

English as a Prestige Language and Its Impact on Tribal Language Use: A Field-Based Study

Gyati Nado Yami

Guest Lecturer, Department of English, Govt. Model Degree college, Palin

Abstract

The increasing dominance of English as a global and national prestige language has significantly reshaped linguistic hierarchies within tribal societies, where language functions as a core marker of identity, cultural continuity, and indigenous knowledge systems. This study examines the role of English in accelerating language shift and ecological imbalance in tribal linguistic contexts, with particular reference to patterns of language use, intergenerational transmission, and community attitudes toward indigenous languages. Drawing on both secondary sources—such as sociolinguistic literature, policy documents, and UNESCO reports—and primary data collected through a field survey of 60 respondents from tribal communities, the study provides an empirically grounded analysis of contemporary language dynamics. The findings indicate that English operates not merely as a communicative tool but as symbolic and socio-economic capital, strongly associated with education, employment, and upward mobility. This prestige has led to a functional redistribution of languages, wherein English dominates formal domains such as schooling and administration, while tribal languages are increasingly confined to domestic and ceremonial spaces. Such domain restriction has weakened intergenerational transmission and diminished the perceived value of indigenous languages, particularly among younger generations. The study argues that the unchecked expansion of English threatens the sustainability of tribal linguistic ecosystems by marginalizing indigenous languages and eroding culturally embedded knowledge systems. It concludes by emphasizing the need for ecologically balanced language policies, mother tongue-based multilingual education, and community-driven revitalization initiatives to ensure that linguistic modernization does not come at the cost of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Keywords: English as a prestige language, tribal languages, linguistic ecology, language shift, indigenous communities

Introduction

Language constitutes one of the most powerful expressions of human culture, embodying collective memory, social values, and distinctive worldviews. For tribal communities, indigenous languages serve not only as tools of communication but also as repositories of ecological knowledge, oral traditions, customary laws, and spiritual beliefs developed over generations of close interaction with local environments. These languages sustain cultural

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continuity and reinforce a sense of belonging, making their survival central to the preservation of indigenous identities.

In contemporary postcolonial societies such as India, however, linguistic landscapes are increasingly shaped by global forces of modernization, education, and economic integration. English, in particular, occupies a dominant position as a language of power, prestige, and mobility. Its association with formal education, salaried employment, governance, and global connectivity has elevated its symbolic value far beyond its communicative function. As a result, English often operates within a hierarchical linguistic order that marginalizes indigenous and minority languages.

Within tribal societies, this hierarchy has profound implications. Indigenous languages are frequently perceived as inadequate for modern aspirations, while English is viewed as a gateway to social advancement. Such perceptions influence language choices within households, schools, and public spaces, gradually reshaping linguistic behavior and attitudes. This article examines how the prestige attached to English has disrupted the linguistic ecology of tribal communities by altering domain usage, weakening intergenerational transmission, and redefining the perceived value of indigenous languages. By situating language shift within broader socio-economic and ideological structures, the study highlights the cultural consequences of linguistic inequality and the urgent need for more inclusive and ecologically sensitive language practices.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both primary and secondary sources to examine language use and attitudes within tribal communities. Primary data were collected through a field survey involving 60 respondents from tribal backgrounds. The survey employed structured questionnaires and informal interviews to gather information on language preference, domains of language use, intergenerational transmission, perceptions of English, and attitudes toward indigenous languages. This empirical data provides insight into lived linguistic practices and community perceptions. In addition, secondary data were drawn from academic journals, books, government policy documents, UNESCO reports, and sociolinguistic studies on language ecology, language shift, and indigenous language endangerment. The triangulation of field-based evidence with established theoretical literature enables a comprehensive analysis of both micro-level linguistic behavior and broader structural forces influencing language change.

Findings

Language Used Most Frequently at Home

The domestic domain is traditionally regarded as the most resilient space for mother tongue maintenance and intergenerational transmission. The graph reveals that Hindi or other regional languages dominate household communication, used by 75% of respondents, while only 16.67% primarily use their tribal language at home. This displacement is significant because it signals a breakdown in the most critical site of language reproduction. Although English use at home remains limited (8.33%), the substitution of tribal languages by regional languages

indicates a multi-layered linguistic hierarchy in which indigenous languages are positioned at the lowest rung. This pattern suggests that language shift is not occurring solely due to English dominance but also through the mediation of regional lingua francas that are perceived as more socially and economically useful. The reduced presence of tribal languages in the home weakens children's early linguistic exposure, which is essential for language competence and emotional attachment. Over time, this erodes linguistic confidence and normalizes the idea that tribal languages are unsuitable for everyday or aspirational communication. The findings thus point to a gradual but structurally significant erosion of linguistic ecology at the household level.

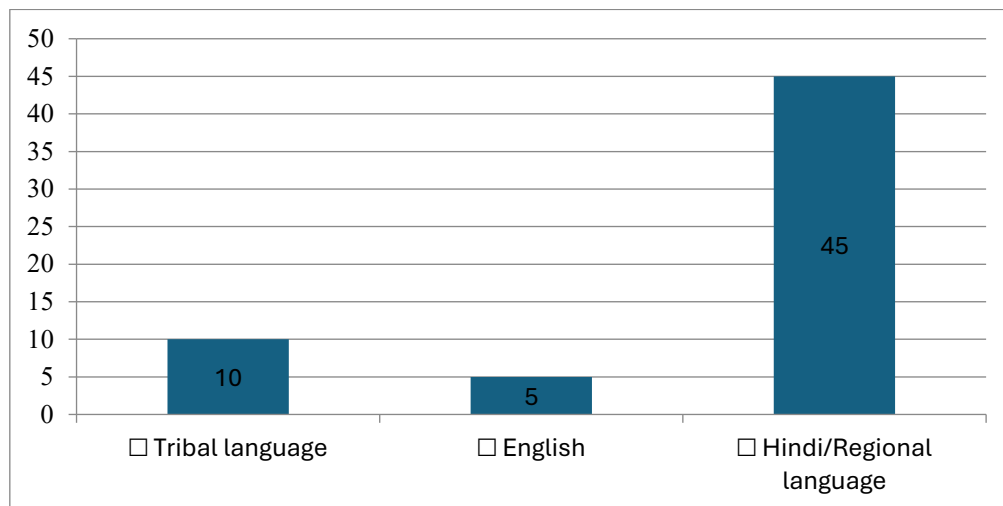


Figure 1: Field Survey

Preferred Language for Education or Formal Learning

The complete preference for English as the medium of education, reported by 100% of respondents, highlights the absolute institutional dominance of English within formal learning domains. This finding reflects not individual linguistic choice but structural compulsion, as educational systems overwhelmingly privilege English as the language of academic legitimacy, evaluation, and mobility. The total absence of tribal languages and regional languages in educational preference demonstrates their systemic exclusion from knowledge production and intellectual validation.

This monopolization of education by English reinforces a hierarchical ideology in which indigenous languages are constructed as intellectually inadequate or pedagogically inefficient. As schooling plays a central role in shaping language attitudes, this exclusion directly contributes to the devaluation of tribal languages in the minds of learners and parents alike. Moreover, children educated exclusively through English are less likely to develop advanced literacy or functional competence in their mother tongue, accelerating language shift and diminishing the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge systems embedded in language.

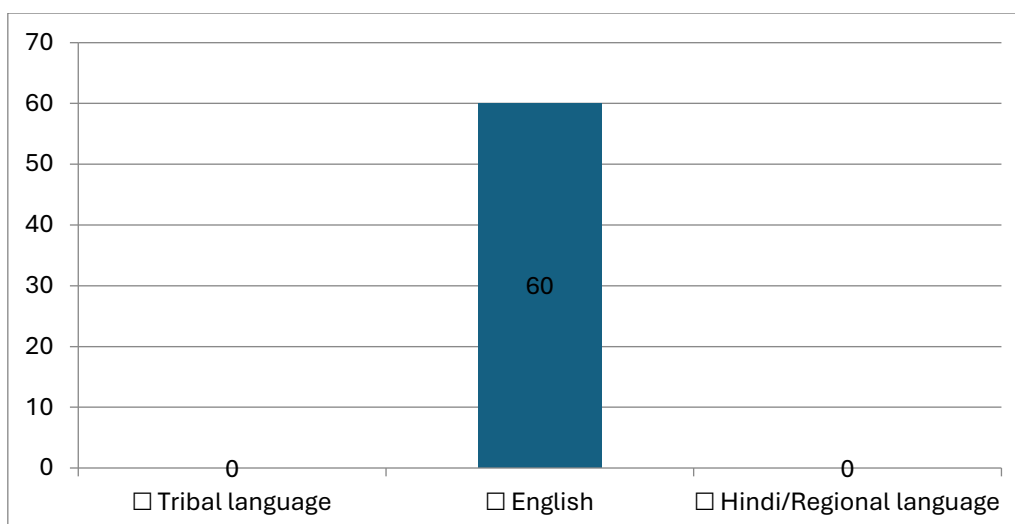


Figure 2: Field Survey

English as Essential for Socio-Economic Mobility

The perception of English as indispensable for socio-economic mobility, affirmed by over 83% of respondents, illustrates the powerful role of English as symbolic capital. English proficiency is not merely associated with communication but with intelligence, employability, and social legitimacy. This widespread belief transforms English into a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates access to economic and social opportunities. Such perceptions exert strong pressure on families to prioritize English acquisition, often at the expense of indigenous languages. Even when tribal languages are emotionally valued, they are increasingly viewed as economically non-viable. This instrumental rationality reshapes language investment patterns, leading parents to consciously or unconsciously reduce the use of tribal languages with their children. The data thus reveal how language shift is driven less by coercion and more by aspirational ideologies linked to survival and advancement in a competitive socio-economic environment.

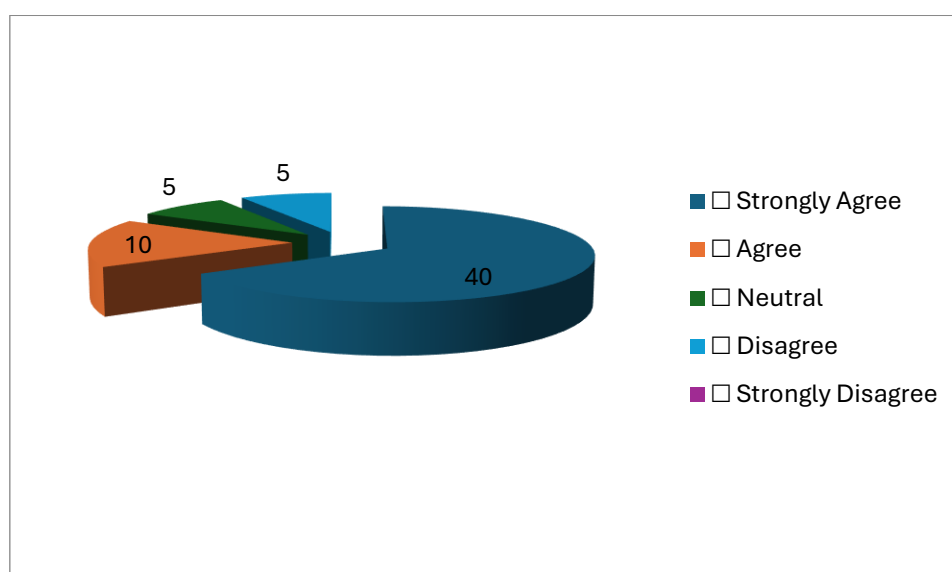


Figure 3: Field Survey

Frequency of Tribal Language Use in Daily Communication

Although the data indicate that tribal languages are still used “often” or “sometimes” in daily communication, the absence of respondents reporting “always” using their tribal language is analytically significant. This suggests that tribal languages no longer function as the primary or default mode of communication. Instead, they coexist with more dominant languages in a context-dependent manner, reflecting unstable bilingualism. From an ecological perspective, this pattern signifies a transitional stage of language shift rather than linguistic stability. The reduced exclusivity of tribal language use diminishes opportunities for linguistic elaboration, creativity, and transmission of complex cultural knowledge. Over time, this can lead to lexical erosion, simplification of grammatical structures, and reduced expressive capacity, further weakening the language’s functional viability.

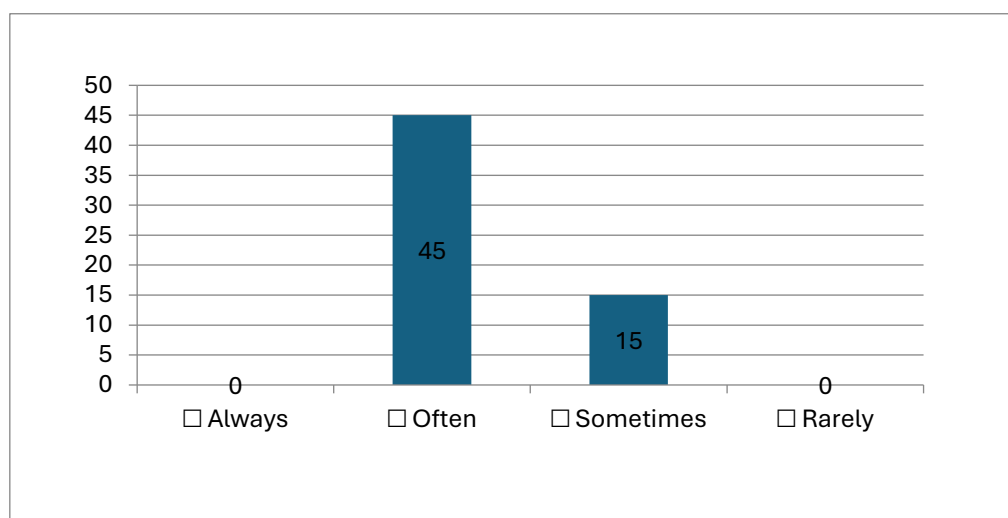


Figure 4: Field Survey

Generational Preference for English

The strong perception that younger generations prefer English (75%) reflects a generational reorientation of linguistic identity. Youth language choices are shaped by schooling, digital media, peer networks, and global cultural flows, all of which overwhelmingly privilege English. This generational divide is particularly concerning because language vitality depends on sustained youth engagement. When younger speakers associate English with modernity and tribal languages with backwardness, language shift becomes self-reinforcing. The uncertainty expressed by some respondents suggests that language preferences among youth are still fluid, presenting a narrow window for intervention. However, without institutional and community support, these preferences are likely to consolidate in favor of English, leading to irreversible linguistic loss.

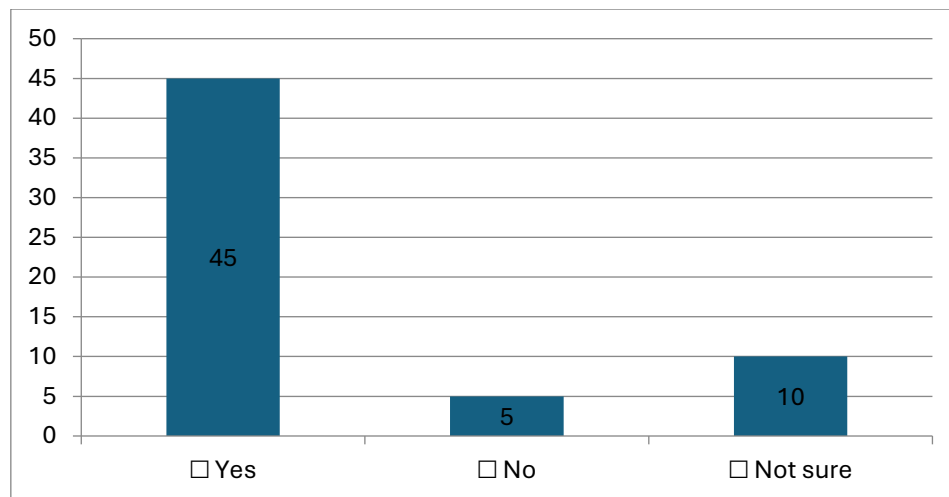


Figure 5: Field Survey

Perceived Value of Tribal Languages in Modern Society

The perception that tribal languages have less value in modern society, shared by 66.67% of respondents, reflects internalized linguistic hierarchies shaped by market-driven ideologies. Language value is increasingly measured in terms of economic utility rather than cultural significance. This instrumental evaluation undermines the symbolic status of tribal languages and weakens speakers' linguistic self-esteem. However, the presence of disagreement and neutrality indicates ideological contestation. These responses suggest that while dominant narratives favor English, alternative value systems rooted in cultural identity persist. This tension highlights the possibility of revalorization if supported by policy, education, and public discourse.

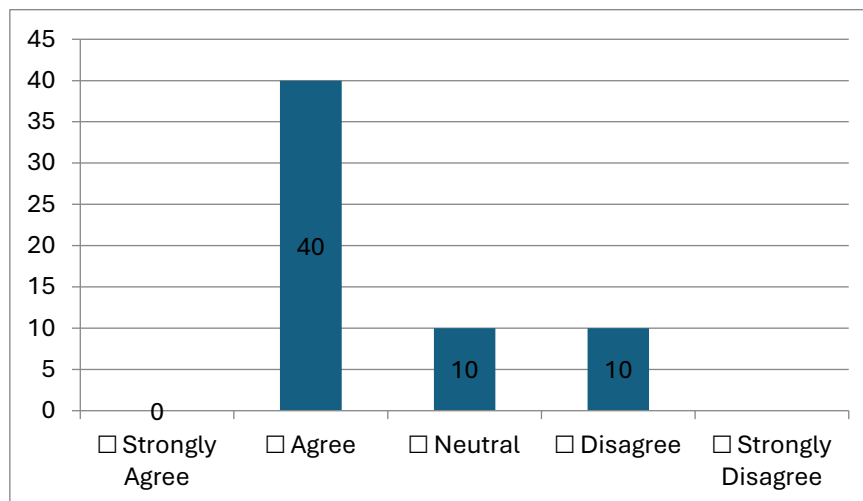


Figure 6: Field Survey

Confinement of Tribal Languages to Informal Domains

The confinement of tribal languages to domestic and informal domains, affirmed by two-thirds of respondents, reflects advanced functional reduction. Languages that are excluded from formal domains such as education, governance, and media lose social authority and visibility.

This confinement reinforces perceptions of tribal languages as private, emotional, and non-intellectual. Such domain restriction limits opportunities for language development and adaptation to modern contexts, making language maintenance increasingly difficult. Over time, this leads to symbolic marginalization and eventual language abandonment, even when emotional attachment remains strong.

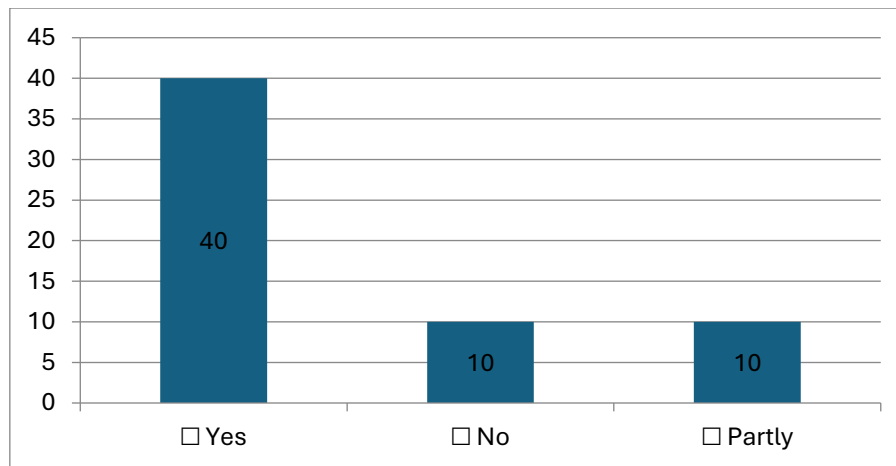


Figure 7: Field Survey

8. Perceived Threat of English to Tribal Language Survival

The data showing that 83.33% of respondents believe English threatens the survival of tribal languages reflects a strong collective awareness of ongoing language shift. Respondents are able to link the growing dominance of English with declining everyday use of their mother tongue, particularly among younger generations. This awareness suggests that language loss is not accidental but visibly experienced through changes in schooling, communication patterns, and social aspirations. At the same time, recognition of threat does not necessarily result in effective language preservation. Many respondents continue to prioritize English because of its association with education and employment. This creates a contradiction in which English is perceived both as a risk to linguistic heritage and as an unavoidable necessity. The finding highlights the need for supportive policies and educational models that allow communities to maintain tribal languages while accessing the benefits of English.

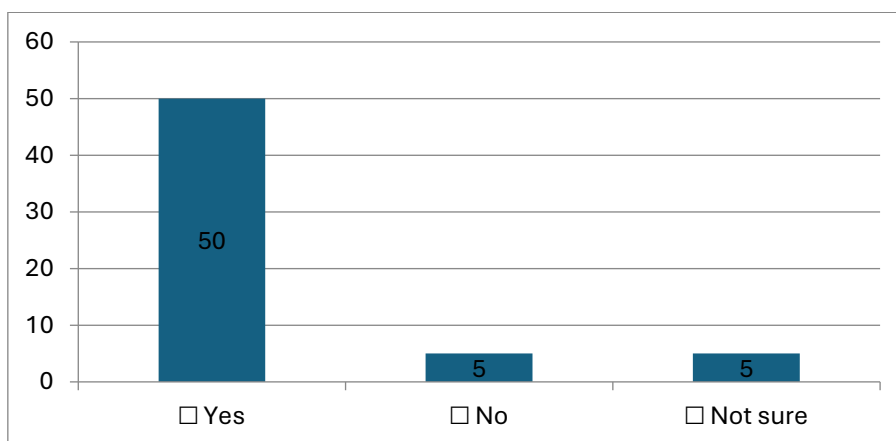


Figure 8: Field Survey

Factors Affecting the Use of Tribal Language in Everyday Life

The data indicate that fascination with foreign languages (45%) is the most influential factor contributing to reduced tribal language use, followed closely by education (40%). This reflects the growing cultural prestige of English and other foreign languages, which are associated with modern lifestyles, global exposure, and social mobility. Such fascination reshapes language preferences, especially among youth, making tribal languages appear less relevant in contemporary contexts. Education further reinforces this shift by privileging English as the primary language of instruction and assessment. Media influence, though reported by fewer respondents (15%), plays a supporting role by normalizing English in entertainment and digital communication. Together, these factors demonstrate that language shift is driven by both institutional structures and changing cultural aspirations, rather than by the inadequacy of tribal languages themselves.

Data	Percentage
Education	40 %
Media	15%
Fascination towards foreign languages	45%

Encouragement of Children to Speak Tribal Language at Home

The findings reveal that encouragement for children to speak the tribal language at home is present but inconsistent. While a small proportion of respondents regularly promote its use, the majority do so only occasionally. This irregular reinforcement weakens the process of intergenerational transmission, which is essential for language survival. The pattern suggests that many parents value their tribal language emotionally but remain uncertain about its practical usefulness in a competitive social environment. As a result, English or regional languages are often prioritized in daily interaction with children. Without consistent encouragement in early childhood, children may develop limited proficiency in their mother tongue, increasing the likelihood of long-term language shift.

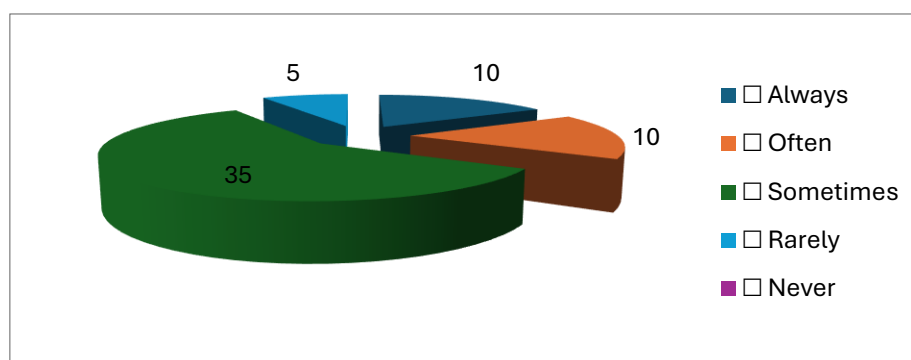


Figure 9: Field Survey

Use of Tribal Language as Medium of Instruction at the Primary Level

The strong support for using tribal languages as a medium of instruction at the primary level reflects community recognition of the educational and cultural benefits of mother-tongue learning. Respondents appear to understand that early education in the child's first language supports better comprehension, cognitive development, and emotional connection to learning. This support contrasts sharply with existing educational practices, where English dominates formal instruction. The gap between community preference and institutional implementation suggests that the marginalization of tribal languages in education results from policy and infrastructural limitations rather than lack of community interest. The findings point to the potential effectiveness of mother tongue–based multilingual education if properly implemented

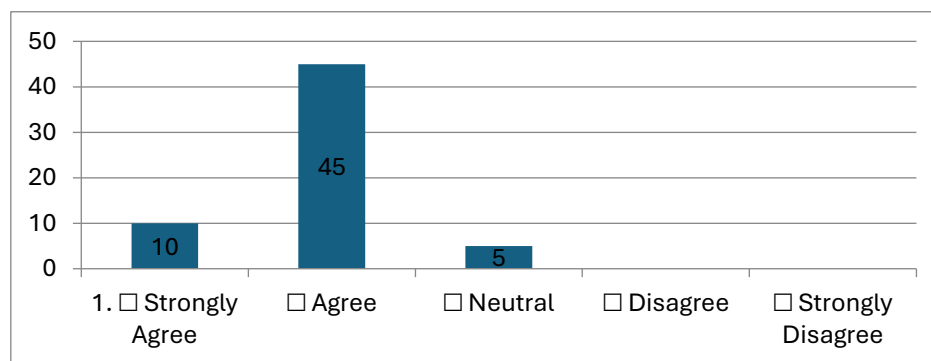


Figure 10: Field Survey

Measures Suggested for Preserving Tribal Languages

Respondents emphasized household usage (60%) as the most important measure for preserving tribal languages, highlighting the central role of families in language maintenance. Regular use at home ensures natural transmission and reinforces children's linguistic confidence. Documentation (30%) was also identified as important, reflecting awareness of the need to preserve linguistic knowledge for future generations. Translation initiatives (10%), though less emphasized, indicate recognition of the value of making tribal languages visible in broader educational and cultural contexts. Together, these suggestions reveal a balanced community perspective that seeks to preserve indigenous languages while continuing to engage with English for wider opportunities.

Data	Percentage
Household Usage	60
Documentation	30
Translation	10

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the growing dominance of English as a prestige language has significantly restructured the linguistic ecology of tribal communities, producing hierarchical imbalances that threaten the vitality of indigenous languages. While English plays an undeniably important role in facilitating education, employment, and socio-economic mobility, its symbolic elevation has contributed to the marginalization of tribal languages by restricting them largely to domestic and informal domains. The findings reveal that language shift is not a neutral or inevitable process but one deeply shaped by changing language ideologies, institutional priorities, and aspirations linked to modernity.

Field survey data indicate a gradual erosion of intergenerational transmission, particularly among younger generations exposed to English-medium education and globalized cultural norms. As tribal languages lose functional domains and social legitimacy, their capacity to transmit cultural knowledge, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom is weakened. At the same time, the widespread recognition among respondents that English dominance threatens tribal languages reflects a growing awareness of linguistic vulnerability and cultural loss.

The study argues that sustainable solutions lie not in resisting English, but in adopting an ecologically balanced multilingual framework that values linguistic diversity. Mother tongue-based multilingual education at the primary level, greater institutional recognition of tribal languages, and community-driven revitalization efforts are essential for restoring linguistic balance. Ultimately, safeguarding tribal languages is not merely a linguistic concern but a broader cultural and social imperative, crucial for preserving indigenous identities, knowledge systems, and social equity in an increasingly globalized world.

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