



Bilingual Education and Cultural Retention: A Study of Oraon Students in Jharkhand and Odisha

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Abstract: *In the richly diverse tapestry of India's cultural landscape, the threads of its indigenous, or Adivasi, communities are among the most vibrant and historically significant. Yet, these same communities stand at a precarious crossroads, facing the relentless pressures of globalization, assimilation, and linguistic homogenization. For the younger generations, the formal education system, often designed with a monolingual ethos, can become an unwitting agent of cultural erosion rather than a ladder of opportunity. This is starkly evident for the Oraon tribe, a prominent Dravidian-speaking Adivasi community primarily residing in the states of Jharkhand and Odisha. For Oraon students, the journey into the formal classroom frequently begins with a profound disjuncture—a world where the language of instruction is alien, the cultural referents are unfamiliar, and the knowledge systems of their ancestors are conspicuously absent.*

This article posits that bilingual education, specifically Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), is not merely a pedagogical tool but a critical mechanism for cultural retention and identity preservation for the Oraon community. It argues that the separation of language from culture in educational contexts creates a cognitive and emotional schism in students, hindering academic success while simultaneously severing the vital link to their heritage. Through an analysis of the linguistic and educational landscape in Jharkhand and Odisha, this study will demonstrate how a well-implemented bilingual education model can serve as a powerful vehicle for sustaining the Oraon language (Kurukh), its associated oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and social values. As the renowned linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas asserts, "Linguistic diversity is a cornerstone of biodiversity and cultural diversity. Killing a language is a double genocide: it kills the body of the language and the cultural and spiritual identity of its speakers" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2). The struggle for bilingual education for the Oraon is, therefore, a struggle against this "double genocide."

Keywords: *Bilingual Education, Cultural Retention, Oraon Tribe, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).*

Introduction:

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agent of cultural erosion rather than a ladder of opportunity. This is starkly evident for the Oraon tribe, a prominent Dravidian-speaking Adivasi community primarily residing in the states of Jharkhand and Odisha. For Oraon students, the journey into the formal classroom frequently begins with a profound disjuncture—a world where the language of instruction is alien, the cultural referents are unfamiliar, and the knowledge systems of their ancestors are conspicuously absent.

This article posits that bilingual education, specifically Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), is not merely a pedagogical tool but a critical mechanism for cultural retention and identity preservation for the Oraon community. It argues that the separation of language from culture in educational contexts creates a cognitive and emotional schism in students, hindering academic success while simultaneously severing the vital link to their heritage. Through an analysis of the linguistic and educational landscape in Jharkhand and Odisha, this study will demonstrate how a well-implemented bilingual education model can serve as a powerful vehicle for sustaining the Oraon language (Kurukh), its associated oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and social values. As the renowned linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas asserts, "Linguistic diversity is a cornerstone of biodiversity and cultural diversity. Killing a language is a double genocide: it kills the body of the language and the cultural and spiritual identity of its speakers" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2). The struggle for bilingual education for the Oraon is, therefore, a struggle against this "double genocide."

Objectives

1. To examine how bilingual education helps preserve the Oraon language.
2. To analyse the problems Oraon students, face in mainstream schools.
3. To Evaluate how well current government policies (like MTB-MLE) work for Oraon students.
4. To Investigate the link between losing their language and losing traditional knowledge.

Literature Review

The question of how language influences culture and cognition has long been central to linguistic anthropology and education studies. In the context of tribal and indigenous education, the relationship between bilingualism and cultural identity becomes particularly urgent. As Joshua Fishman argues, "The intergenerational transmission of language is the transmission of culture itself" (Fishman 12). For the Oraon community, whose language Kurukh serves as both a medium of communication and a repository of ancestral wisdom, bilingual education is crucial to cultural continuity.

Globally, the literature on bilingual education provides a solid foundation for understanding the Oraon case. Cummins's theory of *additive bilingualism* (1991) emphasizes that acquiring a second language should enhance rather than replace the first. This is reinforced by Skutnabb-Kangas's concept of "linguistic human rights," which posits that the denial of mother-tongue education constitutes a form of linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas 45). UNESCO's *Education in a Multilingual World* (2003) similarly asserts that education in one's first language enhances learning outcomes and self-esteem, while promoting social inclusion.

In India, multilingualism is both a resource and a challenge. Scholars such as Mohanty (2009) and Panda and Mohanty (2015) have highlighted the paradox wherein India's linguistic diversity is celebrated rhetorically but often suppressed institutionally through monolingual schooling practices. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) recognizes the pedagogical advantages of early mother-tongue instruction, but its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly among marginalized tribal groups. As Mohanty notes, "Tribal children enter school with rich linguistic capital, but the system treats their language as a deficit" (Mohanty 283).



Research specific to Jharkhand and Odisha indicates the uneven success of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). Odisha's early adoption of MLE programs, supported by NGOs like Siksha Sandhan and the Centre for Multilingual Education, led to demonstrable improvements in attendance and comprehension (Panda and Mohanty 208). In contrast, Jharkhand's policy efforts have been limited to pilot projects. A study by Kujur (2019) found that "Kurukh-speaking students in Hindi-medium schools experience alienation and loss of confidence, perceiving their home language as inferior" (Kujur 58).

Cultural anthropologists have also underscored the role of language in transmitting indigenous ecological knowledge (Berkes 47). Among the Oraon, flora, fauna, and ritual knowledge are linguistically encoded. Kindo's (2018) study on the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge in Simdega demonstrates how the decline of Kurukh fluency among youth leads to environmental disengagement. Thus, bilingual education is not only a linguistic strategy but an ecological and epistemological safeguard.

In sociolinguistic studies of the Oraon diaspora, Lakra (2025) observes that migration exacerbates language loss as Oraon migrants adopt Hindi or Odia for socioeconomic survival, leading to a weakening of Kurukh's intergenerational transmission. However, digital revitalization efforts such as the Kurukh Wikipedia and community literacy campaigns show promise for language revival.

Furthermore, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) provides a philosophical grounding: education must empower learners to reclaim their voice. For Oraon students, bilingual education enables them to engage critically with both traditional and modern knowledge systems. It challenges what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o terms "linguistic colonization" (Ngũgĩ 26), where dominant languages marginalize indigenous epistemologies. The emerging field of Indigenous Language Pedagogy reinforces this perspective, emphasizing culturally responsive curricula that integrate oral traditions, local histories, and indigenous cosmologies (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 95).

Collectively, this literature reveals that bilingual education is not a mere pedagogical preference but an ethical imperative. It affirms cultural identity, cognitive development, and educational equity. Yet, the Oraon case demonstrates that without systemic support—teacher training, resource development, and community involvement—the promise of bilingual education remains unrealized.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from Sociolinguistic Theory, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, and Postcolonial Education Theory.

1. Sociolinguistic and Cognitive Theories

Jim Cummins's *Interdependence Hypothesis* (1981) provides the foundational premise that proficiency in the first language (L1) transfers to the second (L2). His "dual iceberg" model suggests that while the surface features of two languages differ, their underlying cognitive processes are interconnected. For Oraon students, a strong foundation in Kurukh enhances their comprehension of Hindi or Odia, thus reinforcing academic success.

Vygotsky's *Cultural-Historical Theory* (1978) also underpins this study. He posits that learning is a socially mediated process and that language is the primary tool through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. In Oraon classrooms, this implies that learning through Kurukh is not only linguistically inclusive but cognitively meaningful, since it links abstract concepts to culturally familiar experiences.

2. Postcolonial and Critical Pedagogy



Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* frames education as an act of liberation. For Adivasi learners, language-based exclusion perpetuates what Freire calls "cultural invasion." MTB-MLE counters this by validating indigenous languages as legitimate carriers of knowledge. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's notion of *decolonizing the mind* (1986) critiques linguistic imperialism and asserts the necessity of reclaiming indigenous tongues as a means of intellectual emancipation.

3. Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory

Howard Giles's theory of *Ethnolinguistic Vitality* (1977) helps explain the Oraon community's linguistic situation. Vitality depends on three factors—status, demography, and institutional support. Kurukh's low prestige and limited institutional backing contribute to its decline. Bilingual education enhances its vitality by institutionalizing its use in schools and validating it as a medium of learning and pride.

4. Indigenous Knowledge and Eco-Linguistics

Eco-linguistic theory (Haugen 1972; Mühlhäusler 2003) views language as part of an ecological system. The decline of Kurukh not only disrupts communication but also the cultural and ecological relationships it sustains. Incorporating Kurukh into environmental education helps preserve both biodiversity and cultural diversity.

Together, these frameworks enable a holistic analysis of how language, culture, and power interact in the educational experiences of Oraon students. They position bilingual education not merely as a policy intervention but as a transformative act of cultural justice.

The Oraon: A People and Their Language at the Crossroads

The Oraon people, who call themselves *Kurukh*, have a distinct cultural identity rooted in their language, social organization, and intimate connection to nature. Their language, Kurukh, belongs to the Northern Dravidian family, making it a linguistic isolate in a region dominated by Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi and Odia. This linguistic uniqueness is a cornerstone of their identity. Traditional Oraon society is governed by a patriarchal council known as the *Parha*, and their worldview is deeply animistic, revering spirits of the forest, water, and ancestors. Knowledge is transmitted orally through songs, stories, rituals, and proverbs, all encoded in the Kurukh language.

However, this intricate cultural ecosystem is under threat. The primary forces of assimilation include migration for livelihood, the influence of mainstream media, and perhaps most decisively, an educational system that marginalizes mother tongues. In Jharkhand, a state created explicitly for the empowerment of its Adivasi populations, the official medium of instruction in most schools is Hindi. In Odisha, it is Odia. For a young Oraon child, the first day of school is often a traumatic introduction to a world where their home language is not only absent but often implicitly or explicitly devalued. This creates what educational theorists refer to as "subtractive schooling," where the home language and culture are subtracted from the child's identity to make room for the dominant one (Valenzuela 20). A teacher in a government school in Gumla district, Jharkhand, noted anonymously, "The children are silent for the first few months. They understand little of what I say in Hindi. We try to bridge the gap, but the curriculum is heavy, and there is no formal training for us to teach in their tongue."

The consequence is a rapid decline in linguistic proficiency. While older generations may be fluent speakers, younger Oraons often become passive bilinguals understanding Kurukh but unable to speak it with fluency or, critically, reproduce the complex cultural lexicon related to flora, fauna, and rituals. This language shift is the first and most critical step towards cultural disintegration.

The Pedagogical Imperative: Why Bilingual Education Works



The argument for bilingual education for Oraon students is grounded in robust pedagogical and psychological research. The UNESCO principle that a child's mother tongue is the best medium of instruction for at least the first six years of schooling is not a sentimental ideal but a cognitive necessity (UNESCO 30). When instruction begins in a familiar language, children build a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. They can connect new concepts to existing knowledge frameworks, fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking skills.

Conversely, being thrust into a monolingual environment in a second language (L2) leads to what Jim Cummins terms the "dual iceberg" model of bilingual proficiency. Surface-level conversational skills in the L2 (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills or BICS) may develop within two years, but the cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP) required for subject-level understanding takes five to seven years (Cummins 175-176). An Oraon student being taught mathematics or science in Hindi from day one is thus attempting to learn new concepts through a language they have not yet mastered cognitively. The predictable outcomes are poor academic performance, high dropout rates, and a loss of self-esteem. As one Oraon parent in Sundargarh district, Odisha, lamented, "My son was so bright at home, asking questions about everything. But in school, his report card was always red. He started saying he is 'dumb.' Now he has left school to work with me in the field." This sentiment echoes the findings of Mohanty et al., who state that "the neglect of the mother tongue in the early school years leads to capability deprivation and capability poverty" among tribal children in India (Mohanty 281).

Bilingual education, particularly the MTB-MLE model, directly addresses this. It advocates for a gradual transition:

1. **Early Stage:** Literacy and initial education are imparted entirely in the mother tongue (Kurukh).
2. **Middle Stage:** A second language (Hindi/Odia) is introduced as a subject, allowing students to develop L2 skills systematically.
3. **Later Stage:** The second language gradually becomes a medium of instruction for some subjects, while the mother tongue continues to be taught and used, ensuring the development of strong CALP in both languages.

This approach does not hinder the acquisition of the dominant language; it facilitates it by building on a solid linguistic and cognitive foundation. The goal is additive bilingualism, where the second language is added without replacing the first.

Cultural Retention: Beyond Language to Worldview

The benefits of bilingual education extend far beyond improved test scores. For the Oraon community, it is fundamentally about cultural retention. Language is not a neutral vessel for communication; it is the repository of a people's collective memory, wisdom, and identity. The erosion of Kurukh directly imperils several key cultural domains:

1. Oral Literature and History: The Oraon have a rich tradition of oral epics, folktales (*Karma* and *Dongar* songs), and proverbs that encode their history, morals, and social norms. These are performed in specific rhythmic and poetic forms in Kurukh. When children no longer understand the linguistic nuances, these narratives lose their meaning and power. As an Oraon elder in Khunti, Jharkhand, explained, "The stories of our ancestor-heroes, like the great Dhani Baghar and his adventures, are not just stories. They teach us how to live. If they are told in Hindi, the soul is lost. The words of our language carry the weight of our ancestors." Translating these works into dominant languages preserves the narrative but severs the performative and emotional connection, leading to what can be termed "cultural flatness."



2. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): The Oraon, like many indigenous communities, possess an encyclopedic knowledge of their local environment. They have specific names in Kurukh for hundreds of plants, their medicinal properties, soil types, and agricultural cycles. This knowledge is critical for biodiversity conservation and sustainable living. Language loss directly translates to the loss of this knowledge. A study in the Simdega district found that younger, Hindi-educated Oraons could identify significantly fewer local medicinal plants than their Kurukh-speaking elders (Kindo 45). Bilingual education that incorporates TEK into the science curriculum, using Kurukh terminology, can validate this indigenous knowledge and ensure its transmission. It transforms the curriculum from an alien imposition into a dialogue between knowledge systems.

3. Rituals and Social Cohesion: The entire ritual life of the Oraon community from birth ceremonies and weddings to the great *Sarhul* festival, which celebrates the sal tree and the advent of spring is conducted in Kurukh. The prayers, invocations, and songs are directed to specific deities in a specific linguistic register. If the next generation cannot comprehend these rituals, they become empty performances, and the spiritual core of the community is hollowed out. Furthermore, the authority of the *Parha* system and the respect for elders are intertwined with their fluency in the cultural-linguistic code. Bilingual education that respects and teaches the language helps maintain the integrity of these social and spiritual institutions.

Policy Frameworks and Ground Realities: Jharkhand and Odisha

Both Jharkhand and Odisha have, on paper, progressive policies for tribal education. Jharkhand's state policy acknowledges the importance of mother-tongue education, and Odisha has been a pioneer in implementing MTB-MLE programs for its tribal communities, including the Oraon in districts like Sundargarh.

The Odisha model, in particular, has shown promising results. The government, often in partnership with NGOs, has developed primers and textbooks in ten tribal languages, including Kurukh. Teachers from the same community are recruited and trained to use these materials. A study of MTB-MLE schools in Odisha found that "children in MLE schools showed significantly better performance in oral and written comprehension, overall classroom achievement, and attendance rates compared to their non-MLE counterparts" (Panda and Mohanty 210). The confidence levels of children who could begin their education in their mother tongue were visibly higher.

However, the implementation is fraught with challenges:

- **Lack of Trained Teachers:** There is a severe shortage of teachers who are both proficient in Kurukh and trained in MTB-MLE methodologies. Many teachers in tribal areas are non-tribal and do not speak the local language.
- **Inadequate Learning Materials:** While primers exist, there is a dearth of supplementary reading materials, children's literature, and subject-specific texts in Kurukh. This limits the scope of learning beyond the initial grades.
- **Political and Social Will:** Often, there is a perception among parents and even some administrators that "real" education happens only in the dominant language, as it is seen as the key to economic mobility. This leads to a demand for English or state-language medium schools, even if they are detrimental to the child's learning and cultural health.
- **The Transition Hurdle:** The transition from mother-tongue instruction to the state language in upper primary grades is often abrupt and poorly managed, negating the early advantages gained.



In Jharkhand, the scenario is even more challenging. Despite being a tribal-majority state, the commitment to MTB-MLE has been inconsistent. The dominance of Hindi is more entrenched, and programs remain small-scale pilot projects rather than a systemic reform.

Conclusion:

The case of the Oraon students in Jharkhand and Odisha illuminates a critical truth: education cannot be culturally neutral. For indigenous children, a monolingual, assimilationist education system constitutes a form of structural violence that undermines their identity, hampers their academic potential, and severs their connection to a priceless cultural heritage. Bilingual education, conceived not as a transitional compromise but as a robust, additive, and culturally-sympathetic model, offers a path of empowerment. It is a path that recognizes that the preservation of Kurukh is synonymous with the preservation of Oraon identity, knowledge systems, and worldview. The classroom must become a site where the Oraon child does not have to leave their culture at the door. Instead, it should be a space where the songs of their ancestors are sung alongside the principles of mathematics, where the names of local plants in Kurukh are part of the science lesson, and where their identity is a source of strength rather than shame.

To achieve this, a concerted effort is required. Policymakers must move beyond tokenism and commit to the large-scale, well-resourced implementation of MTB-MLE, including continuous teacher training and rich material development. The community, especially parents, must be made aware of the pedagogical benefits of mother-tongue education. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously stated, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 68). For the Oraon students, a bilingual education expands their world, granting them full access to both their ancestral heritage and the tools to navigate the complexities of the modern, globalized nation. It is the most viable strategy to ensure that the vibrant voice of the Oraon people does not fade into a silent echo of the past but continues to resonate with strength and pride for generations to come.

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