

Exploring Challenges And Opportunities In Implementing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education In Arunachal Pradesh's Tribal Communities

Dr. Ch. Sarajubala Devi^{*1}, Dr. R. K. Brajananda Singh²

¹Associate Professor, NERIE, Shillong

²Assistant Professor, Liberal College, Imphal

*Corresponding Author: Email - sarajubala@yahoo.com

Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the linguistically diverse North East region of India, represents a critical case study in the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). Home to over 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, the state faces unique challenges in integrating indigenous languages into formal schooling, particularly through the development and use of tribal language textbooks. This paper examines the status, quality, and pedagogical alignment of third-language textbooks introduced at the primary level in five tribal languages: Idu Mishmi, Kaman Mishmi, Wancho, Galo, and Nyishi. Employing a qualitative framework, the study analyses the textual content, instructional design, linguistic standardization, and cultural relevance of these materials. Findings reveal both progress and persistent gaps: while textbook creation reflects growing institutional and community engagement, it suffers from inconsistencies in pedagogical structure, lack of assessment tools, and inadequate dialectal representation. These issues are compounded by broader policy-level disparities, where national commitments to mother tongue education are undermined by limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and the continued dominance of English and Hindi. The study argues for a shift from symbolic to substantive inclusion of indigenous languages through centralized academic support, inclusive curriculum design, and community co-authorship. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the discourse on linguistic justice, educational equity, and the preservation of endangered languages in India's tribal regions by highlighting the need for culturally grounded and pedagogically sound approaches to textbook development. Without systemic reforms and sustained policy attention, the transformative

potential of mother tongue education in Arunachal Pradesh risks remaining unrealized.

Keywords: Mother Tongue-Based Education, Tribal Language Textbooks, Linguistic Diversity, Arunachal Pradesh, Multilingual Policy, Pedagogical Inclusion.

Introduction

The North East region of India represents one of the most linguistically diverse areas in the world, characterized by a mosaic of minor and often endangered languages, most of which belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family. These languages, spoken by various indigenous communities, are rich in oral traditions but are frequently under-documented and lack standardized writing systems or widely accepted orthographies. This linguistic diversity, while culturally valuable, poses complex challenges for educational planning and language policy, especially in the realm of formal schooling where the medium of instruction often diverges from the child's home language. India's constitutional provisions and language policies, such as the Three-Language Formula and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasize the promotion of multilingualism and the use of the mother tongue in the early years of schooling. These policies acknowledge the pedagogical advantages of mother tongue-based education, including improved cognitive development, stronger foundational learning, and greater classroom participation. However, the transition from policy to practice remains uneven, particularly in peripheral regions like the North East, where the lack of institutional capacity, trained teachers, and educational materials in local languages undermines the effective implementation of such initiatives.

Arunachal Pradesh, one of the most remote and least densely populated states in India, encapsulates these challenges in unique ways. Home to over 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, each with its own language or dialect, the state reflects the intense multilingualism of the broader North East region. In recent years, Arunachal Pradesh has undertaken renewed efforts to incorporate indigenous languages into the school curriculum, especially at the primary level. As part of this initiative, several tribal languages have been introduced as third language subjects, with the aim of fostering linguistic pride and enhancing cultural continuity among younger generations. Despite the positive intent, the integration of tribal languages into formal education systems raises important questions about the quality, consistency, and pedagogical relevance of the materials used. The development of textbooks in these languages represents a critical component of this process. However, many of these textbooks

are still in their nascent stages of development, and concerns persist regarding their linguistic accuracy, age-appropriateness, cultural representation, and alignment with established educational standards.

This paper aims to explore the current status and emerging challenges of mother tongue-based education in Arunachal Pradesh by focusing on the use and effectiveness of tribal language textbooks introduced in primary schools. Specifically, it investigates the pedagogical design, linguistic standardization, and classroom usability of these third language textbooks, drawing on case studies from selected districts in the state. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on the role of indigenous languages in education, the implementation of inclusive language policies in multilingual contexts, and the ways in which educational resources can be tailored to support linguistic and cultural diversity in India's tribal regions.

Review of Previous Works

India is globally recognized for its extraordinary linguistic diversity, encompassing languages from five major families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Semito-Hamitic (Mahapatra, 1991; Annamalai, 2001). The Indo-Aryan group constitutes the linguistic majority, with Hindi spoken by over 43% of the population according to the 2011 Census (Government of India, 2011). In contrast, the Tibeto-Burman language family, spoken by only about 1% of Indians, shows remarkable internal diversity, particularly in the North Eastern region, where more than 60 languages thrive (Devy, 2010; Singh, 2009). Pattanayak (1968) was among the first scholars to highlight the lack of a coherent national language policy in India, an issue that has continued to complicate language planning and educational implementation. Despite the constitutional recognition of 22 scheduled languages, many scholars (Mohanty, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) have noted a systematic marginalization of minor tribal languages in formal institutions. The National Education Policies (1968, 1986, 2020) have repeatedly emphasized the value of mother tongue-based instruction, especially in early education (Ministry of Education, 2020), yet the translation of this vision into practice remains fragmented and inconsistent (Doda, 2020; Srivastava, 1990). Sarajubala (2018) describes North East India's linguistic landscape as "rather complex," with over 98% of the region's languages categorized as minor tribal tongues. These languages often lack standard scripts or formalized grammars, making their incorporation into mainstream education a daunting task (Abbi, 2012; UNESCO, 2003). The symbolic inclusion of such languages in school syllabi is rarely accompanied by comprehensive efforts in curriculum design,

teacher training, or textbook development (Evans, 2008; Pradhan, 2021). Mohanty (2009) and Panda & Mohanty (2011) emphasize that education in a child's home language significantly enhances learning outcomes, cognitive development, and cultural identity. However, multilingual education faces logistical and political challenges, especially in tribal regions where schools often default to dominant regional or national languages due to the lack of prepared teachers and learning materials (Jhingran, 2005; Dasgupta, 2007).

In Arunachal Pradesh, recent initiatives to integrate indigenous languages into the formal education system as third languages mark an important policy shift (Nyori, 2020). Nonetheless, scholars argue that the success of such programs depends heavily on the quality of textbooks and the training of educators (Rai, 2017; Kom, 2016). Most tribal language textbooks remain in the experimental phase, often created by local experts with minimal pedagogical input (Singh & Rai, 2019; Buragohain, 2021). Zide (1996) and Blench (2006) have documented the historical neglect of Tibeto-Burman languages in linguistic research, which has had downstream effects on their institutional representation in education. This gap also contributes to the fragility of these languages, as younger generations increasingly shift to dominant languages for socioeconomic mobility (Ratanlal, 2014; Mehta, 2016). UNESCO (2010) warns that many tribal languages in the region are endangered, underscoring the urgency of educational interventions. Experts like Subba (2015) and Boro (2018) highlight those even well-intentioned policies often fall short due to inadequate infrastructure, especially in rural tribal areas. The success of mother tongue education relies not only on the availability of textbooks but also on community participation, linguistic standardization, and political will (Lahiri, 2004; Paul, 2022). Moreover, multilingual textbooks should reflect local cultural content and oral traditions, which are crucial to maintaining the relevance and authenticity of tribal education (Tsunoda, 2005; Das, 2021).

In essence, while there is substantial academic support for mother tongue-based multilingual education in India's tribal regions, especially in North East India, the literature points to critical gaps in implementation. The intersection of policy, pedagogy, and linguistic diversity presents a complex field that demands context-sensitive, inclusive, and community-driven approaches. This study builds upon these insights by examining the specific case of tribal language textbook development and its pedagogical alignment in Arunachal Pradesh.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the current status and effectiveness of mother tongue-based education in Arunachal Pradesh, a region characterized by significant linguistic diversity and the predominance of under-documented tribal languages. Specifically, the research aims to analyse the quality, content, and pedagogical alignment of selected tribal language textbooks introduced at the primary school level as third languages. Additionally, the study seeks to identify critical gaps in the implementation of language education policies and offer context-sensitive, actionable recommendations to enhance the integration of indigenous languages into the formal education system, thereby supporting linguistic preservation and inclusive learning outcomes.

Materials and Methods

The present research adopts a qualitative methodology centered on the textual and pedagogical analysis of tribal language textbooks developed under the mother tongue education initiative in Arunachal Pradesh. The primary materials for this study comprise textbooks published in 2021 by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Arunachal Pradesh, for use as third language resources at the upper primary level. Five representative tribal languages say Idu Mishmi, Kaman Mishmi, Wancho, Galo, and Nyishi were selected to reflect both geographical and ethnolinguistic diversity across the state. These languages represent a cross-section of the state's major tribal communities and provide insight into how linguistic and cultural specificity is handled in educational materials. Each textbook was systematically reviewed using a multi-dimensional analytical framework. The evaluation focused on key components such as textual structure, thematic organization, linguistic content, pedagogical strategies, cultural representations, and the extent of contextual relevance for the learners. The analysis also considered visual and narrative elements, indigenous knowledge integration, and the adaptability of the materials for classroom instruction. The qualitative approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how mother tongue textbooks function as tools for both language preservation and foundational education. By focusing on both content quality and pedagogical coherence, this methodological design aims to illuminate the strengths and limitations of current textbook development efforts within the broader policy discourse on multilingual and tribal education in India.

Analysis and Results

The analysis of tribal language textbooks in Arunachal Pradesh reveals significant insights into the linguistic complexities of the region, the challenges of policy implementation, and the

pedagogical inconsistencies that characterize current textbook development. These findings are organized into key thematic areas to highlight both structural limitations and promising practices.

Linguistic Complexity and the Challenge of Standardization: Arunachal Pradesh is marked by extraordinary linguistic heterogeneity, comprising 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes. This internal diversity is not limited to inter-tribal variation but extends to intralinguistic differentiation. For instance, the Tangsa language alone exhibits at least 28 distinct varieties, many of which are mutually unintelligible. Similar patterns are found within the Mishmi and Adi language groups. This multiplicity presents significant barriers to the standardization required for textbook development, as the selection of a single dialect or script can marginalize speakers of other variants and spark issues of representation and identity within communities. The effort to preserve linguistic heritage through education thus becomes a sensitive balancing act between linguistic inclusivity and pedagogical feasibility.

Policy Intent and Implementation Disparities: Although national and state-level education policies support multilingual education and cultural preservation, the actual implementation in Arunachal Pradesh falls short of these goals. Mother tongues are currently relegated to the position of third languages in the curriculum, while English and Hindi occupy the more dominant first and second language slots. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) have played a proactive role in the development of tribal language materials, demonstrating local commitment and expertise.

Content and Pedagogical Insights of Textbooks: A closer examination of selected textbooks reveals a mixed picture in terms of quality and instructional design. They are 1) Idu Mishmi (Asahi Idu Azobra): This 31-page textbook introduces basic vocabulary and phonetic elements but lacks engaging exercises. Activities are limited to rote copying and matching, with no provisions for critical thinking or reflective learning. 2) Kaman Mishmi (Kaman Pit): Slightly shorter at 29 pages, this textbook incorporates culturally relevant images and vocabulary. However, it does not include any structured language activities or exercises, thus failing to support skill development beyond passive recognition. 3) Wancho (Sedan Book I): Among the reviewed materials, this 75-page book stands out for its structured layout, story-based learning modules, illustrations, and inclusion of exercises. It offers a relatively balanced approach to language instruction. 4) Galo (Qok Agom): While it emphasizes the sound system and dialectal features, the book lacks a coherent thematic structure

and provides only basic writing tasks, missing opportunities for deeper linguistic engagement. 5) Nyishi (Nyishi Lvr Kitab Jabbum): This textbook offers culturally rich content and introduces early language exercises. It reflects a better grasp of foundational pedagogical principles but still diverges from a standardized format shared with other language textbooks.

Emerging Patterns and Pedagogical Gaps: Despite the diversity in content and approach, several common issues emerge across the reviewed textbooks are i) Absence of a uniform pedagogical framework and instructional structure; ii) Lack of assessment tools and measurable learning outcomes tied to national standards; iii) Limited opportunities for interactive, reflective, or creative language use; and iv) Ambiguity in the selection of dialects within multi-dialect communities, potentially leading to exclusion or confusion among learners. These findings emphasise the urgent need for a cohesive strategy in developing tribal language textbooks that not only respect linguistic diversity but also meet educational standards. Collaborative efforts involving linguists, educators, policymakers, and local communities are essential to ensure that mother tongue education in Arunachal Pradesh evolves from symbolic inclusion to substantive educational transformation.

Discussion

The study of mother tongue-based education in Arunachal Pradesh reveals a deeply layered linguistic and pedagogical landscape shaped by historical marginalization, institutional gaps, and ongoing efforts toward cultural preservation. The findings reinforce a well-established but often neglected premise in multilingual educational discourse: that policy success hinges not only on intent but on grounded, community-sensitive implementation. The North East region, and Arunachal Pradesh in particular, presents an instructive case where language endangerment intersects with educational marginality, underscoring the complexity of translating national multilingual policies into local realities.

The textbooks reviewed in this study exemplify both progress and pitfalls. On one hand, their very existence indicates a positive policy shift and a growing awareness of the need for culturally rooted education. The inclusion of tribal languages as third-language subjects marks a tangible step toward linguistic empowerment. On the other hand, the analysis highlights a clear disconnect between textbook design and pedagogical best practices. For example, while the Wancho (Sedan Book I) demonstrates a relatively integrated approach to language learning, others such as Idu Mishmi (Asahi Idu Azobra) and Kaman Pit suffer from structural and

pedagogical limitations, offering little more than rote vocabulary with minimal learner engagement. These shortcomings reveal a pattern that is consistent with prior observations by Mohanty (2006) and Panda & Mohanty (2011), who noted that symbolic inclusion of tribal languages rarely leads to meaningful educational outcomes without corresponding investments in curriculum development and teacher training. The issue of dialectal fragmentation adds further complexity. Arunachal Pradesh's linguistic map is characterized by high intralinguistic variation, as seen in the 28 mutually unintelligible varieties of Tangsa and similar patterns among the Mishmi and Adi languages. Selecting a single variety for standardization in textbooks can inadvertently marginalize other speech communities and provoke identity-based tensions. This dilemma, noted by Blench (2006) and Zide (1996), illustrates the need for inclusive decision-making processes where linguistic representation is negotiated through community consultation rather than imposed by external authorities. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), which have already played a pivotal role in developing these materials, should be given a more institutionalized role in shaping curriculum frameworks and determining language varieties to be used in instruction.

Policy-level gaps are another pressing concern. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for early education in the mother tongue, recognizing its benefits for cognitive development and inclusive learning. However, Arunachal Pradesh's positioning of tribal languages as third-language options undercuts the intended benefits of early linguistic immersion. The continued dominance of English and Hindi as first and second languages reflects a broader sociolinguistic hierarchy that prioritizes national integration over local identity, a tension previously highlighted by scholars like Pattanayak (1968) and Mohanty (2009). While state and central governments may be reluctant to displace dominant languages, doing so at the expense of foundational literacy and cultural inclusion undermines both educational equity and linguistic sustainability. Besides, textbook development efforts appear to lack centralized academic oversight. The inconsistencies in structure, absence of assessment tools, and minimal interactive content demonstrate a fragmented approach to curriculum design. As Sarajubala (2018) and Pradhan (2021) argue, without pedagogical alignment and a clear instructional vision, mother tongue education risks becoming a token gesture rather than a transformative tool.

To move beyond symbolic representation, future strategies must prioritize systemic coherence. This includes establishing a standardized pedagogical framework adaptable

to local languages, training teachers in multilingual methodologies, and integrating indigenous knowledge systems into curriculum content. Community participation must not be limited to consultation but should extend to co-authorship and content review. As UNESCO (2010) and Subba (2015) emphasize, language vitality is closely tied to educational inclusion. Unless mother tongue education in Arunachal Pradesh is supported by context-sensitive pedagogy, inclusive policy frameworks, and sustained institutional commitment, its transformative potential will remain unfulfilled. To sum up, while the initiative to introduce tribal languages into the school curriculum is commendable, its current execution reflects deeper structural and ideological challenges. The success of such programs requires more than the availability of textbooks, it demands a paradigm shift that re-centres education around linguistic rights, cultural affirmation, and pedagogical inclusivity.

Summary and Conclusion

This study explored the current status, pedagogical value, and implementation challenges of mother tongue-based education (MTBE) in Arunachal Pradesh, one of India's most linguistically diverse states. With over 26 major tribes and more than 100 sub-tribes, the region exemplifies the intense multilingualism and linguistic vulnerability that characterizes the broader North East India. Although national policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Three-Language Formula support early education in the mother tongue, actual implementation in peripheral and tribal regions remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. Arunachal Pradesh's initiative to introduce tribal languages as third-language subjects in schools represents a significant, though complex, step toward linguistic inclusion and cultural preservation. The study conducted a qualitative content analysis of five tribal language textbooks such as Idu Mishmi, Kaman Mishmi, Wancho, Galo, and Nyishi to assess their pedagogical design, cultural content, and alignment with the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE 2023). While the effort to document and teach tribal languages is commendable, the analysis revealed critical gaps in instructional quality, linguistic standardization, and educational coherence. Most textbooks lack a unified pedagogical framework, structured exercises, or measurable learning outcomes, making them less effective as tools for foundational education. The variability in content structure, dialect selection, and visual representation underscores the absence of centralized academic guidance and quality control. Despite these limitations, some materials, particularly the Wancho and Nyishi textbooks exhibit promising practices, such as story-based modules, cultural integration, and foundational

exercises. These examples demonstrate the potential for creating culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive educational resources when community input is combined with academic rigor. However, systemic improvements are necessary to achieve broader educational equity and language preservation. In conclusion, while Arunachal Pradesh's MTBE efforts reflect an important policy shift, their success hinges on addressing issues of standardization, pedagogical consistency, and institutional capacity. Collaborative engagement among linguists, educators, policymakers, and local communities is essential for transforming mother tongue instruction from symbolic representation into a meaningful, effective, and sustainable model of inclusive education. Only then can tribal languages transition from endangerment toward revitalization within India's formal educational landscape.

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