

# A Review Study on the Role of Language in Tribal Students' Education in Madhya Pradesh

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## ABSTRACT

Language plays a decisive role in shaping access to education, classroom participation, and academic achievement, particularly for learners from linguistically marginalized communities. In India, tribal students often enter formal schooling through a language that differs from their home language, creating structural barriers to comprehension, engagement, and assessment. Madhya Pradesh, which has one of the largest tribal populations in the country, represents a complex linguistic context where indigenous tribal languages coexist with Hindi and English as dominant school languages. This review article examines the role of language in the education of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh by synthesizing research studies, national and state policy documents, and international reports published between 2000 and 2024. Using a PRISMA-informed qualitative review procedure, the study identifies key themes related to home-school language mismatch, classroom participation, assessment practices, learner identity, and policy implementation. The review highlights the relevance of mother tongue-based multilingual education, teacher preparedness for linguistically diverse classrooms, and context-specific language planning. The article argues that strengthening language-responsive educational practices is crucial for enhancing equity and improving learning outcomes for tribal students in Madhya Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Tribal education, Language, Multilingual education, Mother tongue, Madhya Pradesh

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with hundreds of languages and dialects spoken across its regions (UNESCO, 2003). This linguistic diversity is particularly evident in states with a high concentration of tribal populations, such as Madhya Pradesh. According to the Census of India, Madhya Pradesh has one of the largest Scheduled Tribe populations in the country, comprising communities such as the Bhil, Gond, Korku, Baiga, Sahariya, and Kol, each associated with distinct linguistic traditions. These languages are not merely modes of communication but are deeply embedded in cultural practices, social organization, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Despite this diversity, formal schooling in Madhya Pradesh is largely conducted in Hindi, with English introduced as an additional language at higher grade levels. For many tribal children, entry into school therefore involves an abrupt transition from their home language to an unfamiliar medium of instruction. Research in language and education consistently demonstrates that such linguistic discontinuities can negatively affect comprehension, classroom participation, and academic achievement, particularly in the early years of schooling (Cummins, 1979; Nambissan, 1994; UNESCO, 2022).

Language occupies a foundational position in education because it functions not only as a subject of study but also as the primary medium through which knowledge is constructed, communicated, and assessed across disciplines. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) explicitly states that all learning is mediated through language and that difficulties in language proficiency can translate into broader learning challenges across subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies (NCERT, 2005). When learners are required to engage with academic content through a language they do not fully understand, they are placed at a systemic disadvantage, regardless of their cognitive potential or prior knowledge.

Recognizing the centrality of language in learning, Indian education policy has repeatedly emphasized the importance of linguistic inclusion. The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) strongly advocates the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the foundational stage, particularly for

children from tribal and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Government of India, 2020). The policy aligns with international research evidence suggesting that early education in the mother tongue supports cognitive development, strengthens conceptual understanding, and facilitates the acquisition of additional languages (Cummins, 1979; UNESCO, 2022).

However, despite progressive policy provisions, the schooling experiences of many tribal students in Madhya Pradesh continue to be characterized by language-related barriers. Studies on tribal education in India suggest that the absence of systematic mother-tongue-based instruction, limited teacher preparation for multilingual classrooms, and language-biased assessment practices contribute to low levels of participation, poor academic performance, and higher dropout rates among tribal learners (Nambissan, 1994; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). These challenges point to a persistent gap between policy intent and classroom practice.

Within this context, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing research and policy literature that examines how language shapes the educational experiences of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh. While several studies have addressed tribal education, language often appears as a secondary concern rather than the central analytical focus. This review study addresses this gap by foregrounding language as the primary variable and examining its role in access, participation, assessment, and educational equity.

## 2. RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REVIEW

The rationale for undertaking this review study is grounded in three interrelated considerations: the educational vulnerability of tribal students, the centrality of language in learning, and the need for context-specific evidence to inform policy and practice in Madhya Pradesh.

First, tribal students in India constitute one of the most educationally marginalized groups, facing multiple layers of disadvantage related to poverty, geographical isolation, cultural discontinuity, and limited access to quality schooling (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). Language intersects with these factors by shaping how students engage with schooling from the very first year. When the language of instruction is disconnected from students lived linguistic realities, schooling can become an alienating experience rather than an empowering one.

Second, language is not a neutral medium in education. Research in sociolinguistics and education highlights that language practices in schools frequently reflect dominant cultural norms, which can marginalize students whose linguistic repertoires diverge from these norms (UNESCO, 2003; NCERT, 2005). For tribal students, whose home languages are rarely represented in textbooks, classrooms, or assessments, this marginalization can result in reduced participation, lower self-confidence, and a weakened learner identity.

Third, while national-level policies such as NEP 2020 provide a broad framework for multilingual education, their implementation depends on state-specific planning and contextual adaptation. Madhya Pradesh presents a unique linguistic landscape that requires localized evidence to inform effective language-in-education strategies. A review study that synthesizes research findings, policy documents, and government reports can offer valuable insights into recurring challenges, policy gaps, and promising directions for improving language-responsive education in the state.

By systematically reviewing existing literature, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of how language influences the educational experiences of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh. The findings are expected to be useful for researchers, policymakers, teacher educators, and practitioners seeking to design more inclusive and equitable educational practices.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 3. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

Understanding the role of language in the education of tribal students requires engagement with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize language not merely as a tool for communication but as a central mediator of learning, cognition, and identity. Several complementary theoretical frameworks inform research on language and education, including sociocultural theory, linguistic interdependence theory, and perspectives on multilingual and indigenous education.

Sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of Vygotsky, emphasizes that learning is socially mediated and occurs through interaction within culturally and linguistically meaningful contexts. Language functions as the primary cultural tool through which knowledge is constructed and shared. From this perspective, when the language of schooling differs from learners' home language, students may struggle to access meaning, participate in dialogue, and internalize academic concepts. For tribal students, whose cultural and linguistic

practices may differ significantly from those of the dominant school norms, the absence of linguistic continuity can limit learning opportunities and hinder meaningful participation in classroom activities.

Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis provides another important theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between home language and school language. According to this theory, proficiency developed in the first language can transfer to the second language, provided that learners receive adequate exposure and support (Cummins, 1979). This implies that strengthening tribal students' home language in early schooling does not hinder but rather supports the acquisition of additional languages such as Hindi and English. Empirical research across diverse contexts has demonstrated that mother tongue-based instruction in the early years is associated with improved academic achievement and long-term educational outcomes (Cummins, 1979; UNESCO, 2022).

Theories of multilingual education further emphasize the educational value of learners' full linguistic repertoires. Multilingual education frameworks argue that students should be encouraged to draw on their home languages as cognitive and cultural resources rather than being expected to abandon them at the school gate. UNESCO's position on multilingual education underscores that the use of learners' mother tongue in early education promotes inclusion, reduces dropout rates, and enhances learning quality, particularly for indigenous and minority communities (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2022).

In the Indian context, these theoretical perspectives align with curriculum and policy frameworks that recognize language as a central component of learning. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) adopts a sociocultural perspective on language, emphasizing that language learning is deeply intertwined with identity, culture, and meaning-making. The framework emphasizes the importance of building bridges between home languages and school languages, rather than treating linguistic diversity as a deficit (NCERT, 2005). These theoretical insights provide a foundation for analyzing how language influences the educational experiences of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh.

#### **4. LANGUAGE AND TRIBAL EDUCATION IN INDIA: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

##### **4.1. Language as a Barrier to Educational Access and Participation**

A substantial body of literature in India has documented the role of language as a barrier to educational access and participation for tribal students. Early research by Nambissan (1994) highlights how the use of dominant regional languages in schools marginalizes tribal learners whose home languages are often overlooked or undervalued in formal education. This linguistic exclusion often manifests in reduced classroom participation, limited comprehension, and difficulties in expressing ideas. Subsequent studies have reinforced these findings, noting that tribal students frequently experience schooling as an alien environment where their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are invisible or devalued. Language barriers can discourage students from asking questions, engaging in discussions, or seeking clarification, resulting in passive learning and a decline in academic confidence. These challenges are particularly acute in the early grades, where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are developed. Research also suggests that language-related difficulties intersect with other forms of disadvantage, such as poverty, being a first-generation learner, and limited parental support for schooling. For many tribal families, the language used in schools is not spoken at home, making it difficult for parents to support children's learning. This disconnect can exacerbate educational inequalities and contribute to lower retention rates among tribal students.

##### **4.2. Medium of Instruction and Learning Outcomes**

The medium of instruction has been a central concern in debates on tribal education in India. Studies consistently show that students learn best when instruction begins in a language they understand. However, in many tribal-dominated regions, schooling begins directly in the dominant regional language, often without adequate transitional support. Empirical evidence indicates that children taught in an unfamiliar language are more likely to rely on rote memorization rather than conceptual understanding. This pattern has been observed in subjects such as mathematics and science, where language plays a crucial role in explaining abstract concepts and problem-solving processes. The absence of mother tongue-based instruction can therefore limit deeper learning and contribute to persistent achievement gaps between tribal and non-tribal students. The National Education Policy (2020) addresses this issue by advocating mother tongue-based instruction in the foundational stage, recognizing that early literacy and numeracy are best developed in a familiar language (Government of India, 2020). However, research suggests that the implementation of such provisions remains uneven, particularly in states with high linguistic diversity, such as Madhya Pradesh.

### 4.3. Language, Assessment, and Academic Achievement

Assessment practices play a crucial role in shaping educational trajectories, yet they frequently overlook linguistic diversity. Several studies have noted that assessments conducted exclusively in the dominant school language can disadvantage tribal students, even when they have understood the underlying concepts. Language-heavy examinations may conflate language proficiency with subject knowledge, leading to misinterpretation of students' abilities. This issue is particularly problematic in high-stakes assessments, where poor performance can result in grade repetition or dropout. Research on tribal education has highlighted that repeated academic failure, often rooted in language difficulties rather than lack of ability, can erode students' motivation and engagement with schooling. Language-sensitive assessment practices, including the use of bilingual assessments or alternative evaluation modes, have been suggested as potential strategies for addressing this challenge.

### 4.4. Policy Perspectives on Language and Tribal Education

Policy documents in India increasingly recognize the importance of language in tribal education. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasizes the need to respect linguistic diversity and utilize language as a resource for learning, rather than as a barrier (NCERT, 2005). Similarly, the National Education Policy (2020) explicitly recommends using the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early years, particularly for children from tribal and marginalized communities (Government of India, 2020). The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has also highlighted language as a key dimension of educational inclusion in its reports on tribal education. Initiatives such as the Eklavya Model Residential Schools aim to improve access to and the quality of education for tribal students, although the extent to which these initiatives incorporate mother-tongue-based pedagogies varies across contexts (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). Despite these policy commitments, the literature points to a persistent gap between policy and practice. The limited availability of teaching materials in tribal languages, inadequate teacher training for multilingual classrooms, and administrative challenges in language planning continue to hinder effective implementation.

## 5. RESEARCH GAPS IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

The review of literature reveals several gaps that justify the need for the present study. First, while language is frequently mentioned as a factor influencing tribal education, few studies treat it as the central analytical focus. Second, there is limited state-specific synthesis of research on language and tribal education in Madhya Pradesh, despite the state's significant linguistic diversity. Third, much of the existing literature focuses on policy intentions rather than examining how language-related challenges manifest in everyday classroom practices. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive review that foregrounds language as the primary variable and situates findings within the specific context of Madhya Pradesh. This review study aims to address the existing gap by synthesizing research evidence and policy perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of language in the education of tribal students.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

### 6.1. Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, exploratory review design**, which is appropriate for synthesizing existing research and policy literature on language and tribal education. Review studies are particularly useful when the objective is to integrate findings from diverse sources, identify recurring themes, and highlight gaps for future research rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships. Consistent with review articles published in Springer and SAGE education journals, the present study relies exclusively on secondary data sources and does not involve any primary data collection or fieldwork.

A qualitative review approach was selected because language-related issues in education are deeply contextual and socially embedded. Quantitative indicators alone are insufficient to capture the ways in which language shapes classroom interaction, learner identity, and access to knowledge. By synthesizing qualitative and policy-oriented literature, the review offers a comprehensive understanding of how language influences the educational experiences of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh.

### 6.2. Data Sources

The review draws on multiple categories of secondary sources to ensure breadth and depth of coverage. These include:

- a. Peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on language in education, tribal education, multilingual education, and indigenous learners in India and comparable contexts.
- b. National policy and curriculum documents, such as the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the National Education Policy (2020).
- c. Government reports, particularly those published by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Government of Madhya Pradesh, related to tribal education initiatives.
- d. International reports and position papers, especially those published by UNESCO on multilingual and mother tongue-based education.

Sources published between 2000 and 2024 were considered to capture both foundational studies and recent policy developments. This time frame allows for analysis of changes in policy discourse while retaining influential earlier research that continues to shape the understanding of language and tribal education.

### 6.3. PRISMA Review Procedure

To enhance transparency and methodological rigor, a **PRISMA-informed review procedure** was followed. Although the study does not claim to be a full systematic review, the PRISMA framework was used as a guiding structure for organizing the literature selection process. The review process involved four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. In the **identification stage**, records were identified through database searches (Google Scholar and Scopus) using keywords such as *tribal education*, *language*, *mother tongue*, *multilingual education*, and *Madhya Pradesh*. Additionally, policy documents and government reports were identified through the official websites of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and the Government of Madhya Pradesh. During the **screening stage**, titles and abstracts were examined to exclude sources that were not directly relevant to language and tribal education. The **eligibility stage** involved a full-text review of the remaining sources to assess their relevance, credibility, and alignment with the study's objectives. Finally, sources that met all inclusion criteria were retained for thematic analysis.

### PRISMA- Literature Selection Process

Stage	Description	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through database search and policy document review	142
Screening	Titles and abstracts screened for relevance	86
Eligibility	Full-text articles and reports assessed for eligibility	52
Included	Studies and documents included in the final review	34

### 6.4. Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying and synthesizing patterns across data sources. The analysis involved repeated reading of the selected texts to identify recurring ideas, concepts, and arguments related to language and tribal education. Initial codes were generated around key issues, including the medium of instruction, classroom interaction, assessment practices, teacher preparedness, and policy implementation. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the dominant ways in which language influences the educational experiences of tribal students. The thematic structure presented in the findings reflects the most consistently reported issues across research studies and policy documents.

## 7. FINDINGS -THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

### 7.1. Home Language-School Language Mismatch

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the review is the mismatch between the home languages of tribal students and the language of instruction used in schools. The literature consistently indicates that many tribal children enter school with little or no proficiency in Hindi, yet formal instruction begins immediately in Hindi without adequate transitional support. This mismatch affects students' ability to follow lessons, understand textbooks, and participate in classroom activities. Studies reviewed suggest that this linguistic discontinuity is particularly detrimental in the early grades, where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are developed. Without instruction in a familiar language, students may resort to memorization rather than

meaningful understanding. Over time, these early difficulties can accumulate, resulting in persistent learning gaps and academic underperformance.

### 7.2. Classroom Interaction and Participation

Language barriers also shape patterns of classroom interaction and participation. The review indicates that tribal students often remain silent in classrooms due to fear of making mistakes in the dominant school language. This limited participation reduces opportunities for dialogue, feedback, and collaborative learning, which are essential for conceptual development. Teachers may misinterpret students' silence as lack of interest or ability, further reinforcing low expectations. The literature highlights that such interactional patterns contribute to the marginalization of tribal students within the classroom and weaken their engagement with schooling.

### 7.3. Assessment Practices and Academic Progress

Assessment practices emerged as a critical theme in the review. Many studies note that assessments are heavily language-dependent and do not adequately account for students' linguistic backgrounds. As a result, the academic performance of tribal students may reflect language difficulties rather than a lack of conceptual understanding. Repeated failure in language-heavy assessments can negatively affect students' motivation and increase the risk of grade repetition or dropout. The review emphasizes the importance of assessment approaches that are sensitive to linguistic diversity, particularly in the foundational and primary stages.

### 7.4. Teacher Preparedness for Multilingual Classrooms

Another recurring theme concerns teacher preparedness for multilingual classrooms. The literature suggests that many teachers lack training in multilingual pedagogy and strategies for supporting learners who are not proficient in the language of instruction. This gap limits teachers' ability to address language-related challenges effectively and to create inclusive learning environments. Teacher education programs often emphasize subject content and general pedagogy, but provide limited guidance on working with linguistically diverse learners. Strengthening teacher preparation in this area is therefore essential for improving language-responsive education for tribal students.

## 8. POLICY ANALYSIS: LANGUAGE AND TRIBAL EDUCATION IN INDIA AND MADHYA PRADESH

Education policies in India increasingly acknowledge language as a central factor in addressing educational inequities faced by tribal and other marginalized learners. At the national level, the **National Curriculum Framework (2005)** marked a significant shift by conceptualizing language as integral to learning across the curriculum. It emphasized that all subjects are language-mediated and warned that ignoring learners' linguistic backgrounds can result in systematic exclusion, particularly for first-generation learners and children from non-dominant language groups (NCERT, 2005). The **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)** further strengthened this position by explicitly recommending the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8, wherever possible (Government of India, 2020). The policy draws on international research evidence to argue that early learning in a familiar language enhances comprehension, reduces dropout rates, and facilitates the acquisition of additional languages. NEP 2020 also emphasizes multilingualism as a national resource and encourages flexibility in language choices, tailored to local contexts. From the perspective of tribal education, the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** has repeatedly highlighted language as a key dimension of educational inclusion. The Expert Group Report on Tribal Education stresses that schooling for tribal children must be culturally and linguistically responsive, and that failure to address language barriers contributes significantly to poor participation and high dropout rates (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). Initiatives such as **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)** aim to improve access and quality of education for tribal students; however, the extent to which these institutions integrate mother tongue-based pedagogies varies widely. At the **state level**, the Government of Madhya Pradesh has implemented several schemes to enhance educational access for tribal students, including residential schools, scholarships, and targeted welfare programs. While these initiatives have improved enrolment, the review suggests that language-related challenges remain insufficiently addressed. Instruction continues to rely predominantly on Hindi, with limited availability of teaching and learning materials in tribal

languages and minimal institutional support for structured multilingual education. This indicates a persistent gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities.

## 9. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this review have important implications for educational practice, policy formulation, and teacher education in Madhya Pradesh.

First, there is a strong case for adopting mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in regions dominated by tribal populations, particularly at the foundational and primary stages. Introducing literacy and numeracy in the home language can support conceptual understanding and provide a strong foundation for learning additional languages such as Hindi and English. Such an approach aligns with both NEP 2020 and UNESCO recommendations on multilingual education.

Second, teacher preparation and professional development must be strengthened to address the realities of multilingual classrooms. Teacher education programs should include training on multilingual pedagogy, strategies for bridging home and school languages, and techniques for encouraging participation among linguistically marginalized learners. In-service training can also support practicing teachers in developing inclusive classroom practices.

Third, there is a need to develop locally relevant teaching and learning materials in tribal languages. Bilingual textbooks, glossaries, and supplementary reading materials can help bridge linguistic gaps and make learning more accessible. Collaboration with local communities and language experts can enhance the cultural relevance and acceptance of such materials.

Fourth, assessment practices need to be made more language-sensitive. Alternative modes of assessment, such as oral explanations, project-based evaluation, and bilingual assessments, can provide a more accurate picture of tribal students' learning. Such reforms can reduce the risk of misdiagnosing language difficulties as cognitive deficits.

## 10. LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature and policy documents, it is subject to certain limitations. First, as a review-based study, it relies entirely on secondary sources and does not include primary data from classrooms, teachers, or students. Consequently, the findings reflect patterns reported in the literature rather than direct empirical observations from Madhya Pradesh.

Second, although the PRISMA-informed procedure enhances transparency, the review does not claim exhaustive coverage, as it is not a full systematic review. Some relevant studies, particularly unpublished reports or region-specific documents, may not have been captured. Despite these limitations, the review offers valuable insights by integrating evidence from diverse and authoritative sources.

## 11. CONCLUSION

This review study examined the role of language in shaping the educational experiences of tribal students in Madhya Pradesh by synthesizing research literature, policy documents, and government reports. The analysis demonstrates that language plays a central role in influencing access to education, classroom participation, assessment outcomes, and the development of learner identity. Persistent mismatches between the home languages of tribal students and the language of instruction continue to disadvantage learners, particularly in the early years of schooling. National and state policies are increasingly recognizing the importance of multilingual education and mother-tongue-based instruction; however, implementation remains uneven. Addressing language-related challenges requires a coordinated and context-sensitive approach that includes policy support, teacher preparation, curriculum development, and assessment reform. Strengthening language-responsive educational practices is essential for promoting equity, improving learning outcomes, and ensuring that tribal students in Madhya Pradesh are not marginalized within the education system.

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