

Multilingualism And Language Power Dynamics In North East India: Challenges And Educational Policy Implications

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Abstract

North East India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, home to hundreds of indigenous languages spoken across varied ethnic communities. However, this rich linguistic heritage is under increasing threat due to systemic neglect, marginalization, and the dominance of major national and global languages in education, administration, and media. This paper explores the intersections of linguistic diversity, language endangerment, and educational language policy in the region, with a particular focus on the implications of the mother tongue-based education movement and the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly literature and policy documents, the study highlights how structural inequalities, socio-political marginalization, and a lack of state-level commitment to multilingual education have contributed to the gradual erosion of indigenous languages. The paper critically examines the theoretical frameworks surrounding language shift, language rights, and educational equity, while also exploring grassroots efforts in community-based language revitalization and multilingual education initiatives. Particular attention is paid to how state and national language policies have historically failed to accommodate the multilingual realities of North East India. The analysis underscores the importance of inclusive, community-sensitive educational practices that promote mother tongue instruction at the primary level, not only for preserving linguistic diversity but also for improving educational outcomes and strengthening cultural identity. The paper concludes by recommending policy reforms aimed at empowering local communities, strengthening teacher training in indigenous languages, and fostering inclusive language planning that aligns with India's constitutional commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, language endangerment, North East India, educational policy, multilingual education, mother tongue instruction.

Introduction

The North East region of India, comprising eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim is a mosaic of extraordinary linguistic diversity. With hundreds of indigenous tribal languages and dialects spoken across the region, many of which remain undocumented or are not written, North East India represents one of the richest yet most vulnerable linguistic ecologies in the world. This complex multilingualism is not merely a reflection of communication practices, but is deeply tied to questions of cultural identity, socio-political representation, education, and power structures. Languages in the region are not only tools for communication; they are symbolic carriers of tradition, heritage, and collective memory. However, many of these languages are under threat due to various socio-economic and political factors. Globalization, migration, increasing dominance of national and global languages, and the marginalization of tribal identities have accelerated language shift among younger generations. As a result, many minority languages are being spoken less frequently and, in some cases, are on the verge of extinction.

Despite the constitutional provisions under Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantee protection for minority cultures and languages, and policies such as the Three Language Formula (TLF) and National Education Policies (NPEs), implementation on the ground has been inconsistent and often ineffective. The education system in North East India increasingly favours dominant languages particularly English over mother tongues or regional languages. English is widely perceived as a vehicle for upward social mobility and global competitiveness. As a result, tribal languages, even when spoken at home or within communities, are rarely used as mediums of instruction or given adequate curricular presence. The preference for English-medium education, even at the primary level, has created a significant gap between linguistic policy intentions and classroom realities. While national policies have reiterated the pedagogical value of mother tongue-based education, especially in early childhood, in practice, many government and private schools across the North East are shifting to English instruction. This not only undermines the educational potential of children from indigenous linguistic backgrounds but also contributes to the gradual erosion of their native languages and cultural knowledge systems. Moreover, the marginalization of these languages is not merely a pedagogical issue but a political and ideological one. The privileging of standardized and widely

spoken languages, such as Hindi and English, reflects broader national tendencies to homogenize cultural diversity in favour of administrative convenience and perceived national unity. This creates a hierarchy of languages, where tribal tongues are seen as 'less developed' or 'non-modern,' further reinforcing the power imbalance in linguistic representation.

The present paper seeks to explore the dynamics of multilingualism in North East India by examining the status and challenges faced by minority and tribal languages in the region. It investigates the role of language-in-education policies, especially the implementation and impact of the Three Language Formula, and evaluates the implications of the National Education Policy 2020 in promoting or undermining linguistic diversity. In doing so, it also aims to highlight the urgent need for sustainable and inclusive language planning that balances educational equity with cultural preservation in one of India's most linguistically diverse regions.

Review of previous works

India's multilingual fabric is both a hallmark of cultural richness and a site of persistent socio-linguistic inequality. While the nation's linguistic diversity is often celebrated, scholars such as Annamalai (2001) and Mohanty (2006) emphasize that this diversity is stratified, privileging dominant languages like Hindi and English while relegating minority and tribal tongues to the margins. These systemic imbalances are not merely cultural but deeply institutional, manifesting in governance, education, and policy frameworks. The result is a layered multilingualism where linguistic communities do not coexist on equal footing, and speakers of minor languages face structural exclusion. Rahman (1996) and Ramanathan (2005) further critique this hierarchy by highlighting how English, seen as a marker of prestige and mobility, dominates institutional and educational spheres, intensifying the marginalization of non-standard languages. This linguistic elitism, they argue, reflects and reinforces broader socio-economic inequities across India.

One of the most evident consequences of this stratification is the declining role of mother tongues in formal education. Chaturvedi and Mohale (1976) noted a drastic reduction in the number of languages used in Indian schools from 81 in 1970 to 41 by 1998 underscoring a systemic retreat from linguistic inclusion. This decline, as Mohanty (2006) argues, stems from both policy inertia and a lack of political will to support multilingual education, as revealed through successive All India School Education Surveys. Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) caution that the erosion of mother tongue education particularly undermines the cognitive development and cultural identity of tribal children, who are forced to study in unfamiliar dominant languages. The Three

Language Formula, initially introduced in 1961 to balance national, regional, and international linguistic needs, has also come under scrutiny. Srivastava (1990), Dua (1996), and Khubchandani (2003) point out that its implementation has been uneven and often manipulated to reinforce the dominance of Hindi and English, with minority languages rarely integrated into the curriculum. Despite reiterations in the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Curriculum Frameworks (2000, 2005), the promise of inclusive language education remains largely unfulfilled.

These dynamics are especially pronounced in North East India, a region with exceptional linguistic diversity, encompassing hundreds of tribal and indigenous languages. According to UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (1996, updated 2010), many of these languages are critically endangered due to declining speaker populations and the absence of intergenerational transmission. Morey (2017) and Post (2013) document the weakening of oral traditions and the encroachment of dominant languages, driven by factors such as urbanization, assimilationist policies, and the prioritization of English in education. The preference for English-medium instruction, as noted by Pattanayak (1981) and Aggarwal (2010), is frequently rationalized as a pathway to socioeconomic mobility. However, this shift has profound implications for linguistic sustainability. Anderson and Lightfoot (2002) show that early exposure to non-mother tongues often results in poor learning outcomes and detachment from cultural identity. Empirical studies by Barman and Singh (2015) in Assam and Manipur reveal that many schools have gradually phased out indigenous languages altogether, even where communities express a desire for linguistic preservation and revitalization.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has sought to reverse this trend by promoting foundational learning in the mother tongue or regional language until at least Grade 5. While scholars such as Jhingran (2009) and Menon (2020) applaud this as a step toward linguistic inclusion, practical implementation remains elusive. Ground-level studies by Nongbri (2021) highlights critical gaps in teacher training, resource availability, and curriculum development, particularly in tribal and remote areas. These challenges emphasises the disparity between policy vision and ground realities, especially in under-resourced regions like North East India. Ultimately, the persistence of linguistic hierarchies continues to shape educational access and equity in India. If structural disadvantages confronting minority languages are not actively addressed through concrete measures, language policies may end up reinforcing existing inequalities instead of resolving them.

Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the dynamics of linguistic diversity in North East India, with a particular focus on the status of minority and indigenous languages within the region's educational and policy frameworks. Specifically it is:

1. To analyse the scope, distribution, and complexity of linguistic diversity across the states of North East India.
2. To examine the key challenges threatening minority languages, including processes of language endangerment, attrition, and intergenerational language shift.
3. To critically evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of language-in-education policies, particularly the Three Language Formula, in the context of North East India.
4. To assess the impact of governmental and educational policies on the preservation, promotion, or marginalization of indigenous and tribal languages.
5. To explore viable strategies for promoting sustainable multilingual education and developing policy measures that support the revitalization and preservation of minority languages.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study relies primarily on secondary data to explore the status and challenges of linguistic diversity in North East India. The research draws from a range of credible sources, including national-level surveys such as the 6th and 7th All India School Education Surveys (AISES) and reports by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Key policy documents informing the analysis include the National Policy on Education (1986), the National Curriculum Frameworks (2000 and 2005), and the National Education Policy (2020). Additionally, data from the Census of India 2011 regarding the distribution of language speakers has been utilized to understand demographic trends. International sources, such as the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, provide a global framework to contextualize the endangerment status of several minority languages in the region. The study also incorporates insights from key academic works, including those of Chaturvedi and Mohale (1976), Mohanty (2006), and Morey (2017), among others, to critically examine the intersection of language, education, and policy. An analytical framework was developed to categorize the findings under five major thematic areas: the endangerment of minority languages, language shift among indigenous communities, the emergence and role of link languages, growing preferences for English-medium education, and the implementation challenges of language-in-education policies. Through this thematic lens, the research aims to synthesize

existing knowledge and identify policy-practice gaps that influence the linguistic landscape of the region.

Analysis and Results

The linguistic landscape of North East India reveals a complex interplay between cultural resilience and systemic marginalization. One of the most pressing concerns is the endangerment of indigenous languages. The region hosts an estimated 59 non-scheduled tribal languages and nearly 200 smaller linguistic varieties. Many of these are spoken by critically small populations for instance, Siram with only five speakers and Pawi with three making them highly vulnerable to extinction. These languages lack formal recognition, institutional backing, and educational presence, which severely limits their intergenerational transmission. Without immediate interventions such as systematic documentation, community-based revitalization, and incorporation into educational frameworks, these languages face an imminent threat of disappearance. Language shift is another significant phenomenon contributing to the decline of linguistic diversity. In states like Assam, languages such as Deori, Mising, and Rajbongshi are increasingly confined to domestic or ceremonial domains as speakers gravitate toward dominant regional languages like Assamese. A similar trend is observed among the Tangsa sub-groups, where smaller linguistic identities have merged or been absorbed due to pressures of socio-economic integration and cultural assimilation. These shifts not only represent a loss of linguistic identity but also signal broader transformations in social structure and value systems.

The emergence of regional link languages such as Nagamese in Nagaland and Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh reflects both a functional response to communication needs and a disruptive force for minority languages. These lingua francas have gained popularity in marketplaces, public discourse, and increasingly in educational contexts. As a result, they often supplant native tongues, reducing the frequency and relevance of indigenous languages in daily life. While they serve a unifying communicative purpose, their rise often comes at the cost of displacing localized linguistic practices and diminishing the presence of minority languages in formal settings. Another critical issue is the growing preference for English-medium education. According to ASER 2011 data, a high percentage of students in states like Mizoram (71%) are enrolled in English-medium institutions. This preference is fueled by the widespread belief that English proficiency ensures better educational and employment prospects. Government efforts to convert regional-medium schools into English-medium ones, such as those undertaken in Tripura and Mizoram, have further entrenched this trend. Although policy documents like

the NEP 2020 advocate for mother tongue instruction in early education, in practice, the dominance of English continues to marginalize indigenous languages from mainstream educational systems. This contradiction between policy intent and on-ground execution reveals an enduring structural imbalance.

The implementation of the Three Language Formula (TLF), introduced as a measure to promote multilingualism, also shows significant inconsistencies in the region. In several North Eastern states, including Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, English is the primary language of instruction, while mother tongues are relegated to the status of third languages, often introduced only from Grade VI. This delayed engagement with native languages overlooks the crucial early years of language development and reduces the effectiveness of linguistic inclusion strategies. Despite, the resilience of local multilingualism remains evident. In many communities, even where language shift has occurred, bilingual or multilingual practices continue to exist, particularly in familial and cultural domains. These practices demonstrate that linguistic loss is not inevitable and that with appropriate support, endangered languages can coexist with dominant ones. This underscores the importance of designing context-sensitive policies that reflect and reinforce the lived realities of linguistic diversity. By acknowledging and supporting layered multilingualism, there remains a possibility to both preserve and celebrate the rich linguistic heritage of North East India.

Discussion

The analysis of linguistic diversity in North East India underscores a broader national paradox: while India is globally recognized for its multilingual richness, this very diversity is entangled in deeply entrenched socio-linguistic inequalities. As scholars like Annamalai (2001) and Mohanty (2006) have emphasized, the stratification within India's multilingualism privileges dominant languages especially Hindi and English at the expense of minority and tribal languages. This inequity is not merely cultural but institutional, as evidenced by the limited visibility of indigenous languages in education, governance, and policy. The linguistic hierarchy that emerges is indicative of structural exclusion, where language becomes a proxy for access to power, knowledge, and opportunity. The field realities in North East India align closely with these national patterns, but the regional context presents an even more acute version of the problem. With hundreds of indigenous and tribal languages, many of them critically endangered, the region reflects the consequences of policy neglect and the absence of sustainable frameworks for linguistic preservation. Language endangerment here is not just a matter of speaker numbers but also of systemic

invisibility in curricula, administrative usage, and literacy materials. This leads to the erosion of intergenerational transmission and the weakening of oral traditions—processes documented by Morey (2017) and Post (2013).

Language shift within the region, such as among speakers of Deori, Mising, and Tangsa sub-groups, signals a broader socio-economic integration that marginalizes linguistic identities. This shift is often driven by the pragmatic need to assimilate into dominant language communities for education, employment, and mobility. The rise of regional link languages like Nagamese and Hindi illustrates how communicative necessity often overrides cultural preservation. While these lingua francas facilitate cross-ethnic interaction, they also gradually replace minority languages in public, and increasingly in private, domains. One of the most transformative forces in this linguistic landscape is the spread of English-medium education. As Rahman (1996) and Ramanathan (2005) point out, English has become a marker of elite access and upward mobility. In North East India, this trend is evident in the state's active conversion of vernacular-medium schools into English-medium ones. While this might appear as a modernizing measure, it inadvertently sidelines mother tongues, especially when foundational education crucial for cognitive development is conducted in a non-native language. Scholars like Anderson and Lightfoot (2002) have shown that this leads not only to poor learning outcomes but also to cultural alienation. The Three Language Formula (TLF), originally designed to promote inclusive multilingualism, has largely failed to live up to its promise, especially in North East India. As pointed out by Srivastava (1990) and Dua (1996), its implementation has been uneven and often strategically manipulated to reinforce linguistic hegemony. In states like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, English dominates the education system, and native languages are introduced only from Grade VI, long after the critical period for language acquisition. This delayed recognition limits the pedagogical and psychological benefits of early mother tongue instruction.

Notwithstanding, there is evidence of resilience and resistance. Many communities continue to practice bilingualism or multilingualism in familial and cultural domains, indicating that linguistic vitality persists even amidst marginalization. These localized practices should inform future policy, which must go beyond symbolic recognition and address the practical conditions under which minority languages can thrive. As highlighted by the research findings, meaningful inclusion requires concrete measures: teacher training in indigenous languages, curriculum development, resource allocation, and community engagement. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a hopeful framework by

advocating for mother tongue instruction in early education. Meanwhile, Nongbri (2021) rightly notes that without sufficient infrastructural and human resource support, the policy remains aspirational. Implementation gaps in tribal and remote regions point to a persistent disconnect between policy vision and on-ground reality. Ultimately, the study confirms that unless structural disadvantages facing minority languages are directly addressed, language policies even when well-intentioned may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. The path forward lies in embracing the lived multilingual realities of regions like North East India, developing educational systems that are inclusive by design, and institutionalizing linguistic justice as a cornerstone of national development.

Summary and Conclusion

This study explores the intricate and fragile linguistic ecosystem of North East India, a region marked by extraordinary multilingual diversity yet facing acute threats to its indigenous and tribal languages. Despite constitutional and policy-level commitments such as Articles 29 and 30, the Three Language Formula, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 implementation gaps and systemic inequities have led to the marginalization of minority languages, particularly in education. The findings reveal several interlinked challenges. Firstly, many indigenous languages in the region are critically endangered due to shrinking speaker populations, lack of institutional support, and erosion of intergenerational transmission. Secondly, language shift is widespread, with communities increasingly adopting dominant regional or national languages like Assamese, Hindi, and English for socio-economic integration. Thirdly, the proliferation of regional link languages say for instance, Nagamese and Hindi and the overwhelming preference for English-medium education have further displaced native languages from public and formal domains.

While English is widely viewed as a vehicle for mobility and modernity, its dominance in the education system undermines both the cognitive development and cultural identity of tribal children. This preference contradicts NEP 2020's emphasis on early childhood education in the mother tongue and highlights a critical gap between policy vision and field realities. The Three Language Formula, though well-intended, has also been ineffectively applied in North East India often reducing indigenous languages to symbolic or supplementary roles rather than integrating them meaningfully into education. Yet, the study also uncovers signs of resilience. Multilingual practices continue in familial and cultural spaces, suggesting that language loss is not irreversible. Sustainable language preservation must build on

these grassroots strengths through context-sensitive and inclusive language policies. This includes systematic documentation of endangered languages, development of localized curricula, training of teachers in indigenous languages, and the creation of educational materials. In conclusion, linguistic justice in North East India requires more than rhetorical acknowledgment. It demands transformative educational reforms, genuine political will, and sustained community engagement. Embracing the region's lived multilingualism not only preserves cultural heritage but also ensures equitable educational outcomes and strengthens national unity through diversity. The future of India's linguistic plurality depends on recognizing and institutionalizing the rights and identities of its most vulnerable language communities.

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