

"We Live in a Society That Does Not Know Our Existence": The Language, Culture and Ethnolinguistic Identity of Mathura Labhan

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Abstract:

In the era of globalization, many ethnic minority and indigenous communities face a paradox as they become more visible in public discourse, but their internal diversity often becomes invisible. The Mathura Labhan exemplifies a similar scenario, as it is a subcaste within the Banjara tribe, one of India's largest tribal groups. Their language, culture, and ethnic identity remained undocumented and socially invisible. Historically, the Mathura Labhans were nomadic cattle herders, but they are now settled in the northern districts of the Indian state of Telangana. The exact population figure of Mathura Labhan is not known, but community leaders say it is between 80,000 to 100,000 in the state. Being a minority language surrounded by dominant and powerful Telugu, Hindi, Kannada, and Marathi languages, its undocumented stage and endangered status are posing severe challenges to its survival in the globalized era. The older literature portrayed Banjara as homogeneous by masking its heterogeneity and the subgroup's hierarchical relations in the community. Due to the geographical isolation, low population, limited access to education, a lack of political representation, and socio-economic backwardness, the Mathura Labhan community is facing severe threats to carrying forward its socio-cultural and ethnolinguistic identity.

The present study aims to investigate the language, culture, and ethnolinguistic identity of the Mathura Labhan within the larger Banjara framework. For this study, the author collected data through several field visits, participant observation and conducted unstructured, informal interviews with community members, and used responses from the language attitude survey. To structure the study, the authors used social identity theory and ethnolinguistic identity theory to provide a comprehensive analysis. The study reveals an intriguing observation that, despite ancestral ties and subgrouping within the Banjara tribe, Mathura Labhans believe they have a separate ethnolinguistic identity, as their speech and sociocultural life differ from those of other subgroups in the tribe. Mathura Labhans compare their social position with other subgroups within Banjara and categorise them as outgroups, considering them lower in the hierarchy. Despite a low population figure, no institutional support, and historical backwardness, Mathura Labhans maintain positive distinctiveness in their sociocultural lives. In addition, the younger generation in the community is slowly moving towards the dominant languages, as they offer employment, higher education, and migration opportunities. The study presents a broader overview of globalisation and deglobalisation by showing how internal diversity within larger ethnolinguistic communities can remain invisible despite increased societal recognition of indigenous peoples. It further highlights the importance of documenting marginalised subgroups that dominant tribal categories conceal. By underscoring the Mathura Labhan experience, the study points out the urgent need for linguistic documentation, cultural preservation, and policy interventions to safeguard endangered minority languages and identities.

Keywords: Banjara, ethnolinguistic identity, Mathura Labhan, Social Identity Theory

