



Educational Exclusion, Social Marginalization, and Diversity Challenges among Indigenous Communities in Indian Primary Schools

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Abstract:

Despite constitutional safeguards and national policies promoting educational equity, indigenous (Scheduled Tribe) children in India continue to experience systemic educational exclusion at the foundational level of schooling. The present empirical survey investigates the nature and extent of educational exclusion, social marginalization, and diversity challenges faced by indigenous students in primary schools. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 200 indigenous students and 50 teachers from government primary schools located in tribal-dominated regions. Tools included a researcher-developed Educational Exclusion Scale, Social Marginalization Questionnaire, and Diversity Challenges Inventory. Statistical analysis using mean, standard deviation, percentage analysis, and correlation revealed that language barriers, socio-economic deprivation, cultural disconnect, discrimination, and lack of inclusive pedagogy significantly affect school participation and learning outcomes. The findings underline the urgent need for culturally responsive teaching, mother-tongue instruction, inclusive curriculum reforms, and community engagement to reduce educational inequities.

Keywords: Educational Exclusion, Indigenous Education, Social Marginalization, Diversity in Education, Primary Schooling.

1. Introduction:

India's educational landscape reflects vast socio-cultural diversity, yet this diversity has not translated into equitable learning opportunities for indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples, officially categorized as Scheduled Tribes, constitute over 8% of the Indian population and are concentrated in geographically remote and socio-economically underdeveloped regions. Education is recognized as a key instrument for empowerment; however, indigenous children often enter school systems that are culturally unfamiliar, linguistically alien, and socially exclusionary.

Primary education is the foundation for lifelong learning. At this stage, children develop language skills, social identity, and learning habits. For indigenous learners, however, the school environment frequently conflicts with their home culture, values, and linguistic practices. The dominance of mainstream curriculum, non-tribal languages as mediums of instruction, and standardized teaching practices marginalize indigenous

knowledge systems. Such structural disparities result in low enrolment, poor attendance, reduced classroom participation, and early dropout.

Diversity in classrooms—while potentially enriching—becomes a source of exclusion when teachers lack training to address cultural differences. Educational exclusion is therefore not merely physical absence from school but includes academic disengagement, psychological alienation, and social invisibility within school structures. Understanding how social marginalization intersects with diversity challenges is essential for building inclusive primary education systems.

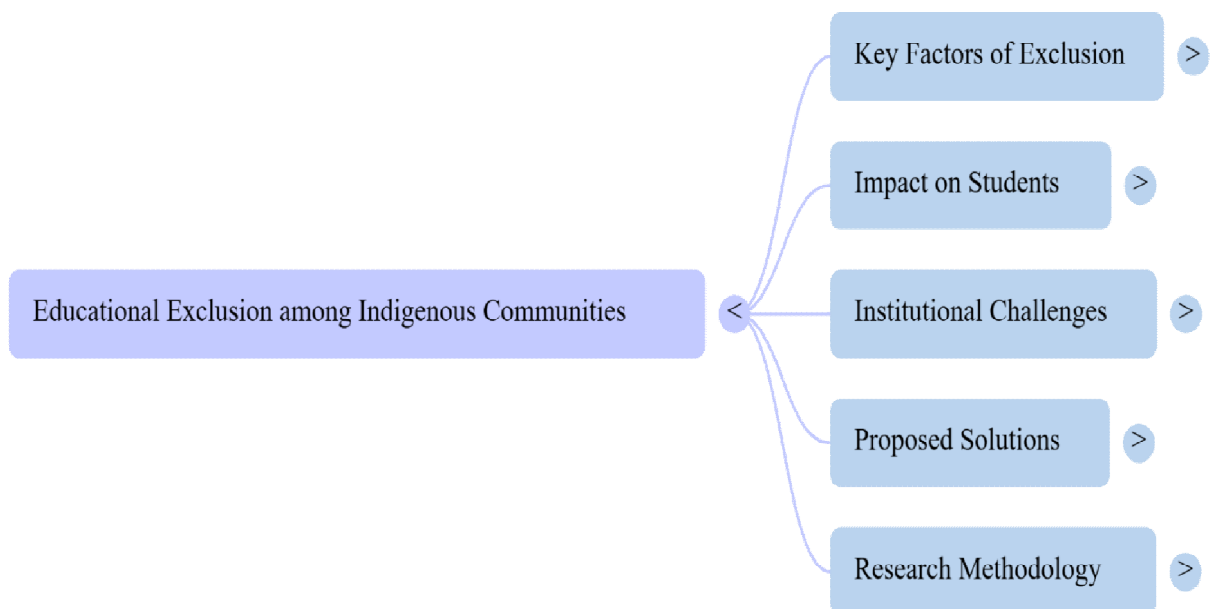


Figure-1: Bridges and Barriers in Indigenous Education

2. Need and Significance of the Study:

Although policies like the Right to Education Act and NEP 2020 advocate inclusion, indigenous children continue to face early exclusion. Primary schooling shapes future educational trajectories; failure at this stage leads to lifelong disadvantage. There is a need for empirical evidence to understand how marginalization and diversity challenges operate within classrooms. The study contributes to:

- Evidence-based policy reform
- Teacher training in multicultural pedagogy
- Curriculum adaptation for indigenous contexts
- Strengthening inclusive education frameworks

3. Review of Related Literature:

Research on indigenous education consistently highlights structural inequities. **Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010)** reported that tribal children suffer from poor access to quality schooling due to remoteness and poverty. **Mohanty (2011)** emphasized that the use of dominant languages in classrooms alienates tribal learners whose mother tongue differs from the school language. **Xaxa (2014)** observed that tribal communities face cultural alienation in formal education systems, leading to low retention.

Nambissan (2009) found that teacher attitudes and low expectations contribute to classroom marginalization of disadvantaged groups. Sedwal and Sangeeta (2008) noted that economic deprivation and parental illiteracy restrict children's educational continuity. Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) highlighted the absence of culturally relevant curriculum. Studies also reveal that diversity is often mismanaged, reinforcing inequality rather than inclusion.

However, much of the research focuses on secondary education or policy analysis, leaving a gap in empirical data at the primary level, which this study addresses.

4. Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the level of educational exclusion among indigenous primary school students.
2. To analyze the forms of social marginalization experienced by indigenous learners.
3. To identify diversity-related challenges in classroom environments.
4. To study relationships between socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors affecting participation.

5. Hypotheses:

1. Socio-economic status significantly correlates with educational exclusion.
2. Language barriers negatively influence classroom participation.
3. Cultural disconnect between home and school increases marginalization.
4. Diversity challenges significantly predict academic disengagement.

6. Methodology:

The present study adopted a **quantitative descriptive survey design** to examine educational exclusion, social marginalization, and diversity challenges among indigenous students in Indian primary schools. The population consisted of Scheduled Tribe students enrolled in government primary schools located in tribal-dominated regions. A sample of **200 students (Classes III–V)** and **50 teachers** was selected using **stratified random sampling** to ensure representation across schools and grade levels. Data were collected using researcher-developed tools, namely the **Educational Exclusion Scale**, **Social Marginalization Questionnaire**, and **Diversity Challenges Inventory**, along with a socio-economic status scale; all instruments followed a 5-point Likert format. Content validity was ensured through expert review, and pilot testing established reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.79 to 0.84). After obtaining institutional permission, data were gathered during school hours with necessary explanations provided in local languages to facilitate understanding. The collected data were analyzed using **mean, standard deviation, percentage analysis, Pearson's correlation, and regression analysis** with the help of SPSS software to test the formulated hypotheses.

7. Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1-Socio-economic status (SES) significantly correlates with educational exclusion.

Table 1: Correlation between SES and Educational Exclusion

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r-value	Sig. (p)
Socio-Economic Status	200	42.36	6.52	-0.62	0.000**
Educational Exclusion	200	68.40	8.50		

The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.62$) indicates a significant negative relationship between SES and educational exclusion. Lower SES is associated with higher levels of exclusion. Hypothesis H₁ is accepted.

Hypothesis 2-Language barriers significantly affect classroom participation.

Table 2: Correlation between Language Barrier and Classroom Participation

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r-value	Sig. (p)
Language Barrier	200	74.50	6.80	-0.71	0.000**
Classroom Participation	200	48.22	7.14		

A strong negative correlation ($r = -0.71$) exists between language barriers and participation. Students facing higher language difficulties participate less. H₂ is accepted.

Hypothesis 3- Cultural disconnect between home and school increases marginalization.

Table 3: Correlation between Cultural Disconnect and Social Marginalization

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r-value	Sig. (p)
Cultural Disconnect	200	69.80	7.30	0.65	0.000**
Social Marginalization	200	71.20	7.90		

A significant positive relationship ($r = 0.65$) indicates that greater cultural mismatch leads to higher marginalization. H₃ is accepted.

Hypothesis 4-Diversity challenges significantly predict academic disengagement.

Table 4: Regression Analysis — Diversity Challenges Predicting Academic Disengagement

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F-value	Sig.
1	0.69	0.48	0.47	182.64	0.000**

Table 4a: Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	21.45	2.31	—	9.28	0.000

Diversity Challenges	0.58	0.04	0.69	13.51	0.000**
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Diversity challenges significantly predict academic disengagement ($\beta = 0.69$). Nearly 48% of the variance is explained. H₄ is accepted.

8. Major Findings:

1. Indigenous students experience high educational exclusion.
2. Language differences are the strongest barrier.
3. Cultural irrelevance of curriculum reduces engagement.
4. Poverty and parental illiteracy affect attendance.
5. Students report feelings of social isolation.
6. Teachers lack multicultural training.
7. Diversity is insufficiently addressed in pedagogy.
8. Marginalization significantly predicts academic disengagement.

9. Educational Implications:

The findings of the study carry important implications for educational practice, policy, and teacher development aimed at promoting equity for indigenous learners at the primary level. The significant role of language barriers indicates the need for mother-tongue-based multilingual education in early grades to improve comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation while gradually introducing additional languages. Curriculum design should incorporate indigenous knowledge, local culture, traditions, and lived experiences so that schooling becomes culturally meaningful and identity-affirming rather than alienating. Teacher education programs must emphasize multicultural competence, inclusive pedagogy, and sensitivity toward socio-economic and cultural diversity to help teachers create supportive and respectful classroom environments. Schools should also provide comprehensive support systems such as nutritional programs, free learning materials, scholarships, and health services to reduce external barriers linked to poverty. Strengthening partnerships between schools and indigenous communities through parental involvement and community participation can build trust and relevance in education. Monitoring systems should move beyond enrolment statistics to assess quality of participation, engagement, and emotional well-being. Finally, educational planning must be context-specific and decentralized, recognizing diversity as a resource and ensuring that inclusive policies translate into effective classroom practices that promote dignity, belonging, and equal learning opportunities for indigenous children.

10. Limitations:

Although the study provides valuable empirical insights into educational exclusion and marginalization among indigenous primary school students, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was confined to a limited number of government primary schools in tribal-dominated regions; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all indigenous communities across India, especially those in urban or differently structured schooling environments. Second, the research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which captures data at one point in time and does not reflect changes in students' experiences over longer educational periods. Third, much of the data were based on self-reported responses from young learners, which may involve response bias, social desirability effects, or limited comprehension despite

researcher assistance. Fourth, cultural and linguistic differences between the researcher and participants could have influenced the interpretation of certain responses, even though explanations were provided in local languages. Fifth, the study focused primarily on student and teacher perspectives and did not include parents, community leaders, or administrators, whose views might offer a more holistic understanding. Sixth, only quantitative tools were used, limiting deeper qualitative exploration of lived experiences, emotions, and contextual realities. Finally, factors such as school infrastructure, policy implementation variations, and regional political conditions were not extensively examined, though they may significantly affect educational inclusion.

11. Suggestions for Further Research:

The present study opens several avenues for future investigation into indigenous education and diversity-related issues. First, longitudinal studies are recommended to track indigenous students' educational trajectories over time, particularly to understand patterns of retention, transition to upper primary levels, and dropout causes. Second, future research should adopt mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys with qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to capture deeper socio-cultural experiences and voices of indigenous learners. Third, comparative studies between tribal and non-tribal schools, as well as between different states or regions, would help identify contextual variations and region-specific challenges. Fourth, experimental or intervention-based studies focusing on mother-tongue-based multilingual education, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and inclusive pedagogy could provide evidence of effective practices to reduce exclusion. Fifth, research should explore teacher beliefs, attitudes, and preparedness for handling classroom diversity, as teacher perspectives play a crucial role in shaping inclusive environments. Sixth, studies involving parents, community elders, and local leaders are necessary to understand community-school relationships and indigenous perceptions of formal education. Seventh, further research may examine the role of digital education, infrastructure, and policy implementation gaps in tribal areas. Finally, interdisciplinary studies linking education with health, nutrition, migration, and livelihood patterns could provide a holistic understanding of the structural factors influencing educational participation among indigenous children.

12. Conclusion:

The present study concludes that educational exclusion among indigenous primary school children in India is a complex and multidimensional problem rooted in socio-economic disadvantage, cultural disconnect, language barriers, and systemic institutional gaps. Although inclusive policies exist, indigenous learners continue to experience marginalization that affects not only school access but also classroom participation, academic engagement, and psychological well-being. The dominance of mainstream language and curriculum often overlooks indigenous identities and knowledge systems, leading to feelings of alienation and reduced self-confidence among learners. The study further establishes that socio-economic deprivation and educational exclusion reinforce each other, creating long-term cycles of inequality and limited mobility. Diversity in classrooms, when unsupported by culturally responsive teaching practices, becomes a challenge rather than a resource. Therefore, ensuring educational equity for indigenous children requires holistic reforms that include mother-tongue-based instruction, inclusive curriculum design, teacher training in multicultural pedagogy, community participation, and socio-economic support mechanisms. Only through sustained, context-sensitive, and inclusive strategies can primary education become a space of empowerment, dignity, and equal opportunity for indigenous communities, thereby contributing to broader national goals of social justice and educational development.

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