

## Linguistic Ecology of India (1971 to 2011)

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### Introduction

Landscape is ‘*all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal*’. Ecology is ‘*the relationships between the air, land, water, animals, plants, etc., usually of a particular area, or the scientific study of this*’. Linguistic landscape provides a *static* picture, whereas the linguistic ecology presents a *dynamic* picture by looking into the changes taking place in languages in a particular area. From decade to decade linguistic situation is changing in India. This could be deciphered by close study of the language data of decennial census.

Now the language tables of the Census of India 2011 could be analysed for different language related information. We can use it to understand the linguistic landscape and ecology of India by comparing and contrasting the language data of 1971 and 2011. Fifty years is a good amount of post independence period to look into the changes in the linguistic pattern that have taken place in the nation. This is the first article planned in this series *Linguistic Ecology of India*. This paper-1 looks at India as a unit for description.

### Census of British India

One of the formal attempts to understand the linguistic landscape of India could be traced back to the *Memorandum of the Census of British India of 1871-72* published in 1875. In this memorandum there is one page note under the caption *Nationality, language and caste*. This describes linguistic landscape of India as it existed at that time. It states that:

“Although nearly the whole of the inhabitants of British India can be classed under one or other of the two prevailing religions, it will be found that, when arranged according to nationality or language, they present a very much greater variety. Bengal proper, and some of the adjacent districts are inhabited by Bengali...; Bengali speaking people number some 37 millions... Allied to these both in language and descent...are the Ooryas, or people of Orissa,

numbering four millions. The Assamese, of whom there are less than two millions, speak a language very similar to Bengali...The Hindustanis of Behar ...their language is Hindee, and they number...some 20 millions.

“In the North-West Province there is less diversity of language, Hindee being spoken by the great mass of Hindoo cultivators...In the south of the Midnapoor district the aboriginal tribes have a language of their own, ..In Oude, Oordoo is the common language, but in some districts Persian, and in others Hindoo words prevail. The Tharoo tribe, numbering about 6,000 in Oude have a language of their own; they are also found in the Sub-Himalayan districts of Rohilkund, Goruckpoor, and Chumparun...

“In the portion of Punjab east of the Indus Hindee or Punjabee is spoken with varying dialect. A form of Thibetan is used in the Kangra highland of Lahul and Spiti. Beyond the Indus, Pushtoo is spoken in the frontier villages to the north, and Beloochee to the south. Oordoo is used in the large cities, and Persian by the higher classes in Peshawur.

“About one half the inhabitants of the British territory in the Central Provinces speak Hindee modified more or less in Nimar and Chutteesgurh by the mixture of Guzeratee words in the former, and those of the hill tribes in the latter case. Rather less than one-fourth of the people speak Mahrattee, which is used in the Nagpoor division; while the original language of Gonds is spoken by a similar number. Ooriya is used in the Sumbulpoor district, bordering on Orissa, and Telooogo in the district of Upper Godavery.

“In Mysore the prevailing language is Kanarese, but Tamil, Telooogo, Hindustani, and Mahrattee are also spoken. In Coorg, besides the Coorg language, Kanarese, Malayalam, Tamil, Tulu and Hindustani are used.

“The Madras Presidency comprises several distinct linguistic divisions, but about five-sixths of the people use either the Telooogo language which is spoken from Vizagapatam to Nellore and North Arcot, or the Tamil ... which prevails from ...north of Madras to the extreme south... On the western coast Malayalam ...is spoken in Malabar, Tulu in part of south Kanara, and Kanarese in north of that district as well as in portion of either districts bordering on Mysore. In the extreme north, Gunjam, on the confines of Orissa, adopts Ooriya, the language of that province, while the Khond tribes in the hills have dialects of their own.

“The languages used in the Bombay Presidency are very numerous, the chief being Sindhee, Kutchee, and Guzeratee, in the north, Mahrattee, to which that of Koncan is taken, in the chief part of Bombay proper, and Kanarese in the south.”

Though the Memorandum itself agrees with the *Imperfection of the Census* for various reasons, it elucidates the linguistic landscape of the British India and tries to segregate language

as an autonomous unit of enumeration and understanding it differently from nationality and caste.

### Linguistic Survey of India

Next is the *Linguistic Survey of India* by its Superintendent George Abraham Grierson from 1898. His survey reported that India has 179 languages, 544 dialects. He presents a classified list of 872 languages or dialects. The number of speakers indicated in this are from the 1891 census. Most important aspect of this survey is that it presents genealogical classification of languages. This classification is used even today by the census as well as other scholars as a reference point. Of course, researchers point out some drawbacks in the methodology etc., adopted by Grierson in his survey. These do not undervalue this landmark survey in the history of study of Indian languages and the linguistic landscape of India.

### People of India Project

The post independence India had a kind of linguistic survey under the name *People of India project* and the results published in 1993, in the volume *Languages and Scripts: People of India* Volume IX. It is found that out of 730 communities studied in India 350 communities are linguistically homogeneous (Scheduled Tribe-72, Scheduled Caste-52 and Others-226) and 380 communities are linguistically heterogeneous (Scheduled Tribe-37, Scheduled Caste-78 and Others-265). Where linguistic homogeneity is - a community speaks one and the same language in all of their habitats and linguistic heterogeneity is - a community speaks different languages in their different habitats. This study has identified 325 languages and their varieties.

### Language Families in India

The decennial Census of India is one of the regular sources of information on languages of India. Here, language information is a small part of the larger information gathering exercise. Even then we can figure out a lot about languages by mining this language data. Let us begin with macro level comparison of language families and changes that have taken place in them.

Language Families of the Indian languages: 1991-2011

Language families	Number of Languages			Number of Persons			Percentage to total population		
	1991	2001	2011	1991	2001	2011	1991	2001	2011
<b>1. Indo-European</b>	19	21	21	631,273,191	790,627,060	94,50,52,555	75.278	76.87	78.05
<b>(a) Indo-Aryan</b>									
<b>(b) Iranian</b>		2	1		22,774	21,677		00.00	0.00
<b>(c) Germanic</b>	1	1	1	178,598	226,449	2,59,678	0.021	00.02	0.02
<b>2. Dravidian</b>	17	17	17	188,945,126	214,172,874	23,78,40,116	22.531	20.82	19.64
<b>3. Austro-Asiatic</b>	14	14	14	9,490,157	11,442,029	1,34,93,080	1.132	01.11	1.11
<b>4. Tibeto-Burmese</b>	62	66	66	8,092,940	10,305,026	1,22,57,382	0.965	1.00	1.01
<b>5. Semito-Hamitic</b>	1	1	1	21,975	51,728	54,947	0.003	0.01	0.00

<b>Total</b>	114		122	838,001,987	1,026,847,940	1,20,89,79,435	99.930	99.83	99.85
<b>Other languages not counted above</b>				582,001	1,762,388	1,875,542	0.07	0.17	0.15
<b>Ttal population of India</b>				838,583,988	1,028,610,328	1,210,854,977			

The above table indicates that Iranian has reduced number of speakers. It is reduced from 22,774 in 1991 to 21,677 in 2011. In case of all other language families it is evident that there is an increase in the number of speakers. However, when we look at the proportionate parentage of population of speakers of different language families between 1991 and 2011, there is an increase in case of Indo-Aryan (75.278 to 78.05), Tibeto-Burmese (0.965 to 1.01) and there is significant decrease in the case of Dravidian (22.531 to 19.64) family of languages. Even the population speaking a language/mother tongue other than the ones covered under different families is on the increase. It has increased from 0.07 in 1991 to 0.15 in 2011. This trend gets illustrated further when we look into the ecology of languages in detail in the next paragraphs.

### Scheduled and Non-Scheduled Languages

The most cited language status tool is the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. It initially had 14 languages only. In 1971 it had 15 languages due to inclusion of Sindhi in 1969. They are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. This list of select languages got expanded by the inclusion of Nepali, Konkani and Manipuri in 1992 and Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Santali in 2002. Languages not listed here are considered as non-scheduled languages. The relation between languages and mother tongues is dynamic one. What is mother tongue today may become a language tomorrow. Maithili was a mother tongue under the Hindi- a composite language umbrella till 2002 and became an independent language since then.

The classification of the Indian languages into scheduled and non-scheduled languages also reflect the increase in the percentage of speakers of the scheduled languages and decrease in the percentage of speakers of non-scheduled languages. The table given below illustrates the point.

	2001	2011
Scheduled languages	96.56	96.72
Non Scheduled languages	3.44	3.27

### Language and Mother Tongue

Now let us come to some basic issues that are bothering us. A monolingual country has a language and its dialects: geographical or social. But one of the challenges that a multilingual country like India throws up is of effectively conceptualising units of description like 'mother tongue' 'dialect' 'language'. The Constitution Bench of the SUPREME COURT OF INDIA recently adjudicated a question on the meaning of the term 'mother tongue' on May 6, 2014.

The question was “What does Mother tongue mean? If it referred to as the language in which the child is comfortable with, then who will decide the same?” The answer it gave was that “Mother tongue in the context of the Constitution would, therefore, mean the language of the linguistic minority in a State and it is the parent or the guardian of the child who will decide what the mother tongue of child is. The Constitution nowhere provides that mother tongue is the language which the child is comfortable with, and while this meaning of ‘mother tongue’ may be a possible meaning of the ‘expression’, this is not the meaning of mother tongue in Article 350A of the Constitution or in any other provision of the Constitution...” This cannot be construed as a generic definition. This conceptualisation is purely in the context of linguistic minorities, their education, their rights and the constitution. Not a linguistically acceptable definition of mother tongue in a multilingual context.

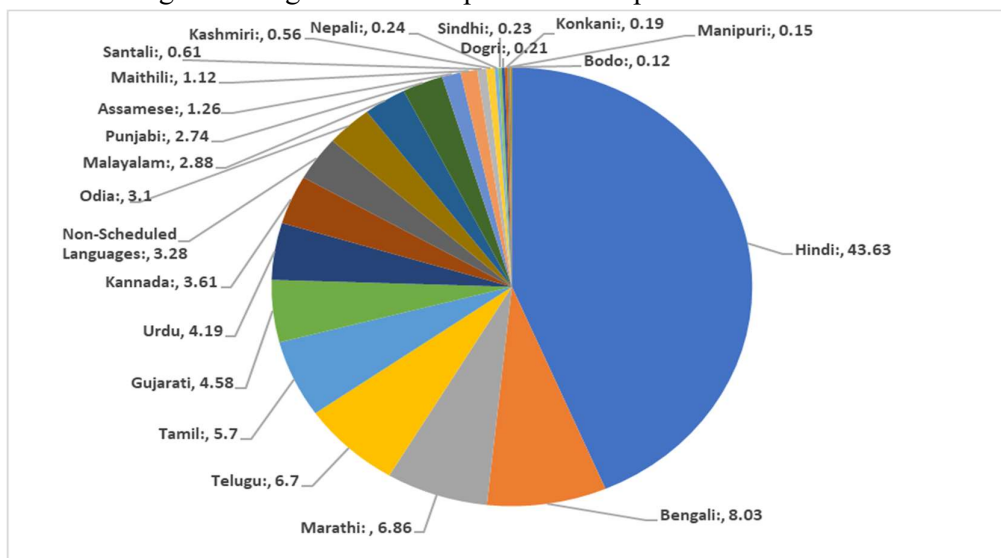
In the context of Indian multilingualism since 1881 census onward, the question on ‘mother-tongue’ was included in the census though it was used by the enumerators differently in different censuses. In the censuses of 1881, 1931, 1941 and 1951, the question was ‘mother-tongue’. The mother-tongue was defined as the language first spoken by the individual from the cradle. In 1891 census, the question was parent tongue’. It was defined as the language spoken by the parent of the individual. In 1901 census ‘Parent tongue’ was replaced by ‘language ordinarily used’. In 1911 the question was ‘language ordinarily spoken in the household’. In 1921 the question was simply ‘language ordinarily used’. The question on mother tongue was repeated from census to census from 1931 to 1971. Though the census has used different definitions of the mother tongue in the earlier enumerations, it is almost consistent in the past 50 years about this definition.

Mother tongue in 1971 was identified as ‘the language spoken in childhood by the person’s mother to the person. If the mother died in infancy, the language mainly spoken in the person’s home in childhood will be the mother tongue. In the case of infants and deaf-mutes, the language usually spoken by the mother is recorded’. Thus, in the context of the Census of India, a ‘mother tongue’ is a concrete entity/unit and ‘language’ is an abstract entity /unit. Hence from the time census enumeration is undertaken in India, it elicits information on ‘mother tongue’ from the people. Once such data is gathered on mother tongue of the individuals’ languages are arrived at applying genetic or functional criteria. So, all Indian languages are mother tongues, but all mother tongues of India are not languages.

The 1961 census had 1652 mother tongue returns. The 1971 census lists mother tongues having 5000 and above speakers. The latest 2011 census had 19,569 mother tongue labels rationalised to 1369 mother tongues whereas 1474 labels are considered as unclassifiable. However, it lists the mother tongues having 10,000 speakers and above only. According to the latest Census 2011, one such a language Hindi has 56+ mother tongues grouped in it and some others like Chang, Deori have only one mother tongue identified as a language. Rest of the languages fall within the range of 59-01 mother tongues. Most of the

Indian languages are ‘composite languages’ having one or more than one mother tongues under an umbrella term of a name of a ‘language’.

The following is the linguistic landscape of India as per 2011 census data.

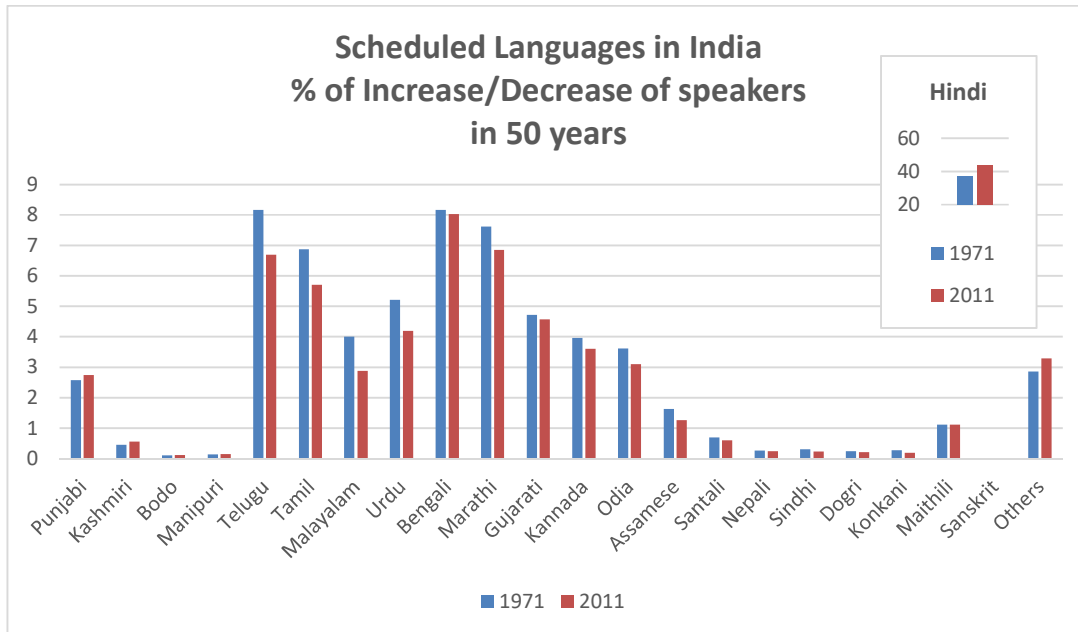


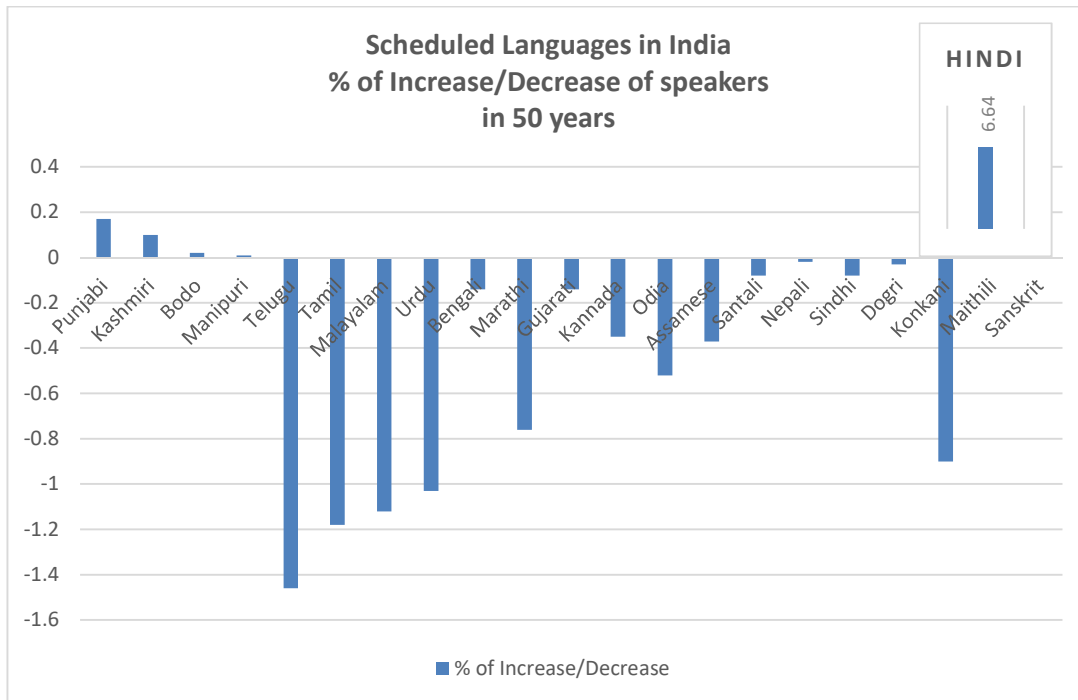
Both the table and charts are given below to help the reader to understand the fact better. Table – 1 and the Graph-1 given below illustrate that in 50 years there is a change in the proportion of languages in the country. There is an increase in some languages - Hindi: 6.64%, Punjabi: 0.17%, Kashmiri: 0.10%, Bodo: 0.02 %, Manipuri: 0.01%), There is no change in Maithili and there is a decrease in rest of the languages. Telugu: -1.46, Tamil: -1.18, Malayalam: -1.12, Urdu: -1.03, Bengali: -0.14, Marathi: -0.76 Gujarati: -0.14, Kannada: -0.35, Odia: -0.52, Assamese: -0.37, Santali: -0.08, Nepali: -0.02, Sindhi: -0.08, Dogri: -0.03 and Konkani: -0.9.

Table -1  
Scheduled Languages in India Percentage of Increase/ Decrease of speakers in 50 years at the national level

	Language	1971	2011	% of Increase/ Decrease
1	Hindi	36.99	43.63	+6.64
2	Punjabi	2.57	2.74	+0.17
3	Kashmiri	0.46	0.56	+0.10
4	Bodo	0.10	0.12	+0.02
5	Manipuri	0.14	0.15	+0.01
6	Telugu	8.16	6.70	-1.46
7	Tamil	6.88	5.70	-1.18
8	Malayalam	4.00	2.88	-1.12

9	Urdu	5.22	4.19	-1.03
10	Bengali	8.17	8.03	-0.14
11	Marathi	7.62	6.86	-0.76
12	Gujarati	4.72	4.58	-0.14
13	Kannada	3.96	3.61	-0.35
14	Odia	3.62	3.10	-0.52
15	Assamese	1.63	1.26	-0.37
16	Santali	0.69	0.61	-0.08
17	Nepali	0.26	0.24	-0.02
18	Sindhi	0.31	0.23	-0.08
19	Dogri	0.24	0.21	-0.03
20	Konkani	0.28	0.19	-0.9
21	Maitihili	1.12	1.12	No change
22	Sanskrit	N	N	N
	Total	97.14	96.71	0.43
	Others	2.86	3.29	0.43





### Languages and Mother tongues

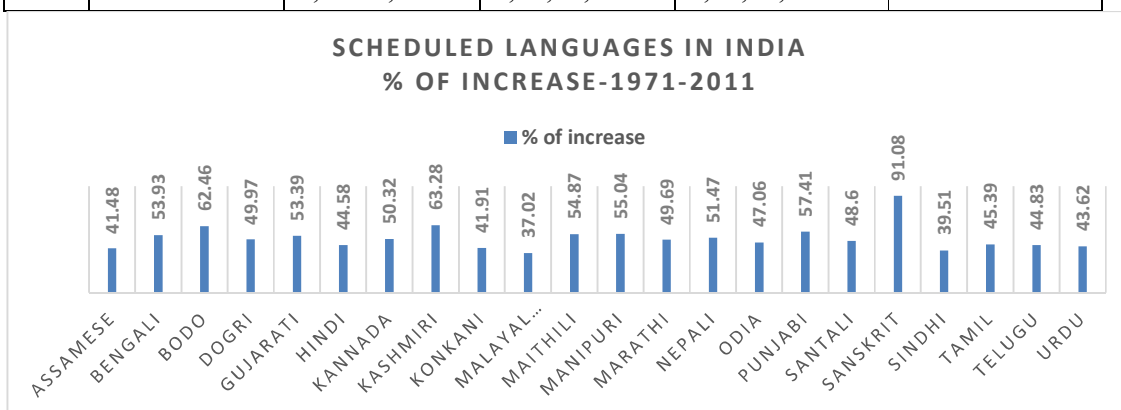
In the Indian context we already saw one comes across (abstract) ‘languages’ and (concrete) ‘mother tongues’ created for the convenience of enumeration by the census. We can have a look at the changes that have taken place among the scheduled languages and the corresponding mother tongue of the scheduled language. The table and the charts given below provide the details of percentage of increase in 50 years period. Some changes are due to inclusion of some mother tongues and exclusion of some other mother tongues etc., into the languages.

Table -2  
Scheduled Languages in India  
Increase of number of speakers in 50 years at the national level

	Language	1971	2011	Increase in 50 years	% of increase
1	Assamese	89,59,558	1,53,11,351	63,51,793	41.48
2	Bengali	4,47,92,312	9,72,37,669	5,24,45,357	53.93
3	Bodo	5,56,576	14,82,929	9,26,353	62.46
4	Dogri	1,29,9,143	2,59,6,767	1,29,7,624	49.97
5	Gujarati	2,58,65,012	5,54,92,554	2,96,2,7542	53.39
6	Hindi	29,27,67,971	52,83,47,193	23,55,79,222	44.58
7	Kannada	2,17,10,649	4,37,06,512	2,19,95,863	50.32
8	Kashmiri	24,95,487	67,97,587	43,02,100	63.28



9	Konkani	1,50,8,432	2,59,6,767	1,08,8,335	41.91
10	Malayalam	2,19,38,760	3,48,38,819	1,29,0,0059	37.02
11	Maithili	61,30,026	1,35,83,464	74,53,435	54.87
12	Manipuri	79,1,714	1,76,1,079	96,9,365	55.04
13	Marathi	4,17,65,190	8,30,26,680	4,12,61,490	49.69
14	Nepali	14,19,835	29,26,168	15,06,333	51.47
15	Odia	1,98,63,198	3,75,21,324	1,76,58,126	47.06
16	Punjabi	1,41,08,443	3,31,24,726	1,90,16,283	57.41
17	Santali	37,86,899	73,68,192	35,81,293	48.60
18	Sanskrit	2,212	24,821	22,609	91.08
19	Sindhi	1,67,6,875	2,77,2,264	1,09,5,389	39.51
20	Tamil	3,76.90,106	6,90,26,881	3,13,36,775	45.39
21	Telugu	4,47,56,923	8,11,27,740	3,63,70,817	44.83
22	Urdu	2,86.20,895	5,07,72,631	2,21,51,736	43.62



Though English is not a Scheduled language but Associate Official Language of India the numerical strength of the same cannot be ignored either as language or as part of bilingualism or trilingualism.

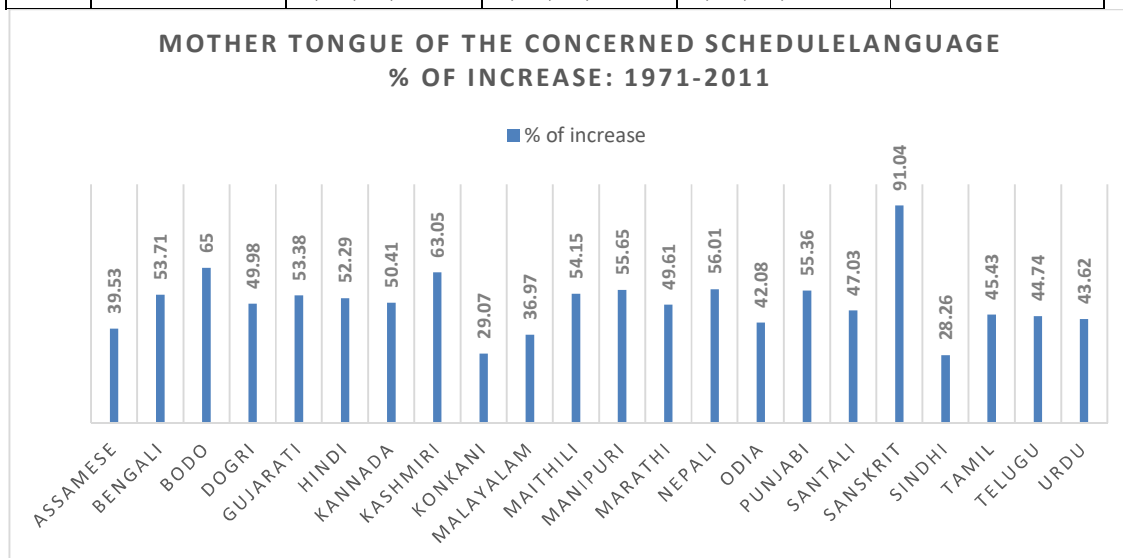
		1971	2011	Increase	Percentage
1	English	1,91,595	2,59,678	68,083	26.22

The following table-3 and the chart below provide the details of the changes in the number of speakers of mother tongue of the respective scheduled language.

Table -3  
Mother tongue of the respective Scheduled Language in India  
Increase of speakers in 50 years at the national level

	<b>Mother tongue</b>	<b>1971</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>Increase in 50years</b>	<b>% of increase</b>
1	Assamese	89,58,977	1,48,16,414	58,57,437	39.53
2	Bengali	4,45,21,533	9,61,77,835	5,16,56,307	53.71
3	Bodo	5,09,006	14,54,547	94,5,541	65.00

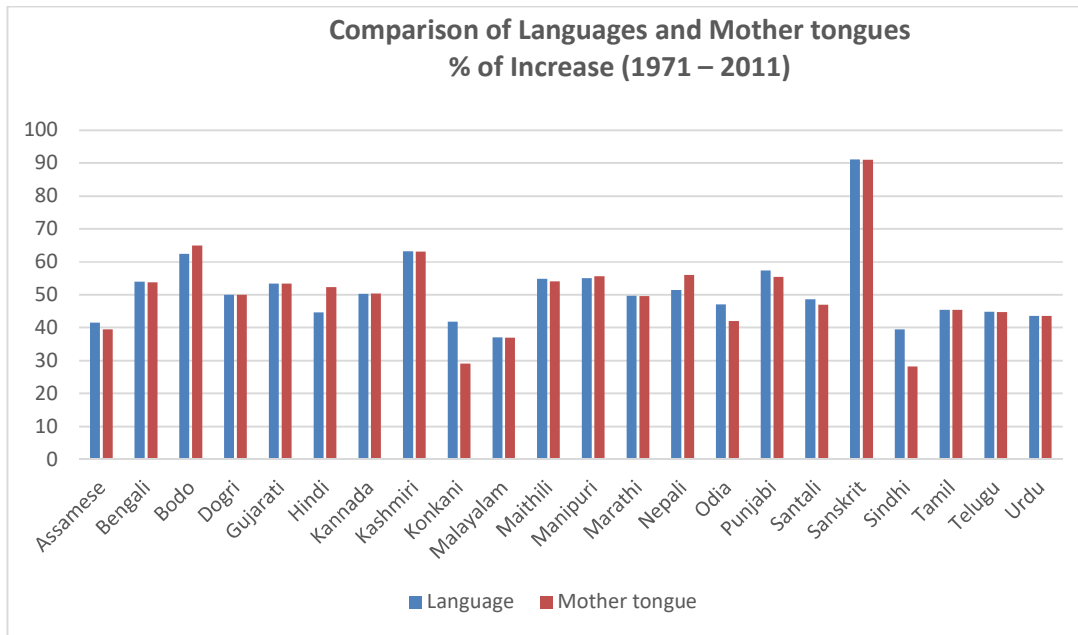
4	Dogri	12,98,855	25,96,763	12,97,908	49.98
5	Gujarati	2,56,56,274	5,50,36,204	2,93,79,930	53.38
6	Hindi	15,37,29,062	32,22,30,097	16,85,01,035	52.29
7	Kannada	2,15,75,019	4,35,06,272	2,19,31,253	50.41
8	Kashmiri	24,21,760	65,54,369	41,32,609	63.05
9	Konkani	15,22,684	21,46,906	6,24,222	29.07
10	Malayalam	2,19,17,430	3,47,76,533	1,28,59,103	36.97
11	Maithili	61,21,922	1,33,53,347	72,31,425	54.15
12	Manipuri	7,80,871	17,60,913	9,80,042	55.65
13	Marathi	4,17,23,893	8,28,01,140	4,10,77,247	49.61
14	Nepali	12,86,824	29,25,796	16,38,972	56.01
15	Odia	1,97,26,745	3,40,59,266	1,43,32,521	42.08
16	Punjabi	1,39,00,202	3,11,44,095	1,72,43,893	55.36
17	Santali	36,93,558	69,73,345	32,79,787	47.03
18	Sanskrit	2,212	24,709	22,497	91.04
19	Sindhi	12,04,678	16,79,246	4,74,568	28.26
20	Tamil	3,75,92,794	6,88,88,839	3,12,96,045	45.43
21	Telugu	4,47,07,697	8,09,12,459	3,62,04,762	44.74
22	Urdu	2,86,00,428	5,07,25,762	2,21,25,334	43.62



The table-4 and the chart given below provide the details of comparison of percentage of increase between a scheduled language and the corresponding mother tongue during the 50 years. It is interesting to note that there is no uniform or comparable increase in the population of speakers of different mother tongues. One should not expect that also.

Table 4  
Comparison of Languages and Mother tongues: % of Increase/decrease (1971 – 2011)

		<b>Language</b>	<b>Mother tongue</b>
1	Assamese	41.48	39.53
2	Bengali	53.93	53.71
3	Bodo	62.46	65.00
4	Dogri	49.97	49.98
5	Gujarati	53.39	53.38
6	Hindi	44.58	52.29
7	Kannada	50.32	50.41
8	Kashmiri	63.28	63.05
9	Konkani	41.91	29.07
10	Malayalam	37.02	36.97
11	Maithili	54.87	54.15
12	Manipuri	55.04	55.65
13	Marathi	49.69	49.61
14	Nepali	51.47	56.01
15	Odia	47.06	42.08
16	Punjabi	57.41	55.36
17	Santali	48.60	47.03
18	Sanskrit	91.08	91.04
19	Sindhi	39.51	28.26
20	Tamil	45.39	45.43
21	Telugu	44.83	44.74
22	Urdu	43.62	43.62



The Sanskrit stands out as an exception among all others with 91.04% of increase. This is because of love of language by the claimants rather than having it really as mother tongue. Here Sindhi (28.56%) and Konkani (29.03%) form one category with a minimum increase. The next category is in the range of 30%+ with Assamese (39.53%) and Malayalam (36.97%). The third group is of 40%+. It has Dogri (49.98%), Marathi (49.61%), Odiya (42.08%), Santali (47.03%), Tamil (45.43%), Telugu (44.74%), and Urdu (43.62%).

The next category has mother tongues in the range of increase of 50%+. They are Bengali (53.71%), Gujarati (53.38%), Hindi (52.29%), Kannada (50.41%), Maithili (54.15%), Nepali (56.01%), and Punjabi (55.36%).

The last category is of mother tongues with an increase in the range of 60+. They are Bodo (65%) and Kashmiri (63.05%).

My interest was to look into changes that have taken place in 50 years. I have done it. Such a vast difference in increase in percentage of speakers of these mother tongues needs to be investigated further from various research angles. Also, reasons for such a difference need to be looked into.

I have covered data on major languages only. There is much more data on Indian languages to be looked into by the interested scholars.