

Digitizing Assam: Preserving the Languages and Cultures of Khamyang, Tai Phake, and Singpho Communities

1. Introduction: Assam's Cultural Mosaic and Digital Revival

Assam is home to a diverse ethnolinguistic heritage, but many smaller indigenous communities—such as the Tai Khamyang, Tai Phake, and Singpho—face the risk of cultural extinction due to rapid modernization, demographic marginalization, and language shift. In response, the 'Digitizing Assam' initiative was launched to digitally preserve and archive endangered languages and literature. This effort is led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Nanda Talukdar Foundation (NTF) in collaboration with civil society, academic institutions, and government agencies.

2. Objective of the Digitizing Assam Project

- Digitally archive rare literature, manuscripts, and oral traditions of Assam's endangered languages.
 - Foster community participation, language revitalization, and digital empowerment.
 - Align with constitutional provisions (Art. 29, Art. 350A) and cultural rights of Scheduled Tribes and Clause 6 of the Assam Accord.
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3. Government and Institutional Support

- Nanda Talukdar Foundation (NTF): Archiving partner, repository curator.
- Government of Assam: Facilitates digitization under Digital India and North East Vision.

- SPPEL (Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages), Ministry of Education: Linguistic documentation of Tai Khamyang, Tai Phake, and Singpho.
 - Technology Partner: Bohniman Systems for OCR, AI-enabled TTS (Text-to-Speech).
 - Academic Support: Dibrugarh University, Asam Sahitya Sabha, Assam Jatiya Bidyalaya Trust.
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4. Community-Wise Initiatives

A. Tai Khamyang Community

- Status: Critically endangered; only one fluent speaker remains.
- Language: Tai group, non-script oral tradition.
- Digital Measures:
 - Audio-visual documentation of oral narratives.
 - Grammatical sketches and dictionaries under SPPEL.
 - Community engagement via AASU for intergenerational transmission.
- Challenges: Lack of script, dispersed population, no institutional recognition yet.

B. Tai Phake Community

- Status: ~2,000 people; Tai Buddhist minority in Upper Assam.
- Language: Phakial (Tai family), written in unique Tai script.
- Manuscript Corpus: Over 4,000 handwritten texts on religion, medicine, folklore.
- Digital Measures:
 - High-resolution scanning of palm-leaf manuscripts.
 - Metadata indexing and open access via assamarchive.org.
 - Tai Phake-English-Assamese dictionaries in progress.

- Cultural Output: Buddhist texts, customary law, traditional knowledge.
- Collaborators: Monks, community historians, Dibrugarh University.

C. Singpho Community

- Status: ~3,000 in Assam; part of the Jingpo ethnic group.
 - Language: Tibeto-Burman, largely oral.
 - Cultural Role: Originators of tea cultivation in Assam.
 - Digital Measures:
 - Recording oral folklore, traditional practices, and community history.
 - Developing a writing system and bilingual education content.
 - Participating in SPPEL for phonological and syntactic analysis.
 - Goals: Promote digital inclusion, mother-tongue education, and e-content creation.
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5. Broader Significance

(a) Cultural Empowerment

- Enhances identity assertion of marginalized ST communities.
- Creates repositories for future educational material and cultural resurgence.

(b) Digital Inclusion

- Ensures tribal participation in Digital India.
- Potential for development of AI-powered TTS tools, mobile apps, digital dictionaries.

(c) Academic and Policy Impact

- Contributes to ethnolinguistic research, documentation, and policy advocacy.

- Supports implementation of Clause 6 of Assam Accord.
 - Promotes cooperative federalism through state–civil society–academic partnership.
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6. Challenges and Recommendations

Challenge	Recommendation
Fragmented data availability	Community-led ethnographic surveys
Lack of script in some languages	Collaborative script development and standardization
Funding constraints	CSR partnerships, central funding under National Mission on Manuscripts
Technological barriers	Mobile-first design, vernacular UI, cloud-based backups
Youth disinterest	Integrate culture into curriculum, gamify archives, social media storytelling

7. Constitutional, Legal and Ethical Dimensions

- Article 29: Right to conserve distinct language, script, or culture.
 - Article 350A: Obligation to provide instruction in mother tongue.
 - UNESCO Convention 2003: Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage.
 - Digital Rights & Access: In line with SDG 16.10 (access to information).
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8. APSC CCE Mains Enrichment (Model Question & Answer)

Q: “The preservation of endangered languages is not just a cultural act but a strategic necessity.” Discuss in the context of Assam’s ‘Digitizing Assam’ initiative.

Model Answer Summary:

Assam’s linguistic diversity is a repository of collective memory, traditional knowledge, and civilizational continuity. In recent years, the threats to smaller communities like the Tai Khamyang, Tai Phake, and Singpho have become acute due to urbanization, language shift, and cultural erosion. The ‘Digitizing Assam’ initiative, through community-led and tech-backed preservation of rare literature, manuscripts, and oral traditions, marks a pioneering attempt to rescue these languages from oblivion. It aligns with constitutional mandates, UNESCO conventions, and the digital empowerment agenda of the Government of India.

By deploying AI, OCR, and community collaboration, this initiative offers a blueprint for inclusive digital citizenship. Preserving endangered languages also serves as strategic cultural diplomacy, fosters regional unity, and secures indigenous epistemologies vital to sustainability. Thus, this initiative is not merely about documentation—it is about decolonization, resilience, and recognition.

9. Conclusion

The Digitizing Assam initiative represents a multidisciplinary and forward-thinking approach to cultural conservation, digital justice, and inclusive governance. By fusing tradition with technology, it offers a replicable model for other linguistically diverse states of India. Its success, however, hinges on sustained funding, institutional support, and intergenerational transmission that turns digital archives into living languages.