INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTS SCIENCE HUMANITIES RESEARCH STUDIES (IJASHRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3139-8944

Diversity Under Pressure: Language Shift, Endangerment and Policy in Multilingual India

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Article information

Received: 10th August 2026
Received in revised form: 2nd September 2026
Accepted: 6th October 2026
Available online: 13th November 2026

Volume: 2
Issue: 4
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJASHRS/3139.8944.0024

Abstract

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, yet this diversity is unevenly distributed and increasingly under pressure. This study examines changes in the country's linguistic landscape between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses and assesses the policy response to language endangerment. Using a secondary-data design, it analyses published census language tables, together with reports on endangered languages and national education policy, and computes decadal growth rates, a relative growth index and indicators of multilingual reach for the 22 scheduled languages. The 2011 Census recorded 19,569 raw mother-tongue returns, rationalised into 1,369 mother tongues and grouped into 121 languages, but 96.71 per cent of the population reported one of the 22 scheduled languages. Hindi speakers grew by 25.2 per cent, against population growth of 17.7 per cent, and Hindi accounted for 58.3 per cent of the total population increase. Most other scheduled languages grew more slowly than the population, and the number of Urdu and Konkani speakers declined. Hindi was spoken by 57.1 per cent of the population as a first, second or third language, and English by 10.6 per cent, almost entirely as an additional language. Because the census separately reports only mother tongues with at least 10,000 speakers, the smallest and most vulnerable languages remain statistically invisible. The study argues that differential demographic growth, institutional status and the census threshold together shape the apparent decline of smaller languages, and it recommends community-based documentation, mother-tongue education and finer-grained language statistics.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Language Endangerment, Language Shift, Census of India, Mother Tongue, Language Policy, Linguistic Diversity

INTRODUCTION

Language is central to culture, identity and knowledge. India's linguistic diversity is exceptional: the 2011 Census recorded 19,569 raw returns of mother tongues, which were rationalised into 1,369 mother tongues and grouped into 121 languages, 22 of them listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Indian scholarship has long described multilingualism as a normal and enabling feature of everyday life rather than a problem to be solved.

Behind this diversity, however, lies marked inequality. In 2011, 96.71 per cent of the population reported one of the 22 scheduled languages as their mother tongue, leaving the remaining 99 non-scheduled languages and numerous smaller mother tongues with just over 3 per cent.[1] Linguists associated with the People's Linguistic Survey of India, which documented about 780 languages, have warned that around 400 of them may be at risk of disappearing.[2] The National Education Policy 2020 responds to such concerns by encouraging instruction in the mother tongue or home language at least until Grade 5.[3]

This study examines the pressures on India's linguistic diversity using the most recent census language data and related policy documents. Its objectives are:

- To analyse changes in the number of speakers of the scheduled languages between 2001 and 2011 relative to population growth;
- To examine the multilingual reach of major languages, including Hindi and English, as second and third languages;
- To assess how census conventions affect the visibility of small and endangered languages; and
- To evaluate current policy responses and suggest improvements.

The paper next reviews the relevant literature, describes the data and methods, presents the results and discusses their implications before concluding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Endangerment and Language Shift

International concern about language loss grew after Krauss warned that a large proportion of the world's languages were no longer being learned by children and could disappear within the century.[4] Fishman's work on reversing language shift emphasised that the key to language survival is intergenerational transmission within the family and community, and that institutional support is effective only when it reinforces home use.[5] Building on these ideas, a UNESCO expert group proposed nine factors for assessing language vitality, including intergenerational transmission, the absolute number of speakers, the proportion of speakers in the population, domains of use, institutional attitudes and the availability of documentation.[6] The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger applies such criteria globally and lists India among the countries with the largest numbers of endangered languages.[7]

Multilingualism and Inequality in India

Pattanayak argued that the plurality of languages in India is a resource and that mother-tongue education is essential to equitable schooling.[8] Annamalai analysed the political management of multilingualism in India, showing how the constitutional recognition of some languages, the reorganisation of states on linguistic lines and the three-language formula created a hierarchy among languages.[9] Mohanty described a double divide in Indian multilingualism: between English and the major Indian languages, and between the major languages and the tribal and minority languages, with speakers of the latter facing compounded educational and social disadvantage.[10]

Analyses of the 2011 census language data have highlighted the rapid growth of Hindi and the slower growth of the major Dravidian languages, while cautioning that these trends partly reflect differences in population growth across regions and the grouping of several mother tongues under Hindi.[11] Systematic assessments that combine census trends with the census reporting threshold and current endangered-language policies remain limited, which this paper seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical design based exclusively on published secondary data; no primary data were collected and no human participants were involved. The principal source is the 2011 Census language data published by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner in 2018, which reports the number of speakers by mother tongue and language, together with comparable figures for 2001 and data on bilingualism and trilingualism.[12] Summary figures on raw and rationalised mother tongues are taken from the official release as reported by the Press Trust of India.[1] Information on endangered languages and policy is drawn from the People's Linguistic Survey of India as reported in the press,[2] the UNESCO Atlas,[7] the National Education Policy 2020[3] and official statements on the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages.

Indicators and Analysis

Three sets of indicators were computed. First, the decadal growth rate of speakers of each

scheduled language between 2001 and 2011 was calculated and compared with the growth of the population covered by the language tables, from 1,028.6 million to 1,210.9 million, or 17.7 per cent. Second, a relative growth index (RGI) was defined as the growth rate of a language divided by the population growth rate; an RGI above 1 indicates that the language grew faster than the population, and an RGI below 1 that it grew more slowly. Third, the multilingual reach of each language was measured as the percentage of the population reporting it as a first, second or third language. Sanskrit is excluded from the growth analysis because a comparable 2001 figure is not available in the sources used.

The analysis has important limitations. Changes in the number of speakers reflect not only language shift but also differences in fertility and migration across regions, which cannot be separated using aggregate data. The census groups many mother tongues under larger languages, most notably under Hindi, so trends for the larger category may conceal shifts among its components. The 2001 figure for Manipuri excludes three subdivisions of Senapati district, which inflates its measured growth. Finally, census returns record self-reported mother tongue, which can be influenced by identity, status and enumeration practices.

RESULTS

Growth of the Scheduled Languages, 2001–2011

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the growth of speakers of the scheduled languages between 2001 and 2011. Hindi speakers increased from 422.0 million to 528.3 million, a rise of 25.2 per cent and an RGI of 1.42, raising Hindi's share of the population from 41.0 to 43.6 per cent.[12] Hindi alone accounted for 58.3 per cent of the total increase in population over the decade. Only four other scheduled languages, Kashmiri (23.0 per cent), Gujarati (20.4 per cent), Manipuri (20.1 per cent) and, marginally below population growth, Bengali (16.9 per cent), grew at or close to the population rate.

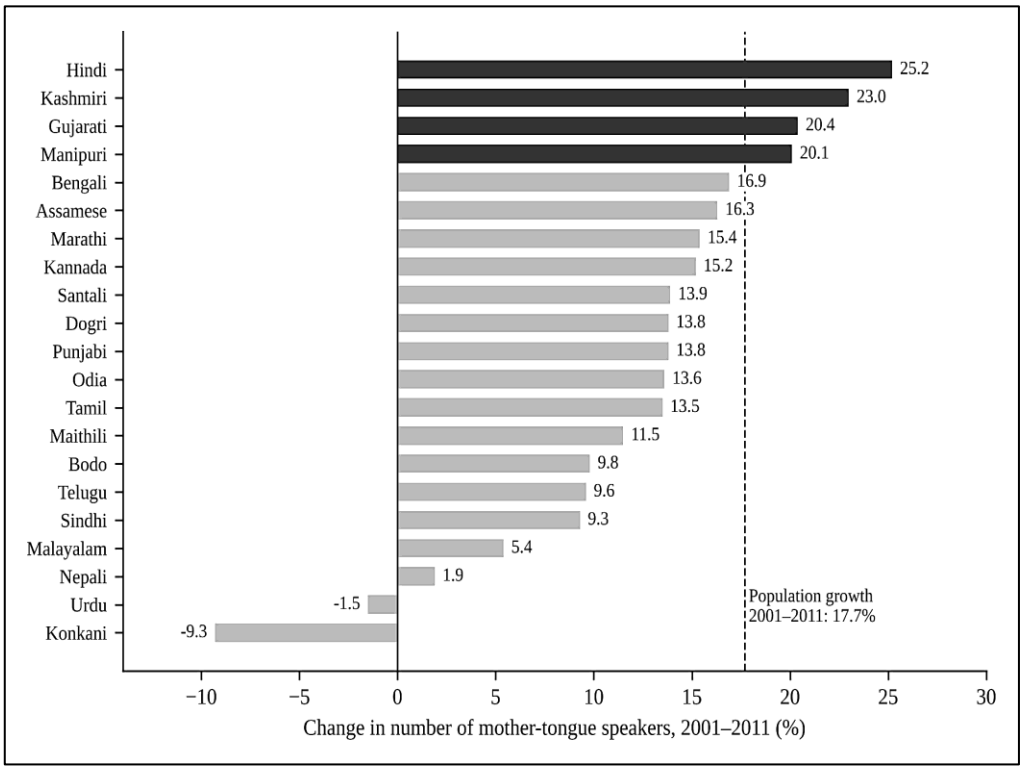
Table 1. Mother-Tongue Speakers of the Scheduled Languages, 2001 and 2011

Language	Speakers 2001 (million)	Speakers 2011 (million)	Share 2001 (%)	Share 2011 (%)	Growth (%)	RGI
Hindi	422.05	528.35	41.03	43.63	25.2	1.42
Bengali	83.19	97.24	8.09	8.03	16.9	0.95
Marathi	71.94	83.03	6.99	6.86	15.4	0.87
Telugu	74.00	81.13	7.19	6.70	9.6	0.54
Tamil	60.79	69.03	5.91	5.70	13.5	0.76
Gujarati	46.09	55.49	4.48	4.58	20.4	1.15
Urdu	51.54	50.77	5.01	4.19	−1.5	−0.08
Kannada	37.92	43.71	3.69	3.61	15.2	0.86
Odia	33.02	37.52	3.21	3.10	13.6	0.77
Malayalam	33.07	34.84	3.21	2.88	5.4	0.30
Punjabi	29.10	33.12	2.83	2.74	13.8	0.78
Assamese	13.17	15.31	1.28	1.26	16.3	0.92
Maithili	12.18	13.58	1.18	1.12	11.5	0.65
Santali	6.47	7.37	0.63	0.61	13.9	0.78
Kashmiri	5.53	6.80	0.54	0.56	23.0	1.30
Nepali	2.87	2.93	0.28	0.24	1.9	0.11
Sindhi	2.54	2.77	0.25	0.23	9.3	0.53
Dogri	2.28	2.60	0.22	0.21	13.8	0.78
Konkani	2.49	2.26	0.24	0.19	−9.3	−0.53
Manipuri	1.47	1.76	0.14	0.15	20.1	1.13
Bodo	1.35	1.48	0.13	0.12	9.8	0.55

Source: Computed from Census of India 2011 language data.[21] Shares are of the population covered by the language tables (1,028.6 million in 2001; 1,210.9 million in 2011). RGI = growth rate of speakers ÷ population growth rate (17.7%). The 2001 Manipuri figure excludes three subdivisions of Senapati district.

Most scheduled languages grew more slowly than the population. The four largest Dravidian languages, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam, together grew by 11.1 per cent, and their combined share of the population fell from 20.0 to 18.9 per cent. Malayalam grew by only 5.4 per cent and Telugu by 9.6 per cent. Two scheduled languages recorded absolute declines: Urdu, by 1.5 per cent, and Konkani, by 9.3 per cent. Nepali grew by only 1.9 per cent.

Figure 1: Decadal Growth of Mother-Tongue Speakers of the Scheduled Languages, 2001–2011



Source: Author's calculation from Census of India 2011 language data.[22] Dark bars indicate growth above the population growth rate (dashed line).

Multilingual Reach of Major Languages

Table 2 shows that many Indians speak more than one language. When second and third languages are included, Hindi was spoken by 691.6 million people, or 57.1 per cent of the population, compared with 43.6 per cent who reported it as their mother tongue.[12] English presents the most striking contrast: only about 0.26 million people reported English as their mother tongue, but 128.5 million, or 10.6 per cent of the population, reported it as a first, second or third language, making it the second most widely spoken language after Hindi in terms of total reach. Sanskrit, reported as a mother tongue by fewer than 25,000 people, was reported as a second or third language by more than 3 million.

Table 2. First, Second and Third Language Speakers of Selected Languages, 2011

Language	First language (million)	Second language (million)	Third language (million)	Total (million)	Total (% of population)
Hindi	528.35	138.91	24.31	691.56	57.11
English	0.26	82.72	45.56	128.54	10.62
Bengali	97.24	9.10	1.14	107.47	8.88
Marathi	83.03	13.00	3.03	99.06	8.18
Telugu	81.13	12.17	1.21	94.50	7.80
Kannada	43.71	13.61	1.43	58.75	4.85
Assamese	15.31	7.58	0.73	23.63	1.95

Malayalam	34.84	0.58	0.22	35.64	2.94
Sanskrit	0.02	1.13	1.96	3.12	0.26

Source: Census of India 2011 language data.[24] Totals may differ slightly from the sum of components because of rounding.

The capacity of languages to attract additional speakers varies sharply. Kannada and Assamese gained substantial numbers of second-language speakers, reflecting their role as languages of wider communication in Karnataka and Assam, whereas Malayalam had very few second-language speakers relative to its mother-tongue base. Languages with strong roles in administration, education and inter-group communication thus expand their reach beyond their native communities, while others remain largely confined to them.

Statistical Visibility of Small Languages

Census conventions shape what is visible. Of the 1,369 rationalised mother tongues identified in 2011, only 270 were reported separately because they had at least 10,000 speakers; 123 of these were grouped under scheduled languages and 147 under non-scheduled languages.[1] In addition, 1,474 mother-tongue names could not be classified and were placed under an "other" category.[1] The remaining mother tongues, each with fewer than 10,000 speakers, are therefore not visible as separate entries in the published national tables.

This threshold matters because the smallest languages are precisely those most at risk. The Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages, launched by the Ministry of Education in 2013 and implemented by the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysuru, focuses on languages spoken by fewer than 10,000 people.[14] By 2025, 117 such endangered languages and mother tongues had been selected for documentation.[13] The census threshold and the endangerment threshold therefore coincide, which means that the languages targeted by preservation efforts are largely absent from the main official language statistics.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal an apparent paradox: India remains extraordinarily multilingual, yet the growth of speakers is concentrated in a few large languages, and the smallest languages are scarcely visible in official statistics. Three interpretations follow.

First, much of the apparent expansion of Hindi and the relative decline of the southern languages reflects demography rather than language shift. Population growth during 2001–2011 was faster in the Hindi-speaking north than in the south, where fertility had fallen earlier, and the grouping of many regional mother tongues under Hindi further enlarges its total.[11] The slow growth of Malayalam, for example, is consistent with Kerala's low fertility and high emigration rather than with speakers abandoning their language. Care is therefore needed before interpreting census trends as evidence of language loss.

Second, genuine pressures nevertheless exist, especially for smaller languages and those without strong institutional support. The declines of Urdu and Konkani, the slow growth of Nepali and the limited second-language reach of many languages point to the importance of institutional factors such as use in education, administration and the media, consistent with the hierarchy identified by Annamalai and Mohanty's double divide.[9] The rise of English as an additional language for over 128 million people reflects its association with education and economic mobility, and may further reduce the domains in which other languages are used. UNESCO's framework emphasises that vitality depends on such domains and on intergenerational transmission, not on absolute numbers alone.[6]

Third, the coincidence of the census reporting threshold with the threshold for endangerment creates a statistical blind spot. Languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers, which experts regard as most at risk,[2] are not separately reported in national tables, so their trajectories cannot be monitored over time. Without such data, policy cannot be targeted effectively, and the loss of a language may go unrecorded.

Several policy implications follow. Community-based documentation of small languages, supported by SPPEL and universities, should be expanded and linked to the production of learning materials, building on existing primers and digital resources.[14] The NEP 2020 commitment to mother-tongue instruction should be implemented in ways that include tribal and minority languages rather than

only the dominant language of each state.[3] Following Fishman, revitalisation efforts should prioritise intergenerational transmission in families and communities.[5] Finally, the census should publish data on mother tongues below the 10,000-speaker threshold, at least at the district level, and the next census should be used to update the picture of language vitality.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined pressures on India's linguistic diversity using census language data for 2001 and 2011 and current policy documents. The number of Hindi speakers grew much faster than the population, accounting for most of the population increase, while most other scheduled languages grew more slowly and Urdu and Konkani declined. Hindi and English have extensive reach as additional languages, whereas many languages remain confined to their native communities. The census threshold of 10,000 speakers renders the smallest and most endangered languages invisible in national statistics, precisely those that preservation policy seeks to protect.

India's linguistic diversity therefore faces a combination of demographic, institutional and statistical pressures. Future research should

- Decompose Changes In Speaker Numbers Into Demographic And Language-Shift Components Using District-Level Data
- Analyse The Data Of The Forthcoming Census As Soon As It Becomes Available
- Conduct Field Studies Of Intergenerational Transmission In Small Language Communities
- Evaluate the outcomes of mother-tongue education and documentation programmes.

Such work is essential if India is to sustain the plurality of languages that has long defined its cultural life.

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