

Standard vs. Native: The Linguistic Dilemma of First-Generation Tribal Learners in West Bengal

Dr. Ranjita Marak¹; Prof. Deepa Mehta²

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Vasanta College for Women,

Professor, Faculty of Education, Banaras Hindu University

Corresponding Author Email: ranjita.vasantabhu@gmail.com

Abstract—Language is more than a means of communication, it is a powerful expression of identity, culture, and belonging. Every individual's linguistic repertoire reflects their history, traditions, and social environment, shaping how they understand themselves and relate to others. Yet, in many contexts, this natural link between language and identity is disrupted by the dominance of politically or socially privileged languages. When communities are forced to abandon their native tongues in favour of standardized or official languages, it often leads to a crisis of identity, cultural dislocation, and social marginalization. In India's education system, this tension is especially evident. Schools frequently favour a single dominant language, sidelining indigenous and tribal languages that are deeply rooted in students' lives. This linguistic exclusion not only affects learning outcomes manifesting in low enrolment, high repetition, and dropout rates but also damages learners' self-esteem, cultural pride, and sense of identity. Tribal children, in particular, face significant challenges when their home languages are dismissed as inferior or irrelevant.

This study seeks to examine the systemic challenges that arise from the dominance of standard languages in education. By focusing on the experiences of tribal learners, it explores how linguistic exclusion fosters identity crises, perpetuates discrimination, and deepens socio-cultural deprivation. By bringing attention to these issues, the research advocates for a more inclusive, culturally responsive, and multilingual approach to education that respects and empowers all learners.

Keywords: Linguistic identity, Standard language, Native language, First generation tribal learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Every individual in a society is defined, in part, by their linguistic repertoire, and the set of languages they are fluent in. One of the most essential aspects of being human is our capacity for speech, which enables us to communicate our thoughts, beliefs, and, importantly, our identities. Language is deeply intertwined with our sense of self. As Micah Andrews (2010) explains, language is a core component of a person's "identity kit," conveying information such as gender, ethnicity, geographic origin, occupation, and social class. The bond between language and identity is central to the human experience. Language doesn't just reflect who we are, it also embodies our identity. It defines us explicitly through names, kinship terms, and descriptions related to appearance, behaviour, and background. It also shapes identity implicitly, as people form judgments about others based on how they speak (Llamas & Watt, 2010). Martin (n.d.) describes linguistic identity as the intersection between language and self-concept, encompassing both personal and social dimensions. It reflects not only an individual's communication skills but also their membership in a linguistic community.

Djite adds that while linguistic identity can reveal our prejudices and expectations, it often fails to capture the full truth of the other. It is a lifelong relationship between speaker and language, a bond shaped by history, environment, and emotion (Joseph, 2006). For tribal children, this relationship runs deep. Their native languages carry generations of wisdom, culture, myths, and meaning. These languages serve as vessels of tradition, history, values, and collective worldview, promoting a deep sense of belonging and reinforcing social cohesion. In a rapidly globalizing world, where dominant languages often overshadow minority tongues, they face linguistic identity crisis which often impede their cognitive development and educational success. Efforts to preserve and revive tribal languages are not just acts of linguistic survival, they are acts of cultural resistance and resilience. Keeping these languages alive means protecting unique worldviews, diverse histories, and the irreplaceable beauty of human expression.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Education in contemporary India is marked by deep-rooted inequalities and ongoing debates about the role of language in learning. Language serves a dual purpose—it is both a medium of instruction and a powerful marker of identity. Yet, its perceived

worth often dictates its acceptance and prominence within educational spaces. Schools, as Pierre Bourdieu observed, tend to mirror the cultural capital of dominant social groups, inadvertently sidelining students from marginalized communities. This systemic bias can lead to feelings of exclusion, low self-worth, and increased dropout rates among children who do not see their languages or identities reflected or valued in the classroom.

While research suggests that human beings are biologically primed to acquire their first language innately, second language acquisition occurs more subtly, shaped by social and cultural interactions. According to Vygotsky, this process unfolds through dialogue and social engagement, especially in classroom settings that should ideally reflect the cultural values and lived experiences of students and their communities.

However, for many tribal children, formal education presents a stark disconnect. They are often taught in unfamiliar, dominant languages that not only hinder comprehension but also create a sense of alienation. Their native languages are frequently dismissed as 'inferior' or 'non-standard,' leading to their exclusion from curricula. This marginalization undermines their linguistic rights, weakens self-esteem, and erodes cultural pride.

This study aims to shed light on these harsh, often invisible realities embedded in our education system, realities that contribute to an ongoing identity crisis, discrimination, and linguistic deprivation faced by first-generation tribal learners. By examining the tension between standardized and indigenous languages in the classroom, the study calls for a more inclusive, respectful, and culturally responsive approach to education, one that affirms every child's right to learn in a language that nurtures both their intellect and identity.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough examination of the research journals, books, dissertations, and theses indicated that language is a crucial component of cultural heritage and personal identity. When tribal learners experience conflict in navigating between their native and dominant language used in education and broader society they face a linguistic identity crisis. Linguistic identity crisis among tribal learners is a multifaceted issue that intersects with language, culture, education and social integration. In this regard the researcher has reviewed existing research on the linguistic challenges and linguistic identity struggles, focusing on the impact of educational systems, cultural transitions, and societal pressures.

According to a study conducted by Farabi (2020), there is a dismal zone of identity crisis among linguistic minorities. The existing dominant structure does not pay attention to the linguistic, psychology and culture of culturally marginalized groups. Mohan (2016) talks about the construction of linguistic identity and language preferences among the Austro-Asiatic language speakers of Jharkhand such as Santali, Mundari and Ho. The study shows that there are some samples, who have already given up their indigenous languages completely. Cheema & Baloch (2021) shed light on the persisting crisis of language and national identity, perpetuated by the vague division of Urdu and English in the socio-political and academic sectors of Naya Pakistan. Piang (2008) opined that to segmentation of tribal people based on various plural social identities has led to the emergence of crosscutting identity among tribal students. This linguistic Identity crisis has significant implications for psychosocial traits. Studies such as Montalvo (2012), & Chukwumezie (2014) have shown that the marginalization of a learner's native language and linguistic crisis negatively impact their self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of belonging.

Few studies like Kumar (2022), Malkani & Rose (2018), Mohanty et al. (2009), Nambissan (1994), and Singh (1994), outline that lack of an adequate number of teachers in schools, crowded general English classrooms, lack of individual attention, perceived indifference and prejudiced behaviour from teachers, lack of knowledge about local languages, more dialects, and lack of script for tribal languages are some of the learning barriers acts as an impediment to retain linguistic ethnicity. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues that the suppression of indigenous languages in education contributes to a loss of cultural identity, as language is a critical component of cultural expression and continuity. In line with the above literature review, this paper aims to explore the key factors influencing the linguistic identity of first-generation tribal learners.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How socio-cultural and academic factors influence the linguistic identity of first-generation tribal learners?
2. What are the major challenges faced by first-generation tribal learners in context of native and standard language?

V. METHODOLOGY

In line with the research questions and nature of the study, the researcher has employed a qualitative research approach using a Collective Case Study (also referred to as a Multiple Instrumental Case Study) method. The study focuses on first-generation tribal learners in West Bengal. The sample consists of 18 first-generation tribal learners, aged 12 to 15 years, from the Santhal (5), Munda (5), Oraon (5), and Birhor (3) communities across the districts of Birbhum, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Cooch Behar in West Bengal. Convenience sampling, a form of purposive sampling, was used to select participants for an in-depth data collection. To gather data, a Semi-structured interview schedule and a Focus Group interview were developed to explore the linguistic identity and challenges faced by these learners. The qualitative data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis.

In qualitative research, ensuring trustworthiness is crucial for evaluating the reliability of methods and data interpretation (Polit & Beck, 2014). In this study, the interview data were assessed for credibility, transferability, and consistency. Four strategies were employed to enhance credibility: prolonged involvement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checks. The researcher spent significant time with tribal learners, their families, teachers, and peers, observing extracurricular activities to build trust and better understand the participants. Method triangulation, using interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, helped validate the findings. The researcher also shared observations with experts and sought participant feedback on the findings, allowing them to correct any inaccuracies. To ensure transferability, the study provided detailed context, sampling strategy, and interview procedures. Additionally, intercoder reliability was used to assess the consistency of the coding process.

VI. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In this study, thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data. Codes were created by taking the text data and segmenting sentences into categories based on the frequency of the participant's response. Four broad categories emerged both for Socio-Cultural Factors and Academic Factors that are associated with linguistic identity of first-generation tribal learners in West Bengal.

VII. SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Table 1: Frequency Table of Socio - Cultural Factors affecting linguistic identity

Theme	Categories	Codes	Frequency (N=18)	Percentage (%)
Cultural Factors	Markers of linguistic identity	Native cultural practices	16	88.89
		Ethnic distinctiveness		
	Linguistic mismatch	The dominance of standard language over native language	18	100
		Improper usage of native language	16	88.89
	Lack of propagation of one's language and culture	Hesitation to communicate	11	61.11
		Discarded/Rejection	15	83.33
	Inadequate practice of own cultural activities	Nurturing elements of dominant culture over native culture	17	94.44
		Absence of native cultural elements	16	88.89

Theme	Categories	Codes	Frequency (N=18)	Percentage (%)

Note: N = Total no of respondents from Santal tribe, Oraon tribe, Munda tribe, and Birhor tribe (18)

• Markers of linguistic identity

In the study, an overwhelming majority of the respondents said that language and culture are closely related. They consider customs, cultural norms, cultural values, cultural beliefs, and caste to be potent linguistic identity markers. When asked, “Do you find cultural practices develop a sense of belongingness to your linguistic identity?” About 88.89 % of the participants stated that celebrating their native cultural practices develops a strong sense of belongingness, and they confidently celebrate it. These cultural activities represent not only their ethnic distinctiveness but also a symbolic space where they can exercise their indigenous cultural norms and values.

Respondent across four linguistic groups shared joyous experiences of celebrating their festivals with pomp for the prosperity and happiness of their community. Respondent 9 from the Oraon community stated,

Verbatim 1

At the Karama festival, we enjoy a lot. We worship branches of the Karama tree. Young boys do fasting; branches of the tree are chopped off, and every care has to be taken so that branches separated from the tree do not touch the ground. All the village people take these branches to puja pandal performing Karama dance. Every year we wait for the month of September – October to celebrate this festival. We dance, sing, wear traditional dresses and enjoy our traditional food together with our family, friends, and community.”

The same scenario changes when a few participants, especially those who have migrated from their native place, prefer dominant group cultural elements. They happily accept and adopt cultural aspects from the standard speech community.

• Linguistic mismatch

When asked, do you find linguistic similarities with the dominant culture in school and society? 100 % of the respondents stated huge linguistic dissimilarities exist with the dominant culture in school and as well as society. Respondent 18 from the Birhor community stated:

Verbatim 2

“At School, I studied in Bengali language. Our mother tongue is not used anywhere at all because all books are written in Bengali. So, when Didimoni teaches in Bengali despite my reluctance I have to study in Bengali.”

The learner learns best in their native language, but when taught in a language unfamiliar to them, they face the burden of dominance of standard language over their native language. 88.88 % of the respondent shared that though they love to recite hymns in their native language, there is less opportunity to use them. Religious books, prayers, songs, and hymns are written in Bengali, Hindi or English and rituals are conducted in standard form. Native language is limited only to verbal form and not in practice.

Diffusion and borrowing of dominant cultural elements are revealed among the respondents. Respondent 1 from the Santal Tribe stated,

Verbatim 3:

“While speaking our mother tongue we borrow many words from Bengali, Hindi and even English. Our mother tongue has become a mixture of different languages. As a result, the purity of our mother tongue is not maintained.”

The researcher also noticed that the language of respondents is shaped by the surroundings in which they live. Many vocabularies of other cultures have also penetrated their native dialect.

So, improper usage of the native language is common nowadays which leads to fragmented use of their original form of language. The mismatch between home and standard language is one of the greatest threats to linguistic identity as it impedes students' overall progress.

- **Lack of propagation of one's language and culture**

Every language and culture have its accepted behaviour, thoughts, rules, standards and beliefs. Being unable to speak and nurture one's native language and culture fluently can be frustrating. However, all of the respondents said they take pride in speaking their native language but 61.11% of them also stated they are hesitant to talk about their native language, culture, traditional dress, and customs because not being able to communicate well in their native language makes them feel different and also makes them hesitant to participate in conversations or voice their opinions.

When asked, "Do you feel discarded when you try to propagate your language and cultural practices?" 83.33 % of the respondents shared that they felt discarded whenever they tried to propagate their language and culture. Others do not welcome native language and culture. Respondent 16 from the Birhor community stated,

Verbatim 4:

"Once I was sharing with my classmates how I dressed up in my traditional attire and participated in tribal dance though they paid attention to my talk but at the same time mocked me calling Jungli. I felt very ignored and low."

Respondents also reported that others do not welcome their language and culture. There is a stark gap in cherishing their identity by the dominant culture. Again, whenever they take the initiative to propagate, there is a clear sign of unwillingness and non-acceptance by the dominant culture.

- **Inadequate practice of own cultural activities**

Cultural practices are most important to the Indigenous people because their whole life is centred on them. Their rituals and cultural practices are mainly related to season, crops, plantation, trees and activities related to farming. It has been reported that traditional cultural practices are not practiced properly in the native language. They are more prone to celebrate dominant festivals forgetting one's own. Respondent 6 from the Oraon community stated,

Verbatim 5:

"I usually celebrate Durga Puja and Kali Puja. But I don't get a chance to celebrate Karama puja because I stay in town."

94.44% of them agreed to this. Relatively high percentages of the respondents are also of the view that

Verbatim 6:

"There are very few numbers of songs (music) and bhajans in their native language, which makes us disheartened."

The researcher has observed that the dominant culture's ideology dominates the educational and cultural discourses of four ethnolinguistic groups. None of the texts prescribed for the children represent the culture and norms of linguistic minority groups. The remains of native history and fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology are subsumed under standard language. When asked, "Do you feel the cultural element of your language is absent in the standard language?" 88.89 % of the respondents stated they do not find traces of native cultural elements in standard language. Dominant literature does not accord the story of unsung heroes of Indigenous people, nurturing inequality that already persists in their society.

VI.II. ACADEMIC FACTORS

Table 2: Frequency Table of Academic Factors affecting linguistic identity

Theme	Categories	Frequency (N=18)	Percentage (%)
Academic Factors	Challenges of Classroom transactions	14	77.78
	Lack of resources in the native language	18	100

Theme	Categories	Frequency (N=18)	Percentage (%)
	Attrition of Native Language	13	66.67
	Negative attitude of teachers	16	88.89

Note: N= Total no of respondents from Santal tribe, Oraon tribe, Munda tribe, and Birhor tribe (18)

• Challenges of classroom transactions

In school, children learn best when the teacher instructs them in their home language. 83.33 % of the respondents reported that their instruction medium is Bengali, and the rest, 16.67 %, responded that they study either in English or Hindi.

Verbatim 8:

“Our mother tongue is not used in school we study in Bengali medium, due to which sometimes we have difficulty in understanding.”

Overall, in the medium of instruction, the researcher found that tribal children who come to school with their most significant resource (native language) do not see a place in the school curriculum, adversely affecting their intuitive potential. It prevents tribal children from accessing education.

When asked, "Do you face difficulties when your classroom teaching is transacted in standard language?" 77.78 % of the respondents reported immense difficulties when taught in standard language. The problems that emerged from their responses are:

Verbatim 9:

“English is a language which consists of more number of sounds than symbols. We face difficulties conceptualizing each symbol with more than one sound. We face problems in identifying alphabets and perceiving texts.”

The researcher found that the root cause of learning deficiency was phonemic awareness and phonics methods in reading. Tribal learners have a high probability of limited to restricted code, which reduces the prediction of syntactic alternatives and speech patterns. The acquisition of standard language requires a higher level of verbal planning to prepare speech to which they are unfamiliar. Some of the respondents did not even know how to read and write in English. Lack of vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, lack of interest, and defective teaching methods are also some of the other problems reported by most respondents.

• Lack of resources in the native language

Textbooks are the most vital aid in the teaching-learning process that student carries home to expand their prescribed knowledge beyond school. However, it is widely seen that textbooks continue to be standard language-centric. 100 % of the respondents believe that most of the textbook words and vocabulary are not in colloquial Bangla (Bengali), which they commonly use in community engagement. This leads to an insignificant understanding of sentence construction and vocabulary, but they face real problems in production skills (speaking and writing).

While interacting Respondent 7 from the Oraon community, shared her innocent experience of conversation with her mother, which is given below:

Verbatim 10:

“When I was very small, I had questions in my mind and asked my mother, Ayo, in English, we have the letters 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D'. In the Bengali language, we have অ· আ· ই· ঐ·, but in the Kurukh language, don't we have such letters? My Ayo replied, No, we don't have. I asked why we didn't have it. She replied we use Bengali language to read and write. We don't have any such script in our language.”

From the above responses, it can be said that lack of script impedes maintaining their linguistic identity. As most tribal languages are unwritten, they don't have their own scripts. They are based on oral tradition, which gets washed away with passing generations due to improper utilization.

- **Attrition of native Language**

Tribal languages have always stood at the bottom of India's hierarchy of languages despite being spoken by more than a million people. They are discouraged not only in formal education but also neglected in various areas of literary programmes.

When asked, "Do you feel isolated in the classroom due to your linguistic identity?" 66.67 % of the respondents reported feeling deprived and isolated as their native language and culture are not included on school premises. Teacher fails to provide an opportunity to use their native language in classroom activity. Respondent 1 from the Santal community said,

Verbatim 11:

"I study in Bengali at school. When I go out to play, I talk to everyone in Bengali. Only at home I use my mother tongue but the rate of using it is very low. Even our native language and culture are not so welcomed on school premises. As a result, neither I am able to talk or understand my native language properly. I feel like I am slowly losing my native language."

In addition, respondents also opined that low social status attached to tribal language and a sense of inferiority has led to significant language shifts among tribal children.

- **Negative attitude of teachers**

Quality learning opportunity is central to the process of learning. About 88.89 % of the respondents stated that schools and teachers do not provide adequate language learning opportunities to them. Teachers are mostly outsiders and are unaware of their culture, beliefs, and language. Hence, they enter school with certain prejudices, often leading to humiliation and deprivation among these tribal children. Here one instance is shared by Respondent 14 from Munda community,

Verbatim 12:

"Our teacher never encouraged us to use our native language in classroom. He looked down on us whenever we used our mother tongue in classroom interactions. If we wanted to express our feelings by mixing languages, he would refuse to listen us. He claims us as useless."

Hence, it can be said that discouragement and fear among these tribal children have pushed them to use standard language in school, adversely affecting their creativity, good humour, and social skills.

VII. DISCUSSION

Findings of the study reveal a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, social, academic, and internal factors that significantly impact the language proficiency and identity of tribal learners. Despite a high proficiency in Bengali, the majority of respondents exhibit minimal skills in their mother tongue. This stark contrast reflects the discouragement of native languages in formal education and the predominance of Bengali in media and daily communication. The preference for dominant languages like English, often associated with social status and better employment opportunities, further exacerbates the marginalization of tribal languages. This marginalization contributes to feelings of shame and a desire to conceal one's cultural identity, ultimately leading to a disconnection from their linguistic heritage. Culturally, respondents' express hesitation in promoting their native languages and cultures due to fears of discrimination, with many feelings discarded when sharing their heritage. The lack of resources in native languages and insufficient representation in mainstream media diminish their sense of identity. Academically, the mismatch between native languages and the medium of instruction poses significant challenges, with many learners struggling due to inadequate teaching methods and negative attitudes towards their languages. While there is a strong interest in learning their native language, active efforts to promote it are limited, indicating a broader crisis of self-efficacy among first-generation learners. Addressing these interconnected issues will be essential for fostering linguistic and cultural preservation within tribal communities.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, language in education is not merely a tool for communication, it is a gateway to identity, self-worth, and social inclusion. In the Indian educational landscape, the dominance of certain languages and the exclusion of tribal and native tongues

reflect deeper structural inequalities that perpetuate marginalization. For first-generation tribal learners, this often results in alienation, loss of cultural identity, and diminished educational outcomes. Recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity is not just a matter of pedagogy but a matter of justice. To move toward a truly inclusive and equitable education system, it is essential to embrace multilingualism, incorporate indigenous languages into curricula, and create learning spaces that honour the voices and experiences of all children. Only then can education fulfill its true promise, as a transformative force that empowers every learner, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background because language is not only what we use. It is who we are.

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