



## Indigenous Language Loss and the Decline of Traditional Sports among Ethnic Communities in Bangladesh

Ritesh Karmaker

Nizam Uddin Ahmed Model College, Mymensingh, Sherpur, Bangladesh

Correspondence: E-mail: [karmakerrites@gmail.com](mailto:karmakerrites@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Traditional sports and indigenous games are integral components of cultural identity, socialization, and physical education among ethnic communities. In Bangladesh, many traditional sports are transmitted through indigenous languages that encode rules, techniques, and cultural meanings. This study examines how indigenous language loss contributes to the decline of traditional sports among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative analytical approach based on existing empirical and cultural studies, the paper explores changes in the transmission of indigenous sports knowledge, participation patterns, and cultural valuation of traditional physical activities. The findings indicate that language loss disrupts intergenerational transmission of sports practices, reduces community participation, and weakens the cultural significance of indigenous games. The study highlights the importance of integrating language preservation into physical education and community-based sports programs to sustain indigenous sports heritage. These findings contribute to discussions on cultural sustainability, physical education, and indigenous knowledge systems.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional sports and indigenous games constitute an important dimension of cultural expression, physical education, and socialization among ethnic communities. These activities are not merely forms of recreation but also serve as cultural practices through which values, social norms, and collective identity are transmitted across generations. Among indigenous communities, traditional sports are closely linked to language, as rules, techniques, terminologies, and symbolic meanings are conveyed through indigenous linguistic systems. When indigenous languages decline, the cultural and instructional foundations of traditional sports are often weakened.

In Bangladesh, indigenous ethnic communities have historically maintained diverse forms of traditional physical activities shaped by local ecology, livelihood patterns, and cultural beliefs. Many indigenous games and sports are embedded in ritual events, seasonal cycles, and communal gatherings, reinforcing social cohesion and intergenerational bonding. Indigenous language plays a central role in sustaining these practices, as it enables the transmission of culturally specific instructions, narratives, and moral lessons associated with physical activities (Amin, 2018).

Language loss has increasingly disrupted this transmission process. As indigenous languages are replaced by dominant languages in everyday communication, traditional sports knowledge becomes fragmented or inaccessible to younger generations. Studies on indigenous communities in Bangladesh suggest that younger individuals are less familiar with traditional games, rules, and techniques, as these are no longer actively communicated in indigenous languages within households or communities (Ali et al., 2016). This linguistic shift contributes to declining participation in traditional sports and increased reliance on mainstream or globalized forms of physical activity.

Educational environments further influence these trends. Formal physical education curricula in Bangladesh prioritize standardized sports that align with national and global norms, often excluding indigenous games and physical practices. When indigenous sports are absent from school contexts, children from ethnic communities encounter limited institutional recognition of their cultural physical heritage (Awal, 2019). This exclusion reinforces the perception that traditional sports lack educational or social value, accelerating their decline.

The loss of the indigenous language also affects the cultural meaning of traditional sports. Indigenous games often carry symbolic significance related to cooperation, resilience, and communal responsibility. When the language associated with these activities is no longer understood or used, their cultural narratives and moral dimensions are diminished. Research on cultural marginalization indicates that the erosion of linguistic context leads to the simplification of traditional practices, reducing them to performative displays rather than lived cultural experiences (Bhuiyan, 2016).

Socioeconomic change further compounds this process. Indigenous communities experiencing economic marginalization and urban migration often adapt to dominant cultural practices to enhance social integration. As a result, traditional sports that require community participation, shared space, and cultural continuity are gradually replaced by mainstream physical activities promoted through dominant-language media and institutions (Beg et al., 2020). This transition reflects broader patterns of cultural adaptation under structural pressure.

Language loss also contributes to generational divides within indigenous communities. Elders who retain fluency in indigenous languages often possess extensive knowledge of

traditional sports and games, while younger generations lack both linguistic competence and experiential familiarity. This gap weakens intergenerational interaction and reduces opportunities for cultural transmission through physical activities ([Uddin, 2017](#)). Over time, the decline of traditional sports mirrors the broader erosion of indigenous cultural identity.

Although indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has been widely studied from sociolinguistic and policy perspectives, its implications for traditional sports and physical education remain underexplored. Existing research tends to emphasize language, education, or economic outcomes, with limited attention to embodied cultural practices such as sports and games ([Sultana, 2023](#)). Examining traditional sports through the lens of language loss provides insight into how cultural practices tied to physical activity are reshaped in multilingual societies.

Based on previous studies ([Karmaker, 2025; Karmaker, 2024](#)), this study addresses this gap by examining how indigenous language loss contributes to the decline of traditional sports among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. By focusing on physical activities as a cultural domain, the study highlights an often-overlooked consequence of linguistic marginalization. The analysis aims to contribute to discussions on physical education, cultural sustainability, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data analysis to explore the relationship between indigenous language loss and the decline of traditional sports among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The research design was appropriate given the study's emphasis on cultural meaning, community practices, and intergenerational transmission rather than quantitative measurement. All data were drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed academic sources included in the bibliographic list provided by the author.

The analysis focused on studies addressing indigenous culture, language use, social participation, and physical or communal practices. Particular attention was given to research discussing cultural marginalization, intergenerational transmission, and the role of language in sustaining traditional knowledge and practices ([Ali et al., 2016; Amin, 2018; Awal, 2019](#)). These sources provided contextual insights into how linguistic shifts influence participation in traditional sports.

A thematic synthesis method was applied to identify recurring patterns linking language decline with changes in traditional sports practices. Themes analyzed included the loss of indigenous sports terminology, reduced youth participation, institutional exclusion from education, and generational knowledge gaps. Findings across studies were compared to identify consistent relationships and contextual variations.

To ensure analytical rigor, only studies with clear cultural or sociological relevance were included. Cross-referencing among sources was conducted to minimize interpretive bias and enhance credibility. As the study relied solely on secondary sources and did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of existing studies indicates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has significantly contributed to the decline of traditional sports and indigenous games among ethnic communities. Traditional sports are deeply embedded in linguistic practices, as indigenous languages transmit rules, movement techniques, moral values, and cultural

meanings associated with physical activities. When indigenous languages weaken, the transmission of traditional sports knowledge becomes disrupted, resulting in declining participation and cultural disengagement (Amin, 2018; Sultana, 2023).

One of the most evident consequences of language loss is the erosion of indigenous sports terminology. Research shows that many traditional games rely on specific indigenous terms to describe movements, scoring systems, and social roles within the game. As dominant languages replace indigenous languages in everyday communication, these terms are gradually forgotten or substituted, reducing the accuracy and cultural depth of sports instruction (Bhuiyan, 2016). This linguistic erosion limits young participants' understanding of traditional sports and discourages active engagement.

Intergenerational transmission of sports knowledge has also weakened. Traditionally, elders introduce children to indigenous games through verbal instruction and demonstration using the indigenous language. Studies suggest that as younger generations increasingly communicate in dominant languages, opportunities for learning traditional sports diminish, creating generational gaps in physical cultural knowledge (Ali *et al.*, 2016). This gap contributes to reduced continuity of indigenous sports practices within communities.

Educational institutions further reinforce these trends. Formal physical education programs in Bangladesh prioritize standardized and globalized sports, often excluding indigenous games from curricula. When traditional sports are absent from educational contexts, indigenous children receive limited institutional recognition of their cultural physical heritage, accelerating disengagement from indigenous games (Awal, 2019). Language loss compounds this exclusion, as indigenous sports knowledge lacks both linguistic and institutional support.

Socioeconomic changes intensify the decline of traditional sports. Economic marginalization and urban migration reshape leisure practices among indigenous populations, favoring mainstream physical activities promoted through dominant-language media and urban lifestyles (Beg *et al.*, 2020). Traditional sports, which require community participation and shared cultural space, become less feasible in such environments. Language shift thus interacts with economic forces to reduce the visibility and practice of indigenous sports.

The patterns in **Table 1** highlight that language loss affects both the practice and meaning of traditional sports. While some games may persist in modified forms, the erosion of the indigenous language reduces their instructional clarity and cultural richness. This transformation mirrors broader processes of cultural marginalization, where dominant-language practices shape the valuation of indigenous physical activities.

Language loss also influences social cohesion through sports. Traditional games historically function as communal activities that reinforce cooperation, conflict resolution, and shared identity. As linguistic competence declines, participation in these collective practices decreases, weakening social bonds and communal interaction (Uddin, 2017). This decline affects not only physical activity levels but also community cohesion and cultural continuity.

**Table 1.** Effects of Indigenous Language Loss on Traditional Sports Practices. The table was synthesized from references (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Amin, 2018; Bhuiyan, 2016; Sultana, 2023).

Aspects of traditional sports	Observed change	Cultural implication
Indigenous sports terminology	Decline	Loss of culturally specific instruction
Knowledge transmission	Disrupted	Reduced continuity of sports practices
Youth participation	Decreasing	Preference for mainstream sports
Cultural meaning of sports	Simplified	Sports are seen as symbolic rather than lived

**Table 2** demonstrates that the decline of traditional sports is structurally driven rather than resulting from individual disinterest. Educational systems, economic pressures, and linguistic hierarchies collectively reshape physical activity patterns among indigenous communities. Language shift within households emerges as a critical factor, as it directly limits the transmission of sports knowledge and cultural values associated with physical practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh contributes to a gradual decline of traditional sports by weakening instructional transmission, reducing participation, and diminishing cultural meaning. While some traditional games may survive in adapted or performative forms, the erosion of linguistic foundations undermines their sustainability as living cultural practices. These results underscore the importance of integrating indigenous language preservation into physical education and community-based sports initiatives to sustain traditional sports heritage and promote culturally inclusive physical activity.

**Table 2.** Structural Factors Contributing to the Decline of Indigenous Traditional Sports. The table was derived from references ([Awal, 2019](#); [Beg et al., 2020](#); [Sultana, 2023](#); [Uddin, 2017](#)).

Structural factor	Influence on sports participation	Linguistic dimension
Dominant-language education	High	Exclusion of indigenous sports terminology
Urbanization and migration	High	Reduced communal space for traditional games
Socioeconomic marginalization	Moderate–High	Shift toward mainstream leisure activities
Cultural undervaluation	Moderate	Decline in perceived relevance of indigenous sports
Household language shift	High	Reduced intergenerational sports learning

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh plays a significant role in the decline of traditional sports among ethnic communities. The findings reveal that diminishing use of indigenous languages disrupts the transmission of sports-related knowledge, weakens participation in indigenous games, and reduces the cultural meanings embedded in traditional physical activities. As language shift occurs within households and educational environments, younger generations become increasingly detached from indigenous sports practices.

Socioeconomic pressures, urbanization, and dominant-language education further accelerate this decline by reshaping leisure patterns and marginalizing indigenous physical heritage. While some traditional sports may continue to exist in symbolic or performative forms, the erosion of linguistic foundations undermines their sustainability as living cultural practices. These findings highlight the importance of integrating indigenous language preservation into physical education curricula and community-based sports programs. Sustaining traditional sports heritage requires attention not only to physical activity but also to the linguistic environments that support cultural transmission and community cohesion.

## 5. 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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