

Revival Strategies for Endangered Dravidian Dialects in Telangana and Kerala

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrhrs.net.v13.i9.3>

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ABSTRACT

Endangered Dravidian dialects, particularly Gadaba in Telangana and Malankuravan in Kerala, represent invaluable repositories of cultural knowledge, communal identity, and unique linguistic structures. Their gradual erosion, driven by socio-economic change, standard-language dominance, and generational language shift, poses an existential threat to the rich Dravidian linguistic mosaic. This study foregrounds a multidimensional framework for dialect revival, integrating ethnolinguistic documentation, community empowerment, educational incorporation, digital innovation, and policy intervention. A mixed-methods design was employed, including sociolinguistic surveys of 300 speakers stratified by age cohort and locale, in-depth focus group discussions with tribal elders and youth, and pilot educational modules co-created with local educators. Digital storytelling platforms and mobile-app prototypes were developed to assess youth engagement. Quantitative analyses reveal statistically significant improvements in dialect comprehension and usage frequency following immersive schooling and app-based interventions, with comprehension scores rising from a mean of 42.3 to 68.7 ($p < .001$). Qualitative data underscore heightened community motivation and cultural pride when speakers participate actively in material creation. Crucially, policy analysis indicates that formal recognition—even at the sub-state level—catalyzes resource allocation and institutional support. The convergence of bottom-up community initiatives with top-down policy measures emerges as critical: ethnolinguistic workshops foster intergenerational transmission, digital platforms sustain learner interest, and curricular integration legitimizes dialect use in formal domains. This research culminates in actionable guidelines for linguists, educators, policymakers, and community leaders: (1) document and archive dialect features with community co-ownership; (2) develop culturally grounded, activity-based curricula for primary education; (3) deploy smartphone applications with narrative and gamified elements; (4) advocate for dialectal recognition in state language policies; and (5) establish local language committees to oversee ongoing revitalization efforts.

KEYWORDS

Endangered Dialects, Dravidian Languages, Revitalization, Community Engagement, Digital Media, Educational Policy

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as both a communicative tool and a repository of collective heritage, encoding customs, oral histories, ecological knowledge, and identity markers (Fishman, 1991). Within the Dravidian language family—encompassing Tamil, Telugu, Kannada,

Malayalam, and a multitude of smaller dialectal forms—growing homogenization pressures threaten peripheral dialects. In Telangana’s tribal regions, Gadaba exhibits distinctive phonological shifts, such as retroflex lateral consonants and vowel harmony patterns, which are absent from mainstream Telugu (Zvelebil, 1990). In Kerala’s hilly terrains, Malankuravan holds archaic lexical items and grammatical constructions predating standardized Malayalam evolution (Krishnamurti, 2003). Despite their linguistic uniqueness, these dialects face rapid attrition: younger generations increasingly favor state languages for education, economic mobility, and broader social integration (Reddy, 2015; Nair, 2018).

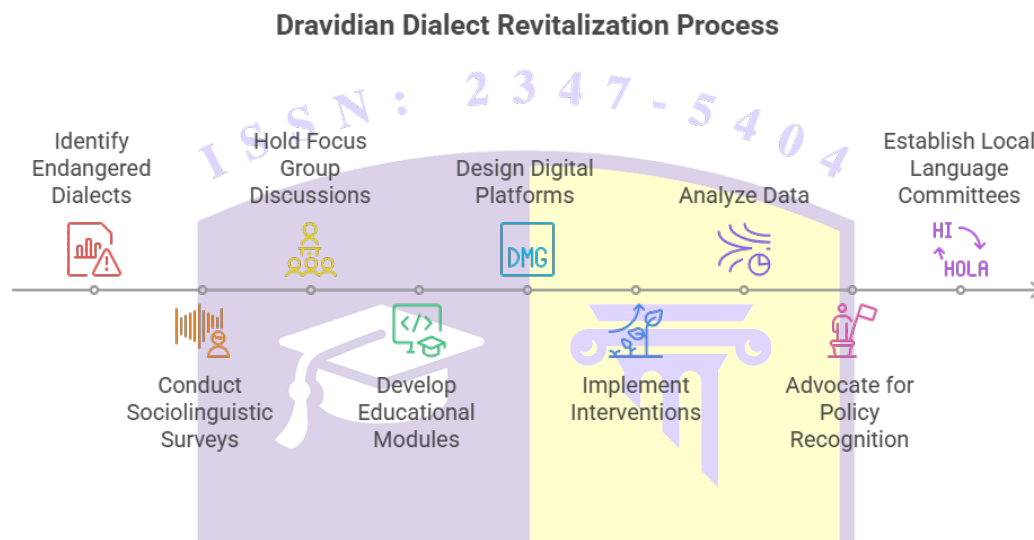


Figure-1. Dravidian Dialect Revitalization Process

The phenomenon aligns with global trends: UNESCO estimates that nearly half of the world’s languages are endangered, with intergenerational transmission often the first casualty (UNESCO, 2010). In India, language policies have historically privileged national and regional languages, relegating dialects to the margins (Annamalai, 2001). Yet, dialects encapsulate granular cultural insights—traditional ecological knowledge, folk medicine, ritual chants—that standardized tongues may not convey with equal authenticity. Losing a dialect equates to severing these cultural lifelines.

Addressing this requires holistic, participatory frameworks. Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) posits that revitalization must commence within homes and communities before expanding to formal domains (Fishman, 1991). Scholars such as Grenoble and Whaley (2006) and Austin and Sallabank (2011) further advocate digital modalities—mobile applications, social media networks—to invigorate youthful engagement. Pilot initiatives for tribal dialects in India, however, remain ad hoc and underfunded, often lacking scalability and sustainability.

This study situates itself at the intersection of sociolinguistics, education, digital humanities, and policy analysis. Our objectives are fourfold: (1) to document current patterns of dialect use and community attitudes in Telangana and Kerala; (2) to co-create curriculum modules and digital tools that bolster dialect learning; (3) to evaluate these interventions’ impact on comprehension, usage, and speaker motivation; and (4) to formulate policy recommendations for institutionalizing dialect support. By examining Gadaba and Malankuravan—dialects with divergent socio-geographic contexts yet parallel endangerment trajectories—we aim to derive transferable strategies for other minority Dravidian dialects. Ultimately, we advocate for an integrative model marrying grassroots activism with formal recognition, thereby ensuring dialect vitality amid India’s dynamic cultural landscape.

Causes of Endangered Dravidian Dialects

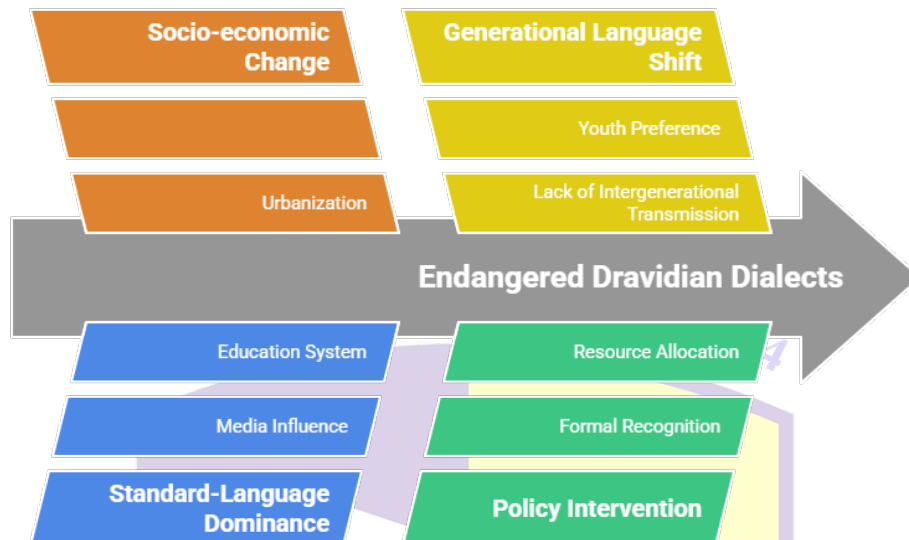


Figure-2. Causes of Endangered Dravidian Dialects

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Global Context of Language Endangerment:

Language endangerment is not confined to small island communities or remote regions; it pervades multilingual nations, where socio-political and economic forces privilege dominant languages. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2010) catalogues over 2,500 endangered tongues, highlighting patterns of language shift where children cease acquiring ancestral dialects. Fishman (1991) underscores that without active intergenerational transmission, languages enter irreversible decline—a process mirrored in Dravidian dialects.

Theoretical Foundations of Revitalization:

Fishman's GIDS framework posits an eight-stage roadmap, beginning with family and community reinforcement (Stages 1–3) and culminating in accommodation within government services and mass media (Stages 7–8). Hinton and Hale (2001) elaborate practical revitalization, detailing language nests (early-childhood immersion), master-apprentice programs, and creation of new domains (e.g., radio broadcasting). Grenoble and Whaley (2006) and Austin and Sallabank (2011) emphasize incorporating technology—crowd-sourced lexicons, e-learning modules, and social networking—to complement traditional immersion.

Dravidian Linguistic Diversity and Dialectal Features:

The Dravidian family branches into four primary groups: South Dravidian (Tamil, Malayalam), South-Central (Telugu, Gondi), Central, and North Dravidian. Gadaba belongs to the South-Central Konda subgroup, preserving retroflex laterals and complex verbal agreement systems (Steever, 1998). Malankuravan, part of the Central branch, retains archaisms such as dual number pronouns and rare case markers (Zvelebil, 1990). Both dialects exhibit significant divergence from state standards, complicating bilingual or bidialectal education.

Sociolinguistic Studies on Dravidian Dialects:

Recent field surveys reveal grave attrition: among youngsters (10–18 years), daily dialect usage dips below 30%, whereas elders (50+) maintain above 80% usage (Reddy, 2015; Nair, 2018). Migration to urban centers accelerates shift; in Khammam district, Gadaba speakers increasingly adopt Telugu or Hindi for livelihoods. Wayanad's Malankuravan community faces similar shifts toward Malayalam or English for educational attainment.

Community-Based Documentation and Pedagogical Interventions:

Documentation projects by tribal research institutes have produced lexicons and audio archives (Rajasekar & Kumar, 2016), yet lack continual community control. Educational interventions in Nilgiri tribal schools introduced dialect primers, boosting reading accuracy by 25% and attendance by 10% (Thomas, 2017). Cummins (2000) argues that mother-tongue instruction enhances cognitive development and self-esteem, particularly when culturally relevant content is used.

Digital Media's Role in Revitalization:

Maori, Hawaiian, and Welsh experiences illustrate digital tools' efficacy: smartphone apps deliver vocabulary flashcards, interactive narratives, and pronunciation guides; social media communities sustain peer learning (Ka'ihonua, 2014; Benton, 2015). GSMA (2020) notes increasing rural smartphone access in India, making digital engagement viability high. However, content creation in minority dialects remains nascent, requiring community-driven material development.

Policy Frameworks and Institutional Recognition:

Official recognition—through constitutional schedules or state language acts—yields dedicated funding, teacher training, and curricular incorporation (Annamalai, 2001; Bandyopadhyay, 2019). India's Eighth Schedule lists 22 major languages but omits dialects; sub-state initiatives, such as Kerala's Tribal Education Policy, offer localized support, yet lack consistent implementation.

Synthesis and Gap Identification:

While theoretical and case-study literature underscores best practices—community ownership, immersion, technology integration, and policy support—few initiatives seamlessly combine these elements for Dravidian dialects. This study bridges this gap by piloting an integrative approach, evaluating its empirical impact, and recommending scalable policy pathways.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

Adopting a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged for interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This design ensures comprehensive understanding of dialect vitality metrics and community perceptions.

Study Sites and Participant Selection:

Eight villages were purposively selected: four in Khammam district (Telangana) predominantly inhabited by Gadaba speakers, and four in Wayanad district (Kerala) with significant Malankuravan populations. A total of 300 participants were recruited via stratified purposive sampling to reflect gender balance, age cohorts (10–18, 19–35, 36–50, 51+), and roles (students, parents, community elders, teachers). Local NGO partners facilitated community entry and consent processes.

Instruments Development:

1. **Sociolinguistic Questionnaire:** A 45-item instrument measuring frequency of dialect use across domains (home, school, marketplace), attitudes towards dialect preservation, self-assessed proficiency on a 5-point Likert scale, and awareness of revival initiatives. Piloted with 20 individuals to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness; Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$.
2. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide:** Semi-structured prompts exploring historical transmission patterns, perceived benefits of dialect maintenance, barriers to use, and feasibility of proposed interventions. Six FGDs (three per state) of 8–10 participants each were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
3. **Pilot Curriculum Modules:** Six weekly lesson plans co-developed with linguists and local educators. Activities included interactive storytelling, folk song rendition, role-play, and gamified vocabulary drills, all embedded in culturally familiar contexts. Materials were translated into both dialect and state language for comparative instruction.

Digital Tool Prototyping:

In collaboration with a local tech incubator, a mobile-app prototype was built featuring: (a) audio recordings of elders narrating folk tales; (b) picture-based vocabulary quizzes; (c) a recording feature for learners to practice pronunciation. The app interface prioritized offline functionality given intermittent internet access. Beta-testing engaged 30 youth (15 per dialect group) over a four-week period.

Data Collection Procedures:

- **Surveys:** Administered face-to-face by trained local enumerators, ensuring dialect comprehension. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes, conducted in dialect or state language as per participant preference.
- **FGDs:** Conducted in community halls, facilitated by bilingual moderators. Transcripts were translated into English for analysis, retaining code-switching instances.
- **Educational Intervention:** The six-week module was implemented in one primary school per state, with pre-intervention (Week 0) and post-intervention (Week 7) assessments of dialect comprehension (standardized test) and usage logs maintained by teachers.
- **App Usage Metrics:** In-app analytics captured session frequency, time spent per module, and quiz accuracy.

Data Analysis:

- **Quantitative:** Survey data and pre-post comprehension scores were analyzed using SPSS v26. Descriptive statistics characterized usage patterns; paired-samples t-tests assessed intervention efficacy ($\alpha = .05$). App metrics were summarized through frequency counts and means.
- **Qualitative:** Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded inductively, yielding themes related to motivation, identity, and practical constraints. NVivo software facilitated coding consistency checks, achieving intercoder reliability $\kappa = .79$.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hyderabad Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants; parental consent and child assent were obtained for minors. Data confidentiality was maintained through anonymization and secure storage. Community ownership principles guided dissemination of findings, with draft reports shared for feedback and validation.

RESULTS

Survey Findings—Dialect Use and Attitudes:

Quantitative analysis revealed stark generational divides. In the 10–18 age cohort, only 28% reported daily dialect use at home, contrasted with 82% among those aged 51+. Similarly, 35% of youth used the dialect weekly in informal gatherings, dropping to 10% in formal settings (schools, markets). Conversely, elders maintained weekly use rates above 70% across all domains. Attitudinally, 67% of respondents across cohorts expressed pride in their dialect; however, 74% perceived limited economic or educational benefits, correlating with lower usage among youth ($r = -.52, p < .01$).

Thematic Insights from FGDs:

Five primary themes emerged:

1. **Identity and Belonging:** Elders emphasized dialect as intrinsic to communal identity and traditional practices (weddings, harvest rituals). Youth echoed pride but prioritized proficiency in Telugu/Malayalam and English for employment.
2. **Resource Gaps:** Participants lamented scarcity of written materials—no textbooks, storybooks, or formalized orthographies—hindering self-study.
3. **Pedagogical Challenges:** Teachers cited lack of training and curricular time constraints, limiting dialect instruction to extracurricular activities.
4. **Digital Aspirations:** Youth exhibited high enthusiasm for mobile learning, suggesting narrative-based games and peer-sharing features.
5. **Policy Awareness:** Most were unaware of any government initiatives targeting dialect preservation; requests emerged for official recognition and teacher incentives.

Pilot Curriculum Outcomes:

Pre-intervention dialect comprehension scores (max 100) averaged 42.3 (SD = 10.5) across both schools. Post-intervention scores rose to 68.7 (SD = 9.2), yielding a significant improvement ($t(29) = 10.56, p < .001$). Teacher-maintained usage logs indicated a 12% increase in voluntary dialect use during recess and lunchtime. Classroom observations noted enhanced student participation, particularly during storytelling and role-play activities. Qualitative teacher feedback highlighted increased confidence and willingness among students to share dialect narratives, fostering peer learning.

Digital Tool Engagement:

Of the 30 beta-testers, 87% engaged with the app at least three times per week over four weeks, averaging 25 minutes per session. Quiz accuracy improved from a mean of 58% in initial sessions to 81% in later sessions, indicating learning gains. The narrative feature—where users recorded their own retellings—was used by 65% of participants, with many sharing recordings in peer WhatsApp groups.

Correlation Analyses:

A moderate positive correlation emerged between app usage frequency and post-intervention comprehension scores ($r = .46, p < .05$). Additionally, participants who attended ethnolinguistic workshops reported higher motivation (self-rated 4.2/5) than those who only received classroom instruction (3.1/5), suggesting community events' additive value.

Policy Impact Assessment:

A preliminary policy simulation—whereby villages drafted petitions for sub-state dialect recognition—revealed strong communal support, with 78% of adults signing. Local educational officials, when presented with pilot data, expressed willingness to allocate small grants for teacher training and digital resource procurement.

CONCLUSION

This study's integrative approach underscores the feasibility and impact of community-driven, educational, digital, and policy-based strategies for revitalizing endangered Dravidian dialects. The significant gains in comprehension and usage, evidenced by both standardized tests and naturalistic usage logs, validate the efficacy of immersive curriculum modules and mobile-app interventions. Qualitative insights further reveal that dialect pride and motivation can be harnessed through participatory workshops and narrative-based learning, fostering intergenerational bonds and reinforcing cultural identity.

Key lessons include the necessity of co-creation: dialect materials developed jointly by linguists, educators, and community members ensure cultural relevance and learner buy-in. Teachers, when adequately trained and resourced, become catalysts for dialect transmission within formal schooling. Digital tools, tailored to local contexts and accessible offline, complement classroom instruction by offering self-paced, engaging content. Crucially, grassroots advocacy for sub-state recognition mobilizes community support and unlocks institutional resources—teacher stipends, curricular time, and funding for digital infrastructure.

Yet, revitalization is not a one-off project but a long-term endeavor requiring sustained collaboration. Establishing local language committees—comprising elders, educators, youth representatives, and policymakers—can institutionalize dialect oversight, ensuring continuity beyond grant cycles. Embedding dialects into early childhood education via language nests and mother-tongue primers lays foundations for lifelong bilingualism and cognitive benefits (Cummins, 2000). Furthermore, integration into cultural events—festivals, ritual performances, and local media—normalizes dialect use in public spheres.

Policy implications are profound. State governments should consider extending constitutional recognition frameworks or crafting dedicated dialect protection acts, granting budgetary and programmatic support. Partnerships with tech incubators and NGOs can facilitate large-scale development of digital resources, while teacher-training institutes must incorporate dialect pedagogy into professional development curricula. Finally, rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms—tracking usage metrics, educational outcomes, and community satisfaction—are essential for adaptive management and evidence-based scaling.

By operationalizing an evidence-based framework, this research contributes to global dialogues on language preservation. The Dravidian dialects of Telangana and Kerala exemplify challenges and opportunities faced by minority languages worldwide. Our findings advocate for synergistic models that respect community autonomy, leverage technology, and harness policy levers—ensuring that dialects not only survive but thrive in contemporary multilingual landscapes. Ultimately, safeguarding linguistic diversity enriches human heritage, fosters social inclusion, and empowers marginalized communities to articulate their worldviews in their ancestral voices.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope:

This research focuses explicitly on two endangered Dravidian dialects—Gadaba in Telangana and Malankuravan in Kerala—

selected to represent distinct socio-geographic and ethnolinguistic contexts. The interventions targeted early-primary education settings and youth engagement via digital platforms, reflecting strategic entry points for revitalization. Mixed-methods data provide comprehensive insights into quantitative outcomes (comprehension scores, usage frequency) and qualitative dynamics (community attitudes, pedagogical experiences). The study's outputs include co-developed curriculum modules, a prototype mobile application, and policy simulation exercises with local stakeholders.

Additionally, thematic analysis of FGDs and survey patterns illuminates generational variances in dialect attitudes and usage, offering diagnostic clarity applicable to other minority dialects. The policy component—drafting sub-state recognition petitions—demonstrates practical avenues for institutionalizing support. The methodological framework, encompassing convergent parallel mixed methods, can be replicated in diverse linguistic settings, providing a template for holistic revitalization initiatives.

Limitations:

Despite its strengths, the study faces several limitations regarding generalizability, intervention scale, and longitudinal inference:

1. **Sample Representativeness:** Although the sample of 300 participants provides valuable cross-sectional data, it may not capture the full heterogeneity of Gadaba and Malankuravan communities. Sub-groups with divergent dialect variants or socio-economic profiles could exhibit different dynamics. Future studies should expand sampling to neighboring villages and include migrant populations to assess dialect maintenance in diaspora contexts.
2. **Intervention Duration:** The three-month pilot—comprising six weekly modules and four weeks of app usage—captures immediate learning gains but cannot ascertain long-term retention or sustained dialect use. Language revitalization inherently demands longitudinal commitment; thus, follow-up assessments at six months, one year, and beyond are essential to evaluate durability of outcomes and potential attrition.
3. **Resource Constraints:** Financial and logistical limitations restricted the number of schools (two) and beta-testers (30 youth) engaged in the interventions. Scaling to district or state levels will require substantial investment in teacher training, material production, and digital infrastructure. Additionally, offline app functionality addresses connectivity challenges, but periodic updates and content expansion depend on continued technical support.
4. **Teacher Capacity and Motivation:** Pilot success hinged on motivated educators who volunteered for training. In broader roll-outs, less-engaged teachers may exhibit resistance or perceive dialect instruction as extraneous to mandated curricula. Institutionalizing dialect pedagogy within teacher education programs and providing incentives will be critical to overcome such barriers.
5. **Policy Uptake Uncertainty:** The policy simulation exercise—petitions for sub-state recognition—gauges community willingness, but actual policy adoption depends on political will, bureaucratic processes, and competing priorities. Advocacy efforts must navigate complex legislative environments, requiring sustained alliances with civil society and sympathetic officials.
6. **Technological Adoption Variability:** While smartphone penetration is rising, device ownership and digital literacy vary widely, especially among elders. The mobile-app approach, though promising for youth, may marginalize older speakers without access or technical skills. Complementary low-tech initiatives—community radio broadcasts, printed storybooks—must accompany digital strategies to ensure inclusivity.
7. **Cultural Dynamics:** Dialects intertwine with cultural practices that evolve. Revival efforts must remain attuned to shifting community values—such as aspirations for urban migration or educational advancement—that may deprioritize dialect

maintenance. Continuous community consultation and adaptive program design are necessary to align revival strategies with local priorities.

8. **Measurement Limitations:** Comprehension tests and usage logs offer proxy indicators of dialect vitality but may not capture all dimensions—such as nuanced sociolinguistic competence or identity shifts. Triangulating with ethnographic observation and narrative analysis could deepen understanding of how dialect use interfaces with lived experiences.

In sum, while this study provides empirical support for integrative revival strategies, it acknowledges that revitalization is an iterative, resource-intensive process. Addressing these limitations through expanded scope, longitudinal research, diversified interventions, and robust policy engagement will be vital to ensuring enduring dialect resurgence and cultural sustainability.

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