



Language for Tomorrow: The Fight and Mission to Revive Indigenous Languages in 21st Century Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Languages are rapidly disappearing around the world in the 21st century. In a multilingual and multicultural country like Nepal, indigenous languages are in danger due to social, political, and institutional neglect. Language extinction not only leads to the loss of identity and culture but also has profound implications for traditional knowledge, local resource management, and social justice.

Methodology: This study reviews international and national theoretical and empirical literature. Using research, reports, and data from UNESCO, linguists, and policymakers, it analyses Nepal's linguistic diversity, conservation efforts, and current challenges.

Results: The study shows that policy ambiguity, political instability, resource scarcity, and social neglect have hindered the conservation of indigenous languages in Nepal. Mother tongue-based multilingual education programmes are capital-centric and limited in reach. However, the use of digital technology, community-based campaigns, and support from international organisations has opened up new possibilities for revitalisation.

Conclusion: Language conservation is linked to social inclusion, cultural continuity, and equitable development. Conservation of linguistic diversity is possible only through long-term strategies, state-community collaboration, and appropriate use of technology.

Novelty: This study highlights the policy-practice gap in multilingual education and proposes technology and community-based measures as strategic solutions.

Keywords: Indigenous Language, Language Shift, revitalization



Introduction

The world is facing the sad reality of losing its languages in the 21st century. Indigenous, marginalized, and endangered communities are the first to suffer this blow, and their languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. According to UNESCO (2003), it was predicted that by the end of the 21st century, about 90 percent of languages would be displaced by dominant languages. Nepal, which has a proud history of linguistic diversity, is also going through this crisis. Institutional neglect has pushed many of its languages to the brink of extinction.

According to the National Statistics of Nepal (2025), four language families are spoken in Nepal: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian. Apart from these, the lone Kusunda language exists in its own right. Additionally, sign language is used within the hearing-impaired community. The 2021 census listed 124 mother tongues, including sign languages. Most of these languages are spoken by indigenous and marginalized communities. Of the 124 languages, 72 belong to the Sino-Tibetan family, sixteen to Indo-European, three to Austro-Asiatic, one to Dravidian, and one to Kusunda. Thus, 93 languages have been classified as indigenous. However, Adhikari (2022) points out that the actual number of languages cannot be ascertained due to the lack of practical and reliable data collection in government records and censuses, as well as inconsistent inclusion of languages in the data. Furthermore, government policies to protect the country's languages have not been effective.

Languages spoken by indigenous and marginalized communities are declining rapidly, with many on the verge of extinction. The decline of indigenous languages in Nepal is not coincidental but rather a consequence of the state's approach to nation-building. During the early unification campaigns, a single language was regarded as an indicator of loyalty to the nation. After the unification of the state by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Nepali language was promoted as the medium of state power and cultural life (Gellner, 2007).

The 1956 National Education Planning Commission report recommended that only Nepali be used as the medium of instruction and that all other languages spoken in the country be considered an obstacle to national unity (Bista, 1991). This ushered in an era of monolingualism (Phillipson, 1992), which severely damaged the social and cultural prestige of many indigenous languages. With the return of multi-party democracy in the 1990s, and especially after the 2006 people's movement, demands for linguistic recognition and inclusion have surged with renewed vigor. The 2006 Interim Constitution and the 2015 Constitution of Nepal defined Nepal as a multilingual and multicultural nation, now organized into seven provinces. However, these constitutional promises have rarely been implemented in practice.

Meanwhile, multilingual education based on the mother tongue is weak in terms of resources, training, and assessment. According to Regmi (2021), the politics of multilingualism in Nepal is still limited to appearances. The loss of a language is not simply the loss of a list of words; it is the fragmentation of a whole way of life. Every language carries its map of existence, its style of memory, and its system of geographical understanding. When a language disappears, so does the atlas of meaning that language carries (Harrison, 2007). In Nepal, indigenous languages are still a treasure trove of ecological knowledge, medicinal plant



knowledge, and ancestral song and story (Turin, 2007). Despite these challenges, the indigenous peoples of Nepal have shown remarkable determination to preserve their languages. They have even opened night schools, prepared dictionaries, and published songs and stories.

Government and non-governmental organizations working in language preservation are advancing language rights as a movement. Today, digital technology is playing a decisive role in this campaign. Mobile apps, creative songs on YouTube, podcasts, and online dictionaries are opening new doors for the development of language skills (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). In Nepal, initiatives such as the Digital Himalaya Project, the Language Commission's growing digital archive, and Indigenous Voice are providing online courses, animated stories, and interactive research resources. Through these means, young Nepalis living in cities or working abroad are starting to hear and learn their languages again, which is re-energizing their connection to cultural values and traditions.

The demand for linguistic justice for communities that have been marginalized for generations is not a simple matter, but a demand for a profound federal restructuring, a system of governance that respects diversity. According to Hangen (2010), for the indigenous movement, speaking one's mother tongue is both a flag and a weapon of resistance; it is a stance that breaks historical silence. The 2015 constitution, which was made possible by the identity movement, guarantees that schools and courts can be run in the mother tongue. However, political obstacles, fragmented state apparatuses, and incumbent leaders have limited it to paper. Although Nepal has pledged to protect indigenous languages by signing UNDRIP and UNESCO declarations, the gap between these international commitments and the classroom of mother tongues is still vast. Economic deprivation, seasonal wages, and the erosion of local autonomy are daily exacerbating the crisis of indigenous languages. According to Crystal (2000), the end of a language is not only the power of sound but also the displacement of a group of dignity in social, legal, and political terms. The revival of indigenous languages is the liberation of the people. However, this has become a complex issue.

This article documents the struggle for revival and studies the past and present from the perspectives of policy, original culture, and technology. It proposes linguistic measures that identify the challenges and possibilities of language preservation.

Objectives

The main objective of this article is to assess the current state of Nepal's languages, analyze the role of language policies and communities, and identify sustainable strategies for language revitalization.

Literature Review

The work of international researchers has provided a theoretical basis for the conservation and revitalization of Nepal's indigenous languages. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2010) presents a global perspective on language crises and recommends conservation measures. However, it has limitations due to vague classifications, lack of local context, and insufficient attention to cultural diversity. Effective solutions to language crises require active community participation and cultural sensitivity, adapting the



recommendations of this atlas to the local level. Furthermore, it does not provide detailed descriptions of practical revitalization projects. Guérin and Yorupi (2017) analyzes the crisis facing Pacific languages. It effectively presents the state of language endangerment and plays an important role in raising awareness of the need to protect languages. However, it could provide more in-depth coverage of the social context, revitalization measures, and the cultural significance of linguistic diversity. Austin (2010) outlines the major challenges and opportunities in language documentation. It guides researchers in effective documentation processes while emphasizing the importance of community participation, ethical considerations, and the use of digital technology. Crystal (2000) illustrates the complexities of language loss and the steps needed to address it. It has played a significant role in raising international awareness about the urgent need to preserve linguistic diversity.

In the context of Nepal, researchers have meticulously documented the challenges faced in preserving mother tongues. Adhikari (2022) illustrates the legal, social, and cultural obstacles to language protection in Nepal, highlighting the gap between the assurance and implementation of language rights and recommending steps for effective protection. While emphasis is placed on policy and legal frameworks, in-depth analysis of actual implementation and impact is lacking. Giri et al. (2025) examine the use of language in governance, the development of language commissions, mother tongue education, and the effects of linguistic colonization. However, this approach appears incomplete, as it covers only a few provincial linguistic contexts. Pun and Gurung (2020) analyze major obstacles to the conservation of indigenous languages in Nepal and strategies for their revitalization, emphasizing the importance of linguistic diversity and the measures needed for its preservation. Turin (2007) notes the rapid pace of language decline in the Himalayan-western regions of Nepal and identifies mother tongue literacy and school curriculum restructuring as urgent priorities. However, his study does not consider the impact of digital access, demographic changes, or policy developments over the past decade. Pun (2020) highlights vulnerabilities in the multilingual education system, ambiguities in policy, and gaps in implementation. Gyanwali (2022) elevates the debate to a global level, concluding that education structures and linguistic mandates have disrupted the transmission of mother tongues. However, long-term preservation practices, such as documentation, archiving, and community-based research cycles remain insufficiently addressed. Kadel (2017) and Regmi (2021) emphasize that multilingual education should not be viewed solely as a tool for preserving minority languages; rather, it is a foundational educational framework that enables social inclusion and multiculturalism. Seel et al. (2017) notes that education in the mother tongue improves learning outcomes for marginalized groups. However, a large gap between policy and practice continues to narrow mother tongue education, potentially jeopardizing the future of Nepal's linguistic heritage. UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) proposed nine indicators for measuring language health, with generational transmission being the first and most crucial. Applying these criteria, many indigenous languages in Nepal appear to be endangered or critically endangered.



Sah and Li (2020) have noted that the implementation of the English-medium education policy in Nepal's public schools has led to language inequality and marginalization of local indigenous languages. Joshi and Islami (2021) observed that despite constitutional guarantees, the right to multilingualism and mother tongue education remains weak in practice. Bam (2021) pointed out the lack of appropriate curricula, limited community engagement, and inadequate educational resources as significant barriers to effective mother tongue education. Scholars, including Kadel (2021), Sharma (2022), Phyak, Sah, & Lama (2022) have explored the role of translation in the Nepali classroom. It has been established that translation deepens the understanding and retention of mother tongue knowledge, as well as promotes greater linguistic inclusion and diversity in multilingual contexts.

Overall, these studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of Nepal's language crisis, key drivers, and potential solutions. However, more in-depth and nuanced studies are needed regarding the long-term impact of government and community-level policy analysis and community-based revitalization programs.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to investigate the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages. Primarily, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with elders, language activists, teachers, institutional representatives, and government officials from various indigenous language-speaking communities to gather in-depth information about real-life experiences, challenges, and opportunities related to languages. In addition, the researcher participated in group discussions with members of different ages and backgrounds to explore topics focusing on mother tongues, preservation measures, and revitalization strategies.

During the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants selected through purposive sampling. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose and topic, and their consent was obtained. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the interviews and data analysis. Additional information was gathered through observations of cultural programs of the Tharu, Gurung, Rai, Newar, and Limbu communities. The researcher also participated in mother-tongue classes in schools, and two group discussions were conducted. Data were collected primarily using mobile recording devices and notebooks, and analyzed through thematic analysis.

Analysis and Findings

I. Importance of Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages embody the history, knowledge, and philosophy of life of any community. When a language disappears, a unique worldview, lifestyle, and thousands of years of expertise are also lost (UNESCO, 2003). Language extinction leads to poverty for humans, closing the exploration of the human mind and consciousness. When a language dies, not only cultural heritage such as drama, traditional festivals, handicrafts, original stories of the community, poetry, proverbs, jokes, and legends are lost, but also biodiversity is harmed (UNESCO, 2010). Language is a storehouse of knowledge, and elements such as



names, usage methods, and quantification found in languages are widespread in indigenous communities.

Indigenous communities create and preserve knowledge about medicinal plants, agriculture, fisheries, geography, forests, weather forecasting, changing conditions of rivers or lakes, water cycles, traditional agricultural systems, seed selection, seasonal crops, weed identification, reproductive cycles, plants, and other natural elements. If the land is destroyed, then the language is also in danger. Therefore, Chiblow and Meighan (2021:4) have said: 'Language is the land and the land is the language.' The language of the tribe is a repository of traditional ecological knowledge, an essential asset for natural and cultural resource management and sustainable development (Romaine & Gorenflo, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to give priority to the language of the indigenous people. However, the number of indigenous languages associated with World Heritage Sites is unknown (Palmer, 2016).

When people of different castes, communities, and linguistic backgrounds live in cities, it may be necessary to make the majority language a common medium of communication. However, there is also a growing tendency to neglect the mother tongue in existing rural societies. For example, in the present day, most Thulung Rai families in Mukli village of Solukhumbu speak Nepali to their children. However, they are unaware of the purpose and reason behind communicating in Nepali instead of their mother tongue. Local Purni Maya Rai says, "We started calling our children in Nepali from a young age. They understand the mother tongue when they hear it spoken in the family and community, but they do not speak it." Similarly, Pancha Maya Thulung Rai says, "Our history, customs, culture, and identity are preserved in the mother tongue. For the Thulung Rai, Mundum, the philosophy of the Rai people, is extremely important because it contains everything from our history, culture and rituals in the mother tongue. On the one hand, the younger generation does not want to learn Mundum; on the other hand, inter-caste marriages are increasing. This is creating a danger of erasing the identity of the Rai. Those who can write should write, those who can speak should speak, by any means, the language and culture must be protected."

Other elders are equally concerned that the existence of the Thulung Rai will disappear with the death of the language. Purna Bahadur Rai, the Shaman of Thulung Rai, says: "I am 82 years old, I do not know how much longer I will live. When I die, the Mundum I know will die with me. Today's youth do not want to learn Mundum; instead, I try to teach it to my grandson, but he shows no interest. Mundum contains our history, language, culture, and philosophy of life. If it can be preserved, the identity of our community will last for a long time; otherwise, we will have to live as strangers." The elders know the language and its importance, but they have no alternative but to pass it on orally.

Language and ethnicity complement each other, if the language remains, the ethnicity remains; if the language dies, the ethnicity dies. Syamul Rai of Sindhuli says, "Others ask me if I can speak my mother tongue, and I always get embarrassed when I answer. If I say I can speak the language, I don't know it, and I find it hard to admit I don't know the language. Even my Rai surname is limited to citizenship."



In the past, all ethnic groups performed religious and cultural activities according to the Shamans of their ethnic group and the religious scriptures of their mother tongue. However, due to the failure to pass down the language, some ethnic groups now perform rituals according to Hindu rituals. Those who have stopped performing religious and cultural activities in their language have forgotten the words used in those activities. If those forgotten words are not documented and archived, they will already have disappeared. Extinct words cannot be revived, but languages, religions, cultures, and histories that are still alive should be documented and included in the school and university curriculum immediately.

If all ethnic groups in Nepal are to be treated equally, then multilingual education should be embraced in Nepal. If all mother tongues are not given equal priority, children are deprived of education. Giri et al. (2025) state that children who do not know Nepali and English fall behind, are deprived of education and knowledge, and end up living a life of slavery. 38-year-old Jivan Lama of Kavre says: "I spoke only the Tamang language until the age of 6, I went to school at the age of 7, but I did not understand anything that the teacher said or taught. I had to be beaten by the teacher every day, after which I stopped wanting to go to school and dropped out." Earlier, the number of children facing such problems was significant, but it has decreased somewhat now. However, children from remote Himalayan and hilly areas, mid-hills, and indigenous communities in the Terai still grow up communicating only in their mother tongue until they go to school. When they go to school, they are forced to study in Nepali, which makes it difficult for them to understand the material. This affects their learning, resulting in low self-confidence and an increased dropout rate.

Let alone the fact that the mother tongue of the indigenous people is in crisis, the English language is dominating Nepali in the current times. On the one hand, students studying in boarding schools do not know Nepali. On the other hand, it has been made mandatory for universities to take exams in English medium and write theses in most subjects at the Master's, MPhil, and PhD levels. It has also been observed that students who are weak in English often struggle to understand the exam questions and cannot write them, which results in low marks for excellent students. Most students are afraid to pursue Master's, MPhil, and PhD degrees due to their weak English. One person shared his complaint with me, "I completed my Master's in Anthropology a long time ago, and I wanted to study MPhil and PhD at Tribhuvan University, but I had to take exams in English and write a thesis. If it were in Nepali medium, I would have studied, but I would not have been able to pass in English." If education were provided in the Nepali medium, the number of students in Nepali universities would also increase, and Nepali students would not be deprived of higher education, and the country would benefit from an increase in educated and skilled workforce, as well as research in every sector, ultimately aiding in its development. In this way, if English is given more priority than Nepali in the education sector, the Nepali language will also be in danger.

Giving priority to the language of our own country strengthens the identity, unity, culture, and self-reliance of the nation. The priority of language is not an opposition to any other language; it is an exercise in the protection and empowerment of our originality and heritage. For example, developed countries like China, Korea, and Japan have succeeded in preserving



their languages by prioritizing them and conducting in-depth research into language, history, and culture. China has spread the common language Mandarin Chinese all over the world, and is teaching its language and culture by deploying teachers, tutors, and volunteers to teach Chinese in various countries of the world. Korea and Japan are also adopting China's strategy. They have also created digital platforms and technical materials in their languages. In the field of education, they give priority to the language of their own country from the primary to the doctoral level. At higher levels, most Western reference materials are translated into their languages, making it easier for students to understand the content and helping them become excellent researchers and famous writers. These three countries have recognized the professional and global importance of the English language; however, this has not been fully embraced due to concerns around national identity and cultural preservation.

Although other countries have made rules regarding the mother tongue of ethnic groups, the Constitution of Nepal states that all mother tongues spoken in Nepal are the national language. The responsibility of preserving all mother tongues spoken in Nepal lies with the Government of Nepal and the community. The preservation of languages enhances social justice, self-esteem, and civic engagement, while promoting peace and stability, all of which sustain long-term development. It also strengthens Nepal's cultural and linguistic diversity, which is central to our national identity.

II. Reasons for the disappearance of indigenous languages in Nepal

1. Historical and political roots of the neglect of indigenous languages in Nepal

The astonishing linguistic diversity of Nepal stands in stark contrast to government policies that have consistently prioritized the Nepali language and neglected indigenous languages. To understand how indigenous languages are gradually disappearing, it is necessary to analyze how state unification, administrative structures, educational policies, and the construction of a common national identity have combined to consolidate a limited linguistic class.

Towards the end of the 1700s, the drive to unify the territory of present-day Nepal gained momentum under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah. He popularized the slogan 'One Language, One Religion, One King' and began promoting cultural uniformity as a national ideal (Onta, 1996). In the language of the state-imposed 'welfare' regime, Nepali was established as the 'national language, while the languages of the indigenous people were classified as 'domestic', 'uneducated', or simply 'uncivilized'. The adoption of a single language removed minority languages from the constitution, displaced them from government documents, and removed them from school classrooms, effectively removing those languages from the public sphere of the state (Regmi, 2021).

During the Rana regime, the Nepali language quietly expanded into the courts, administration, military camps, and classrooms. The mother tongue, once a source of village memories and songs, was silenced and designated as superfluous. Textbooks in school classrooms were limited to Nepali; asking questions or telling stories in the indigenous language was punishable. Regmi (2021) argues that the rulers destroyed the authenticity of vibrant epics, folk songs, and seasonal hymns, deeming them 'magical' or 'uneducated,' and



forced them to be forgotten. This humiliation also destroyed the self-respect that children had for those languages. When King Mahendra's 1960 Panchayat rule was based on the slogan 'One language, one costume, one country', the ruling edict was so firm that it was like a helmet on the brain (Gc, 2023). Nepal National Education Planning Commission was clear: teaching in Nepali would inevitably lead to the disappearance of other languages (Sardar et al., 1956). This remark indicated a plan to eliminate linguistic diversity systematically.

The 2015 and 2019 constitutional documents affirm that only 'Nepali in Devanagari' was the language of the state. The 1971 National Education System Plan closed the doors of schools to minority languages and deprived them of any formal educational role (Giri et al., 2025). Onta (1996) sees the state's conscious imposition of uniformity by keeping Nepali 'mainstream' and classifying other languages as 'culturally inferior'. This approach made it easier for Kathmandu to control the entire nation and pushed indigenous communities to the brink of citizenship.

The 1990 constitution designated Nepali as the sole national language, granting no formal recognition to other languages. While the 2015 Constitution of Nepal allows for the use of indigenous languages at the provincial and local levels, there are wide variations in the regularity, effectiveness, and regional compliance of their use.

2. Drivers of Language Shift

Language shift refers to the process of indigenous or local communities reducing the use of their mother tongue and shifting to another language. The process of language shift is progressing rapidly in local, indigenous, and minority languages in Nepal. This process is driven by various drivers, which are presented as follows.

a. Migration: When people move from their original place to a new region or country for any reason, be it natural disaster, conflict, education, or employment, their linguistic behavior changes. They are forced to adopt the majority or official language to establish themselves socially, economically, and educationally in the new place. This is why the mother tongue is gradually disappearing in most immigrant communities. Immigrants often settle in areas where their mother tongue is not commonly spoken. In such a situation, they have to learn the local or majority language to participate in school, employment, administrative services, and social life. Gautam and Adhikari (2023) have found that language shift has increased widely in urban areas. For example, people with different mother tongues who come to Kathmandu to study or earn money mostly use Nepali, English, and Hindi, which has led to the neglect of their mother tongue.

Initially, there is a situation of speaking two languages, but over time, the original language weakens and the new language is fully established. This is because the need and use of the old language decreases when settling in a new society. In particular, the second generation of immigrants starts using the new language instead of their mother tongue under the influence of school or friends (Pauwels, 2016). Due to the lack of use of the mother tongue, students learn the new language but start forgetting the old language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). After migration, parents do not want to teach their children their mother tongue to quickly integrate into the new community (Guérin & Yorupi, 2017).



b. Economy and Education System: When a country's economy opens up to new and foreign markets or transforms from an agricultural system to a cash economy, it is beneficial to know a widely used language (Guérin & Yorupi, 2017). Currently, Nepalese are given priority over Nepali and English for employment and education. In addition, the number of people learning languages of other countries, including Korean, Japanese, German, and French, has increased rapidly. The purpose of learning these languages is to get foreign employment or study abroad. There are countless registered and unregistered educational consultancies, institutes, and manpower companies across Nepal, which are conducting language classes. I had surveyed the online Japanese language classes in the consultancy, and the classes are conducted from 6 am to 10 pm. More than 100 students are studying Japanese in each class. There is also an equal demand for learning Chinese, English, Korean, French, and German. Shobha Tamang, a student of Japanese, says, "I used to speak Tamang when I was in the village. I came to Kathmandu to study the Japanese language so I could go to Japan. Most of the time, my friends and I only speak in Nepali, and now I find it easier than Tamang. Initially, I started studying Japanese out of compulsion. It was tough at first, but now I am about to complete the N4 level course, and learning the language is fun." Knowing other languages is beneficial, but forgetting one's mother tongue is a sad thing.

According to UNESCO (2010), if a community's language is not economically and socially functional or respected, they are more likely to abandon their language as they try to progress in modern economic or socio-political life. A Magar teacher said, "We, the elders, taught our son Nepali and English from a young age, and we did not consider it necessary to teach our mother tongue. It would have been better if we had taught our mother tongue, but we do not regret it. Now that he is abroad, he does not need his mother tongue." Many Nepali parents want their children to learn English and go abroad to study or work, to make their future bright. Therefore, there is a tendency to lure parents by saying that schools are English Medium, regardless of the quality of teaching. In many countries around the world, English speakers are often regarded as intellectuals, while local or mother tongue speakers are viewed as second-class.

c. Technology: In recent decades, information technology has spread the world's knowledge across the globe, but with this technological development, the linguistic diversity of the human race is gradually decreasing (UNESCO, 2010). In today's digital age, the use of smartphones, television, the internet, and social media has become commonplace. However, these media are often available in the majority language or an international language. This causes young people, children, and the general public to use the language played on television or mobile phones more than their mother tongue in their daily lives. For example, in Nepal, children who speak Tharu, Limbu, or Newari languages also learn Nepali, English, or Hindi by watching Cartoon Network or YouTube, but start forgetting their mother tongue.

As Poshka (2021) says, the influence of the English language is seen in all areas, including technology, public places, means of transportation, and restaurants. Is it a necessity or an attraction? English is a necessity in technology, education, and international relations,



but in many other areas, its excessive use is driven by style, attraction, cultural pressure, or social prestige. Dhan Man Gurung, Chairman of the National Council House of Tamu, says: “There is a place in Tanting village of Kaski district. In the past, it was named ‘Puluko Danda’ in the Gurung language. Now it is called Selfie Dada. Everyone knows it as Selfie Danda. That place has a separate history and culture. It is wrong to erase the mother tongue and cultural identity in the name of attraction.” In ancient times, in Nepal, the places where indigenous people lived were named in their language. Later, gradually, in the name of development, the names of all places, including roads, bridges, and rivers, started being given in Nepali or English, so the original names given in the mother tongue of the indigenous people began to be erased.

3. Decline in Intergenerational Transmission

Language transmission is the fundamental basis of language preservation. When language transmission ceases in an entire community, the language becomes endangered within a few generations and eventually disappears completely (Guérin & Yorupi, 2017). The language is transmitted through the family, society, and culture. Older generations, such as parents and grandparents, act as language messengers, they pass on the language through conversations with children in their mother tongue, telling stories and poems, and sharing folklore and knowledge. The use of the mother tongue, which has been passed down through generations, seems to be decreasing with each generation. In most families, it is no different from the fact that it is not passed on to the new generation.

If the mother tongue-speaking parents and grandparents want to pass on the language to their children while they are alive, the language will be passed on; otherwise, it will die with them. On 4 November 1995, Kasabe, an African language spoken in Cameroon, existed; but on 5 November, it did not. The last speaker of the language, Bogon, died that day, and the language died with him (Crystal, 2000). Samuel Rai said, “My father is Bahing Rai, and my mother is Chamling Rai; their language is different, so they speak Nepali. I had learned my mother tongue while my grandparents were alive. After they passed away, I spoke only Nepali. Now I have forgotten my mother language.”

Similarly, Sharmila Tamang from Sindhupalchowk married Binod Lama from Kavre. Since the languages of Kavre and Sindhupalchowk are different, she started calling her son in Nepali. When others call her 6-year-old son in Tamang, he responds in Nepali. In this way, there is a problem in language transmission and inheritance in families where women and men who speak different languages are married. In Nepal, there are other languages from place to place, even within the same ethnic group.

4. Loss of Linguistic Self-Esteem

Loss of linguistic self-esteem marks a crucial point in the decline of language. Sometimes the younger generation thinks of their mother tongue as a ‘rural’, ‘less prestigious’ or ‘disrespectful’ language. Such thinking is due to social discrimination, linguistic manipulation, and lack of linguistic self-esteem (King, 2001). This inferiority complex is transmitted from generation to generation. When children feel ashamed to use their mother tongue, the environment in which they can learn that language is lost. Due to such social



views, many people try to teach their children a ‘respectable’ language and turn away from their language (Fishman, 1991). Kirat Yakthum Chumlung President Prem Yekten says: “Before 1990, anyone who spoke their mother tongue felt insulted because others looked down on them as ignorant and rude. Those who spoke only Nepali but did not speak Limbu were referred to as so-called advanced. Now, it seems that anyone who does not know Limbu feels regret.” This thinking is found not only in the Limbu community, but also in other communities. Prabhat Lama of Bhimdhunga, Kathmandu, says, “I do not know why my parents did not teach me the Tamang language. We need a son-in-law when someone dies in our in-laws' house or for some social or cultural work. Everyone is speaking in the Tamang language, which I do not understand, and I feel awkward. If I knew the language, it would be easier to do everything. Now, I feel much regret about not knowing the language, so I am learning the language with my wife.” When community members are unaware of the cultural, historical, and identity connections of their mother tongue, they become ashamed to use it or consider it backward. This prevents the transmission of the language to new generations, diminishes its use, and ultimately leads to language extinction.

III. Challenges and Opportunities for Linguistic Diversity in Nepal

Challenges: The main challenge to preserving the mother tongue in Nepal is government neglect. Reluctance among policymakers to accept multilingualism, policy on mother tongue education at the primary level but reluctance or delay in implementation, failure to allocate posts for mother tongue teachers and provide salary facilities, keeping the subject of mother tongue as an optional subject, providing low budget to government institutions for language preservation, many people in the community do not know about the importance of mother tongue, dominance of Nepali and English languages, feeling of inferiority when speaking the mother tongue, lack of intergenerational transmission, migration, increasing marriage between women and men who speak different languages, unclear definition of mother tongue, lack of training for people working on mother tongue, lack of experts who can create and read the script of any community, lack of textbook production, use of the language only at home, different languages and pronunciations even within the same ethnic group on the basis of location, lack of separate multilingual education act, lack of language act and policy formulation at the provincial and local levels, lack of framework for managing linguistic diversity, use of Nepali Devanagari script in indigenous mother tongue textbooks, the use of Nepali language in mother tongue classes, the inability to document language and script, the large number of endangered languages but the lack of linguists who go to fieldwork to collect data. For example, some of the problems that organizations and individuals face when working on language can be seen. A mother tongue newsreader at Nepal Television says: “We have forgotten many words in our mother tongue, we are forced to use slang words instead of original words. Since there is no broadcast technician or vision mixer of the same language, the combination of news and visuals is being messed up.” Newsreader Bir Man Tamang: “One thing is we use a dictionary when preparing news, but since that dictionary is also not standard, it is difficult to select the appropriate words. Another thing is, it is difficult to sustain the life of a mother tongue journalist with a low salary and facilities.” Badri Kaji Gurung, senior news



editor and coordinator of inclusive news at Nepal Television, says: “There is a shortage of skilled workforce to edit, translate, and read news in the mother tongue. Since the settlements of the concerned communities are located in remote areas, it is difficult to reach them and cover their issues in the news due to geographical constraints.”

Although the mother tongue is taught in schools, both Nepali and the mother tongue must be used, which takes time to learn. According to mother tongue teacher Rachana Moktan, Nepali must be spoken to explain the Tamang language to children of other ethnic groups. Children from the Terai often struggle with speaking Nepali, making it challenging to explain the Tamang language. Similarly, various NGOs and government organizations working on language conservation have complained that a lack of budget has made it difficult to work.

Opportunities: Mother tongue is not only a means of linguistic identity, but it is also a source of important opportunities in various fields such as education, employment, cultural preservation, and policy making. Especially if primary education is in the mother tongue, children's learning becomes easy, effective, and confident, which increases their academic progress. Textbook production and teaching work are being done in languages such as Tharu, Limbu, Tamang, and Magar in Nepal, which has created employment opportunities for mother tongue teachers and translators. Similarly, the possibility of careers based on art and creativity has also increased for those who produce literature, folklore, songs, music, drama, and media content in their mother tongue. In various provinces of Nepal, the use of local languages in government work has led to the representation of native speakers in the administrative, information, and communication sectors. In addition, international organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, and SIL International are running projects for the protection and promotion of native languages, in which researchers, linguists, and community workers are provided with opportunities to participate. Knowledge of native languages can also contribute to economic and social progress in areas such as tourism, cultural guiding, and folk art. In this way, native languages provide various opportunities to prepare the basis for social, educational, economic, and cultural transformation for individuals, communities, and nations.

IV. Indigenous Language Revitalization

1. Government Policy and Constitutional Promises on Language Rights

For the past few decades, the indigenous peoples of Nepal have been conducting various movements and campaigns demanding the protection, promotion, and assurance of their mother tongue. As the Nepali state has been pursuing a nation-building project in line with the principle of one language for a long time, indigenous languages have been gradually being displaced through education, administration, and media. Expressing dissatisfaction with this, after the People's Movement of 1990, the indigenous peoples moved forward by making linguistic rights an issue of their culture and identity. With the establishment of the Indigenous Peoples Federation in 1991, institutional voices began to be raised in favor of mother tongue rights. Since then, issues such as ensuring a clause related to mother tongue in the constitution, conducting education in mother tongue, and ensuring the use of mother tongue at the local level have become the main agenda of the movement. In addition, indigenous peoples established



various institutions and councils to preserve history, language, culture, and existence. They are restoring old cultural practices to preserve their mother tongue and are exerting organized pressure on the political and policy levels. The 2006 movement gave new momentum to the movement for linguistic equality, inclusion, and identity in Nepal. The impact of this movement has spread to the policy, institutional, and public levels of consciousness.

The 1990 constitution has provided for the provision of primary education in the mother tongue, the fundamental right of all Nepalis to preserve their culture, script, and language. The 2015 constitution has recognized linguistic diversity and has mentioned all mother tongues spoken in Nepal as the national language. The establishment of the Language Commission, the use of mother tongue at the local level, and the theoretical system of education in mother tongue are considered to be the achievements of this movement. These movements are not only linked to ensuring linguistic rights but also to the practice of self-identity, cultural autonomy, and inclusive democracy. This has opened the door to new possibilities for linguistic democracy and pluralism in Nepali society. However, even after 10 years of the enactment of the Constitution of Nepal 2015, there is a complaint from language activists, researchers, and youth of indigenous peoples that there has been no progress in its implementation.

The indigenous peoples have been carrying out peaceful movements and struggles for the preservation of language and culture since ancient times. Yekten Limbu said: “Even before 1990, there were people who were imprisoned and politically repressed in every period while trying to preserve the Limbu language and culture. At that time, the Limbu script was written by hand and distributed from house to house; that was also a revolutionary campaign. My father kept the handwritten script hidden in the bag. I learned to read and write the script from that.”

2. Experience and Research

Until 1990, only a few ethnic groups had the opportunity to receive an education. Most students had to study primary education in their village schools, but had to go far away or to cities for secondary and higher education. While studying in their village schools, they studied in their mother tongue, but when they transferred to another school, they had to use a second language. Subodh Singh Tharu, the chairman of the Tharu Commission shared his experience: “At home and in the village, I spoke only Tharu. When I went to school, I could not understand anything that the teachers who were supposed to speak Nepali said. The teacher who taught science was a Tharu, so I studied in Tharu until grade 7. When I went to Nepalgunj city to study grade 8, the teaching was in Nepali, and it was not easy to understand the words used by the teacher. When teacher was teaching the lesson on Amla (acid) and Kshyar (alkali), I understood that it was called Amala (*Phyllanthus emblica*), but it was not. At that time, I felt that if I had been taught in Tharu, I would have understood it better. That is where I learned the importance of language through pain.” Dhan Man Gurung also has a similar experience. He says: “In 1972, I came to Kathmandu to study after completing my SLC from my village, and then it became tough because I did not understand the Nepali language. If I said something, all my friends in the class would laugh. Since 1973, I have been continuously campaigning for the preservation of language and culture so that others do not



have to suffer the pain I have experienced. I want to create an environment where mother tongue and culture are taught up to the Master's level.” Similarly, Jivan Hatacho Rai, chairman of Kirat Rai Yayokhkha, also shared his experience: “Since childhood, we spoke only our language in the family, but we had to speak only Nepali at school. Since I did not know the language, I could not understand what the teachers taught, so I had to be beaten by them. That is why I used to think of teachers as Yama and would run away during half days, and I was even afraid to go to school. That is where the pain made me feel that I had to protect my language and culture.” Teacher Rachana Tamang says, “When I was in school, I could not speak Nepali. One day, the teacher asked me the names of plants. I only knew them in Tamang. I had said the names of plants in Tamang, and the teacher beat me up. From that moment on, I started to love my language. At least I feel like I can express my thoughts in the language I know. Now I am thrilled to teach my mother tongue to my students.” They are just examples; many other people have faced similar problems.

Many people love language and culture, not by experiencing it in their personal lives, but by reading and understanding it. Co-chair Ganga Bahadur Thapa Magar of Nepal Magar Association, says, “When I read the history of the Magar people, I learned that in ancient times, our ancestors traveled to different places to find places to mine. At that time, the government banned the Magars living around the mines from speaking their language. If they were heard speaking the language for the first or second time, their wages would be cut off. If they were heard speaking the language for the third time, their tongues would be cut off. In this way, they were forced to speak Nepali, and the Magars were forced to forget their language. Now, more than half of the Magars do not understand the language. Such oppression should not be tolerated, and I have started a campaign to protect the language, culture, history, and identity by making the younger generation aware.” Now, many young indigenous people are educated and aware. They are trying to find out the truth about their past and present through research. They have come to understand the importance of their mother tongue. Ganga B.T. Magar says, “We have moved forward with a clear roadmap of what our past was, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future.” Similarly, Yekten Limbu says, “If the situation had been the same as before 1990, our history would not have survived, but now the indigenous people have awakened, it is no longer possible to destroy our language and culture.” The speed at which indigenous campaigners and researchers are currently running various campaigns for language revival indicates that the languages of indigenous peoples will be the languages of tomorrow.

3. Ethnic Institution

The responsibility of preserving a language is not just the responsibility of one or two individuals, but of an institution (Poshka, 2021). To preserve history, language, and culture, each ethnic group has established central institutions, branches, and other small institutions in various places. They have been researching language, preparing textbooks for the primary level, searching for and creating scripts, conducting various programs, appealing to the government for support for the preservation of language and culture, advising the government, and putting pressure on the government if it is not listened to, including the script in Unicode, etc.



Their main current demands are that the post of mother tongue teacher should be fixed, that the mother tongue subject should be made a compulsory subject at the primary level, and that studies related to the language, culture, and history of indigenous peoples should be taught up to the Master's level. Whalen et al. (2022) believes that the efforts to revive and rebuild the language have changed the language from a dying state to a sleeping state. Indigenous organizations are making great efforts to save their mother tongues from dying and to revive them from their dormant state. The Limbu and Kusunda communities can be considered successful examples of this revival. The Kusunda language, which only one person spoke, is now spoken by more than 12 people (Giri, 2025). According to Yekten Limbu, 90% of the Limbus in Nepal speak their mother tongue.

The Rai and Limbu use the Sirijanga Script, the Newar uses the Ranjana script, the Gurung uses the Khema script, the Magar uses the Aakkha script, the Tamang uses the Sambota script, the Sunuwars use the Kõits script, the Lepchas use the Rong script, and the Santhals use the Olchik script. Subodh Singh Tharu says, “The Tharu script has been discovered, and we are seeking an expert to read it. We hope one will be found, but if not, we will consult Tharu language specialists to reach a conclusion.” Scripts of other mother tongues are also being prepared, searched for, and created.

The Language Commission has been working in the areas of preparing the basis for determining the language of government work, preserving, promoting and developing the language, measuring the level of the mother tongue and studying the feasibility of using it in education, conducting language classes for language transmission, collecting folklore, technologically based documentation of all languages of Nepal, sociolinguistic scientific survey, and studying and researching language and script (Giri et al., 2025). The National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities is also working to conduct research for the preservation and promotion of language, script, culture, art, and history, and to digitize research records. These organizations have created an environment for the community to present various works in the mother tongue by organizing multiple programs during festivals and other occasions.

4. Media and Technology

The media is an essential platform for language preservation. Whether it is mass media, online media, or social media, they are making a necessary contribution to providing knowledge about languages to the public and making them aware of conservation. Efforts are being made to create a ‘linguistic ontology’ that can share and compare data on languages from all over the world (Giri et al., 2025).

In Nepal, the first mother tongue news broadcast in the Newar language started on Radio Nepal on 14 April 1951. However, it was discontinued on 4 May 1965 and then resumed on 15 June 1990. After this, on 18 September 2007, news in mother tongues under the title Naya Nepal was started in Gorkhapatra. On 29 January 2023, news broadcasts started in Tamang and on 31 January 2023 in Gurung languages on Nepal Television. Similarly, on 8 January 2024, the National News Agency began publishing news in the language of the period. Additionally, from 15 October 2024, a news service in Maithili and Nepali



was initiated. This has dramatically helped in preserving the language and culture of the indigenous people. Badri Kaji Gurung, coordinator of inclusive news, says: “Many community issues ignored by mainstream news are addressed by inclusive news, which strengthens belonging to language, culture, and lifestyle. Mother tongue journalism aims to empower and uplift these communities.”

The Language Commission (Giri et al., 2025) has alleged that there is no clarity on the basis on which news is published and broadcast in the language in these government media, and that it is arbitrary. However, Nepal Television’s News Chief Pushpahari Campa Rai has denied this and said, “We are very sensitive when presenting the content of news and programs related to language. We have made the Language Commission the first basis and the National Census the second basis when broadcasting news in the mother tongue on Nepal Television.” The effectiveness of government media in the community is seen to be good. For example, Nepal Television's mother tongue news anchor Anita Gurung says, “I have found the community very happy and a sense of belonging to watch news in the mother tongue.” Binu Chemjong says, “Mother tongue news is helping preserve the language and cultural identity.” News coordinator Gurung says: “People from the community concerned are very excited. Even those who do not speak the language have been found to share the news on social media. It is raising awareness about the protection of their language and originality, so the audience is responding positively.” The community also expresses its happiness when news is published and broadcast in its language. For example, Binita Tamang from Sindhuli always watches Tamang news. She says, “I never thought that news would be published and broadcast in the Tamang language. Nowadays, I only watch Tamang news on TV. It makes me happy.” The response of other viewers, listeners, and readers is similar.

Apart from government media, some non-government media have also given importance to news and programs in their mother tongue. Indigenous TV is the first television station in the country dedicated entirely to the indigenous community, which was established in 2016. In addition, some community or local FM radios and local newspapers in various districts are broadcasting and publishing news in their mother tongue.

In online media, indigenous organizations, institutions, and language commissions have started digitizing language-related research materials on their websites, where readers from all over the world can easily access and read the materials they need. Digital publishing of linguistic materials will bring us back to the situation of a hundred years ago (Whalen, 2004). The Language Commission has so far prepared digital dictionaries in 30 languages, developed linguistic corpora and digital archives in 27 languages, and established language laboratories (Giri et al., 2025). The Faculty of Science and Technology of Kathmandu University has developed a machine translation system for converting the Tamang language into Nepali (Bal, 2012, as cited in Giri et al., 2025).

The best platform today is social media. According to Statista, in 2025, Facebook had the highest number of users in the world, followed by YouTube and Instagram. Ethnic organizations whose websites are not well managed are active on Facebook and Instagram. Some youth from indigenous communities are creating videos showcasing entertainment and



local life in their languages and sharing them on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. They broadcast songs, dances, poems, stories, proverbs, interviews, language-related messages, and other programs in their mother tongue. The ethnic organizations have also planned to create a dictionary and glossary through a digital app. Dhana Man Gurung says, “Nowadays, the most powerful weapon to preserve the language is the mobile app and visualization. Everyone has a mobile phone in their hands, making it easy to access and enjoy content for free. Traditional education is not that effective. We have set up language classes in a traditional way, but after a few months, they forget the language again.”

5. Art and Literature

Songs, plays, films, documentaries, and literature are being produced and presented in the mother tongue. The first film in the mother tongue of indigenous peoples in Nepal, Newari language movie ‘Silu’, was released in 1987. Since then, some important films have been produced in various indigenous/mother tongues of Nepal, which have highlighted linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and community issues. Yekten Limbu says: “The language, dialect, and words of indigenous peoples, which were hated as a taboo until a few years ago, have now been made famous through dramas, songs, plays, telefilms, and films. An environment has been created where people can proudly say that this is my language.” This makes it clear that their ethnic and cultural identity is determined by language, pronunciation, style of speech, and dialect.

The indigenous people are producing paintings that reflect their own culture, language, beliefs, and lifestyle are visible through signs, symbols, and shapes. Therefore, we can call painting ‘Symbolic language’, ‘Visual Language’, or ‘Cultural Language of Expression’. These genres have brought indigenous languages to the public stage, expressing their beauty and message to the new generation.

6. Education

So far, the Tamang and Newari languages in Bagmati Province, the Gurung language in Gandaki Province, and the Limbu language in Koshi Province have been approved for use in government work among the indigenous languages. The Language Commission has already recommended the use of the Magar and Tharu languages. This is also an excellent achievement for the indigenous people. Along with the policy of teaching mother tongue at the primary level, mother tongue teaching has been started in schools where the mother tongue is the majority, which has created an environment for children to acquire bilingual knowledge and preserve their mother tongue.

Children are thrilled to study in their mother tongue school. I went to Mahendra Boudha Secondary School and observed a mother tongue class. There, students studying their mother tongue had responded that they enjoyed studying their mother tongue more than Nepali and English. Teacher Rachana Moktan said, “The Tamang script is interesting. I teach using audiovisual, so not only the native speakers but also the students of other ethnic groups are interested in learning.” When children learn a language at a young age, they tend to remember it for a long time. According to Rabindra Karki from Solukhumbu, raised in a Rai village and



migrated to the Terai at 14, later learned and forgot English. Despite not hearing Rai for nearly 30 years, he still retains about 5% of the language.

Since the language and pronunciation of even the same ethnic group living in different places in Nepal are different, it has been decided, with the agreement of linguists, researchers, and organizations, which language to use and how to pronounce it. For example, Suboth Singh Tharu says, “Some Tharu people pronounce the word Tharu, some Thharu. Many such words differ from place to place, but we have created the curriculum by choosing which words and pronunciations are correct.” Likewise, according to Ganga B.T. Magar, school textbooks have been created in all three Magar languages: Magar Dhut, Magar Kham, and Magar Kaike.

Most of the indigenous languages in Nepal are oral, and it is necessary to document them first. According to Himelman ‘Initially, ‘language documentation’ meant compiling grammars, dictionaries, and texts of little-known languages. Since 1995, it has emerged as an independent sub-discipline in response to the global endangered language crisis, aiming to record the linguistic knowledge of communities (Himelman, 1998, as cited in Austin, 2010). Currently, the number of students from the indigenous community in Nepal is increasing in the fields of anthropology, sociology, archeology, linguistics, history, political science, journalism, and education. Therefore, researchers, campaigners, and linguists are also increasing. In addition, government agencies, non-governmental agencies, and international organizations are also conducting research on the history, language, and culture of the indigenous people, which is a positive sign for the tribal people.

The preservation of linguistic diversity in Nepal must now be based on policy commitment, community ownership, and coordination with technology. Adopting a multifaceted strategy by linking language with rights, education, culture, employment, and identity is the path to Nepal's multilingual future. Suppose we do not put the concept of a multilingual nation into practice today. In that case, not only the language but also the entire system of philosophy of life, culture, and knowledge will be lost. Therefore, the path forward needs to be determined through multilingual justice, policy implementation, and community renaissance.

Discussion

This article confirms previous research. As Pun and Gurung (2020) show, the leading causes of the language crisis in Nepal are insensitive language policies, the dominance of Nepali and English, and the social devaluation of local languages. The findings of this study also align with Guérin and Yorupi's (2017) ‘language shift’ factors, in which urban migration, the shift to the dominant language for education and employment, and intergenerational language shift are evident. The oral interviews collected in the study provide concrete examples of communities losing cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems when they lose their languages. Turin (2007) described this as ‘the loss of a language is the loss of an alternative way of seeing the world,’ which is directly consistent with the findings of this study. The disruption in intergenerational language transmission is particularly worrisome. The main reasons for this are the younger generation's lack of desire to learn their mother tongue, the



scarcity of opportunities to use it in schools and urban environments, and limited access to multilingual education programs. As Regmi (2021) notes, multilingual education policy in Nepal is mainly limited to paper, and this study has also reaffirmed this reality.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion: Nepal is at a critical juncture in preserving its linguistic heritage. Its indigenous languages are not just a means of communication; they are also the vehicles of our history, culture, philosophy, and identity. However, state-imposed homogenization policies, social pressures, urbanization, and the dominance of Nepali and English have pushed many languages toward extinction. The experiences of elders, parents, and young students highlight the urgent need for intergenerational, policy-based support and community-led initiatives. On the positive side, indigenous communities, researchers, and institutions are actively trying to revitalize languages through education, media, digital technology, and the arts. Platforms such as mother tongue schools, inclusive news, social media, and mobile apps are providing opportunities for languages to flourish. Nepal's future is only possible when linguistic diversity is recognized as a key pillar of national identity and development, where policy, education, technology, and cultural pride combine to transform today's endangered languages into tomorrow's living heritage. The preservation of Nepal's languages is not just a struggle for words, but also for memory, knowledge, and the soul of the nation.

Recommendation: Based on the findings, this study points out some policy recommendations. First, both rights and resources should be ensured at the local level for linguistic revitalization by institutionalizing state-community collaboration. Second, a structure should be developed that includes all linguistic communities by implementing practical multilingual education from the earliest stages of schooling. In this, it is necessary to prioritize teacher training, curriculum, and material development. Third, the active use of digital technology through mobile apps, multimedia content, online learning platforms, and community-based digital archives is essential to sustain the work of connecting the younger generation with their mother tongue. Fourth, cultural revitalization and documentation songs, stories, rituals, and traditional knowledge should be systematically documented and reused in educational and cultural contexts.

To preserve linguistic diversity in the long term, it must now be the shared responsibility of the state, educational institutions, civil society, and the community. The preservation of mother tongues in Nepal is not only about preserving the heritage of the past, but also about strengthening the social, cultural, and historical foundation for future generations.

Author Contribution

For this article, the data collection and analysis were carried out by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this research, its findings, or the preparation of this manuscript.



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