

# ***“From Home Language to School”-Navigating Linguistic Challenges of Mymensinghia Students***

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the educational challenges faced by Mymensinghia students, who speak the Mymensinghia dialect and are educated through the Assamese medium, with a focus on their English language learning experiences over the past thirty years. The research explores two key historical aspects: the evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT) policies in Assam and their impact on Mymensinghia students, and the effectiveness of government initiatives aimed at promoting English language acquisition for minority groups. Through analysis of government reports, educational documents, and firsthand accounts from students and educators, this study aims to identify persistent barriers and propose recommendations for improving English education for Mymensinghia students in Assam.

**Keywords:** ELT Policies, Minority, English Language Learning, Government Policies, English Education

## **Introduction**

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational experiences of students, and English, as the global lingua franca, is increasingly crucial in a rapidly globalizing world. In Assam, the Mymensinghia community, particularly those residing in rural areas, faces significant challenges in acquiring English language skills. Many Mymensinghia students come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, often as first-generation learners

with limited support at home. The educational system in Assam primarily operates in Assamese, which is the medium of instruction in most schools. However, for Mymensinghia students, whose first language is a dialect of Bengali, this creates an additional barrier to learning. Over the past few decades, various educational policies have attempted to address these challenges, yet their success in improving the English proficiency of Mymensinghia students has been mixed. This paper explores the historical evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT) policies in Assam, their impact on the Mymensinghia community, and the effectiveness of government initiatives aimed at improving English proficiency among minority communities.

**The Marginalization of the Mymensinghia Community:** The Mymensinghia community in Assam is part of the broader Bengali-speaking Muslim population that migrated from the Mymensingh region of present-day Bangladesh to Assam, particularly during the British colonial period and the early post-independence years. Initially, many Mymensinghia settlers were able to thrive as peasant farmers in Assam's fertile lands, particularly in the Barak Valley and the Brahmaputra River floodplains. However, over time, socio-economic pressures, including population growth, land scarcity, and recurring natural disasters like floods and river erosion, have left many Mymensinghians landless or marginalized as small farmers. Despite their long-standing presence in Assam, this community continues to face significant economic hardships. Their vulnerability is compounded by the degradation of the char-chapori (riverine) areas where many families reside, leaving them dependent on low-income jobs and agricultural labor.

The socio-economic challenges faced by the Mymensinghia community have been compounded by political marginalization. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Assam, with its focus on Hindutva ideology and the protection of indigenous Assamese interests, has led to the portrayal of Bengali Muslims, including the Mymensinghians, as

outsiders or even a threat to Assamese identity. This political rhetoric has contributed to the exclusion of the Mymensinghia community from broader societal and educational discussions, reinforcing stereotypes and exacerbating their marginalization. As a result, Mymensinghians struggle to gain acceptance as part of the Assamese identity, and their specific needs, including those related to education, remain overlooked.

**Historical Context and Evolution of ELT Policies:** The role of English in Assam's education system has evolved over time, shaped by India's colonial past and post-independence educational reforms. Under British rule, English was the language of administration, governance, and education in Assam. After independence, the educational system sought to become more inclusive and reflective of India's linguistic diversity. In Assam, this shift led to several significant educational reforms, particularly in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). These reforms, however, have often been insufficient in addressing the needs of marginalized communities like the Mymensinghians, who face unique linguistic and socio-economic challenges.

**ELT Policies and Their Impact on Mymensinghia Students:**

One of the key policy shifts in Assam's educational system was the introduction of English from an early stage in primary education. Prior to 2006, English was introduced only in Class 5, which placed Assam's students at a disadvantage compared to other regions of India where English was taught earlier. In 2006, the Assam government made a significant change by introducing English from Class I. While this policy benefited many students by giving them an early start in learning English, it also presented a particular challenge for Mymensinghia students. These students, who already struggled with learning Assamese, were now required to learn both Assamese and English simultaneously. This additional burden of learning two non-native languages compounded the difficulties these students faced, as they

were caught between learning in a medium (Assamese) that was not their mother tongue while trying to master English, which further isolated them from mainstream education.

Another significant policy was the introduction of the Three Language Formula (TLF) in 1968. This policy mandated the study of Assamese, Hindi, and English, with English being a core subject for all students. The intention of the TLF was to create multilingual proficiency among students. However, for Mymensinghia students, this policy has posed several challenges. The Mymensinghia community, whose native dialect is not Assamese but a Bengali variant, faces a dilemma in selecting a first language. They are often forced to choose between Assamese, which is the regional language, and their mother tongue, leading to a disconnection from their cultural identity. This policy, while promoting multilingualism, does not align with the community's linguistic realities, leaving Mymensinghia students at a disadvantage. The pressure to prioritize Assamese over their native dialect not only undermines their linguistic heritage but also leads to confusion and difficulties in mastering the languages required by the curriculum.

### **The Impact of Syllabus Design: A Historical Perspective on English Teaching in Assam**

The evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Assam has been marked by a series of policy shifts aimed at improving language skills. However, the unique needs of the Mymensinghia community, whose first language is a dialect of Bengali rather than Assamese, have often been overlooked in these reforms. The design of the English syllabus, historically and in more recent years, has not adequately addressed these challenges, contributing to the continued marginalization of Mymensinghia students in the education system.

### **Pre-1970s: Teaching English Through “Word-for-Word” Translation**

Before the 1970s, English instruction in Assam was heavily focused on a ‘word-for-word’ translation approach. Students were taught to translate English texts into Assamese or Bengali, with little emphasis on real-world communication or the practical use of the

language. This approach, common in Assamese medium schools, placed a strong emphasis on grammar rules, memorization, and translation accuracy. Students, including those from the Mymensinghia community, were required to engage with complex English literature, such as Shakespeare and Washington Irving, which was culturally and linguistically distant from their everyday lives. For Mymensinghia children, who were already struggling with Assamese as a second language, this approach only added to their difficulties. The classroom became a space of rote learning rather than meaningful language acquisition, as students focused on translating texts rather than learning how to use English in real-life situations. This created a disconnect between the language being taught and how students could apply it outside the classroom, exacerbating the gap between their educational experience and practical language use.

### **Post-1970s: A Shift Toward Building “Language Blocks”**

In the 1970s, the focus of ELT in Assam shifted toward the systematic study of language ‘building blocks,’ such as syntax, phonetics, and vocabulary, rather than translation. The State Education Board (SEBA) introduced this new method in 1969, following expert recommendations to improve foundational language skills. While the aim was to help students understand the structure of the English language, the approach still failed to address the specific challenges faced by Mymensinghia students. These students, whose first language was a Bengali dialect and who already struggled with Assamese, found the focus on abstract language structures detached from their lived realities. The curriculum emphasized mechanical language learning, such as repetitive drills and exercises, rather than engaging with real-world language use. This left Mymensinghia students feeling disconnected from the language they were learning, further alienating them from the practical application of English.

### **1980s to 1990s: From Rote Learning to “Real-World” Communication**

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift toward more communicative forms of English teaching, influenced by the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986. The policy emphasized practical communication skills over rote memorization and grammatical accuracy. In Assam, this led to the introduction of more interactive and task-based teaching methods, aimed at engaging students in real-life conversations. While this reform was seen as a positive step, it faced challenges in rural areas, where many Mymensinghia students resided. Traditional, lecture-based methods, which still relied on rote learning, continued to dominate. In these classrooms, even as the syllabus aimed for more communicative approaches, the lack of proper teacher training and resources meant that the shift to interactive learning was not effectively implemented. As a result, Mymensinghia students, who needed more contextually relevant and practical language exposure, still found themselves unable to use English in real-life situations, as their classroom experience remained disconnected from their daily lives.

### **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005: The Push for Multilingual Education**

The NCF 2005 emphasized the importance of teaching in a child’s ‘home language’ during the early years of education, recognizing that children learn best when they are taught in a language familiar to them. This policy aimed to create an educational environment that supports multilingualism and better aligns with students' linguistic backgrounds. However, in Assam, the implementation of this policy has been inconsistent, particularly for Mymensinghia students. These students speak a dialect of Bengali, yet are required to learn in Assamese, which is not their first language. The pressure of learning in a non-native language while simultaneously learning English places an additional cognitive burden on them. The mismatch between the medium of instruction (Assamese) and their native language (Bengali dialect) creates significant learning challenges. Although the NCF advocates for the use of a

child's mother tongue, the reality in Assam's classrooms, especially in rural areas, remains far removed from this ideal.

### **The Disconnect Between Policy and Practice**

In Assam, policies like the introduction of English and the Three Language Formula were meant to enhance language proficiency, but they have been ineffective for Mymensinghia students. These students, whose linguistic context is distinct from the dominant Assamese-speaking population, face challenges that these policies overlook. The early introduction of English assumes a uniform linguistic background, ignoring the difficulties Mymensinghia children face in learning both Assamese and English. The Three Language Formula, intended to promote multilingualism, has not been implemented in a way that addresses the specific needs of Mymensinghia students, leaving them without adequate support in their first language and second-language acquisition.

The gap between policy and practice is further deepened by the outdated English Language Teaching (ELT) approach. The shift from rote learning to communicative methods did not account for the ongoing struggles of students, particularly in rural areas, who are still grappling with Assamese as a second language. The lack of proper resources, teacher training, and contextual relevance has hindered the effectiveness of these reforms. Moreover, the NCF 2005's focus on multilingual education has not been fully realized, leaving Mymensinghia students to navigate both Assamese and English without sufficient support. The problem is not only academic but socio-political as well. Mymensinghia students' struggles are tied to their socio-economic status and political marginalization, compounding the challenges they face in learning English. The educational system's failure to accommodate their linguistic and cultural realities perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, preventing them from accessing opportunities that could lead to academic and professional success.

In sum, the disconnect between educational policy and classroom realities has created significant gaps in the English education of Mymensinghia students. The failure to tailor policies to their specific linguistic needs has left them at a disadvantage, further entrenching educational and social inequities.

### **Government Initiatives to Promote English Language Acquisition :**

Recognizing the importance of English for economic development and social mobility, the Assam government, alongside national initiatives, has launched several programs aimed at improving English language skills. One of the key initiatives is the Assam Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), which focuses on improving the quality of education across the state through enhanced infrastructure, teacher training, and inclusive curriculum design. The SSA also seeks to raise English proficiency, particularly among disadvantaged students, by promoting more inclusive teaching practices. Additionally, in collaboration with the British Council, teacher training programs emphasizing modern English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), have been introduced. These initiatives aim to equip teachers with updated pedagogical tools to teach English effectively. However, despite these efforts, significant challenges persist especially in the area of multilingual teacher training.

A major problem lies in the insufficient focus on multilingualism within teacher training programs. In Assam, where students speak a variety of languages, teachers are expected to teach English while navigating the complexities of multiple local languages. However, many teachers particularly in rural areas are inadequately trained to address the multilingual needs of their students. The existing teacher training programs have not adequately equipped educators to manage the linguistic diversity in their classrooms, leaving them ill-prepared to teach English alongside Assamese or other local languages. This lack of specialized multilingual training leads to a mismatch between the government's policy of

inclusive and effective English teaching and the actual teaching practices in schools. Furthermore, outdated traditional teaching methods continue to dominate many classrooms, particularly in rural areas. Despite the push for modern ELT methodologies, many teachers still rely on rote learning and grammar translation, which are not effective for multilingual classrooms. This gap between the government's policy emphasis on communicative methods and the persistence of outdated teaching approaches further hampers the development of English proficiency among students. The absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation system further exacerbates these problems. Without regular oversight and support, the innovative teaching strategies promoted by the government remain poorly implemented. This lack of monitoring and follow-up means that the gap between the intended and actual educational practices continues to widen, leaving many students, particularly those from multilingual backgrounds, at a disadvantage in acquiring English proficiency.

### **Adarsha Vidyalayas: A Missed Opportunity for Mymensinghia Students**

The establishment of Adarsha Vidyalayas in Assam in 2022 was a promising step toward improving access to quality education for marginalized students, particularly those in rural areas like the Mymensinghia community. By offering an English-medium, CBSE-based curriculum, these schools aimed to bridge the education gap between urban and rural students, providing a pathway for upward mobility and social inclusion. On the surface, this initiative appears to offer new hope for students who have long been excluded from mainstream educational opportunities.

However, as with many well-intentioned policies, the reality is far more complex. While the Adarsha Vidyalayas promise to bring about transformative change, their design and implementation seem to overlook the specific needs of communities like the Mymensinghia, whose presence is often ignored in broader policy discussions. These students, who speak a dialect of Bengali as their first language, are expected to learn in

English and Assamese languages that are not part of their daily lives. The lack of attention to local languages and cultural contexts in the curriculum leaves them at a disadvantage, both linguistically and socially. Moreover, the training and support for teachers, especially in rural areas, has been inadequate. Despite the government's push for modern teaching methods, many teachers continue to rely on outdated approaches that fail to engage students meaningfully. This gap between policy and practice raises the question: *Are policymakers truly aware of the challenges faced by these communities?*

The absence of robust monitoring and evaluation further complicates matters. Without a system to assess the effectiveness of these schools, *how can we ensure that the intended goals of inclusive education are actually being met? Are the needs of the Mymensinghia students, and others in similar situations, being properly addressed in these educational reforms?* Furthermore, the larger issue remains: *Why is the political marginalization of these communities not being actively addressed? How can educational reforms succeed if they ignore the deeper political and cultural contexts that shape the lives of these students?* The Mymensinghia students are not just facing educational challenges; they are caught in a cycle of socio-political exclusion that makes their struggle for quality education even more difficult. In the end, while the Adarsha Vidyalayas initiative is a step in the right direction, it raises more questions than answers. *Are policymakers willing to confront the deeper socio-political issues that affect marginalized communities like the Mymensinghians? And, most importantly, can these reforms truly be transformative if they fail to engage with the lived realities of the students they aim to serve?* These are questions that need to be asked if we are to ensure that education in Assam becomes a tool for true social and political inclusion.

## **NEP 2020 and Its Implications for English Language Teaching(ELT) Policies for Minority Groups:**

The National Education Policy 2020 (“NEP 2020”) is the third educational policy developed after 34 years. The first education policy was announced in 1968 based on the reports and recommendations of the Kothari Commission, and the second education policy was announced in 1986. The NEP 2020 has a transformative vision of education policy, offering a comprehensive framework that underscores multi-disciplinary and multi-modal universities, including technology-enabled education. The NEP 2020 helps us understand a futuristic education policy for our country. It not only discusses concepts but identifies innovations to bring about equality in education. The NEP 2020 seeks to “*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*” by 2030. The UNESCO in its Guidelines for Inclusion viewed inclusion ‘*as a process which is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers*’ in education, ensuring the *presence, participation, and achievement of all students and their diversities*. The NEP brings the three-language formula at the initial stage of schooling with the stated motive to promote multilingualism and national unity. The choice of languages has been left to multiple actors of the education system. However, the repercussions might be unavoidable. For minority groups like the Mymensinghia in Assam, implementing a learning system based on mother-tongue education will be difficult due to the sheer number of languages and dialects in India, as well as internal migration. In the end, it may end up reinforcing language hegemony and mainstream learning mechanisms, undermining the unique linguistic identities of communities like the Mymensinghia. Homogeneity is a myth and intersectionality is a reality. The lives and experiences of people with multiple identities, coming from different walks of life, matter; and should play a role in policy-making. A single-axis analysis of an individual dimension would be futile in achieving effective policy-making. Also the COVID-19

pandemic has dramatically reshaped India's educational landscape, particularly affecting minority group students of rural areas. The transition to online learning exposed significant inequalities, as many rural schools, already struggling with poor infrastructure, lacked the resources to shift to digital platforms. Reverse migration from cities further strained rural schools, increasing enrolments without adequate facilities to accommodate the influx of students. For many students in these areas, the shift to online education was an unattainable luxury. Access to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or laptops was limited, and even where devices were available, inconsistent electricity supply and weak internet connectivity posed further obstacles. In addition, students from linguistic minorities, especially those who did not speak English as their first language, faced an even steeper learning curve.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, while aiming to transform the educational system, has significant gaps that were highlighted during the pandemic. It stresses the importance of digital learning but lacks concrete strategies to address the digital divide in rural areas, where access to technology remains limited. While NEP 2020 emphasizes multilingual education, there is not sufficient emphasis on providing resources in regional languages or training teachers to meet the needs of linguistic minorities. The policy also falls short in offering clear guidelines on how to ensure equitable access to education for marginalized groups in the face of such crisis.

To address these gaps, a more focused effort is needed to bridge the digital divide, provide multilingual resources, and create an inclusive learning environment for all students, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds. The Assam government's introduction of six indigenous languages-*Mising, Rabha, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa, and Deuri*, as mediums of instruction at the foundational stage marks a positive step towards inclusivity for many indigenous communities. Despite the government's efforts to promote linguistic inclusivity,

Mymensinghia students still continue to be marginalized and excluded. This exclusion deepens the educational challenges these students face, contributing to a lack of representation and further eroding their linguistic and cultural identity within the education system. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 fails to address these ground realities, offering no clear roadmap for integrating the diverse linguistic needs of Assam's marginalized communities, such as the Mymensinghia. Without a more inclusive approach, such policies risk perpetuating educational inequities and leaving these communities further alienated in the system.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

Given the complex educational, linguistic, socio-economic, and political challenges faced by the Mymensinghia community in Assam, the following suggestions and recommendations seek to propose pathways for more inclusive, contextually relevant, and equitable education policies. These are not definitive answers, but rather ideas that policymakers, educators, and communities might consider, with flexibility for adaptation.

#### ➤ ***Revisit Language Policies***

- *Could mother-tongue instruction in Mymensinghia students' native dialects (Bengali variant) at the foundational level reduce cognitive overload and enhance comprehension?* Perhaps a pilot program in regions with significant Mymensinghia populations could be explored.
- *Is there room for a stronger emphasis on multilingual pedagogy in teacher training and curriculum development?* A system that includes flexibility for local dialects alongside Assamese and English might better reflect the linguistic diversity of Assam.

#### ➤ ***Enhance Teacher Training***

- *Might teacher training programs benefit from integrating practical multilingual teaching methods and cultural competency?* Understanding the linguistic and cultural

needs of Mymensinghia students could help educators foster a more inclusive learning environment.

- Could ongoing professional development focus on both modern teaching techniques and the specific socio-political dynamics of marginalized communities? This might enable teachers to stay responsive to the evolving educational landscape.

➤ ***Strengthen Political and Social Inclusion***

- Could education become a tool for social cohesion by embracing the linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of Assam? Schools might act as spaces where students from marginalized communities feel respected and valued.
- Should policymakers engage with the Mymensinghia community to co-create education policies that address their specific challenges? Greater community involvement could lead to more contextually relevant and effective reforms.

➤ ***Implement Effective Monitoring Systems***

- What if monitoring and evaluation systems were made more participatory, involving local communities and educators in assessing the impact of educational policies on marginalized students? This could ensure that the policies are truly serving the needs of the community.
- Could the collection of real-time data on student progress particularly on language proficiency and socio-economic background help inform more responsive educational strategies?

➤ ***Leverage Technology for Inclusive Education***

- Could technology bridge the educational divide for Mymensinghia students in rural areas? Investments in affordable digital devices and internet connectivity might provide new opportunities for learning, especially in underserved regions.

- Is there potential for developing digital content in both Assamese and Bengali dialects? This could help Mymensinghia students access educational resources that align with their linguistic background and improve their learning outcomes.

➤ ***Tackle Socio-Economic Barriers***

- Could targeted scholarships and financial aid programs be created to help Mymensinghia students overcome economic barriers to education? Making such programs accessible and well-promoted might ensure greater participation in schooling.
- Might improving school infrastructure in rural areas such as providing clean drinking water, sanitation, electricity, and digital resources create a more conducive learning environment for Mymensinghia students?

➤ ***Align Educational Policies with NEP 2020***

- Does the NEP 2020 adequately address the linguistic and socio-political realities of communities like the Mymensinghians? Could adjustments to the policy ensure that smaller linguistic groups are properly represented in the curriculum and educational resources?
- Could NEP's push for digital learning be better aligned with rural realities? Adapting digital initiatives to include offline resources might ensure that Mymensinghia students in remote areas aren't left behind.

### **Concluding Thought**

The question remains: *How can we ensure that Assam's education system doesn't merely adapt to the needs of the majority but also prioritizes the inclusion of marginalized communities like the Mymensinghians?* Could we, as a society, rethink education as a transformative tool that embraces linguistic diversity, empowers marginalized students, and creates pathways for true social and political inclusion? These suggestions represent starting

points for addressing the myriad challenges faced by Mymensinghia students. However, it is essential to recognize that these recommendations are neither exhaustive nor final answers. Rather, they open up an ongoing dialogue between policymakers, educators, communities, and students themselves, urging continuous reflection and adaptation. Only through a committed, multifaceted approach can we create an educational landscape where no child is left behind due to their linguistic, socio-economic, or political background.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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