

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Assam: A Comparative Study of Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri Communities

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Abstract

Mother tongue-based education (MTBE) plays a critical role in fostering inclusive, equitable, and effective learning, especially within linguistically diverse contexts such as Assam, India. This study investigates the implementation, perception, and sustainability of MTBE among two linguistically distinct communities in Assam: the Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from parents, students, teachers, and community members through structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal significant disparities in the institutional support and community attitudes toward mother tongue education between the two groups. Bodo, benefiting from constitutional recognition and active advocacy by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, enjoys stronger institutional backing, including availability of textbooks, trained teachers, and curriculum integration across educational levels. Conversely, Bishnupriya Manipuri faces challenges due to contested linguistic identity, lack of official recognition, and limited institutional resources, which impede its sustainable development in formal education. Despite these challenges, both communities expressed strong support for mother tongue education, recognizing its role in cultural preservation and cognitive development. However, Bishnupriya Manipuri stakeholders reported less teacher support and weaker language use within formal educational settings. The study underscores the importance of positive attitudes, community involvement, and government support in sustaining MTBE. It also highlights the need for decentralised, community-led language planning that respects local sociopolitical contexts. This research contributes to broader debates on linguistic justice and multilingual education policy, emphasising that recognition alone is insufficient without sustained institutional commitment and resource allocation. The findings advocate for targeted interventions to strengthen MTBE in Assam, ensuring equitable access and promoting linguistic diversity in the educational system.

Keywords: mother tongue education, linguistic diversity, Bodo language, Bishnupriya Manipuri, multilingual education, Assam

Introduction

Assam, situated in the northeastern region of India, is a mosaic of ethnolinguistic communities and cultural traditions, making it one of the most linguistically diverse states in the country. The state is home to a rich array of languages drawn from four major language families: Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Tai. This linguistic plurality reflects a complex sociocultural fabric where multiple identities coexist and interact. While Assamese serves as the dominant and official language, large sections of the population speak Bengali, Bodo, and other indigenous languages, each with its own historical roots and cultural significance. Tribal and minority communities have preserved their unique languages over generations, although many of these languages face threats of marginalization due to limited institutional support.

In line with the Indian government's Three Language Formula (TLF), Assam has formally embraced multilingualism within its education policy. The TLF promotes the learning of the regional language, Hindi, and English, with additional space theoretically available for minority and tribal languages. However, the practical implementation of this policy has been uneven, particularly with respect to mother tongue-based education (MTBE). MTBE is crucial for cognitive development, identity formation, and cultural continuity, especially in multilingual regions. Yet in Assam, discrepancies persist in the adoption and integration of mother tongues into formal education, revealing deeper issues related to language hierarchies, policy enforcement, and the allocation of educational resources.

This paper explores the status and institutional support for mother tongues in Assam's formal education system, with a particular focus on Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri. Bodo, a constitutionally recognized Scheduled Tribe language with official status in the Bodoland Territorial Region, has seen significant progress in terms of curriculum development and educational infrastructure. In contrast, Bishnupriya Manipuri, spoken by a smaller linguistic community, lacks similar recognition and institutional backing, limiting its presence to the earliest levels of schooling, if at all. This disparity

underscores how political recognition and demographic strength influence the inclusion or exclusion of languages in state-run education. Beyond the curriculum, the study also aims to examine community-level perceptions, attitudes, and usage of these mother tongues among students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Language attitudes play a critical role in the vitality and transmission of minority languages. Stakeholders' perspectives often determine whether a language is seen as a valuable medium of instruction or relegated to the private domain of cultural rituals and oral traditions. By analysing both institutional frameworks and sociolinguistic dynamics, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges and prospects of implementing MTBE in a multilingual state like Assam. Through this thematic focus, the paper contributes to broader discussions on language policy, educational equity, and the preservation of linguistic diversity in India. It underscores the urgent need for inclusive educational planning that recognizes the importance of all mother tongues, not just those with political or numerical dominance and addresses the structural inequalities that hinder their integration into mainstream education.

Review of Literatures

The importance of mother tongue-based education (MTBE) in promoting inclusive, equitable, and effective learning has been widely acknowledged in both global and Indian academic discourse. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that instruction in the mother tongue during early years significantly improves cognitive development and educational outcomes. Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) further argue that MTBE fosters stronger identity formation, improves self-esteem among learners, and enhances conceptual understanding. In the Indian context, despite constitutional commitments to multilingualism, implementation challenges persist, particularly in relation to tribal and minority languages (Annamalai, 2001; Mohanty, 2006). India's Three Language Formula (TLF) was introduced to balance national integration with linguistic diversity, allowing space for regional, national, and global languages within the education system (NCERT, 2005). However, several scholars (Jhingran, 2009; Panda & Mohanty, 2009) have pointed out that the TLF often marginalizes non-dominant languages, particularly those spoken by smaller tribal groups. In Assam, while the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) has developed textbooks in 14 languages, their actual use and acceptance vary significantly due to sociopolitical factors and the absence of structured implementation at all levels of education (Goswami, 2013; Saikia, 2014).

Bodo, a language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, has benefited from its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and its Associate Official Language status in the Bodoland Territorial Region. The role of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) has been instrumental in advocating for the language's use in education and administration (Basumatary, 2015; Brahma, 2012). According to Dutta (2017), this official backing has led to the development of a robust infrastructure for Bodo-medium education, including teacher training, textbook production, and institutional funding. In contrast, Bishnupriya Manipuri, spoken primarily in southern Assam's Barak Valley has faced several hurdles in gaining recognition and state support. Scholars like Singh (2010) and Khumanthem (2018) highlight the contested linguistic identity of Bishnupriya Manipuri, often viewed as a dialect or hybrid by other Manipuri or Meitei speakers. These identity politics, along with sociopolitical tensions among the Manipuri, Bengali, and Bishnupriya communities, have hindered the language's institutional development (Devi, 2016). Unlike Bodo, Bishnupriya Manipuri lacks the backing of a powerful literary body or official recognition, limiting its inclusion in curriculum design and formal schooling beyond the primary level. Attitudes toward language have also been a critical subject of inquiry. Gardner and Lambert (1972) originally established that learners' motivation and attitudes greatly influence language acquisition and usage. In the context of linguistic minorities, negative perceptions—both internalized by speakers and externally imposed—can significantly impair a language's growth and transmission (Tollefson, 1991; May, 2012). Bhattacharya (2011) observes that in Assam, minority languages are often perceived as having little socioeconomic utility, resulting in their reduced desirability in formal education.

Furthermore, the availability of trained teachers, quality learning materials, and career prospects linked to minority language proficiency directly affect the sustainability of MTBE (Mohanty, 2010; Srivastava, 2014). Studies by Nayak (2020) and Baruah (2019) demonstrate that in rural and tribal regions of Assam, these limitations disproportionately affect communities with non-dominant languages, leading to higher dropout rates and academic underperformance. The logic of language policy, sociolinguistic identity, and community aspirations has emerged as a central theme in contemporary research. Scholars like Pattanayak (1990) and Subba (2021) have advocated for decentralized, community-led language planning that respects local contexts and cultural autonomy. In this framework, linguistic justice entails more than textbook inclusion—it requires a paradigm shift in how language rights are perceived, resourced, and institutionalized.

Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the implementation, perception, and sustainability of mother tongue-based education (MTBE) among two linguistically distinct communities in Assam say Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri

within the broader context of Assam's multilingual education system. Specifically it is: 1) To investigate how mother tongue education is being implemented for the Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities across different levels of schooling in Assam. 2) To assess the attitudes and perceptions of various stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and community leaders, regarding the value, relevance, and effectiveness of mother tongue instruction. 3) To compare the degree of institutional support such as availability of textbooks, trained teachers, official recognition, and curriculum integration afforded to Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri, and their usage across educational and community domains. 4) To identify the key challenges hindering the effective execution of mother tongue education in these communities and propose actionable recommendations for strengthening MTBE in Assam's multilingual and socio-politically diverse context.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted among two linguistically distinct communities in Assam namely Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri, residing in different geographical and sociocultural regions. The Bodo community was studied primarily in the Bodoland Territorial Region, encompassing the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, and Chirang, while the Bishnupriya Manipuri community was examined in the Barak Valley, covering the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined quantitative and qualitative techniques for comprehensive data collection. Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires based on Likert scales, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The study included four categories of respondents: parents, students, teachers, and community members. In total, 101 individuals from the Bishnupriya Manipuri community (21 parents, 33 community members, 32 students, and 15 teachers) and 80 individuals from the Bodo community (20 respondents in each category) participated in the research. The questionnaires were tailored for each group, comprising 48 items for parents and community members, 50 for students, and 51 for teachers. The data collected were analysed thematically under three core areas: the current status of the mother tongue, the level of support available for mother tongue-based education, and the extent to which the mother tongue is used in educational and community settings. This methodology enabled an in-depth comparison of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by both communities within Assam's multilingual educational framework.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis of Assam's formal education system reveals that while linguistic diversity is acknowledged at the foundational level, a stark disparity exists in the continuity and institutionalization of mother tongue education across higher stages. All 14 listed languages are introduced at the Ka-shreni (kindergarten) level, reflecting a symbolic gesture toward inclusivity. However, this inclusivity diminishes rapidly as only 9 languages (64.3%) are continued at the Primary level and just 7 languages (50%) are taught at the Upper Primary and High School stages. Notably, only Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Nepali, Manipuri, English, and Hindi are integrated throughout all four levels, indicating structured curricular and policy support. In contrast, Garo and Hmar are offered only up to the Primary stage, and five languages say Bishnupriya Manipuri, Tiwa, Mishng, Rabha, and Deori are confined to Ka-shreni. This data underscores an educational hierarchy where dominant languages enjoy sustained presence, while several minority mother tongues lack formal pathways for long-term development in education.

Community-level responses further illuminate disparities in linguistic confidence and institutional support. The Bodo community displayed a stronger sense of linguistic equality and pride, with the majority of parents (75%), teachers (70%), and students (60%) affirming positive attitudes toward their mother tongue's status in education. This may be attributed to Bodo's constitutional recognition, active literary institutions like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, and government policy backing. On the other hand, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community showed signs of linguistic marginalization. Nearly half (47.6%) of Bishnupriya Manipuri parents and a substantial portion (23.5%) strongly disagreed with the notion of linguistic equality, likely reflecting historical socio-political tensions and lack of official recognition. Despite these differences, a common aspiration was visible: 70% of Bodo parents and 61.9% of Bishnupriya Manipuri parents supported the continuation of mother tongue-based education beyond the primary stage, underlining the perceived value of linguistic heritage in early learning. Both communities acknowledged the urgent need to promote and support mother tongue education through targeted interventions. There was overwhelming agreement on the importance of community initiatives and government backing in revitalizing mother tongues. Approximately 90% of respondents across both groups emphasized the role of technological tools, quality pedagogical resources, and dedicated teacher training in sustaining mother tongue-based education (MTBE). However, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community expressed notable concerns: 47.6% of parents and 33.3% of community members felt that teachers did not actively support mother tongue instruction. This dissatisfaction points to systemic neglect and underscores the need for strategic capacity-building. Socio-political and economic hurdles were common to both groups, with 53.6% of Bishnupriya Manipuris and 66.6% of Bodos identifying structural challenges to effective MTBE implementation.

Language usage patterns among students further reveal differing levels of vitality. Bodo students actively use their mother tongue across both public and private domains, indicating institutional normalization and community reinforcement. In contrast, Bishnupriya Manipuri students restrict the use of their language primarily to informal settings. Usage in formal school environments remains limited, only 28.1% reported using it within school contexts and 27.4% outside school contexts. However, peer-group communication remains strong, with 71.8% using the language among in-school friends and 88% with peers outside school. This suggests that while institutional support may be lacking, cultural transmission continues through social interaction, particularly among the younger generation. Nonetheless, the limited visibility of the language in educational settings could accelerate its marginalization unless proactive educational and policy measures are taken.

Discussion

The importance of mother tongue-based education (MTBE) as a critical factor in promoting inclusive and effective learning is well-established in both global and Indian scholarship. UNESCO (2003) underscores that early education in the mother tongue significantly enhances cognitive development and overall educational achievement. Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) emphasize how MTBE strengthens learners' identity, bolsters self-esteem, and deepens conceptual understanding. These insights align with the findings from this study, which reveal that despite formal recognition of multiple languages at the foundational levels of education in Assam, sustained support across higher educational stages remains uneven and inadequate. This disconnect echoes Mohanty's (2006) observation that, in India, constitutional commitments to multilingualism often confront practical challenges, particularly for tribal and minority languages. The present study's findings that only a subset of languages, including Bodo but not Bishnupriya Manipuri, receive consistent curricular support beyond primary levels reflects similar concerns raised by Jhingran (2009) and Panda and Mohanty (2009) regarding the marginalization of smaller, less dominant languages within India's Three Language Formula.

The contrasting trajectories of the Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri languages further illustrate the influence of sociopolitical recognition and institutional backing in shaping MTBE outcomes. Bodo's inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and its official language status in the Bodoland Territorial Region have fostered a supportive ecosystem for language maintenance. As Basumatary (2015) and Brahma (2012) note, organizations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) play a pivotal role in advocacy, curriculum development, and teacher training factors corroborated by Dutta's (2017) documentation of robust infrastructural support for Bodo-medium education. In contrast, the Bishnupriya Manipuri language faces challenges stemming from contested identity and sociopolitical marginalization, as highlighted by Singh (2010) and Khumanthem (2018). The absence of official recognition and institutional champions hampers its curricular integration beyond early schooling stages. This dichotomy supports Devi's (2016) argument that political and linguistic identity conflicts severely restrict the institutional development of minority languages, an issue reflected in this study by the limited formal use and community concerns about teacher support for Bishnupriya Manipuri.

Attitudinal factors play a decisive role in sustaining MTBE, a point underscored by Gardner and Lambert's (1972) seminal work on motivation and language acquisition. Negative attitudes both internalized by minority speakers and imposed externally can undermine language vitality, as Tollefson (1991) and May (2012) argue. The skepticism expressed by nearly half of Bishnupriya Manipuri parents toward the linguistic equality of their language resonates with Bhattacharya's (2011) findings that minority languages in Assam are often deemed of limited socioeconomic value, discouraging their use in formal education. This internalized marginalization may diminish community engagement and investment in MTBE. Moreover, the availability of trained teachers, appropriate learning materials, and prospects for minority language proficiency remain critical barriers to sustainability, corroborated by Mohanty (2010) and Srivastava (2014). The high dropout rates and underperformance among students from non-dominant language communities documented by Nayak (2020) and Baruah (2019) parallel the structural challenges highlighted by respondents in this study.

The interplay between language policy, sociolinguistic identity, and community aspirations emerges as a crucial determinant of MTBE's success. Scholars such as Pattanayak (1990) and Subba (2021) advocate for decentralized, community-led language planning that respects local cultural autonomy and moves beyond token textbook inclusion. The findings here reinforce that linguistic justice requires systemic shifts in resource allocation, teacher training, and institutional commitment rather than superficial policy gestures. Both communities in this study called for greater governmental support and community mobilization, recognizing that technology and quality pedagogy are vital for sustaining mother tongues. The divergence in language use widespread public and institutional use of Bodo versus the confined private and peer domain use of Bishnupriya Manipuri illustrates how socio-political recognition influences language vitality. As peer communication among Bishnupriya youth remains strong, cultural transmission persists, suggesting a reservoir of resilience that could be nurtured through more robust educational and policy interventions. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of research emphasizing that successful MTBE hinges not only on

constitutional recognition but also on genuine, sustained institutional support, positive community attitudes, and context-sensitive policy implementation. The contrasting experiences of the Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by minority languages in Assam and underscore the urgent need for targeted strategies that address structural, socio-political, and attitudinal barriers to ensure equitable, effective multilingual education.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined the implementation, perceptions, and challenges of mother tongue-based education (MTBE) among two linguistically distinct communities in Assam, the Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri, within the state's multilingual education system. While all 14 recognized languages are introduced at the kindergarten level, the continuity of mother tongue instruction sharply declines at higher educational stages, with only seven languages, including Bodo, being taught consistently up to high school. Bishnupriya Manipuri, along with several other minority languages, faces severe restrictions beyond early childhood education, reflecting systemic gaps in curriculum integration and institutional support.

The findings reveal a stark contrast between the two communities in terms of linguistic pride, institutional backing, and language vitality. The Bodo community benefits from constitutional recognition, official language status, and active literary organizations, contributing to stronger institutional infrastructure, positive attitudes, and widespread use of the mother tongue across both formal and informal domains. Conversely, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community experiences marginalization stemming from contested linguistic identity, limited official recognition, and sociopolitical tensions, resulting in constrained language use largely confined to informal peer groups and private settings. Concerns about lack of teacher support and inadequate resources further highlight the challenges faced by Bishnupriya Manipuri speakers in sustaining MTBE. Despite these differences, both communities express strong support for the promotion of mother tongue education and emphasize the critical role of government involvement, technological tools, quality teaching materials, and trained educators in sustaining MTBE. Socioeconomic and political hurdles are widely acknowledged as major impediments to effective implementation. To sum up, the study underscores that recognizing linguistic diversity at the policy level is insufficient without sustained institutional commitment, community engagement, and context-specific strategies. For MTBE to fulfill its promise of inclusive, equitable education in Assam, comprehensive efforts are required to strengthen curricular continuity, build teacher capacity, and foster positive attitudes toward minority languages. The contrasting experiences of Bodo and Bishnupriya Manipuri highlight the urgent need for nuanced, community-led approaches to language planning that ensure the vitality and intergenerational transmission of Assam's rich linguistic heritage.

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