Language, Multi Ethnicity, and Conflict

The challenges of mother tongue education in primary education in Assam (India)

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This presentation focuses on the state of Assam (India), specifically the districts of Kokrajhar and Chirang, which fall within the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). They share an international border with Bhutan and a state border with West Bengal.
The Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), is a special territorial privilege under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, that encompasses four districts of Assam: Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri, and Baksa.

This was the outcome of a decades-long movement by the Bodos, a tribal people of this region, for political autonomy.

The Bodoland Movement marked a period of instability and violence with the insurgency of Bodo armed groups, violent Government repression and army operations, as well as inter-ethnic conflict.

Though Bodo language speakers are a major ethnic group in this region, many other communities live in the area....
People and languages of this area

The various other languages spoken in this area are Nepalese, Rajbongshi, Santhali, and other “Adivasi” languages; Rabha; and different forms of Bengali.

Despite the coexistence of multiple linguistic groups in this region, most government primary schools in the area offer a choice of only Assamese and Bodo as medium of instruction.

A system of schooling set apart from the linguistic ecology of their world.
Language policies and primary education

- The official languages of Assam are Hindi, Assamese, and English, with Bodo, Bengali as associate languages of some areas.
- Most other languages become “mother tongues” with little official recognition.
- Bodo became a Eighth Schedule language of the Constitution only in 2003, along with Maithili, Dogri, and Santali after the 92nd Constitutional amendment, and after decades of struggle.
Language policies and primary education

This leads to a situation where:

- A substantial number of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds go to Assamese-medium schools.

- Children struggle to acquire fluency in reading and writing in Assamese, a language that they rarely hear in their day-to-day lives.

- Problems of poverty, teacher absenteeism, lack of resources also add to the problems of children, many first generational learners.

- The language problem affects learning and retention levels, and the dropout levels of children from some of these communities is very high.

Language continues to be a contentious issue in Assam.
Indian language policies and minority languages: The background to some of the movements by various groups for political autonomy and language rights

- The 1961 Census recorded 1,652 mother tongues in India. Tribal languages constituted a quarter of the 1,652 mother tongues, and some of them such as Santhali, Gondi, and Khasi (all tribal languages) could be counted as major languages [Krishna 1991:11].

- The 1971 Census onwards, the census commissioner was advised to drop listing all languages with less than 10,000 speakers.

Sadhana Saxena’s study of linguistic diversity and the Eighth Schedule, which examines the hierarchy of languages imposed by the Eighth Schedule.
Hindi speakers who accounted for 30.37 per cent of the total population in 1961, had by 1981 extended to over 39.94 per cent of the total population. And from about 15 million Oriya speakers in 1961, the numbers had doubled to an estimated 30 million by 1981.

- Eighth Schedule (ES), our constitutional dispensation listed only 14 languages originally, increasing to 22 by 2003; as a result of several movements, often violent, by tribal and other communities.
- ES languages have gained power, recognition, and prestige as “mainstream” or “standard” languages. The others have been left to languish with demeaning labels such as “dialects”, “minor languages”, “tribal languages”, and so on...
Rajbongshi spoken in Kokrajhar, Chirang, and other parts of Assam and Bengal. In the early 19th century this region, then Goalpara, got caught up between the competing Assamese and Bengali language nationalism opting to choose neither language; the Rajbongsi language and Goalpara identity became a form of resistance for the people in this region.

Today, it is neither a scheduled nor nonscheduled language, subsumed under the Bengali language in the official categorization. The Rajbongshi community is one of the many communities in this region engaged in a struggle for political autonomy.
Language rights and ethnic identity mobilization

Ethnic identity mobilization often becomes a means of procuring language rights, for speakers of minority languages.

The effects of this mobilization along lines of exclusive ethnicity in an multiethnic environment like Kokrajhar and Chirang often builds up to tension between communities and conflict.

Almost every community in this region now has its own identity mobilization, and political parties and student organizations based on ethnicity.
Language rights, medium of instruction, and conflict: The Bodoland Movement of the 1980s and 1990s

- Language rights in the educational sphere and medium of instruction in school were central to the demands of the Bodo people’s struggle for political rights.

- The Assam Official Languages Act 1960 was one of the impetus for the language movement of the 1960s.

Struggle has extended from introduction of Bodo as medium of instruction on 18 May, 1963, at the Kokrajhar Government High School to introduction of Bodo at the postgraduate level in Gauhati University in 1996.
It was finally only after decades of political and armed struggle that Bodo become a ‘prestige’ language or a scheduled language in 2005. The Centre recognised the Bodo language as one of the scheduled languages under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, with the signing of the Bodoland Accord among the Centre, the Assam government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (or BLT, an armed, separatist group representing the Bodo community).
But identity based movements in a multi ethnic environment such as Kokrajhar and Chirang, often result in ethnic strife. The years of the Bodoland Movement saw not just Government repression, with police and Army atrocities, but also strife among the various communities along with unequal access to education and language politics, the situation is compounded by years of conflict, psychological trauma and displacement.

1992-93 : Bodo Muslim Riots
1996-98 : Bodo Santhali Riots
2012 : Bodo Muslim Riots

This region has since large scale internal displacement and people living in relief camps for decades.
Armed struggle for political rights: The cost to the community and the further marginalization of groups without access to bi lingual or mother tongue education

The situation of children from the Santhali Community

- The after effects of violence still felt in a conflict generation whose education was interrupted by the violence, and were not able to attend high school or College.
- Very few Santhali speaking teachers in Assamese schools. Teachers do not understand the children’s language.
- Little political mobilization for medium of instruction or bilingual teaching despite it being a demand of the Santhali Sahitya Sabha.
- The Santhali community do not have Schedule Tribe status in Assam. No rights under Forest Act.
- No remedial help or second language teaching in schools, no cultural connect of the school or curriculum with the community.
Right to Education Act 2009 and mother tongue education

- The RTE Act 2009 has been criticized by educationists on grounds of its ambiguity towards mother tongue education; the provision on the required curricular framework [Section 29 (2) (f)] states that "medium of instruction shall, as far as practicable, be in child's mother tongue" (Sadgopal, 2010)
- Given the background of India’s language policies, specifically with the state’s reluctance to promote mother tongue education for minority languages, the caveat of ‘as far as practicable’ does not imply a serious engagement with the language issues of children speaking minority languages, crucial to making education a fundamental right.
- Also, this is a much more diluted version of Article 350A from the Constitution which makes it obligatory for the State to "provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups..." (Sadgopal, 2010)
Diagram from Sadgopal, 2010, showing the relationship between denial of the child’s language rights in the classroom, and its effects on democracy.

ARTICLE 19(a) IN JEOPARDY
Policy Framework for Denial of Fundamental Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression in the Education System

- Undermining children's languages.
- Ignoring multi-linguality as a foundation of learning.
- Destroying mother tongue as a component of multi-linguality.
- Equating mother tongue with state language.

- Children without identity
- Children losing capacity to learn, think and create

• LOSS OF RIGHT TO EXPRESS & ARTICULATE AND PARTICIPATE IN DEMOCRACY
Language Support Program in Kokrajhar and Chirang District (supported by ASER Centre, Delhi)

Additional language support in mother tongue languages and bi-lingual instruction, for children in primary school (Std 2 to Std 5) whose home language is different from school language.

Our project works in 50 villages in Kokrajhara and Chirang districts of Assam, with children and community teachers from the Rabha, Bodo, Muslim, Nepali, Rajbongshi and Santhali communities.

Students have a teacher who speaks their language and comes from their village, to work with them after school.
We learn from children’s resilience and creativity with dealing with languages. This is an environment of ‘shared’ languages. And children learn despite the odds...

Lots of theatre and storytelling and songs, and oral language resources
Vocabulary acquisition, language use and comprehension as essential to the learning process. At the same time, we intend to develop the children’s competence in reading and writing skills, using both home and school language

Training and empowering our volunteer teachers and resource persons to not only teach children, but also be involved with other aspects of community life and the school such as preparing teaching material using local resources, community mobilization around education etc.
Foster understanding between communities: our community teachers working with children from their own linguistic communities, work together with the larger group in training and workshops, and together seek solutions to questions of teaching, curriculum and life.

Community teachers from the different language groups come together to share practices in training workshops, and this fosters understanding and cooperation between members of different tribes and communities. Often from communities at strife with one another at some point or another.

With the 2013 ethnic riots that affected this area, we further felt the need to continue to work with people from every community. When our work on education became imbued with a larger role in society.
The long term vision of our program:

To demonstrate the efficacy of language learning with home language support using local resources. So that teachers and the Government schools will begin to think of innovative ways to work with language...

To inspire more parents and the community to look at home language support positively, and support school initiatives that involve home language input.

To help our children have a positive self image of their own culture and language, and grow up with a sense of the diversity and richness of their region. To respect their own and other’s languages.
To influence educational practice in Government and private schools of the region, so that language support and community based classroom content becomes an essential part of the school curriculum and structure.

To influence the teacher training bodies and Government agencies to give serious thought to the issue of children’s language problems in the classroom.

A positive step towards one’s language rights, through learning and education.
Conclusion: Mother tongue education and ethnic strife, a part of the solution.

The linguistic dimension of conflict. All the linguistic groups of Assam must receive equal educational opportunity under the law, to ensure a resolution of strife in the future.

‘...the legislature could ensure that all legal residents of Assam have the same access to and opportunity for education in their native languages. This could be achieved by legislation specifying that adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue of minority groups be available not only at the primary education level, but also in the state's secondary schools and universities. Measures such as this are imperative: because language helps define cultures, no solution to Assam's cultural conflict will be complete unless it includes a linguistic dimension.’

-Robert G. Gosselink, Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India, 14 B.C. Third World L.J. 83