

Ethnolinguistic Identity and Career Choices: A Study Among Multilingual Indian Youth

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intersection between ethnolinguistic identity and career choices among multilingual Indian youth. India's cultural and linguistic diversity presents a complex framework for understanding how language and identity influence career aspirations, decisions, and mobility. By exploring how multilingual youth perceive their mother tongues and regional dialects in relation to career prospects, this study reveals patterns that connect language pride, stigma, and socioeconomic opportunities. Through surveys, interviews, and statistical analysis conducted among 500 students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, the study identifies the emerging trends, constraints, and empowerment associated with multilingualism in shaping career trajectories. The research highlights the need for inclusive language policies in education and employment to bridge sociolinguistic disparities.

KEYWORDS

Ethnolinguistic identity, multilingualism, career choices, Indian youth, language and employment

INTRODUCTION

In India, language is not merely a tool for communication but an emblem of cultural identity and regional affiliation. With 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of dialects, the Indian socio-political landscape is inherently multilingual. This linguistic diversity shapes not only personal identity but also socio-

economic access, particularly in education and employment. The interplay between ethnolinguistic identity and career decision-making among youth presents a crucial yet underexplored area of inquiry.

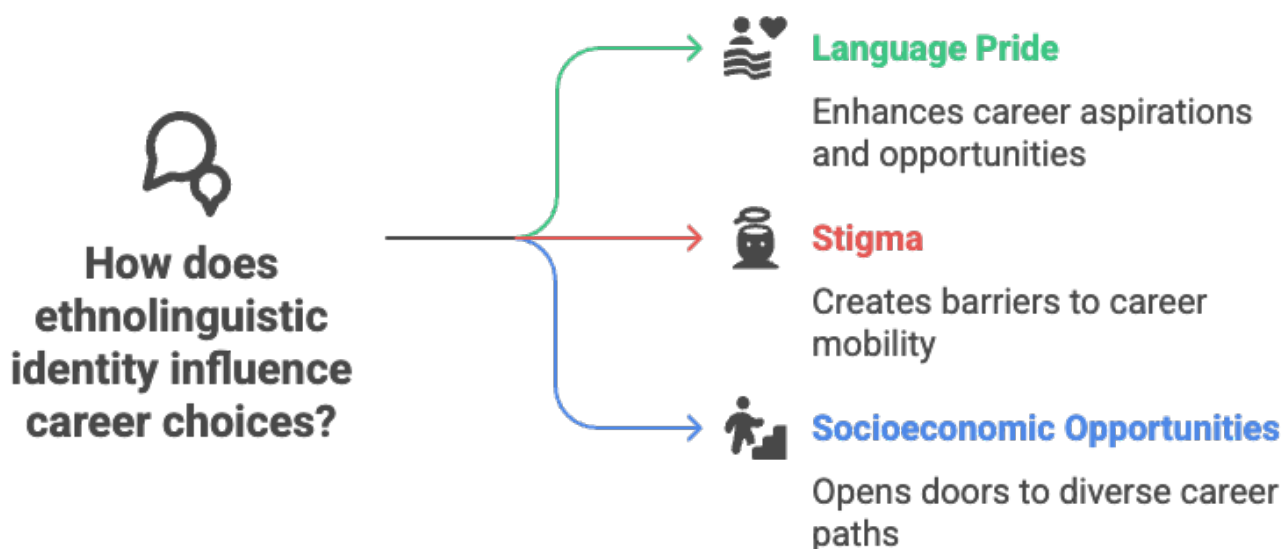


Figure 1

The current study explores how Indian youth who navigate multiple languages interpret their identity and align their career choices accordingly. Ethnolinguistic identity here refers to a youth's sense of belonging to a particular linguistic group and how that informs their aspirations, self-perception, and social mobility. In a competitive job market where English often dominates, regional languages may be both a resource and a barrier. For some, proficiency in a dominant language like English is seen as a ticket to upward mobility. For others, retaining regional linguistic roots reinforces cultural pride but may entail limitations in mainstream professional spheres.

This research thus aims to understand: How does multilingualism affect the career decision-making process? What role do regional languages and cultural identity play in occupational aspirations? And what are the perceived benefits and challenges of ethnolinguistic identity in professional advancement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language and identity has been widely examined across disciplines like sociolinguistics, psychology, and education. Fishman (1999) argued that language is a primary marker of ethnic identity, particularly in multilingual societies. In India, language affiliation often overlaps with caste,

religion, and regional affiliation, influencing how individuals see themselves and are perceived by society (Annamalai, 2001).

Bridging Sociolinguistic Disparities

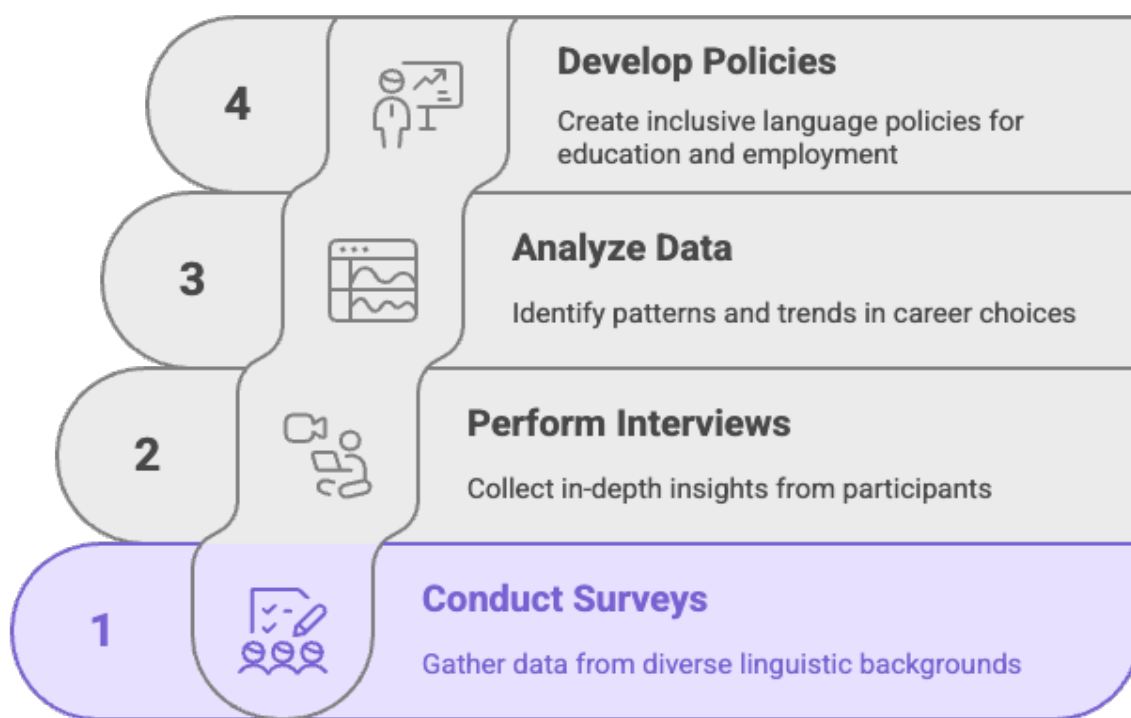


Figure 2: Bridging Sociolinguistic Disparities

Studies by Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) and Mohanty (2010) highlight the hierarchical valuation of languages in India, where English occupies a prestigious status while regional languages are relegated to informal and local domains. This dichotomy affects how youth relate to their mother tongues in academic and professional settings.

Norton (2013) noted that language learning and use are tied to social identity and power relations, which suggests that language can either empower or marginalize depending on context. For Indian students, being multilingual may offer cognitive flexibility (as shown in Kumar et al., 2015), but the socio-economic value attached to languages is unequal.

Recent research also reveals that career counselling in India inadequately addresses linguistic identity, often prioritizing language-neutral aptitude measures over sociocultural factors. Meanwhile, UNESCO (2019)

advocates for mother-tongue-based multilingual education to preserve linguistic heritage and improve learning outcomes.

However, there is a paucity of empirical studies focusing specifically on Indian youth and how their ethnolinguistic affiliations influence career-related decisions. This study aims to fill that gap by integrating quantitative data and qualitative narratives from students across India.

Social Relevance of the Topic

The social relevance of understanding ethnolinguistic identity in career choice-making is profound, especially in a country like India where language intersects with access to education, employment, and power structures. Regional and minority languages are often pushed to the margins of formal discourse, yet they remain central to individual identity and cultural continuity. For multilingual youth navigating between familial tongues, regional dialects, and English, career choices are often influenced by this linguistic negotiation.

This study contributes to policy-level discussions on inclusive education, linguistic justice, and employability. It questions existing systems that prioritize monolingual English or Hindi frameworks and highlights the psychological consequences of language-related marginalization. Youth from marginalized linguistic communities often face a dissonance between their identity and professional opportunities, leading to underrepresentation in elite careers.

By understanding how youth perceive and negotiate their ethnolinguistic identity in professional contexts, educational institutions and employers can develop more equitable and inclusive strategies. Such insights are vital in creating a workforce that values cultural diversity and linguistic plurality.

Furthermore, with increasing globalization, multilingualism is gaining recognition as an asset in diplomacy, media, international business, and technology. Therefore, promoting regional and minority languages can also create new avenues of employment in sectors like translation, localization, content development, public administration, and indigenous research.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. The sample consisted of 500 multilingual Indian youth aged between 18 and 25, selected through purposive sampling from five linguistically diverse states: Maharashtra, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Assam.

Data Collection Instruments:

1. **Survey Questionnaire** – Contained both closed and open-ended questions covering:
 - Primary and secondary languages spoken
 - Language used in school and at home
 - Perceptions about the utility of each language in careers
 - Career aspirations and perceived barriers
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews** – Conducted with 30 participants for in-depth insights into:
 - Experiences of language discrimination or privilege
 - Influence of family and community expectations
 - Decisions to pursue language-aligned careers (e.g., teaching, journalism, translation)
3. **Focus Groups** – Conducted virtually with groups of 8–10 participants in each region to capture shared narratives and group dynamics around language and career choice.

Analytical Framework:

Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using SPSS for correlation, frequency distribution, and cross-tabulations to detect patterns between language use and career preferences. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring ideas around identity, pride, conflict, and opportunity.

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. The study received clearance from an institutional ethics board.

RESULTS

The study revealed multiple layers of influence that ethnolinguistic identity exerts on career choice among multilingual Indian youth. The following are key findings based on the survey of 500 participants and qualitative interviews with 30 individuals across five states:

1. Language Preferences and Aspirations

- 74% of respondents reported using English as their primary language in professional or academic settings.
- 62% considered English crucial for upward mobility.

- 38% expressed a desire to pursue careers that allowed them to use their regional or mother tongue, particularly in education, media, and local governance.
- Respondents from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu were more likely to associate linguistic pride with their regional language, while those from Punjab and Maharashtra exhibited a stronger tendency toward English for career mobility.

2. Perceived Barriers

- 41% indicated they had to suppress their native language use to conform to English-medium environments.
- 27% reported facing linguistic bias in interviews or college admissions.
- Participants from linguistic minorities expressed lower self-confidence in multilingual or English-dominant environments.

3. Career Stream Correlations

- Those who studied in mother-tongue-based institutions were more inclined toward careers in teaching, journalism, and social work.
- Students from English-medium backgrounds leaned toward engineering, IT, finance, and corporate sectors.

4. Thematic Insights from Interviews

- Recurring themes included “language inferiority complex,” “loss of cultural anchoring,” and “strategic bilingualism.”
- Some participants noted that maintaining their native language gave them an edge in regional job markets, such as content creation, translation, and government services.
- One Tamil respondent stated: “My command over Tamil helped me get a role in a regional TV channel, even though my English was not fluent.”

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that ethnolinguistic identity plays a significant yet nuanced role in shaping the career trajectories of multilingual Indian youth. While English remains the dominant language for socio-economic mobility, regional languages continue to offer cultural grounding and localized employment opportunities.

The findings demonstrate that career decisions are not made in a linguistic vacuum. Instead, they are influenced by the social capital attached to different languages, the identity negotiations youth undergo, and the expectations of both family and educational institutions.

Moreover, ethnolinguistic pride can motivate youth to pursue culturally meaningful careers, especially in areas like literature, education, and public service. However, language-based exclusion persists, especially when regional tongues are viewed as less competent or professional.

Thus, policymakers and educators must embrace multilingualism as a strategic asset rather than a barrier. Recognizing and validating ethnolinguistic diversity can empower Indian youth to make career choices aligned with both professional aspirations and cultural identities.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

Several avenues emerge for future research:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Tracking career progress over time to examine how initial language-influenced decisions impact long-term outcomes.
2. **Urban vs. Rural Comparison:** Comparing how language-related career perceptions vary between urban and rural multilingual youth.
3. **Sector-Specific Studies:** Focusing on specific industries—like media, law, public administration—where language plays a central role.
4. **Policy Impact Analysis:** Studying the effectiveness of state language policies and their role in shaping inclusive employment ecosystems.
5. **Gender and Language Identity:** Investigating how linguistic identity intersects with gender in influencing professional aspirations.

By addressing these research gaps, further studies can strengthen the argument for inclusive linguistic practices in educational and employment frameworks and reinforce the value of India's linguistic heritage.

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