

# Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Use of a Minority Language as the Language of Instruction in Primary Schools in India

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## ABSTRACT

*This study evaluates the attitudes of primary school teachers in Rabha language- majority areas of Assam, a state in India about the use of Rabha as a language of instruction in the light of the new National Education Policy 2020. Fifty one school teachers were surveyed and 15 teachers were interviewed using the triangulation method. This article makes a case for advocacy and mobilization of the community for successful implementation of educational policies. Even well-intended policies might not achieve success if the target community is not convinced of the positive outcomes of the policy recommendations. The findings of the study reveal that though the teachers were overtly supportive of the use of Rabha in the classroom, they displayed subtle resistance toward its use due to the widespread misconception that if education is not imparted in more mainstream languages, students will lose important educational and employment opportunities. The authors make recommendations for carrying out proper advocacy and mobilization drives in order to create awareness about the advantages of mother tongue-based multilingual education.*

**Keywords:** Rabha, National Educational Policy (NEP), Home language, MTB-MLE, Dominant languages, Advocacy and mobilization, Language policy, Language attitudes.

## INTRODUCTION

When children are deprived of the right to be educated in their home language, those languages are at risk of perishing. Mother tongue medium education is central to the survival and flourishing of languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008a). However, in many countries around the world, children from minority groups are forced to go to schools that use languages which are not their own. Being forced to learn in a different language can endanger students' mother tongues and often their development of in

the language of schooling is slow and limited. Due to the inadequate development of both their original language and language of education, they achieve only limited bilingual proficiency, and children fail to benefit from the usual cognitive and meta cognitive advantages associated with bi-/multilingualism (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

India is a country with tens of thousands of unique languages. However, 22 are recognized as major languages in the 8th schedule of the Indian constitution. The national census also recognizes 22 languages as official languages. The rest are yet to be recognized, have fewer speakers, and are often embroiled in socio-political issues.

Assam is a state the linguistically diverse northeast India where Assamese is the dominant language, and Rabha is a strong secondary language. Rabha is a Tibeto-Burman language and its speakers are found in different parts of Assam. The Rabha-speaking population in India according to the latest census report is approximately 437,000. Since the dominant language in Assam is Assamese, generations of Rabha students have received formal education in Assamese. For higher education and job purposes, proficiency in Assamese is required.

## THE INDIAN EDUCATION POLICY AND MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

India's 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) puts significant stress on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) as a "supportive language education policy" ("National Education Policy 2020", 2020). According to Malone (2001), such policies ensure that governments support education in minority languages and provide resources for development.

The NEP acknowledges the importance of, and advocates the use of, home languages/mother tongues. It takes into account the fact that students often come from multilingual backgrounds. It strongly recommends the use of languages appropriate to the student and the continued teaching of those languages. According to the policy, one of the fundamental principles that guides both the education system at large, as well as the individual institutions within it, is promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning.

While the Indian policy specifies what should be done, it offers very little support vis-à-vis implementation. Moreover, very scant attention has been paid to the perspectives of those at the community level where implementation will actually occur. Examination of the ideological and implementational space at the ground level must be considered in addition to the national level for successful implementation of the policy. In addition, while the national MTB-MLE policy statement aims to integrate mother tongue instruction throughout the country, the actual implementation will differ across communities. This points to the importance of teachers and parents in the policy process because, in essence, their actions are the policy (Levinson et al, 2009).

## THE MTB-MLE SITUATION IN ASSAM

In Assam, like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, MTB-MLE programs have been piloted at the community level with support from international non-governmental

agencies like the Summer Institute of Languages. As part of this program, primers in the Rabha language were designed and teachers were trained. The process of implementation involved community mobilization, selection of community volunteers to teach, training of teachers, teaching learning material production, mentoring and monitoring of teachers, etc. The programme successfully piloted only because of some dedicated community members who took pride in their own language. It was welcomed by the community and achieved a degree of success. However, since it was not implemented at the government level, it soon fizzled out. Now, with the new interest in MTB-MLE by the government, the Rabha language will soon become the medium of instruction in the areas with a majority of Rabha speakers.

The government of Assam took a cabinet decision in 2022 to introduce five minority languages including Rabha as mediums of instruction up until fifth grade. However, at the time of writing of this paper, all government schools in Assam have been being instructed to teach mathematics and science in English from sixth grade onwards. This was considered as the solution to the abysmally low student enrollment and high dropout rates in government schools. So, the context of the present study is complicated by the recommendation of the NEP to use the student's home language in schools, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the instruction of the government to teach these two content subjects in English.

## THE OBJECTIVE AND RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study determines the attitude of the school teachers of the Rabha community toward the use of their own languages, as opposed to mainstream language/s, and highlights the challenges they foresee in using Rabha as the medium of instruction in their schools. In so doing it adds another local perspective on language policy, which while present (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Shohany, 2005), are frequently absent from debate. Findings vary across contexts, but this article's findings could inform language policy development and practices in areas other than Assam, India.

This study fills both theoretical and practical gaps around MTB-MLE policy. It addresses the gaps in studies about the attitudes of local stakeholders in the language policy process. The intent of policy documents is often not reflected on the ground. At the time of writing this paper, the NEP recommendations were yet to be implemented in the area. Therefore, there is plenty of opportunity to learn from the experiences in order to inform future decisions regarding MTB-MLE in the Rabha majority areas of Assam.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is split into two sections. The first is a brief review of the literature on MTB-MLE. The second is a brief review of the literature on language attitudes.

### A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE WORK DONE ON MTB-MLE

Though MTB-MLE is gaining ground in the field of education, there is still very limited literature available on its merits and implementation. Thomas & Collier (2002),

as cited in Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty (2008), talk about strong forms of bi/multilingual education that lead to high levels of bi-multilingualism and are associated with greater academic success for linguistic minority students. These programs also respect linguistic human rights and educational equity for children (Ball, 2010).

Malone (2008) spoke in her 2005 presentation at the 60th anniversary of UNESCO about the importance of formative participation of ethnic minority speakers in planning and implementing programs for their own communities. She mentioned supportive language and education policies, and preliminary research that provides information about language and language communities. Though she conceded that multilingual education is difficult, she acknowledged its necessity, and noted it has achieved success in Asia and around the world.

According to Malone (2007), MTB-MLE in South Asia usually means “the use of students’ mother tongue and two or more additional languages as Languages of Instruction in school” (p.1). These languages are the students’ mother tongue or first language, a regional language, the national language and an international language. Malone (2010) states that a sustainable MTB-MLE program has characteristics like: it is started because people in the community want it, community members take a formative role in planning and implementing their program, and the community takes responsibility for maintaining it. She lists teachers, supervisors, trainers in the program and others as possible stakeholders. She stresses the active participation of community members as decision makers in order for the program to serve the community. Crucially important is community members’ attitudes toward literacy and education in general. She mentions both informal and formal research. This article is an example of formal research, using previously prepared forms.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2008b) looks at tribal communities and children from India’s Scheduled Tribes who face disadvantages at multiple levels due to various historical and geographical factors. The study reiterates a need for special mechanisms to ensure that children belonging to tribal communities receive the benefits of these interventions. In the 1998 Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the article covering mediums of education is so heavily qualified that the minority is completely at the mercy of the state. On the other hand, the NEP categorically recommends the use of alternative languages and the use of textbooks to bridge the gap between the language spoken by the child and the medium of instruction, as well as the adoption of a bilingual approach, and bilingual teaching learning materials for the teachers with students whose home language differs from the medium of instruction. According to the new policy, all languages irrespective of whether they are mediums of instruction or not will be taught and learned well.

However, according to scholars, there are problems of such top-down approaches. They tend to ignore the contextualized nature of language in communities (Kaplan, 1990; Martin-Jones & Saxena, 1995; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996, as cited in Burton, 2013). One faulty assumption of top-down policy approaches is that the mandate will be followed simply because the order was issued. Policies must essentially be assured to succeed as long as the appropriate resources are allocated (Matland, 1995).

Khejeri’s (2014) study did not target a specific group of teachers like the research for this current article, which focuses only on Rabha primary school teachers. In

Kenya, too, community languages play “an insignificant role outside the community”. The language policy in Kenya recommends that mother tongue be used for instruction in the first three years of schooling, after which it should be replaced by English.

## A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE WORK DONE IN THE AREA OF LANGUAGE ATTITUDE

Malone (2012), in her later work, highlighted the challenges of raising awareness and mobilizing community members for language and education in non-dominant language communities. Such lack of understanding is one of the most important challenges faced by workers at the ground level.

Burton’s (2013) seminal work on MTB-MLE in the Philippines provides a bottom-up perspective for studying top-down policies. It influences the present study because the contexts in which both studies were carried out are similar, though not the same. Almost 80 percent of the population in Burton’s sample spoke a different language from the two languages taught in school, but for the area of study in our research, almost the entire population speaks both Assamese (the more dominant language) and Rabha (the language of that particular community). Also, while Burton’s study examined the ways in which teachers and parents understand and enact MTB-MLE in one school district in the Philippines, this study examines only teachers’ attitudes toward MTB-MLE and how far they suppose it will be effective in this particular context. Burton’s study provided a bottom-up perspective of teachers and parents amidst the national top-down reform. Its objective and methodology inspired subsequent researchers like Anudin (2018), who found that the implementation of MTB-MLE was impeded by teachers who did not feel confident in delivering lessons in the mother tongue, and lack of adequate teaching materials. That study was conducted on kindergarten and elementary teachers. This study also adapted the instruments from Burton’s (2013) and Ramos’ (2001) studies.

Alieto (2018) also stresses the importance of language attitude toward policy implementation. MTB-MLE was adopted in education policy at the time that study took place. Its purpose was similar to the present study because it determined the language attitude of the respondents and their willingness to teach in a mother tongue. Our research is different, however; while Alieto looked at the mother tongue as a substitute for English as a medium of instruction in the early stages of education, we look at it as a substitute for the dominant regional language – Assamese. Alieto’s findings showed respondents’ attitude to be slightly positive. Our findings differ slightly, as will be shown. Alieto also looked at gender differences in attitude, which was not taken into account in our present study. The context to Alieto’s study has parallels with our own. Both contexts are multilingual, and the question, “*What language should be used as a medium of instruction?*” is relevant to both. The multilingual context of Assam makes implementation of mother tongue-based education quite challenging. Another similarity is the use of the dominant language to teach in multilingual contexts.

In most of the studies mentioned above, children had to study in an unfamiliar language in school, but in the context of the present study, students were quite familiar with the language of instruction, Assamese, because both Assamese and Rabha were used in their homes. The complex situation in Assam finds resonance in

Mohanty's work (2019) that highlights the 'double divide' in which disparity between languages leads to loss of linguistic diversity and also discrimination in education. In Assam State, Assamese is the dominant language, even in some Rabha majority areas. However, Assamese itself is threatened by English as the more profitable language, and English medium schools are flourishing in this region. Closer to home, Boruah & Mohanty's (2022) study on the challenges faced by multilingual language policy implementation in India from an aspirational language like English provides insights into this complex issue. It critiques the previous policies and discusses the NEP and its silence on the status and role of English, finding "attitudes to English medium instruction as a route to modernity and success have neither faded nor altered, (p.59)" while stressing the acknowledgment of the home languages of learners.

This article investigates attitudes of teachers in Assam State toward MTB-MLE. Only with the willing participation of people on the ground level can there sustainable MTB-MLE. Given this, our three research questions are: How aware are Assam State teachers of MTB-MLE? What is the general attitude of these teachers toward the Rabha language as a medium of instruction? What are the difficulties they foresee in the implementation of Rabha as the medium of instruction?

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was based on the significant work done by Burton (2013) and Anudin (2018) in the area of language attitudes.

## PARTICIPANTS

Fifty one teachers participated in this study, of which 31 were male and 20 were female, and 39 were assistant teachers, with 12 head teachers. A total of 31 teachers were aged 25-30 years old, with 20 teachers aged over 30. A total of 31 teachers had between 0-3 years of teaching experience, with 20 teachers having more than that. Only 13 of the teachers had Assamese as their first language, while 38 had Rabha as their first language. The younger teachers were fresh from studying MTB-MLE at the community literary body the Rabha Sahitya Sabha. Almost all teachers taught at all levels in their schools.

The study was carried out in Rabha dominated areas of Assam, the districts of Goalpara and Kokrajhar. Similar to Burton's study (2013), we used a descriptive qualitative design to determine the language attitudes of teachers toward the use of Rabha as the language of instruction, and also to identify the challenges they might encounter in using the Rabha language as the medium of instruction. Qualitative design of research "Qualitative research facilitates the gathering of important information while being conscious of the sentiments and requirements of the subjects being studied".

## TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS

We adopted a questionnaire from Burton's (2013) and Anudin's (2018) studies. These comprehensive questionnaires were suitable for us to adopt as they shared objectives with our own study. Piloting was done with four participants. Purposive

sampling was done on the basis that only primary teachers were selected for survey and the interview. The language of the questionnaire was Assamese, as teachers were proficient in both Assamese and Rabha, and Rabha speakers use the Assamese script to write in Rabha. Also, one of the researchers is not a speaker of the Rabha language.

The questionnaire was shared online using Google Forms with the teachers. The responses were then analyzed. For further validation of data collection, an interview questionnaire was prepared. Fifteen teachers were interviewed using an unstructured questionnaire. Researchers asked interview questions mainly in Assamese. Responses from interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. This study used a descriptive qualitative design to find out the language attitudes of teachers toward the use of Rabha as a medium of instruction, and the challenges faced while teaching.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was inductive, establishing patterns and themes. The study used purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were set to determine whether respondents were qualified to be a part of the study; the criterion was that the respondents should be government primary school teachers.

The findings are organized by research question to present the themes that emerged within each category. These categories include Rabha school teachers' knowledge of policy, beliefs about policy outcomes, support and resistance to the reform, and challenges for implementation.

## RESULTS

The results of this study rationalize the attitudes and difficulties of Assam State teachers of grades K-3 in using Rabha as a medium of instruction, as recommended by the NEP, as opposed to the dominant Assamese language.

### Research Question 1: How aware are teachers of MTB-MLE?

A total of 31, more than half of the 51 respondents (60.8 percent), claimed they understood policy terminology like MTB-MLE. However, the qualitative data revealed that most of them did not have adequate knowledge of MTB-MLE. Respondents were not able to explain what it was. A good number of teachers (56.9 percent) claimed that they never received any training in MTB-MLE, whereas the rest claimed to have undergone training, varying in duration from a couple of days to over a week.

### Table 1

*Teachers' views on the importance of culturally relevant lessons.*

How important do you think it is for primary school teachers to create lessons related to life in Rabha communities?	Very important/ important	Not important/ somewhat important
	37 (72.5%)	14 (27.4%)

## Research Question 2: What is the general attitude of teachers toward the use of Rabha as the medium of instruction?

The quantitative data revealed that more than half of the teachers (37, 72.5 percent) felt that lessons should be created that are related to the life of the Rabha community. The rest (14, 27.4 percent) said it was not very important. During the interview, one teacher lamented the lack of literature in Rabha, especially children's literature. He termed it 'scary'. The teacher's comment (translated from Assamese) was: "There is a scarcity of Rabha literature, especially children's literature. It is scary!"

An important element of MTB-MLE is the use of culturally appropriate materials in the classroom. The NEP states that —materials should reflect the 'local people, events, realities; and appropriate to the language, age and culture of the learners' ("National Education Policy 2020", 2020, p. 4).

**Table 2**

*Teachers' views on the importance of parent involvement.*

How important do you think it is for grade 1 teachers to involve parents in writing Rabha stories?	Important/ very important	Not important/ Somewhat Important
	43 (84.3%)	8 (15.6%)

Most of the teachers felt that it would be an enriching experience for both teachers and parents to create materials for teaching. According to them, parents should also be involved in the process. In fact, a majority of the teachers supported the involvement of parents in creating instructional materials. One teacher commented that the main problem with Rabha being the medium of instruction is that there is a scarcity of literature appropriate for children in the language. He emphasized the importance of parents in creating materials in Rabha. However, the same teacher predicted that parents would be reluctant to send their children to Rabha medium schools, and that awareness raising and sensitization programs were important. To emphasize this point he said that even the dominant language Assamese is being threatened by English, so for Rabha to be the medium of instruction in schools effective planning and assurances to the community are needed.

**Table 3**

*Teachers' beliefs about content-based understanding.*

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Learning math and science in Rabha helps children do better in those subjects.	37 (72.5%)	14 (27.4%)

A majority of the teachers (72.5 percent) felt that content subjects like math and science should be taught in Rabha. However, a small number of teachers (27.4 percent)

felt the opposite. This data becomes more significant in the light of the recent decision by the Assam State government to teach math and science in English from third to fifth grade in government schools. In such a situation, Rabha has to compete with Assamese as well as English as a medium of instruction.

While our qualitative data indicated that the teaching of math and science can be done with a bilingual approach, since the terminology must be in English or Assamese, understanding the content is a benefit of these mediums of instruction. As discussed in the fourth research question about the challenges of MTB-MLE, this issue was complicated by the fact that many math and science terms do not have known Rabha translations. Teachers and parents agreed that student learning was enhanced through the mother tongue in terms of conveying meaning, but they noted that meaning was occasionally lost when Rabha terms replaced more commonly recognized Assamese or English terminology.

Our data indicated that teachers do not agree with the government's decision to teach math and science in English because students who are in the third grade (average age 8) cannot even identify English letters. According to them, English should be taught, but only as a subject in itself. Students understand math and science better in their own languages. One respondent commented (translated from Assamese): "Rabha should be used more while teaching math and science, but English should be used alongside since students will need English later on."

A bilingual approach seemed to be the only solution for them.

Table 4 shows the overwhelming agreement of respondents in terms of teachers' beliefs and effects of Rabha literacy. When asked if they believed students who could read and write in Rabha would be able to learn English with more ease than those who could not, 76.4 percent agreed, with 12 teachers disagreeing.

**Table 4**

*Teachers' beliefs about effects of Rabha literacy.*

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Children who can read and write in Rabha will be able to learn a second language like English and/or Assamese with more ease than children who cannot read and write in Rabha.	39 (76.4%)	12 (23.5%)
Children will do better in school if they learn to read and write in Rabha first.	43 (84.3%)	8 (15.6%)
When children learn to read and write in Rabha it is easier to learn to read and write in English and/or Assamese later.	37 (72.5%)	14 (27.4%)

In the item that asked if they agreed that pupils would do better in school if they learned to read and write in Rabha first, almost all (84.3 percent) of them agreed. The same was true for the next item in the survey (when children learn to read and write in Rabha, it follows that it is easier learning to read and write in English later).

A majority of teachers (74.5 percent) stated that instruction in Rabha was important or very important. Similarly, most teachers' discounted the claim that

Rabha instruction would have a negative impact on learning English (64.7 percent) or that an English only method would produce better English results (49 percent).

**Table 5**

*Teachers' views on the importance of Rabha as a medium of instruction.*

How important do you think it is for grade 1 teachers ...	Group	Important/ very important	Not Important/ Somewhat important
To instruct in Rabha?	Teachers	38 (74.5%)	13 (25.4%)

A good number (64.7 percent) of teachers discounted the claim that using Rabha would negatively affect their learning of English or Assamese. They responded that students would learn English/Assamese best if English or Assamese was the only language spoken in the classroom. This attitude was not confirmed in the interviews. The teachers said that the learners will be better serviced by either Assamese or English as those were the languages of the academic and professional workspaces, and Rabha was yet to be recognized as an official language. One teacher commented that learners should start with their mother tongue and then introduce Assamese and English. Since Rabha speakers use the Assamese script, it should not be a problem to learn Assamese later on.

**Table 6**

*Teachers' beliefs about language of instruction.*

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Using Rabha to teach children has negative effects on learning English/Assamese.	18 (35.2%)	33 (64.7%)
Children will learn English/Assamese best if English/Assamese is the only language spoken in their classroom.	26 (50.9%)	25 (49%)

While these high percentages suggest relatively strong favorability toward the development of Rabha literacy in schools, they run contrary to our findings. The data points to deep underlying ideologies about how Assamese and also English literacy is achieved. Despite the teachers' claims that Rabha literacy could be academically beneficial, their comments pointed to uncertainty about the long-term outcomes of MTB-MLE. They held an assumption that MTB-MLE would improve Rabha literacy at the expense of Assamese or English development.

In terms of grade levels, almost all teachers expressed satisfaction in the mother tongue for instruction in grade one. However, most teachers did not believe MTB-MLE should be implemented in other grades. There was concern among teachers that use of the mother tongue beyond grade one would inhibit the learning of English and Assamese.

Despite the enticing outcome of increased student understanding through MTB-MLE, it was viewed primarily as a short-term benefit rather than a long-term

advantage. Teachers demonstrated difficulty in connecting this benefit to students' future academic or career success. One teacher commented (translated): "If our children learn in the Rabha language until fifth grade, they will face problems in using Assamese or English in college, so all three languages should be taught. Assamese and English are both important along with Rabha."

Table 7 shows that writing, speaking and listening in Rabha is considered more important by majority of the teachers.

**Table 7**

*Teachers' views on the importance of Rabha literacy.*

How important do you think it is for grade 1 students...	Very important/ important	Not important/ somewhat important
To learn to read in Rabha?	34 (66.6%)	17 (33.3%)
To learn to write in Rabha?	41(80.3%)	10 (19.6%)
To speak in Rabha?	42(82.3%)	9(17.6%)
To listen to the teacher speak in Rabha?	43(84.3%)	8(15.6%)

### Research Question 3: What challenges exist related to implementing MTB-MLE?

**Table 8**

*Teachers' perceptions of implementing MTB-MLE in the classroom.*

Statement	Very prepared	Prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared
How prepared do you feel to implement MTB-MLE in your classroom?	9 (9.8%)	38 (74.5%)	4 (7.8%)	4 (7.8%)
	Very similar	Somewhat similar	Somewhat different	Very different
How similar is MTB-MLE to the way you taught last year?	3 (5.9%)	28 (54.9%)	16 (31.4%)	4(7.8%)
	No extra work	A little extra work	Some extra work	Lots of extra work
How much extra work will it take for you to use MTB-MLE in your classroom?	7 (13.8%)	14 (27.5%)	23 (45.1%)	5 (9.8%)
	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
How difficult will it be to implement MTB-MLE in your classroom?	5 (9.8%)	17 (33.3%)	26 (51%)	3 (5.9%)

The perceived challenges of a reform may affect its ability to be implemented at the ground level. Teachers' general views of these challenges were reflected in their perceptions of the feasibility of classroom implementation. Most teachers stated that they were prepared to implement MTB-MLE in the classroom (74.5 percent) with 51

percent saying it would be somewhat difficult to do so. Almost half of the respondents perceived MTB-MLE to involve some extra work (45.1 percent), and a majority said it was very different from the previous policy (54.9 percent). Another significant aspect that emerged from data was the teachers' confidence in transitioning from Rabha to Assamese. According to them, since Rabha does not have a script of its own, and it has borrowed the Assamese script, this can be an advantage in learning the Assamese language later.

Another challenge that was consistently reported in responses was the difficulty of translating academic terminology into Rabha. In many instances, English or Assamese words were chosen to describe a concept because of their familiarity to students. One interviewee pointed out that in some Rabha majority areas where the home language is Assamese, Rabha will have to be taught as a subject. However, in the areas where Rabha is spoken at home, it can be used as the medium of instruction.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that, regarding language of education reform in India, primary school teachers in Assam State exhibit strong overt support and subtle covert resistance. On the surface, they responded favorably to aspects of the MTB-MLE policy. However, teachers subscribed to the popular opinion that learning in one language is subtractive and means depriving learners of learning other languages. In addition to that, they also highlighted the concern that parents might hesitate to send their children to Rabha medium schools. This corroborates the observations of Malone (2012) on the challenges faced while raising awareness among stakeholders about the benefits of MTB-MLE.

This article also indicates that there are still many teachers who are unaware of MTB-MLE and its significance in preserving linguistic diversity, as well as making education accessible to all. The data reveals that while teachers claimed to know about MTB-MLE, they were not able to explain what it was. The general attitude of teachers toward Rabha as a medium of instruction was conflicted, as they seemed to appreciate the use of Rabha for better understanding the content being taught, but they felt that using only Rabha would hinder learners from becoming proficient in economically more advantageous languages like Assamese and English. This attitude is common across India as observed by researchers such as Groff (2017) who observed that the demand for 'higher-status languages' (p. 153) like English is one of the factors that leading to the rejection of home languages for instruction. However, almost all the respondents in this study claimed that it was imperative to impart education in the home languages of students in order to keep culture and heritage alive. In the context of this study, it is more a question of keeping the language alive, than helping students learn better with the use of their home languages. This is because in all Rabha majority areas, most of the speakers speak both Rabha and Assamese at home.

The teachers' responses in this study appeared to be influenced by the expectations set forth by the NEP in 2020. Their positive responses toward MTB-MLE align with the NEP requirements. Teachers cited students' increased understanding of classroom content as the biggest benefit of MTB-MLE. The perceived benefit of increased understanding was confirmed in the survey data. This was specifically noted in relation to the effect of MTB-MLE in content areas such as math and science.

Almost 72.5 percent of teachers agreed that learning math and science in Rabha helps students perform better in those subjects. This statement received the highest level of agreement of all the items on the survey that assessed language learning beliefs.

However, teachers also demonstrated quiet forms of resistance which they did not explicitly discuss. The most important challenge for MTB-MLE that stood out was the teachers' concern regarding whether their students would miss out on important opportunities if they received education in their home languages. They supported the use of the learners' home languages but their responses were also indicative of their apprehensions, feeling it will make their students less proficient in the more economically viable languages of Assamese and English.

This problem is also acknowledged by Mohanty (2019) who pointed out that the power wielded by languages like English and Hindi in India will lead to further complications in MTB-MLE implementation. MTB-MLE, at best, was viewed as a short-term benefit by most of the teachers surveyed. Mohanty talks about a double divide, where English is the dominant global language that provides high levels of prestige and access to education, formal employment and higher socioeconomic status. Second tier languages are national or vernacular languages like Hindi and other official languages of India that are also helpful in obtaining employment opportunities but do not enjoy the same prestige as top tier languages, and the third tier constitutes the largest but least powerful group of minority languages.

Responses indicate a lack of adequate instructional materials in Rabha. The difficulty of translating academic terminology into Rabha was also mentioned by some of the teachers. According to the teachers, in many instances, English or Assamese words were chosen to describe a concept because of their familiarity to students. This problem is not unique to the context of the present study as studies such as Lartec et al. (2014), Alberto et al. (2016) and Cabansag (2016) have also reported it as one of the major challenges for the implementation of MTB-MLE. However, as far as implementation in the classroom was concerned, teachers seemed confident that it would be easier to switch from Rabha to Assamese as the medium of instruction as Rabha used the Assamese script.

Throughout this study, teachers seemed conflicted about which language to use as the medium of instruction. Though the quantitative data suggest that they want Rabha to be the medium of instruction, the qualitative data suggest that English or Assamese should be the medium of instruction. Apparently, the lack of Rabha script and literature in Rabha coupled with the fact that Rabha does not have an official status (as yet) could be the factors leading them to that opinion. The use of Rabha was mainly seen as a short-term benefit and not a long-term one. Focusing on just one language will be a problem if there are too many socioeconomic, nature-related or political choices which point in a homogenizing market-oriented direction. Then prerequisites for good MTB-MLE will also deteriorate, both attitudinally and structurally. This is an important consideration in language policy and planning (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 656, as cited in Mohanty, 2019). The teachers also shared their apprehension regarding parents being reluctant to send their children to Rabha medium schools. Significantly, however, the teachers agreed that a bilingual approach could be adopted to teach content subjects like math and science.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the attitudes toward the implementation of MTB-MLE of primary school teachers in Assam State were recorded and analyzed. Teachers are important in the implementation of education policies since they are the ones who will implement them in the classrooms. They are the stakeholders who are the most in tune with the ground realities, and if they are not convinced about the policies, they might hinder the successful implementation of such policies.

Though the world is waking up to the importance of MTB-MLE, it still has a long way to go in order to ensure equitable education for all. At present, the pedagogic worth of the language needs to be highlighted in awareness raising and sensitization programs, as the teachers were surveyed were unsure about how to motivate the community – especially since Rabha is yet to be recognized as an official language in the constitution of India.

In summary, the MTB-MLE reform is challenging for teachers to implement in the classroom. Three main themes were uncovered in the data related to such challenges. These were the multilingual environment of Assam, the difficulty in translating academic language into Rabha, and the limited resources and materials available to teachers and parents to support the efforts of the reform. Despite the complex environment, teachers still hoped to be able to overcome these challenges.

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