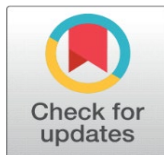
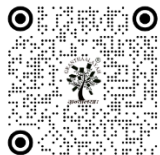


MANAGING DECLINE OR BUILDING INHERITANCE? POLICY PATHWAYS TO SUSTAIN TAMIL IN URBAN AND MIGRANT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This research work is all about the examination of the reasons why the Tamil language is less confidently transmitted to the younger generations in India, especially in urban and migrant contexts. Instead of blaming the situation of forcibly moved, displaced, or directly suppressed people for the decline of the language, the paper proposes that language loss today is mainly due to decision-making in families, schools, and institutions. The paper brings together the sociolinguistics, education, and language policy disciplines' concepts to describe the daily changes that result in language transmission from one generation to another becoming less successful. These changes are less use of Tamil at home, the early stage where reading and writing skills get weakened, and schooling practices favoring dominant regional languages and English. Besides that, the research exposes a blatant inconsistency in language policy. On paper, multilingualism is accepted and supported, but it is implemented through systems that result in language substitution rather than language accumulation. The paper claims that phenomena associated with urbanisation, social mobility, and migration, among other things, influence this pattern by altering the ways in which languages are valued and used in daily life, mainly in the multilingual metropolitan environments. Based on a few European experiences, the paper proposes that multilingualism should be considered as a continuation, which comes from regular use and literacy that is sustained over generations. The research work finally points out the possible practical implications of this for families, the education sector, and state institutions. Besides, it also suggests the preservation of languages like Tamil should not be considered individuals' burden but as the social responsibility that is shared by everyone.

Keywords: Intergenerational Language Attrition, Mother Tongue Transmission, Additive Multilingualism, Language Policy, Urbanisation and Migration

1. INTRODUCTION

Languages continue to exist through usage, learning, and everyday life practices. Among these, intergenerational transmission is the most effective way through which languages not only serve as communication tools but also as carriers of cultural memory and social values.

Tragic factors like displacement, coercion, or political suppression typically cause language loss. However, studies are pointing more and more to a silent process of attrition in urban and migrant localities where change in family practices, schools, and social aspirations gradually determines linguistic choices [Fishman \(1991\)](#).

Every day in cities growing fast, older tongues lose ground as people reach for wider-spoken words to get by. Reading those first scripts? That fades early. Writing them slips even quicker. Then voices stop shaping the old sounds—only echoes remain, half-remembered fragments tucked behind common talk. Not bans or laws push this shift forward. Just small steps added one after another, never meant to erase but ending up doing just that. Everyone tends to pick the easier path, nudged by school incentives and job markets. Staying true often slips into recollection instead of action.

Take Tamil, for instance—its story stretches back over two millennia, rich with written works recorded long ago [Zvelebil \(1973\)](#), [Hart \(1975\)](#). Still, despite centuries of steady presence and clear visibility in daily life, something quiet is shifting. In city homes among educated families, fewer parents are passing on the Tamil language, including those who have moved abroad and even within Tamil Nadu itself. What slips away now isn't found at society's edges, but where stability and access once promised continuity.

This article draws from studies into language change, multi-language learning, and movement across borders [Cummins \(2000\)](#), [UNESCO \(2003\)](#). It treats shifting languages not as a fixed outcome of progress. Instead, social decisions shape how speech passes down. Urban growth plays a role in that shift. So do classroom habits. Policy also steers what children inherit. Together, these forces redirect linguistic legacy.

One by one, regional languages lose ground despite India's official support for many languages. Rather than holding multiple discussions simultaneously, schools and cities quietly exchange them over time. Tamil, long strong against change, now slips as kids favor more powerful speech forms. Gaining status matters more than holding on to ancestral ways of talking.

2. LANGUAGE LOSS WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT

A shift in language strength does not need force or forced moves to take place. Sometimes, even when lives stay rooted in one area, a community's language begins fading quietly. Research into how speech shapes society reveals that small choices add up—what parents speak at home, which school children attend, and job paths taken are all shaped by what feels like better pay or respect. Many sociolinguistic studies have proven that such change is mostly due to the decisions related to the use of family language, schools, and jobs that provide monetary or social benefits [Fishman \(1991\)](#). Such behavior, in time, will lead to change in the minds of people. Instead of being stripped away through exclusion, languages tend to become less spoken because of the mindset of people considering education, work, and social status as priorities.

The loss of mother tongue from one generation to the next typically begins at home, where conversations become limited and no one actively promotes the language. Such practices will lead to limited communication even though language has a strong influence in public [UNESCO \(2003\)](#). Research from different multilingual communities posits that the voluntary shift in language is because of the aspirations for institutional incentives and can be an effect of transmission disruption, rather than the more directly coercive processes that have been documented by previous research [Edwards \(2010\)](#). In such instances, language loss not only shows a given but also a preference for the dominant norms.

What drives them? Inner aims outweigh rewards schools or workplaces offer. Street signs in the background and broadcast voices playing repeatedly gradually fade away. At the same time, movement starts, and then there are significant drops, especially in written and reading comprehension. As motion begins, written fluency and understanding of printed lines drop quickly. Ambient sounds get louder, and echoes travel through the airwaves. This gradual softening of skill doesn't mean loss, it hints instead at quiet realignments beneath speech, a drift toward accepted patterns shaping thought without notice.

Even when more people speak a language, the rise in numbers can mask deeper losses, reading and writing often fade even if speaking stays strong. Growth doesn't mean health. Familiarity lingers at home, yet fluency weakens beyond conversation. More voices do not always bring stronger skills. As people move more and use global and AI languages, the gap between how many speak a language and how well they can use it will likely grow.

3. HOME AS THE PRIMARY SITE OF ATTRITION

The home is the most significant environment where intergenerational language transmission can either be strengthened or weakened. Daily parental decisions on how to speak with the kids change the communication patterns

and affect the thinking, learning, and emotional expression processes. When the native language is slowly changed from the language of interaction, instruction, and informal guidance, children usually keep passive understanding while they are becoming more active, language usage is challenging. Gradually, this change is accompanied by a drop in reading and writing skills that limit the possibilities of long-term transfer even more [King et al. \(2017\)](#).

Such changes typically do not signify a conscious choice to abandon one's native language. Slowly, over time, how people talk begins to lose its strength—no matter if the words are seen on street signs or held up as part of a shared past [UNESCO \(2003\)](#). The impact is bigger, even if the decisions seem insignificant. Research indicates that the loss of literacy skills is much before the spoken language decline, and it makes recovery impossible [Curdt-Christiansen \(2013\)](#). Studies also reveal that in multilingual families, the frequent use of a dominant language commonly alters linguistic priorities. Mother tongue has become an identity rather than a part of daily communication [Curdt-Christiansen and La Morgia \(2018\)](#). When this limitation of domains occurs in the family, the impact of schools and community efforts is generally only slightly corrective.

When families move away from their language-speaking regions, the frequency of using their mother tongue diminishes. This scenario is usually the case for people who move away from Tamil-speaking regions of India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. During such situations, support from educational institutions also becomes weaker due to schooling and work-related communication being done in other languages dominant in that region. Not because of choice, but circumstance. Speech reshapes itself across borders, slowly. In such situations, institutions weaken their support for the language, primarily conducting schooling, administration, and public communication in other languages. These moments illustrate how families now bear the majority of the responsibility for preserving a native language, as regional and global languages increasingly dominate everyday routines. Because of this shift, upkeep once handled by schools or governments quietly moves into homes, where parents, grandparents, and siblings keep speaking despite wider trends.

Over time, this shift quietly reshapes how languages pass between generations. It wasn't banned outright, but it faded from use without an official moment of choice or blame. Though people let go by their own will, the act still carries weight. Slowly slipping from daily life, speech handed down long ago may finally break off. Once broken, picking up those words again grows tougher with each passing year, as the lack of practice and exposure to the language diminishes fluency and familiarity.

4. EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND THE POLICY PARADOX

Families pass down languages differently depending on how schools treat them. However, the environment plays an equally significant role in the natural acquisition of a language. Once, communities shaped speech without top-down control. Then came colonial changes placing some languages above others. English climbed fast. So did a few local ones. Meanwhile, countless native voices faded from classrooms. That shift wasn't undone later, even when policies claimed equality. Old rankings quietly linger beneath today's rules. The teachings of today continue to resonate with the power lines of the past.

To start, today's education rules, such as the three-language approach and the National Education Policy 2020, support the use of more than one language in schools. They say kids should learn first in their own spoken tongue. Yet how things play out on the ground tends to blur what counts as a child's real first words at home versus local speech norms. This confusion can leave students falling behind. When boundaries blur, using more than one language in classrooms loses its purpose. When kids show up at school, their home speech often gets ignored—support usually flows to big or state-approved languages, leaving family languages behind [Mahapatra and Anderson \(2023\)](#). Without help from classrooms, these ways of speaking struggle to move from one generation to the next.

The gap identified between policy and everyday practice of mother tongue shows that institutions treat mother tongue as just symbols of cultural identity and not for showcasing competencies in different languages. Parents prioritize English over their native language because schools support this approach, and it is important for future employment. Different curriculum structures and the assessment and expectations of employers tend to change families' expectations regarding the dominant language. This in turn leads to a neglect of the mother tongue, and the routine use of the language is lost. This trend is observed even in the case of well-established literary traditions, such as Tamil [Vogelzang et al. \(2024\)](#). The differential between policy and practice also serves to accelerate this change. Restricted provision of proper teaching materials, lack of trained teachers, and the shortage of clear mechanisms for non-dominant mother tongues all serve to diminish the practical multilingual policy's reach. What is ideologically presented as an additive approach is

functioning as a sequential replacement process, wherein the acquisition of new languages is done at the cost of the existing ones [Fatima and Nadeem \(2025\)](#). Hence, schooling usually reproduces linguistic hierarchies and expands the patterns of erosion that have already started within the household, instead of being a corrective force.

5. URBAN AFFLUENCE, ASPIRATION, AND LANGUAGE SHIFT

Where people speak multiple languages, city wealth and social climbing shape how languages pass between generations. Even beyond migrant groups, homegrown ways of speaking stay alive in everyday routines. Yet within wealthier city homes, old family words slip away, replaced by big-name global ones such as English, wanting change moves it faster than any push. In social studies of talk, this pattern earns a label, "elite multilingualism," where worth comes from access: entry into schools, jobs, and far-reaching networks [Barakos and Selleck \(2019\)](#). Here, English plus major regional forms dominate daily talk, meanwhile, heritage languages fade not just from conversation but from reading and writing habits too

Most research points to parents stepping into policy-making roles around language, even when unaware. They influence the use of language at home, whether they are aware of it or not, based on school norms or social objectives [Curd-Christianen \(2016\)](#), [Curd-Christianen and Wang \(2018\)](#). Feelings tied to heritage speech may stay strong, yet choices tend to lean toward those seen boosting grades and future. This shift often results in limited bilingual ability. It may even push some toward using just one language in daily life. Kids could grasp their family's original tongue. Yet active use fades after young years, reading or writing hardly continues, studies show across cities and migrant areas [Mirvahedi and Hosseini \(2023\)](#). Values tied to success deepen the issue. Language then feels like currency. Weakness in English or a dominant local speech form brings setbacks in busy urban spaces where competition runs high. So change happens inside homes of wealthy city dwellers who stay rooted geographically. The driving force of this phenomenon is the desire-based replacement that shapes how languages weaken today.

6. MIGRATION, DIASPORA, AND ACCELERATED ATTRITION

When people move inside a country or beyond its boundaries, speech often fades faster through family lines. Shifting homes reshapes the spaces where ancestral languages survive. Big towns or new countries tend to thinly scatter speakers. Daily routines then lean on major languages instead, leading to a decline in the use of ancestral languages in everyday communication. Education follows broader patterns of joining into society and work life. All these make families shift from their language, sometimes even in one generation. There is a shift in the mother tongue, even within a generation [Diskin \(2020\)](#), [Fatima and Nadeem \(2025\)](#). When families move away from native lands to urban centers, the ancestral words just slip out of the regular chats, while dominant languages become more frequent in classrooms and regular family chats.

Home routines without steady guidance or local help mean education and work demands guide how people choose languages. Due to pressures like these, households sometimes speak only one language daily despite knowing another. Over time, kids may lose skill in reading or writing their family's first language fairly quickly [Mirvahedi and Hosseini \(2023\)](#). Walk into different corners of South Asia, and the pattern repeats itself. City living nudges youth toward new ways of talking. Over time, familiar languages fade out of daily chat [Abbasi et al. \(2023\)](#). Together, these results show that movement pushes for faster loss, not just cutting off daily speech but also weakening official backing. Still, experts stress answers must stretch past homes into schools, status, and local efforts.

7. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE PROTECTION

Though English spreads widely, certain European groups still hand their native languages to children at home. Success comes not by chance, it takes steady backing from officials who care. Outcomes differ across countries, even so, slow trends show up, pointing to classrooms and local involvement as quiet anchors for speech variety. Rules help, though school routines often shape results just as much. What happens out loud changes how we think, often without notice. Once schools and offices act like speaking different languages is ordinary, families start treating it that way too. In Sweden and Denmark, research shows kids hold on to their family's tongue more easily when schools teach in that language, especially if money and policy support it. Science backs these findings up, yet progress stalls whenever politics drags its feet or budgets get slashed. Without steady help, these ways of speaking slip out of everyday life quicker than expected [Salö et al. \(2018\)](#).

The differential between policy and practice also serves to accelerate this change. Restricted provision of proper teaching materials, lack of trained teachers, and the shortage of clear mechanisms for “non-dominant mother tongues” for consistency all serve to diminish the practical multilingual policy's reach. What is ideologically presented as an additive approach is functioning as a sequential replacement process, wherein the acquisition of new languages is done at the cost of the existing ones [Fatima and Nadeem \(2025\)](#). Hence, schooling usually reproduces linguistic hierarchies and expands the patterns of erosion that have already started within the household, instead of being a corrective force.

Unarguably, this is the same practice in the educational approaches of Norway and France that consider multilingualism as a cognitive and social resource, and this helps children retain their traditional languages [Bubikova-Moan \(2017\)](#). In those places, the employers and the general attitude favour the policy goals, especially when people can speak different languages and it is considered a kind of cultural capital.

In many parts of Europe, proficiency in multiple languages facilitates access to employment opportunities, facilitates travel between countries, and fosters a sense of belonging in diverse locations, as clearly demonstrated by EU regulations [Arvidsson and Jemstedt \(2022\)](#). Still, India hosts countless languages, many official, but struggles since support lacks strength and attention jumps around too much. English or major local dialects adopted by schools slowly replace time-honored native ways of speaking, confining these indigenous speech forms to a lesser status in both education and formal communication [Groff \(2017\)](#). This pattern isn't fixed though, evidence points elsewhere. In certain parts of Europe, change appears: mother tongues hold on where groups remain tight-knit, support flows into struggling regions, and daily habits mix words without force, while demands ease up.

8. REFRAMING MULTILINGUALISM: FROM REPLACEMENT TO INHERITANCE

Beginning again with a different language never wipes out the past. Supported by others, a fresh way of talking settles beside the first one rather than replacing it outright. Words acquired in a second speech form can facilitate communication between family members, ease conversations, ignite stories during meals, and quietly strengthen bonds while enhancing everyday reading and writing skills [Hollebeke et al. \(2023\)](#). What matters most slips under notice: how these voices mix. Does the newcomer squeeze out the familiar one or stand beside it without conflict? This overlap becomes essential when many ways of speaking coexist in the same life, as making room is always better than shutting out. The studies link such additive arrangements to various benefits, including cognitive flexibility, emotional development, and a more confident sense of identity [Bohnacker \(2022\)](#), [Karpava et al. \(2025\)](#). India-based evidence is consistent with these conclusions. Research indicates that instruction in the mother tongue and multilingual homes do not create obstacles to literacy development in languages of the region or the world, English included, and may even be facilitators of it [Vogelzang et al. \(2024\)](#). Therefore, the decline of languages over time is less a reflection of the failure of multilingualism itself and more of the ways in which it is implemented. Multilingualism, in many instances, is a process of substitution in sequence whereby the new languages are acquired at the cost of the old ones, rather than a process of cumulative inheritance that is based on continued use and literacy. To view multilingualism as a matter of inheritance is to change the role of mother tongues from optional cultural symbols to indispensable pillars of multilingual competence. It shifts the emphasis from symbolic recognition to the actual choices made within families, education systems, and policy frameworks. Besides, it offers a conceptual basis for the policy interventions that will be elaborated in the next section.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES, EDUCATION, AND POLICY

When a family no longer speaks its first language, the effect goes beyond just missing old customs. Deeper questions appear around obligation and freedom, even hidden pressures built into everyday life. Using that original speech at home every day matters far more than saving it for special occasions. Thinking, sharing ideas, and chatting in it regularly helps maintain strong reading and talking abilities across ages. Once it fades to silence or turns into something symbolic, bringing it back often fails.

It is not the number of languages taught at school that causes trouble. Slowly, older kids drift away from speaking their family's language. This shift chips away at who they are and weakens talks at home. Without balance, classroom habits push some languages aside while lifting others higher. Native ways of speaking do not get stronger when ignored after early years. Equal attention in lessons might let different voices grow side by side. Support for reading and writing in one's native language must persist beyond the initial classrooms.

Understanding rules around language isn't only about naming languages in official texts or nodding toward diversity. Passing speech from one generation to the next takes clear definitions of what being a native speaker really means, systems in schools and offices that actively support literacy, and decisions by those in charge who see multilingualism as a strength, not a strain. This fits in more appropriately when people accept keeping their languages alive as a daily practice and routine and not just as a social image.

10. POLICY TOOLKIT: FROM SYMBOLIC RECOGNITION TO LINGUISTIC INHERITANCE

This portion is a rundown of just a few essential policy tools that would be required for multilingualism to operate as a system of language inheritance rather than that of controlled decline. It does not put forward a detailed plan of action but rather points to a limited number of the design levers taken from the research on heritage and native language maintenance in the city and migrant environments, such as community engagement initiatives and educational programs that promote bilingualism. The emphasis is on guaranteeing the consistency of the domains that influence the use of language in everyday life, such as education, community engagement, and media representation.

The language toolkit concentrates on the alignment of early literacy support, school curriculum, credential recognition, public funding, teacher preparation, community provision, and the everyday presence of languages in the media and digital spheres. If these elements are functioning separately, language support is still fragmented and of a very short duration, which undermines the effectiveness of language acquisition and retention in communities. If they are aligned, they become a means through which mother tongues keep their functional relevance and literate transmissions can take place across different generations. Every instrument was designed as an actionable lever connected to a clear goal and measurable result. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of these tools as well as the evidence that supports their inclusion.

Table 1 Illustrative Policy Instruments for Intergenerational Mother Tongue Maintenance

Policy lever	Operational instrument	Measurable outcome (target, timeline, metric)	Indicative evidence
Early mother tongue literacy benchmark	Statewide Grade 3 reading and writing benchmark in the declared mother tongue	At least 85 percent proficiency within five years on a standardised mother tongue literacy screen	Ganuja and Hedman (2019) , Piper et al. (2018) , Dahm and De Angelis (2018)
Credentialed proficiency pathways	CEFR, aligned or equivalent proficiency ladder across schooling years with external moderation	At least 25 percent of Grade 10 candidates certified at A2 level or above and 10 percent at B1 within five years with public reporting	Brunfaut and Harding (2019) , Diez Bedmar and Byram (2018) , Rehner et al. (2021)
Weighted per pupil funding	Additional funding weight of 0.05 to 0.10 for instruction and materials in non-dominant or heritage languages	At least 90 percent annual execution of allocated funds within three years with finance transparency	Wang and Hatoss (2024)
Community and weekend heritage schools	Public vouchers or grants for accredited community run programmes meeting minimum curricular standards	At least 10 percent enrolment of eligible children and 70 percent pass rates on standardised mother tongue assessments within four years	Borowczyk (2020) , Chen et al. (2018)
Teacher preparation and incentives	Scholarships, micro credentials, and career incentives for mother tongue teachers	At least 95 percent of sanctioned posts filled and 80 percent three year retention within five years	Diez Bedmar and Byram (2018) , Rehner et al. (2021)
Public media and digital localisation	Minimum quotas for public broadcasters and localisation of public digital interfaces and apps	At least 1,000 hours per year of original children's content and one million monthly active users for localised services within three years	Wang and Hatoss (2024)
Family language planning supports	Book packs, one-page commitments, and SMS nudges delivered through schools and clinics	At least 60 percent weekly home reading in the mother tongue and ten percentage point gains on Grade 1 to 2 literacy screens within two years	Shen and Del Tufo (2022) , Chen et al. (2018) , Kwon (2017)

Note: These instruments are illustrative and modular. Targets should be calibrated to baseline proficiency, teacher supply, and media market size. While the salience of individual instruments varies by context, the underlying mechanisms apply across urban home states, internal migration settings, and diaspora environments, requiring calibration rather than redesign.

11. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that language attrition in the modern world, taking Tamil as an example, is a result of the migration of people from their regions to the other parts of the world caused by urbanization, aspiration, and policy design. No language declines in one go. It is a gradual process wherein the daily usage diminishes, literacy weakens, and the transmission reaches the hands of those who are not active in the process. In such a milieu, the perception of Tamil and other heritage languages as mere options is far from being a neutral one since it, at the very least, progressively disrupts the continuity between generations. Hence, the disappearance of mother tongues in a society that speaks different languages indicates that it is a combined effort of institutional arrangements and family choices that favour convenience and short-term benefits rather than pride.

Seeing multilingualism not as a swap-out but as an ongoing flow shifts how we treat speech, not as a heritage badge but as a working tool. This shift means moving past nods of approval into real backing: steady help with reading skills, clear school routes, accepted qualifications, visibility online and in shared spaces. Culture is kept alive by using it daily, passing it down in writing, and making it part of how people connect.

A decade from today, keep close whatever follows. Whether urban living crushes speech or helps it bloom depends on the decisions we make right now. Handing language forward won't occur by waiting. It demands action each single day. Friendly homes and schools where speaking comes effortlessly, yet steady help from programs adds up slowly. Work moves through spaces, corridors, and even desks. When progress seems stuck, steady effort counts above all. Survival favors what gets put into practice, never just kept safe. In every raised voice, Tamil breathes, far beyond recollection. Movement never stops, speech flows from one person to another. Down the line, staying alive hinges on choices made now. Trouble could grow if nobody acts soon. The way stuff is put together matters somehow. Shared loads shift outcomes just as much.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Sunitha Prabhuram: Conceptualization, literature synthesis, analytical framing, writing of the original draft, and revision of the manuscript.

Thamburaj Anthuvan: Conceptual input, critical review, supervision, and refinement of the manuscript for scholarly and policy relevance.

All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not require institutional ethics approval because it did not involve human participants, primary data collection, or identifiable personal information. This study is based exclusively on the conceptual analysis and synthesis of publicly available academic literature and policy documents.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data was generated or analyzed in this study. All referenced sources are publicly available in academic and policy literature.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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