



Exploring Preservation Techniques for Ethnic Minority Languages in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Preservation of ethnic minority languages has been highlighted worldwide. However, very few studies highlighted the preservation techniques worldwide. But a very few studies in Bangladesh context are rare. To minimize this gap, this study explores the existing literature for a sustainable policy reform to preserve the ethnic minority languages in Bangladesh. Our study explores effective preservation mechanism for policy. It covers the nature, knowledge and language preservation policies worldwide. In this viewpoint, this study depends on a multi-stage search process of literature, which is designed by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain a focused analysis. Based on the findings from the literature, our study suggests that independent national language commission, mother tongue-based multilingual education and digital linguistic bank are essential techniques to preserve ethnic minority languages in Bangladesh. These recommendations might be useful for national and international policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders to design national language policy for ethnic minority languages.

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Background

The 1952 Language Movement is deeply ingrained in Bangladesh's linguistic identity. With 98% of the population using Bangla as their primary language, with this scenario Language Movement now reflects the demographic reality that the language is the ultimate medium for mass communication, state administration, and national unity, resulting in an atmosphere that seems to be monolingual. A critical examination, however, shows that this dominance frequently hides the complex multilingual customs that are a part of Bangladeshi culture. While Bangla maintains ideological supremacy, the functional necessity of English in the judiciary and corporate sectors, alongside the deep-seated presence of Arabic in religious spheres, suggests a complex linguistic hierarchy that the current "monolingual" state narrative fails to fully acknowledge.

Bangladesh, which has 41 different languages, is a country with considerable linguistic stratification despite its apparent homogeneity (Faquire, 2010). While 98% of total population consists of the Bangali ethnolinguistic community, the remaining 2% comprises approximately 45 different ethnic communities using around 26 to 40 distinct languages, which have cultural legacy and is position under danger (Islam, 2020). These ethnic minority languages lack the institutional support required for survival because they are marginalized in national discourse. There is a gap between the country's celebrated history of linguistic rights and its current treatment of linguistic diversity because ethnic people face significant obstacles to social mobility in the absence of formal recognition; mother tongues of ethnic people are excluded from the formal structures of education and law (Gupta, 1997).

The urgent creation of a National Language Policy (NLP) is required due to the conflict between unilingual and a multilingual reality. By redefining linguistic variety as a national asset rather than an obstacle to integration, such a framework would close the divide between the excluded minority and the dominating majority. A comprehensive strategy would bring the state's legal framework into line with its pluralistic and globalized reality by standardizing

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and defining the functional roles of Arabic and English language. In the end, safeguarding all 41 languages is more than simply a practical requirement for a country that emerged from a fight against linguistic hegemony; it is a moral requirement of social fairness and an essential step toward preserving true national integrity.

Our study has a significant impact because it brings urgent gaps in understanding the dimensions of ethnic minority languages loss, offering relevant policy recommendations based on the findings from related observational studies, enrich related literature, and develop specific guidelines for preservation of ethnic minority languages. Objectives of the study are to explore essential facts and findings from different countries, and develop a need-based national language policy for ethnic minority groups.

Literature Review

Every government's choice of language or languages to use when interacting with its citizens is guided by its language policy (Wyss, 2020). In actuality, however, Bangladesh is not the only country facing the difficulty of striking a balance between linguistic nationalism and functional multilingualism. The “98 vs. 2” dilemma, in which a dominant majority language coexists with several minority or indigenous tongues, has been handled in a variety of ways by countries throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. A road map for balancing mother-tongue preservation with national unity can be found by examining the experiences of nearby nations like Sri Lanka and Bhutan as well as global examples like Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Nigeria.

The linguistic journey of Sri Lanka serves as a powerful testament to the volatility of language politics and the necessity of inclusive governance. History of this nation was long defined by the “Sinhala Only” Act of 1956, a policy that prioritized one language at the expense of social harmony, eventually fueling ethnic conflict. Critically, the subsequent shift toward a trilingual framework- integrating Sinhala,

Tamil, and English as a link language- marks a strategic move toward social reconciliation (Wyss, 2020). By embedding these languages into the functional bedrock of the state, including Parliament, provincial councils, the judiciary, and the education system, Sri Lanka has attempted to use language policy as a mechanism for peace-building (Herath, 2015). This transition highlights that for a multilingual state, legal inclusivity is not merely a linguistic choice but a prerequisite for political stability.

In contrast, Bhutan represents a unique model of “linguistic engineering,” where policy is used proactively to balance traditional identity with global integration. To unify a landscape of over 20 diverse native languages- such as Tshangla, Lakha, and Lepcha- the government promoted Dzongkha as a central pillar of cultural defense and national heritage (Dorjee, 2014). However, Approach of Bhutan is notably pragmatic; while Dzongkha is standardized to preserve soul of the nation, English is strategically employed as the medium for modern education, business, and global diplomacy. This dual-track system allows for a functional synergy where Dzongkha dominates the National Assembly and cultural life, while both languages are encouraged in official correspondence. Unlike the reactive shifts seen in Sri Lanka, Bhutan’s model demonstrates how a state can consciously design a bilingual path to navigate the demands of both local preservation and global presence.

Beyond the sub-continent, post-colonial states demonstrate diverse strategies for navigating the tensions of globalization through language. The Philippines emerged as a pioneer of “Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education” (MTB-MLE), legally mandating 19 indigenous languages in early schooling to foster cognitive bridges toward Filipino and English (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2025). However, this ambitious framework has recently faced significant legislative challenges, with 2024–2025 marking a shift toward “flexible” implementation due to resource constraints. In contrast, Thailand has traditionally maintained a “unilingual” stance centered on Standard Thai as a tool for national consolidation. Yet, recent shifts- characterized by a “regrowth of interest” in regional dialects and a

push for English proficiency- reveal a pragmatic attempt to remain competitive within the ASEAN region (Sahan et al., 2025). These cases illustrate that even established unilingual states must eventually negotiate with the multilingual demands of regional integration and local identity.

In other post-colonial contexts, language policy acts as a fragile “official bridge” between competing ethnic and economic interests. Malaysia exemplifies a perpetual “tug-of-war” between heritage and utility, with policies fluctuating between Bahasa Melayu for nationalistic identity and English for scientific and technological advancement (Renganathan, 2023). This oscillating approach reflects the difficulty of balancing indigenous pride with the requirements of a globalized economy. Similarly, Nigeria, with its vast landscape of over 500 indigenous languages, utilizes English as a neutral “official” medium to mitigate ethnic friction among its major groups- Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (Batibo, 2005). In these fragmented societies, the choice of a colonial “link language” is less an endorsement of imperialism and more a strategic necessity for maintaining political stability. Ultimately, these global experiences suggest that successful language policies must balance the symbolic power of local tongues with the functional power of international ones.

Methodology

For our study to be transparent, and less biased, we follow a multi-stage process design. To maintain the focus of our study, we establish clear guidelines for what should and should not be included in our literature review. Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, newspapers, edited books, working papers, and dissertations from a specific time period are given greater weight under the first criterion. However, editorials and articles in languages other than English that are directly relevant to the primary recommendations fall under the final criterion.

Several digital databases and repositories are reviewed in order to ensure a comprehensive compilation of information and data. These include the official websites of the Ministry of Cultural

Affairs, UNESCO, the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO (BNCU), the National Text Book Board (NCTB), the Ministry of Education, and the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), in addition to popular and extensively used research and academic websites like Science Direct, JSTORE, and Research Gate.

The search strategy combines certain keywords that are relevant to the objectives of our study with Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT). These methodical literature reviews ensure that a broad variety of still-relevant material is found, encompassing both the fundamental theories and the most recent findings in the field of ethnic minority languages.

To reduce the pool of available literature, the selection techniques employ a multi-tier screening procedure. To eliminate duplicate entries and studies that are not pertinent based on meta-data, a title and abstract screening is first carried out. Second, we thoroughly read the remaining papers to ensure that they adhere to the rigorous research criteria and have the necessary subject relevance for our investigation. The finalized core literature set serves as the foundation for the study.

The final stage, integration, involves comparing data and conclusions from many social and economic contexts. This stage allows us to examine both single instances that deviate from the norm and broad trends in ethnic minority languages. This provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Human subjects are not used in our work, and careful citation upholds research integrity. We review each document for internal validity, the reasoning behind its policy implications, and its conclusions.

Preservation Techniques for Ethnic Minority Languages

Multiple structural and socio-cultural challenges are the commonly

identified problems for preserving ethnic minority languages in Bangladesh. Lack of political commitment along with limited institutional and administrative supports, the dominance of Bangla in education and print and electronic media, shortage of standardized writing systems, and shortage of teaching materials and trained educators are the main barriers to preserving ethnic minority languages. In addition, insufficient documentation and research on ethnic minority languages are far from providing policy guidelines and ways forward for preserving ethnic minority languages. To minimize these impediments, it is essential to consider the following policies.

Constitutional Refinement and Inclusive Governance

A reliable NLP must start by balancing the state's pluralistic reality with its single identity. The strategy should formally identify the 41 indigenous languages as "National Heritage Languages" while upholding Article 3 of the Constitution's sanctity of Bangla as the state language. In order to ensure that the spirit of the 1952 Language Movement is extended to the 2% minority population, this legislative framework would move the state from a "unilingual" position to a "rights-based" multilingual paradigm. The state can remove the systemic obstacles that communities like the Chakma, Marma, and Santal currently face by creating an independent National Language Commission, which would provide the guideline and framework required to protect ethnic minority and endangered languages and offer translation services in the judiciary and public administration.

Standardizing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

The policy must close the cognitive gap between the national language and the home language in order to be considered educationally valid. In order to ensure literacy and cognitive development, the proposed structure promotes a three-tier linguistic model: using the Mother Tongue as the primary medium of instruction from Pre-Primary to Grade 3; progressively introducing Bangla as the national link language; and strategically integrating English as a global tool for science and

technology. The “periphery effect,” in which minority pupils drop out as a result of linguistic marginalization, is avoided by this planned transition. The program guarantees that language diversity is viewed as a national asset that promotes rather than impedes social mobility and academic performance by standardizing curriculum materials in indigenous scripts and training specialized teachers.

Balancing Functional Utility and Cultural Integrity

The “tug-of-war” between cultural heritage and global utility in the professional and religious spheres must also be addressed by a strong strategy. This entails acknowledging the usefulness of Arabic in the citizens’ religious and cultural lives while also elucidating the importance of English in the corporate and judicial sectors to preserve competitiveness in the global economy. The policy would go beyond ideological arguments in favor of a practical distribution of linguistic functions by establishing a Digital Linguistic Bank. In the end, this all-encompassing framework guarantees Bangladesh’s continued unity as a country where national integrity is established through an organized, inclusive, and justice-focused approach to its 41-language reality rather than through linguistic erasure.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The proposed National Language Policy (NLP) for Bangladesh highlights a critical development from a historically “unilingual” state narrative to a “right-based” multilingual paradigm. By formally recognizing the 41 languages of ethnic minority as “National Heritage Languages,” Bangladesh can reduce the gap between the 1952 Language Movement and the marginalization of ethnic minorities. Our study suggests that a structured approach, i.e., balancing the constitutional sanctity of Bangla with the functional utility of English and Arabic and the preservation of mother tongues is a moral and practical necessity for social justice and national integrity.

In order to obtain this version, it is recommended that the government should create a separate NLP to protect ethnic minority

languages that are in danger of extinction and to offer translation support services when needed. Additionally, the Ministry of Education, IMLI, and NCTB should collaborate to develop a policy for implementing need-based MTB-MLE and create a three-tier linguistic model where the mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction from Pre-Primary to Grade 3 with financial and technical support from the UNESCO. Finally, it is crucial to generate a digital linguistic bank essential for preserving ethnic minority languages as a part of cultural heritage without sacrificing global economic competitiveness.

Despite these comprehensive recommendations, our study faces a set of lacunas. The methodology relied heavily on literature survey and secondary data from reputable database rather than primary field surveys or direct consultations with community leaders of all 41 ethnic groups. As a result, while our recommendations draw valuable lessons from global and regional ethnic minority languages preservation practices like the Philippines and Sri Lanka, it may not fully capture the unique, localized socio-economic barriers or the specific script-readiness of endangered languages in Bangladesh. Future research should incorporate longitudinal field studies to assess the practical feasibility and resource constraints of implementing such a wide-scale linguistic transition.

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