



Impact of digital media on indigenous languages of North-East India

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Abstract

The proliferation of digital media has transformed communication practices worldwide, reshaping how languages are used, transmitted, and preserved. In North-East India, a region marked by extraordinary linguistic diversity, indigenous languages face both opportunities and threats from digital technologies. This study explores the impact of digital media on these languages, focusing on the dual role of technology as a tool for linguistic preservation and as a driver of language shift. Using secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, government reports, and ethnolinguistic surveys, the study critically examines how social media platforms, messaging apps, and digital content influence language practices, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission. The analysis highlights both the empowering potential of digital media in promoting indigenous languages and the challenges it poses due to the dominance of English and regional lingua francas. Recommendations are provided for leveraging digital platforms to support language preservation while mitigating risks of linguistic erosion.

Keywords: Digital media, indigenous languages, North-East India, language preservation, language shift, social media, linguistic identity

Introduction

North-East India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, home to hundreds of languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austroasiatic families. These languages serve as crucial markers of identity, vehicles of oral traditions, and repositories of cultural knowledge. However, the region's indigenous languages are increasingly influenced by broader socio-political, educational, and technological forces. Among these, digital media has emerged as a powerful agent of change. While social networking sites, messaging platforms, and digital content provide unprecedented opportunities for language documentation, creative expression, and intergenerational communication, they also amplify the dominance of English and regional lingua francas, contributing to language shift and marginalization of smaller languages. Understanding the nuanced impact of digital media is therefore essential for designing effective strategies for linguistic and cultural preservation.

Research Methodology

This study relies exclusively on secondary data sources. Scholarly articles on sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistic surveys, government census data, and reports from organizations engaged in language preservation in North-East India were analyzed to understand the patterns, trends, and challenges associated with the influence of digital media. Digital content usage, social media practices, and language documentation initiatives were examined to evaluate both the enabling and disruptive effects of digital technologies on indigenous languages. The secondary research approach allows a comprehensive understanding of macro-level trends and theoretical perspectives while situating the discussion within the broader socio-cultural and technological context of North-East India.

Body

Digital media has become a central arena where language use, identity, and cultural negotiation converge. Platforms

such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and regional content apps have facilitated the creation and dissemination of indigenous language content, ranging from short videos and memes to folk songs, oral histories, and educational material. These digital spaces allow speakers to maintain linguistic visibility, engage younger generations, and connect diasporic communities with their heritage languages. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of English and dominant regional languages on digital platforms has created a linguistic hierarchy in which smaller indigenous languages struggle to gain traction. The ease of digital communication in English or lingua francas often results in code-switching, lexical borrowing, and the gradual displacement of mother tongues in both online and offline contexts. This phenomenon highlights the tension between the emancipatory potential of digital media as a tool for linguistic empowerment and its inadvertent role in accelerating language shift.

Moreover, digital media reshapes intergenerational transmission patterns. While younger speakers are more active on digital platforms and can contribute to content creation in indigenous languages, they often prioritize dominant languages to access broader audiences or to conform to globalized digital norms. Consequently, digital media functions simultaneously as a tool for revitalization and as a space where language hierarchies are reproduced. Ethnolinguistic identity is increasingly performed online, where visibility is mediated by the choice of language, further influencing how indigenous languages are perceived in the socio-cultural imagination of youth.

Findings and Analysis

The secondary data indicate that digital media has a complex, dual impact on indigenous languages of North-East India. On one hand, platforms that facilitate content creation, online language communities, and digital storytelling enhance the visibility and prestige of smaller languages. They provide tools for linguistic documentation,

educational outreach, and community engagement, particularly among youth and diasporic populations. On the other hand, the dominance of English and regional lingua francas in digital spaces reinforces existing linguistic hierarchies, subtly encouraging speakers to deprioritize their mother tongues. The analysis suggests that the influence of digital media is mediated by factors such as language vitality, the number of speakers, literacy rates, and the availability of digital content in the respective language. Languages with limited speakers or without standardized orthography face greater risk of marginalization, whereas those with digital resources and active online communities demonstrate resilience.

Challenges

Several structural and socio-cultural challenges emerge in the digital context. First, the lack of orthographic standardization and digital tools for many indigenous languages hinders their effective representation online. Second, limited internet access and digital literacy in rural areas constrain equitable participation in online linguistic spaces. Third, the prestige attached to English and regional lingua francas continues to shape language practices, leading to code-switching and hybrid linguistic forms that may dilute the distinctiveness of indigenous languages. Finally, the rapid pace of digital innovation often outstrips efforts to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate digital content, creating a gap between technological affordances and language preservation objectives.

Recommendations

Maximizing the positive impact of digital media requires coordinated strategies involving community engagement, technological innovation, and policy support. Development of digital tools such as fonts, keyboards, and language apps tailored to indigenous languages can enhance their usability online. Encouraging content creation in mother tongues, including videos, podcasts, online storytelling, and educational resources, can increase linguistic visibility and youth engagement. Initiatives to document oral histories, folk narratives, and traditional knowledge in digital formats will strengthen intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, integrating indigenous languages into social media campaigns, educational software, and regional digital platforms can counteract marginalization and promote a sense of linguistic pride. Policymakers, researchers, and community organizations must collaborate to ensure that digital media becomes a medium for empowerment rather than erosion of linguistic diversity.

Conclusion

Digital media exerts a paradoxical influence on the indigenous languages of North-East India. While it provides unprecedented opportunities for documentation, transmission, and creative engagement, it simultaneously reinforces linguistic hierarchies and pressures speakers to adopt dominant languages. The future of indigenous languages in the region hinges on the strategic deployment of digital technologies that prioritize accessibility, visibility, and cultural authenticity. By fostering digital literacy, developing language-specific resources, and encouraging community-led content creation, digital media can become a potent instrument for linguistic preservation, enabling

indigenous languages to thrive alongside modern communication technologies.

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