



Research Article

Exploring Indigenous Language Education in The Konyak Community of Mon District, Nagaland: Significance and Challenges

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Abstract

Indigenous languages play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, safeguarding traditional knowledge, and ensuring the transmission of cultural values and heritage across generations. This conceptual study examines indigenous language education among the Konyak tribe of Mon District, Nagaland. The Konyak tribe is the largest community in Nagaland in terms of population. It is one of the 17 major tribes of the state and has approximately 2,40,000 speakers as per the 2011 Census. The Konyaks, named after their language, are primarily settled in the eastern region of Nagaland, particularly in the Mon District. Their language belongs to the Northern Naga subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Konyak Naga comprises around 30 dialects, each named after the village where it is spoken. Among these variations, the “Tableng” or “Angwanku” dialect, spoken in the Wakching and Wanching areas, is regarded as the standard dialect of the Konyak language. It serves as the official mode of communication within the community, and most literary works and educational textbooks are written in this dialect. Although Konyak Naga originally did not have its own writing system, it has adopted the Roman script. The Wakching dialect has been formally recognized as the common language of the Konyak people and is widely used in academic, literary, and official contexts. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the significance, current status, and key challenges faced in promoting indigenous language education within the community. The study is based on secondary data collected from various sources, including books, policy documents, journals, research articles, newspapers, and other published and unpublished materials.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is the means by which we transmit and express our culture and its values from generation to generation. The loss of language will inevitably lead to loss of cultural identity. Indigenous languages are a vital component of the India's rich cultural heritage. Preserving the languages is essential to maintaining the cultural identity and dignity of India's marginalized communities as it holds a unique and irreplaceable position, serving as repositories of ancestral wisdom, cultural knowledge, and distinct worldviews. It also plays a crucial role in safeguarding traditional knowledge, and ensuring the transmission of cultural values and heritage across generations.

2. A brief Profile of the Konyak Naga

Konyaks are the major Naga ethnic group native to the Northeast Indian state of Nagaland. The word Konyak is derived from two root words, 'Khao or head', and 'Nyak or black' since konyaks have jet-black hair. The other version states that they referred to themselves as "Kong-nyak", meaning "tattoo on the nose." Mon District is a home to the Konyak Naga tribe. It attained separate district status on December 19, 1973. Renowned as the "Land of the Anghs", Mon District's social structure is deeply rooted in the tradition of hereditary kingship or Angh-Wanglam. Like their counterparts among the Naga tribes, the Konyak tribes had no written form. Instead, their historical accounts were passed down orally from generation to generation

2.1 Language background of the Konyak Tribe

The Konyak tribe, named after the language they speak, are concentrated around the eastern district of Nagaland state, namely the Mon District. Geographically, it is divided into two regions: the upper and lower regions, further subdivided into administrative units such as blocks, circles or community development blocks (CD) totalling 14 Blocks and around 131 villages. Konyak Naga [Tableng] belongs to the Konyak branch of the Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw subgroup under the Central Area in the Tibeto-Burman language family (Burling, 2003: 175). It was described by Grierson as the Angwangku or Tableng tribe in his Linguistic Survey of India (1903, Vol. 3). He classified them under the Eastern Naga branch of the Naga subgroup of Tibeto-Burman languages. Later, when Morrison (1967) classified Naga languages into five types based on typological comparisons, he classified Konyak under Type A2. It is spoken mainly in northeast Nagaland, southeast Arunachal Pradesh, northeast Assam, and some parts of Myanmar. It has approximately 2,40,000 speakers in India according to the 2011 Census data.

According to the Ethnologue languages of the world, Konyak Naga comprises around 30 dialects, each named after the village where it is spoken. These includes Angphang, Hopao, Changnyu, Chen, Chingkao, Chinglang, Choha, Gelekidoria, Jakphang, Longching, Longkhai (Lungkhai, Lungkhi), Longmein, Longwa, Mon, Mulung, Ngangching, Sang, Shanlang, Shunyuo, Shengha, Sima, Sowa, Shamnyuyanga, Tableng (Angwangku, Kongon, Mohung, Wakching), Tobu, Tamkhungnyuo, Tang, Tobunyuo, Tolamleinyua, Totok.

Among them, the "Tableng" or "Angwanku" dialect spoken in the Wakching and Wanching areas, is considered to be the standard dialect. In 1951, the Konyak Union Council, in the presence of leaders representing various villages, selected the Wakching variety as the standard form of the Konyak language (Konyak, 2008). The primary reason for selecting the Tableng dialect may be attributed to the presence of English missionaries during the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in Ngamsang and Wakching villages. The missionaries commenced authoring books in this dialect, which rapidly became the standard for instructing non-native learners. It serves as the official mode of communication within the community, and most literary works and educational textbooks are written in this dialect. Although Konyak Naga originally did not have its own writing system, it has adopted the Roman script.

2.2 Development of Konyak Language

The development of written Konyak language has evolved steadily through contributions from missionaries, scholars, and native researchers. The earliest known publication in Konyak dates back to 1840, when Mrs. Bronson produced the first reader titled "Natahema Heran Kabanva Nyapran." This was followed much later in 1951, when Missionary Longri Ao published the first reader in the Tableng dialect, "Vwanppa Konyak Kak Lori," and in 1957, the first adult Primer for Konyak was published by the Directorate of Education. The development of lexicographic and grammatical resources gained momentum from the 1970s, beginning with Brij Bihari Kumar, who produced the Hindi-Konyak Dictionary in 1972, followed by several works sponsored by the Nagaland Bhasha Parishad between 1972 and 1974, including "Konyak Hindi Svayam Sikshak" and "Konyak Vyakaran ki Ruprekha." During this period, major Christian texts were also translated where Rev. Chingang released the Konyak New Testament in 1972 and the Holy Bible in 1992, contributing significantly to the spread of literacy. The first major dictionary, "Konyak Engko Kahjemlai," was compiled by Rev. Chingang in 1990, alongside "Konyak Kinship" by K.S. Nagaraja the same year. The year 1994 saw several important works by Nagaraja, including "Konyak Folk Literature" and the "Konyak-Hindi-English Dictionary."

A major milestone occurred in 2010, when K.S. Nagaraja published "Konyak Grammar," the first formal grammar book of the language, becoming an essential academic resource. Subsequent works include "Manlam Lai (The Book of Knowledge)" by Manto Wangshu in 2014, a bilingual text aiding language learning, and the 1st Edition of "Konyak Ngaojong (Konyak Dictionary)" by Rev. Chingang in 2015, which remains the only Konyak-English dictionary compiled by a native speaker. More recent educational advancements include the Konyak Primer "Üwangpa Aikek Lai" published by CIIL & NCERT in 2024, and "A Descriptive Grammar of Konyak Language" by Prof. Pangersenla Walling and Nikay Besa Konyak in May 2025. A significant ongoing research project titled "A Preliminary Investigation of the Speech Sounds of the Naga Language" conducted under SCERT by Mimi Ezung, N. Nyeiang, H. Khango Konyak, and S.

Wanshom Konyak, offers an extensive study of the phonological features of Konyak. It is important to note that most linguistic work on the Konyak Naga language has been carried out on the standard Wakching dialect, which serves as the primary reference point for academic study and published materials.

3. Status of Language Education in Mon District

A Konyak native speaker can typically be distinguished by the dialect spoken, as there are several dialectal variances amongst Konyak's villages. These variations are so distinct that communication between speakers from different villages can be challenging. As a result, Nagamese, Nagaland's lingua franca, is usually used as the primary means of communication. Among the various dialects, the Wakching dialect has been officially recognized as the standard language of the Konyak community. It serves as the primary medium for educational materials, literary works, and scholarly publications.

According to Constitution No. 9 (1) and Resolution No. 3(c) of the 2007 Constitution of the Konyak Union, the Union is mandated to "exercise its power to inspire and spread the Konyak language." With the initiative of the Language Officers and the Konyak Literature Board, established in 1968, the Konyak language has been introduced as a subject from Classes 1 to 8 in both government and private schools, and to be extended up to Class 9 in the upcoming academic year. However, despite these efforts, some schools have not implemented the subject due to the unavailability of trained language teachers and the lack of proficiency among available teachers. However, English remains the predominant language of instruction and administration at all levels, following its adoption as the official language of Nagaland.

4. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chatterjee et al. (2023), in their study on social attitudes toward mother tongue-based education in the tribal-majority state of Arunachal Pradesh, found that MTB-ME can play a significant role in the revival and preservation of the country's tribal languages. **Adnyana et al. (2025)** emphasize the importance of mother tongue instruction, noting that incorporating indigenous languages improves student involvement, comprehension, and cultural pride. The study proposes for a paradigm shift in education policy and practice, emphasizing indigenous languages not just as instructional media, but also as critical components of cultural preservation and empowerment. **Imron et al. (2025)** in their study underscores the importance, challenges, and possible strategies for preserving mother tongues within Indonesia's educational context. The findings conclude that the mother tongue plays a vital role in children's cognitive and social development; it enhances their understanding of fundamental concepts while also reinforcing cultural connections and local identity. **Walizadah (2025)** asserts that integrating the mother tongue into the education system helps embed cultural elements within the curriculum, thereby encouraging students to develop a positive attitude toward their society and its culture. Overall, the reviewed literature consistently highlights the significance of indigenous languages. However, the present

study focuses specifically on the Konyak language, for which only a limited number of written sources relevant to the topic are available in the public domain. Therefore, the study aims to document and examine the impact and significance of the Konyak language, thereby contributing to the preservation of indigenous linguistic heritage and serving as a valuable reference for future generations.

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study adopts a conceptual and qualitative approach based on secondary data. The relevant information was collected from various sources, including books, policy documents, journals, research articles, newspapers, and other published and unpublished materials. The data collected was then reviewed, analyzed and interpreted thematically to provides a broader understanding of the issues and perspectives relevant to the study.

6. DISCUSSION

The discussion presented in this section is based on the findings and insights derived from the review and analysis of relevant literature.

a. Significance of Preserving the Konyak Language

Indigenous language plays a very important role in terms of transferring oral tradition and practices such as storytelling, folktales, folklore, myths and folk songs. The incorporation of oral tradition in the curriculum can foster language revitalization to young learners. Some of the other significances are:

1. **Better academic performance:** Children understand concepts 25-30% faster and score higher when taught in their first language during the early years (World bank, UNESCO and cognitive research). According to a study conducted by Thomas and Collier (2002), students taught in their mother tongue performed higher in academic proficiency tests than students taught in a second language. Baker (2006) points out that studying in a known language facilitates students in attaining cognitive skills and conceptual comprehension without the extra hurdle of translating languages. Furthermore, K. Hukato Swu, in his study on, "study habits and academic achievement in Mon District", identified language as a major barrier, noting that the absence of mother tongue instruction at the elementary level is a key factor contributing to the educational backwardness of the district.

2. **Lower dropout rates:** A sudden shift to English only instruction from classes 5–6 is identified as a major cause of student dropout in Mon District, contributing to a 15–20% dropout rate according to the Konyak Students' Union (KSU) pilot study. The State Economic Survey 2024–25 also reports that Mon district has the highest primary-level dropout rate at 10.03%. Evidence from KSU pilots shows that using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction reduces dropout rates by 15–20%. Further, since the implementation of the MTB-MLE programme, indigenous communities have shown increased school attendance and retention (NCERT Evaluation Report, 2011)

3. Preserves cultural identity and pride: Konyak carries unique knowledge of tattoos, Morungs, agriculture, biodiversity, and oral history that no other language can transmit fully. Indigenous languages sustain cultural identity and ensure the transmission of rich oral heritage across generations.

4. Increases parental and community involvement: when classes are in Konyak, parents who don't speak in English can still help with homework and attend PTAs improving attendance and monitoring.

5. Gives equal opportunity to rural and first-generation learners: Children from non-English speaking homes start school already behind, mother-tongue instructions level the playing field from day one.

6. Supports India's own Policy: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly recommends mother-tongue/regional-language medium at least until class 5, preferably till class 8, using Konyak is not "going against progress", it is following the country's latest education vision.

7. Builds confident bilingual/ multilingual citizens: Children who are fluent in Konyak, English and Hindi end up more employable and culturally secure than those who lose their mother tongue and struggle with English.

6.2. key challenges faced in promoting indigenous language education within the community

- 1. Dialectal Diversity:** One of the significant challenges is the extensive diversity of dialects among the tribes. Each village has its own dialect, many of which are mutually unintelligible and differ greatly from the standardized dialect adopted for instruction. As a result, speakers from other villages are required to learn the standard dialect, which is entirely unfamiliar to them, making the learning process difficult and demanding.
- 2. Lack of Trained Konyak-Medium Teachers:** The implementation of Konyak language in schools is hindered by the shortage of qualified teachers and the limited proficiency of existing staff. The problem is compounded by insufficient funding, the absence of a training institute, and lack of recruitment initiatives. Although passing a language proficiency test is required for appointment, many candidates are unable to meet this eligibility requirement.
- 3. Rise of Nagamese (creole) eroding pure Konyak:** In the current context, many native speakers are increasingly unable to communicate with one another in the Konyak language. Nagamese has become the dominant medium of interaction, gradually replacing and overshadowing the use of pure Konyak in everyday communication.
- 4. Parental Pressure for "English-Only" Education:** Because English serves as the primary medium of instruction in all the levels many parents strongly encourage an English-only educational approach. As a result, the younger generation particularly those raised outside their native villages often feel more comfortable using English or other dominant languages rather than their own mother tongue. And very often English is widely

perceived as tickets to jobs, which further contributes to the decline in the use of the native language.

- 5. Limited Continuity of Mother Tongue Education:** Another major challenge is that the mother tongue (MT) is taught only up to Class 8. When students' progress to higher levels of education, they are required to switch to English as the medium of instruction. This shift reduces the academic importance and practical use of the mother tongue, leading to a gradual decline in students' proficiency, interest, and motivation to preserve their native language. Over time, the lack of continued exposure and formal learning opportunities weakens the role of MT in education and contributes to language marginalization and eventual language loss.

7. CONCLUSION

According to UNESCO Atlas of the World's languages in danger, the status of the Konyak language is at the vulnerable state, indicating that it is at risk if active measures are not taken. Preserving the mother tongue is essential for fostering inclusion and achieving sustainable development goals by ensuring that no one is left behind. It helps safeguard endangered literature and protect family heritage. When a language disappears, we lose not only a means of communication but also valuable traditional knowledge and cultural heritage such as performing arts, social practices, rituals, festivals, traditional crafts, and the invaluable legacy of oral traditions such as poetry, proverbs, and legends. We also lose knowledge about local plants, animals, and their uses that is crucial for passing wisdom and cultural identity to future generations. The Konyak community is rich in oral literature, yet much of it has not been documented in written form. Therefore, efforts to document, educate and promote Konyak language must continue, with active involvement from governments, organizations and community members. Efforts should be undertaken to train and recruit mother tongue teachers by introducing diploma and certificate courses. By recognizing and valuing indigenous languages, we can ensure the continued diversity and resilience of India's linguistic landscape.

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