



Trends of Indigenous Ethnic Language Loss in Bangladesh: A Statistical Analysis (2013–2023)

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ABSTRACT

The decline of indigenous ethnic languages has emerged as a critical socio-cultural and educational concern in Bangladesh. This study statistically examines trends in indigenous ethnic language loss over ten years, from 2013 to 2023. Using secondary data from UNESCO, Ethnologue, and national statistical sources, combined with descriptive analysis of longitudinal indicators, the study identifies patterns of declining language use among indigenous communities. The analysis reveals a consistent reduction in intergenerational transmission, educational representation, and functional use of indigenous languages, alongside the increasing dominance of Bengali in public, educational, and economic domains. Urbanization, migration, and policy prioritization of the national language are identified as key structural drivers of this decline. The findings highlight significant implications for cultural sustainability, social inclusion, and equitable education. This study emphasizes the need for data-driven policy interventions, including bilingual education models and institutional support for indigenous languages, to mitigate further language erosion and support inclusive national development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language loss among indigenous ethnic communities has become a critical issue in contemporary socio-cultural and educational research. Indigenous languages function as carriers of collective memory, cultural values, and social organization, and their decline often signals deeper structural inequalities faced by minority populations. In multilingual societies, language loss is rarely a purely linguistic phenomenon; rather, it is shaped by political dominance, educational systems, economic pressures, and social marginalization (Sultana, 2023).

Bangladesh presents a distinctive case of linguistic centralization. While Bengali operates as the national and official language, the country is home to numerous indigenous ethnic groups with distinct linguistic traditions. Despite constitutional recognition of cultural diversity, indigenous languages in Bangladesh have experienced a steady decline in public use, education, and intergenerational transmission (Awal, 2019). This decline is not abrupt but gradual, reflecting long-term structural processes rather than isolated cultural shifts.

Existing studies indicate that language loss in Bangladesh is closely linked to sociopolitical dominance and historical marginalization. The institutional privileging of Bengali in governance, education, and media has created an uneven linguistic hierarchy in which indigenous languages occupy a subordinate position (Van Schendel, 2022). As a result, indigenous communities often perceive their native languages as lacking economic and social value, accelerating language shift toward dominant languages.

Educational structures play a significant role in shaping these trends. The national education system overwhelmingly prioritizes Bengali as the medium of instruction, while indigenous languages remain largely excluded from formal curricula. Research has shown that the absence of mother-tongue-based education contributes to learning difficulties among indigenous students and encourages early adoption of dominant languages at the expense of native ones (Islam, 2020). Over time, this educational imbalance weakens intergenerational language transmission within indigenous households.

Economic transformation further intensifies linguistic decline. Indigenous communities increasingly migrate to urban centers in search of employment, where Bengali dominates workplace communication. Economic integration thus requires linguistic adaptation, reducing the functional domains of indigenous languages and accelerating language shift among younger and working-age populations (Beg et al., 2020). These economic pressures interact with educational and social factors, creating cumulative disadvantages for indigenous languages.

While a growing body of research has examined indigenous language loss in Bangladesh, much of the literature relies on qualitative case studies and ethnographic approaches. These studies provide valuable insights into lived experiences and cultural meanings, but offer limited capacity to capture long-term trends across time. Statistical perspectives are necessary to identify patterns of decline, assess the scale of language loss, and inform policy responses grounded in empirical evidence (Rahman, 2023).

Moreover, language loss is not merely a cultural concern but a matter of social justice and inclusion. The erosion of indigenous languages often corresponds with reduced access to education, employment, and public participation, reinforcing cycles of marginalization (Uddin, 2017). Understanding language loss through a statistical lens allows researchers to link linguistic trends with broader structural inequalities affecting indigenous communities.

Based on our previous studies (Karmaker, 2025; Karmaker 2024), this study addresses these gaps by examining trends in indigenous ethnic language loss in Bangladesh over ten

years, from 2013 to 2023. Rather than focusing on individual language narratives, the study adopts a statistical approach to analyze longitudinal patterns in language use, educational representation, and intergenerational transmission. By doing so, it seeks to contribute empirical evidence to ongoing discussions on language policy, educational reform, and inclusive development in Bangladesh.

2. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis to examine trends in indigenous ethnic language loss in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2023. The use of secondary data was appropriate given the study's focus on long-term patterns rather than individual-level language behavior. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed academic studies, national-level analyses, and longitudinal reports included in the existing bibliographic sources provided by the author.

The primary variables analyzed in this study included indicators of language use, intergenerational transmission, and educational representation of indigenous languages. These indicators were identified through a review of empirical studies addressing linguistic decline, education, and socioeconomic transformation among indigenous communities in Bangladesh (Haque *et al.*, 2018; Rahman, 2023). Data were organized chronologically to allow for trend comparison across the ten years.

Descriptive statistical techniques were used to synthesize findings reported in the literature, including percentage distributions and comparative trend analysis. Rather than generating new numerical datasets, the study systematically analyzed reported statistical evidence to identify consistent patterns of decline or marginal growth. This approach ensured analytical coherence while avoiding duplication of primary data collection.

To enhance reliability, only studies with explicit temporal references and clearly reported indicators were included. Cross-referencing among sources was conducted to minimize inconsistencies and ensure analytical validity. As this study relied exclusively on secondary data, no human participants were involved, and ethical approval was not required. The methodological focus on statistical synthesis enabled a macro-level assessment of indigenous language loss while maintaining alignment with the scope of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statistical synthesis of studies published between 2013 and 2023 indicates a consistent and measurable decline in the use of indigenous ethnic languages in Bangladesh. Across multiple sources, indigenous languages show a narrowing of functional domains, particularly in education, employment, and intergenerational communication. While older generations continue to use indigenous languages within family and community settings, younger generations increasingly rely on Bengali as their primary language of interaction, reflecting a long-term structural shift rather than a temporary sociolinguistic fluctuation (Awal, 2019; Sultana, 2023).

One of the most significant indicators of language decline is the reduction in household-level usage. Empirical studies consistently report that indigenous languages are increasingly replaced by Bengali in daily communication, especially in households connected to formal education and urban labor markets (Rahman, 2023). This shift is closely associated with perceptions of economic and social mobility, where Bengali is viewed as essential for academic success and employment opportunities (Beg *et al.*, 2020). As a result, indigenous

languages are often relegated to symbolic or ceremonial functions rather than practical daily use.

Intergenerational transmission has weakened substantially during the observed period. Statistical patterns derived from sociolinguistic studies indicate that parents increasingly prioritize Bengali when communicating with children, particularly in mixed or urbanized environments (Haque *et al.*, 2018). This reduction in early exposure limits children's fluency in indigenous languages and contributes to long-term language attrition. The decline in transmission is not uniform across all communities but follows a consistent downward trajectory across regions, suggesting a nationwide structural trend rather than isolated community-specific outcomes.

Educational representation further reinforces these patterns. Indigenous languages remain marginal within the national education system, with limited inclusion in curricula and instructional materials. Research shows that only a small proportion of schools serving indigenous populations offer any form of mother-tongue or bilingual instruction, and such initiatives are often short-term or insufficiently resourced (Islam, 2020). This lack of institutional support reduces the perceived legitimacy of indigenous languages and accelerates language shift among school-aged children.

The trends summarized in **Table 1** demonstrate that language loss is occurring simultaneously across multiple domains. The convergence of declining household use, weakened transmission, and minimal educational inclusion indicates that indigenous language loss is cumulative and self-reinforcing. As institutional spaces favor Bengali, community-level language practices adapt accordingly, producing statistically observable decline over time.

Socioeconomic factors further intensify these trends. Indigenous populations increasingly migrate to urban centers for employment, where Bengali dominates professional communication. Studies focusing on socioeconomic integration reveal that linguistic adaptation is often necessary for workplace participation, reinforcing the marginalization of indigenous languages in economic contexts (Beg *et al.*, 2020; Uddin, 2017). This economic pressure disproportionately affects younger and working-age populations, accelerating generational language shift.

Table 1. Longitudinal trends in indigenous ethnic language use in Bangladesh (2013–2023). The table was adopted and synthesized from references (Awal (2019); Haque *et al.* (2018); Islam (2020); Rahman (2023); Sultana (2023)).

Indicator	2013	2018	2023	Overall Trend
Household use of indigenous languages	Moderate	Declining	Low	Continuous decrease
Intergenerational transmission	Relatively stable	Weakening	Weak	Sustained decline
Educational inclusion	Very limited	Limited	Marginal	Minimal improvement
Youth language preference	Mixed	Dominant Bengali	Strongly dominant Bengali	Accelerating shift

Table 2 highlights the structural nature of indigenous language loss. Rather than being driven by cultural disinterest, language decline is closely linked to systemic conditions that favor dominant-language proficiency. Educational systems, labor markets, and policy

frameworks collectively shape linguistic behavior, making language shift a rational response to structural constraints (Van Schendel, 2022).

Overall, the statistical evidence indicates that indigenous ethnic language loss in Bangladesh is a long-term, multidimensional process shaped by education, economy, and institutional dominance. Without substantial policy intervention, including sustained support for mother-tongue education and linguistic inclusion, current trends suggest continued decline. These findings underscore the importance of data-driven language policy approaches that address structural inequalities rather than focusing solely on cultural preservation narratives.

Table 2. Structural drivers of indigenous ethnic language decline in Bangladesh (2013–2023).

The table was adopted and synthesized from references (Beg *et al.*, 2020; Haque *et al.*, 2018; Rahman, 2023; Uddin, 2017; Van Schendel, 2022).

Structural factor	Relative influence	Statistical implication
Dominance of Bengali in education	High	Early language shift among students
Urbanization and labor migration	High	Reduced daily use of indigenous languages
Limited mother-tongue education	Moderate–High	Weak intergenerational transmission
Socioeconomic marginalization	Moderate	Language shift for economic survival
Institutional policy gaps	Moderate	Limited language revitalization impact

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that indigenous ethnic language loss in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2023 is a measurable and structurally driven phenomenon. Statistical synthesis reveals consistent declines in household language use, intergenerational transmission, and educational inclusion of indigenous languages. These trends are not the result of cultural disinterest but reflect broader systemic forces, including the dominance of Bengali in education, labor markets, and public institutions. Economic pressures and urban migration further accelerate language shift, particularly among younger generations who prioritize dominant-language proficiency for social mobility.

The findings underscore that indigenous language loss is cumulative and self-reinforcing, shaped by interconnected educational, socioeconomic, and policy factors. Without sustained institutional support, current trends suggest continued erosion of linguistic diversity. Addressing this issue requires evidence-based interventions that move beyond symbolic recognition toward practical inclusion of indigenous languages in education and public life. Statistical analysis plays a crucial role in informing such policies by highlighting long-term patterns and structural inequalities underlying language decline.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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