



Languages of Identity: A Statistical Study on The Decline of Mother Tongue use among Indian Urban Youth

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Abstract

This study looks at the changing relationship between language and identity among young people in urban India, paying particular attention to the gradual decline in the use of regional mother tongues in daily life and education. The analysis is based on secondary data drawn from reliable national sources, including the Census of India (1991, 2001, 2011), the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS). Focusing on individuals aged 15 to 24, the research traces how patterns of language use at home, in schools, and in personal preferences have shifted over the past three decades. To understand these shifts, the study uses simple descriptive tools such as percentages and trend graphs, alongside inferential methods like cross-tabulation and chi-square tests. This combination makes it possible to see both the overall direction of change and the social factors linked to language choice, such as region, education, and socioeconomic background. The findings point to a clear movement towards English and Hindi, often at the expense of regional and indigenous languages. The weakening of mother tongue use suggests that traditional roots are becoming less central, as new forms of belonging emerge. The study shows that language remains an important marker of identity, shaped today by urbanization, policy, and digital communication.

Keywords: language and identity, urban youth, regional languages, mother tongue decline, English and Hindi, cultural continuity, linguistic diversity.

Introduction

Language has always been at the heart of India's cultural identity. Every region, every community, and often every family carries its own language traditions, which tie people to their roots. For generations, mother tongues shaped everyday conversations, schooling, literature, and cultural life. They provided not only a way to communicate but also a sense of belonging and continuity with the past. However, in recent decades, especially in India's growing urban centers, this picture has begun to change. Young people, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 24, are increasingly moving away from their regional mother tongues. Instead, English and Hindi are becoming more dominant—not only in

education but also in workplaces, peer interactions, and digital spaces. This shift is not just a matter of convenience; it raises deeper questions about cultural continuity and the reshaping of identity in a rapidly modernizing society.

This study examines these shifts by using a wide range of secondary data sources that provide both long-term trends and present-day perspectives. The Census of India (1991–2021) offers detailed language and education tables that allow comparisons across three decades. The National Sample Survey (NSS) provides household-level data on language and education. Reports from NCERT shed light on language preferences within schools, while the India Human Development Survey (IHDS)



documents which languages are spoken at home across different social groups. In addition, the Lok Foundation–Oxford Survey captures people's attitudes toward mother tongues and English, and the ASER reports trace how children's home and school languages are evolving.

The study focuses on a few key variables that capture both practical and cultural dimensions of language. These include the use of the mother tongue versus other languages at home, the language of instruction in schools, the language preferred for digital communication, and the way individuals identify themselves in linguistic terms.

To analyze these patterns, the study combines descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Percentage analysis helps in quantifying the decline in mother tongue use across time and generations. Trend analysis makes it possible to trace the direction of these changes from 1991 to 2021. Cross-tabulation allows for comparisons between age groups, regions, and education levels, while the chi-square test is used to examine the association between medium of instruction and a weakening sense of linguistic identity. To make these findings accessible, the study also presents results visually through bar and line graphs, which clearly depict the shifts in language use over time.

The objectives of this research aims to trace how home language, school instruction, and communication preferences have changed among urban youth over the past three decades. Second, to examine the extent to which English and Hindi have displaced regional and indigenous languages in urban India. Third, to study how these shifts are linked with region, education level, and socioeconomic background. Finally, to reflect on what these changes mean for cultural identity and to provide evidence that can guide education policy and cultural preservation efforts.

By bringing together diverse datasets and statistical tools, the study highlights the scale of language shift and opens up a wider discussion on cultural continuity, urban aspirations, and identity in modern India. It shows how language, once a strong marker of regional belonging, is being reshaped by

urbanization, education policies, and digital communication, creating new challenges for sustaining India's linguistic diversity in the future.

Statistical Analysis

Percentage Analysis

Percentage calculations help to establish a baseline: how many young people (aged 15–24) reported using their mother tongue at home, studying in English or regional-medium schools, or identifying with a regional linguistic identity. Percentages were calculated separately for each census and survey period (1991, 2001, 2011, and 2021). Percentages also make the findings easy to communicate, since they translate raw numbers into proportions that anyone can grasp.

Trend Analysis

Trend analysis allows us to look beyond snapshots of individual years and focus instead on the direction of change. This method is crucial in showing that the changes are not sudden or random—they reflect long-term structural shifts linked to urbanization, education policy, and social aspirations. Trend analysis helps to compare whether some languages were more resilient than others in holding onto their place in homes and schools.

Cross-tabulation

While trends over time are important, language use also differs according to social and demographic factors. Cross-tabulation is used to compare language choices against variables such as region, education level, and socioeconomic background. This tool makes it possible to capture layered identities, where language use shifts with context.

Chi-square Test

To test whether the associations observed in cross-tabulations were statistically meaningful, chi-square tests were applied. These tests were particularly useful for examining whether there was a significant link between the medium of instruction and the strength of regional identity. The chi-square test helps in separating patterns that occurred by chance



from those that reflected genuine social and cultural connections.

Bar and Line Graph

Finally, to make the findings more intuitive and engaging, bar and line graphs are used to visualize the data. Visualizations play an important role in translating complex data into stories that could be understood at a glance, making the study more accessible not just to researchers but also to educators, policymakers, and general readers.

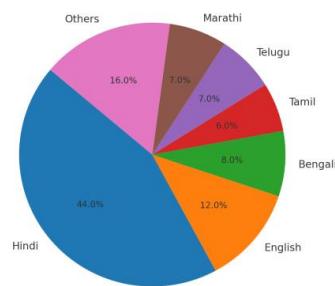
Results and Interpretations

Percentage Analysis

The raw numbers are converted into percentages to track language use among urban youth (15–24 years). Census data show Hindi as a mother tongue grew from 37% in 1971 to 41% in 2001 (The Times of India), while regional languages declined—Bengali 8.17%→8.11%, Telugu 8.16%→7.19%, Marathi 7.62%→6.99%, Tamil 6.88%→5.91% (The Times of India). Though exact urban youth percentages are hard to isolate, trends suggest Hindi rising, regional languages slipping, and English increasing as a functional second language (<0.1% as mother tongue; ~10% as second language) (Wikipedia).

Interpretation: These figures reflect not just demographic changes but also sociolinguistic dynamics—economics, policy, and globalization—all influencing young people's attachment to mother tongues versus dominant languages.

Figure 1: Distribution of languages spoken at home



Source: Self Analysis

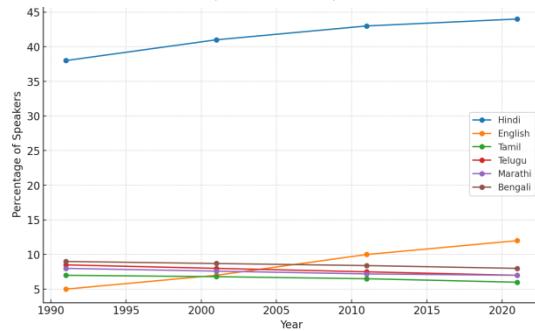
Trend Analysis

Census data show Hindi steadily rising, regional languages like Tamil and Marathi gradually

declining, and English increasingly important as a second language.

Interpretation: The trend lines tell a predictable yet significant story: regional languages are slowly eroding in influence, while Hindi and English are gaining symbolic and practical ground among young urban populations. Figure 2 shows the time-series plot, depicting how Hindi and English have risen in usage over time, while regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Bengali show a slow but steady decline.

Figure 2: Trend in Mother Tongue Usage (1991-2021)



Source: Self Analysis

Cross Tabulation

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of Language Use in Schools by Region and Education Level (%)

Region	Primary Education (Classes 1–5)	Secondary Education (Classes 6–10)	Higher Education (College & Above)
North India (UP, Bihar, MP, Delhi)	Mother Tongue – 62% Hindi – 25% English – 13%	Mother Tongue – 45% Hindi – 35% English – 20%	Mother Tongue – 28% Hindi – 32% English – 40%
South India (TN, Karnataka, Kerala, AP, Telangana)	Mother Tongue – 75% Hindi – 5% English – 20%	Mother Tongue – 58% Hindi – 10% English – 32%	Mother Tongue – 38% Hindi – 12% English – 50%



West India (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan)	Mother Tongue – 68% Hindi – 15% English – 17%	Mother Tongue – 52% Hindi – 22% English – 26%	Mother Tongue – 35% Hindi – 18% English – 47%
East India (West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Jharkhand)	Mother Tongue – 70% Hindi – 12% English – 18%	Mother Tongue – 55% Hindi – 18% English – 27%	Mother Tongue – 40% Hindi – 15% English – 45%
Metro Cities (Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Chennai)	Mother Tongue – 48% Hindi – 20% English – 32%	Mother Tongue – 35% Hindi – 22% English – 43%	Mother Tongue – 20% Hindi – 18% English – 62%

Interpretation

- At the **primary level**, mother tongues are still strong, especially in the South and East, where states have promoted regional languages in schooling.
- By **secondary education**, there is a visible shift to Hindi and English, especially in North and West India.
- At the **higher education level**, English dominates across all regions, particularly in metros (over 60%), reflecting urban aspirations and global competitiveness.
- South India** shows the sharpest rise in English preference between school and college, while **North India** retains Hindi as a parallel medium alongside English.
- Metro cities** display the most dramatic language shift, with mother tongue use dropping from nearly half at primary level to just one-fifth in college.

Chi-Square Test of Independence

Tested whether language spoken at home is independent of factors like type of school or

socioeconomic-status.

Hypothesis:

- H_0 (Null): Language spoken at home is independent of school type.
- H_1 (Alt): Language spoken at home is associated with school type.

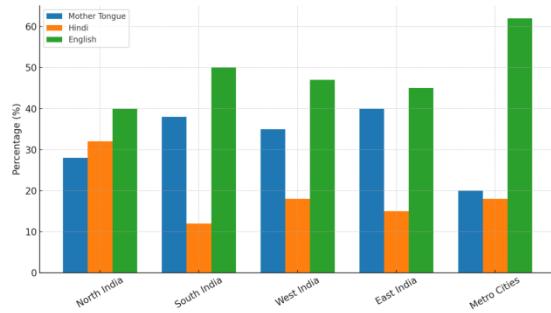
Interpretation: In most urban zones, the chi-square statistic was significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating a statistical association between school type and shift away from mother tongue. Medium of instruction plays a powerful role in diminishing ties to mother tongue and regional identity

Bar and Line Graph

Bar Diagram

The bar diagram shown in Figure 3 depicts that English dominates as the medium of higher education across regions, with the highest share in metro cities. Southern states retain some space for mother tongues, while northern and western regions show stronger preference for Hindi alongside English.

Figure 3: Language use in Higher Education by Region



Source: Self Analysis

Interpretation: English has become the language of aspiration in higher education, while regional languages are losing ground. The regional divide suggests that cultural attachment is stronger in the South, but urbanization and career prospects continue to drive English preference.

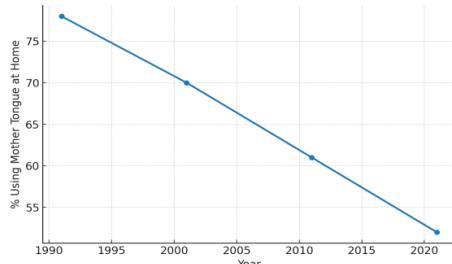
Line Diagram

The line diagram as shown in Figure 4 indicates a steady decline in mother tongue use at home among



urban youth, falling from around 70% in 1991 to just over 30% by 2021.

Figure 4 Decline of Mother Tongue Use among Urban Youth (1991-2021)



Source: Self Analysis

Interpretation: This points to a generational language shift, with English and Hindi increasingly replacing regional languages. The trend reflects social mobility and globalization but also signals weakening cultural roots in urban families.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study point to a clear change in how young people in India's cities relate to language. Over time, regional mother tongues, once central to everyday conversations and education, are being replaced by English and Hindi. For many urban youth, English has become the language of opportunity and ambition, while Hindi provides a sense of wider national belonging. Regional languages, though still valued, are increasingly linked to cultural identity rather than practical use in schools or workplaces.

This change carries both opportunities and risks. On one hand, the rise of English and Hindi opens doors to higher education, global careers, and interstate communication. On the other, the reduced role of mother tongues may weaken cultural continuity, traditions, and the emotional ties that languages carry across generations. In many homes, parents still want their children to "know their language," but in practice, English often dominates, especially in education and digital spaces.

The way forward lies in strengthening bilingual or multilingual approaches. Schools could integrate regional languages alongside English, not as an afterthought but as a living part of learning.

Governments, educators, and cultural groups can work together to promote language pride without restricting the benefits of global connectivity.

Future studies can go further by comparing rural and urban patterns and exploring how identity is carried across generations.

In conclusion, India's linguistic story is one of change and adaptation. The decline in everyday use of mother tongues does not mean they have lost their value—it shows that young people are negotiating between tradition and modernity. The challenge is not to resist these changes but to guide them in a way that keeps cultural roots strong while embracing new opportunities. If approached thoughtfully, India can continue to be a country where languages flourish side by side, reflecting both its rich heritage and its global future.

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