

Indigenous Language Project Report 2025

Cross-Community Language Trends

Transmission

Main methods of indigenous language transmission across different communities rely almost solely on in-home usage and transmission from elders and parents to children. Thus, although young people within various communities are able to understand certain words or specific phrases, modern fluency is typically limited to elders and older adults, or to communities that are incredibly isolated.

Age Demographics and Fluency

As stated, the main individuals who are fluent in indigenous languages are elders or older adults in these communities. However, young people are not the only ones who are currently being affected by language loss. For example, in the Gurung community in Aarughat, the elders struggled speaking in Gurung, and were thus unable to pass it down effectively. In this way, language disappearance is not solely affecting younger generations, and it is critical to approach this problem with a wider mindset than purely focusing on language accessibility for students and young people, as the barriers are all highly intersectional.

Current Language Preservation Efforts

In KTM, there are efforts to teach young people (typically university-aged people) their indigenous languages through literature projects, which are likely to result, or even have resulted in, attempts to integrate more indigenous language curriculum into specific schools. Although this is typically occurring in more populated/central areas of KTM and other similar areas around Nepal, working with organizations that do this type of work is an important next step for IRD's language projects.

Most language projects in more rural areas and areas with lesser-known adivasi janajati communities focus primarily on young school-aged children, but are complicated by a lack of infrastructure (rendering many technological application-based solutions more useless) as well as physical inaccessibility, meaning that rural language projects are most often headed up in smaller areas by individuals, and these programs are more likely to be disconnected from one another and not linked by a cohesive curriculum base.

Current Barriers

Migration

Both in-migration and out-migration are huge factors into why Nepal is seeing a loss of indigenous languages post-language-positive legislation.

Returning to the Gurung community in Aarughat, the elders stopped speaking Gurung when their community had to mass-relocate to Aarughat, and their accents hindered their ability to effectively communicate in Nepali with the rest of the community they met there. However, the Tamang community I spoke with near Pokhara was unable to encourage the speaking of Tamang in schools because all of the teachers had moved into the village to teach, and thus couldn't speak any Tamang, not being Tamang themselves. Thus, communication during in-migration has posed an issue for adivasi janajati communities, regardless of whether it is adivasi janajati people moving to a new village, or other individuals moving into their spaces and communities.

While speaking with parents of young indigenous people, they often expressed extreme confliction regarding their children and their language. On one hand, they generally believed their language is important to their culture and that they would be thrilled if their children could effectively communicate in it. However, they also said that they feared for their children's education, social repercussions, and future hireability. Generally, parents wanted their children to be able to leave their villages and travel for better opportunities, so they didn't encourage their children to speak anything other than Nepali or English in the home, the main space of indigenous language and cultural transmission. Interviewees specifically pointed to fearing that their children would be made fun of for having an accent, that they would struggle learning English and Nepali if they mainly spoke them at school, and that employers wouldn't see indigenous languages as something valuable on a future resume. These are all highly understandable fears, but contribute to language loss, particularly in rural communities that emphasize their desire for young people to travel outside of their area for better opportunities.

Although NGOs cannot fix the underlying social issues that discourage indigenous language usage, these kinds of pressures actively discourage communities from teaching indigenous languages, and could complicate efforts to immediately introduce language preserving programs without attempting to subvert or break down some of these fears.

Municipality Governments

Municipalities under recent legislation have been given the legal permission to create materials to be taught in schools to teach indigenous languages. However, the law does not suggest how this should be done, where it should be done, or even necessarily encourage it, leading to a significant lack of action in many communities where municipality involvement would be helpful. A type of Potential Action Plan that could be sent to municipalities, suggesting potential steps that governing agents could take to improve language skills for adivasi janajati communities could potentially be helpful, as well as using influence and presence to encourage municipality governments to include more information about indigenous languages and actively keep indigenous communities in mind while making decisions.

Resource Inaccessibility

Although lack of municipality efforts to generate curriculums for teaching indigenous languages is a significant problem, there are many areas that are making efforts to encourage these languages to be spoken in the classroom. However, a problem arises when a singular municipality has various different indigenous populations in it, as was the case in a village we visited near Pokhara. The municipality had started developing a curriculum, but it was for a significantly larger Magar community, arguing that that community would benefit more from the resources. This leaves the Tamang community behind and at a loss for how to get their own support in a municipality that supports adivasi janajati communities, but has limited ability to generate resources.

Additionally, adivasi janajati communities often are economically disadvantaged due to histories of minoritization, meaning that resources requiring continued digital access (such as solely digital materials, rather than printable materials or other things that could be brought to communities and laminated for reuse) become unusable, despite being highly useful and effective.

NGOs

As stated earlier, it is essential for NGOs to recognize the current state of all communities and mold efforts to their needs, rather than coming up with potential solutions and attempting to fit them to all groups. Specifically looking at IRD's application, it is certainly going to be highly successful in very specific, technologically-dense areas. However, communities with lower amounts of municipal support that might benefit from IRD's language efforts might not be able to be reached by this solution due to a lack of digital access due to physical inaccessibility or economic disadvantage. Additionally, it is crucial to critically examine the underlying issues of language loss, such as persisting subconscious social pressures to conform to "one language, one nation" or English as an "essential language". Supporting efforts to undermine these expectations and norms surrounding language in political dialogues as well as in-organization conversations is a necessity to begin working on language preservation projects. Many of the barriers pointed out are simply symptoms of these larger issues, which naturally cannot be fixed by a single organization or actions; yet, it is essential to keep the stem of the issue in mind while brainstorming solutions to attempt to meet communities' actual needs and rather than a perceived symptom.

Recommendations

IRD would make a significant impact by making online resources that can be printed out and shared with schools, as these students don't have consistent access to technology, given that many adivasi janajati communities are largely economically disadvantaged due to the histories surrounding indigeneity in Nepal. In fact, IRD could potentially partner with an organization that works to bring technology to different areas, and assist in providing technology (such as a desktop computer) that already has the language-learning application downloaded.

Additionally, many older community members in different areas expressed interest in using an application to practice speaking their language and use it even more frequently, but they are unsure how to use a computer or a phone for anything other than a phone call. It is worth considering for IRD to try to bring more awareness regarding how to use apps or other technologies to rural areas as it expands its work, as older people shouldn't be left behind in technology/intellectual knowledge-spread efforts because they are seen as a slowly disappearing population that will soon be replaced with the next generation.

Finally, the most crucial recommendation I can make is for IRD to focus currently on building connections. Although the application is in progress and could make significant impacts, there are still so many barriers that would prevent it from making the kind of change that it could. However, while the application is in development, IRD can use its influence to connect municipalities and encourage them to share their indigenous language curriculums, so that each municipality might not have to create their own (perhaps creating an online database that teachers in rural areas or even around the world could print from). Additionally, that could build bridges between adivasi janajati communities, increasing cross-cultural and cross-community solidarity, and allow communities to connect with each other to share resources and support for a variety of issues related or unrelated to language. The overall goal is to support these communities and uplift their cultures, and the best way to do that is by building respect and connections that outlast IRD's direct involvement, becoming fully self-sustaining.