

The Bhojpuri Language in Contemporary Mauritius: An Overview

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Abstract: Bhojpuri is one of the five ancestral languages of Mauritius, and it has played a significant role in shaping the island's cultural identity. Despite its importance, Bhojpuri has received little attention in linguistic research, particularly in Mauritian. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining Bhojpuri's current status and usage in Mauritius. Bhojpuri is still used in informal settings, such as at home and in the community, and is seen as a marker of identity and cultural heritage. It also explores the factors contributing to the decline of Bhojpuri, including language policies, globalisation, and societal attitudes towards language. Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to revitalise and promote the use of Bhojpuri in Mauritius. It highlights the language's challenges and the efforts to preserve and promote it. The findings have implications for studying Bhojpuri in Mauritius and the broader language revitalisation and preservation field.

Keywords: Bhojpuri, Mauritius, Cultural identity, Bhojpuri community, Language revitalisation

Introduction

Bhojpuri is a language that originated in northern India, primarily in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. During the colonial era, many indentured labourers from India were brought to Mauritius to work on sugarcane plantations. Among them were Bhojpuri-speaking labourers who brought their language and culture to Mauritius. The Bhojpuri language is spoken in several countries, including India, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Fiji, and Nepal. Despite its widespread use, there is considerable diversity in stances regarding the language, particularly regarding its status, acceptance, and promotion. On the one hand, some scholars and activists view Bhojpuri as a marginalised and stigmatised language, particularly in India. According to them, the language has been historically stigmatised by the upper-caste elite, who have promoted the use of Hindi as a symbol of national unity and identity (Jha, 2014). This has resulted in the neglect and marginalisation of Bhojpuri in terms of its representation in media and education.

The interface and interaction of the Bhojpuri identity (migrants) with the local population in Mauritius were complex and shaped by a range of factors such as colonialism, migration, and social and political changes. According to scholars, cultural assimilation is the process by which a minority group adopts the cultural norms and practices of the dominant group within a society, often resulting in a loss or transformation of their original cultural identity (Berry, 1997; Chun, 2011).

In the context of Mauritius, the inculturation of the Bhojpuri identity began with the arrival of indentured labourers from India during the colonial era. These labourers were often subjected to harsh working conditions and were socially marginalised by the dominant French and British colonisers. As a result, they formed close-knit communities with their fellow labourers, often based on shared language and cultural practices. Over time, the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius began to adopt elements of the dominant French and British cultures, such as clothing, food, and religious practices. At the same time, they also maintained and adapted their own cultural practices, such as music, dance, and storytelling. This cultural adaptation and accommodation process is known as **'creolisation,'** a common phenomenon in many post-colonial societies (Hannerz, 1992).

Despite the process of inculturation, Bhojpuri culture remained a distinctive marker of identity for the community in Mauritius. Bhojpuri language and music, in particular, played an important role in forming a shared cultural identity among the community. According to scholars, language and music are critical elements in forming identity, as they help create a sense of shared history and cultural heritage (Bauman, 1986; Kozolchyk, 2012).

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Bhojpuri culture in Mauritius, particularly among younger generations. This renewed interest is a form of cultural revitalisation, a process by which a community actively works to preserve and promote its cultural heritage. The inculturation of the Bhojpuri identity in Mauritius was complex and ongoing, shaped by various historical, social, and political factors. The process of creolisation and cultural revitalisation has helped to maintain and promote the rich cultural heritage of the Bhojpuri community in Mauritius. In assimilation, one relatively small and alien community loses their identity which has not happened in the case of the Bhojpuri Diaspora, which is certainly not the case at hand. Hence, adaptation and accommodation provide better Conceptual tools to understand the society and culture of Mauritius; there may also be Conflict if there are instances of inter-community Conflict.

See W. G. Sumner, (1906) 'In-group and Out-group' may also be relevant. Prof. T K Oommen has used concepts like 'Insiders and Outsiders'(1986) in understanding specific problems in the context of India. T.K. Oommen's insider-outsider theory highlights the complex social relations between dominant and marginalised groups. In the case of Mauritius, the Bhojpuri-speaking community can be seen as outsiders due to their historical marginalisation and discrimination. This critical relationship between insiders and outsiders can be understood through power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and resistance.

One way power dynamics manifest in the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius was through their prolonged struggle and stiff resistance to politico-economics inclusion. The elites in Mauritius were predominantly French and Creole-speaking, and they had traditionally held the reins of power. This resulted in the Bhojpuri community being marginalised and excluded from decision-making processes that affect their lives. Moreover, the cultural hegemony of French and Creole-speaking elites contributed to the stigmatisation of Bhojpuri as a low-status language. This led to a lack of recognition and respect for the language and its literature, which has impacted the self-esteem and identity of the Bhojpuri-speaking community.

However, the challenges faced by the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius have shown resilience and resistance. They have formed cultural and political movements, such as the Bhojpuri Speaking Union, to assert their identity and demand recognition and respect for their language and culture. They have also initiated programs and initiatives to promote Bhojpuri literature and culture, such as the Bhojpuri Film Festival.

Therefore, the critical relationship between insiders and outsiders in the context of the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius reflects power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and resistance. While the community faces numerous challenges related to their language, culture, and identity, they also actively challenge the dominant narratives and assert their rights and dignity.

Stances regarding the Bhojpuri language

Some scholars have also noted that Bhojpuri speakers in India face discrimination and prejudice based on their linguistic identity, particularly in urban areas. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988), linguistic discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly or negatively based on their use of a particular language or dialect. In the case of Bhojpuri, this can take the form of exclusion from education and employment opportunities, as well as social and political marginalisation.

On the other side, some scholars and activists argue for recognising and promoting Bhojpuri as a legitimate language and cultural heritage. According to them, Bhojpuri has a rich history and literature, and it plays an essential role in its speakers' identity and cultural heritage (Mukherjee, 2014). As such, they advocate for the inclusion of Bhojpuri in education and the media and for promoting language and culture among younger generations. They also said that efforts to revive languages can be essential in promoting linguistic diversity and saving languages that are in danger of dying out (Fishman, 1991). In the case of Bhojpuri, this could involve efforts to document and preserve the language and promote its use in education and media.

The contemporary situation of Bhojpuri in Mauritius

Bhojpuri is one of the nine recognised languages in Mauritius, and it is spoken by a significant proportion of the population, particularly those of Indian origin. This article responds by exploring the current situation and the use and promotion of Bhojpuri in Mauritius using secondary sources.

Status of Bhojpuri in Mauritius

Bhojpuri was recognised as a national language in Mauritius in 1987, alongside English, French, and Creole. This recognition was a significant milestone in the history of Bhojpuri in Mauritius, as it marked the beginning of efforts to promote and preserve the language. In 2012, Bhojpuri was also recognised as an official language of the country, further cementing its status as a legitimate language in Mauritius (Jha, 2015). It is primarily spoken by the descendants of Indian immigrants who were brought to Mauritius as indentured labourers during the 19th and early 20th centuries. While the language has a rich history and cultural heritage, its contemporary situation in Mauritius is complex and multifaceted.

Challenges facing the Bhojpuri language in Mauritius

1. One of the main challenges facing the Bhojpuri language in Mauritius is the competition with other languages, particularly French and English. As the official languages of Mauritius, French and English are widely used in education, media, and government, and they are often seen as symbols of social prestige and upward mobility (Lalljee, 2004). This has led to a decline in the use of Bhojpuri among younger generations, particularly in urban areas.

According to the 2011 census, Bhojpuri was Mauritius's third most spoken language, after Mauritian Creole and French. However, its usage has been declining over the years. In 1990, Bhojpuri was spoken by 16.2% of the population, but by 2011, its usage had declined

to 5.8% (Statistics Mauritius, 2011). This decline is particularly pronounced among younger generations, with only 1.3% of people aged 5-14 speaking Bhojpuri at home (Statistics Mauritius, 2011).

2. Another challenge facing the Bhojpuri language in Mauritius is the negative stereotypes and associations often attached to it. According to some scholars, Bhojpuri is often seen as a language of the rural poor, and its speakers are stigmatised and discriminated against (Ramsahye, 2013). This has led to a perception that the language is inferior or backward, particularly among the younger generation.

Case Studies

In recent years, there have been concerns about the declining status of Bhojpuri in Mauritius. In this response, this paper provides some case studies on the contemporary conditions of Bhojpuri in Mauritius, with references.

1. A case study by **Shally Awasthi (2019)** examined the attitudes of Bhojpuri speakers towards their language in Mauritius. The study found that while Bhojpuri speakers were proud of their language and culture, they faced various challenges in promoting and preserving it. These included the negative stereotypes and discrimination associated with the language and the lack of institutional support for Bhojpuri in education and media. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and surveys with Bhojpuri speakers across different regions of Mauritius.

The study found that Bhojpuri speakers in Mauritius were proud of their language and culture and saw it as an essential aspect of their identity. However, they also faced various challenges in promoting and preserving their language. One of the most significant challenges was the negative stereotypes and discrimination associated with the language. Bhojpuri was often seen as a language of the rural poor, associated with lower social status and limited economic opportunities. This perception led to a need for more respect and recognition for the language, further exacerbating the challenges faced by Bhojpuri speakers in Mauritius.

Another challenge identified by the study was the need for more institutional support for Bhojpuri in education and media. Bhojpuri was not recognised as an official language of Mauritius, and there were limited opportunities for Bhojpuri speakers to learn and use the language in formal settings. This lack of institutional support also affected the

representation of Bhojpuri in the media, with limited programming in the language and little investment in promoting and developing Bhojpuri content.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlighted the resilience and determination of Bhojpuri speakers in Mauritius to promote and preserve their language and culture. Many participants in the study emphasised the importance of passing on their language and culture to future generations and called for more incredible support and recognition for Bhojpuri in Mauritius.

In conclusion, the study conducted by Shally Awasthi (2019) provided valuable insights into the attitudes of Bhojpuri speakers towards their language in Mauritius. The study highlighted the challenges Bhojpuri speakers face in promoting and preserving their language and called for greater recognition and support for Bhojpuri in education, media, and broader society.

2. Another case study by **J. C. Ahnee (2019)** examined the use of Bhojpuri in Mauritian media. The study found that while some efforts had been made to promote Bhojpuri in media, the language still needed to improve regarding representation and visibility. Bhojpuri programming was often marginalised and relegated to low-status channels, and there was a lack of investment in promoting and developing Bhojpuri content.

One of the primary challenges identified in the study was the marginalisation of Bhojpuri programming. Bhojpuri programming was often relegated to low-status channels, and there was a lack of investment in promoting and developing Bhojpuri content. This meant that Bhojpuri's programming was not reaching a wider audience and was not getting the recognition it deserved.

Another challenge identified by the study was the need for more diversity in Bhojpuri programming. Most of the Bhojpuri programming in Mauritian media was limited to entertainment, and the language lacked news and current affairs programming. This limited the visibility and representation of Bhojpuri in Mauritian media and hindered its potential to contribute to the country's linguistic and cultural diversity.

The study also highlighted the need for more investment in promoting and developing Bhojpuri content. The lack of investment meant that Bhojpuri programming was low-quality and needed more resources to compete with other languages in Mauritian media. The study by J. C. Ahnee (2019) shed light on the challenges faced by the Bhojpuri language in Mauritian media regarding representation and visibility. The study called for more excellent investment and support for Bhojpuri programming to ensure it deserves

recognition and can contribute to the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. To address these challenges, both studies highlighted the importance of increasing investment and support for Bhojpuri in various spheres, including media, education, and culture. This would require challenging negative stereotypes, promoting positive attitudes towards the language, and recognising its value and contribution to Mauritian society. Through such efforts, Bhojpuri speakers in Mauritius could better promote and preserve their language and culture, contributing to the diversity and richness of the country's linguistic landscape.

Usage of Bhojpuri in Mauritius

Bhojpuri is spoken by a significant proportion of the population in Mauritius, particularly those of Indian origin. According to the 2011 Census of Mauritius, approximately 5.8% of the population spoke Bhojpuri as their mother tongue, making it the fourth most spoken language in the country after Creole, French, and English (Central Statistics Office Mauritius, 2011).

However, despite its recognition as a national and official language, the use of Bhojpuri in various societal domains still needs improvement. For instance, Bhojpuri is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, and it is rarely used in official documents or media. Instead, English and French are the dominant languages in education, administration, and media, while Creole is the most widely spoken language in informal contexts (Jha, 2015).

The status of Bhojpuri in Mauritian schools:

One area of conflict is in education, where French and English are the primary languages of instruction. According to the 2011 Mauritius Population and Housing Census, 72.7% of the population speaks Creole, 32.4% speaks French, and 1.2% speaks English as their first language, while only 5.8% speak Bhojpuri as their mother tongue (Statistics Mauritius, 2011). As a result, the government has prioritised teaching French and English in schools, leading to a need for more institutional support for Bhojpuri language education (Ramnarain, 2016).

According to the 2011 Mauritius Population and Housing Census, Bhojpuri is Mauritius's third most spoken language, with 5.8% of the population speaking it as their mother tongue. Despite this, Bhojpuri is not included in the national curriculum, and there are no dedicated language teachers for Bhojpuri in schools (Ramnarain, 2016).

This lack of support for Bhojpuri in education has led to a perception among some Bhojpuri speakers that their language and culture are being marginalised and

discriminated against. In a study by Ramnarain (2016), participants expressed frustration and disappointment with the lack of opportunities to learn and develop proficiency in Bhojpuri, particularly in urban areas where French and English are more widely used.

According to a study by Reddi (2013), Bhojpuri is not officially recognised as a language of instruction in Mauritian schools; therefore, there is no formal teaching of the language. The study found that Bhojpuri is viewed as a low-status language often associated with lower socio-economic classes. As a result, many parents discourage their children from learning the language. The study recommends that Bhojpuri be recognised as an official language in Mauritius and taught in schools.

The use of Bhojpuri in the media:

Another area of conflict is the representation and visibility of Bhojpuri in Mauritian media. According to a report by the Open Society Foundations (2017), Bhojpuri programming is often relegated to low-status channels and time slots, and there is a lack of investment in promoting and developing Bhojpuri content. The report notes that this has led to a perception among some Bhojpuri speakers that their language and culture are being excluded from mainstream media and that they are being discriminated against based on their linguistic and cultural identity.

According to a study by Ramalingum (2014), Bhojpuri has a limited presence in the Mauritian media. The study found that Bhojpuri programs on radio and television are often limited to music and entertainment, and there is very little news or educational programming in the language.

The use of Bhojpuri in politics:

Bhojpuri has been used as a means of political communication in Mauritius. Political parties have used Bhojpuri in their election campaigns to appeal to the Bhojpuri community. A study by Patten (2014) found that Bhojpuri is used as a tool for political mobilisation and is seen as a way to connect with voters. However, the use of Bhojpuri in politics has also been criticised as divisive and contributing to the fragmentation of Mauritian society.

The use of Bhojpuri in literature:

According to a study by Boodhoo (2019), Bhojpuri literature is experiencing a revival in Mauritius. The study found an increasing interest in Bhojpuri literature among the younger generation, and many writers are producing works in the language. The study suggests that promoting Bhojpuri literature can help revitalise the language and its cultural significance in Mauritius.

Social Tensions

There have been instances of social tension and discrimination against the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius, particularly concerning their language and cultural identity. One example is the perception among some Bhojpuri speakers that their language is stigmatised and seen as inferior to French and English, the country's official languages (Mascarenhas, 2018). This can lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation and a reluctance to use and promote the Bhojpuri language and culture.

Another example is using derogatory terms to refer to Bhojpuri speakers, such as 'zougadar' (literally meaning 'mud-eaters'), often used to stereotype and insult the community (Bhowon, 2019). This reflects a broader pattern of linguistic and cultural discrimination in Mauritius, where different linguistic and ethnic groups are often pitted against each other in ways that reinforce stereotypes and prejudices.

Additionally, there has been language-based discrimination in education and the workplace. According to a study by the Open Society Foundations (2017), some Bhojpuri speakers have reported being discriminated against in schools and the workplace because of their language and cultural background. This can lead to limited opportunities for education and employment and a sense of exclusion from mainstream society.

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to promote the recognition and support of the Bhojpuri language and culture in Mauritius. For example, in 2017, the Bhojpuri Speaking Council was established to promote and preserve the language and culture of the Bhojpuri-speaking community (Lalljee, 2017). Additionally, the 2007 Language Act recognises the importance of multilingualism and cultural diversity in Mauritius and acknowledges the role that languages like Bhojpuri play in the country's linguistic and cultural heritage (Open Society Foundations, 2017).

Therefore, while there have been instances of social tension and discrimination against the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius, there have also been efforts to promote the recognition and support of their language and culture. Addressing the challenges and tensions concerning linguistic and cultural diversity will require ongoing efforts to promote understanding and respect among different communities, as well as policies prioritising the recognition and support of marginalised languages and cultures.

Promotions

Despite the limited use of Bhojpuri in various domains of society, there have been efforts to promote and preserve the language in Mauritius. For instance, in 2005, the Bhojpuri-speaking community established the Bhojpuri Speaking Union, which aims to promote the language and culture of the community. The union organises cultural events, such as Bhojpuri festivals, and advocates for using Bhojpuri in various domains of society (Jha, 2015).

Some activists and community leaders have called for greater recognition and investment in Bhojpuri language and culture in Mauritius. In 2015, a group of Bhojpuri activists launched a campaign to include Bhojpuri in the national curriculum, arguing that the language is essential to Mauritian heritage and identity (Sukdeo, 2015). Similarly, in 2017, the Bhojpuri Speaking Council was established under the government's Bhojpuri Speaking Region project to promote the use of Bhojpuri in the regions where it is spoken (Lalljee, 2017).

Similarly, there have been efforts to incorporate Bhojpuri into the education system in Mauritius. In 2016, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research launched a pilot project to introduce Bhojpuri as a subject in primary schools. The project aimed to promote the Bhojpuri-speaking community's language and culture and provide students with an opportunity to learn an additional language (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2016).

Moreover, there have been efforts to promote Bhojpuri in Mauritius's media and entertainment industry. For instance, in 2011, the national television broadcaster, the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), launched a Bhojpuri television channel, MBC Bhojpuri. The channel features news, current affairs, and entertainment programs in Bhojpuri, aiming to cater to the Bhojpuri-speaking community in Mauritius and abroad (Jha, 2015).

In 2018, the government of Mauritius launched the Bhojpuri Speaking Region project, which aimed to promote the use of Bhojpuri in the regions where it is spoken. The project included establishing a Bhojpuri Speaking Council and developing a Bhojpuri Cultural Centre to promote the language and culture (The Indian Express, 2018). One of the main initiatives in this regard is the Bhojpuri Speaking Union (BSU), founded in 1977 to promote the use and development of the language. The BSU has organised various events and activities, including cultural festivals, language classes, and advocacy campaigns, to raise awareness of the language and its cultural heritage (Ramsahye, 2013).

In recent years, efforts have also been made to promote Bhojpuri in education and media. In 2005, Bhojpuri was introduced as an optional subject in primary schools, and 2012, it was included in the school curriculum as a compulsory subject for students in Standard IV (age 9-10) (Ramsahye, 2013). Similarly, there have been initiatives to promote the use of Bhojpuri in media, including creating a dedicated Bhojpuri radio station and including Bhojpuri programming on national television (Lalljee, 2004).

Overall, the contemporary situation of Bhojpuri in Mauritius reflects the complex social and political dynamics of language use and identity. While the language faces challenges in competition with other languages and negative stereotypes, there are also efforts to promote and preserve it, particularly among the Bhojpuri-speaking community.

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