

## Mother Tongue Education in Manipur's Hill Districts: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** This case study investigates the current status and challenges of mother tongue-based education in Manipur's hill districts, home to numerous tribal communities with distinct languages. Based on a survey of 251 respondents including parents, teachers, community leaders, and students the study explores language use in education, availability of teaching materials, language proficiency, and community preferences. The findings reveal a strong disconnect between children's home languages and the medium of instruction in schools, which is usually English or Manipuri. Most schools lack textbooks or resources in local languages, and few teachers are trained or fluent in them. Nevertheless, there is widespread community support for using the mother tongue in early education, as it enhances comprehension, participation, and cultural identity. Major challenges include lack of insufficient teacher training, education materials, standard orthography, and community anxiety about English proficiency. The study highlights the importance of aligning educational practices with linguistic realities to promote equity, effective learning, and language preservation.

**Keywords:** Mother Tongue Education, Medium, Orthography, Indigenous

### 1. Introduction

Education in one's mother tongue during early childhood is widely recognised as a cornerstone for effective learning and cultural preservation (Mohanty, 1994; Cummins, 2001, 2009, p.34). Research and policy reports have highlighted that when children are taught in a language they do not understand, it negatively impacts their learning outcomes (Thomas & Collier, 2002). India occupies the eighth position in the world in book production but houses fifty percent of the world's illiterate population. One of the major reasons for this paradox is that people's languages are not used either for literacy or for primary education. Indian languages are developed neither as languages of knowledge nor as languages of communication (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020). According to a UNESCO report, approximately 40% of the global population is denied access to education in a language they understand (The Daily Star, 2016), a challenge especially acute in highly multilingual regions. In response to such challenges, India have begun to emphasise mother tongue instruction in policy frameworks. India's latest language policy document National Education Policy 2020, for instance, recommends that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language". This policy reflects a growing consensus that early education in the mother tongue can bolster comprehension, participation, and overall academic success.

Manipur, a state in Northeast India, offers a vivid context for examining the importance of mother tongue education. The state is home to a rich variety of ethnolinguistic groups. While Meiteilon (Manipuri) is the lingua franca and official state language, the surrounding hill districts are inhabited by numerous tribal communities, broadly classified under Naga and Kuki-Zo groups, each with its own native language. According to census data, Meiteilon accounts for just over half the population's mother tongue, with the rest split among more than thirty tribal languages such as Thadou, Tangkhul, Hmar, Paite, Mao, Rongmei, and many others. In these tribal areas, educational provision has historically been delivered either in the state's official language (Manipuri) or in English, often to the detriment of local languages. Community leaders and scholars have long voiced concerns that children from tribal communities



face linguistic barriers in school, which can contribute to disengagement and high dropout rates when their mother tongue is not used as a medium of instruction. However, in some very remote villages in Tamenglong district, the situation is reversed, not by design, but by circumstance. In the absence of teachers proficient in English or Manipuri, local community members or volunteer teachers often step in to teach using the indigenous language. Moreover, the lack of clear strategy to multilingual education or mother tongue education materials poses a threat to the survival of these indigenous languages, many of which have relatively small speaker populations.

Despite these known benefits and policy intentions, implementing mother tongue-based education in Manipur's hill districts has been fraught with practical difficulties. The state government has officially approved 18 tribal languages for introduction in school education, a step that in theory acknowledges the right of tribal communities to learn in their native tongues. However, the on-ground reality often falls short of these aspirations. Funding and resource allocation for developing curricula and materials in these languages have been minimal. Many languages remain de facto unsupported in schools, leaving the burden of language preservation and informal education to community organisations and literature societies. Within this context, understanding the experiences, attitudes, and needs of local stakeholders is crucial. How do community members perceive the current state of mother tongue education? What do they see as the main challenges, and what changes do they desire in schooling for their children?

This paper attempts to explore the above questions and to explore these them, a survey titled Mother Tongue Education Survey in Manipur's Hill Districts: A Case Study was conducted among stakeholders in tribal hill communities. The aim is to shed light on the current practices of language use in education within these communities, the preferences and attitudes of the people regarding mother tongue instruction, and the barriers hindering its effective implementation. The findings are organised thematically covering language representation, teaching methods, educational materials and orthography, teacher availability, medium of instruction preferences, stakeholder roles, government's role, quality of education, and challenges to provide a comprehensive overview.

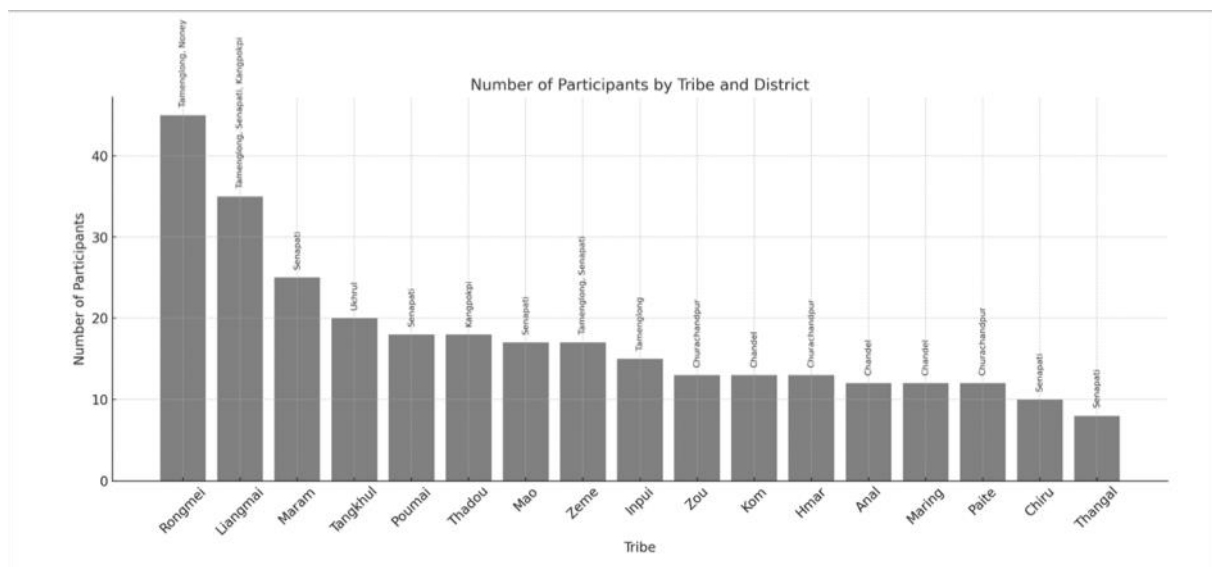
## 2. Methodology

According to Gangmei (2012, p. 9), there are 35 tribal languages spoken in the state of Manipur, of which 18 have been officially recognized for use in school education. This study includes interviews with speakers from 17 of these languages. The study employed a descriptive survey design to gather firsthand information on mother tongue education in Manipur's hill districts. A structured questionnaire was developed, containing both close-ended and open-ended questions. The survey instrument was designed to capture multiple dimensions of the issue: respondents' linguistic background, their schooling experience, observations on current teaching practices, availability of learning resources, and opinions on policy and community involvement. The questions were organised thematically – for example, sections on home language use, medium of instruction at school, methods employed by teachers (monolingual vs. bilingual teaching), the script and materials used for mother tongue reading/writing, and perceived roles of government or community in education.

A total of 251 respondents participated in the survey, while additional insights were gained through informal interactions and face-to-face conversations with community members. Consultations were held with both present and former Literature Society leaders of 17 tribes. The sample was drawn from villages in Manipur's hill districts, ensuring representation of various tribal communities. Participants were selected using a purposive approach, the aim to include individuals with direct knowledge or experience of local schooling. As such, the respondent pool included respective tribal Literature Society Leaders, a diverse group of parents whose children are currently attending school, school administrators, local school teachers, and students or community members interested in mother language education. The sample size (251) is modest, reflecting the scope of a case study, but it is sufficient for identifying common trends and issues in the community. Given the diverse linguistic setting, the 251 respondents collectively spoke a range of mother tongues, reflecting at least half a dozen different tribal languages. Each respondent was assured of anonymity, and the data was collected through their voluntary participation.

Of the total survey forms, 61 were personally administered by the researcher, who is familiar with the local languages and cultural context. The remaining half were distributed and later collected by volunteers from each tribe on behalf of the author.





**Figure 1.** Number of Participants and Districts

In each village or locality, respondents filled out the questionnaire with guidance from the survey volunteers or the researcher by telephone to clarify any questions. Where needed (especially for open-ended questions or if literacy was an issue), the surveyors conducted short interviews following the questionnaire, noting down the responses. The data collection was carried out during the period between July 2023 to February 2025, covering seventeen tribal communities in eight hill districts of Manipur (See Table 1 figure 1 for these consulted tribes and districts). The author visited Tamenglong, Kangpokpi, Senapati, Ukhrul and Noney Districts in person but could not visit Churachampur, Chandel and Tengnoupal districts due to the then present social-political situation.

Upon collection, the survey data were compiled and analysed. Closed-ended question responses were tallied to produce frequency counts and simple percentages for various options (for example, the percentage of respondents who preferred a certain medium of instruction, or who reported availability of mother tongue textbooks, etc.). These quantitative results were organised according to the predefined themes. Open-ended responses and comments were examined qualitatively to identify recurring themes or notable insights (such as specific challenges mentioned or personal anecdotes illustrating the impact of language barriers). During analysis, particular attention was given to consistency and divergence across different language groups in the sample, checking if respondents from different tribes showed different attitudes or if the issues raised were universal. The results are presented in an aggregated form; individual responses are anonymised and only used to illustrate general points. In the following section, the key findings are reported theme by theme, with interpretative commentary that remains grounded in the data obtained from the 251 respondents.

### 3. Linguistic Situation in Manipur

Manipur, a state in Northeast India, presents a linguistically rich yet complex and under-documented landscape. Though it is often broadly categorised into three major communities as Meitei, Kuki, and Naga, such classification oversimplifies the region's intricate ethnolinguistic diversity. As Singh (2003, p. 78) notes, the classification of Manipur's tribal communities into just Naga and Kuki is increasingly seen as inadequate and overly simplistic. As per official records, the Government of Manipur has recognised 34 tribes and approved 18 tribal languages for use in early school education under the Multilingual Education (MLE) framework. Council of Tribal Languages and Literature Studies, Manipur listed thirty seven languages in total (Gangmei, 2012, p.9). Despite these recognitions, many speech communities and their languages remain linguistically unstudied, poorly documented, or entirely excluded from educational or official domains. The majority of tribal languages spoken in Manipur belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, exhibiting rich phonological, morphological, and syntactic diversity. Most of these languages are oral in tradition and are transmitted inter-generationally without the support of a standardised orthography. In fact, many languages are currently struggling to develop or agree upon a standard writing system, which in turn affects their use in literacy and education.



The linguistic situation is further complicated by legal and political classifications. Due to the constitutional recognition of Scheduled Tribes, mutually intelligible dialects are often categorized as distinct languages because each tribe is treated as a separate administrative unit. On the other hand, mutually unintelligible varieties such as those spoken by different Tangkhul villages are sometimes grouped under a single language label due to their shared ethnic identity (Haokip, 2011, p.5). This misalignment between linguistic reality and administrative classification has led to anomalies in language documentation and policy implementation. For example, speakers of the Uipo language are currently advocating for the official recognition of the Uipo (Khoibu) tribe, which had previously been grouped under the Maring tribe in government records. This classification was not incorrect from within the communities themselves, but rather a result of external categorization by outsiders unfamiliar with the distinct identities. Similar precedents include the official recognition of Poumai as a separate tribe from Mao in 2003; Liangmai and Zeme as distinct tribes from the broader Kacha-Naga category in 2011; and Rongmei and Inpui as separate tribes from Kabui in the same year. Meiteilon (Manipuri), also a Tibeto-Burman language and the only scheduled language of the state, functions as the lingua franca across Manipur. It is widely used in administration, media, and education beyond the primary level. However, in rural and tribal areas, local languages continue to be the primary means of communication, especially within villages and intra-community settings, a pattern also observed by Devi (2019), who noted that tribal languages are predominantly used for domestic and interpersonal communication. This prevailing situation where Meiteilon dominates formal domains and tribal languages occupy informal ones creates both challenges and opportunities for language maintenance and education policy.

## 4. Findings

The survey results are organized into thematic areas that emerged from the questionnaire: (4.1) Language representation in the community and schools, (4.2) Teaching methods and use of language in classrooms, (4.3) Availability of educational materials in the mother tongue, (4) Content of the printed educational materials, (4.5) Orthography, (4.6) Mother language competency, (4.7) Medium of instruction preferences, and (4.8) Roles of government and community. Each subsection below summarizes the survey findings on these themes and interprets the key patterns.

### 4.1 Language Representation and Use in Education

The linguistic profile of the respondents underlines the diversity of Manipur's hill districts. The 251 respondents identified at least seventeen distinct mother tongues among them, corresponding to different tribal communities. The first tribal languages officially recognised for school education in Manipur were few and selectively introduced, beginning in the early 1970s. Recognition was initially limited and gradual, primarily focused on providing mother tongue instruction at the primary level. The first five languages to receive such recognition were Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Rongmei, and Tangkhul. Since then, additional languages have been progressively included, bringing the total number of recognized tribal languages for school education in Manipur to 18 as of today: they are Anal, Hmar, Inpui, Kom, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, Mizo, Paite, Poumai, Rongmei, Simte, Tangkhul, Thadou (Kuki), Vaiphei, Zeme, Zou. This present study surveyed seventeen languages, the brief status of which are summarized in Table 1. A common thread was that for all respondents, the mother tongue was the primary language of communication at home and in community life. Many reported that they grew up speaking their indigenous language within their family and village settings. While Manipuri and English were primarily introduced through formal schooling, exposure to these languages also occurred in informal social environments and interactions beyond the home for many respondents.

When it comes to language use in education, the data reveal a significant disconnect between home language and school language. A large majority of respondents (over 80%) indicated that the medium of instruction during their own early schooling (or their children's schooling) was not their mother tongue.



**Table 1.** Summary status of 17 languages surveyed in the present study

| Language      | Taught in school? | Class/standard  | Education materials | Schools   | District              |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Mao           | Yes               | upto 12         | Widely available    | Mave School, Senapati, GPS, Punanamei Village                     | Senapati              |
| Liangmai      | Yes               | upto 12         | Somewhat available  | Langmei School, Tamei, and other places                           | Tamenglong            |
| Maram         | Yes               | upto 12         | Somewhat available  | Maram Don Bosco and other places                                  | Senapati              |
| Poumai        | Yes               | upto X          | Somewhat available  | Oiname H/S and other places                                       | Senapati              |
| Thangal       | No                | NA              | Scanty/Nil          | NA  | Senapati              |
| Tangkhol      | Yes               | upto graduation | Widely available    | OTC Junior Academy, Ukhrul H/SEC School, Ukhrul, etc              | Ukhrul                |
| Rongmei       | Yes               | upto XII        | Somewhat available  | Dailong P/S, Several Schools in Noney/Tamenglong                  | Tamenglong/Noney      |
| Thadou (Kuki) | Yes               | upto graduation | Widely available    | Chalwa H/S, and several Schools in Kangpokpi/Churchanpur district | Kangpokpi/Churchanpur |
| Inpui         | No                | NA              | Scanty/Nil          | NA  | Noney                 |
| Zou           | Yes               | upto XII        | Somewhat available  | Not sure  | Churchanpur           |
| Kom           | Yes               | IX&X            | Somewhat available  | Grace Academy School, Imphal, Model Hr. Sec. School, Saikul       | Kangpokpi             |
| Zeme          | Yes               | IX&X            | Scanty              | Pretty Lamb, Tamenglong and Zeme villages                         | Tamenglong            |
| Hmar          | Yes               | upto graduation | Widely available    | PMS School,, ICI Standard High School, Saikot and other places    | Churchanpur           |
| Anal          | Yes               | upto X          | Somewhat available  | Chapikarong H/S, Oak Hills Academy, Chandel                       | Chandel               |
| Maring        | Yes               | upto X          | Scanty              | Khunbi Primary School, village, Machi P/S, Tengnoupal             | Chandel               |
| Paite         | Yes               | upto graduation | Somewhat available  | VK Tawna High, Don Bosco, Churchanpur, Churchanpur College        | Churchanpur           |

Instead, most attended schools where teaching was conducted in English or in the state lingua franca Manipuri (Meiteilon). A few respondents noted that in some remote village schools or community-run institutions in hill districts, instruction was provided in local mother tongues such as Rongmei and Liangmai, mainly because teachers are local community members and external teachers were unavailable. Otherwise, Respondents across all language groups consistently observed that their native languages have little to no presence in the classroom in any official capacity. For example, one respondent from the Thadou community stated that while their native language is spoken at home, English dominates the school environment from textbooks to blackboard instruction. This sentiment indicates the prevalent experience that the mother tongue is confined to informal domains, while formal education operates in other dominant languages. At Hamai English High School in Tamei and Langmei Government High School in Langmei under Tamenglong district, the Liangmai language is frequently used to explain subjects such as Science and Mathematics.



## 4.2 Teaching Methods and Classroom Practices

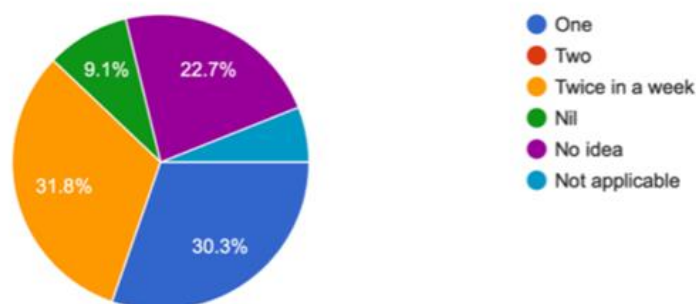
Given the gap between home and school languages, the teaching methods adopted by educators become crucial for student comprehension. Survey responses indicate that teachers in these hill district schools often employ a form of bilingual teaching, albeit in an ad-hoc manner. About half of the respondents reported that teachers would translate or explain lessons in the local language when students struggled to understand content delivered in English or Manipuri especially in rural areas. This practice was more common in lower primary classes: teachers informally acted as interpreters, switching to the students' mother tongue (or heterogenous group) to re-explain difficult concepts or instructions. While not an official policy, this code-switching strategy is a pragmatic response by individual teachers to bridge the understanding gap.

However, the extent and effectiveness of this bilingual approach vary. Approximately 30% of respondents especially those from areas where the teacher was not a local person indicated that little to no mother tongue was used in teaching. In these cases, teachers stuck to the prescribed medium (often English) without providing explanations in the local language, perhaps due to lack of proficiency in that language. In towns where schools serve students from multiple tribal communities, it is common for institutions not to offer instruction in specific tribal languages. For instance, Don Bosco High School in Senapati does not offer any particular tribal language in the school. Instead, it offers Modern Indian Language (MIL) options such as Manipuri, Hindi, or Alternative English. Students who wish to take their mother tongue as a subject for the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM) matriculation exam often seek private tuition outside of regular school hours. In many cases, these language classes are organised by respective tribal councils and held as evening or weekend sessions. For example, the Poumai community conducts weekly language classes in Senapati town, Senapati district. However, about 25 km from Senapati, another Catholic school offers Maram as a subject. While the majority of students are Maram, the school also includes students from other communities such as Zeme, Mao, and Nepali. Since the school does not offer any other tribal languages, non-Maram students typically opt for Maram by default.

In the context of mother tongue classroom practices in Manipur, responses from participants reveal a varied and inconsistent implementation across schools. Approximately 30% of the respondents reported that mother tongue classes are conducted once every day, suggesting a regular but limited exposure. Meanwhile, 31% indicated that such classes occur only twice a week, reflecting a more sporadic schedule that may hinder continuity and language reinforcement (see Figure 2 for the frequency of Mother Tongue class). Notably, 22% of the respondents expressed that they had no idea about the frequency of mother tongue instruction, which points to either a lack of communication within the school system or minimal visibility of these classes in actual practice. This uneven pattern highlights the challenges in the institutionalisation of mother tongue education and underscores the need for clearer policy implementation, teacher engagement, and community awareness.

How many classes are conducted for your mother tongue in a day?

251 responses



**Figure 2.** Frequency of Mother Tongue Class

In response to the question on how mother tongue classroom periods are arranged, the majority of respondents indicated that they are conducted class-wise, meaning students from different tribes attend the same class level (e.g., Class I, VIII, or X) and are taught a single language, regardless of their individual mother tongues. A smaller number of respondents selected either 'No idea' or 'Not applicable', suggesting limited awareness or absence of such classes in some schools. This pattern reflects the broader sociolinguistic reality in Manipur, where

most districts tend to be linguistically homogeneous or dominated by a particular tribe. For instance, Rongmei is predominant in Tamenglong town, Liangmai in Tamei subdivision of Tamenglong district, Maram in Maram area under Senapati district, and Tangkhul in Ukhrul district. Consequently, schools in these areas often default to teaching the dominant tribal language to all students, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds or no mother language is offered in school as in Don Bosco Higher Secondary School, Senapati where the student body comprises multiple tribal communities, mainly due to lack of teacher or infrastructure. A respondent reported that a school name Olivia High School in Kanglatongbi, near the foothills of Manipur, often strongly encourages, at time compels, pre-university tribal students to choose their mother tongue if it is offered, presumably to promote the language. However, many of these already fluent Liangmai-speaking students prefer to study Alternative English paper instead, hoping to strengthen their proficiency in more widely used languages like English or Manipuri (see §4.8). Significantly, none of the respondents reported the practice of grouping students by their mother tongue, a model commonly implemented in other multilingual contexts, such as Sherpa language classrooms in Sikkim (Mataina, 2022).

### 4.3 Availability Mother Tongue Educational Materials

The survey investigated the availability of educational materials (textbooks, storybooks, primers, etc.) in the mother tongues of the communities studied. The results reveal a general scarcity of resources. A majority of respondents (nearly 70%) reported that they had not seen any textbooks in their language. There were virtually no printed materials for academic subjects available in most tribal languages. A few respondents did recall limited access to supplementary materials such as community-produced alphabet charts and folktale booklets for young children but these were seldom integrated into official school programs and were typically used informally at home or in Sunday schools.

Several respondents emphasized the urgent need for formal textbooks in their mother tongues. They expressed that if government or educational authorities provided foundational materials—such as primers for reading in the local language or translated elementary math and science books—it would significantly support early learning. The lack of mother tongue materials is viewed as a major barrier, forcing children to acquire literacy directly in a second language (English or Manipuri), which poses a steep learning curve.

However, as shown in Table 1, relatively better-resourced communities such as the Tangkhul, Thadou, Hmar, Mao, and Rongmei possess a comparatively greater number of textbooks for school use. While all 17 languages surveyed have developed at least some educational materials, the quantity, quality, and availability of these resources vary significantly across communities.

### 4.4 Content of the printed Educational Materials

The educational materials currently available for tribal languages in Manipur reflect a blend of local and non-local content. Many primers and textbooks include English prose, short biographies of nationally recognized figures such as Mary Kom and Rabindranath Tagore, and other general knowledge passages. While these inclusions may be well-intentioned, aiming to expose students to broader cultural narratives, they often overshadow indigenous content and fail to reflect the lived experiences and cultural contexts of the tribal community's themselves. On the local side, the materials typically include poetry composed by native writers, as well as folk tales and songs. However, there is a notable absence of deeper cultural knowledge systems—elements that are essential components of indigenous folklore. For instance, traditional knowledge related to childbirth practices, marriage customs, food preparation methods, agricultural techniques, or community-based strategies for preserving indigenous languages is rarely, if ever, documented in these materials. The exclusion of such culturally rooted content diminishes the opportunity for students to engage with their heritage in meaningful and practical ways through education.

In recent years, efforts have been made to publish primer books for several tribal languages, including Tangkhul, Rongmei, Liangmai, and Thadou, among others. These primers, however, often follow the structural pattern of English primers. This replication creates significant pedagogical issues. In English, each of the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet typically corresponds to at least one word beginning with that letter, which facilitates phonics-based learning (e.g., A for Apple, B for Ball, etc.). However, many tribal languages do not possess lexical items that



begin with every letter of the Roman script, especially when the script has been modified with digraphs or diacritics to accommodate the phonemic inventory of the language.

To conform to the phonics model of English, some tribal language primers have included English words such as "Ice-cream" for the letter I in situations where no native word exists for that sound in the initial position. This practice not only undermines the phonological structure of the native language but also introduces pronunciation patterns that are inconsistent with the natural phonotactics of the language. Consequently, the foundation of literacy in the mother tongue is compromised. Students may internalize incorrect pronunciation and orthographic conventions, leading to long-term challenges in both spoken fluency and written accuracy in their native language.

Encouragingly, a recent initiative led by the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in collaboration with the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) marks a positive development (CIIL, 2024). In 2024, CIIL and NCERT prepared and published new primer books specifically tailored for ten tribal languages of Manipur: Anal, Hmar, Rongmei, Kom, Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, Tangkhul, and Zeme. These primers are currently under print, with plans to distribute 2,000 copies for each language, signaling a welcome step toward strengthening foundational literacy in mother tongues. The primers have been designed to reflect the internal linguistic structure of the respective languages, moving away from the English-based phonics model and toward a more context-sensitive approach. This initiative also indicates growing institutional support for the documentation and development of tribal languages in the region. Further details on this project can be accessed via the official CIIL website: [https://www.ciil.org/primers\\_book](https://www.ciil.org/primers_book).

The need for culturally and linguistically appropriate content remains urgent. Developing primers and educational materials that reflect the phonological systems and lexical inventories of individual tribal languages, rather than imitating English models, would provide a more effective and respectful approach to early literacy and language preservation. Furthermore, the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems within educational content would enhance cultural pride and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

#### 4.5 Orthography

One of the primary challenges faced by many tribal communities in the realm of literary development is the perceived necessity of having an indigenous script. There exists a widespread notion among these communities that without a unique script of their own, their language lacks legitimacy or authenticity. This belief, however, is a misconception. A language's value and vitality are not dependent on whether it possesses a distinct script. In practice, all 17 recognized tribal languages in Manipur and several others have adopted the Roman script, often with locally motivated modifications to suit the phonological needs of the language.

These adaptations commonly include digraphs such as *ph*, *th*, and *ch*, as well as the use of diacritics like *ī* and *ē* to represent particular vowel qualities, including the schwa sound. While this adoption of the Roman script facilitates a degree of literacy and inter-community intelligibility, the absence of a standardized orthography continues to hinder the production of consistent written materials, especially for educational and literary purposes.

The urgency for standardization is evident. A unified and consistent writing system is essential for developing textbooks, children's literature, teaching aids, and other literacy materials. However, the process of developing a standard orthography is complex and sensitive. As Malone (as cited in Karan, 2014) aptly observes, writing systems are not developed quickly they require time, patience, community dialogue, and often, compromise. In the context of Manipur's tribal languages, the rush to establish standardized writing systems often driven by political, social, or educational pressures has inadvertently complicated efforts toward sustainable literary development. Instead of fostering unity, premature standardization efforts have, in some cases, led to internal disagreements over orthographic choices, thereby delaying progress in mother tongue education.

#### 4.6 Mother Language Competency

In the tribal regions of Manipur, each community possesses its own distinct tribal language, which functions as the first language (L1) for children. As such, all tribal children grow up speaking their mother tongue fluently, and by the time they enter school, they already have well-developed oral proficiency. Many children also acquire basic literacy skills in their language through community use, church-based initiatives, or locally available primers. This



observation is further supported by field interactions with students from Langmei Primary School, Hamai English High School, and Liangnah School, all located in the Tamei area of Tamenglong district where majority of them speaks Liangmai. When asked to interpret relatively complex or culturally specific words such as *kata* 'all', *khangchiu* 'morung', and *zawra* 'traditional wine', students were able to provide accurate meanings with ease. Moreover, when prompted to orally narrate folk tales from their community, many students responded confidently and with clarity, demonstrating both linguistic fluency and cultural knowledge.

In addition to oral responses, these students were also able to write short descriptive passages about their daily activities, such as "what they do today" or "what they did yesterday" when asked to do so. This level of writing ability is largely attributed to the community-wide use of the Roman script, which the students have learned formally in school and continue to practice through reading and writing in educational contexts. In the course of formal schooling, English is introduced, and most children develop at least foundational reading and writing abilities in English alongside their native language. This positions students as natural bilinguals, with varying levels of written proficiency in both languages.

However, while students demonstrate strong oral competence in their mother tongues, the medium of instruction (MoI) used in schools often poses a significant barrier to effective learning. In many rural and linguistically homogeneous areas, such as Tamei, Nungba and Tousem in Tamenglong district, Pural and Wuilong in Senapati district, Kotlen or Waichong in Kangpokpi district, Chingai and Jessami in Ukhrul, and other sub-divisional headquarters within the state, teachers often use the mother tongue as an informal medium to explain academic content in subjects like mathematics, science, and social studies. This practice facilitates better comprehension and engagement, especially in the foundational years of schooling. For example, complex concepts like photosynthesis or lowest common multiple factor (LCM) are explained using everyday metaphors and terms in the local language, thereby anchoring abstract knowledge in students' lived experiences.

In contrast, schools located in more urban or semi-urban areas such as Senapati town tend to have linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. In these contexts, English is adopted as the default medium of instruction, even at the primary level. This shift often creates cognitive and linguistic gaps, particularly for tribal students who are still developing their English proficiency. As a result, students may struggle to grasp academic concepts, not because of lack of intelligence or motivation, but due to a mismatch between the language of instruction and their cognitive-linguistic strengths.

This contrast between rural/homogeneous and urban/heterogeneous schooling contexts underscores the importance of context-sensitive language policy and teacher training. While tribal students generally possess strong oral command of their mother tongue, the effectiveness of instruction depends significantly on whether the education system recognizes and incorporates this strength into classroom pedagogy. Ensuring that the mother tongue is used systematically in early education especially for concept explanation can bridge comprehension gaps and strengthen students' academic foundations.

#### 4.7 Medium of Instruction Preferences

One of the core objectives of the survey was to examine community attitudes regarding the medium of instruction (MoI) in early education. As expected, the results show that every respondent has a positive attitude toward the formal inclusion of their mother tongue in education, which aligns with earlier findings (Varah, Khamrang, & Pawar, 2023). Respondents were asked which language they believe should be used as the MoI in primary schools within their area. The results reveal a nuanced but insightful picture of community preferences and the socio-economic pressures that influence language choices in education. A significant 77% of non-student respondents expressed a clear desire for the use of the mother tongue as the MoI in early education.

Many stated that they were proud of their languages and strongly believed that children learn better when taught in the language they speak at home.

However, this sentiment appears to contrast with another survey question finding: 87% of parent respondents today indicated that if given the choice, they would prefer to enrol their children in English-medium schools over mother tongue-medium schools. This preference is further reflected in the responses to the question on the preferred medium of instruction. While 63% preferred English as the medium for all subjects but mother



tongue for language classes, 18% opted for mother tongue as the medium for all subjects, 12% chose English for all subjects, and 9% were unsure (see Figure 3). I would analyse this as not a contradiction of their linguistic pride, but rather a reflection of their pragmatic concerns regarding economic mobility and future career opportunities. As pointed out by Mohanty (2010), such decisions often reflect what he calls "elite closure", where dominant languages like English are associated with power, education, and employment, pushing minority language speakers toward subtractive bilingualism. English is widely perceived as the language of opportunity, and essential for higher education, government employment, and professional advancement (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Which option would you prefer?

251 responses

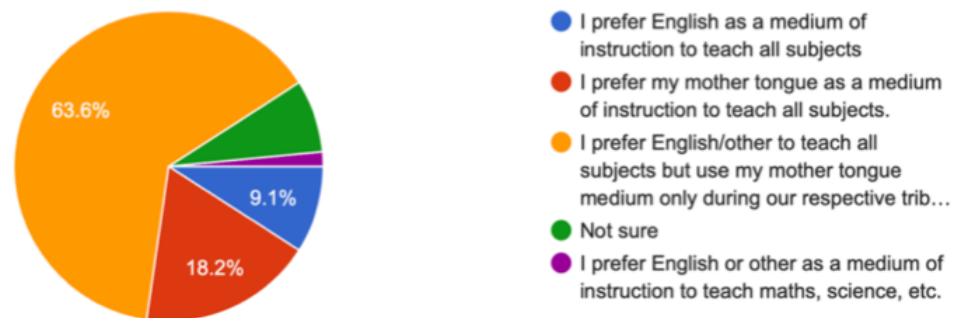


Figure 3. Medium of Instruction Preference

Interestingly, around 25% of respondents preferred a mixed or bilingual approach from the outset. While also valuing the mother tongue, these individuals stressed the importance of early exposure to English. They supported a gradual transition model, in which the mother tongue is used extensively in the early years, while English is introduced gradually and becomes the dominant medium by upper primary or middle school. This approach aligns with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for mother tongue-based instruction in the early years while allowing for a smooth transition to other languages, including English, as required by learners' future academic and career needs (NEP, 2020). Notably, none of the respondents advocated for excluding the mother tongue entirely. Even those prioritizing English emphasized the importance of retaining the mother tongue at least as a subject or as a support language for concept explanation. This demonstrates a universal acknowledgment of the mother tongue's educational value, even when practical preferences lean toward English for long-term prospects.

#### 4.8 Roles of Government and Community in Mother Tongue Education

Mother tongue (MT) education in Manipur is the result of a complex interaction between state government agencies and community-level initiatives. Various state bodies such as the Tribal Research Institute (TRI), Imphal, the Department of Education, the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur (BOSEM), the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur (COHSEM), and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) play key roles in shaping the direction of tribal language education. The Board of Secondary Education, Manipur (BOSEM) is primarily responsible for developing the curriculum for lower and upper primary levels, while the Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur (COHSEM) oversees curriculum design for the pre-university stage (Classes XI and XII). The SCERT, under the Department of Education, coordinates the development and printing of textbooks and learning materials, and also provides pedagogical support, including teacher training programs.

In some cases, NCERT-printed books are supplied where appropriate, based on the demands and availability as communicated by individual tribal communities.

Few tribal communities that received funds from government state that funding for the printing and distribution of mother tongue educational materials is partially supported by the Department of Education, Government of Manipur, and this is only for select tribal communities. This partial funding is typically routed through the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and is often based on proposals submitted by recognized tribal literature societies. However, this support is not comprehensive, and no tribal community receives full government funding for the development of their educational materials. As a result, the majority of production

costs such as textbook writing, printing, and distribution are borne by the communities themselves led by their literature bodies, primarily through community fundraising, voluntary contributions, and donations.

Each tribal group in Manipur typically has a registered literature society or language body recognized by the Government of Manipur. These organizations play a crucial role in developing orthographies, creating learning materials, and submitting proposals to the Department of Education for the production of educational resources in their respective languages. For instance, communities such as the Tangkhul, Rongmei, Thadou, Liangmai, and Mao have made notable progress in developing educational materials in their mother tongues, although significant gaps and needs still remain. In many cases, these initiatives are entirely community-funded, with materials developed through donations, voluntary contributions, and grassroots mobilization. Among them, the Mao Academy stands out as an exemplary institution. It has produced a significant number of high-quality MT materials that are used in local schools in Senapati district. Mao education materials are hosted at Mave School, Senapati. Similarly, the Tangkhul community in Ukhrul has shown sustained commitment to MT education, producing relatively abundant resources. Tangkhul is also the only tribal language from Manipur currently recognized by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) as an optional subject up to Class 12. However, smaller tribal communities such as the Anal, Maring, and Thangal face severe challenges due to the lack of educational resources, with some having little to no mother tongue materials available in schools. This inequity in resource availability creates serious barriers to implementing effective mother tongue education across the state. While the state plays a foundational role in policy and limited funding, the burden of material development and implementation largely falls on the respective tribal communities. The uneven distribution of educational materials remains one of the most significant challenges to the broader success of mother tongue education in Manipur.

Besides the material production, lack of language teachers and teacher training is another concern. Out of the total respondents, 15% stated they have one government appointed teacher, 28% stated nil, and 58% stated no idea for the question how many govt appointed teachers are there for your language. 100% of them said they have no idea about the language teacher training conducted for their language.

In addition to the challenges related to material production, the shortage of qualified language teachers and the lack of teacher training opportunities present significant obstacles. Among the respondents surveyed, only 15% reported having a government-appointed teacher for their language, 28% stated that there were none, and a majority, 58% were unaware of whether any government-appointed teachers existed for their language. Furthermore, all respondents (100%) indicated that they had no knowledge of any teacher training programs conducted for their respective mother tongues. This highlights a critical gap in institutional support for capacity building in mother tongue education.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This case study on mother tongue education in Manipur's hill districts underscores the intricate dynamics between linguistic diversity, policy implementation, and community-led educational efforts. The findings reveal a significant mismatch between policy aspirations and ground realities. While the state government has taken important steps, such as recognizing 18 tribal languages for school education, the implementation remains limited in scope, unevenly distributed, and heavily reliant on the initiative of local communities. A key observation is that tribal children across the hill districts enter school with a high degree of oral fluency in their native languages, which they acquire naturally in their home environments. However, this linguistic strength is often not leveraged in formal education, as most schools continue to use English or Manipuri as the primary medium of instruction. As the data suggest, such language gaps can hinder comprehension, lower participation, and diminish early learning outcomes. In a few remote areas where mother tongue is used informally due to the absence of teachers fluent in dominant languages, students benefit from greater conceptual clarity and cultural relevance, highlighting the value of mother tongue-based instruction.

Despite clear community support for mother tongue education as reflected in the 77% of respondents who preferred it in the foundational years, parental preference for English-medium schooling (87%) also reflects broader socio-economic anxieties. Manipuri is state official language but it is used not as a medium of instruction but as a subject of learning in all hill schools of Manipur. English continues to be seen as the key to academic and professional success, creating a tension between linguistic identity and economic mobility. This dilemma suggests that any



successful mother tongue education policy must also address transition models that incorporate both mother tongue and English in a balanced, phased manner.

One of the most pressing challenges remains the lack of educational materials in tribal languages. Most communities do not have access to government-provided textbooks or primers in their language, and the few existing resources are largely produced through community efforts. Moreover, the content of these materials often fails to reflect indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems, and many primers are modeled uncritically after English phonics systems, which are not always suitable for the phonological structures of tribal languages. Standardizing orthographies and developing linguistically and culturally appropriate materials are urgent needs for sustaining and expanding mother tongue education. Another critical issue is the shortage of trained teachers who are proficient in local languages. Only 15% of respondents reported having a government-appointed teacher for their language, and none were aware of any teacher training programs focused on their mother tongue. This lack of institutional investment in human resource development severely limits the effectiveness and scalability of mother tongue instruction. Without systemic training and recruitment of local teachers, even well-developed materials cannot be effectively delivered in classrooms.

Overall, the study highlights the indispensable role of community-led literature societies in driving language development, advocacy, and grassroots educational initiatives. Yet, without consistent and equitable state support—both financial and institutional—these efforts risk remaining fragmented and insufficient. Moving forward, it is imperative that mother tongue education in Manipur's hill districts be approached as a collaborative endeavor. Policies must be contextualized, responsive to local realities, and rooted in both linguistic justice and academic pragmatism. Strengthening partnerships between government agencies and community institutions, expanding resource allocation, investing in teacher training, and developing locally relevant content are essential steps toward building an inclusive and effective multilingual education system. By aligning educational practices with linguistic identities, Manipur can not only enhance learning outcomes but also contribute meaningfully to the preservation of its rich tribal language heritage.

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Yes

### Conflict of interest

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