



Dynamics of Celebrating Mother Tongue Day in Multilingual and Digital India

Mohmad Ashraf Bhat ^{a, *}

^a Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

* Corresponding author Email: ashraf.iitk@gmail.com

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Abstract: India, with its vast linguistic diversity, is home to 1,652 mother tongues, making it one of the most complex multilingual nations in the world. However, globalization, urbanization, and the increasing dominance of English and Hindi have marginalized many indigenous languages, posing a serious threat to their survival. International Mother Language Day (IMLD), observed annually on February 21st, serves as a global initiative to promote linguistic diversity and protect endangered languages. This article explores the challenges of preserving mother tongues in India's sociolinguistic landscape, highlighting the historical context, policy interventions, and technological advancements aimed at safeguarding linguistic heritage. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has reinforced mother tongue-based education, but its implementation remains a challenge due to infrastructure gaps and societal attitudes favoring English. Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies offer promising solutions, yet the dominance of English in digital spaces limits access for many regional languages. Government initiatives such as the Bhashini Project aim to bridge this gap, but concerted efforts are needed to integrate regional languages into education, media, and technology. The discussion underscores the importance of preserving mother tongues as an integral part of India's cultural identity and socio-economic progress while advocating for inclusive language policies in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: Linguistic Diversity, Mother Tongue Preservation, Multilingualism in India, International Mother Language Day (IMLD), Language Policy, Education Digital Languages

Introduction

In November 2006, during the 28th All India Conference of Linguists at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Professor Udaya Narayana Singh (a linguist, creative writer, translation theoretician, lexicographer and a researcher in culture studies) the then Director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, emphasized the significance of linguistic diversity as a national strength. He stated that "linguistic diversity is one of the greatest strengths of a nation, and we must strive not only to preserve this diversity but also to uphold the principle of unity in diversity" (Singh, 2006). Addressing an audience comprising linguists from across the country, he underscored the importance of multilingualism and the necessity of safeguarding India's 1,652 mother tongues. He elaborated on the methodologies required to preserve, sustain, and promote these languages, with a specific focus on ensuring that even the less privileged languages are protected from endangerment. This discourse aligned with the broader academic consensus that linguistic plurality fosters inclusivity and equal representation for all languages spoken in India. The interconnected concepts of "unity in diversity" and "multilingualism as an asset" serve as guiding principles for linguistic policies that aim to provide equitable space for all languages in India's diverse linguistic ecosystem.

Before discussing the issues of safeguarding mother tongues in a multilingual context such as India is complex due to its cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions, it is essential to understand the concept of 'mother tongue' and the historical background of International Mother Language Day (IMLD). The concept of 'mother tongue' has been interpreted and defined differently by various scholars, reflecting diverse perspectives on its role in linguistic identity, cognitive development, societal integration, and linguistic preservation. Scholars across linguistic, sociolinguistic, and educational disciplines have extensively explored the concept, particularly in the



contexts of bilingualism, education, and language policy. Generally, it refers to the first language a person acquires in early childhood, typically from their parents or primary caregivers. However, scholars differ in their interpretations, emphasizing different aspects such as linguistic dominance, cultural identity, and cognitive development. While the definition of mother tongue varies among scholars, common themes include early acquisition, habitual use, emotional attachment, linguistic dominance, and cultural identity. The varying definitions emphasize its significance not only as a primary mode of communication but also as a critical factor in cultural heritage, academic success, and multilingual competence.

Based on the concept of 'mother tongue', the International Mother Language Day is a globally recognized observance dedicated to promoting linguistic diversity and the preservation of mother tongues. It was established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1999 and has been observed annually on February 21 since 2000. The origins of International Mother Language Day can be traced back to 1952, aligning closely with the fundamental principles of linguistic identity, cultural heritage, and socio-political allegiance. This historical context underscores the intrinsic power and significance of each language or mother tongue, emphasizing its role in shaping collective identity, linguistic loyalty, and cultural cohesion, which can lead to war or peace. The IMDL is profoundly intertwined with the Bengali Language Movement (Bhasha Andolon) in the 1940s and 1950s. Following the partition of the British India in 1947, Pakistan was created as a nation with two geographically and linguistically distinct regions: West Pakistan (present Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). Despite the fact that the majority of the population in East Pakistan spoke Bengali, the government of Pakistan sought to impose Urdu as the sole national language, leading to widespread protests (Rahman, 1996). On February 21, 1952, students and activists organized protests in Dhaka (then part of East Pakistan) to demand official recognition of Bengali. The police opened fire on protesters, resulting in the deaths of several students. These individuals later became martyrs in the movement for linguistic rights (Kabir, 2015). As a result of continued resistance, Bengali was eventually recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan in 1956 (Rasul, 2019). This movement played a crucial role in the nationalist sentiments that ultimately led to creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Preserving Mother Tongues in Multilingual India: Challenges and Policy Interventions

India, celebrated for its linguistic diversity and multilingual framework, is home to hundreds of languages and dialects, leading to its classification as a "sociolinguistic area." This designation highlights the intricacies of India's linguistic landscape, where multiple languages coexist within its socio-cultural fabric. The country's linguistic diversity is extensive, encompassing hundreds of languages, dialects and different mother tongues. Indian languages were empowered under different names such as Scheduled Languages, Official Language, Regional languages, Modern Indian languages, Oriental Languages, Classical Languages, Minor Languages, Minority Languages, and Tribal Languages. However, globalization, urbanization, and the increasing hegemony of English and Hindi pose substantial challenges to the preservation of indigenous languages. Notably, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has classified 197 Indian languages as endangered, underscoring the urgent need for policy interventions to safeguard linguistic heritage (UNESCO, 2021).

The challenge of preserving mother tongues in a rapidly globalizing India is compounded by multiple socio-political and technological factors. Historically, language policies in India have oscillated between multilingual inclusivity and hegemonic imposition. Post-independence, the nation witnessed linguistic reorganization of states based on regional languages (States Reorganization Act, 1956), a move that empowered local languages. However, recent policy shifts, including efforts to promote Hindi monolingualism in administration, education, and public life, have sparked linguistic resistance and identity-based conflicts (Crystal, 2000). The debate surrounding Hindi as a national language, the decline of mother tongue literacy, and the digital exclusion of non-dominant languages further complicate the linguistic scenario in India. India's Constitution recognizes 22 official languages under the Eighth Schedule, but nearly 197 Indian languages are classified as endangered by UNESCO. This alarming statistic underscores the need for initiatives like International Mother Language Day to celebrate, preserve, and promote linguistic heritage. The linguistic diversity of India is unparalleled, as it is home to numerous language families, including Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic, and Sino-Tibetan. Each language carries its own distinct cultural heritage, literature, and oral traditions, making India a truly multilingual nation.



Despite the celebration of linguistic diversity, many indigenous and regional languages in India face extinction due to political, economic, and technological pressures. According to [David Crystal \(2000\)](#), language endangerment arises from multiple factors, including natural catastrophes, which lead to the displacement of linguistic communities due to environmental disasters; war and genocide, where conflicts result in the eradication of linguistic groups; overt repression, wherein state policies suppress minority languages; and cultural, political, and economic dominance, where the hegemony of certain languages marginalizes others. These factors collectively threaten the linguistic diversity of India, necessitating urgent policy interventions to preserve and promote endangered languages. India's increasing preference for English in education and professional sectors has marginalized regional languages. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges this and emphasizes mother tongue-based education up to Grade 5, ensuring linguistic inclusivity. However, the practical implementation of this policy remains a challenge due to the lack of trained teachers proficient in regional languages, inadequate teaching resources, and the societal perception that English provides better career prospects. Furthermore, technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI) and digital communication, favor dominant languages like English and Hindi. According to research from [UNESCO \(2021\)](#), over 80% of digital content worldwide is available in English, leaving many Indian languages underrepresented in cyberspace. AI-driven voice assistants, chat bots, and translation tools often lack robust support for minority languages, further disadvantaging non-dominant linguistic groups.

Every single word, even that of an unprivileged or neglected language, takes ages to develop and sustain. Loss of a single word is tragic for the language it holds. India must save its linguistic diversity, and should not sacrifice it in the name of 'common national language' any instrumental orientation or integrative motivation. Language data from the last decade exhibits scary figures, when it comes to the list of Indian Languages. In February 2009, UNESCO released the list of endangered languages, according to which 196 Indian languages were listed as endangered. In the year 2014, the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) Mysore, embarked on a mega project "Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India" sponsored by the Ministry of HRD, government of India, to document nearly 500 endangered languages in the country, each spoken by less than 10,000 people. Each language was categorized as i) Vulnerable, ii) Definitely Endangered, iii) Severely Endangered, iv) Critically Endangered. There are 42 languages, which were dealer "Critically Endangered" as per UNESCO's report for the year 2014. According to [Mehrotra \(1999\)](#), in India, there are presently 442 languages that have only between one and five speakers left. Alternatively, what would happen to the 90 tribal languages each of which is left with a speech community of 10,000 or more? If the dominant monolingualism is imposed, it would lead to demise of the asset of multilingualism in India, and the rich linguistic diversity of India would only survive in the history books.

Post-independence, language planning of India was society-centered, and now there is a need of an economy-centered languages planning. As Economic factors also play a significant role. Many regional languages are underrepresented in industries such as media, entertainment, and business, which prioritize languages with wider reach and profitability. Government initiatives such as the *Bhashini Project* aim to bridge this gap, but their impact is yet to be fully realized. If proactive measures are not taken, India risks losing significant linguistic heritage within the next few decades.

Harnessing Technology for Language (MT) Preservation in the Digital Era

With rapid digitization, technology has emerged as a crucial tool for language preservation. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) have facilitated real-time translation services, speech recognition, and text-to-speech applications in regional languages. The Indian government's Bhashini project under the National Language Translation Mission is a pioneering initiative that promotes multilingualism through digital platforms. Additionally, social media, digital archives, and AI-driven language tools like Google Translate and Microsoft Translator have contributed to bridging the digital divide for underrepresented languages. The digital age has opened unprecedented opportunities for the preservation and promotion of Indian languages. Online platforms, voice recognition tools, and AI-driven educational applications have enabled wider access to regional languages. For instance, speech-to-text technology now allows users to input text in their mother tongues, making it easier to communicate in languages that have limited written resources. Digital archiving initiatives like the



People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) have documented numerous indigenous and endangered languages, ensuring they are accessible for future generations. However, the dominance of English in digital spaces presents a challenge. A significant portion of online content is in English, limiting accessibility for speakers of regional languages. Additionally, AI-based translation services still struggle with grammatical nuances and contextual meanings in Indian languages, often producing inaccurate translations. Many smaller languages lack substantial digital footprints, making them less likely to be integrated into major technological platforms. Social media has played a dual role in the preservation of Indian languages. On one hand, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have provided spaces for regional language expression, allowing users to engage with content in their mother tongues. YouTube channels and regional content creators have contributed to the visibility of languages that were previously underrepresented in mainstream media.

On the other hand, the overuse of Roman script for typing Indian languages on social media has led to a gradual dilution of native scripts. Many younger users prefer writing in transliterated Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, or Telugu using English letters, reducing familiarity with native scripts. Furthermore, while AI-driven apps like Google Bolo, Duolingo, and Microsoft's Indic Keyboard support learning and translation in regional languages, they often focus on major languages, leaving many dialects and tribal languages without digital representation. To balance these trends, proactive efforts must be made to develop AI models that are more inclusive of India's linguistic diversity. Government and private sector collaborations should prioritize digital literacy in regional languages and expand initiatives that integrate AI and NLP into educational curricula. Only through such concerted efforts can Indian mother tongues thrive in the digital era.

Mother Tongue[s], State-Level Policies and Resistance to Monolingualism

Several states in India have implemented policies to promote regional languages, reinforcing their significance in education and administration. These initiatives reflect a determined effort to preserve linguistic diversity in the face of increasing dominance by Hindi and English. In 2017, Kerala mandated Malayalam as a compulsory subject up to Class X in all schools, including those affiliated with CBSE and ICSE. Similarly, Karnataka and Assam followed suit, making Kannada and Assamese mandatory in their respective school systems. That same year, Assam introduced Sanskrit as a compulsory subject up to Class VIII, while West Bengal required Bengali to be taught in all schools, including private English-medium institutions. These policies underscore a strong regional commitment to preserving linguistic heritage while simultaneously highlighting growing resistance to perceived linguistic homogenization at the national level. Additionally, Tamil Nadu has consistently opposed any attempts to impose Hindi, reinforcing its two-language formula that prioritizes Tamil and English. Likewise, Maharashtra and Punjab have taken active measures to promote Marathi and Punjabi in educational institutions and government proceedings. Despite these efforts, concerns persist regarding the marginalization of smaller indigenous languages, many of which remain endangered due to a lack of institutional support. Furthermore, the increasing digitization of education and government services necessitates policies that integrate regional languages into digital governance and AI-driven linguistic resources, ensuring they remain relevant in the modern era.

The Role of Media and Literature in Preserving Mother Tongue[s]

As of February 2021, India had 900 permitted private satellite television channels, with a significant portion dedicated to regional languages or mother tongues. Public institutions like Doordarshan and All India Radio (AIR) play a vital role in broadcasting content in regional languages, reaching 78% and 99.37% of India's population, respectively. Literary bodies such as Sahitya Akademi have ensured the translation of regional literature into multiple languages, making literary works accessible to a broader audience. Regional cinema, newspapers, and digital storytelling platforms further contribute to linguistic inclusivity. In addition to traditional media, the rise of digital platforms has played a crucial role in promoting regional languages and mother tongues. Streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar have started incorporating more regional language content, increasing exposure and appreciation of linguistic diversity. Similarly, social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become avenues for native speakers to create and share content in their mother tongue, fostering engagement and revitalization of endangered languages. Furthermore, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) has enabled the digitization and preservation of regional languages.



AI-driven translation services, automated speech recognition, and text-to-speech applications have facilitated communication across linguistic barriers, ensuring wider accessibility of content in different languages. Initiatives like Google's Bolo app and Microsoft's AI-powered language processing tools have further contributed to language preservation and education. Government-supported projects such as Bhashini under the National Language Translation Mission are actively working towards enhancing digital representation of regional languages, ensuring their integration into the broader technological ecosystem. These efforts not only help in language preservation but also reinforce cultural identity, ensuring that regional languages continue to thrive in the digital age.

Mother Tongue: Impact on Education, Culture, and Society

Mother tongue education fosters cultural pride, strengthens social cohesion, and enhances learning outcomes. Studies have shown that early education in a child's first language significantly improves cognitive development, literacy skills, and overall academic achievement. However, implementation challenges remain. The digital divide, lack of infrastructure, and shortage of trained teachers in regional languages pose significant hurdles.

Prior to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's educational language policies, as administered by bodies like NCERT, CBSE, State Universities, and the UGC, primarily adhered to the three-language formula. The concept originated from the recommendations of the University Education Commission in 1948-1949, which emphasized the importance of linguistic diversity in education. The policy was formally introduced in the National Education Policy of 1968, aiming to address the linguistic challenges in a diverse country like India. This approach mandated the teaching of Hindi, English, and a regional language, with English often serving as the medium of instruction, especially in higher education. For instance, the CBSE permitted instruction in Indian languages but predominantly utilized English. However, it was replaced by the newly formulated NEP 2020, which emphasizes the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction up to at least Grade 5, preferably extending to Grade 8 and beyond. This policy shift aims to enhance cognitive development and cultural integration among students. Additionally, the NEP advocates for the promotion of multilingualism and the preservation of Indian languages, recommending the development of high-quality textbooks and learning materials in multiple languages. To support this initiative, the UGC has invited authors to create original textbooks in 12 Indian languages, aligning with the NEP's focus on strengthening regional languages in higher education. This represents a significant departure from previous policies by actively encouraging education in one's mother tongue across all levels, thereby fostering inclusivity and preserving linguistic heritage.

Moreover, while NEP 2020 emphasizes multilingual education, effective execution at the grassroots level is necessary to ensure its success. Many schools, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas, lack the resources to develop quality curricula and materials in regional languages, making the policy difficult to implement uniformly. Culturally, the loss of mother tongues threatens indigenous knowledge systems, folklore, and oral traditions. Language is not just a tool for communication; it carries history, traditions, and identity. The assimilation of smaller linguistic groups into dominant languages leads to cultural homogenization, eroding India's rich heritage. As regional languages fade, so do the unique worldviews, proverbs, and wisdom embedded in them. Additionally, this shift contributes to generational divides, as younger generations increasingly use English or Hindi, often struggling to fully engage with the linguistic and cultural traditions of their ancestors. The impact extends beyond culture to employment and governance. In multilingual societies like India, linguistic proficiency plays a role in social mobility and access to government services. A decline in mother tongue education may limit individuals' ability to engage with government policies, legal proceedings, and even local markets. With the rise of artificial intelligence and digital platforms, there is a need for more investment in regional language technology to prevent further marginalization of non-dominant languages. Ensuring that mother tongues are preserved and promoted requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and the public. Investing in regional language education, developing AI-driven translation tools, and supporting literature and media in indigenous languages are essential steps in protecting India's linguistic diversity. If these initiatives are not taken seriously, India may risk losing a fundamental aspect of its cultural and intellectual identity.



The Future of Mother Tongue[s] in India

In essence, language is more than just words—it embodies history, wisdom, memory, and the identity of generations. The gradual decline of linguistic diversity threatens not only indigenous knowledge systems, traditional folklore, and community-specific wisdom but also the broader intellectual diversity essential in a rapidly evolving world. Preserving and promoting mother tongues is crucial, not merely for cultural heritage but also for cognitive development, educational success, and social cohesion. As Cummins (2001) highlights, children who receive early education in their mother tongue demonstrate stronger literacy and numeracy skills, reinforcing the role of linguistic diversity in fostering creativity, tolerance, and social harmony. Moreover, a strong foundation in one's mother tongue enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to learn additional languages, making it an invaluable asset for individuals and society alike.

Celebrating International Mother Language Day serves as a powerful reminder of the significance of linguistic diversity in fostering national unity and cultural resilience. While globalization and technological advancements present challenges to the survival of mother tongues, they also offer innovative solutions for their preservation and promotion. To ensure a multilingual future, India must implement comprehensive policies that actively promote mother tongue education and regional language learning, while simultaneously investing in AI-driven language technologies and digital infrastructure to enhance linguistic inclusion. Encouraging state and national initiatives to preserve and document mother tongues is essential to ensuring their survival for future generations. Additionally, fostering linguistic tolerance and awareness through media, education, and cultural programs is crucial for maintaining India's rich linguistic heritage. Expanding language research initiatives and establishing robust digital repositories will further strengthen efforts toward mother tongue[s] preservation. Collaboration with international organizations is also vital in facilitating knowledge sharing and adopting best practices in mother tongue[s] conservation. Furthermore, integrating mother tongue education with skill-based learning will create career opportunities for speakers of regional languages, reinforcing the social and economic value of linguistic diversity. By implementing these strategic measures, India can preserve its multilingual identity while simultaneously embracing the opportunities of globalization and technological advancements, ensuring that its mother tongues remain a thriving part of the nation's evolving socio-economic and cultural landscape.

On this International Mother Language Day, the state should reaffirm its commitment to safeguarding India's linguistic heritage for future generations. Policymakers, educators, and the public must work collectively to foster an inclusive linguistic ecosystem where every language, irrespective of the number of speakers, has the opportunity to flourish and contribute to the nation's social and intellectual fabric. Furthermore, the significance of mother tongues extends beyond academia; they serve as a repository of indigenous knowledge systems, traditional practices, and folklore. With the rapid expansion of globalization, many indigenous languages face the threat of extinction. The digital age, however, presents new opportunities for the revitalization of these languages through AI-driven translation tools, digital archives, and language learning platforms, ensuring that linguistic heritage remains an integral part of India's future.

Conclusion

The celebration of International Mother Language Day in multilingual India serves as a critical reminder of the importance of preserving linguistic diversity in an era of globalization and digital transformation. India's vast linguistic heritage, with its 1,652 mother tongues, represents an invaluable cultural and intellectual asset that must be safeguarded against the growing dominance of English and Hindi. While initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Bhashini Project offer promising pathways for integrating regional languages into education and digital platforms, significant challenges remain in terms of implementation, accessibility, and societal attitudes. The decline of mother tongues in India is not merely a linguistic issue but a broader socio-cultural and economic concern. Language loss leads to the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems, diminishes cultural identity, and creates barriers to inclusive development. The increasing shift toward English-centric education and employment highlights the need for a balanced approach—one that ensures linguistic inclusivity while equipping individuals with global competencies. As India moves forward, proactive policy measures, technological advancements, and community-driven efforts are crucial to revitalizing and sustaining mother tongues. Investments in AI-driven language technologies, multilingual education policies, and digital content



creation in regional languages can significantly contribute to this cause. Additionally, media, literature, and social initiatives must continue to promote linguistic inclusivity, ensuring that every language—regardless of its number of speakers—has the opportunity to thrive. In essence, preserving linguistic diversity is not just about protecting languages but about maintaining India's cultural richness, social cohesion, and intellectual legacy. A collective effort involving policymakers, educators, technologists, and the general public is imperative to ensure that India's linguistic heritage remains vibrant for future generations. By fostering a multilingual ecosystem, India can not only honor its past but also build an inclusive and dynamic future where every voice, in every language, is heard and valued.

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