

Research Paper

Learning through Non-Native Language: A Study on the Experiences and Challenges of Tribal Female Students in Higher Education in Assam

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ABSTRACT

In multilingual regions like Assam, tribal students often face challenges of pursuing higher education in a non-native language, which significantly affects their academic engagement and performance. This study explores the lived experiences and challenges of Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, particularly girls who are compelled to learn through Assamese or English, languages that differ from their mother tongues such as Bodo, or Rabha. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 100 tribal female students across four higher education institutions in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam through structured questionnaires and semi structured interviews. The study employed descriptive statistical tools, including mean, standard deviation and percentage to analyze the quantitative responses, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative insight. The findings reveal that non-native language instruction hampers student's comprehension of academic content, reduces their classroom participation, and lowers their confidence in Assamese. Female students reported facing additional difficulties due to cultural constraints, lack of exposure and limited language support at home. Despite these challenges, many students adopt coping strategies such as peer assistance, translation tools and extra study hours. The study highlights the urgent need for bilingual pedagogical approaches, culturally responsive teaching, and institutional language support programmes to bridge the gap in learning outcomes. These insights have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers aiming to make higher education more inclusive and equitable for tribal communities.

Keywords: Tribal Students, Non-Native Language, Higher Education, Assam, ST Girl

India's educational landscape is marked by extraordinarily linguistic diversity, with more than 22 official languages and hundreds of mother tongues (Mohanty, 2010; Annamalai, 2005). While this cultural richness is a national asset, it also presents substantial challenges in the context of higher education, particularly for students from indigenous or tribal backgrounds whose first language often differs from the medium of instruction used in the colleges and universities (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004).

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Received: February 17, 2026; Revision Received: April 14, 2026; Accepted: April 17, 2026

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Language is not only a medium of communication but also a powerful tool of inclusion or exclusion within educational systems. When students are required to learn complex academic content in a non-native language, it can result in reduced comprehension, poor classroom participation, and a decline in academic confidence and performance (UNESCO, 2016). For Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, who are already marginalized due to socio-economic and geographic disadvantages, language become a further barrier that restricts equal participation in the higher education system (Mohanty, 2006).

This issue is particularly critical for tribal girl students, who often face dual disadvantages, linguistic and gender based (Nambissan, 1996; Subrahmanian, 2005). Their educational journey is frequently shaped by household responsibilities, cultural restrictions on mobility and voice, and limited access to academic resources in their home languages. As such they experience a unique set of challenges that are seldom captured dialogues (Kumari and Rani, 2019).

The National education policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges the importance of mother tongue instruction, especially in the early years, but there is insufficient focus on these principles translate into practice at the higher education level (NCERT, 2018; Panda & Mohanty, 2022). While primary and secondary education reforms increasingly promote multilingualism, higher education continues to privilege dominant languages, thereby deepening existing inequalities for tribal learners.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore how learning through a non-native language affects the educational experiences of tribal students, with a particular emphasis on girl students, in the higher education institutions of Assam's Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Understanding the academic challenges of tribal students learning through a non native language requires a multidisciplinary theoretical lens that incorporates perspectives from language acquisition, socio-cultural learning, and critical pedagogy and gender studies. This study draws on four theoretical frameworks:

- **Cummins's Language Interdependence Hypothesis**

Jim Cummins (1979) proposed that the development of proficiency in a second language is strongly related to the learner's first language (L1) competence. According to his interdependence hypothesis, a solid foundation in one's mother tongue supports cognitive development and enhances the ability to acquire a second or third language (L2/L3). In context like Assam, where tribal students may not receive education in their native languages, this foundation is often weak, leading to slower academic progress in Assamese or English. Cummins's theory highlights the cognitive cost of depriving students of L1 education supports her need for mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in higher education.

- **Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory:**

Lev Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural theory emphasizes that learning is inherently a social process and is shaped by the cultural and linguistic environment of the learner (Vygotsky, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006 for thematic framing). His concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that students learn best when supported by more

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knowledgeable peers or instructors. In a classroom where the language of instruction is unfamiliar, tribal students may struggle to engage within their ZPD unless adequate scaffolding is provided. Vygotsky's framework is particularly relevant for understanding how language mediates learning, and how exclusion from the dominant academic language can isolate learners from collaborative educational experiences.

- **Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy critiques traditional educational models that marginalize students by ignoring their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Freire's argue that education should be dialogic and empowering, enabling learners to bring their lived experiences into the classroom. In this study's context, tribal students are often forced to abandon their linguistic identity in favor of academic assimilation, which contributes to alienation and underachievement. A Freirean lens underscores the need for linguistic justice, where students are not silenced but given space to learn and express in ways that are meaningful to them.

- **Feminist Theory in Education**

Feminist educational theory adds a gender-sensitive layer to the analysis, focusing on how social structures and cultural norms impact girl's access to and experience of education. Tribal girl students often face intersectional marginalization, affected by their gender, ethnicity and language. Drawing on the works of scholars like Nambissan (1996) and Subrahmanian (2005), this study recognizes that language related challenges are experienced differently by girls due to lower exposure, fewer educational resources and social expectations. Feminist theory helps explain the deeper power dynamics embedded in educational language policies and pedagogies.

Thus, together these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework to examine the multilayered experiences of tribal girl students in higher education. They illuminate how linguistic challenges are not just academic hurdles but also reflect deeper issues of identity and equity.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

- **Language as a barrier in higher education**

Language plays a pivotal role in knowledge acquisition, academic engagement and student success. In multilingual countries like India, a significant number of students pursue higher education in languages that are not their mother tongue, typically English or a dominant regional language like Hindi or Assamese. Studies show that when students are instructed with non-native language, they often struggle with comprehension, critical thinking, classroom participation and written expression (Mohanty, 2010; Panda & Mohanty, 2022). These linguistic difficulties directly affect academic performance, retention rates and self-confidence (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). The UNSCO (2016) Global Education Monitoring Report also warns that language mismatches in education disproportionately affect indigenous and marginalized learners.

- **Tribal and indigenous students in multilingual context**

Indigenous and tribal learners worldwide face educational disadvantages rooted in linguistic cultural alienation. In the India context, tribal students belong to communities where mother tongues are often excluded from formal education system. Scholars like Skutnabb –Kangas (2009) and Mohanty (2006) argue that such exclusion undermines cognitive development

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and perpetuates structural inequality. In North-East India, including Assam, tribal students from communities like the Bodo, Rabha, Karbi and Missing are expected to perform in Assamese or English, which limits their academic agency and participation (Deka & Kalita, 2021). These students often remain silent in classroom, refrain from asking questions, and struggle to express their ideas in written assessment.

• Gender dimensions of language and learning

The challenges of non- native language of learning are further compounded for tribal girl students. Research shows that girls from marginalized communities often have less access to literacy support at home and are more likely to internalize feelings of inferiority in academic settings (Nambissan, 1996; Subrahmanian, 2005). Gender based roles and expectations restrict their educational exposure and confidence, especially when learning through a language they are not fluent in. Kumari & Rani (2019) highlight that, tribal girls often report being too afraid to speak in class or approach teachers due to fear of making language mistakes. This linguistic insecurity tied with social conditioning, leads to poor academic outcomes and low progression to higher levels of study.

• Multilingual policy in India

India's education policy framework has historically encouraged multilingualism, yet its implementation remains skewed. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes mother tongue instruction at the foundational and school level, but lacks concrete strategies for integrating tribal languages in higher education. While Universities have started offering regional medium instruction in some states, tribal languages remain absent from curriculum design, textbooks and classroom discourse. Studies point out that the lack of trained faculty, resources and political will contributes to this linguistic exclusion (Annamalai 2005; NCERT, 2018)

Research Gap

Existing literature has examined the academic challenges of linguistic minorities and tribal students in school education, but research on their experiences in higher education is still limited, especially when filtered through a generated lens. Few studies have explored how tribal girl students navigate higher education system that use unfamiliar languages, and even fewer have focused on specific tribal regions like the BTR area of Assam. The study seeks to bridge this gap by offering an in-depth understanding of the intersections between language and tribal identity in the context of higher education.

Research Questions

- What are the experiences of tribal students while learning through a non-native language in higher education?
- What challenges do they face in understanding academic content and participating and performing in the class?
- What specific challenges do they face due to the medium of instruction?
- What strategies and support systems do students use to cope with these language related challenges?

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the academic experiences of tribal students learning through a non native language in higher education

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2. To identify key linguistic challenges faced by these students in understanding, participating and performing in the class.
3. To understand about the gender impact on students in learning through not native language.
4. To understand the coping mechanisms and support systems available to tribal students
5. To recommend inclusive pedagogical practices and institutional policies
6. What interventions can institutions adopt to make higher education more accessible to tribal students?

Significance of the study

This study contributes to the growing body of research on educational inequality in India by shedding light on the unexplored issue of language as a structural barrier in higher education for tribal communities. By focusing on the generated experiences of ST girl students, the study adds a critical perspective to discussions on inclusion, equity, and multilingual education. The findings aim to inform policymakers, educators and curriculum designers about the urgent need for linguistically inclusive pedagogies and culturally sensitive support mechanisms in higher education.

Sample

The present study is geographically confined to colleges and Universities located in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam. The Target Population comprises Scheduled Tribe female (ST) students pursuing higher education at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate level. The sample of the study consists of 100 Scheduled Tribe female students including 70 Undergraduate and 30 Post-graduate students. These participants were selected from the one and only University of the BTR i.e. Bodoland University and three Provincialised Degree Colleges of Baksa district of BTR, Assam. Students from the 1st, 3rd and 5th semesters of the Provincialised colleges and the 1st and 3rd semesters of the University were included as participants. The selection of institutions and participants was carried out using purposive sampling, focusing on tribal majority institutions and students who speak a tribal mother tongue as Bodo, Rabha or others.

Research Design

As the present study aims to investigate a current phenomenon, a Descriptive Survey Method was adopted. Moreover, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the issue, a mixed-methods approach was used enabling the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Instrument

Data were collected through Questionnaires using a 5 point Likert Scale, Areas were covered as language of instruction, comprehension levels, classroom participation, academic performance and emotional impact. Content validity was checked through subject expert and the reliability tested using Cronbach's Alpha (value = 0.82) indicating good internal consistency.

A Semi-Structured Group Interview Schedule also conducted covering 20 students to understand the depth of the challenges faced by the students. 5 student from the University and 15 students from the Provincialised colleges were included in the interview.

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Procedure

Data were collected using both online and offline method. In the offline method, the investigator personally visited the colleges, obtained permission from the authorities and interacted with the selected sample students. After establishing a good rapport, the investigator explained the purpose of the study and administered the questionnaires, which were duly filled in and collected. For University students, data were collected through online modes, including Google forms and Teleconferencing. The entire data collection process was carried out over a period from July-December 2025.

Data Treatment

Both Quantitative and Qualitative methods were employed for the analysis of data. For quantitative analysis, Descriptive Statistical techniques such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used and analysed using SPSS software. Content Analysis was used to analyse the data derived from Semi Structured Group Interview.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines laid out by the Research advisory Committee (RAC) of the Department of Education, Gauhati University.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis and findings are presented under key thematic areas derived from the Questionnaire responses and Semi Structured Interviews and they were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to understand the prevalence and nature of these challenges. These reflect the academic and emotional experiences of tribal girl students in navigating higher education through a non native language.

Comprehension difficulties in classroom instruction

Table 1: Comprehension difficulties face by students: Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation (N=100)

Item statement	% of Agree and Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Difficulty understanding lectures delivered in English	82%	4.21	0.79
Difficulty understanding lectures delivered in Assamese	64%	3.84	0.88
Inability to follow fast speech by instructor	76%	4.11	0.72
Technical vocabulary is difficult to comprehend	71%	4.09	0.74
Struggle with the textbook written in Non-native language	69%	4.1	0.68

The data in the table-1 reveal that, a significant number of ST girls face challenges in understanding classroom instruction due to language barriers. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree)

- The highest agreement (85%) and highest Mean (M=4.28) were recorded for the item “*Technical vocabulary is difficult to comprehend*”, indicating that unfamiliar terminologies from a major hurdle in their learning process.

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- A considerable 82% of students reported difficulty with English medium lectures (M=4.21, SD=0.79), which reflects the struggle of these students with a Non-native academic language.
- Fast pace instruction also affects comprehension, as seen in the Mean score of 4.11 (SD=0.72), where 76% of students expressed difficulty following lectures when teachers speak quickly.
- Notably even 64% found it to be challenging to follow Assamese- medium instruction, which yielded a moderate Mean (M=3.84, SD=0.88), suggesting that even the regional language may not fully align with their mother tongue.
- 69% of students also struggle when learning by understanding textbooks which are not written in native language with a Mean=4.1, and SD =0.86

These results exemplify that the medium of instruction and academic language complexity severely limit student's ability to understand learning materials. *"Sometimes I don't understand anything in class, especially when the teacher speaks continuously in English. I just copy notes and try to study at home"* said a second year Bodo girl student

These findings align with Mohanty (2010), who emphasized that language mismatch negatively impacts content comprehension for tribal learners.

Thus, the data underscores a clear mismatch between the language of instruction and the linguistic background of ST girl students. This mismatch can contribute to reduced understanding, lower academic confidence and increased dropout risk. It suggests an urgent need for multilingual support, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and development of bilingual or multilingual instructional materials.

Reduced classroom participation and Language anxiety

This section examines how language difficulties influence classroom engagement among tribal girl students-

Table 2: Language difficulty & classroom participation:

Item statement	% of Agree and Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Avoid speaking due to fear of mistakes in English/Assamese	78%	4.18	0.82
Hesitate to ask questions because of language difficulties	73%	4.03	0.86
Feel anxious during class discussions	66%	3.91	0.89
Prefer writing tasks over speaking in front of the class	81%	4.32	0.71

Table-2 highlights the impact of language difficulties on student's classroom participation

- The item *"prefer writing tasks over speaking in front of the class"* received the highest Mean score (M=4.32, SD=0.71) and 81% agreement, indicating that students feel more confident expressing themselves in writing due to the time it allows for organizing thoughts and minimizing language errors.
- 78% of respondents admitted to avoid speaking in the class due to fear of making language mistakes, reflected in a high Mean (M= 4.18, SD =0.82), showcasing how language anxiety limits oral engagement.

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- A further 73% reported hesitation in asking questions, with a mean of 4.03 (SD= 0.86), suggesting that students often choose silence even when they need clarification.
- The item “*feel anxious during class discussions*” also received substantial agreement (66%) and a moderate Mean (m=3.91), confirming that language-induced anxiety reduces classroom participation.
- In their words “*Even if I don’t understand, I don’t ask. I feel scared that I will say something wrong in front of everyone*” noted a respondent from the Rabha community”

This reinforces Freire’s (1970) argument that language can become a source of silence and oppression in traditional classrooms when learners are not given voice in their own terms.

Challenges in Academic performance

Table 3: Impact of language barriers on Academic Performance of students

Item statement	% of Agree and Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
Difficulty in writing during exam	68.3%	3.92	1.01
Understands concepts mentally but cannot write it clearly in English	71.5%	4.10	0.98
Feel stressed during English based assessment	65.8%	3.85	1.07

The Mean scores ranging from 3.85 to 4.10 suggest a high level of agreement among respondents, confirming that linguistic challenges are a core issue in their academic Performance. During the interview, many students (71.5%) stated that they could mentally comprehend concepts but struggled to articulate them effectively during assessments. One student said “*I know the answer in my mind, but I cannot write it well in English*”,.

These data and statement reveals that the internal conflict experienced by learners who are cognitively capable but linguistically constrained. This echoes findings by Tollefson and Tsui (2004), which linked language barriers to limited academic achievements among linguistic minorities.

This underscores the need for alternative and supportive assessment practices, such as bilingual support systems, use of vernacular explanations, and formative assessments focusing on comprehension rather than purely linguistic ability.

Other challenges

For this objective, data was collected only through Group Interview. During the interview, female students reported unique challenges, including a lack of exposure to formal or academic language use at home, limited digital access for self study, the cultural pressure to remain silent in mixed gender classrooms.

“*At home, no one speaks Assamese or English, only Bodo. I get nervous in class, especially boys are around*” shared a first year girl student.

Coping strategies and Sources of support

Table 4: Coping strategies adopted by Tribal female students to overcome language barriers (N=100)

Coping strategy	Percentage of students
Relying on peer explanations in the mother tongue	64%
Using mobile translation apps	58%
Attending extra tutorial and private coaching	39%
Teachers explaining in both Assamese and English or allowing discussion in L1	Qualitative evidence only
Teachers occasionally using local language to explain difficult concepts	Qualitative evidence only

Note: Percentages are based on student's self-reports: qualitative inputs were derived from interview narratives.

The data in table reveals that tribal female students adopted various strategies to cope with language barriers. The most common approach was relying on peer explanations in the mother tongue (64%) indicating the importance of peer-mediated support in multilingual classrooms. Additionally, (58%) of students used mobile translation applications, highlighting a growing dependence on technology for real time language assistance. 39% students attending extra tutorials or private coaching suggesting a gap in institutional academic support systems.

Qualitative findings reveal that some teachers explain the subject matter in both Assamese and English or allowed group discussion in the mother tongue.

“Our English Teacher sometimes explains in Bodo too. That helps a lot”, some students noted.

Such practices reflect Vygotsky's of scaffolding, where learners benefit from culturally responsive instruction within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Institutional gap and limited language support

Despite some teacher's efforts, most colleges are lack in formal support mechanisms such as remedial language labs, bilingual materials or trained staff familiar with tribal languages. This indicates a need for institutional reform and multilingual policy implementation at the higher education level.

The findings underscore that learning in a non-native language severely restricts the academic potential of tribal girl students in higher education. The findings show that language barriers deeply affect comprehension, participation, performance and overall confidence. The challenge is not only linguistic but also cultural, psychological and gendered. Female students face added obstacle due to limited language exposure, social restrictions, and the pressure to conform to silent or passive classroom roles. While students demonstrate resilience and adaptability, the lack of institutional support exacerbates their marginalization. These patterns reflect the urgent need to design inclusive pedagogical approaches and policies that recognize the linguistic rights and learning needs of tribal learners in Assam as well as in all parts of the world where there are tribal people.

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To ensure inclusive and equitable access to higher education for tribal students, especially girls, the following measures are recommended-

- Implement bilingual education models in tribal majority colleges, especially in the first year of undergraduate studies
- Use translanguage pedagogy, encouraging the use of mother tongues alongside English/ Assamese in teaching and learning.
- Establish language support cells or remedial classes in college to help students improve academic English /Assamese skills.
- Provide bilingual glossaries and simplified learning materials in tribal languages
- Train faculty members to recognize and adapt to student's linguistic diversity
- Encourage code-switching in lectures to support comprehension.
- Promote safe, inclusive classrooms that encourage tribal girl students to speak and ask questions without fear.
- Provide mentoring programs and confidence- building workshops tailored for female students from marginalized backgrounds.
- Develop and implement language-inclusive institutional policies aligned with NEP 2020's multilingual vision
- Involve tribal educators and language experts in curriculum design and delivery
- Expands studies to include dropouts and students who discontinued due to language related stress.
- Investigate the long term academic and career impact of language barriers on tribal students.

By recognizing the interesting barriers of language, culture and gender, this study calls for transformative action from policymakers, educators and institutions. Higher education must evolve to become not only accessible but also linguistically just and culturally inclusive for all learners.

Delimitations of the study

- The research includes students from Arts and Humanities and excludes technical, medical and professional courses to maintain a focused scope.
- The data was collected during the year 2025 and the findings are reflective of the circumstances during this year.

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Acknowledgment

The author is thankful to all who participated, offered support and co-operation during this research work.

Conflict of Interest

The author ensured of no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kalita, A. (2026). Learning through Non-Native Language: A Study on the Experiences and Challenges of Tribal Female Students in Higher Education in Assam. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(2), 077-087. DIP:18.01.008.20261402, DOI:10.25215/1402.008