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Tribal education in odisha: An exploratory study of ho children's access to quality education in elementary stage in present context under nep 2020

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Abstract

In this light, this study focuses on understanding whether the Ho tribal children in Odisha have real access to and translate their entitlements into the reality of quality elementary education as per the aspirations of NEP 2020. The paper draws on a systematic secondary data review to examine these three intersecting areas: mother-tongue based instruction and Multilingual Education (MLE), culturally-responsive pedagogy, and the dynamics in implementation of policy at community level. Results have revealed that although NEP 2020 states mother-tongue educating and a decentralised-inclusive school system, in Ho-dominated districts there is an uneven MLE implementation, shortages of Ho-speaking teachers; insufficient contextualised instructional materials and infrastructural limitations inhibit retention and learning outcomes. The analysis focuses on state level responses to create resources in more MLE classrooms and encourage enrollment of teachers but cautions that these are likely to remain sporadic unless the state offers community-based curricula, properly trains teachers under the tribal pedagogy and implements robust monitoring. Key policy recommendations include scale-up of Ho-language materials and teacher recruitment; institutionalisation of Warang Chiti where suitable, setting up tribal representation structures in School Management Committees well atop the political orders and investment in context-sensitive implementation plans to translate NEP 2020 objectives to culturally embedded practices.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Ho tribe, tribal education, mother tongue instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, educational equity

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

India's educational framework has consistently strived for inclusivity and equity, yet tribal communities, particularly in states like Odisha, continue to face systemic barriers to accessing quality education. Odisha is home to 64 tribal groups, with the Ho tribe being one of the major and most socio-culturally distinct among them. Residing predominantly in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Sundargarh, Balasore, Dhenkanal, Jajpur, Deogarh, and Angul, the Ho people speak the Ho language, belonging to the Austroasiatic linguistic family, having its own written script called "Warang Chiti" invented by Pandit Lako Bodra, which consists of 32 letters, both capital and small and retains strong Indigenous traditions, livelihoods, and belief systems. Despite various government initiatives, children from the Ho community continue to face significant challenges in attaining quality education, especially during the foundational elementary stage (Grades I-VIII), which is crucial for long-term academic and socio-emotional development whether there are MLE schools running in some regions of Odisha by the state Government.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative shift in India's educational vision, emphasizing early childhood care, mother tongue-based instruction, inclusive curricula, and equity-driven strategies. It prioritizes equitable learning outcomes for historically marginalized communities, including Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, translating the NEP 2020 framework into practical, context-sensitive, and linguistically relevant educational delivery remains a significant challenge in areas dominated by tribal populations. While NEP 2020 offers a promising blueprint, its implementation in tribal regions such as those inhabited by the Ho community raises critical questions about linguistic inclusion, cultural relevance, teacher preparedness, infrastructural adequacy, and community engagement.

The Ho community has historically encountered educational exclusion due to geographic

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remoteness, lack of schools, insufficient Ho-speaking teachers, inadequate teacher training in tribal pedagogy, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This study explores how NEP 2020 has influenced educational access and quality for Ho children in Odisha's elementary education stage, with a special focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, mother tongue instruction, infrastructural development, and community participation.

1.2 Context of Tribal Education in Odisha

Tribal population of Odisha, one-fourth of the state population have been marginalized in the education system. Although certain tribal education promotion initiatives like Ashram schools are available, large gaps still persist at the level of literacy and attainments in the field of education. High dropout rates, especially at the primary and upper primary levels among tribal children is attributed to reasons that include language barriers, poverty and lack of parental awareness.

The Ho community, which is present in numbers in Odisha as well, similarly struggles with the challenge of language and cultural assimilation within the mainstream education. While attempts have been made for providing mother tongue-based education (MLE) in tribal areas, the effectiveness and coverage of such MLE need to be closely examined within the NEP 2020 framework.

1.3 NEP 2020 and its Implications for Tribal Education

This policy strongly emphasizes inclusive education, promoting multilingualism and cultural integration as part of the teaching-learning process. It promotes the mother tongue or regional languages as Medium of Instruction (MoI) for at least Grade 1-5, and ideally until extended to grade 8th and beyond. It also emphasizes culturally relevant curricula, strong teacher development and community engagement to provide a supportive learning environment for all students, including those from historically underserved populations.

Implementation of these provisions in tribal areas particularly for the Ho community is, however, a bit challenging to come up with. This includes securing a force of qualified, tribal language-fluent teachers; creation of bilingual educational materials that are evidence-based and can stand up to the same scrutiny as any state's curriculum offering; and moving beyond current systemic social, economic, and cultural barriers.

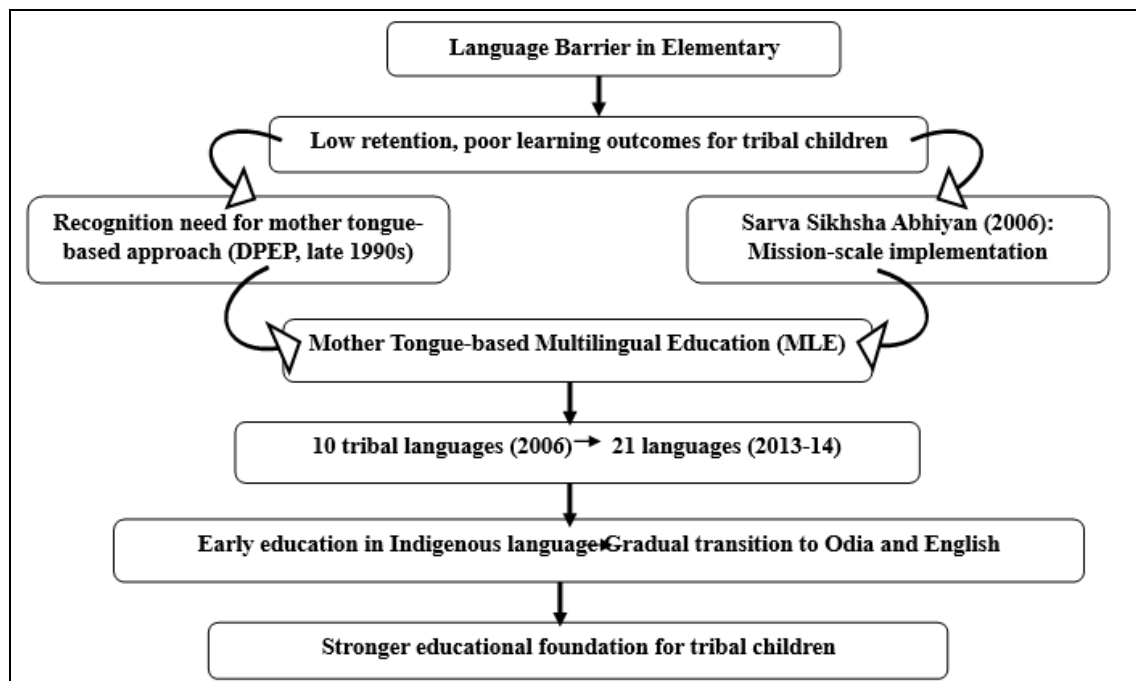
1.4 Bridging the Linguistic Divide for Tribal Children in Elementary Schools

Odisha, one of the country's most linguistically and culturally varied states has difficulty in delivering quality education to its large tribal population. Presently, although

Odia is the state language and the language of school education, a sizeable number of tribal children speak different mother tongues which are mainly indigenous languages thereby creating a great linguistic divide preventing their educational growth especially at the primary level.

- **The challenge of language barrier in elementary education:** Odisha has tribal children who are by default coming for the first time to formal school and that too in a language not heard or spoken by them. There is a linguistic divide here, which hampers the seamless transition for that child from her home environment into the classroom and makes it more difficult for her to follow through already during early days of schooling itself absorbing lessons with ease, participating actively and getting meaningfully engaged in what has been designed as curriculum for them. Textbooks releases are contextual to us; this issue is even worst with tribal children as most of the time they come across unfamiliar terms leading to lower retention rates and low learning outcomes. This approach aligns with the core principles of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, which emphasizes that multilingualism should be considered an asset, not a limitation, in educational settings.
- **Multilingual Education (MLE) as a solution:** In its quest for solution, Odisha has initiated a unique and first-of-its-kind endeavour that has established Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE) in elementary schools in tribal majority areas. Understanding the significance of mother tongue instruction in early learning, it is meant to cultivate a strong educational base for tribal children by imparting education primarily in their indigenous languages and transitioning them into Odia medium syllabus with English as a medium of instructions from class British Sign Language Meanwhile 1 onward.
- **Historical context and evolution of MLE in Odisha:** The path to MLE in Odisha started with the identification of language as an issue early on in the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in late 1990s through linguistic surveys, and the need for a mother-tongue based approach. These new efforts led the foundation for MLE when it was taken up on a mission scale under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2006. In the beginning, 10 tribal languages were covered under this program by 2013-14 it was expanded to 21 tribal languages.

Mother Tongue- Based Multilingual Education (MLE) in Odisha: How it works



Key features and strategies of the Odisha MLE program

- **The Medium of Instruction:** The mother-tongue based instruction (MTBI) in the early grades, especially at grade 1.
- **Phased Language Transition:** Odia is taught in phases Starting from Class II with oral and written alphabets, till the student can read and write this language. Odia is medium of instruction from Class V upwards, mother tongue as a subject.
- **Contextualized Curriculum & Materials Teacher:** learning material including text books and supplementary reading material is prepared in tribal languages using tribe culture, folk tales, songs & traditions as a subject.
- **Teacher Recruitment and Training:** Teachers from the specific tribal communities are recruited and go through proper training to use MLE approaches in their teaching practices i.e. an approach which helps them teach in a culturally responsive manner while handling students coming from different languages, within the same classroom
- **Community Involvement:** It actively encourages community participation through programs like “Srujan” that ensures the enthusiasts within a community help create an atmosphere where learning is fun and local knowledge flows nonchalantly into the curriculum of the school.
- **Strong support system:** Tribal Education Coordinators (TECs), District Institutes of Education and Trainings (DIETs) and District Resource Groups are responsible for academic as well as administrative support to facilitate smooth delivery of the programme, close monitoring and timely redressal of the issues.

1.5 Challenges

Challenges though must be as is with any program and it was the case in the Odisha MLE. Other studies point out complaints about lack of teacher preparation, tardy arrival of materials for learning, low student participation, negative parental attitudes, lack of incentives for teachers and the

isolation of local schools. Solving this entails sustained investment, strong monitoring, development of contextual curriculum and efforts to sensitize and engage the tribal communities.

In assumption, the Multilingual Education Odisha Initiative of educating the tribal children is in positive alignment with fostering inclusive education and sustaining linguistic diversity alongside bestowing cultural heritage. While the program still faces infrastructural challenges, its success to date reaffirms our belief in the power of mother tongue-based education as an effective tool to provide agency to tribal children and increased equitable participation for their children within the educational system.

1.6 Research Aim

This research aims to explore the extent to which Ho tribal children in Odisha are able to access and benefit from quality elementary education in alignment with the vision and provisions of the National Education Policy 2020.

1.7 Research Rationale

There exists a critical need to investigate how the NEP 2020 is transforming educational realities in tribal communities such as the Ho tribe. Although multiple educational policies in India have emphasized tribal welfare, evidence shows that the learning outcomes, school retention rates, and transition to higher levels of education remain dismally low among tribal students. According to UDISE+ and ASER reports, tribal children often lag behind their peers in literacy, numeracy, and language comprehension. NEP 2020 brings a fresh opportunity to integrate mother tongue instruction, localised curricula, and experiential learning methods. However, for these policies to be successful, they must be contextualized to reflect the lived experiences, languages, and values of tribal communities. This research is significant because it focuses on a relatively under-researched tribal group, the Ho, whose educational needs and systemic barriers are poorly documented in existing academic literature. By focusing this community, the study contributes to policy discussions, program designs, and educational innovations tailored for Indigenous populations.

Moreover, the findings will support educational planners, tribal welfare departments, NGOs, and local governance bodies in Odisha to effectively implement inclusive educational models under NEP 2020.

2. Literature Review

Theme 1: Access to Education among Tribal Communities

Access to elementary education in tribal areas has historically been constrained by geographic isolation, poverty, and institutional neglect. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), Scheduled Tribes (STs) exhibit the lowest literacy rates across all social groups in India. Studies by Govinda & Bandyopadhyay (2011)^[27] and Mehta (2016)^[22] show that school access does not always translate to consistent attendance or retention among tribal children due to factors such as child labour, early marriage, and seasonal migration. In Odisha, where the Ho tribe is primarily located, tribal literacy (as per Census 2011) lags behind the state average. Research by Padhi (2014)^[24] highlights infrastructural deficits in tribal districts insufficient classrooms, untrained teachers, and high dropout rates, as major impediments to quality education. Although residential schools such as Ashram and Ekalavya Model Schools were designed to mitigate these barriers, questions remain about their cultural adaptability and inclusiveness.

Also, while Right to Education (RTE) has improved enrolment, tribal children often experience "silent exclusion" within classrooms, where learning outcomes remain poor despite physical presence (Jandhyala, 2012)^[26]. These issues make it imperative to assess whether NEP 2020 has triggered any qualitative shifts in Ho children's educational journey.

Theme 2: Language, Pedagogy and Cultural Relevance

The use of the child's mother tongue in early education is a key principle in NEP 2020, which aligns with global educational research emphasizing that children learn best in their first language (UNESCO, 2016)^[23]. Yet, India's formal education system continues to impose dominant state or national languages (such as Odia or Hindi), marginalising Indigenous languages like Ho. Research by Mohanty (2009)^[31] has critiqued "submersion" models of education, where tribal children are forced to abandon their linguistic identity in favour of unfamiliar languages. This leads to early alienation, poor academic performance, and loss of cultural identity. The Multilingual Education (MLE) program initiated in Odisha, though well-conceived, has faced challenges in scalability, availability of tribal-language teachers, and curriculum development (Mishra & Panda, 2017)^[21]. Pedagogical practices in tribal classrooms are often not aligned with the children lived realities. Studies (Nambissan, 2010)^[33] have shown that the curriculum is frequently urban-centric and does not reflect the knowledge systems or experiences of tribal communities. Teachers are rarely trained in culturally responsive teaching or in understanding tribal worldviews, contributing to an implicit bias in classroom interactions.

Hence, literature highlights the urgent need for curriculum decentralisation, teacher sensitisation, and integration of Indigenous knowledge. However, studies specifically exploring how these pedagogical principles are being implemented post-NEP 2020 in Ho tribal areas are scarce.

Theme 3: Policy Implementation and Community Participation under NEP 2020

NEP 2020 advocates for localised decision-making, increased school-community engagement, and decentralised planning. It recommends School Complexes and community-led School Management Committees (SMCs) to promote accountability and inclusivity. However, effective implementation of these provisions in tribal areas remains inconsistent. Studies (Singh, 2021; Yadava, 2022)^[14, 10] note that although NEP 2020 has progressive ideals, translating policy into practice requires capacity-building at grassroots levels and involvement of tribal communities in decision-making. In many tribal regions, SMCs are either inactive or operate under the influence of non-tribal bureaucrats, limiting their effectiveness. Field-based evidence from Odisha is limited. While NGOs have played a role in fostering community participation, government-led efforts have often failed to establish sustained relationships with tribal stakeholders. The role of digital technologies highlighted in NEP 2020 also remains questionable in remote areas with limited electricity, network, or digital literacy.

Thus, the literature underlines a clear need to examine how NEP 2020 is perceived and experienced by tribal communities, especially in terms of participation, monitoring, and ownership of educational processes. Research focusing on the Ho community's engagement with these reforms is nearly non-existent.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. CRP, as articulated by Ladson-Billings (1995)^[32], emphasises the importance of aligning pedagogy with learners' cultural identities, languages, and community knowledge. It advocates for inclusive teaching practices that recognise and affirm the unique social and linguistic identities of tribal learners. Bronfenbrenner's framework (1979), on the other hand, situates educational outcomes within multiple layers of environmental influence from the classroom and family (microsystem) to policy frameworks like NEP 2020 (macrosystem). This dual framework helps explore not only the content of education (language, pedagogy) but also the structural and systemic environments in which tribal education is situated.

2.2 Literature Gap

Despite increasing academic attention to tribal education in India, three key gaps remain. First, most existing literature offers macro-level analysis without focusing on individual tribal communities such as the Ho, who have a distinct linguistic and cultural profile. Second, while NEP 2020 is frequently discussed in policy papers and theoretical commentaries, empirical studies evaluating its impact on tribal learners in specific contexts are severely lacking. Third, the interaction between language policy, teacher practice, and community engagement under NEP 2020 remains an under-researched triad. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by generating field-based insights on how the NEP 2020 is unfolding in the lives of Ho children, with a focus on language, access, pedagogy, and participation.

2.3 Research Gap

While there is a growing body of literature on tribal

education in India, most studies tend to focus on macro-level analyses or broader categories of Scheduled Tribes without disaggregating data based on individual tribal identities. Very limited empirical research exists specifically on the Ho tribe, especially in the context of NEP 2020's implementation. Furthermore, while NEP 2020 emphasizes mother tongue instruction and early childhood education, there is a lack of research assessing how these principles are operationalized in tribal schools, what challenges schools and teachers face in implementing them, and how tribal communities perceive these reforms. This gap makes it difficult to evaluate the policy's real impact on marginalized tribal learners. This study addresses this void by generating qualitative and quantitative insights into the lived educational experiences of Ho children in Odisha under NEP 2020.

3. Research Objectives

- To assess the status of access to elementary education among Ho children in selected districts of Odisha.
- To evaluate the implementation of NEP 2020 provisions particularly mother tongue- based education, inclusive curricula, and teacher training in schools serving Ho children.
- To identify socio-cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural barriers affecting the delivery of quality education to Ho children at the elementary level.
- To examine community perceptions and parental involvement in education among the Ho community under the NEP 2020 framework.
- To recommend strategies for improving the implementation of NEP 2020 to enhance educational equity for tribal children in Odisha.

4. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a descriptive research design based entirely on secondary data sources to explore the access of Ho tribal children in Odisha to quality elementary education in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. As a qualitative inquiry rooted in documentary analysis, the research relies on the systematic review and interpretation of existing literature, government reports, policy documents, and educational data published by national and state-level institutions. Key materials include official publications from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), and Odisha's Department of School and Mass Education, along with reports from organisations such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+), and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). These sources provide statistical insights into enrolment rates, dropout patterns, school infrastructure, language instruction practices, and teacher availability in tribal areas, particularly in districts inhabited by the Ho community. Academic journal articles, doctoral theses, and working papers published by educational researchers and tribal studies scholars were also analysed to understand the pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of tribal education in India. Peer-reviewed databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ERIC, and Google Scholar were used to extract relevant literature using keywords like "Tribal Education in Odisha," "Ho Tribe Education," "NEP 2020 Implementation," "Mother Tongue Instruction," and "Multilingual Education." In addition, the study examined

NEP 2020's provisions, comparing policy intent with documented implementation realities across tribal regions. Grey literature, including NGO reports, field notes, and media coverage, was also reviewed to gain nuanced perspectives on the ground-level experiences of tribal communities. A thematic analysis approach was used to categorise the secondary data into core focus areas: educational access, language and pedagogy, and policy-community interface, aligning with the study's objectives. This method allowed the researcher to explore the convergence and divergence between national educational goals and the actual conditions prevailing in tribal schools. While the reliance on secondary data imposes limitations such as the inability to capture real-time community voices or school-level observations, the breadth of documented evidence across various credible sources offers a comprehensive foundation for understanding the broader patterns, gaps, and challenges facing Ho children in accessing quality education. Ethical considerations were maintained by citing all sources accurately and ensuring that data was drawn from publicly available or academically verifiable platforms. In sum, the secondary descriptive approach provided a robust methodological basis for critically examining how NEP 2020 aligns with or falls short of addressing the educational needs of Ho tribal children in Odisha.

5. Discussion

The findings drawn from secondary data highlight a complex and layered reality surrounding the educational experiences of Ho children in Odisha. Despite the progressive intent of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, significant gaps persist between policy objectives and ground-level implementation. At the core of these challenges lies a disconnect between the cultural and linguistic realities of tribal communities and the standardized, often urban-centric, frameworks that dominate elementary education in India. While NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusion, equity, and mother tongue instruction, the Ho community's lived educational experiences reveal ongoing exclusion due to systemic neglect, infrastructural inadequacy, and limited community participation. One of the primary challenges is access to quality education. While enrolment rates have shown improvement in tribal districts such as Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar, this quantitative success is not mirrored in learning outcomes or retention rates. Reports from UDISE+ and ASER reveal that many tribal children, including those from the Ho community, attend school irregularly, often due to socio-economic burdens, language barriers, and lack of motivation. Moreover, many schools are located far from tribal settlements, making daily attendance a logistical challenge, especially for younger children. This issue is further exacerbated by the shortage of Ho-speaking teachers, making classroom instruction alienating and ineffective for first-generation learners. NEP 2020 promises foundational literacy and numeracy for all children, yet tribal learners are left behind when the curriculum, language of instruction, and teaching style do not reflect their realities.

A significant issue that emerged from the literature is the gap in linguistic and cultural alignment. Although NEP 2020 promotes mother tongue instruction at the foundational stage, its implementation remains inconsistent and poorly supported in tribal contexts. The Ho language, despite its

wide usage in certain districts, is still not widely institutionalised in the educational system. While the Multilingual Education (MLE) program was introduced in Odisha with the aim of using tribal languages in early education, the scale, quality, and sustainability of the program remain limited. In many schools, Odia or Hindi continues to be the medium of instruction from the first grade, causing cognitive dissonance and early disinterest in learning among Ho children. Additionally, curriculum content often fails to reflect tribal culture, knowledge systems, and day-to-day experiences. The lack of culturally relevant pedagogy alienates tribal students from mainstream education, reinforcing a cycle of marginalisation.

Another critical theme is the disconnect between policy and grassroots-level implementation. NEP 2020 sets forth transformative goals for decentralised, participatory, and inclusive education systems. However, the mechanisms for translating these goals into actionable strategies in tribal areas remain weak. School Management Committees (SMCs), which are designed to ensure community participation, are often underutilised or dominated by non-tribal members, limiting the agency of tribal parents and leaders in educational decision-making. There is a noticeable gap in teacher training, particularly in tribal pedagogy, inclusive methods, and multilingual teaching. Teachers posted in tribal schools frequently lack cultural competence and are not adequately prepared to engage meaningfully with tribal learners. Moreover, education officers and bureaucrats often treat tribal education as a compliance issue rather than a context-sensitive developmental priority, leading to the adoption of one-size-fits-all approaches that undermine NEP's core principles.

The research also reveals that digital and technological initiatives, such as those proposed in NEP 2020, are far from being realised in Ho-dominated regions. The digital divide is stark; many villages lack internet access, electricity, or digital literacy, making e-learning initiatives inaccessible to the majority of tribal children. While NEP 2020 encourages the use of technology to bridge learning gaps, its rollout in tribal belts has only widened existing inequalities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, most Ho children were excluded from digital education due to a lack of smartphones, online platforms in tribal languages, or parental support. This digital exclusion has long-term consequences for learning continuity and educational equity.

One positive insight, however, is the resilience and enthusiasm within the Ho community toward education, despite systemic challenges. Several NGOs and community-led initiatives have made strides in developing Ho-language learning materials, promoting local tutors, and conducting community awareness programs. These grassroots efforts suggest that when tribal culture and language are acknowledged and respected, educational engagement improves significantly. The NEP 2020's emphasis on community ownership and flexibility in curriculum offers an opportunity to scale such models. However, for this to be realised, the policy must be actively reinterpreted through the lens of tribal realities, rather than being applied in its current top-down form.

In the end, this discussion points to the need for a context-specific, community-embedded implementation model of NEP 2020 in tribal regions. For Ho children to truly benefit from educational reforms, there must be a deliberate shift

toward empowering tribal communities in shaping local education policies. This includes recruiting and training teachers from the Ho community, producing textbooks in the Ho language, integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula, and building culturally affirming school environments. Additionally, there must be sustained investment in school infrastructure, transportation, and nutrition to support attendance and retention. In conclusion, the NEP 2020 holds immense potential to transform tribal education in India. But, without targeted strategies that reflect the linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of communities like the Ho, the policy risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to eliminate. The discussion reinforces that access to education must not be measured solely by enrolment figures but by the quality, relevance, and inclusivity of learning experiences. A truly equitable education system must begin with listening to the voices of those most excluded from it, and in Odisha, that means listening to the Ho children, their parents, and their communities.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the extent to which Ho tribal children in Odisha can access quality elementary education in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The findings, drawn from a comprehensive secondary analysis, reveal a persistent and multifaceted disconnect between the aspirations of NEP 2020 and the lived realities of the Ho community. While the policy framework emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and culturally rooted education, its on-ground implementation remains hindered by linguistic barriers, infrastructural deficits, pedagogical gaps, and limited community engagement. The absence of mother tongue-based instruction in many schools serving Ho children continues to impede cognitive development and emotional engagement. Moreover, a lack of culturally relevant curricula and inadequate teacher training further alienates tribal students from the mainstream education system. Although enrolment statistics in tribal districts have improved, the quality of education and student retention remain a pressing concern. NEP 2020's transformative vision will remain aspirational unless operationalised with a deep understanding of local sociocultural contexts and the specific needs of tribal learners.

Significantly the study underscores the critical role of community ownership and culturally responsive pedagogy in transforming tribal education. Empowering Ho communities to participate in educational planning, investing in tribal-language teachers, and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems are not supplementary measures; they are central to realising educational equity. Without these, the risk of perpetuating systemic exclusion under the guise of reform remains high.

In conclusion, bridging the gap between policy intent and grassroots realities requires not just administrative reform but a paradigmatic shift in how tribal education is conceived and delivered. For NEP 2020 to become truly inclusive, it must move from policy rhetoric to culturally anchored practice where every Ho child sees themselves reflected, respected, and empowered through education.

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