

Spatiality of alveolars and palatals across Eastern India¹

This study is concerned with spatial diffusion of sound shifts that affected alveolars and palatals /c, s, ʃ/ in Assamese and Bengali, the two easternmost Indo-Aryan languages of India. The other principle Indo-Aryan languages spoken in the region such as Oriya, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Awadhi did not fully participate in the shifts. The consequences of such shifts were mergers and splits affecting phonemic inventories, allophonic relations and the creation of palatal and non-palatal fields. The census records of 1891 and available materials from medieval India suggest the movement of people, ideas and knowledge across the region over the past few hundred years. Considering this, it is interesting that alveolars and palatals show considerable variation in Bengali and Assamese speaking regions cutting across linguistic boundaries.

The shifts under discussion include the following:

	Sound shifts	Nature of shifts
1	c, ch > s	The shifts are either almost complete, variable or absent across the region.
2	j, jh > z	
3	s, ʃ > h, x	
4	s > ʃ	
5	ʃ > s	

Though the shifts (1) to (3) can be said to be more characteristic of Assamese, (4) of Bengali and the shift (5) of Oriya, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Awadhi, mapping these shifts across Eastern India suggests more permeable than discrete boundaries. The first three shifts extend well into the adjoining Bengali speaking region, thereby uniting Eastern Bengali with Assamese. The diffusion of the shift of sibilants to shibilants (4) is much more restricted within the Western Bengali speaking region. Thus the isoglosses show boundaries of contact and diffusion on the one hand and boundaries of resistance on the other. Using the texts available in *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson 1903)¹, the present study is a modest attempt to map the sound shifts both qualitatively and quantitatively to understand the following:

- (a) The patterns of diffusion.
- (b) The nature of boundaries as one of contact and diffusion or of resistance.
- (c) Weakening or stability of structural constraints across dialects.

¹ Grierson, G.A. 1903. Linguistic Survey of India. Vol. V, Indo-Aryan Family, Eastern Group. Calcutta: Office of the superintendent of government printing, India.

1. Information on Language

Bengali is spoken in the state of West Bengal, adjoining Bangladesh, Tripura and in districts of Assam. These regions are also home to a variety of non-Indo-Aryan languages. The North Eastern part of India where Assam is located is home to numerous Tibeto-Burman languages. Oriya is principally spoken in Orissa, Bhojpuri, Maithili in Bihar and Awadhi in parts of Uttar Pradesh, but not limited to these states alone.

Map showing parts of Eastern India: Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa.



Survey of India Maps, Govt. of India 1986.

