

## Language Endangerment in India: An Overview

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### Introduction

India is considered to be a pluri-lingual and pluri-ethnic nation and has a great relevance of it. Unity in diversity is the most distinctive feature of Indian civilisation (Gaur, 2020). If we look from East to West and from North to South, we will notice that almost all the regions portray various cultures, traditions, customs, beliefs, and mother tongues. The study conducted by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2011) reveals the grave picture of the world's languages which are extinct or are on the verge of extinction. This report provides the updated data of 2500 endangered languages of the world. According to this report out of 6000 existing languages in the world, 482 languages are unsafe, 577 languages are Critically endangered, 537 languages are severely endangered, 640 languages are definitely endangered, and 228 languages become extinct in the last three generations. According to this report (the Atlas from here on) India has the largest number of endangered languages in the world followed by United States of America (191) and Brazil (190) respectively. Currently 197 languages are endangered or on the way to extinction in India. Out of these, 81 languages are vulnerable, 62 definitely endangered, 7 severely endangered, 42 critically endangered and 5 languages are already extinct. Many linguists estimate that at the end of 21<sup>st</sup> century around half of the languages from the currently speaking 6000 languages will disappear (Atlas, 2011). Moore (2006) also projects that by the end of this century around 2500 languages will disappear, if necessary steps are not taken. These 197 endangered languages also include official languages like Manipuri and Bodo. According to a study conducted by Peoples Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) in the year 2013, around 780 languages are spoken in India and 86 different scripts are used. As per this report India has lost around 250 languages in the last five decades. (Davy, 2013).

Language endangerment is a very serious issue. Ancestral knowledge is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. Loss of any language is a loss to humanity. It is not only the loss of language itself, but it means the loss of the complete knowledge system; culture and heritage consisted in that language. Endangered languages are those languages which are in very less use or are not transferred to the next generation. In general term, language endangerment means either the speakers of the language are not alive, or they are not using that language in their day-to-day communication. Languages are dying every year and often a

language's death is recorded when the last known speaker dies. About 35 percent of languages in the world are currently losing their speakers or are more seriously endangered. Most of these have never been recorded and so would be lost forever. This paper highlights the state of language endangerment in India, position of endangered languages in different Indian states, governments initiatives to prevent and protect these languages. It will also try to find out the various reasons of language endangerment and the possible solutions of it.

### Official Languages

As per census 2011, there are 1369 rationalized mother tongues and 270 identifiable Mother Tongues (comprising 123 mother tongues grouped under the Scheduled Languages and 147 mother tongues grouped under the Non-Scheduled Languages) and 22 schedule Languages spoken in India. These languages belong to mainly four language families namely Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burmese. Among these languages, 15 languages belong to the Indo-Aryan language family, 1 from the Austro-Asiatic language family, 4 from the Dravidian language family and 2 from the Tibeto-Burmese language family.

After the adoption of Constitution on 26 November 1949, fourteen languages, namely Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu (Mallikarjun, 2012) were given the status of official languages as per article 344 (1) of Indian constitution. In the year 1967, under 21<sup>st</sup> constitution amendment, Sindhi language was included in the list of official languages. After some time in 1992 under 71<sup>st</sup> constitution amendment Nepali, Manipuri and Konkani languages were also given the status of official languages. Under the 100<sup>th</sup> constitution amendment in 2003 four more languages namely-Bodo, Dogri, Santali and Maithili were also given the status of official language. In this way as of now there are 22 official languages namely: (1) Assamese, (2) Bengali, (3) Gujarati, (4) Hindi, (5) Kannada, (6) Kashmiri, (7) Konkani, (8) Malayalam, (9) Manipuri, (10) Marathi, (11) Nepali, (12) Oriya, (13) Punjabi, (14) Sanskrit, (15) Sindhi, (16) Tamil, (17) Telugu, (18) Urdu (19) Bodo, (20) Santali, (21) Maithili and (22) Dogri are listed in the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of Indian constitution. Apart from these 22 Indian languages, English has also awarded the status of “subsidiary official language”. It is the First official language of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland and second official language of the rest of the Indian states. Of the total population of India, 96.71 percent have one of the scheduled languages as their Mother Tongue; the remaining 3.29 per cent is accounted for by other languages. The Official Languages and their number of speakers are given in the below table.

<b>Scheduled Languages in Descending Order of Speakers' Strength - 2011</b>				
<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Name of the State/s where spoken</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Population in Percent</b>
1.	Hindi	Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi	52,83,47,193	43.63%
2.	Bengali	West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Jharkhand	9,72,37,669	8.03%

3.	Marathi	Maharashtra, Goa, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	8,30,26,680	6.86%
4.	Telugu	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Puducherry	8,11,27,740	6.70%
5.	Tamil	Tamil Nādu, Puducherry	6,90,26,881	5.70%
6.	Gujarati	Gujrat, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	5,54,92,554	4.58%
7.	Urdu	Bihar, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal	5,07,72,631	4.19%
8.	Kannada	Karnataka	4,37,06,512	3.16%
9.	Odia	Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal	3,75,21,324	3.10%
10.	Malayalam	Kerala, Lakshadweep, Puducherry	3,48,38,819	2.88%
11.	Punjabi	Punjab, Delhi, Haryana	3,31,24,726	2.74%
12.	Assamese	Assam	1,53,11,351	1.26%
13.	Maithili	Jharkhand	1,35,83,464	1.12%
14.	Santali	Jharkhand	73,68,192	0.61%
15.	Kashmiri	Jammu and Kashmir	67,97,587	0.56%
16.	Nepali	Sikkim, West Bengal	29,26,168	0.24%
17.	Sindhi	Gujarat	27,72,264	0.23%
18.	Dogri	Jammu and Kashmir	25,96,767	0.21%
19.	Konkani	Goa, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	22,56,502	0.19%
20.	Manipuri	Manipur	17,61,079	0.15%
21.	Bodo	Assam	14,82,929	0.12%
22.	Sanskrit	Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand	24,821	N
N Stands for negligible				

(Source: Census 2011)

Besides these 22 official languages, there are demands for inclusion of 38 more languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. These are: (1) Angika (2) Banjara (3) Bazika (4) Bhojpuri (5) Bhoti (6) Bhotia (7) Bundelkhandi (8) Chhattisgarhi (9) Dhatki (10) English (11) Garhwali (Pahari) (12) Gondi (13) Gujjar/Gujjari (14) Ho (15) Kachachhi (16) Kamtapuri (17) Karbi (18) Khasi (19) Kodava (Coorg) (20) KokBorok (21) Kumaoni (Pahari) (22) Kurak (23) Kurmali (24) Lepcha (25) Limbu (26) Mizo (Lushai) (27) Magahi (28) Mundari (29) Nagpuri (30) Nicobarese (31) Pahari (Himachali) (32) Pali (33) Rajasthani (34) Sambalpuri/Kosali (35) Shaurseni (Prakrit) (36) Siraiki (37) Tenyidi and (38) Tulu (Census 2011).

### Linguistic Overview of India: State-wise

At present there seems to be a contrast between official languages and non-official languages in India. For example, on one hand we can see that there are six schedule languages which appear in the Ethnologue's list of the top 20 most spoken languages of the world. **Hindi** with 600 million speakers is on third position, **Bengali** with 268 million speakers is on sixth

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position, **Urdu** with 230 million speakers is on tenth position, **Marathi** with 99 million speakers is on fourteenth position, **Telugu** with 96 million speakers is on fifteenth position and finally **Tamil** with 85 million speakers is on seventeenth position. Besides these six Indian languages, English language which is recognized as associate official language in India is the most spoken language with 1.384 billion speakers worldwide and 125 million speakers in India. According to Census 2011, among 22 schedule languages, almost 96.71% of Indian population speak at least one language. The languages which are put under schedule language category appear to be in a good condition in comparison to languages which are not in the category of schedule languages.

According to Constitution of India there are 22 official languages in India. The total number of people speaking these 22 official languages is 90 percent. Hindi is the most spoken language in India. Almost 43 percent people speak this language and because of its widespread nature it is treated as the lingua-franca. Bengali is the second most spoken language with 8 percent speakers, followed by Marathi language with 7 percent, Telugu with 6.7 percent and Tamil with 5.7 percent of the total population. The state-wise list of major languages, other important languages and endangered languages can be seen in the below table.

Name of State	Name of Major Language	Name of Other Languages	Name of Endangered Languages
Andhra Pradesh	Telugu	Urdu, Hindi, Tamil	Gadaba or Gutob, Gondi, Gormati, Gutaba Gadaba, Kolami, Konda-Dora or Porja, Koya, Kui, Kupia or Valmiki, Kuvi, M&a, Mannadona, Parji, <b>Reli</b> (extinct), Savara, and Yerakula
Arunachal Pradesh	English	Nepali, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese	Adi, Tangam, Milango, Nah, Puruik, Khowa or Bugun, Meyor, Miji, Singhpo, Aka or Hrusho, Nishi, Wancho, Sherdukpen, Zaiwa, Mra, Na, Tangam
Assam	Assamese	Bodo, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali	Karbi, Tiwa, Tai Nora, Tai Rong, Bodo, Misings, Deoris, Biate, Apatani, Nishi
Bihar	Hindi, Urdu	Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magadhi, Bajjika, Angika, Bajjika	Majhi, Kudmali, Musasa, Birhor, Chero, Birjia, Turi
Chhattisgarh	Chhattisgarhi/ Hindi	Bengali & Odia	Bhunija
Goa	Konkani	English, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Urdu	Portuguese

Gujarat	Gujarati	Hindi, Sindhi, English, Marathi, Urdu	Mangeli, Karwa, Dungri, Bhili, Nayki, Kathodi, Kathali, Talaviya Rathod, Sidi
Haryana	Hindi	Punjabi & Urdu	Korvi
Himachal Pradesh	Hindi & Pahari	Punjabi & Nepali	Shirmau, Tinan, Bharmauri, Chinali, Baghati, Jad, Kanashi, Handuri, Pangvali, Sirmaudi, Mandiyali, Mahasu Pahari, Chambiyali, Bilaspuri
Jammu & Kashmir	Urdu	Dogri, Kashmiri, Ladakhi, Dadri, Punjabi, Hindi	Khash, Hassadi, Zangskari, Dargari, Dogri, Gojri, Bhadharwahi
Jharkhand	Hindi	Santali, Bengali & Urdu, Mundari, Santhali, Kurukh, Ho, Kharia, Kurmali and Nagpuri	Korwa, Sabari, Malto, Angika, Santhali, Khortha, Korwa, Asuri, Birhori
Karnataka	Kannada	Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Konkani, Kodava and Tulu	Koraga, Irula, Soliga, Badaga, Yerava, Gouli, Bettakuruba, Jenukuruba, Siddi, HakkiPikki, Kutiya, Toda, Bellari, Kuruba
Kerala	Malayalam	None	Malasar, Ara Nandan, Moopan, Maduga, Paliya, Mannan, Eravallan
Madhya Pradesh	Hindi	Marathi, Urdu, Malvi, Nimadi, Bundeli, Bagheli	Bhilodi, Gondi, Kalto, Malvi, Nimadi
Maharashtra	Marathi	Hindi, Urdu & Gujarati	Naiki, Nihali, Korku, Khandeshi
Manipur	Manipuri	Nepali, Hindi & Bengali	Aka, Zo, Thadou, Vaiphei, Aimol, Koireng, Lamgang, Langrong, Purum, Tarao
Meghalaya	English, Khasi, Garo	Hindi, Bengali, Jaintia, Nepali	Ruga
Mizoram	Mizo	English, Hindi, Bengali, Nepali	Tiddim, Chin
Nagaland	English	Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Ao, Konyak, Angami, Sema, Lotha	Yacham, Yimchungru
Odisha	Odia	Hindi; Telugu & Santali	Manda, Pengo, Parji
Punjab	Punjabi	Hindi, Urdu, English	Rai Sikh, Sansi, Odi
Rajasthan	Hindi	Marwari, Punjabi, Rajasthani & Urdu,	Hadoti

		Malvi, Dhundhari, Harauti, Mewari, Mewati, Ahirwati, Shekhawati, Wagdi, Bagri, Nimadi	
Sikkim	Nepali	Hindi, Bengali, Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu	Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu
Tamil Nadu	Tamil	Telugu, Kannada & Urdu	Eravallan, Toda, Jen Kurumba, Kurumba, Malasar, Kota
Telangana	Telugu & Urdu	Some minor languages	Kolami, Koya, Gondi, Kuvi, Kui, Yerukala, Savara, Parji, Kupia
Tripura	Bengali	Hindi, Tripuri, Manipuri, Kokborak	Tiwa (Ladung)
Uttar Pradesh	Hindi	Urdu	Awadhi, Brajbasha
Uttarakhand	Hindi	Urdu, Punjabi & Nepali	Sanskrit, Bangani, Garhwali, Kumauni
West Bengal	Bengali	Hindi, Santali, Urdu, Nepali	Dhimal, Sobor, Goya, Tharu, Jalda, Asur, Hemal, Bedia, Kurukh, Toto, Turi

Name of Union Territory	Name of Major Language	Name of Other Languages	Name of Endangered Languages
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Bengali	Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Nicobarese & Malayalam	Jarawa, Tehniu, Luro, Muot, Sanenyo, Shompen, Great Andamanese, Lamongse, Onge, Pu, Sentilese, Takahanyilang
Chandigarh	Punjabi	Hindi and English	Rai Sikh, Sansi and Odi
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	Gujarati	Hindi, Konkani and Marathi, Gujarati, Bhili, Bildoli	Warlis, Dhodia Kokna tribal languages
Daman and Diu	Gujarati	Marathi, Hindi, Bildoli or Bhili, Konkani, English	Portuguese
Delhi	Hindi	English	None
Lakshadweep	Malayalam	English, Divehi	Muduga, Malaveda, Kanikkar, Kakkala, Mahl
Puducherry	Tamil	Telugu, Kannada and Urdu	--

(Source: Dash, 2020)

After the 1971 census, the Indian government decided that any language which is spoken by less than 10,000 persons will not be considered as Official Language. In India,

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therefore, all the languages which are spoken by less than 10,000 people are treated as potentially endangered by UNESCO.

### **Language Endangerment**

Language is not only the medium of communication, but it is also a medium of preserving, maintaining, and protecting the culture, tradition, custom and beliefs. Language and society are interrelated to each other. As we know that language is a social phenomenon, it is directly affected by society. It declines when society declines, it grows when the society grows, and it dies when the society dies or when the members of the speech community stop using it. This is somehow the story of almost every language in the world. More than 6000 languages are spoken worldwide (Atlas, 2011). Among these, all the languages do not enjoy the equal status. There are some languages which are spoken by a large number of people and on the other hand there are few languages which are being spoken by a small group of people. By looking carefully, it can be found that 50 percent of world's population speaks English, Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi and Russian languages and on the other hand there are few languages which have very few speakers left. These languages with very few speakers are on the verge of extinction. These languages are primarily known as endangered languages. Language death is both a regional and global problem. In India the problem of language endangerment is very serious which is a cause of concern. It is very interesting to see here that Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil are among the list of top 20 most spoken languages of the world and despite this, India is also a home to most endangered languages in the world.

There are several tribal languages which are moving towards extinction in India. **Majhi** language spoken in Sikkim is the most threatened language. According to a research conducted by People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), only four people currently speak Majhi language and all of them belong to the same family. Similarly, the **Mahali** language spoken in eastern India, **Koro** language spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, **Sidi** language spoken in Gujarat and **Dimasa** language spoken in Assam are facing the danger of extinction (Devy, 2011). Languages such as Asur, Birhor and Korwa are categorised as endangered languages (Atlas, 2011). Among these Birhor is categorised as 'Critically Endangered language' as there are just 2,000 speakers left.

There are so many other languages which are no longer being learned by new age children or by new adult speakers; after a certain period of time these languages will become extinct when their last speaker dies. There are number of languages today whose speakers are very limited in number, and after the death of these speakers the language will become extinct: It will no longer be spoken, or known, by anyone in the future.

Language Vitality and Endangerment document of UNESCO (2003) establishes six degrees of language endangerment which may be distinguished with regard to intergenerational language transmission, which are also recognised as cornerstone of a language vitality.

Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational Language Transmission
Safe	Language is spoken by all generations; Intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted.
Vulnerable	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.
Severely endangered	Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
Critically endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older; and they speak the language partially and infrequently.
Extinct	There are no speakers left.

(Source: UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework)

### Reasons for Language Endangerment

According to UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert Group on endangered languages (2003) there are nine factors which are mainly responsible for language endangerment: (i) Absolute number of speakers, (ii) Response to new domains and media, (iii) Type and quality of documentation, (iv) Intergenerational language transmission, (v) Availability of materials for language education and literacy, (vi) Proportion of speakers within the total population, (vii) Community member's attitudes towards their own language, (viii) Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use, (ix) Shift in domains of language use. As per UNESCO's Vitality and Endangerment framework, among these nine factors six degrees of endangerment can be established. The most important factor is the intergenerational language transmission: whether or not a language is being transferred to the next generation. This factor is generally accepted as the 'gold standard' of language vitality (Fishman, 1991).

There are many reasons of language endangerment. These reasons may be internal, external, political, economic, or cultural. Some of the important reasons are: Shifting of speakers to dominant language, Language marginalization, Internal threat, External threat, Economic Reasons, Migration and urbanization, Politico-economic and cultural subordination etc.

**Shifting towards dominant language:** Language is a social entity. Hence it is directly connected with speakers. When the speakers of a language disappear, or they shift to another powerful or dominant language the language becomes endangered. Sometimes speakers of a minority language in order to secure their children's future, decide to teach them a language which gives guarantee to economic success.

**Language marginalization:** In current scenario, English language has become the language of knowledge, employability, and power. It has become the primary language of the internet as the major content of the digital sphere is available in English language, and, therefore, other regional languages have been marginalized.



**Economic reasons:** Language gains greater currency when it becomes useful in marketplace. This reason makes mother tongues or regional languages to be restricted to very few domains. The attitudes towards their mother tongue get change by this reason.

**Internal threat:** Sometimes language is threatened by internal forces such as community's negative attitude towards its own language.

**External threat:** Sometimes languages are being threatened by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation.

**Migration and urbanization:** Increased migration and rapid urbanization also play an important role in language endangerment. These factors often bring along the loss of traditional ways of life and a strong pressure to speak a dominant language.

**Politico-economic and cultural subordination:** Reasons such as Politico-economic and cultural subordination are also very important. Social dominance of one group leads to the language of that group becoming more popular in that society.

### **Government Initiatives**

Ministry of Education, Government of India has initiated a Scheme known as "Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India" (SPPEL) in 2013. The main objective of this Scheme is to protect, preserve and document the languages which are spoken by less than 10,000 People and that have become endangered or are likely to be endangered in the near future. The scheme is monitored by **Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL)** Mysuru, Karnataka. The CIIL has made collaborations with various universities and institutes across India for this mission. The languages which are spoken by less than 10,000 speakers or languages which are not linguistically studied earlier are chiefly considered to be documented under this scheme. Till now 117 languages have been listed for the documentation purpose. This documentation is done in the form of grammar, dictionary, and ethno-linguistic profiles of about 500 lesser-known languages are estimated to be accomplished in the coming years. Besides this so many other institutions and individuals are also working in this area.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

India is a country with diverse linguistic situation. It is a home for multiple languages and ancient scripts. People from many cultures, customs and beliefs live here. They follow different traditions and rituals. They speak so many languages. Language is an important attribute of human beings which differentiate them from other living beings. It is not mere a tool of communication but a central and defining feature of human identity as our ideas, emotions and feelings are expressed with the help of language. Language is a mirror of society. It is a vehicle of our cultures, collective memory, and values. These are an essential component of our identities, and a building block of our diversity and living heritage (Atlas, 2011).

The analysis presented in the above sections clearly suggests that there is a large number of smaller minority languages which are threatened, and these include schedule languages, non-scheduled languages and official languages (Bodo and Manipuri) of some of the states like Assam and Manipur respectively. In order to protect the linguistic diversity of India, there is a strong need for quick initiation of policies for promoting, protecting and revitalizing of the endangered languages. Language endangerment is a serious threat to the mankind. Some of the efforts which can be taken to prevent a language from being endangered is:

- To create favourable conditions for the speakers of that language so they can speak and teach it to their upcoming generation.
- The government should make policies which recognizes and protect the interest of minority and lesser-known languages and promote education in mother-tongue.
- Need to change the attitude of society towards its own language.
- Need to create livelihood in the minority and lesser-known languages at local level. Because if there is livelihood support nobody will migrate and switch from their own language.
- Need to record the knowledge consisted in that language as much possible.
- Encourage multilingualism and respect for minority languages.

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