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Linguistic Identity and Educational Empowerment: A Model for Tribal Language Preservation in Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how using tribal languages in education can help protect these languages and support the overall growth of tribal students. In India, especially in Himachal Pradesh, many tribal languages are slowly disappearing. This loss affects not just how people speak but also their culture, identity and confidence. Through interviews, classroom observations and curriculum reviews, the research explores how learning in one's mother tongue helps students feel more confident, take part in class and improve communication skills. It shows that when schools include tribal languages, students stay connected to their roots and grow into stronger, more active learners. The research focuses on tribal groups like the Pangwalas, Gaddis and Gujjars and suggests a new way of teaching that includes tribal languages and soft skill development. Overall, using tribal languages in schools helps both in preserving culture and in building essential life skills.

Keywords: Tribal education, linguistic identity, soft skills, language preservation, Himachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Language is an important part of who we are. It connects us to our culture, traditions and community. In India, many tribal groups speak unique languages, especially in states like Himachal Pradesh. Communities such as the Pangwalas, Lahaulas, Gaddis and Gujjars have their own dialects like Pangwali, Gaddiyali and Gujari. These languages carry deep cultural meanings through stories, songs and rituals passed down through generations. However, many of these tribal languages are now disappearing because of modernization, migration and the growing use of Hindi and English in education. When a language is lost, an important part of culture and identity is also lost. This research focuses on how education can help to protect tribal languages and also support students' overall development. Teaching in the mother tongue helps students to feel proud of their roots, boosts their confidence and improves important life skills like communication, leadership and teamwork. This paper explores such educational strategies for tribal empowerment.

2. Research Objectives:

This research aims to:

1. Examine how tribal languages shape linguistic and cultural identity with a focus on the tribal communities of Himachal Pradesh.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of current educational models for tribal language preservation and their impact on student empowerment.
3. Explore how integrating tribal languages into school curricula can support soft skill development and propose culturally inclusive educational reforms.

3. Research Questions

1. How do tribal languages help shape the cultural and linguistic identity of tribal communities?
2. What methods are currently used in schools to preserve tribal languages and how effective are they?
3. How does teaching in the mother tongue help tribal students develop communication and other soft skills?

4. Literature Review

4.1. Tribal Language and Identity

Language is closely linked to person's identity. It connects us with our past, our traditions and our people. According to scholars like Fishman (1991), language helps communities keep their identity strong. When people stop speaking their mother tongue, they lose a vital connection to their roots. This is especially true for tribal groups, where language is not just a way to communicate but a way to pass on stories, customs, and wisdom. In Himachal Pradesh, the Pangwalas, Gaddis, Lahaulas and Gujjars use dialects such as Pangwali, Gaddiyali and Gujari to share their knowledge of herbs, festivals, local history and weather patterns. Annamalai (2001) points

out that when schools ignore native languages, students grow up feeling less confident about who they are. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) even calls this loss as “linguistic genocide” because it wipes out entire cultures.

4.2. Education and Language Preservation

Education can be a strong tool to protect and grow tribal languages. Mohanty (2009) found that students learn better when they are taught in their mother tongue. They understand lessons more clearly, feel more confident and perform better in school. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also supports the use of local languages in early education, showing that national efforts are now recognizing the value of mother tongue education.

Hornberger (2008) introduced the idea of the "Continuum of Biliteracy" suggesting that schools should allow students to read and write in both tribal and mainstream languages. This way students can connect their traditional knowledge with modern learning.

Some inspiring examples include the Adivasi Academy in Gujarat and the Bhasha Research Centre and the Ekavya Model Schools. These schools use local teachers, elders and language experts to teach students in their native dialects. They also include traditional songs, folk stories and local practices in the lessons which makes learning more enjoyable and meaningful.

4.3 Linguistic and Literary Contributions

Even though many tribal languages don't have much written literature, they have a rich tradition of oral storytelling. In Himachal Pradesh, Gaddi ballads and Pangi folktales that are passed down through generations. These stories teach lessons about bravery, love, nature and values. Scholars like G. N. Devy (2006) and institutions like the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) are working hard to record these oral traditions. These oral stories can be turned into reading material for schools, helping children learn both their language and culture. These literary traditions are not just for entertainment. They are deeply educational and can form a base for developing school textbooks, storybooks and activity-based learning tools that reflect the community's life.

4.4 Soft Skills and Learning in Tribal Languages

Soft skills include communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership and emotional understanding. These are the skills people need to succeed in today's world. Research by UNESCO (2003, 2016) shows that students who are taught in a familiar language feel more confident. They speak up in class, work better with others and become strong leaders. When children understand the language being used in school, they are more likely to ask questions, share their ideas and solve problems creatively. This builds their self-esteem and prepares them for jobs, higher education, and social life.

In tribal communities where children learn in their own language, teachers have noticed better student behaviour, more participation and stronger peer relationships. Teaching in the mother tongue doesn't only protect a language but also builds the future of a community by giving children the tools they need to succeed in life.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study has used a qualitative research design to understand how tribal languages affect students' identity, learning and soft skills. Instead of using numbers, this design focuses on real-life experiences and personal views. The research was done in tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh, where local languages like Pangwali, Gaddiyali and Gujari are spoken. The aim was to explore how students learn better when taught in their mother tongue and how this connects to their cultural roots. The design helped the researcher look closely at what happens in schools, how students feel and what teachers and community elders think about tribal languages. This type of research is useful when we want to learn about people's thoughts, feelings and day-to-day practices. It allowed the researcher to deeply understand how education can help keep tribal languages alive while also building student confidence and communication skills.

5.2 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study was done in three tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh, i.e. Pangi (Chamba), Lahaul-Spiti and Kangra. A total of 25 participants were selected using purposive sampling. This non-random sampling technique was chosen to include individuals with direct knowledge and involvement in tribal education and language use. The sample consisted of 10 school teachers, 8 students, 5 community elders and 2 education officers. Participants were selected to represent a range of ages, genders and roles within the educational and community structures. This diversity ensured that multiple viewpoints were captured regarding the preservation and application of tribal languages in educational settings. The sample size and selection method allowed for focused and meaningful data collection, providing relevant insights into how tribal languages contribute to identity and educational development.

5.3 Method of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using three main methods to collect data: interviews, classroom observations and document review. First, interviews were held with teachers, students, elders and education officers. These interviews were semi-structured, i.e. they had questions but allowed participants to speak freely. This helped them share personal experiences, opinions and stories about tribal language use in schools. Second, classroom visits were done to see how teachers used their mother tongue and how students reacted. Third, documents like textbooks, lesson plans and NEP 2020 were reviewed to understand what the system says

about local languages. These three methods gave a clear picture of the current situation and its effect on students.

5.4 Method of Data Analysis

Data collection was carried out using three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with teachers, students, elders and education officers to gather detailed perspectives on the use and value of tribal languages in schools. Semi-structured questions were used to guide the conversations while allowing participants the freedom to express their thoughts openly. Classroom observations were undertaken in selected schools to document the actual use of mother tongue in teaching, student participation and overall classroom dynamics. In addition, official documents such as textbooks, lesson plans, teacher guides and policy papers particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 were reviewed. This triangulated approach provided a comprehensive view of the educational environment and the practical integration of tribal languages.

5.5 Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. All interview answers, classroom notes and documents were carefully read. Important points were highlighted and grouped into common themes like identity, confidence and language use in class. This helped in finding patterns and understanding what most people experienced. Differences in views were also noted. The analysis showed how tribal languages influence learning, culture and soft skills. This clear and step-by-step method helped in drawing meaningful conclusions from the data.

6. Results and Discussion

The study showed that using tribal languages in education had a strong and positive impact on students, especially in the tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh.

6.1. Language and Identity

Most teachers, students and elders shared that tribal languages like Pangwali, Gaddiyali and Gujari are closely linked to their cultural identity. When students learn in their mother tongue, they feel proud of their roots and traditions. Elders also said they feared their languages would disappear if not used in schools.

6.2. Classroom Use and Confidence:

In schools where tribal languages were used, students were more confident, spoke more in class and took an active part in learning. Teachers noticed

better understanding and stronger connections between students and lessons. Students expressed greater comfort in asking questions and sharing their ideas.

6.3. Education and Soft Skills

Learning in their native language helped students build important soft skills like communication, teamwork and leadership. They were better at group work and classroom discussions. Teachers believed this made students more prepared for future jobs and life outside school.

6.4. Challenges Observed:

Despite the benefits, many schools still use only Hindi or English. There is a shortage of tribal language teachers and learning materials. Some teachers want to help but do not have proper training. Also, government support is limited even though policies like NEP 2020 promote local languages.

7. Suggestions for Improvement:

- (i) *Better School Programs*: Use tribal languages in all subjects and make lessons that reflect local culture.
- (ii) *Train Teachers*: Prepare teachers to teach in local tribal languages.
- (iii) *Work with Community*: Get help from elders and language experts to make lessons.
- (iv) *Create Learning Materials*: Make books and digital tools in tribal languages.

8. Conclusion

Saving tribal languages in Himachal Pradesh is about more than just words. It is about helping people stay connected to who they are. Teaching in mother tongue helps children grow in confidence, skills and pride. Schools, families and governments must work together to protect these languages and build a better future for tribal communities. However, more support is needed to train teachers, create materials and fully apply policies. Without these efforts, many tribal languages remain at risk.

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