

## Mapping the Nature and Extent of Multilingual Education in Primary Schools in Assam

*Nirmali Goswami*

### Abstract

This paper draws on debates about multilingual education in India and argues that despite the reiterations at policy levels, the practice of multilingual education has not moved beyond the formal recognition of minority languages at schools. The paper employs the concept of standard language ideology to critically examine school teachers' ideas and practices about the use of 'mother tongue' and 'home language' within school premises. It draws on interviews with language teachers employed in Assamese medium primary schools in the Sonitpur district of Assam. The findings reveal the pervasive effect of standard language ideology that prevents the attainment of multilingual educational goals.

**Keywords:** Multilingual education, teacher beliefs, language in education policy, schooling in Assam, NEP

### Introduction

India is a multilingual society where people use more than one language at the grassroots level. The society in northeast India, including Assam, is well known for the social, cultural, and linguistic diversity of its population. The issue of language education in schools, and the medium of instruction in which diverse students are taught, assume a special significance in this context. Along with the existence of diversity, there has been a history of ethnic consciousness and political mobilisations on ethnic grounds. Historically, the issue of official state language and language of education has been a matter of intense and passionate debate in Assam. The specificity of the Assam situation, the long history of immigration of people with different ethnic backgrounds from

different regions of the subcontinent prevented an easy resolution of the language issue in the initial years of colonial rule and in the post-independence period as well leading to several conflicts on the issue of official language and language of education (Barua, 1978; Kar, 1982; Kar, 2008). Assam continues to be a highly diverse ethnic society in terms of the sheer number of linguistic and ethnic communities. The co-existence of hill tribes, plains' tribes, caste-Hindus, and other religious communities has contributed to a multicultural multilingual social world. The language data of the census of 2011, listed as many as 122 languages in the category of the mother tongue in Assam (Census 2011). The scale of diversity presents itself both as a challenge as well as an opportunity for the educationists and policymakers alike.

This paper seeks to examine the nature and extent of multilingualism that exists within its school system. Towards this end, I am using the concept of standard language ideology and how it affects the ideas about teaching-learning of language in educational context. Standard language ideology refers to the belief that languages exist only in their standard forms and, when people start thinking about their language and languages in general in a similar manner, they are said to be living in a standard language culture (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Milroy, 2001). Gal and Irvine have demonstrated how linguistic ideologies work through semiotic processes and are central to the creation of social and linguistic boundaries (1995). They highlight the methodological implications of the one language-one culture assumption in the scholarly work of linguists, philologists, missionaries, and ethnographers alike (Gal & Irvin, 1995). In India the standard language ideology works as the tendency among people to relate with the prestige languages associated with education. These prestige languages tend to operate along a grid of national and regional hierarchy of officially recognised languages that tend to be preferred in the school context (Brass, 2004).

On the other hand, multilingual education refers to the set of principles and practices that view languages, irrespective of their official status, as resources that can be used for educational purposes (Agnihotri, 2007; Mohanty, 2009). According to Mohanty, multilingual education acts like a bridge that connects the home language of the child to the regional, national, and global languages of the world (Mohanty, 2009, p. 8). However, the ground reality of school education in India has not been very encouraging in adopting these ideas even as we see their inclusion in policy discourses.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section identifies the mismatch between ideals and practice of multilingual education. The next section discusses the specific context of schools in Assam in a linguistically diverse society and the methodological approach used in carrying out the empirical study. The findings from the interviews are again organised in two sections. First, the social and linguistic background of the language teachers is examined vis-à-vis their awareness and ideas about the diversity of language varieties used by students. The second section gives details about their beliefs, ideas, and the teaching strategies used in managing their classrooms. These observations are summed up and connected with the larger debates on how a strong belief in standard language usage creates an ideological barrier towards realisation of the principles of multilingual education in an actual school setting.

### **Policy Discourses and Practice of Multilingual Education in India**

The New Education Policy of India, 2020 identifies the ‘promotion of multilingualism and power of languages’ as one of the fundamental principles that are supposed to guide the ‘education system at large as well as the individual institutions within it’ (NEP, 2020, pp. 5-6). Overall, the policy document lays great emphasis on the promotion of the principles of multilingual education and the need to develop teaching and learning resources in multiple Indian languages.

However, it is not the first time that these issues have surfaced at the policy level and the debates and discussion on the question of the appropriate language/s of education have had a long history in the Indian subcontinent.

National Curricular Framework (NCF) of 2005 has extensively dealt with the ideas of mother tongue education and multilingual education. Particularly, its Position Paper on Teaching of Indian Languages addresses language issues in their social and cultural contexts and links them with the broader policy goals of social justice and equality. It also affirms the belief in the ability of the child to be proficient in multiple languages simultaneously. One of the important shifts from the earlier approach was an attempt to treat the local context as a source of knowledge or a learning resource rather than as an obstacle to the learning of an official language. From this perspective, the task of a school is to relate the language of the school to that of the home language of a child. It also recommends allowing a multilingual atmosphere in the classroom. Most

significantly, rather than dwelling on the question of the selection of a suitable language for learning, it recommends allowing the coexistence of several language varieties in the classroom (NCF, 2005).

Several scholars and educationists have argued that even as these policy pronouncements are significant for a multi-ethnic polity like India, these are not sufficient to enable sustenance and promotion of multilingualism in the true sense of the term (Agnihotri, 2007; Abbi, 2010; Mohanty, 2009, 2018). Mohanty has termed the different modes of language education in Indian schools as a 'nominal form of multilingualism' that is different from real multilingual education (2018). The question of why multilingual education did not assume deeper roots in Indian education despite the presence of many institutional mechanisms has engaged several educationists and researchers alike.

First, there have been issues with conceptual conflation between ideas about 'mother tongue education and education in 'the regional languages.' Khubchandani (1977) discusses the problems of conflating "mother-tongue education" with the regionally dominant languages while ignoring the linguistic diversity and complexity of India. He draws attention to the fact that the difference between the language spoken at home and the regional varieties taught in the school has been largely ignored by educationists. There are few occasions when minority languages are recognised for schooling.

Secondly, there are problems identified with the conception and implementation of the Three Language Formula. This formula is often criticised for favouring Hindi, English, and the dominant regional languages at the expense of minority languages within a region. These concerns led some scholars to suggest the incorporation of alternative mechanisms in Hindi and non-Hindi-speaking states which would identify minority languages as well (Abbi, 2010). Others have asserted that an approach which prioritises languages as a subject of learning itself is at the root of the problem (Agnihotri, 2007; Mohanty, 2009).

Others have focussed on actual classroom settings and identified social and psychological barriers in attaining the goals of multilingual education. An examination of actual classroom teaching and learning scenario suggests that the classroom practices are usually conducted in the standard languages (Jhingran, 2009; Goswami, 2017). The hierarchy of languages in India reflects power-based social inequities on dimensions of class, caste, gender region, community, geographic location, and

a host of other intersecting grids. These inequities continue to shape the school-based practices of language teaching and learning through ideologies and belief systems based on hierarchies of language.

Standard language cultures, or belief in a correct or canonical form of language can be cited as one such belief that has had a pervasive influence. It manifests in conceptions about people and languages among teachers, and students. Scholars have pointed out links between teachers' beliefs and policy goals and how belief in standard language ideologies affects teachers' beliefs (Pulinx et al., 2017). This paper employs the concept of standard language ideology and culture to examine language teachers' approach to multilingual education. Here standard language ideology refers to a belief in the uniformity of language and standard language culture refers to the development of a consciousness of the correct form of a language (Milroy, 2001; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In the Indian context, studies have demonstrated the prevalence of standard language ideologies in schools and how these shape ideas about the correct form of language to be used in a school setting (LaDousa, 2014; Goswami, 2017). These ideas significantly shape and affect the classroom learning environment and pedagogic approach adopted by teachers within the classroom. Unless these are specifically addressed through a teacher education programme, and sometimes, in spite of them, the beliefs about standard language continue to inform much of teaching-learning practice in school settings across the world and in India.

### **The Context and Methods of the Study**

This paper draws from a research project carried out between 2013-15 in the Sonitpur district of Assam. The language data of the Census of 2011 listed as many as 122 languages in the category of the mother tongue.

Along with the existence of diversity, there is a history of ethnic consciousness and political mobilisations on ethnic grounds. Various scholars have attributed the emergence and growth of identity politics in the Northeastern region to the legacy of colonial policies of segregation and protectionism, and the developmental policies of the post-independence Indian state (Gohain, 1997). A high sense of community consciousness and demand for cultural autonomy has evolved leading to the recognition of Assamese, Bengali, and Bodo as major languages of school education in addition to English and Hindi. In specific areas, Karbi and Mishing languages are also recognised for primary education.

But this does not give us insights about the extent and practice of multilingual education within the system.

The empirical research was carried out in Sonitpur district which is the second-largest district of Assam in terms of its geographic spread and is the third-largest in terms of population. It has a lower literacy rate of 50.79 as compared to the state average of 64.28. The district has a diverse population belonging to different communities and tribes. Apart from Assamese, there are speakers of Bengali, Bodo, Nepali, and Hindi. Census data also suggests presence of speakers of Mishing and *adibasi* language associated with the tea-tribe community in Assam.

This paper draws on the interviews conducted with eighteen language teachers associated with the Assamese medium schools. Most of the teachers except four were from government-funded or government-aided schools. Of these fourteen had received the mandatory in-service teachers training of which eight had attended language-specific training. The language teachers were interviewed using an interview schedule. The sample included eleven male and seven female teachers. Assamese was identified by fourteen teachers as their mother tongue. Three identified with Nepali but admitted to using Assamese at home as well, and one identified as a speaker of Bengali language. Interviews were carried out in the Assamese language within school premises. The interview tool focussed on teachers' familiarity with different language varieties, their assessment of the students' linguistic backgrounds, their perceptions about the language used by their students, and their strategies for language classroom management.

### **Mapping the Nature and Extent of Multilingualism in Schools**

Mapping the extent of multilingualism in empirical settings is a complex task because people tend to identify with a prestigious major language group, which happens to be the language taught at the school. In Assam, the political salience of language and identity questions, and a high level of language consciousness have made it a particularly contentious issue. As the citizenship questions have also been linked with language identity, people feel diffident about identifying with languages other than standard languages. The research was planned and developed in a way that assumed diversity of speech practice. We relied on self-reporting of the number of languages used and observed by the teachers. It also helped the researcher to assess whether teachers are aware of the linguistic diversity of the students.

It was found that most of the teachers identified themselves as Assamese but were able to identify the linguistic variation in their students' speech. This identification was usually mediated through the identification of the ethnic background of the students. Some of the language varieties that were named by the teachers were *Mymensinghia* and *Miya* associated with the Bengali-Muslim students; *Nepali* with Nepali; and *Hindi* with Bihar origin students. In addition, students from ex-tea-garden community members were seen as using *Adibaxi bhaxa*. In other words, teachers seemed to be aware of the diverse ethnic background of students and that they are using languages other than standard Assamese among themselves.

However, the information about the linguistic plurality of the students did not necessarily mean that they believed these to be useful as educational resources. Most of the teachers, including those who admitted to using several languages at home and outside school denied using any language on school premises other than the standard Assamese and English. They did not think these language varieties should be used on school premises. Some teachers also added that they actively discouraged students from speaking in their mother tongue or neighbourhood languages in school. Only two teachers admitted to using any of the students' language variety in the classroom. Even the teachers who admitted to its use were Nepali teachers teaching in a school with Nepali students. It is important to note that Nepali is also a scheduled language. Overall, there was a complete disassociation with the use of non-standard language for teaching purposes though their use was not denied outside the formal context of schooling.

The denial of the use of non-standard language is important to note because the belief in standard languages runs high in societies with the unequal status being ascribed to different language varieties. Other researchers have also highlighted how the prestige associated with schools leads people to deny any association with a non-standard language here (LaDousa, 2014; Goswami, 2017). From a sociological perspective, the differential evaluation of different language varieties is reflective of the deeply hierarchical nature of our society where class-based inequality intersects with caste, gender, region, religion, and other markers of status. The excessive reliance on regional standard languages and the neglect of education in English have also been criticised from a Dalit perspective (Ilaiah, 2011; Rege, 2010). In this context, we can



also see that the relationship between teachers and students is mediated by inequalities of class as well as that of formal educational status that bestows prestige on certain language varieties and not on others. This belief in the superiority of the standard language varieties shapes and gets reflected in the teachers' ideas about the non-standard language varieties used by students.

Apart from denying association with non-standard languages, the teachers also believed that these language varieties have a corrupting influence on the practice of standard language varieties among students. When teachers were asked to identify the problems of language teaching with a diverse set of children, they conflated the problems of learning with the social background of the students. This was common across the teachers and was articulated in different ways.

In one instance, a young teacher of 25 years who was posted in a rural LP school with most students from Bengal origin-Muslim community, said in exasperation that the majority of students do not know anything about the Assamese language. While this was an extreme case, teachers in general expressed issues with the incorrect use of language. For example, they had problems with what they identified as 'mispronunciations' and incorrect use of words which seemed to emerge due to the influence of their *ghorua bhaxa* or home language. Terms like *khichri bhasa* or mixed language and *bhanga Axomiya* or broken Assamese were used to refer to the use of the non-standard version of Assamese at school. In general, 'mixing' was seen as a major problem that seemed to afflict students who were from an ethnic minority in the context of Assamese medium school. It is also important to note that the teachers tended to attribute the problem of incorrect usage of language to the background of students rather than to the lack of teaching resources or support at the institutional level because none except one teacher expressed dissatisfaction about the availability of teaching-learning resources.

Further, when teachers were asked about the strategies adopted to deal with students with different linguistic backgrounds, they came up with two kinds of responses. Some of them referred to disincentivising tactics in which they talked about prohibiting students from using non-Assamese words while in school. While the majority talked about their efforts at correcting and reforming the inaccuracies that they find in their classwork. Teachers in general believed in the sanctity of a



particular form of language and any deviation from its 'pure' use called for corrections. They went to great length in describing and explaining the corrections of the spellings, and how mispronunciation of the words can be corrected with practice by using methods of reading aloud in classes, by dictations, and by asking students to memorise the right words. A few also talked about using 'simpler language' with students when explaining a new lesson. Particularly regarding English teaching, two teachers talked about using translation methods in classrooms to make it easier for students.

One of the teachers employed in a private Assamese medium school affirmed that they advise the parents of students to start using proper Assamese at home. While this is a standalone example and cannot be generalised, it is indicative of how these varieties are held in contempt and sought to be continually reformed within and occasionally outside of the schools. Ironically, these are often the languages that the students are most familiar with, particularly at the primary level of education.

The empirical findings are suggestive of some of the issues that commentators have highlighted in the past as well. For example, the continued devaluation of and a lack of engagement with the students' 'home language' when it is associated with the linguistically marginalised groups is troubling. It feels as if shifts at policy level remain merely on paper and have not touched the lifeworld of school teachers. Teachers' engagement with linguistic diversity and difference from standards tended to be influenced by standard language ideologies. And yet it is important to notice the instances of practical solutions when teachers intuitively turn towards use of simpler language and translations to facilitate ease of learning. The presence of such strategies suggest that apart from teacher beliefs, one has to account for issues related to curricular material and teacher training for a better understanding of why we do not seem to be making much headway when it comes to multilingual teaching. In this case, despite several proclamations about the use of the 'mother tongue' and to use of multilinguality as an 'educational resource' at the primary level, standard language ideology continues to inform educational spaces. Recent research has indicated how the use of a child's first language at school level can ease a student's transition towards standard languages at a higher level (Jhingran, 2009; Mohanty, 2018).

## Conclusion

The paper tried to address the question of multilingual education by focusing on the role played by the beliefs held by language teachers in the primary schools of Assam. Multilingualism is the social reality of Indian society and has been reiterated in several policy documents dealing with the language of education in India. It is also known that despite various plans and proclamations linguistic hierarchy is the reality of the Indian education system leading some scholars to call Indian multilingualism a hierarchical form of multilingualism which recognises the diversity of languages of the elite groups (Brass, 2004; Agnihotri, 2007). In this research, an attempt is made to make sense of a multilingual school context in Assam by employing the notion of standard language ideology to examine the language teachers' awareness, recognition, and beliefs about the use of standard and non-standard language within school premises.

Assam is faced with the major challenge of dealing with a linguistically diverse school-going population. Even though the schools follow the teaching and learning of at least three languages, a close examination of classroom context through teachers' interviews suggests that while teachers are aware of the linguistic diversity of students, they fail to develop adequate teaching strategies because of ideological barriers against the use of non-standard languages. Though many teachers had received some sort of training for teaching after joining the school, they did not seem to be sensitive to the issues of multilingual education in the Indian context. Sometimes, the training received was of no use to their classroom teaching.

What is coming out from even this small set of observations is the insistence on the use of a standard variety of language. The standard is often derived from textbook languages, written in a completely different context, often in metropolitan centres of textbook production which is distant from the actual context of the school children.

What is important is the need to challenge the internal logic of schools which operate based on a particular variety of a language and any deviance from the model invokes punishment. The fact that it continues to happen in a multilingual society like Assam, is a strong reminder of the need to restructure our education system based on the social reality of the people. There is enough evidence that suggests that multilingual

education in a true multilingual spirit adds to the cognitive growth and social tolerance among children belonging to different communities (Agnihotri, 2007; Jhingran, 2009; Mohanty, 2009). There is a need to move beyond a fixed rule- and curriculum-bound knowledge of language to a more creative engagement with language, which perhaps may unlock the transformative potential of education.

### Funding

The research was sponsored by UGC as a minor research project on “A micro-study of the medium of instruction and languages taught in the primary schools of Assam” between 2013-15.

### References

- Abbi, A. (2010) Vanishing diversities and submerging identities: An Indian case. In A. Sarangi (Ed.), *Language and politics in India* (pp. 299-311). Oxford University Press.
- Agnihotri, R.K. (2007). Identity and multilinguality: The case of India. In A. Tsui & J. Tollefson (Eds.), *Language policy, culture, and identity in Asian contexts* (pp. 185–204). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Annamalai, E. (2001). *Managing multilingualism in India: Political and linguistic manifestations*. Sage.
- Barua, S. (1978). Language problem in Assam. *Social Scientist*, 6(12), 66-74.
- Brass, P. (2004). Elite interests, popular passions, and social power in the language politics of India. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(3), 353-375.
- Dasgupta, J. (2003). *Language policy and national development in India*. MIT Press.
- Dasgupta, J., & Gumperz, J. (1971). Language, communication and control in north India. In *Language in social groups* (pp. 129–150). Stanford University Press.
- Dasgupta, P. (2001). Introduction. In E. Annamalai (Ed.), *Managing multilingualism in India: Political and linguistic manifestations*. Sage.
- Gal, S., & Irvine, J.T. (1995). The boundaries of language and discipline: How ideologies construct difference. *Social Research*, 62(4), 967-1001.
- Garcia, O. (2009). Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In A.K. Mohanty et al. (Eds.), *Multilingual education for social justice* (pp. 128-147). Orient Blackswan.
- Gohain, H. (1997). Ethnic unrest in the north-east. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(8), 389-391.
- Goswami, N. (2017). *Legitimising standard languages*. Sage.
- Ilaiah, K. (2011, February 14). Dalits and English. *Deccan Herald*. Retrieved <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/dalits-english-2393415> on 28/10/21

- Jhingran, D. (2009). Hundreds of home languages in the country and many in most classrooms-coping with diversity in primary classrooms. In A.K. Mohanty et al. (Eds.), *Multilingual education for social justice* (pp. 250-267). Orient Blackswan.
- Kar, B. (2008). 'Tongue has no bone': Fixing the Assamese language, c. 1800–c. 1930. *Studies in History*, 24(1), 27-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/025764300702400102>
- Kar, M. (1982). Evolution of Assamese as a medium of instruction. In M. Miri (Ed.) *Linguistic situation in north-east India* (pp. 49-68). Concept Publishing Company.
- Khubchandani, L. (1977). Language ideology and language development. *Linguistics*, 15(193), 33–52.
- LaDousa, C. (2014). *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky: Education, language, and social class in contemporary India*. Berghahn Books.
- Milroy, J. (2001). Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 5(4), 530–555.
- Misra, S. (2006). Redrawing frontiers. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 43(2), 199-225.
- Mohanty, A.K. (2018). Multilingualism of the unequals and predicaments of education in India. In A.K. Mohanty (Ed.), *Multilingual reality: Living with languages* (pp. 262-282). Multilingual Matters.
- Mohanty, A.K. (2009). Multilingual education: A bridge too far? In A.K. Mohanty et al. (Eds.), *Multilingual education for social justice* (pp. 5-19). Orient Blackswan.
- National Curriculum Framework. (2005). New Delhi. NCERT. Retrieved from <https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nc-framework/nf2005-english.pdf>
- New Education Policy. (2020). New Delhi. Retrieved from [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Pulinx, R., Van Avermaet, P., & Agirdag, O. (2017). Silencing linguistic diversity: The extent, the determinants and consequences of the monolingual beliefs of Flemish teachers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 20(5), 542-556.
- Rege, S. (2010). Education as *Trutiya Ratna*: Towards a Phule Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(44), 88-98.
- Woolard, K.A., & Schieffelin, B.B. (1994). Language ideology. *Annual Reviews*, 23, 55-82.

*Nirmali Goswami is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Tezpur University. Her areas of interest are identity politics and school education, gender politics and language ideologies.*

*nirmalig@gmail.com*