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## Community, Language, and Identity: Understanding the Arangtet Initiative under the AO Riju in Ao Language Preservation

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) through an analysis of the Arangtet examination, a community-designed Ao language proficiency program developed under the Ao Riju in Nagaland. It explores how the initiative revitalizes Ao linguistic identity while contributing to discussions on the role of the mother tongue in education across India. Using insights from policy papers, academic research, and community publications, the paper views Arangtet as a practical example of collective action that links language learning with cultural renewal and educational development. The paper further investigates the collaboration between the Ao Literature Board and Ao Senden, assessing how this partnership shapes teaching practices, teacher preparation, and community attitudes toward local-language learning. Findings indicate that Arangtet has enhanced the standing of the Ao language, provided motivation for learners and teachers, and complemented national education reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020). However, the initiative still faces challenges related to limited materials, insufficient teacher training, and the social preference for English over local languages. The study concludes by suggesting stronger integration of Arangtet within MTB-MLE frameworks, expanded teacher-training programs, and greater community participation in language education.

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### Introduction



Language is not merely a means of communication; it is deeply tied to identity, heritage, and the continuity of culture. For many Indigenous communities, preserving the mother tongue is essential for transmitting oral traditions, collective wisdom, and social values. In multilingual societies, the choice of the instructional language has a powerful influence on learning outcomes, literacy development, and the preservation of cultural identity. The approach known as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has gained wide recognition for its ability to promote comprehension, literacy, and student participation while nurturing pride in one's language and culture (UNESCO 2017).

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) underscores the importance of using the home language or mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction during the early years of schooling (Government of India 2020). This recommendation aligns with global advocacy for inclusive and culturally responsive education. However, implementing such policies remains challenging. The shortage of trained teachers, limited access to standardized teaching materials, and a widespread social preference for English often hinder effective mother-tongue instruction. These challenges reveal the gap between educational policy and classroom reality.

Within this context, the Arangtet initiative, introduced by the Ao Literature Board/ Ao Riju, emerges as a practical and localized model of MTB-MLE. Arangtet is designed to systematize Ao language learning through certification while encouraging cultural pride and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. By linking education with community effort, the program demonstrates how local institutions can preserve linguistic heritage even in a globalizing environment.

This paper examines Arangtet as an example of community-led multilingual education. It discusses its framework, objectives, and contributions to both pedagogy and cultural identity, emphasizing its potential as a model for sustainable language preservation.

## Literature Review

Extensive research in multilingual education has shown that instruction in a learner's mother tongue during the early years strengthens literacy, cognitive growth, and long-term academic achievement (Cummins 2000; Mohanty 2019). The philosophy of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) emphasizes that a child's first language serves as the foundation for understanding new concepts and acquiring additional languages. By beginning literacy in the language most familiar to the learner, MTB-MLE enhances both comprehension and classroom engagement.



In the Indian context, scholars such as Mohanty (2015) and others have noted that while MTB-MLE policies are conceptually strong, their implementation faces several persistent challenges. These include a lack of well-trained teachers, limited resources for developing instructional materials, and uneven institutional support. Moreover, English continues to be perceived as the language of upward mobility and modern success, which often discourages communities from investing in the preservation of their native tongues.

To counter such challenges, community-led initiatives have increasingly become an important supplement to formal government policy. Local literature boards, cultural organizations, and language committees contribute to the standardization of orthography, the creation of textbooks, and the promotion of cultural pride. Within the Ao Naga community, such collective efforts have proved especially vital in safeguarding their linguistic and cultural identity. The Arangtet initiative represents one such community response — a model that connects formal education with cultural revival and linguistic self-determination.

UNESCO's 2017 report on multilingual education highlights that programs succeed best when communities are active participants rather than passive beneficiaries. The report emphasizes that language revitalization efforts are most sustainable when the people themselves take ownership of educational planning, implementation, and evaluation. The Arangtet program aligns closely with this philosophy, offering a localized and culturally relevant model of MTB-MLE that fosters both academic learning and cultural continuity.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how the Arangtet initiative functions within the framework of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). The study relies entirely on secondary data drawn from multiple credible sources. These include newspaper articles reporting on Arangtet examinations and convocation ceremonies (Nagaland Tribune 2023; Morung Express 2023; Eastern Mirror Nagaland 2022), publications from the Ao Literature Board, and policy documents such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020). In addition, global frameworks and recommendations provided by UNESCO have been used to situate Arangtet within the wider discourse on multilingual education and language revitalization. To ensure reliability and accuracy, this study employs data triangulation, comparing information from various sources to identify recurring themes and validate interpretations. This process allows a comprehensive understanding of Arangtet's structure, its goals, and its community impact. The data analysis considers both educational and socio-cultural



perspectives, examining how the program operates as a pedagogical instrument and as a medium for cultural reinforcement.

The study specifically focuses on two interconnected dimensions:

1. **Pedagogical Perspective:** Investigating how Arangtet promotes structured language learning, develops teaching frameworks, and supports teacher capacity building within the Ao community.
2. **Sociocultural Perspective:** Analyzing how the program fosters community participation, strengthens cultural identity, and enhances the prestige of the Ao language in everyday life.

Through this descriptive and interpretive lens, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the Arangtet program not only promotes literacy and education but also embodies a broader cultural movement that revitalizes linguistic heritage and strengthens community agency.

### **Ao Language and Institutional Support**

The Ao Naga are one of the prominent Naga tribes residing mainly in Mokokchung district, Nagaland. Their mother tongue, Ao, belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and carries a long and rich oral tradition encompassing folktales, songs, chants, and proverbs. Historically, the Ao language has served as a vital medium for preserving the tribe's collective memory, transmitting wisdom, and reinforcing moral and social values. It has also functioned as a repository of indigenous knowledge concerning customs, agricultural practices, and community governance.

Over time, however, the growing influence of formal education and the dominance of English and other regional languages have disrupted this natural process of linguistic transmission. Among younger generations, English is often perceived as a symbol of academic success and social advancement, leading to a gradual decline in fluency and everyday use of the Ao language. Recognizing this shift, the Ao community took deliberate steps to preserve its linguistic heritage through institutional and community efforts spearheaded by the Ao Literature Board (Ao Riju).

The Ao Literature Board plays a key role in standardizing and codifying the Ao language. Its work includes compiling dictionaries, creating grammar manuals, and designing textbooks that align with current educational needs. The Board has also developed a standardized orthography and formulated syllabi that enable schools to teach Ao as both a subject and a medium of instruction. Among its most important contributions is the establishment of the Arangtet examination, which serves as a structured framework for assessing and certifying proficiency in Ao language and literature. The Arangtet program



fulfills multiple purposes. It establishes clear proficiency levels, encourages learners to pursue excellence, and motivates teachers to enhance their pedagogical knowledge. The program is organized into progressive levels—ranging from basic reading and writing to advanced literary and teaching competencies—allowing participants to gradually build expertise.

Beyond institutional mechanisms, community participation plays a vital role in the success of language preservation. Local elders, scholars, and writers collaborate to produce study materials, develop curricula, and mentor young learners. Cultural events such as storytelling sessions, literary competitions, and Arangtet convocation ceremonies create opportunities for public recognition and collective celebration of Ao heritage. These activities cultivate linguistic pride and reinforce the community's commitment to sustaining the language as a living, evolving cultural asset.

In addition to traditional efforts, collaborations with universities, NGOs, and cultural organizations have helped expand the reach of Ao language programs. Modern tools such as digital archives, online learning platforms, and mobile applications now complement oral traditions, connecting young speakers to their heritage in contemporary ways.

In essence, the preservation of the Ao language depends on a dynamic partnership between institutional support and community initiative. The cooperation between the Ao Literature Board and grassroots participation represents a sustainable and culturally responsive model of language maintenance—one that aligns with the core principles of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) by integrating education, identity, and cultural continuity.

### **Arangtet Structure and Objectives**

The Arangtet program is organized as a multi-level certification system that evaluates proficiency in the Ao language, its literature, and its cultural and pedagogical applications. It is divided into three main stages—Certificate, Diploma, and Postgraduate Diploma—each progressively designed to measure a learner's skills in reading, writing, and interpretation. Beyond linguistic competence, the program emphasizes the preservation of cultural and literary heritage, ensuring that learning Ao extends beyond grammar to include the stories, customs, and values that the language embodies.

The key objectives of the Arangtet initiative can be summarized as follows:

1. Promotion of Ao Language and Culture:



To encourage the learning and appreciation of the Ao language in both its traditional and literary dimensions, thereby strengthening cultural identity and linguistic pride.

2. Revitalization of Cultural Knowledge:

To deepen learners' understanding of Ao myths, oral literature, folklore, and traditional customs, ensuring that ancestral wisdom continues to be shared and valued.

3. Enhancement of Linguistic Prestige:

To raise the status of the Ao language by promoting translation and exchange between Ao and other languages, thus integrating it into broader academic and cultural dialogues.

4. Preservation of Oral Traditions:

To record and safeguard folktales, songs, and other oral narratives for future generations through documentation and educational dissemination.

5. Encouragement of Linguistic Accuracy and Fluency:

To establish a platform for cultivating correct usage, clarity, and confidence in speaking, reading, and writing Ao.

6. Modernization and Language Development:

To ensure that the Ao language evolves in step with changing times by supporting innovation, terminology development, and adaptation to new educational contexts.

7. Promotion of Ao Literary Heritage:

To encourage the creation and publication of Ao-language works, advocate their inclusion in school curricula, and promote literary exchange within and beyond the community.

Collectively, these objectives reveal that Arangtet is more than a linguistic assessment tool—it is a cultural movement that blends education with identity preservation. By combining language instruction with cultural transmission, Arangtet embodies the principles of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), offering a framework where language learning becomes a pathway for both intellectual growth and cultural continuity.

### **Pedagogical Implications**



The Arangtet initiative holds significant pedagogical importance for the Ao community because it directly shapes instructional practices, curriculum design, and learner engagement. By introducing a formal and graded certification system, it provides a sense of purpose and recognition for both teachers and students. Learners gain motivation to develop language proficiency, while teachers receive encouragement to refine their teaching methods and deepen their knowledge of Ao. Certified individuals often serve as resource persons or language instructors, forming a network of skilled educators who sustain the teaching of Ao within schools and community institutions.

One of the major contributions of Arangtet lies in its standardization of Ao language instruction. Before the establishment of the program, teaching practices were largely informal and differed across regions, leading to inconsistencies in pronunciation, vocabulary, and orthography. Arangtet introduced a structured curriculum with graded proficiency levels, enabling educators to follow a more systematic approach to literacy and literature instruction. This structure allows for uniform evaluation standards, ensuring that students across various schools and villages are assessed according to the same linguistic benchmarks.

The initiative has also played a central role in developing teaching and learning materials. Participants and certificate holders contribute to producing textbooks, workbooks, and audiovisual materials that reflect local customs, folktales, and social realities. These resources not only enhance literacy and comprehension but also reinforce students' connection to their cultural background. By embedding local knowledge within educational content, Arangtet ensures that learning remains both meaningful and culturally grounded.

Another important pedagogical outcome of Arangtet is its impact on teacher training and professional growth. The certification process encourages teachers to stay updated on new teaching methodologies, assessment techniques, and bilingual education strategies. Workshops organized by the Ao Literature Board provide practical training on integrating Ao with other subjects and on developing effective bilingual classroom practices. Experienced Arangtet-certified teachers often mentor newer educators, fostering collaboration and professional development across the educational network.

In addition to improving teacher quality, Arangtet enhances student motivation and participation. Public acknowledgment of successful candidates through certificates and convocation ceremonies gives learners a sense of accomplishment and pride in their mother tongue. This recognition strengthens emotional and cultural attachment to the language, motivating continued engagement even outside formal education.



Furthermore, the initiative supports the broader goals of multilingual education. While Ao remains central to early instruction, students also learn English and regional languages, enabling them to develop cross-linguistic skills. This approach aligns with UNESCO's recommendation that children first acquire literacy in their mother tongue before transitioning to additional languages (UNESCO 2017). As a result, students develop a stronger foundation for learning and improved cognitive flexibility.

In summary, the Arangtet initiative functions as a comprehensive educational framework that integrates assessment, curriculum design, teacher training, and learner motivation. It demonstrates that community-led programs can successfully complement formal education systems, ensuring that indigenous languages like Ao are not only preserved but also taught with the same rigor and value as national or global languages.

### **Sociocultural Impact**

The Arangtet initiative extends beyond the educational sphere to exert a profound influence on the social and cultural fabric of the Ao Naga community. By institutionalizing language learning and creating spaces for recognition and celebration, it has rekindled pride in the Ao identity and strengthened intergenerational ties. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vessel of shared memory, moral understanding, and collective consciousness. The revitalization of Ao through Arangtet therefore reinforces both cultural continuity and a sense of belonging among community members.

One of the most visible social outcomes of the program is the renewed prestige of the Ao language. In a period when English has become the dominant medium in education and social interaction, Arangtet provides a counterbalance by reaffirming the value of the mother tongue. The certification framework and public ceremonies—particularly the annual Arangtet Convocation—offer symbolic recognition that equates linguistic achievement with academic excellence. This formal acknowledgment transforms language learning from a personal pursuit into a communal honor, restoring dignity to the use of Ao in both public and private domains.

The program also fosters intergenerational learning by creating opportunities for elders and youth to interact through language activities. Storytelling sessions, oral history projects, and cultural performances associated with Arangtet connect younger learners with traditional wisdom. Such exchanges bridge generational gaps and promote respect for ancestral knowledge systems, which might otherwise fade in a rapidly modernizing society.



Furthermore, Arangtet reinforces social cohesion and cultural resilience. The collaborative nature of the program—drawing on teachers, elders, writers, and students—encourages collective responsibility toward language preservation. It also strengthens intra-community networks that extend beyond the classroom, contributing to a sense of shared purpose and mutual support. The pride generated through this collaboration extends to other aspects of community life, such as festivals, literature, and art.

From a cultural standpoint, Arangtet serves as a symbol of self-determination. It represents the Ao community's agency in shaping their own educational priorities rather than depending entirely on state-driven models. This self-governed approach reflects a broader assertion of cultural autonomy and decolonial identity-building. It aligns with the global movement among Indigenous groups who view education not merely as a tool for literacy but as a means of reclaiming narrative ownership and sustaining endangered languages.

Finally, the sociocultural impact of Arangtet can also be observed in the changing attitudes of the youth. The younger generation, which had increasingly favored English and other dominant languages, now finds renewed motivation to learn Ao, recognizing its intellectual and emotional worth. By connecting language learning to community pride and achievement, Arangtet transforms the perception of Ao from a heritage language to a living, evolving medium relevant in modern education and identity formation. In this way, the Arangtet initiative transcends its role as an educational program. It functions as a cultural renaissance, reinforcing the link between language, identity, and belonging. Through it, the Ao community demonstrates that language revitalization is not only possible but also essential for sustaining the soul of a culture in a rapidly changing world.

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

Although the Arangtet initiative has played a transformative role in revitalizing the Ao language and strengthening community-based education, several challenges continue to affect its sustainability and wider adoption. These issues are both structural and attitudinal, reflecting the complex relationship between language, policy, and society.

One of the primary challenges lies in the shortage of qualified teachers who are adequately trained in both the Ao language and pedagogical methods suited to multilingual classrooms. Many teachers who speak Ao fluently lack formal training in language teaching or literacy instruction. This results in uneven quality across different schools and examination centers. The absence of a standardized teacher-training module tailored to the Arangtet framework further limits the effectiveness of classroom delivery.



A second major obstacle is the limited availability of updated teaching and learning materials. While the Ao Literature Board and related organizations have produced textbooks and readers, these resources often remain concentrated in certain regions. The scarcity of visual and digital materials suitable for young learners makes it difficult to integrate the Ao language effectively into early education. As a result, students may not receive adequate exposure or reinforcement outside formal lessons.

Another persistent issue involves societal attitudes toward language hierarchy. English continues to dominate academic and professional spaces, shaping perceptions of success and modernity. Many parents still encourage their children to prioritize English-medium education, believing it offers better prospects for higher education and employment. This widespread preference can unintentionally marginalize the Ao language, making it appear secondary or less valuable.

The lack of institutional funding and government recognition also presents a serious limitation. Although the Arangtet program is supported by the community and local organizations, it requires stronger collaboration with educational institutions and policy-makers to ensure long-term stability. Without official inclusion in broader MTB-MLE frameworks or teacher-training programs, the initiative risks being confined to a localized context rather than being scaled for broader impact.

To address these challenges, several recommendations can be proposed:

1. Teacher Training and Professional Development:

Establish dedicated training modules in collaboration with universities and educational departments to equip teachers with bilingual and pedagogical expertise relevant to Ao language instruction.

2. Expansion of Educational Resources:

Develop a wider range of age-appropriate teaching aids, including audiovisual materials, digital learning tools, and mobile applications, to enhance engagement and accessibility.

3. Integration with National Policies:

Align Arangtet more closely with the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) to gain institutional recognition, funding, and curriculum support for long-term implementation.

4. Community Awareness Campaigns:



Conduct outreach initiatives to raise awareness among parents, educators, and students about the cognitive and cultural benefits of learning in the mother tongue, thereby countering the misconception that English alone guarantees academic success.

#### 5. Research and Documentation:

Encourage further academic studies on the impact of Arangtet, including longitudinal research on literacy development, cultural identity, and community participation.

Through these recommendations, Arangtet can move beyond its current scope to become a sustainable model of mother-tongue-based education. By merging community initiative with institutional collaboration, it can serve as an inspiring example of how local efforts contribute to global goals for inclusive and culturally grounded education.

### **Conclusion**

The Arangtet initiative stands as a remarkable example of how a community-driven effort can successfully link education, culture, and identity through the medium of language. Rooted in the philosophy of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), it reaffirms the importance of learning in one's native language—not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a vital means of preserving collective heritage. By integrating formal certification, structured pedagogy, and cultural celebration, Arangtet has redefined language education for the Ao Naga community.

Through its graded levels of assessment, standardized curriculum, and community-wide participation, Arangtet has strengthened both literacy and linguistic pride. It has created a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern education, demonstrating that the mother tongue can be both a carrier of ancestral knowledge and a vehicle for intellectual growth. The collaboration between the Ao Literature Board, Ao Senden, and local educators reflects how grassroots initiatives can effectively complement national education policies such as the NEP 2020.

At the same time, the study recognizes the ongoing challenges that require attention—particularly the shortage of trained teachers, limited access to updated learning materials, and persistent social bias toward English. Addressing these issues will require coordinated efforts among educators, policymakers, and community leaders. The development of teacher-training programs, digital resources, and broader policy integration can further enhance the sustainability and impact of the Arangtet program.



Ultimately, the success of Arangtet highlights a deeper truth: language preservation cannot be achieved through policy alone; it must grow from the will and participation of the people who speak it. The Ao community's commitment to sustaining their language offers a powerful example for other Indigenous groups seeking to maintain their linguistic and cultural identities. As the Ao saying goes, "*oshi ka ji pei sobaliba*" — "language is identity of one's culture", by valuing the mother tongue as a foundation for learning and belonging, Arangtet demonstrates that education can be both transformative and deeply rooted in cultural pride.

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