

Educational Disparities Among CHT Indigenous People: Addressing Vernacular Challenges And Prejudice

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Abstract:

This study explores the educational barriers faced by Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, focusing on vernacular language challenges and systemic prejudice within the education system. Indigenous groups such as the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura encounter significant difficulties due to the dominance of Bangla as the primary medium of instruction. Many Indigenous students speak vernacular languages, often unwritten, creating substantial linguistic barriers to comprehension and engagement in the classroom. Sultana (2011) notes, "The absence of indigenous languages in the formal education system limits students' ability to engage and comprehend, restricting their overall academic development." This linguistic divide often results in lower academic performance and higher dropout rates from schools among Indigenous students. The challenges are further compounded by entrenched prejudice and discrimination, which alienate students and perpetuate their marginalization. Unequal treatment, culturally irrelevant curricula, and insensitive teaching practices exacerbate exclusion, lowering self-esteem and hindering educational outcomes. As Roy (2017) asserts, "For Indigenous students, education in their mother tongue is not just a matter of comprehension but a gateway to preserving their identity and cultural heritage." This study examines the intersection of linguistic and cultural biases through qualitative methods, offering insights into how these barriers impede access to quality education. The findings highlight the urgent need for language-sensitive policies, mother-tongue instruction, and systemic reforms to address discrimination. Such measures can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, fostering socio-economic development while preserving cultural identity and heritage for Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Indigenous community, Vernacular language, Prejudice, Education Barrier, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Cultural discrimination

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I. Introduction

Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, a region characterized by its geographical remoteness and ethnocultural diversity, is home to numerous indigenous communities. These indigenous groups have preserved distinct languages, customs, and cultural identities for generations, deeply interweaving their way of life with their vernacular languages. However, the educational framework within Bangladesh is predominantly structured around the national language, Bengali, which creates significant challenges for indigenous students. According to Mallick and Chakma (2016), "The lack of recognition and inclusion of Indigenous languages in the formal education system creates a disconnect between Indigenous students and the curriculum, making education less accessible." This disconnection not only alienates Indigenous students but also impedes their academic progression and engagement with formal education.

Education is a critical lever for socio-economic development, acting as a channel for marginalized communities to uplift their socio-economic status and preserve their cultural heritage. Islam (2018) notes, "Education is not only a fundamental human right but also a powerful catalyst for breaking the cycles of poverty and preserving cultural heritage." However, despite numerous governmental and non-governmental interventions aimed at improving education in the CHT, the indigenous populations continue to face stark challenges, particularly concerning language barriers and ingrained social prejudices. These issues not only obstruct their access to education but also undermine the quality of education they receive, resulting in poor educational outcomes that prolong socio-economic disparities.

Problem Statement

The linguistic divide is a significant barrier to quality education for Indigenous students in the CHT. The national curriculum is delivered in Bengali, a language unfamiliar to many Indigenous children, creating challenges in comprehension, engagement, and academic performance. Roy (2017) notes, "The absence of

indigenous languages in primary education contributes significantly to poor educational outcomes, as students struggle to comprehend lessons.” This language gap often leads to high dropout rates and limited academic success.

Additionally, entrenched prejudice within the education system impairs inclusion. Akhter and Tripura (2020) highlight that “*Indigenous students often experience subtle and overt forms of prejudice from peers, teachers, and educational authorities, which exacerbates their sense of exclusion and lowers self-esteem.*” Discriminatory practices, including culturally irrelevant curricula and unequal treatment, alienate Indigenous students and undermine their educational experiences. These dual challenges of linguistic alienation and systemic bias perpetuate cycles of marginalization and limit socio-economic opportunities for Indigenous communities.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to explore the multifaceted barriers that Indigenous students in the CHT face in accessing quality education, with a particular focus on the challenges posed by vernacular language differences and systemic prejudice. The specific objectives of this research are as follows:

- To investigate the scope to which vernacular languages hinder Indigenous students’ engagement with and access to formal education. Hasan (2021) emphasizes that “*Understanding the role of vernacular in education is critical for creating inclusive and effective learning environments.*”
- To examine the prevalence and nature of prejudice and discrimination within the education system that undermine the academic success of Indigenous students in the CHT.
- To assess the long-term socio-economic and cultural implications of the lack of quality education for the Indigenous communities in the CHT, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on educational inequality and cultural preservation.

These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language and social biases meet to create systemic barriers to education for Indigenous students, offering potential pathways for reforming the education system to be more inclusive and culturally sensitive. To delve deeper into the educational challenges faced by the Indigenous communities in the CHT, the following research questions will guide this study:

- How does the use of vernacular languages impede the educational progression of indigenous students in the CHT? As Rahman (2019) argues, “*Language is more than just a medium of communication—it shapes how students learn, perceive, and engage with their educational experience.*”
- In what ways do prejudice and discrimination within the educational system affect Indigenous students’ access to quality education?
- What strategies can be implemented to mitigate the challenges posed by vernacular differences and prejudice in the CHT educational context?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study transcends academic inquiry, offering vital insights for policymakers, educators, and NGOs focused on improving educational outcomes in linguistically diverse and marginalized regions like the CHT. By examining the barriers posed by vernacular language differences and systemic prejudice, this research provides actionable recommendations for inclusive and culturally sensitive education policies. As Chakrabarty (2020) emphasizes, “*An inclusive education system must consider both linguistic diversity and the cultural sensitivities of indigenous populations.*”

Additionally, this study enriches the existing discourse on educational inequality and Indigenous education by providing empirical evidence of the challenges faced by sidelined communities. Addressing the intersection of language, culture, and social bias, it highlights the structural factors prolonging educational disparities for Indigenous students. The findings aim to inform targeted interventions, fostering greater accessibility, equity, and inclusion in education for Indigenous communities in the CHT and similar contexts.

II. Literature Review

Many studies have focused on the educational challenges faced by Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. These studies highlight two major obstacles to learning: language barriers and prejudice within the education system. This review discusses key research on these issues and how they affect Indigenous students' ability to access and succeed in education.

One of the central issues affecting Indigenous education in the CHT is the linguistic barrier. Selim’s (2017) research, *Language Problem in Educating Indigenous Children of Chittagong Hill Tracts*, identifies how the formal education system, which predominantly uses Bengali as the medium of instruction, alienates Indigenous students whose first languages are various local dialects. According to Selim, the absence of mother tongue-based instruction contributes significantly to poor academic performance and high dropout rates among Indigenous children. The study underscores the importance of incorporating Indigenous languages into the curriculum to ensure inclusivity and improve educational outcomes.

Chakma (2024), in his study *Challenges of Indigenous Children's Primary Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, builds on this by discussing how Indigenous students face discrimination in schools. The study shows that the education system often ignores their language and cultural needs, which makes students feel left out and unsupported. Chakma emphasizes that prejudice in schools, combined with language barriers, worsens the educational difficulties for Indigenous students and calls for changes that respect their linguistic and cultural identities.

Islam's (2014) doctoral thesis, *Equity and Diversity for Primary School Indigenous Children in Bangladesh*, adds another layer to the discourse by examining issues of equity and diversity in Indigenous education. Islam argues that the educational policies in Bangladesh largely overlook the unique needs of Indigenous communities in the CHT, contributing to the downgrading of these groups. His findings suggest that the current educational practices not only perpetuate social inequalities but also hinder the ability of Indigenous students to thrive academically. Islam's thesis supports the need for educational reforms that promote inclusivity through the integration of Indigenous languages and cultural practices into the curriculum, thus addressing both the linguistic and prejudicial barriers that Indigenous students face.

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the educational experience for Indigenous students. In the study *E-Learning Experience of Indigenous Rural Communities in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2023), Md. Salman Sohel and colleagues explored how this transition affected Indigenous students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Their research found that many students faced significant challenges, not only due to limited access to technology but also because the lessons were not adapted to their languages and cultural needs. This lack of cultural relevance and language support made learning even more difficult, highlighting how language barriers and cultural disconnects became major issues during the pandemic.

Another study, *Let's Go Back to Go Forward: History and Practice of Schooling in the Indigenous Communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, a master's thesis authored by Mohammed Mahbulul Kabir and submitted in 2009, examines how the history of education for Indigenous communities has contributed to today's challenges. It explains how colonial and post-colonial education systems have long ignored Indigenous languages and cultural practices. Kabir argues that the problems Indigenous students face today are rooted in this historical neglect and suggests a return to community-based education models that value Indigenous languages and traditions as a solution. Together, these studies paint a comprehensive picture of the educational barriers faced by Indigenous communities in the CHT. The recurring themes across the literature highlight the crucial role that language and culture play in educational access and quality. The lack of mother tongue instruction and the prevalence of systemic prejudice in the formal education system create significant obstacles to learning for Indigenous students. These studies collectively call for an overhaul of the current educational framework to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring that Indigenous students are given equal opportunities to succeed.

The literature indicates that overcoming the educational barriers faced by Indigenous students in the CHT requires a multi-faceted approach. Addressing the linguistic divide through mother tongue-based education and tackling systemic prejudice within schools are key to improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. By comparing the findings of these existing studies with the results of this current research, it will be possible to build a deeper understanding of the impact of language and discrimination on educational access for the CHT Indigenous community and propose concrete strategies for creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

III. Methodology

Research Design:

This study uses a qualitative case study design to explore the educational challenges faced by Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The case study approach is suitable because it allows for a detailed look at real-world issues, like language barriers and systemic prejudice, within the education system. By focusing on the experiences of Indigenous students, educators, parents, and community members, this method helps us understand the factors that affect access to education. As Stake (1995) points out, case studies are great for capturing the unique experiences of individuals in specific situations.

For this study, I have applied semi-structured interviews with twenty participants from four different groups where each group has five representatives of their own and fifteen more participants for three individual online focus groups interviews. These methods will give rich, detailed information about participants' experiences, especially concerning language and culture. According to Yin (2018), the case study method is ideal for understanding complex social and cultural issues that are difficult to measure with numbers but are important for understanding the bigger picture.

Using this approach will provide deep insights into the challenges Indigenous communities face in education. As Creswell (2013) mentions, qualitative research provides personal stories that highlight how

language, culture, and education interact in marginalized communities. This approach ensures that the voices and challenges of Indigenous people in the CHT are heard and understood.

Data Collection Methods:

Sampling Strategy and Data Analysis Techniques

This study employs semi-structured interviews and online focus groups to explore the educational barriers faced by Indigenous students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), focusing on language barriers and systemic discrimination.

Semi-structured interviews will involve Indigenous students, teachers, parents, and community leaders to delve into personal and communal challenges related to vernacular language use and prejudice in education. As Kvale (2007) notes, "*Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to explore participants' unique experiences while ensuring the research questions are addressed,*" enabling participants to share insights shaped by their diverse linguistic and social contexts.

Online focus groups will engage parents, educators, and community members to better understand collective experiences and perceptions of systemic issues in education. Wilkinson (1998) emphasizes that "*Focus groups provide insight into collective views and are particularly useful in understanding shared experiences within a community.*" This method ensures accessibility across the CHT and fosters open dialogue to identify community-driven solutions.

This research will use a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who have direct experience with the educational challenges faced by Indigenous students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Purposive sampling is an approach that focuses on choosing participants who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse information. As Creswell (2013) notes, "*Purposive sampling allows researchers to focus on participants who are best positioned to provide rich, relevant, and diverse data for a study.*" In this case, the sample will include Indigenous students, teachers, parents, and community leaders from various parts of the CHT to ensure a range of perspectives. The goal is not to gather a large number of participants but to gain deep, meaningful insights from those who are directly involved with these educational issues. This approach is particularly helpful for understanding complex challenges, as it ensures the most relevant voices are included in the study.

After gathering data through semi-structured interviews and online focus groups, the research will apply thematic analysis to interpret the findings. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying and analyzing patterns or themes in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, "*Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data.*" The researcher will carefully review the interview and focus group transcripts, manually organizing the data into themes related to language barriers, prejudice, and access to education. This process will allow the researcher to systematically explore how these issues affect Indigenous students in the CHT and to draw meaningful conclusions based on the recurring themes.

IV. Results:

Semi-Structured Interview results

The findings reveal a shared recognition across students, teachers, parents, and community leaders of the significant challenges faced by Indigenous students in navigating a Bangla-centric education system. On the first question, all groups emphasized the disconnect between home and school, where Indigenous languages hold cultural significance but are excluded from the curriculum. Students and parents noted that this gap hampers comprehension, erodes confidence, and diminishes academic performance, while teachers highlighted the absence of bilingual resources and culturally relevant materials, leaving students struggling with complex subjects and technical terms. Prejudice and systemic bias further alienate students, as reported by both students and community leaders, who criticized the lack of representation of Indigenous heritage in education, framing it as a broader failure to honor diversity. Collectively, the groups advocated for reforms such as bilingual education, culturally trained teachers, and the integration of Indigenous languages and traditions into the curriculum to foster inclusivity, enhance engagement, and restore cultural pride.

The interviews with Indigenous students, teachers, parents, and community leaders reveal significant challenges in learning Bangla due to its differences from students' native languages. Student A, E, and Student C expressed difficulties with pronunciation and grammar, which caused anxiety and hindered class participation. Student B and Student D highlighted struggles with comprehension, as translating unfamiliar terms slowed progress. Teachers like Teacher A and Teacher B acknowledged the cognitive load of learning both a new language and academic content simultaneously, and the lack of bilingual resources intensified these challenges. Parents, such as Parent A and Parent C, noted their children's struggles with vocabulary comprehension, embarrassment over pronunciation, and difficulties with writing, particularly in technical subjects like science and math. Community leaders, including Leader A and Leader B, pointed out how language barriers and prejudice lead to feelings of exclusion and diminished self-esteem, further impacting academic success. They all

emphasized the urgent need for bilingual support, culturally inclusive curricula, and improved teacher training to address these systemic issues and ensure equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

The semi-structured interviews unveil how language barriers uniquely challenge Indigenous students, with narratives highlighting personal struggles. Student A shared her humiliation when stumbling over Bangla reading in class, exacerbated by a teacher's lack of support. Students B and E described his difficulty expressing answers in tests, which resulted in poor grades. Student C, A felt ignored by her teacher after struggling during a class presentation. For Student D, learning was slowed by her reliance on siblings to translate lessons, and Student E expressed frustration at failing an essay due to limited Bangla proficiency. These stories collectively demonstrate how language barriers hinder academic success and erode students' confidence.

Teachers and community members offered broader perspectives on these struggles. Teachers A, and E, admitted that some educators mistakenly label Indigenous students as lazy, compounding biases, while Teachers C and D advocated for better training to foster empathy and inclusion. From the parents' side, Parents A, B, and E observed how their child was overlooked due to language challenges, while Parent C noted bullying from peers and frustration from falling behind in class. Community Leaders A, C, and E stressed the lack of systemic initiatives, calling for sustainable,

The results reveal the profound impact of language barriers and prejudice on Indigenous students, alongside diverse perspectives on potential solutions. Students like Student 1 and Student 4 shared experiences of exclusion and humiliation, with Student 2 feeling overlooked in group settings due to assumptions about his abilities. These stories highlight how prejudice diminishes confidence and participation, leaving students struggling to thrive academically and socially. Teachers, including Teacher 1 and Teacher 3, acknowledged the need for systemic changes, supporting bilingual education, culturally sensitive training, and learning materials to bridge linguistic gaps and foster inclusivity.

Parents such as Parent 1 and Parent 3 emphasized foundational lessons in Indigenous languages, coupled with bilingual teaching support, to ensure their children can navigate educational challenges without losing cultural identity. Community leaders, including Community Leaders 1,4 and Community Leaders 3, underscored the importance of government-led bilingual curriculums, cultural workshops, and anti-prejudice policies to address systemic inequities. These perspectives collectively stress the need for a holistic, collaborative approach to education, where linguistic diversity is embraced, prejudice is actively countered, and every student feels valued and supported.

To support the Indigenous students, teachers, parents, and community members agree on the issue of the critical impact of linguistic barriers on Indigenous students' education, highlighting the need for systemic solutions. Teachers (T1–T5) advocate bilingual education to improve comprehension, confidence, and engagement, easing transitions to Bangla-medium learning. Parents (P1–P5) express concern over inadequate institutional support, citing a lack of specialized programs and materials, leaving students dependent on family and community resources. Both groups underscore the urgency of addressing these systemic gaps.

Community members (C1–C5) highlight their role in providing bilingual support, fostering pride in Indigenous identity, and advocating for bilingual education. They stress the need for systemic measures like integrating Indigenous languages into curricula, training educators in cultural sensitivity, and equipping schools with resources to bridge linguistic gaps, promoting inclusivity, and preserving cultural heritage.

Online focus group interview results

The online focus group interviews with parents, teachers, and community members reveal that Indigenous students face significant challenges in Bangla-medium schools due to linguistic barriers, systemic prejudice, and a lack of cultural representation. Parents emphasized how limited Bangla proficiency hampers comprehension, participation, and academic engagement, particularly in science and math, with virtual learning exacerbating these difficulties. They highlighted the absence of bilingual support and cultural inclusion as major shortcomings, which disconnect students from their heritage, eroding their confidence and sense of belonging. To address these challenges, parents recommended bilingual education programs, targeted Bangla language support, culturally sensitive teacher training, and the inclusion of Indigenous teachers to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps.

Similarly, teachers identified the linguistic struggles of Indigenous students, citing limited exposure to Bangla, pronunciation issues, and difficulties with the script and subject-specific terminology as barriers to comprehension and participation. They proposed bilingual education from early grades, Indigenous-language materials, and hiring Indigenous teaching assistants, coupled with cultural sensitivity training for educators, to enhance inclusivity and improve academic outcomes. Community members echoed these sentiments, underscoring the impact of linguistic barriers on students' confidence and performance. They advocated for bilingual education, culturally inclusive curricula, and teacher training to foster a supportive learning environment.

Prejudice and exclusion further compound these challenges, as parents noted discriminatory attitudes from teachers and peers, resulting in alienation and diminished academic progress. Teachers acknowledged the systemic nature of prejudice, where inconsistent anti-discrimination policies fail to adequately address the issue. They emphasized the role of inclusivity and cultural representation in mitigating biases, proposing cultural awareness workshops and anti-discrimination policies as vital interventions. Community members also highlighted the detrimental impact of unfair treatment, advocating for increased representation of Indigenous culture and educators in schools.

The focus group discussions identified systemic barriers, including the absence of Indigenous languages and cultural representation in curricula, as alienating for students and detrimental to their identity and confidence. To address these barriers, stakeholders proposed bilingual education, integration of Indigenous history and culture, and the hiring of Indigenous educators as long-term strategies. They also emphasized the need for resource allocation, teacher training in cultural and linguistic sensitivity, and the active involvement of communities to create an equitable, inclusive educational environment for Indigenous students. These collective recommendations aim to bridge linguistic divides, counter prejudice, and empower Indigenous students to succeed academically while preserving their cultural identity.

V. Discussion:

The semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students, teachers, parents, and community leaders elucidate the profound challenges posed by linguistic barriers and engrained prejudice within the Bangla-centric education system. A unifying theme across all groups is the discord between the linguistic and cultural heritage of Indigenous students and the dominant curriculum, which impedes comprehension, participation, and academic achievement. Students particularly struggle with the complexities of Bangla, especially in technical subjects like science and mathematics, while the omission of Indigenous languages from the curriculum aggravates feelings of cultural dislocation and undermines self-esteem.

Prejudice and systemic bias further compound these challenges, with students and community leaders highlighting experiences of marginalization, ridicule, and lowered expectations. Teachers also acknowledged the detrimental effects of insufficient cultural awareness and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, which foster an exclusionary environment and hinder both academic and social integration. These compounded obstacles contribute to a pervasive sense of alienation, emphasizing the urgent need for structural reforms that promote inclusivity and equity in educational practices.

Stakeholders agree on the importance of bilingual education, integrating Indigenous languages into curricula, and training educators in cultural sensitivity. These reforms aim to bridge linguistic divides and empower Indigenous students to succeed academically while preserving their cultural identity.

The findings from the online focus group interviews reveal significant challenges Indigenous students face in their educational journey, with linguistic barriers, prejudice, and systemic deficiencies emerging as key concerns. Parents, teachers, and community members agree that limited proficiency in Bangla significantly hampers students' comprehension, participation, and engagement, especially in subjects like science and math. This linguistic divide, coupled with inadequate institutional support, exacerbates these challenges, leaving Indigenous students isolated within the educational system. Prejudice and exclusion further undermine students' confidence and well-being, as discriminatory attitudes—ranging from ridicule to exclusion—create a toxic environment that stifles academic progress and fosters alienation.

All three stakeholder groups emphasize the importance of systemic reforms to address these issues and foster inclusivity. They advocate for bilingual education, integrating Indigenous languages and cultural elements into the curriculum, and providing professional development for teachers in cultural sensitivity. These measures are critical not only for improving the academic performance of Indigenous students but also for preserving their cultural heritage and promoting pride in their identity. By addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, these reforms aim to create an equitable learning environment where Indigenous students feel valued, respected, and equipped to thrive.

VI. Conclusion:

This study, titled "*Educational disparities among CHT Indigenous people: Addressing vernacular challenges and prejudice*" employed qualitative research methods, including focus group discussions and interviews with parents, teachers, and community members. The findings reveal that linguistic challenges and systemic prejudice significantly hinder the educational experiences of Indigenous students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Language barriers rooted in limited Bangla proficiency, coupled with the exclusion of Indigenous languages and cultures from the curriculum, create obstacles in understanding lessons and connecting with their heritage. The study also underscores the detrimental impact of prejudice and discrimination, which erode students' confidence and emotional well-being, further impeding academic success.

The research highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. Stakeholders emphasize the implementation of bilingual education programs, integration of Indigenous cultural elements into curricula, and targeted teacher training in cultural sensitivity and linguistic inclusivity. By addressing these barriers, the education system can foster a supportive and equitable environment, empowering Indigenous students to achieve academic success while preserving their cultural identity. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on improving access to quality education for marginalized communities and serves as a foundation for future research and policy initiatives.

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