Minority Matters: Issues in Minority Languages in India

by

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0. Introduction

0.1. This paper discusses the following major issues relating to minority languages in India: (a) the definition of minority languages; (b) their status; (c) the factors contributing to their retention or attrition; and (d) the role of speakers’ attitude towards their language.

0.2. The paper demonstrates that the definitions of minority languages proposed in the current literature are inadequate to define minority languages in India. It further argues that minority languages can be defined on the basis of two major features: (a) their functional load;¹ and (b) their functional transparency in the various domains of society. Minority languages are typically those which carry relatively less or marginal functional load and functional transparency. The concept of “functional load” in this context refers to the ability of languages to successfully function in one or more social domain. The load is considered to be higher or lower on the basis of the number of domains it covers. The higher the number of domains, the higher the load. For example, in India the English

¹ The term “functional load” is taken from phonology where it is used to determine the degree of contrast between phonemes. “For example, in English, the contrast between /p/ and /b/ would be said to have higher functional load than between /j/ and /z/. The former contrast distinguishes many minimal pairs whereas the latter contrast distinguishes only a few. Several criteria are used in making such quantitative judgements, such as the position within a word at which the contrast is found, and the frequency of the occurrence of the words in the language” (Crystal 1985, 130). The term “functional load” in this paper is used to provide a quantitative base to evaluate the notion of “power” of the languages in a society in order to distinguish between major and minor languages. The language that successfully functions in relatively more domains is considered to have a higher functional load. Moreover, functional transparency is another concept used here as a parameter to measure “power”.
language covers almost all the major public domains such as business, education, national and international communication, and technology. In contrast, the tribal languages control only one (rapidly diminishing) domain, that of home. The regional languages cover private domains such as home, as well as public domains such as intra-state communication, education, government and law.

0.3. The “functional transparency” feature is important in determining the degree of functional load. Functional transparency refers to the autonomy and control that the language has in a particular domain. Thus the functional load is higher if the language does not share the function with other languages, i.e. there is an invariable correlation between the language and the function. In other words, if it is perceived as the most appropriate language to carry out that particular function, the language is considered to be “transparent” to the function. For example, Sanskrit is most transparent to its function of expressing Hinduism. Regional languages are most transparent to their function in state government. Similarly, English is transparent to the function of “modernity”. If the function is shared by other languages, the transparency is lowered and the functional load is also lowered. For example, the function of regional languages in the domain of education is shared by English in many states, which lowers the transparency of their function and consequently lowers their functional load.

0.4. I argue that there is a hierarchy of functional load in India, where multilingualism is part of the ecology. This hierarchy coincides with the power hierarchy of languages. The higher the functional load, the more powerful the language is perceived to be. Thus, minority languages are those that carry a lower functional load and thereby hold a lower position in the power hierarchy. The hierarchy of power (political, economic and cultural) of languages in multilingual India needs to be taken into account in order to fully define and explain the status of minority languages. It is further demonstrated that decrease versus enhancement of the functional load can be seen as the major factor in the status of minority languages.
0.5. The above definition of minority languages allows us to evaluate the role of factors such as language planning and policies, and the attitudes of speakers in India towards either protecting, maintaining and promoting minority languages or causing their decay and attrition. Those factors contributing towards increasing the functional load are identified as those promoting sustenance and promotion of the languages, while those reducing the functional load are identified as those causing decay or attrition.

1. Definitions of Minority Languages

1.1. The Constitution of India recognises eighteen languages as “scheduled languages”\(^2\) (listed in Schedule VIII, Articles 343–51) while those languages not included in the scheduled eighteen are listed as “minority languages”. A close examination clearly shows that the criteria used to divide languages into “scheduled” and “non-scheduled”\(^3\) (minority) languages fail to account for the status of languages in India. The Constitution does not provide a clear criterion for defining minority languages. The Supreme Court of India, in 1958, presented a parameter for defining a minority language as “the language of the minority community” (which is defined as a community numerically less than 50 per cent). However, this parameter is not applicable at the national level because “there is no linguistic group in India which can claim the majority status” (Chaklader 1981, 14). Hindi, the official language of the Union, is the language of only one-third of the total Indian population. Thus, as Chaklader (1981, 14) correctly points out, “the majority-minority question is considered in reference to the state only”. In this context, Chaklader (1981, 14) argues for adopting a definition of minority languages at the state level. For example, a minority language can be viewed as the language of the population which is less than 50 per cent of the total population of a state and which is different from the language of the majority community and the language of the state. This parameter turns the numerical majority languages into minority languages (Bhatt and Mahboob 2002). Kashmiri, which is spoken by 53 per cent of the total population in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, is not the state language (which is Urdu). Moreover, Urdu, the official language of Jammu and Kashmir, is spoken by less than 1 per cent of the total population.

\(^2\) See Annex Table 1.
population of the state. Similarly, English, the official language of Meghalaya, is spoken by 0.01 per cent of the total population. Thus the parameter of defining minority languages on the basis of their numerical strength is not appropriate in the context of India.

1.2. Other parameters have been proposed based on the dominance or “power” (political, economic and/or cultural) of languages (Bhatt and Mahboob 2002; Chaklader 1981; Williams 1964, among others). Languages lacking political, economic or cultural power tend to be included in the list of minority languages. A good example is that of the tribal languages, speakers of which constitute 7.08 per cent of the total population of India. These languages lack political, economic and cultural power at the state or national levels, therefore they belong to the category of minority languages. In contrast, Sanskrit, which is perceived as a language of the cultural heritage of India (but not spoken natively in any state) is not labelled as a minority language. Similarly, English, though numerically a minority language, is not viewed as such owing to its high economic value at the national as well as the international level.

1.3. A very broad definition of minority provided by the United Nations captures the salient features of minority languages: “The term minority includes only those non-dominant groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve stable, ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population.” The two features, “non-dominant” and “different from the rest of the population”, are generally shared by the minority languages of India. Moreover, this definition points out that a language receives its minority status due to the minority status of the speech community to which it belongs. It allows a language to be labelled as a minority language if the community using it is numerically large but non-dominant.

1.4. Another phenomenon which complicated the definition of minority languages in India was the large-scale reorganisation of the states according to the concentration of
languages in different parts of India (based on the Report of the States Reorganisation Commission of 1955). Although the policy behind the reorganisation was to minimise the number of linguistic minorities (and to some extent it did so), it created new minorities as no state was completely unilingual. Speech communities were distributed across state boundaries, therefore an official/majority language in one state could become a minority language in another state. For example, Telugu is an official/majority language in Andhra Pradesh while it is a minority language in Tamil Nadu.

1.5. Srivastava (1984) provided a new approach towards defining minority-majority languages based on two principles, “quantum” and “power”, as shown in the diagram.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Power} & \text{Quantum} \\
+ & - \\
(a) \text{majority} & (c) \text{elite} \\
(b) \text{Janta} & (d) \text{minority} \\
\end{array}
\]

According to this view, a language can be of four types: (a) powerful as well as majority (e.g. Marathi in Maharashtra State); (b) powerless but majority (e.g. Kashmiri in Jammu and Kashmir); (c) minority but powerful (English in all states); (d) minority and powerless (tribal languages in all states).

1.6. The above discussion shows that definitions of minority languages are based on either numerical or functional criteria. While the numerical criterion marks a language as minority if the number of speakers of the language (i.e. the speech community) is relatively low, the functional criterion marks a language with relatively low power of dominance in the economic, political and social domains. The numerical criterion (based on the size of the speech community) is inadequate to describe the status of minority languages in India. The criterion of dominance fails to take into account the fact that, in a multilingual country such as India, different languages are dominant in different domains. For example, Sanskrit is dominant in religion but not in economics, politics and business.

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The regional languages are dominant at home, but in higher education and business at the national level they are not. English is dominant in higher education, business and politics but not in religion. The criterion of dominance will indicate the same language as dominant and non-dominant in different domains.

1.7. In the light of the above, I propose that a different framework needs to be formulated which will take into account the multilingual profile of India, the functional distribution of languages across domains, the size of the speech community and the notion of dominance. Moreover, the framework should be able to explain various types of minority in the country, and why the same language can have the status of minority as well as dominant language simultaneously (in different states). For example, minority languages can be divided into three groups: (a) those which have “minority (non-dominant)” status in their native state; (b) those which are reduced to “minority status” in their non-native states; and (c) languages which do not have a native state but are distributed across states (e.g. Sindhi and Konkani). This framework clearly shows that a language acquires minority status when its functional load is reduced (in a non-native state where the dominant language of that state is different, and used in many public domains), while it continues to enjoy the status of a dominant (non-minority language) in its native state.

1.8. The concept of functional load of a language provides a framework within which a comprehensive definition of “minority languages” can be presented. In this context, I argue that all the above definitions of minority languages have one feature in common – minority languages (regardless of whether they are numerically a minority or not) carry a marginal functional load, or none at all, in the public domains of society. Thus, English, though numerically a minority language, cannot be called a minority language as it carries a heavy functional load in the public domain (education, business, international and intranational communication, religion, etc.). In contrast, Kashmiri, a majority language in Jammu and Kashmir, is viewed as a minority language because it does not carry a heavy functional load in the public domain of the society within which it is located. The tribal languages are numerically minority languages, and carry a marginal
functional load in the domains of education, business and inter-group communication. This definition of minority languages further allows us to identify the factors (sociopolitical) that are instrumental in creating minority languages. Moreover, it has a predictive value, in that a language which is in the process of being eliminated from the public domain (its functional load is decreasing) will be reduced to the status of a minority language. Also, this definition implicitly assumes that a stable or increasing functional load is conducive to language retention, while a decreasing functional load leads to language attrition. It also predicts that a minority language can acquire the status of a dominant language if its functional load increases in the public domain.

2. Factors Influencing the Status of Minority Languages: Language Planning and Language Policies

2.1. The following discussion indicates the factors that have contributed towards reducing the functional load of minority languages in the public domain, and thereby led to the shift of these languages to the dominant languages. In a number of cases minority languages (especially tribal languages) are facing rapid attrition. These factors are: (a) language policies; (b) modernisation; (c) speakers’ attitudes towards their languages; (d) separation of the link between language and identity or a change in the speech community’s perception of its identity. I point out below how these factors can be seen as mechanisms through which the marginalisation of minority languages is taking place.

2.2. First, the impact of language policies on minority languages is discussed. The policy of reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis was seen as a strategy to homogenise a state where the language spoken by the majority (over 50 per cent of the total population of the state) would become the official language. It was assumed that this policy would bring the administration and the people together, in contrast to the British policy that had imposed English as the language of administration in India and thereby severely inhibited the growth and development of the indigenous vernaculars. In order to implement this policy, each state developed a programme to ensure the use of the majority vernacular in major domains such as legislation, education, administration and
other state-controlled operations such as public transport, banking, etc. In the context of legislation at state level, the official language of the state was used for (a) introducing Bills by the Governor under Article 213 of the Constitution; (b) introducing by-laws passed by the state government or by Parliament or the state legislature, all official notifications issued by Parliament or the state government; and (c) for other official correspondence within the state (see Chaklader 1981, 45 for further discussion).

2.3. In the domain of education, the Education Commission set up in 1966\(^6\) recommended the use of the state language at university level. However, for high-school education, a “three-language formula” was proposed and approved by the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1957 and was fully endorsed by the chief ministers of the states in 1961. The implementation of the formula was complex. The three languages were introduced at different phases of high-school education: (a) at lower-primary level (grades I–IV), either the mother tongue or the official language; (b) at higher-primary level (grades V–VII) two languages – mother tongue or regional language and Hindi (national language) or English; (c) at lower-secondary level (grades VIII–X) three languages – mother tongue/regional language, Hindi and English; (d) at higher-secondary level (grades XI–XII) any two languages including a classical language.

2.4. In the third and major domain of administration, regional vernacular languages were promoted for intra-state communication in all contexts, such as the official Gazette of the state government, the judiciary, employment procedures, and all official documents had to be in the official language of the state. For inter-state communication, the use of the associate language English was permitted. This situation continues today with varying degrees of implementation. Another major domain where the reorganisation of the states influenced the status of languages was the conditions of employment. Under Article 309 and item 41 of list I in Schedule VII, the states organised Public Commissions\(^7\) to determine the conditions of employment within the states. The members of the Commissions were appointed by the state governors. Though it was agreed by chief

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ministers that language should not be an obstacle to recruitment, a number of states (with the Commissions’ approval) sanctioned the legislation that knowledge of the state official language should be made mandatory for all state employees. Maharashtra (Marathi), Orissa (Oriya), West Bengal (Bangla), Gujarat (Hindi and English), Haryana (Hindi) and Punjab (Hindi and Panjabi) were the early advocates of this requirement for knowledge of the respective state languages.

2.5. Regardless of the degree of success in implementing this measure in different states, the three-language formula, and the recommendations of the various Commissions towards language use, had an enormous impact on minority languages. The “functional load” of the numerically minority languages was drastically reduced in the public domain and as a result their status as non-dominant/powerless was further confirmed. They were almost completely eliminated from the dominant public spheres. Four types of response to these policies were observed: (a) language movements against the policies; (b) segregation from the “mainstream” communities; (c) assimilation with the larger, majority language communities; (d) adoption of multiple strategies. Thus the Bengali speech community in Assam (with Assamiya as the state language) demanded autonomy and rights to education in Bangla, while many communities of numerically minority languages such as Konkani (in Maharashtra and Karnataka), and many tribal languages in the north-east, have adopted a separatist attitude and maintained their languages. However, most of the minority-language speech communities have adopted the third choice, of assimilation with the majority or dominant languages within their respective geographic regions or states. Kundu (1994) explains why several tribal language communities are losing their languages in a process of assimilation with the dominant language in the north-eastern parts of India. Lack of educational facilities such as textbooks, teachers, schools with the tribal language as the medium of instruction, lack of a standard language (and script), and most importantly, marginalisation or exclusion from the major domains of social behaviour, have severely curtailed the sustenance of tribal languages. A similar situation exists with Yerva in Kerala, or Bhumj and Rajbamshiin in West Bengal. The adoption of multiple strategies (using their language at home and the

dominant language at school and other public domains) to maintain their languages is seen among the minority languages in diaspora. These languages have a stable cultural and linguistic base elsewhere that provides a constant motivation for their retention.

2.6. The languages spoken by a numerical minority have clearly become non-dominant and powerless minority languages under the above language policies. Again, it should be noted that their non-functionality in the major domains of society may be seen as the reason for their low status.

3. Constitutional Safeguards

3.1. The Indian Constitution adopted several safeguards to protect linguistic minorities in the country. Articles 350(A) and 350(B) were adopted in addition to the earlier Articles 29(1), 30, 347 and 350 in order to safeguard the interests of minorities. Article 29(1) notes: “Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.” This clearly guarantees the right of minorities to conserve their cultural as well as linguistic traditions. The first clause of Article 30 of the Constitution guarantees all minorities based on religion or language to establish and administer educational institutions of their own in order to preserve their linguistic and/or cultural heritage. The second clause of Article 30 prohibits the state from discriminating against minority educational institutions in giving financial aid on the grounds that they are under the management of minorities. Thus minorities are allowed to secure state funds for their educational institutions. Article 347 allows the use of minority languages for official purposes. Accordingly, a state should be recognised as unilingual only if one language group within the state constitutes 70 per cent or more of the total population. Moreover, where there is a minority of over 30 per cent or more of the total population, the state should be recognised as bilingual for administrative purposes. A similar principle applies at the district level.
3.2. Minority languages can be majority languages at the local level. Clear cases of this are Karbi and Dimasa in the autonomous districts of south Assam; Tibetan in the Ladakh region, and Baltistan in the north, of Jammu and Kashmir; Nepali in Sikkim; Hindi in the north-eastern region of Maharashtra, etc.

3.3. Article 350(A) proclaims, “[I]t shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups.” Moreover, Article 350(B) gives power to the President to appoint appropriate officers and use proper methods to investigate and safeguard the rights of linguistic minorities. Wadhwa (1975) points out that the 12th Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities shows that education in the minority languages is provided at the primary level in the following states and union territories: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Delhi, Goa, Daman and Diu, Pondicherry.

3.4. The above discussion shows that the Constitution of India attempts to guarantee linguistic minorities the right to use their languages in administration and education. According to our hypothesis, this government strategy would result in increasing the functional load of the languages. The above safeguards proposed by the Constitution guarantee the use of minority languages in the domain of education, thereby identifying and guaranteeing a certain functional load to those languages. However, the implementation of these policies is not always successful for various reasons, both external and internal to linguistic minorities, which are discussed in the following sections.

4. Bilingualism and the Status of Minority Languages

4.1. 13 per cent of the Indian population is bilingual and over 42 per cent of the minority population is bilingual (Singh 2001). Singh and Manoharan (1993) point out
that among the 623 tribal communities with which they worked, only 123 were monolingual while 500 were bilingual. They further note, “[T]he second or third language may be either a minor language, a scheduled language or even a regional language of the area in which they reside. … Apart from the official language of the State, regional languages like Chattisgarhi, Halbi, and Tulu are also spoken for inter-group communication by Tribal communities.” Each state in India is multilingual but the rate of minority languages varies from 10 per cent (Gujarat) to 44 per cent (Panjab) (Bhatt and Mahboob 2002, 22). Moreover, the three-language formula has further contributed to the high rate of bilingualism among minority linguistic communities.

Traditionally, tribal communities lived isolated from the cities and villages and their occupations included cutting firewood, hunting, fishing and farming (for further discussion see Parvathamma 1984). The languages of those communities have been maintained due to their isolation from the mainstream population which did not interact with them. In the fifty years since India’s independence in 1947, it has become necessary for tribal communities to interact with the mainstream population owing to the following changes caused by modernisation (Pandharipande 1992, 258): (a) mechanisation of the professions of farming, fishing, tanning of leather, etc., (b) deforestation and urbanisation of villages, and (c) the policy of state governments to promote education in these communities (through the three-language formula), which has accelerated the speed of learning the dominant regional language among these communities. As a result, a majority of tribal languages are shifting to the “dominant language” in almost every functional domain. The functional domain of these languages is restricted to home and intra-group communication. Several studies – Biligiri (1969), Karunakaran (1983), Khubchandani (1983), Roy Burman (1969), Raju (1977), Abbi (1995) – show that due to the lack of script, the paucity of teaching materials and the small number of speakers, a large number of tribal languages are facing attrition.

4.2. The discussion here shows that the reduction in their functional load in the public domain is leading minority languages towards attrition. It is important to note that there is a hierarchy in the shift of the minority to the dominant languages. While Kui in Andhra Pradesh and Bhili in the Nagpur area (Maharashtra) show a very high degree of shift,
Santali in Bihar and West Bengal shows a relatively lower degree of shift. In contrast, some of the tribal languages in Kerala show negligible shift or none at all.

4.3. Like tribal languages, the minority languages of diaspora in different states also face pressures from state or regional languages in their respective state of immigration. Pandharipande (1992) points out that the maintenance versus shift of these languages is determined by their prestige or importance at the national level or in their native states. An example is Hindi in its non-native state of Gujarat. Although the number of Tamil and Hindi speakers in Gujarat is similar (about 1.6 per cent), the degree of maintenance of Hindi is much higher than that of Tamil, because Hindi is a national language while Tamil is only a regional and state language. Similarly, English is a minority language in every state. However, its maintenance is very high. The two cases of Hindi and English support the hypothesis of the correlation between a higher functional load and the maintenance of languages. Another important factor to note is that the implementation of the three-language formula is almost impossible when the mother tongue of the speakers is tribal and does not have a script, a standard code or literature. In the absence of these, it is not possible for the education department to produce teaching materials to ensure teaching of the mother tongue, even at the elementary/primary level. Young children who are speakers of tribal languages tend to begin to learn the state language at the primary level of education, and soon become bilingual. The use of the state language in school further causes the reduction of the domain of use of their first (tribal) language because bilingual children tend to use the state language (as opposed to their mother tongue) in most public domains. After a couple of generations, the language of home (of the tribal communities) is gradually replaced by the dominant state language, thus causing severe attrition of the tribal language. In contrast, those children who do not go to school tend to preserve their languages (tribal languages) as their use at home is maintained. This phenomenon supports the hypothesis that a guaranteed functional load (i.e. sustained use in a domain) guarantees maintenance of a language while the reduction and/or elimination of functional load leads to language attrition.
5. Language Attitudes, Functional Load and Minority Languages

5.1. This section covers some of the internal reasons for the reduction of the functional load of minority languages resulting in their rapid shift and attrition. One of the major factors affecting the maintenance or shift of minority languages is the speakers’ perception of their own languages. Modernisation of Indian society has resulted (in addition to the mechanisation mentioned above) in the need to acquire a certain type of linguistic capital for sustained upward mobility in society. English, Hindi and other regional state languages (in that order) present a hierarchy of the power of linguistic capital. Technology for communication at the state, national and international levels has promoted unprecedented vigour in the use of English (although regional languages are catching up). In the domains of production, sustenance, promotion of any product (both material and ideological), linguistic capital plays an important role. In India, the labour market in all domains is dominated by English and regional languages.

**Power hierarchy**

- English High
- Regional/state languages
- Minority languages Low

5.2. In other words, the functional load of English and the regional languages is extremely high compared with that of minority languages, therefore it is not surprising that speakers of minority languages perceive their languages as “powerless” in terms of their functionality in society. Several studies show that speakers of minority languages do not think that it is useful or important to learn their first language. Singh (2001) points
out that out of the total 7.8 per cent tribal population in India, only 4 per cent speaks tribal languages. Breton (1997, 30–31) also illustrates the phase of transition of a large number of tribal languages towards the respective dominant languages. Razz and Ahmed (1990) claim that half of India’s tribal population have already lost their languages, and that people have assimilated with the dominant linguistic group, adopting the dominant language as their mother tongue. Abbi (1995, 177) supports the above claim: “It is sad that the Kurux and Kharia languages are quickly disappearing from most of the urbanised area of Ranch district. This trend indicates that the urban tribals seldom consider it their privilege to speak their mother tongues. On the contrary, ignorance of the tribal languages is regarded as an enhancement of status and prestige. In speaking Hindi they feel superior in comparison to other fellow-tribals who cannot speak it.” This negative attitude towards their languages has resulted in their shift to the dominant languages and a drastic reduction in their use.

5.3. The study in Pandharipande (1992) shows that the dialects of Marathi spoken around the Nagpur area corroborate the above claims about the attitudes of minority language speakers. As part of a survey, educated farmers in the 30–35 age group were interviewed. They controlled both standard Marathi and their dialect (Varhadi) of Marathi. These subjects, unlike their parents, had replaced the use of their dialect by standard Marathi, even at home. They readily admitted that the retention of their own dialect would hamper their socioeconomic success in the rapidly urbanising society of Maharashtra. However, they did not think that the loss of their code would result in the loss of their (sub)cultural identity. In fact, they thought that they could retain their identity through their rituals, foods and their “unique values” towards life. The minority speakers feel that they must control the dominant code in order to compete and succeed in the dominant culture. A similar case is that of the Hindi dialects in the northern parts of India. These dialects, Braj, Bhaka, Bangru, Bundelkhandi, and other closely related languages such as Maghai, Maithili and Bhojpuri, are rapidly being replaced by Khadi Boli (Standard Hindi) which is the dominant language in the area. Most speakers of the dialects can also speak Hindi.
5.4. An important point to note here is that there is not an invariable correlation between maintenance of language and maintenance of culture. Diachronic evidence supports this claim. The Persian community that migrated to India in the seventh century has lost its language but has meticulously maintained its ethnic identity through preservation of a religious and cultural identity separate from the dominant culture and society.

5.5. In contrast, some minority linguistic communities seem to have strong language loyalties which they use for retention of their ethnic identity as well as to secure sociopolitical rights. The Santali language movement is a case in point (Mahapatra 1979). Santals demanded the establishment of a separate province for the tribes of Chota Nagpur and introduced Santali as the language of schools. Similarly, Sindhi and Konkani are preserved due to the extreme loyalty of the speakers towards their languages.

6. A Changing Equation of Language and Culture

6.1. Another dimension of speakers’ attitudes towards their languages is a changing perception of their own cultural identity. The modernisation and technological development of the country has created a new vision of homogeneous culture with modern amenities available to all, where individuals are judged by their ability to succeed in the (apparently) fair competition. The road to success, in this view, is carved out through science and technology. As a result, languages such as English and Hindi are perceived as mechanisms to achieve the “dream of success”. This overarching vision of culture is commonly shared by all, majority as well as minority communities. Their choice of language is therefore determined by their view of their “imagined or aspired” identity. The Bhils and Gonds in Maharashtra are keener to move up the economic ladder than to retain their tribal identity. When I asked a Tulu (minority language) speaker (a maid) in Mumbai why she did not speak Tulu to her children, she said, “I want her to go to law school. I do not want her to be a maid when she grows up. She should know English and Marathi.” With great pride, she asked her daughter to recite an English poem to me, as if proclaiming her victory over the linguistic barrier!
7. Functional Load, Functional Transparency and Language Maintenance

7.1. I argue above that minority languages are prone to attrition as they are being replaced by other dominant languages in almost all public domains. In other words, attrition of minority languages is directly related to their reduced functional load. In the following discussion I provide evidence to support the assumption of a correlation between functional load and language maintenance. A language with a higher functional load shows a higher degree of maintenance than a language with a lower degree of functional load. For example, the regional languages in India are used in many more domains than the tribal languages. While regional languages are maintained, tribal languages face attrition, leading to death. American-Indian languages in North America and tribal languages in Australia are rapidly being replaced by the dominant languages in every domain (see Fishman 1991). Haugen’s classic work on the Norwegian language in the United States (Haugen 1953) also shows that, over a period of time, the Norwegian language spoken by Norwegian immigrants was gradually replaced by English in almost all domains, leading to shift of the Norwegian language. Similar cases are also noted by Dorian in her 1982 work on loss and maintenance in contact situations, which points out that English and Russian are displacing many indigenous languages in Australia and the Soviet Union, respectively, while English is not endangering the native languages of India (Fishman 1977). The reason is that the indigenous languages in India have retained their functional domains (i.e. official context, local business, schools, etc.). Dorian (1982) also refers to Hebrew as an example of revival of a language by the national/political policy of making it functional in virtually all domains of use (Dorian 1982, 44). Derhemi (2002 and forthcoming), in her case study of Arbresh in Italy, points out how the language is in a dangerous phase of attrition in Italy due to its displacement by Italian in many public domains such as school, media, business, etc. Crystal (2000, 83), discussing why languages die, claims that in South America the indigenous languages are left alone as they are not viewed as a serious threat to national unity. However, as he points out, these languages are not used in any major public domains of prestige. “People find they have fewer opportunities to use their language, because it has been marginalised. It is not
found in official domains such as local offices of civil service, and the local banks. It is not found in the media. It is not found as the language of higher education” (Crystal 2000, 83). The presence of these languages in unimportant domains creates what Fishman (1987) calls, “the ‘folklorisation’ of a language – the use of indigenous languages only in irrelevant or unimportant domains” (Crystal 2000, 83). Crystal further claims, “And with each loss of a domain, it should be noted, there is a loss of vocabulary, discourse patterns, and stylistic range. It is easy to see how languages would eventually die, simply because, having been denuded of most of its domains, there is hardly any subject matter left for people to talk about, and hardly any vocabulary to do it with.” In his monumental work on *Reversing Language Shift*, Fishman (1991) describes the case of the Irish language, which is being consciously revived by making it functional in the public domains of musical recitals, drama, school education, workplace, etc. These examples clearly demonstrate two points: (a) languages are endangered or die when their functional load is reduced in the public domain; and (b) they are maintained when their functional load is retained or increased.

7.2. In the above discussion, it is claimed that “functional load” provides a parameter for defining minority languages. It is assumed that the degree of functional load can be measured by the number of functional domains of the languages, i.e. the higher the number, the higher the functional load. I would argue here that the number of domains is not the only parameter for measuring the degree of functional load, but that “functional transparency” is another important parameter. Functional transparency can be explained as follows: if a language A is the only language used to perform a particular function in a particular domain, then language A can be said to have “functional transparency” vis-à-vis that function. In contrast, if the same function is performed by more than one language, the languages involved are said to be not transparent (but opaque) to that function. A language with higher functional transparency can be said to have a higher functional load compared with a language that does not have functional transparency. For example, the only language used for science and technology in India is English. Therefore, English can be said to be transparent to this function. Similarly, regional languages (in their native states) are almost exclusively used at home, thereby command
functional transparency in that domain. In Mumbai, the pidgin Hindi (Bazaar Hindi) is almost exclusively used as the “market language”, thereby claiming transparency to the function of a link language (in the multilingual community in Mumbai). I argue that the invariable correlation between the language and its function makes the language transparent to that function.

7.3. In contrast, two languages are generally used as alternatives by immigrants in their non-native context. That is, they begin to use the dominant language (of the country/place of immigration) along with their native language in various domains (home, social gatherings, etc.) where they earlier used their native language exclusively. In this case, their native language does not remain transparent to the function. Though the number of domains in which their native language is used is higher than the domain of Bazaar Hindi, its functional load will be said to be lower than Bazaar Hindi. This situation is fairly common within minority languages in India. Many minority languages spoken exclusively at home at one point in time, gradually begin to be accompanied by the dominant language when children begin schooling in that language. This use of two languages (minority and dominant) reduces the functional transparency of minority languages.

7.4. Some other cases fall between the two extremes, where a language may not be exclusively used for a function but there is a high correlation between the language and its function. A good example of this is the Sanskrit language, which in India is closely connected to the context of Hinduism (although other languages also perform the same or a similar function).
7.5. The hierarchy of functional load can be presented as follows:

1. + functional transparency + number of domains
2. + functional transparency − number of domains
3. − functional transparency + number of domains
4. − functional transparency − number of domains

7.6. The above diagram shows relatively high/low degrees of functional load. Languages such as English and regional languages in India fall into category (1) as they all carry a high degree of transparency as well as a high number of domains. Sanskrit and Bazaar Hindi belong to category (2), where the functional transparency is high but the number of domains is low. Categories (3) and (4) show the phases of attrition of minority languages. In the first phase (3), minority languages are used along with the dominant language (thus losing functional transparency); and in the second phase (4), the dominant language displaces minority languages, leading to their disappearance.

7.7. The question of maintenance and shift of languages is related to the above. Can we assume that a high degree of functional load is a necessary as well as an adequate condition for the maintenance of a language? The answer is as follows: a language with a higher functional load has a better chance of survival than a language with a lower functional load. For example, the regional languages, with their higher functional load, are more likely to be maintained in India than the tribal languages with a very low functional load. However, a language with a higher degree of transparency (and low number of domains, see category (2)) has a better chance of survival than a language with a high number of domains but low transparency.

7.8. Evidence to support this hypothesis comes from the fact that languages involved in a diglossic situation generally show a high degree of maintenance compared with languages used to perform identical functions. In a multilingual country such as India,
each (multilingual) community maintains stable bi/multilingualism as long as functional transparency is maintained across languages or, in other words, the situation is di/multiglossic.

8. Conclusion

8.1. The above discussion shows that minority languages can be defined on the basis of their low prestige, which is the result of their low functional load in the public domain. “Functional load” can be used as a diagnostic tool to predict maintenance or attrition of languages. It is further shown that external factors (language policies, modernisation) as well as internal factors (attitudes of speakers) contribute to the enhancement or retardation of minority languages. Two main points emerge: (a) culture can be maintained without the language; and (b) perception of the (desired) identity changes over time and therefore the choice of language to express that identity also changes. The paper brings out the complexity of the issues related to definitions and the desirability of language maintenance. The hypothesis proposed makes a strong case for the need to raise the functional load of minority languages to prevent their shift and/or attrition.

Annex

Table 1: Scheduled Languages

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**Table 2: Non-scheduled Languages**

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