



Whispers of Extinction: An Exploration of Endangered Languages of North-East India

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Abstract

The North-East region of India, a melting pot of linguistic diversity, houses a myriad of indigenous languages that embody centuries of cultural and historical heritage. For instance, the state of Arunachal Pradesh alone is home to over 90 languages, many of which are spoken by small tribal communities. A striking example is the Tai Khamti language, which has a rich oral literature but fewer than 5,000 active speakers. Similarly, UNESCO reports that nearly 30% of languages in the region are critically endangered, emphasizing the urgency of preservation efforts. These languages are not just tools of communication but also repositories of unique ecological knowledge, traditional customs, and cultural identities, making their preservation a matter of global significance. However, the region also represents one of the most significant linguistic graveyards, with many languages on the brink of extinction. This paper explores the current status of endangered languages in North-East India, their sociolinguistic contexts, the factors contributing to their decline, and the efforts being made to preserve them. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, this study underscores the urgency of linguistic preservation as a critical component of cultural sustainability. This extended analysis delves deeply into the historical, cultural, and institutional aspects that shape the linguistic landscape of this unique region, exploring practical pathways for revitalization.

Keywords: Endangered languages, Indigenous languages, North-East India, Sociolinguistic.

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a repository of a community's history, culture, and identity. In North-East India, for instance, the disappearance of the Ranglong language in Tripura has resulted in the loss of traditional weaving terminologies, while the fading of the Singpho dialects in Arunachal Pradesh has erased unique folk songs and ecological knowledge that were once integral to the community's way of life. North-East India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is home to over 200 languages, many of which belong to the Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austroasiatic families (Census of India, 2011). This linguistic wealth reflects the region's rich cultural diversity and history of sustained interactions among indigenous communities. Despite this richness, the region faces a grim reality—a significant number of its languages are endangered, with some already extinct. For instance, the Singpho dialects in Arunachal Pradesh have entirely disappeared, erasing a treasure trove of unique folk songs, oral histories, and traditional ecological knowledge, as younger generations increasingly adopted Assamese or Hindi for broader communication. Similarly, the disappearance of the Ranglong language in Tripura has led to the loss of traditional weaving techniques and terminologies once encoded in its lexicon. Such losses are not isolated; they symbolize a broader cultural amnesia that severs communities from their historical roots and intangible heritage. According to UNESCO, several languages in the region, including those that have recently vanished, had fewer than 100 speakers in their final years, illustrating the alarming rapidity of decline. This underscores an urgent need for preservation efforts aimed at safeguarding not just linguistic structures, but the intricate cultural ecosystems they support.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the endangered languages of North-East India. It addresses questions such as: What are the factors driving linguistic endangerment in the region? What are the implications of language loss for cultural identity and knowledge systems? And what strategies can be employed to revitalize these languages? By examining case studies, sociopolitical contexts, and community-driven initiatives, the paper also highlights the integral role of language in shaping cultural and ecological narratives.

1.1. Linguistic Diversity in North-East India

1.1.1. A Historical Perspective

The linguistic diversity of North-East India has been shaped by millennia of migration, trade, and cultural exchange. Communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, and Khasi have developed distinct linguistic traditions, often

influenced by their geographical isolation and interactions with neighboring cultures (van Driem, 2001). Each community's linguistic identity reflects a unique synthesis of historical and cultural influences. For instance, the Nagas' tonal languages incorporate complex oral storytelling traditions, while the Khasi have developed a phonetic system that complements their elaborate oral genealogies. The diverse topography of the region—ranging from the rugged hills of Nagaland to the lush plains of Assam—has historically fostered linguistic isolation and innovation. Rugged terrains often acted as natural barriers, limiting interaction and fostering the development of distinct linguistic traits. This has resulted in micro-linguistic ecologies where languages evolve unique grammatical structures, phonetic systems, and oral traditions that are finely tuned to their cultural and environmental contexts. For example, the Mizos' linguistic expressions often encode ecological knowledge about their hilly landscapes, such as terminology for various types of bamboo or rain patterns.

Colonial interventions, however, disrupted the natural evolution of these linguistic systems. For instance, the British colonial administration prioritized English as the medium of instruction and governance, sidelining indigenous languages and oral traditions. Policies such as the introduction of English-medium schools diminished the role of local languages in education, relegating them to informal use within communities. Additionally, missionary activities, while developing written scripts for some tribal languages, often focused on translating religious texts rather than preserving the broader linguistic heritage. This shift not only marginalized local languages but also altered their sociolinguistic functions, pushing many to the brink of extinction. For example, during British rule, policies promoting English and other dominant languages for administrative and educational purposes marginalized indigenous languages. The introduction of English-medium education gradually eroded the use of local languages in formal settings. Additionally, the categorization of languages in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* often reduced rich oral traditions to mere 'dialects,' undermining their cultural significance. Missionary activities, while contributing to the development of scripts for some languages, also prioritized translations of religious texts over preserving indigenous linguistic diversity, further altering the trajectory of these languages. British administrators, while conducting surveys such as Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903), often categorized languages without accounting for their rich oral and cultural traditions. For example, languages with no standardized script were dismissed as 'dialects,' ignoring their complex oral literatures and cultural significance. The imposition of dominant languages like Assamese or Hindi during colonial and post-colonial periods further marginalized indigenous tongues, creating a hierarchy that persists to this day. This hierarchy relegated many indigenous languages to informal settings, stripping them of prestige and functional utility in education, governance, and media. Consequently, communities began to view their native languages as impediments to socioeconomic mobility, accelerating their decline.

2. Classification and Distribution

Languages in the region can be broadly classified into three families:

1. **Tibeto-Burman:** Dominant in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, this family includes languages like Ao, Meitei, and Adi. These languages often share similarities in syntax and phonology but exhibit significant lexical divergence. For example, Meitei, spoken in Manipur, has a rich tradition of classical literature and dance forms encoded in its lexicon, while Adi in Arunachal Pradesh is known for its tonal variations and oral epics that narrate historical migrations and tribal lore.
2. **Indo-Aryan:** Spoken mainly in Assam and parts of Tripura, this family includes Assamese and Sylheti. Assamese, with its roots in the ancient Kamrupi dialect, serves as a lingua franca in the region and has a prolific literary heritage, including the medieval Vaishnavite texts of Sankardev. Sylheti, spoken in southern Assam and neighboring Bangladesh, stands out for its distinctive phonological features, such as vowel reduction and a rich tradition of folk ballads.
3. **Austroasiatic:** Represented by languages like Khasi and War-Jaintia in Meghalaya, this family is characterized by its unique phonetic inventory and tonal patterns (Grierson, 1903). Khasi, for instance, is notable for its extensive use of clicks and glottal stops, elements rare in other Indian languages, and its oral storytelling tradition that preserves indigenous knowledge about the region's biodiversity. War-Jaintia, a closely related language, is renowned for its elaborate root-bridge construction terminology, linking linguistic features to unique ecological practices.

Despite this diversity, many languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, placing them in UNESCO's vulnerable or endangered categories (UNESCO, 2010). For instance, Tai Khamyang in Assam, with fewer than 100 speakers, is critically endangered due to limited transmission to younger generations. Dimasa, spoken in Assam and Nagaland, is considered vulnerable as its usage is increasingly restricted to older adults. Khasi and War-Jaintia in Meghalaya, though actively spoken, are listed as vulnerable because of declining use among urban youth. These examples illustrate the spectrum of endangerment, shedding light on the challenges faced by languages in the region.

3. Endangered Languages: Definitions and Criteria

UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger categorizes languages based on intergenerational transmission, the number of speakers, and their usage across different domains. These categories provide a structured framework to assess the status of endangered languages, ranging from "vulnerable" to "critically endangered" and "extinct."

1. **Vulnerable:** These languages are used by the majority of children in a community but are increasingly restricted to specific domains. For instance, Khasi in Meghalaya remains vibrant in rural areas but faces declining usage among urban youth due to the dominance of English and Hindi in education and media.
2. **Definitely Endangered:** These languages are no longer learned as a mother tongue by children in the home. Dimasa, spoken in Assam and Nagaland, is an example, as its transmission to younger generations is diminishing.
3. **Severely Endangered:** These languages are spoken mainly by grandparents and older generations, with younger generations either not speaking the language or understanding it only passively. Tai Phake in

Assam, for example, is primarily used in religious and ceremonial contexts, reflecting this level of endangerment.

4. Critically Endangered: These languages are used by very few speakers, often exclusively among the elderly. Tai Khamyang in Assam has fewer than 100 speakers, with younger generations almost entirely adopting Assamese or other dominant languages.
5. Extinct: Languages that no longer have native speakers. The Ranglong language in Tripura, which ceased to be actively spoken in the late 20th century, exemplifies this tragic endpoint.

These categorizations highlight the varying degrees of linguistic endangerment across the North-East. For example, the Tai Phake language, also from Assam, faces critical endangerment, with less than 1,500 speakers maintaining its use primarily in religious contexts. Meanwhile, the Mishing language, spoken by a larger community in Assam, is vulnerable as younger generations increasingly shift to Assamese for everyday communication.

Moreover, the Singpho dialects, classified as critically endangered, have almost entirely disappeared from daily use, with speakers adopting Assamese or Hindi for broader communication. These classifications underscore the necessity of targeted interventions to preserve not only the linguistic structures but also the intricate cultural ecosystems they support.

Factors Contributing to Language Endangerment

3.1. Sociopolitical Marginalization

Many indigenous communities have been historically marginalized, leading to a decline in linguistic and cultural vitality (Singh, 2012). The marginalization stems from policies that prioritize dominant languages like Assamese or Hindi for administrative and educational purposes. Over time, this has created a perception that indigenous languages are less valuable for socioeconomic mobility.

3.2. Urbanization and Economic Pressures

Migration to urban centres for education and employment often necessitates the adoption of dominant languages like Hindi and English (Bhattacharya, 2016). Urbanization introduces children to environments where their mother tongue holds little functional utility, accelerating language shift. This trend is particularly evident in cities like Guwahati, Shillong, and Imphal, where indigenous languages are rarely used in public domains.

3.3. Educational Policies

The lack of mother-tongue education in schools undermines linguistic transmission. Dominant languages are often prioritized in the curriculum (Agnihotri, 2007). The National Education Policy (2020) advocates for multilingual education, but its implementation remains uneven across North-East India. Schools often lack resources—such as textbooks and trained teachers—to support indigenous languages.

3.4. Media and Technology

Television, social media, and entertainment content are overwhelmingly produced in Hindi or English, marginalizing minority languages. Efforts to create digital content in languages like Khasi or Mizo are nascent and lack institutional support. For instance, while Khasi has seen the development of YouTube channels dedicated to folklore and traditional songs, these initiatives are often led by individual enthusiasts rather than institutional bodies. Mizo, on the other hand, has benefited from community-driven projects to digitize folk tales and Bible translations, yet faces challenges due to limited funding and outreach. Successful attempts in other regions, such as the creation of online dictionaries and language-learning apps for endangered languages like Cherokee in the United States, highlight the potential for similar approaches to be adopted for North-East Indian languages. However, the absence of comprehensive support frameworks limits the scalability and sustainability of these digital initiatives.

3.5. Cultural Assimilation and Loss of Traditional Practices

Many indigenous communities in North-East India are experiencing cultural assimilation due to the influence of dominant regional and national cultures. As younger generations adopt mainstream lifestyles, traditional practices that rely on native languages—such as oral storytelling, folk songs, and indigenous ceremonies—are being abandoned. For example, the decline of rice cultivation among the Ao Naga has led to the loss of agricultural lexicons and rituals once conducted in their native tongue. Similarly, the shift from traditional bamboo crafts to mass-produced goods has erased specific terminologies in languages like Khasi and Mizo.

6. Lack of Institutional Support

While governmental and non-governmental organizations have initiated preservation programs, their reach and impact remain limited. Programs such as the Documentation of Endangered Languages (DEL) often lack the resources to comprehensively cover all vulnerable languages in the region. Furthermore, regional governments have struggled to provide adequate funding or policy frameworks to support linguistic preservation. For instance, language boards established in states like Assam and Nagaland often focus on larger linguistic groups, neglecting smaller, critically endangered communities.

State-Wise Overview of Endangered Languages in North-East India

4. Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh, with its staggering linguistic diversity, is home to numerous endangered languages. Among these are:

1. Miji (Dhammai): Spoken by a small community, Miji has unique tonal patterns. Current revitalization efforts include workshops to teach the language to younger generations.
2. Sherdukpen: Known for its oral epics, Sherdukpen has fewer than 3,000 speakers. Preservation initiatives involve creating bilingual storybooks.

3. Khamba: Predominantly found in the Tawang district, Khamba is closely tied to Buddhist rituals. Collaborative documentation projects aim to preserve its lexicon and oral traditions.
4. Adi: Despite being relatively stable, Adi faces dialectal fragmentation. Community-driven documentation projects aim to preserve its diverse oral traditions.
5. Nocte: With fewer than 20,000 speakers, Nocte's oral folklore and ritualistic chants are under threat. Preservation includes creating written versions of oral literature.

Assam

Assam, often considered the cultural gateway to North-East India, houses several endangered languages:

1. Dimasa: With approximately 110,000 speakers, Dimasa's survival is threatened by the dominance of Assamese and Hindi in its native region (Boro & Sharma, 2019). Documentation projects led by local scholars have made strides in preserving these oral histories.
2. Karbi: Spoken predominantly in the Karbi Anglong district, Karbi is losing speakers to Assamese. Initiatives include cultural festivals showcasing Karbi songs and dances.
3. Moran: A historically significant language, Moran is nearly extinct. Documentation efforts are underway to record its grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Manipur

1. Poumai: Predominantly spoken in hill districts, Poumai has a declining speaker base. Efforts include introducing it as a subject in local schools.
2. Tangkhul: With a rich oral literature tradition, Tangkhul is supported by church-led revival programs and cultural festivals.

Meghalaya

1. Pnar: A sub-language of Khasi, Pnar retains vibrant oral traditions but is under-researched. Efforts focus on standardizing its script.
2. Biate: Predominantly spoken in Jaintia Hills, Biate faces challenges due to limited institutional support. Preservation includes documenting folktales.

Mizoram

1. Ralte: This language has fewer than 10,000 speakers. Efforts focus on preserving its unique songs and oral narratives.
2. Tlanglau: A severely endangered language, Tlanglau is being documented through community-led storytelling sessions.

Tripura

1. Riang: Spoken by the Bru community, Riang is endangered due to displacement and migration. Revitalization includes teaching programs in refugee camps.
2. Uchai: With fewer than 1,000 speakers, Uchais' oral traditions are being preserved through audio recordings.

Sikkim

1. Sherpa: A minority language in Sikkim, Sherpa is primarily spoken by Buddhist communities. Preservation includes translating religious texts.
2. Tamang: Known for its ritualistic chants, Tamang faces attrition. Efforts focus on promoting it in cultural festivals.

Across Multiple States

1. Monpa: Predominantly spoken in Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, Monpa's tonal patterns and oral literature are being documented through academic collaborations.
2. Chakma: Spoken in Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, Chakma is supported by cultural organizations promoting its use in schools.
3. Hajong: Found in Assam and Meghalaya, Hajong is being revitalized through literary competitions and cultural events.
4. Rabha: Found in Assam and Meghalaya, Rabha integrates oral literature with cultural practices like farming songs. Preservation efforts include promoting its use in community gatherings.
5. Mishing: A language of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Mishing faces challenges from Assamese dominance. Revitalization efforts include teaching materials and cultural events.

This state-wise structure provides a comprehensive overview of the region's endangered languages, their cultural and ecological significance, and the multifaceted approaches to preserving them. It underscores the urgent need for community involvement, governmental policy support, and innovative methods like digital tools to sustain these languages.

4.1. Preservation Efforts: Strategies and Case Studies

4.1.1. Grassroots Movements for Language Preservation

Community-driven initiatives have emerged as a vital force in preserving endangered languages. For instance, the Zeliangrong Youth Front in Manipur conducts workshops on Rongmei and Liangmai languages, teaching traditional songs, folktales, and basic conversational skills to younger generations. In Arunachal Pradesh, the Nyishi Language Development Board (2021) organizes cultural camps where elders mentor children in Nyishi oral traditions, including folk medicine and ecological knowledge. These grassroots movements emphasize community ownership, ensuring that preservation efforts align with local needs and aspirations.

4.2. Government Policies and Institutional Frameworks

The Indian government has launched initiatives like the "Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages" (SPPEL) to document and archive endangered languages. However, the success of these programs varies by state. In Meghalaya, the Khasi Authors' Society (2018) has collaborated with SPPEL to create dictionaries and digital archives. Conversely, in Mizoram, similar programs face logistical challenges, including a lack of trained linguists and digital infrastructure.

Digital Tools and Innovations

Advancements in technology have opened new avenues for linguistic preservation. Mobile applications and online platforms, such as the "North-East India Language App," allow users to learn basic phrases and grammar in languages like Ao, Chakma, and Mishing. Collaborative projects, such as Wikipedia entries in minority languages and YouTube channels dedicated to indigenous folklore, have also contributed to increasing visibility and accessibility. For example, the Karbi Youth Collective (2022) has developed an e-learning module for the Karbi language, incorporating multimedia resources like videos and songs.

4.3. Integration into Education

Multilingual education policies, particularly those advocating the inclusion of mother tongues in primary education, have shown promise. In Assam, schools under the Axom Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission (2021) have introduced textbooks in languages like Bodo and Mishing. Similarly, Nagaland has piloted programs where Chakhesang and Sumi are taught as elective subjects in secondary schools. These efforts not only preserve linguistic knowledge but also foster a sense of pride and identity among younger generations.

4.4. Revitalizing Cultural Practices

The revival of traditional festivals and practices has played a crucial role in preserving endangered languages. For example, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland celebrates Naga languages through cultural performances, craft exhibitions, and interactive sessions with elders. Similarly, the Wangala Festival in Meghalaya serves as a platform for promoting Garo language and folklore. These events encourage intergenerational dialogue and create opportunities for younger participants to engage with their linguistic heritage.

4.5. Implications of Language Loss

The extinction of a language signifies the loss of unique worldviews, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge (Maffi, 2005). For instance, the extinction of the Tai languages in Assam has disrupted traditional medicinal practices that were orally transmitted, leaving communities reliant on less sustainable methods. Similarly, the near loss of the Pnar language in Meghalaya has diminished its unique oral narratives, which were central to the community's cultural identity and understanding of their environment. These examples underscore how language extinction erodes the intangible heritage of communities, often leading to the fragmentation of their social and ecological wisdom. In North-East India, where many languages encode indigenous knowledge about biodiversity and sustainable practices, linguistic erosion undermines both cultural and environmental sustainability. The loss of oral traditions, such as agricultural songs or medicinal folklore, has tangible implications for the survival of traditional practices. For instance, agricultural rituals among the Mishing tribe in Assam, often embedded in their folk songs, are at risk of fading as younger generations adopt dominant languages. Similarly, the Riang community in Tripura has experienced a decline in the transmission of herbal medicinal knowledge, historically tied to their language and oral history.

The broader impact of language loss extends to identity and community cohesion. As linguistic ties weaken, so does the sense of belonging and cultural pride among younger members, leading to a dilution of cultural distinctiveness. Moreover, the historical and spiritual narratives embedded in these languages often remain untranslated, effectively removing them from the collective memory of humanity. This loss is not merely regional but a global concern, as each language represents a unique perspective on human experience and the natural world.

Conclusion

The endangered languages of North-East India are more than just means of communication; they are repositories of collective memory, cultural identity, and ecological wisdom. As these languages fade, communities risk losing not only their unique voices but also their connection to ancestral knowledge systems. The factors contributing to this decline—ranging from sociopolitical marginalization to the pressures of globalization—highlight the complexity of linguistic endangerment in the region. However, the resilience of these communities, coupled with innovative preservation strategies, offers hope.

Concrete examples of successful initiatives, such as the Zeliangrong Youth Front's efforts and the use of digital tools, demonstrate that linguistic revitalization is achievable. By strengthening educational policies, increasing institutional support, and fostering community participation, North-East India can preserve its linguistic and cultural heritage for future generations.

The task ahead requires a multi-faceted approach that balances the urgency of documentation with the long-term goal of revitalization. Language is not merely a relic of the past; it is a living, evolving entity that can adapt to modern contexts. With sustained efforts, the whispers of these endangered languages can once again resonate across the vibrant landscapes of North-East India, ensuring that their legacy endures for generations to come.

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