



## PRESERVING TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA: CHALLENGES, STATE INTERVENTIONS, AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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### ABSTRACT

*India's linguistic diversity is unparalleled. It has a number tribal dialects/ languages that encapsulate their own unique cultural identities and indigenous knowledge systems. However, many of these languages face the threat of extinction due to multiple social and political factors. This paper examines the problems/challenges that tribal languages in India face, assesses state and grassroots efforts to protect them, and suggests ways to ensure they stay alive and grow. This paper results from the author's engagement with tribes and their issues over a decade of research. It builds on participant observations and reviews of secondary literature and official reports to map the constitutional, educational, and sociopolitical dimensions of tribal language endangerment.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tribal Languages, endangerment, extinction, language loss, revitalization, preservation

### INTRODUCTION

The language and culture of a community are closely related. The language that people speak serves as a storehouse for their shared understanding of the world. It also stores its history, culture, and way of life. Moreover, through socialization, it preserves and transmits cultural artifacts from previous generations, including folk songs, tales, proverbs, and rituals. According to Fishman (1991) and Crystal (2000), it also encompasses a worldview through which people make sense of the world around them. Consequently, the erasure of a language signifies more than simply the disappearance of a linguistic code; it also means the disappearance of cultural memory, identity, and cognitive diversity (Harrison, 2007).

In the present times, many tribal languages in India, particularly those lacking written scripts or official documentation, are in danger of becoming extinct. The plight of 310 languages, including 263 spoken by fewer than five people and 47 by fewer than a thousand, has drawn the attention of the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) (Bandyopadhyay, 2013). Despite being already listed in the 1961 census, the majority of these languages are in danger of going extinct due to a lack of state efforts to promote and preserve them. According to the survey, only ten of these languages appear to be left today, meaning that a fifth of India's linguistic diversity has already vanished over the past 50 years.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2011), with 197 languages being listed endangered, India has more endangered languages than both Brazil and the United States. The situation has become even more dire for coastal and migratory tribal communities, speeding up the extinction of their languages due to migration, assimilation

pressures, and insufficient government aid (UNESCO, 2011; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Academicians such as Pattanayak (1990), Devy (2008), and Abbi (2009) have also previously raised similar concerns about the highly problematic trend of language loss and called for immediate action to address such issues and thereby pave the way for language conservation and continuity.

### **THE CRISIS OF TRIBAL LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT**

UNESCO (2003) estimates that by the end of the 21st century, nearly half of the globe's 7,000 languages may become extinct. It has further indicated that every fortnight, a language is disappearing. While India is celebrated for its linguistic diversity, the situation is changing fast. Linguistic diversity, especially in the case of tribal languages, is becoming endangered. The tribal languages constitute a substantial segment of India's approximately 19,500 languages and dialects (Census of India, 2011), however, many are in critical danger of extinction. For tribal languages, the crisis in India is especially acute as these languages are frequently spoken by small populations which have restricted access to education in their native languages and receive scant institutional support from the state (Annamalai, 2001; Mohanty, 2009). Moreover, as tribal people further shift their focus to more widely spoken regional or national languages in pursuit of economic and social mobility, these languages are becoming even more endangered.

One can look at the examples of a few tribal languages to understand this. For instance, the Toto language (spoken by the tribal Toto people in Totopara, West Bengal along the border with Bhutan) is at risk of extinction because the state does not actively promote it, and the language is not being passed down from one generation to another (Singh, 2001). The Bhumij language, which is spoken in Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal, exhibits a substantial disparity between the ethnic population (which is more than 9,00,000) and the number of speakers (27,506) who speak it. This suggests a substantial departure from the language (Census, 2011; Devy, 2017), thereby signaling language loss. The Asur language spoken by the Asur people of Jharkhand is also in danger of dying out because there is no written form of the language and no official resources to help spread it (Mohanty, 2010). The fact that the Gorum language—also known as Parengi—was almost extinct in 2011 due to its low population of 20 speakers is a further evidence of this problem (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2022). Aimol, with fewer than 3,000 speakers in Manipur, is also endangered due to neglect in the state education system and the dominance of more widely spoken languages in public and institutional domains.

Pattanayak's (2001) research indicates that while 8.6% of the country's population is tribal, only 3.8% of people in India say that they speak a tribal language as their first language (mother tongue). This difference brings to light a change in the scenario of tribal language and culture, thus indicating that tribal identities are becoming increasingly separate from their linguistic roots.

### **DEFINING TRIBE, TRIBAL LANGUAGES AND THE PROBLEM OF CLASSIFICATION**

The concept and definition of a "tribe" in India is complex and challenging to define, as it lacks a universally agreed-upon meaning. Previously, the British colonial administration introduced the term "tribe" in the Censuses conducted by them in 1861 and 1871. Thereafter, they categorized and notified specific communities as "criminal tribes" through the Criminal Tribes Act 1871. The Criminal Tribes Act was later repealed in independent India in 1952, and such tribes were Denotified Tribes (DNTs) thereafter. However, tribal communities in India, whether denotified or not, do not form a uniform or homogenous group. The distinction between tribal and non-tribal populations is often blurred, as no absolute cultural or social boundary separates the two.

After Independence, the term "tribe" has been institutionalized by the Indian Constitution, which officially recognizes specific communities as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under Article 342. The designation is made by the President and Parliament of India, and is primarily administrative, judicial, and political in nature. It is administrative because the government agencies gather data, survey the community, and thereby notify lists later on. However, legal scrutiny or court decisions can confirm or challenge a community's status, thereby making the process judicial as well. It is also a political process because

the Indian Parliament and the President decide which groups are included, affecting power and representation. Thus, while not all the tribes are scheduled tribes, the Indian Constitution treats only the Scheduled Tribes as tribes.

The Languages spoken by such Scheduled Tribes are often called "tribal languages," though there is no clear linguistic basis for this classification. These languages do not form a unified or homogenous linguistic group. Thus, tribal languages are not distinct because of their linguistic features, but rather because they are spoken by Scheduled Tribe communities that are historically, geographically, politically, socially, and culturally set apart from the rest of the population by the Indian Constitution.

However, the categorization of specific languages as "tribal" remains contested. For instance, Gujari (also known as Gojri), spoken by the Gurjar community, is subject to such debates. In Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, where Gurjars are classified as a Scheduled Tribe, Gujari is often considered a tribal language. In contrast, in other Indian states where Gurjars do not hold Scheduled Tribe status, the same language is typically not recognized as tribal. This reflects how linguistic classification in India is closely tied to language speakers' socio-political identities, rather than purely linguistic considerations and the language's promotion.

### CHALLENGES IN DOCUMENTING AND ASSESSING THE VITALITY OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES

The linguistic survey data from India, originally collected by Anglo-Irish linguist and civil servant George Abraham Grierson for the Linguistic Survey of India (1903–1928), provides a necessary but insufficient picture of the linguistic variety in the nation. Recent census efforts have improved our knowledge of language demographics. However, there are still many obstacles to overcome before we can be sure that our data is correct and complete. The limitation of inaccurate and incomplete data are particularly significant for tribal languages, many of which are endangered or face severe risk of extinction. The disparity in linguistic statistics makes it harder to evaluate the health of a language and determine its actual speaker population due to factors like high internal migration, low literacy rates, and language shift.

Especially among indigenous communities, underreporting is a big problem with the census results. People don't report their language identities as much when they switch to more widely spoken national or regional languages, like English, Bengali, or Hindi. Devy (2008) states that the difficulty of collecting reliable language data is exacerbated by the high rate of language shift, in which younger generations are abandoning their home languages for more frequently spoken ones (often regional languages). Because of this occurrence, the census records show an exaggerated number of speakers of some languages and an underestimated number of speakers of others. Determining linguistic demographics is already a challenging task, and high rates of internal migration and people moving between urban and rural areas further worsen things. Furthermore, it is also possible that migrants underplay the use of their native languages in their reports, either because they are no longer actively speaking them or due to a lack of recognition of the dialects or languages they speak in urban settings.

Additionally, especially in cases involving indigenous groups, demographic patterns do not necessarily correspond to the real quantity of speakers of a specific language. For example, Pasayat (1998) discusses the Juang tribe (the Juang are an Austroasiatic ethnic group found only in the Gonsaika hills of Keonjhar district of Odisha), whose population exceeds the number of native Juang speakers, implying that the language is losing ground among the Juang people. On the other hand, more persons are speaking Koya than live in the Koya tribe, which suggests that non-Koya speakers are picking up the language. The comparison of the Juang and Koya tribal languages explains that changes in demographics do not always portend an increase or decrease in language usage, highlighting the complexity of language survival. Hence, protecting indigenous populations doesn't guarantee that their languages will remain in use. Language maintenance is influenced by factors including cultural choice, availability of native language education, and social value, so it's not just a demographic issue.

Finally, there are many moving parts when it comes to recording and evaluating the health of India's Tribal languages. Internal migration, low literacy, language change, and underreporting all contribute to census data anomalies, thereby making it difficult to understand the actual state of tribal languages. Also, we need more advanced methods for documenting languages because there are differences between demographic trends and how people actually use languages. For legislators and linguists who want to keep the language legacy of indigenous communities alive, language transmission, community involvement, and the effects of outside forces like migration and education on the health of a language are more important than just looking at population numbers.

## CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

The Indian Constitution includes several articles that aim to safeguard and advance linguistic rights, including Articles 29, 30, and 350A. However, most of these articles focus only on languages "scheduled" to be protected within the constitution. With each new revision, the number of languages mentioned in the Eighth Schedule has increased from fourteen to twenty-two, including Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The increase in the number of languages in the Eighth Schedule indicates the growing awareness of the rich linguistic diversity in India.

However, most tribal languages are not a part of the Eighth Schedule. As a result of their exclusion from the Scheduled Languages list, most tribal languages continue to suffer from a lack of institutional support (Abbi, 2009; Pandharipande, 2002). It was only in 2003 that the Santhali and Bodo languages were added to the list. Some non-scheduled languages like Gondi, Ho, Mundari, Khasi, and Kurukh are spoken by millions of tribal groups. However, these languages are still put in the "minority" or "marginal" categories. Classifications like these are problematic as they legitimize the already existing power structures while further undermining indigenous peoples' knowledge systems. Furthermore, Abbi (2009) has argued that the government's "reductionist policy" that groups different tribal languages together under broad linguistic umbrellas also erases their individual identities.

In addition, there are several symbolic, cultural, educational, and political advantages to having a language listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. First, the language's cultural validity is validated and it receives various benefits in governance, education, and public life when included in the Schedule. For instance, Article 344(1) and Article 351 of the Constitution state that the Union shall encourage the growth of Hindi and, in doing so, shall enrich it with terminology borrowed from languages already included in the Eighth Schedule. Furthermore, the scheduled languages are utilized in state and federal administrative communication, along with judicial activities, and legislative procedures followed by the state. All these state provisions make it easier for people who speak these languages to participate in democracy, allowing them to communicate with the government in their mother tongue, thereby enhancing their participation in democracy. In addition, the recognition of the language (as scheduled) as an official part of the nation's language landscape affirms the speakers' identity and cultural legacy, thereby enhancing the confidence of its speakers.

The Educational policy of India, especially for elementary and secondary schools, is also impacted by adding a language to the Eighth Schedule. Many educational institutions consider only the recognized languages in the Eighth Schedule as their medium of instruction and study subjects. To further assist in the intellectual and literary growth of these scheduled languages, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and other publicly funded organizations offer funding for study, translation, and publishing in these Indian languages. For instance, candidates whose language is listed in the Eighth Schedule can use that language to write competitive exams, such as the Civil Services Examination offered by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). This promotes inclusivity in government services and enhances the accessibility of non-Hindi and non-English speakers (Annamalai, 2001). The Sahitya Akademi, the National Book Trust, and the Central Institute of Indian Languages are some organizations that are state-funded and provide institutional support to languages that are listed in the Eighth Schedule. Critical to the survival of minority and endangered languages, these organizations fund

literary creation, translation, and documentation (Abbi, 2009). Doordarshan (India's public service broadcaster) has also started new channels in the names of languages from the Eighth Schedule, which helps support and keep these languages alive by giving them more visibility and reach.

## EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND LANGUAGE SHIFT

The state's educational policies have played a significant role in pushing the tribal languages to the side. This has happened because the state has, for a long time, ignored tribal languages and has pushed dominant languages in formal education systems instead. In the context of education, Hindi and English, have mostly benefited from government spending and attention. As a result, tribal children are forced to learn in a language that isn't their first language. This results in suboptimal academic performance, language alienation, inadequate comprehension, low retention rates, and elevated dropout rates among tribals (Mohanty, 2010; Annamalai, 2001). While the Indian Constitution recognizes the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity, in practice, educational planning has often not been able to support or encourage the use of tribal languages, which has led to their decline in status, use, and transmission.

The National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) and the National Curriculum Framework (2005) both recognized the importance of teaching in the mother tongue. However, their implementation has been inconsistent and shallow. Some states had started Multilingual Education (MLE) programs to teach tribal languages to young children before moving on to regional or national languages. However, these programs did not have enough trained teachers, educational materials, or institutional support (Mohanty, 2009). These projects were only tokenistic and did not stop people from losing their language without ongoing funding.

In India, formal education has often looked down on tribal cultures and ways of knowing as unimportant or unworthy. School and university curricula have been standardized and focused on mainstream history, literature, and values. There is not much room for tribal oral traditions, folklore, ecological knowledge, or indigenous practices. This systematic devaluation leads people to assume that tribal languages are old-fashioned or not functional in modern life, which makes younger generations and even tribal families less likely to use them (Skutnabb-Kangas & Mohanty, 2009). This change is not just practical; it is also ideological. Abbi (2009) shows how urban tribal groups are starting to see Hindi or English as signs of modernity and a way to move up in the world. Speaking one's native language may be thus perceived as a sign of backwardness, resulting in self-alienation. For example, Kurux and Kharia speakers in Ranchi stopped using their own language and started using Hindi. This has led to language loss across generations.

Also, the fact that tribal languages aren't used in textbooks, teacher training, tests, and other educational assessments shows a lack of attention from the government. The state has not done much to create standardized scripts, grammars, and dictionaries for most tribal languages. So, even when people want to keep tribal languages alive by socializing their children into them, communities have trouble getting these children to read the same language in formal education because of structural problems. Some tribal languages, like Santali in Jharkhand and West Bengal, are doing well because of active language movements and the availability of literature, thereby supporting education in them. However, most tribal languages do not have many educational or cultural resources.

## STATE INTERVENTION AND GRASSROOTS EFFORTS

Although inconsistently, state interventions and grassroots initiatives have played an essential role in preserving and promoting tribal languages in India. The state develops policy frameworks, allowing changes to the formal education system, and sponsoring and promoting community-driven projects. Together, these state initiatives provide a growing ecosystem for protecting India's rich and diverse tribal linguistic heritage. When we analyze the state policies, we observe that they mainly focus on providing institutional support, undertaking educational reforms, and supporting documentation in

tribal languages. On the other hand, Grassroots movements led by civil society are also filling in the gaps left by these state-supported programs and playing a vital role in bringing endangered tribal languages back to life.

The Multilingual Education (MLE) program, supported by the central government, is one of the most critical state-run efforts to keep tribal languages alive. Under this, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MT-MLE) programs have been set up in several Indian states, such as Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. These programs support and promote the use of the child's home language as the language of instruction, especially in the early (primary) school years. Learning in the mother tongue is critical because it allows children to learn more about their studies while strengthening their cultural ties. Mohanty (2009) argues that this method of imparting primary education in the mother tongue (native language) builds a strong educational base for the child before slowly adding regional/state languages and English. One good example where a mother tongue-based multilingual education program has been implemented is in Odisha, where primers and textbooks in more than 21 tribal languages have been created.

Another publicly funded institution that has contributed to the creation of educational resources and maintains databases of indigenous languages is the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL). The academic and linguistic documentation of tribal languages has been enhanced by CIIL thanks to programs such as the Scheme for the Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL), which aim to protect and preserve endangered Indian languages. Furthermore, academies at the state level and national institutions such as the Sahitya Akademi have contributed to the cultural and literary development of tribal languages, too. Other programs, such as the Janshala Program (1998), a partnership between the Indian government and UN agencies, have made teaching materials and workbooks in tribal languages for many states, such as Assam (Bodo), Madhya Pradesh (Gondi, Bhili), Karnataka (Soliga), and Maharashtra (Bhili, Pawara). By using local knowledge and including the cultural contexts of tribal children in education, this program has made significant progress in making schools more welcoming for tribal students. Furthermore, Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) have also helped preserve language by researching, developing dictionaries, and documenting tribal traditions. However, the reach of TRIs is still limited, and their effects are often limited to one area because no coordinated national policy allows them to work and collaborate with each other.

On the grassroots level, the civil society, which includes tribal communities, NGOs, and activists, has also played a vital role in keeping languages alive. For instance, literacy and documentation programs supported by the civil society have been a critical strategy for preserving tribal languages in India. One example is the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, which has supported multiple tribal groups through the Adivasi Academy, Gujarat, in documenting oral traditions and developing literacy materials in languages like Bhili and Gondi. The Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, Gujarat, has established "The Vaacha", an ethnohographic museum of voice and a cultural platform that provides a space for tribal languages. These civil society efforts are ensuring that the linguistic heritage of tribal groups is passed down to future generations by involving the tribal public in their projects. Another necessary grassroots effort is developing scripts for tribal languages. Tribal intellectuals have played a significant role in making or bringing back scripts, such as Ol Chiki for Santali and Warang Citi for Ho. These efforts to develop scripts for tribal languages have helped people to read and write in their own languages, which further helps to strengthen their cultural identity.

Within the civil society efforts, cultural revival movements have also played a critical role in passing down tribal languages from one generation to the next. For instance, grassroots organizations that work with the public in the field are bringing back local festivals, storytelling events, and folk performances to keep languages alive in the community. Scholars and activists such as Ganesh Devy have led efforts like Bhasha Sangam and the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) to record the many languages spoken in India, including tribal languages, while highlighting their cultural significance to the nation.

It's also important to note that civil society groups working with the masses increasingly use media and technology to promote tribal languages in the present times. Because of such efforts, YouTube channels, mobile apps, and community radio stations are all digital spaces where tribal languages are growing and thriving. For example, in Jharkhand, community radio stations broadcast in languages like Kurukh and Gondi. Broadcasting in a tribal language makes it easy for tribals to learn the language and share their culture, thereby leading to the preservation of their tribal heritage. One of the most well-known examples which teaches us how media can be used as a medium to propagate and preserve a tribal language is the work of Javaid Rahi, a tribal scholar and activist who has used digital platforms, social media, YouTube, and community outreach to keep the Gojri language and the cultural heritage of the Gurjar and Bakarwal tribal community alive and promote them. He is a leader in digital tribal language activism, makes videos in Gujri/Gojri, and records folk songs, folk stories, and Gurjar history programs in tribal languages. Rahi's work shows how grassroots innovation can work with government policy by making resources that are easy to use and focused on the community, which empower speakers and help tribal languages thrive in the digital age.

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A LINGUISTICALLY INCLUSIVE FUTURE

Tribal language endangerment is a complex issue stemming from sociocultural marginalization, policy exclusions, historical neglect, and rapid social change that is taking place. The loss of indigenous languages impacts indigenous communities, and it transcends the loss of mere linguistic heritage, but also leads to the loss of cultural heritage. Despite constitutional guarantees, the state has failed to ensure linguistic justice for India's tribal populations. However, the civil society organizations and groups, in their own ways, have contributed to the preservation, continuity, and development of tribal languages. To support tribal languages, the state needs to undertake policy changes that are both structural and participatory. The first steps are to support community-led language documentation, effectively implement mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), and add more tribal languages to the Eighth Schedule. Also, including tribal linguistic heritage in mainstream conversation will further support the preservation and promotion of tribal languages. In the process, the state can learn and collaborate with the civil society and use their methods to promote tribal language preservation and continuity. To keep India's cultural and cognitive diversity alive, tribal languages must survive. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) powerfully stated, language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Its disappearance would not just silence words, but voices, worldviews, and ways of life.

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