



Indigenous Language Loss and Culinary Heritage among Ethnic Communities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous culinary heritage is deeply embedded in language, as food knowledge, preparation methods, and cultural meanings are often transmitted through linguistic practices. In Bangladesh, the decline of indigenous languages has raised concerns regarding the preservation of traditional food systems among ethnic communities. This study examines the relationship between indigenous language loss and the erosion of culinary heritage in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative analytical approach based on existing empirical and ethnographic studies, the paper explores how diminishing language use affects traditional food knowledge, intergenerational transmission of recipes, and cultural food practices. The findings indicate that language loss contributes to the simplification of indigenous food traditions, reduced use of native terminology, and weakening of cultural identity linked to food practices. The study highlights the importance of integrating language preservation into cultural and food heritage initiatives to sustain indigenous culinary knowledge. These findings contribute to discussions on food culture, cultural sustainability, and indigenous knowledge systems within agrarian societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food is not merely a source of nutrition but a cultural system through which communities express identity, social relationships, and historical continuity (Feldman & Wunderlich, 2023; Parrish *et al.*, 2025). For indigenous ethnic communities, culinary practices are deeply embedded in language, as recipes, food classifications, preparation methods, and symbolic meanings are transmitted through indigenous linguistic expressions. When indigenous languages decline, culinary heritage is often among the first cultural domains to be affected, as food knowledge relies heavily on oral transmission within families and communities (Amin, 2018).

In Bangladesh, indigenous ethnic communities possess rich culinary traditions shaped by local ecology, agricultural practices, and cultural beliefs (Swiderska *et al.*, 2022; Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon, 2022; Redvers *et al.*, 2023). These food systems reflect generations of accumulated knowledge regarding crops, foraging, preservation, and ritual consumption (Kone *et al.*, 2025). Indigenous food terminology often encodes culturally specific meanings that cannot be fully translated into dominant languages without loss of nuance. As indigenous languages face decline, the linguistic foundation supporting culinary knowledge becomes increasingly fragile (Sultana, 2023).

Language loss has been closely linked to cultural simplification in indigenous contexts. Studies indicate that when younger generations adopt dominant languages, traditional food knowledge is frequently reduced to a limited set of practices, while more complex preparation techniques and symbolic meanings are forgotten (Ali *et al.*, 2016). This process does not necessarily eliminate indigenous foods but transforms them into simplified cultural markers detached from their original linguistic and cultural contexts.

Intergenerational transmission plays a crucial role in sustaining indigenous culinary heritage. Traditionally, food knowledge is passed from elders to younger family members through verbal instruction, storytelling, and participation in food preparation. When communication increasingly occurs in a dominant language, indigenous food terminology and culturally embedded practices are gradually replaced or abandoned (Islam, 2020). This shift weakens the continuity of culinary heritage and alters the cultural identity linked to food practices.

Socioeconomic and environmental changes further intensify this process. Indigenous communities in Bangladesh face increasing economic pressures that reshape dietary patterns and food preferences. Urbanization, market integration, and exposure to mainstream food culture encourage the adoption of standardized food practices, often communicated through the dominant language (Beg *et al.*, 2020). As a result, indigenous culinary practices may persist only in ceremonial contexts rather than in everyday life.

Cultural marginalization also affects how indigenous food traditions are valued. Research suggests that dominant cultural narratives often portray indigenous food practices as informal or outdated, contributing to reduced cultural pride and limited efforts to document or sustain traditional food knowledge (Bhuiyan, 2016). When indigenous languages are marginalized, the cultural legitimacy of indigenous cuisines is similarly diminished, reinforcing cycles of cultural erosion.

Despite growing scholarly attention to indigenous language loss in Bangladesh, the relationship between language decline and culinary heritage remains underexplored. Existing studies tend to focus on language policy, education, or socioeconomic outcomes, with limited attention to food as a cultural domain affected by linguistic change (Sultana, 2023). Understanding culinary heritage through the lens of language loss provides valuable insight

into how everyday cultural practices are reshaped under conditions of linguistic marginalization.

Based on previous studies (Karmaker, 2024; Karmaker, 2025), this study addresses this gap by examining how indigenous language loss influences the preservation and transmission of culinary heritage among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. By focusing on food-related cultural practices, the study highlights an often-overlooked consequence of language decline. The analysis aims to contribute to discussions on cultural sustainability, indigenous knowledge systems, and food heritage preservation within multilingual and agrarian societies.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data analysis to explore the relationship between indigenous language loss and culinary heritage among ethnic communities in Bangladesh. The research design was appropriate given the study's focus on cultural meaning, traditional knowledge, and intergenerational transmission rather than quantitative measurement. All data were drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed academic sources included in the bibliographic list provided by the author.

The analysis focused on studies addressing indigenous culture, language use, food practices, and socioeconomic change. Particular attention was given to research that discussed cultural traditions, daily practices, and identity formation within indigenous communities. Sources were selected based on their relevance to language loss, cultural transmission, and indigenous livelihoods (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Amin, 2018; Beg *et al.*, 2020).

A thematic synthesis method was applied to identify recurring patterns linking language decline with changes in culinary practices. Themes analyzed included intergenerational transmission of food knowledge, linguistic erosion of indigenous food terminology, and the impact of socioeconomic pressures on traditional diets. Findings from multiple sources were compared to identify consistent relationships and contextual variations.

To ensure analytical rigor, only studies with clear cultural or sociolinguistic relevance were included. Cross-referencing among sources was conducted to minimize interpretive bias and enhance validity. As the study relied solely on secondary sources and did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of existing studies indicates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh has a direct and significant impact on the preservation of culinary heritage among ethnic communities (see **Table 1**). Food-related knowledge is traditionally transmitted through indigenous languages using culturally specific terminology, oral instruction, and participatory learning within households. As indigenous languages decline, this knowledge transmission becomes fragmented, resulting in the gradual erosion of culinary practices that rely on linguistic precision and cultural context (Amin, 2018; Sultana, 2023).

One of the most observable outcomes of language loss is the reduction of indigenous food terminology. Studies focusing on cultural practices among ethnic groups reveal that many traditional food names, preparation methods, and ingredient classifications are increasingly replaced by Bengali terms (Bhuiyan, 2016). This linguistic substitution simplifies culinary knowledge and removes culturally embedded meanings that cannot be fully translated into

dominant languages. Over time, indigenous foods may continue to exist, but their original cultural narratives and symbolic significance diminish.

Intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge has also weakened. Traditionally, elders pass down food preparation skills through verbal explanation and demonstration using the indigenous language. When younger family members communicate primarily in a dominant language, the transfer of nuanced culinary knowledge becomes limited or incomplete (Islam, 2020). This shift leads to selective retention, where only commonly practiced dishes survive, while more complex or ritual-based food practices fade from everyday use.

Socioeconomic pressures further accelerate this process. Indigenous communities facing economic marginalization often adapt their dietary practices to align with mainstream food culture, which is communicated through dominant-language channels such as markets, media, and education (Beg *et al.*, 2020). As a result, traditional food systems are increasingly confined to ceremonial occasions rather than daily consumption. Language loss thus interacts with economic forces to reshape culinary identity.

Table 1. Impacts of indigenous language loss on culinary knowledge transmission (Amin, 2018; Bhuiyan, 2016; Islam, 2020; Sultana, 2023).

Culinary aspect	Observed change	Cultural implication
Indigenous food terminology	Decline	Loss of culturally specific meanings
Recipe transmission	Fragmented	Incomplete transfer of preparation knowledge
Ritual food practices	Reduced	Simplification of ceremonial traditions
Everyday food diversity	Narrowed	Preference for mainstream food practices

The patterns presented in **Table 1** illustrate that language loss affects not only what foods are prepared but also how culinary knowledge is understood and valued. When indigenous languages are marginalized, food-related knowledge loses its linguistic foundation, leading to cultural dilution rather than outright disappearance. This process highlights the role of language as a cultural framework through which culinary practices gain meaning.

Cultural identity linked to food practices is similarly affected. Indigenous cuisines often serve as markers of ethnic identity, reinforcing community belonging and cultural pride. Research indicates that when indigenous food terminology is no longer actively used, younger generations may perceive traditional foods as outdated or symbolic rather than integral to daily life (Ali *et al.*, 2016). This perception weakens cultural attachment and reduces motivation to preserve traditional culinary knowledge.

Environmental and agricultural changes also intersect with language loss. Indigenous food systems are closely connected to local ecosystems, seasonal cycles, and traditional farming knowledge. When language decline limits the transmission of ecological knowledge embedded in food terminology, communities may lose sustainable practices related to crop selection, food preservation, and resource management (Amin, 2018). This loss has broader implications for food security and cultural sustainability.

The findings summarized in **Table 2** demonstrate that culinary heritage erosion is driven by structural conditions rather than individual choice. Educational systems, economic integration, and cultural hierarchies collectively shape how food practices evolve under linguistic pressure. Language shift within households emerges as a particularly influential factor, as it directly affects everyday culinary communication.

Overall, the results suggest that indigenous language loss contributes to a gradual reconfiguration of culinary heritage in Bangladesh. While traditional foods may continue to exist in adapted forms, the erosion of indigenous language reduces their cultural specificity

and intergenerational continuity. These findings emphasize that preserving indigenous culinary heritage requires attention not only to food practices but also to the linguistic environments that sustain them. Integrating language preservation into food and cultural heritage initiatives may therefore play a critical role in sustaining indigenous knowledge systems within rapidly changing social and economic contexts.

Table 2. Structural factors influencing culinary heritage erosion among indigenous communities (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Beg *et al.*, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2016; Islam, 2020; Sultana, 2023).

Structural factor	Influence on food practices	Linguistic dimension		
Dominant-language education	High	Reduced use of indigenous food terms		
Market integration	High	Standardization of food preferences		
Urbanization	Moderate–High	Decline of home-based food preparation		
Cultural marginalization	Moderate	Lower cultural valuation of indigenous cuisine		
Language shift within households	High	Disrupted culinary knowledge transmission		

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that indigenous language loss in Bangladesh significantly affects the preservation of culinary heritage among ethnic communities. The findings indicate that diminishing use of indigenous languages disrupts the transmission of food-related knowledge, reduces the use of native culinary terminology, and weakens the cultural meanings embedded in traditional food practices. As language shift occurs within households and communities, culinary knowledge becomes simplified, with complex preparation methods and ritual-based foods increasingly confined to symbolic or ceremonial contexts.

Socioeconomic pressures, dominant-language education, and market integration further accelerate these changes, reshaping indigenous food systems toward standardized practices. While traditional foods may continue to exist, the erosion of linguistic foundations reduces their cultural specificity and intergenerational continuity. These findings highlight that culinary heritage preservation cannot be separated from language sustainability. Integrating indigenous language preservation into food culture initiatives and community-based programs is essential for sustaining indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identity within rapidly changing social and economic environments.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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