Research Article

Linguistic Diversity, Power Dynamics, and Educational Policy in Multilingual North East India

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper critically examines the intersection of linguistic diversity, language endangerment, and educational policy in North East India, a region known for its extraordinary multilingualism but marked by systemic neglect of minority and tribal languages. Drawing on qualitative methods and an extensive review of policy documents, academic literature, and field-based case studies, the study explores how historical marginalization, flawed policy implementation, and socio-economic hierarchies contribute to the displacement and decline of indigenous languages. Despite constitutional and educational frameworks that promote multilingual education such as the Three Language Formula (TLF) and National Education Policy (NEP 2020) practical implementation remains inconsistent and inadequate, especially in tribal regions. Dominant languages like English, Assamese, and Meitei often replace local mother tongues in schools, leading to linguistic alienation, reduced learning outcomes, and cultural disconnection. The paper highlights the emergence of functional lingua francas such as Nagamese and Hindi, which, while facilitating inter-group communication, further marginalize smaller languages from public and institutional spaces. Through case studies of endangered languages like Tangam, Chirr, and Purum, the paper illustrates the urgency of language documentation, codification, and educational inclusion. The "double divide" between dominant and minority languages, and between the mother tongue and the language of instruction frames the ongoing structural inequalities in education. The study argues that meaningful revitalization of indigenous languages must move beyond symbolic policy to include community-driven language planning, investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and a reimagining of pedagogical practices to reflect local linguistic ecologies. Without such measures, India's linguistic heritage particularly in the North East faces imminent erosion, with long-term consequences for cultural identity, educational equity, and social justice. **Keywords:** Linguistic Diversity, Language Endangerment, Multilingual Education, North East India, Educational Policy, Indigenous Languages.

Introduction

The North Eastern region of India comprising of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura is a cradle of extraordinary linguistic diversity. This culturally rich region is home to numerous tribal and indigenous communities, each possessing its own language, dialect, and oral traditions. With over 200 languages spoken, many from the Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Indo-Aryan language families, the region reflects a vibrant yet fragile linguistic heritage that is integral to India's pluralistic identity. However, this wealth of linguistic resources is under growing threat, not due to natural language attrition alone, but because of systemic policy neglect and socio-political marginalization. Most of these languages remain undocumented or only partially developed, lacking standardized scripts, published literature, and institutional support. This underdevelopment has led to their systematic exclusion from formal domains such as education, administration, media, and technology.

Without formal recognition or government backing, these languages are rarely used as mediums of instruction in schools, leaving children from tribal backgrounds disconnected from their cultural and linguistic roots during their formative years. As a result, young learners are often forced to adopt dominant regional languages or English, not out of choice, but out of necessity contributing to both academic disadvantages and a decline in linguistic vitality.

Although the Indian Constitution promises to safeguard the rights of linguistic minorities under Articles 29 and 30, and successive educational policies such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Education Policy (2020) advocate for mother tongue-based learning, the practical implementation in North East India has remained inadequate. Several challenges, including a lack of teaching materials, trained educators, and clear governmental coordination, continue to hinder the integration of indigenous languages into mainstream education. The increasing preference for English-medium education, widely regarded as a pathway to economic mobility and global connectivity, has further marginalized native tongues. Moreover, the ongoing processes of urbanization, migration, and globalization have intensified this trend, pushing many communities to abandon their mother tongues in pursuit of socio-economic progress. This language shift carries deeper implications: it reflects and reinforces existing power imbalances, where a handful of dominant languages enjoy institutional prestige, while minority languages are stigmatized or forgotten. Within the North East itself, linguistic hierarchies also exist. A few dominant tribal languages, such as Meitei in Manipur or Mizo in Mizoram, often receive more official support and visibility, overshadowing smaller or more remote languages that remain unrecognized or under-documented. This internal marginalization, alongside external linguistic pressures, creates a complex web of sociolinguistic inequality that threatens the survival of numerous lesser-known languages.

This paper examines these intersecting challenges by exploring how linguistic diversity, educational policy, and socio-political dynamics interact in North East India. It aims to highlight the urgent need for inclusive, mother tongue-based multilingual education and equitable language planning. By addressing these issues, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on linguistic rights, educational justice, and the preservation of endangered languages in one of India's most culturally and linguistically vibrant regions.

Literature Review

India's linguistic landscape has long intrigued scholars for its unparalleled diversity and complexity, with the North Eastern region representing one of the most linguistically dense areas in the country (Annamalai, 2001; Pattanayak, 1981). Home to hundreds of indigenous languages from families such as Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Indo-Aryan, the region reflects both cultural richness and policy neglect (Borah, 2007; Srivastava, 1980). The challenges faced by these languages are intertwined with historical, political, and educational trajectories that have privileged a few dominant languages while marginalizing the rest. Early work by Chaturvedi and Mohale (1976) on the Three Language Formula (TLF) emphasized the potential of multilingual education in preserving linguistic diversity. However, Mohanty (2006, 2010) criticized the TLF as a "formulaic failure," especially in tribal and minority contexts where neither the mother tongue nor the regional language finds space in schooling. The discrepancy between policy and practice has led to growing discontent and educational alienation among linguistic minorities, particularly in the North East.

Educational surveys such as the All India School Education Survey (AISES) by NCERT (2006) documented a stark decline in the number of languages used as mediums of instruction—from 81 in 1970 to just 47 by 2006. This trend is emblematic of the growing dominance of English and regional lingua francas, such as Assamese or Bengali, at the expense of tribal languages (Nambissan, 2009; Panda and Mohanty, 2009). Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) similarly argued that denying children the right to education in their mother tongues constitutes a form of linguistic and epistemic discrimination. UNESCO (1996, 2003) has consistently underscored the importance of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for improving learning outcomes, reducing dropout rates, and promoting cultural preservation. However, in the Indian context, the operationalization of such frameworks has been inadequate, particularly in tribal areas (Mitra, 2008; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2006). Scholars like Agnihotri (2007) and Ramanathan (2005) have drawn attention to how English-medium education is increasingly viewed as the only viable pathway to social mobility, thereby intensifying the abandonment of indigenous languages.

In the North East, while constitutional provisions and state-level policies recognize linguistic plurality, actual classroom practices often reflect monolingual ideologies and resource limitations (Morey, 2017; Dutta, 2021). Languages like Meitei (Manipuri) and Mizo have received some degree of institutional support, yet smaller languages such as Hruso, Karbi, or Tangkhul remain virtually invisible in school curricula and public discourse (DeLancey, 2015; Post & Burling, 2011). Morey (2010) noted that the linguistic ecology of the region is marked by both cooperation and competition, where some languages flourish at the expense of others. Mohanty (2010) introduced the concept of "double divide" between dominant and minority languages, and between mother tongue and language of instruction to explain the layered inequalities that minority language speakers face. This is echoed by Hornberger (2002) in her "continua of biliteracy" framework, which illustrates how language policies often marginalize non-dominant languages by ignoring

sociocultural contexts. Similarly, Annamalai (2003) pointed out that Indian language policy tends to operate on a symbolic level, with little effort toward practical or financial implementation.

Several linguists have highlighted the urgent need for language documentation and codification in the North East to prevent further endangerment (Evans, 2001; Bradley, 2002; Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2022). Language shift and loss are not merely linguistic phenomena but are deeply linked to cultural erosion, psychological dissonance, and social inequality (Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Crystal, 2000). These perspectives underscore the ethical and developmental imperatives of preserving minority languages through formal educational support and community participation. Further, studies by Jain and Cardona (2007) and Khubchandani (1992) reflect on the sociolinguistic power dynamics at play in multilingual settings. Though multilingualism is culturally embraced, it often benefits elites while marginalizing others (Mohanty, 2006). In the North Eastern context, this dynamic is amplified by geographic isolation, infrastructural deficits, and historical exclusion from mainstream academic discourses.

Meanwhile, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirmed India's commitment to multilingual education, but several scholars remain skeptical about its implementation. Jhingran (2009) cautions that without clear guidelines, resource development, and teacher training, the policy might fail tribal learners, as earlier initiatives did. Panda and Mohanty (2011) advocate for community-based language planning that recognizes local linguistic ecologies and involves indigenous stakeholders in the educational process. The present body of literatures reveals a consistent recognition of India's linguistic richness, juxtaposed against policy inertia and systemic marginalization. The North East emerges as both a site of linguistic treasure and vulnerability where educational frameworks and language ideologies must be urgently reimagined to preserve its endangered linguistic heritage and promote equitable learning outcomes.

Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to critically examine the relationship between linguistic diversity and educational policy in North East India, with a focus on language endangerment, representation, and sociolinguistic dynamics. Specifically, the study aims to: analyse the complex nature of linguistic diversity in the region; assess how minority and tribal languages are represented in educational policies and practices; investigate the key factors driving language endangerment and intergenerational language shift; evaluate the effectiveness and implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and the Three Language Formula; and explore the sociolinguistic power structures that influence language status, preference, and use in educational and social domains.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in an extensive review of secondary data sources, policy analysis, and case study evaluation. Key data includes demographic and linguistic information drawn from the Census of India (2011), as well as educational trends captured in the 6th and 7th All India School Education Surveys (AISES) conducted by NCERT. International insights into language vitality and endangerment are drawn from UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. Policy analysis involves critical examination of national educational frameworks such as the National Policy on Education (1986), the National Curricular Frameworks (2000 and 2005), the National Education Policy (2020), and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2022), focusing on their treatment of linguistic diversity and mother tongue-based education. Academic literature by leading scholars—including Mohanty (2006) and Morey (2017) provides theoretical grounding on multilingual education, language shift, and sociolinguistic hierarchies. The study also incorporates case studies of specific endangered tribal languages such as Purum and Chirr in Manipur, and Tangam and Siram in Arunachal Pradesh, to highlight grassroots realities of language marginalization. A comparative analysis of state-level education policies and their on-ground implementation in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, and Mizoram is undertaken to examine regional disparities in policy adoption, infrastructural support, and pedagogical practices. The combination of documentary analysis and region-specific case studies enables a nuanced understanding of how educational frameworks intersect with linguistic diversity and power dynamics in North East India.

Analysis and Findings

Intricate Nature of Linguistic Diversity: The North Eastern region of India is home to one of the most complex linguistic ecologies in the world, characterized by languages from three major language families namely Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic. This diversity is further compounded by intense intra-ethnic variation, where even within a single tribal community, language varieties may differ drastically from one village to another. Most of these languages lack codified scripts, standardized grammar, or orthographies. According to recent assessments, over 98% of the region's languages are either unscripted or poorly documented. This absence of linguistic infrastructure has led to their systematic exclusion from formal

education systems and government-supported cultural programs. Consequently, many of these languages remain vulnerable to neglect, even within their native speech communities.

Educational Marginalization and Linguistic Disempowerment: Despite constitutional guarantees and policy frameworks advocating multilingual education, minority languages in the North East rarely find a place within mainstream pedagogy. English and dominant regional languages such as Assamese, Meitei, or Mizo are often preferred as mediums of instruction, sidelining the native tongues of smaller communities. This institutional preference results in a widening educational gap between children from dominant language backgrounds and those from tribal communities. Data from NCERT indicates that the percentage of English-medium schools at the primary level rose from 4.99% in 1999 to 12.98% in 2006, reflecting an increasing shift away from local languages. The absence of learning materials, trained teachers, and curriculum development in mother tongues has had a direct impact on educational access and learning outcomes for indigenous children.

Language Endangerment and Community-Level Shift: Several tribal languages in the region are teetering on the edge of extinction. Languages such as *Purum* and *Chirr* in Manipur, and *Tangam* in Arunachal Pradesh, have fewer than 500 speakers, often concentrated in a single locality. The linguistic shift is not limited to endangered tongues but also affects relatively larger groups; for instance, Deori and Rajbongshi communities increasingly identify with Assamese, while languages like *Mossang* and *Kimsing* have assimilated into larger linguistic groups like *Tangsa*. These shifts are not merely the result of natural linguistic evolution but are driven by socio-economic factors, including the pursuit of mobility, urbanization, and the perception of prestige associated with dominant languages. Without systemic intervention, many of these smaller languages face imminent disappearance.

Functional Lingua Francas and Their Consequences: In the absence of a shared mother tongue across diverse communities, new link languages have emerged to facilitate communication. *Nagamese* in Nagaland and Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh serve as regional lingua francas, enabling inter-ethnic interaction and administrative cohesion. However, while these functional languages bridge linguistic gaps, they also contribute to the marginalization of smaller local languages. The widespread use of such lingua francas in public domains including markets, schools, and governance diminishes the space for native languages, weakening their role in everyday communication and intergenerational transmission.

Policy Gaps and Unequal Power Structures in Multilingualism: Although India's educational policies particularly the Three Language Formula advocate for the inclusion of mother tongues, the reality on the ground is inconsistent and often contradictory. For example, in Arunachal Pradesh, tribal languages are introduced only as third languages from Class VI, a practice that delays mother tongue instruction during the critical early years of learning. In Nagaland and Mizoram, English is often taught as the first language from the primary level, directly contravening the principles of mother-tongue-based education. These implementation gaps are further entrenched by socio-political hierarchies where dominant regional languages wield greater institutional support and symbolic capital. The resulting imbalance fosters identity-based conflict and deepens linguistic inequality, challenging the preservation and revitalization of minority languages in North East India.

Discussion

The linguistic landscape of North East India reflects a dynamic interplay between diversity, policy, and marginalization. As noted by Annamalai (2001) and Pattanayak (1981), the region is one of the most linguistically complex areas in India, hosting hundreds of indigenous languages belonging to Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Indo-Aryan families. This plurality, while emblematic of rich cultural heritage, is also symptomatic of deep-seated structural challenges. The present study's findings affirm that educational neglect, socio-political marginalization, and uneven policy implementation continue to exacerbate language endangerment in the region. Mohanty's (2006, 2010) critique of the Three Language Formula (TLF) as a "formulaic failure" finds significant resonance in the North Eastern context. While the TLF and policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) theoretically promote mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), practical outcomes show a stark contrast. In regions like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram, dominant languages like English or regional lingua francas often displace indigenous tongues in school settings. The mismatch between linguistic realities and educational practices marginalizes non-dominant languages by overlooking sociocultural contexts, as noted by Hornberger (2002) in her "continua of biliteracy."

The decline in the number of languages used as mediums of instruction from 81 in 1970 to 47 by 2006 (AISES, NCERT) is a stark indicator of this systemic erosion. Nambissan (2009) and Panda and Mohanty (2009) identify this as a form of linguistic and epistemic injustice, denying children access to knowledge systems rooted in their cultural realities. Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) further argue that depriving children of mother tongue education is not merely an educational lapse, but a human rights violation, amounting to what they term "linguistic genocide." The present findings support these views by documenting how endangered languages such as Purum, Chirr, and Tangam face existential threats not only due to

demographic constraints but also because of the increasing shift toward dominant languages like Assamese or Hindi. The merging of smaller languages say for instance, Mossang into Tangsa reflects a survival strategy in a sociolinguistic environment that offers little institutional recognition or support to minority tongues. This aligns with Crystal's (2000) view that language loss is often accompanied by cultural erosion and psychological dissonance, highlighting the urgency of intervention.

Moreover, the emergence of lingua francas like Nagamese and Hindi, though functional in facilitating inter-community communication, simultaneously undermines smaller languages. These link languages dominate public spheres such as administration, education, and commerce, pushing tribal languages into the private and domestic domain an observation corroborated by Morey (2010) and Post & Burling (2011). In this context, language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of power, identity, and resistance. The role of policy remains ambivalent. While documents like NEP 2020 reaffirm commitments to multilingualism, scholars such as Jhingran (2009) and Ramanathan (2005) warn that without concrete implementation strategies such as curriculum development, teacher training, and community involvement, these policies risk becoming symbolic gestures. Agnihotri (2007) and Annamalai (2003) emphasize that real change requires more than policy articulation; it necessitates structural investment and grassroots mobilization.

This study reveals a "double divide" as theorized by Mohanty (2010): first, between dominant and minority languages; and second, between the mother tongue and the actual language of instruction. These divides intersect with issues of access, identity, and empowerment, especially in geographically isolated and economically underdeveloped parts of North East India. Educational frameworks often perpetuate what Khubchandani (1992) called "hierarchical multilingualism" where multilingualism is additive for elites and subtractive for the marginalized. Therefore, the preservation of minority languages is not just a cultural imperative but a developmental one. Language revitalization must be integrated into formal education and supported by inclusive policy design. As scholars like Panda and Mohanty (2011) advocate, community-based language planning incorporating the voices and agency of indigenous stakeholders is essential for sustainable linguistic and educational development.

Research Gap

Despite a growing body of literature on linguistic diversity, multilingual education, and language endangerment in India, several critical gaps persist, especially concerning the North Eastern region. First, while many national-level studies acknowledge the region's linguistic richness, they often generalize findings without accounting for intra-regional variations in language ecology, policy implementation, and socio-political dynamics. There is limited comparative analysis of how different states within North East India such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, and Mizoram apply educational policies to support (or marginalize) local languages. Second, the practical implementation of MTB-MLE in tribal regions remains under-researched. Although policy documents like the NEP 2020 support mother tongue education, few empirical studies evaluate how these policies are translated into classroom practices in remote tribal settings. Issues such as the availability of teaching materials, teacher training in indigenous languages, and community participation in curriculum design are largely undocumented.

Third, most existing studies focus on either the structural aspects of language loss (such as demographic decline or lack of script) or the symbolic aspects (like identity and prestige). There is a lack of integrative frameworks that examine the intersection of linguistic marginalization with educational inequality, psychological well-being, and long-term development outcomes. For instance, few studies explore how language shift affects cognitive development, school retention, or self-esteem among tribal children. Fourth, while some endangered languages have been documented through linguistic surveys or ethnographic research, systematic documentation efforts especially involving digital archiving, orthographic development, and community-based revitalization are still rare. Languages like Chirr, Siram, or Hruso are critically endangered, yet lack even basic pedagogical materials or institutional backing.

Finally, more interdisciplinary and participatory research approaches are needed. Most current literature is dominated by top-down analyses, leaving out the perspectives of the actual language speakers, especially women, youth, and elders in tribal communities. A bottom-up, community-driven approach to research and policy is crucial for bridging the gap between linguistic heritage and educational equity in North East India.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper examined the complex linguistic diversity of North East India and its intersection with educational policies and language endangerment. Despite the region's rich multilingual landscape, smaller tribal languages face marginalization due to insufficient policy implementation, lack of resources, and the dominance of English and regional lingua francas. Many indigenous languages remain undocumented and are excluded from formal education, contributing to their rapid decline. Policies like the Three Language

Formula have largely failed to support mother tongue instruction effectively, especially in tribal areas, exacerbating educational inequities and cultural erosion.

To summarize, the study reinforces the urgent need for context-sensitive, community-driven approaches to language preservation and education in the North East. Strengthening mother tongue-based multilingual education, improving resource development, and actively involving indigenous communities in language planning are essential for reversing language shift and ensuring equitable learning opportunities. Protecting the region's linguistic heritage is critical not only for cultural survival but also for fostering social inclusion and sustainable development among its diverse populations.

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