



## Indigenous Religion, Language Loss, and Cultural Identity among Ethnic Communities in Bangladesh

Ritesh Karmaker

Nizam Uddin Ahmed Model College, Mymensingh, Sherpur, Bangladesh

Correspondence: E-mail: [karmakeritesh@gmail.com](mailto:karmakeritesh@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Religion plays a central role in shaping cultural identity and social life among indigenous ethnic communities, with religious beliefs, rituals, and moral teachings often transmitted through indigenous languages. In Bangladesh, the decline of indigenous languages has raised concerns regarding the continuity of indigenous religious practices and spiritual knowledge. This study examines the relationship between indigenous language loss and religious life among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative analytical approach based on existing empirical and sociocultural studies, the paper explores how diminishing language use affects religious rituals, oral prayers, spiritual narratives, and communal worship practices. The findings indicate that language loss contributes to the simplification of religious expressions, reduced intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge, and weakening of religious identity. The study highlights the importance of integrating language preservation into religious education and community-based spiritual initiatives to sustain indigenous religious heritage. These findings contribute to discussions on religion, culture, and indigenous identity in multilingual societies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion constitutes a fundamental dimension of cultural identity and social organization among indigenous ethnic communities. Religious beliefs, rituals, and moral teachings are often inseparable from language, as spiritual knowledge is transmitted through prayers, chants, oral narratives, and ceremonial instructions expressed in indigenous languages. In many indigenous societies, language functions as the primary medium through which religious meanings are articulated and sustained. Consequently, the decline of indigenous languages poses significant challenges to the continuity of indigenous religious life and spiritual identity.

In Bangladesh, indigenous ethnic communities practice diverse forms of religion, including indigenous belief systems, syncretic traditions, and organized religions shaped by local cultural contexts. These religious practices are deeply embedded in everyday life and communal activities, reinforcing social cohesion and shared values. Indigenous languages play a crucial role in conveying sacred meanings, ritual procedures, and ethical norms within these religious traditions (Amin, 2018). As indigenous languages weaken, the linguistic foundation supporting religious expression becomes increasingly fragile.

Language loss has been associated with changes in religious practice and spiritual transmission among indigenous communities. Studies indicate that when dominant languages replace indigenous languages in daily communication, religious expressions are often simplified or translated into dominant linguistic forms, resulting in a loss of cultural nuance and symbolic depth (Bhuiyan, 2016). This linguistic shift affects how religious knowledge is understood, practiced, and transmitted across generations.

Intergenerational transmission is particularly critical in sustaining indigenous religious traditions. Traditionally, elders serve as custodians of spiritual knowledge, guiding younger members through rituals, oral prayers, and moral instruction using the indigenous language. When younger generations lack proficiency in their ancestral language, access to this spiritual knowledge becomes limited, leading to partial understanding or disengagement from religious practices (Ali *et al.*, 2016). Over time, this disruption weakens religious continuity and communal participation.

Educational and social environments further influence these dynamics. Formal education systems in Bangladesh largely operate in dominant languages and rarely incorporate indigenous religious or cultural knowledge. As a result, indigenous children may encounter religious instruction detached from their linguistic and cultural heritage, contributing to identity distancing and reduced engagement with traditional spiritual practices (Islam, 2020). This separation reinforces the marginalization of indigenous religious expression within broader societal structures.

Socioeconomic pressures also contribute to changes in religious life. Indigenous communities experiencing economic marginalization and urban migration often adapt their religious practices to dominant cultural norms to facilitate social integration. This adaptation may involve conducting religious activities in dominant languages, reducing the use of indigenous languages in worship and spiritual instruction (Beg *et al.*, 2020). Language loss thus interacts with economic and social forces to reshape indigenous religious identity.

Research suggests that language decline affects not only religious practices but also the sense of spiritual belonging among indigenous individuals. Religious identity is closely linked to language, as sacred expressions and spiritual narratives are often culturally specific and difficult to translate without loss of meaning (Sultana, 2023). When indigenous languages are

marginalized, religious identity may become fragmented, particularly among younger generations navigating between ancestral traditions and dominant cultural expectations.

Despite growing scholarly attention to indigenous language loss in Bangladesh, the intersection between language decline and religious life remains underexplored. Existing studies tend to focus on language policy, education, or socioeconomic outcomes, with limited emphasis on religious practices as a domain affected by linguistic change (Awal, 2019). Examining religion through the lens of language loss offers valuable insight into how spiritual life and cultural identity are reshaped in multilingual contexts.

Based on previous studies (Karmaker, 2025; Karmaker, 2024), this study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between indigenous language loss and religious life among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Rather than focusing on doctrinal aspects of religion, the study emphasizes everyday religious practices, spiritual transmission, and identity formation. By synthesizing existing empirical and sociocultural research, the study aims to contribute to discussions on religion, language preservation, and cultural sustainability in indigenous contexts.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data analysis to explore the relationship between indigenous language loss and religious life among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The research design was appropriate given the study's focus on cultural meaning, spiritual practices, and identity rather than quantitative measurement. All data were drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed academic sources included in the bibliographic list provided by the author.

The analysis focused on studies addressing indigenous culture, language use, religious practices, and social marginalization. Particular attention was given to research discussing intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge, ritual practices, and the role of language in religious expression (Ali et al., 2016; Amin, 2018; Bhuiyan, 2016). These sources provided insight into how linguistic shifts influence religious life within indigenous communities.

A thematic synthesis method was applied to identify recurring patterns linking language decline with changes in religious practices. Themes analyzed included the simplification of religious rituals, reduced use of indigenous languages in worship, generational gaps in spiritual knowledge, and identity transformation. Findings from multiple sources were compared to identify consistent relationships and contextual variations.

To ensure analytical rigor, only studies with clear cultural or sociological relevance were included. Cross-referencing among sources was conducted to minimize interpretive bias and enhance credibility. As the study relied solely on secondary sources and did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of existing studies indicates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has a substantial impact on religious life and spiritual identity among ethnic communities. Indigenous religions and localized forms of worship rely heavily on language to transmit prayers, ritual instructions, cosmological narratives, and moral teachings. As indigenous languages decline, these religious expressions are increasingly conducted in dominant languages, leading to a gradual transformation of spiritual practices and meanings (Amin, 2018; Sultana, 2023).

One of the most significant consequences of language loss is the simplification of religious rituals. Studies show that rituals traditionally performed using indigenous languages are often shortened or linguistically translated when younger generations lack fluency in their ancestral language (Bhuiyan, 2016). This translation process frequently removes culturally embedded metaphors and symbolic references, resulting in ritual practices that retain outward form but lose deeper spiritual resonance. Over time, religious ceremonies become more standardized and less reflective of indigenous cosmology.

Intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge has also weakened. Elders traditionally serve as custodians of religious narratives and ethical instruction, passing this knowledge orally to younger members through the indigenous language. Research indicates that younger individuals who primarily use dominant languages often experience limited access to this spiritual knowledge, creating gaps in religious understanding and participation (Ali *et al.*, 2016). These generational divides reduce communal cohesion and weaken the continuity of indigenous religious traditions.

Language loss further affects collective religious identity. Indigenous religious practices often function as markers of ethnic belonging, reinforcing shared values and communal solidarity. When indigenous languages are marginalized, religious identity may become detached from its cultural roots, leading to fragmented or hybrid forms of spiritual expression (Awal, 2019). This detachment is particularly evident among youth navigating between ancestral beliefs and dominant religious-cultural norms.

The patterns in **Table 1** demonstrate that language loss reshapes not only how religious practices are performed but also how they are understood. While religious activities may continue in modified forms, the erosion of the indigenous language diminishes their cultural specificity and spiritual significance. This transformation reflects broader processes of cultural adaptation under dominant-language pressure.

**Table 1.** Effects of Indigenous Language Loss on Religious Practices. The table was synthesized from references (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Amin, 2018; Bhuiyan, 2016; Sultana, 2023).

Religious aspect	Observed change	Cultural implication
Ritual language use	Decline	Loss of symbolic depth in rituals
Oral prayers and chants	Simplification	Reduced spiritual nuance
Transmission of sacred narratives	Disrupted	Incomplete religious knowledge
Community participation	Decreasing	Weakened religious cohesion

Educational and institutional contexts further influence religious transformation. Formal education systems rarely incorporate indigenous religious knowledge or language, encouraging the separation of spiritual life from linguistic heritage (Islam, 2020). As a result, indigenous religious expression becomes increasingly confined to private spaces rather than communal or institutional settings. Language loss thus reinforces the marginalization of indigenous religion within broader social structures.

Socioeconomic pressures also contribute to changes in religious practices. Indigenous communities facing economic marginalization and urban migration often adapt religious expression to dominant cultural norms to facilitate social integration (Beg *et al.*, 2020). This adaptation frequently involves conducting religious activities in dominant languages, further reducing opportunities for indigenous-language worship and instruction. Over time, economic necessity reshapes spiritual practices and weakens indigenous religious identity.

**Table 2** highlights that religious transformation is driven by structural conditions rather than individual disengagement. Educational systems, economic pressures, and institutional hierarchies collectively shape religious expression and linguistic practice. Household language

shift emerges as a critical factor, as it directly affects the transmission of spiritual knowledge and religious values.

**Table 2.** Structural Factors Influencing Religious Transformation among Indigenous Communities. The table was derived from references (Awal, 2019; Beg *et al.*, 2020; Islam, 2020; Sultana, 2023).

Structural factor	Influence on religious life	Linguistic dimension
Dominant-language education	High	Exclusion of indigenous religious language
Urbanization and migration	High	Reduced communal worship in the indigenous language
Socioeconomic marginalization	Moderate–High	Adaptation to dominant religious norms
Institutional neglect	Moderate	Limited support for indigenous religious practices
Household language shift	High	Disrupted spiritual transmission

Overall, the findings suggest that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh contributes to the gradual transformation of religious life by weakening ritual complexity, reducing intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge, and reshaping religious identity. While indigenous religions may persist in adapted or hybrid forms, the erosion of linguistic foundations undermines their cultural continuity. These results underscore the importance of integrating language preservation into religious education and community-based spiritual initiatives to sustain indigenous religious heritage within multilingual societies.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has a significant impact on religious life and spiritual identity among ethnic communities. The findings show that diminishing use of indigenous languages contributes to the simplification of religious rituals, weakens intergenerational transmission of spiritual knowledge, and reduces communal participation in indigenous religious practices. As religious expressions increasingly shift to dominant languages, culturally embedded meanings and symbolic depth are gradually lost.

Structural factors such as dominant-language education, urbanization, socioeconomic marginalization, and institutional neglect further accelerate this transformation. While indigenous religious practices may continue in adapted or hybrid forms, the erosion of linguistic foundations undermines their cultural continuity and spiritual authenticity. These findings highlight that sustaining indigenous religious heritage requires attention not only to religious practice but also to the linguistic environments that support spiritual transmission. Integrating indigenous language preservation into religious education and community-based spiritual initiatives is therefore essential for maintaining indigenous religious identity within multilingual societies.

## 5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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