Language Data of 2011 Census

What is the issue?

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- Recently, the Census of India made public the language data based on the 2011 Census.
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- It appears to inadequately reflect India’s linguistic composition, and is inconsistent with global ideas.
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Why now?

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- The language enumeration takes place in the first year of every decade.
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- The findings are made public about seven years later.
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- This is because the processing of language data is more time consuming.
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- The latest language data is based on the 2011 Census.
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What are the highlights?

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- **Mother tongues** - Citizens submitted 19,569 names of mother tongues, technically called “raw returns”.
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- However, authorities decided that of these, 18,200 did not match “logically”.
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- This was based on the previously known linguistic and sociological information.
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- The left out “raw returns” represent nearly 60 lakh citizens.
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- Because of the classification regime, their linguistic citizenship has been dropped.
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- A total of 1,369 names, called “labels”, were picked as “being names of languages”.
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- **Others** - In addition to these shortlisted “mother tongue” names, there were 1,474 other mother tongue names.
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- These were placed under the generic label “Others”.
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- These linguistic “Others” do have languages of their own.
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- But the classification system has not been able to identify what or which languages these are.
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- **Scheduled** - The 1,369 labels have been grouped further under a total of 121 “group labels”.
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- These group labels have been presented as “Languages”.
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- Of these, 22 are included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution, called “Scheduled Languages”.
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- The remainder, 99, are “Non-scheduled Languages”.
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How was language data diluted?

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- The 1961 census enumerated in full the languages in the country.
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- India learnt that a total of 1,652 mother tongues were being spoken.
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- Strikingly, this figure was fixed at only 109, in the 1971 Census.
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- The logic was that a language deserving respectability should not have less than 10,000 speakers.
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- This had no scientific basis but the practice continues to be followed.
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What are the concerns?

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- **Hindi** - It is found that most of the groupings are forced.
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- E.g. under the heading “Hindi”, there are nearly 50 other languages.
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- Bhojpuri spoken by more than 5 crore people comes under “Hindi.”
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- It notably has its own cinema, theatre, literature, vocabulary and style.
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- Also, nearly 3 crore population from Rajasthan with its own independent languages is under Hindi.
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- The Powari/Pawri of tribals in Maharashtra and MP, Kumauni of Uttarakhand are also added to Hindi.
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- Clearly, the report shows an inflated figure on those speaking Hindi as their mother tongue.
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- There is a similar and inflated figure for Sanskrit.
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- This is done by counting the returns against the question about a person’s “second language”.
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- **English** - The use of English is not seen through the perspective of a second language.
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- Counting for this is restricted to the “mother tongue” category.
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- In effect, it brings down the figure substantially.
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- But a significant number of Indians use English as a utility language.
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- It is relevant across education, law, administration, media and health care.
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- To some extent it is the language of integration in this multilingual country.
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Why is language significant?

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- **Legacy** - Language facilitates access to education, protecting livelihoods, preserving culture and knowledge traditions.
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- Because of its nature, a language is not visible and fails to concern anyone except its very last speaker.
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- Death of a language is covered in silence and when a language disappears it goes forever.
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- It takes with it the knowledge gathered over centuries and its unique world view.
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- **UNESCO** - UNESCO has progressively developed its vision of global linguistic diversity.
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- Significantly, it had debated “Multilingualism in the Context of Education for All”.
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- It has proclaimed and observed February 21 as International Mother Language Day.
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- In 2001, the ‘Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity’ acknowledged the linguistic heritage of humanity.
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- UNESCO has also brought out an Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.
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- Thus, in the community of nations, the Indian census is bound to be discussed.
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What lies ahead?

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- Failure to protect a language and its loss is indeed a form of violence.
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- The recent data seems to be helping neither educators nor policy makers or the speakers of languages themselves.
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- Language data should help in a greater inclusion of the marginal communities and not otherwise.

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- India’s linguistic diversity should become an integral part of the national pride.
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Source: The Hindu

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