



Tribal Languages in Digital Perspectives: A Study with Special Reference to Assam's Indigenous Tribes

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ABSTRACT

Assam is home to a diverse mosaic of indigenous tribal communities, each with its own distinct language, oral traditions, and linguistic heritage. However, the increasing dominance of mainstream languages and digital communication tools has marginalized these tribal tongues. This research paper explores the interface between tribal languages and digital technology, focusing on the challenges and possibilities of preserving and promoting indigenous tribal languages of Assam in the digital age. Drawing from case studies, government initiatives, and community-based innovations, this study examines how digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media are influencing language use, revitalization efforts, and intergenerational transmission. The paper highlights both the potential and the pitfalls of digitizing tribal languages and suggests practical strategies for sustainable linguistic preservation.

Introduction

Language is not merely a medium of communication but a repository of a community's identity, culture, and worldview. In the context of India, which boasts a remarkable linguistic diversity, tribal languages occupy a crucial yet vulnerable position. Assam, located in Northeast India, is home to over 23 scheduled



tribes, each contributing uniquely to the state's ethnolinguistic richness. However, globalization, urbanization, and technological homogenization have severely impacted the vitality of tribal languages.

While digital platforms present a threat by encouraging the dominance of global languages like English and Hindi, they also offer a powerful opportunity to document, disseminate, and revitalize endangered tribal languages. This paper delves into the digital perspectives of tribal language preservation, with a specific focus on Assam's indigenous communities such as the Mising, Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, and Tiwa.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the current status of tribal languages in Assam in the digital domain.
2. To examine the challenges faced by these languages in the context of digital marginalization.
3. To explore the role of digital tools and platforms in preserving and revitalizing tribal languages.
4. To identify community-based and institutional initiatives promoting linguistic digitization.
5. To propose strategies for integrating digital media in sustainable language preservation.

3. Review of Related Literature

Scholars such as Ganesh Devy (1999) and UNESCO reports on endangered languages have extensively discussed the erosion of tribal languages due to socio-political and economic changes. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), more than 400 Indian languages are at risk, with a significant number from Assam.

Banikanta Kakati and Birinchi Kumar Barua in their linguistic studies have acknowledged the diversity of Assam's tribal dialects but emphasized the need for preservation. Recent literature highlights the digital divide between mainstream and tribal language speakers, urging for technological inclusivity (Krishna & Wood, 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

4. Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, field reports, and case studies. Data was gathered from government publications, linguistic surveys, mobile application databases, and interviews conducted through digital means with educators and activists involved in tribal language



preservation. Communities primarily focused on include the Mising, Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, and Rabha tribes of Assam.

5. The Linguistic Landscape of Assam's Tribal Communities

Assam's tribal population includes both hill and plain tribes. Each group possesses a distinct linguistic heritage:

- **Mising** (a Tani language): Rich in oral tradition, endangered due to Assamese dominance.
- **Bodo** (a Tibeto-Burman language): The first tribal language to be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
- **Karbi, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa**: Lesser-known languages facing rapid attrition among younger speakers.

Most of these languages have rich oral traditions but lack standardized scripts and digital content.

6. Challenges in Digitizing Tribal Languages

1. **Lack of Standardization**: Many tribal languages lack a written script or have inconsistent orthographies.
2. **Low Digital Literacy**: Internet penetration in remote tribal areas remains limited, reducing digital engagement.
3. **Neglect in Education**: Tribal languages are rarely used as mediums of instruction beyond primary education.
4. **Economic and Political Marginalization**: Insufficient government funding for linguistic research and digital initiatives.
5. **Dominance of Major Languages**: Platforms like Google, Facebook, and YouTube offer limited support for tribal languages.

7. Digital Opportunities and Current Initiatives

Despite challenges, several initiatives have been undertaken to digitize and promote tribal languages:

7.1 Bodo Language Digitization



- **Bodo Wikipedia** (launched in 2021) provides a platform for native speakers to create and share content.
- Unicode script integration and e-learning materials in Bodo are being developed.

7.2 Mising Language Apps and Documentation

- "**Mising Language Keyboard**" developed by local tech groups to facilitate texting in Mising.
- Community-driven Facebook groups and YouTube channels teach Mising alphabets and storytelling.

7.3 Digital Archives and Dictionaries

- Organizations like the **North East Centre for Oral Literature (NECOL)** are digitizing folk stories, songs, and linguistic resources.
- Creation of e-dictionaries in Karbi, Dimasa, and Rabha languages is ongoing.

7.4 Use of AI and NLP Tools

- Emerging collaborations between technologists and linguists aim to develop Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools like voice-to-text converters and automatic translation systems for tribal tongues.

8. Role of Government and Institutions

- **NEP 2020** promotes mother tongue education and multilingualism, offering a policy-level impetus.
- **IGNCA** and **CIIL Mysore** are supporting digitization of endangered languages.
- State-level programs in Assam have initiated bilingual educational materials for tribal children.

However, the implementation remains inconsistent, and bureaucratic hurdles delay projects.

9. Community Involvement and Youth Initiatives

The participation of youth is crucial. Initiatives include:

- Tribal youth-led podcasts and blogs in local languages.



- Online storytelling festivals featuring indigenous folklore.
- Use of TikTok and Instagram reels in native dialects.
- Collaboration with universities like Tezpur University for language documentation projects.

10. Findings and Discussion

- **Positive Trend:** There is a growing awareness among tribal communities about the importance of linguistic preservation.
- **Youth Engagement:** Young tribal content creators are utilizing YouTube and Instagram to create digital spaces for their languages.
- **Technological Gaps:** Absence of Unicode scripts, typing tools, and OCR software for many tribal languages hampers progress.
- **Policy-Practice Divide:** While the NEP 2020 promotes mother-tongue education, few digital materials have been created to support this vision.
- **Language Revitalization Through Digital Media:** Podcasts, mobile apps, and crowdsourced dictionaries are breathing new life into endangered tribal languages.

11. Recommendations

1. **Create Digital Resource Hubs:** Centralized portals offering e-books, audio content, and educational videos in tribal languages.
2. **Government-Community-Tech Partnerships:** Collaborate with tech firms to develop AI and speech recognition tools.
3. **Incorporate Tribal Languages in Digital Curriculum:** E-learning platforms should include local languages at the school level.
4. **Digital Training for Tribal Youth:** Conduct workshops on content creation, digital archiving, and language documentation.
5. **Crowdsourcing Language Data:** Involve native speakers in data collection and validation for language processing tools.

12. Conclusion

The digital age presents both a threat and an opportunity for the survival of tribal languages in Assam. While mainstreaming and urbanization pose serious challenges, the advent of digital tools offers a



powerful medium for preservation and revitalization. The key lies in inclusive policies, community-driven initiatives, and technological innovation tailored to indigenous linguistic contexts. Only through collaborative, sustained, and culturally sensitive efforts can Assam's tribal languages find a meaningful space in the digital world.

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