Understanding *Language Endangerment* and its Policy Implications

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Mahul Phul: Infinitely Indigenous Dialogues

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Fading Lights across the World

Languages at risk of dying out due to a lack of speakers are known as **endangered languages.**

Language shift is when speakers of a language are drawn away from the mother tongue towards another dominant language.

Majority tongue is the "default" language of an area, in which most information relating to education or public affairs is communicated.
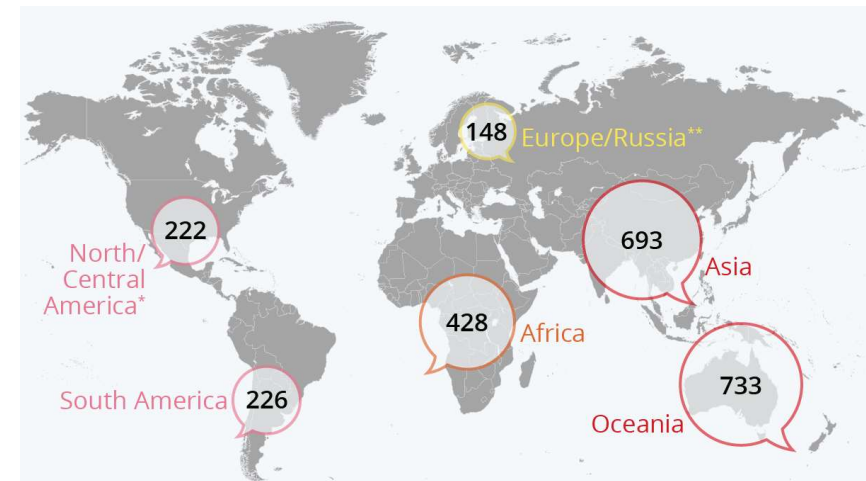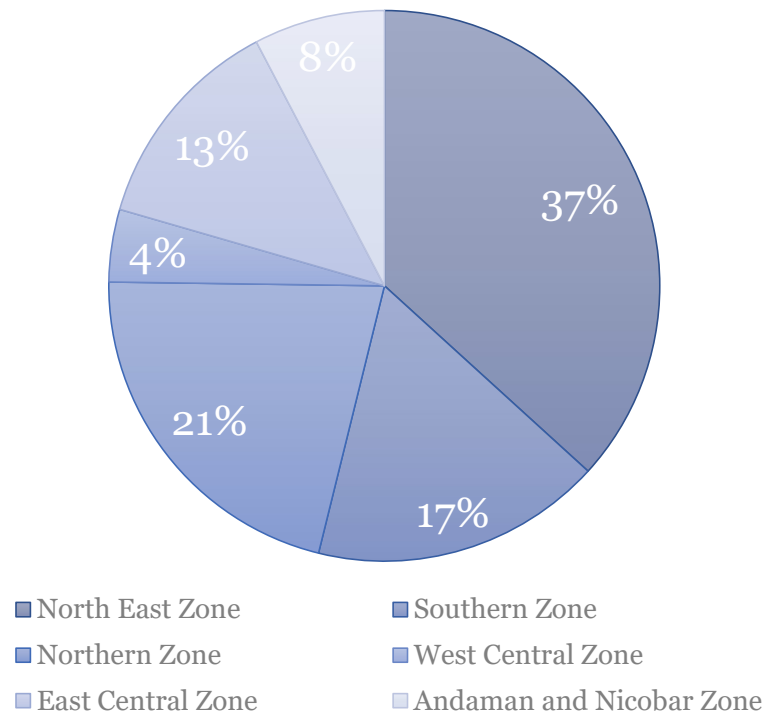

*"**Over 40 percent** of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing."*

- Endangered Languages Project
endangeredlanguages.com/about

Fading Lights in the Northeast

Fig 1. The 117 languages on SPPEL's
Endangered Languages List – by zone

- North East Zone
- Southern Zone
- Northern Zone
- West Central Zone
- East Central Zone
- Andaman and Nicobar Zone

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Northeast has highest per capita language in world: People's Linguistic Survey of India

TNN / Jul 18, 2013, 00:39 IST

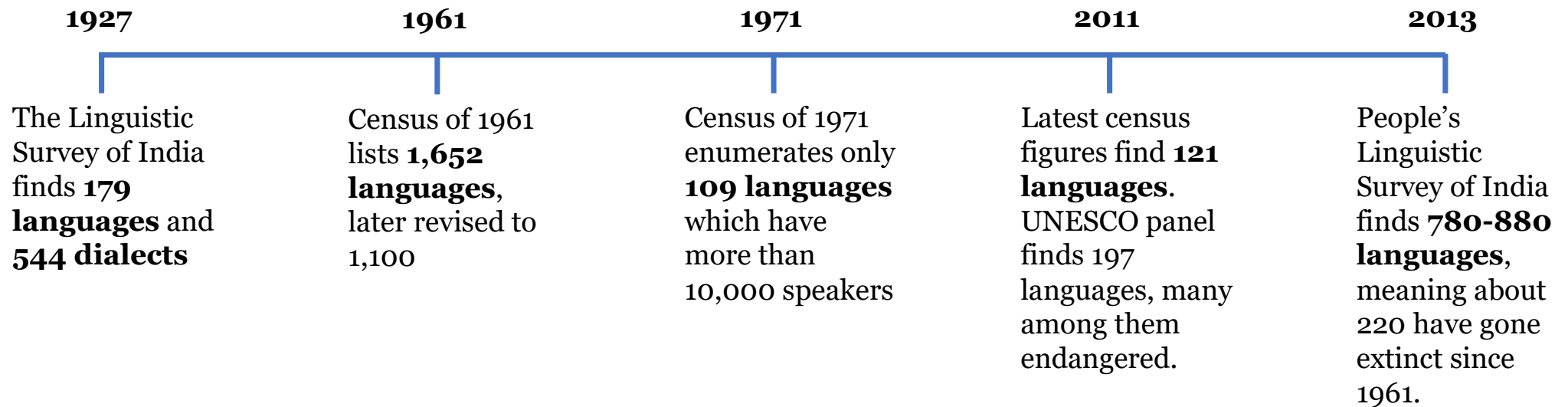*"**Over 40 percent** of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing."*

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A Simple Question: How Many?

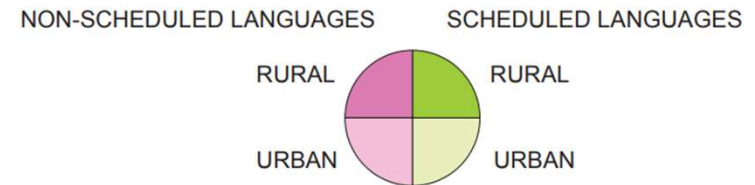| 1927	1961	1971	2011	2013
The Linguistic Survey of India finds **179 languages** and **544 dialects**	Census of 1961 lists **1,652 languages**, later revised to 1,100	Census of 1971 enumerates only **109 languages** which have more than 10,000 speakers	Latest census figures find **121 languages**. UNESCO panel finds 197 languages, many among them endangered.	People's Linguistic Survey of India finds **780-880 languages**, meaning about 220 have gone extinct since 1961.

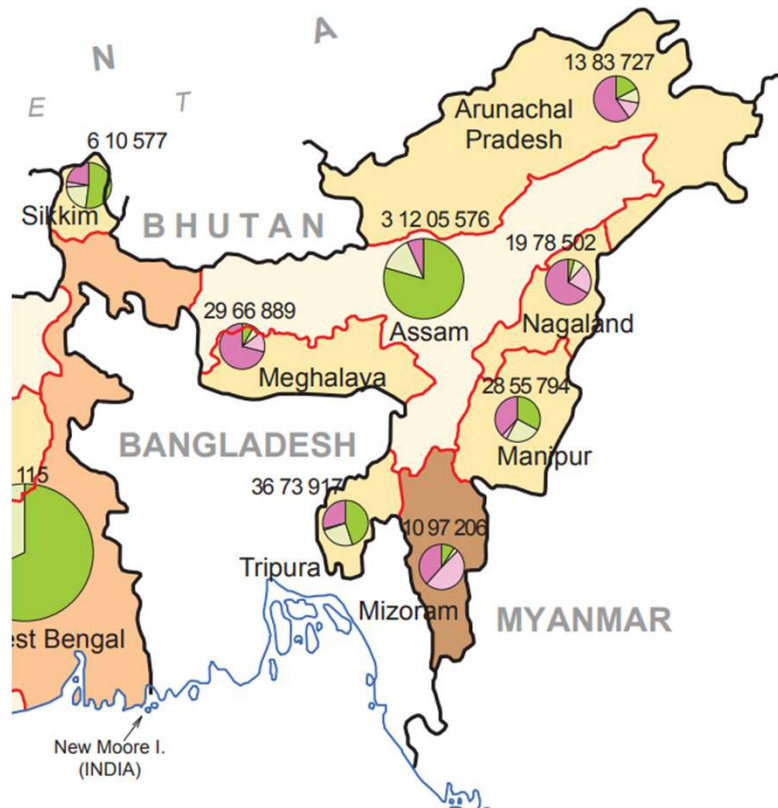# Scheduled Languages Speakers in the Northeast

Fig 2. Scheduled and non-scheduled language speakers across rural and urban spaces.
Language Atlas 2011, Census of India

Scheduled Languages Speakers in the Northeast

26.7%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Arunachal Pradesh during the 1990s

223%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Mizoram during the 1990s

6.53%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Assam during the 2000s

20.5%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Nagaland during the 2000s

Why NOT speak my mother tongue?

Numeric

	+	−
+	Majority	Elite
−	Janta	Minority

(row label: **Functional**)

*"I want her to go to law school. I do not want her to be a maid when she grows up. She should know **English and Marathi**."*

- Tulu-speaking maid to Padharipande (1992)

The Kurux and Kharia languages are quickly disappearing… the urban tribals seldom consider it their privilege to speak their mother tongues. On the contrary, ignorance of the tribal languages is regarded as an enhancement of status and prestige. In speaking Hindi they feel **superior***…"*

- Abbi (1995)

Srivastava, R. 1984. "Linguistic minorities and national language".
Florian Coulmas (Ed.), Linguistic Minorities and Literacy: Language
Policy Issues in Developing Countries, 99–114. Mouton de Gruyter.

The Tai Khamti

Figure 3. Namsai marked in red.

- Resident in Namsai District

- Two-level social stratification

- Language is both majority and minority at different subnational levels

- Spread across economic strata

- Speaker counts range from:
  - 12,890 (Census 2011)
  - 5,000 (Gaur et al., 2022)
  - 7,500 (Morey, 2005)

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews (n=10)

Respondents included:
- Government workers
- Teachers
- Independent artistes
- Clergymen

Age range [25, 56].

Literate; educated up to graduate level.

Reversing Language Shift
(Fishman, 1991)

Cultural markers included:

- Language identification and maintenance

- Indigenous knowledge and documentation

- Linguistic culture like honorific usage

- Narrative methods

Findings

On community identification

? Language maintenance by the community

? Self-identification with the language

? Level of bilingualism

On indigenous knowledge

? Language documentation and script

? Language teaching

? Preservation of traditional knowledge

Findings

On community identification

- "thoda Hindi toh bolte hai" – multiple speakers
- Hindi vs. Assamese
- Elder to younger – language maintenance
- "We learn English only in school" – Namchoom
- Tai Khamti Heritage and Literary Society
- "Two or three generations from now, Khamti will still be spoken."

On indigenous knowledge

- No dictionary, script digitalisation in progress – Mannoi
- No textbooks, teachers use Myanmarese material
- Das and Tag (2004) vs. Moungkang
- Indigenous context and its uniqueness (Abbi, 2021)
- Inability to translate – word will die with the language

Findings

On the use of honorifics

? Sections of society as well as family elders are referred to through a rigid system of honorifics. Is this still prevalent?

? Can this be translated into majority tongue?

On narrative forms

? Folktales and songs preserve cultural heritage

? Do you remember folktales? Do you tell them to your family/friends?

? Do you sing traditional songs? Are they propagated through modern methods?

Findings

On the use of honorifics

- Honorifics carried over into majority tongue speech without translation

- When asked, translation becomes onerous

- Characteristic transferred by language, not of culture - linguistic culture (Schiffman, 1996)

On narrative forms

- Almost all have heard folktales, few can remember

- "Like my father used to tell me stories, I cannot quite remember that. Some stories I can tell… (but) not quite narrate like that."

- Unique to the culture – not translations

- Songs performed at festivals, recorded and distributed as physical media and online

Recommendations

- **Cultural programmes**
  - Ceremonial use, reaffirming identity
  - Provides forum for community
  - Must be provided resources

- **Building local capacity**
  - Community stakeholders – good for research & for inclusive decision-making
  - Training in documentation, provision of tools and resources

- **Funding for data collection**
  - Large repositories require technical tools
  - Disparity between current grants and grants abroad
  - Gaur et al. (2022) report outdated primary data

- **Reference materials**
  - Absence of material limits maintenance
  - Initiative is taken by community
  - Resource-intensive task requires support

Recommendations

"Only a community can keep its language alive. No governmental or non-governmental initiative is sufficient in this regard."

- Gaur, C. R., Dey, S., & Mamta, K. (2022). Tribal and Indigenous Languages of India. UNESCO.

Recommendations

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ACILITATE

Fund documentation, archiving, and research efforts, such as local libraries and scholarships to native scholars; provide aid to heritage festivals and other resource-intensive vehicles of language rejuvenation.

Follow the changes in speaker numbers for *all* languages, building infrastructure to collect better data if necessary; follow the line set by indigenous leaders and scholars in terms of policy.

Facilitate the creation of local organisations to help organically build a community; provide training to local scholars and push forward language teaching.