

Curriculum, Culture and Power: Examining the Representation of Tribal Identity in School Textbooks of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: *The present study is a critical analysis of the portrayal of tribal identity in the school education system of Himachal Pradesh with special reference to curriculum, culture and language. It employs critical pedagogy, cultural studies and postcolonial theory to investigate primary and secondary school textbooks and curriculum documents through qualitative content analysis. The findings imply that the tribal identities are, in general, portrayed in a fragmented, stereotyped or idealized manner. Tribal languages and indigenous knowledge systems are almost non-existent. Such curricular gaps result in linguistic marginalization and are barriers to learning for indigenous youngsters whose mother tongues are different from the medium of instruction. The study recommends the integration of culturally responsive and multilingual curricula, including tribal languages, indigenous knowledge and community perspectives, to enhance inclusive education and strengthen learners' identity formation.*

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Multilingual Curricula, Tribal Identity

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1. Introduction

Education is a powerful tool in forming knowledge, identity and social consciousness. School curriculum is a critical site in the determination of what is taught, how it is taught and the devaluation of whose knowledge as a body of knowledge organized in a structured manner. However, curriculum is not a neutral collection of facts, but is embedded within socio-political and cultural frameworks that reflect dominant ideologies. The issue of representation in curriculum is most pertinent in a country as diverse as India. There are a number of tribal communities in Himachal Pradesh like Gaddi, Kinnaura, Lahaula, and Pangwal. These communities have rich cultural traditions and languages and unique knowledge systems that have evolved over generations. However, despite this diversity, mainstream school education often fails to represent tribal identity in a meaningful and authentic way. The marginalization of tribal knowledge in curriculum is not just a question of omission but is deeply tied to larger issues of power and knowledge production. In some cultures, being underrepresented or misrepresented affects how students view themselves and others. Tribal students may experience a gap between their daily lives and the knowledge presented in classrooms. This can lead to difficulties with identity alienation and lower engagement in education. The present paper is an attempt to analyze critically the representation of tribal identity in school education in Himachal Pradesh. It examines if curricular representations are reflective of cultural diversity or continue to perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization. The study aims to reveal the power structures that frame the production and representation of knowledge in education through the analysis of textbooks and curricular materials.

2. Theoretical

The study attempts to explore the relationship between curriculum, culture, language and power in school education based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory. Critical pedagogy understands education as a social and political process in which power relations are reproduced and challenged. Curriculum in this sense is not neutral but a medium for the transmission of dominant ideologies and cultural norms. It often results in the marginalization of minority and indigenous voices from formal systems of education. This understanding is enhanced by cultural studies that stresses the notion of representation. Representation is understood as a discursive process of constructing and

circulating meanings. The study is about representation of tribal communities in textbooks and curricular materials which is very important in shaping learner's perceptions, attitudes and understandings of tribal identity, culture and knowledge systems. Postcolonial theory extends this critique further, identifying the historical and continuing marginalization of indigenous epistemologies in dominant educational structures. It contends that mainstream curricula often reflect the privileging of Western or dominant systems of knowing and denigrate or exclude local and tribal ways of knowing. This imbalance aggravates epistemic inequality and cultural hierarchies in education. In addition, the framework is grounded on the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy which stresses the importance of integrating learners' linguistic and cultural contexts into teaching practices. This approach promotes inclusive education by recognizing and valuing diversity and increases student engagement, identity affirmation and meaningful learning outcomes.

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3. Background of the Study

In this study, curriculum is conceptualized as a site of dynamic and contested interaction in which knowledge and representation are shaped by culture and power. The framework is based on Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy. It conceptualizes the curriculum as a socially constructed system mediated by dominant ideologies and institutional structures, rather than as a neutral or objective body of knowledge. In the construction of curricula, therefore, power relations are implicated in the selection, ordering and representation of knowledge. Such decisions affect the way tribal identities, languages and cultural practices are portrayed in educational materials. Thus, the production, reinforcement, and marginalization of meanings is an important process in representation. The study further argues that the way tribal identity is portrayed in the curriculum has direct implications on the learner's cultural perception and identity formation and engagement with education. Partial, stereotyped or exclusionary representation can lead to cultural alienation and decrease tribal student participation. On the other hand, inclusive and accurate representation may foster a sense of belonging, validate linguistic and cultural identities, and enhance learning outcomes. The conceptual framework emphasizes the connection between curriculum, power, representation, learner identity, and the necessity of a more inclusive and culturally responsive way to design curriculum.

Conceptual Model

Power Structures (Dominant ideologies, social, political, economic structures shape knowledge, and decision-making processes.)	Curriculum Design (Selection, organization, sequencing of content, language, and cultural themes reflect priorities of those in power.)	Representation (Tribal identities, languages, and cultural practices are represented or misrepresented in textbooks and classroom discourse.)	Student Identity & Cultural Perception (Influences learners' cultural understanding, identity formation, self-esteem, and educational engagement.)
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Flow: Power Structures → Curriculum Design → Representation → Student Identity & Cultural Perception

4. Literature Review

School knowledge is not value free but socially and ideologically constructed as repeatedly pointed out in the literature on curriculum studies. Apple (1993) and Giroux (1988) have argued that the curriculum is a cultural and political site for the validation of knowledge but also for the marginalization of other epistemologies. As a result, educational content embodies the broader power relations that favor dominant cultural narratives and marginalize indigenous identities. Research on tribal education has shown that indigenous knowledge systems, languages and cultural practices are still being marginalized in formal schooling. Research in indigenous contexts has demonstrated that mainstream curricula do not mirror the lived experiences of tribal learners leading to cultural alienation and diluted identity formation. One of the major reasons for educational disengagement of the tribal students has been identified as the difference between home culture and the knowledge taught in the school. The literature on multilingual education and mother-tongue based instruction is rich and points to the importance of linguistic inclusion in early and foundational learning. UNESCO (2003) states that learning in the mother tongue promotes cognitive development, understanding and participation in the

classroom. But in many cases, the dominance of regional or official languages in the schooling systems is disadvantageous for tribal learners, leading to poorer academic results and greater exclusion from education. The marginalization has linguistic implications for the inter-generational transmission of indigenous languages. Another critical discourse analysis of textbooks shows how tribal communities are sometimes represented in a stereotyped, fragmented or romanticized manner. The binary constructions of tribal identities as ‘traditional versus modern’ or ‘primitive versus developed’ are not to be commensurate with the socio-cultural complexities and modern realities of these groups. The representations become distorted in the perception of the learners and replicate hierarchical forms of knowledge in educational systems. Culturally responsive pedagogy has been found to be significant in the delivery and development of curriculum by integrating the cultural backgrounds of students. Indeed, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy is a bridge between home and school cultures that results in student engagement, academic success and affirmation of identity. However, its implementation still remains limited in many multilingual and tribal contexts because of lack of adaptation of curriculum, teacher training and policy level constraints. Research on tribal education in India shows that there is still a limited and very localized representation of indigenous peoples in the curriculum. However, even with the effort to incorporate local knowledge systems, most of the school textbooks still have a dominant cultural framework with very little representation of tribal languages and epistemologies. This gap is most visible in the Himalayan regions where we have high linguistic and cultural diversity and low curriculum responsiveness. In this context, the present study contributes to the existing literature by critically analyzing the presentation of tribal identities in school curriculum and its implications for language learning and cultural understanding in Himachal Pradesh. It conceptualizes the curriculum as a site of ideological compromise and a way of fostering discussion around linguistic inclusiveness, cultural sustainability and educational equity in tribal contexts.

5. Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research design for critical analysis of representation of tribal identity in school curriculum in Himachal Pradesh. The choice of a qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it provides a holistic interpretation of the meanings of texts, cultural narratives and the ideological structures of educational content.

5.1. Study Design

Study type was descriptive and interpretive. The research is not about measuring results, but about how tribal identities, languages and cultural practices are built and represented in school textbooks.

5.2. Sources of Data

The primary sources of data are:

- Text books at Primary and Secondary level prescribed by State of Himachal Pradesh framework and curriculum syllabus
- Relevant documents of the education policy

Documents were selected in order to understand the representation of tribal culture, language and knowledge systems in formal school education.

5.3. Methods of Data Analysis

The prevailing method of interpretation is qualitative content analysis. This concerns the systematic analysis of textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, inclusions and exclusions in the representation of tribes. Data were also coded and analyzed using thematic analysis, within major themes that included:

- Depiction of tribal life and customs
- Tribal languages in curriculum inclusion

- Recognition or rejection of indigenous knowledge
- Stereotyped, idealized images of tribal peoples

Explicit content (direct references in textbooks etc.) and implicit meaning (underlying narratives, framing, discourse) are critically examined.

5.4. Analytical Framework

The data interpretation is informed by Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory. These frameworks enable us to think of curriculum as a site of power, where dominant ideologies determine which knowledge gets selected and how it is represented.

5.5. Extent of Examination

The present study deals with the effect of curriculum on the cultural consciousness and language learning of tribal students. It also explores the relationship between representation and identity development in language learning.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of some school text books and curriculum documents shows that the representation of tribal identity in school education in Himachal Pradesh is mostly fractured, selective and culturally reductive. Sometimes the term ‘tribal communities’ is used in cultural or social science content, but this is often superficial and does not reflect the complex lived experience of tribal communities.

6.1. Tribal Recognition Status

The dominant pattern revealed by textbooks is to frame the tribal identity using simple cultural markers like dress, festivals and traditional practices. Such representations are in danger of essentializing tribal communities as static cultural groups, overlooking their historical transformations and present socio-economic realities. This framing echoes previous academic commentaries that have noted curriculum’s tendency to reproduce stereotypical representations of indigenous communities, along a binary of “traditional” and “modern”.

This narrow focus means that learners have a poor understanding of what is tribal identity. Textbooks often depict tribal communities as ethnographic or folkloric subjects rather than as active participants in modern society, thus continuing the process of cultural othering.

6.2. Marginalization of language and non-existence of tribal languages

One of the main findings of the analysis is the almost complete absence of tribal languages in the formal curriculum. The medium of instruction and content of learning are largely determined by the dominant regional/national languages and there is little or no space for indigenous linguistic systems. This removal of language clearly disenfranchises the home languages of learners from the language of the school. Thus, tribal students are less worried in understanding, participation in class rooms and concept formation. Cognitive engagement is bad for mother tongue representation, for linguistic marginalization, and for slow language shift. The findings supported UNESCO’s (2003) assertion that mother tongue education is a pre-requisite for effective learning especially at the early stages. The integration is a linguistic alienation for the learners from tribal communities.

6.3. Traditional Knowledge System (TKS)

The analysis also reveals the near absence of indigenous knowledge systems in curricular content. A lot of knowledge transmission happens through formal academic structures, leaving little space for local ecological knowledge, oral traditions or community learning practices. This exclusion reflects a more general epistemic inequality within education, which favors formal knowledge over indigenous knowledge systems. Such curricula

are involved in epistemic marginalization and diminish the visibility of tribal intellectual traditions in formal education.

6.4. Stereotypes and Cultural framing

Another important finding is the stereotypical and romanticized description of tribal groups. Tribal life is often portrayed as 'simple', 'close to nature', or culturally exotic. They do not reflect contemporary realities of education, migration, economic participation and social change. This framing also devalues tribal identity, reifies hierarchical cultural narratives. Learners are socialized into partial and biased understandings that may lead to problematic perceptions of tribal communities.

6.5. Implications for Learning and Identity Development

Collectively, these modes of representation have a major influence on the development of learners' identities and participation in education. Students' cultural and linguistic realities often clash with the content of formal schooling, often resulting in lack of participation and a sense of cultural alienation. Students who cannot find themselves and their languages in the curriculum are likely to suffer from low self-esteem and have little attachment to education. More representation can be used to increase identity affirmation and motivate participation in learning processes.

6.6. Discussions

Findings from this study are consistent with critical pedagogy and postcolonial perspectives that the curriculum is a site of power in which the selection and representation of knowledge is ideologically constructed. The marginalization of tribal languages and knowledge systems we see is a reflection of greater structural inequalities in the education system. The study also adds to the body of evidence supporting culturally responsive pedagogy that advocates for the infusion of learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in curriculum and teaching practices. Without integration, education can perpetuate exclusionary structures rather than challenge them. The analysis shows that curriculum in this study context still struggles with dominant knowledge paradigms that do not fully recognize tribal identities. The analysis demands an urgent review of the curriculum to offer inclusive and equitable education.

7. Implication of the Study

Implication of the Study to the Curriculum: These findings highlight the need for curricular change and not tokenistic inclusion of tribal communities. Curriculum developers should meaningfully include tribal histories, cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems. Tribal identities are not static cultural reference points for curricula, but dynamic and evolving realities.

Language-Planning Implications: The findings are significant in terms of mother-tongue education and multilingual education at the early and basic stages of education. In the domain of educational policy, tribal and regional languages should be chosen as the medium of instruction or at least as strong supporting languages in the classrooms. This will help bridge the gap between home and school language and improve understanding and learning outcomes.

Implications for Education: Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges and incorporates the students' cultural background into the classroom, and teachers need to be supported and prepared for this approach. Such practices can be useful to promote student engagement, participation and affirmation of identity, especially for tribal learners who are often culturally alienated from formal education.

Preparation of Text-books and other Teaching Material: The development agencies should critically look into the available contents and remove the stereotypes and mis-representation of the tribal communities. The educational materials should represent the diversity of tribal societies and provide authentic representations of their social, cultural and linguistic practices. Oral traditions, local histories and indigenous knowledge systems can enrich learning experiences.

Equity and Inclusiveness Issues: More generally, the research feeds into the debate on social justice and equality in education. It's access to education but it's also about representation and recognition. Curricula that fail to reflect the identities of learners are perpetuating structural inequalities in the education system. We argue for an inclusive, culturally responsive education model that integrates curriculum, language and identity and values tribal knowledge systems and linguistic diversity. We need reform that will create equitable learning environments where academic success and cultural sustainability are possible.

8. Conclusion

The study critically reviewed the representation of tribal identity in school education in Himachal Pradesh for investigating convergence of curriculum, culture and language. The study uses critical pedagogy, cultural studies and postcolonial theory to argue that the curriculum is an ideological space that gives preference to some types of knowledge over others. Curriculum documents and textbooks tend to depict tribal identities in a stereotyped, fragmented and culturally essentialist manner. These representations flatten complex and fluid communities into cultural categories that constrain learners' understanding of tribal realities. One of the major lacunae in formal education in language and epistemology is the non-inclusion of tribal languages and traditional knowledge systems in the curricular material. The study has also shown that such representations contribute to linguistic marginalization and hinder effective learning, especially for learners whose language of instruction is not their home language. This disjuncture between the learner's cultural and linguistic experience and formal education is detrimental to understanding, participation and identity construction. The study finds that the existing curricular structures are not adequate to cater to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the tribal communities. This further widens educational disparities and limits the boundaries of inclusive education. Therefore, the study emphasizes the need for curriculum reforms that integrate tribal languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally responsive pedagogical practices into school education. Such reforms would not only promote educational equity and linguistic justice but also ensure the meaningful representation of tribal communities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive education system in Himachal Pradesh.

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Conflicts of Interest: “The authors declare “No conflict of interest”.

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