



## Community Service as a Strategy for Indigenous Language Revitalization in Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

Indigenous languages in Bangladesh are increasingly endangered due to exclusion from formal education, limited government recognition, and the dominance of Bengali in public life. This study explores how community service functions as a strategy for indigenous language revitalization, especially in the absence of institutional support. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with ethnic communities in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, the study reveals those grassroots efforts—such as informal language teaching, storytelling, and cultural events—play a critical role in maintaining linguistic heritage. Despite enthusiasm and local leadership, communities face challenges like financial constraints, gender disparities, and lack of materials. Respondents also showed growing interest in digital tools as a means to engage younger generations. The findings emphasize the need to support community-led initiatives through targeted funding, inclusive policies, and NGO collaboration. This research highlights community service as a foundational model for sustainable language preservation in Bangladesh.

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Submitted/Received 19 Dec 2024

First Revised 20 Dec 2024

Accepted 08 Feb 2025

First Available online 09 Feb 2025

Publication Date 01 Mar 2025

#### Keyword:

Bangladesh,  
Community service,  
Indigenous languages,  
Informal education,  
Language revitalization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous languages in Bangladesh are facing increasing threats of extinction due to systemic exclusion from formal institutions, particularly the national education system (Karmaker, 2025; Chakma & Sultana, 2024; De Varennes & Kuzborska, 2016; Kingston & Siebert, 2022). Ethnic communities such as the Chakma, Marma, Santal, Garo, and Khasia have seen their languages steadily marginalized as Bengali continues to dominate public communication, education, and administration (Marma & Yesmin, 2024). This shift has disrupted intergenerational transmission and weakened the cultural identity of indigenous peoples, resulting in a growing concern among communities over the loss of their linguistic heritage.

Many reports regarding this matter have been well-documented (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023; Reza & Ullah, 2023; Hasan *et al.*, 2022; Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018). While previous studies have focused on the structural and policy-related causes of language endangerment, much less attention has been paid to the role of community service in language preservation. Because formal support systems for minority language education remain inadequate, many ethnic communities have turned to local, grassroots initiatives to preserve and transmit their languages (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014; Groff, 2017; Chiatoh, 2014; Freire *et al.*, 2022). These include storytelling, rituals, music, informal language instruction, and the use of cultural events as learning spaces. These community-led efforts are often driven by cultural pride and necessity, rather than institutional backing. Existing literature identifies community engagement as an important factor in successful language revitalization, yet empirical studies documenting these efforts in Bangladesh are limited. Most research emphasizes top-down policy recommendations without exploring how community-based practices contribute to language sustainability on the ground. Additionally, informal programs are often overlooked in national education planning, despite their relevance and reach within marginalized communities (Sakata & Prideaux, 2013).

This study aims to explore how community service contributes to the revitalization of indigenous languages in Bangladesh. It investigates the types of community initiatives currently active, the challenges they face, and the perceived impact among those involved. The study builds on existing fieldwork data from Sherpur Sadar Upazila, using mixed methods to highlight community perspectives and strategies. Its novelty lies in focusing specifically on community service as a framework for language preservation, moving beyond institutional critique to showcase what is already being done at the grassroots level.

The impact of this research is its potential to guide language planning and development policies that include and support community-based approaches. By recognizing and resourcing local efforts, national stakeholders can better address linguistic inequality while promoting cultural diversity and inclusion in Bangladesh.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The decline of indigenous languages in Bangladesh has been widely attributed to political, educational, and sociocultural barriers. Monolingual education policies and the dominance of Bengali in formal institutions continue to marginalize minority languages, leaving ethnic communities with limited means of preserving their linguistic heritage (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023). These structural conditions are reinforced through the exclusion of native languages from schooling, official documentation, and media, leading to the gradual erosion of language use among younger generations (Beg *et al.*, 2020; Uddin, 2017).

While several studies focus on the failures of institutional frameworks (Karmaker, 2025), fewer emphasize the role of community-driven efforts in language preservation. In international contexts, grassroots revitalization movements—such as those supporting the Māori and Hawaiian languages—have shown that community involvement, especially through cultural engagement and informal education, plays a vital role in sustaining endangered languages (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Faruk & Rosenbaum, 2022). These efforts are not dependent on top-down support but emerge from the active participation of local people.

In the Bangladeshi context, the need for community involvement is increasingly recognized, particularly as formal institutions have failed to provide adequate teacher training, curriculum development, or material support for indigenous language instruction (Islam, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018). Indigenous communities have thus taken the initiative to organize local storytelling sessions, cultural festivals, and informal learning spaces to continue transmitting their language and traditions to younger generations. These efforts are rooted in a strong sense of cultural identity and local knowledge.

Technology has also emerged as a tool with great potential in supporting community-based language preservation. Studies suggest that access to mobile apps, YouTube channels, and social media platforms can help revitalize endangered languages by making them visible and engaging, especially for youth (Hasan *et al.*, 2022). However, communities often lack the financial and digital infrastructure needed to implement such strategies effectively.

Despite growing interest in community involvement, little research in Bangladesh specifically addresses the structure, challenges, and long-term impact of community service on language revitalization. Current literature tends to overlook how informal efforts—such as peer learning, cultural rituals, and elder-led education—can be formalized and scaled with proper support. Furthermore, gender roles and generational dynamics remain underexplored concerning community-led language initiatives, even though women and elders play critical roles in transmitting language and culture (Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

This study builds on existing research by focusing on the lived experiences of community members involved in indigenous language efforts. It contributes a field-based understanding of how community service functions as both a response to institutional neglect and a strategy for linguistic survival (Karmaker, 2025).

### 3. METHODS

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of community service in preserving indigenous languages in Bangladesh. The research was conducted in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, which includes both rural and urban indigenous communities. This location was selected because it reflects regional diversity in ethnic populations and their engagement with informal education and cultural programs.

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants had relevant knowledge or involvement in language and cultural preservation activities. A total of 197 individuals participated, comprising 165 survey respondents, 12 semi-structured interviewees, and 20 focus group discussion (FGD) participants. Respondents included ethnic community members, teachers, research scholars, cultural leaders, and local residents engaged in language-related activities.

Surveys contained 16 Likert-scale items designed to measure community perceptions and involvement in indigenous language efforts. Interviews focused on personal experiences with community-led language preservation and challenges faced in maintaining language use.

FGDs were used to explore group-level ideas on the effectiveness of grassroots programs, the influence of traditional practices, and the role of cultural events in language transmission.

Data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns related to informal education, digital strategies, financial barriers, and the role of elders, women, and youth in language preservation. Quantitative data from the surveys were interpreted using descriptive statistics to understand community attitudes toward language loss and revitalization.

The study was conducted with full ethical consideration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their anonymity and right to withdraw. All data were stored securely, and findings were used solely for research purposes, with a focus on representing participant voices authentically.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal strong community awareness of language endangerment and widespread support for grassroots action. Participants expressed concern that their languages are disappearing because there are few formal platforms for preservation and little institutional support. Community members emphasized that they are ready to take action through cultural practices, informal education, and digital tools if they receive basic resources and recognition.

Survey responses showed that over 80% of participants strongly supported the establishment of community-based language programs. Informants noted that informal spaces such as homes, religious gatherings, and local events are being used to transmit language and cultural practices to the younger generation. However, these efforts remain scattered and under-resourced.

Participants in FGDs highlighted the significance of storytelling, festivals, and traditional songs as vital means of preserving indigenous languages. One participant shared, “We are losing the environment to communicate. Ethnic people are losing their culture for not getting the environment to practice or preserve it. We have a lack of financial capabilities and scope to present our culture.” Another participant noted, “All the books or medium of instruction are either Bengali or English. Like other countries, we can’t study in our language, it poses a threat to ethnic people.”

The study also found that while community efforts are ongoing, they are limited by a lack of access to funding, materials, and teacher training. Participants cited the absence of institutional partnerships and formal recognition as obstacles to sustaining their work. Despite this, communities have developed informal language classes, peer learning systems, and cultural initiatives that serve as critical platforms for linguistic transmission.

There was a strong interest in digital solutions, particularly among youth. Community members suggested creating mobile apps, YouTube content, and social media-based initiatives to revitalize indigenous languages. Participants viewed digital platforms as a way to bridge the generational gap and to adapt to the current media landscape where traditional language use is declining.

Participants also identified key community figures—especially elders and women—as instrumental in transmitting language and culture. However, gender disparities and social limitations hinder the broader involvement of women in structured preservation efforts. These challenges point to the need for inclusive and targeted community service programs that consider intersectional barriers within ethnic groups.

Overall, the data affirm that while formal systems have failed to address language endangerment, Indigenous communities are active and willing agents in revitalization.

Community service is already occurring in multiple forms, but it requires structured support, resources, and partnerships to become sustainable and impactful (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Islam, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018; Hasan *et al.*, 2022; Reza & Ullah, 2023).

The findings of this study demonstrate that Indigenous communities in Bangladesh are highly aware of the urgency of language loss and are actively engaging in grassroots efforts to preserve their linguistic heritage. These efforts have emerged not as extensions of institutional initiatives, but as necessary community responses to the absence of formal support. Community service, in the form of informal language education, storytelling, rituals, and cultural events, has become a primary tool for safeguarding indigenous languages.

Participants reported a consistent lack of institutional recognition and access to funding, which has forced communities to rely on their resources. Despite these constraints, community members continue to organize local festivals, pass down oral traditions, and establish informal teaching systems. These findings align with research showing that indigenous groups often carry the burden of language preservation themselves because national language policies fail to accommodate their linguistic rights (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019).

The study found strong community interest in using digital platforms such as mobile applications and social media to support language learning. Respondents recognized that younger generations are increasingly drawn to digital media, and they saw this as an opportunity to create relevant and accessible language content. However, their ability to act on these ideas remains limited due to the lack of funding and technical skills. This mirrors broader issues in Bangladesh's indigenous communities, where technological gaps restrict access to modern learning tools (Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

The role of elders and women was emphasized throughout the discussions, with elders seen as crucial knowledge holders and women as central figures in intergenerational language transmission. Yet, gender-related barriers and social norms limit women's participation in formalized language work, pointing to the need for inclusive planning in community-based revitalization. Educational inequalities, cultural restrictions, and lack of institutional acknowledgment further complicate women's involvement in community language initiatives (Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018; Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

Importantly, the study shows that community service is not merely supplementary to institutional frameworks—it is foundational where such frameworks do not exist. Participants clearly articulated that language preservation is possible when local ownership, cultural pride, and support structures align. Community members have the will and ideas to protect their languages but require resources, recognition, and partnerships to move beyond survival-level efforts.

Although some review literature has recognized the cultural value of community involvement, this study adds depth by presenting field-based evidence that shows how community service fills gaps left by government and education systems. Respondents repeatedly described how the education system excludes their languages, and that community-led programs are often the only accessible form of language learning. These realities reinforce calls for greater policy engagement and NGO collaboration with grassroots actors (Islam, 2020; Reza & Ullah, 2023).

Community service in language preservation is therefore both a strategy and a necessity. It is a strategic tool to reclaim cultural identity and a response to structural exclusion. This

dual role makes it particularly important in the Bangladeshi context, where ethnic languages are endangered not only by disuse but by systemic neglect. Strengthening community initiatives through formal support mechanisms could yield sustainable outcomes for indigenous language revitalization.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study confirms that indigenous communities in Bangladesh are actively engaged in efforts to preserve their native languages through community service, despite the absence of institutional support. These initiatives (ranging from informal language teaching and storytelling to cultural festivals and digital proposals) demonstrate that grassroots action is not only possible but already underway. Communities are motivated by a sense of urgency because language loss is directly linked to the erosion of cultural identity, intergenerational knowledge, and social cohesion. The findings show that although these community efforts are resilient, they face serious limitations due to financial constraints, lack of materials, gender inequalities, and technological gaps. Participants consistently expressed a willingness to expand their involvement if basic resources and partnerships were made available. Without policy support or structural assistance, these grassroots programs struggle to achieve long-term sustainability. To address these challenges and support effective community service for language revitalization, the following recommendations are proposed:

- (i) Community-based language centers should be formally established in indigenous regions, operated by local leaders, and supported through NGO and government collaboration. These centers can provide space for intergenerational learning, cultural events, and informal teaching.
- (ii) Digital platforms such as mobile apps, community radio, and YouTube channels should be developed in native languages to engage youth and document oral traditions.
- (iii) Targeted funding should be allocated to grassroots organizations working in language preservation, with transparent mechanisms for resource distribution.
- (iv) Training programs must be designed to empower local educators, elders, and women to take active roles in revitalization efforts.
- (v) Policy frameworks should explicitly recognize community service as a core component of national language planning, ensuring that these efforts are not isolated but integrated into a broader strategy for preserving linguistic diversity.

Community service is not a substitute for institutional action, it is the foundation upon which inclusive, sustainable language revitalization must be built. Supporting these local efforts is essential to safeguarding Bangladesh's endangered linguistic heritage and empowering ethnic communities to maintain their cultural identities for future generations.

## **6. AUTHORS' NOTE**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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