

# The Status of Tribal Languages of Assam Based on Linguistic Context

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## Abstract

Assam is home to a diverse population of ethnic and linguistic groups. Assamese is one of these languages and is used in Assam as a state language and a means of communication. Furthermore, since Assamese is the primary language of instruction in government institutions, all students, regardless of their multilingualism, receive a formal education in Assamese. In Assam, only members of that particular tribe speak the tribal language. Due to the lack of a script, these languages are not historically significant. With the use of another language's script, certain languages are written. However, in terms of written literature, the languages could not be extravagant. In addition, there is a lot of adversity, which makes it difficult for languages to advance without facing these obstacles. This difficulty has become more important due to current, entirely unknown advancements in science and technology, the expansion of transportation and communication, as well as the advancement of education, etc. Additionally, the endangered languages are threatened due to their restricted use. In this instance, the study discusses the current state of these Assamese languages, the issues with tribal languages, the growth of the language, and the responsibilities associated with maintaining these languages. This essay also discusses the extent of Assamese tribal languages' endangerment and evaluates their viability in light of the criteria suggested by UNESCO. We may draw the conclusion from the study that adequate language planning and all essential action should be taken by the government and the integrated tribe in order to preserve these languages. The only acceptable and reliable language for the present and the future will inspire and draw the following generation to adopt the same.

**Keywords:** Tribal language, Challenges, Language issue, Language strategy, Linguistic context, and Language development.

## INTRODUCTION

The most remarkable linguistic demography of Assam is filled with speakers of many different languages. Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, and Austro-Asiatic are three of the primary linguistic families that coexist in the state. The Indo-European language, Assamese has been designated as the official language and lingua franca of this multilingual nation. Sino-Tibetan is the origin of the tribal languages of Assam. The Tibeto-Burman and Thai-Sin dialects are the classifications given to the Sino-Tibetan language by researchers. Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Deori, and other Tibeto-Burman languages as well as Khampti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, and Turung are some of the native tongues spoken in Assam. Certain characteristics of these languages are universal (Bhimkanta Boruah:2003).

Some of the characteristics are as follows:

- These languages have a small speaking population that is restricted to members of the respective tribes.
- These languages are cryptic to one another, and they typically prefer Assamese when communicating with the public.
- Most of these languages are primarily tonal. These languages have monosyllabic words that is they use one syllable per word which is difficult for a natural speaker of another language to understand.
- The appearance of the short and long term vowels differs when different languages are spoken. This means that multiple meanings can be conveyed by using long and short vowels. The Assamese language is devoid of this quality.

The undocumented nature of these languages (apart from those of the Thai-Sin branch) and the custom of not writing them had greatly diminished their status in the integrated society. Additionally, the absence of written literature, a lack of lexicon-grammar, the linguistic minority, receiving instruction in a second language as a medium of instruction, the lack of native language use among the younger generation, the urbanisation process, the mutual obscurity, the extreme impact of Assamese or another dominant language, etc. have all led these languages down a dangerous path. There is a good chance that the range of applications for these languages may narrow or that they may go extinct if we do not take the appropriate actions in the near future taking these issues into consideration. In this situation, a severe existential crisis has engulfed the indigenous people. By focusing on the concerns and the existing usage of these languages, an effort has been made in this study to raise awareness and alertness among the watchful.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

- To discuss the main issues and problems of the tribal languages of Assam
- To bring more attention to the tribal language's linguistic situation now as well as in the future.
- To talk about our responsibilities for resolving Assamese tribal languages' issues.

### **Limitations of the Research of Study**

Instead of specifically addressing the issues facing each Assamese tribal language, a general discussion of the issues facing all Assamese tribal languages has been conducted in this study.

### **Method of the Study**

The required data for this investigation was gathered using the observation approach. Additionally, pertinent information has been gathered from a variety of books, experimental archives, and the internet. Mostly descriptive and analytical methods are employed when discussing the subject.

## **DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

### **➤ The Major Issues With Tribal Languages of Assam**

The primary impediment to the growth and raising of indigenous languages is the issues they face. The following headings can be used to categorise and debate these issues:-

### 1) Unwritten Language

Script is the primary means of maintaining language and preserving its history. The scope of language is constrained by time and place. Script is absolutely necessary to free a language from this restriction. Only by using script can the language of the mind be preserved and given a literary form. A specific race's identity is conveyed in literature. In contrast to starting over with the aid of scripture, a language advances along the road of development with a distinct identity, and the language gets formed with the aid of the writing or intellectual practise.

However, neither of the languages—aside from Thai and Sin—have their own script. The Thai-Sin languages, however, do not have a long history of elaborate writing despite having a written alphabet. The Assamese tribal languages are plagued by this issue above any others. The language's pronunciation rules must be maintained while accepting a new script. Language study on a more specialised level is required in this situation. These languages were once attempted to be written using modified Roman script or Devanagari script. Well, it couldn't fit the expected reader society given the low number of literate people. As a result, the folks must have been let down by the reader's lack of appropriate response.

### 2) Lack of Written Literature

The bedrock of a race is literature. A society's literature expresses its mental, intellectual, social, cultural, and ethnic characteristics. In relation to this, no tribal language has a sophisticated and developed written language tradition. The evaluation of these languages' historical development to their current state has not been possible due to the dearth of recorded literature. Additionally, the growth and spread of the language are greatly influenced by written literature. The inferiority of these languages prevented many locations from adopting it as a medium of instruction for educational purposes.

### 3) Use of Second Languages in Education as a Medium of Instruction

Tribal languages' development and spread are still stagnant since they are not recognised as acceptable as a medium of instruction in schools.

Because expansion is the primary factor in a colloquial language's growth. Up to the post-graduate level, only the Bodo language of Assam has been approved as a medium of teaching. On the other hand, until the primary level, languages like Mising, Rabha, Dimasa, Deori, Khampti, Turung, Phake, etc. are restricted to a single subject. A language can be studied and researched in a variety of ways in that language if it is accepted as a medium of education. But as a result of not receiving acknowledgment, several questions remain regarding the study of Assamese tribal languages.

### 4) Linguistic Minority

Assam is a state that is a combination of Aryan and Non-Aryan. Before the advent the Christ various people of varied community like Australian, Negro and Mongoloid etc. came to Assam and inhabited with full unity. At the beginning, the people of Mongolian tribe didn't settle permanently. They kept on changing their habitation in search of livelihood. Consequently, for changing their habitat, the nexus of the earlier resident detached and they turned to be linguistic minority. At present the number of the native speaker of tribal language is also not satisfactory. Because a large number of speakers of a community can be protect and maintain their language by regular use in daily life. Assam is a state that combines Aryans and Non-Aryans.

Before the birth of Christ, Assam was settled by a variety of people from different communities, including Australians, African Americans, and Mongoloids, among others. The Mongolian tribe's inhabitants did not initially establish themselves permanently. In search of a living, they kept shifting their residence. The earlier residents' nexus broke off as a result of altering their habitat, and they became a linguistic minority. Native speakers of tribal languages are currently insufficient in number. Considering that widespread use of a language in daily life might help its speakers safeguard and maintain it. According to the tribal languages of Assam, it is not necessary for native speakers of other languages to study these languages or that they even feel the need to do so. Due to the influence of other languages, as well as their social and cultural effects, many languages must fight for their individuality.

5) Lack of Lexicon-Grammar

A language's comprehensive lexicon and grammar are notable. However, due to the trend of informal use, the research of Assamese tribal languages is not done sufficiently. The specialised study of a language helps to create a synergetic form and clarifies the dialects or forms of regional languages. Due to the lack of such research, users of regional languages are unwilling to acknowledge other regional languages. As a result, there are numerous obstacles to finishing the grammar or dictionary rules. The study of grammar and diction has not been expanded since Assamese tribal languages have not been studied. Additionally, despite the fact that these languages are acknowledged by the integrated tribes, these factors contribute to a lack of publications and magazines at the educational level.

6) Impact of Globalization and Urbanization

The tribal languages of Assam are in danger of extinction due to the current processes of globalisation and urbanisation. Most tribal people are currently moving away from pastoral areas and becoming more drawn to urban life. The oral language of these people has changed significantly as a result of urban life. The majority of young people in the new generation are even ignorant of their own language and culture, and some of them even have inferiority complexes. Additionally, there is a significant change in their language due to the combined impact of other languages as they choose a second language for higher education. On the other hand, some parents take pride in their children acquiring languages other than their mother tongue. Therefore, these kids are unable to contribute in any way to the preservation of these languages.

7) Language Used in Mutual Agreement

Mutual obscurity is a major barrier to the development of Assamese tribal languages. Due to improper instruction and the restriction of the language to a single tribe, it is highly obscure for those who belong to other tribes despite belonging to the same language family. As a result, native speakers of other languages never read literature in that language that is studied using someone else's script.

8) Inhabiting as in Island

When tribal people are seen in their homes, it is clear that the majority of them reside in the same tribe or clan. Even though the Assamese language encloses the population, Bodo-speaking individuals live primarily in lower Assam's Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Kamrup, Nalbari, etc. The Assamese language also encompasses the native speakers of Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Dimasa, etc. These folks safeguard interactions with native language speakers for the benefit of business, education, etc. By learning Assamese as the integrated language, these persons are obligated to be multilingual in this situation. Consequently, several

Assamese linguistic components have been included into their languages. The quality of these languages has been threatened by this. For instance, Assamese tribal languages were mostly tonal, but the tone of the Mising language has completely disappeared in the current toneless Assamese language.

➤ **The Assamese Tribal Languages: Their Current and Possible Future Situation**

Based on the three perspectives, the study discusses the state of tribal languages. These are:

- i. Language Problem
- ii. Language Use and Maintenance
- iii. Language Attitude

**Language Problem**

Similar to a race's or society's heartbeat, language is essential. The language contains implicit references to a nation's historical and identity construction process. But the general and quick advancement of human civilization, science, and technology has presented a difficult and significant threat to all the weak minority languages of the world, as well as the more significant tribal language of Assam. The foundation of today's civilisation is science and technology. Language and culture of a nation or race may eventually become extinct if they are unable to evolve and adapt to modern society. Languages that are incapable of being preserved in written form, as well as those that have less study and practise, increase the likelihood. Assamese tribal languages are currently considering this idea. Because a language depends on people using it. Even with the greatest care, a language won't last if it can't accommodate the usage requirements of a society or race in the present and the future. 2700 of these endangered languages are listed in the 2011 edition of the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger by UNESCO, the founding organisation of the UN. The UNESCO has categorised all of the languages in the globe according to the issues each language has encountered. The classifications are:

- Safe- The languages spoken by people of all ages, starting with little children.
- Vulnerable- The majority of kids speak their native tongue, but it could be restricted in some settings, such the household.
- Definitely endangered- Children may not be use their language in the home as 'mother tongue' in near future.
- Severely endangered- Older generations, such as grandparents, utilise language; however, the younger generations, such as mothers and fathers, may merely understand it and do not talk or use it with their offspring or among themselves.
- Critically endangered- Only the grandparents and older generation, who only infrequently or to a limited extent, speak the language.
- Extinct- No one is able to communicate in that language. That indicates that all speakers have passed away.

These include the tribal languages of Assam as well as the North-Eastern languages of India. The Tai-Phake and Tai-Aiton are the most critically endangered of these. The languages most in danger are those that are only comprehended by the second generation and only spoken by the grandparents, who have since stopped communicating with the third generation in the same language. There are currently only

2000 native speakers of Tai-Phake and Tai-Aiton. Deori, Mising, Tiwa, Kachari, and other endangered languages are beyond a doubt. Because the youngsters have stopped speaking these tribal languages as their mother tongues and the younger generations no longer use them for communication. The number of native speakers of Deori is 28,000, whereas the number of native speakers of Mising is 5.5 lakhs, according to data from the UNESCO database. For the Kachari and Tiwa, however, it is roughly 59000 and 28000, respectively.

Tribes who use languages that are vulnerable are those who use them in accordance with their environment and geographical location. The spreadsheet of vulnerable languages now includes Karbi, Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, etc. Around nine lakh individuals currently speak Bodo, according to the spreadsheet's data. There are about 4.2 lakh Karbi speakers. Dimasa and Rabha, on the other hand, each receive 1.12 lakhs and 1.5 lakhs. It is noteworthy that as a result of this circumstance, the Tai-Ahom language has become extinct. Therefore, if appropriate measures are not taken to preserve it, tribal languages may descend into extinction. Currently, a language can only survive on the basis of use in all aspects of peoples' everyday lives, and it must be passed down from generation to generation. In this situation, the community that speaks a language should be supportive of their mother tongue. A language's degree of endangerment can be defined on the basis of its vibrancy and activity or its impassiveness, and is determined by the UNESCO as ranging from safe to extinct. When it comes to the tribal languages of Assam, it can be noted that the knowledge, or the speaking and understanding. Languages are not adequately passed down from one generation to the next, particularly for those living in cities.

Therefore, it is extremely difficult to preserve and defend the languages for the foreseeable future. When everyone in the community interacted with one another using their own language, that was the past. But it has not seen today. A language reflects the knowledge that is accumulated over time and expresses the community's cultural legacy, social identity, and ethnicity. A community is distinguished from other communities by its specialisation. However, only a small percentage of Assamese language speakers from each linguistic community utilise their native tongue in regular conversation; some only use it for private and restricted contacts. On the other hand, urban residents who are members of a tribal group use and adopt a dominant language, such as Assamese, Hindi, or English, as well as adhere to that group's culture.

### **Language Use and Maintenance**

A language can endure with the right upkeep and usage. Every speaker in this situation ought to be fluent in every language competence. The productive skills that are evaluated include speaking and writing. The competence of the two linguistic abilities mentioned above determines language proficiency. A language is utilised in many different contexts, situations, and domains, all of which are crucial for any language. In addition to traditional domains like the home, workplace (court, office), education, business, and religion, there are currently a lot of new and developing ones. A language should be employed throughout the entire new domain, including literature, print media, electronic media (television, radio), the internet, and new media, etc., for better growth and preservation. UNESCO has divided language proficiency into six categories based on how flexible a language is used.

- The dynamic language is the first, and it is utilised in all the new domains.
- The second is the robust/active language, which is utilised in the majority of new domains.
- Thirdly, there is the receptive language, which is utilised in a variety of fresh fields.
- Fourth, copying language. This language is employed in a few fields.
- Fifth, the minimal language, which is restricted to a few of the new domains.

○ Finally, the dormant language, which is not employed in any of the new fields (UNESCO, 2003). The majority of Assamese speech groups, including the Bodo, Mising, Rabha, Deori, Singpho, and Karbi people, have made an effort to diversify their languages by using them as a medium of instruction in schools. Only Bodo language is recognised in this situation at the master's level in Gauhati and Bodoland University and is also capable of producing research papers or theses for Ph.D. or M.Phil. degree pursuit. In the Bodoland Autonomous Region, the Bodo language is utilised as the official language.

For the greater development of the language, the Indian constitution also grants the language a special status as a scheduled language. The Devanagari script has been used to write the language as of right now since 1963. However, the language has not been broadcast through media, such as radio shows, television, and the internet, satisfactorily. Bodo should be maintained as a robust/active language category. Since the language has been employed in the majority of new domains. Only primary level schools use the aforementioned languages, in addition to Bodo, as well as Khampti, Phake, Aiton, Turung, and Khamyang, but these systems have not yet been sufficiently developed. These languages have not been used in the media either. Every Wednesday at 7:15 through the Dibrugarh Radio centre, a 20-minute show with the name "Karpung Puli" is broadcast only in Mising. As a result, given that they are only employed in a handful of the new domains, these languages can be maintained under "grade 1." A language must be usable as a teaching tool in the educational field in order to sustain its vitality. It is amazing that every major language has a long history of writing. There is no shortage of books, grammars, dictionaries, and other written materials that emphasise the vibrant strength of the relevant language.

Any language with a strong oral heritage and body of literature should have an education system that will give it the strength it needs to endure into the future. Languages without written scripts ought to have adopted a script that corresponds to their speech patterns. Books, magazines, and other written products need to be planned well and prepared. Additionally, it helps the community's socioeconomic development and language awareness. The majority of Bodo speakers studied the language from primary level to post-graduate level, placing it among the tribal languages of Assam. Additionally, they have conducted research projects using the Bodo language, such as M.Phil. and Ph.D. There are enough dictionaries, grammars, texts, and works of literature in this language, which is also used in the Bodoland territorial region's administration and as a medium of instruction at several institutions and universities. Although the Bodo language possesses all the available resources, it is not frequently employed in the media. In addition to Bodo, the Assamese languages of Chino-Tibetan heritage are developing their orthography and certain texts are being written. Although languages are included in the elementary school curriculum, they have not yet been taught correctly. However, while having their own alphabet and ancient religious writings still existing, the Tai origin languages lack a long legacy of elaborate writing. Additionally, these languages are not taught in the curriculum of schools.

### **Language Attitude**

For a language to be maintained properly and successfully in a consolidated form, the attitude of the native speakers becomes the determining factor. Only the positive attitudes of the native speakers of a particular language group may improve the longevity, vitality, planning, policy, etc. of their language through regular use. Language attitudes toward one's own native tongue and other languages are always indicators of bilingualism, code switching and mixing, people's choice of language, a community's innate propensity for language change, language preservation, etc. When it comes to extending a language used by a minority speech population and establishing its present and future positions, language attitude becomes a

particularly important topic for research. UNESCO has also divided the language attitude into six degrees, which are as follows:

- First, the fifth grade: In this case, every single member of the specific community values their language and wants to advance.
- Second, the fourth grade: In this case, the majority of the community members are in favour of maintaining their language.
- Thirdly, grade three: in this case, many language users advocate maintaining their native tongue, but some group members may not care or even favour language extinction.
- Fourthly, in this grade two scenario, some speakers advocate language preservation while others are uninterested or may even favour language loss.
- Fifth, grade one: In this case, only a small number of speakers advocate maintaining their language, while the majority are uninterested or even actively seek language extinction.
- Lastly, the grade zero condition, on the other hand, has no members who don't care if their language is lost; instead, every member supports using the dominant language.

People's attitudes about various languages, dialects, accents, and speakers of those languages. Such attitudes, which can be either positive or extremely negative, can be seen in subjective assessments of the "correctness," value, and aesthetic characteristics of variety as well as in assessments of the speaker's character traits. Language behaviour and language change may be significantly influenced by a person's attitude toward language. In 2003, Peter Trudgill (2003:73). The majority of the members of each speech community in Assam have a positive attitude toward their language and culture, and they fervently hope that their language will experience proper development and growth. This is relevant to the language attitudes of Assamese tribal people. However, in the modern era, the advancement of science and technology, the rapid development of transportation and communication systems, the widespread use of mass media, and the development of relationships, dependencies, and momentum between various speech communities and ethnic groups are all factors.

The indigenous people have been forced to utilise Assamese, Hindi, or English as a result of their contact with diverse cultures and languages. The researcher attempted to look at how the Mising speech community felt about their language and culture in "The Bilingual Situation of the Mising Speech Community of Assam: Sociolinguistic Study," an unpublished Ph.D. thesis.

He discovered that the majority of the community's speakers (80% or more) had a favourable attitude toward their native tongue and way of life. They also support the expansion of education in the language's medium and express wishes and preferences regarding the language's teaching-learning process. The Mising speech community has a favourable attitude toward the airing of Mising language programmes in the media for the preservation and development of the language. (2017) Gakul Gogoi. According to the study's findings, the majority of the tribal people have a favourable attitude toward the development of their own language. Due to their positive individuality, Assamese tribal languages might be classified as "grade 4" languages.



➤ **Applications And Responsibilities Regarding the Languages**

Proper language planning and implementation of the plan are essential to resolving the issues that Assamese tribal languages are facing. Actions must be made with proper language planning that considers the status of the languages as well as their corpus. Eminent publications should encourage and draw readers to purchase and read both the basic and translated literature of these languages. In this situation, it is absolutely essential to teach the specific language-speaking people how to read and write in order to develop readers.

Here, the government or a native speaker who is cognizant and informed should take the appropriate action. The growth of the language through mass media and television must be prioritised. Along with this, students who speak integrated languages should be required to attend classes in these mediums starting in elementary school. They should also be made aware of the importance of the language and how it should be constructed for the future. We can't hope that the next generation will study a language because it appeals to their nationality.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the explanation above, the key points are as follows:

- Every single tribal language spoken in Assam is still spoken today in its colloquial form, and they all belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family.
- The main issues impacting languages include: mutually incomprehensible languages, a lack of written literature, the use of second languages as a medium of teaching in schools, the effects of globalisation and urbanisation, linguistic minorities, a lack of lexicon grammar, isolation, etc. These elements make the languages endangered, and their development is fraught with difficulties.
- These languages have been listed as endangered by UNESCO based on language use and users. All languages, with the exception of Bodo, are not recognised as being taught in official education. Because the majority of Assamese tribal people have received their education in Assamese, which is the language of teaching in the state's government schools. These languages haven't been utilised in media like radio, television, or the internet either. As a result, Assamese tribal languages have not developed and grown as much as other important and dominating languages.
- The majority of Assamese tribal languages have persisted so they might grow and progress. But only the Bodo language has been successful. Most languages have adopted a well-known orthography for practical purposes in order to develop their languages, and some resources are now being published. However, because of a lack of proficiency in reading and writing in each language, the languages have not been properly kept and cultivated.
- The majority of the community's native language speakers have demonstrated their favourable attitudes regarding the language. It also appears that there is a positive attitude toward the broadcasting of various programmes in their languages through mass media, such as television, radio, or new media, for the expansion and development of the language. When the language has reached a perilous point and preservation and development are needed in the near future, tribal communities' use of such a constructive strategy will be very fruitful.
- Today, it is evident that the current generation of native language speakers no longer sees a practical need for or demand for tribal languages. For which the languages may face significant difficulties

in preserving and defending their existence in the near future. Language maintenance and development may become more challenging due to this feature.

- Most importantly, we should have implemented a proper language planning strategy that included the implications for the languages' position and corpus in order to address the issues affecting Assamese tribal languages. Additionally, emphasise the need of language extension through mass media and broadcasting; offer textbooks, dictionaries, and suitable language policies starting in basic education, etc.

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