

Tribal/Minority Languages in Education: A Case of Karbi and Mising of Assam

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Abstract

India is a multilingual country with 780 languages written in 66 scripts (PLSI), of which 22 are scheduled languages. India's North East has about 220 languages which fall under three linguistic families. Every Indian school has a reflection of this multilingualism in terms of the numbers of languages coming into a class. The country set mother tongue based multilingual education as a goal of school education (National Curriculum Framework: NCF 2005) the stand has been re affirmed through Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009. As a response to these initiatives as well as from the recent trend of identity assertion phenomena in North East India, many tribal/minority languages are emerging in the school education curriculum. Karbi and Mising language of Assam have been introduced in the Education system in 1980s but the recent field work conducted in the two languages reveals that the people at large are not aware of the significance of bringing tribal languages in education rather it is considered as one of the initiatives of the government and there is not much people can do about sustaining these languages in education. The paper intends to look into the challenges of sustaining tribal languages in the education system in today's globalised world.

Keywords: Karbi, Mising, languages of Assam, multilingualism, education, curriculum, minority language, bridging process

Introduction

North East (NE) India is a multilingual region where the nature of linguistic diversity is very complex. The region is home to around 125 different languages, different tribes have different languages and different villages within tribes are having different dialects¹. More than 98% of the languages spoken in this region are minor tribal languages which are either unscripted or poorly scripted. And they are far excluded from the educational process in terms of medium of instruction as well as in the development of Teaching Learning materials. Adding to this problem is the trend of negligence observed in the developmental process of these languages. Despite India's stand to promote minority languages with all the policies and constitutional mandate, the Sixth All Indian Educational Survey (NCERT, 1999) shows that in India only 41 languages are currently used either as the subject of instruction or as the medium of instruction, the figure has declined from 81 in 1970 to 67 in 1976, 58 in 1978, 44 in 1990 and 41 in 1998, showing a clear picture of non-preference to mother tongue in the curriculum. The condition is even worse if we consider the

¹ In Manipur, the Tangkhul language has a variety of mutually unintelligible languages while claiming to be the speakers of the same language.

levels in which the mother tongue is used: the VI educational survey data reveals that 33 languages are used in the primary level, 25 in upper primary, 21 in secondary and 18 in higher secondary, the corresponding figure in the V survey was 43 in primary, 31 in upper primary, 22 in secondary and 20 in higher secondary, the picture is that of neglecting mother tongue education in the country as a whole. Interestingly India's North East shows consciousness in this issue by giving a place to the minority languages in the school curriculum; following is the status of languages of North East in the school education:

Languages Used as Mediums of Instruction

Elementary:	12 (Assamese, Bengali, Bodo/Boro, Chakma, Kokborok, English, Hindi, Nepali, Khasi, Garo, Manipuri, Mizo)
Secondary:	10 (Assamese, Bengali, Bodo/Boro, English, Hindi, Nepali, Khasi, Garo, Manipuri, Mizo)

Languages Used as Subjects or Medium of Instruction

<u>States</u>	<u>Languages</u>
Arunachal Pradesh	English, Hindi, Adi, Apatani, Galo, Khampti, Monpa, (Idu) Mishmi, Singpho, Sanskrit, Tangsa(8)*
Assam	Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Deori, English, Garo, Hindi, Hmar, Karbi, Manipuri, Mishing, Nepali, Tai, Tiwa(8)
Manipur	Assamese, Bengali, English, Hindi, Hmar, Kom, Mao, Manipuri/Meitei, Mizo, Nepali, Paite, Kabui (Rongmei), Tangkhul, Thado, Vaiphei, Zou(10)
Meghalaya	Assamese, Bengali, English, Garo, Hindi, Khasi, Nepali (2)
Mizoram	Chakma, English, Hindi, Lai, Lakher (Mara), Mizo(4)
Nagaland	Angami, Ao, Chang, Chokri, English, Khezha, Khiemnungan, Kuki, Konyak, Liangmei, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Yimchungre, Zeme(17)
Sikkim	Bhutia, English, Gurung, Hindi, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Nepali, Newari, Rai, Sherpa, Sunuwar, Tamang(10)
Tripura	Bengali, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Chakma, English, Mizo Kokborok (4)

* indicates the number of tribal/minority languages.

Though many languages are recognised as a subject of instruction, medium of instruction remain by and large the majority regional languages or English in many cases. Preferences of English medium schools over the government schools are also very high in the states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Sikkim², when the children are enrolled in English medium schools the question of teaching learning in the tribal language does not arise.

The existence of the teaching learning materials in the tribal language is a big question, materials are generally very scanty. In many cases the books are developed independent authors

² Numbers of children enrolled in English medium schools in the age group of 6-14 in these States are 71.1%, 54.3%, 40.9% and 28.2% respectively (ASER, 2011).

who are good in the language not in pedagogy, the very question of bringing languages into the school system is due to the efforts of a group of language lovers of the community. In many cases these group of people are pro-active and very dedicated. For the love of the culture and language as a whole they are working for no social or monetary benefits. In many instances it so happen that this group of people in general are experts in the language not in the language pedagogy, they could write beautiful as well as culturally relevant pieces of literature but the question of appropriateness in level of children's learning and the language pedagogy to be followed in children's book are missing. They hardly get recognition from the official stakeholders therefore their chance of attending any programme on textbook writing, the emerging concerns and pedagogy is almost nonexistent. Adding to the existing problem is the scope of revision of the textbooks. The situation is like once approved it remain for years as the only textbook available, probably because people hardly take interest in what is going on in the teaching learning process of the language.

Situating the Problem in the Context of Karbi and Mishing Communities of Assam

The author, as a part of a research study on the Perception and Attitude of the community members and educational stakeholders on mother tongue education, visited the Karbi Anglong and Dhemaji districts of Assam which are inhabited by the Karbi and Mishing communities respectively. 4 sets of interview schedules were prepared, and focus group interview were conducted to the educational stakeholders, teacher, students and community members to ascertain (i) the status of language in school education, (ii) the available resources, (iii) preference/non-preference of the mother tongue in the education, (iv) the responsible stakeholders, (v) the attitude of the community members toward the present policy of language in education.

The Case of Karbi Language

The Karbi tribe inhabits mainly in the Karbi Anglong a district of Assam, the district is run by Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

The language is taught as a subject of instruction till class VIII as a major Indian Language (MIL) in the schools of the district though this Modern Indian Languages (MIL) is not compulsory. The books are mainly developed by the Karbi Textbook Production Board, which again get approval from the State Council of Educational Research and Training(SCERT) of Assam and the SCERT published the books and distribute free of cost under the scheme of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA). As the Assam government has adopted/ adapted NCERT books in school mother tongue textbooks got revolutionised in the light of NCF 2005, presently in the Karbi books are yet to be revised, the process of adaptation of Assamese textbook in the language has been initiated and likely to revise the books soon. In addition to other literatures in the language till date Karbis have 7 dictionaries, and a detail grammar is written by Ms. Linda Anna Kornneth, Oregon University, USA in 2014. This mean to say that unlike other tribal languages which have scanty of standard books the language in question is far developed. The question of language standerdisation which is considered to be the prerequisite of language development does not arise for the Karbis.

Resources here in this connection mean the funds for upliftment of the language in school education and the availability of the schools offering Karbi language and the availability of

teachers. Assam government also has appointed few Karbi language teachers to teach Karbi sometimes in 2000 but the teachers so appointed are hardly found teaching Karbi languages as they are appointed either in the places where the Karbi population is less specially in the urban areas, or there is no replacement of teachers once the teacher is retired or converted into other subject teachers as there is very few teachers posted in the particular school. However, the situation is made far better by the initiatives of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KADC). The Council is very active in this regard they have established 29 Karbi medium Primary schools and appointed 358 Primary teachers to teach Karbi language on contract basis. It is interesting to note that they are paid for only 11 months in a year, and their pay is less than the government teachers of Assam, despite this situation there is no dearth of teachers willing to teach Karbi. This shows the preference of the mother tongue/Karbi language in the school system. Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council is spending around 4 crores of rupees for the language development and promotion³ this makes Karbi language sustained in education.

It is revealed that community as a whole has preference of having Karbi language as one of the subject but the question of making Karbi medium schools is little problematic not only of the funding from the Assam Government but also for the problems children will be facing in switching from one medium to another. People are aware of the problems in switching to either Assamese or English in the higher classes after Primary education, children though practically supposed to be conceptually clearer in mother tongue converting the concept in the school language needs lots of support and encouragement from the teacher concerned.

The Case of Mising Language

Mising tribe is scattered in the districts Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Gholaghat districts of Assam. Numerically they are the second largest tribe of Assam, Misings also have under Mising Autonomous Council which was established in 1995. The research on mother tongue of the Misings pertains only to the Dhemaji District of Assam which is considered to be the largest settlement of Misings. Misings normally inhabits near the river banks and they are nomadic tribe. Till date, there is no special programme taken up by Mising Autonomous Council for the promotion of Mising language.

Mising language is one of the 6 languages recognised by the government of Assam to be a subject of instruction in the primary classes. Till date there are four text books available for primary classes:

Sl.No.	Name of the book	Class	Writer/Publisher
1.	Posang Otsur- I	I	Rodnesor Perme, SCERT Assam
2.	Posang Otsur- I	II	Indresor Pegu, SCERT Assam
3.	Ngoluk Po:tin - I	III	A group of writers, SCERT Assam
4.	Ngoluk Po:tin -II	IV	A group of writers, SCERT Assam
5.	Poman Moman (Rhymes)	---	Tabu Taid
6.	Mising Gomlan (Word list)	---	Norendra Pa:du

³ The Language Development officer in KADC told the researcher that they will continue to bear the amount as long as it is feasible.

Two books **Ngoluk Po:tin – I & II** are developed in the line of NCF 2005. The books, though in black and white, are attractive and illustrations are in accordance with Mising culture. The books in general give ample scope for the child to get engaged in the language and develop linguistic skills. Regarding availability of teachers in around 120 Mising language teachers were appointed by the Government of Assam. Out of this number, many got retired and many are utilised as subject teacher other than Mising⁴ a few more sought transfer in places where Mising children are less and the question of teaching this particular language does not arise. But nothing has been seriously looked into by any stakeholders, Government in their end is proud to say that they have appointed teachers, and that they provide textbooks under SSA scheme. It seems that hardly any further step is taken up improving the teaching learning process happening in the particular language. They only have done bare minimum on their part; the rest is left to the system. Parents do consider that if their children get to study mother tongue, it is well and good, if not given opportunity the simple answer is what to do, our liking and disliking does not make any difference. *Mising Agom Kebang*, the literary organisation of Mising, is working for the introduction of Mising in Upper Primary level. The organisation is trying to open Mising medium schools at present; the efforts are yet to reap rewards. Only a handful of people are keen on this project and so the sustainability question in case of Mising is quite obvious.

Sustainability in Education

Many languages are entering into the education sphere in this state mainly due to untiring and selfless effort of individuals or group of individuals who relentlessly work for the upliftment of the languages. The works done by the respective Literature Organisations in the state deserves a special recognition. But a point of caution here is as for smaller linguistic communities which are recently entering into the academics (school system) as a part of greater consciousness, understanding of the importance of preserving the mother tongue in education, as a part of identity construction or, for a larger political agenda, the community as a whole need to think for a proper language planning in terms of status (which needs to maintain), the corpus to be used for developing the language to further scales and the acquisition planning as well. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998:63) describe the need for “*Prior ideological clarification*” before policy decisions are made. They continue, “*This calls for an open, honest assessment of the state of the language and how people really feel about using and preserving it, replacing wishful thinking and denial of reality with an honest evaluation leading to realistic recommendations. Personal and community attitude are as important as –if not more important than – the technical aspects that are less emotional.*” To sustain the system the following need to be fulfilled:

(i) State Policy on Language: Assam is yet to have a proper policy to bring mother tongues in education, it should not be a quick fix response to a pressure group. The availability of funds, resources, the willingness of people, the strategies to be adopted need to chalk out before. At the same time taking into consideration of the need and importance of mother tongues in shaping the personality of the child and the relevance to education in early years of schooling, the government

⁴ These groups of teachers were called promoted to ---- whatever subjects they teach other than Mising. This particular terminology reinforces the subordinate status of the language teachers.

should have a strong political will to bring mother tongues in school at the same time ensuring a good bridging process to the languages of wider communication.

(ii) Good Mother Tongue Textbooks: A language textbook which aims at developing proper academic competencies in the language concerned should have a systematic progression of ideas. Language textbooks should focus on grammatical correctness and proper usage of the grammatical forms at the same time should be able to reflect the social issues and the realities. It should not be a collection of just few poems and prose written by someone. Anything new which has a justifiable reason to include in the textbook may be incorporated in the light of the existing knowledge in an interesting manner and to reorganise the existing knowledge.

While doing so one has to see the scope for application of constructivist approach in both planning and writing of the textbook as well in the pedagogy adopted. The material presented in the book should be so that the child is given enough scope for enable a child to enquire, explore, question, debates, application and reflection leading to theory building and creation of ideas. For this reason, the textbook developers need to ensure that the books should have well organised learner friendly tasks and questions. Therefore, the textbook should become a tool to provide examples, pointers, programmes to be perused, and introduction of principles.

The task is not over here as we need all the languages which are required for living in a multilingual setting we need to study other languages, the language of wider communication, the language of the global scientific knowledge, what required next is a proper bridging process from the mother tongue to the other languages.

(iii) The Bridging Process: This is the process of linking the learning process from the minority language to the other languages, which are usually the school language in this context. “The bridging process allows children to maintain local language and culture while providing state and/or national language acquisition and instruction. This process provides learners with the opportunity to contribute to national society without forcing them to sacrifice their linguistic and cultural heritage”. (Pamela Meckenzie)

The process of bridging is rather complex in the context of North East in general and Assam in particular as we many languages to bridge to mainly the Regional language (Assamese), Hindi and English. Though there are models of bridging available the state as a whole is yet to adopt the models. Presented here are two model of bridging suggested by Pamela Mckenzie in Indian context, what is suggested is that the government may think about such a plan where the languages of the state can be fitted:

(i) Language skills and Concept Development chart (Pamela Mackenzie)

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6	Stage 7

L1	Build small children's oral fluency, competence and confidence in L1	Use L1 as the medium of instruction Continue to build oral L1 Introduce reading and writing in L1	Use L1 as the medium of instruction Continue to build oral and written L1	Use L1 as the medium of instruction Continue to build oral and written fluency in L1	Continue to build oral and written L1 & L2 for fluency, and learning new concepts	Continue to build fluency & confidence in using L1, L2 and L3 for everyday communication & for learning new concepts	Use all languages for learning
L2			Introduce Oral L2 Introduce reading and writing in L2	Continue to build oral L2			
L3				Introduce oral L3			

L1,L2, L3: First language, Second language and Third language

(ii) Possible plan for transition based on The National Curriculum Framework, 2005

Pre-sch 1	Pre-sch 2	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
Language oral MT	Language oral MT	Language in MT	Language in MT	Language in MT	MT as subject	MT as subject
Number MT	Number MT	Math in MT	Math in MT	Math in MT	Math in L2	Math 12

Environmental awareness in MT	Environmental awareness in MT	EVS in MT	EVS in MT	EVS in MT	EVS in MT /L2	EVS in L2
Play	Play		L2 oral development	reading and writing in l2	L2 lang development	L2 lang development
					Oral L3	Reading and writing in L3

MT: mother tongue, EVS: environmental studies

Source: Pamela McKenzie

Conclusion

To sustain mother tongues in the school education system is one of the major challenges that minority languages are facing now⁵. To tackle this issue first we have to look into the question of acceptability of the minority language which is used in education by the community, second we should be sure of the standardisation process of the language and as well the relevance of language in wider context outside school factors. Among the school factors a close relook in the curriculum and the instructional materials in terms of relevance of developing academic concepts and the degree of relatedness to the community and the culture at large, availability of schools, teachers and most importantly takers of the language needs to be assessed. The community also has to devise ways and means of conservation of the rich cultural heritage, the indigenous knowledge system which is expressed through language; it is we, the speakers who should be taking proactive role in conserving the language⁶. Above all sustainability of minority language should come with a proper policy at national and state level.

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⁵ In Manipur and Nagaland though the textbooks are available for the elementary classes there is hardly any student who reads it and use it for study, perhaps the books are not as interesting or there may be the cases that the language class cannot be given for feasibility issue.

⁶ In Tripura announcement in the Airport was made in Kokborok language for around 2 to 3 months sometimes in 2012 but all of the sudden it stopped, no one raised any question and till date no further announcement is made. Inquiring about this the responsible officer said it was our duty to bring the language we did our part when it stopped no one questioned that means, it's ok if we do not give announcement in Kokborok.(Director Kokborok and Minority Languages, Tripura)

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