SHIFTING IDENTITY IN KURMALI: A PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION

Bhim Lal Gautam[a] & Sharada Sapkota[b]

[a] Central Department of Linguistics, T.U., Nepal.
[b]MPhil-PhD Scholar, T.U., Nepal.
Corresponding author: bhim.gautam@cdl.tu.edu.np

This paper investigates patterns, reasons, and effects of language shift in the Kurmi community located at eastern and southern part of Jhapa. It provides a detailed picture of language use and attitudes in different activities like migration, marriage, the media, and so on. The data was gathered through interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and survey questionnaire during March-June, 2024. Questionnaires were analyzed in Excel tools and the qualitative data were interpreted on various themes. This study realizes that the younger Kurmis do not speak this language in their daily life because of the influence of media, migration and globalization.

Keywords: Shifting, identity, migration, culture, cross border

1. Introduction

Kurmali (ISO-639-3) language belongs to Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European language family. It is used as a first language by Kurmi people primarily inhabiting in various parts of Jhapa district, of Koshi province. Besides, Kurmis are scattered in small number in Morang district as well as in Bagmati province but Kurmis outside Jhapa speak different languages such as Maithili,Tharu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi etc. According to national population census 2021, the total population of the Kurmali speakers is 397 among which 377 is found in Jhapa district (NSO, 2023). Based on our observation Kurmis of Nepal have a close connection with the Kurmis of Jharkhand, India in terms of language and culture. According to the senior Kurmi citizens, they have approximately a hundred years of history in Nepal. Thus, Kurmali is purely a cross-border language spoken in Nepal and India equally. In India, the Kurmali language is spoken in south-east Jharkhand in Seraikela Kharswan, east Singhbhum, west Singhbhum and Ranchi districts. In north-eastern Odisha, it is spoken in Mayurbhanj, Kendujhar, Jajpur and Sundargarh district; and in west Bengal it is spoken in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and Western Medinipur districts. Kurmi people migrated to Nepal from India for various reasons. However, the main reason is to secure their future. Kurmis claim that they are originally from Ayodhya, India but due to some reason they were migrated to Jharkhand and ultimately they were migrated to Nepal and settled there. They are all Hindu by religion and their primary occupation is agriculture. The Kurmis of Nepal identify themselves as *Kshetriya* who believe they are the descendant of Lord Shree Rama.

The Kurmali language is one of the least studied languages of Nepal. It is highly endangered language because the number of its speakers is decreasing gradually. In our observation we found that most of the young Kurmis do not speak this language in their daily life. Instead, they prefer speaking the Nepali language. We have observed a massive language shift among the youth and new generation.

2. Research methodology

This study employed mixed method by integrating qualitative (focus group discussions and interviews) and quantitative (ethnographic survey) data collection and analysis. The ethnographic survey questionnaire, initially prepared in English, was translated into Nepali and administered to informants during March- June 2024 in Kurmi villages located in the southern part of Jhapa

District. The data collected in Nepali was subsequently translated into English for this paper. Informants were purposively selected from two Kurmali-speaking communities viz., *Kantharghutu, Anandagunj, Kachhubari, Maheshpur*, etc. (see Table 1).

The selected informants were asked about the languages they use in different activities and situations. In addition, four FGDs were carried out during the field visit. At least two FGDs were conducted from each village during the survey. There were 4-6 members in each FGD and they were asked and interviewed questions regarding language use and attitude that supplemented the ethnographic survey. Altogether six individual interviews were taken and recorded from Kurmali people. The informants include housewives, teachers/ academicians/monks, politicians/ language activists, businessmen/ shopkeepers, workers/ vendors, and students.

Informants were categorized into three age groups: A1 (15-30), A2 (31-55), and A3 (56+) in order to assess the impact of multilingualism and language shift across different generations. They were also classified by gender (male/female) and marital status (married/unmarried). The pseudonyms have been used and anonymized for privacy.

Table 1: *List of informants*

Place	Female	Male	Number
Kantharghutu	11	6	17
Maheshpur	8	4	12
Kachhubari		3	3
Dhaulapul	4	5	9
Aanandagaj		4	4
Tulasibadi	2	10	12
Total	25	32	57

The data collected with the help of an ethnographic questionnaire were analyzed statistically. For this, the data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed and presented in tables and figures. Survey findings were statistically presented, and qualitative data were utilized to corroborate the survey results, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. During the analysis, the findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were aligned with the statistical presentation, enhancing the robustness of the analysis. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of speakers' perceptions and attitudes (Garret, 2010; Gautam, 2018; Gautam, 2019). Additionally, thematic categories emerged during the examination of qualitative data transcripts. Initially, micro themes were identified, and then broader themes were developed, considering recent advancements in multilingualism and language shift research and studies.

3. Analysis and discussion

In this section, the main findings are classified and described based on the data collected from ethno-linguistic survey, FGDs, and informal interviews. The findings are analyzed and contextualized with related literature in order to deal with different aspects of multilingualism and language shift among the Kurmalis.

3.1 Patterns of language shift

As per the Kurmi history in Nepal, there are, apparently, four generations living till date. The first generation speaks Kurmali in their day-to-day life and they are emotionally attached to it. The second generation also speaks their language regularly within their circle and they also taught their children Kurmali. However, they frequently use Nepali due to daily contact with the Nepali community. Likewise, they also use Santhali, Rajbanshi, Bihari[i], and so on because of their societal structure. The third generation knows about Kurmali but they prefer using Nepali mostly. Because of contact and the schooling system, they are familiar with Nepali and they find it easier to use in comparison to Kurmali. They also speak Hindi and Maithili in their workplace. For the fourth generation, Kurmali has become a strange language. Children under ten years say Kurmali is

a 'ḍaḍi's language (the language of the grandmother)'. They feel more comfortable with Nepali and English than Kurmali. Thus, Kurmali has become a heritage language for the fourth generation.   The following chart shows the patterns of language shift in various social activities.

Figure 1: *Language use in social activities*
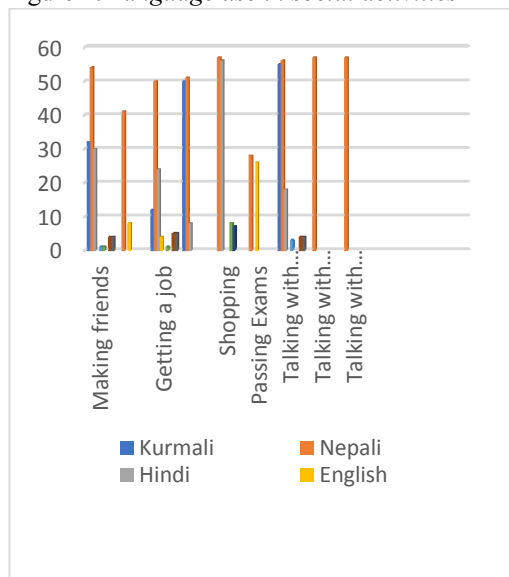
Source: Field report, 2024

Figure 1 illustrates that different language is used in different social activities. Among all the languages Nepali is the mostly used language in every activity. Similarly, Kurmali is also used for specific purpose such as making friends, shopping, and to talk with the workers.

3.2 Language use in family and relatives

As discussed in previous section, the first and second generations use Kurmali regularly in their daily life. But the third generation frequently switches into Nepali along with Santhali, Rajbanshi etc. However, they also use their language while talking to their parents and elder generation. Figure 2 presents the patterns of language use in family and relations.

Figure 2: *Language use in family and relations*
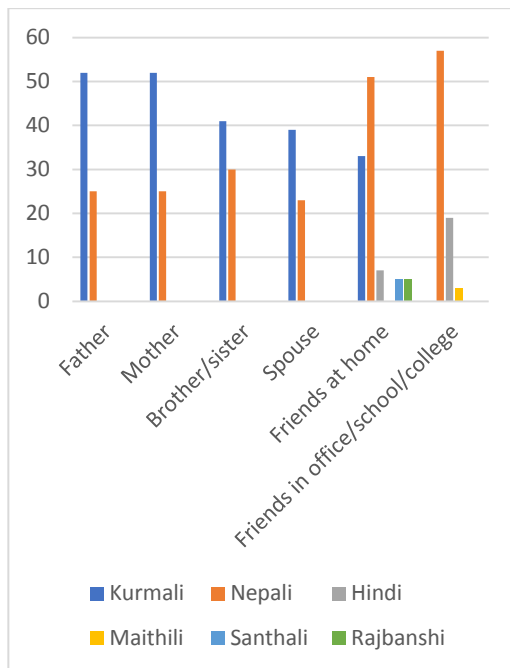
Source: Field report, 2024

Figure 2 shows mainly Kurmali and Nepali languages are frequently used in family members and relatives. Kurmali is used inside the family relations such as talking to the parents, sibling, and spouse. But outside the family, they prefer using Nepali language because people outside the home understand and speak Nepali.

3.3 Religious and cultural activities

Language and culture have historically played a significant role in communication (Thomason, 2015, p. 26). Kurmali is rich in its diverse and unique rituals and culture. Unlike Nepali, it has its own rituals in terms of marriage, death, and so on. For example, male Kurmis never wear *jənəi* 'sacred thread 'except on their wedding day. Similarly, they have a unique festival called *Karma Parva* which we never find in any other community in Nepal. Thus, we can say Kurmis prefer using Kurmali in religious and cultural activities. Figure 3 shows their attitude in using Kurmali on special occasions.

Figure 3: *Language use in religious and cultural activities*
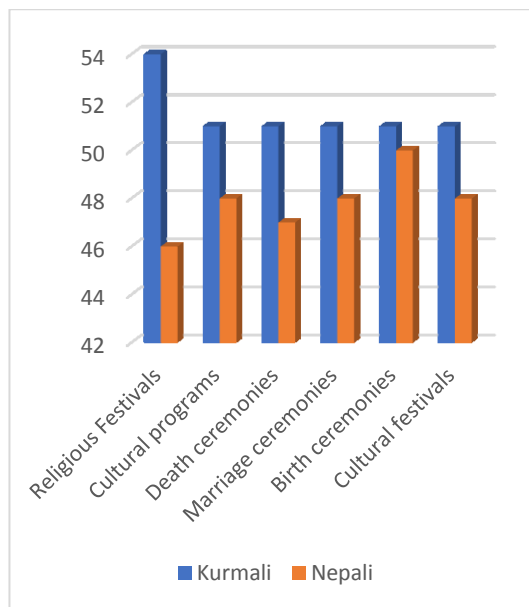
Source: Field report, 2024

Figure 3 illustrates that Kurmi people use Kurmali in religious and cultural activities. It shows that they are aware of their language. And the use Nepali language shows that the young generation gradually has been shifted towards Nepali, as a result Kurmali language is at the verge of extinction.

3.4 Official and ceremonial activities

In Nepal, the Nepali language has the official status while other 124 languages do not have the same status. Thus, it is mandatory to use Nepali for official and ceremonial activities in Nepal. Kurmi people use Kurmali in office or work place along with Hindi besides Nepali. However, mostly they use Nepali. Figure 4 presents the patterns of language use in various official and ceremonial activities.

Figure 4: *Language use in official and ceremonial activities*
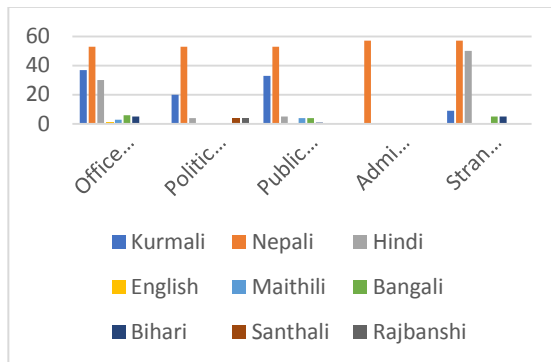
Source: Field report, 2024

Mostly, in office or work place, and public activities and fun fair, they use Kurmali along with Nepali. Sometimes they also use Hindi, Bangali, Bihari, Rajbanshi, Santhali, and Maithili as per the situation. However, Nepali language is used widely in every situation.

3.5 Behavioral activities

Kurmi people use multiple languages in multiple situations. For instance, they can equally use Nepali, Kurmali, and Hindi to accomplish different tasks. Figure 5 shows the use of different languages for different behavioral activities.

Figure 5: *Different behavioral activities*
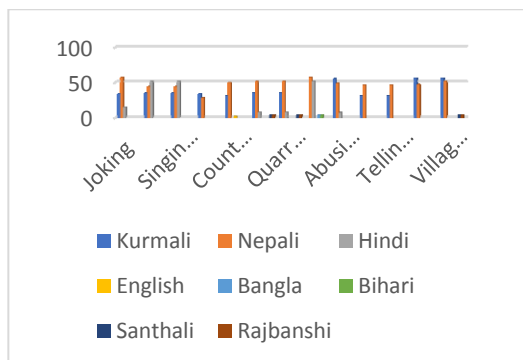
Source: Field report, 2024

From Figure 5 we see that the Nepali language is mostly used during joking, counting, shopping or bargaining, and telling stories to children or others. Further, they prefer Nepali, while quarreling and discussing or debating. However, Kurmali is used while praying, abusing, family gatherings, and at village or community meetings. Hindi is also used for singing and shopping. Besides Bangali, Bihari, Rajbanshi, and Santhali languages are also used for certain purposes. This indicates the idea of Vygotsky and sociocultural theory (SCT) where a community's culture and an individual's mind are in an inherently dialectical relationship as semiotically organized functional systems (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985). During our field visit, people in this cross-cultural and cross-border area have expressed different dialectal features of Kurmali varieties in *Kantharghutu*, *Mahespur,* and *Kachhubari* with the sociopolitical context of the neighbor and community they live nearby.

4. Shifting identity on language

There are many ways of identifying people with the help of language. In the modern mixed and multilingual societies, translanguaging has been associated with the development of multilingual identities where bilingual speakers construct complex discursive practices (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, p.314) by using their complete language repertoire, and these practices cannot be easily assigned to one language or another (Gracia & Li Wai, 2014). Kurmali spoken in Nepal side is slightly different from Kurmali spoken in India. Due to the frequent contact with the Nepali language, it has adopted some of the features of Nepali for instance *[ʌ]* insertion. Originally, Kurmali did not have *[ʌ]* sound but due to the contact of Nepali for more than 100 years the sound was easily adopted and nativized very easily. Now it is very common for Kurmali people to have long and detailed discourses on various subjects by using particles and lexicons like */ʌni/, /lagi/, /mʌkʌi/,* and more which are nativized from Nepali to Kurmali. This is the result of language contact in cross-border and cross-cultural situations in the multilingual society that slowly leads towards shift and change. The mixing of multiple languages in a single utterance such as *hame gʰar dzabo, ɖʰijapuʈa kanʈəi* '(I go home, children might cry) where there are three languages mixed together. Here, */hame/* is Maithili, */ghar/* is Nepali and the rest is a Kurmali expression.

4.1 Shifting identity on kinship relationship

The kinship terminology of any language is a natural meeting point for the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics (Turin, 2001, p. 277). The manner in which people construct and understand their relationships with others has a direct impact on the words they use to describe these relationships. Kurmali people use their own Kinship terminologies like other autonomous language communities. However, the younger generation gradually shifting toward Nepali, Hindi, and other dominant neighboring languages so that they are forgetting their first language due to the contact effect. Kinship terms are also being rarely used among this generation and the new kinship relations are created and used in the shifting environment. For example, the Kurmali community has their own term for daughter in law i.e. '*putahu*' but nowadays Kurmi people prefer using '*buhari*' which is the kinship term borrowed from Nepali language.

During our field visit, we asked for common as well as traditional kinship terms to a very old Kurmi person (82 M) in Anandagunj. Kisun (pseudonym) has been living in Jhapa (different places) since he left his job in Indian Army (Assam Rifles) in 1962. He could not remember all the terms and telephoned his wife for reference and informed us. This indicates that even the older generation is also using commonly used kinships because of the frequent contact with the Nepali language. While Kisun telephoned his wife to ask about the exact kinship we realized that Kurmali people have maintained the kinship terms within the group of women but most of the males and young people have completely forgotten because of the influence of Nepali in Jhapa and Bengali in

Maheshpur area. We collected more than forty-six kinship terms in Kurmali which need to have a detailed anthropological study by comparing them with neighboring languages. Some kinship terms among the Kurmi are listed below.

Table 2: *Kinship terms found in Kurmali*

	Kurmali (Romanized)	English meaning
1.	mai	Mother
2.	bap	Father
3.	pota/poti	Son's son/daughter
4.	nati/natini	Daughter's son/daughter
5.	mama/mami	Maternal uncle/aunt
6.	chacha/chachi	Uncle/Aunt
7.	dada/dadi	Grandfather/Grand mother (Father's Home)
8.	nana/nani	Grandfather/Grand mother (Mother's Home)
9.	phuphu	Father's sister
10.	phupha	Father's sister's husband
11.	jawai	Son-in law
12.	beti jawai	Son-in-law (daughter)
13.	bahin jawai	Brother-in-law (younger sister)
14.	didi bohonai	Older sister and her husband
15.	sala/sali	Brother/sister of wife
16.	sorojini	Wife's brother's wife
17.	sadu/chat sadu	Wife's sister's husband
18.	jaid sath	Older mother-in-law
19.	bad sadu	Husband of older mother-in-law
20.	nanad	Husband's sister
21.	dewar	Husband's younger brother
22.	jed sas	Older sister of mother-in-law
23.	bhaigana/bhaigani	Sister's son/daughter
24.	bhatija/bhatiji	Brother's son/daughter
25.	padosi	neighbour
26.	samdhi/samdhini	Son/daughter's father/mother-in-law
27.	chat gotani	Husband's younger brother's wife
28.	bad gotani	Husband's older brother's wife
29.	bhoji	Older brother's wife
30.	bauwasin	Younger brother's wife
31.	putahu	Son/daughter-in-law
32.	sautin	Step wife
33.	mosi	Aunt (uncle's wife)
34.	mosa	Uncle
35.	gungu	Father's older brother
36.	gumai	Father's Older brother's wife
37.	bad mosi	Mother's older sister
38.	bad mosa	Mother's sister's husband
39.	badka/badki	Older male/older female
40.	majhla/majhli	Middle male/middle female
41.	sainla/sainli	Third son/daughter
42.	chot sainla/sainli	Forth son/daughter
43.	chotka/chotki	Youngest son/daughter
44.	giduwa/nunu	grandson
45.	gidriya/nuni	granddaughter
46.	bahu	wife

Source: Field report, 2024

From Table 2, we can see that there is widespread use of borrowed kinship terminologies in modern Kurmali which is shifted due to the contact effect.

Many loaned kinship terms from Nepali, Hindi, and Maithili have been used widely and they provide a context-free and socially neutral way of addressing outsiders, thus filling a niche which is largely shifted to Kurmali from Nepali (Turin, 2001).

4.2 Shifting identity in religious and cultural festivals

People working in various psychological and sociolinguistic aspects have generally studied the pragmatics of language as it is used by speakers and writers to enact culture. They are able to measure the pragmatics of a language in relation to the psychological and social characteristics of a specific language group that speaks and uses the language for particular activities. But in recent years, some researchers have been drawn to poststructuralist approaches that investigate how language and culture co-construct each other in intercultural encounters due to their dissatisfaction with such structuralist approaches to pragmatic cultural variation (Kramsch, 2014). People frequently emphasize the connection between mother tongues and ethnic identity, emphasizing how crucial they are to preserving communal cohesion (Gautam, 2024). Kurmali celebrate most of the Hindu festivals. Almost all their festivals have been shifted with the dominating neighbouring festivals. They now celebrate Dasain, Tihar, Maghe Sanskranti and other festivals like other people living in Nepal. However, they celebrate these festivals within the limitation of their cultural identity. As language serves as one of the most powerful markers of cultural identity, uniting people within shared traditions, beliefs, and histories. In cross-border regions, languages transcend national boundaries, evolving and adapting to diverse environments. These cross-border languages embody a unique cultural identity that reflects the dynamics of migration, trade, colonization, and shifting political boundaries

5. Impacts of the modern developments

Various developments are responsible for the shifting identity of any cross-border language. The shifting patterns of migration, globalization, and technology can lead to the loss of cross-border languages like Kurmali. As people migrate to urban areas or adopt dominant global languages, cross-border languages may face reduced use, particularly among younger generations. This language shift can weaken cultural ties, as language is often a key part of identity and shared history (García & Fishman, 2002).

5.1 Migration and urbanization

Migration has a profound impact on cross-border languages. As people migrate for work, education, or to escape conflict, they carry their language with them to new regions (Gautam, 2012). This often results in a blend of languages, where the migrant language is influenced by the local language of the new country. The Kurmis of Jhapa have migrated from various districts of India for jobs and agricultural works have been shifted to Nepali mixed Kurmali language. The same situation can be seen for the speakers of Somali, who have migrated from the Horn of Africa to other parts of Africa and even Europe, maintaining their language, but new dialects or linguistic variations emerge based on where they settle (Ameka & Toupin, 2003). These new forms of the language reflect both their Somali and Kurmali roots and the influence of the new linguistic environment because of migration.

Urbanization is creating a lot of socio-cultural impacts on global south countries, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. This often draws rural populations speaking cross-border languages into large cities, where dominant national languages (such as English, French, Spanish, Hindi, or Nepali) prevail. Over time, cross-border languages may either blend with urban languages or slowly decline in use. The case of Kurmali is worth studying in this particular issue.

5.2 Globalization

Globalization has led to greater interconnectedness between countries, but it has also contributed to language shift. Dominant global languages like English, Spanish, and French often take precedence in cross-border regions due to international trade, media, and education (Gautam, 2022; Gautam & Paudel, 2022). For the context of the Kurmali community in Jhapa, Nepali, Hindi and other local dominant languages like Bengali, Maithili, and Rajbansi are more influential to language shift. This can lead to the marginalization of cross-border languages as people prioritize learning more "global" languages.

However, globalization also creates opportunities for the preservation and spread of cross-border languages. Digital media, films, and music in native languages help sustain cultural identity. For example, Swahili has gained prominence across East Africa as a lingua franca, partly due to its promotion through global platforms such as films, online content, and regional cooperation between East African countries. In the case of Kurmali, it has been the dominant language community in *Jharkhanda*, India where Kurmi people have received a lot of socio-political recognition within their community.

5.3 Technology and digital media

The digital age has brought new platforms for the preservation and promotion of cross-border languages. Social media, podcasts, online communities, and mobile apps enable speakers to connect, share, and teach their languages. For languages at risk of decline, digital archives and apps can be used to record and preserve these languages for future generations (Crystal, 2003). Mobile technology and social media platforms have helped different communities maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage by creating digital spaces for language learning, storytelling, and cultural exchanges (Gautam, 2020, 2021). While collecting various data among the Kurmis, we found that they are also familiar with this digital impact. A man (56M) at *Tulsibadi* has completely changed his dress formal while we were trying to interview him about the history of Kurmi in Nepal. He was asking us about the time when his interview is released on Facebook page.

6. Conclusion and implication

Cross-border languages are powerful symbols of cultural identity that transcend national boundaries. They reflect a shared history and community among people divided by borders. As migration, globalization, and technology reshape these regions, cross-border languages adapt, sometimes blending with dominant languages or evolving into new dialects. These languages, however, remain vital to preserving cultural heritage, and efforts to sustain them are key to maintaining cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world. For people who speak cross-border languages like Kurmali, their linguistic identity is tightly connected to cultural identity. In many cases, despite being divided by borders, the people speaking these languages share similar customs, traditions, and even historical experiences. In various contexts where historical minority languages are being promoted, it is becoming more widely accepted that educating students about the significance of language and culture for marginalized language communities can be regarded as the essential component of language education (Darquennes, 2017, p. 302). Language plays a crucial role in studies of human cultural diversity which is examined through the lenses of social, cultural, historical, or psychological variety (Evans, 2013, p. 233). The combined knowledge of native and non-native speakers is one of the most useful aspects of multilingualism. However, the use and attitudes of those who speak minority or indigenous languages have highlighted the neoliberal influences in the global south that promote imperialist notions.

In this small-scale case study on the Kurmali-speaking community, multilingualism has led to a progressive change in the main languages, such as Hindi, English, and Nepali. Data from ethnographic surveys, focus groups, interviews, and narratives all suggest that Kurmali is mostly employed in household contexts pertaining to culture and religion. The national language of Nepal, Nepali, is extensively utilized in official, ceremonial, social, and media-related contexts. Hindi and English are used more frequently in formal settings, such as the media and ceremonies. The Kurmali community's preference for English over Hindi highlights the neoliberal and global influence in places like Maheshpur, Tulsibadi, Kachhubari, and Anandagunj. The Kurmalis who work in academia, government, and the tourism industry favour Nepali and English over other languages. The facts and narratives discussed in this paper call into question about the local languages that are primary means of communication and the key to intercultural understanding among people who live nearby (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej et al., 2022).

The Kurmali people in the southern part of Jhapa district are also influenced by globalization, international linkages, and their participation in various social, cultural, and ceremonial activities in the diverse mixed society, motivating a shift towards new languages from their heritage language. In this context, this research intersects with various socio-political factors/variables where individuals employ different languages in diverse contexts and situations. Additionally, existing language policies and their implementation at various levels of government contribute to language shift and change. Based on the analyzed data and our own field observations, it is evident that Kurmali is experiencing language shift and endangerment, necessitating a careful revision of existing policies. Unlike the urban multilingualism throughout the world, Kurmalis of Maheshpur and Tulsibadi share many common issues and problems of language shift and change. This paper also contributes to linking multilingualism with language policy in the context of Nepal, thereby generating future policy implications regarding language preservation and revitalization.

It is imperative to seriously consider the preservation and revitalization of the Kurmali language, as its speakers shift towards Nepali, Maithili, Bengali, Hindi, and other neighbouring languages, thereby creating new avenues in language policy and planning to address the ecological reality of multilingual Nepal.

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[i] Bihari is the common language spoken by many people in border area which is the mix form of Bangali,Hindi and Maithili.