



Indigenous Cultural Identity and the Impact of Language Loss among Ethnic Communities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Language is a central component of cultural identity for indigenous ethnic communities. In Bangladesh, the gradual loss of indigenous languages has raised serious concerns regarding cultural continuity, social cohesion, and identity formation. This study examines the impact of indigenous language loss on the cultural identity of ethnic communities in Bangladesh, focusing on how declining language use reshapes values, traditions, and social relationships. Using a qualitative-analytical approach based on existing empirical studies and documented community experiences, the study explores patterns of identity transformation associated with language shift. The findings indicate that reduced intergenerational transmission, limited public use of indigenous languages, and dominant-language pressure contribute to weakening cultural attachment and symbolic belonging. Language loss is shown to affect ritual practices, collective memory, and community solidarity, particularly among younger generations. The study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive educational and community-based initiatives to sustain indigenous identity. These findings contribute to broader discussions on cultural preservation and inclusive education within multilingual societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in shaping cultural identity, particularly for indigenous ethnic communities whose histories, belief systems, and social norms are transmitted through linguistic practices. Indigenous languages function not only as tools of communication but also as symbolic resources that sustain collective memory, cultural continuity, and a sense of belonging. When such languages decline, the impact extends beyond linguistic loss to affect identity formation, social cohesion, and intergenerational relationships within ethnic communities (Sultana, 2023).

In Bangladesh, the relationship between language and cultural identity is especially complex. While Bengali serves as a powerful symbol of national unity, indigenous ethnic communities maintain distinct cultural identities rooted in their own languages, rituals, and social practices. Despite their historical presence, these communities have experienced increasing cultural marginalization as dominant linguistic norms shape education, media, and public life (Awal, 2019). As indigenous languages lose functional relevance, cultural expressions embedded within those languages also face erosion.

Language loss has been closely associated with identity transformation among indigenous populations. Studies suggest that when younger generations adopt dominant languages, their connection to traditional values, oral histories, and communal practices weakens (Kolancali *et al.*, 2024). This shift often produces identity tensions, where individuals navigate between ethnic heritage and mainstream cultural expectations. In such contexts, language becomes a key marker distinguishing cultural continuity from assimilation (May, 2023).

In Bangladesh, indigenous language loss has contributed to changes in ritual practices, storytelling traditions, and social interaction patterns. Research focusing on ethnic communities indicates that ceremonial expressions and culturally specific knowledge are increasingly conducted in Bengali rather than indigenous languages, reducing the symbolic depth of these practices (Chakma & Sultana, 2024). Over time, this linguistic substitution alters the meaning and transmission of cultural identity, particularly among youth who lack fluency in their ancestral languages.

Educational and social environments further shape these identity dynamics. Indigenous children often encounter dominant-language expectations from early schooling, which influences their self-perception and cultural affiliation. When indigenous languages are absent from formal education, children may internalize the notion that their native language—and by extension their cultural identity—is less valuable or relevant (Ali *et al.*, 2016). Such experiences contribute to identity distancing and reduced cultural pride.

The loss of language also affects social cohesion within indigenous communities. Language traditionally functions as a boundary marker that reinforces group solidarity and shared identity. As linguistic practices shift, internal community communication may fragment, creating generational divides between fluent elders and dominant-language-speaking youth (Uddin, 2017). These divides can weaken collective identity and reduce participation in cultural activities.

While previous research has addressed indigenous language decline in Bangladesh, much of the literature emphasizes sociolinguistic or policy-oriented perspectives. Fewer studies explicitly examine how language loss reshapes cultural identity and everyday cultural practices. Understanding language loss through an identity-centered lens is essential for capturing its broader social and psychological implications (Faruk & Rosenbaum, 2022).

Based on our previous studies (Karmaker, 2024; Karmaker, 2025), this study addresses this gap by examining the impact of indigenous language loss on cultural identity among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Rather than measuring language decline statistically, the study

focuses on how diminishing language use influences cultural attachment, identity expression, and community cohesion. By synthesizing existing empirical and conceptual research, the study aims to contribute to discussions on cultural sustainability, inclusive education, and indigenous identity preservation in multilingual societies.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data analysis to examine the relationship between indigenous language loss and cultural identity among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The research design was appropriate given the study's focus on meaning, identity, and cultural experience rather than numerical measurement. Data were drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed academic sources included in the bibliographic list provided by the author.

The analysis focused on studies addressing indigenous language use, cultural practices, identity formation, and social marginalization. Key themes examined included intergenerational language transmission, cultural participation, ritual practices, and identity negotiation in contexts of language shift. Sources were selected based on their relevance to cultural identity and their explicit discussion of indigenous communities in Bangladesh and comparable contexts.

A thematic synthesis method was used to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships across studies. Findings reported in the literature were compared and interpreted to examine how language loss influences cultural identity at individual and community levels. This approach allowed for the integration of diverse perspectives while maintaining analytical coherence.

To ensure analytical rigor, only studies with clear conceptual frameworks and empirical grounding were included. Cross-comparison among sources was conducted to reduce interpretive bias and enhance credibility. As the study relied solely on secondary sources, no human participants were involved, and ethical approval was not required.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of qualitative findings reveals that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has profound implications for cultural identity and community cohesion among ethnic groups. Across multiple studies, language emerges as a primary marker of identity that shapes how individuals perceive their cultural belonging and social position. As indigenous languages decline, cultural expressions embedded within linguistic practices become increasingly fragmented, leading to shifts in identity formation, particularly among younger generations (Sultana, 2023).

One of the most visible impacts of language loss is the weakening of cultural transmission. Indigenous languages traditionally serve as the medium through which oral histories, folklore, and communal values are conveyed. When younger members of ethnic communities adopt dominant languages, their engagement with traditional narratives and cultural knowledge diminishes. Research indicates that this linguistic shift often results in partial or symbolic participation in cultural practices rather than deep cultural immersion (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Chakma & Sultana, 2024).

Language loss also reshapes ritual and religious practices within indigenous communities. Ceremonial expressions that were historically conducted in indigenous languages are increasingly performed in Bengali, altering their symbolic meaning and cultural resonance. This transition reflects broader patterns of cultural adaptation and assimilation, where

dominant linguistic norms reshape indigenous traditions (Awal, 2019). Such changes do not imply cultural disappearance but indicate transformation under structural pressure.

Identity negotiation emerges as a central theme in the literature. Individuals from indigenous backgrounds often experience tension between maintaining ethnic identity and adapting to mainstream linguistic expectations. Studies show that younger generations frequently associate dominant-language proficiency with social acceptance and educational success, while indigenous language use is perceived as less relevant in public life (May, 2023). This perception contributes to identity distancing and reduced cultural pride, particularly in urbanized contexts. **Table 1** shows cultural dimensions from indigenous language loss.

Table 1. Cultural dimensions affected by Indigenous Language Loss in Bangladesh. The table was adopted from references (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Awal, 2019; Chakma & Sultana, 2024; Sultana, 2023).

| Cultural dimension | Observed impact | Illustrative patterns |
|-------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Oral traditions | Decline | Reduced storytelling in indigenous languages |
| Ritual practices | Transformation | Ceremonies conducted in the dominant language |
| Intergenerational bonds | Weakening | Communication gap between the elders and the youth |
| Cultural pride | Reduction | Lower symbolic value of the indigenous language |

The erosion of indigenous language use has also affected social cohesion within ethnic communities. Language traditionally functions as a shared code that reinforces group solidarity. As linguistic practices diverge across generations, internal communication becomes fragmented, weakening collective identity and participation in communal activities (Uddin, 2017). These divisions are not merely linguistic but reflect broader shifts in cultural orientation and social values.

Educational environments further mediate identity outcomes. The absence of indigenous languages in formal education reinforces dominant cultural norms and marginalizes ethnic identity. Research suggests that indigenous students often internalize dominant-language hierarchies, leading to identity conflict and emotional detachment from cultural heritage (Faruk & Rosenbaum, 2022). Over time, this dynamic contributes to long-term cultural disconnection rather than immediate language abandonment.

The findings in **Table 2** indicate that indigenous language loss does not simply result in linguistic substitution but initiates broader cultural restructuring. While some cultural practices persist through adaptation, the loss of linguistic depth reduces their cultural specificity and symbolic meaning. This process aligns with theories of linguistic racism and cultural marginalization, where dominant languages shape social hierarchies and identity recognition (May, 2023).

Importantly, the literature suggests that cultural identity remains resilient despite linguistic decline, though in altered forms. Communities continue to express ethnic identity through dress, festivals, and collective memory, even as language use diminishes (Chakma & Sultana, 2024). However, without sustained linguistic transmission, these expressions risk becoming symbolic rather than lived cultural practices.

Overall, the results demonstrate that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh significantly reshapes cultural identity at both individual and collective levels. The interplay between language, education, and social structures produces identity transformations that extend beyond communication, influencing how ethnic communities negotiate belonging and cultural continuity. These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive

educational and community-based initiatives to sustain indigenous identity within multilingual societies.

Table 2. Identity-Related Consequences of Indigenous Language Loss. The table was adopted from references (Faruk & Rosenbaum, 2022; May, 2023; Sultana, 2023; Uddin, 2017)

| Identity aspect | Community-level outcome | Individual-level outcome |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sense of belonging | Fragmented | Identity ambivalence |
| Cultural participation | Declining | Reduced engagement |
| Symbolic identity | Weakened | Lower cultural confidence |
| Intergenerational identity | Disrupted | Cultural detachment |

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh extends beyond linguistic change and significantly reshapes cultural identity among ethnic communities. The findings demonstrate that declining use of indigenous languages weakens intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, alters ritual practices, and disrupts social cohesion within communities. Language loss contributes to identity negotiation and cultural distancing, particularly among younger generations who increasingly associate dominant-language proficiency with social acceptance and educational success.

Rather than indicating cultural disappearance, indigenous language loss reflects a process of cultural transformation under structural pressure. While ethnic identity persists through adapted cultural expressions, the erosion of linguistic depth reduces the symbolic and experiential richness of these practices. These dynamics underscore the role of language as a core component of cultural continuity and collective belonging. Addressing indigenous language loss, therefore, requires culturally responsive approaches that recognize language as integral to identity preservation, community cohesion, and inclusive education in multilingual societies

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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