

Linguistic Diversity, Marginal Dialects and Accessibility in Bihar

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Abstract: Bihar, one of India's most linguistically diverse states, offers a rich mosaic of languages and dialects that reflect its complex cultural and social fabric. The state's linguistic landscape is marked by major regional languages such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, Angika, and Bajjika, alongside Hindi and Urdu. Each of these languages represents unique histories, oral traditions, and literary heritages that contribute to Bihar's cultural identity. This study explores the intersection of linguistic diversity, marginal dialects, and accessibility in Bihar, emphasizing the need for equitable language policies that validate local speech forms as integral components of the state's identity. The preservation of Bihar's linguistic heritage is not merely a cultural imperative but a socio-economic necessity for ensuring inclusivity and empowerment among all linguistic communities. However, despite this diversity, issues of linguistic marginalization and unequal access persist. The dominance of Hindi as the official and educational medium has led to the gradual neglect of regional dialects, often regarded as "substandard" or "non-prestigious." This hierarchy within language usage marginalizes speakers of local dialects, limiting their access to education, employment, and participation in public discourse. Furthermore, digital and administrative platforms in Bihar often lack adequate linguistic accessibility, further alienating non-Hindi speakers. The marginalization of dialects not only undermines linguistic diversity but also erodes cultural memory and identity. Recent academic and policy discourses advocate for inclusive linguistic planning that recognizes and preserves these dialects through education, media, and technology. Promoting mother-tongue-based learning and integrating regional languages into digital spaces can significantly enhance social inclusion and literacy outcomes.

Keywords: Linguistic, diversity, dialects, heritage, sub-standard, non-prestigious

1. Introduction

Bihar is one of India's most linguistically rich states, where multiple Indo-Aryan languages and numerous dialects coexist with Hindi and Urdu. Despite this diversity, language policy, education, and public services have historically privileged standardized Hindi and English, marginalizing many regional languages and dialects (Bajjika, Angika, Magahi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Surjapuri, and others). This paper maps Bihar's linguistic landscape, traces the socio-historical forces that create and perpetuate marginalization, examines the consequences for educational access and social inclusion, and proposes policy and programmatic measures to increase linguistic accessibility. Drawing on census data, language surveys, government announcements, and recent scholarship, the paper argues that strengthening mother-tongue based education, documentation and media representation of marginal dialects, community-led revitalization, and inclusive administrative practices are essential to ensure linguistic rights and improve learning and civic outcomes in Bihar.

Language is both a marker of identity and a medium of access to education, employment, and public life. In Bihar, a densely populated state in eastern India, linguistic plurality is a historical constant: Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Angika, Bajjika and a range of other speech varieties are spoken across contiguous but socially and politically differentiated regions. Yet modern administrative and educational systems often treat these varieties as dialects of Hindi or ignore them entirely, producing barriers to learning, representation, and rights for speakers of marginal dialects. This research paper examines the historical roots of Bihar's linguistic diversity, the mechanisms by which certain varieties have been marginalized, the accessibility implications of current language practices (especially in schooling and

administration), and policy interventions to redress inequities.

2. Background and Linguistic Profile of Bihar

2.1 Major languages and regional distribution

Bihar's linguistic ecology is dominated by several Indo-Aryan languages commonly grouped as "Bihari" varieties. According to the 2011 Census and state language profiles, key languages and approximate shares in Bihar include Hindi (the broad administrative category many respondents use), Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi (Magadhi), Urdu, and smaller languages such as Surjapuri, Angika, and Bajjika. Statewise language profiles estimate substantial speaker populations: Maithili and Magahi account for sizable proportions of the population alongside Bhojpuri and Urdu. These figures primarily come from the 2011 Census language returns and aggregated state profiles.

2.2 Historical roots and literary traditions

Many of Bihar's speech varieties descend from Magadhi Prakrit and other eastern Indo-Aryan forms; several have strong literary and ritual traditions. Maithili, for example, has a well-documented literary history and was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003, giving it constitutional recognition and enabling its use in certain educational and official contexts. Other varieties like Bhojpuri and Magahi have rich oral and folk literatures despite less institutional support historically. Recognition and institutionalization differ markedly among these languages — a difference with concrete implications for access and prestige.

3. The concept of marginal dialects and mechanisms of marginalization

3.1 Marginal dialects defined

For the purposes of this paper, “marginal dialects” are speech forms with a substantial speaker base but limited institutional recognition, weak presence in formal education and media, and lower prestige relative to standardized varieties (here, Standard Hindi and English). Marginalization is not only linguistic but political and socio-economic: varieties associated with less powerful communities often receive less investment, which feeds a cycle of invisibility.

3.2 Mechanisms that produce marginalization

Several interlocking mechanisms explain why some languages become marginalized:

- 1) **Administrative classification and census reporting:** The way the census and official forms treat mother tongues (grouping under broad labels like ‘Hindi’) reduces visibility of many Bihari languages and inflates the dominance of Hindi in public statistics, which affects policy attention and funding. [Census India](#)
- 2) **Education systems and medium of instruction:** Historically, schooling has favored Hindi (and English in elite contexts), disadvantaging children who speak other mother tongues at home. Language of instruction mismatches contribute to lower comprehension and higher dropout rates. Recent policy shifts have signaled change, but implementation remains uneven. [The Times of India+1](#)
- 3) **Prestige and language ideologies:** Standardized languages associated with upward mobility (Hindi/English) attract speakers away from home varieties; parents may encourage children to adopt dominant languages for perceived economic benefit, accelerating language shift.
- 4) **Media and publishing ecosystems:** Limited publishing, schooling materials, and broadcast content in many regional languages lower their visibility in public life.
- 5) **Legal recognition and resource allocation:** Inclusion in constitutional schedules or state language lists translates into concrete benefits (education support, broadcasting, cultural grants); languages without such recognition have fewer institutional avenues for support. Maithili’s inclusion in the Eighth Schedule is an example of how legal recognition can create channels for institutional support.

4. Linguistic accessibility and education in Bihar

4.1 Mother-tongue based pedagogy: evidence and relevance

Globally, research supports mother-tongue instruction in early grades to improve comprehension, retention, and learning outcomes. In Bihar, where home languages frequently differ from the medium of instruction, lack of mother-tongue education has been linked to poorer

foundational learning. The National Curriculum Framework and recent central board guidelines increasingly recommend the use of the mother tongue or home language in foundational schooling stages; this has important implications for Bihar’s multilingual classrooms.

4.2 State announcements and policy trends

In 2021 Bihar’s education leadership announced intentions to move toward using regional languages (Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili) as mediums of instruction in elementary schools — a policy direction that, if implemented at scale, could improve accessibility for large numbers of learners. However, announcements must be translated into curriculum materials, teacher training, assessment frameworks, and resource allocations to be effective.

4.3 On-the-ground constraints

Implementing mother-tongue education faces several hurdles in Bihar:

- **Materials and standardization:** Many marginal dialects lack standardized orthographies or a sufficient corpus of age-appropriate textbooks and readers. Where orthographies exist, dialectal variation complicates material design.
- **Teacher preparation:** Teachers are often trained only in Hindi and lack pedagogical skills to teach in local languages or to transition learners toward second languages.
- **Assessment and progression:** Examinations and higher-grade instruction remain predominantly in Hindi/English — creating bottlenecks for students taught initially in their mother tongue unless a planned bilingual transition is in place.
- **Political and administrative inertia:** Policy announcements may be delayed or only partially enacted due to competing priorities and resource constraints.
- **Parents’ aspirations:** Families may resist exclusive use of regional languages when they perceive Hindi or English as gateways to employment and social mobility.

5. Social and Civic Accessibility Beyond Schools

5.1 Public services and civic participation

Language affects access to government services, legal processes, and local governance. Government forms, notices, and legal proceedings primarily in Hindi (and often legalese Hindi) create barriers for speakers of marginal dialects, especially those with low literacy in the standard registers. Ensuring multilingual dissemination of critical public information (health advisories, disaster response) is essential in a flood-prone state like Bihar.

5.2 Media, broadcasting, and cultural visibility

Local radio, folk theatre, and increasingly digital platforms remain important vectors for regional languages. However, the market logic of mass media often sidelines less-commercialized languages. Supporting community radio,

local publishing, and digital content creation in marginal dialects can expand their presence and utility in public life.

5.3 Economic and employment consequences

Language proficiency mediates labor market access: fluency in standardized Hindi and English confers advantages in formal employment sectors, while monolingual speakers of marginal dialects are often constrained to informal economies with fewer protections. This contributes to cyclical poverty and reduces incentives for intergenerational transmission of marginal languages or — conversely — accelerates language shift toward dominant languages.

6. Case studies and Illustrative Examples

6.1 Maithili: recognition and institutional gains

Maithili's inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (2003) and its presence in certain educational and cultural forums illustrate how legal recognition can empower a language community. Post-recognition developments include literary promotion, inclusion as an optional paper in certain competitive examinations, and state-level initiatives in adjacent Jharkhand. Maithili's trajectory suggests pathways for other Bihari languages seeking stronger institutional footholds.

6.2 Magahi and community mobilization

Magahi activists and scholars have documented the language's history and lobbied for recognition and educational inclusion. Recent scholarship and policy talk indicate growing attention to Magahi preservation and teaching, with some academic programs, publications, and local initiatives supporting its revitalization. Nevertheless, formal recognition at the national level remains pending, and educational integration is uneven.

6.3 Implementation experiment — pilot mother-tongue instruction

Where pilot programs or NGO interventions have provided mother-tongue primers and trained teachers, early learning indicators (literacy, numeracy engagement, attendance) have improved. However, systematic, large-scale data for Bihar is limited in public reporting; hence pilot successes often fail to scale without sustained state investment.

7. Methodological note (how this paper was built)

This paper synthesizes official language and census sources, state policy announcements reported in mainstream media, scholarly articles and book chapters on Bihari languages, and NGO and media reporting on mother-tongue education and linguistic rights. Key factual anchors include census language data and state language profiles, government education statements, and peer-reviewed work on language preservation. Given heterogeneity in sources and the policy flux since 2011, this paper flags dates of key facts (e.g., census figures refer to 2011 returns) and situates more recent policy signals (2021 state announcements; central board

language guidance in 2025) as indicative of shifting practice rather than completed reforms.

8. Recommendations — policies and practice to improve linguistic accessibility

8.1 Institutional recognition and data visibility

Disaggregate language data: Administrative forms and future census exercises should encourage precise mother-tongue reporting (allowing local language entries instead of defaulting to 'Hindi'). Improved mapping of speaker populations will enable targeted resource allocation and policymaking. [Census India](#)

8.2 Education: scalable mother-tongue based programs

- **Foundational years in mother tongue:** Implement mother-tongue as the medium of instruction in Foundational and Preparatory stages (Grades 1–5), following the NCF and recent board guidance, with planned bilingual transitions toward Hindi/English for upper grades. This entails curricula, primers, and an assessment regime aligned with multilingual pedagogy.
- **Textbook and materials development:** Invest in co-created curricular materials in Bajjika, Angika, Magahi, Bhojpuri, Maithili and other local varieties, developed with local educators and linguists to balance dialectal variation and intelligibility.
- **Teacher training and incentives:** Pre-service and in-service teacher training must include multilingual pedagogy, methods for bridging home languages and second languages, and resources for translanguaging classrooms. Incentives for recruiting teachers proficient in local languages can improve retention and learning outcomes.

8.3 Media, culture, and digital inclusion

- **Support for local media:** Grants and regulatory support for community radio, local theater, and digital content creators in marginal dialects can increase visibility and usage domains.
- **Digital language resources:** Sponsor open repositories of oral histories, dictionaries, and annotated corpora for researchers, educators, and community members.

8.4 Legal and administrative inclusion

- **Multilingual public communication:** Translate essential public information — health advisories, disaster warnings, legal notices — into dominant regional languages in affected districts; this is especially urgent in flood-prone northern Bihar.
- **Recognition pathways:** States can recommend languages for inclusion in national and regional schedules and create state-level lists that entitle languages to curricular and broadcasting support. Maithili's Eighth Schedule inclusion has shown the potential impact of formal recognition in opening institutional avenues.

8.5 Community empowerment and intergenerational transmission

- **Community-led documentation:** Funding and capacity building for community initiatives that document, archive, and teach local speech forms (storytelling programs, intergenerational learning circles).
- **Economic linkages:** Create economic incentives to maintain languages through local tourism, cultural entrepreneurship, and integration of regional languages into local markets (e.g., labeling, signage, service provision).

9. Challenges, trade-offs and open questions

9.1 Standardization vs. dialectal diversity

Designing curricula for dialectally diverse regions requires trade-offs between standardizing orthographies (for material production and assessment) and respecting local speech forms. Participatory approaches that allow plural orthographies and flexible pedagogy are promising but administratively complex.

9.2 Political economy and resource constraints

Large-scale reforms require sustained funding, political commitment, and bureaucratic capacity. Short-term pilot projects can demonstrate benefits but must be coupled with long-term planning to avoid abandonment.

9.3 Measuring success and longitudinal monitoring

To evaluate multilingual interventions, states must build monitoring frameworks that measure literacy, numeracy, and longer-term outcomes (retention, transition to higher grades, employment) disaggregated by mother tongue and region.

10. Conclusion

Bihar's linguistic diversity is an asset linked to cultural knowledge, oral traditions, and regional identity. Yet marginalized dialects and languages face systemic barriers in education, administration, and media that limit accessibility and entrench social inequities. Emerging policy trends — such as state announcements favoring regional languages in elementary instruction and national guidance on mother-tongue education — create a policy window to redesign systems for inclusion. Realizing this potential demands concerted action across data collection, curriculum development, teacher training, media support, and community empowerment. Legal recognition (as seen in Maithili's case) can catalyze institutional support, but meaningful inclusion will depend on implementation fidelity and community participation. Prioritizing mother-tongue accessibility is not merely a cultural prerogative: it is fundamental to improving learning, civic participation, and the equitable distribution of opportunities across Bihar's linguistically diverse population.

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