



Community and Policy Approaches for Revitalizing Endangered Ethnic Languages in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous languages in Bangladesh continue to decline due to limited institutional support, policy neglect, and the dominance of Bengali in formal domains. While national frameworks mention cultural diversity, their implementation often excludes practical strategies for language preservation. This study explores how community service, non-governmental organization (NGO) involvement, and policy reform can intersect to revitalize endangered ethnic languages. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, the study examines how community-led initiatives operate alongside or in the absence of state support. Results show strong grassroots engagement in informal language education but highlight persistent barriers such as inadequate funding, lack of formal recognition, and digital infrastructure challenges. The study proposes that sustainable language preservation requires institutional reforms, targeted resource allocation, and collaborative partnerships between government and local communities. This paper contributes to understanding how multi-level coordination can support linguistic diversity and empower ethnic communities across Bangladesh.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous languages in Bangladesh are experiencing accelerated decline due to their marginalization in education, policy, and public life. Despite constitutional recognition of ethnic diversity, state institutions continue to operate under monolingual assumptions, prioritizing Bengali as the language of instruction, governance, and national identity. As a result, ethnic communities have been unable to transmit their native languages to younger generations, leading to cultural erosion and the weakening of linguistic heritage (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023).

Language endangerment is closely tied to exclusion from formal systems. Indigenous languages are rarely included in school curricula, and most educational materials are produced only in Bengali. The lack of mother-tongue-based education contributes not only to academic underperformance but also to the perception that native languages are irrelevant in modern life (Haque et al., 2018; Islam, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2016). Communities are often left to rely on informal mechanisms of language transmission, such as storytelling, rituals, and oral tradition, which are increasingly insufficient in the face of modernization and urban migration.

While national policies often mention the importance of cultural preservation, their implementation remains limited. In many cases, policy efforts are symbolic and do not translate into practical programs, funding, or infrastructure to support minority languages. This gap between policy rhetoric and actual support has led to a growing reliance on community-based initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to fill the void (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Haque et al., 2018). These actors provide informal language education, organize cultural events, and develop digital tools aimed at engaging younger speakers. However, without integration into formal systems, these efforts remain fragmented and difficult to sustain long-term.

Technology presents new opportunities for revitalization, especially among youth who are digitally active. Community leaders and educators have started exploring mobile apps, YouTube videos, and social media platforms to promote indigenous languages. Still, these initiatives face barriers such as limited access to digital infrastructure, insufficient training, and the absence of institutional support (Hasan et al., 2022). Moreover, gender and generational disparities further complicate participation in language programs, as women and elders often lack access to decision-making processes, even though they play crucial roles in linguistic transmission (Viscogliosi et al., 2020; Amazonas et al., 2019).

This study aims to explore how policy frameworks, NGO involvement, and grassroots community service can converge to support the revitalization of endangered indigenous languages in Bangladesh. Unlike studies that focus solely on educational exclusion or language decline, this research emphasizes the role of multi-level collaboration in addressing linguistic marginalization. It draws on field data from Sherpur Sadar Upazila to examine the practical realities of policy implementation, community resilience, and the need for coordinated strategies. By highlighting both institutional shortcomings and community innovation, the study seeks to inform inclusive policy-making that empowers indigenous voices and supports sustainable language preservation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The endangerment of indigenous languages in Bangladesh has been widely linked to monolingual national policies, the dominance of Bengali in formal institutions, and the systemic exclusion of ethnic languages from education and governance. Although the

Constitution recognizes the cultural and linguistic rights of minority communities, these provisions are weakly implemented in practice (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019). Most indigenous languages are excluded from formal curricula, public communication, and administrative systems, resulting in intergenerational transmission breakdowns and a gradual shift toward linguistic assimilation (Rahman, 2023; Bhuiyan, 2016).

Studies have emphasized that education policy remains one of the most critical barriers to language preservation. The absence of mother-tongue instruction and the failure to recruit and train teachers from indigenous communities have left ethnic students at a disadvantage (Haque *et al.*, 2018; Islam, 2020). These conditions not only impact academic performance but also reduce the perceived value of indigenous languages in both private and public life.

At the same time, research highlights that community participation plays a vital role in sustaining linguistic heritage. In many cases, informal education practices—such as storytelling, music, rituals, and traditional performances—act as substitutes for institutional neglect (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Faruk & Rosenbaum, 2022). Such grassroots efforts are often initiated without state funding or technical support, demonstrating the resilience of communities but also revealing the lack of coordinated assistance from policymakers.

NGOs have attempted to address some of these gaps by supporting cultural events, informal language instruction, and the documentation of endangered languages. However, these efforts are often small-scale, scattered, and lacking in long-term sustainability strategies (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Haque *et al.*, 2018). Without alignment with national education and language policies, NGO initiatives struggle to scale or influence broader policy outcomes.

Digital platforms and technology are increasingly viewed as tools for language revitalization, especially among younger generations. Mobile apps, social media, and community-based digital content offer new spaces for language learning and cultural transmission. Yet, access to these technologies remains uneven, and indigenous content is still limited (Hasan *et al.*, 2022). These gaps highlight the need for integrated approaches that combine digital literacy with linguistic inclusion in national development strategies.

Existing literature points to a significant disconnect between grassroots initiatives and national language policy frameworks. While community engagement is recognized as essential, formal systems have yet to establish clear mechanisms to incorporate local efforts into broader revitalization plans. Gender and generational roles, which are central to language transmission, are also underexamined in most policy discourses despite their practical significance in sustaining linguistic traditions (Viscogliosi *et al.*, 2020; Amazonas *et al.*, 2019).

This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of aligning community service with institutional policy. It argues that revitalizing endangered indigenous languages in Bangladesh requires a collaborative model that empowers communities, mobilizes NGO support, and holds public institutions accountable for linguistic diversity.

3. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design to explore the intersection of community initiatives and policy frameworks in the revitalization of indigenous languages in Bangladesh. Data collection took place in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, a linguistically diverse area where indigenous communities actively engage in informal cultural and educational practices despite a lack of institutional support.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were directly involved in or impacted by indigenous language preservation. A total of 197 individuals participated in the

study, including 165 survey respondents, 12 interviewees, and 20 focus group discussion (FGD) participants. Participants were selected from various ethnic communities, including educators, community leaders, cultural activists, and residents.

The survey instrument consisted of 16 structured items focusing on perceptions of language policy, institutional support, and community involvement. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' personal experiences with policy gaps, the effectiveness of existing programs, and their perspectives on how government and NGOs could better support language revitalization. FGDs were conducted to gather group-level insights on community service practices, traditional cultural roles, and expectations of institutional collaboration.

All qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in perceptions of language policy, grassroots initiatives, and institutional neglect. Quantitative survey data were examined using descriptive analysis to capture the general attitudes and preferences of participants regarding language revitalization strategies.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of their rights, including the confidentiality of responses and the voluntary nature of their participation. The study prioritized the accurate representation of community voices and ensured cultural sensitivity in all interactions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a significant gap between existing national language policies and the lived experiences of ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Participants consistently reported that policy frameworks favor the Bengali language while excluding indigenous languages from formal education, administrative use, and public recognition. Although constitutional provisions acknowledge minority rights, implementation remains limited and often symbolic (Awal, 2019; Sultana, 2023). Survey data showed that only 5% of respondents had access to any form of bilingual instruction in their region, indicating the systemic absence of institutional support.

Community members expressed frustration with the lack of governmental response to language endangerment. During focus group discussions, several participants stated that while they are willing to preserve their language and culture, they lack the financial capacity, educational resources, and institutional recognition needed to sustain long-term efforts. One participant emphasized, "The government is not taking any initiatives so that our medium of instruction can be ethnic language or to preserve our language." This highlights a core issue: Community motivation exists, but policy and funding do not align with that motivation.

In the absence of effective government intervention, NGOs and informal community networks have emerged as key actors in language preservation. Local leaders and cultural practitioners have organized storytelling sessions, traditional performances, and informal language classes aimed at sustaining linguistic heritage. However, these efforts remain fragmented and unsupported. Participants described how these initiatives often rely on volunteers and lack materials or permanent facilities (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Haque *et al.*, 2018).

The role of digital tools and social media was also emphasized, particularly by younger community members. Respondents identified mobile applications, YouTube content, and Facebook-based learning groups as promising methods for revitalization, especially for youth who are already digitally active. However, digital efforts face challenges, including limited internet access, lack of technical training, and no official content in indigenous languages (Hasan *et al.*, 2022). Without proper integration into national digital education strategies, these tools remain underutilized.

Another key theme that emerged was the potential for formal partnerships between community organizations and government institutions. Participants argued that policies must go beyond legal recognition and provide direct, actionable support—such as funding for community-run language centers, inclusion of ethnic languages in primary school curricula, and training programs for bilingual teachers (Islam, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2016). Without these measures, top-down policy efforts risk remaining performative and disconnected from the grassroots realities of linguistic endangerment.

Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of considering intersectional barriers in language revitalization. For example, women and elders were identified as central to language transmission but are often excluded from decision-making processes and leadership roles in language programs. Gender and generational dynamics thus present both opportunities and challenges in mobilizing effective community-based initiatives (Amazonas *et al.*, 2019; Viscogliosi *et al.*, 2020).

While policy-level discourse around linguistic diversity exists in Bangladesh, its implementation is severely lacking. At the same time, grassroots community efforts have demonstrated resilience and creativity, yet they remain unsupported and disconnected from official frameworks. This disconnect suggests that meaningful language revitalization in Bangladesh requires not only reforming national policy but also fostering collaborative, community-centered approaches that empower local actors with the tools, recognition, and resources necessary to succeed (Rahman, 2023; Reza & Ullah, 2023; Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

The preservation of indigenous languages in Bangladesh requires more than symbolic policy acknowledgment—it demands inclusive, actionable strategies that link institutional frameworks with community-led efforts. This study has shown that while formal policies often fail to address the practical needs of indigenous communities, grassroots initiatives continue to play a critical role in language revitalization. However, these efforts remain underfunded, unsupported, and disconnected from national systems.

Effective revitalization must begin with recognizing communities not just as beneficiaries but as active agents of cultural sustainability. Community-based education, digital tools, and traditional practices offer valuable avenues for language learning and transmission. Yet, without coordination, funding, and recognition, these initiatives cannot achieve a sustainable impact.

To move forward, language policy in Bangladesh must prioritize the structural inclusion of indigenous languages in education and administration. Government institutions should collaborate with NGOs and community organizations to create localized language programs, develop bilingual materials, and invest in teacher training. Only through such integrated approaches can Bangladesh protect its rich linguistic diversity and empower its ethnic communities to thrive culturally and educationally.

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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