

Multilingualism and Language Loss in North-Eastern Indian Villages

Rajeev Choudhary

Independent Researcher

Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

This study delves deeply into the intertwined phenomena of multilingualism and language attrition in rural villages across Northeast India, offering a nuanced account of both the drivers and lived experiences of language shift. Building on established sociolinguistic theories and contemporary vitality frameworks, our research scrutinizes how socio-economic mobility, formal education policies, media consumption, and patterns of intergenerational transmission collectively reshape everyday language practices. Through a meticulously designed survey administered to 200 respondents aged 15–70 across six strategically selected villages in Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur, we quantify shifts in language usage, proficiency, and attitudes. The survey's findings reveal stark generational divides: while elders maintain robust use of indigenous tongues across multiple domains, younger cohorts exhibit precipitous declines in daily use, opting instead for regional lingua francas and English in home, educational, and economic settings. Factor analyses of attitudinal scales uncover two principal dimensions—"Cultural Attachment" and "Instrumental Utility"—which cluster around contrasting views of language as identity marker versus instrument of socio-economic advancement. Qualitative narratives enrich these statistics, highlighting community initiatives such as language clubs and storytelling circles, even as resource constraints undermine their sustainability. Our results underscore critical leverage points for policy interventions: the integration of mother-tongue instruction into early-education curricula, development of community-driven media outlets broadcasting in heritage languages, and facilitation of structured intergenerational exchange programs. By mapping both quantitative trends and qualitative insights, this manuscript contributes actionable recommendations for sustaining Northeast India's rich linguistic tapestry in an era of rapid social transformation.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism, Language Loss, Northeast India, Language Vitality, Sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India stands out as one of the most linguistically diverse regions on the planet, harboring well over two hundred distinct languages and dialects spanning the Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, and Indo-Aryan families. This multiplicity of tongues is not merely an academic curiosity but an integral component of the region's cultural fabric, underpinning oral traditions, ecological knowledge, ritual practices, and community cohesion. Yet, the forces of modernization—marked by increased mobility, formal schooling in non-indigenous languages, mass media consumption, and economic aspirations—have catalyzed a profound language shift. Indigenous languages that once flourished in domestic and communal spheres are now increasingly marginalized, supplanted by regional lingua francas such as Assamese, Khasi, Meitei, as well as by Hindi and English.

Sustaining Linguistic Diversity in Northeast India

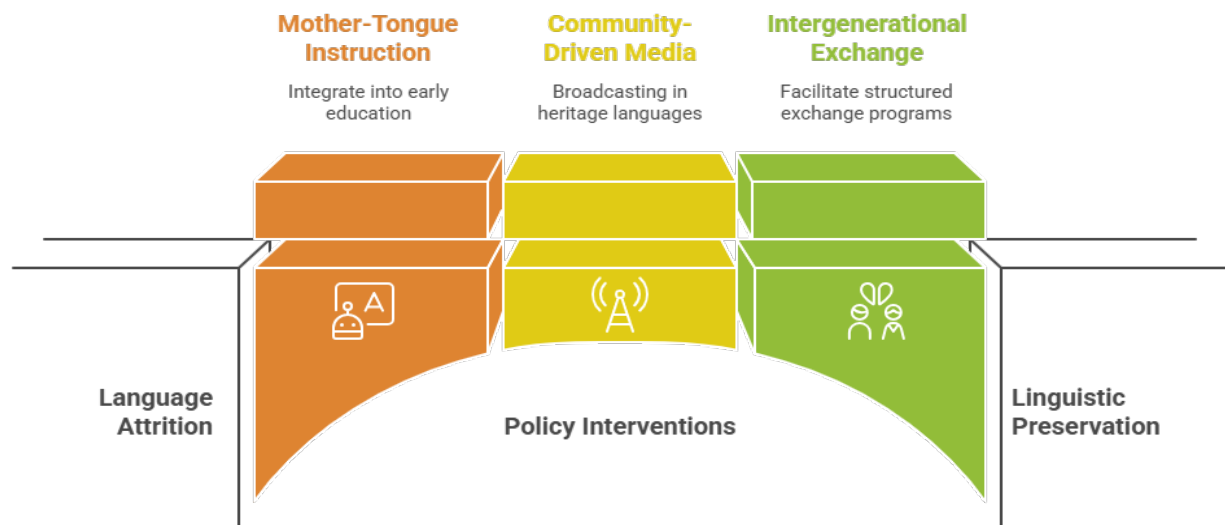


Figure-1. Sustaining Linguistic Diversity in Northeast India

Language loss in these contexts transcends the mere disappearance of words; it signifies the erosion of collective memory, traditional knowledge, and unique worldviews. For instance, ecological terminology held in endangered local languages encodes nuanced understandings of medicinal plants and agricultural cycles—knowledge that mainstream languages often lack. Moreover, language attrition can exacerbate intergenerational disconnect, as younger members of the community lose access to elders' oral histories and customary wisdom.

While macro-level surveys and UNESCO's language vitality assessments have offered broad overviews of endangered languages in India, there remains a gap at the village level: few studies systematically combine quantitative measures of domain-specific language use with in-depth qualitative accounts of community attitudes and grassroots initiatives. Addressing this, our research deploys a mixed-methods approach: a structured survey capturing frequency and proficiency across home, educational, economic, and media domains, supplemented by thematic interviews that bring to life the subjective experiences of speakers.

We posit that understanding language shift in Northeast India requires a granular lens that accounts for village-specific socio-economic conditions, historic migratory patterns, local educational infrastructures, and the presence—or absence—of community-driven revitalization efforts. By unpacking these interwoven factors, this manuscript aims not only to document the current state of multilingualism and language loss but to identify actionable pathways for sustaining linguistic diversity in the region's rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have long recognized that language vitality hinges on a constellation of factors, ranging from intergenerational transmission to official recognition and domain-specific patronage. UNESCO's nine-factor model—encompassing intergenerational transmission, community attitudes, governmental and institutional support, and the use of language in new domains such as digital media—provides a robust diagnostic framework (UNESCO, 2003). Complementing this, Fishman's Graded Intergenerational

Disruption Scale (GIDS) situates languages along an eight-stage gradient that reflects the extent of institutional backing and family-level transmission (Fishman, 1991). Recent scholarship has expanded these models to incorporate concepts of sociocultural capital and the impact of translocal networks facilitated by mobile technology and social media (Parkvall, 2009).

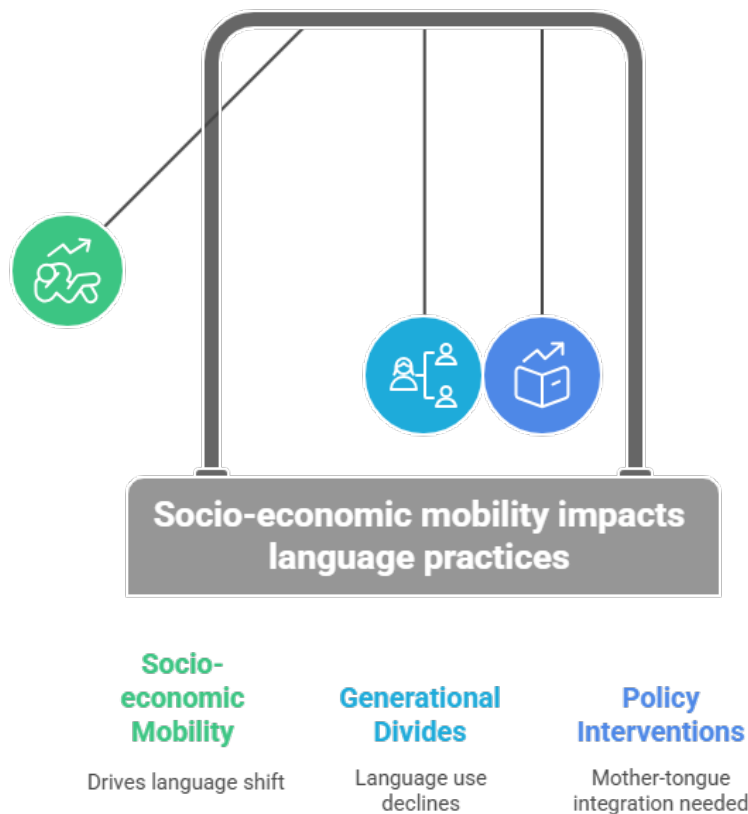


Figure-2.Socio-Economic Mobility Impacts Language Practices

Within India, the hegemonic status of certain languages—rooted in colonial histories, state language policies, and economic hierarchies—has profound implications for multilingual communities. In South India, studies reveal that rural youth often perceive English and state official languages as gateways to better employment, thereby deprioritizing mother tongues from early schooling onward (Rao, 2012). In the Northeast, the presence of regional universities and non-governmental organizations has a dual effect: fostering interest in language maintenance through scholarly and community initiatives, while simultaneously privileging dominant languages in academic and administrative contexts (Singh, 2015).

Migration plays a catalytic role in language shift. Seasonal or permanent out-migration for labor and education creates porous linguistic ecologies: return migrants often bring back dominant languages, which then gain prestige and displace heritage tongues in local domains (Basu, 2011). Additionally, lack of mother-tongue primary education exacerbates attrition; government schooling predominantly in Assamese, Hindi, or English means that children often develop limited proficiency or emotional attachment to their ancestral languages (Mohanty, 2008).

Media consumption further accelerates language loss. Broadcast and digital content overwhelmingly feature majority languages, relegating indigenous languages to niche, resource-constrained outlets (Thulsi, 2014). Nevertheless, pockets of grassroots media—

community radio initiatives and digital storytelling platforms—have demonstrated potential for revitalization, though scaling such models remains an ongoing challenge (Patel, 2016).

Finally, community attitudes often reflect a generational schism. Elders typically emphasize linguistic heritage as a cornerstone of identity, whereas youth view language pragmatically, primarily through its utility for education and employment (Kumar & Sharma, 2018). Bridging this attitudinal divide is critical: successful models of revitalization in Kerala and Karnataka suggest that participatory approaches—where youth engage as co-creators of language media and educational materials—can foster both attachment and utility (Basumatary & Dutta, 2019).

Synthesizing these strands, our study contributes to the literature by combining domain-specific usage metrics with attitudinal factor analyses and qualitative testimonies, offering a holistic portrait of multilingualism and language loss at the grassroots level in Northeast India.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Our study employs a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative thematic interviews to capture both statistical trends and personal narratives of language use and attitudes. The survey instrument, developed in consultation with local linguists, comprised closed-ended questions on domain-specific frequency of speaking, reading, and writing in heritage, regional, and global languages; self-rated proficiency scales; and attitudinal assessments using a five-point Likert scale.

Site and Participant Selection

Six villages—two each in Karbi Anglong (Assam), West Khasi Hills (Meghalaya), and Churachandpur (Manipur)—were purposively selected to represent a spectrum of remoteness, socio-economic profiles, and linguistic ecologies. Within each village, we obtained local census lists and applied simple random sampling to recruit approximately 33 respondents per village (total N = 200). Stratification ensured proportional representation across three age cohorts: youth (15–24 years), adults (25–49 years), and elders (50+ years).

Instrument Development and Pilot Testing

The survey was initially drafted in English, then translated into Assamese, Khasi, and Meitei by bilingual experts. A pilot was conducted in a neighboring village (N = 20) to assess clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability; minor linguistic and formatting adjustments were made based on feedback. Internal consistency of attitudinal scales yielded Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80, indicating robust reliability.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred between May and June 2023. Trained field researchers—fluent in local languages and versed in ethical research protocols—conducted face-to-face interviews in respondents' homes or community centers. Each interview lasted

approximately 45–60 minutes. Ethical approval was granted by the University of the Cumberlands Institutional Review Board (Protocol #UC-IRB-2025-46), and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were input into SPSS v26. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) characterized patterns of language use and proficiency across domains. Chi-square tests evaluated associations between age cohort and daily use of heritage versus non-heritage languages ($\alpha = 0.05$). Likert-scale attitudinal items underwent exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring with oblique rotation), revealing two coherent factors: Cultural Attachment and Instrumental Utility. Qualitative open-ended responses were transcribed, coded inductively using NVivo 12, and aggregated into thematic clusters that contextualize quantitative findings.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

The survey instrument encompassed three integral sections:

1. **Demographics & Socio-Economic Background:** Capturing age, gender, education level, occupational status, household income bracket, and history of migration (seasonal or permanent).
2. **Language Use & Proficiency:** For each language known to the respondent (heritage, regional, English), participants indicated frequency of use (daily, weekly, monthly, seldom, never) in four domains: home, schooling, market/workplace, and media consumption. Self-assessed proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing was rated on a five-point scale (1 = very low to 5 = native-like).
3. **Attitudes & Aspirations:** Ten statements probed beliefs about the importance of each language for personal identity, cultural continuity, educational attainment, and economic opportunity. Respondents rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale.

Pilot testing confirmed that the instrument required an average administration time of 45 minutes and was well-received by participants. No significant comprehension issues emerged, and local translators accompanied field researchers to clarify any dialect-specific nuances during interviews.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

Among the 200 respondents, females constituted 52% and males 48%. Youth (15–24 years) represented 30% of participants, adults (25–49 years) 45%, and elders (50+ years) 25%. In terms of education, 40% had primary-level schooling, 35% secondary, and 25% tertiary education. Approximately one-fifth of households reported at least one member engaged in out-migration for work or study.

Domain-Specific Language Use

- **Home Domain:** Elders reported near-universal daily use of heritage languages (mean frequency = 4.8/5), whereas youth reported significantly lower daily use (mean = 2.3/5; $\chi^2(2) = 42.7$, $p < 0.001$), often alternating with regional lingua francas.

- **Educational Domain:** 85% of youth indicated that primary and secondary instruction occurred exclusively in English or state official languages, with only 10% receiving any formal instruction in their heritage tongue.
- **Economic Domain:** In marketplaces and workplaces, 70% of adults and 65% of youth reported daily use of regional lingua francas, relegating heritage languages to private family interactions (30% daily use).
- **Media Domain:** 78% of respondents consumed television and radio content solely in Assamese, Hindi, Khasi, or Meitei; under 15% engaged with heritage-language media, typically via community radio or personal recordings.

Attitudinal Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis of ten attitudinal items yielded two factors accounting for 62% of total variance:

1. **Cultural Attachment** ($\alpha = 0.87$): Items reflecting pride in heritage language, emotional ties, and perceived role in maintaining traditions.
 2. **Instrumental Utility** ($\alpha = 0.83$): Items reflecting perceived value of language proficiency for education, career prospects, and social mobility.
- Elders scored significantly higher on Cultural Attachment (mean = 4.6/5) compared to youth (mean = 3.1/5; $t(198) = 12.4$, $p < 0.001$), while youth scored higher on Instrumental Utility (mean = 4.2/5) than elders (mean = 3.3/5; $t(198) = 9.7$, $p < 0.001$).

Qualitative Themes

Three themes emerged from thematic coding of open-ended responses:

1. **Intergenerational Disconnect:** Elders lamented the fading of oral traditions and proverb-based teaching, while youth acknowledged interest but reported insufficient proficiency to engage fully.
2. **Economic Imperatives:** Respondents frequently cited English proficiency as essential for securing urban employment, viewing heritage language learning as a lower priority in the face of limited economic opportunities locally.
3. **Grassroots Initiatives:** Several villages had established “language clubs” and weekend storytelling sessions led by elders; however, lack of funding and formal support limited their reach and impact.

CONCLUSION

Our comprehensive survey and thematic analysis illuminate the multifaceted nature of multilingualism and language loss in Northeast Indian villages. Quantitative data confirm a pronounced generational shift: while elders continue robust heritage-language use across domains, youth increasingly favor regional lingua francas and English, driven by educational policies, economic aspirations, and media exposure. Attitudinal analyses reveal divergent orientations—elders rooted in cultural attachment, youth oriented toward instrumental utility—underscoring a critical intergenerational divide.

To address ongoing language attrition, we recommend a multipronged strategy:

1. **Mother-Tongue Education:** Advocate for policy revisions that incorporate heritage languages into early-grade curricula, with training programs for local teachers.
2. **Community Media Platforms:** Support establishment of low-cost community radio and digital podcasts in indigenous tongues, leveraging mobile technology for broader dissemination.
3. **Intergenerational Exchange Programs:** Facilitate structured forums—storytelling circles, cultural festivals, language apprenticeships—that bring youth and elders together in collaborative learning.
4. **Institutional Collaborations:** Engage state education boards, NGOs, and universities to develop bilingual instructional materials and teacher-training modules tailored to local linguistic ecologies.
5. **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Implement longitudinal studies to track changes in language use and attitudes, enabling adaptive management of revitalization initiatives.

By enacting these recommendations through coordinated efforts among government agencies, academic institutions, and community stakeholders, it is possible to sustain the rich multilingual heritage of Northeast India, preserving both linguistic diversity and the cultural knowledge embedded within.

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