

Medium of Instruction in the Schools of Assam: a Dilemma between Self identity and Unification

AMAR UPADHYAYA

Assistant Professor Dept. of Education, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh-786004

Email: amarupadhyaya2013@gmail.com

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Abstract Education is always considered as a medium of social transformation. Education transmits the cultural and social identity of an individual or group of individuals from one generation to another generation. In broad sense education is the sum total of knowledge of society. During the present era the formal education has a crucial role to be played in transforming the existing knowledge and exploring the new knowledge in the human society. The formal system which is also called school system is highly responsible in this context. Now the question is if the demographic distribution of a particular region is highly uneven and each demographic group wants to sponsor their own language as medium of instruction, what would be the best solution. How does the governing system accommodate it? This paper highlights the same scenario in the school system of Assam, which is culturally and demographically diverse state of North East India. As Assam is a Tribal dominated state, the new generation of tribal segments is mostly the first generation learners. The greater Assamese society covers the sub communities like Tie- Ahom, Tie- Phake, Bodo, Missing, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa, Konch, Sonowal, Kachari, Kalita, Dimasa, Tea Tribes, Gorkhas, Maran, Mattak, Khanti, Koibatra, Bengali and many more. Most of these communities have their own language or dialect and cultural traditions. Now the critical aspect is whether these communities get educated through Assamese language as medium of instruction or their own language as medium of instruction. This brings the dilemma between self identity and unification. Again the growth of English medium schools in Assam has shown another dimension of the aspect.

Keywords: Medium of Instruction, School, Assam, Self identity, Unification

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is always considered as a medium of social transformation. Education transmits the cultural and social identity of an individual or group of individuals from one generation to another generation. In broad sense education is the sum total of knowledge of a society. During the present era, the formal education has a crucial role to be played in transforming the existing knowledge and exploring the new knowledge in the human society. The formal system which is also called school system is highly responsible in this context. The importance of formal as well as informal types of education has always been emphasized to make the society more dynamic. In this context, language has a vital place in making the education more sensitized and effective. **Kumar (1986)** defines language in the book *“The Child’s language and the Teacher”* as *“Most of us are so used to defining language as a means of communication that we often forget its usefulness as a means to think, feel, and react to things. This wider use of language is extremely important for people who want to work with young children for in childhood language plays a formative role in the development of the child’s personality and abilities.”* The Language is the best way to preserve and transmit cultural and educational heritage from one generation to other. Now the question is if the demographic distribution of a particular region is highly uneven and each demographic group wants to sponsor their own language as medium of instruction, what would be the best solution. How does the governing system accommodate it? How to preserve and transmit the language and culture of each and every linguistic group. Does one common language is the best solution to accommodate the all population segments of a society? This paper highlights the same scenario in the school system of Assam, which is culturally and demographically diverse state of North east India. As Assam is a Tribal dominated state, the new generation of tribal segments is mostly the first generation learners. The greater Assamese society covers the sub communities like Tie- Ahom, Tie- Phake, Bodo, Missing, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa, Konch, Sonowal, Kachari, Kalita, Dimasa, Tea Tribes, Gorkhas, Maran, Mattak, Khamti, Koibatra, Bengali and many more. Most of these communities have their own language or dialect and cultural traditions. Now the critical aspect is whether these communities get educated through Assamese language as medium of instruction or their own language as medium of instruction. This brings the dilemma between self identity and unification. Again the growth of English medium schools in Assam is seen as another crucial dimension of this aspect. Due to over emphasis on English the flavor of mother tongue may be lost. The research studies had showed the impact of English education on mother tongue. **Azu (2013)** conducted a study

on Impact of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism on English Language Education: The Case of Arunachal Pradesh and found that The impact of multilingualism on English education can be observed in phonological influence of mother tongues of the different speech communities, the verbatim transcription of it in English in spoken as well as written form. Influence of mother tongues can be heard all around in the state. It affects in speaker's fluency in other languages. The importance of mother tongue in education has realized through the findings of different research studies. **Kadel (2010)** found that instruction in mother tongue is highly important at the beginning of education, for development of strong educational foundation. **Ball (2010)** asserted that children learn best in their mother tongue as a foundation for and bilingual and multilingual education. This implication of mother tongue in school education makes the situation more complex in case of Assam. In context of Assam, the over emphasis on self identity may disintegrate the Assamese Society and culture. Again the high tendency of unification may threat to the ethnic language and culture. ***So in this context three crucial points can be highlighted:***

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- Should education be provided through own Mother tongue? This may fulfill the constitutional provisions for the ethnic groups but on the other hand it may disintegrate the whole Assamese language and culture.
- Should education be provided through Assamese as medium of instruction? This may lead to the integration of Assamese language and culture but it may be a threat to the ethnic language and culture.
- Should education be provided through English as medium of instruction? It may globalize the education but it will certainly create threats to the whole Assamese culture as well as the ethnic characteristics of different indigenous communities.

So, this paper seeks answer about what would be the best suitable option as medium of instruction for the schools of Assam.

A brief view on Linguistic composition of Assam: In 1951,120 languages were recorded as mother tongue in Assam and the number rose to 200 in 1971. Some of them are new languages names, as some almost dead and extinct dialects even came up as languages during the period. This is the result of the ethnic consciousness gradually developed amongst different groups which were in process of assimilation into the greater and larger indigenous society of Assam called the Assamese. The table below shows the principal languages of undivided Assam spoken with the given the number of speakers and the percentage of speakers to the total population.

Table 1: No. of persons speaking and Percentage of the Language in 1971.

Language	1971	1971
Assamese	8,904,917	60.89
Bengali	2,882,039	19.71
Hindi	792,481	5.42
Khasi	20,082	0.14
Garo	76,004	0.52
Bodo/Boro	533,713	3.65
Lushai/Muzo	4,001	0.03
Nepali	349,116	2.39
Karbi	191,354	1.31
Oriya	150,196	1.03
Manipuri	97,167	0.60
Santali	86,086	0.59
Miri	177,226	1.21

Source: SSo Source: *Census of India*, 1961, Vol. III. Assam Part I-A, General Report, p.210.

Table 2: Language spoken in Assam as declared Mother Tongue (as percent to total population).

	1951	1961	1971	1991	2001
Assamese	61.9	62.6	60.9	57.8	48.8
Bengali	21.4	19.0	19.7	21.7	27.5
Bodo	2.1	2.6	3.7	5.3	4.9
Hindi	4.2	5.1	5.4	4.6	5.9
Other Languages	10.5	10.7	10.3	10.6	12.9

Source: Barooah, V.K., "The Killing Fields of Assam", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII No 4, 2013

Language in Assam always remained a contentious issue. The table 2 clearly depicted that fall in the share of Assamese speaking people in the state through the decades has been seen by the natives of the state as a threat. It has several causes. The most important is the migration of Bangladeshis from the other side of the border. And another is during the recent time due to political elements, sense of self identity and a sense of alienation among sections of people started to declare their native language as their mother tongue. Each population segment has been trying to preserve and flourish their language

and literature to secure their cultural and racial identity. This is a crucial issue to be addressed in a state like Assam where population is culturally diverse.

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2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- a. To analyze the present status of Vernacular and English medium schools in Assam.
- b. To highlight the rising trend of demand of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.
- c. To analyze the observations and recommendations of different Commissions and Policies regarding the language and medium of instructions in school education.
- d. To provide probable suggestions to accommodate the local languages as medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.

2.1 Methodology

The paper is based on secondary data source. The secondary data were collected from the reports of local, national and international agencies. The investigator had also used internet sources to fulfill the objectives stated in the paper.

2.2 Analysis of Objectives and Findings

The analysis is made objective wise:

- *To analyze the present status of vernacular and English medium schools in Assam*

The growth of education sector in Assam is not very far from the national growth. The school education in Assam is mainly managed under the state government. There are following type of schools found in the state of Assam as per the report of DISE.

- **Schools under Department of Education (State Government):** Schools run under the finance and management control of State government.
- **Private Aided School:** Schools run under private management but with a portion of financial support from government.
- **Private Unaided School:** Schools run under private management without any financial support from government.
- **Tribal/social welfare Department:** Schools run by Tribal/Social welfare Department.
- **Local Body:** Schools run under the management of local body like Panchayat, Municipality, Zila Parishad etc.

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- **Schools under Central Government:** Schools run under the finance and management of Central government.
- **Unrecognized Venture & Private:** Schools running without recognition and financial support.
- **Schools run by PSUs:** Schools run under the finance and management control of companies like OIL, IOCL, BVFCL etc.

2.3 Categorization of Schools on The Basis of Management

This categorization is important to see the increasing trend of management from Government to private. As most of the private schools are in English medium, this reflects the interest of peoples toward the English medium education instead of mother tongue and Assamese as medium of instruction. This is because-

- Increasing consciousness among the ethnic communities towards their culture and language. When the education is not provided in their own mother tongue, they agree for education through English as medium of

Table 3: Distribution of schools according to management.

Management	Primary	Primary with Upper Primary	Primary with upper primary and secondary/ higher secondary	Upper Primary only	Upper Primary with secondary/ higher secondary	Total	Percentage to total schools
Department of Education	35,061	941	3	4,884	1474	42,363	69.3
Private aided & Unaided	742	518	887	5477	304	7930	13
Others & unrecognized	9932	96	92	577	120	10817	17.7

Table 4: Number of Schools with different mediums.

	Number of schools	Percentage to total schools
Assamese	46,775	76.54
Bangla	8310	13.6
Hindi	573	.094
English	2,075	3.4
Bodo	2,816	4.61
Total schools in Assam	61,110	99.09

Source: DISE 2011-12

instruction instead of Assamese. After all both the languages are not their mother tongue.

- The rising trend of English as medium of instruction is also caused by its significance in the globalised world.

Language in general and particularly in elementary education remains one of the vital issues. The governments are constitutionally obligated to provide adequate facilities of instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) has also emphasized education in mother tongue in early school years. The majority of schools in Assam (76.54%) reported Assamese as the primary medium of instruction. Again 13.6% Bengali medium, .094% Hindi medium, 3.4% English medium and 4.61% Bodo medium. As table 2 reflects that in 2001 the percentage of population who accepted Assamese as mother tongue was 48.8 % but the share of Assamese medium schools in 2011-12 was 76.54%. This indicates that the other ethnic communities have accepted Assamese as their medium of instruction. But in recent trend the growth of English education in Assam cannot be ignored. Though the numbers of English schools are less but their enrollment is significant.

- ***To highlight the rising trend of demand of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the schools of Assam:***

The each community has been demanding their education in their mother tongue and it is in rising trend. As the constitution of India has emphasized and legalized the education in mother tongue, it is common, to demand the same by the different communities of Assam.

The dilemma of fear of losing self identity in the globalised world has really impacted on the ethnic groups of Assam in selection of medium of instruction. As everyone knows that education is only the strongest and permanent channel through which the language can be protected and nourished. This realization of importance of mother tongue as medium of instruction is counter attack by the heavy spread of global language (English) as medium of instruction. So, the dilemma between 'education through mother tongue' and 'education through English' has led the Assamese people in a confusion stage. Growth and development of English as the medium of education is contradicted by the increasing assertion of and demands for institutional recognition of indigenous languages.

The diversity of indigenous languages creates a problem of identity which again ultimately leads to the peoples towards unification through Assamese or English language. In the context of Assam, language can be arranged as

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- Mother tongue: Assamese, Bodo, Karbi, Bengali, Nepali, Saotali, Missing, Deori, Tai, Rabha,
- State language or Regional language: Assamese
- National language: Hindi
- Global language: English

Now for example, question arises for a Bodo child that in what language he/she should be educated? Should he/she be educated by Bodo as medium of instruction, which is his/her mother tongue? Should he/she go to Assamese medium school or English education? Here question arises about self identity. If education is provided through Bodo language, than the local language will be strengthen but the unification towards to the Assamese language will be hampered. Again if he/she is educated through English as medium of instruction than the flavor of mother tongue will be lost, which ultimately endanger the indigenous language. So, it is a very crucial aspect to be considered in policy making. Govt. has to initiate for the survival of indigenous languages and culture as well as the unification of the whole Assamese society.

The State of Assam has already witnessed several community classes which are basically associated with the process of Self Identity. The major clashes can be point out as-

- Karbis clash with Kukis,
- Dimasas with Zemes,
- Rabhas with Garos,
- Bodos with Santhals
- Bodos with Muslims

The demand of separate Bodoland by the Bodo community on the basis of language is also the crucial issue to be addressed by the govt. Government has to deal with the issues of language and culture as well as the medium of instruction very cautiously so that it should not be a threat for the whole Assamese society. The tribal and other communities should not feel that they are excluded from the mainstream of the Assamese society. Assamese Language is one of the best ways to intake the cultural ethnicities of greater Assamese society.

- *To analyze the observations and recommendations of different Commissions and Policies regarding the language and medium of instructions:*

Before recommending any suggestions, it is essential to analyze the recommendations made by Education policies and Commissions constituted in the country in different periods of time.

The Indian Education Commission (1964-66) recommended that- the languages has to be dealt with very cautiously in the education system of India. The Commission recommended that the regional languages are already in use as media of education at the primary and secondary stages and urgent steps should now be taken to adopt them as media of education at the University stage. The Commission also recommended three-Language Formula at the secondary stage of School Education. The three-language formula includes the study of a modern Indian language, apart from Hindi and English in the Hindi-speaking States, and of Hindi along with the regional language and English in the non-Hindi speaking States. The commission also focused on development of Modern Indian Languages through the education system. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the development of the Indian languages is both urgent and essential for the development of the Indian people and as a way of bringing together the elite and the masses. It can make scientific and technical knowledge more easily accessible to the people in their own languages and thus help not only in the progress of industrialization but also in the wider dissemination of science and the scientific outlook.”¹ This recommendation has supported mother tongue strongly as a measure to promote social and national integration. The Emotional Integration Committee was of the view that the use of regional languages as media of education from the lowest to the highest stage of education was a matter of ‘profound importance for national integration’.

The New Education Policy (1986) recommended that- The socio-cultural milieu of the STs has its distinctive characteristics including, in many cases, their own spoken languages. This underlines the need to develop the curricula and devise Instructional materials in tribal languages at the initial stages, with arrangements for switching over to the regional language.

Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy, 2016 highlighted that the tribal finds it difficult to understand the regional language which is the medium of instruction in the education system. However, the general feeling was that while the medium should be regional language, in the initial grades, it should be taught through local dialect. The Committee said that in the initial stages teachers would need training and requisite learning material in local dialect. The Committee recommends that the medium of instruction up to Class V must be the mother tongue or regional language. Regarding Three Language Formula (TLF) the Committee found that it has not been uniformly implemented in many states. With the passage of time the states have responded to local aspirations and preferences voiced by parents who would like their children to possess language communication skills that

¹Vol. 2: School Education, Education and National Development Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, Published by National Council Of Educational Research And Training, 1970, New Delhi 16.

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can facilitate intra-state, intra-regional as well as global mobility. Keeping this in mind, the Committee recommends that as long as the states ensure that the mother tongue or the regional language forms the basis of primary education up to Class V the choice of the second (at primary level) and third language (at secondary level) should be left to individual states to decide.”²

So, the Education Commissions and Education Policies of the country have also strongly emphasized on mother tongue as medium of instruction. In this context, it is a critical aspects for the policy makers of the state.

- ***To provide probable suggestions to accommodate the local languages as medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.***

This paper recommends the following points to be considered to deal with the language issue in medium of instruction in the schools of Assam:

- a. In Assam due to existence of various indigenous communities, the numbers of Mother tongues are high. So, it is a difficult situation for the government to accommodate all the communities in respect of their mother tongue as medium of instruction in schools.
- b. Those who want education through mother tongue, the govt. should give the provision of mother tongue specially in primary stage. After all it is a constitutional provision. Along with this the focus should also be made on Hindi and English language as a subject. Again, Assamese should also be learnt as a regional language.
- c. Those who want education in Assamese as medium of instruction, the focus should also be made on Hindi and English language as a subject.
- d. Those who want education through English as medium of instruction, the regional language i.e. Assamese should be made compulsory from class I to XII. This is because Assamese language and culture can only unify the peoples of Assam. It can only preserve the Assamese sentiments. Hindi should also be taught.
- e. Those who want education through Hindi as medium of instruction, the regional language i.e. Assamese as well as English should be made compulsory from class I to XII.
- f. Now question also arises that if a student spend so much of time on learning only languages, than the importance of other core subjects will be reduced, which should not be happened at any cost. Because of this reason, presently in Assam, the emerging English medium schools are keen to follow with a focus on content subjects rather than language. This is one of the main reasons behind the *growth of English medium schools*

² Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy (National Policy on Education 2016), Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 30/04/2016.

in Assam. This situation may lead to crisis of self identity among the indigenous communities of Assam.

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CONCLUSION

The paper is highly concerned about the growing importance of English as a medium of instruction in the state of Assam. On the one hand the indigenous communities are demanding to use and preserve the traditional languages through the medium of education and on the other hand the rising importance of English really makes the scholars anxious. Language is the identity of a society. Though English is essential in the globalised world but the importance of mother tongue should not be ignored. So, the best way is to focus on self identity with a unified gesture, which ultimately helps in forming a greater Assamese Society.

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