindus, in the south, the offices were mostly staffed with Niyogi Brahmins as made apparent in various texts. Despite the familiarity with vernaculars, the medium of in-group

communication and local out-group communication remained Tamil and Telugu in the South, and yet revenue records were maintained in Persian and Marathi.⁵⁸

Omlahs were treated as one intermediary legal-linguistic class to be singled out in post-1857 Colonial reports. However, while discussions ensued about their functions, and the various transliterations of the name of their office, it was established that ‘*amildārs*, or *omlahs*’ (corrupted also as *amlah*, *amla*, *umla*, *omrah*, *aumil*, *amil*), were one class, and occupied the same function – that of mostly working in the collector’s office of various agencies.⁵⁹ This office was eventually adopted over wider swathes of the British Empire, and carried out the same function throughout the British trading outposts in the Ottoman territories;⁶⁰ and as described in Arthur Wellesley’s memoirs, or in British factor exchanges with offices they had in the Middle East⁶¹ – all performed revenue collection.⁶²

Company records highlight instances of the *omlah*’s corruption. For example, in an extract from proceedings of the Board of Revenue at St. George, 19 May 1803, the administrative clerk recorded that the ‘*amildār* often manipulated land rents and assessments for personal gain and observed that they preferred low official rents because it allowed them to impose higher unofficial charges (private assessments) without raising the suspicion of Company officials, and villagers were unlikely to report him.’⁶³ However, if the ‘*amildār* started taking from the public revenue itself the administrator observed, it created financial discrepancies that were easier to detect unless others in the system were *as* complicit or the collector proportionally inattentive. In order to avoid detection, ‘*amildārs often* avoided extra assessments and instead fabricated excuses like crop failures to explain unpaid balances. When such excuses were offered, it raised suspicion and led to the *omlah*’s immediate removal. His successor could easily uncover the truth by questioning villagers who would expose the former ‘*amildār* if they had already paid.’⁶⁴

It is imperative here, as Bhavani Raman has shown in her work, to also trace the changing discourse around corruption itself, in the nineteenth century. Discourses and definitions of what counted as corruption shifted over the nineteenth century. As Raman highlights, it became difficult to highlight what corruption was due to the differing depositions provided by eye-witnesses in cases of corruption.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Raman also acknowledges that these definitions of corruption became more pronounced when it came to the establishment of regimes of property rights for various communities throughout the nineteenth century.⁶⁶

Company documents record their concern that law and justice be accessible to Gonds in their own vernaculars and is as much a concern as it is for the Crown. Simultaneously, *omlahs* were seen as having some sort of monopoly over language, legal culture and mannerisms of the locals. For instance, in a letter addressed to the Company Court Directors (October 1835–December

VIII. *Omlah, or Native Subordinates :*

Corrupt character of the *omlah*; the European magistrates are to a great extent in their hands, *Theobald* 949, 950, 1040-1042, 1105, 1106 ----- Evidence relative to the *omlah*, or native officers attached to the courts; their duties and their corrupt character, *Auld* 1345-1348, 1359-1372, 1396-1419 ----- Instances of plaintiffs having many decrees remaining unexecuted; corrupt character of the *omlah* on this score, *ib.* 1403-1414 ----- The corrupt state of the *omlah* is a main cause of the insecurity of property, *Freeman* 1477, 1478 ----- Evils of the present system of interpreters in their not being a proper check upon them; how this may be remedied by a proper system of advocates, *ib.* 1737-1744.

Very corrupt character of the native *omlah*, *Mac Nair* 2000, 2004, 2005, 2484; *Wise* 2643; *Saunders* 9876 ----- Check upon the mal-practices of the *omlah* when the judges are efficient, *Wise* 3025, 3030, 3115-3117 ----- The native *omlah* would still be required under a system comprising the English language and efficient interpreters, but their bribery would be duly checked, *ib.* 3115-3117, 3158, 3159 ----- Influence of the sheristadars over the European judges; belief that the British officers generally are more or less influenced by their native subordinates, *Warder* 6110-6113, 6272-6274 ----- Reference to Mr. Elphinstone's delineation of the character of the Hindoos as illustrating the injurious operation of the system of *omlah* under the Company's courts, *ib.* 7511-7513.

Influence of the native *omlah* equally in the case of judges appointed from this country as of judges appointed from the service in India, *Milb* 9010-9012 ----- In the Supreme Court the judges are not influenced by the *omlah* in the same way as in the Company's courts, *ib.* 9013-9017 ----- Witness was never dependent on his *omlah*, *W. H. Martin* 9246 ----- The judge or magistrate is not, as a rule, under the influence of his *omlah*; the reverse is the rule, *Bidwell* 9270, 9300-9302.

Figure 3. Studies and statements on *Omlah* corruption in the *First Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India)*.

Note: First Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India); with the Minutes of Evidence Taken Before Them: Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be Printed, 6 May 1858 (United Kingdom: House of Commons, 1858), 4-8.

1835),⁶⁷ dated to around the time of Macaulay's minutes mentioned above, one C. Macseveen Esq. pushed for the need to replace the Persian with Hindustani and for the introduction of Marathi in the Devanagari – which had led, according to the letter, to a large amount of dissent in the provinces.⁶⁸ Company records on the office of the *omlah* are scant, but their corrupt practices are mentioned in various London-based magazines.⁶⁹

After the 1858 administrative takeover by the Crown, the *omlah*, also at times identified as the *sheristadar*,⁷⁰ (and/or the *golah*) appears to be a problem everywhere – and the removal of *omlah* marked the removal of some of the last vestiges of Mughal administrative functionaries. For example, in the *First* and *Fourth Reports from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement* issued by the House of Commons, the mass of studies cited and the mass of statements made regarding the *omlah* are revealing⁷¹ of just how much of a thorn the *omlah*'s corruption proved to be in the Raj's side (see Figure 3).⁷² Further, these mass of studies all attest to how language substitution was to be made a site of administrative intervention.⁷³ Crown administrators argued for a more rational market-driven system rather than one being based on any concern for the plight of Central Indian Tribes or their interactions with *omlahs*.

The *Fourth Report* acknowledged just how much the Crown's economic architecture was taken from the BEIC's, and why courts and revenue systems established according to various codes dating from the 1830s to the late 1850s needed to be replaced. There were two major avenues that were sought out for reform – the courts, and the economic-administrative architecture. The first proposal towards reforming the courts was to maintain an English *lex loci* – just as it functioned in the case of Hindu and Muslim personal law.⁷⁴

Even as late as 1858, Englishmen could under certain events come under the jurisdiction of non-English local magistrates, and were not completely protected from the extension of religious personal laws into the space of English government (known collectively as being the case under the *black acts*, the *affray laws*, and other such codes inherited from the Company).⁷⁵ This usually included circumstances in which civil-cum-commercial laws were concerned regarding the sale and movement of Indigo and Opium. The report refers minutely to various other imperial powers and their legal operations, including the language of their operations, such as the Dutch at Chinsura, the French, mostly as they operated in Algeria, and the Portuguese within their own various territories. The mirroring of the French *Code Napoléon* is cited a number of times as the model of which English law was to be thought of.

The reports also set out a second avenue for reform with regard to the economic architecture of colonial government. The BEIC system had essentially relied on financial advances to ryots (cultivators) of opium, sugarcane, and indigo, advances that would then be recovered through overseas sales. The ryots were usually forced to take the advances at under the threat force and violence of *lattials* sent by the *zamindars* to beat dissenting ryots into submission. In Edmund Burke's memoirs, *omlahs* are remembered for several horrors such as murdering and branding farmers to accept loans.⁷⁶

Omlahs had been put in charge of providing advances to cultivators under the BEIC and the Crown. Such functionaries were also alternately known by other names, such as the *ameen*, or *gomastha*.⁷⁷ Between the extension of advances and sales of opium and cotton, a large amount of money was always lost through corruption and kickbacks. The Crown tried to resolve the shortfall in revenue between advance and risk of overseas sales through several means.

The first was that of devising a new social category of intermediaries who would facilitate the needs of creating infrastructure, managing native labour and attracting capital investments from Europeans to free up the capital resources of land, timber and minerals. With regard to this, two nineteenth-century administrators – G. B. Tremeneere and Rev. J. Mullens in the Colonial Settlement Reports – proposed the creation a caste of labourers who would work as capital-directors, but who were purely European (bred from European soldiers married to European women), and whose children would then be taken

away to be housed in Lawrence Asylum and made to function for the government.⁷⁸

The other measure eventually taken to diminish losses on advances given to *ryots* was to minimise dependence on the office of the *omlah* as a linguistic-judicial-legal functionary. The corruption of *omlahs* became a source of concern regarding the amount of revenue being received by the government. The *omlah* in all reports dating back to the Company days of the 1830s and 1840s are mentioned as being ‘foreigners’.⁷⁹ Not only were these *omlahs* mentioned as having been knowledgeable of the language, intimate manners, and customs of the natives – the mitigation of which, it was thought that introducing English in the courts would do away with – but they also had a legal monopoly over the office they held and over the instruments of advances. For the most part, in company records at least, the *omlah* are also mentioned as all having functioned in the Persian idiom.

Their monopoly over the system of advances meant that the consent of cultivators seemed wholly unnecessary, especially due to the threat of violence. Often *ryots* were flogged if not killed, followed by acquiescence to supply goods at the dictated rate that then followed. Oftentimes, the *omlah* or *gomasta* pocketed anywhere between twenty to forty per cent of the advance as a combination of the monies put forwarded by the EIC as well as the Crown as well as local zamindars. Agricultural immiseration during EIC and parts of Crown rule were a direct consequence of regressive systems of profit-making and taxation, but in large parts was also caused by ways in which middlemen operated. Often, immiseration came through a combination of market-volatility and the corruption that resulted from this economic system.⁸⁰

Language as a Tool of Governance

Given the sort of corruption taking place between the *omlah* and the Central Indian tribes and the *ryots*, there were a number of attempts by the BEIC and the Crown to map out languages in order to control territories more effectively. The cycle of administrative-colonial philology really began after the 1850s, and more concertedly so in the 1870s. One might recall Edward Said’s distinctions between various kinds of orientalism. Famously, Edward Said through his *Orientalism* sought to discern and locate the colonial theatres of cultural rhetoric at three levels, namely at the level of those Western intellectuals who studied Asiatic and Oriental societies in some serious academic fashion; at the level of those who represented it in the realm of imagination (travellers and voyagers and what not); and finally, at the level of British and French administrators who put essentialist divisions between east and west into practice by teaching it, authorising statements about it, and ruling over it.⁸¹

It was through the third aspect of the Orientalist construction of India carried out at the level of languages that had scripts or through standardised administrative languages, that the East India Company were using to bridge the gap between the Mughal empire and their own rule – particularly through Persian and through the BEIC's own conciliatory policies.⁸² It was through these policies regarding a continuity of administrative structure that Persian was patronised by East India Company officials as far as into the 1840s and 1850s.⁸³ Much of this is to say that the Orientalist construction of India was an affair ensconced within administrative/intellectual endeavours, and further, that it was an overarchingly textual conquest. Essentially, this was the third kind of Orientalism that Said had delineated, something that concerted be dated to the period between the 1850s and the 1870s.

Before the 1870s, there were several British administrators who had taken up philological exercises independently of each other, many of whom were nonetheless in conversation with each other through the Society, and the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. None of these studies, however, had served the East India Company's administration in any central way due to the EIC's Court of Directors usually being situated back in England.

It was for example one of William Jones' contemporaries, H. T. Colebrooke, who had first tried to define the territorial limits of language – i.e. place languages as objects of knowledge in time and space. While Jones had done so as well, the idea of territory was less important for Jones, for whom grammar and the internal structures of languages became more important than their administrative-territorial limits.⁸⁴ Sometime after Colebrooke (1736–1857), John Beames (1837–1902) had attempted a large study as well, of Bengali and Oriya – and the territorial limits of Oriya.

It was however with Erskine Perry (1806–1882) that the mapping of language became important.⁸⁵ Perry had served on the Supreme Council of India (SCI) – a body that had overseen the transition from Company to Crown after the revolt of 1857. As part of the SCI, he had also served on the Settlements and Colonization Committee in 1858. In 1853, Erskine Perry had also contributed an essay to the *Journal of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* titled: *On the Geographical Distribution of the Principal Languages of India, and the Feasibility of introducing English as a Lingua Franca*⁸⁶ in which he had maintained that 'the true object of its investigation of Oriental arts, sciences, and literature, for which this Society was established in 1804, is identical with that of politics, or "πολιτεία" (politeia), in its large sense, i.e. the art or science of increasing the happiness of man in civilized society'.⁸⁷ The idea of grouping and categorising language had constituted the idea of 'good government' before the 1850s, but it was only in the 1870s that it would be implemented in any serious fashion – mostly due to the cycle of crises mentioned above. Further, what becomes clear is that the language-implementation at the level

of administration came down to a utilitarian calculus rather than cultural chauvinism.

Perry grouped and named the five northern languages as part of the *panch-gaurs*; the five gaurs being Saraswathi – an extinct language, Kanauji, Gaur (or Bengali), Maithili and Oriya. Perry's project involved wanting to introduce the English language, the enumeration of principle languages and the enumeration of groups of languages – the *panch gaur* and the *panch dravida*.

Perry's reasons for both mapping and proposing the introduction of English had in large part to do with the loss of the ability to adjudicate properly in the courts. This loss of the ability to adjudicate in a system of colonial administration had arisen out of access to local languages – and here particularly local oral cultures. However, much of this changed towards the 1870s as taxation became a central part of the Crown's calculus.

Taxation is seldom seen in relation to the material aspects of more intellectual endeavours such as philology. However, it is to the detriment of histories of philological and oriental practices⁸⁸ that they are rarely, if ever, studied as more organically connected to other imperial ideas such as economy and taxation. However, taxation, language, and custom were intimately imbricated enterprises, and their imbrication became evident in the late nineteenth century.

From the 1860s to the mid-1870s, Robert Needham Cust,⁸⁹ who had also rationalised tax-codes for the NWFP, used Erskine Perry's ideas regarding the grouping and mapping of languages in his initial surveys. These surveys were eventually published as *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies* in 1878. In 1866, twelve years before he published *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies* (1878), Cust had also rationalised the land-revenue code for the North-Western Provinces, publishing this in his *Manual for the Guidance of Revenue Officers in the Punjab* (1866). This standard government manual laid out the existing practices and principles by which revenue was to be collected by village headmen in the NWPs. At first glance, Cust's efforts to rationalise tax codes in the NWFP might appear unrelated to his later philological pursuits, but the two were in fact closely connected.

Before the 1850s, the condition of revenue collection in Punjab was afflicted by a non-rationalised, scattered regime in which local Punjabi landowners were pocketing one-sixth of all revenue that came into collection, and civil courts had remained ineffective in protecting against local lawsuits.⁹⁰ While Punjab had been annexed in 1846, Shimla, Yamuna and Sutlej had come under Company rule in 1809 (Delhi in 1803). There had been no system for revenue management in these areas till 1842. From 1858 onwards, much after the Trigonometrical Survey (1802–1871) as well as local topographical surveys, circulars on land laws and tenant codes had been distributed both among the English offices, as well as what every English territorial revenue office eventually came to have, a vernacular office.

The East India Company had not placed limits on revenue from land-produce (or rent), or had done so willy-nilly, incoming revenue sometimes amounting to half of agricultural produce, leading to immiseration among certain cultivators in the NWP. Cust's land-revenue codes, following James Thomason's (the Lt. Governor of the NWP, 1843), sought to create proprietary rights by placing limits on the Crown's demand for revenue extraction to sustain incoming rent (in the first term, for at least thirty years), by ensuring more concrete property rights for cultivators.

The attempts, therefore, after 1858 went towards creating what in recent North American historiography on the founding of America, has been called a 'yeoman's republic' – a concept also shared in the wording of the Cust's manual.⁹¹ A large part of the solution to the problem of revenue mismanagement had been the lax phraseology of previously circulated land-codes in which lands grants were promised to individuals in villages where the British Government held no proprietary rights; and a large part of the problem of revenue mismanagement had been that the East India Company had set up (or allowed for the continued existence of) intermediary classes who were paid in land assignments, which was cutting out a large share from the revenue of the Crown, or as Cust put it, a great deal of confusion if not outright disturbance was caused by the disordered standards of inheritance and estate laws which in some places was thought of in terms of customary laws and, in others, through adherence to terms of Government settlement regulations.⁹²

The major changes that Cust's *Manual* introduced were (i) the enumeration and standardisation of civil rights of proprietors as against their land-holdings and their titles, (ii) the disbanding of irregular horsemen and footmen collectors previously conscripted for the collection of revenues by native governments from religious institutions and (iii) the shifting of function of Civil Justice from Civil Courts to the Revenue Department, and to the person of the local Collector in charge of assessments of land. This meant essentially that the Collector as a representative of the Revenue Department had a large say in a great number of civil matters – and has been mentioned above – functionally, this meant the *omlah* had a say in civil matters. It also meant that civil matters could essentially be translated as being revenue matters – and that therefore boundary (both land and village boundary) disputes fixed for revenue assessments were fixed also keeping civil, and by extension, criminal matters in mind – but more so that land became the overarching basis for legal rights.

This change also had a tertiary effect, namely that ethnographic, linguistic, and philological exercises were mainly now taken up outside of local courts (which had served as sites of ethnology),⁹³ as part of a collector's alternate function.⁹⁴ Thrusts towards regional-vernacularisation, at least at the administrative levels, while being seen as just, and fair, nonetheless remained, for the most part, top-heavy exercises. Further, where there existed no textualised languages,

omlahs seemed to have gained a monopoly over legal language. This growing distance between justice and property – this growing element of friction produced by the inability to complete these transactions on behalf of both parties as described above due to the inaccessibility of language – not only led to both the Company and the Crown undertaking a number of overtures towards regional language substitution towards the mid to late nineteenth century, but eventually various attempts at bridging this gap between law and language.⁹⁵

After his tenure in Punjab, Cust retired and left India only to return towards the end of the decade of the 1860s and turn his attention towards the conditions of the Gonds in the central provinces. Having lain at the interstices of a number of successor-states, these areas were bound by loose tax codes and legislation. The large tribal population of Bhils and Gonds who had existed in the region, were eventually adjudicated on by the creation of the Central India Agency in 1854 – a number of whom would approach local courts with boundary disputes.⁹⁶ And it was within this theatre that law and language become ever more so intimately connected.

Propertied-justice, and the need for diminishing the role of *omlahs* seems to have been a prime concern for Robert Needham Cust. Much of this concern – which seems to have emanated from a mixture of an overt self-professed imperialism, but also simultaneously a charitable evangelical outlook towards Gonds – resulted in Cust's mapping of vernacular regions using the philological-linguistic-geographic method in his linguistic survey. Cust's methods were eventually adopted by George Abraham Grierson for his own survey,⁹⁷ but the initial impetus for linguistic-surveys in the post-1857 moment had come from the complex set of conditions described above.

Cust had expressed a need to administer justice in the language of the Sontal, Kole, Khonds and Gonds spanning the various regions, from present-day Orissa to the central provinces, laterally west to Nagpur; and that while certain vernaculars such as Persian, Hindustani, Urdu and Hindi were preponderant with European and native officials, these languages also presented the administration of justice in languages that were 'unknown to native and unwilling populations' – akin to what Cust said was happening in Europe.⁹⁸ As Cust says,

I think that the subject is overlooked or misunderstood. Certain vernaculars obtain a preponderant favour with the European and Native officials, and it is often presumed, without sufficient reflection that the people understand the vernaculars, used by the governing or influential classes of the towns. Now it is a terrible oppression, when justice is administered, or rather a mock form of justice is administered, in a Language not intelligible to the people. Very many of the political troubles in European States bare arisen from the insane idea of forcing a dominant language upon an unwilling population. It is a charge constantly made by the Slavonic subjects of the German and Austrian Empires. It is positive danger to the Peace of the Country, and the

stability of the British Empire in India, that the officials should be ignorant of the Languages of the different tribes.

Linguistics and philology, at least in Cust's estimation, was intimately tied to empire and imperialism. Approaching the problem from this point of view, Cust believed that the problem of justice was tied to the understanding of customs of tribal populations who formed a 'counterpoise' to the 'Brahminical and Mahometan' elements. The problem with the administration of vernacular justice was the need to account for histories of tribes and sects to administer justice according to customary laws.

By 1871, Cust had taken up Gondi representations with the British administration with regard to educational legal integration into the court systems through their own language. The Criminal Tribes Act had been passed in 1871 and Cust's representation amounted to making sure that Gond populations would not come under its ambit.

As far as into 1882 in the *Report of the Education Commission*, the discourse of Central Indian tribes shares a large part of the ratiocinative resources of Government. They are described as numbering over two millions; as a group that was gradually blending with the Hindu populations of the plains while still maintaining some of their cultural traits; and as having adopted the caste system and avoided eating with outsiders. Economically disadvantaged, they could not afford school fees and were often overlooked by village teachers.

As for education, it was recommended that where a tribal language lacked a written form or wasn't suitable for instruction, the local vernacular of nearby populations be used instead. If possible, both the tribal tongue and the regional language were to be taught to the Gonds. Cust strongly opposed this dismissal of the Gondi language by the Chief Commissioner who claimed that Gonds easily communicated in Hindi or Marathi and saw Gondi as unworthy because it lacked a script. Cust defended Gondi legitimacy, arguing it could be effectively written using a modified Roman alphabet. He also rejected claims that it was a 'barbarous' language, citing Bishop Caldwell, a leading scholar of Dravidian languages, who praised Gondi's complex grammar even comparing it to Turkish in its sophistication.⁹⁹

Certain aspects of colonial literature only allude to the Gondi language as belonging to the Central Asian and Turkic families while other authors downright asserted their descent from such groups. The Gonds are exceptionalised in colonial literature which must not be seen as any internal merit of Gondi language itself, but as an aleatory effect of the existence of a high Gondi population. Without belabouring the point about Gonds, what next becomes clear is Cust's method of mapping in which dominant neighbouring languages were mapped out.

The period after 1875 can be seen as a mobilisation and centralisation of philological resources by the Crown – essentially dovetailing into the two big

linguistic surveys in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Secretary of the State's Dispatch soliciting the opinions of various Philologists and linguistic intermediaries and local schoolteachers and intellectuals stated that until the 1870s, no comprehensive study of the modern languages of the East Indies had been attempted. Although individual scholars had produced authoritative work on specific languages, their findings were scattered across hard-to-access publications.

In order to address this gap, Cust compiled a focused overview of the linguistic relationships, dialects, and geographical distribution of these languages which eventually was published as his *A Sketch of the Modern Languages*. The Secretary of State's dispatch to Cust had stated that languages (and not dialects) were of direct relevance to the Indian government, and an accurate 'public' understanding of these languages was important. Aware of the challenges in being first to attempt such a work, Cust welcomed criticism of his language-mapping and aimed to improve future editions. The Secretary of State therefore asked the Government of India to circulate the book among qualified individuals and institutions for feedback.¹⁰⁰

It was with Cust that the cycle of administrative philology began, but the question was how the Crown would use its resources to bring philological exercises within the ambit of administration. The 'linguistic survey' provided an answer to this conundrum for it set out the terms by which languages could be observed, collected, studied and included into the plane of government. In his *Linguistic and Oriental Essays* written simultaneously to these exercises, Cust spells out what philology was to mean to him.

Philology in the mode, in which I propose to treat it, is a part of Geography. The first branch of that Science is no doubt 'Physical', and its second 'Political', but a third and a fourth are distinctly marked out, 'Ethnographical' and 'Linguistic'. When we have been informed of the natural characteristics of a Continent, and the Social Institutions, which the population inhabiting that Continent have adopted, we are led on to inquire to what Race of Mankind they belong, and what Language they speak.¹⁰¹

Archival material of Cust's surveys consists of letters, petitions, notes and materials solicited by philologists working at various levels through the whole of India – from full-time philologists, to schoolteachers, to collectors, linguists, missionaries and various other departmental administrators. These notes and letters were collected over a period of three years (from 1876 to 1879) and suggest that Cust's first edition of his book was published somewhere around 1875 (if not earlier), twenty years prior to when the LSI was initiated. There may have been an earlier edition, however such an edition is either lost, or was only ever circulated in official circles. The archives are also one of the first mobilisations of philological resources for the use of state machinery after 1857. But the reason for such mobilisation is what this article has attempted to focus on, namely the distance that was brought into

sharp relief between the Company, the Crown and Central Indian Tribal groups. It was the transaction ‘friction’ that came to exist between the quotidian exchanges between courts and Central Indian Tribes, the preponderant use of Persian, Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani and other textualised languages, and the monopoly over such sources that intermediaries had that provided the initial impetus for late nineteenth-century linguistic surveys.

Conclusion

This article has explored how the British colonial state in nineteenth-century Central India came to see language not only as a medium of governance, but as a site of administrative crisis. At the heart of this story were the *omlahs*: a class of legal-linguistic intermediaries who emerged from Mughal-era revenue administration and adapted themselves to British rule. These figures served as translators, legal aides and power brokers – occupying the space between colonial officials and tribal populations such as the Gonds. Their authority rested on their control of local languages, legal vernaculars and customary knowledge of land inheritance, rituals and kinship structures, making them both indispensable to governance and frequently accused of corruption, obstruction and exploitation.

By situating the *omlah* within the broader colonial apparatus, this article challenges the prevailing historiographical trend that sought to establish language reform as merely an elite cultural project. Rather, the archival record reveals that many British officials were preoccupied with the practical difficulties of rule: legal opacity, conflicting custom and the uncontrollability of intermediary actors. It was in response to these anxieties that reformers such as Erskine Perry and Robert Cust sought to map languages, simplify translation regimes, and create new forms of vernacular education. Their interventions aimed not simply to uplift or educate, but to neutralise the political power of intermediaries and reduce the administrative friction caused by linguistic plurality. Recent scholarship by Rama Mantena has shown how colonial philology and language policy were intertwined with broader debates over historical method and indigenous knowledge production, complicating earlier frameworks that treated language policy primarily through the Anglicist-Orientalist divide.¹⁰²

In tracing this history, this article also reorients our understanding of vernacularisation under empire. Rather than interpreting vernacular reform as a post-1857 innovation or a concession to nationalist pressure, it should be understood in part as a technocratic solution to the problem of corruption and administrative opacity. Language reform was a strategy of governance born in crisis – a way to bypass troublesome intermediaries by making law and rule more legible, even if only aspirationally so. Recognising this helps

us connect the micro-politics of translation and litigation with the macro-structures of imperial administration.

This fiscal relationship between corruption accusations and administrative reform suggests that British language policy emerged less from abstract cultural imperatives than from concrete financial pressures. The repeated failures to eliminate *omlah* corruption through direct confrontation drove officials towards what might be termed a strategy of linguistic financialisation – treating language itself as a site of administrative efficiency and fiscal control. This reframes our understanding of colonial language policy not as primarily driven by Orientalist discourse or civilising missions, but as responses to recurring crises in revenue extraction and bureaucratic oversight.

Notes

1. *Oriental Herald and Colonial Review*, Vol. II, May to August, 70.
2. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 486. Yule and Burnell also mention ‘*amildārs*, or *omlahs* (corrupted also as *amlah*, *amla*, *umla*, *omrah*, *aumil*, *amil*).
3. *Oriental Herald and Colonial Review*, Vol. II, May to August. For the internal file issued during the East India Company days, see British Library, *India Office Records*, IOR/E/4/944, 696–698, from Madras Despatches, 3 January to 30 July 1834.
4. Rama, *Document Raj*, 25.
5. Cf. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colonies*.
6. *Narrative of a Second Visit to the Gonds of the Nurbudda Territory*, File BHH/13/19, British Library, India Office Records.
7. To these complex conditions, we might add other things such as the existing administrative machinery the Crown eventually inherited from the BEIC, cultural-linguistic codes of local tribal groups such as the Gonds and British cultures of imperial governance, all of which lent to making language a site of intervention.
8. Subrahmanyam, “Between A Rock and a Hard Place, Some Afterthoughts”, 430. Subrahmanyam, in keeping with the theme of the edited volume refers to them as ‘go-betweens’.
9. Manuel and De Sousa, eds. *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches*; Rothman, *Brokering Empire*; Häberlein and Wieland, eds. *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*; Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, eds. *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*; Mark-Thiesen, *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital*; Schaffer, Roberts, Raj, and Delbourgo, eds. *The Brokered World*; and in the South Asian context, Bayly, *Empire and Information*; for a helpful conceptualization of brokers in the medical field in African history, see Webel, “Medical Auxiliaries and the Negotiation of Public Health in Colonial Northwestern Tanzania”, 393–416.
10. Schaffer, Roberts, Raj, and Delbourgo, eds. *The Brokered World*, 430.
11. Cf. Tsing, *Friction*.
12. Schaffer, Roberts, Raj, and Delbourgo, eds., *The Brokered World*, 430.
13. Pollock, Elman, and Chang, eds. *World Philology*, 22; Radin, “Legal Philology”, 771–803.
14. Cf. Lal, *Colonial State and Forms of Knowledge*, 14, for Lal’s characterization of Orientalism as a form of textual fetishism borrowing from Edward Said’s own formulations.

15. Cf. Dykstra, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*.
16. See Tsing, *Friction* for an immensely productive conceptual idea of ‘friction’ and its relation to processes of language and translation.
17. Cf. Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, 191–220, for his analysis of the introduction of a (false) governmentality.
18. Faruqi, *Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719*, 3–7; Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India*, 17–22; see both of these works, for different reasons they attribute to the collapse of the Mughal Empire.
19. Alam, *Crisis*, 213.
20. Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders, and State Formation*, 25; Hasan, *Malwa Under the Mughals (1562–1707)*; Habib, “The Currency System of the Mughal Empire (1556–1707)”. The figure is an approximation by silver content. The early-eighteenth-century Mughal rupee contained roughly 11 grams of fine silver, so Rs. 10,000,000 represents approximately 110 metric tonnes of silver – on the order of US\$250 million at silver spot prices in mid-2026. The equivalence is offered as a rough order of magnitude in bullion terms only; silver was unusually elevated in 2026, and purchasing-power conversions would yield different figures.
21. Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders*, 27.
22. *Conciliation of the Gond Chiefs Who Possess the Jungly Tract of Country on the Narbada to the West of India, So as to Avert Their Impeding the Movements of British Troops*, Progs., Nos. 340, 1782–1888, PR_000000423557, Hyderabad Residency Records, National Archives of India, 1782; Cf. Ehrlich, *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge*.
23. Bhangya, “The Subordination of the Sovereigns”, 288–317.
24. Temple, Chatterton, and Hislop, *The Story of Gondwana*, 45.
25. Temple, *The Story of Gondwana*, 45 – He would also be responsible for the establishment of Nagpur.
26. Bhangya, “The Subordination of the Sovereigns”, 293, The ‘*Ain-i-Akbari* mentions that the rulers of Chanda were among those that did not pay tribute to the Mughals.
27. Bhangya, “Subordination”, 294, Despite these complex social structures, the Gonds communicated in one idiom, such as the Koyas, Gaitas, Pardhans, and Kolams, all spoke dialects of a larger Gondi language.
28. NAI, *Letter to the Acting Poll Agent S W Frontier*, March 18, 1831, Cons. 18 March 1831, No. 32-5, R-1, NAIDLF01540176.
29. Smith, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Chanda District*, 75.
30. *C.I.A. Rubkar to the Effect That No Chief Could Grant Jagirs for a Period Extending Beyond His Life*, 14 Progs., Nos. 33, PR_000000532999, Hyderabad Residency Records, National Archives of India, 1782.
31. Bhangya, “Subordination”, 302.
32. NAI, *Gonds – Amelioration of the Condition of the Hill Tribes on the Hills North of Berar*, PR_000000426320, Progs., Nos. 498, Hyderabad Residency: Old Office Records, 1852–1883; *Assessment of Villages of the Gond Rajas*, PR_000000426744, Progs., Nos. 495, Hyderabad Residency Old Office Records, National Archives of India, 1782–1888, 1852; *Police (Jaglia) – Rules for the Guidance of the Police in the Gond Hills on the Northern Frontier of the Nizam’s Dominions*, PR_000000424622, Progs., Nos. 501, 1782–1888, Hyderabad Residency Old Office Records, National Archives of India, 1827–1853; *Village or Jaglia Police to Be Established in the Gond Hills*, PR_000000426837, Progs., Nos. 494 (V), Hyderabad Residency Old Office Records, National Archives of India, 1852; *Gond Chiefs Ellichpur – Settlement of*

- Claims Preferred in April 1842*, PR_000000427076, Progs., Nos. 746, Hyderabad Residency Old Office Records, National Archives of India, 1842.
33. See Alam and Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi", 61–72; Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*; Naqvi, "On the Road", 1–25.
 34. Torri, "Surat during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century", 679–710.
 35. Michelguglielmo, "Surat", 703.
 36. Haider, "Language, Caste and the Secretarial Class in Mughal India", 249–60, 253. 'Amils or revenue collectors in charge of *parganahs* began to mostly function in Persian – a change that seems to have been affected under Sher Shah Suri and furthered by Todar Mal; Also see Bhardwaj, "Bilingual Lexicons as Training Manuals in the Sur Period". 351–59. Much of this also comes to us from the *Ajaychandnāma*. See Hakala, "Ajay Čand-nāma".
 37. Habib, *Agricultural System of Mughal India*, 275.
 38. Haider, "Language, Caste and the Secretarial Class", 254, for a detailed description of the ways in which *siyāq* accounts were kept.
 39. Badayuni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 192.
 40. Badayuni, *Muntakhab*, 192.
 41. Habib, *Agricultural System of Mughal India*, 285. The practice known as *ijārā* led a rather widescale system of oppression; Cf. Narayan, "Agents of Capital", 655–85.
 42. Habib, *Agricultural System*, 244.
 43. Banerjee-Dube, *A History of Modern India*, 11.
 44. As mentioned above, see Anna Tsing's work on the concept of friction.
 45. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, 45–50. For considerations on the subject, see Sheth, "Revenue, Reform, and Resistance", 1485–512.
 46. Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", 1–42.
 47. Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India*, 45–47. Sinha, *The Awadh Blue Book*, 12–16.
 48. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1–10.
 49. Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries", 375–402, or as Gupta astutely observes in this piece, corruption is often constitutive of the state.
 50. Tripathi, *The Oxford History of Indian Business*, 112–15.
 51. Tripathi, *Indian Business*, 114.
 52. Young, *The Revenue Hand-book*, 233.
 53. For example, see Pani, "Historical Insights into Modern Corruption".
 54. Raman, *Document Raj*, 27.
 55. Raman, *Document Raj*, 34–38. Raman's discussion of their polyglot nature, and their importance to these Deccani offices is rich, but particularly useful are the character sketches she reproduces for us, not to mention the paintings she has reproduced of certain Southern clerks. These paintings allow us to slot these clerks within our visual schema of British administration.
 56. Raman, *Document Raj*, 25, 26. Raman uses a telling quote here by Thomas Munro, the Governor of Madras, who in his vision of governance and the distribution of power between the British and revenue officers, is recorded as having said the following, 'If we are to have corruption, it is better that it should be among the natives than among ourselves, because the natives will throw the blame of the evil upon their countrymen [but] they will retain their high opinion of our superior integrity; and our character, which is one of the strongest supports of our power, will be maintained'.
 57. Raman, *Document Raj*, 37.
 58. Wagoner, "Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge", 783–814; Cf. Kanalu, "Prefatory Notes on Persian Idioms of Islamic Jurisprudence", 93–111, for an understanding of how, particularly in the case of Persian, the language

- was adopted to approximating the language of law, namely Arabic; Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 637.
59. Wilson, *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, 23.
 60. Boake, *Mannár: A Monograph*.
 61. 'Précis of Turkish Arabia Affairs. 1801–1905' [74v] (148/388), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/C236. Further, see 'Abstract of Letters Received from India 1861' [49r] (102/650), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/CA1.
 62. Wellesley, *Supplementary Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda*.
 63. Cf. Raman, *Document Raj*, 138, 156.
 64. *Records of Fort St. George*, 195.
 65. Raman, *Document Raj*, 138, 156. See Raman's superb commentary on the changes in discourses regarding corruption throughout nineteenth century colonial India.
 66. Raman, *Document Raj*, 139.
 67. *Madras Political Consultations*, 15 November 1811, fol. 54r, British Library: India Office Records, IOR/P/242/38.
 68. *Ibid.*; *Madras Despatches*, 3rd January to 30th July 1834, British Library: India Office Records, IOR/E/4/944, fols. 696–98.
 69. *Reports from Committees* (United Kingdom: Ordered to be printed, 1858); *The Dublin University Magazine: A Literary and Political Journal* (Dublin, Ireland: William Curry, Jun., and Co., 1833–1877); *Oriental Herald and Colonial Review* (United Kingdom: J. M. Richardson, 1824); *Ames Library Pamphlet Collection* (United Kingdom: [publisher not identified], 1849); Carrau, *Reports of Cases Determined in the Court of Nizamut Adawlut for 1851–[1859]*; *The Oriental Herald* (United Kingdom: [publisher not identified], 1824); *Allen's Indian Mail and Register of Intelligence for British and Foreign India: 1861*, 7/12 (United Kingdom: [publisher not identified], 1861).
 70. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 626. The definition reads, 'The head ministerial officer of a court, whose duty it is to receive complaints, and see that they are in proper form, and duly stamped; and generally to attend to routine business. Properly Hind. Pers. From sar-rishta-dar or sarishta-dar, "register-keeper". Sar-rishtā, an office of registry, literally means "head of the string"'.
 71. *First Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India); with the Minutes of Evidence Taken Before Them*.
 72. *Fourth Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India); Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, 6.
 73. Cf. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 39, 40, 135.
 74. *Fourth Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement (India)*, 15; Cf. Brimnes, "Beyond Colonial Law", 513–50.
 75. See Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*, 1959, 61. It was only residents of presidency towns who operated under English law, and not under Company law, even before 1857.
 76. Burke, *The Works of Edmund Burke Volume 3*.
 77. Young, *The Revenue Hand-book*, 233–243; *Fourth Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement*, 255.
 78. *Fourth Report from the Select Committee on Colonization and Settlement*, 13.
 79. *Fourth Report from the Select Committee*, 161.
 80. Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries", 375–402.
 81. Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
 82. See Ehrlich, *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge*.

83. Cf. Abdullah, “East India Company kī m‘a tahat Farsi ki t‘alīm”, 64–65.
84. Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860*, 88–120.
85. Cf. Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case*.
86. Perry, “On the Geographical Distribution of the Principal Languages of India, and the Feasibility of Introducing English as a Lingua Franca”, 289–99.
87. Ibid.
88. Cf. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 285.
89. See Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*.
90. Cust, *Manual for the Guidance of Revenue Officers in the Punjab*, 10.
91. Cf. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 5–7; Cust, *Manual for the Guidance of Revenue Officers in the Punjab*, 30.
92. Cust, *Manual*, 7.
93. See Naithani, *In Quest of Indian Folktales*, 7.
94. Naithani, *Indian Folktales*, 7.
95. India Office Records, IOR/F/4/1684/67993, October 1835–December 1835. The letter (which approximates those of Macaulay’s Minutes) states that language petitions had been an ongoing affair, and that the previous language petition filed in 1829.
96. Boundary dispute, *Pindara Jagir, Bhura Khajura/ Sheojalpur (Gwalior) Vs. Jabrai Bhil.*, Progs., Nos. 146, (Gwalior Agency: National Archives of India, 1867–1872); Boundary dispute, Claim of Bhumia of Kali Baori against the Dhar Darbar for having possession over the Bhil paras Viz. Bahadara Nilda etc, Progs., Nos. P/16, (Bhopawar Political Agency: National Archives of India, 1876); C.I.A. Dastur-ul-amal (*Rules*) containing instruction for settlement of boundary disputes, Progs., Nos. 327, (Central India Agency, Bundelkhand: National Archives of India, 1862).
97. Cf. Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*; Majeed, *Nation and Region in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*.
98. IOR: MSS EUR E223/12, From the Grierson Collection, Class V, No. 15, fol. 107v.
99. *Report of the Indian Education Commission*, 1882, Calcutta, Printed by the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1883, 510, 511.
100. IOR: MSS EUR E223/12, No. 3/40, Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home Department (Public) – under date Fort William, the 27 March 1879, Read – Secretary of the State’s despatch No. 190, dated 7th November 1878, forwarding 40 copies of a work by Mr. R. N. Cust entitled ‘Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies’, and enclosing a copy of a letter from Mr. Cust and of a Note by the Librarian of the India Office on the work in question.
101. Cust, *Linguistic and Oriental Essays*, 33.
102. Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India*; for earlier debates, see Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*.

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