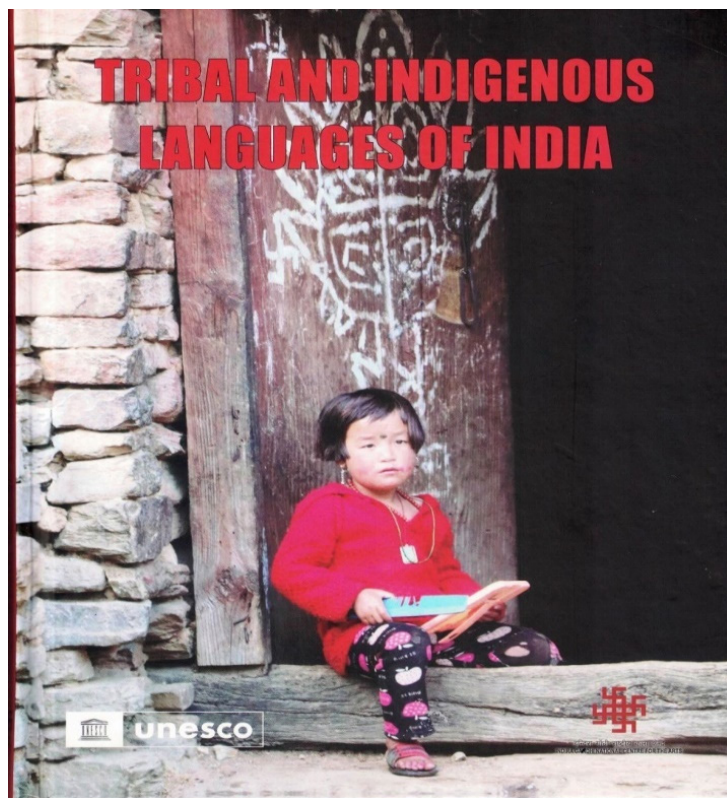


Documenting the Tribal and Indigenous Languages of India



Tribal and Indigenous Languages of India. Written by Ramesh Chandra Gaur, Sumit Dey and Kumari Mamta. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and UNESCO New Delhi Cluster Office, 2022, ISBN: 9789391045500.

India, a land of diverse cultures and linguistic traditions, is home to over 1554 languages, of which 22 are officially recognized (as shown in Chapter 3, p. 27-160). However, beyond the mainstream languages, lies a rich tapestry of tribal and indigenous languages, spoken by the country's marginalized communities. These languages, though often overlooked, are vital to the cultural identity and survival of India's indigenous peoples. India's tribal and indigenous languages belong to five major language families: Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and unclassified (including Great Andamanese, Tai-Kadai, Pidgin and Isolate) (Chapter 4, p. 191-192). These languages are predominantly spoken in the country's tribal-dominated regions, such as the North-East, Central India, Eastern India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to the 2011 Census,

there are 461 languages spoken by India's Scheduled Tribes, which account for approximately 8.6% of the country's population.

The book is structured in five Chapters, namely, (i) Introduction, (2) Linguistic Scenario in India, (3) Comprehensive Tabulated Data, (4) Analysis of the Data Found and (5) Findings and Recommendations.

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, tribal and indigenous languages in India are more than just a means of communication; they embody the history, customs and traditions of their respective communities. These languages often possess unique characteristics, such as: (i) Oral traditions: Many tribal languages rely heavily on oral storytelling, passing down cultural knowledge and myths through generations; (ii) Rich linguistic diversity: Tribal languages exhibit remarkable linguistic diversity, with some languages having multiple dialects and regional variations; and (iii) Cultural specificity: These languages often contain words and expressions that reflect the community's intimate relationship with their natural environment.



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Chapter 3 provides comprehensive tabulated datasets in three Tables, namely, List of All Tribal/Indigenous, Minor and Lesser-known Languages in India (Table 1, covering 1554 entries); List of All Classified Languages in the 1961 Census and mention in Subsequent Census Survey records (Table 2, covering 466 entries); and Decadal Change of Number of Speakers of Non-Scheduled Indian Languages (Censusindia.gov.in) (Table 3 covering 99 entries). Examples of prominent tribal languages in India as shown in Table 1 of Chapter 3 (p. 27-160) include: (i) Santali (spoken in Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura); (ii) Mizo (spoken in Mizoram, Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland), (iii) Boro (spoken in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and West Bengal), (iv) Gondi (spoken in Telangana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh); besides hundreds others.

Despite their cultural significance, tribal and indigenous languages in India face numerous challenges pointed out by the authors in the Chapters 1, 4 and 5, namely, (i) Language endangerment: Many languages are at risk of extinction due to urbanization, migration and cultural assimilation; (ii) Lack of documentation: Insufficient linguistic documentation and research have hindered language preservation efforts; (iii) Limited education and media representation: Tribal languages are often excluded from mainstream education and media, further marginalizing their speakers; and (iv) Government policies: Inadequate policy support and recognition have contributed to the decline of tribal languages.

In the Chapter 5 titled Findings and Recommendations, the authors pointed out some of the preservation efforts and

various initiatives undertaken to address these challenges by the public bodies. These include: (i) Language documentation: Organizations, such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), are working to document and study tribal languages; (ii) Language education: Efforts to incorporate tribal languages into school curricula and develop language-specific educational materials are underway; (iii) Community-led initiatives: Tribal communities are taking ownership of language preservation through language clubs, cultural festivals and language revitalization programs; and (iv) Government recognition: The Indian government has established the Scheduled Languages Commission to promote and protect tribal languages.

The tribal and indigenous languages of India are a vital component of the country's rich cultural heritage. Preserving these languages is essential to maintaining the cultural identity and dignity of India's marginalized communities. Efforts to document, educate and promote tribal languages must continue, with active involvement from governments, organizations and community members. By recognizing and valuing these languages, we can ensure the continued diversity and resilience of India's linguistic landscape. The Book ensures a comprehensive documentation of language traditions and diversity in India, particularly the tribal and indigenous languages. Thus, the book becomes an essential read for the ethnographic researchers, linguists, cultural ambassadors, literary practitioners, documentalists and public policymakers for their knowledge enrichment and sustainable development of the tribal and indigenous communities in India.

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