Struggling Against Social Exclusion: A Qualitative Study on the Odia Language Speakers in the Tea Community

Pollob Kumar Tanti*, Mohammad Monjur-Ul-Haider**

Abstract: The tea community people of Bangladesh have their own languages. Odia is one of them, The Bangladesh government is currently implementing initiatives to protect the language and culture of indigenous communities. Primary education in the mother tongue will help these ethnic communities protect their rights, and it is a process of inclusion. But the tea community is deprived of this initiative. The government does not provide them with any opportunities to get primary education in their mother tongue. It is a process of social exclusion. A total of 40 interviews had been carried out with the participants following purposive sampling to conduct this research. Observation, 24 in-depth interviews (IDI), 12 key informant interviews (KII), 1 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methods were followed to conduct the research. Results revealed that, the Odia language is a rich language having a written form, an alphabet, and an extensive amount of literature. Despite its richness, the Odia language of the tea community is being ignored day by day. As a result, the new generation is losing interest in communicating in their mother tongue. As these things are in the opposite position of inclusion, they can be identified as excluded.

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Introduction

Language is the finest channel of communication. Every community has its own language, through which the community members express their thoughts, emotions and communicate with one another. A language not only represents an individual's identity but also expresses the identity of a community. The language of a society expresses the history, past, and current conditions of its culture as well as the society itself. Education is the most effective means for the development of a society. And a society or a community will be properly educated when they get the privilege to receive their primary education in their mother tongue. The Bangladesh government is currently implementing initiatives to protect the language and culture of minor ethnic communities. Primary education in the mother tongue will help these ethnic communities protect their rights, and it is a process of inclusion. However, the tea community is deprived of this initiative. The government does not provide them with any opportunities to get primary education in their mother tongue. It is a process of social exclusion.

The concept of social inclusion and exclusion emerged in French policy debate in the mid-1970s (Jackson, 1999, 125). Later, in the late 1980s, the European Union adopted the idea as a crucial social policy term, frequently displacing the concept of poverty. Progressive agencies extensively recognized the concept and progression readings as an alternate method of appreciating and reducing deficiency in the South (Jackson, 1999, 125). Furthermore, the portrayal of social exclusion in relation to Southern cultures suggests an interaction of societal strategies for globalization and global immigration between the North and South (Maxwell, 1998, cited in Francis, 2000, 75). According to Silver (1994), the sense of social exclusion is

determined by the characteristics of the society or the leading example of the culture from which exclusion occurs (Francis, 2000, 75), and it varies in meaning according to national and philosophical milieus (Silver, 1994, 539). O'Brien and Penna (2007) said that the concept of social exclusion, as well as the modern European exploration programme based on it, were shaped by the difficulties associated with maintaining social direction and solidity.

Aside from the Bangali, several ethnic communities have lived in this land for a long time. The number of such categories varied between researchers. According to Shahed Hassan (2011) and others, "more than 45 small ethnic groups living in Bangladesh at present" (p. 07). The tea community is one of them. They have their own language and culture. In addition to their mother tongue, the community members practice the Bengali language from childhood. As the mainstream people's language is Bengali and the medium of education is also Bengali, these people have to practice the Bengali language. Furthermore, even if you want to acquire a job in the country, you must be able to communicate well in Bengali; thus, most parents push their children to speak and learn the Bengali language. As a result, the new generation is losing interest in communicating in their mother tongue. As these things are in the opposite position of inclusion, they can be identified as exclusions.

Relevant Literature Review and Study Gap

The Odia-speaking tea workers in Bangladesh represent a marginalized community facing linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic exclusion. This literature review explores existing research on their struggles, focusing on identity, language preservation, labor rights, and social integration.

Historical Context of Odia-speaking Tea Workers in Bangladesh

The tea workers in Bangladesh are primarily descendants of indentured laborers brought by British colonial rulers from

Odisha, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh in the 19th century (Bose, 1964; Rahman & Islam, 2018). Despite their long-standing presence, they remain socially and politically marginalized (Siddiqui, 2001). Historical studies highlight how colonial labor policies entrenched their exclusion, relegating them to low-wage plantation work with limited mobility (Guha, 1977).

Linguistic and Cultural Marginalization

Bangladesh government has implemented policies that promote education in the mother tongue. And some of those were established incorrectly. Lack persists, and these inclusions can occasionally be the source of social marginalization (Tripura et. al., 2017). Odia-speaking tea workers face linguistic discrimination, as Bangla dominates education, media, and governance (Mohsin, 2003). Their native language is often stigmatized, leading to generational erosion (Das, 2015). Ethnographic studies reveal that language barriers restrict access to healthcare, legal rights, and employment outside plantations (Chakma & Roy, 2020).

Socioeconomic Exclusion and Labor Exploitation

Research indicates that tea workers endure severe economic hardships, with wages below the national minimum (ILO, 2019). They live in isolated labor lines with poor infrastructure (Bhowmik, 2016). Studies highlight systemic discrimination in land ownership and citizenship rights (Sarker & Davey, 2020).

Resistance and Advocacy Efforts

Despite marginalization, Odia-speaking communities engage in cultural preservation through festivals (e.g., Durga Puja, Rathyatra) and oral traditions (Sen, 2018). NGOs and labor unions have mobilized for better wages and education (Bhattacharya, 2021). However, political underrepresentation remains a challenge (Ahmed, 2022).

Comparative Studies on Linguistic Minorities

Bangladeshi ethnic peoples indicate the presence of a 'mother tongue' and a 'national language' that is ideologically infused, complex, value-laden, relational, and paradoxical at the micro level (Sultana, 2021). Similar cases, such as Urdu-speaking Biharis in Bangladesh or Tamil tea workers in Sri Lanka, show parallel struggles (Hossain, 2017). Policies like mother-tongue education (e.g., in India's Odisha) could serve as models for linguistic inclusion (Patnaik, 2020).

There have been several research studies on how vernacular education can help ethnic people understand and anchor their cognitive and psychological talents. While labor exploitation is well-documented, few studies focus on Odia language erosion and identity politics. Qualitative research on grassroots resistance is also limited. However, it is not addressed how language might improve social inclusion or the functional upbringing of social exclusion among ethnic groups. This study seeks to demonstrate that social exclusion through language fills a vacuum in existing literature.

Objective

The study's major objective is to explore the pattern of Odia language as well as common conceptions and struggles about practicing this language.

The specific objectives are,

a. to know about the Odia language of the tea community in Sreemangal Upazila, and

b. to analyze the causes and patterns of social exclusion through this language.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Data Sources: This study was exploratory in character, with a qualitative approach. As the study was focused,

we used purposive sampling. We conducted interviews to obtain detailed information from the respondents. Both primary sources and secondary sources were used in this study. At the primary source, data were collected from rigorous fieldwork. In-depth Interviews (IDI), Key Informant Interviews (KII), and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted to collect primary data from participants. Both observation and field notes were taken throughout the field visit. Apart from the primary data, secondary data were extracted from websites, books, articles, journals, research reports, and newspapers to compare the situations.

Sample Size and Selection Procedure: A total of 40 participants were finally picked up using the purposive sampling technique. A cross-sectional study was conducted to acquire information about the exclusion process.

Table 1. Category of Informants, Methods, and Sample size

Category of Informants	Methods	No. of participants	Comment
Tea Worker (Odia Language Speaker)	In-depth interview (IDI), Key Informant Interview (KII), & Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	22	IDI (14 Persons), KII (4 Persons), FGD (6 Person)
Odia Language Teacher	Key Informant Interview (KII), Case Study	3	KII (2 Persons) Case Study (1 Person)

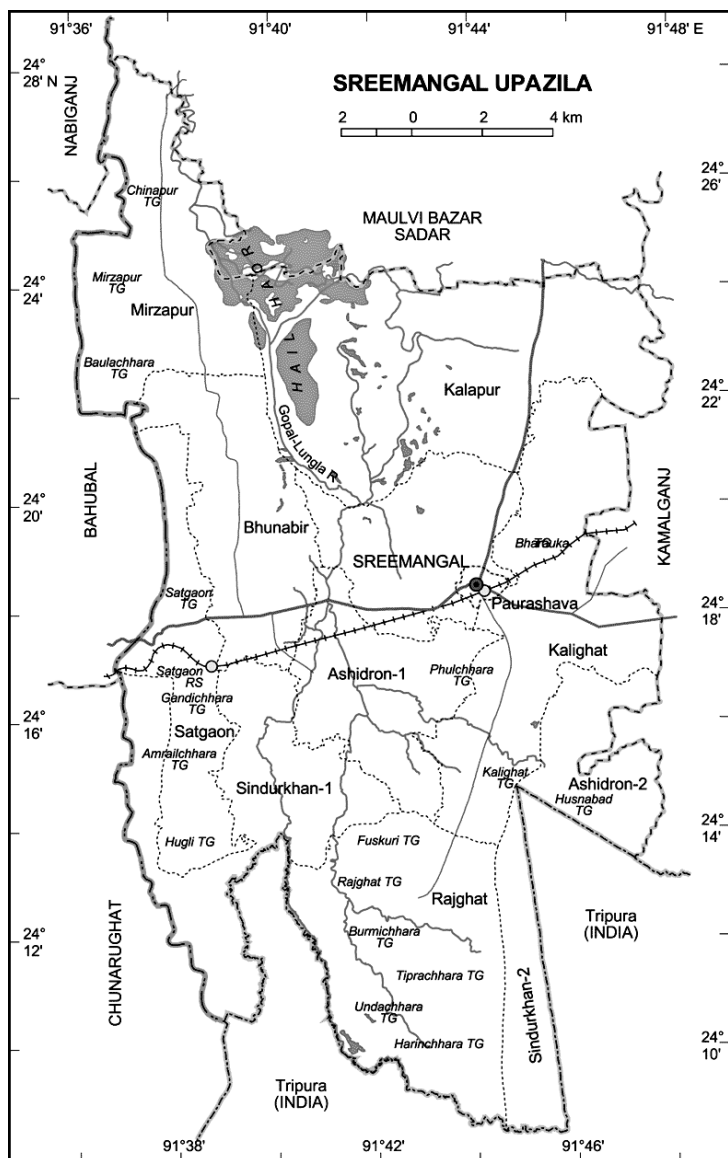| Students	In-depth interview (IDI)	8	IDI (8 Persons)
Social Worker and Professionals (Govt. and NGO job holder, odia language speaker)	Key Informant Interview (KII), Case Study	7	KII (6 Persons) Case Study (1 person)
Total Participants		40	

Ethical Issues: All information about participants was ethically considered. Before collecting data, both verbal and written consent of the participants was taken, and the participants were well explained the purpose of the research. Data were collected anonymously, and they considered the difficulties of writing the entire conversation on paper; an audio recording was used to record conversations and brief notes.

Study Setting: The study was carried out in two tea estates from two unions of Sreemangal Upazila under the Moulvibazar district.

Table 2. Study Area

District	Upazila	Union Council	Village
Moulvibazar	Sreemangal	7 no Rajghat	Rajghat Tea Estate
		8 no Kalighat	Kalighat Tea Estate

The fieldwork took place over a six-month period, from October 2023 to April 2024.

Map of the Study Area : Sreemangal Upazila, Moulvibazar District.

Source: https://images.app.goo.gl/BZixBSyvBpN7BZMB8

Results and Discussions

The findings of this study demonstrated how the vernacular could influence the social structure of both ethnic and non-ethnic communities. The Bangladesh government has launched an initiative to promote ethnic literacy in the home tongue. Ethnic development and understanding are significant developmental and programmatic priorities at both the national and regional levels. The government's top priorities include understanding ethnic concerns and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. A study developed from the information provided above will be an important source for determining the situation of the ethnic people at the bottom. It will continue to be the primary reference for any initiative aimed at benefiting the tea community people in that specific location. So, this study is highly crucial and a solid guideline for the government to increase its focus on pursuing future development efforts.

Noam Chomsky (1957), in his book 'Syntactic Structure,' said that "Language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length, and constructed out of a finite set of elements." (p. 13). A society's language conveys both the history and present circumstances of its culture and the society as a whole. In general, the term 'identity' refers to an individual's behavior and personality that allow the collective awareness of a society to form. It is primarily concerned with a person's positions, relationships, roles, reputations, and social dimensions within the society to which he or she belongs. Language and identity are fundamentally linked. Furthermore, language can express a society's culture in an experimental way.

In this study, the development process of ethnic community people was observed. And these types of development achievements are seen as social inclusion for ethnic community members. For these ethnic communities, the government and

other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have adopted some initials. And these initials are considered to be development projects aimed at protecting the rights of ethnic community members.

Odia language speakers are impacted as well by this issue, and as a result, several non-governmental organizations and governments are taking steps to protect their rights. After a lengthy period of time, the process of education through mother tongue has lately begun. Several ethnic communities are also able to receive an education in their mother tongue. This can be considered social inclusion if it runs properly. But the Odia language speakers of the tea community are deprived of this opportunity. No steps have been taken by the government or any NGO to preserve the linguistic rights of the tea community. As a result, the Odia language is gradually becoming extinct. This can be considered as social exclusion.

However, the tea community's Odia language has become muddled, and the current generation is unable to properly communicate in their mother tongue. It is because community members are required to talk in Bengali or English in academic settings.

Odia Language and Culture

The mother tongue of this community is Odia. The Odia alphabet has a total of 52 letters, of which 13 are vowels and 39 are consonants. The book for learning the Odia alphabet is called Chattashali Patho. Kalisas Kobi and Sarla Das Kobi are well known among the Odia poets. The pronunciation of the Odia alphabet has some similarities with the Bengali alphabet. However, Bengali and Odia consonants are both 39. It is believed the Odia language, like Bengali, has originated from the 'Gauro Apabhrangso.' Odia, like most languages worldwide, including Bengali, is written from left to right (left peripheral).
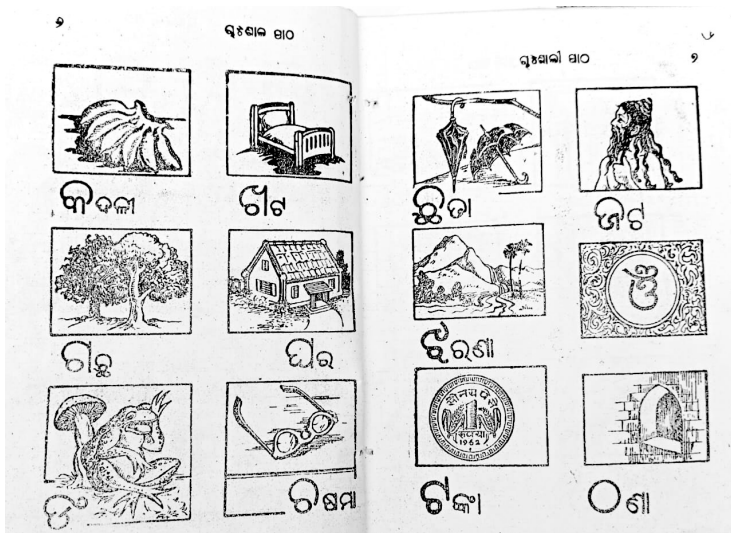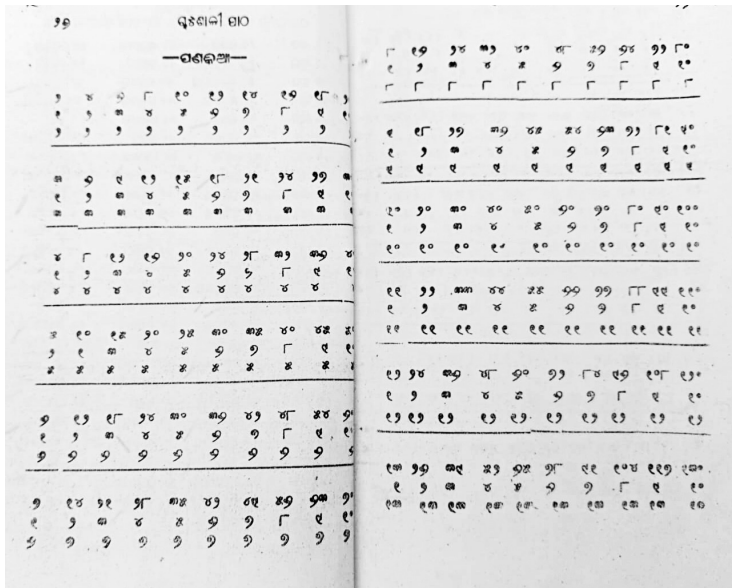
Figure 1: Odia Alphabet

Source: Collected from fieldwork (Rajghat Tea Estate, December 22, 2023)

According to the Odia grammar, the verb of a sentence is placed after the object, like in Bengali grammar. For example, if we translate "I eat rice" into Bangla and Odia, we see that in Bangla it is "ami vat khai" and in Odia it is "mu vato khauchi." Here, khauchi means to eat, and it is the verb in this statement. Thus, the Odia language is closely related to the Bengali language.

Figure 2: Identification of letter and number

Source: Collected from fieldwork (Rajghat Tea Estate, December 22, 2023)

Language and culture have an unbreakable connection; one cannot be imagined without the other. In this regard, the words of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908) are appropriate. Explaining language and culture, she said, 'Firstly, language and culture are homologous; secondly, historically, both are similar; and thirdly, language and culture are interrelated.' Culture is expressed through language, whether written, spoken, abstract, or symbolic. A close relationship between language and culture is also observed in the case of the Odia speaker of the tea community. Language and culture have an unbreakable connection; one cannot be imagined without the other. In this regard, the words of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908) are appropriate. Explaining language and culture, she said, 'Firstly, language and culture are homologous; secondly, historically, both are similar; and thirdly, language and culture are interrelated.' Culture is expressed through language, whether written, spoken, abstract, or symbolic. A

close relationship between language and culture is also observed in the case of the Odia speaker of the tea community.

The tea community's Odia speakers follow the Sanatan faith. All religious works on Sanatan Dharma are also written in Odia. Padma Purana, Surya Purana, Garuda Purana, Vishnu Purana, Vishamitra Purana, Kalki Purana, Narasimha Purana, Chandi Purana, Brahmabaivarta Purana, Shiva Purana, Lakshmi Purana, Markand Purana, Kartik Purana, and others (a total of 18 puranas) are well-known Sanatan Dharma Puranas written in Odia.

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Figure 3: Some Religious Literature (Puranas)

Source: Collected from fieldwork (Rajghat Tea Estate, December 28, 2023)

The Odia language has much folklore and literature. The Odia-speaking people also discuss and try to follow all of the

guidelines necessary for daily living that they have learned from numerous Odia literatures. Odia texts describe how a married couple should treat each other, how to treat others in the family, when is the best time to wake up, what to do next after waking up, and how everyone should act and perform in their daily activities. Some of these books include Prastaba Sindhu, Samsara Sargita, Gopibhasa, Rajokrira, Nandikaloganana, Bilongka Ramayana, Yamuni Bharato, Hanumano Prashan, Tustimalika, Sita Bilapo, Trinatho Mala, Narasimha Kabocho, Gurubaro Usha, Ganesho Bivuti, Sarvamangala Tusti, Murguni Tusti, Tulsi Malika, Gunasagro, Keshavkaili, Kantakaili, Baromasi Kaili, Mahabharata, etc.

Figure 4: Some Religious Literature

Source: Collected from fieldwork (Rajghat Tea Estate, December 28, 2023)

Social Exclusion through Odia Language

In Bangladesh, the Odia language-speaking tea community is bilingual and, in certain cases, multilingual. The majority of them can communicate in Bangla, Hindi, Jangli, and English as well. It does not imply that they have a high level of education;

rather, they need to learn those languages in order to survive and earn a livelihood. Their feelings towards the Odia language are ambivalent. Most of the tea workers (less educated or uneducated) on tea estates teach their children the Odia language. All communication with them is conducted in Odia. However, because no one understood the Odia language at school or outside the tea garden, they encouraged them to study Bangla in addition to the Odia language.

Case 1: Social Exclusion through Odia Language Speakers

Rumon Boonerjee, age 34, is a tea community member who lives in Rajghat Tea Estate. He holds a master's degree and works as a social worker. He is quite proud of his rich Odia culture and eager to learn more about it. As a result, he has collected some Odia literature. Unfortunately, he does not know how to read or write Odia. His mother tongue is Odia, but he has not had the opportunity to read or write in it since he was a child. As a result, he had difficulty understanding and receiving primary education in Bengali, the mainstream language. He didn't grasp many of the teachers' phrases. He gradually learned Bengali and completed his postgraduate studies. Even though he could read and write Bengali, his inertia kept him from speaking the language. He frequently blurted out words when speaking in Bengali, which made him feel humiliated. As a result, he struggled to make friends with mainstream Bengalis, with the exception of his own Odia-speaking buddies. In this scenario, he felt excluded from the others. Despite his advanced education, he regrets his inability to speak Bangla fluently. He also regrets his inability to read and write in his own language, Odia. According to him, there are no qualified teachers to provide Odia education in his area. As a result, despite his high level of education and passion, Rumon is denied an education in his mother tongue.

Pseudonym used to protect privacy

On the other hand, educated tea community members living on tea estates converse with their children in Bangla. All forms of communication are conducted in Bangla. They do not speak to their children in Odia, instead emphasizing the significance

of learning Bangla more than Odia. They believe that being able to speak and write Bangla fluently is essential for success in Bangladesh; thus, they prioritize teaching their children Bangla. These children's mother tongue is Bangla, as their parents never speak Odia to them. They have spoken to them in Bengla since they (the children) were born. Although the mother tongue of their parents is Odia, the mother tongue of the children is Bangla. Furthermore, when children of tea workers (who converse with their children in Odia) are asked if their mother tongue is Odia, they respond that it is Bangla. Because they learned from textbooks that our mother tongue is Bengla.

A tea worker, Kamal Boonerjee, (age 45) said,

> People used to laugh at us when we spoke to our friends in the Odia language outside the tea estate. They said, 'Look, the baganis are talking.' Many people insulted us by calling us 'Bagani Kuli.' But we are not 'Kuli'; we are 'tea workers.' I did not allow my child to speak Odia so that he would not have to go through this humiliation. We taught him Bangla since he was a child, and we solely spoke to him in Bangla.

The Odia-speaking tea community must communicate in the mainstream Bangla language in all aspects of their everyday lives, beginning with primary education. As a result, they and their children must learn Bangla. When asked why you don't teach your child Odia, a tea worker, Bosonto Tanti, (age 37) replied,

> Will anyone give my son a job if he knows the Odia language? To acquire a job in Bangladesh, you must know Bangla well; thus, I taught my son Bangla from a young age.

> **Case 2: Struggle against Social Exclusion**
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> Suresh Tanti, age 47, is a tea worker at Rajghat Tea Estate. He is also an Odia language teacher. He learned to read and write in his mother tongue, Odia, from his father. Now, he occasionally teaches the Odia alphabet to interested men and women in the evenings, but he is unable to do so on a regular basis. As a result, many interested students fail to show up at other times. He wishes to provide comprehensive Odia instruction to all interested parties, including primary school students. However, in order to earn a living, he must work in a tea plantation; thus, he is unable to fulfill this task. He wants to draw the attention of government and private groups by stating that if the government or any non-government organization pays his teaching costs for his living, he will be able to fully deliver his learning to everyone who requires it. In this way, students who have dropped out of primary school will be motivated to learn and will be able to complete primary school more easily if they have the option to learn in their native language.
>
> *Pseudonym used to protect privacy*

To establish oneself professionally in Bangladesh, you must be able to speak and write in Bangla. Furthermore, the Odia-speaking tea community is not given the opportunity to acquire education in their mother tongue other than Bengali. As a result, while many people can speak Odia, they are unable to read or write it. As a result, the current generation has lost interest in the Odia language. If this trend continues, the Odia language will eventually die. A student, Probir Nayek (14) Said,

> I can't speak the Bengla language properly. When I try to speak in Bengla, sometimes the Odia language slips in, and for that reason, I often feel embarrassed. People sometimes say that even though I'm educated, I still can't speak Bengla well. But at home, I always speak Odia; I only speak Bengla when I go to school. When I make mistakes while speaking Bengali, I feel very humiliated.

Initiative taken by the Government and NGO

The Bangladesh government signed an agreement with ethnic communities under the Peace Accord Act (1997). This agreement includes basic education in the mother tongue as well as the quota system for higher education. Section B-33(2) refers to 'basic education in the mother tongue.' Also, part D, number 10, specifies 'quota reservation and scholarship.' In the context of 'basic education in mother tongue,' the government announced that only five ethnic groups, Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Sadri, would be covered by the method. In the National Education Policy, the government stated about the ensuring of the educational rights and the education in the mother language of the ethnic community people. But the Odia-speaking tea community people are deprived of the opportunity. Despite having all the characteristics of an ethnic community, they are not gazetted as an ethnic minority by the government. As a result, this community is denied access to all of the facilities and services accessible to minority groups. The IDEA, one of the familiar NGO sectors, owns the project named 'ALOY ALO' that aims for pre-primary education in the villages of the tea communities. They provide pre-primary education through their ECD centers. But the language used for teaching in these ECDs is Bangla, like in government institutions. No initiatives have been taken by the NGO to preserve the linguistic rights of the tea community.

The Odia-speaking tea community in Bangladesh faces multidimensional exclusion. Future research should explore language revitalization strategies and policy interventions for inclusive development.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is a state with a high level of cultural diversity. Bangladesh's indigenous people have the right to practice their culture. Because language is a cultural symbol, learning and speaking your mother tongue is a way to acquire rights. Members

of ethnic communities should begin practicing their mother tongues as children, both orally and in writing. Indigenous people's rights must be respected, and it is vital to comprehend their language and culture. This enables us to create a truthful history of the Bengali nation. The government has taken some initial steps by creating policies that can help ensure ethnic communities' linguistic rights. However, the tea community is deprived of these initials. It is necessary because children in the tea community should be taught in their native tongue rather than Bangla, since this will decrease language mixing and allow children to acquire lessons with greater ease. In this instance, government and non-governmental organizations can help reduce marginalization. If any of the aforementioned organizations provide students with an opportunity to obtain primary education in their mother tongue, Odia, in addition to Bengali and English, Odia-speaking pupils will be able to receive primary education more easily, reducing this exclusion. This study focuses on the Odia people. Due to shortages of time and resources, all Odia members from the tea community were unable to be observed. Only a few individuals from two tea estates are chosen. If our approach could accomplish that, the data would be far more accurate and precise, as different people's perspectives differ. During the empirical investigation, the researchers encountered numerous issues and limits. For example, validity was not examined; reliability was not measured in a subsequent study; the study used a small number of participants proportionate to the population; and non-parametric tests were employed to elaborate information. Only the linguistic aspect, particularly education in one's mother tongue, has been addressed. However, the language component is rich in itself and is not detected at all. Language practice in everyday life, as well as language mixing, would be more perfect and pragmatic if thoroughly researched.

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Conflict of interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The article does not represent the views of any organization, but rather the views of the authors.

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