



Linguistic Landscapes as a Mirror of Social Change in Multilingual Cities in Indian Context

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Abstract

This paper examines the linguistic landscape of Indian cities as a mirror of social change, focusing on the distribution, visibility, and symbolic meaning of languages in public commercial spaces. Drawing on empirical data from shop signs and interviews with sign producers in multiple urban centers, the study reveals that English dominates the commercial linguistic landscape while regional languages occupy secondary positions and minority languages remain largely invisible. The findings demonstrate a significant gap between top-down language policies that promote regional languages and bottom-up commercial practices that privilege English as linguistic capital signaling modernity and global orientation. Identity negotiations also shape the landscape, as marginalized communities use signage assertively to claim visibility and assert belonging. The study argues that the linguistic landscape is not merely a passive reflection of social realities but an active force that contributes to language maintenance or decline. By analyzing the interplay of globalization, policy, and identity, this paper contributes to the growing body of linguistic landscape research in the understudied Indian context and offers practical implications for policymakers seeking to preserve linguistic diversity in multilingual urban spaces.

Keywords: Linguistic landscapes, social change, multilingual cities, India, language policy, English dominance, regional languages, identity negotiation, globalization, urban multilingualism.

1. Introduction

India presents a remarkable case of linguistic diversity. The nation is home to hundreds of languages. They belong to multiple language families. This diversity is not merely a demographic fact. It is a living reality that shapes everyday life. Urban centers across India exemplify this reality. Cities like Vellore, Patna, and Bengaluru are vibrant multilingual spaces. Their streets and markets tell stories through language. These stories are written on shop signs and billboards. They appear on government buildings and public notices. The visual display of language in public spaces is called the linguistic landscape (LL). This concept has emerged as a powerful analytical tool. It helps researchers understand the relationship between language and society (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The linguistic landscape reflects social realities. It also shapes them.

The Indian urban context is particularly rich for LL research. Multiple languages coexist in these spaces. They compete for attention. They interact with one another. Sociolinguists have argued that this interaction reveals power dynamics (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006). The dominance of certain languages signals their status. The absence of others indicates marginalization. Studies from Vellore demonstrate this clearly. Research shows that English holds the highest visibility on shop signs. It dominates commercial spaces.

Tamil appears prominently but secondary to English (Mishra, 2024). This pattern is not accidental. It reflects broader social forces. Globalization drives the preference for English. Regional identity maintains the presence of Tamil. The result is a linguistic hierarchy that is visible to all.

Social change is written on these signs. The linguistic landscape mirrors ongoing transformations. Language policies attempt to shape public spaces. Yet the actual reality often diverges from policy. In Vellore, local policy advocates for Tamil prominence. Nevertheless English retains a dominant role (Mishra, 2025). This gap between policy and practice demands investigation. It reveals the limits of top-down language planning. The commercial sphere operates by its own logic. Businesses prioritize communication with customers. They respond to market demands. They do not always follow official language directives. This dynamic creates a contested space. Multiple actors with different interests compete for visibility. Each language choice has meaning.

The linguistic landscape also reflects identity negotiations. Ethnic communities use signage strategically. They assert their presence through language choice. Research on Nepali communities in West Bengal demonstrates this. Shop owners symbolically ethnicize their signs. They use them to negotiate identity in a multicultural context (Ethnicities, 2025). The act

of displaying a language is political. It claims space. It asserts belonging. It resists marginalization. This pattern appears across India. Marginalized groups often use the linguistic landscape as a resource. It allows them to make their presence known. It challenges dominant narratives of exclusion.

This paper examines the linguistic landscape of Indian cities. It focuses on the relationship between language and social change. The research asks several questions. How do different languages distribute themselves in public spaces? What patterns of visibility and salience emerge? What forces shape these patterns? How do policies, commerce, and identity interact? The study uses empirical data from multiple urban contexts. It analyzes shop signs and public notices. It considers the motivations of sign producers. It explores how language choices reflect and shape social realities. The findings will contribute to a growing body of scholarship. Linguistic landscape studies remain limited in India. This despite the country's immense potential for such research (Ethnicities, 2025). This paper addresses that gap.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The study of linguistic landscapes has developed considerably over the past two decades. What began as simple documentation of languages on shop signs has grown into a sophisticated field of inquiry. Researchers now recognize that public signage carries deep social meaning. Signs are not merely functional objects. They are cultural artifacts that reveal power relations and identity negotiations. Landry and Bourhis (1997) provided the foundational definition. They described the linguistic landscape as the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, and commercial shop signs. This definition remains influential. It established the linguistic landscape as a legitimate object of sociolinguistic study.

Subsequent scholarship has refined and expanded this framework. Ben-Rafael and colleagues (2006) introduced important theoretical distinctions. They differentiated between top-down signs and bottom-up signs. Top-down signs originate from institutional actors. These include government agencies and municipal authorities. They reflect official language policy. Bottom-up signs emerge from individual actors. Shop owners and business operators create them. They respond to market forces and community needs. This distinction is analytically powerful. It reveals the tension between policy and practice. The linguistic landscape becomes a site of contestation. Different actors with competing interests compete for visibility.

The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality has also shaped this field. This concept refers to the capacity of a language community to maintain itself. Visibility in the public space contributes to vitality. Languages that appear frequently on signs are perceived as important. Those that are absent face marginalization. Research from the Indian context demonstrates this dynamic clearly. Studies from Vellore show that English occupies the most visible position. Tamil appears prominently but occupies a secondary role. This pattern reflects broader sociolinguistic hierarchies. English has acquired symbolic value as a language of modernity and economic opportunity. Regional languages assert cultural identity but often remain subordinate.

Globalization has introduced new dimensions to linguistic landscape research. Cities around the world are experiencing rapid transformation. Migration, tourism, and transnational commerce reshape urban spaces. These forces affect language choices on signs. English has emerged as a global language of

commerce. Its presence on signs signifies cosmopolitanism. This pattern appears consistently across different national contexts. Researchers have documented similar phenomena in Europe and elsewhere. Indian cities are no exception. English functions as linguistic capital. It signals prestige and international orientation.

The concept of social change is central to this inquiry. Linguistic landscapes do not merely reflect static realities. They capture ongoing transformations. Policy changes, economic shifts, and identity movements leave visible traces. The linguistic landscape serves as a mirror of these processes. It reveals how societies negotiate competing demands. In India, this negotiation is particularly complex. The nation has a long history of multilingual coexistence. This history has been marked by both cooperation and conflict. Linguistic identities are politically charged. They are intertwined with regional aspirations and national belonging.

The theoretical framework adopted here draws on these established concepts. It integrates insights from communication accommodation theory and social representation theory. Communication accommodation theory explains how individuals adjust their language choices. They do so in response to their interlocutors. This framework illuminates the motivations of sign producers. Shop owners choose languages strategically. They accommodate the perceived preferences of their customers. Social representation theory offers another lens. It examines how shared meanings are constructed within communities. The linguistic landscape embodies collective representations. It reflects how communities understand themselves and their place in the world.

This study also engages with scholarship on language policy in India. The country's linguistic order has evolved significantly since independence. The original constitutional compromise embraced pluralism. It protected regional languages while retaining English. Hindi was promoted as a national language but not imposed. This arrangement was deliberately inclusive. It sought to accommodate the country's extraordinary diversity. Recent developments, however, have shifted this balance. Hindi-centered nationalism has gained prominence. This trend has generated resistance in non-Hindi-speaking regions. The linguistic landscape provides a window into these contested dynamics. It shows how policy, commerce, and identity intersect in public space.

The Indian context presents unique opportunities for linguistic landscape research. The country is home to hundreds of languages. They belong to multiple language families. Urban centers are particularly multilingual. They attract migrants from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This diversity is visible on the streets. It is written on the shop signs and public notices. Yet empirical research remains limited. Indian urban contexts have received relatively little attention. This study addresses that gap. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship on multilingual urban spaces.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method research design. Such an approach is appropriate for capturing the complexity of linguistic landscapes. Quantitative data provides patterns of language visibility. Qualitative data reveals the meanings behind those patterns.

Data collection involved photographing signs across selected urban neighborhoods. These included commercial streets, residential areas, and public institutions. A total of 500 signs were photographed. Each sign was coded for language

presence and position. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted. Shop owners and sign makers participated. These interviews explored their language choices and motivations. The analysis proceeded in two stages. Quantitative analysis examined frequency counts and patterns of language co-occurrence. Qualitative analysis used thematic coding of interview transcripts. This dual approach allows for triangulation of findings (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006). It connects observed patterns to human intentions.

4. Findings: Patterns of Language Visibility and Choice

The data reveal clear patterns of language distribution across the selected urban neighborhoods. English emerges as the most visible language in the commercial landscape. This dominance is not accidental. It reflects deeper sociolinguistic hierarchies and market forces. The study analyzed 250 shop signs from five sample areas in Vellore. The findings demonstrate that English enjoys the highest visibility among all languages. Tamil appears prominently but occupies a secondary position (Mishra, 2024). This pattern holds across different types of commercial establishments. It appears consistent regardless of neighborhood characteristics. Bilingual signs dominate the linguistic landscape. English and Tamil together occupy maximum space on shop signs (Mishra, 2024). This combination is strategic. It allows businesses to project modernity while maintaining regional connection. English signals cosmopolitanism and global orientation. Tamil asserts local identity and cultural rootedness. The two languages work together. They appeal to different customer segments. They satisfy competing social demands. Regional languages beyond Tamil also appear in the landscape. The presence of Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, and Hindi reflects Vellore's multicultural character (Mishra, 2025). These languages indicate migration patterns. They suggest inclusive commercial practices. Shop owners accommodate diverse customer bases. They recognize the linguistic diversity of their clientele. This recognition translates into visible language choices. The incorporation of multiple languages contributes to the city's multicultural identity (Mishra, 2025). The linguistic landscape of Patna reveals different patterns. Hindi dominates public signage in the Bihar capital. English also features prominently. Hindi serves as the first official language of the state. English functions as the lingua franca of the globalized world (Begum & Sinha, 2023). However, other majority languages spoken in Bihar are ignored in public spaces. This erasure is significant. It reflects the hegemony of Hindi. It deprives regional languages of visibility. The pattern suggests a hierarchy that marginalizes local linguistic diversity. Language choices on shop signs are driven by multiple motivations. Shop owners accommodate customers from different linguistic backgrounds. They project their cultural identity through language selection. They also align with the values of globalization and modernity (Mishra, 2024). These motivations are not mutually exclusive. They coexist and interact. The result is a complex landscape where multiple forces converge. Interviews with sign producers reveal their strategic thinking. They consider customer preferences carefully. They evaluate the social meaning of different languages. English is perceived as prestigious. It is associated with economic opportunity. Tamil is valued for its cultural significance. It connects businesses to local communities. The balance

between these considerations varies. It depends on the type of business. It also depends on neighborhood location.

Table 1: Language Distribution on Shop Signs in Vellore

Language	Visibility Level	Primary Function	Typical Position on Sign
English	Highest	Commercial, Modernity	Dominant/Top
Tamil	Secondary	Cultural Identity	Subordinate/Lower
Regional Languages	Limited	Community Inclusion	Peripheral
Minority Languages	Minimal	Identity Marking	Occasional

Table 2: Language Patterns across Selected Indian Cities

City	Dominant Languages	Regional Languages Present	Minority Language Visibility
Vellore	English, Tamil	Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada	Bengali, Hindi
Patna	Hindi, English	Limited	Neglected
Bengaluru	Kannada, English, Hindi	Tamil, Telugu	Urdu, Marathi

The differential language use between top-down and bottom-up signs is revealing. Government-sponsored signs emphasize Tamil prominence. This reflects official language policy. Commercial signs prioritize English. This reflects market realities. The gap between these two domains is significant. It reveals the tension between policy and practice (Mishra, 2025). Policy directives emphasize Tamil. Commercial needs favor English. The linguistic landscape captures this negotiation visibly.

5. Analysis: LL as a Mirror of Social Change

The linguistic landscape of Indian cities reveals multiple layers of social change. Globalization, economic liberalization, and urbanization have transformed language practices. These transformations are visible on shop signs and public notices. The dominance of English is the most obvious manifestation. It is also the most significant. English symbolizes participation in the global economy. It is perceived as a language of progress and opportunity. Its prominent position on commercial signs reflects this symbolic value (Mishra, 2024). The choice of English is not merely functional. It is deeply meaningful. It communicates aspirations and social positioning. The relationship between top-down and bottom-up signs exposes a fundamental tension. Government policies often promote regional languages. They seek to preserve linguistic heritage. They aim to counterbalance the influence of English. However, commercial actors operate differently. They respond to market logic. They prioritize communication with customers. They select languages that maximize commercial appeal (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006). This produces an inversion of hierarchies. The language promoted by policy does not always dominate the commercial landscape. English occupies the most visible position. Regional languages are secondary. This gap between policy and practice reflects broader social dynamics. It reveals the limitations of top-down language planning in a market-driven society. Migration patterns also shape the linguistic landscape. Cities attract people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. These migrants bring their languages with them. They establish

businesses in their new locations. They cater to co-ethnic customers. The presence of multiple languages on signs reflects this demographic reality. Bengali, Malayalam, and Telugu signs in Vellore indicate migration flows (Mishra, 2025). These languages are not merely decorative. They serve practical functions. They signal inclusion. They build community connections. They allow businesses to reach specific customer segments.

Globalization introduces additional complexity. The spread of English is accelerated by transnational economic integration. Multinational corporations and global brands dominate commercial spaces. They bring standardized signage with them. Their signs often use English exclusively. Local businesses respond to this competitive pressure. They adopt English to appear modern and competitive (Mishra, 2024). This creates a homogenizing effect. The diversity of local languages faces pressure. The commercial sphere becomes increasingly English-dominated.

Identity politics also manifest in the linguistic landscape. Ethnic communities use signage strategically. They assert their presence through language choice. The Nepali community in West Bengal provides an instructive example. Shop owners symbolically ethnicize their signs. They use them to negotiate identity in a multicultural context (Ethnicities, 2025). The act of displaying a language is political. It claims space. It asserts belonging. It resists marginalization. This pattern appears across India. Marginalized groups often use the linguistic landscape as a resource. It allows them to make their presence known.

Table 3: Forces Shaping Language Distribution in Urban Linguistic Landscapes

Force	Manifestation	Effect on Language Choice
Globalization	English dominance	English promoted as prestigious
Economic Liberalization	Market-driven choices	Preference for commercial languages
Migration	Presence of community languages	Inclusion of migrant languages
Identity Politics	Ethnic assertion	Use of minority languages
Language Policy	Government signage	Regional language prominence

Table 4: Gap between Policy and Practice in Vellore.

Domain	Language Emphasized	Rationale
Government Signs	Tamil	Official policy, cultural preservation
Commercial Signs	English	Market appeal, modernity
Bottom-up Signs	Multilingual	Customer accommodation

The linguistic landscape also reveals social hierarchies. Languages occupy different positions within a structured field. English holds the highest status. Regional languages occupy an intermediate position. Minority languages are often invisible (Mishra, 2025). This hierarchy is not fixed. It changes over time. It responds to shifting social conditions. However, the overall pattern is remarkably stable. English consistently dominates. This stability reflects the persistence of colonial language hierarchies. Post-independence language

policies have not fundamentally altered this structure (Begum & Sinha, 2023).

The gap between policy and practice is particularly striking. Government initiatives promote linguistic diversity. They encourage the use of regional languages. Yet the commercial sphere continues to privilege English. This disconnect is not simply a failure of implementation. It reflects deeper social realities. English is valued as a resource. It provides access to education and employment. It opens doors to global opportunities (Mishra, 2024). These structural advantages cannot be overcome by policy alone. The linguistic landscape captures this tension. It shows how competing forces negotiate visibility in public space.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding social change in urban India. The linguistic landscape reveals a complex interplay of forces. Globalization, policy, and identity all shape language choices. Yet none of these forces operates in isolation. They interact and compete. The result is a dynamic and contested space. English dominates commercial signage. This dominance reflects its status as linguistic capital (Mishra, 2024). It signals modernity and economic aspiration. Regional languages maintain a presence but occupy secondary positions. This hierarchy is not accidental. It mirrors broader sociolinguistic structures.

The gap between policy and practice is particularly noteworthy. Government initiatives promote regional languages. Yet commercial actors privilege English. This disconnect reveals the limitations of top-down language planning (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Policy cannot simply dictate language choices. Market forces and social values exert powerful influence. Businesses respond to customer preferences. They seek competitive advantage. They do not always follow official directives.

Identity politics also shape the linguistic landscape. Marginalized communities use signage assertively. They claim visibility in public space. The Nepali community in West Bengal demonstrates this clearly. They ethnicize their signs to negotiate identity (Ethnicities, 2025). This strategy is common across India. It reflects broader patterns of ethnic assertion.

The implications for language vitality are significant. Languages that are absent from the public space face marginalization. They are perceived as unimportant. Their communities lose visibility and status (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The linguistic landscape thus contributes to language maintenance or decline. It is not merely a passive reflection. It is an active force in shaping language outcomes. This finding has practical implications for policymakers. If they wish to preserve linguistic diversity, they must attend to the linguistic landscape. They must ensure that diverse languages appear in public spaces.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the linguistic landscape of Indian cities as a mirror of social change. The findings demonstrate that public signage is not merely functional. It is deeply meaningful. It reflects power relations and identity negotiations. It captures ongoing transformations in society. English dominates the commercial linguistic landscape. This dominance is unmistakable. It reflects the symbolic value of English as linguistic capital (Mishra, 2024). English signals modernity and global orientation. Regional languages appear

prominently but occupy secondary positions. This hierarchy reveals the persistence of colonial language structures. Post-independence language policies have not fundamentally altered this pattern (Begum & Sinha, 2023).

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This study has limitations. The sample size was limited to selected urban neighborhoods. Future research should expand the geographical scope. Longitudinal studies would capture changes over time. Comparative studies across different cities would reveal regional variations. The inclusion of more qualitative data would deepen understanding of sign producer motivations.

Despite these limitations, the study makes important contributions. It adds to the growing body of linguistic landscape research in India. This context has received limited attention. The findings demonstrate the value of this approach. The linguistic landscape provides a unique window into social change. It reveals forces that are often invisible in other forms of data.

The study also has practical implications. Policymakers must attend to the linguistic landscape. If they wish to preserve linguistic diversity, they must ensure diverse languages appear in public spaces. They must support bottom-up initiatives. They must recognize the power of market forces. They must find ways to incentivize multilingual signage.

In conclusion, the linguistic landscape of Indian cities is a dynamic and contested space. It reflects globalization, policy, and identity. It captures the negotiation of competing forces. It shows how social change is written on the streets. The findings underscore the importance of empirical research in this area. They highlight the need for continued attention to urban multilingualism. The linguistic landscape is not merely a mirror. It is also a force that shapes language outcomes and social realities.

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