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## Inclusive Language Education for Tribal Students: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Oraons

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### Abstract

*This article examines how inclusive language education can support the educational and cultural needs of the Oraon tribal community of Gumla in Jharkhand. Focusing on the sociolinguistic context of Oraon students, it explores the challenges they face in accessing quality education due to the dominance of English and regional languages like Hindi in schools. At home, these students speak Kurukh, their native language, which is often excluded from formal education. This linguistic disconnect can hinder learning and weaken cultural identity. Through a sociolinguistic lens, the study analyses classroom practices, teacher approaches, and community perspectives to understand how language use affects educational outcomes. It emphasizes the need for mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), where children begin learning in their native language before transitioning to others. The article also advocates for culturally responsive teaching methods and reforms in language policy that acknowledge the linguistic diversity of tribal populations. Such inclusive strategies not only improve academic achievement but also preserve indigenous languages and identities. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need to bridge the gap between home and school languages to create an education system that is truly inclusive and equitable for tribal learners like the Oraons.*

**Key Words:** *Inclusive education, Oraon community, Tribal students, Sociolinguistics, Language and identity*

### Introduction

Language plays a critical role in shaping educational access, identity, and social inclusion, particularly for tribal communities whose linguistic heritage is often marginalized within mainstream schooling systems. Among these groups, the Oraon community of Gumla district in Jharkhand faces distinct challenges as they navigate a multilingual environment dominated by Hindi and English, while their native language, Kurukh, is sidelined in formal education. This disconnection between the home language and the medium of instruction contributes to low academic engagement, poor literacy outcomes, and a gradual erosion of cultural identity. In India's diverse linguistic landscape, tribal languages are frequently excluded from

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educational frameworks, creating systemic barriers to equity in learning. The Oraon students' struggle reflects a broader pattern in which indigenous languages and perspectives are overlooked, despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments. The study of inclusive language education through a sociolinguistic lens becomes crucial in identifying not only the linguistic and pedagogical challenges faced by tribal learners but also the transformative potential of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE).

This article investigates the educational experiences of Oraon students, classroom language practices, and community attitudes toward language use. It argues that inclusive language policies and culturally responsive teaching are essential to foster both academic success and the preservation of indigenous identity. By focusing on the Oraon community, the study underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive and linguistically sensitive approach to education for India's tribal populations.

### Objectives of the study:

- To examine the linguistic challenges faced by Oraon students
- To analyse classroom language practices and teacher approaches
- To explore community perspectives on language use in education
- To advocate for mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and culturally responsive pedagogy

### Sociolinguistic Background of the Oraon Community:

The Oraon community is one of the well-known tribal groups in eastern India. They mostly live in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal. In the Gumla district of Jharkhand, the Oraons have kept their strong cultural and language identity through their mother tongue, Kurukh, which is part of the North Dravidian language family. Even though Kurukh has a rich history, it is not used much in schools, where Hindi and English are the main languages. Because of this, the Oraons are becoming more excluded from the formal education system. The Oraons live in a society where many languages are spoken. Kurukh is spoken at home and in the community, while Hindi and other official languages are used in public places like schools and government offices. English, which is seen as a language that brings better opportunities, is still very new and difficult for most Oraon children, especially in the early years of school. This difference between the language spoken at home and the language used in school makes learning hard for many children. It often leads to low interest in studies, poor performance, and a feeling of being disconnected from their own culture (Mohanty, "Multilingual Education in India" 287). The language situation of the Oraons shows how language is treated unequally in India. Kurukh is not included in textbooks, teacher training, or school exams, which makes it almost invisible in schools. However, the community's traditional stories, songs, and cultural practices are deeply connected to Kurukh. This shows how important the language is for keeping their tribal identity and local knowledge alive (Tigga 102). From a sociolinguistic point of view, language is more than just a way to talk—it also carries culture and identity. When Kurukh is left out of the school system, it increases inequality and weakens the value of tribal knowledge. This is a serious issue, especially since studies show that mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) helps children from minority language backgrounds learn better and think more clearly (UNESCO, "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?" 2016). To solve these language-related problems, we need changes in how schools and governments deal with language. This includes making better language policies, training teachers properly, and including Kurukh in the school curriculum. Teaching children in their mother tongue like Kurukh can help them do

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better in school and feel proud of their culture. It can also create a fairer and more inclusive education system for Oraon students.

- **Language Shift and Educational Access**

This section talks about how moving away from the tribal language Kurukh to more widely used languages like Hindi and English affects Oraon students' education and learning.

In the Oraon community of Gumla, Jharkhand, people mostly speak Kurukh at home and in daily life. But in schools, the main languages used are Hindi and English. This difference creates a problem for students, known as "language shift"—when people slowly stop using their mother tongue and start using a more dominant language, often to get better jobs or opportunities. Sadly, this shift makes it harder for students to understand lessons and feel confident in school. Learning in unfamiliar languages can lead to confusion, poor performance, and low self-confidence. Kurukh is not included in textbooks, exams, or classroom teaching. This makes it harder for students to understand their lessons and also separates them from their culture. When Kurukh is ignored in education, students may start losing their connection to their language and identity. As they try to learn Hindi and English, they may forget Kurukh, which weakens the passing down of their language from one generation to the next. One solution is to use mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). This means children start learning in Kurukh and slowly move to other languages like Hindi and English. This method helps students understand better, do well in school, and stay connected to their culture (UNESCO 2016). It also supports language diversity, which is very important in a multilingual country like India.

- **Cultural Significance of Kurukh Language:**

Kurukh language goes beyond being a means of communication among the Oraon people; it is the source of Oraon cultural memory, oral history and a sense of communal identity. As Nirmal Tigga notes, "Kurukh is not only a medium of everyday communication but also a repository of myths, folktales, rituals, and songs that sustain the Oraons' distinct worldview" (102). That makes it clear that Kurukh constitutes the indigenous knowledge systems of the community and is a vessel to pass values on through the generations. Anthropologists and sociolinguists highlight the fact that in tribal communities' language cannot be separated with the cultural expression. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of linguistic capital helps explain why the marginalization of Kurukh in schools weakens the Oraons' symbolic power: "The suppression of minority languages in education results in the suppression of the culture and identity carried by them" (Bourdieu 55). To the Oraons, failing to educate the children with Kurukh does not only make children academically fall behind, but also to de-legitimize their culture. Kurukh serves also as a tool of sociability. Oral traditions such as dandakat (ritual songs), karma (festive dances), and storytelling in Kurukh foster solidarity and reinforce cultural pride. According to Sunil Mishra, "tribal languages like Kurukh encode ecological knowledge, agricultural practices, and spiritual beliefs that are central to community survival" (78). The danger of losing this holistic worldview is losing the language. A decolonial approach would view the maintenance of Kurukh as an act of resistance against imposed linguistic homogenization as ascribed by state policies that place importance on Hindi and English. Skutnabb-Kangas warns of "linguistic genocide in education," where children are compelled to abandon their mother tongues for dominant languages, thereby erasing indigenous epistemologies (31). Pressure in the school system toward Hindi and English has led to rapid language change and weakening of intergenerational transfer in the Oraon case. Besides, cross-cultural research proves the advantages of cultural and cognitive sustainability of indigenous tongues. UNESCO observes that "mother tongue

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matters: local languages are a key to effective learning, and they strengthen the child's sense of identity and belonging" (Mother Tongue Matters 12). This would not only enhance understanding of Kurukh in the curriculum but also stabilize culture in a fast moving socio-economic set up where culture is being lost or forgotten due to the influence of the Western cultures.

Therefore, the cultural value of Kurukh is the fact that it helps to construct collective memory, represent the ecological and spiritual wisdom, and identity against the homogenizing ranks of globalization, and national integration. The value of Kurukh in education is not merely a pedagogical issue, but an ethical one with generational cultural survival repercussions.

### Methodology:

This qualitative study involved ethnographic fieldwork in selected Oraon communities in Gumla district (Jharkhand).

- Questionnaires supplied to 50 Oraon students of Kartik Oraon College Gumla
- Interviews with Oraon students from Kartik Oraon College Gumla
- Classroom observation at K.O College Gumla

### Data, Findings and Analysis:

The data collected from 50 individuals provides insight into the occupational background of their families. A significant majority of the respondents (74%) reported that farming is the primary occupation of their family. Specifically, 37 out of 50 respondents indicated that their family is engaged in agriculture or farming, which suggests a strong agrarian background, commonly seen in tribal or rural communities such as the Oraons. A small fraction of the families is employed in the formal sector. Only 1 respondent each (2%) reported that their family member is engaged in a government job and a private sector job, respectively. This reflects limited penetration of formal employment avenues within the sample population. In addition, 2 families (4%) are involved in business-related activities, showing minimal entrepreneurial engagement among the respondents. Notably, 9 respondents (18%) did not provide information regarding their family occupation. This non-response rate is relatively high and may indicate hesitation, lack of clarity, or unwillingness to disclose occupational details. It highlights a potential gap in the data collection process and may require follow-up or additional clarification.

Table 1.1

Occupation Type	Frequency	Percentage
Farming	37	74%
Government Job	1	2%
Private Job	1	2%
Business	2	4%
Not Responded	9	18%
Total	50	100%

The data clearly indicates that agriculture remains the dominant occupation among the families of the respondents. The low representation in government and private jobs, as well as business, suggests

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limited access to diversified employment opportunities. This could be due to factors such as educational barriers, lack of vocational training, or regional economic constraints. The findings underscore the importance of considering occupational background when planning educational or economic upliftment programs in such communities. Additionally, the high non-response rate may point to the need for more culturally sensitive or trust-building approaches in future surveys.

The data reveals varying levels of English writing proficiency among the 50 respondents, specifically in the area of descriptive writing. The responses have been categorized into three groups based on the quality and accuracy of their descriptions:

- **Well Described – 12 Participants (24%)**  
These participants demonstrated a good command of English writing skills. Their descriptions were coherent, contextually appropriate, and grammatically correct. They effectively interpreted the image and used vocabulary that reflected clarity and creativity. This group shows potential for higher academic achievement and better communication skills in English.
- **Described but Grammatically Incorrect – 21 Participants (42%)**  
The majority of respondents fell into this category. While they attempted to describe the image, their responses contained noticeable grammatical errors, such as incorrect tense usage, subject-verb disagreement, limited vocabulary, or sentence structure issues. Despite these errors, the core message or interpretation of the image was mostly understandable. This indicates a partial grasp of English writing, with a need for focused language support, especially in grammar and composition.
- **Not Described – 17 Participants (34%)**  
A significant portion of the participants either left the question unanswered or were unable to construct any meaningful description. This may point to a lack of confidence in using English, limited exposure to descriptive writing tasks, or difficulty in understanding visual cues. This group requires foundational training in language comprehension and expression.

The data highlights a wide gap in English writing proficiency among the Oraon community members surveyed. While nearly one-fourth are capable of descriptive writing, over three fourths exhibit either grammatical weaknesses or a complete lack of response. This suggests a pressing need for targeted language intervention programs focusing on writing skills, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and visual literacy. The findings also underscore the importance of integrating descriptive writing tasks in the curriculum and offering more opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on their written English.

In this qualitative item aimed at assessing the English writing skills of the participants, particularly in terms of sentence formation, grammar, and coherence, 50 responses were collected. The answers were categorised into three groups based on writing quality:

- **Well Written (24 responses – 48%)**  
Nearly half of the participants (48%) were able to construct clear, meaningful, and grammatically correct sentences. These responses demonstrated a fair command of vocabulary, sentence structure, and the ability to express thoughts coherently. This indicates that a significant portion



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of the group has acquired a functional level of proficiency in English writing, sufficient for basic self-expression.

- **Grammatically Wrong (19 responses – 38%)**  
About 38% of the students attempted to write but made noticeable grammatical errors. While the intention and meaning were often understandable, the structure of sentences showed issues like subject-verb disagreement, incorrect use of tenses, punctuation problems, and spelling errors. This category reflects learners who are in the process of developing English writing skills but still struggle with foundational grammar rules.
- **Wrongly Written or Incoherent (7 responses – 14%)**  
The remaining 14% of responses were poorly structured to the point where the message was unclear or incomprehensible. These responses lacked basic grammatical structure, proper vocabulary, and logical sentence sequencing. This suggests either a lack of sufficient exposure to English writing or severe difficulty in expressing thoughts in English.

The data reveals a wide range of English writing proficiency among the Oraon students surveyed. While it is promising that nearly half of the respondents could write well, the presence of 38% with grammatical issues and 14% with incoherent writing highlights the need for targeted language support, particularly in grammar and sentence construction. These findings could help in planning remedial teaching interventions, with a focus on bridging the gap between those who are learning and those already proficient.

### Interpretation of Findings:

The results of the presented research show how devastating that linguistic stratification can be on the achievements of Oraon students. The information indicated that although almost half of the respondents showed that they possessed skills to write simple sentences in English, a significant proportion of them still appeared to have challenges with grammar, vocabulary and coherence. This lack of fair distribution of proficiency is a sign of structural disadvantages in their language learning setting. As Jim Cummins argues, “children’s ability to succeed academically is contingent on the extent to which their linguistic and cultural knowledge is affirmed in the school” (Language, Power, and Pedagogy 39). The Oraon case stands on the contrary: eviction of Kurukh in classrooms would result in the loss of self-confidence and would impede the evolution of the literacy. The occupational background data, showing 74% of families engaged in farming, underscores the intersection between socio-economic marginalization and educational inequality. According to Ranjana Dutta, “tribal education in India cannot be understood without reference to economic deprivation and systemic exclusion” (436). Limited access to diverse occupations translates into reduced exposure to dominant languages like English, making educational success even more difficult for Oraon learners. The writing assessments also highlight how linguistic disconnects influence performance. While 24% of students wrote descriptive responses well, a majority (76%) displayed errors or could not respond. This aligns with Dhir Jhingran’s observation that “children from minority language backgrounds face a severe learning disadvantage when forced to study in a language they do not understand” (15). For Oraon students, learning English without a strong foundation in Kurukh or Hindi results in partial comprehension and fractured expression.

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The findings also reveal that language shift is not simply a linguistic adaptation but a threat to identity. As Sk. Musharraf Haque argues, “language, identity, and schooling among Adivasis are deeply entangled, and the neglect of tribal languages in education alienates children from their culture” (12). The Oraon experience confirms this, as the pressure to adopt Hindi and English undermines intergenerational transmission of Kurukh and weakens cultural pride. At the same time, the data suggest pathways forward. Research in multilingual education affirms that mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) strengthens both comprehension and identity. Benson explains, “children taught in their first language during the early years are more likely to succeed in later learning of second and third languages” (4). Applying this to the Oraon context, integrating Kurukh into the curriculum would not only improve literacy outcomes but also empower students by validating their cultural heritage. Thus, the interpretation of findings demonstrates that the linguistic struggles of Oraon students are not merely individual deficits but structural consequences of policy neglect and social inequality. Inclusive, culturally responsive approaches such as MTB-MLE and community-based language planning emerge as essential strategies to bridge the gap between home and school, ensuring that education becomes a site of empowerment rather than alienation.

### Discussion:

The findings of this study shed light on the linguistic and educational struggles faced by Oraon students in Gumla, Jharkhand. The dominance of Hindi and English in formal education, in contrast to the use of Kurukh at home, creates a linguistic gap that significantly affects students’ academic performance and engagement. The data reveals that while a portion of students demonstrate moderate to good English writing proficiency, a substantial number still struggle with grammar, vocabulary, and coherence. This indicates a pressing need for early and continuous language support. The occupational background of the respondents, with the majority belonging to farming families, further contextualizes the educational challenges. Limited economic resources and exposure to English contribute to the uneven development of writing skills. The data also highlight that language shift is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but one deeply tied to identity, access, and empowerment. The sociolinguistic perspective emphasizes the role of language as a carrier of culture and knowledge. The exclusion of Kurukh from educational settings not only hampers comprehension but also threatens the intergenerational transmission of cultural identity. The community’s cultural wealth, embedded in oral traditions and Kurukh expressions, risks being overshadowed by educational policies that prioritize dominant languages.

Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) emerges as a promising approach to bridge this gap. When students begin learning in Kurukh, they are more likely to develop confidence, better understand concepts, and transition effectively into other languages like Hindi and English. Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogy—where the local context, values, and language are incorporated into classroom teaching—can strengthen both academic outcomes and self-esteem. Overall, the study supports the need for inclusive language policies, teacher training in multilingual methodologies, and the integration of tribal languages like Kurukh into mainstream education. Without such measures, the educational system risks alienating tribal learners and contributing to the erosion of their cultural heritage.

### • Implications for Policy and Practice:

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both policy formulation and educational practice. The evidence from the Oraon community clearly demonstrates that language exclusion perpetuates educational inequality and cultural loss. As Skutnabb-Kangas notes, the denial of indigenous

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languages in education constitutes “linguistic genocide” because it compels children to abandon their home language in favor of dominant tongues (31). For the Oraons, this means that policies which prioritize Hindi and English without recognizing Kurukh inadvertently undermine both learning and identity.

- **Policy Reform and Linguistic Inclusion:**

National and state-level policies need to explicitly recognize tribal languages like Kurukh as mediums of instruction. The *National Curriculum Framework (2005)* acknowledges the importance of learning in the child’s home language, yet implementation has been weak. As Srivastava reminds us, “policy without practice remains rhetorical and fails to change the everyday realities of marginalized children” (137). Ensuring budgetary allocation for curriculum design, teacher recruitment, and textbook development in Kurukh is essential for bridging this gap.

- **Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE):**

The practical adoption of MTB-MLE must be prioritized. Research across contexts has shown that “children taught in their first language during the early years are more likely to succeed in later learning of second and third languages” (Benson 4). In the Oraon case, initiating literacy in Kurukh, with gradual transition to Hindi and English, would build both competence and confidence. UNESCO likewise emphasizes that “mother tongue matters: local languages are a key to effective learning, and they strengthen the child’s sense of identity and belonging” (*Mother Tongue Matters* 12).

- **Teacher Training and Pedagogical Practices:**

Teachers play a pivotal role in either validating or silencing tribal voices in classrooms. Panda and Mohanty argue that “language matters, so does culture; beyond rhetoric, multilingual education must engage with students’ lived linguistic repertoires” (612). Training programs should therefore prepare teachers to employ multilingual pedagogies, using Kurukh strategically alongside Hindi and English, and designing culturally responsive lessons rooted in tribal knowledge systems.

- **Community Participation:**

Language planning and policy must involve the Oraon community itself. As Haque observes, “for Adivasi students, schooling that disregards parental aspirations and community culture becomes alienating” (14). Involving elders, cultural practitioners, and parents in curriculum development ensures legitimacy and strengthens intergenerational knowledge transfer.

- **Equity and Social Justice:**

Finally, the implications extend beyond pedagogy to broader frameworks of justice. Sen argues that development is about expanding freedoms, which include the freedom to sustain one’s language and culture (*Development as Freedom* 112). Policies that marginalize Kurukh restrict Oraon students’ educational choices and erode cultural continuity. Thus, promoting inclusive language education must be seen as a human rights obligation as much as an educational reform.

- **Recommendation:**

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen inclusive language education for the Oraon community and similar tribal populations:

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- **Adopt MTB-MLE:** Introduce Kurukh as the initial medium of instruction with gradual transition to Hindi and English.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Include Kurukh in textbooks, classroom activities, and assessments to affirm cultural legitimacy.
- **Teacher Training:** Equip teachers with multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogical skills.
- **Language Support in English:** Provide remedial programs focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills.
- **Community Involvement:** Engage parents, elders, and local stakeholders in language planning and educational content.

By adopting these recommendations, educational institutions and policymakers can move toward a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustaining model of education for tribal students such as the Oraons.

### Conclusion:

This study highlights the deep-rooted linguistic and educational inequalities experienced by the Oraon community in Gumla, Jharkhand. The stark disconnects between the home language, Kurukh, and the dominant school languages, Hindi and English, has created barriers to learning, cultural preservation, and academic achievement. The analysis of English writing skills among Oraon students reveals significant gaps in grammar, vocabulary, and expression, which stem from limited exposure and support in both the home and school environments. Furthermore, the predominance of farming as a family occupation underscores the socio-economic challenges that intersect with linguistic marginalization. Through a sociolinguistic lens, the article demonstrates that language is not just a medium of instruction but a key factor in cultural identity, self-esteem, and educational success. The exclusion of Kurukh from educational frameworks weakens students' sense of belonging and undermines the richness of tribal knowledge systems. However, the implementation of mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), alongside culturally responsive pedagogy, offers a viable path forward. Incorporating Kurukh into the curriculum, training teachers in multilingual approaches, and involving the community in language planning can foster a more inclusive and empowering educational experience. Addressing these linguistic injustices is not merely a pedagogical concern but a social imperative, essential for ensuring that tribal students like the Oraons are not left behind in the quest for equitable education.

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