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Bhojpuri on the Margins: Language Socialisation and Marginalisation across Urban and Rural Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

This study explores the trajectories of Bhojpuri language socialisation in two contrasting sites of eastern Uttar Pradesh: the urban city of Varanasi and the rural area of Chunar. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with school children, teachers, parents, and elders, the research examines how Bhojpuri is simultaneously sustained in intimate domains and marginalised in formal, educational, and aspirational spaces. Employing the ethnographic approach, data were collected through interviews, participant observations, language diaries and natural discourse transcriptions, enabling a detailed account of everyday negotiations of language use. The analysis is grounded in three interlocking frameworks: the language socialisation paradigm, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, and García-Sánchez's concept of interactional marginalisation. Findings show patterned shifts in language use, experiences of correction and linguistic shame, aspirational ideologies privileging Hindi and English, and emerging practices of Bhojpuri pride and resistance. Together, these results show how children are socialised into viewing Bhojpuri as emotionally rich but economically devalued, while simultaneously carving spaces of symbolic resistance through peer culture and digital media. The study highlights the structural inequalities embedded in India's multilingual ecology and argues for educational policies that respect vernacular languages as heritage carriers and as resources of identity, belonging, and cultural legitimacy.

Keywords: Language Socialisation, Marginalisation, Multilingualism, Symbolic Capital.

Introduction

In northern India, language choice is never merely a matter of communication; it encodes histories of power, social hierarchies, and aspirations for mobility. From the earliest stages of childhood, lullabies, peer interactions, and classroom routines socialise children by introducing them to language and teaching them not only how to speak but also which voices society legitimises and which it silences (1-3). This process becomes particularly fraught in the Bhojpuri-speaking belt of eastern Uttar Pradesh, where nearly fifty million people use Bhojpuri daily. Despite its vitality in homes, oral traditions, and cultural performance, Bhojpuri remains institutionally marginalised. The Census officially categorises it as a Hindi dialect rather than an independent language, and schools, policies, and state bodies frequently devalue it for this reason (4). Although Bhojpuri is institutionally framed as a "dialect" of Hindi, speakers in this study articulated linguistic boundaries in flexible and context-dependent ways. Bhojpuri was consistently identified as the mother tongue associated with intimacy, affect, and local belonging, while Hindi was invoked as a language of schooling, formality, and upward mobility. Rather than perceiving these varieties as mutually exclusive, participants navigated a fluid continuum in practice, shifting registers according to setting and audience. At the same time, this fluidity coexisted with clear ideological distinctions, revealing how linguistic boundaries are interactionally negotiated yet institutionally hierarchised. This study investigates these dynamics through ethnographic research in two contrasting field sites. In Varanasi, an urban centre, Bhojpuri is often ridiculed or sanctioned in classrooms, reflecting dominant ideologies stigmatising local languages. By contrast, in Chunar, a rural setting, Bhojpuri flourishes as the medium of everyday interaction. However, it is conspicuously absent in aspirational domains such as formal schooling and projects of upward mobility. These settings illustrate how language hierarchies are lived and reproduced across diverse contexts. Scholarly work has demonstrated that such hierarchies are not

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accidental but rather historically and structurally constructed. Colonial and post-independence language policies elevated English and Hindi as the "legitimate" languages of education, social advancement, and national identity, relegating other languages to subordinate positions (5-7). In Bourdieu's terms, these dominant codes accumulate symbolic capital, while Bhojpuri continues to be framed as "emotionally rich but economically poor" (8, 9). This politics of erasure is systemic: although the Census of India lists 121 languages with more than 10,000 speakers, only 22 enjoy constitutional recognition in the Eighth Schedule (10, 11). Bhojpuri's absence starkly illustrates how state classification perpetuates inequality. At the micro level, speakers reinforce these broader hierarchies through what García-Sánchez terms interactional marginalisation, a process whereby they downgrade 'minor' languages through ridicule, correction, or fines rather than explicit bans (12-14). However, exclusion is never total. Recent scholarship highlights Bhojpuri's revival in digital spaces, folk performance, and grassroots mobilization, demonstrating that speakers actively reclaim and revalue their linguistic practices (15-17).

The present study poses two central questions within this context: How is Bhojpuri regulated, resisted, and reframed in contemporary Uttar Pradesh? Moreover, what do children's everyday linguistic experiences reveal about the broader processes of inequality in India? The study foregrounds Bhojpuri as a dynamic case of suppression and negotiation by situating children's socialisation at the intersection of institutional regulation and emergent cultural resistance. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and language diaries from Varanasi and Chunar, the study argues that state policy and everyday interaction systematically reproduce Bhojpuri's marginalisation. At the same time, acts of grassroots pride and digital assertion illustrate that socialisation is not a unidirectional process. Instead, Bhojpuri speakers continually contest erasure, reassert their identities, and renegotiate the value of their language.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a layered theoretical lens and a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine how Bhojpuri is marginalised in everyday life. At its foundation lies the language socialisation paradigm, which views language acquisition not only as the mastery of grammar and vocabulary but as an apprenticeship into social values, hierarchies, and ideologies (2, 3). Learning to alternate between Bhojpuri, Hindi, and English involves more than code-switching for Bhojpuri-speaking children. It entails internalizing judgments about which languages are legitimate and which mark them as rural, unschooled, or "backwards." One girl in Varanasi recalled being fined for using Bhojpuri in school and described the humiliation of being made to stand apart from her peers. Such instances show how correction becomes pedagogy, embedding lessons about language and power. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital provides a second interpretive layer, explaining why some languages are framed as resources that can be "cashed in" for jobs, respect, and opportunity, while others are dismissed as non-valuable (8). In both Varanasi and Chunar, parents consistently described English as a "passport to the future," Hindi as a practical necessity for examinations and government work, and Bhojpuri as a language of dil (heart) but not of naukri (employment). This hierarchy was reflected in school practices: English-medium institutions rewarded children with certificates or points for using English, while penalizing lapses into Bhojpuri or, at times, even Hindi. Here, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence becomes relevant: the internalization of a belief that one's mother tongue lacks worth, even while it continues to anchor familial and intimate domains (8). A final conceptual strand is García-Sánchez's idea of interactional marginalisation, which highlights how broader ideologies are enacted in micro-level exchanges (12). In Chunar, Bhojpuri was not formally banned, yet children reported that teachers would respond in Hindi when addressed in Bhojpuri, quietly signaling its irrelevance in "serious" contexts. In Varanasi, exclusion was more overt as children were mocked, ignored, or corrected for using Bhojpuri, reinforcing its illegitimacy in institutional spaces. These subtle and overt practices of marginalisation accumulate across childhood, teaching children to associate Bhojpuri with intimacy and informality but never with prestige or opportunity.

Methodology

The research was framed as a small-scale ethnographic study carried out in two contrasting sites. Varanasi, a bustling urban hub, embodies aspirational Hindi–English norms, while Chunar, a smaller rural town, represents spaces where Bhojpuri continues to be the everyday language of interaction. The choice of these locations was deliberate, shaped not only by their contrasting sociolinguistic settings but also by the researcher's own trajectory growing up in Chunar and later pursuing higher studies in Varanasi. This positionality offered a unique vantage point, balancing insider access with reflexive distance.

The participant group consisted of thirty individuals overlapping the categories of respondents, including twenty schoolchildren (ten from each site): ten parents, ten teachers, and six elders. Snowball sampling facilitated the identification of individuals engaged across multiple domains of language use, such as home, school, and peer groups, thereby ensuring a layered perspective that was examined through three primary tools of structured data collection. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bhojpuri, Hindi, or a combination of both, depending on the participant's comfort level. These explored beliefs about language, experiences of correction, and aspirations for the future. Second, participants kept week-long language-use diaries, recording interactions across Bhojpuri, Hindi, and English and reflecting on how these choices shaped their sense of self. Third, participant observation was central, with the researcher observing classrooms, playgrounds, and household routines while recording corrections, silences, shifts in code, and moments of laughter or embarrassment. Field notes were supplemented with selective discourse transcription to capture natural exchanges in their raw form.

Analysis followed an iterative; manual process, consistent with the study's low-resource and context-sensitive aims. Field notes, diaries, and interview transcripts were analysed following a thematic analysis approach. Initial codes were generated inductively through repeated readings of the data, focusing on recurrent patterns related to linguistic correction, expressions of pride, aspirational orientations, and forms of resistance. These codes were provisionally organized using a colour-based system—red for correction, green for pride, blue for aspiration, and yellow for resistance—to support systematic comparison across sources. In subsequent phases, codes were reviewed, refined, and, where appropriate, merged into broader themes through constant comparison. Analytical saturation was established when further analysis yielded no new codes or thematic distinctions, indicating sufficient depth and coherence across the dataset. Notably, the analysis was interpretive and was afterwards guided by the theoretical lenses. For example, a boy's account of a teacher's silence after he asked a question in Bhojpuri was coded not simply as "correction" but interpreted through García-Sánchez's notion of silence as a form of erasure (12). Similarly, when a parent in Varanasi dismissed Bhojpuri as "gaon ki bhasha" (village language), this was read through Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital as an articulation of devaluation (8).

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. All participants provided informed consent, with parental assent for children. Pseudonyms were used, and audio recording occurred only with explicit permission. The reliance on handwritten notes over digital recording was deliberate, minimizing intrusiveness and aligning with community comfort levels. While this manual, small-scale design limited the dataset, it enabled a depth of cultural intimacy and interpretive nuance that larger surveys might miss.

Ultimately, the theoretical and methodological choices were closely intertwined. Ethnographic tools capture the subtle micro-interactions of marginalisation, while the theoretical frameworks situated these as part of broader structural processes of inequality. Together, they show that Bhojpuri speakers are not simply corrected or ignored in isolated moments but are systematically socialised to place their language on the margins of legitimacy.

Results

The ethnographic exploration of Bhojpuri language socialisation across Varanasi and Chunar reveals a complex terrain where children, parents, and teachers continually negotiate conflicting ideologies of value, identity, and aspiration. These findings point not simply to individual preferences but to systematic processes through which Bhojpuri speakers are socialised into hierarchical structures that position English as the currency of success, Hindi as the marker of respectability, and Bhojpuri as the language of intimacy yet simultaneously of inferiority. Such patterns were not abstract but emerged in the everyday rhythms of correction in classrooms, laughter among peers, parental aspirations for upward mobility, and, more recently, digital acts of resistance that contest dominant narratives.

Domain-Specific Language Shifts

One of the clearest findings is the profound domain-specific shifts in language use that mirror ideological positioning. Across both sites, participants demonstrated consistent compartmentalization: Bhojpuri was confined mainly to domestic and intimate spaces, while Hindi and English dominated educational and aspirational domains.

In urban Varanasi, children displayed an acute awareness of where Bhojpuri could be spoken without social penalty. Language diaries often reflected automatic shifts in practice when moving between home and school. During the fieldwork, C1, a 13-year-old girl in a private school, wrote: “Mummy se Bhojpuri mein baat karti hoon. School mein nahi. Wahan agar main Bhojpuri bolun to sab hanste hain ya ma’am daant deti hain” (I speak Bhojpuri with my mother. Not in school. There, if I speak Bhojpuri, everyone laughs or the teacher scolds). Her account reflects how linguistic boundaries were internalised at a young age.

Teachers reinforced these boundaries institutionally as reflected in the statement of T1, a private school teacher, who explained candidly: “Hamare yahan English bolna zaroori hai. Hindi bhi chal jaati hai, par Bhojpuri bilkul nahi. Bache ko fine bhi lagta hai agar woh Bhojpuri bolte hain” (Here, speaking English is essential. Hindi is acceptable, but Bhojpuri absolutely not. Children are fined if they speak Bhojpuri). Such acts of monetary fines, public correction, and symbolic humiliation reflect what Bourdieu describes as symbolic violence: hierarchies internalised through systematic devaluation rather than overt prohibition (8). Over time, children learn to associate Bhojpuri with shame and exclusion, while valorising English and Hindi as pathways to success.

In the rural context of Chunar, the trajectory of marginalisation was more subtle yet equally powerful. Bhojpuri remained dominant in households and peer exchanges but was systematically excluded from educational legitimacy, as the following classroom interaction of C2, a 12-year-old boy in a government school, observed: “Sab log Bhojpuri mein baat karte hain. Par class mein masterji sirf Hindi mein bolate hain. Kabhi kabhi Bhojpuri bolte hain jab hansi mazaak hoti hai” (Everyone speaks Bhojpuri. But in class, the teacher speaks only in Hindi. Sometimes they speak Bhojpuri when joking around). His reflection illustrates a quiet stratification: Hindi reserved for instruction and authority, while Bhojpuri was relegated to the margins of humour and informality.

This dynamic resonates with García-Sánchez’s framework of interactional marginalisation (12). Bhojpuri was not formally prohibited in Chunar schools, yet its relegation to “joking contexts” implicitly signaled its unsuitability for serious or intellectual engagement. Over time, such practices teach children that Bhojpuri is inappropriate in formal settings, even when it thrives socially. A linguistic economy emerges in which English dominates aspirational mobility, Hindi mediates institutional respectability, and Bhojpuri is pushed to the private backwaters of pride, intimacy, and nostalgia.

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language shift. Left unchecked, these dynamics risk contributing to long-term language decline or even death. However, as subsequent themes will show, Bhojpuri's story is not solely one of loss but also marked by resilience, assertion, and creative acts of reclamation.

Correction, Shame, and the Internalization of Linguistic Hierarchies

The urban field site of Varanasi was particularly marked by practices of correction, ridicule, and explicit sanction, where teachers, parents, and peers consistently discouraged the use of Bhojpuri in institutional contexts. During the fieldwork, a Hindi teacher (T1) stated bluntly: "Hamare school mein sirf Hindi-English chalta hai. Bhojpuri gaon ke liye theek hai" (In our school, only Hindi-English works. Bhojpuri is fine for the village). Such framing symbolically distances Bhojpuri from education and modernity, confining it to the rural margins.

For children, the effects of this distancing were visible in their everyday practices of self-censorship as noted in C1's language diary, which revealed that she avoided Bhojpuri even during breaks: "Friends tease if you talk in Bhojpuri." Peer ridicule thus operated as a subtle yet powerful disciplinary tool, reinforcing hierarchies not through formal prohibition but through laughter and social shaming. Another student (C3) admitted: "Break time mein bhi Bhojpuri nahi bolte. Agar bolun to doston ke hansne ka darr rehta hai" (Even during break time, we do not speak Bhojpuri. If I do, I fear my friends will laugh).

Beyond ridicule, explicit punitive mechanisms were also standard, as reflected in the response of C1 recalled: "Hamare school mein sirf English-English bolna padta hai. Agar Bhojpuri ya Hindi mein baat karo to paanch rupiya fine lagta hai" (In our school, we have to speak only English. If we speak in Bhojpuri or Hindi, we are fined five rupees). Though seemingly minor, such penalties carried significant symbolic weight: Bhojpuri was not merely excluded but actively constructed as a deficit, a language that incurs debt rather than accrues capital. Several participants confirmed that such fines were enforced, especially in elite schools where English functioned as the only legitimate medium.

These practices echo García-Sánchez's notion of interactional marginalisation, where a language is not formally banned but consistently ridiculed, penalised, or rendered irrelevant in serious contexts, producing a climate of shame and stigma for speakers (12). They also resonate with Goffman's concept of the "presentation of self," whereby speaking Bhojpuri in an urban classroom risked projecting the "wrong self", one marked as provincial, unschooled, and backwards (1).

In Chunar, correction was less punitive but still significant as a government school teacher's (T2) statement suggested: "Hum Hindi mein padhate hain, par unki bhasha ko galat nahi bolte" (We teach in Hindi, but we do not call their language wrong). Bhojpuri was thus tolerated, but never valorised, remaining outside the domain of instruction (3). Students internalised this message: as C2 reflected, "Master ji kabhi kabhi Bhojpuri bol dete hain, lekin class mein Hindi hi bolate hain" (The teacher sometimes speaks Bhojpuri, but in class, he only teaches in Hindi). The silent switching off of Bhojpuri during lessons conveyed its unsuitability for authority and knowledge.

The emotional burden of this regulation was palpable. This interaction strengthens this argument as C1 wrote in her diary: "School mein Bhojpuri bolne par sharam aati hai ki sab dehati samjhenge" (I feel ashamed to speak Bhojpuri at school because everyone will think I am a villager). Such reflections mirror Mohanty and Annamalai's observation that linguistic marginalisation in India is not only structural but deeply lived, shaping children's sense of worth through daily humiliations (19, 20). The outcome is a silencing effect in which, even within peer interactions where Bhojpuri might have been permissible, it came to be avoided and self-censored.

Aspirational Language Ideologies

Parents across both Varanasi and Chunar consistently articulated strong beliefs in Hindi and English as essential pathways to success, reinforcing their symbolic capital (8). Bhojpuri, by contrast, was viewed as a natural inheritance that required no institutional support. As one urban mother (P1) in Varanasi put it: "Ham chahten hain ki hamari beti angrezi aur Hindi mein tez ho. Bhojpuri to waise bhi aati hi hai" (We want our daughter to be fluent in English and Hindi. Bhojpuri comes naturally anyway). For her, Bhojpuri was taken for granted as a resource of intimacy, while English was considered indispensable for mobility and respectability.

Parents voiced similar ideologies even in rural Chunar, where Bhojpuri is deeply embedded in everyday life, as shown in the statement of a father (P2) who explained: "Bachpan se Bhojpuri bolat bani, lekin aage badhe ke khatir Hindi jaruri ba" (We speak Bhojpuri from childhood, but to progress in life, Hindi is necessary). His words captured a layered linguistic hierarchy: Bhojpuri for belonging, Hindi for mobility, and English for prestige. Another parent (P3) was more direct, linking English to dignity and opportunity: "Angrezi bolab matlab izzatdar hokhal. Hamare bachpana mein Bhojpuriye rahal, lekin ose naukri nahi milal" (Speaking English means being respectable. In our childhood, we only had Bhojpuri, but it did not get anyone a job). Here, English functioned as symbolic capital that could be converted into material opportunities, while Bhojpuri was relegated to the sentimental or domestic domain.

Children internalised these ideologies in powerful ways. During a fieldwork in Chunar, a student's (C3) diary reflected this internalisation process: "English bolne par teacher aur mummy khush hoti hain. Bhojpuri bolne par koi shabashi nahi milti" (When I speak English, my teacher and mother are happy. Speaking Bhojpuri brings no praise). Such reflections underscore the affective economy of language socialisation: English was rewarded with pride and approval, while Bhojpuri was rendered invisible, associated with shame or irrelevance instead.

Teachers also reinforced these hierarchies as teacher (T1) in Varanasi asserted: "Angrezi ke bina student aage nahi badh sakta. Bhojpuri kewal unke ghar ki bhasha hai" (Without English, students cannot progress. Bhojpuri is only their home language). The phrasing of Bhojpuri as "only" a home language marked it as illegitimate in academic or professional spaces. In the rural region, parents echoed this concern, with one rural father insisting: "School mein Bhojpuri padhawa, ta log hansihan" (If Bhojpuri were taught in school, people would laugh).

These findings highlight how correction and shame are justified within aspirational ideologies of progress. Bhojpuri is celebrated as natural and affectionate, yet dismissed as unworthy of cultivation. Hindi is often portrayed as the bridge to upward mobility, while English is associated with prestige, respect, and global opportunities. Bhojpuri remains consistently marginalised in this layered hierarchy, reflecting Hornberger and Vaish's argument that schools often play a central role in devaluing vernacular languages (5). Despite policy commitments to mother-tongue education in the recent National Education Policy, parents and teachers act pragmatically, fearing ridicule and exclusion if Bhojpuri were to be legitimised in formal schooling (10). Bhojpuri thus risks being sidelined not only in classrooms but also in literary, cultural, and institutional spaces, further constraining its visibility and resources for development.

Bhojpuri Pride and Emerging Resistance

This section presents a contrasting viewpoint that is reflected in previous sections of this paper. Despite the pervasive pressures of correction, sanction, and aspirational language ideologies, expressions of pride in Bhojpuri consistently surfaced across urban and rural field sites. For many participants, Bhojpuri was not simply a communicative code but a repository of memory, culture, and identity. Elders, particularly in rural areas, framed the language as a source of dignity and a sense of belonging. P2, a father in Chunar, resisted stigmatising discourses with a pointed question: "Bhojpuriye bolke ham padhai kaini. Kahe ke sharam?" ("I studied while speaking Bhojpuri. Why should there be shame?"). Similarly, E1, a grandmother, articulated an affective attachment to the language: "Hamra khatir Bhojpuri ego sanskar ba. E bhasha se hi toh hum aapn jivan bitaili" ("For me, Bhojpuri itself is culture. Through this language, I lived my life"). Such reflections highlight how Bhojpuri is rooted in intergenerational transmission, closely tied to notions of heritage, emotion, and moral value.

Among younger speakers, pride in Bhojpuri emerged through more mediated and often clandestine practices. Digital culture played a particularly significant role in this revaluation, as exemplified by YouTube channels such as Magadhi Boys. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and regional OTT channels created spaces where Bhojpuri was reimagined as modern, playful, and creative. During an interview, C4, a 15-year-old boy from Chunar, explained: "Hum YouTube par Bhojpuri rap sunila. Hamar dost log bhi gaana banawalan. Ab lagela ki Bhojpuri ke aapn pehchan ba" ("I listen to Bhojpuri rap on YouTube. My

friends also create songs. Now it feels like Bhojpuri has its own identity too"). Likewise, C3, a 14-year-old, described the everyday joy of linguistic play: "Facebook pe Bhojpuri reel bhejte hain, sabko hasi aata hai. Angrezi se alag maza hai" ("We send Bhojpuri reels on Facebook, everyone laughs. It is a different kind of joy than English"). These accounts show how humour and music function as vehicles of counter-ideology, enabling youth to reframe Bhojpuri as contemporary and socially meaningful. The digital domain also amplified explicitly political forms of linguistic pride. Participants frequently cited Bhojpuri artist Neha Singh Rathore, whose satirical songs circulated widely online. C5's response during a field interaction highlighted this point: "YouTube par Neha Singh Rathore ka gana dekhte hain, wo Bhojpuri me gajab gati hain" ("We watch Neha Singh Rathore's songs on YouTube; she sings amazingly in Bhojpuri"). For these youth, Rathore's performances provided entertainment and counter-narratives that contested the dismissal of Bhojpuri as backwards or provincial. In urban Varanasi, where stigma was sharper, expressions of pride were often private, hidden from public scrutiny as mirrored in C1's diary: "Kabhi kabhi ghar par Bhojpuri gaana sunte hai, lekin school mein kisi ko batate nahi" ("Sometimes I listen to Bhojpuri songs at home, but I do not tell anyone at school"). Pride here became an intimate act of resistance, veiled but significant.

These accounts demonstrate that Bhojpuri continues to serve as a source of cultural resilience despite conditions of systemic marginalisation. Elders frequently framed it as a repository of heritage and moral instruction, while younger speakers mobilised it for humour, creative experimentation, and pointed political critique. As researchers demonstrate in the context of Northeast India, digital platforms offer marginalised languages new symbolic visibility, and Bhojpuri speakers appear to be engaging similar strategies of linguistic assertion (17). Overall, a comparative lens highlights divergent yet interconnected trajectories across field sites. In Varanasi, Bhojpuri's marginalisation was sharper in institutional settings, leading children to monitor their speech and code-switch to avoid sanctions closely. Conversely, in Chunar, Bhojpuri maintained greater public legitimacy in households and peer networks, though Hindi remained the language of education and social mobility. Importantly, Bhojpuri's presence in rural digital life is visible in the open circulation of Bhojpuri songs, jokes, and memes, contrasting the secrecy reported in urban contexts. The findings reveal a dynamic dialectic between marginalisation and resistance. Bhojpuri is systematically devalued within institutional hierarchies that privilege English and Hindi, yet it persists as an affective and symbolic resource, continually revalorized through intergenerational practices and new media. This suggests that Bhojpuri's marginalisation is not passively endured but actively contested through everyday gestures of pride and creativity. These counter-practices, whether quiet listening at home or public performances online, signal Bhojpuri's enduring vitality and potential as a resource of identity, resistance, and renewal in contemporary North India.

Discussion

The lived experiences of Bhojpuri-speaking children, parents, and teachers across Varanasi and Chunar illuminate a contradictory terrain of language socialisation that extends far beyond simple patterns of maintenance or loss. The findings show that linguistic hierarchies are actively produced through social and institutional practices that position languages not merely as communicative tools but as markers of social worth, cultural legitimacy, and economic opportunity. This discussion situates the ethnographic evidence within broader theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how Bhojpuri marginalization constitutes a form of structured violence while simultaneously giving rise to creative resistance and identity reclamation spaces.

The systematic exclusion of Bhojpuri from formal schooling exemplifies what García-Sánchez calls interactional marginalization (12). In both urban and rural sites, this marginalization operated through subtle but pervasive mechanisms, such as public ridicule framed as correction, monetary fines for speaking Bhojpuri, and the relegation of the language to domains of humour and intimacy. Such practices resonate with broader accounts of symbolic violence in Indian classrooms, where English-medium policies discipline linguistic minorities by positioning their mother tongues as

barriers to success. Urban Varanasi provided stark examples, with private schools monetizing linguistic hierarchies by penalizing children for using Bhojpuri. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these dynamics reflect the regulation of symbolic capital, where English and Hindi accrue value as currencies of respectability. At the same time, Bhojpuri is framed as culturally rich but economically irrelevant. The parental refrain that "Bhojpuri to aati hi hai" ("Bhojpuri comes naturally") illustrates an insidious form of symbolic violence, naturalising Bhojpuri's exclusion from educational investment by positioning it as automatically acquired rather than worthy of institutional support. This ideology contradicts research demonstrating the cognitive and academic benefits of mother tongue instruction, which India's National Education Policy 2020 acknowledges but rarely implements in practice (10, 13).

Geographic location further shaped how participants experienced these hierarchies. In rural Chunar, Bhojpuri retained stronger visibility in households and peer groups, yet children still internalised the valuation of Hindi as the language of mobility and formal instruction. This reflects broader challenges in implementing multilingual education, where communities sometimes resist mother tongue education, having internalised ideologies equating linguistic diversity with disadvantage (5, 21).

At the same time, the ethnographic data complicates linear narratives of loss by documenting how Bhojpuri speakers creatively revalue their language in everyday life. Digital spaces emerged as significant sites of resistance (22). Bhojpuri content on YouTube, Facebook, and OTT platforms allowed young speakers to frame their mother tongue as modern, humorous, and politically relevant. Online creators such as Neha Singh Rathore exemplify this shift, deploying Bhojpuri for satire and critique that reach broad audiences. Such practices align with global Indigenous and minoritised language revitalisation patterns, where online platforms disrupt hegemonic ideologies by generating new forms of symbolic presence (11, 23). This digital revalorization carries both cultural and political significance. Youth participants' enthusiasm for Bhojpuri rap, memes, and comedy reflected more than entertainment; it represented active engagement with counter-hegemonic narratives that reposition Bhojpuri as a language of critique and truth-telling. The rapid growth of vernacular digital content in India, where 95% of video consumption now occurs in regional languages, further underscores the extent to which Bhojpuri and other minoritised languages are reclaiming public space in ways that challenge the dominance of English and Hindi (24, 25). These developments suggest that younger speakers are not merely passive recipients of institutional hierarchies but active agents of linguistic reclamation, innovating pathways of identity affirmation that bypass formal education systems.

Theoretically, these findings extend understanding of language socialisation in three key directions. First, they show that linguistic marginalisation is not simply a byproduct of modernization but a systematic process of ideological reproduction enacted through daily interaction and institutional practice. Capturing the emotional textures of hesitation, pride, and humour was possible only through ethnographic methods, which foreground the lived experience of navigating these hierarchies. Second, the study extends García-Sánchez's concept of interactional marginalisation into digital domains, showing how resistance can manifest in speech, visibility, circulation, and virality (12). Third, the findings highlight the persistent gap between policy and practice, as the NEP 2020 endorses mother tongue-based instruction, yet punitive practices in schools reveal the endurance of colonial ideologies that continue to frame regional languages as obstacles rather than assets (6, 9).

The aspirational narratives voiced by parents further reveal how colonial hierarchies continue to shape educational choices. English is consistently framed as essential for mobility, while Bhojpuri is relegated to culture and sentiment, reinforcing a false dichotomy between economic advancement and cultural identity. However, counter-narratives also emerged. Participants who insisted that true educational success included Bhojpuri challenged dominant ideologies that cast linguistic diversity as incompatible with achievement. Such perspectives resonate with research demonstrating both the cognitive benefits of multilingual education and the cultural value of mother tongue instruction (26, 11). The findings show that Bhojpuri socialisation is not a passive

process of attrition but an active site of ideological negotiation. Children, parents, and teachers constantly balance aspirations for mobility with attachments to heritage, producing complex practices of code-switching, concealment, and pride. The vitality of Bhojpuri in digital spaces demonstrates that marginalisation does not inevitably lead to loss but can also foster new forms of resistance and creative expression.

The implications for educational policy are significant. Addressing Bhojpuri marginalisation requires more than rhetorical commitments to multilingualism; it requires dismantling the symbolic violence embedded in everyday educational practices. This entails teacher training, curricular development, and active community engagement, but it also confronts the ideologies that position regional languages as liabilities (27). The success of Bhojpuri digital creators underscores audiences' eagerness for regional content, suggesting that institutional barriers to multilingualism are ideological rather than practical.

Ultimately, Bhojpuri-speaking children in this study are not merely learning to use language; they are learning to navigate a sociolinguistic terrain where every linguistic choice carries implications for belonging, aspiration, and legitimacy. Their strategies, whether through pride, humour, digital creativity, or strategic silence, demonstrate that marginalisation is neither uniform nor uncontested. Instead, Bhojpuri socialisation emerges as emblematic of broader struggles over linguistic rights, cultural recognition, and educational justice in multilingual postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Bhojpuri language socialisation in Varanasi and Chunar is shaped by everyday negotiations of power, aspiration, and belonging. Ethnographic evidence shows that Bhojpuri functions not only as a medium of communication but as a repository of cultural memory and social identity, whose legitimacy is continually tested against the prestige of Hindi and English. Educational institutions, family practices, and peer interactions emerge as key sites where linguistic norms are enforced, often resulting in the correction or suppression of Bhojpuri and influencing children's linguistic self-understanding. Yet, alongside these pressures, acts of affirmation—particularly within familial spaces—signal the language's continuing symbolic and affective value.

By foregrounding interactional practices rather than narratives of simple language decline, the study reframes linguistic marginalisation as a dynamic process involving regulation, accommodation, and selective resistance. In doing so, it contributes to sociolinguistic debates on language socialisation in multilingual and postcolonial settings, highlighting how hierarchies are reproduced through everyday pedagogical and affective encounters. The findings underscore the need for educational and policy approaches that move beyond deficit models and acknowledge regional languages as integral to children's cultural and linguistic repertoires. Accordingly, claims regarding systematic linguistic marginalisation refer to recurrent and patterned practices observed within these sites and are context-specific, such as in academic institutions, family and peer interactions, rather than to universal conditions across all Bhojpuri-speaking regions. Future research may extend this analysis by examining other Bhojpuri-speaking regions, attending to gendered patterns of language use, and analyzing how digital platforms are reshaping linguistic visibility and value. Longitudinal approaches would further illuminate how language ideologies evolve across generations, offering insights relevant to both sociolinguistic theory and initiatives aimed at linguistic inclusion and revitalization.

Abbreviations

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Author Contributions

Ajeet Singh: conceptualization, preparation of the first draft of the paper, collected and analysed the data for the study, Swasti Mishra: edited, strengthened the methodology section.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript.

Ethics Approval

The authors have read and followed the ethical requirements for publication. Informed oral consent was obtained from all the participants, and their names were anonymised.

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