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Educational Impact and Trends of Ethnic Language Loss in Bangladesh: A Statistical and Policy-Based Review (2013-2023)

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A B S T R A C T

This paper investigates the declining use of ethnic minority languages in Bangladesh over the last decade (2013–2023), with particular attention to the role of education in accelerating or mitigating this trend. Using a statistical approach supported by field data, the study examines language shift patterns across various regions, educational levels, and policy changes. Findings reveal a steady decline in the use of indigenous languages, exacerbated by national curricula that prioritize Bengali and English, as well as the lack of multilingual teacher training. Educational policies often neglect the linguistic rights of minority communities, leading to reduced intergenerational language transmission. The paper argues that integrating indigenous languages into school systems, providing culturally responsive materials, and training bilingual educators could reverse the trend. The study contributes both quantitative evidence and policy recommendations for revitalizing endangered languages in education and beyond.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a core component of identity, heritage, and social inclusion. In Bangladesh, the dominant use of Bengali in education, administration, and media has contributed to the marginalization and gradual disappearance of indigenous languages. Although the country is home to over 40 ethnic communities, most of their languages are excluded from national curricula, textbooks, and teaching practices. This lack of institutional support has caused a rapid decline in native language use, especially among younger generations who are socialized through monolingual education systems.

The educational system in Bangladesh plays a central role in this trend. Primary and secondary schools overwhelmingly use Bengali and, increasingly, English as mediums of instruction. Ethnic minority students are often placed in linguistically unfamiliar learning environments, where their mother tongues are not recognized or supported. This undermines both cognitive development and cultural identity, while reinforcing systemic exclusion. The absence of trained teachers, bilingual teaching materials, and policy frameworks for multilingual education further accelerates the erosion of minority languages. As a result, many indigenous children gradually shift toward dominant languages to succeed academically and socially, leaving behind their ancestral linguistic heritage.

Recent research has highlighted the limitations of Bangladesh's education policy in safeguarding indigenous language rights. Although the National Education Policy 2010 mentioned the need to support ethnic languages, implementation has been minimal or symbolic. Textbooks and teacher training programs rarely include indigenous language content, and community-led education initiatives often lack formal recognition. Furthermore, the growing reliance on standardized testing in Bengali and English discourages students from using or learning their native languages in academic settings. Between 2013 and 2023, the trend of language loss has become more measurable through national reports, NGO assessments, and community surveys. However, quantitative research connecting educational policy to language decline remains limited. Most studies focus on sociolinguistic or cultural dimensions, without incorporating statistical trends or school-level data. This gap hinders the development of evidence-based strategies for language preservation in the education sector.

This paper addresses that gap by analyzing ethnic language loss through the lens of educational systems and policies. It examines a decade of data to understand how institutional priorities, curriculum design, and classroom practice contribute to language shift among ethnic communities. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of statistical analysis with educational critique, offering both empirical evidence and policy-oriented recommendations. The impact aims to inform inclusive education reforms, support multilingual development, and help reverse the trajectory of language loss in Bangladesh's marginalized communities (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023; Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al*., 2018; Hasan *et al*., 2022; Reza & Ullah, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The loss of ethnic languages in Bangladesh has been widely studied from sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives. Research consistently shows that indigenous languages are in danger of extinction due to the dominance of Bengali and English in both formal and informal communication domains (Karmaker, 2021; Karmaker, 2025a; Karmaker, 2025b). The lack of institutional and policy support has exacerbated the vulnerability of these languages. Studies emphasize that language is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of cultural knowledge and community identity (Sultana, 2023; Bhuiyan, 2016). Economic pressures, lack of institutional support, and government policies prioritizing assimilation over preservation further

marginalize native languages (Beg *et al.,* 2020; Uddin, 2017; May, 2023). The challenges of bilingualism and its implications for language preservation among indigenous children.

One of the primary contributing factors to language decline is the education system. The majority of indigenous children are taught exclusively in Bengali or English, often from early childhood, which leads to a process of language shift. It is seen how such policies negatively impact the linguistic rights of indigenous groups in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2025). Efforts to monitor parity in education for marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples, have been partially tracked under SDG Indicator 4.5.1 (see https://banbeis.gov.bd/index.php/en/publications/education-and-training-statistics-2023). When education is not offered in the mother tongue, students experience lower academic performance and decreased cultural attachment. Multilingual education has been promoted globally as a solution, but implementation in Bangladesh remains minimal (Sultana, 2023). There is a significant disconnect between policy aspirations and classroom realities, as school curricula and teacher training rarely accommodate linguistic diversity (Haque *et al.,* 2018; Hasan *et al.,* 2022). The policy for preserving the ethnic heritage is not effective (Karmaker, 2025a; Karmaker, 2025b). Chakma-language textbooks were published for pre-primary education as part of a limited multilingual effort (see https://nctb.gov.bd/site/page/878e9725-96c5-4bb9-86c4-d37b0562c73b). More than thirty small ethnic groups, such as the Patra community in Sylhet, maintain distinct cultural and linguistic identities despite unclear historical origins (See https://imli.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/imli.portal.gov.bd/page/08069fb7_806f_4972_9ad4_7b1302159649/2022-04-17-02-53-85f4ef8b40f8fe2f801b68782e63e8e3.pdf).

Research has also documented the absence of textbooks and materials in indigenous languages. Although the National Education Policy acknowledges the need for inclusivity, it has not been fully operationalized, especially in remote or marginalized areas (see https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/bangladesh_national_education_policy_2010.pdf). Ethnic people's lack of use of digital platforms has hindered their achievement of knowledge (Hasan *et al.,* 2022). Several case studies reveal that community-based schools occasionally attempt to teach in the local language, but these efforts often lack government recognition or funding (Rahman, 2023; Reza & Ullah, 2023). This undermines their sustainability and broader impact. Rather, Community-driven initiatives, supported by governments and NGOs, have created sustainable programs for language preservation (Haque et al., 2018). UNDP Bangladesh in 2018 (see https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/publications/united-nations-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-sadri) published the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in the Sadri language, marking an important milestone for ethnic language recognition in Bangladesh.

The literature further highlights the intergenerational gap in language use (see **Tables 4** and **5**). Younger generations are more likely to adopt Bengali or English for economic and educational advancement, leading to a discontinuity in native language transmission. Language loss is, therefore, closely tied to structural inequities in education and social mobility. Language loss in Bangladesh is linked to power politics, cultural suppression, and a lack of linguistic rights protection (Awal, 2024). Today, technology, including mobile apps, online courses, and digital archives, has enabled younger generations to reconnect with their linguistic roots (Hasan *et al.,* 2022). Preserving indigenous languages through education and technology is vital for sustaining the cultural heritage of ethnic communities in Bangladesh (see https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/national-consultation-indigenous-languages-call-preservation-and-technology-integration).

Without state intervention or targeted educational reform, this trend is expected to continue, threatening linguistic diversity in the country (Awal, 2019). The failure of ethnic children in primary and secondary education is attributed to the lack of textbooks in their native languages (Islam, 2020; Islam, 2022). The difficulties indigenous people in Bangladesh face while using their mother tongues (Bhuiyan, 2016). While existing research provides valuable insights into the causes and consequences of language endangerment, there is limited empirical data tracking these trends quantitatively over time. Very few studies combine statistical data with educational analysis to understand the depth of language erosion. This review underscores the need for a more integrative approach that connects education policy, community needs, and language rights through both qualitative and quantitative lenses.

3. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative data analysis with qualitative policy review. The primary objective was to investigate the trends of ethnic language loss in Bangladesh over 10 years (2013–2023), with a particular focus on how national education systems and school-level practices have contributed to this phenomenon. Data were collected through two main sources: (i) numerical data on language use and speaker population over time, and (ii) content analysis of educational policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and literature on minority language education.

A total of 165 respondents participated in this study, all of whom were students from secondary and higher secondary institutions and collegiate universities across Sherpur's 7 institutions in Bangladesh. The author and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) formed the group of respondents with the assistance of local authorities or institutions. Participants were recruited using random sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling to ensure representation from diverse marginalized communities.

Students (n = 165): Recruited from seven institutions: urban-1 - 1 collegiate university + 4 schools; rural 1 college + 1 school in Sherpur, Bangladesh. Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Members (n = 20): Consisted of teachers, policymakers, local education administrators, and an ethical community leader contributing to both structured questionnaires and FGDs. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation or transportation arrangements were provided. Participants traveled independently to the study locations.

The survey instrument was developed based on a literature review of indigenous education, education equity frameworks, and government policy impact studies. It consisted of 30 structured questions, including 15 Likert-scale questions, categorized into the following themes:
(i)   Trends in indigenous language decline in Bangladesh (2013-2023).
(ii)   Influence of national education policies on language loss.
(iii)   School practices affecting ethnic language use.
(iv)   Institutional support for indigenous language education.
(v)   Impact of monolingual education on language retention.
(vi)   Educational effects on intergenerational language transmission.
(vii)   Community involvement in language preservation efforts.
(viii) To ensure clarity, the survey was piloted with 10 respondents before large-scale distribution.

The survey specifically examined public awareness and government policies related to ethnic languages. It also analyzed the relationship between policy implementation gaps and the continued decline of indigenous languages, supported by quantitative data, which are found in Section 6.4. discussion

The semi-structured interviews and FGDs were designed to gather in-depth qualitative insights on the Educational Impact and Trends of Ethnic Language Loss in Bangladesh for marginalized communities. The protocols covered key topics such as:
(i)   Experiences with ethnic language use and loss in educational settings
(ii) Perceived impact of national and local education policies on native language retention
(iii) Role of schools and teachers in promoting or neglecting indigenous languages
(iv) Community and family efforts to sustain intergenerational language transmission

Interviews (n = 23) and FGDs (n = 20) were conducted in the native language (Bengali), recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Surveys were administered both online and in person to accommodate participants with limited internet access. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in local schools, government offices, and community centers to ensure a comfortable environment for discussion.

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (Approval No.: NAMC/01-02-24.00.04.00033) for data collection at three participating sites in Sherpur District: an urban computer training center, an urban secondary school, and a rural college. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving verbal and written explanations in Bangla. The IRB verified that:
(i) No institutional or participant identifiers would be disclosed
(ii) Data would be stored on encrypted servers with access limited to the research team
(iii) Participation was voluntary, with no compensation provided to avoid coercion

The approval included specific authorization for:
(i)   Audio recording of interviews/FGDs
(ii) Use of anonymized survey responses
(iii) Accessibility accommodations for disabled participants

All data collection occurred at three strategically selected sites in Sherpur District:
(i)   An urban computer training center (Sherpur Sadar Upazila)
(ii) An urban secondary school's computer lab
(iii) A rural college's main digital learning center

Surveys were administered in person across multiple scheduled sessions (N=213 total). Interviews (n=23) and FGDs (n=20) were conducted in private rooms at these locations using identical workstation configurations (Intel i3/8GB RAM/Windows 10) to ensure technical consistency. The data collection took place from 20 June 2024 to 18 January 2025, ensuring sufficient time for gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Data were securely stored in encrypted files, and access was restricted to the research team to ensure confidentiality and safeguard participants' information.

Survey responses, including 15 Likert-scale questions, were analyzed using SPSS with the following statistical methods:

Descriptive statistics to identify relationships between ethnic language, government policies, and educational outcomes. Regression analysis to assess the impact of government policies, ethnic language, and socioeconomic factors on educational outcomes:
(i)   A policy index was developed to quantify government efforts, considering:
(ii) Identification of key government policies related to ethnic language preservation and education.
(iii) Translation of policy objectives into measurable indicators for analysis.
(iv) Assessment of policy implementation effectiveness and gaps through survey and qualitative data.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually using Excel to code and categorize responses regarding:
(i) Identification of relevant government policies impacting ethnic language education (e.g., policy scope, clarity).
(ii) Analysis of policy implementation and enforcement at school and community levels (e.g., resource allocation, monitoring).
(iii) Evaluation of gaps between policy intentions and actual practice in preserving indigenous languages (e.g., lack of teacher training, insufficient materials).

In writing down the paper, the following limitations are found
(i) Limited geographic scope may affect generalizability.
(ii) Self-reported data may include bias.
(iii) Cross-sectional design limits causal inference.
(iv) Language translation could affect data accuracy.

The methodology emphasized regional and community-specific analysis to avoid generalization and to capture local variations in language preservation efforts. Overall, the study was designed to integrate statistical modeling with educational critique, supporting evidence-based discussions on how language loss can be mitigated through inclusive and multilingual policy reforms. Ethical considerations included the anonymization of community-specific data and reliance on publicly available sources to ensure responsible use of cultural information.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section explores the measurable decline in indigenous language use across various ethnic communities in Bangladesh from 2013 to 2023, with particular emphasis on the role of formal education systems and policy structures. The integration of statistical trends with educational analysis reveals a multifaceted crisis in language sustainability.

Quantitative data from several communities indicate that the decline in native language use is not evenly distributed but rather shaped by factors such as geographic isolation, access to education, and curriculum design. The data reveal a stark reduction in the number of fluent speakers, particularly among school-age children in areas where Bengali is the dominant language of instruction. As shown in **Table 1**, the decline is more prominent among younger demographics, suggesting intergenerational disruption in language transmission (Sultana, 2023).

Table 1. Speaker population by age group in selected indigenous communities (2013 vs. 2023)

Age Group	2013 (%)	2023 (%)	Change (%)
Under 10 years	26.4	11.8	−14.6
11–20 years	23.0	17.5	−5.5
21–40 years	29.5	31.2	+1.7
Above 40 years	21.1	39.5	+18.4

This age-based distribution supports the argument that the education system's language policy directly impacts younger generations, where early exposure to monolingual schooling displaces native languages. Since language acquisition is most efficient during early childhood, the lack of mother tongue support in schools has a compounding effect on long-term language retention. As the table illustrates, older generations continue to maintain native language fluency, while younger groups increasingly shift toward Bengali or English due to systemic educational exposure.

In many cases, children are enrolled in schools that do not acknowledge their linguistic background. Bengali or English is introduced as the medium of instruction from the first year of

primary education, and in some institutions, local languages are even discouraged. This linguistic assimilation begins early and continues through the education system, leading to the progressive abandonment of ethnic languages at home and in the community (Awal, 2019).

The language shift is also amplified by parents' attitudes toward education and economic mobility. In a competitive academic environment, Bengali and English are viewed as tools for success. Parents may encourage children to prioritize these languages while discouraging the use of native tongues, especially when the latter are absent from textbooks, examinations, and classroom discourse. The absence of culturally responsive curriculum contributes to the internalization of inferiority associated with minority languages, affecting not only communication but also cultural confidence (Rahman, 2023).These patterns align with previous findings on educational exclusion of ethnic minorities. According to Haque *et al.* (2018), language plays a gatekeeping role in educational access, with monolingual curricula creating structural disadvantages for children from non-Bengali-speaking communities. The lack of inclusive pedagogy undermines comprehension, participation, and academic achievement. Consequently, many indigenous students fall behind in early education, reinforcing the belief that success requires linguistic assimilation.

Although the National Education Policy 2010 included a provision for incorporating indigenous languages in primary education, implementation has remained weak and symbolic. Textbooks are rarely available in ethnic languages, and there is a shortage of teachers who are both trained and fluent in these languages. Some experimental initiatives were launched, particularly in the CHT (Chittagong Hill Tracts) regions, but most lacked sustained funding and institutional endorsement. This has led to fragmented and unsystematic efforts to preserve language through education (Hasan *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, language endangerment is not only an educational issue but also a socio-political one. The absence of institutional recognition for minority languages reflects a broader issue of marginalization. Language is linked with identity, and when state systems delegitimize it, entire cultures face erasure. In Bangladesh, ethnic groups such as the Chakma, Marma, and KRUX-speaking communities have experienced loss of cultural autonomy through educational assimilation and state language policies (Reza & Ullah, 2023).

The analysis of school-level practices confirms that there is little space for linguistic diversity in classrooms. Teachers often lack the training and materials to accommodate multilingual instruction. Moreover, the centralized curriculum design process fails to reflect regional or community-specific needs. As a result, students are evaluated based on a standard that does not consider their linguistic starting points. Standardized assessments are offered exclusively in Bengali and English, further institutionalizing inequality (Bhuiyan, 2016).

In some regions, NGOs and community-based organizations have initiated language preservation projects by establishing informal schools or cultural centers. These efforts are vital but remain disconnected from national education systems. Without alignment with official policy and support from education authorities, such programs risk becoming unsustainable. Even when language classes are offered, they are often seen as supplementary rather than integral to formal education (Sultana, 2023). The implications are critical. If indigenous languages continue to disappear at the current rate, Bangladesh risks losing not only linguistic diversity but also valuable cultural and ecological knowledge embedded in these languages. Education systems have the potential to reverse this trend by adopting inclusive language policies, developing mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs, and integrating community voices into curriculum development.

Table 2 illustrates the stark regional disparity in curriculum support and teacher preparedness for indigenous language education. Only the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region shows signs of

structured inclusion of indigenous languages in its educational framework. Even here, trained teachers account for only 15% of the total, and the sustainability of these efforts remains questionable due to inconsistent funding and limited policy continuity. Other regions, such as Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Khulna, show negligible to zero support in both teacher training and textbook provision.

Table 2. Indigenous language curriculum and teacher capacity by region.

Region	Curriculum Available	Teacher Trained in Indigenous Language (%)	Indigenous Language Textbooks Available
Chittagong Hill Tracts	Yes	15	Yes
Sylhet Division	No	2	No
Mymensingh Division	No	1	No
Rangpur Division	No	0	No
Khulna Division	No	0	No

The lack of institutional capacity has profound implications for both language vitality and educational equity. In schools outside of CHT, even where indigenous students are in the majority, teachers are often monolingual in Bengali. This creates a hostile learning environment for minority students, who must adapt linguistically from the outset of their schooling experience. It undermines their ability to participate fully in the learning process, often resulting in early dropout or low academic performance. These outcomes reinforce the perception that ethnic identity and academic success are mutually exclusive—a damaging belief that fuels cultural assimilation.

Further analysis of qualitative data from policy documents reveals that while indigenous inclusion is mentioned in high-level policy rhetoric, actionable items such as budget allocation, teacher deployment, and curriculum adaptation are largely absent. Advocates for mother-tongue education during early grades, but there are no enforcement mechanisms or accountability structures to ensure its realization. As a result, policy aspirations remain symbolic rather than transformative (Haque *et al*., 2018). In addition to institutional shortcomings, there are also sociolinguistic dynamics at play that accelerate language shift. Many ethnic communities have historically maintained oral traditions with limited written literature. The lack of orthographic standardization in several indigenous languages makes it difficult to produce teaching materials or include these languages in formal assessments. Without a standardized grammar or writing system, educational institutions are reluctant to engage in curriculum development, citing impracticality. Yet this absence is a product of exclusion, not an intrinsic limitation of the languages themselves (Rahman, 2023; Reza & Ullah, 2023).

Efforts to document and develop writing systems for these languages have been made by researchers and NGOs, but their work often remains disconnected from the Ministry of Education and curriculum development units. Language planning must therefore be seen as a collaborative effort involving not only linguists but also educators, community elders, and policymakers. Without this ecosystemic approach, language revitalization will remain marginal and fragmented. In field visits and surveys cited in the reviewed document, some teachers expressed willingness to incorporate indigenous knowledge and language into classroom instruction but noted that doing so added to their workload without institutional reward or training. Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages is sometimes met with resistance from Bengali-speaking administrators or fellow teachers, who regard it as unprofessional or irrelevant. This stigmatization discourages even well-meaning teachers from initiating change at the school level.

One particularly striking finding is that in areas where indigenous language support was piloted (for example, through community schools or NGO-funded bilingual programs) student participation, attendance, and comprehension improved significantly. Children were more

engaged, and parents were more involved, seeing their cultural values reflected in the education system. However, these successes were often short-lived, terminated when external funding ended or when they failed to gain government endorsement. The absence of a long-term integration strategy limited their impact, underlining the need for institutional adoption (Sultana, 2023). Beyond classroom-level implications, the erosion of indigenous languages also threatens intergenerational transmission of environmental knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and community governance systems. Language is deeply embedded in the ecology and spirituality of many indigenous groups, encoding knowledge about medicinal plants, agricultural practices, and oral histories. The loss of linguistic diversity, therefore, represents a broader loss of intellectual diversity and environmental stewardship capacity, which are crucial in the context of climate adaptation and sustainable development. This link between language loss and broader educational development is particularly important in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. Without recognition of linguistic rights, the goal of inclusive education remains unmet. Current practices in Bangladesh disproportionately favor dominant linguistic groups, effectively excluding marginalized populations from full participation in education and society.

Another policy disconnects lies in teacher education. Teacher training institutes do not include modules on multilingual pedagogy, intercultural sensitivity, or indigenous language teaching. Prospective teachers are seldom prepared to navigate the multilingual realities of Bangladesh's rural classrooms. This is a glaring oversight in a nation with over 40 ethnic groups. By not investing in the pedagogical capacities required for mother-tongue-based multilingual education, the system fails both teachers and learners.

At the macro level, the findings support the argument that ethnic language loss is not a passive outcome of globalization or modernization but a product of active policy decisions and institutional designs. Language planning in Bangladesh has historically centered on the promotion of Bengali as a tool of national unity, often at the expense of minority languages. While such nation-building goals may be politically motivated, they must be balanced with constitutional commitments to cultural diversity and equity. The discussion also raises critical questions about identity formation. For many indigenous youths, being educated in a foreign language from the earliest years results in alienation, not only from their community but also from themselves. This contributes to the erosion of cultural self-worth and weakens community cohesion. Educational systems must therefore be reimagined as spaces of cultural affirmation rather than assimilation.

The findings clearly show that education in Bangladesh, as currently structured, functions as a mechanism of language displacement for ethnic minorities. The combination of monolingual curricula, untrained teachers, lack of teaching materials, and sociopolitical marginalization constitutes a powerful force against language preservation. To counter this trend, systemic reforms are needed across policy, teacher training, curriculum design, and community engagement. As detailed in **Table 3**, a major issue in indigenous language preservation is the gap between stated policy and its execution. While the National Education Policy in 2010 includes several progressive provisions (such as mother-tongue instruction, recruitment of bilingual teachers, and inclusion of cultural knowledge), these are rarely implemented in practice. The only aspect moderately addressed is the mention of indigenous culture, which often amounts to tokenistic references in textbooks rather than deep curricular integration. The absence of teacher training modules in multilingual pedagogy further compounds the problem, as teachers remain unprepared to address linguistic diversity even when motivated.

Table 3. Policy provisions vs. implementation gaps in indigenous language education.

Policy Provision	Stated in the National Education Policy (2010)	Implementation Status (2023)
Mother tongue instruction in early grades	Yes	Partial
Development of indigenous language textbooks	Yes	Very Limited
Recruitment of bilingual teachers	Yes	Negligible
Inclusion of indigenous culture in the curriculum	Yes	Minimal
Training modules on multilingual pedagogy	No	Absent

This misalignment reflects a structural disinterest in the operationalization of inclusive education. Bureaucratic inertia, lack of funding, and low political will prevent these policies from reaching classrooms. In interviews cited within the reviewed material, educational administrators acknowledged awareness of these policies but admitted that there were no practical directives or budgets to implement them. As a result, local school authorities either ignore these policies or are unable to act on them due to constraints.

In regions where indigenous populations form a large minority, the consequences of this policy-practice gap are visible. For instance, schools in northern Sylhet and Rangamati that once served as community hubs have now become agents of cultural displacement. Children attend schools where neither the language nor the worldview presented aligns with their lived reality. Over time, they internalize negative attitudes toward their linguistic and cultural heritage, creating what sociolinguists call "subtractive bilingualism", a process where acquiring a dominant language causes the loss of the mother tongue. This phenomenon has psychological consequences. Studies showed that children who are educated in unfamiliar linguistic environments often suffer from low self-esteem, increased anxiety, and poor academic performance. In Bangladesh's ethnic communities, these effects are amplified due to historical marginalization and poverty. Children experience alienation not only from school content but also from their peers and teachers. This emotional distance leads to early school leaving, perpetuating cycles of educational underachievement (Rahman, 2023).

There is also an economic dimension to this discussion. Language plays a role in determining access to information, services, and jobs. Ethnic minority students who do not master Bengali or English due to exclusionary schooling are doubly disadvantaged—they lose their native language and still fail to gain functional fluency in the dominant languages.This linguistic limbo affects employability, civic participation, and access to higher education. Ironically, the very institutions meant to empower these students act as filters of exclusion. Community responses to these challenges vary. In some areas, indigenous groups have begun to organize informal education initiatives using local volunteers, elders, and religious leaders. These initiatives focus on storytelling, oral histories, and basic literacy in the native language. While these programs foster cultural pride and intergenerational bonding, their scope remains limited without state recognition or integration into formal education pathways. Moreover, they risk becoming obsolete in the absence of modern educational alignment or digital support tools.

Digital technology offers potential solutions. Language apps, voice recognition tools, and virtual classrooms can be harnessed to promote mother-tongue literacy. However, these technologies are not widely accessible in rural Bangladesh due to internet infrastructure, cost barriers, and a

lack of localized content. Initiatives by NGOs and universities to digitize endangered languages have shown promise but remain underfunded and disconnected from national education policy. Despite these challenges, global frameworks provide a useful reference point. The United Nations' International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) underscores the urgency of protecting linguistic diversity. Bangladesh, as a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals, is expected to align its education system with SDG 4 and SDG 10, which emphasize inclusive education and reduced inequalities. Yet, current practices indicate a divergence from these commitments.

There is growing international evidence that mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) enhances learning outcomes, particularly in early childhood education. Countries like the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Guatemala have implemented such models with measurable success. These models are built on a gradual transition: children first learn in their native language, followed by structured exposure to national and global languages. This approach preserves linguistic identity while enhancing academic performance.

In Bangladesh, a similar approach could be piloted with support from teacher training institutions, local governments, and donor agencies. MTB-MLE would allow children to begin their education in a familiar language, build cognitive skills more effectively, and develop positive attitudes toward school. Transition to Bengali and English could be phased in with contextual sensitivity, ensuring functional bilingualism rather than cultural erasure. Teacher recruitment must be localized, focusing on identifying bilingual candidates from indigenous communities. Training programs should include language pedagogy, cultural competence, and community engagement. Furthermore, decentralized curriculum design would allow communities to contribute their knowledge and narratives to educational content. Such reform would not only reverse language loss but also contribute to peace-building and social cohesion in multi-ethnic regions. It is important to note that resistance to such reforms may come not only from institutions but also from within communities. Some parents, having internalized dominant language ideologies, may view native language instruction as a barrier to their children's advancement. Public awareness campaigns and pilot success stories would be necessary to rebuild trust and highlight the value of bilingual education.

Additionally, the creation of a national language registry and linguistic mapping of schools could help allocate resources more effectively. Schools with high concentrations of indigenous students should be prioritized for bilingual programs.

Partnerships with linguistic departments in universities can aid in developing orthographies, grammar rules, and teacher manuals for less-documented languages. The cumulative evidence from this study indicates that preserving linguistic diversity in Bangladesh requires more than cultural sympathy—it demands educational restructuring. Language loss is not inevitable but is engineered through neglect, exclusion, and policy inaction. The education system, as a primary instrument of socialization, must be repurposed to support rather than erase the identities of Bangladesh's indigenous peoples.

The data in **Table 4** reveal a striking generational decline in indigenous language fluency, particularly among children under 15 years of age. While 95% of grandparents are fluent in their ethnic languages, only 10% of the youngest generation can communicate fluently. This drop illustrates the systemic failure to sustain intergenerational transmission, which is a key indicator of language vitality. In contrast, fluency in Bengali has sharply increased among youth and children, showing a reversal in linguistic hierarchy within families.

Table 4. Intergenerational language shift in indigenous families.

Generation	Fluent in Indigenous Language (%)	Fluent in Bengali (%)	Primary Language Used at Home
Grandparents	95	50	Indigenous
Parents	70	85	Mixed
Youth (15–25 years)	35	95	Bengali
Children (<15 years)	10	98	Bengali

The shift in primary home language from indigenous tongues to Bengali is a direct consequence of educational and social pressures. Families often make pragmatic choices, believing that Bengali fluency will secure better educational outcomes and social mobility for their children. However, this choice frequently results in a weakening of family bonds and community identity, as children lose the ability to communicate with elders or understand cultural expressions embedded in language. This intergenerational erosion also affects the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge. For instance, indigenous words for local flora and fauna, farming techniques, and spiritual practices often have no direct equivalents in Bengali. As children grow up disconnected from these linguistic traditions, they also lose access to sustainable environmental practices that have been preserved orally for centuries. In the context of climate change and biodiversity loss, this linguistic erosion carries material consequences for resource management and disaster resilience.

Educational institutions reinforce this trend by privileging monolingual instruction. Classrooms that ignore students' home languages fail to recognize their prior knowledge and experiences. Cognitive studies show that when learners are taught in a familiar language, they are more likely to retain information and develop critical thinking skills. The current structure, which forces a linguistic transition at the onset of schooling, interrupts cognitive development and creates a deficit-based learning model. The ideological framing of Bengali as the sole language of progress further marginalizes indigenous identity. Children who speak their native language may face ridicule or punishment in schools, creating an emotional association of shame with their heritage. Over time, this internalized stigma leads to voluntary language abandonment, a phenomenon observed in various ethnolinguistic minorities worldwide.

To reverse this trajectory, policy reforms must be complemented by shifts in societal attitudes. Media and public discourse should promote linguistic diversity as a national asset rather than a barrier to unity. Government-sponsored television and radio content in indigenous languages, children's books in dual languages, and scholarships for bilingual students could begin to restore dignity and pride in multilingualism. Furthermore, the role of higher education is critical. Universities in Bangladesh should offer degrees and research opportunities in indigenous linguistics, anthropology, and education. Collaborations with indigenous scholars and students must be encouraged to produce knowledge that reflects lived experiences rather than top-down academic perspectives. These institutions can also serve as hubs for creating digital archives, dictionaries, and teacher-training modules that preserve and promote minority languages.

Community engagement remains a cornerstone of any revitalization strategy. Language revival cannot succeed without the active involvement of the speakers themselves. Community leaders, elders, parents, and youth must all have a role in shaping educational content, pedagogical approaches, and long-term planning. Participatory curriculum development, where local stories, values, and art are integrated into formal learning, ensures both relevance and acceptance. International cooperation can also amplify local efforts. Successful models from other multilingual nations offer valuable lessons. For example, New Zealand's Māori language immersion programs,

or Bolivia's plurinational education model, demonstrate how state structures can support linguistic rights. While the context of Bangladesh is unique, these cases highlight the feasibility of implementing bilingual and bicultural education at scale.

Table 5. Causes of losing use of ethnic Languages in Bangladesh (2018-2023). Data was adopted from https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/national-consultation-indigenous-languages-call-preservation-and-technology-integration

Cause	Estimated percentage contribution to language loss (2018-2023)	Key details and trend (2018-2023)
Dominance of Bengali (National language)	(2018-2023): 45-50%	The continued dominance of Bengali as the official language in Government, education, and media has remained the leading cause of language loss. The Bengali first policy has become more entrenched with the increasing importance of Bengali in digital spaces.
Urbanization and Migration	(2018-2023): 22-30%	The migration of ethnic groups to urban centers like Dhaka has the use of Bengali for economic and social integration. The urban population of ethnic groups has led to their adaptation to more widely spoken Bengali, accelerating language shift.
Educational System and Language of Instruction.	(2018-2023): 15-20%	The national education system continues to favor Bengali as the medium of instruction. Ethnic language education remains limited or non-existent in many areas, which has led to fewer young people learning or using their native language.
Social and Cultural Integration Pressure.	(2018-2023): 10-15%	Ethnic groups face growing pressure to assimilate into Bengali culture for social mobility, access to education, and employment opportunities. The continued cultural dominance of Bengali.
Lack of Language Special Media, And Resources.	(2018-2023)5-10%	The availability of ethnic language media (TV, Radio, and Print) remains limited, and there is insufficient infrastructure to ethnic languages, support the preservation and development of ethnic languages. This shortage has contributed decline of these languages.
Intergenerational Language Transmission Failure.	(2018-2023)5-10%	The failure to pass on ethnic languages generation has worsened as young people increasingly use Bengali for daily life and career prospects. This shift had been especially notable in urban areas, where ethnic languages are often perceived as less useful.
Political Instability and Conflict	(2018-2023)5-8%	In regions as the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Political instability and conflict have marginalized ethnic languages. The tension between ethnic groups and the central government, while not a major driver in the last five years, still plays a role in language decline.

Dominance of Bengali remains the primary cause of language loss in ethnic groups. The trend of Bengali being used in official and educational settings has led to a steady increase in its dominance. This has been consistent across the 2018-2023 period with an estimated contribution of 45-50%. Urbanization and migration have continued to drive the shift towards Bengali. Ethnic groups moving to urban centers like Dhaka for better employment and educational opportunities have led to an increase in the use of Bengali. The contribution has been relatively high, ranging from 22-30%.

The Educational system still favors Bengali as the medium of instruction, contributing significantly to language loss. Ethnic language instruction is rare or nonexistent, and educational reforms continue to focus primarily on Bengali, which has led to an estimated contribution of 15-20%. Social and Cultural Integration Pressures have been growing in the past five years. Ethnic communities are under pressure to conform to the mainstream Bengali culture to secure better social and economic prospects. This has intensified due to globalization and digital media, with a contribution of 10-15%.The Lack of Media and Resources in ethnic languages has continued to be a challenge. The absence of TV, radio, and print media in ethnic languages has limited their usage, contributing to a decline in their survival. This factor is responsible for about 5-10% of the language loss.

Intergenerational Transmission has been a consistent challenge, with younger generations increasingly adopting Bengali for education and career prospects. The failure to pass ethnic languages down to younger generations has become a critical issue, contributing 5-10% to the language loss in the last five years. Political Instability and Conflict in certain areas, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, continue to impact the preservation of ethnic languages. However, political conflict has had a lesser impact on language loss in recent years, contributing about 5-8%

One promising yet underutilized strategy is language immersion preschools. These early intervention centers can build foundational literacy in the mother tongue, providing a smoother transition to national and international languages later in life. Studies have shown that students in such programs perform equally well (or better) than their monolingual peers in national exams, disproving the myth that multilingualism confuses learners. Monitoring and evaluation must also become integral to any national language policy. Clear indicators, such as the number of indigenous language textbooks printed, bilingual teacher hires, and curriculum hours devoted to minority languages, can provide transparency and accountability. Disaggregated data collection by ethnicity and language background will help target interventions more effectively. Lastly, legal protections must be strengthened. While Bangladesh's constitution acknowledges cultural diversity, there is no specific law safeguarding linguistic rights. Enshrining these rights in national legislation would empower communities to demand services in their languages and seek redress when discriminated against. A language rights act, similar to those in India or South Africa, could be a transformative step toward equity.

In conclusion, the data and analysis presented throughout this section indicate that ethnic language loss in Bangladesh is not merely a linguistic concern—it is a multidimensional crisis affecting education, culture, equity, and sustainable development.

The education system stands at the center of this challenge. With comprehensive reform, rooted in both justice and pragmatism, it is possible to create an inclusive model where all languages and identities thrive.

Recommendations are in the following:

(i)   Implement Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): Initiate pilot programs in indigenous-majority areas to promote early-grade learning in students' native languages, with structured transition to Bengali and English.

(ii)　Develop Teacher Training Programs: Design and roll out training modules focused on multilingual pedagogy, cultural competence, and community engagement, prioritizing the recruitment of bilingual teachers from indigenous backgrounds.

(iii)　Revise Curriculum Content: Integrate local culture, oral literature, and ecological knowledge into textbooks and learning materials to reflect and validate indigenous worldviews.

(iv)　Support Digital Language Resources: Invest in the development of mobile apps, e-books, and audiovisual materials in ethnic languages to support literacy and preservation.

(v)　Establish Legal Protections: Enact language rights legislation to institutionalize access to services, education, and public communication in minority languages.

(vi)　Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Develop indicators to track the implementation of language-in-education policies and conduct regular assessments of community language use.

(vii)　Promote Public Awareness: Launch national campaigns that emphasize the value of linguistic diversity and challenge the stigma associated with speaking indigenous languages.

(viii)　Foster International Collaboration: Engage with successful global models of language revitalization and adapt them to Bangladesh's socio-political context.

5. CONCLUSION

The declining use of ethnic languages in Bangladesh reflects deep-rooted structural issues in education policy, curriculum implementation, and societal attitudes. The generational language shift is accelerating due to monolingual instruction, lack of institutional support, and perceived economic disadvantages of native language use. Without immediate policy reform and inclusive pedagogical strategies, the loss of linguistic diversity will intensify. Revitalization requires mother-tongue-based education, community engagement, and national commitment to cultural preservation. Embracing multilingual education can foster both equity and academic success while safeguarding the country's rich ethnolinguistic heritage for future generations. Education must become the core of this transformation.

6. 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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