Advancing Inclusive Quality Education and Peace in India through Mother Tongue-Based Learning

Dr. Ch. Sarajubala Devi*

*Associate Professor, NERIE, Shillong, Email - sarajubala@yahoo.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	India's educational Environment is shaped by a profound linguistic diversity, with over 780 spoken languages, yet this diversity remains largely unacknowledged in the formal school system. Despite national policy commitments such as the Right to Education (2009), the National Curriculum Framework (2005), and the National Education Policy (2020), the consistent implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is insufficient. This paper critically examines the intersection of language, education, and equity in the context of India's multilingual and socially stratified society. Drawing from theoretical insights offered by Becker, Bourdieu, Putnam, and Sen, the paper positions education as a transformative force that builds human, cultural, and social capital, while also interrogating how systemic inequalities particularly linguistic and socio-economic undermine its equitable potential. Through a multidisciplinary qualitative analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and secondary data sources, the study reveals that the exclusion of tribal and linguistic minority languages from early education leads to cognitive, cultural, and emotional dissonance among learners. This exclusion directly impedes India's progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The paper argues that linguistic discrimination in schools constitutes a violation of children's Linguistic Human Rights (LHR), weakening educational outcomes and perpetuating generational inequality. It calls for context-sensitive, culturally responsive, and community-driven educational reforms to build inclusive institutions rooted in India's pluralistic identity. The findings reinforce the urgent need to implement MTB-MLE strategies and to reframe educational inclusion as both a developmental priority and a matter of social justice. Recommendations emphasize multilingual curriculum design, participatory governance, and equity-driven pedagogy as critical tools for transforming India's education system to serve all its children. **Keywords:** Multilingual education, linguistic diversity, educational equity, tribal communities, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as the cornerstone of human resource development and a critical catalyst for national growth. It plays an instrumental role in shaping the socio-economic, political, and cultural fabric of a society by fostering individual capabilities, enhancing employability, and promoting democratic values. As Frederick Harbison (1973) aptly noted, human beings are not just passive recipients of development; rather, they are the active agents who drive capital accumulation, manage natural resources, and build institutions. In essence, the true wealth of a nation lies in its people, their knowledge, skills, creativity, and capacity to transform challenges into opportunities. Echoing this vision, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, in its seminal report for UNESCO (1996), emphasized that education must serve not only as a vehicle for economic progress but also as a means of nurturing peace, social justice, environmental sustainability, and holistic human development. The Commission identified four key pillars of learning, learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be as essential for preparing individuals and societies to meet the complex demands of the modern world. Thus, education is not merely about literacy or technical skills; it is about building the foundations of an inclusive, equitable, and enlightened society.

India, with its rich demographic diversity and constitutional commitment to equality, has made concerted efforts to democratize education and ensure that it reaches the most disadvantaged sections of society. Landmark initiatives such as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) aimed to achieve universal elementary education by improving infrastructure, teacher availability, and community participation. The *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) extended these efforts to the secondary level, focusing on access, retention, and quality of education. These two programs were later unified under the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, a holistic approach to school education from pre-primary to senior secondary levels, integrating learning enhancement and digital initiatives. While these policy interventions have resulted in significant gains—increased enrollment rates, reduction in gender disparities, and expansion of school infrastructure—the deeper challenge lies in bridging the gaps in educational quality and equity. The learning outcomes of children, particularly from marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), continue to lag behind national averages. Many of these children face structural barriers including poverty, geographical isolation, linguistic disadvantage, and social exclusion, which impede their ability to access and benefit from educational opportunities on an equal footing.

Moreover, disparities in teacher deployment, school facilities, curriculum relevance, and community engagement further exacerbate the inequities in the education system. Addressing these issues requires not only policy refinement but also a reorientation of educational governance to be more inclusive, culturally responsive, and context-sensitive. The present study seeks to critically examine the role of education as a driver of national development and to assess the effectiveness of India's educational initiatives in achieving inclusive and quality education for all. Special attention is given to the educational status of SC and ST populations, exploring the persistent gaps and suggesting pathways toward a more just and equitable learning environment.

Review of Previous Literatures

Education has long been recognized by scholars as a vital mechanism for fostering individual development and societal transformation. Theoretical frameworks provided by Becker (1964), Bourdieu (1977), and Putnam (2000) have laid the foundation for understanding education as a form of human, cultural, and social capital. Becker emphasized education's role in enhancing human capital through increased productivity and economic participation, while Bourdieu introduced the idea of cultural capital, highlighting how educational institutions reproduce social inequalities. Putnam (2000), meanwhile, linked education to the strengthening of social capital, underscoring the role of educational networks in fostering civic engagement and trust. UNESCO (2009) extended these conceptualizations through its framework on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), advocating for a holistic, interdisciplinary educational approach to address pressing global issues such as poverty, climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality. Similarly, Sen (1999) underscored education's instrumental value in enabling individuals to lead lives they value, framing it as a key element of human development and freedom.

A substantial body of research has explored the exclusion of marginalized communities from equitable educational opportunities. Studies such as those by Nambissan (2010) and Jhingran (2005) highlight the persistent educational disadvantages faced by Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), often due to entrenched socio-economic disparities and cultural biases embedded within school systems. Devi (2018) points out that these inequalities are further compounded by linguistic challenges, especially in India's multilingual landscape. The importance of language in education has been extensively studied in the context of multilingual societies. Pinnock (2009) argues that early education in a second or unfamiliar language can result in cognitive overload for young learners, especially those from tribal or remote regions who are first-generation school-goers. Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) advocate for mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), asserting that instruction in a child's first language enhances cognitive development, self-esteem, and academic achievement. Pattanayak (1981) and Annamalai (2001) emphasize the need for integrating indigenous languages in the educational framework to preserve linguistic diversity and promote inclusive learning. Their work illustrates that language is not merely a medium of instruction but a carrier of culture, identity, and epistemology. This view is supported by Mohanty (2009), who discusses the "double divide" of language and poverty that often traps tribal and minority learners in a cycle of exclusion and underachievement. Further, Rao and Singh (2005) suggest that education systems in India often mirror social hierarchies, resulting in institutional discrimination against children from disadvantaged communities. Kumar (2004) critiques the one-size-fits-all approach in curriculum design and pedagogy, arguing for more context-sensitive and culturally relevant educational practices. Similarly, Dey and Mishra (2016) highlight the role of caste, class, and gender in shaping educational access and outcomes, suggesting that policy measures must account for intersectional inequalities.

The finding of Malik and Sharma (2017) stresses the need for educational reforms that recognize the lived experiences of learners from rural and tribal backgrounds. They argue for community participation in curriculum development and school governance to ensure contextual relevance and inclusivity. Alexander

(2001) similarly supports child-centered pedagogies that align with local knowledge systems and socio-cultural realities. The impact of global educational agendas has also been critically examined. Tikly and Barrett (2011) critique the neoliberal framing of education within global development discourses, urging for a more equitable and justice-oriented perspective. Similarly, Stromquist (2002) points out that while international frameworks promote universal access, they often overlook the structural inequalities within national contexts that impede true educational inclusion. These previous findings emphasise the transformative potential of education, while simultaneously exposing the systemic barriers that inhibit its equitable distribution. A recurring theme is the need for multilingual, culturally responsive, and socially inclusive education systems, especially in contexts marked by diversity, poverty, and historical marginalization. These insights form the conceptual basis for analysing the challenges and opportunities of education in India's tribal and underrepresented regions.

Objectives

This study aims to critically examine the role of education in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), particularly in contexts marked by linguistic diversity and social marginalization. It seeks to understand how education, when made inclusive and equitable, can serve as a transformative tool for achieving social justice, strengthening institutions, and fostering democratic participation among historically disadvantaged communities in India. Specifically, the research explores the potential of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in addressing persistent learning inequalities among tribal and linguistic minority populations. It assesses the impact of existing educational policies on access, retention, and academic performance of these communities while identifying the cultural, linguistic, and institutional barriers that hinder effective implementation. The study further aims to offer strategic, context-sensitive recommendations for building a linguistically responsive and socially just education system that aligns with the broader goals of sustainable and inclusive development.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from education studies, linguistics, development theory, and policy analysis. The research primarily relies on secondary data sources, including academic journals, policy documents, governmental reports, and global development frameworks. Key documents such as the National Education Policy (2020), Right to Education Act (2009), Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan reports, and UNESCO publications have been critically examined to understand the structural and policy-level interventions in India's education system. In addition, scholarly contributions from educational theorists and linguists have been reviewed to construct a conceptual framework around the issues of language, identity, and inclusion in education.

The study also engages in a thematic content analysis of literature and official data to assess how current educational policies and initiatives affect marginalized groups particularly Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and linguistic minorities. Special emphasis is placed on evaluating the effectiveness of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in reducing learning disparities and enhancing access to quality education. Qualitative case studies and regional data from tribal-dominated areas provide grounded insights into the lived experiences of learners and educators. Triangulating findings from diverse sources, the research identifies gaps between policy intent and on-ground implementation, and formulates context-specific recommendations. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between language, policy, and equity within India's complex educational landscape, with a focus on aligning the findings with the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 16.

Analysis and Findings

India's rich linguistic landscape, comprising over 780 spoken languages, presents both a remarkable cultural resource and a formidable challenge for the education system. Despite this diversity, the formal education structure remains linguistically exclusionary. Data from the 7th All India Education Survey (AIES) reveals that only 41 languages are currently used as mediums or subjects of instruction, a significant decline from 81 languages in 1970. This narrowing of linguistic representation in schools directly contradicts the spirit of inclusivity envisioned in national frameworks like the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, both of which advocate for education in the child's mother tongue at the primary level. However, these recommendations have yet to be implemented consistently across states and educational levels, resulting in persistent disparities in access and outcomes. The Three Language Formula (TLF), originally introduced to accommodate regional, national, and global linguistic needs, has not succeeded in upholding its inclusive intent. While designed to promote linguistic harmony, the formula is often interpreted inconsistently at the state level, frequently side lining tribal and indigenous languages in favour of dominant regional or national tongues. This marginalization has serious consequences: children

from tribal and linguistic minority communities are often taught in languages they do not speak at home, leading to diminished comprehension, lower classroom participation, and poor academic achievement. In effect, this language gap becomes a systemic barrier that perpetuates educational inequity.

The failure to incorporate mother tongue-based instruction also impedes India's progress towards several targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Target 4.1 emphasizes universal primary and secondary education with meaningful learning outcomes. However, when learners cannot understand the language of instruction, effective learning becomes unattainable. Target 4.5 calls for the elimination of disparities in education access and achievement for vulnerable groups. Yet, linguistic minorities especially Scheduled Tribes remain underserved, reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Similarly, Target 4.7, which focuses on education for sustainable development, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity, remains out of reach without the recognition and inclusion of indigenous linguistic identities. Besides, the exclusion of learners' native languages has direct implications for Sustainable Development Goal 16, which advocates for peaceful, inclusive societies and strong institutions. Schools that ignore the linguistic backgrounds of students fail to build trust or foster meaningful participation, thereby weakening the institution's inclusivity and legitimacy. As noted by UNESCO (2003), denying children education in a language they understand constitutes a violation of their Linguistic Human Rights (LHR). This disregard not only undermines individual learning but also erodes the cultural and epistemological heritage of entire communities.

To sum up, the findings reveal that India's education system, while progressive in principle, continues to fall short in addressing the linguistic needs of its most marginalized populations. The underutilization of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) strategies perpetuates systemic inequality and undermines the broader developmental and democratic goals enshrined in the Sustainable Development Agenda. Recognizing and integrating indigenous languages into formal education is not merely a pedagogical concern—it is a matter of social justice, cultural preservation, and inclusive national development.

Discussion

The analysis of India's educational landscape through the lens of linguistic inclusion highlights both the transformative potential of education and the systemic barriers that limit its equitable distribution. Drawing on foundational theories from scholars such as Becker (1964), Bourdieu (1977), and Putnam (2000), this discussion situates the current findings within a broader conceptual framework that links education to human capital, social reproduction, and community cohesion. Becker's view of education as an investment in human capital underscores the importance of equitable access to learning opportunities that enhance individual productivity and socio-economic mobility. However, as evidenced in the findings, tribal and linguistic minority children are often taught in languages foreign to them, impeding comprehension and reducing learning efficacy. This misalignment between the language of instruction and learners' linguistic environments undermines their ability to fully benefit from education as a tool of personal and economic advancement.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital further sharpens our understanding of how the education system can serve to reproduce social inequalities. The marginalization of indigenous languages within Indian schools reflects a deeper privileging of dominant linguistic and cultural forms. This institutional bias not only devalues the knowledge systems and identities of tribal communities but also reinforces their marginal status within the broader social order. Language thus becomes a gatekeeping mechanism that determines who succeeds and who is left behind. Putnam (2000) adds another dimension by emphasizing the role of education in building social capital, trust, cooperation, and civic engagement. However, when the school system disregards learners' native languages, it fails to create inclusive spaces that nurture these outcomes. Exclusionary practices erode the trust of marginalized communities in formal institutions and reduce the potential for collective participation and democratic engagement.

UNESCO's (2009) framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) advocates for an inclusive, context-sensitive approach to education that addresses social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. The persistent exclusion of mother tongues from mainstream education in India runs counter to these goals, limiting not only learning outcomes (SDG 4) but also the formation of inclusive institutions (SDG 16). The inability of the education system to reflect the multilingual reality of the country jeopardizes the global agenda of "leaving no one behind." Sen's (1999) capability approach resonates strongly in this context. He posits education as essential to individual freedom and agency. Yet, when instruction occurs in an incomprehensible language, it restricts rather than expands the learner's capabilities. It denies children the opportunity to express themselves, engage meaningfully with knowledge, and imagine alternative futures, an affront to the very idea of education as a vehicle for freedom and self-determination. The works of Nambissan (2010), Jhingran (2005), and Devi (2018) reveal how the combined forces of caste, class, and language continue to shape unequal educational trajectories. Linguistic exclusion emerges as a critical axis of

disadvantage that compounds the structural vulnerabilities faced by SC/ST populations. As Pinnock (2009) noted, early education in a second or unfamiliar language results in cognitive overload, especially among first-generation learners from remote tribal regions. Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012), Mohanty (2009), and Pattanayak (1981) offer compelling evidence for the benefits of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). These include improved cognitive development, stronger self-esteem, and enhanced academic performance. Beyond pedagogy, the integration of indigenous languages represents a commitment to linguistic rights, cultural preservation, and participatory learning.

Furthermore, critiques by Kumar (2004), Rao and Singh (2005), and Dey and Mishra (2016) point to the rigidity and social insensitivity of Indian curricular frameworks, which often fail to accommodate the diverse realities of learners. Community-led education models advocated by Malik and Sharma (2017) and Alexander (2001) provide valuable alternatives, emphasizing the need for local engagement, context-specific content, and culturally rooted pedagogies. Lastly, Tikly and Barrett (2011) caution against global education agendas framed in neoliberal terms, which prioritize standardized metrics over meaningful inclusion. While SDG targets offer useful benchmarks, their translation into national policy must be critically examined to ensure they do not perpetuate existing inequities. It affirms that inclusive education particularly through MTB-MLE, is not merely about improving literacy or test scores. It is fundamentally about restoring dignity, agency, and identity to historically excluded communities. Without a linguistically responsive and socially just education system, India cannot claim to meet its commitments under SDG 4 and SDG 16. The imperative now is to move beyond symbolic policy endorsements and ensure real, structural change that recognizes language as a central pillar of democratic and equitable development.

Research Gap

Despite substantial national and international discourse on inclusive education and the promotion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), there remains a critical research gap in understanding the intersection of language, identity, and equity within India's formal education system, especially as it pertains to indigenous and tribal communities. While numerous studies have addressed the benefits of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), much of the research remains either policy-oriented or theoretical, with limited empirical exploration of the systemic challenges hindering implementation at the grassroots level. Moreover, the linguistic dimension of educational exclusion is often subsumed under broader categories of socio-economic disadvantage, leaving insufficient attention to the specific ways language policies and practices affect access, retention, and learning outcomes among marginalized groups. Existing educational surveys and reports (e.g., AIES) provide statistical snapshots but lack qualitative insights into the lived experiences of tribal learners navigating a linguistically alien school environment.

There is also a dearth of research examining how the exclusion of indigenous languages impacts the achievement of SDG 16, particularly in terms of fostering trust in public institutions and democratic participation. The failure to integrate linguistic human rights into educational frameworks represents a blind spot in the current development agenda. This study seeks to fill these gaps by critically analysing the disconnect between policy rhetoric and implementation, and by highlighting the cultural, institutional, and structural barriers to building a linguistically inclusive and socially just education system in tribal and multilingual regions of India.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper explores the critical intersection of education, language, and social justice in the context of India's multilingual and socially diverse society, with particular focus on tribal and linguistically marginalized communities. Drawing from theoretical frameworks offered by scholars like Becker (1964), Bourdieu (1977), and Sen (1999), it conceptualizes education not only as a tool for individual empowerment but also as a vehicle for collective development, civic participation, and cultural preservation. The study also anchors itself in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) as guiding frameworks for assessing equity and inclusivity in education. The analysis reveals that India's education system, while progressive in intent through initiatives like the Right to Education (RTE) Act, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), and the Three Language Formula (TLF), remains largely unresponsive to the linguistic realities of tribal and minority populations. Out of over 780 languages spoken across the country, only 41 are currently used in the classroom. The lack of mother tongue instruction leads to poor comprehension, low retention, and alienation among first-generation learners—undermining effective learning and deepening educational inequality.

Besides, the exclusion of indigenous languages violates children's linguistic human rights and impedes the realization of inclusive and strong institutions envisioned in SDG 16. Policies intended to promote diversity

and inclusion are frequently diluted at the implementation stage, reflecting institutional inertia and socio-political hierarchies. The present study emphasizes that recognizing and integrating mother tongues into the mainstream educational framework is not merely a pedagogical preference but a moral and developmental imperative. Inclusive education policies must move beyond token recognition to genuine linguistic justice, ensuring that children are taught in languages they understand and identify with. Such an approach will enhance learning outcomes, preserve cultural knowledge systems, and contribute to a more equitable and democratic society. Ultimately, achieving the SDGs in India requires context-sensitive, multilingual, and participatory education strategies that reflect the country's linguistic and cultural diversity.

References

1. Alexander, R. J. (2001). *Culture and pedagogy: International comparisons in primary education*. Blackwell.
2. Annamalai, E. (2001). *Managing multilingualism in India: Political and linguistic manifestations*. SAGE Publications.
3. Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. University of Chicago Press.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Cultural reproduction and social reproduction*. In J. Karabel and A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487-511). Oxford University Press.
5. Devi, L. (2018). *Language barriers in tribal education: An analysis of learning challenges in North East India. Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 7(1), 55-70.
6. Dey, S., and Mishra, S. (2016). *Caste, class and gender in schooling: A study of marginalised groups in India*. Economic and Political Weekly, 51(17), 43-51.
7. Jhingran, D. (2005). *Language disadvantage: The learning challenge in primary education*. APH Publishing.
8. Kumar, K. (2004). *What is worth teaching?* (3rd ed.). Orient Longman.
9. Malik, R., and Sharma, P. (2017). *Rethinking equity in education: Role of community and curriculum. Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 31(2), 109–124.
10. Mohanty, A. K. (2009). *Multilingual education in India: Overcoming the language barrier in schooling. Psychology and Developing Societies*, 21(2), 151-172.
11. Nambissan, G. B. (2010). *The global economic crisis, poverty and education: A perspective from India. Journal of Education Policy*, 25(6), 729-737.
12. Pattanayak, D. P. (1981). *Multilingualism and mother-tongue education*. Oxford University Press.
13. Pinnock, H. (2009). *Language and education: The missing link. How the language used in schools threatens the achievement of Education for All*. Save the Children/CfBT Education Trust.
14. Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
15. Rao, N., and Singh, A. (2005). *Equity in education: The role of school culture and policy. Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 2(1), 59-81.
16. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
17. Skutnabb-Kangas, T., and Heugh, K. (2012). *Multilingual education and sustainable diversity work: From periphery to center*. Routledge.
18. Stromquist, N. P. (2002). *Education in a globalized world: The connectivity of economic power, technology, and knowledge*. Rowman & Littlefield.
19. Tikly, L., and Barrett, A. M. (2011). *Social justice, capabilities and the quality of education in low income countries. International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(1), 3-14.
20. UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a multilingual world: UNESCO education position paper*. Paris: UNESCO.
21. UNESCO. (2009). *UNESCO world conference on education for sustainable development*. Bonn Declaration.