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LANGUAGE USE, ATTITUDE, AND VITALITY OF BRAJBHASHA: INSIGHTS FROM FIELDWORK IN MATHURA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the current status of Brajbhasha (ISO 639:3, Language Code: bra), an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the Braj region of North India, with a focus on language use, attitude and vitality. The research is based on the fieldwork conducted by the author in May 2024 across Mathura City and the nearby regions of Mahaban, Baldev, Raya and Govardhan within Mathura district.Using a combination of a sociolinguistic questionnaire, informal interviews and observations, this research examines the patterns of language use across various social domains and the attitudes of Brajbhasha speakers towards their language and the superstratum language Hindi. The vitality of Brajbhasha is assessed using UNESCO's nine-factor parameters, providing a comprehensive understanding of its sustainability.The results show that there has been no significant shift towards Hindi and that Brajbhasha remains rather prevalent in the informal and home domains. Brajbhasha has positive sentiments from its speakers despite Hindi's high prestige. The central dialect of Brajbhasha, specifically from the Govardhan area, has been described as the purest and best variant. In addition, Brajbhasha is transmitted through generations in a robust manner. However, speakers acknowledge that knowing Hindi is essential for broader opportunities outside their region.The study emphasizes the significance of language attitudes in the reception and usage of mother tongue, highlighting Brajbhasha speakers' favourable attitudes about their linguistic heritage. Despite the limited sample size, the qualitative findings have important implications for the long-term viability of Brajbhasha. These findings contribute to the larger discussion of bilingualism and linguistic identity by underlining the survivability and cultural value of regional languages in a multilingual society

Keywords: Brajbhasha, Language Vitality, Prestige, Bilingualism, Language Identity.

1. Introduction

Brajbhasha (ISO 639:3, Language Code: *bra*), also known as Braj, is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the Braj region of North India. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson, 1908) classifies

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Brajbhasha as a variety of Western Hindi in the Central Group of Indo-Aryan languages – a sub-family within the grand Indo-European family of languages – and places Brajbhasha amongst Hindustani, Bangaru, Kannauji and Bundeli. A chart representing the placement of Brajbhasha in the language tree of Indo-Aryan languages as per Grierson's categorisation is presented below (Chart 1).

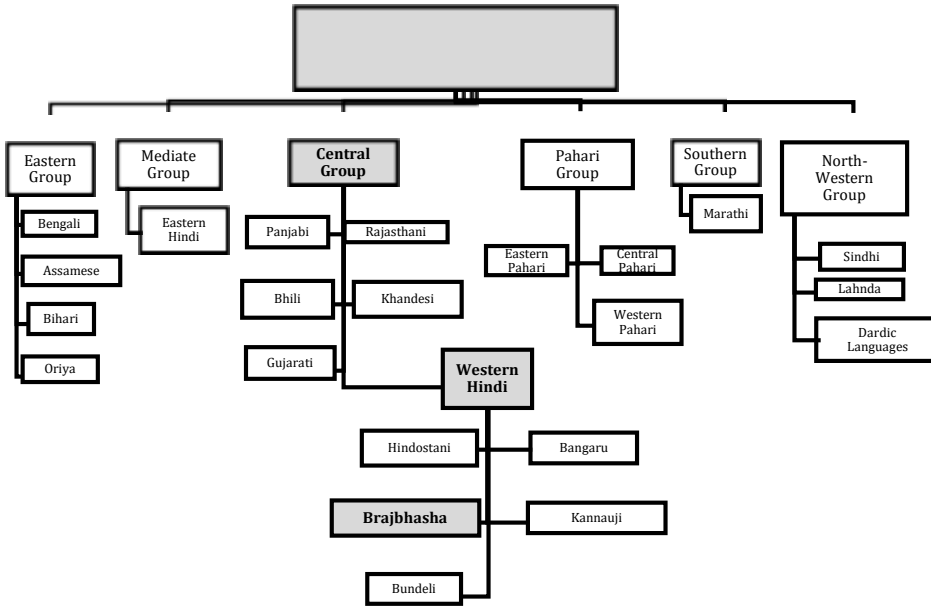


Chart 1 - Grierson's (1903) Categorisation of Brajbhasha

The geographical extent of the Brajbhasha extends to the districts of Mathura, Aligarh, Hathras, Agra, Firozabad, Etah, and parts of Etawah and Mainpuri in Uttar Pradesh; Gwalior, Morena, Bhind in Madhya Pradesh; Bharatpur, Karauli, Dholpur in Rajasthan; and Palwal in Haryana. This whole area, known as Braj, has its centre in the city of Mathura. A reference map showing the districts where Brajbhasha is primarily spoken is presented in the following lines.



The Government of India classifies Brajbhasha as one of the 57 varieties that are listed as 'mother tongues' under the language 'Hindi' (Census of India, 2011). The Census uses the term 'mother tongue' to refer to how people respond when they are asked about the language they speak as their first language or as their mother tongue. The total number of people who regarded Brajbhasha as their mother tongue is 15,56,314 – approximately 15.6 lakhs (Census of India, 2011). Brajbhasha is categorised as a 'dialect' of Hindi in the census and is treated the same way in all the statistical analyses carried out as part of the census. Majority of the Brajbhasha-speaking area falls within

the territory of the state of Uttar Pradesh, including Mathura. The Government of Uttar Pradesh does not officially recognise Brajbhasha as a distinct language. Instead, Hindi and Urdu are the two designated official state languages. Brajbhasha, along with other regional languages, is primarily regarded by the state as a dialect of Hindi, valued more for its cultural significance than as a fully recognised language.

Language vitality is a crucial concept in sociolinguistic research. It denotes the overall strength of a language, its functional utility across diverse contexts, and its prospects for being passed down to future generations. Language vitality determines the degree of endangerment of a language and its sustainability. Language endangerment can result from external factors such as political, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it can be caused by internal factors such as a community's unfavourable attitude towards their language (UNESCO, 2003). Factors, such as the patterns of language use in different social situations or domains, intergenerational transmission, and attitude of both internal and external forces towards the language, point to the vitality of a language. For studying language patterns and assessing vitality, an assessment framework is employed that accounts for various relevant factors responsible for the endangerment of a language.

UNESCO (2003) has provided a nine-factor assessment framework for determining the vitality of a language. Eight out of the nine factors have a six-point scale to be accorded to the language under research after considering local contexts and situations. The nine factors are as follows.

Factor 1 – Intergenerational Language Transmission (scale)
Factor 2 – Absolute Number of Speakers (real numbers)
Factor 3 – Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population (scale)
Factor 4 – Trends in Existing Language Domains (scale)
Factor 5 – Response to New Domains and Media (scale)
Factor 6 – Materials for Language Education and Literacy (scale)
Factor 7 – Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and Use (scale)
Factor 8 – Community Members' Attitudes toward their Own Language (scale)
Factor 9 – Amount and Quality of Documentation (scale)

A comprehensive analysis of these factors contributes to the assessment of a language's vitality. UNESCO emphasizes that none of these factors should be evaluated in isolation. The first six factors are identified as the primary indicators of language vitality. This study employs UNESCO's framework to assess the vitality of Brajbhasha. All nine factors will be examined, taking into account local contexts and speakers' perspectives on the language.

2. Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in May 2024 in the core Brajbhasha-speaking region of Mathura district, Uttar Pradesh. The research was carried out in Mathura city and the surrounding areas of Mahaban, Baldev, Raya, and Govardhan. Data for the study was collected through a combination of methods, including a sociolinguistic questionnaire, informal interviews, and observations. The primary method for assessing language use and attitudes was an orally administered sociolinguistic questionnaire. In addition, detailed informal interviews were conducted to gather in-depth responses from participants. Both the questionnaire and interviews were conducted in Hindi, as most Brajbhasha speakers are bilingual in Brajbhasha and Hindi. A total of 32 participants were included in the study. To ensure diversity, participants were randomly selected across a range of social variables, including age, gender, education levels, occupation, and urban versus rural residence.

3. Results and Observations

This study first talks about the patterns of language use by Brajbhasha speakers. Following that, a report on the attitude of the speech community and the government towards the language is presented. Using the patterns of language and the attitudes towards Brajbhasha, the nine factors of language vitality are evaluated.

a. Language Use Patterns

In rural areas, Brajbhasha is widely spoken by both adults and children in various domains, including homes, market places, informal settings such as temples and social gatherings, and other contexts where oral use is desired. However, due to Hindi (and Urdu) being the official languages of Uttar Pradesh, all official work is conducted in Hindi in settings such as tehsils, local courts, banks, post offices, and similar institutions. Despite this, when interacting with acquaintances or locals within these offices, conversations may still occur in Brajbhasha. While visiting cities for work or educational purposes, rural residents tend to use Hindi more frequently. Even in cities like Mathura and Agra, located within the core Brajbhasha-speaking region, rural inhabitants often prefer to use Hindi when communicating with the urban population. In urban areas, the use of Hindi is even more prevalent, particularly among the younger generation, who primarily use Hindi in both formal and informal settings.

Modern usage of Brajbhasha in written form is limited. Although Brajbhasha was a major literary language of North India during medieval times (Busch, 2010), with a vast collection of literature still extant, its contemporary usage is largely restricted to religious songs and folklore. Brajbhasha has historically been associated with the Vaishnavism sect of Hinduism, which flourished in the Braj region. Considering these facts, religious and literary activities are still

healthily carried out in Brajbhasha. New literature is still being produced in Brajbhasha, though it remains confined to literary circles and has limited reach among the general population.

For media consumption and entertainment, Hindi remains the primary language across all age groups. Notably, Prasar Bharati, the official radio broadcaster of India, operates a station based in Mathura where Brajbhasha is regularly used by hosts and anchors during broadcasts, alongside events and media content in Brajbhasha.

The transmission of Brajbhasha to future generations appears strong, with children acquiring the language at home and within their communities. In schools, however, students are introduced to Hindi, as Brajbhasha is not part of the curriculum, and there is no formal syllabus for teaching the language in educational institutions.

b. Language Attitudes

As previously discussed, Brajbhasha is firmly attached to its religious identity and has a rich literary past. This connection serves as a source of immense pride for the people of the Braj region, who consider everything related to Braj – the land, rivers, trees, leaves, animals, hills, people, and the language itself – to be sacred. These factors contribute to a strong sense of linguistic pride among Brajbhasha speakers, who hold their language in high religious esteem and frequently express fondness for its perceived '*sweetness*' and pleasing quality. The language also fosters a sense of social cohesion within the community. For instance, a local resident returning to the region after an extended period away may be criticized for incorporating too many Hindi words into his/her speech and encouraged to speak 'more like the locals'.

Despite this cultural and religious significance, Brajbhasha does not receive official recognition from the state or national governments. In official records and proceedings, the language is classified and treated as a dialect of Hindi, lacking formal recognition as a distinct language. Brajbhasha is not included in school or college curricula and has limited functional use in written communication. A significant portion of the population perceives Brajbhasha as 'backward', 'uncultured', a 'village language', or 'useless'.

Many parents prefer their children to become fluent in Hindi rather than Brajbhasha, even if they transmit the language at home. They view proficiency in Hindi as essential for success in education and social mobility. In urban areas, speaking Brajbhasha is often stigmatized, with speakers being labelled as 'villagers' or 'illiterate'. This stigma also extends to rural settings, where individuals may switch to Hindi to showcase themselves as educated, civilized, or presentable.

c. Understanding Language Vitality Using UNESCO's Scale

This section systematically assesses all nine factors under UNESCO's vitality scale, considering both the local contexts and the perspectives of speakers regarding the language.

Factor 1 – Intergenerational Language Transmission

Brajbhasha is being actively transmitted to the next generations. Children learn Brajbhasha from their homes and neighbourhoods. The language is spoken by people of all generations. Many parents prefer their children to become fluent in Hindi rather than Brajbhasha, even if they transmit the language at home. They view proficiency in Hindi as essential for success in education and social mobility. Particularly in the urban areas, usage of Hindi is far more prevalent, particularly among the younger generation, who primarily use Hindi in both formal and informal settings. Brajbhasha receives a grade of 5- (*stable yet threatened*) on the scale for this factor.

Factor 2 – Absolute Number of Speakers

According to the Census of India (2011), approximately 15.6 lakh people reported Brajbhasha as their mother tongue. Given this substantial number of speakers in the community, the language does not appear to be at immediate risk of losing its speaker base or merging with a more dominant language or variety.

Factor 3 – Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

A vast majority of residents in rural areas speak Brajbhasha in their daily lives. However, this is not the case in urban areas. Due to the stigma associated with the language, its lack of official status, and the absence of economic opportunities tied to its use, urban residents, particularly younger generations, tend to use Brajbhasha less frequently. Given these factors, Brajbhasha is assessed as receiving a grade of 3 (*definitively endangered*) on the language vitality scale.

Factor 4 – Trends in Existing Language Domains

Brajbhasha is widely spoken by both adults and children across various domains, including homes, market places, informal settings such as temples and social gatherings, especially in rural areas. However, the language lacks official or institutional recognition and use. When rural residents visit cities for work or educational purposes, they tend to use Hindi more frequently. In urban areas, the use of Hindi is even more pronounced, particularly among younger generations who primarily rely on Hindi in both formal and informal contexts. For this reason, Brajbhasha is assessed with a grade of 4 (*multilingual parity*) on the scale for this factor.

Factor 5 – Response to New Domains and Media

Brajbhasha has minimal presence in multimedia, broadcasting, social media, or the internet, with the exception of a Prasar Bharati radio station based in Mathura that seldom uses Brajbhasha. The

publication of books, journals, or magazines in Brajbhasha is also limited, typically confined to the literary circles of the society. Brajbhasha receives a grade of 1 (*minimal*) on the scale for this factor.

Factor 6 – Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Brajbhasha is not taught in school or colleges. Hence, there is no curricula and syllabi for Brajbhasha. Written literature is usually consumed in the form of religious songs and folklore. Brajbhasha is assessed with a grade of 2 on the scale for this factor.

Factor 7 – Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and Use

Brajbhasha does not receive official recognition from state or national governments. In official records and proceedings, the language is classified and treated as a dialect of Hindi, lacking formal recognition as a distinct language. The language is valued more for its cultural significance than as a fully recognised language. Brajbhasha is assessed with a grade of 3 (*passive assimilation*) on the scale for this factor.

Factor 8 – Community Members' Attitudes toward their Language

There is a strong sense of linguistic pride among Brajbhasha speakers, who regard their language with high religious esteem and often describe it as 'sweet' and pleasing. Despite its religious and cultural importance, a significant portion of the population views Brajbhasha as 'backward,' 'uncultured,' a 'village language,' or 'useless.' Many parents prefer their children to become fluent in Hindi rather than Brajbhasha, even if the language is used at home. In urban areas, speaking Brajbhasha is often stigmatized, with speakers being labelled as 'villagers' or 'illiterate.' This stigma also affects rural areas, where individuals may switch to Hindi to present themselves as educated and civilized. Consequently, Brajbhasha is assessed with a grade of 2 on the scale for this factor.

Factor 9 – Amount and Quality of Documentation

Brajbhasha has limited presence in modern multimedia, broadcasting, and social media platforms. Being a language with rich literary past, Brajbhasha has enjoyed wide representation in literary forums and research. However, as Brajbhasha is often not seen as distinct from Hindi, the language lacks dedicated modern grammars and dictionaries. In linguistic studies, Brajbhasha is frequently discussed within the broader context of Hindi, with insufficient focus on its unique documentation. Nonetheless, recent developments in linguistic research are accelerating, including the creation of some computational tools and corpora for Brajbhasha. Despite these advancements, Brajbhasha is assessed with a grade of 1 (*inadequate*) on the scale for this factor.

4. Conclusion

Brajbhasha is actively spoken in different informal domains, such as at home,in social gatherings, in the marketplace and for prayers. The language is robustly passed on to the next generations in home settings. Being a language attached to religion, speakers of Brajbhasha have a sense of pride and identity attached to their language. The language possesses substantive cultural significance for its speakers, which has helped in the maintenance of the language against the behemoth of Hindi. However, with no official recognition from the state and central governments, the speakers of Brajbhasha are obliged to view their language as 'inferior' to Hindi. Education in schools from elementary to higher levels does not make any use of the language. With the entire school curriculum and syllabi in either Hindi or English, children are obliged to learn these languages for their education. Almost zero work opportunities based on Brajbhasha have rendered it economically useless for its speakers. The language is not 'endangered' in the sense of the term and is not going to disappear in the near future. However, with diminishing positive attitudes towards their language and increasing usage of Hindi by the people for their livelihood, the language faces an eventual threat.

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