Linguistic Diversity, Dominance, and Marginality: A Case Study of North-East India

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Abstract

North East India is the easternmost region of India both from a geographic and administrative perspective. Famous for the Seven Sister States, in other words, the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Sikkim is also now included in the North Eastern Region of India as the eighth state. According to the 1971 Census, people of North East India speak around 220 languages which belong to multiple language families namely – Indo-European, Sino–Tetian, Kra–Dai, and Austroasiatic languages. Out of these, 12 languages from North East India are listed under endangered languages. Ideally, linguistic diversity should be a source of strength; unfortunately, it mostly ends up being a source of dominance by the bigger group and marginalization of the numerically smaller group. In India, English along with the national/official/regional languages constitute the dominating languages that become oppressive for the common people using the local dialects. These marginalized groups include poor people and mostly the tribal communities. This very factor in turn forces many of the local dialects into a state of endangerment and degradation. Therefore, this paper tries to highlight the interplay of the existing linguistic diversity, dominance by the numerically preponderant linguistic group, and ultimately marginalization of the local languages and the people speaking them in the context of North-East India.

Key Words: Language Policy, NEP, Dialects, Ethnic diversity, Endangerment.

1. Introduction

Linguistic diversity refers to the variety and multiplicity of languages spoken and used by different individuals, communities, or regions within a particular geographical area or across the world (Arcodia and Mauri, 2017). It encompasses the range of languages, dialects, and linguistic variations that exist among human populations. Linguistic diversity highlights the fact that languages differ in terms of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and cultural nuances. It recognizes that languages are not only means of communication but also repositories of knowledge, identity, and cultural heritage for the communities that speak them.

However, linguistic diversity faces numerous challenges, including language endangerment, language shift, and language loss due to factors such as globalization, urbanization, migration, and the dominance of major languages. Linguistic diversity and the marginalization of languages are interconnected phenomena. Marginalization refers to the social, economic, and political exclusion or devaluation of certain languages and their speakers within a broader linguistic landscape. This marginalization can occur at both individual and community levels.

Therefore, the present paper tries to highlight the dynamic of linguistic dominance and marginalization amidst the hub of linguistic diversity in North-East India.

2. North-East India

North-East India, also known as North-eastern India or simply the North-East, is a region in the easternmost part of India. It comprises eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Geographically, the region is located in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent, bordered by Bhutan to the north, Myanmar (Burma) to the east, and Bangladesh to the south and southwest. North-East India is known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, with numerous indigenous communities residing in the region. Each state has its own distinct identity, language, and cultural practices.

3. Map of North-East India

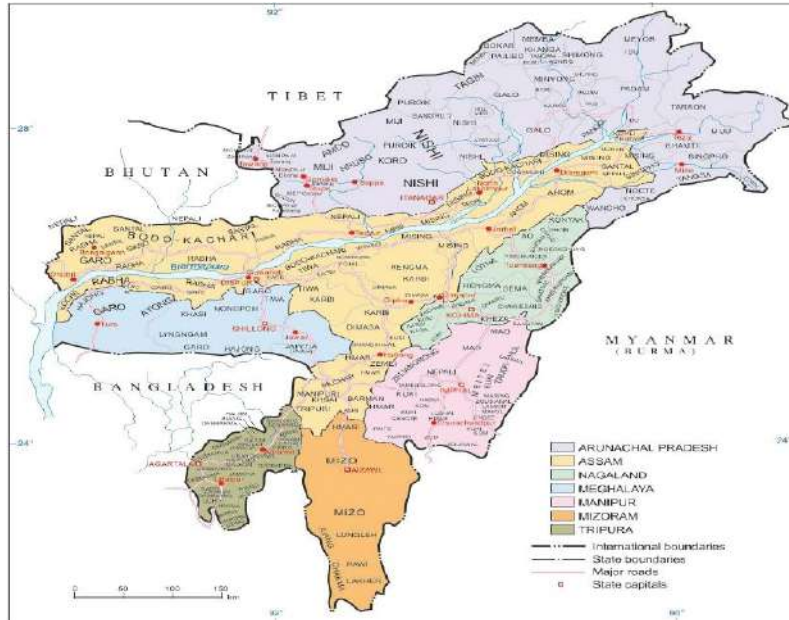**(Source: Published by Bishop's House Guwahati)**

4. Linguistic Characteristics of North-East India

North-East India is known for its remarkable linguistic diversity, with a multitude of languages spoken across the region. According to 1971 Census, people of North-East India speak around 220 languages. These languages belong to various language families, including Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Kadai, and Dravidian, among others. Some of the well-known languages in the region include Assamese, Manipuri (Meitei), Bodo, Khasi, Mizo (Lushai), Naga languages (such as Ao, Angami, Lotha, Tangkhul, Rongmei, and Zeme), and Tripuri (Kokborok).

In addition to these major languages, there are numerous smaller languages and dialects spoken by various ethnic communities in the region. The linguistic landscape of North-East India is characterized by rich diversity and cultural heritage, with many languages being endangered or facing the risk of language shift due to various socio-cultural and political factors. At present, 12 languages from North-East India are listed under endangered languages. The linguistic diversity of North-East India is characterized by the presence of a large number of languages belonging to different language families. The region is home to several major language families such as Tibeto-Burman,

Austroasiatic, Indo-Aryan, and Tai-Kadai, among others. This linguistic diversity, while rich and culturally significant, has also led to language dominance and marginalization within the region.

5. Linguistic Distribution in North-East India

(Source: Published by Bishop's House Guwahati)

6. Communities Inhabiting the Different States of North-East India

(According to the 2001 Census)

Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura
26 Major Tribes and 100 Sub-tribes	45 Communities altogether (14 plain tribes, 15 Hill tribes and 16 Scheduled tribes)	35 Communities altogether (33 different sub-tribes under the umbrella tribes of Nagas and Kukis and Meiteis and Meitei Pangals)	3 Major Communities	5 Major tribes and 11 minor tribes	16 Major tribes	3 Major Communities	19 Major communities

7. Languages Spoken in Different States of North-East India

7.1 Manipur:

Manipuri (Meiteilon) is the official language of Manipur and is spoken by a majority of the population. Other languages/dialects spoken include Naga, Anal, Moyan, Monsang, Maring, Lamkang, Tarao, Tangkhul, Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Zou, Kom, Aimol, etc., which are primarily spoken by various tribal communities.

7.2 Nagaland:

Nagamese, a Creole language, is widely spoken as a lingua franca among different Naga tribes. Each Naga tribe has its own distinct language, such as Angami, Ao, Sema, Lotha, etc.

7.3 Arunachal Pradesh:

Arunachal Pradesh is known for its linguistic diversity, with a large number of languages spoken by different indigenous communities. Major language families in the state include Tibeto-Burman languages such as Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Galo, Monpa, etc., as well as languages from other families like Assamese, Hindi, etc.

7.4 Tripura:

Bengali is the most widely spoken language in Tripura and serves as the official language of the state. Kokborok, an indigenous language spoken by the Tripuri community, is also prevalent.

7.5 Meghalaya:

Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia are the major indigenous languages spoken by different tribal communities in Meghalaya. English is also widely spoken and serves as an important language for communication and administration.

7.6 Mizoram:

Mizo is the official language of Mizoram and is spoken by the majority of the population. Other languages/dialects spoken include Lushai, Hmar, Mara, etc.

7.8 Sikkim:

Nepali is the most widely spoken language in Sikkim, with a significant majority of the population conversing in Nepali. It is also the official language of the state. Other Language or dialect includes Bhutia, Lepcha, Tamang, and Limbu.

8. Difference between "Language" and "Dialect"

8.1 Language: A language is a complex system of communication that is used by a particular community or group of people. It encompasses a set of sounds, words, grammar, and rules that enable individuals to express and convey meaning. A language is typically associated with a specific cultural, geographical, or ethnic community. It is characterized by mutual intelligibility, meaning that speakers of the same language can understand each other.

8.2 Dialect: A dialect is a variant form of a language that is spoken in a particular region or by a specific group within a larger language community. Dialects are characterized by variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. These variations may be influenced by factors such as geographical location, historical development, social factors, and cultural

influences. Dialects often coexist within a broader language, and they may differ from one another to varying degrees. While speakers of different dialects within the same language can generally understand each other, there may be some differences that require adjustment or clarification.

9. Linguistic Diversity, Dominance, and Language Marginalization Through the Anthropological Lens

Linguistic Relativity which is also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, this theory suggests that the structure and content of language influence the way people perceive and think about the world. It implies that different languages encode and prioritize different aspects of reality, leading to diverse cultural perspectives and worldviews. From this perspective, linguistic diversity is seen as essential for maintaining a diverse range of cognitive and cultural perspectives (Hoijer, 1954).

According to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), language is learned and acquired within social and cultural contexts. This theory which is also called Socialization theory, highlights the role of social interactions and cultural norms in shaping language use and transmission. Language socialization theory emphasizes that language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for cultural reproduction and social identity formation. It recognizes the significance of linguistic diversity in maintaining cultural traditions and social cohesion (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Garret and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002).

Drawing from sociopolitical theories, anthropologists examine how dominant languages and cultures exert power and influence over marginalized or minority languages. Language dominance is often associated with unequal power relations and can result in the marginalization or suppression of minority languages (Mustapha, 2014). Hegemonic forces such as colonialism, globalization, and nation-building processes contribute to language dominance by favoring the use of dominant languages in institutions, media, and other domains, while marginalizing or stigmatizing minority languages (Domjancic, 2015).

The theory of Language Endangerment and Vitality focuses on the factors that contribute to language endangerment, decline, and potential extinction. Anthropologists examine linguistic, social, economic, and political factors that affect the vitality of languages. According to UNESCO (2003), language endangerment is often linked to sociocultural changes, urbanization, migration, globalization, and language shift towards dominant languages. Anthropologists emphasize the importance of language revitalization efforts, community empowerment, and the recognition of linguistic rights to counter language endangerment.

Besides, there is the concept of Linguistic vitality which focuses on the factors that contribute to the maintenance and vitality of languages within a community. It highlights variables such as demographic factors, intergenerational transmission, institutional support, and community attitudes toward the language. Giles et al., (1977) in their book "*Towards a Theory of Language in ethnic group relations*" talk about the theoretical framework of ethnolinguistic vitality and its relationship with intergroup relations. Ethnolinguistic vitality theory provides a framework for understanding the conditions under which languages thrive or decline and guides efforts to support language revitalization and preservation (Giles and Johnson, 1987). Fishman (1991) discusses language shift and language revitalization efforts, providing valuable insights into the preservation of ethnolinguistic vitality in his book "Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages". Subsequently, Grenoble et al. (2006) discuss various strategies related to language revitalization, offering practical insights into maintaining ethnolinguistic vitality.

10. How linguistic diversity of North-East India leads to language dominancy and marginalization

The dominance of major languages in North-East India could be observed in many states. Certain languages have acquired dominant status due to historical, social, or political factors (Devi, 2006). For example, languages like Assamese, Manipuri, and Bengali have emerged as major regional languages with wide usage and official recognition (Devi, 2006; Sarma, 2014). The dominance of these languages marginalizes other languages within the region, as they are given preferential treatment in education, administration, media, and other domains (Fishman, 1991; May, 2001).

Language policies pursued by governments can contribute to language dominance and marginalization. For instance, the adoption of a particular language as the official language or the medium of instruction in schools favors speakers of that language while marginalizing speakers of other languages (Grin et al., 2015). Language policies that do not recognize or support the linguistic diversity of the region can perpetuate language dominance and marginalization (McCarty, 2011). For example, when a dominant language is chosen as the sole official language or the medium of instruction in education, it marginalizes minority languages and restricts access to education, employment, and other opportunities for speakers of those languages (Kaplan et al., 1997).

Besides, economic and social factors can also influence language dominance and marginalization (Milroy and Gordon, 2003). In North-East India, there is often a correlation between language dominance and economic opportunities. Speakers of dominant languages have better access to employment, education, and social mobility, while speakers of marginalized languages may face barriers and discrimination (Milroy and Gordon, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991, Blommaert, 2001; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This can create an imbalance of power and resources, reinforcing the marginalization of certain languages and their speakers.

Again, language shift occurs when speakers of one language gradually adopt another language, often due to social, economic, or political pressures (Fishman, 1991; Woodlard, 1985). In North-East India, there are instances of language shift where speakers of minority languages are increasingly using dominant languages in their daily lives, leading to the marginalization and decline of their native languages. This assimilation process can further reinforce language dominance and marginalization (Gal, 1979; Wardhaugh, 1987).

In addition to the above impacts, linguistic diversity can also give rise to language hierarchies, where certain languages are considered prestigious, dominant, or "major" languages, while others are marginalized or deemed inferior (Bourdieu, 1991; Fishman, 1991, Gal, 1979; Woodlard, 1985). This can lead to the marginalization of languages that are less widely spoken or have lower social status, limiting their use in formal domains, education, media, and public life.

Ultimately, linguistic diversity is threatened by language loss and endangerment, which occur when languages cease to be spoken or when their use declines significantly (Crystal, 2000; Harrison, 2007). Factors such as globalization, urbanization, and migration can contribute to the marginalization and erosion of minority languages, as speakers shift to more dominant languages for economic or social reasons (Grenoble et al., 2006).

11. The three language Policy of NEP 2020 and North-East India

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposed a three-language policy for schools across India, including the North-East region. While the policy aims to promote multilingualism and enhance

language skills, there are certain challenges and concerns specific to the implementation of the policy in the North-East.

Here are some of the problems associated with the implementation of the three-language policy in North-East India. Firstly, the North-East region is known for its linguistic diversity, with each state having its own indigenous languages and dialects. Implementing a uniform three-language policy may neglect the importance of preserving and promoting local languages. Many communities in the region have expressed concerns about the potential marginalization of their native languages under this policy.

Secondly, the region faces infrastructural and resource challenges, including a shortage of qualified teachers, textbooks, and teaching materials. Implementing a three-language policy requires additional resources and training for teachers to effectively teach multiple languages. Without sufficient resources, it becomes challenging to ensure quality language education across different languages. Thirdly, limited proficiency in Hindi poses a great linguistic imposition to the people living here. Hindi is one of the three languages proposed in the policy, alongside the mother tongue and English. However, Hindi is not widely spoken or understood in many parts of the North-East. Students and teachers may face difficulties in acquiring the required proficiency in Hindi, making it challenging to implement the policy effectively. The Fourth problem that arises here is the North-East region has a unique socio-cultural identity and history. The imposition of a three-language policy that does not adequately reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the region may lead to feelings of alienation and a sense of cultural imposition. It is crucial to consider the cultural sensitivities and aspirations of the local communities while implementing any language policy. Finally, the North-East region is home to numerous indigenous languages that are at risk of extinction. The three-language policy should prioritize the preservation and promotion of these indigenous languages rather than relegating them to a secondary status. Efforts should be made to integrate indigenous languages into the curriculum and provide resources for their preservation and development.

12. Conclusion

Linguistic diversity, dominance, and marginality in North-East India highlight the complex dynamics surrounding language use and preservation in the region. The Northeast is renowned for its remarkable linguistic diversity, with numerous languages and dialects spoken by various communities. This linguistic richness reflects the cultural heritage and identity of the region's diverse ethnic groups.

However, the dominance of certain languages, often associated with the majority or politically influential communities, can marginalize and endanger indigenous languages and dialects. The process of language dominance can result from historical, social, economic, and political factors that influence language use, education, media representation, and access to resources.

This linguistic marginalization poses challenges to the vitality and survival of endangered languages in the region. With their unique cultural knowledge and expressions, Indigenous languages are at risk of being lost, potentially leading to the erosion of cultural diversity and identity.

Efforts are being made to address these challenges and promote linguistic diversity and revitalization in Northeast India. Language preservation initiatives, community-based language programs, documentation projects, and advocacy for linguistic rights play crucial roles in raising awareness, promoting intergenerational language transmission, and empowering marginalized communities.

Safeguarding linguistic diversity in North-East India requires collaborative efforts from communities, scholars, policymakers, and society at large. By valuing and celebrating the richness of languages in the region, it is possible to foster an environment that respects linguistic rights, preserves cultural heritage, and strengthens the social fabric of North-East India.

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