



Preserving Indigenous Languages and Cultures in India through NEP 2020: Multilingual Education, Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Sustainability

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ABSTRACT:

India's extraordinary linguistic diversity forms a vital part of its cultural, intellectual, and civilisational heritage. Indigenous and minority languages are repositories of collective memory, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, cultural values, and community identity. However, unequal educational, economic, administrative, and technological structures often enable dominant languages to displace indigenous languages from important domains, weakening intergenerational transmission of language and culture.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides an important framework for addressing these challenges through its emphasis on multilingualism, mother-tongue or home-language education, Indian languages, bilingual learning materials, local cultural contexts, and Indian Knowledge Systems. It recommends the use of the home, mother, local, or regional language as the medium of instruction, wherever possible, at least until Grade 5 and preferably beyond Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 further stresses local language, culture, heritage, indigenous knowledge, and traditional learning practices (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023). UNESCO's *Bhasha Matters: State of the Education Report for India 2025* likewise highlights mother-tongue-based multilingual education as essential to inclusion and linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2025).

Focusing particularly on Assam and North-East India, this paper critically examines NEP 2020 through Language Ecology, Linguistic Human Rights, Additive Multilingualism, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Cultural Sustainability. It proposes the **DECDI framework—Documentation, Educational Inclusion, Community Participation, Digital Revitalisation, and Intergenerational Transmission**—to translate policy vision into sustainable practice. The paper argues that preservation requires not merely symbolic recognition but meaningful contemporary domains for indigenous languages in education, research, digital spaces, and everyday life.

KEY WORDS: indigenous languages, multilingual education, NEP 2020, language revitalisation, cultural sustainability, language ecology, North-East India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a principal way human communities organise experience, preserve memory, communicate knowledge, construct identity, and transmit values across generations. For indigenous communities, this relationship between language and culture can be especially significant because oral narratives, songs, proverbs, place-names, ritual expressions, ecological knowledge, traditional

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practices, and community histories are frequently transmitted through linguistic forms developed within particular cultural environments.

The loss or weakening of an indigenous language therefore has implications beyond the disappearance of a particular vocabulary or grammatical system. UNESCO's framework on language vitality and endangerment identifies intergenerational transmission, domains of language use, response to new domains and media, availability of educational materials, and institutional language attitudes as important factors in determining linguistic vitality (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). This understanding is particularly relevant in educational contexts. A language may remain actively used within households or cultural settings while gradually disappearing from formal education, administration, publishing, employment, mass media, and digital communication. Once a language becomes restricted to fewer domains, its social prestige and practical utility may decline, potentially accelerating language shift.

UNESCO's *Bhasha Matters: State of the Education Report for India 2025* places this issue within the Indian educational context. The report notes that India is home to 1,369 languages and argues that multilingual education is essential to educational inclusion, linguistic diversity, and meaningful learning. It further identifies teacher preparation, learning resources, community participation, indigenous knowledge, digital infrastructure, and language-responsive technologies as important areas for action (UNESCO, 2025). Against this background, the National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant policy intervention. NEP 2020 places considerable emphasis on multilingualism and recommends that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably beyond Grade 8, should be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). The policy also calls for high-quality bilingual teaching-learning materials and gives considerable attention to Indian languages and local cultural contexts.

The significance of NEP 2020 extends beyond the question of medium of instruction. Its discussion of "Knowledge of India" explicitly includes Indian Knowledge Systems, tribal knowledge, and indigenous and traditional ways of learning. The policy identifies areas such as tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional crop cultivation, agriculture, conservation, linguistics, literature, and other knowledge domains for curricular consideration (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 further develops this orientation by emphasising that curriculum and pedagogy should be rooted in India's local contexts in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, geography, and indigenous and traditional ways of learning (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023).

This paper therefore asks not simply whether NEP 2020 "supports" indigenous languages. Rather, it asks how educational policy can create the conditions for indigenous languages to remain living and evolving components of contemporary society.

The paper advances the following central argument:

NEP 2020 can contribute to indigenous-language revitalisation only when its provisions for multilingualism, local-language education, indigenous knowledge, and cultural rootedness are translated into meaningful educational, institutional, community, and digital domains of language use.

The distinction between preservation and revitalisation is important. Preservation may involve documentation and safeguarding, whereas revitalisation involves creating conditions for the continued use, development, and intergenerational transmission of a language. Fishman (1991) places intergenerational continuity at the centre of efforts to reverse language shift, while Hinton (2011) identifies schools as potentially important sites for creating new generations of speakers.

The paper consequently approaches indigenous-language preservation as a dynamic process involving language, education, rights, knowledge, identity, technology, and cultural sustainability.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The paper has the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between indigenous languages, cultural identity, and indigenous knowledge.
2. To analyse the language-related provisions of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023.
3. To develop a differentiated theoretical framework for understanding indigenous-language preservation through education.
4. To examine the relevance of mother-tongue-based multilingual education for indigenous and linguistically diverse communities.
5. To identify institutional, pedagogical, technological, and social challenges in implementing multilingual education.
6. To propose an operational framework for sustainable indigenous-language revitalisation.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper addresses six principal questions:

1. How does NEP 2020 conceptualise multilingualism, mother-tongue education, and indigenous knowledge?

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2. How can language ecology and linguistic human-rights perspectives explain the challenges faced by indigenous languages?
3. How can additive multilingualism prevent the acquisition of dominant languages from resulting in the displacement of indigenous languages?
4. What relationship exists between indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge systems?
5. How can education contribute to long-term cultural sustainability?
6. What institutional framework can translate the objectives of NEP 2020 into sustainable indigenous-language revitalisation?

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and policy-analytical approach.

It does not claim to present primary ethnographic data from a particular indigenous community. Instead, it examines policy documents and relevant scholarly literature concerning language ecology, linguistic rights, multilingual education, indigenous knowledge, cultural sustainability, language endangerment, and language revitalisation.

The principal policy documents examined are:

- *National Education Policy 2020*;
- *National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023*; and
- UNESCO's *Bhasha Matters: State of the Education Report for India 2025 on Mother Tongue and Multilingual Education*.

These are considered alongside established scholarship on language ecology (Haugen, 1972), linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), biliteracy and multilingual education (Hornberger, 2003), Indigenous knowledge and decolonising education (Battiste, 2013), cultural sustainability (Soini & Birkeland, 2014), language shift (Fishman, 1991), and language revitalisation (Hinton, 2011).

The analysis is primarily conceptual and policy-oriented. Where the paper discusses Assam and North-East India, it does so as a context of linguistic diversity, rather than claiming empirical findings about a particular community without primary research.

5. INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Indigenous languages can be understood as repositories of collective memory. Through oral narratives, songs, proverbs, ritual expressions, place-names, myths, genealogies, and traditional terminology, communities transmit knowledge about their histories, environments, social relationships, and cultural values.

UNESCO's framework on language vitality explicitly links language to cultural wisdom and identity and identifies language loss as the loss of knowledge and cultural heritage. It also emphasises that threatened languages require meaningful contemporary roles rather than merely archival preservation (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

This is a crucial point for educational policy.

If an indigenous language survives only within ceremonial or domestic contexts while dominant languages control education, employment, administration, and digital communication, its ecological position remains vulnerable.

The problem can therefore be represented as:

Restricted domains → reduced institutional value → declining prestige → reduced transmission → language shift

Conversely, language revitalisation can be conceptualised as:

Expanded domains → increased legitimacy → greater use → stronger transmission → linguistic vitality

Schools matter because they can intervene in this process.

Education can either reinforce language shift by privileging dominant languages or contribute to language maintenance by legitimising and expanding the use of indigenous languages.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The preservation of indigenous languages and cultures through education is a multidimensional phenomenon that a single theoretical perspective cannot adequately explain. Language functions simultaneously as a means of communication, a marker of identity, a repository of knowledge, a social institution, and a mechanism of intergenerational cultural transmission.

This paper therefore draws primarily upon four complementary theoretical perspectives:

1. Language Ecology
2. Linguistic Human Rights
3. Indigenous Knowledge Systems
4. Cultural Sustainability

Additive Multilingualism complements these by adding a pedagogical dimension, and scholarship on language revitalisation and reversing language shift provides further support.

The perspectives are deliberately differentiated. They answer different questions rather than repeating the same argument.

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6.1 Language Ecology

Language Ecology provides the first theoretical foundation.

Haugen (1972) conceptualises language in relation to its social environment rather than as an isolated linguistic system. The ecological approach therefore examines how political, cultural, economic, institutional, and social conditions affect language use.

The central question is:

What social and institutional environment allows an indigenous language to remain vital?

UNESCO's language-vitality framework operationalises this question by identifying intergenerational transmission, domains of language use, responses to new domains and media, educational materials, and governmental and institutional attitudes as major factors affecting vitality (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

An indigenous language may be used in:

- family communication;
- community gatherings;
- traditional occupations;
- cultural ceremonies;
- oral literature; and
- local social interaction.

At the same time, it may have little presence in:

- formal education;
- higher education;
- government;
- publishing;
- mass media;
- scientific communication;
- employment; and
- digital platforms.

This creates an unequal linguistic ecology.

The important theoretical proposition is therefore:

Language vitality depends not merely upon the number of speakers but also upon the range, significance, and prestige of the domains in which the language is used.

This proposition has direct implications for NEP 2020. If indigenous languages enter formal education, they gain an important institutional domain. If they also become languages of literature, research, digital communication, and contemporary cultural production, their ecological position becomes stronger.

6.2 Linguistic Human Rights

The second theoretical perspective is Linguistic Human Rights.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) places language education within a broader framework of linguistic rights, minority-language protection, educational equality, and cultural diversity.

The central question is:

What linguistic conditions are necessary for individuals and communities to participate equitably in education and society?

A rights-based approach moves the discussion beyond cultural preservation.

An indigenous language should not be protected merely as an archaeological remnant or cultural artefact. Its speakers should have meaningful opportunities to maintain, transmit, develop, and value their language while participating fully in wider society.

Education matters because schools shape which languages are seen as legitimate knowledge.

If the language spoken in the home is systematically excluded from education, learners may encounter a gap between their linguistic identity and the formal knowledge system.

Conversely, recognition of the learner's language can contribute to dignity, belonging, and participation.

However, linguistic rights should not be interpreted as linguistic isolation.

Indigenous learners also require access to regional, national, and international languages.

The appropriate principle is therefore:

Linguistic inclusion rather than linguistic isolation.

This principle connects linguistic rights with additive multilingualism.

6.3 Additive Multilingualism

Additive Multilingualism provides the pedagogical bridge between linguistic rights and educational practice.

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The concept refers to educational approaches in which acquiring additional languages expands rather than displaces the learner's existing linguistic repertoire.

Hornberger's (1989) ecological framework of biliteracy is especially useful because it understands multilingual literacy as developing across interconnected linguistic, social, cultural, and educational contexts.

UNESCO's research on mother-tongue-based bilingual and multilingual education similarly distinguishes additive approaches from models that shift learners away from their first language toward a dominant language of instruction (Ball, 2011).

The distinction can be represented as:

Subtractive multilingualism

$L1 \rightarrow L2 \rightarrow$ weakening/displacement of $L1$

versus

Additive multilingualism

$L1 + L2 + L3 \rightarrow$ expanded linguistic repertoire

For indigenous learners, this distinction is crucial.

A learner may use an indigenous language within the family, a regional language in wider community interaction, and additional Indian or international languages for broader educational and professional purposes.

These languages need not be treated as competitors.

NEP 2020's multilingual orientation creates the possibility of an educational model in which learners retain their familiar linguistic resources while acquiring additional languages (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Thus:

Additive multilingualism provides the pedagogical mechanism through which linguistic diversity can become an educational resource rather than an educational barrier.

6.4 Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The fourth perspective concerns Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

In this paper, IKS is treated as an epistemological perspective rather than a single unified theory.

It focuses on the ways communities generate, organise, preserve, interpret, and transmit knowledge within specific cultural, linguistic, and ecological contexts.

Indigenous knowledge may include:

- medicinal practices;
- agricultural knowledge;
- biodiversity management;
- traditional environmental knowledge;
- weather knowledge;
- water management;
- architecture;
- food systems;
- craft traditions;
- oral literature;
- customary practices; and
- ecological ethics.

Language is central to transmitting this knowledge.

Traditional terminology may encode culturally specific distinctions relating to plants, animals, soils, landscapes, seasons, agricultural processes, and social relationships.

Consequently:

Language preservation and knowledge preservation can mutually reinforce each other.

NEP 2020 explicitly recognises Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning. It identifies areas including tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional agriculture, conservation, linguistics, literature, and other knowledge domains (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

NCF-SE 2023 further states that curriculum and pedagogy should be rooted in local contexts, including language, culture, heritage, geography, indigenous and traditional ways of learning, and local knowledge (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023).

This represents an important opportunity to connect linguistic preservation with epistemological inclusion.

However, integrating indigenous knowledge must be undertaken ethically. Communities should participate in decisions concerning what knowledge can be documented, taught, published, digitised, or otherwise disseminated.

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6.5 Cultural Sustainability

The fifth theoretical perspective is Cultural Sustainability.

Soini and Birkeland (2014) demonstrate that cultural sustainability has multiple interpretations, including cultural vitality, diversity, heritage, locality, resilience, and the role of culture in sustainable development.

For this paper, cultural sustainability refers to communities' capacity to maintain, transmit, renew, and adapt cultural practices under changing social conditions.

This perspective matters because preservation should not mean freezing culture in an unchanging historical form.

Indigenous communities experience:

- migration;
- urbanisation;
- formal education;
- technological change;
- employment mobility;
- social media;
- new cultural influences; and
- changing economic conditions.

A language that remains confined to traditional domains may eventually become disconnected from younger generations.

Cultural sustainability therefore requires:

continuity through adaptation.

Indigenous languages should be capable of expressing contemporary:

- education;
- literature;
- science;
- technology;
- environmental concerns;
- social media;
- public discourse; and
- everyday experience.

Cultural sustainability consequently provides the long-term objective of language revitalisation.

6.6 Language Revitalisation and Intergenerational Transmission

The preceding perspectives need to be supplemented by scholarship specifically concerned with language shift and revitalisation.

Fishman (1991) places intergenerational continuity at the heart of reversing language shift. His analysis shows that language revitalisation requires attention to the social organisation of language transmission, not merely to producing linguistic materials.

Hinton (2012) similarly argues that school-based programmes can be important mechanisms for revitalisation because schools provide access to large groups of potential language learners. At the same time, she identifies teacher shortages as a significant constraint. Hinton also emphasises that the ultimate objective of revitalisation is for the language to regain a meaningful role in everyday community communication.

These perspectives reinforce the argument that indigenous-language preservation cannot stop at documentation.

The ultimate objective must be living use and intergenerational transmission.

7. DIFFERENTIATING THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The theoretical framework can be summarised as follows:

Language Ecology	What conditions support language vitality?	Domains of use
Linguistic Human Rights	Is linguistic participation equitable?	Rights and recognition
Additive Multilingualism	How can additional languages be acquired without displacement?	Pedagogy
Indigenous Knowledge Systems	What knowledge is embedded in and transmitted through language?	Epistemology
Cultural Sustainability	How can cultural continuity be maintained while adapting?	Long-term cultural continuity
Language Revitalisation	How can language shift be reversed?	Intergenerational transmission

This differentiation prevents conceptual overlap.

Language Ecology explains the linguistic environment.

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Linguistic Human Rights explains the normative dimension.

Additive Multilingualism explains the pedagogical mechanism.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems explain the epistemological significance.

Cultural Sustainability explains the long-term cultural objective.

Language Revitalisation provides the intergenerational dimension.

8. Synthesised Theoretical Model

Drawing upon the preceding perspectives, this paper proposes the following integrated model:

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Indigenous-Language and Cultural Revitalisation

Language Ecology



Linguistic Rights and Recognition



Additive Multilingual Education



Indigenous Knowledge Integration



Cultural Sustainability



Intergenerational Language Transmission

Source: *Author's synthesis based on Haugen (1972), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), Hornberger (1989), Battiste (2013), Soini and Birkeland (2014), Fishman (1991), and Hinton (2012).*

The model suggests that revitalisation requires movement across several interconnected levels.

A supportive linguistic ecology creates the conditions for linguistic recognition.

Recognition becomes educationally meaningful through additive multilingualism.

Multilingual education becomes culturally meaningful when it incorporates indigenous knowledge.

Together, these processes strengthen cultural sustainability.

The ultimate test is whether the language continues to be transmitted across generations.

9. NEP 2020 and the Linguistic Turn in Indian Education

NEP 2020 represents a significant shift towards multilingual and culturally rooted education.

The policy recommends that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably beyond Grade 8, should be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

The policy also calls for:

- multilingual education;
- Indian-language learning;
- bilingual teaching-learning materials;
- local cultural contexts;
- children's literature in multiple languages; and
- greater recognition of Indian Knowledge Systems.

The policy's language provisions are therefore relevant to all five theoretical perspectives developed in this paper.

Language Ecology

Education becomes a new domain of indigenous-language use.

Linguistic Human Rights

The learner's linguistic identity receives greater institutional recognition.

Additive Multilingualism

Learners can acquire additional languages while retaining their first language.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Local and tribal knowledge can enter the curriculum.

Cultural Sustainability

Language and culture can remain connected to contemporary educational practice.

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10. NCF-SE 2023: From Policy to Curriculum

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 provides an important bridge between NEP 2020 and curriculum implementation.

NCF-SE 2023 states that curriculum and pedagogy should be rooted in the Indian and local context, including culture, traditions, heritage, language, geography, contemporary and ancient knowledge, indigenous and traditional ways of learning, and local social and scientific needs (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023).

This is important because policy statements about language preservation become meaningful only when translated into:

- curriculum;
- textbooks;
- teacher preparation;
- assessment;
- classroom practice;
- local learning resources; and
- institutional structures.

The NCF-SE therefore strengthens the possibility of moving from policy recognition to educational practice.

It also provides a basis for connecting indigenous language with local knowledge rather than treating language as an isolated school subject.

11. MOTHER-TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education should not be confused with monolingual education in an indigenous language.

The objective is to provide learners with a strong linguistic foundation while progressively developing competence in additional languages.

UNESCO's research on multilingual education emphasises that mother-tongue instruction can support effective learning while multilingual education simultaneously provides access to wider regional, national, and international languages (Ball, 2011).

The UNESCO *Bhasha Matters* report similarly places mother-tongue-based multilingual education within an equity and inclusion framework and emphasises its relevance to tribal, rural, and linguistically diverse communities (UNESCO, 2025).

The appropriate model is therefore:

Strong foundation in familiar language

Progressive acquisition of additional languages

rather than:

Replacement of the home language by the dominant language

This distinction is fundamental to indigenous-language sustainability.

12. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND CURRICULUM

NEP 2020's recognition of Indian Knowledge Systems provides an important opportunity to broaden the epistemological basis of education.

The policy explicitly includes tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning, identifying areas such as tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional agriculture, conservation, linguistics, and literature (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

The NCF-SE 2023 reinforces this orientation by emphasising locally rooted curriculum and pedagogy.

For indigenous communities, this can create possibilities for curriculum development around:

- local environmental knowledge;
- oral literature;
- traditional agriculture;
- community history;
- medicinal practices;
- crafts;
- ecological practices;
- local geography;
- food traditions; and
- customary knowledge.

However, an important ethical distinction exists between teaching about indigenous knowledge and learning through respectful engagement with indigenous knowledge holders.

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Community participation is therefore indispensable.

13. INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Language serves as an important medium of cultural memory.

A community's oral traditions may contain:

- origin narratives;
- historical memories;
- songs;
- myths;
- proverbs;
- genealogies;
- place-names;
- ritual expressions;
- ecological terminology; and
- community values.

When communities document such material and incorporate it into education, the school can become a site of intergenerational cultural transmission.

A useful conceptual relationship is:

Language



Cultural Memory



Collective Identity



Intergenerational Transmission

This relationship demonstrates why language revitalisation cannot be separated from cultural sustainability.

UNESCO's language-vitality framework similarly emphasises the relationship between language, cultural identity, knowledge, and intergenerational transmission (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

14. Assam and North-East India: A Multilingual Context

The theoretical framework developed here is particularly relevant to Assam and the wider North-Eastern region because multilingualism is an important feature of the region's social and educational environment.

The issue should not be reduced to a simple opposition between an indigenous language and English.

Learners may operate across several linguistic environments:

Home/community language



Regional language



National language(s)



International language(s)

The educational challenge is to ensure that movement across these languages does not necessarily mean moving away from the indigenous language.

The principle of additive multilingualism is therefore particularly relevant.

An indigenous language should not be regarded as a barrier to the acquisition of other languages. Instead, the education system should build on the learner's existing linguistic resources.

UNESCO's current Indian multilingual-education framework explicitly calls for attention to linguistically diverse and tribal communities and recommends strengthening multilingual teacher preparation, community participation, multilingual materials, and digital resources (UNESCO, 2025).

15. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Language revitalisation cannot be successfully imposed entirely from outside the speech community.

UNESCO's language-vitality framework places the speech community at the centre of language maintenance. It emphasises collaborative relationships between communities, language specialists, educators, and governments (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

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Community members can contribute as:

- language experts;
- storytellers;
- elders;
- teachers;
- translators;
- curriculum developers;
- researchers;
- cultural resource persons; and
- digital content creators.

Community participation is particularly important when indigenous knowledge is involved.

Some knowledge may be suitable for public educational use, while other knowledge may be culturally restricted.

Educational institutions must therefore establish ethical procedures concerning:

- informed consent;
- ownership;
- attribution;
- access;
- storage;
- publication; and
- digital dissemination.

The objective should be community partnership rather than knowledge extraction.

16. TEACHER EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Teacher preparation is one of the most important conditions for successful multilingual education.

Hinton (2012) identifies teacher shortages as a major challenge facing endangered-language education.

The UNESCO *Bhasha Matters* report similarly identifies teacher preparation and multilingual competence as major areas requiring attention in India (UNESCO, 2025).

Teacher education should therefore include:

1. multilingual pedagogy;
2. culturally responsive teaching;
3. local-language awareness;
4. indigenous knowledge;
5. oral-history methods;
6. bilingual resource development;
7. community-based learning; and
8. digital language documentation.

Where trained indigenous-language teachers are insufficient, community language experts can be involved through structured institutional partnerships.

This can also strengthen the prestige of indigenous languages within the educational system.

17. LEARNING MATERIALS AND INDIGENOUS-LANGUAGE PUBLISHING

The availability of educational materials is an important indicator of language vitality.

UNESCO's language-vitality framework identifies materials for language education and literacy as a major factor affecting the strength of threatened languages (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

NEP 2020 calls for high-quality bilingual teaching-learning materials, and government initiatives have already supported bilingual and tribal-language publishing.

The Ministry of Education reports that the National Book Trust has produced books in several tribal languages, including Bodo, Garo, Khasi, Kokborok, Lepcha, Mizo, Santhali, and others, as well as bilingual books in Indian languages.

Such initiatives should be expanded to include:

- children's literature;
- textbooks;
- supplementary readers;
- dictionaries;

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- glossaries;
- oral-literature collections;
- bilingual editions;
- audio books;
- digital books; and
- higher-education materials.

The aim should be to develop indigenous languages as languages of knowledge, not merely languages of cultural performance.

18. DIGITAL REVITALISATION

The digital environment has become an increasingly important domain of language use.

UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) seeks to mobilise governments, Indigenous peoples, academic institutions, civil society, and other stakeholders to preserve, revitalise, and promote indigenous languages. The Decade specifically recognises the need to expand language use in education, media, and digital spaces.

Digital technologies can support:

- digital dictionaries;
- audio archives;
- oral-history databases;
- podcasts;
- video storytelling;
- e-books;
- language-learning applications;
- online courses;
- speech technologies; and
- digital cultural archives.

UNESCO's current action agenda also links indigenous knowledge with digital technology, illustrating how digital tools can help make orally transmitted knowledge more visible while retaining community-language contexts.

For younger generations, digital visibility matters most.

A language that cannot function in contemporary digital environments risks being perceived as disconnected from modern life.

19. Indigenous Languages and Emerging Language Technologies

Artificial intelligence and language technologies create new possibilities for indigenous-language revitalisation.

Potential applications include:

- speech recognition;
- transcription;
- text-to-speech;
- machine translation;
- optical character recognition;
- digital dictionaries;
- language-learning tools;
- corpus development; and
- searchable oral archives.

However, technological inclusion also presents challenges.

Languages with limited digital data may remain underrepresented in AI systems.

This could create a new form of digital linguistic inequality.

Language technology development should therefore be community-centred and ethically governed.

Indigenous communities should participate in decisions concerning:

- collection of linguistic data;
- ownership;
- storage;
- access;
- commercial use;
- cultural restrictions; and
- future technological applications.

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Digital revitalisation should therefore mean digital empowerment, not simply digital extraction.

20. Preservation versus Revitalisation

A central argument of this paper is the distinction between preservation and revitalisation.

Preservation may include:

- documentation;
- recording;
- archiving;
- dictionary creation;
- historical research; and
- cultural heritage protection.

Revitalisation requires:

- new speakers;
- educational use;
- family transmission;
- contemporary literature;
- digital communication;
- institutional recognition;
- public visibility; and
- everyday use.

Fishman's (1991) work demonstrates the importance of intergenerational continuity in reversing language shift.

UNESCO similarly identifies intergenerational transmission and expansion into new domains as central dimensions of language vitality (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003).

The objective, therefore, should not be to preserve indigenous languages as static cultural artefacts.

It should be to create conditions in which they remain living languages.

21. THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

Despite NEP 2020's strong policy orientation, implementation faces substantial challenges.

21.1 Shortage of trained teachers

There may be insufficient teachers who possess both indigenous-language competence and formal pedagogical training.

21.2 Lack of educational materials

Some languages may have limited textbooks, dictionaries, children's literature, and digital resources.

21.3 Orthographic and standardisation issues

Where written conventions are limited or multiple varieties exist, decisions concerning orthography and standardisation may require extensive community consultation.

21.4 Parental aspirations

Parents may prefer dominant languages because they associate them with higher education, employment, and socioeconomic mobility.

21.5 Transition beyond the foundational stage

Mother-tongue initiatives may weaken as students progress to secondary and higher education.

21.6 Digital inequality

Communities with limited connectivity or digital infrastructure may have fewer opportunities to develop digital-language resources.

21.7 Institutional coordination

Implementation requires coordination among ministries, state governments, curriculum bodies, universities, teacher-education institutions, schools, and communities.

21.8 Risk of tokenism

Occasional inclusion of a folk song, festival, or traditional story does not constitute genuine indigenous-language education.

The challenge is to move from symbolic inclusion to structural inclusion.

22. THE DECDI FRAMEWORK

To translate the theoretical framework into an operational strategy, this paper proposes the DECDI Framework:

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Documentation → Educational Inclusion → Community Participation → Digital Revitalisation → Intergenerational Transmission
The author proposes the framework as an original analytical and operational model.

22.1 Documentation

The first stage involves systematic documentation of:

- vocabulary;
- oral narratives;
- songs;
- proverbs;
- place-names;
- traditional terminology;
- community histories;
- ecological knowledge; and
- linguistic structures.

Documentation creates the resource base for educational and cultural revitalisation. However, documentation should be community-centred and ethically governed.

22.2 Educational Inclusion

Documented linguistic and cultural resources should enter educational institutions through:

- textbooks;
- supplementary readers;
- bilingual materials;
- oral-history projects;
- storytelling;
- local literature;
- cultural studies;
- community-based learning; and
- indigenous-knowledge modules.

Education thereby becomes an institutional domain of language use.

22.3 Community Participation

Communities should participate in:

- curriculum design;
- language documentation;
- teacher preparation;
- cultural interpretation;
- assessment;
- publication; and
- digital archiving.

This ensures that revitalisation is not imposed externally.

22.4 Digital Revitalisation

Indigenous languages should be developed within contemporary digital spaces through:

- e-books;
- podcasts;
- online dictionaries;
- language applications;
- digital archives;
- social media;
- audiovisual resources; and
- language technologies.

This creates new domains of language use.

22.5 Intergenerational Transmission

The final objective is transmission across generations.

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Children and young people must have opportunities to:

- hear;
- speak;
- read;
- write;
- create;
- publish; and
- communicate in their indigenous language.

The ultimate measure of success is therefore not the number of archived documents but the extent to which younger generations continue to use the language.

23. INTEGRATING THE THEORETICAL AND DECDI MODELS

The two levels of the paper can now be brought together.

Theoretical level

Language Ecology

↓

Linguistic Rights and Recognition

↓

Additive Multilingualism

↓

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

↓

Cultural Sustainability

↓

Intergenerational Transmission

Operational level

Documentation

↓

Educational Inclusion

↓

Community Participation

↓

Digital Revitalisation

↓

Intergenerational Transmission

The theoretical framework explains why indigenous-language revitalisation requires multiple dimensions.

The DECDI framework explains how these dimensions may be operationalised.

This distinction gives the paper a clear theoretical-to-practical structure.

24. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preceding analysis, the following recommendations are proposed.

24.1 Develop State-Level Language-in-Education Policies

State governments should develop clear multilingual education policies that identify the role of indigenous and minority languages at different educational stages.

This recommendation is also consistent with UNESCO's *Bhasha Matters* report.

24.2 Establish Indigenous Language Resource Centres

Universities and teacher-education institutions should establish resource centres for:

- documentation;
- translation;
- curriculum development;
- teacher training;
- digital archiving; and
- language research.

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24.3 Strengthen Teacher Education

Pre-service and in-service teacher education should incorporate multilingual pedagogy and culturally responsive education.

24.4 Develop Multilingual Materials

Government agencies and publishers should expand production of:

- textbooks;
- children's literature;
- bilingual books;
- dictionaries;
- digital resources; and
- audiovisual learning materials.

24.5 Institutionalise Community Participation

Indigenous communities should participate in curriculum development and decisions concerning knowledge documentation and dissemination.

24.6 Create Community-Controlled Digital Archives

Digital archives should be developed with appropriate community governance and access protocols.

24.7 Support Indigenous-Language Literature

Writers, translators, storytellers, illustrators, and publishers working in indigenous languages should receive institutional support.

24.8 Expand Indigenous-Language Use Beyond Primary Education

Language revitalisation should not end at the foundational stage.

Where educationally feasible, indigenous languages should continue into secondary and higher education through courses, bilingual materials, research projects, and cultural studies.

24.9 Promote Language Technologies

Investment should be made in:

- speech recognition;
- digital dictionaries;
- text-to-speech systems;
- OCR;
- translation tools; and
- language-learning technologies.

24.10 Develop Measurable Indicators

Language-policy implementation should be evaluated through indicators such as:

- number of trained teachers;
- availability of learning materials;
- student proficiency;
- frequency of classroom use;
- community participation;
- digital resources;
- number of new speakers; and
- evidence of intergenerational transmission.

25. DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that NEP 2020 provides an important policy foundation for indigenous-language and cultural revitalisation, but policy recognition alone cannot guarantee linguistic vitality.

From the perspective of Language Ecology, the educational use of indigenous languages can expand the domains in which they function.

From the perspective of Linguistic Human Rights, such recognition can contribute to linguistic dignity and educational inclusion.

From the perspective of Additive Multilingualism, indigenous-language education need not prevent learners from acquiring dominant regional, national, or international languages.

From the perspective of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, language preservation can contribute to the preservation and transmission of culturally situated knowledge.

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From the perspective of Cultural Sustainability, the objective is not to freeze indigenous cultures in the past but to create conditions in which they can adapt and remain meaningful in contemporary life.

Finally, the perspective of Language Revitalisation reminds us that the ultimate test is intergenerational transmission.

These dimensions are interconnected but analytically distinct.

The central issue is therefore not simply:

Is an indigenous language recognised?

The more important questions are:

Is it used?

Is it taught?

Is it valued?

Is it used for knowledge production?

Can it function digitally?

Can young people use it in contemporary life?

Is it being transmitted to the next generation?

UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) provides an important international context for these questions. The Decade seeks coordinated action to preserve, revitalise, and promote indigenous languages and increasingly emphasises education, media, digital spaces, community participation, and intergenerational transmission.

The current Indian policy environment therefore offers an important opportunity.

NEP 2020 provides the broad policy framework.

NCF-SE 2023 provides curricular direction.

UNESCO's *Bhasha Matters* provides contemporary evidence and recommendations.

The challenge is to connect these frameworks with community-level implementation.

26. CONCLUSION

Indigenous languages are living repositories of communication, cultural memory, knowledge, identity, and collective experience. Their decline therefore extends beyond linguistic communication to cultural continuity and epistemological diversity.

India's multilingual reality makes language-sensitive education particularly important.

NEP 2020 represents a significant policy development because it recognises multilingualism, home-language and mother-tongue education, Indian languages, local cultural contexts, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Its emphasis on tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning creates opportunities to connect linguistic preservation with curricular transformation (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

NCF-SE 2023 further strengthens this direction by advocating education rooted in local language, culture, heritage, geography, and indigenous and traditional ways of learning (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023).

The UNESCO *Bhasha Matters* report provides an important contemporary confirmation of the significance of this policy direction. It places mother-tongue-based multilingual education within a framework of educational inclusion, linguistic diversity, and equity. It identifies teacher preparation, multilingual materials, community participation, indigenous knowledge, digital infrastructure, and language technologies as critical areas of action (UNESCO, 2025).

The theoretical framework developed in this paper demonstrates that indigenous-language revitalisation requires several complementary dimensions.

Language Ecology explains the importance of expanding meaningful domains of language use.

Linguistic Human Rights links language to dignity, equality, and participation.

Additive Multilingualism provides a pedagogical approach that lets learners acquire additional languages without abandoning their first language.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems demonstrate the epistemological significance of linguistic diversity.

Cultural Sustainability establishes the long-term objective of maintaining cultural continuity while enabling adaptation.

The DECDI framework—Documentation, Educational Inclusion, Community Participation, Digital Revitalisation, and Intergenerational Transmission—translates these theoretical insights into an operational model.

The central argument of the paper can therefore be expressed as follows:

Indigenous languages survive not merely when they are documented or officially recognised, but when they remain socially meaningful, educationally legitimate, culturally valued, technologically visible, and intergenerationally transmissible.

The preservation of indigenous languages should consequently not be understood as an attempt to isolate communities from linguistic change.

The objective should be to create an additive multilingual environment in which indigenous languages coexist with regional, national, and international languages.

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The future of indigenous-language education therefore lies not in choosing between tradition and modernity, or between indigenous languages and global languages, but in creating educational systems where these linguistic and cultural resources can interact productively.

The ultimate goal should be for an indigenous language to remain a language in which children can speak, learn, read, write, create, research, communicate, remember, innovate, and imagine the future.

In this sense, preservation becomes more than protection. It becomes revitalisation. And education becomes more than a mechanism for transmitting dominant knowledge. It becomes a space in which linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and contemporary aspirations can coexist.

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