placed on the collection and analysis of linguistic data, and its subsequent
documentation. Such research involves linguistic fieldwork as conceptualized in
Samarin’s classic textbook (1967) on field linguistics, referred to in Higgins (2009) in
the following terms,

‘Field linguistics is primarily a way of obtaining linguistic data and studying
linguistic phenomena. It involves two participants: the speaker (or speakers) of a
language and the linguistic researcher. The means of carrying on investigation is
the most direct possible, by personal contact. The speaker of the language, the
informant is the source of information and the evaluator of utterances put to him by
the investigator. Field linguistics can be carried on anywhere, not just in the
field.’ (Samarin 1967 as cited in Higgins 2009)

As against this more traditional approach, community-based language research is an
approach that is gradually gaining ground in the academic world. This model of
research, as defined in Higgins (2009), not only allows for the production of knowledge
on a language, but also assumes that that knowledge can, and should be constructed for,
with, and by community members, and that it is therefore not merely (or primarily) for
or by linguists.

In this context, it would be relevant refer to the three research models posited by
Cameron et al. (1992), termed as Ethical research, Advocacy Research and Empowering
Research. The Ethical Research refers to research on social subjects with an acknowledgment of
the contribution of the researched. Both Advocacy and Empowering Research go
beyond Ethical Research and seek to establish direct contact with the researched where
the researchers become active participants. Thus, in Advocacy Research, the researchers
act on behalf of the language-users to try to effect positive changes in the language-
states:
1. Introduction

1.0 Preview
The present chapter is orientational in nature and is intended to serve as an introduction to the topic of research and also to the Singpho community that provides the context for this research. The chapter begins by putting forward certain arguments in favour of a community-based language research model (1.1) on which this research is based, as opposed to a researcher-centered approach. This is followed by an overview of Multilingual Education (MLE) where various issues relating to MLE are discussed (1.2). Certain statistics on the current linguistic situation from the global, national and regional contexts are also presented. The section highlights the factors leading to the educational failure of children from minority language communities and the global effort under way to promote Multilingual Education for such children.

The second part of the chapter is an introduction to the Singpho community. After discussing various views regarding the origin of the Singphos (1.3.1), aspects of the demography, culture, religion and economy of the community are presented in 1.3.2 and the subsequent sections.

Finally, the scope of the present research is indicated, along with certain delimitations implemented in this regard (1.4).

1.1 Towards a Community-based Model of Research
At this juncture, a very pertinent issue relating to the language research paradigm needs to be raised. The nature of linguistic research in the last 100 years or so has undergone some changes. The most usual linguistic research in the past basically aimed at the documentation, description and analysis of a particular language. Such linguist-led and linguist-focused researches contributed towards the more academic knowledge base about languages of the world. The participation of the members of the target community in such a research model is restricted to the role of serving as an informant and language helper to the linguist. This model assumes, according Higgins (2009), that linguists and communities they work with belong to separate worlds, that there is a divide or boundary between researcher and researched, expert and non-expert, linguist and language community. In other words, in such research, the main focus is generally
The 'advocacy' position is characterized by a commitment on the part of the researcher not just to do research on subjects but research on and for subjects. Such a commitment formalises what is actually a rather common development in field situations, where a researcher is asked to use her skills or her authority as an 'expert' to defend subjects' interests, getting involved in their campaign for healthcare or education, cultural autonomy or political and land rights, and speaking on their behalf.

In this research, the researcher is expected to take into account the social and linguistic context of the language users, and to work for them. In this context it needs to be pointed out that the present study provides an instance where the researcher has taken into account the social and ethnic context of the Singpho community while deciding upon certain aspects of the programme. Especially, in the context of the orthography (5.5.3) a number of decisions have been taken, keeping view the sentiment and aspirations of the community in terms of their social, ethnic and political affiliations.

Empowering research goes one step beyond Advocacy research and is conducted not only on the language of the language-users and for the users, but is also conducted with them. In this model, the researcher and the researched are both participants in the programme. The researcher might, for example, train the community members in linguistic methods, or in preparing some kind of language teaching material etc. The researcher or the linguist is the principal research expert in this process.

But Higgins (2009) posits one more research model which goes even beyond these two community-inclined models. This is labelled as Community-based Language Research (CBLR) model. This model of research can be thought of as the closest and most active participatory research in terms of both the researcher and the researched (i.e. the community) in comparison to the linguist-focused research model. CBLR incorporates all three 'programmatic statements' proposed by Cameron et al. (1992) in their discussion of empowering research. These are

a) Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects
b) Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them
c) If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing
Following these principles, Higgins (2009) states that the CBLR implies research on a language and such research is conducted for, with, and by the speakers of that language. This kind of research involves a collaborative relationship, a partnership between researchers and the community members within which the research takes place. This model of research strives towards providing training to the community members to undertake research on themselves, making the presence of a researcher from outside the community redundant. According to Higgins (2009), the main factor which distinguishes CBLR from other research models is that it acknowledges and welcomes the extent to which the linguists are trained by and learn from the community members on issues related to language, linguistics and culture. So, both linguists and community members are equal partners in this model of research.

This present study on the MTB-MLE in Singpho follows the CBLR model of research. It is based on a strong collaborative and participatory approach where the Singpho community is the principal stakeholder. This study has evolved around the active participation of the community in each and every aspect of the study. It has produced trained members of the community for undertaking different linguistic and sociolinguistic surveys. Training has been conducted on the production of MT literature for the community also. As a part of this study, a number of trained teachers for the MTB-MLE programme have also become a part of the resource. Efforts have also been directed towards capacity building among the community members to perform duties in different capacities to continue this research programme.

At this point, an anecdote will serve to show the community’s reservations about linguist-led and linguist-focused models of research. On 2006, just two years after my first contact with the Singpho community, I registered for my Ph.D. in the Department of Linguistics of Gauhati University to work on ‘Language contact situation: Assamese and Singpho’. After being officially registered as a Ph.D. scholar, I went to the community and told them about the proposed research. The reaction that came from two of the learned members of the community really left me thinking. Both Slg. Rajesh Singpho and Slg. Rajib Ningkhee told me that they were not happy about the way many research scholars obtained Ph.D. degrees by writing a thesis on some aspect of their
community. They felt that the whole process of Ph.D. research was too much focussed on the researcher and the whole exercise did not actually bring any benefit to the community. None of the researchers even bothered to inform them that they had obtained the degree. In this context, Rajesh Singpho strongly stated that "The research scholars from different universities or colleges actually use us as Raw material for their own benefit". This is a fitting example of the kind of research where the linguists are responsible and accountable primarily to themselves and to their academic and scholarly communities. Moreover, the output of the research is inevitably influenced by the linguists' assumptions about knowledge, its construction and value, and rarely takes into consideration the assumptions of the users of the language under study.

Therefore, after this dialogue, both of members of the community requested me to work on something that could benefit both the community as well as me. That was enough impetus for me to return from the field and cancel my registration. Subsequently, I re-registered in 2008 for Ph.D. on the present topic namely, 'A Multilingual Education Programme for the Singpho Language in North East India'. This topic has provided me a lot of scope to do collaborative and participatory research which has benefited the community. The study presents a detailed account of this active collaboration between the researcher and the members of the Singpho community in the planning, implementing and sustaining a Mother Tongue based Multilingual Education Programme for the community. I was fortunate to get full support from my supervisor in this regard which has eventually made it possible for me to carry out this research. Currently, under this study, the community has been running an MTB-MLE school in Ketetong, in Tinsukia district to teach their MT to their children. The following is a list of events in a chronological order that took place during the span of this study. It clearly shows the level of community participation and their ownership in this research.
Table 1: A chronology of events relating to the Singpho MTB-MLE programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Nature of event</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>April – May, 2006</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Baseline survey and Language attitude survey.</td>
<td>Both surveys were conducted by the researcher with active cooperation from the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>October, 2006</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>General Community meeting</td>
<td>This first community mobilization meeting was attended by almost 80 to 100 community members that included community leaders, religious heads, parents and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>19th-25th November, 2006</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Mobilization/programme planning workshop</td>
<td>The first mobilization workshop where members of the community prepared a provisional cultural calendar for chalking out a proper plan for the whole programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>16th-22nd May, 2007</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>Follow-up writers workshop</td>
<td>The first writers’ workshop where the members of the community received training on writing stories, songs, lullabies, rhymes etc in their own language for their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>10th – 19th January, 2008</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Writers’ workshop</td>
<td>A follow-up writers’ workshop for preparing more reading materials for the young learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>8th – 13th September, 2008</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Primer Production workshop</td>
<td>The first locally-held workshop at Ketetong where the participants were trained to produce the primer and the pre-reader in their mother tongue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>July, 2009</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>Teachers training</td>
<td>The first teachers’ training event for the community which selected three Singpho teachers to undertake training on imparting education through the Multi track method in MLE programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 9th August, 2009</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Formation of School Management Committee A strong School Management Committee consisting of local leaders, learned members of the community and some interested and insightful parents and teachers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 9th September, 2009</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Opening of the first Singpho MT school Formally inaugurated in the local English medium school building. The SMC decided to use the school for holding the classes initially.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. 21st March, 2010</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Donation of building and land for setting up a permanent MT school A plot of land along with a half-built structure donated by Slg. Rajib Ningkhee to the SMEPC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. 8th-11th July, 2010</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Environmental Studies (EVS) workshop This workshop saw the active involvement of the young educated members of the community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 19th September, 2010</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Shifting for the school to the newly built permanent structure Inaugurated by the Brigadier of Mountain Division of Indian Army who donated a computer lab to the school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. 18th-21st January, 2011</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Curriculum development The researcher worked on a curriculum on behalf of the community who could not attend the workshop for some problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 31st July – 2nd August, 2011</td>
<td>Ketetong</td>
<td>Follow-up EVS-cum-material production workshop This workshop enabled the community members including the young members to contribute to the reading materials for the programme by writing some exciting stories, songs etc on the local environment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2 Multilingual Education

Multilingual Education (MLE) refers to the community based, mother tongue first education program which works towards providing better educational experience to the linguistically disadvantaged members of the minority language communities. This concept stresses on educating the tribal children through their mother tongue at the beginning, and then enabling them to make a smooth transition to the state or the national language or to other languages of wider communication (LWC). One of the main objectives of MTB-MLE is the development of the cognitive abilities of children from the marginalized language groups of the world. Research around the world has proved that learning through L1 provides the maximum scope for the development of all the cognitive faculties for any learners. For that purpose, it is necessary to provide continuous Mother tongue education for the children for as many years as possible.

More specifically, through this programme, efforts have been to enable the children from the linguistically disadvantaged communities to acquire the basic literacy through their mother tongue. Research shows that at least five years of instruction in the first language is instrumental in forming a solid educational foundation for young learners (e.g. Baker, 2006; Benson, 2004; Cummins, 2000, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Table 2 shows an ideal model for MTB-MLE programme for ethnolinguistic minorities.

Table 2: Ideal progression of an MTB-MLE programme (Kosonen et al 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIMARY LEVEL</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th>L1 (LoI + subject))</th>
<th>L2 (LoI + subject)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>L1 (LoI + subject)</td>
<td>L2 (LoI + subject)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>L1 (LoI + subject)</td>
<td>L2 (LoI) + L2SL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>L1 (LoI)</td>
<td>L2SL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>L1 (LoI)</td>
<td>L2SL (oral + written)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-PRIMARY</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>L1 (LoI, literacy in L1)</td>
<td>L2SL (oral)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^The term ‘minority language community’ refers to those communities whose mother tongue is not recognised as a language for use either in offices or in educational institutions of the state. Usually, such languages are more prone to endangerment due to their reduced use by native speakers. Thus, the term ‘minority’ is being used to refer to a linguistically disadvantaged group, as opposed to ‘religious minority’.
Beginning school in the L2 actually hinders and delays the cognitive development of the learners until they can use this L2 for thinking, and that takes a number of years. In such a situation, the first years of school in L2 are focused on language development rather than on content learning. It takes at least 5-6 years for a learner to master the L2 at least to be able to do complex thought processing for content learning. In our present context, most the schools and more generally, the education system, do not provide that opportunity to the children from the linguistically disadvantaged groups. The children have to rush through the grades and lessons without getting any time for learning the L2. This often results in rote learning by the learners without any actual learning taking place. Consequently, there is a huge wastage of natural talent of the students from these communities who do not get the opportunity to learn in their MT. Thus, the privilege of developing their cognitive abilities to its optimum limit is denied to them. This has led to the higher rate of educational failure and attrition among the children of these communities.

So in order to prevent this pathetic condition from deteriorating further, MTB-MLE has emerged as an international movement. MLE has been successful in offering an effective and innovative alternative to the current submersion forms of early education that involve the neglect of the home language and the cultural experience of children, subtractive language learning, large scale school failure and high attrition rate.

1.2.1 Global concern

Before going into the specific details of a Multilingual Education Programme, in the following sections we shall look at global efforts in promoting MTB-MLE for improving the sad state of education among the marginalized language communities around the world. As the main mode of communication for human beings, language
literally opens up the source of knowledge acquisition for humankind. It is through language that human beings learn to look, observe and learn about every little thing in their surroundings. It helps us develop our cognitive thinking skills which is so vital for every human being to develop. Therefore, it is very important that acquisition of language should be as smooth as possible for every human being.

1.2.2 The current linguistic situation

If we look at the current linguistic situation in the world, we find that there is a multitude of languages that are variously estimated within the range of 6000 to 7000 languages (6909 according to the Ethnologue²). But unfortunately, half of these languages are on the verge of extinction. Out of these 7000 languages, at best, only 4% of all languages are spoken by 97% of the total population of the world. This implies that only 3% of the world’s population actually speaks the rest of the 96% of the languages. According to SIL International’s Ethnologue database, some 2,165 (32% of the total number of the world’s living languages) languages are spoken in Asia. But it is surprising that out of these 2165 languages, only 45 are being used as national or official languages in the 30 nations of this continent. In other words, these 45 languages enjoy the privilege of being used extensively in different government and public domains. On the other hand, the rest of the 2120 languages mostly used by some of the linguistic minority tribal groups do not enjoy any such facilities. Most of the speakers of these languages are gradually shifting from their language, as they feel that the use of their mother tongue will not benefit their children.

Narrowing down the focus to India, we find that a total of 445 languages (out of which, 438 are identified as languages used by indigenous communities) are spoken at present in this country. This number makes up 6.44% of world’s total number of living languages. Of these languages, only 22 have been given the status of official language by the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The rest of the 423 languages are used neither as mediums of instruction nor as a subject in the schools, not to speak of being used in official or in any other governmental purpose.

In terms of what is happening globally, it is estimated that approximately 221 million school-age children around the world are speakers of local or indigenous languages—languages that are used in communities and families, but are not recognized in schools or in official settings. Parallel to this, there is an alarmingly high rate of academic failure and school drop out in the world. According to the estimate of the UNICEF, 20% of children of primary school age do not attend schools in the developing countries while another 30% drop out by Grade 4. In India the drop-out rate among the disadvantaged groups is estimated at 80%. ‘Less than 1% of the Scheduled Tribe children have education through the medium of their own language’. (Mohanty and Misra 2000). A question arises as to why such a grave situation has come about. Surveys and Researches conducted in this regard till date have shown that the present practice of educating indigenous children through the dominant/ state/ national language medium of instruction is mainly responsible for such high rate of educational failure among these children. World Bank (2005) points out,

‘Fifty percent of the world’s out of school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition.’

Indigenous children, when forced to learn new knowledge and concepts taught in a language that is not their mother tongue, always struggle with comprehension. This, in turn, hampers their academic achievement and cognitive growth, resulting in a low level of self-perception, self-esteem, emotional security and ability to participate meaningfully in the educational process. In this regard, Jhingran (2005), observes,

‘Such children face a ‘double disadvantage’ of having to try and learn an unfamiliar language and to simultaneously attempt to understand new information and concepts being thrown at them in this unfamiliar language from the first day at school.’
This clearly shows the kind of uncomfortable zone the indigenous children are put into by the dominant language medium schools. It limits the cognitive development of the children resulting in the slow progress in acquisition of knowledge and skills. Eventually these children with underdeveloped understanding or no understanding at all of the knowledge being imparted at the school finally opt to leave school. Thus this contributes towards the high rate of school drop outs and high repetitions.

The linguistic, pedagogical and psychological impediments created by the use of the dominant language as the medium of instruction for the indigenous and minority children actually hinder their access to education. In this system of education, the minority children are forced to accept the subtractive language learning situation. Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) writes that in such situations,

'... the minority children with a low status mother tongue are forced to accept instruction through the medium of a foreign majority/official language with high status, in classes where some children are native speakers of the language of instruction, where the teacher does not understand the mother tongue of the minority children and where the majority language constitutes a threat to the minority children's mother tongue (MT), which runs the risk of being displaced or replaced (MT is not being learned (at a high level) ; MT is 'forgotten'; MT does not develop because the children are forbidden to use it or are made to feel ashamed of it ) - a subtractive language learning situation. '

Such an impediment also affects the attitude of the children and parents of indigenous communities towards their own language. It creates an impression that the language of the minority group is worth less than that of the dominant group. As a result, the younger generation of the minority communities gradually starts abandoning the language. This leads to the interruption in the intergenerational transfer of linguistic and cultural knowledge from the parents’ generation to the children’s generation. The obvious result of this is the endangerment of the language, contributing to the disappearance of the world’s linguistic diversity.

This grave scenario highlights the relevance and need of bilingual or multilingual education programmes for the children of linguistic minority groups.
around the world. Various models of bilingual and multilingual education programmes emphasize the need for mother tongue based literacy programmes. In such programmes, the students are taught basic literacy skills, initially, through their mother tongue. This, in turn, prepares them for a smooth transition to reading and writing the mainstream languages. In other words, learning through one's own mother tongue actually facilitates a more comfortable and effective learning of other languages of wider communication. Bilingual research has shown that human beings actually learn only once to read and write. Briefly, the skills required for reading and writing such as the principles of reading and writing are learnt only once. And if this is done through the learners' own language at first, then it becomes much easier for that learner to transfer those skills in learning another language. Once these basic skills are acquired, such children can pick up other content-based learning such as mathematics, science, social studies etc. more comfortably.

This kind of insights have led to efforts all over the world by national and international organizations, governments and university departments to ensure proper education to the disadvantaged minority language communities.

In 1990, in a World conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, representatives from more than 100 countries arrived at a global consensus on an expanded vision of basic education. Six goals were set in order to ensure improvement in the state of basic education all over the world. The second of the six goals was ‘Universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered as "basic") by the year 2000.’ (UNESCO, 1990)

But none of these six goals set by the participants of the conference got any momentum towards achievement throughout the decade that followed. Therefore, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, representatives from more than 180 nations signed a Framework for Action that advocated improvement in all aspects of the quality of education (UNESCO 2000). In 2001, the heads of the United Nations agencies responsible for the Education for All movement reviewed the situation. They found that the situation was still highly alarming with more than 113 million primary school age children, more than 60 percent of whom are girls, being denied the chance to go to school. They reaffirmed the importance of education and restated the new EFA
goals, notably the elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education by 2005, and completion by all children of the full course of primary education by 2015.

However, in all these efforts, the most obvious question whether Education for All refers to education for everyone including the minority language communities of the world, was raised only very recently. This question was brought up by Susan Malone, an SIL International linguist with vast experience as an educator in Papua New Guinea, Asia and elsewhere, in a recent seminar at the World Bank. Recent statistics show that as many as 221 million primary school age children belong to linguistic minority groups. In other words, this section of children always faces the serious educational challenge of having to try and learn new concepts and lessons imparted to them in a language they do not understand at all or, as in some cases, find it hard to understand if not totally unintelligible. As a result, a huge number of such children become subject to low level of self-confidence and high rate of attrition. Consequently, many of them drop out from school early, resulting in the alarmingly high rate of wastage of manpower.

The UNESCO, as far back as in 1951, felt the necessity of starting the campaign for MT based education for the minority children. In 1953, its expert committee stated in its report entitled The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education:

'It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the member of the community to which he belongs. Educationally he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.' (UNESCO, 1953)

But it was not sufficient to create a general awareness among the countries of the world for promoting educational opportunity for all. Therefore, this idea was reinforced in an position paper on education entitled Education in a multilingual world, published by the UNESCO in 2003, which states that
UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers.

It further comments,

'UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies.' (UNESCO 2003)

The multilingual setting of India naturally poses a great challenge to providing effective educational environment to the children of all its ethnic and linguistic minority groups. It is encouraging to see that the Constitution of India, in its Article 350 (A), clearly states that every child in the country has the right to learn in his/her mother tongue. Article 350(A) states that

'it shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups'.

Keeping this in mind, there has been a constant effort from the government as well as from other non-governmental agencies to take necessary steps for providing quality education to all the children in the country. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2000 and National Curriculum Framework 2005 are the result of such deliberations. These two documents are the result of a lot of thinking and dialogue on the current educational policy of the government by eminent scholars, educationists, psychologists and scientists to provide necessary input to the government to enable it to provide quality education for all the children of our country. Putting due importance on providing mother tongue education for the children, Prof. Yash Pal, an eminent scientist and chairperson of the National Steering Committee set for reviewing the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE 2000), emphasised the importance of mother tongue education for the children of our country in his foreword on the National Curriculum Framework 2005, in the following terms:
'I hope we can become operational on ideas of a common school system, work and education, and letting children enter the world of formal learning through the language of their home and environment.'

(National Curriculum Framework 2005 Foreword p. IV)

The NCF 2005 argues for

'...an emphasis on the recognition of children's mother tongues, including tribal languages, as the best medium of instruction.' (ibid.: vii)

It goes on to say that

'...multilingual proficiency... is possible only if learning builds on a sound language pedagogy in the mother tongue.' (ibid.: vii)

It is in the face of such an emphasis on educating the minority school children through their mother tongue that the concept of Mother Tongue based Multilingual Education (hereafter, MTB-MLE) has come to the forefront. A number of successful MTB-MLE programmes are being run for many linguistic minority groups in Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines, Cambodia and in some other European and African countries. It is important to note that two states in India — Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Orissa — have started mother tongue based multilingual education (MLE) on a pilot basis for tribal children. AP started MLE in 8 tribal mother tongues (MTs) in 2004 and Orissa in 10 tribal MTs in 2006. The states have the program in over 500 schools with first batch of children in grades IV and V, respectively, in AP and Orissa; AP is adding over 2300 schools in the year 2011 and Orissa is scheduled to add 500 schools. Besides these two states, some other states like Assam, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are also working on MTB-MLE. This present doctoral study on the Singphos in North Eastern India is also based on one of such programmes. The notion of MT based MLE programme will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, while the subsequent chapters will deal with the various steps of the process of implementation of the theory in the context of the Singpho Multilingual Education Programme for the children of the Singpho community of Northeast India.

1.3 The Singpho Community

The following sections are intended as a brief introduction to the Singpho community in terms of their origin, location, religion, demography, culture and tradition. In this
regard, the researcher would like to point out that most of the details relating to the origin of the community being presented here are not to be regarded as conclusive. There are a number of different opinions regarding the origin of the Singphos, some of which will be selectively presented here.

1.3.1 Introduction and origin

The Singphos are described by Robinson (Baruah 1977) as ‘one of the most powerful tribal communities bordering in the valley for several generations’. Their areas of inhabitation stretch from parts of Upper Assam to villages in the Changlang and Lohit Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Linguistically, Singpho is closely related to Jinghpaw spoken in Northern Burma, being part of the Jingpho-Konyak-Bodo group (Burling 2003). About the physical description of the Singpho people, an interesting description is as follows in (Dalton 1872):

‘The features are of the Mongolian type, very oblique eyes and eyebrows, mouth wide, cheek bones high and heavy square jawbones. Their complexion never ruddy, varies from a tawny yellow or olive to a dark brown. Hard labour tells on the personal appearance of the females rendering them coarse in feature and awkward in gait but in the families of the chiefs, light complexions and pleasing features are sometimes seen.’

There have been a number of different and often inconsistent theories regarding the origin of the Singphos. According to their tradition and belief, the original homeland of the Singphos was in the Hukang Valley which is a vast tract laying towards the North east of the Patkai mountain range on the India-Myanmar border. South of Hukang valley stretches a vast plain inhabited by the Burmese. Being obstructed by the Burmese in their Southward migration, the Singphos turned towards south-east crossed the Patkai ranges and entered Assam in the early part of 18th century (Baruah 1977).

Again another theory traces the migration of the Singphos to the tract of Tibet in the 800-700B.C. According to this theory, after living there for some hundred years, in
about 100 B.C., the Singphos entered into North east India, coming upstream the river Changpo (Ningkhee 2009).  

In many of the oral histories found among the elderly members of the Singpho community there is a mention of a mountain called ‘Mojoishingra Bum’ somewhere in Tibet which is often referred to as the origin place of the Singpho community. Regarding the geographical location of the Singphos Baurah (1977) states,

‘According to Colonel Hanney, the Singphos are identical in race with the Kakus or Kakhyens of Burma whose chief habitat was on the great eastern branch of the river Irrawadi. They extended nearly as far south as latitude 24° North, while touching the on the North and East the borders of China in latitude 27° North.’

Regarding the appearance of the Singphos in Assam, there have been different estimates as well. There have been some notes in the Assam History about the appearance of the Singphos in Assam during the reign of Ahom King Gaurinath Singha. In a magazine published from Japan, one writer Mr. Aguhkyen has mentioned that the Singphos entered Assam as early as 12th century (Ningkhee 2009). Again the ‘Deodhai Assam History’ edited by Dr. Surjya Kumar Bhuyan (1932) mentions the entrance of some of the Singpho leaders into Assam along with the first Ahom king Sukapha.

Thus there has been a lot of speculation about the time of the presence of the Singphos in Assam but none of them is conclusive. But it can be said that by the time of the presence of the British reign, the Singphos enjoyed political control over a vast area of Upper Assam. In an article titled ‘Description of the Singphos’ published in the Assamese Megazine ‘The Arunodoi’ as cited in (Ningkhee 2009) attributed the boundaries of the Singpho area as follows – river Bramhaputra to the North, Misimi mountain to the east, the Patkai range to the west and the whole area from Noa Dihing up to Burhi Dihing to the south were the boundaries of the Singpho area.

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Rajib Ningkhee is one of the most learned members of the Singpho society. He has written a number of articles about different aspects of the Singpho community in different local newspapers and Journals. His book ‘The Singphos- Society and Civilization’ is a valuable contribution to the Assamese literature as it contains a lot of interesting details about different aspects of Singpho community and society.
1.3.2 Geographical location

The Singphos of Upper Assam and in Arunachal Pradesh are divided into four areas or Hkawngs in Singpho (Nath 2008). These are named as follows:

- Numhpuk Hkawng (Burhidihingriver, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh)
- Diyun Hkawng (Upper Dihingriver, Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh)
- Tieng Hkawng (Lohit district Arunachal Pradesh)
- Turung Hkawng (Jorhat, Golaghat, KarbiAnglong)

The following is a list of villages within Numhpuk Hkawng, using the common Romanized spellings.

1) Ingthong
2) Ketetong
3) Inthem
4) Kumsai
5) Bisa
6) Wagan 1
7) Wagan 2
8) Wagan 3
9) Wakhet Na
10) KheremBisa
11) Guju
12) Giding
13) Duarmora

Tieng Hkawng villages are scattered along the river Tengapani in the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh. The Singpho spoken in this area differs to some extent from that spoken in Numhpuk Hkawng. The names of some of the villages under this hkawng are listed below.

1) Umphum
2) Lutho (Project)
3) Munglang
4) Mbong
5) Nsa
6) Kulang
7) Dingwa
8) Ncho

Diyun Hkawng refers to the Singpho speaking areas lying on both sides of the river Upper Dihing River in Arunachal Pradesh. It is a large area, as can be seen from the number of villages listed here:

1) Gumyu
2) Ningrang
3) Peyong
4) Mudoip
5) Inao
6) kumsai
7) Sumbui
8) Dumba
9) Khagam
10) Phup
11) Lawang
12) Khamuk
13) Pisi
14) Miao
15) Namphaip
16) Skao

Apart from Assam in India, there are also Singphos living in countries like Burma, America and in China.

1.3.3 Culture

Demographically, the Singphos in Assam are a small tribal group with a small population of not more than 8000. However, even though they are small in number, this community has a rich cultural heritage. The major cultural festival of the community which is known as the Shawpawng Yawng Manau Poi is a rich demonstration of cultural songs and dances through which the community pays homage to their forefather Māthum Mātha. This festival is observed in a big way every year in February, and Singpho delegates from different parts of the world participate in this festival.
This community has a rich variety of traditional songs which reflect the indigenous characteristic of the community. Songs like *Hkaq yawng Ningkin* (the river rowing song), ‘Mam htu soi wa’ (the rice pounding song), *siawq gaw i ningkin* (song of love) are some of the beautiful varieties of traditional songs which can reveal a lot about the community. Unfortunately, people who understand these songs are decreasing in number. Nowadays, these songs are very rarely sung, and that too by only a handful of the older members of the community.

1.3.4 Religion

The Singphos are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Even though Buddhism is a recent adoption, the community observes all the Buddhist festivals with great devotion. At the same time, they still perform their traditional worship of the spiritual God who is known as the Nat. There are different nats that the Singpho community believes are responsible for their well-being and prosperity. Therefore, at different times, Singpho families are seen observing traditional rites and worship for such nats.

1.3.5 Economy

The economy of the Singpho community can be termed as of an average level. Their economy is mainly agriculture-based, as has been reported in 4.2. Usually, most of the Singpho families possess a considerable amount of land for doing agricultural production. Apart from cultivating different paddy, the Singphos are also known as a pioneer tea growing community. Recently, the production of organic tea by some of the members of the community has further enhanced the economic status of the community.

1.4 Delimiting the Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to presenting the different issues and challenges involved in the Mobilization, planning implementation of an MTB-MLE programme in the context of the Singpho community in Ketetong, Margherita under Tinsukia district of Upper Assam. In this regard, the study looks at these different issues, but does not claim to provide any permanent solutions to any of these problems. The ways which were adopted by the community under the guidance of the researcher are applicable to this special context only, and hence the researcher does not claim that it can be applied without any modification (or even applicable at all) in case of other communities. As has already been discussed above, the strength of this study lies in a strong
collaborative, participatory and community-oriented approach. So, in many cases, the researcher's point of view on certain issues is more inclined towards the community sentiment than towards purely academic linguistic considerations. In many cases, certain decisions and solutions offered in this study may not accord with core academic principles. Instead, the researcher claims to have worked in close collaboration with the community members towards certain practical steps through which the Singpho MTB-MLE can progress. At the same time, it is important to note that many aspects of this programme are still in a prospective state. Therefore, the researcher does not provide any judgmental opinion regarding the success of the programme. The present study has confined itself to laying out the building blocks for the smooth functioning of the programme and to empowering the community in terms of building their capacity to take control of the programme.

1.5 Overview
This chapter has put forward the researchers' arguments in favour of a community based language research model. It is followed by an introduction on the concept of Mother tongue based Multilingual Education programme in general. Section 1.2 of this chapter looked at the benefits of using the first language for the optimum development of the cognitive faculties of young learners. It also introduced an ideal progression plan of an MTB-MLE programme. Next, the current linguistic situation was reviewed in terms of both global and local perspectives and with the help of some statistical data. It also highlighted the high rate of school drop outs among the children of ethnic minority communities and related it to the double disadvantage suffered by those children. The relevance of bilingual or multilingual education for the children of ethnic minority communities was emphasized in this regard. This point is further reinforced in the subsequent sections where global efforts to encourage and promote such education system for the ethnic minority communities were cited.

The second half of this chapter concerned the Singpho community (Section 1.3). This section introduced the Singphos in terms of their origin, geographical locations, culture, religion and economy as well as a list of Singpho-inhabited areas in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. 1.4 presents certain delimitations of the scope of the study along with relevant justification.
Having introduced the concept of MTB-MLE in the present chapter, the next chapter will take up the discussion of the various components of such a programme.