

Issues and Challenges of Teaching *Mishing* in Assamese Medium Schools

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Abstract

Mishing, is the language of the second largest ethnic community in Assam¹ after the Bodos and is taught as a language subject in the 3rd and 4th standards in 230 schools in the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur on the upper bank and Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Golaghat on the lower bank of the Brahmaputra River of Assam. The article briefly discusses the history and challenges of teaching *Mishing* as a language subject in schools and introducing it as a medium of instruction. The second part of the article investigates the facts of *Mishing* language education from the perspectives of provisions made in NEP 2020. I also introspect on the issues and challenges of teaching *Mishing* in schools while investigating the applicability of 'Languages For Learning' (LFL) proposed in Mahapatra and Anderson (2022).

Keywords: Language policy and planning, multilingual school education, *Mishing* language, minority community, Assam

Introduction

Every society undergoes a change in social, economic, cultural, linguistic, and political matters. And these changes are inevitable. However, the causes and consequences of such social changes may differ from society to society, and the causes may both be internal and external. The present *Mishing*² society has witnessed a series of socio-historical changes traced back to the pre-Sankardeva period. Thus, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Mishings* migrated from their original homeland in the Dafla hills of Arunachal Pradesh to the swampy riverine areas of the alluvial landmass in search of food, and a safe and stable habitat and

fearless existence.³ During the Vaishnavite movement promulgated by Sankardeva and his disciples in the fifteenth century, the Mishings who settled in the Brahmaputra valley had undergone religious conversion along with their original worship of Donyi Polo⁴, they started to accept the preaching of the Neo-Vaishnavites and the educational norms of the *Satras*. The Mishings find their first mention in the *Ahom* chronologies documented during the seventeenth century,⁵ which cites incidents of initial conflicts between the Mishings and the Ahoms and of later settlements followed by glorious positioning of Mishing fellows as royal kinsmen of the Ahom kingdom. Recently, many Mishing people have emerged from their traditional habitats and eventually settled in urban locations such as Guwahati city, the towns of Tezpur, Jorhat, or Dibrugarh for higher education and consequent placements. In the early twentieth century, Baptist missionaries successfully converted Mishings to Christianity. As mentioned in Tayung (2017: 86), there are approximately 4,000 Christians among the Mishings who prefer to educate their new generation in English medium schools.⁶

During British colonial rule and even during the post-independence period, the impact of modernity was immense on every tribal society in every sphere of their lives, such as education, healthcare, food habits, architectural norms, and village administration. Only during this period (to be precise, from the early nineteenth century) did the Mishings, like any other tribal community, start to receive formal school education. Though slowly, they adapted to the changing system to assimilate with the mainland people, which resulted in a transition among the tribe. And the effects were all-pervasive. Concurrently, the Mishing community is going through radical structural changes that can be evaluated on the following parameters—increased differentiation from the original identity, pattern of mobility, and inequality among the community concerning their access to resources such as education and healthcare. Post-Independence, the Government of India made special provisions for the tribal population of the country in the fields of higher education and job opportunities through reservations by declaring them a Schedule Tribe (ST). Financial assistance in the form of scholarships was provided to pursue higher studies. Thus, towards the later part of the twentieth century, many Mishing youths took the opportunity to move out of their villages for studies and jobs.

1.1 History

Mishing Agom Kebang (MAK) or, the Mishing Language Society,⁷ which was established in 1972 with a vision to uplift the Mishing language and literature among other social activities, has been publishing books, magazines, and periodicals to document their history, language, and culture⁸. They came up with primers or school grammar books to teach and create awareness about the language among the younger population. In 1985, the Government of Assam accepted the proposal submitted by MAK to teach Mishing in schools and re-formulated the language in education policy. In 1986, the language was introduced by the Government of Assam in 100 Assamese medium Lower Primary schools with the appointment of one Mishing language teacher in each of these schools. This happened in a phased manner in the schools located in the areas where the Mishings formed the majority⁹ (Pegu, 2010: 15). The plan was to teach the language in the higher as well as the lower standards.¹⁰ The textbooks published by MAK and taught in the schools are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Mishing Textbooks Taught in Lower Primary Schools*

<i>For 3rd Standard</i>	<i>For 4th Standard</i>	<i>Text Title Meaning</i>
<i>Lakor – I</i>	<i>Lakor – II</i>	The language
<i>Poman moman – I</i>	<i>Poman moman – II</i>	Rhymes
<i>Gomlam – I</i>	<i>Gomlam – I</i>	Grammar

Subsequently, 130 more schools were added. After their success in creating an environment for teaching the Mishing language, MAK, in collaboration with the state government’s Education Department, is presently involved in imparting language education in schools located in Mishing inhabited areas (or Tribal Belt Areas) in 7 districts.¹¹

Table 2: MAK's Initial Demands Restated in a Memorandum Submitted to the Assam Legislative Assembly Members in 2008

1. Introduction of Mising language as a language subject from class-I onwards.
2. Creation and sanction of 1221 posts of Mising Language Teacher.
3. Creation of three posts of Sub-Inspector of Schools for monitoring and supervision of Mising Language Teaching.
4. Appointment of Instructors of the Mising Language in the Basic Training Centres of Dhakuakhana and Azad in Lakhimpur district and Majuli in Jorhat district.
5. Adoption and declaration of a clear-cut Tribal Language Policy.
6. Creation of a separate Directorate for Tribal Languages with a provision of separate budget allocation.
7. Constitution of districtwise committees for the evaluation of Mising language teaching under the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan.

MAK has been demanding the introduction of Mishing Language education in all the 1,221 schools where all or majority of the students belong to the community. Another significant demand of MAK is to introduce Mishing in lower standards, i.e. 1st and 2nd, to cover the elementary stage of schooling.¹² MAK is even considering proposing Mishing as a medium of instruction in most schools in Mishing-dominated areas. However, this proposal has not yet been placed for various practical reasons.¹³ So far, no report on the issues and challenges of teaching Mishing as a language subject has been published.

1.2 Mishing-Assamese Bilingual Education

Bilingual education has become a norm and necessity in every linguistically diverse country and a socio-culturally complex country like India, attention must be paid to children's holistic cognitive growth and development while teaching them enough material in their native languages too. In fact, today, most Mishing youths are multilingual (at least receptive bilingual). They can converse in some of the neighbouring tribal languages such as Bodo, Deuri, Tai (group of languages), Santhali, etc., because they co-inhabit in areas where these languages are also spoken.

For the present study, pilot surveys were conducted in four schools in Laimekuri and Bahir Jonai in the Dhemaji district and Matmora and Dhakuakhana in the Lakhimpur district¹⁴. All these schools are located

in areas with a highly concentrated Mishing population. More than 75-95 per cent of students in these schools are ethnically Mishing, but they can speak Assamese, the dominant language in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. We have observed that even though the Mishing teachers teach the language subject, they would first read out the text in Mishing and then explain its meaning in Assamese, followed by a discussion in Mishing. This implies that the children who are learning their own mother tongue in schools follow Assamese in a better way. Teachers opined that even though a non-Mishing person is supposed to learn the local language thoroughly during the pre-joining training period¹⁵, this objective has hardly been achieved because of a lack of linguistic similarities between Assamese (or Bengali as well) and Mishing (a Tani language of the TB family as mentioned before), which increases the difficulty level of learning Mishing by a non-Mishing teacher who is grown up adults. Also, all these schools are Assamese medium schools, and therefore, imparting education through Assamese becomes instrumental as well as necessary. The Mishing teachers do teach the students in Mishing as per the rule though in most cases, Assamese does function as the link language in the class. On many other occasions, various code-switching and code-mixing between Assamese and Mishing is observed. Practically, the teaching-learning pedagogy, therefore, was found to be a mix of learning both Assamese and Mishing. Interestingly, when English is taught in these schools as a language subject, the pedagogy shifts to three languages (i.e. English, Assamese, and Mishing). Children learn Assamese more effectively than the other two because of its ubiquitous use in the home domain. To summarize, these children learn Mishing and English as language subjects and Assamese as a medium of instruction.

1.3 The Present Scenario

I refer to a report published by *The Telegraph* titled 'Mishing Body 'Hunts' for Language Teachers' way back in 2015. The apex literary body MAK had initiated a drive to bring back those fled language teachers¹⁶ who were appointed in schools to teach Mishing to young children whose first language was Mishing. The report stated that those teachers were later required to teach other subjects. This serves as a reality check for our present discussion on the challenges of offering Mishing even as a language subject. One of the main reasons why they were upgraded to 'general-category' teachers to teach all subjects was that posts were lying

vacant in these schools, so they were in dire need of teachers to cover the courses. MAK's initial proposition prohibited Mishing language teachers from being shifted to any other subject, violating the government's rationalization policy. Another challenge is their locational disadvantage because most of these schools are in extremely remote parts of the state and are scattered over places that are quite distant from each other. Therefore, these teachers cannot collaborate with others and face a lack of immediate support. The report states that MAK 'gave these teachers three months' time to write to the authorities so that they could be reappointed as Mishing-subject teachers but hardly anyone responded'. In 2021, Education Minister Dr. Ranoj Kumar Pegu raised a proposal to introduce the Mishing language as a bridging language in the Budget session. The proposal was granted without any debate. However, this move was strongly opposed by MAK as they have demanded the status of the language as the medium of instruction. MAK has reiterated through protests that they want the implementation as soon as possible for the development and propagation of the language.

The situation is more complex for an urban Mishing family who has settled in any city outside their homeland. Their children hardly get any chance to learn the language as schools in the cities and the towns, for that matter, do not teach the language; thus, eventually, they adopt Assamese in most of their conversational domains. Even in the schools where Mishing is taught, Mishing children end up conversing with each other in Assamese and become more fluent in the dominant language.¹⁷

1.4 Positioning Mishing in NEP 2020's Proposition

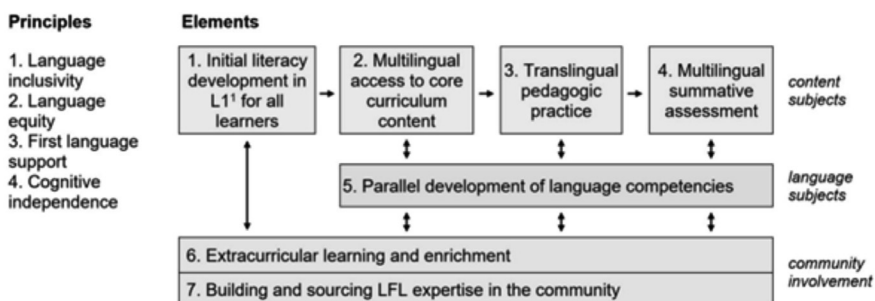
Breaking away from its fundamental orientation towards multilingual teaching-learning pedagogy, NEP 2020 stands alone in the history of GoI's educational policies and adapts mother-tongue-based multilingual education. It proposes and advocates the promotion of multiple languages in education and attempts democratic reform in educational language policy making. The erstwhile editions of NEPs of the Indian Government published in 1968¹⁸, 1986¹⁹, and 1992²⁰ also made similar attempts and very rightfully propagated radical reconstruction, equity, and access to education through some successful missions by confiding with the constitutional provisions such as the Right to Education Act of 2009. Among NEP 2020's many facets, from the restructuring of school education and higher education to shrouding discipline and

curriculum boundaries, one most prominent features is its constant and clearly defined guidelines for educators to teach students in their native languages. While raising the quality of education, NEP 2020 strongly recommends and emphasizes children’s holistic cognitive development by imparting foundation education in their native languages. The medium of instruction (in both public and private schools) up to the 5th standard (or, the 8th standard, if possible) should be in the home language, the mother tongue or the local language. But Mishing students are learning Assamese which is their second language at this level of school education. So far, the goal of teaching Mishing in schools as a language subject has only been orienting them towards learning vocabulary, grammar, culture, and literature. However, minimal or no emphasis has been given to their conversational aptitude. As the final decision is left to the state government for proper implementation of these directives, smaller indigenous languages are to be uplifted to the sphere of mainstream education without prejudices.

1.5 A New Perspective Through LFL

Language politics has always been a core concept while defining language-in-education policies in India. However, a formal and uniform approach is required to introspect and retrospect the failures of implementing education in local/regional languages at various stages of education. The new policy also intends to remove hierarchies among languages by advocating the creation of pedagogic materials in multiple languages and the utilization of learners’ multilingual repertoires for facilitating learning at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2022: 3).

Figure 1: *The LFL Framework Design (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2022: 8)*



With four guiding principles of pedagogy—1) language inclusivity (more participatory discussion will be encouraged irrespective of language choice), 2) language equity (threat posed by dominant languages are to be reduced by creating a classroom community), 3) first language support (sufficient availability of mediation and resources) and 4) cognitive independence (not only language subjects, even content subjects like mathematics, science and social science should be evaluated if expressed through one's mother tongue), LFL attempts to challenge language prejudice inside the classroom and wishes to help eradicate judgemental preconceptions based on unequal linguistic competence.

To support these principles, LFL proposes seven defining elements—i) initial literacy development²¹ in L1 for all learners, ii) multilingual access to core curriculum content²², iii) translingual pedagogic practice²³, iv) multilingual summative assessment²⁴, v) parallel development of language competencies²⁵, vi) extracurricular learning and enrichment and vii) building and sourcing LFL expertise in the community. Each of these elements may be useful for rightfully implementing a mother-tongue-based education, at least at the school level.

1.6 Conclusion

The LFL framework is designed to be adapted to common multilingual contexts of India's linguistically pluralistic scenario. The framework has been meticulously developed to fit into both urban and rural educational contexts appropriately. It mainly encourages languaging through language to attain the desired cognitive development. It aims to develop a pedagogy in the early years of learning rooted in multilingualism.

Linguistic realities of India's rural and tribal areas are much more complex and intertwined due to various factors, including language shift, speakers' attitudes, and even cultural assimilation. Therefore, to address all these aspects inside the classroom with a vision to develop children's cognitive skills and mental abilities, the policy (to exploit its optimum potentialities) needs to understand the real challenges faced by every stakeholder in this context. However, a systematic involvement of literate speakers of minority languages, language, and cultural activists, grammarians, and lexicographers may result in the development of effective content, translation services as well as IT literacy among community members. All these would collectively offer

greater social worth to these marginalized communities, thereby leading them towards a new economy based on linguistic diversity (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2022: 14).

Notes

1. According to the 2011 census, the Mishing population in Assam was 6,29,954, which constitutes 17.8 per cent of the tribal population of Assam.
2. Mishing is an endonym that means 'man of the land/soil' while *Miri* was their exonym. In Assam, Mishing has now become an exonym, while in Arunachal Pradesh, the remaining population of this community is referred to as Hill *Miri* even today. Earlier, the fraction of the Mishing population who migrated to and settled in Assam was termed Plains *Miri*. Their migration history or stories have no written form, but they have been orally transmitted through generations.
3. Mishing (ISO 639-3) is the single Tani language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family and is spoken in Assam by a population of 6,29,954. It is identified as a 'definitely endangered' language by UNESCO. Other Tani languages comprise a group of languages that are mutually unintelligible but spoken by culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and anthropologically related people such as the Apatanis, Bokars, Nyshis, Tagins, Bengnis, Yanos, Galos, Damus, Boris, Minyongs, and Padams in Arunachal Pradesh.
4. The Mishing people consider themselves to be descendants of Abotani, who is the son of *donyi*, the sun whom they consider their father and *polo*, the moon, whom they consider their mother.
5. During the reign of Swargadeo-Suhung mung, or the Dihingia Raja (1497 AD-1539 AD).
6. In the year 1980 AD, a section of the missionaries started their reformation activities in some Mishing villages scattered over Majuli, Sadiya, Silapathar, Jonai, Dhakuakhana, Akajan, and Tarajan by establishing English medium schools to educate young Mishing youths in English.
7. Another active statutory body for Mishing self-rule in their tribal areas as constituted by the Government of Assam is Mishing Autonomous Council (MAC), which has relentlessly contributed towards socio-cultural as well as economic development of the community.
8. http://www.misingagomkebang.org/downloads/mak_memorandum.pdf.
9. Though it was introduced in the schools in North Lakhimpur and Majuli as well, it discontinued due to various factors.
10. Starting in 2015, Dibrugarh University's Centre for Studies in Languages (Faculty of Humanities and Law) used to offer a 6-month Certificate Course

in the Mishing Language (CCML) to interested learners with a graduation in any discipline. The course discontinued due to the pandemic.

11. Though *Majuli* has a high concentration of Mishing population, it has never been offered in the schools of this river island district.
12. This proposal well-aligns with NCERT's curricula proposed in 1988 as well as 2000 reinstating the mother tongue to be the medium of instruction in the first two years of primary education.
13. Source: <http://www.misingagomkebang.org/activities.php>
14. The survey respondents were—3 Mishing teachers, 3 non-Mishing teachers, and 10 students from each school. Owing to the pandemic and restrictions over meeting more than 10 people at a time in many schools in those interior areas, the survey could be done with a limited number of respondents. Our observation method inside the classroom was also affected due to some school-specific restrictions.
15. MAK's memorandum to the State Legislative Assembly members in 2008 raises one crucial concern regarding the training of teachers—"Training of Mishing language teachers, which is of great pedagogic importance, is an area of gross negligence. Although these teachers are deputed for Basic Training, they are not provided special training in Mishing language teaching. There is an urgent need to provide training in at least two Basic Training Centres with qualified instructors of Mishing language. Such training may be imparted in the Basic Training Centres at Azad and Dhakuakhana in the Lakhimpur district".
16. Out of 208 Mishing teachers appointed in Lower Primary schools, 17 teachers (8 per cent in total) have discontinued teaching the subject for various reasons.
17. A study shows that out of a total of 600 respondents, as many as 87.3 per cent of them can read and write in Assamese while only 45.7 per cent can read and write using Mishing.
18. Free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years of age, emphasis on adult education, equal opportunities to all sections of the society irrespective of any socio-linguistic, geographical, and economic affiliations and the Three Language (Hindi, Sanskrit and English) Formula were some of its salient features.
19. Removal of disparity, educational opportunities, and job opportunities to minorities (ST, SC, OBC and PWD) and women, use of technology in education, vocational education, restructuring of the previous educational system from 10 + 2 + 3 to (5 + 3 + 2) + 2 + 3, introduction of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (which proposed that education must be imparted in consonance with contemporary social needs), Midday Meal and Navodaya Vidyalaya, and strengthening of Kendriya Vidyalaya, UGC, AICTE and NCERT were some of the salient features.

20. Acceptance of +2 level as part of school education, introduction of common entrance test for professional and technical programmes and emphasis on Samagra Shaksrata Abhiyan were some of the salient features.
21. While this component of LFL stresses the need to begin to read and write one's first language in the early primary grades, many states, including Assam, have made the state official language, i.e. Assamese the default language for the early years.
22. Even the core curriculum of content subjects must use materials in the mother tongue, which is mutual to the teacher and the student. However, the technology-enabling of these curricula is another challenge given the rate of infrastructure development in rural areas of Assam, and the entire Northeast for that matter.
23. Without a thorough and critical training for teachers, translanguaging an Indian multilingual classroom pedagogy cannot be achieved. Because in this component of the LFL framework, apart from teaching, the teacher also needs to undertake planning and evaluation in the language in question.
24. Summative examination material would be translated into minority languages by teachers and administrative staff who are literate in such languages, potentially with assistance from minority language support groups (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2022: 12) whereas the questions may be set in two or more languages (depending on the linguistic situation) using parallel texts.
25. This is a real challenge of implementing LFL in an Assamese medium school teaching the Mishing language. In many places (especially in Jorhat and Dibrugarh), the Mishings co-inhabit with the Santhalis, the Hos or the Mundas (all are Tea tribes speaking Austro Asiatic languages), and Tai (Ahom, Turung, Phake, Aiton, etc) group of speakers. All children go to the nearby school, and the situation becomes more complex because not only do they speak genetically unrelated languages but they belong to ethnically diverse communities.

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