



MAGAHİ LANGUAGE AND MAGADH

Bir Bahadur Mahato, PhD

Coordinator, Magahi page of Naya Nepal,
Gorkhapatra Daily
mahatobirbahadur@gmail.com

(Received on February 16, 2026; Accepted on March 15, 2026)

ABSTRACT

Magahi is an Indo-Aryan language, spoken in Eastern part of India and Nepal. Magahi is one of the national languages spoken in Nepal. It is mainly spoken in Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Sirha, Saptari, Sunsari, Morang, Jhapa and Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. It is genealogically related to Magadhi Apabhramsa, once having the status of rajbhasha, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka. The paper outlines the Magahi language in historical context along with its present status. The paper is also a small endeavour to capture the history of Magadh. The paper discusses that once a history of Magadh constituted the history of Bharatbarsha. The paper also attempts to discuss the people and culture of present Magadh.

Keywords: *Magahi, Magadhi Apabhramsa, Emperor Ashoka.*

1. Introduction

The history of ancient India is predominated by the history of Magadh. Magadh was once an empire which expanded probably till present day Indian peninsula excluding Southern India. Presently the name 'Magadh' is confined to Magadh Pramandal of Bihar state of India. The prominent language spoken in Magadh Pramandal and its neighbouring areas is Magahi. This paper talks about Magahi as a language, its history, geography, script and its classification. The paper is also a small endeavour towards the study of the history of ancient Magadh. The association of history of Magadh with the history and culture of ancient India is outlined. The paper also talks about people and culture of present-day region of Magadh.

1.1 The Magahi language

This section is concerned with general features of the Magahi language. These general features are genealogical history of Magahi language, from where the language Magahi got its name, position of Magahi language among various Indian languages, geographic distribution of the language, dialects of the Magahi language, the scripts used in writing the Magahi language and finally classification of Magahi language.

1.1.1 The Language

Magahi is an Indo-Aryan language. Grierson (1927) has named Magahi along with Maithili and Bhojpuri as Bihari language. These days Magahi is spoken in districts of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa and Rautathat to jhapa in Nepal. The alternate names for the Magahi language are Bihari, Magadhi, Magaya, Maghai, Maghaya, Maghori, Magi, Magodhi and Megahi. Magahi has developed from Magadhi Apabhramsa or Eastern Apabhramsa branch of Magadhi Prakrit. Magahi is not the only language developing from Magadhi Apabhramsa. Other languages developing from Magadhi Apabhramsa are Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bangala, Assamese and Oriya. Pandey (1980)

Section One: Language Description

analysing the closeness of these modern Indo-Aryan languages to Magadhi Apabhramsa writes that though Ancient Bangala, Ancient Oriya, Ancient Assamese, Ancient Maithili, Ancient Magahi and Ancient Bhojpuri had associated themselves with Magadhi Apabhramsa but Magahi should be considered a model language developing from Magadhi Apabhramsa. To support his argument, he further writes that the literature of Siddhas, which are the earliest available documents on Magadhi Apabhramsa, there are found many instances which possess direct resemblance with modern Magahi. Aryani (1976) is also of the view that the language used by Siddhas is old form of Magahi.

1.1.2 Magahi, the name

Magahi is also known by its Prakrit name, Magadhi. But the name 'Magadhi' is famous mainly among the educated speakers. Magahi is the common and popular name for the language. The name Magahi is derived from the word 'Magadhi' which was the popular name of eastern dialect of Apabhramsa, fully known as Magadhi Apabhramsa. As we have seen above, Magahi is more directly related to Magadhi Apabhramsa than the other languages developing from it, the name of the language Magahi is also the direct descendent from the name of the Apabhramsa, i.e., Magadhi. Aryani (1965) writes that the word 'Magadhi' underwent phonological changes with the development of Pali and Apabhramsas from Prakrit and became the word 'Magahi'. Aryani (1965) further writes that Apabhramsa was following Prakrit but underwent various phonological changes. Because of those changes /ma/ became /mʌ/. Sound /g/ remained protected. /dʰ/ got changed into /h/. /ī/ coming with /dʰ/, remained as same. So, we have /magʌdʰī/ changing to /magʌhi/.

1.1.3 Dialects of the Magahi language

Pandey (1980), keeping in mind geographical, cultural and administrative factors, classifies four different forms of Magahi which are Standard Magahi, Eastern Magahi, Western Magahi, and Mixed Magahi. Grierson (1927) and Aryani (1965) both have mentioned about three types of Magahi, i.e., Standard Magahi, Eastern Magahi and Mixed Magahi. The detailed discussion on these classifications is done in section (2.1.6). Grierson (1927) writes about the different dialects of Magahi like Kurmali, Khontai, Kurmali Thar, Khotta, Pargania and Tamaria. The commonality about all these dialects is that all these are different forms of Eastern Magahi. Eastern Magahi is a common name given to Magahi spoken in the state belonging to the border of Bihar with West Bengal and Orissa. However, a pocket of Eastern Magahi speakers is also found in South-East Hazaribag and SouthEast Ranchi which are very close to West Bengal. Eastern Magahi spoken in Mayurbhanj and Bamra is known as Kurmali. While in western Malda it is known as Khontai. In Manbhum the language is known as Kurmali Thar and Khotta. In the South-East of Ranchi, it is known as Pargania or Tamaria.

1.1.4 Scripts used in writing

Verma (2007) mentions that Magahi is written in four scripts: Devanagari, Kaithi, Bangla and Oriya. She writes "Bangla and Oriya scripts are employed in writing the forms of Eastern Magahi currently in the Manbhum area, such as Purulia but also the south-eastern part of Hazaribag district that borders on the Manbhum region. The Oriya script is used, expectedly, in the areas where it coexists with Oriya, such as Mayurbhanj. Devanagari is the script for whatever is sought to be published today, or has been sought to be published since the early part of the twentieth century." On use of Kaithi script for Magahi, Verma writes "The traditional script for Magahi has been Kaithi, which is still used in personal communication and sometimes in semi-legal transactions. The Kaithi script gets its name from the word 'Kāyath' or 'Kāyastha', the caste of writers in Northern India, and has been recently in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. It derives from early Nagari and is closely related to the current Gujrati script which replaced the Devanagari only in the nineteenth century." On use of Kaithi script Pandey (2007) writes

Section One: Language Description

“Kaithi was the traditional script of the Bhojpuri and Magahi languages and the popular script of the Awadhi and Maithili languages. Kaithi was also used to write Urdu or the “Hindustani” lingua franca, although now the Perso-Arabic script is associated with Urdu.” Though Kaithi is the traditional script for Magahi and other Bihari languages but it got replaced by Devanagari in Early twentieth century because of social and political importance given to the Devanagari script. However, the use of Devanagari script for Magahi is a bit problematic. Verma (2007) writes about this problem “The pronunciation convention associated with the Devnagari in the greater Hindi area (as also Nepali) drops the inherent vowel of the last consonant character of a word. Quite a number of verbal forms in Magahi end in that inherent vowel /ʌ/. Therefore, the Devanagari for Magahi has been slightly modified with the addition of a word-final character, namely the ‘avagraha’ <S>, to provide for that vowel word finally.” Presently, Devanagari has become the popular script for Magahi.

2. Languages of ancient Magadh

In ancient Magadh, languages like Magadhi Prakrit, Apabhramsa and Pali were in use. By that time, Magadhi Prakrit was gaining coin as a vernacular language in the Magadh region. In other parts of India, different forms of Prakrits were developing. Parallel to Prakrits developed another language, known as Pali. It developed independently and was mainly a written form of language. Prakrits further underwent changes and gave rise to new vernacular forms. Today, these vernaculars are known as Apabhramsa. Various Indo-Aryan languages spoken all over present India are genealogical successor of Apabhramsas. Apabhramsas are the connecting link between Prakrit and NIA (New Indo-Aryan). Eastern dialect of Apabhramsa, known as Magadhi Apabhramsa, was the vernacular language of Ancient Magadh later on. As mentioned earlier, Magahi got developed from Magadhi Apabhramsa. Magadhi Apabhramsa, popularly known as Magadhi, was recognized as rajbhasha by Emperor Ashoka. He used this language to inscribe messages on his rock-edicts. On the rock-edicts found in the North West places of his Empire, which are in local languages, the influence of Magadhi Prakrit is visible.

2.1 Relation between Magadhi and Pali

Sankrityayan (1993) writes on recognition of Pali as language that today we use the word ‘Pali’ in the sense of a language and the whole Tripitak and Anupitak literature of Theraveda sect of Buddhism is available in this language. Initially the word was used to denote the original teachings of Buddha or Tripitak but later on it started symbolising a language in which Buddha’s teachings are available. Thus, the use of the word ‘Pali’ in the sense of a language is quite new and this sense got advertised in the nineteenth century. On the relation between Magadhi and Pali, Sankrityayan writes that the language which we name presently as Pali has been traditionally called Magadhi. People have been calling it as Magadhi from the age when Atthkathas were written on Tripitak. Sankrityayan, however, differentiates Pali from Magadhi and writes that the earliest available form of the Magadhi is in the Ashokan rock-edicts found in Orissa, Bihar and Uttar-Pradesh. The Magadhi language of these rock-edicts and the Magadhi which is known for Pali language are different. He further writes that Pali underwent many changes like /s/ in place of /ʃ/ of Magadhi, /n/ in place of /ŋ/ of Magadhi and /r/ in place of /l/ of Magadhi. This happened under the influence of Sthavirvadi Buddhist follower from Cylon. Sankrityayan writes that Pali would have got the privilege of becoming oldest form of Magadhi if it has not done away with /ʃ/ and /r/. Despite of these changes, Sthavirvadi says that their original scripture (Tripitak) is in Magadhi language. But Sankrityayan does not favour this view and concludes that Pali is the name of the language available in Sthavirvadi Tripitak. Various linguists are of the view that Pali is more related to Shaurseni Prakrit which was spoken in Madhya-dasha. So, it can be said

Section One: Language Description

to be a literary language based on language spoken near Ujjain and Mathura. Pali got lost as a literary language from India in the early fourteenth century with the loss of Buddhism from the land. But it survived in other countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam until eighteenth century. So, it can be said that Pali was never a spoken language in India and it especially signifies the language of written Buddhist literature Tripitak and Anupitak.

2.2 Magadhi and Buddha

Magahi is genealogically related to Magadhi Prakrit. During the time of Buddha, Magadhi Prakrit was the vernacular language. Buddha gave importance to Magadhi for his preaching and sermon. He was opposed to the use of Sanskrit for his preaching as Sanskrit by his time had become prescriptive. Moreover, Buddha was against orthodox karmkandas which by that time had evaded Hindu religion. Sanskrit was limited to formal teachings and became a tool in the hands of orthodox Hindus. Buddha, for his teachings to easily percolate into the common mass, used the vernacular language, Magadhi Prakrit. Aryani (1965) writes that Buddha used to move around Kashi, Koshal, Videh and Magadh. In these areas, Magadhi was the popular language. That's why Buddha also chose Magadhi as the medium for his preaching and sermon. But Buddha also had followers from Kuru, Avanti and Gandhar. Sankrityayan (1993) writes about these in G.J.I.S.S., Vol.3(2):52-59 (March-April, 2014) ISSN: 2319-883457 that they started following their own language in the suktas used in Buddha's preaching. Few followers were against these changes and therefore requested Buddha if his preaching could be written and preserved in a form of literary language. But Buddha was against it. According to Sankrityayan, about four centuries later, after Buddha's Nirvana, his preaching was preserved in Cylon (Sri Lanka) by Sthavirvadis in Pali, though they claim it to be Magadhi language. Chatterji (1963) writes that Lord Buddha's teachings and sermons were first compiled using the Magadhi language, which was later translated into Pali. The compiled form of Buddhas's teaching is known as Tripitak.

3. The Present Status of Magahi in Nepal

The National Population and Housing Census 2021 (Nepal) lists Magahi among the enumerated mother tongues. The 2021 census reports 230,117 people identifying Magahi as their mother tongue in Nepal (0.79% of the total population in the census report listing mother tongues). This number represents a substantial increase compared with earlier figures reported in previous censuses (for example, far smaller counts recorded in earlier enumerations). The sudden rise in self-reported Magahi speakers between earlier counts and 2021 has attracted attention among language researchers and planners.

3.1 Geographic concentration

Magahi speakers in Nepal are concentrated predominantly in the Terai Madhesh (southern plains) — districts such as Sarlahi, mahottari, Rautahat, Dhanusha, Sirha, Saptari, Sunsari, Morang, Jhapa and Capital City of Kathmandu.

3.2 Sociolinguistic vitality: domains of use

3.2.1 Home and family

Field surveys point to continued use of Magahi in family and community settings in many rural Terai villages. Older generations commonly use Magahi as the primary home language; however, in many families, younger members are increasingly bilingual or shifting toward Nepali (the national lingua franca) or dominant regional varieties (Maithili, Bhojpuri) depending on schooling and migration patterns. A sociolinguistic survey focused on Magahi in Nepal documents patterns of bilingualism and reports variation in mother-tongue proficiency and use by age cohort.

3.2.2 Education and the public sphere

Nepal's formal education system largely uses Nepali and regional languages that have established educational materials. Magahi has limited representation in formal

Section One: Language Description

schooling: there is a scarcity of mother-tongue teaching materials, textbooks or formal instruction in Magahi in government schools. This constrains transmission in the critical early education domain, and often pushes parents to prioritize Nepali (for mobility and economic reasons) or Maithili/Bhojpuri where localized bilingual programs exist.

3.2.3 Media, literature and religion

Magahi's presence in print media, radio broadcast and television in Nepal is limited compared with larger regional languages. Some local radio programs, community initiatives and cross-border media (from India) include Magahi content; oral and folk literature remain important cultural repositories. Religious ritual language often uses local vernaculars — including Magahi — especially in village ritual contexts, which helps maintain the language's ritual and expressive functions.

3.2.4 Workplace and migration domains

Labour migration (to urban Nepalese centres and abroad) affects language choices: migrants frequently adopt Nepali or other major languages in workplaces, which can reduce daily Magahi use. Seasonal cross-border migration to/from India reinforces cross-border linguistic networks, which can support maintenance but also create pressure toward more regionally prestigious varieties.

3.2.5 Language attitudes, identity and prestige

Attitudes toward Magahi vary. In many rural communities the language is a marker of local identity and cultural heritage; folk songs, proverbs and ritual speech sustain positive affective ties. Yet Magahi faces social pressures: in urbanizing contexts and in formal domains, Nepali and, to some extent, Hindi or regional standards (Bhojpuri, Maithili) are associated with socioeconomic advancement. Such pragmatic considerations can lower Magahi's prestige for schooling and employment, contributing to intergenerational shift in some areas. Researchers note that visible institutional support (media, education, official use) can shape attitudes positively.

3.2.6 Policy context and institutional recognition in Nepal

3.2.6.1 Constitutional and official language landscape

Nepal's 2015 constitution and subsequent language policy discussions recognize the multilingual character of the nation. The 2021 census officially enumerated 124 mother tongues, reflecting growing institutional interest in documenting linguistic diversity. However, constitutional recognition does not automatically translate into equal support for all languages in education, media or administration. Magahi is not among the very few languages that enjoy wide formal institutional backing (such as Nepali, Maithili in specific provinces), so practical support remains limited at the national level.

3.2.6.2 Local government and mother-tongue education

Some local governments and civil society organizations in Terai have supported mother-tongue literacy drives, community radio, and local cultural programs. Decentralization in Nepal gives municipalities the authority to support languages locally — an opportunity that has not yet been uniformly exploited for Magahi. Language planning analysts urge municipalities with significant Magahi populations to include mother-tongue materials in early grades and to support cultural programming.

3.3 Threats and language shift dynamics

Key threats to Magahi in Nepal include:

1. Domain loss in education and administration: Limited mother-tongue schooling reduces children's opportunities to learn literacy in Magahi. Parents often favour Nepali for perceived mobility benefits.
2. Urbanization and migration: Movement to cities and job markets encourages use of Nepali or other dominant tongues.

Section One: Language Description

3. Language labelling and classification: In multilingual zones, respondents may shift labels among related languages (e.g., reporting Bhojpuri, Bajjika, or simply “Hindi”), complicating maintenance efforts and census comparability.
4. Limited media presence: Little mass-media content in Magahi reduces visibility and prestige.

Cumulatively these forces can produce gradual shift from Magahi toward Nepali (or other regional languages) especially among younger urban cohorts — a pattern common to minority languages worldwide.

3.4 Maintenance and revitalization: existing initiatives

Despite challenges, several strands of activity support Magahi maintenance:

Community cultural activities: Folk music, local festivals, oral storytelling and ritual performance remain vibrant in many villages; these transmit vocabulary, idiom and social functions.

Sociolinguistic documentation: Academic and governmental surveys (including the sociolinguistic survey of Magahi in Nepal) provide baseline documentation critical for planning and revitalization. Such surveys help understand domains of use, bilingualism patterns and community attitudes.

Local media and civil society: Some community radios, local NGOs and cross-border cultural programmes broadcast content in regional vernaculars including Magahi; these initiatives bolster everyday use and pride.

Municipal efforts and bilingual schooling pilots: In a few places, local schools and NGOs have experimented with bilingual literacy materials and mother-tongue based multilingual education components, though coverage is uneven. Language-planning research recommends scaling up such pilots.

These bottom-up activities are essential; combined with supportive policy, they can create durable maintenance ecosystems.

4. Case studies and micro-evidence

4.1 Sarlahi and neighbouring districts (Terai)

Districts such as Sarlahi have visible Magahi populations; local surveys indicate robust use in home and market domains among older adults, with younger speakers showing varying degrees of bilingualism. In rural wards, Magahi remains the primary medium for agricultural discussion, folklore and ritual speech; in municipal wards (towns), Nepali grows more prevalent. Anecdotal field reports and community interviews highlight the role of local festivals in maintaining Magahi song and narrative traditions.

4.2 Cross-border cultural flows

Because the Terai is contiguous with Bihar, Indian Magahi media — songs, films and radio — reach Nepali Magahi communities and function as resources for language exposure. While these flows support language maintenance, they also complicate standardization and locally produced content development. Greater investment in local media production would strengthen Magahi’s institutional presence.

5. Recommendations for policy and practice

To strengthen the status of Magahi in Nepal, I recommend a multi-pronged approach combining research, education, media, and community empowerment.

5.1 Research & documentation

Fund and expand sociolinguistic fieldwork to map domains of use at the village/ward level, language attitudes by age cohort, and intergenerational transmission rates. Use such data to design targeted programs. (Existing surveys provide a baseline; more microdata are needed.)

5.2 Mother-tongue education & materials

Develop age-appropriate Magahi literacy primers, readers and teacher-training modules for early grades in municipalities with significant Magahi populations. Pilot

Section One: Language Description

mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs and evaluate learning outcomes relative to Nepali-only instruction. Encourage local schools to include Magahi storybooks, songs and cultural content in class activities.

5.3 Media & cultural programming

Support local community radio programmes, podcasts and short video content in Magahi. Small grants for community journalists and content creators can increase presence. Promote local festivals and recording projects (folk songs, oral histories) to archive cultural heritage and produce shareable media.

5.4 Policy & local governance

Encourage municipal governments in Magahi-majority wards to adopt language-friendly policies: bilingual signage, official forms available in Magahi, and recognition of Magahi in cultural events. Use decentralization frameworks to channel small budgetary support to local language programs.

5.5 Cross-border cooperation

We should create cross-border cultural and academic exchanges with counterparts in Bihar to share materials, training and media resources while ensuring locally relevant content for Nepalese Magahi speakers. This may leverage shared cultural capital while tailoring programs to Nepali administrative realities.

5.6 Community capacity building

Train local teachers, radio producers, and cultural leaders in documentation methods (audio/video archiving, basic orthography if needed) so communities can take ownership of language maintenance. Encourage youth participation through creative media (music, short films, social media) in Magahi.

6. Limitations of current knowledge and further needs

While national census data and targeted surveys provide useful snapshots, there are limitations:

Census figures capture self-reported mother tongue but not depth of proficiency or domain frequencies; they can also be affected by respondents' choice of labels. Micro-level ethnographic work is needed to measure active proficiency, literacy rates in Magahi, and domain usage patterns.

Existing sociolinguistic surveys are valuable but geographically limited. Comprehensive district-level mapping would illuminate regional variation and hotspots of vitality or risk.

Evaluation studies are needed for any MTB-MLE pilots to determine educational efficacy and long-term social impact.

7. Conclusions

Magahi is an Indo-Aryan language. Magahi got developed from Magadhi Apbhransha. Magadhi Apbhransha as a language is associated with ancient Magadh. The language in ancient Magadh was known as Magadhi. Even today, the name 'Magadhi' for the language Magahi is popular among educated people. G.J.I.S.S., Vol.3(2):52-59 (March-April, 2014) ISSN: 2319-883459 Historically, we find that ancient Magadh was once an Empire, which expanded all over the present day Indian peninsula. Maurya dynasty and Gupta dynasty were the most prominent rulers of ancient Magadh. Their history constitutes the history of India. Today, Magahi language is confined to Nepal some region of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. Looking into the literary tradition of Magahi language, we find that earliest form of written Magahi is found in the literature of Siddhas. After Siddhas, Magahi survived only as a spoken language. However, in Modern period, various folklores, folksongs and other forms of vernacular literature were compiled and published. Presently, an attempt to write grammar and to study the language linguistically is going on.

REFERENCES

- Aryani, S. (1965). *Magahi Lok Sahitya*. Hindi Sahitya Sansar.
- Aryani, S. (1976). *Magahi Bhasha aur Sahitya*. Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad.
- Census of India. (2001). *Table No.- C 16*. Registrar General of Census of India.
- Chatterji, S. K. (1926). *The origin and development of Bengali language*. Calcutta University Press.
- Chatterji, S. K. (1963). *Bhartiya Arya Bhasha aur Hindi*. Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Greirson, G. A. (1903–1928). *Linguistic survey of India* (Vols. 1–11). Motilal Banarsidas
- Lal, M. (Ed.). (2002). *Ancient India: Textbook for Class XI*. NCERT.
- Pandey, R. B. (1976). *Magahi Sahitya va Sahityakal*. Lok Sahitya Sagar.
- Pandey, R. B. (1980). *Magahi Bhasha ka Itihas*. Lok Sahitya Sagar.
- Pandey, A. (2007). *Proposal to encode the Kaithi script in ISO/IEC 10646*.
<ftp://std.dkuug.dk/JTC1/sc2/wg2/docs/n3389.pdf>
- Sankrityayan, R. (1993). *Pali Sahitya ka Itihas*. Vani Prakashan.
- Verma, S. (2007). Magahi. In G. Cardona & D. Jain (Eds.), *The Indo-Aryan languages* (pp. 547–565). Routledge.