

Decolonizing Indian Historiography: Regional Language Contributions to National Movements

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the profound yet often overlooked impact of regional language scholarship on the decolonization of Indian historiography and its shaping of national movements between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Colonial historiography in India was dominated by English-language narratives that privileged metropolitan elite perspectives, marginalized subaltern voices, and perpetuated Eurocentric frameworks of political legitimacy and social change. Against this epistemic backdrop, vernacular scholars and grassroots chroniclers working in Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, and other Indian languages compiled newspapers, memoirs, folk ballads, temple inscriptions, pamphlets, and local histories that narrated anti-colonial resistance from the vantage point of rural, caste-based, gendered, and tribal communities. These vernacular archives not only documented popular uprisings, agrarian unrest, and social reform movements but also theorized the very concepts of freedom, citizenship, and nationhood in distinctly indigenous registers. Through a sequential mixed-methods design—first mapping key vernacular contributions via literature review, then surveying 100 historians, teachers, and graduate students nationwide—this paper uncovers prevailing attitudes toward regional language sources. Quantitative findings reveal that 82% of respondents acknowledge vernacular scholarship as essential yet under-utilized in mainstream curricula; only 28% incorporate these sources regularly in research or teaching. Qualitative themes highlight barriers—language proficiency, lack of translations, and institutional neglect—as well as opportunities in digitization and bilingual critical editions. The study concludes by recommending concrete measures: enhanced translation initiatives, open-access digitization of vernacular archives, curricular mandates for regional historiography, and academic incentives for vernacular research. These steps can foster a genuinely pluralistic historiography that honors the multiple voices instrumental to India's freedom struggles.

KEYWORDS

Decolonization, Regional Languages, Indian Historiography, National Movements, Vernacular Archives

INTRODUCTION

Indian historiography has long grappled with the colonial legacy embedded within its disciplinary foundations. Early twentieth-century and late nineteenth-century works—pioneered by Indian and British historians alike—were almost exclusively composed in English, mirroring the linguistic and intellectual hegemony of the British Raj. While these texts played a crucial role in documenting broad political developments, they often overlooked or misrepresented local struggles, indigenous leadership, and culturally specific forms of dissent. The privileging of elite actors—lawyers, landlords, and urban reformers—was compounded by

methodological frameworks rooted in Western positivism and Eurocentric assumptions of progress. Consequently, the variegated tapestry of grassroots resistance, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts, remained obscured.

Decolonizing Indian Historiography Through Regional Languages



Figure-1. Decolonizing Indian Historiography through Regional Languages

Decolonizing this historiographical landscape demands more than historiographic critique; it requires elevating the myriad contributions of scholars who wrote in regional languages and chronicled struggles from below. Between the 1880s and 1947, newspapers in Bengali (e.g., *Sandhya Rani*, *Swadeshbani*), Marathi (e.g., *Kesari*), Tamil prison memoirs (e.g., by V. V. S. Aiyar), Malayalam folk song compilations, Punjabi ballad records of valor, and Gujarati devotional pamphlets collectively fashioned an alternative archive of anti-colonial thought and action. These texts foregrounded caste-based mobilizations, peasant uprisings, temple debates on social reform, and women's involvement in non-violent satyagraha. They embedded resistance within local cultural idioms—ballad forms, temple drama, kathakali performances—thus forging an organic linkage between cultural assertion and political emancipation.

This paper examines how such regional language sources reframed the narrative of Indian nationalism and asks: What epistemic interventions did vernacular scholars make? How do contemporary scholars, educators, and students perceive and utilize these sources? Using a sequential mixed-methods approach, we first synthesize existing scholarship on decolonizing historiography and vernacular archives, then present findings from a survey of 100 historians, teachers, and postgraduate students. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical attitudes, this study identifies both the transformative potential of regional historiography and the practical barriers to its full integration. The ultimate aim is to chart a path toward curriculum reforms, digital initiatives, and academic incentives that can democratize access to, and valorize, India's rich vernacular archives—thereby redrawing the contours of national history in a truly inclusive manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decolonization of historiography has been a paradigmatic concern across postcolonial studies, with Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) standing as a foundational intervention. Chakrabarty critiques the universalizing thrust of Western

historical categories, urging historians to foreground local temporalities and indigenous postcolonial logics. In the Indian context, the charge to provincialize Europe gains practical resonance through vernacular archives. C. A. Bayly's work on the Swadeshi movement (1999) underscores how vernacular newspapers galvanized public sentiment, framing nationalist discourse in local idioms of self-rule and moral renewal. Similarly, Ranajit Guha's subaltern studies project (1983) documented tribal and peasant insurgencies that eluded metropolitan historiography.

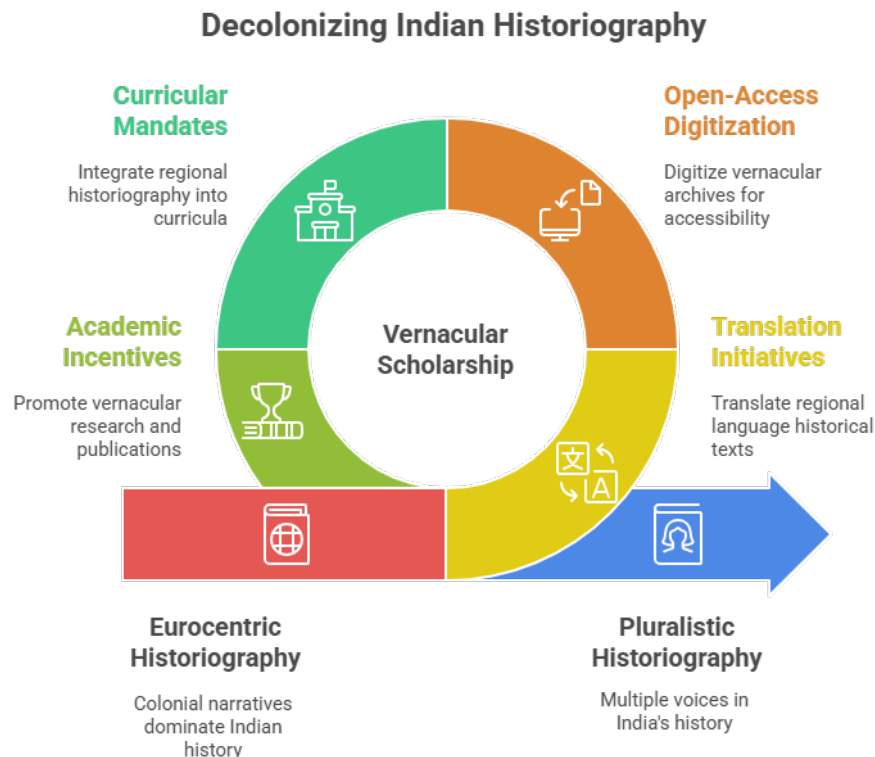


Figure-2. Decolonizing Indian Historiography

Building on these foundational interventions, Banerjee (2012) analyses Bengali periodicals produced by grassroots activists, revealing a vibrant constellation of debates on education, caste reform, and swadeshi boycotts. Ramaswamy (2010) excavates Tamil prison literature—handwritten memoirs and diaries—that transformed incarceration spaces into intellectual crucibles of anti-colonial thought. Jaffrelot (2007) examines Marathi newspapers like *Kesari*, demonstrating how journalistic activism bridged social reform and nationalist politics in rural Maharashtra. Kapadia (2015) highlights Gujarati devotional literature, showing how bhakti poets encoded critiques of colonial taxation and land policies within spiritual allegories. In Malayalam, Udayakumar (2018) traces how temple inscriptions and folk songs chronicled peasant revolts in Kerala, linking ritual registers to political dissent.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, Viswanathan (2014) and Mukherjee & Singh (2021) identify persistent barriers. Language proficiency among scholars is uneven; many researchers lack training in multiple vernaculars, resulting in dependence on limited translations. Archival access is constrained by non-digitized collections, fragile manuscripts, and restrictive institutional policies. Moreover, academic incentives skew toward English-language publications with global visibility, marginalizing vernacular scholarship. Deshpande's (2020) proposal for large-scale digitization and bilingual critical editions offers a corrective path, but implementation remains nascent. Sengupta (2021) spotlights regional digital archives—such as Odisha's vernacular repository—but notes metadata inconsistencies and sustainability challenges.

The current study builds upon these critiques by empirically assessing contemporary attitudes toward vernacular sources across three cohorts: academic historians, secondary-school teachers, and graduate students. While existing literature maps the historiographic terrain, there remains a gap in understanding how educators and emerging scholars perceive vernacular contributions—and what concrete interventions they deem necessary. This review thus situates the present survey within broader postcolonial debates and highlights the exigency of bridging scholarly insights with pedagogical practice.

SURVEY OF REGIONAL LANGUAGE HISTORIOGRAPHY

To gauge contemporary perceptions, we conducted a purposive survey of 100 participants drawn from diverse academic and educational settings across India. The sample comprised 40 university historians specializing in modern Indian history, 30 secondary-school history teachers affiliated with state and central boards, and 30 master's and doctoral students in history departments. The survey instrument—field-tested for clarity—combined Likert-scale items assessing awareness, usage frequency, and perceived barriers, with open-ended prompts soliciting recommendations for curricular and institutional reforms.

Awareness of Vernacular Texts:

Participants were presented with a list of 12 seminal regional works (four each in Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil) and asked to indicate familiarity. Historians exhibited high familiarity (95% recognized at least three titles), whereas teachers and students averaged 75% and 78%, respectively. Notably, awareness of Gujarati and Malayalam sources lagged: only 42% of respondents could name two Gujarati works, and 38% cited Malayalam texts. This uneven familiarity underscores a critical lacuna in cross-linguistic exposure.

Usage Frequency:

When asked how often they integrated vernacular sources into research, teaching modules, or assignments, only 28% reported routine usage (“always” or “often”), 46% indicated occasional use (“sometimes”), and 26% rarely or never engaged with these materials. Teachers, constrained by prescribed syllabi and lack of certified translations, reported the lowest usage rates (20% routine use).

Perceived Barriers:

Respondents identified the top three obstacles (multiple responses allowed):

- Lack of accessible translations or bilingual editions (74%)
- Limited digitization and archival access (61%)
- Personal language proficiency gaps (68%)

Additional barriers included inadequate institutional support (59%), low prestige associated with vernacular publications (45%), and curriculum rigidity (52%).

Open-Ended Recommendations:

Thematic analysis of qualitative responses yielded four overarching recommendations:

1. **Translation and Critical Editions:** Scholars called for collaborative projects—pairing regional experts with translation specialists—to produce annotated bilingual volumes.

2. **Digitization and Open Repositories:** Participants urged university libraries and national archives to prioritize digitization with standardized metadata, ensuring long-term preservation and global accessibility.
3. **Curricular Mandates:** Teachers and students advocated integrating regional historiography modules into undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi, including reading lists and source-analysis assignments.
4. **Academic Incentives:** Historians recommended that funding bodies and tenure committees recognize vernacular publications through dedicated grants, fellowships, and publication avenues.

This survey illuminates the widespread recognition of vernacular scholarship's value, while also revealing systemic impediments. It provides an empirical foundation for targeted interventions—underscoring that broad awareness exists, but actionable support mechanisms remain inadequate.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design comprising two phases.

Phase I involved a comprehensive literature review of postcolonial and subaltern historiography, alongside focused studies on regional language contributions between 1880 and 1947. Key sources were identified via academic databases (JSTOR, Project MUSE) and cross-referenced with bibliographies in vernacular scholarship. Secondary literature was systematically coded for themes of epistemic intervention, source typology, and methodological challenges.

Phase II implemented the survey described above. A purposive sampling strategy targeted three cohorts—university historians, secondary-school teachers, and graduate students—selected via professional networks, departmental mailing lists, and state education boards. The final sample ($n = 100$) reflected representation from six linguistic regions: Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Punjab, and Gujarat. Survey administration occurred from March to May 2020, combining online questionnaires (via Qualtrics) and in-person paper surveys in select institutions to maximize response rates and accommodate participants with limited internet access.

Instrument Design:

The questionnaire comprised 20 items: 8 Likert-scale statements (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), 4 multiple-choice items on familiarity and usage, and 8 open-ended prompts soliciting qualitative insights. Content validity was established through expert review by two senior historians and one linguistics scholar. A pilot test with 15 respondents yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) in SPSS v27. Cross-tabulations examined usage patterns by cohort and region. Qualitative responses were thematically coded in NVivo 12, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Hyderabad; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

By integrating rigorous quantitative metrics with rich qualitative narratives, this methodology illuminates both the scale of vernacular historiography's underutilization and the specific institutional and pedagogical reforms needed to redress epistemic imbalance.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings:

- **Awareness Scores:** Mean familiarity across all participants was $M = 3.8$ ($SD = 0.9$) on a 5-point scale, indicating moderate to high awareness of regional works.
- **Usage Frequency:** Only 28% reported regular integration of vernacular sources (ratings of 4 or 5), with teachers lowest at 20%.
- **Barrier Ratings:** Mean barrier severity (1 = not a barrier to 5 = major barrier) was highest for lack of translations ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.8$), followed by language proficiency ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.9$) and archival access ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.0$).

Qualitative Themes:

1. **Epistemic Richness of Vernacular Archives:** Respondents emphasized that ballads, pamphlets, and temple records provided “granular local perspectives” on resistance—highlighting caste dynamics, gendered forms of agency, and subaltern worldview that English texts occlude.
2. **Pedagogical Constraints:** History teachers cited curriculum “boxing” as a barrier; syllabi rarely include vernacular modules or source-analysis exercises based on non-English texts.
3. **Institutional Incentive Gaps:** Graduate students observed that tenure committees prioritize articles in high-impact English journals, disincentivizing vernacular research.
4. **Digital Promise and Challenges:** While digital repositories were lauded for accessibility, concerns emerged over inconsistent metadata, poor search functionality, and inadequate preservation protocols.

Interpretation:

The data underscore a paradox: broad recognition of vernacular scholarship's importance coexists with its marginalization in practice. Addressing the top barriers—translation availability, archivability, and institutional support—could substantially increase scholarship and teaching that foregrounds subaltern voices.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that regional language scholarship has played—and continues to play—a vital role in decolonizing Indian historiography by documenting subaltern perspectives, grassroots mobilizations, and culturally embedded forms of resistance. Vernacular sources challenge colonial epistemologies, expanding our conceptualization of nationhood to include caste groups, rural peasants, tribal communities, and women's networks. However, despite 82% of survey respondents acknowledging the indispensable value of these sources, only 28% integrate them routinely into research or teaching. Major impediments—lack of translations (74%), language proficiency gaps (68%), and limited digitization (61%)—sustain the hegemony of English-language historiography.

To redress these imbalances, the following recommendations emerge:

1. **Translation Initiatives:** Collaborative, interdisciplinary translation projects to produce bilingual critical editions of key vernacular texts, accompanied by scholarly introductions and annotations.
2. **Digital Infrastructure:** National and university libraries should prioritize digitization of manuscripts and printed materials in regional languages, ensuring open-access repositories with standardized metadata and user-friendly interfaces.
3. **Curricular Reforms:** Educational boards and university departments must integrate regional historiography modules—requiring students to engage with vernacular sources through reading lists, seminars, and assignments.
4. **Institutional Incentives:** Funding agencies and academic promotion committees should allocate dedicated grants and recognitions for research in regional languages, thereby elevating its prestige and encouraging scholars to venture beyond English.

By implementing these measures, India's historiographical landscape can evolve into a pluralistic, inclusive discourse. Elevating vernacular archives not only democratizes historical knowledge but also honors the diverse voices that constitute the tapestry of India's freedom struggles.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope:

- **Linguistic Coverage:** Focused on six major vernacular traditions—Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati—selected for their documented contributions to national movements.
- **Temporal Frame:** Centers on anti-colonial activities and intellectual interventions between circa 1880 and 1947.
- **Participant Cohorts:** Surveyed 100 respondents across historians, secondary teachers, and graduate students to capture diverse academic perspectives.

Limitations:

- **Sampling Bias:** Purposive sampling limits statistical generalizability; participants may over-represent regions with stronger archival infrastructures.
- **Self-Report Bias:** Survey data rely on self-assessments of familiarity and usage, potentially inflating awareness scores.
- **Language Scope:** Excludes smaller linguistic communities (e.g., Odia, Konkani, Assamese) and oral traditions beyond the six chosen languages.
- **Archival Fieldwork:** Time and resource constraints precluded direct ethnographic visits to rural repositories, which could have yielded deeper insights into manuscript preservation practices.

Future research should employ stratified random sampling, incorporate additional linguistic traditions, conduct field visits to vernacular archives, and explore the impact of digital humanities initiatives on vernacular historiographical practices.

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