

It Starts at Home:
Community Involvement for
Language Rejuvenation in
Northeast India

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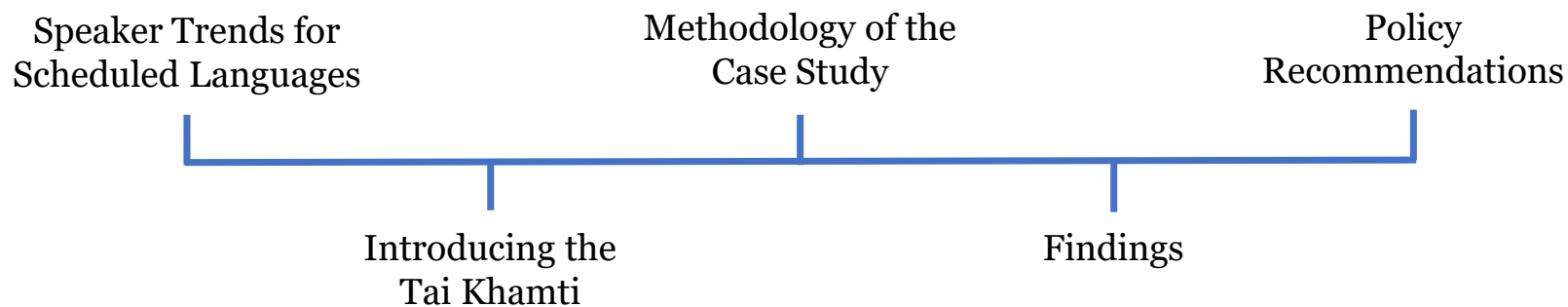
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Community and Culture

Community involvement is sufficient to undertake language rejuvenation with policymakers playing a facilitative role.



Fading Lights in the Northeast

Languages at risk of dying out due to a lack of speakers are known as **endangered languages**.

Language shift is when speakers of a language are drawn away from the mother tongue towards another dominant language.

Majority tongue is the “default” language of an area, in which most information relating to education or public affairs is communicated.

Northeast has highest per capita language in world: People's Linguistic Survey of India

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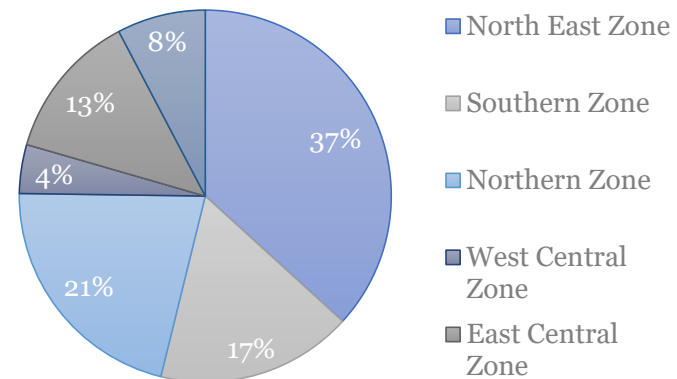
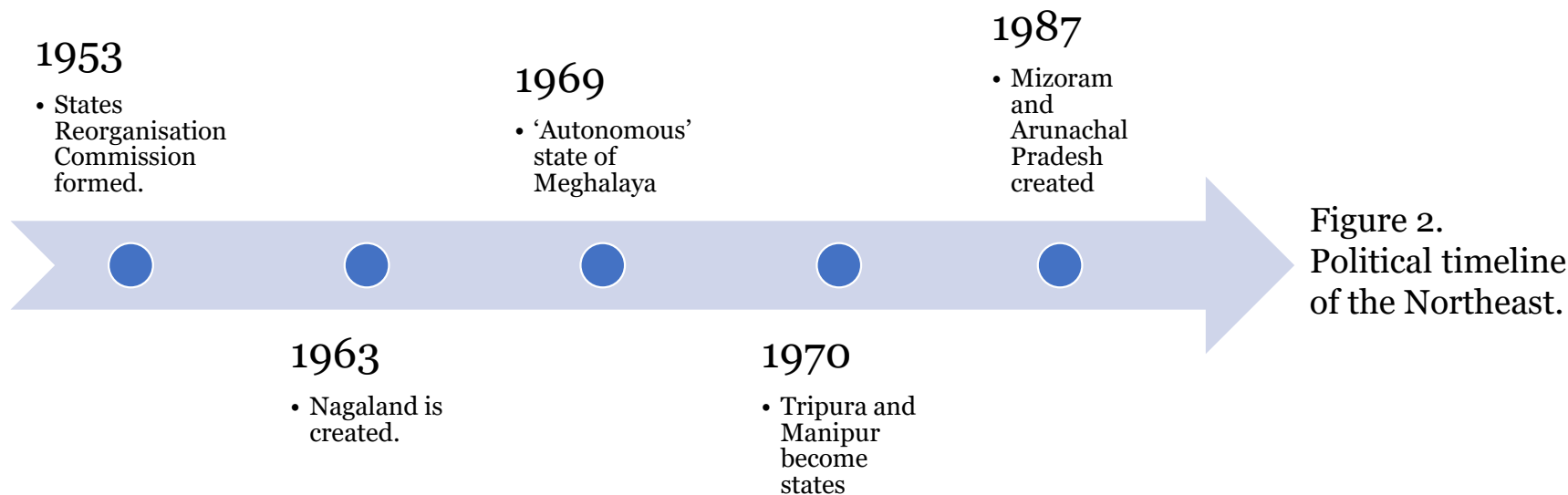


Figure 1. Zonal division of the SPPEL Endangered Languages List

Did Autonomy Deliver?



“Even the smallest of the mini states of north-east India is anything but culturally or linguistically homogeneous.”

Baruah, S. (1989). Minority Policy in the North-East: Achievements and Dangers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24(37), 2087-2091.

Quantitatively Explaining Language Shift

26.7%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Arunachal Pradesh during the 1990s

223%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Mizoram during the 1990s

6.53%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Assam during the 2000s

20.5%

Growth in share of scheduled language speakers to population in Nagaland during the 2000s

The Tai Khamti

Figure 3.
Namsai marked
in red.



- Resident in Namsai District
- Two-level social stratification
- Language is both majority and minority at different subnational levels
- Spread across economic strata
- Speaker counts range from:
 - 12,890 (Census 2011)
 - 5,000 (Gaur et al., 2022)
 - 7,500 (Morey, 2005)

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews (n=10)

Respondents included:

- Government workers
- Teachers
- Independent artistes
- Clergymen

Age range [25, 56].

Literate; educated up to graduate level.

*Reversing
Language
Shift*

(Fishman, 1991)



Cultural markers included:

- Language identification and maintenance
- Indigenous knowledge and documentation
- Linguistic culture like honorific usage
- Narrative methods

Findings

On community identification

- “thoda Hindi toh bolte hai” – multiple speakers
- Hindi vs. Assamese
- Elder to younger – language maintenance
- “We learn English only in school” – Namchoom
- Tai Khamti Heritage and Literary Society
- “Two or three generations from now, Khamti will still be spoken.”

On indigenous knowledge

- No dictionary, script digitalisation in progress – Mannoï
- No textbooks, teachers use Myanmarese material
- Das and Tag (2004) vs. Mounkang
- Indigenous context and its uniqueness (Abbi, 2021)
- Inability to translate – word will die with the language

Findings

On the use of honorifics

- Honorifics carried over into majority tongue speech without translation
- When asked, translation becomes onerous
- Characteristic transferred by language, not of culture - linguistic culture (Schiffman, 1996)

On narrative forms

- Almost all have heard folktales, few can remember
- “Like my father used to tell me stories, I cannot quite remember that. Some stories I can tell... (but) not quite narrate like that.”
- Unique to the culture – not translations
- Songs performed at festivals, recorded and distributed as physical media and online

Recommendations

- Cultural programmes
 - Ceremonial use, reaffirming identity
 - Provides forum for community
 - Must be provided resources
- Building local capacity
 - Community stakeholders – good for research & for inclusive decision-making
 - Training in documentation, provision of tools and resources
- Funding for data collection
 - Large repositories require technical tools
 - Disparity between current grants and grants abroad
 - Gaur et al. (2022) report outdated primary data
- Reference materials
 - Absence of material limits maintenance
 - Initiative is taken by community
 - Resource-intensive task requires support

*“Only a community can keep its language alive.
No governmental or non-governmental
initiative is sufficient in this regard.”*

- Gaur, C. R., Dey, S., & Mamta, K. (2022). Tribal and
Indigenous Languages of India. UNESCO.