

BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING BRIDGES: ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT TOOL OF PVTG WOMEN.

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Abstract:

The paper will show how English language education can be empowering in the sense of empowering the women who constitute the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India. Since 75 PVTGs represent approximately 2.8 million individuals in 18 states, these communities are characterised by several marginalisations, and women have been impacted in various ways. The literacy levels of PVTGs in the female gender are at a very low critical level of 30-40, as compared to the national average of 70.3. The paper follows a mixed-methodology design, which reviews second-order data, i.e., government reports, NFHS-5 (2019-21), and the latest empirical studies, to discuss how English language proficiency could initiate socio-economic empowerment. The findings demonstrate that English education increases employment by 45 per cent, income by 38 per cent and government program access by 52 per cent. They still face significant issues of language barriers, poor infrastructure, ineffective teachers, and socio-cultural opposition.

The article also addresses other more recent programs, such as PM-JANMAN (2023) and suggests a model of multilingual education that intersects with indigenous language and English language proficiency, as well. Community language centres, use of technology-based learning solutions, culturally sensitive means of instruction, and some of the recommendations. It concludes the study that, in combination with cultural preservation initiatives, strategic English language education has the potential to effectively disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty and marginalisation within the PVTG women group.

Keywords: PVTG women, English language education, socio-economic empowerment, multilingual education, PM-JANMAN, tribal development, gender equality.

1. Introduction

Tribal communities in India are a rich cultural diversity of 8.6% of the national population (including 705 different groups, speaking 105 languages and 225 dialects) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are especially conspicuous in this polychromatic image; they are highly marginalised and vulnerable groups. The Government of India has listed 75 PVTGs in 22,544 villages in 220 districts in 18 states and in the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).

In 2006, a paradigm shift in the awareness of the problems faced by these communities was reflected in the replacement of the name Primitive Tribal Groups with the name Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (Xaxa, 2014). These groups are characterised by pre-agricultural

economies, geographical isolation, declining or stagnant populations, extremely low literacy rates, and minimal integration with mainstream economic systems (Panda, 2014).

Within PVTGs, women face a double burden of discrimination—as members of marginalised communities and as women in deeply patriarchal structures. The intersection of tribal identity and gender creates unique challenges that conventional development approaches have failed to address adequately. According to the 2011 Census, while the overall tribal female literacy rate stands at 49.4%, the rate among PVTG women is estimated to be between 30-40%, with some groups showing rates as low as single digits (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011).

Language emerges as a critical factor in this marginalisation matrix. The linguistic isolation of PVTGs, compounded by the predominance of oral traditions and the absence of scripts for many tribal languages, creates formidable barriers to accessing education, healthcare, government services, and economic opportunities. In this context, English language education presents both opportunities and challenges. While critics argue that English education may lead to cultural erosion, proponents highlight its potential as a tool for empowerment and social mobility.

This paper investigates the hypothesis that strategic English language education, when implemented through culturally sensitive approaches, can serve as a powerful instrument for the socio-economic empowerment of PVTG women. The research addresses three primary questions: (1) What is the current status of English language education among PVTG women? (2) How does English proficiency impact their socio-economic outcomes? (3) What pedagogical and policy interventions can optimise English education for PVTG women's empowerment while preserving cultural identity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Context of Tribal Education in India

The educational journey of tribal communities in India reflects a complex interplay of colonial legacy, post-independence policies, and contemporary challenges. Christian missionaries were the main force behind the education of tribal populations during the British colonialist era, and their aim was more to convert people than to empower them (Higham & Shah, 2013). This style developed from an early distrust of the formal schooling system in tribal groups.

The Indian Constitution added special provisions to the Scheduled Tribes, under 46, 275, and 330-342, which required the state to encourage their educational and economic interests after independence. However, the implementation of these provisions has been uneven and often ineffective, particularly for PVTGs (Bhuria, 2002). The Dhebar Commission (1960-61) first identified the disparity in development among different tribal groups, leading to the creation of the PTG (later PVTG) category.

2.2 Gender Dimensions in Tribal Education

The intersectionality of gender and tribal identity creates unique educational challenges. Vidarthi and Rai (1977) observed that, although tribal societies tend to be viewed as more egalitarian than the mainstream Indian society, the view obscures the fact that they have considerable gender-based inequality in the provision of education and resources. As per recent studies conducted by Sabar

(2021) on PVTGs in Odisha, the researchers identified cultural practices, early marriage, and household responsibilities as the key influences on the education level of girls.

The National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) data show that there are dramatic differences: 84.7% of men in India are literate, and 70.3% of women can read and write. These rates fall to 68.5 per cent among tribal men and 49.4 per cent among tribal women. There is no detailed data on PVTG women, but field research suggests that literacy rates are 30-40 per cent, and some groups have literacy rates under 10 per cent (NFHS-5, 2021).

2.3 Language and Power: The English Factor

It is hard to overestimate the role of English in the socio-economic life of India. According to Annamalai (2005), English is a powerful language in India because it offers access to higher education and formal jobs, and social mobility. In the case of marginalised communities, proficiency in English may act as an access point to mainstream opportunities and may also establish linguistic stratifications within communities.

Mohanty (2006) cautions against the perils of subadditive bilingualism, in which English education results in the loss of English proficiency in the mother tongue. However, according to Panda and Mohanty (2009), additive multilingualism should be supported in which English is learnt, but with a firm mother tongue basis. The method is especially applicable to PVTGs, in which the cultural continuity depends on the language.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Language and Women's Empowerment

Empirical research on the connection between English and women's empowerment has been carried out recently. The authors found that English-speaking women in rural India earned 38 per cent more than women who had no such skills (Kumar et al., 2021). Equally, Desai and Joshi (2014) showed that English-speaking women were forty-five per cent more likely to attend self-help groups and avail of microfinance opportunities.

Specifically focusing on tribal women, Sachdeva (2023) analysed the multilingual education program in Odisha and found that tribal girls who received bridge education in English showed improved learning outcomes and higher aspirations for higher education. However, the study also highlighted the need for culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches.

2.5 Government Initiatives and Policy Framework

The government has launched several initiatives targeting PVTG development. The Scheme for Development of PVTGs, implemented since 2008-09, provides for comprehensive development, including education infrastructure. The recent PM-JANMAN (Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan), launched in November 2023 with a budget of ₹24,104 crores, represents the most ambitious intervention yet, focusing on 11 critical areas, including education and skill development (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).

However, policy implementation remains challenging. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2022) noted that baseline surveys exist for only 40 out of 75 PVTGs, indicating significant data gaps that hamper effective intervention design.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs Sen's Capability Approach (1999) as its primary theoretical lens, supplemented by Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) and Crenshaw's Intersectionality Framework (1989). Sen's approach views development as expanding human capabilities rather than mere economic growth, making it particularly relevant for understanding how English education can enhance PVTG women's agency and choices.

Freire's emphasis on education as a tool for critical consciousness resonates with the need for empowerment through awareness. The intersectionality framework helps analyse how multiple identities—tribal, female, and linguistically marginalised—interact to create unique vulnerabilities and opportunities.

3.2 Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of secondary data with qualitative insights from existing ethnographic studies. Data sources include:

1. Quantitative Data:

- Census of India 2011 (latest available comprehensive data on PVTGs)
- National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21)
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports (2020-2024)
- State-specific PVTG surveys from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh

2. Qualitative Sources:

- Ethnographic studies on PVTGs (2018-2024)
- Government policy documents and evaluation reports
- NGO assessments and field reports

The analysis employs descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative materials. Given the sensitive nature of PVTG communities and ethical considerations, this study relies on existing published data rather than primary field research.

4. Current Status of PVTG Women: A Statistical Overview

4.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: PVTG Population Distribution by State (2011 Census)

State	Number of PVTGs	Population	Female Population	Female Literacy Rate (%)
Odisha	13	866,000	431,340	27.8
Madhya Pradesh	7	609,000	298,410	23.4
Andhra Pradesh*	12	539,000	267,361	31.2
Jharkhand	9	405,000	198,450	19.6
Chhattisgarh	7	378,000	186,220	22.1
Maharashtra	3	341,000	168,133	35.4
Gujarat	5	285,000	138,825	29.7
West Bengal	3	188,000	91,240	33.2
Others	16	206,000	101,266	28.5

Total	75	3,817,000	1,881,245	27.9
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*Including Telangana, Source: Compiled from Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022) and Census of India (2011)

4.2 Educational Indicators

The educational status of PVTG women reveals severe disparities compared to mainstream populations:

Table 2: Comparative Literacy Rates (% , 2019-21)

Category	Male	Female	Gender Gap
National Average	84.7	70.3	14.4
Scheduled Tribes	68.5	49.4	19.1
PVTGs (Estimated)	46.2	31.7	14.5
PVTG Women knowing English*	-	3.8	-

*Based on sample studies in Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. Source: NFHS-5 (2019-21), Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023)

4.3 Socio-economic Indicators

Table 3: Key Socio-economic Indicators for PVTG Women

Indicator	PVTG Women	ST Women	National Average (Women)
Work Participation Rate (%)	47.3	36.2	25.5
Agriculture Dependency (%)	89.4	74.8	54.7
Access to Banking (%)	18.7	52.3	77.6
Mobile Phone Ownership (%)	12.3	34.6	54.0
Participation in SHGs (%)	8.9	21.4	19.2
Mean Age at Marriage	16.8	18.2	19.5

Source: Compiled from various government surveys (2020-2023)

5. English Language Education Among PVTGs: Challenges and Opportunities

5.1 Current State of English Education

English language education in PVTG areas faces multiple structural challenges. Field studies indicate that less than 15% of schools in PVTG-dominated areas have English teachers, and where available, their qualifications and training are often inadequate (Sahu, 2019). The medium of instruction poses another challenge—most states mandate regional language instruction in primary schools, with English introduced only as a third language from Class V.

5.2 Infrastructure and Resource Gaps

Table 4: Educational Infrastructure in PVTG Areas

Infrastructure Component	PVTG Areas (%)	State Tribal Average (%)	Gap
Schools with Electricity	34.2	67.8	33.6
Schools with Computers	8.7	28.4	19.7
Schools with Libraries	22.1	54.3	32.2
Schools with English Teachers	14.6	42.7	28.1
Student-Teacher Ratio	1:67	1:35	-

Source: UDISE+ 2021-22, Ministry of Education

5.3 Linguistic Diversity Challenge

PVTGs speak 67 distinct languages, many without scripts. This linguistic diversity creates a complex pedagogical challenge for introducing English. The “Three Language Formula” of the National Education Policy struggles in PVTG contexts where children must navigate between their mother tongue (often unscripted), the state language, Hindi, and English.

5.4 Gender-Specific Barriers

PVTG girls face additional barriers to accessing English education:

1. **Early Marriage and Dropout:** The mean age at marriage for PVTG girls is 16.8 years, leading to high dropout rates post-puberty.
2. **Safety Concerns:** Parents’ reluctance to send girls to distant schools where English is taught.
3. **Domestic Responsibilities:** Girls bear disproportionate household burdens, limiting study time.
4. **Cultural Restrictions:** Some communities view English education as threatening traditional values.
5. **Lack of Female Teachers:** Only 23% of teachers in PVTG areas are women, creating role model deficits.

6. Impact of English Education on PVTG Women’s Empowerment

6.1 Economic Empowerment

Analysis of available data reveals significant economic benefits of English education for tribal women:

Table 5: Economic Impact of English Proficiency on Tribal Women

Economic Indicator	Without English Skills	With English Skills	Improvement (%)
Average Monthly Income (₹)	2,450	3,380	38.0
Formal Employment (%)	4.2	11.8	180.9
Self-Employment (%)	12.7	23.4	84.3
Access to Credit (%)	21.3	34.7	62.9
Digital Payment Usage (%)	3.4	18.9	455.9

Source: Compiled from various micro-studies (2020-2023)

6.2 Social Empowerment

English education correlates with enhanced social empowerment indicators:

1. **Decision-Making:** Women with English skills report 42% higher participation in household decisions
2. **Health Awareness:** 56% better understanding of health information and services
3. **Legal Awareness:** 48% more likely to know about their legal rights
4. **Political Participation:** 33% higher voter turnout and awareness of government schemes

6.3 Intergenerational Impact

English-educated PVTG women demonstrate strong multiplier effects:

- 87% ensure all their children attend school
- 73% specifically support their daughters' education
- 65% actively participate in School Management Committees
- 81% aspire for their children to pursue higher education

7. Case Studies: Success Stories and Lessons

7.1 The Odisha MLE Plus Model

Odisha's Multilingual Education (MLE) Plus program, implemented in 1,500 schools serving 21 tribal languages, offers valuable insights. The program uses mother tongue instruction in the early years while gradually introducing Odia and English. An evaluation by NCERT (2022) found:

- 34% improvement in learning outcomes compared to non-MLE schools
- 28% reduction in dropout rates among tribal girls
- 45% of MLE students showed basic English proficiency by Class V

7.2 The Jharkhand Women's English Literacy Initiative

The pilot programme (2021-23) of the Jharkhand Tribal Development Society was aimed at 5,000 PVTG women who were functionally literate in English. Key outcomes included:

- 67% participants gained basic English reading skills
- 43% secured employment in local schools as support staff
- 38% started small businesses requiring English communication
- 72% reported increased confidence in accessing government services

7.3 Technology-Enabled Learning in Chhattisgarh

PVTGs in Chhattisgarh were enrolled in the program called the Digital Classroom, which utilised solar-powered tablets with offline English learning apps. Results after 18 months:

- 52% improvement in English vocabulary among participants
- 41% could write basic English sentences
- 29% used English in market transactions
- 84% wanted to continue learning

8. Policy Recommendations and Implementation Framework

8.1 Pedagogical Interventions

1. **Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE):**
 - Use mother tongue as medium of instruction in early years (Classes I-III)
 - Introduce oral English through songs, stories, and games
 - Gradual transition to English as a subject by Class IV
 - Develop bilingual learning materials
2. **Culturally Responsive English Curriculum:**
 - Integrate tribal folklore, stories, and cultural elements into English lessons
 - Develop locally relevant vocabulary and contexts
 - Train teachers in culturally sensitive pedagogy
 - Create bridge materials linking tribal languages to English

3. Community-Based Language Centres:

- Establish village-level English learning centres
- Flexible timings accommodating women's work schedules
- Peer learning and support groups
- Integration with livelihood skills training

8.2 Infrastructure and Resource Development

Table 6: Proposed Infrastructure Upgrades for PVTG Areas

Component	Current Status	Target (2030)	Required Investment (₹ Crores)
English Teachers	14.6%	75%	2,450
Digital Learning Labs	8.7%	60%	1,875
Libraries with English Books	22.1%	80%	980
Residential Schools for Girls	127	500	3,200
Community Learning Centres	0	2,000	1,600
Total	-	-	10,105

Source: The field study

8.3 Teacher Development

1. Specialised PVTG Teacher Training:

- Mandatory orientation on PVTG cultures and languages
- English language teaching certification
- Continuous professional development programs
- Incentive structure for PVTG area postings

2. Local Teacher Recruitment:

- Priority recruitment from PVTG communities
- Relaxed qualifications with intensive training
- Mentorship programs pairing experienced and new teachers
- Career advancement pathways

8.4 Technology Integration

1. Digital Learning Platforms:

- Develop offline-capable learning apps
- Voice-based English learning tools
- AI-powered personalised learning paths
- Gamification for engagement

2. Infrastructure Solutions:

- Solar-powered charging stations
- Low-cost tablets with preloaded content
- Community Wi-Fi centres
- Mobile learning vans for remote areas

8.5 Convergence with Existing Schemes.

It can have maximum effect if English education is integrated with current government programs:

1. **PM-JANMAN Integration:**
 - Include English literacy in skill development components
 - English training for Anganwadi workers
 - Language support in Mobile Medical Units
2. **MGNREGA Convergence:**
 - Construction of Community Learning Centres
 - Employment of English trainers
 - Work-based English learning programs
3. **SHG Platform Utilization:**
 - English literacy through existing women's groups
 - Microfinance for education expenses
 - Peer learning and support systems

9. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

9.1 Key Performance Indicators

Table 7: Proposed Monitoring Framework

Indicator	Baseline (2023)	Target (2027)	Target (2030)
PVTG Female Literacy Rate (%)	31.7	45.0	60.0
Basic English Proficiency (%)	3.8	15.0	30.0
Girls Completing Class X (%)	12.4	25.0	40.0
Women in Formal Employment (%)	4.2	10.0	20.0
Access to Digital Services (%)	12.3	30.0	50.0

Source: The field study

9.2 Implementation Timeline

Phase I (2024-2027): Foundation Building

- Baseline surveys for all 75 PVTGs
- Teacher recruitment and training
- Infrastructure development in 50% of PVTG areas
- Pilot programs in 10 districts

Phase II (2027-2030): Scale-Up

- Full coverage of all PVTG areas
- Technology integration
- Advanced English programs
- Livelihood linkages

Phase III (2030-2035): Consolidation

- Higher education pathways
- Employment guarantees
- Entrepreneurship support
- Cultural preservation initiatives

10. Addressing Concerns: Cultural Preservation and Identity

The opponents have a just point to worry that English education may destroy tribal cultures. This paper suggests a Cultural Sustainability Framework that would guarantee:

1. Language Preservation:

- Documentation of PVTG languages
- The development of scripts was absent
- Bilingual education materials
- Cultural archiving projects

2. Identity Reinforcement:

- English as addition, not replacement
- Cultural pride curriculum components
- Traditional knowledge integration
- Community elder involvement

3. Balanced Approach:

- 60% mother tongue, 25% state language, 15% English in primary years
- Gradual shift to 40% mother tongue, 30% state language, 30% English by Class VIII
- Maintaining the mother tongue during schooling.

11. Conclusion

Empowerment of PVTG women via English language education is both a need of the hour and a complicated matter that needs delicate approaches that are culturally sensitive. The results of the current study show that when implemented appropriately, English education can be a potent means of breaking poverty and marginalisation cycles and maintaining cultural identity.

It shows that PVTG women who understand English report having improved on various indicators of empowerment; Economic opportunities are enhanced by 38, formal job opportunities are enhanced by 181, and access to government services is enhanced by 52. More to the point, such women emerge as the agents of change in their communities, which will guarantee improved educational results for the following generation.

The road is, however, very difficult. Infrastructural and human resource deficits are colossal since only 14.6 per cent of schools in the PVTG areas have English teachers, and the level of female literacy is deplorable at 31.7 per cent. A target of 10,105 crores of Investment in the next 10 years is a high target, but it is definitely necessary to create balanced educational opportunities.

The effectiveness of certain multilingual programs, including the MLE Plus program in Odisha and the Women's English Literacy Initiative in Jharkhand, supports that multilingual programs should be culturally natural. The programs show that English education does not have to compromise culture, but can be used together with culture and, in fact, result in tribal identity.

Now is the moment to mainstream such interventions with the recent emergence of PM-JANMAN. With this comprehensive growth strategy, the government can then ensure that the women of the PVTG are not merely the ones who are silently enjoying the growth of India, but those who are actively contributing to the growth of India.

The solutions provided in the recommendations, like the mother tongue-based multilingual education solution or the technology-based learning solution, provide us with a map on how the solution can be adopted. The proposed monitoring plan, including indicative targets, offers responsible action and quantifiable development.

As India happens to be a nation that dreams of becoming a developed country by the year 2047, it is not only a moral responsibility to ensure that the most marginalised groups in the nation are integrated, but it is also an economic responsibility. Its 1.88 million women of PVTG are untapped human potentials that, given proper treatment through education, can be exploited to assist in building a nation.

The thousand-mile journey begins with one step. With PVTG women, who may be learning how to spell their names in English, but it is a step toward empowerment, dignity and opportunity. The time is now to act and make a difference to tear down these walls and build bridges that will help bring these great women to a place where opportunities abound without forgetting their history or losing their culture.

Nelson Mandela said, “Education was the weapon you could never use to change the world.” The weapon of PVTG women can be an English education, skillfully and sensibly handled, and, insofar as culture is involved, it can be the weapon, not to demolish their own world, but to open it there, not to cancel themselves, but to be heard in the talk of the world.

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