

Mother Tongue Matters

An Empirical Review of Multilingual Education Practices in Tribal Schools of India

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Abstract

This empirical review examines the implementation, outcomes, and challenges of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in tribal-dominated regions of India. Grounded in the principles of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which promotes foundational literacy and multilingualism, this paper synthesises empirical findings from studies published between 2013 and 2024 across Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the Northeast. Drawing from government reports, field evaluations, and peer-reviewed articles, the review explores the pedagogical impact of using tribal languages in early-grade instruction, its effects on learning outcomes, and teacher preparedness. The analysis reveals that while MTB-MLE improves early literacy and student engagement, gaps remain in teacher training, resource availability, and community participation. Further, a lack of sustained political and financial commitment limits scalability. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening linguistic inclusivity in India's school system and emphasises the role of contextualised pedagogy in bridging equity gaps. It argues for integrating local knowledge systems into the mainstream curriculum as a step toward culturally responsive education.

Keywords: Multilingual Education, NEP 2020, Tribal Schools, Mother Tongue, Inclusive Pedagogy, India

INTRODUCTION

India is home to over 19,500 languages and dialects (Census of India, 2011, p. 12), making

multilingualism a defining feature of its social and educational fabric. This linguistic diversity is not merely cultural but deeply tied to

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the identity, community knowledge systems, and intergenerational transmission of heritage. Yet, paradoxically, the Indian education system has historically privileged dominant regional languages and English, often at the cost of excluding tribal and minority linguistic groups from meaningful educational participation.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marked a pivotal moment in reversing this trend by recommending the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably up to Grade 8 and beyond (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 14). This recommendation reflects a shift toward inclusive, culturally responsive pedagogy and acknowledges global research indicating that early education in the mother tongue significantly improves learning outcomes, particularly for children from marginalised communities (UNESCO, 2003, p. 35).

In India, the stakes are especially high for Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations, who comprise over 8.6 per cent of the population but continue to face persistent educational disadvantages, including low enrolment, high dropout rates, and poor learning outcomes (Mohanty, 2019, p. 106). These disparities are exacerbated in contexts where children are taught in unfamiliar languages, leading to cognitive overload, alienation, and early disengagement from

school (Kumar and Mishra, 2016, p. 68). For tribal learners, whose languages are often unwritten or orally transmitted, the mismatch between home language and school language creates significant entry-level barriers.

Several state-level initiatives have experimented with integrating tribal languages in primary education. Odisha has implemented MTB-MLE programmes in over 1,500 schools using languages such as Kui, Saora, and Santali (Mohanty, 2019, p. 108). Chhattisgarh has piloted primers in Gondi and Halbi, while Jharkhand has promoted the use of tribal languages in early childhood education (Patra, 2021, p. 71). North-Eastern states like Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland have also developed region-specific models for multilingual education, particularly in areas where tribal communities form the majority.

Despite these efforts, widespread implementation of MTB-MLE remains inconsistent and fragmented. Key challenges include a shortage of trained teachers fluent in tribal languages, inadequate curricular resources, and limited community engagement (Desai, 2020, p. 123; Singh, 2018, p. 89). Moreover, language planning in education, continues to be influenced by socio-political hierarchies where tribal languages are often considered inferior or transitional, rather than as foundational tools for learning (Kumar and Sahoo, 2017, p. 56).

This empirical review aims to critically examine the landscape of MTB-MLE interventions in India's tribal regions. Drawing upon studies published between 2013 and 2024, this paper synthesises findings on the pedagogical effectiveness of mother tongue instruction, the extent of institutional support, the capacity of the teaching workforce, and the responses of tribal communities. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to assess the viability of MTB-MLE as a sustainable model for inclusive education and to identify key factors enabling or impeding its success.

By situating MTB-MLE within broader debates around linguistic justice, cultural rights, and educational equity, this review contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise the Indian classroom. In doing so, it aligns with NEP 2020's call for a more equitable, multilingual, and learner-centred education system that values the knowledge and identities of India's most marginalised communities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

MTB-MLE has emerged globally as a transformative approach to inclusive pedagogy, particularly for linguistically diverse and marginalised populations. In the Indian context, the literature spans pedagogical theory, policy frameworks, field-based empirical evaluations, and critical perspectives on language politics in education. This section synthesises key strands of literature that inform the current study.

Theoretical Foundations of MTB-MLE

The cognitive and socio-cultural benefits of learning in the mother tongue have long been established in educational research. Cummins' (2000) theory of linguistic interdependence argues that proficiency in the first language facilitates second-language acquisition and cognitive development (Cummins, 2000, p. 39). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory also emphasises that learning is mediated through language, and thus, meaningful education must begin in the language a child understands best (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). These frameworks underscore that language is not merely a tool of instruction but a vehicle for constructing knowledge and identity.

Language, Identity, and Exclusion in Indian Classrooms

Several scholars argue that language hierarchies in India contribute to systemic exclusion in education. Mohanty (2009) highlights the "submersion" model in which tribal and minority children are immersed in dominant state languages (like Odia or Hindi) without transitional support, leading to poor comprehension and disengagement (Mohanty, 2009, p. 97). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) terms such practices as "linguistic genocide", when children are systematically denied the right to education in their mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 189).

Scholars like Menon and Iyer (2018) argue that linguistic devaluation in school spaces also reinforces caste and ethnic marginalisation (Menon and Iyer, 2018, p. 102).

National Policy and State-led Interventions

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) and NEP 2020 both recognise the pedagogical importance of mother tongue instruction in early education. The NEP 2020 explicitly recommends that, “whenever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 14). Building upon this, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, 2023) further reinforced the policy direction by emphasising the foundational role of home languages in achieving early literacy and numeracy. It was noted that, “children learn best in a language they understand well” and therefore recommended that it was the mother tongue or regional languages should serve as the medium of instruction at the Foundational Stage (Grades 1–2) and preferably beyond (NCERT, 2023, p. 37). Odisha has been a pioneer in institutionalising MTB-MLE through its 21-language programme developed with support from SCERT and UNICEF. Empirical evaluations demonstrated that children enrolled in these mother tongue-based

programmes showed significantly higher reading proficiency and classroom participation compared to their peers in Odia-medium schools (Patnaik and Mishra, 2017, p. 74). Jharkhand’s Sido Kanhu Mission and Chhattisgarh’s Pilot Gondi Curriculum have similarly sought to mainstream tribal languages in early childhood education (Verma, 2021, p. 61).

Teacher Capacity and Institutional Support

A recurring concern in the literature is the shortage of teachers being fluent in tribal languages. Desai (2012) found that while state governments develop multilingual textbooks and primers, schools often lack teachers who can use them effectively (Desai, 2012, p. 99). This results in a symbolic implementation, where MTB-MLE exists on paper but fails in practice. Studies by Kumar and Sahoo (2017) and Rao (2020) also note that tribal language-speaking teachers are often deployed away from their communities or given secondary roles, undermining continuity and cultural responsiveness in teaching (Kumar and Sahoo, 2017, p. 62; Rao, 2020, p. 145).

Community Perceptions and Aspirations

Community participation is critical to the success of MTB-MLE. However, literature reveals ambivalence among tribal parents. While some value

mother tongue education as a means of cultural preservation, others see it as a barrier to accessing upward mobility through English or dominant state languages (Mahapatra, 2015, p. 132). This “aspirational ambivalence” reflects a dual concern—preserving identity while ensuring access to mainstream opportunity structures (Narayan, 2019, p. 118). Successful models of MTB-MLE often involve active community engagement in curriculum development and school governance, as seen in the Adivasi Academy model in Gujarat (Pandey, 2016, p. 77).

Literacy Outcomes and Cognitive Development

Empirical studies on learning outcomes demonstrate a consistent pattern: students taught in their mother tongue outperform peers in language acquisition, numeracy, and comprehension. A large-scale study by NCERT (2016) comparing multilingual classrooms in Odisha and Assam found that children in MTB-MLE schools performed better in reading fluency and story recall than those in monolingual schools (NCERT, 2016, p. 84). Similarly, a longitudinal study by Mishra and Mohanty (2020) observed improved retention rates and learner confidence in Saora-speaking children when taught in their native language during early grades (Mishra and Mohanty, 2020, p. 53).

Barriers to Sustainability and Scaling

Despite promising results, systemic barriers hinder the sustainability of MTB-MLE. Funding constraints, frequent transfers of trained teachers, lack of political will, and the absence of long-term curricular vision, are widely documented (Singh, 2018, p. 89). Furthermore, tribal languages often lack standardised scripts, making material development time-intensive (Senapati, 2021, p. 104). Scholars argue that unless tribal languages are integrated into teacher education, examination systems, and digital education platforms, MTB-MLE will remain a peripheral concern (Mohanty and Panda, 2015, p. 113).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative empirical review methodology, aimed at synthesising existing knowledge, evidence, and policy insights on the implementation and impact of MTB-MLE among tribal populations in India. Given the diversity of socio-linguistic contexts and the complexity of education delivery in tribal areas, a qualitative review approach allows for capturing contextual subtleties, implementation dynamics, and lived experiences that are often obscured in purely quantitative studies (Thomas, 2016, p. 29).

Research Design and Approach

The study adopts a systematic, narrative review design to assess and synthesise the findings of 32 selected documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, NGO evaluations, doctoral theses, and state-level programme assessments published between 2013 and 2024. The focus is not merely on summarising past research but on identifying empirical trends, conceptual patterns, and practice-oriented insights that are critical to understanding how MTB-MLE is being implemented and received in tribal education systems (Gough, 2017, p. 112). This methodology is especially appropriate for examining education among marginalised populations where large-scale randomised data may be unavailable, and instead, deep insights arise from case studies, qualitative interviews, ethnographies, and action research (Silverman, 2021, p. 77).

Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Documents were retrieved from academic databases and institutional repositories such as ERIC, JSTOR, Shodhganga, Google Scholar, NCERT Digital Library, Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports, and State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) archives. A comprehensive keyword search was conducted using combinations such as:

- “mother tongue education” + “tribal India”

- “MTB-MLE” + “indigenous languages”
- “multilingual education” + “tribal children”
- “early literacy” + “Adivasi” + “NCERT”

The inclusion criteria for selecting sources were:

- The study population includes Scheduled Tribes or other indigenous linguistic minorities;
- The study presents empirical data— either qualitative (e.g., interviews, observations) or quantitative (e.g., baseline studies, assessments);
- The primary focus is on early childhood or primary-level education, particularly Grades 1–5;
- The study examines either the pedagogical, socio-cultural, or policy-related dimensions of mother tongue instruction.

Studies were excluded if they focused on general language policy without a tribal focus, lacked empirical data, or were outdated pre-2013 publications unless foundational.

Review and Synthesis Process

A three-stage review protocol was used for data analysis.

Preliminary Scan and Shortlisting

After retrieving 87 documents in total, titles, and abstracts were screened for relevance. After removing duplicates and non-qualifying papers, a final list of 32 studies was curated for in-depth analysis.

Thematic Coding

Each source was analysed using manual coding and NVivo software to extract recurrent themes, categorised into five domains:

- Student learning outcomes (literacy rates, classroom comprehension, dropout rates)
- Pedagogical practices (use of bilingual materials, teacher language fluency, curriculum adaptation)
- Implementation challenges (infrastructure, language-material mismatch, teacher training)
- Community engagement (parental support, local language valuation, resistance or acceptance), and
- Policy frameworks and institutional design (state-level schemes, National Education Policy alignment, monitoring systems).

For example, studies such as Mohanty *et al.* (2019, p. 63) and Jhingran (2015, p. 28) offered substantial qualitative data on classroom practice and learner engagement.

Synthesis and Triangulation

The final stage involved comparing and triangulating findings across different regional contexts—primarily Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and the Northeastern states (for example, Nagaland, Assam). Variations in outcomes were mapped to policy strength, teacher

preparedness, language proximity, and socio-political support.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a secondary review of publicly available research, this study does not involve direct fieldwork or human subjects. However, ethical standards were maintained in attributing ideas, data, and frameworks to original sources, ensuring academic integrity and respect for indigenous knowledge systems and the scholars who document them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 299).

LIMITATIONS

While every effort was made to ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy, several limitations persist:

- **Data Gaps:** Some tribal languages are either under-documented or absent in empirical literature, limiting comparative analysis (Borah and Boro, 2020, p. 51).
- **Grey Literature Variability:** NGO and state programme evaluations often lack peer-review, making data quality inconsistent.
- **Contextual Non-uniformity:** The diversity of tribal contexts—cultural geographic, and political—makes it difficult to generalise findings across regions.
- **Temporal Variation:** Programmes change over time, and some studies assessed early stages, while others covered mature implementation, affecting comparability.

Despite these limitations, the methodology remains robust in drawing a holistic picture of MTB-MLE practices in tribal India, offering grounded insights that can inform both policy design and classroom reform.

FINDINGS

This section synthesises empirical data across multiple regions and studies to present a detailed analysis of learning outcomes, teacher preparedness, curricular availability, and community engagement in Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programmes in India. The findings highlight both the transformative potential and persistent implementation barriers of MTB-MLE in tribal-dominated areas.

Learning Outcomes in MTB-MLE Programmes

A consistent theme across the literature is that the use of the mother tongue in early education enhances children's cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development. Empirical studies from Odisha, Assam, and Chhattisgarh show that the children who receive instruction in their native languages demonstrate greater reading comprehension, retention, and classroom engagement than those taught solely in dominant regional or national languages.

For instance, in Odisha's Saora- and Kui-language classrooms, students performed significantly better in standardised reading

assessments than their peers in monolingual Odia or Hindi classes. These learners also exhibited faster word recognition and stronger conceptual clarity in mathematics and environmental science (Mohanty, 2019, p. 108). Likewise, an evaluation of the Bodo-MLE pilot in Assam reported higher rates of classroom participation, reduced absenteeism, and increased self-confidence among learners exposed to instruction in Bodo (Goswami and Pattanayak, 2017, p. 95).

Moreover, students in MTB-MLE programmes were better able to bridge home and school learning, especially in oral narrative exercises and early writing tasks, which encouraged the familial involvement and reinforced intergenerational knowledge transfer (Khatriwada and Mohanty, 2021, p. 44). These findings align with UNESCO's global learning framework, which underscores the cognitive advantages of using the first language during foundational learning (UNESCO, 2021, p. 11).

However, in regions where MLE implementation was partial or poorly supported, gains were modest or negligible. In some tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, where programmes relied on transliteration or word-level substitution without contextualisation, students struggled to grasp abstract academic content, indicating the importance of deep linguistic immersion over superficial language representation (Mehta and Ranjan, 2016, p. 57).

Success Stories of MTB-MLE Implementation

Several state and community-level initiatives provide encouraging evidence of the transformative potential of MTB-MLE. In Odisha, the 21-language Multilingual Education Project implemented with support from SCERT and UNICEF led to measurable improvements in reading proficiency, classroom participation, and reduced dropout rates among tribal learners (Patnaik and Mishra, 2017, p. 74; Mohanty, 2019, p. 108). In Assam, the Bodo-medium pilot demonstrated increased learner confidence, reduced absenteeism, and higher classroom engagement (Goswami and Pattanayak, 2017, p. 95). Gujarat's Adivasi Academy model, which involved tribal elders in curriculum development, successfully combined cultural preservation with improved literacy outcomes (Pandey, 2016, p. 77). Similarly, community-driven MTB-MLE classrooms in Nagaland—such as those using Ao and Angami—fostered stronger intergenerational knowledge transmission and enhanced parental participation (Lkr and Maring, 2021, p. 60). These cases illustrate that when mother tongue instruction is implemented with adequate resources, teacher capacity, and community ownership, it yields both cognitive and socio-cultural gains for learners.

Teacher Training and Capacity

Teacher preparedness has emerged as a crucial bottleneck in MTB-MLE implementation. The shortage of trained tribal educators and the lack of professional development opportunities in multilingual pedagogy have been noted across multiple states. Most government school teachers are recruited centrally and often lack familiarity with the local tribal language, leading to communication breakdowns, low learner motivation, and reliance on rote learning (Kumar and Mishra, 2016, p. 67).

In Chhattisgarh, a 2021 government report found that less than 30 per cent of teachers in tribal blocks had received pre-service or in-service training in multilingual or culturally relevant teaching methods. Consequently, many relied on Hindi-only instruction, ignoring the linguistic backgrounds of students and inadvertently reinforcing dropout rates (Patra, 2021, p. 74). In Odisha, where the state had initiated large-scale teacher recruitment from tribal communities under the Multilingual Education Project, outcomes were significantly better, especially in early grade literacy (Mohanty *et al.*, 2015, p. 35).

Some NGOs have attempted to fill this gap through bridging workshops and teacher shadowing programmes, particularly in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. These initiatives trained para-teachers and community educators in bilingual scaffolding,

contextual curriculum design, and narrative-based learning, which reportedly improved learner outcomes in experimental classrooms (Das and Sinha, 2020, p. 59). However, systemic institutionalisation of such training remains limited, often due to bureaucratic constraints and funding discontinuities (Desai, 2020, p. 124).

Curriculum and Resource Constraints

Curricular limitations constitute a second major barrier. Despite progressive national policies like the NEP 2020, the availability of high-quality, age-appropriate textbooks and supplementary materials in tribal languages remains patchy and underfunded. While the NCERT and SCERTs have developed primers in languages such as Gondi, Santhali, Bhili, and Ho, these materials are often limited to Grades 1 and 2, leaving older learners unsupported (Desai, 2020, p. 122).

Further, many of the developed materials lack cultural contextualisation—they are mere translations of Hindi textbooks, failing to reflect indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, or local environmental realities (Basu and Mahapatra, 2019, p. 88). Standardised assessments, particularly large-scale learning outcome surveys like NAS and ASER, are rarely adapted to multilingual contexts, leading to a systematic underestimation of tribal students' cognitive capabilities (Singh, 2018, p. 88).

In contrast, successful programmes have taken a 'transcreation' approach—developing content grounded in local culture, idioms, and lived realities. For example, in Odisha's MLE classrooms, storybooks and numeracy games were co-created with tribal elders and local artists, enhancing both relevance and learner motivation (Mohanty, 2019, p. 109). Such efforts require sustained collaboration between curriculum designers, linguists, and local communities, which remains sporadic under existing educational planning frameworks.

Parental and Community Engagement

Parental and community attitudes towards MTB-MLE play a pivotal role in shaping programme success or failure. In some tribal communities, the recognition of their languages within formal education was viewed as a validation of identity and history, leading to greater school attendance and volunteerism (Mohanty *et al.*, 2015, p. 34). In Odisha and Jharkhand, local youth and elders were involved in designing teaching-learning materials and advising on culturally appropriate classroom practices, generating a sense of community ownership.

However, ambivalence persists. Some tribal parents perceive instruction in their mother tongue as an educational detour—useful for early learning, but a potential hindrance to socio-economic mobility, especially when upward aspirations

are tied to English or Hindi proficiency (Baraik, 2020, p. 93). This tension often results in pressure to transition prematurely to dominant languages, undermining the developmental benefits of MTB-MLE.

Additionally, in urban or peri-urban settings where tribal families have migrated, there is linguistic dilution and social stigma attached to indigenous language use, further complicating parental support (Sarkar and Roy, 2022, p. 52). The lack of consistent public awareness campaigns, local champions, or role models who have succeeded via MTB-MLE further reduces its appeal in aspirational communities.

Nonetheless, in programmes where local knowledge systems, folklore, agricultural cycles, and environmental heritage were integrated into the curriculum—such as in the North-East's Ao and Angami-language classrooms—there was increased enthusiasm among parents, especially elders, who saw education as a mechanism for cultural transmission as well as mobility (Lkr and Maring, 2021, p. 60).

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings from across India's tribal regions consistently support the pedagogical and socio-cultural benefits of Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). Numerous studies affirm that children taught in their home language in the foundational years develop better literacy and

cognitive skills, higher classroom engagement, and stronger self-esteem. This reflects Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning, which emphasises the centrality of language and cultural context in knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 34). In tribal schools in Odisha and Assam, students learning in Saora, Kui, and Bodo languages have demonstrated superior performance compared to their peers in non-MTB-MLE classrooms (Mohanty, 2019, p. 108; Goswami and Pattanayak, 2017, p. 95).

However, the promise of MTB-MLE has not translated uniformly across India. The evidence suggests that while policy frameworks exist—particularly through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—actual implementation is uneven, suffering from gaps in human resources, infrastructure, and political support. This unevenness underscores the limitations of top-down planning in linguistically diverse contexts. For example, studies by Kumar and Sahoo (2017, p. 55) highlight how centrally designed policies often overlook the granular realities of tribal communities, including dialectical variation, oral traditions, and pedagogical practices rooted in local epistemologies.

A critical factor affecting the success of MTB-MLE is teacher preparedness. The lack of teachers who are proficient in local tribal languages or who have been trained in culturally responsive pedagogy

has created significant bottlenecks. Patra's (2021, p. 74) study in Chhattisgarh reveals that fewer than one-third of primary school teachers in tribal districts had any training in multilingual pedagogy. Many teachers themselves come from non-tribal backgrounds and are unfamiliar with the cultural contexts of their students. As a result, even when textbooks or primers exist in tribal languages, the lack of skilled delivery undermines their efficacy.

Further complicating implementation is the inadequacy of culturally relevant teaching-learning materials. While agencies such as NCERT and SCERTs have initiated the development of primers and storybooks in tribal languages, such as Gondi, Santhali, and Bhili, these efforts often lack consistency and scale (Desai, 2020, p. 122). In many cases, materials are produced in a 'translation mode'—merely converting existing Hindi or English content into tribal languages—rather than originating content rooted in tribal narratives, cosmologies, and knowledge systems. This disconnect can reduce the authenticity and relevance of educational content for tribal learners.

Another key dimension of MTB-MLE success is community engagement. The literature indicates that where community members, especially elders and cultural custodians, are involved in curriculum design and classroom interaction, the outcomes are significantly improved.

Odisha's Multilingual Education Project stands as a compelling example where community participation helped build ownership and sustain the intervention over time (Mohanty *et al.*, 2015, p. 34). However, attitudes toward mother tongue education within communities are not uniform. While some parents view mother tongue instruction as affirming to their identity, others fear it may limit their children's opportunities in mainstream education and employment (Baraik, 2020, p. 93). This tension is particularly acute in contexts where English or Hindi are perceived as gateways to economic mobility.

Moreover, policy implementation continues to be fragmented and underfunded. Despite NEP 2020's strong advocacy for foundational learning in the mother tongue, budgetary allocations remain modest. Project discontinuities are common due to changes in political leadership or donor priorities, as seen in several halted programmes in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh between 2017 and 2022 (Saxena, 2022, p. 86). The absence of institutionalised multilingual monitoring tools also weakens accountability. Standardised tests are usually designed in dominant languages, which often underrepresent the cognitive and conceptual competencies of children learning in their home languages (Singh, 2018, p. 88).

Technological innovations remain underutilised in MTB-MLE strategies.

While some states have experimented with audio-visual content in tribal languages, these initiatives are often pilot-level and lack integration into formal schooling. Given the proliferation of smartphones and internet access even in remote regions, there is untapped potential in leveraging digital platforms to expand mother tongue content (Rao, 2021, p. 100).

Lastly, the role of NGOs and grassroots organisations in advancing MTB-MLE is significant but often unsystematised. Organisations such as the Adivasi Academy in Gujarat and the Zubaan Project in North-East India have pioneered participatory curriculum development, oral history projects, and tribal language literacy programmes. However, these efforts require more coordinated partnerships with government agencies to achieve scale and sustainability (Verma and Shah, 2023, p. 76).

In sum, while the benefits of mother tongue education are well-documented, the barriers to systemic adoption remain formidable. These include inadequate teacher training, lack of culturally authentic materials, variable community attitudes, weak policy implementation, and limited financial investment. Overcoming these challenges requires a multi-level, multi-stakeholder strategy informed by both empirical evidence and community experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical review affirms the transformative potential of Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in India's tribal regions. When implemented with sensitivity to linguistic and cultural context, MTB-MLE not only enhances literacy and learning outcomes but also fosters identity, belonging, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. However, its implementation is often fragmented and constrained by systemic challenges, including limited teacher capacity, inadequate materials, and insufficient policy coherence.

To ensure that India's vision for inclusive and equitable education materialises meaningfully for its tribal populations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Contextual Teacher Training:** District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) and State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs) should develop and mandate pre-service and in-service training programmes that include multilingual pedagogy and tribal language proficiency. Such programmes must be grounded in participatory, community-based approaches to education (Kumar and Mishra, 2016, p. 67).
- **Curriculum Co-creation:** Curriculum development should involve community elders, local storytellers, artists, and linguists to ensure that materials are

culturally relevant and locally resonant. Initiatives like the Adivasi Academy's *Indigenous Knowledge Textbooks* offer models of co-creation that can be scaled (Verma and Shah, 2023, p. 79).

- **Technology Integration:** Develop mobile applications and e-learning platforms in tribal languages that incorporate oral histories, songs, and local games. Such tools can be used both inside and outside classrooms and can particularly benefit out-of-school children and adult learners (Rao, 2021, p. 101).
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks:** Establish multilingual assessment systems that are sensitive to linguistic diversity and measure holistic learning. Indicators should include cognitive development, linguistic proficiency in multiple languages, and cultural competencies (Singh, 2018, p. 89).
- **Policy and Financial Commitment:** States should embed MTB-MLE into their education budgets with clear timelines, targets, and accountability frameworks. Dedicated budget lines and long-term investment plans will reduce dependency on short-term donor-funded projects and enhance programme sustainability (Saxena, 2022, p. 87).
- **Community Mobilisation and Awareness:** Conduct community workshops and campaigns to build parental awareness about the long-term benefits of MTB-MLE. These efforts must address prevalent myths around the superiority of dominant languages and reassure families about transition pathways to Hindi and English in later grades (Baraik, 2020, p. 94).
- **Research and Knowledge Sharing:** Establish regional MTB-MLE knowledge hubs that document good practices, develop language corpora, and foster peer learning across states. Collaborative research with universities, tribal research institutes, and NGOs can generate insights that improve design and implementation (Desai, 2020, p. 124).

Without sustained attention to linguistic justice, India risks deepening educational exclusion for millions of tribal children. As the NEP 2020 aspires to achieve “education for all,” ensuring the survival, dignity, and academic success of indigenous learners through their own languages is not just a policy option—it is a moral imperative.

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