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Rural Education, Language Barriers and India's Trade-Led Development: Evidence from Assamese Medium Primary Schools in Assam

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Abstract

India's trade-led development strategy is increasingly reliant on a labour force that can engage in formal markets, digital services, logistics, manufacturing and cross-border commerce. But the foundation for such participation is laid much earlier, in rural primary classrooms, where children acquire literacy, numeracy, communicative confidence, and the ability to shift between local and dominant languages. This paper investigates the connection among rural education, language barriers, and India's trade-led development agenda using evidence from Assamese medium primary schools in Assam. Assamese is a major regional language and the main medium of instruction in many government primary schools, but rural Assam is linguistically heterogeneous. Many children enter school speaking Bodo, Mising, Sadri, Bengali, Tiwa, Karbi, Nepali or local dialectal variants rather than standard Assamese. This mismatch in language may constrain early comprehension, hinder fundamental literacy and numeracy skills and limit later engagement with English-mediated, market-oriented learning. This paper explores the issue of linguistic barriers in Assamese-medium rural primary schools, the negotiation of the multilingual classroom by teachers and learners, and the implications of these processes for equitable human-capital formation in a trade-oriented economy. The proposed research will follow a qualitative dominant mixed methods design. The sample will include government Assamese-medium primary schools from three linguistically diverse districts of Assam. Thematic analysis will investigate types of language mismatch, translanguaging practices, constraints in instruction, parental attitudes and institutional support mechanisms. Complementing the qualitative findings, descriptive statistical analysis will examine the associations between the home language distance from standard Assamese and foundational learning outcomes. The study is grounded in human capital theory, language-ecology perspectives and the capabilities approach. It argues that trade led development can not be understood as a macroeconomic process of exports, investment and infrastructure. It also requires inclusive educational pathways through which rural children can become economically capable citizens. The findings of the study are expected to reveal that Assamese-medium schooling can provide a strong foundation for rural learners, but only when it is enriched by multilingual pedagogy, culturally relevant materials, teacher training, and structured bridges to English and other languages of wider communication. This research will add to the discourses on the National

Education Policy 2020, mother-tongue-based multilingual education, rural educational inequality, and social prerequisites of India's trade-led growth model. The main argument is that language-inclusive primary education is not a marginal welfare issue but a strategic element in inclusive development. In the absence of it, the benefits of trade-led growth may remain concentrated among urban, English-speaking and socially privileged populations, with rural and linguistic-minority children suffering from cumulative disadvantage.

Key words: Rural education; Language barrier; Assamese-medium schools; Mother-tongue education; Multilingualism; Trade-led development; Assam; NEP 2020.

1. Introduction

"India's contemporary development model is closely tied to trade expansion, export-led manufacturing, digital services, infrastructure development and integration into regional and global value chains. These processes require not only ports, roads, industrial parks and trade agreements but also a population with basic capacities to participate in formal economic life. Education is therefore central to trade-led development, as it provides the literacy, numeracy, technical adaptability and communicative competence demanded by modern labour markets(Govt. of India) .

But the relationship between education and trade-led development is uneven. In particular, children in rural areas, especially those from linguistic-minority and tribal communities, enter schooling in a language that is different from that spoken at home. This mismatch might seem small at the point of enrolment, but it can have long-term consequences(Govt of Assam,Tezpur University) A child who cannot fully comprehend the teacher, textbooks, classroom instructions or assessment language may struggle with early literacy and numeracy. That same child may not be as well prepared for secondary education, vocational training, electronic literacy, employment based on migration or participation in trade-connected sectors later on(Nath)

Assam provides a particularly rich context for exploring these questions. The state has a multilingual population and a school system in which Assamese is the main medium of instruction in government primary schools. Research in Assam reveals that Assamese is the main medium of instruction in most schools, while Bengali, Bodo, English and Hindi are also media of instruction in different areas. Meanwhile, a study of primary schools in Assam found that most surveyed schools taught more than two languages, mirroring the linguistic diversity of the student population(Kalita Nath, Assamese Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Leveraging Translanguaging Techniques)

The National Education Policy 2020 recognises this challenge. It recommends that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond, should be the child's home language, mother tongue, local language or regional language(Govt. of India, Cabinet Approves National Education Policy 2020, Paving Way for Transformational Reforms in School and Higher Education Systems in the Country).The policy also calls for bi-lingual teaching-learning materials for children whose home language is different from the medium of instruction in the school. But the reality in rural Assam is more complicated. Many schools are officially in the Assamese medium, but the classrooms are not all children for whom daily language is standard Assamese(Govt. of India, Nipon Bharat Mission, Stakeholders : Roles and Responsibilities).

This paper, therefore, studies rural education, language barriers and trade-led development through the case of Assamese medium primary schools in Assam. Language is seen as a cultural issue but also as an educational and economic resource. The central argument is that unless rural, multilingual children are given a strong foundation education in the languages they know and well-planned opportunities to learn English and other languages of mobility, India's trade-led development agenda will remain socially incomplete(Medhi and Goswami, Language Ideologies and Multilingual Education: Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese)

2. Research Problem

Trade-driven development is often discussed in terms of exports, foreign investment, logistics, industrial policy and market access. These are important but they do not necessarily lead to inclusive development. To benefit from trade-led growth, rural communities must first build the educational foundations that will enable them to participate in skilled, semi-skilled, entrepreneurial and service-sector activities(Agnihotri). In Assam, most of the children in rural areas enter the Assamese medium schools without knowing standard Assamese well. The official language of the classroom is Assamese, but at home, children speak Bodo, Mising, Sadri, Tiwa, Karbi, Bengali, Nepali or the local dialects(Devi and Singh).This results in a disconnect between the language of home and language of school. Such a gap can affect understanding, engagement, reading development, numerical reasoning, classroom confidence and parental engagement.(Kalita Nath, Assamese Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Leveraging Translanguaging Techniques).

The problem is not that education in Assamese-medium is itself harmful. Assamese is a major regional language and can be a good medium of instruction for many learners. The problem arises when Assamese medium schooling is undertaken without due appreciation of the multilingualism of the classroom(Medhi and Goswami, Language Ideologies and Multilingual Education: Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese) Without teachers trained in multilingual pedagogy, textbooks in the languages of the children's homes, and assessment that considers the importance of linguistic diversity, the formal policy of mother-tongue education may not become a reality in inclusive learning(Sarma et al.)

Thus, the present study investigates the following research problem: How do language barriers in Assamese-medium rural primary schools influence foundational learning and what are their implications for equitable participation in India's trade-led development process?

3. Objectives

The study will have the following objectives:

- To study the language backgrounds of learners in selected rural primary schools with Assamese as the medium of instruction in Assam.
- To know the major language barriers faced by students, teachers and parents in Assamese medium classrooms.
- To study the classroom language practices of teachers in terms of use of Assamese, home languages, translation, code-switching and trans-languaging.
- To study the relationship of home-language distance from standard Assamese with students' foundational literacy and numeracy performance.

- To examine the availability and use of multilingual teaching-learning materials in rural primary schools. English medium education and economic mobility: A study of parental perspectives on Assamese-medium schooling.
- To suggest policy and pedagogical strategies to enhance language-inclusive rural education in Assam.
- To connect the findings with the broader goal of equitable human-capital creation under India's trade-led growth strategy.

4. Research Questions

- What are the home languages of learners in rural primary schools with an Assamese medium?
- What kinds of language barriers do learners and teachers face in the course of everyday classroom interaction?
- Is there any evidence of a link between home language background and foundational learning outcomes?

5. Hypotheses

Here are the tentative hypotheses that will be tested in the study:

- H1: Students who have a home language similar to standard Assamese will perform better in early literacy and numeracy than students whose home language is very different from standard Assamese.
- H2. Teachers'planned translanguaging and bilingual explanation will create greater classroom participation than those teachers who just use standard Assamese.
- H3: Reported language barriers in teaching and assessment are expected to be positively related to the lack of multilingual teaching-learning materials.
- H4: Parents who view Assamese and English as a pathway to employment will be supportive of schooling, but many will also have concerns that poor English skills are a constraint on economic mobility.
- H5: Pedagogical practices that are language-inclusive will enhance the learners' conceptual understanding even if the official medium of instruction continues to be Assamese.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Language, education and basic learning

There is a large body of international research supporting the view that children learn best when early instruction builds on a language they understand. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly states that young children learn non-trivial concepts faster in the home language or the mother tongue. This position is consistent with the principle that children should not be expected to learn new subject content and an unfamiliar language of instruction simultaneously(Press Information Bureau, 2025).

In the Indian context, the policy recommends instruction in the home-language/regional-language at least till Grade 5 and preferably till Grade 8(Agnihotri). It also encourages the use of bilingual approaches and resources in situations where the language of instruction is not the child's home language(Hazarika).However, implementation is still a challenge in linguistically diverse rural areas, where 'mother tongue' may not refer to one standardised language but a range of dialects and community languages(Devi and Singh).

The larger problem is illustrated by research in rural education in Uttar Pradesh. In one study, 82 percent of rural school administrators reported a critical shortage of instructional materials in local languages such as Awadhi and Bhojpuri, leaving teachers to devise ad hoc solutions. Assam may have a different linguistic context, but the problem is the same. While official language policy may recognise local languages, classrooms often lack trained teachers, materials and assessment systems to support them(Govt. of India, Nipon Bharat Mission, Stakeholders : Roles and Responsibilities).

6.2 Multilingual Education in Assam

Assam is an especially interesting place to study language and education because the school population there is very multilingual. A UGC-sponsored study of primary schools in Assam found that government schools teach major subjects in Assamese, but also employ Bengali, Bodo, English and Hindi in different contexts as media of instruction. The same study found that 80 percent of the schools surveyed provided instruction in more than two languages at the elementary level(Press Information Bureau).

A study found that of the schools in Assam, 76.54 percent have Assamese as the primary medium of instruction followed by Bengali, Bodo, English and Hindi. These figures reaffirm the centrality of Assamese medium education in the state's school system. But this does not imply that all Assamese-medium classrooms are linguistically homogeneous. Many rural schools have children from Bodo, Mising, Sadri, Tea Tribe, Tiwa, Karbi, Nepali and Bengali speaking communities(Devi and Singh).

Recent research on the teaching of Assamese language reveals the reality of the highly multilingual classrooms. The study, which is based on interviews with Assamese language teachers in Sonitpur district, talks about the challenges of teaching Assamese in multilingual classrooms and the relevance of translanguaging. A second study maps the nature and extent of multilingual education in Assamese-medium primary schools in the same district through teacher interviews. These studies suggest that teachers often act as informal language mediators, alternating between Assamese and learners' home languages to render instruction comprehensible(Upadhyaya).

Studies on the Mising and Tea Tribe communities also find problems of teaching and learning in Assamese medium lower primary schools due to the mismatch between the language of the school and the language spoken at home by the children. The study identifies bilingualism, multilingualism, teacher training, and context-sensitive medium of instruction arrangements as possible solutions(Phukan).

6.3 NEP 2020 and the Multilingual Shift

NEP 2020 is an important policy shift in that it views multilingualism not as a problem to be solved but as an educational resource. The policy encourages mother tongue-based education, multilingualism and learning of English along with Indian languages. It also acknowledges the importance of making available high quality textbooks including science textbooks in home languages where possible(Binjola and Sharma) However, scholars have pointed out a huge implementation gap. NEP 2020 lays emphasis on mother tongue teaching but few teachers are adequately trained to handle linguistically diverse classrooms, especially in states with multiple local languages(Press Information Bureau) The gap is especially wide in Assam where a teacher may be trained to teach in Assamese but not sufficiently trained to support systematically Bodo-, Mising- or Sadri-speaking children(N.Nath 2026)

The multilingual vision of the policy is therefore necessary, but not sufficient. It must be backed up by teacher training, locally relevant resources, flexible assessment, community engagement, and realistic recognition of dialectal variation(Kalita Nath).

6.4 Development Driven by Trade and Human Capital

Trade-led development is an export-led growth strategy that depends on import competition, foreign investment, global value chains and market integration to drive economic growth. In such a model education is a form of investment in human capital. People's access to formal employment, entrepreneurship, migration opportunities and higher education depends on literacy, numeracy, digital competence, technical skills and communication skills.

Yet human capital theory alone does not account for educational inequality. We need a capabilities approach, too. From this perspective, development is not merely about increasing income or export earnings; it is about expanding people's real freedoms and capabilities. A rural child may live in a state that benefits from trade, but if the child cannot read, calculate, communicate confidently, or continue schooling, then the developmental benefits remain distant(Maitra and Chakraborty)

Language is central to this capability formation. Fluency in English is frequently linked to opportunities for higher education, jobs in the service sector, and international communication. At the same time, meaningful comprehension requires strong background learning in the home language or in a familiar regional language. The most equitable approach is therefore not a simple choice between Assamese and English, but a sequenced multilingual model: strong foundations in familiar languages, gradual development of Assamese where needed, and structured acquisition of English(Wani).

7. Theoretical Framework

In the present study, three complementary theoretical perspectives will be used.

7.1 The Human-Capital Theory

Human-capital theory suggests education is an investment that enhances productivity and earning potential. In a trade-led economy, education is associated with a more flexible workforce, better entrepreneurship and higher formal market participation. Here, language barriers are costly because they lower the efficiency of schooling and the acquisition of economically valuable skills(Qazi Muhammad Adnan Hye).

7.2 Ecologies of Language and Multilingualism

In language-ecology perspectives languages are seen as part of a larger social and communicative environment. In rural Assam, the children do not move from a monolingual home to a monolingual school. They move through languages, dialects, community practices, institutional expectations. A language-ecology approach thus views multilingualism as normal and asks how schools can use learners' linguistic resources rather than suppress them(Qazi Muhammad Adnan Hye).

7.3 The capabilities approach

The capabilities approach is linked with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and is about what people are actually able to do and be. In education, it means asking not just whether children are enrolled in school, but whether they can understand what is taught, read with understanding, express themselves, continue to

learn and participate in social and economic life. Language inclusive education opens up; language exclusion closes down(Joo and Shawl).

8. Methodology:

8.1 Design of Research

The study will be a convergent mixed-methods design with qualitative classroom research and quantitative learning assessment. In the qualitative part, the production and negotiation of language barriers in everyday classroom life will be studied. The quantitative part will test if home-language background is linked to foundational learning outcomes.

This design is suitable because language barriers are observable practices and measurable educational conditions. Interviews and observations can reveal how teachers translate, code-switch, or simplify instruction; assessments of literacy and numeracy can reveal whether these practices are associated with different learning outcomes.

8.2 Study Area and Sample

The study will be conducted in three linguistically diverse districts of Assam preferably in one district with large Bodo speaking population, one with large tribal language diversity and one with mixed rural population. Four government Assamese medium primary schools will be selected purposively from each district. Therefore, the total sample will be of twelve schools.

Each school will have the following in the study:

- Two teachers for Grades I-V.
- 1 headteacher or school administrator
- One focus group discussion with 6 to 8 parents/guardians.
- Foundation literacy and numeracy assessment Twenty students Grade III-V.

This means the total expected sample will be approximately 24 teachers, 12 administrators, 12 parent focus groups and 240 learners. The purposive sampling is justified as the study needs schools with linguistic diversity and Assamese as the official medium of instruction in these schools.

8.3 Data collection tools

Four main instruments will be used in the study:

- **Classroom Observation Schedule**: This will document teacher language use, learner responses, code-switching, translation, group work, use of teaching aids and patterns of participation.
- **Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Guide**: This will examine teachers' perceptions of language barriers, their strategies for supporting multilingual learners, training needs, and material constraints.
- **Parent Focus-Group Guide:** This will examine parents' language practices at home, attitudes toward Assamese, English and local languages and perceptions of education as a route to employment.
- **Foundational Learning Assessment Tool:** This will assess basic Assamese reading, oral comprehension, writing, number recognition, addition, subtraction and simple word problems. The tool will be adapted from ASER style foundational learning assessment principles, being sensitive to local linguistic contexts.

8.4 Data Collection Procedure

Permission will be obtained from school authorities, district education officials and relevant institutional ethics committees before data collection. Informed consent will be sought from teachers, parents and guardians. Children will be requested to provide their assent in age appropriate language.

Classroom observations will be conducted in each school over two to three days. After the observations the teachers will be interviewed so as not to influence classroom behaviour. Parent focus groups will be held in the language most comfortable for participants, with translation assistance as needed. Individual learning assessments will be administered in a quiet space with instructions in Assamese and clarification through home languages where ethically and practically appropriate.

8.5 Anályis of Data

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse qualitative data from observations, interviews and focus groups. The analysis will look for recurring themes such as language mismatch, teacher mediation, translanguaging, material scarcity, parental aspiration, difficulty of assessment and learner withdrawal.

Quantitative data will be analysed through the use of descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and correlation analysis. Home-language distance from standard Assamese will be categorised as close, moderate and distant. Literacy and numeracy scores will be compared between these groups. Moreover, the study will compare the learning outcomes in classrooms with frequent planned translanguaging to those in classrooms with limited language mediation.

8.6 Ethical issues

The study will maintain participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms to refer to schools, teachers and learners. No child will be identified in the final report. The assessments' results will be used only for research purposes and will not be published as individual school rankings. The study will not represent local languages as lacking, but as a resource that requires institutional support.

9. Findings and Discussion

9.1 Language Mismatch: An Invisible Barrier

The study is expected to find that a lot of learners in Assamese medium rural schools speak a home language other than the standard Assamese. This mismatch may not always be captured by enrolment records, as children may be officially classified according to the school's medium rather than their actual home language(Upadhyaya, "Medium of Instruction in the Schools of Assam: A Dilemma between Self Identity and Unification").

This mismatch in the classroom may manifest itself as silence, delayed responses, dependence on peers, misunderstanding of instructions, and difficulty with reading comprehension. Teachers may interpret these behaviours as low ability, lack of attention or poor preparation, when in fact they may be a reflection of a language-access problem(Goswami).

9.2 Teachers as Informal Translanguagers

Informal translation, code-switching, demonstration, repetition and peer support are expected to be used by teachers to bridge communication gaps. Recent studies from Assam indicate that Assamese language

teachers are already teaching in highly multilingual classrooms and face challenges that require translanguaging-sensitive approaches(Medhi and Goswami, Language Ideologies and Multilingual Education: Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese).

But informal translanguaging is not the same as systematic multilingual pedagogy. Without training, teachers might translate inconsistently or lack the vocabulary or confidence to explain academic concepts in the learners' home languages. The study is therefore expected to reveal teacher mediation as helpful but uneven and unsupported(Medhi and Goswami, Language Ideologies and Multilingual Education: Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese)

9.3 Limitations of Materials and Assessment

The lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate materials will likely be a key constraint. This finding would be consistent with reports from other rural Indian settings of severe shortages of local-language teaching materials by administrators. In Assam, the problem may not just be the absence of Bodo, Mising or Sadri textbooks but also the absence of Assamese supplementary textbooks that reflect local experiences, names, environments and cultural practices(Devi and Singh).

Assessment can be a hurdle too. If children are tested only in standard written Assamese, then language difficulty may be confused with academic failure. This is especially problematic in the early grades when children are still learning school language.

9.4 Parental Aspirations and English

Many parents value Assamese-medium education for cultural continuity and accessibility, but many also consider English vital for higher education, government jobs, private sector employment, and mobility. This is not to say that parents are rejecting mother-tongue education. Or they may want both — strong learning in a language they know, and practical access to English(Medhi & Goswami, n.d.-b).

This result would be in favour of a balanced multilingual model. NEP 2020 itself provides for students to learn in their mother tongue, while also becoming proficient in English and other languages. The policy challenge is to ensure that English is added without displacing the language through which children first make sense of the world(Binjola and Sharma).

9.5 Implications for trade-driven development

In the study, we will argue that language barriers in rural primary education can erode the human-capital base needed for trade-led development. If basic literacy and numeracy skills are lacking among rural children, they will be less able to take advantage of vocational education, digital skills programs, entrepreneurship schemes or employment in trade-connected sectors.

Assam's location in Northeast India also makes language-inclusive education economically strategically relevant. Better education can help with mobility, awareness of cross-border trade, tourism, logistics, services and small business development. However, these opportunities will be unequal if large segments of the rural population are excluded because of early language disadvantage(Maitra and Chakraborty).

10. Policy and Pedagogical Suggestions

- Language mapping at the school level. Schools must determine the real home languages of registered children, not only the de jure medium of instruction.
- Train teachers to teach in multilingual ways Teacher-education programs should include translanguaging, bilingual explanation, code-switching strategies and teaching early literacy in multilingual classrooms.
- Develop additional Assamese materials with local content. Textbooks and reading materials should include local names, occupations, ecology, folklore and examples known to rural learners.
- Develop bridge materials between the home languages and Assamese. Children can be assisted in the transition from home language to school language through the use of picture dictionaries, oral language activities, bilingual word lists and storybooks.
- Use of oral assessment flexibly in early years. The teachers should check the conceptual understanding through oral explanation, drawing, demonstration and home-language clarification before using the written Assamese.
- Teach English slowly, in a communicative way. English should be an additional language for mobility and opportunity and not a substitute for Assamese or home languages.
- Increase community engagement. Local bilingual community members, parents and language experts can assist with classroom translation, oral storytelling and culturally relevant learning materials.
- Keep track of key learning by language background. Education administrators should collect disaggregated data to determine whether linguistic-minority children are lagging behind in literacy and numeracy.

11. Limitations

The study will be confined to some selected rural Assamese medium government primary schools and may not be representative of the entire schools of Assam. The sample size will be sufficient to allow exploratory analysis but not to allow broad causal generalisation. School infrastructure, teacher quality, attendance, nutrition and household income may also affect learning assessments, not just language. Thus, the study will consider language as an important factor within a broader system of educational inequality(Kalita and Rajkhowa).

12. Conclusion

Rural education is a foundation for inclusive trade-led development. Assam's Assamese-medium primary schools can be a gateway to education for rural children but they need to realistically address the multilingual realities of their students. We should not blame children, parents or teachers for language barriers. These structural problems stem from the mismatch between linguistic diversity and educational provision(Kalita Nath, Assamese Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Leveraging Translanguaging Techniques)

The proposed study argues for the inclusion of language inclusive rural education as a strategic priority in India's trade-led development agenda. Early education in a language that children understand is most effective and when supported systematically to learn additional languages including English, they open up wider opportunities for children. NEP 2020 provides a strong policy framework for this approach but

its success will depend on teacher education, materials, assessment reform and community engagement(Binjola and Sharma) Ultimately, equitable development requires that rural and linguistic-minority children are not just present in classrooms, but are able to understand, participate, learn and aspire. Thus, language-inclusive primary education is not only a pedagogical necessity, it is a development imperative.

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