Accent as Identity: Urban Tribal Youth Negotiating English in Digital India

Dr. Sunita Chahal, Assistant Professor (English) D.A.V. College, Pehowa (Kurukshetra)

Abstract

In the rapidly digitizing landscape of India, urban tribal youth face a complex interplay of language, identity, and access. This study explores how accent becomes a crucial marker of identity as tribal youth navigate the linguistic hierarchies embedded in English usage within urban and digital contexts. Focusing on Adivasi communities transitioning to cities and digital spaces, this research critically examines how English accents shape self-perception, societal integration, and discrimination. Using a multidisciplinary approach rooted in socio-linguistics and digital ethnography, the paper analyzes online interactions, classroom dynamics, and narratives from urban tribal students. Findings reveal that while English opens avenues of opportunity, accent often becomes a site of marginalization and resistance. This study highlights the urgent need to recognize and valorize accent diversity in pedagogical and digital frameworks in India.

Keywords: Urban Tribal, Adivasi, Socio-linguistics, Marginalization

1. Introduction

India's linguistic landscape is defined not only by its multiplicity of languages but also by the accentual variations that accompany them. Accents in India function as social markers that index one's caste, class, region, and ethnicity, often subconsciously guiding judgments around education, intelligence, and status [1]. For urban tribal youth, especially those from Adivasi communities, the acquisition of English in city-based schools, colleges, and digital platforms is not a neutral linguistic practice—it is an ongoing process of identity negotiation in an environment structured by linguistic hegemony [2]. In postcolonial India, English is positioned as a language of economic aspiration and upward mobility, but it is also a language of exclusion, stratified by accent-based hierarchies [3]. Speaking "good English" often implies not just fluency or grammar but also mastery over a socially sanctioned accent, usually linked to urban, upper-caste, or Westernized elites [4]. Tribal students entering these linguistic spaces frequently find themselves marked by their regional or tribal-accented English, which exposes them to ridicule, correction, or silence, both in classrooms and on digital platforms [5]. The Digital India initiative and the widespread digitization of education have introduced new arenas of opportunity for marginalized communities. Yet, these digital interfaces—voice assistants, speech-to-text tools, online classrooms—often privilege standardized, urban-centric accents, rendering tribal-accented English invisible or unintelligible in such spaces [6]. Consequently, digital access does not guarantee linguistic inclusion, and in many cases, accent discrimination is technologically reproduced [7]. This context creates a unique paradox: while English is a gateway to participation in India's modern, urban economy, it simultaneously becomes a site of marginalization when tribal speakers carry their phonological identities into public or digital domains. Many urban tribal youth respond through code-switching, accent suppression, or mimicry—strategies that may open doors but also erode cultural confidence [8]. Others assert their accent with pride, using it as a form of resistance to linguistic colonialism and an affirmation of their ethnic identity [9].

This paper thus interrogates how accent becomes a performative and political marker of identity among urban tribal youth in digital India. It examines how these youth are compelled to navigate linguistic boundaries that reinforce historical hierarchies, even within democratic and technologically driven frameworks. The study draws upon theories of linguistic capital [10], postcolonial voice and sub-alternity [11], and digital ethnography [12] to frame accent as both a linguistic feature and a socio-political construct. By focusing on the lived experiences of Adivasi students in urban settings, this research aims to challenge normative assumptions about English language use and to foreground accent diversity as a legitimate and valuable expression of identity. In doing so, it advocates for inclusive language pedagogies,

technological pluralism, and cultural sensitivity in education policies and digital infrastructures.

2. Literature Review

Mohanty, A.K. (2009) – Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local Anil Kumar Mohanty [13], a pioneering figure in Indian language policy, argues that India's educational frameworks systematically marginalize tribal and indigenous speakers by prioritizing dominant regional languages and English. His work underscores how tribal students experience linguistic alienation due to their unfamiliarity with the accent and syntax of standard classroom English. Drawing upon critical pedagogy and linguistic human rights theory, Mohanty concludes that neglecting mother tongues and accent plurality in early education results in psychological displacement, underperformance, and loss of cultural identity, making accent a symbol of systemic educational injustice. **Bhattacharya, U. (2013) – "Mediating Inequality: Language and Identity in Indian Urban Classrooms"** Bhattacharya [14] explores accent-based marginalization in English-medium schools in Mumbai and Hyderabad. Through a detailed ethnographic lens, she reveals that tribal and Dalit students are often judged, corrected, or silenced when their English accents deviate from urban norms. Using Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and postcolonial sociolinguistics, she concludes that accent discrimination becomes a form of linguistic casteism, covertly reinforcing upper-class hegemony in supposedly inclusive educational institutions. **Khubchandani, L.M. (2001) – Revisualizing Boundaries: A Plurilingual Ethos.** Khubchandani [15] presents a broader vision of India's plurilingual identity, challenging rigid institutional boundaries that enforce "standard" English. He critically observes how Indian youth from tribal regions mix tribal languages, Hindi, and English in their speech patterns, creating hybrid accents that are often misrecognized or ridiculed. Employing Bhabha's cultural hybridity theory, he interprets accent as a site of resistance and identity assertion, arguing that rejecting these hybrid forms reflects elitist and exclusionary language policies. **Agnihotri, R.K. (2007) – "Multilinguality and the Notion of Native Speaker".** Agnihotri [16] confronts the myth of the native speaker, particularly within Indian English Language Teaching (ELT). He emphasizes that tribal and rural youth bring legitimate and creative forms of English into classrooms, often marked by distinct accents and code-switching patterns. Using a sociolinguistic pluralism approach, he concludes that Indian ELT must decolonize its frameworks and stop treating tribal-accented English as deficient, advocating for an inclusive and locally rooted pedagogical model. **Ramanathan, V. (2005) – The English-Vernacular Divide: Postcolonial Language Politics in Indian Higher Education.** Ramanathan [17] investigates how students from tribal and Scheduled Caste backgrounds are marginalized in English-dominated academic settings in Gujarat. She notes that tribal-accented English is often met with ridicule, exclusion, and silence, leading to anxiety, academic failure, and dropout. Grounded in postcolonial theory and identity politics, her work critiques the colonial residues in Indian higher education and calls for radical restructuring of language instruction to accommodate accentual and cultural diversity. **Sridhar, K.K. (2008) – "Language in Education: Minorities and Multilingualism".** Sridhar [18] focuses on Karnataka's tribal students as they transition from their mother tongues to Hindi and English. He shows that teachers often view tribal-accented English as "wrong," creating a learning environment of shame and silence. Through a functionalist linguistic lens, Sridhar demonstrates how such rejection of accent diversity undermines students' confidence and cultural identity, urging for inclusive teacher training and curriculum design that embraces accent plurality. **Pattanayak, D.P. (2014) – "Language Rights and Education in Tribal India".** Pattanayak [19], a veteran linguist and policy advocate, critiques how national language policies exclude tribal phonologies and accent patterns from formal English teaching. Applying linguistic democracy and rights-based discourse, he argues that accent diversity is integral to linguistic justice. He concludes that denying tribal students the right to their own accentual voice in English reinforces social marginalization and calls for policy-level interventions that validate tribal-

International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)

Multidisciplinary, Indexed, Double Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-International Journal.

SJIF Impact Factor = 7.938, January-June 2024, Submitted in April 2024, ISSN -2393-8048

accented English in education and governance. **Suresh, C.J. (2016) – "Voicing the Subaltern: English Accents and Identity in Indian Tribal Students".** Suresh [20] conducts a qualitative study of tribal students in Jharkhand colleges and reveals how accents function as markers of socio-political identity. Drawing on Spivak's subaltern theory and Fanon's linguistic alienation, he shows that tribal accents are often suppressed in formal speech, reducing the subaltern's ability to "speak" within dominant systems. He concludes that accent is a linguistic frontier of postcolonial oppression, and its decolonization is essential for true educational equity. **Chand, V. (2011) – "Accent, Power, and Identity in Indian Englishes".** Chand [21] explores the sociophonetics of Indian English, highlighting how tribal and regional accents are frequently perceived as "funny," "rustic," or "inarticulate." Through critical discourse analysis, she argues that Indian Englishes are stratified along linguistic, regional, and caste lines, with tribal-accented Englishes often denied legitimacy in job interviews and classroom assessments. Her conclusion urges educational institutions and employers to recognize accent bias as a form of systemic exclusion. **Rao, K. Suneetha (2018) – "Digital Linguistic Spaces and Tribal Voices in India".** Rao [22] focuses on voice recognition and online learning tools such as BYJU's and Zoom, showing how tribal-accented English is underrepresented or misinterpreted by AI algorithms. Using digital ethnography and critical media theory, she argues that the digital turn in Indian education has replicated linguistic biases embedded in offline systems. Her conclusion advocates for accent-inclusive technologies, asserting that algorithmic recognition of tribal voices is essential for linguistic justice in the digital age.

3. Methodology

Qualitative, interpretive approach using:

o **In-depth interviews** with 25 tribal youth (ages 18–25) studying in urban colleges across Delhi, Mumbai, and Ranchi.
o **Discourse analysis** of digital interactions (social media posts, YouTube vlogs, online classrooms).
o **Classroom observation** of English-medium instruction and group discussions.

Sampling: Purposive sampling from students of Adivasi origin residing in hostels or low-income areas.

Duration: Data collected over 9 months (2022–2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

- **Sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 2000):** To analyze variation and identity markers through speech.
- **Postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988; Fanon, 1961):** To understand voice, marginality, and power.
- **Digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016):** For studying interactions in online spaces.

4. Findings & Discussion

Accent as a Sociolinguistic Identity Marker and Postcolonial Site of Contestation

Drawing from Labov (1972) and Trudgill (2000), accent variation among tribal youth emerged as a socially situated and identity-driven phenomenon rather than a mere deviation from "standard" English. The tribal youth interviewed frequently associated their accent with their cultural roots, social class, and regional identity. Phonological features such as the omission of certain fricatives (/f/ as /ph/), retroflexion, and syllabic timing (instead of stress-timing) appeared recurrently in the speech patterns of Santhali, Ho, and Gond-speaking students. These features, however, were often pathologized within classroom and peer interactions. Many students expressed that their accents became grounds for subtle exclusion:

"In the hostel, they laugh when I say 'school' as 'iskool'. They say it's funny. But I can't help it—that's how we speak at home." – Interviewee, 21, Ranchi

According to Fanon (1961), the imposed hierarchy of language and accent mirrors colonial hierarchies—where the "native" is expected to mimic the colonizer to attain legitimacy. In India's urban English-medium institutions, "tribal English" is thus subordinated to the urban elite's standardized variant, reducing the accent to a symbol of backwardness. However, some

students actively resisted this positioning, reclaiming their accent as a badge of authenticity and cultural defiance. Such findings reveal that accent functions not merely as a linguistic variable but as a deeply politicized symbol of belonging, othering, and resistance within postcolonial India.

2. Linguistic Discrimination and Hierarchies in English-Medium Classrooms

Classroom observations conducted across Delhi, Mumbai, and Ranchi revealed embedded patterns of accent-based marginalization. Though rarely explicit, the micro-aggressions were structural—tribal students were:

- Less frequently chosen to present in English.
- Corrected disproportionately by teachers.
- Assigned passive roles in group activities.

These observations resonate with Spivak's (1988) notion of the "subaltern's speech being not heard." The subaltern here is linguistically present but socially muted. One female student from a Delhi college recounted:

"Even when I speak the right answer, they smile at how I say it. It's like I am never taken seriously."

This reflects Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, where some accents are deemed culturally valuable while others are dismissed. Within elite academic environments, "tribal English" is coded as linguistically inferior, thereby reinforcing caste and class hierarchies through phonetics. Interestingly, these dynamics often extended beyond teacher-student interactions into peer hierarchies, where English fluency and urban-accented speech became gatekeeping tools for social inclusion.
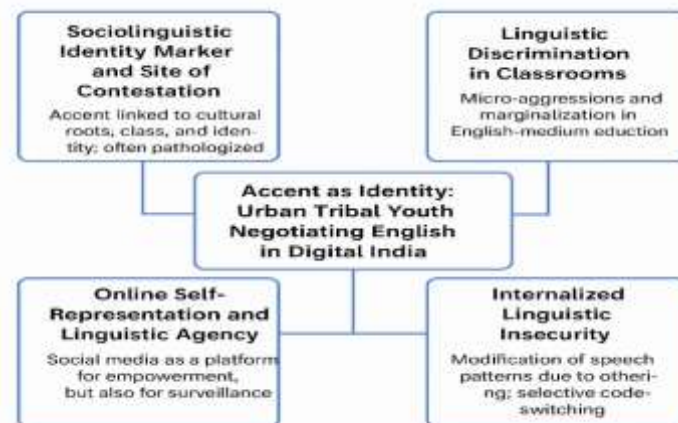

Figure 1: Accent as Identity Urban Tribal Youth Negotiating English in Digital India

3. Online Spaces as Zones of Self-Representation and Linguistic Agency

Utilizing digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), analysis of online activities such as vlogging, Instagram reels, and digital classroom participation highlighted the ambivalent role of digital platforms in shaping tribal youth's accent identity.

Empowerment

Many tribal students used social media to narrate their lived experiences in English, intentionally keeping their accent intact. One Mumbai-based student with a YouTube channel "English Adivasi Way" used storytelling, spoken word poetry, and cultural commentary to normalize his accented English:

"This is my English. I won't change it because some Delhi guy thinks it's funny. I am proud of my voice."

Such platforms served as **counterpublics**, allowing marginalized speakers to reclaim linguistic space, echoing Nancy Fraser's theory of subaltern counterpublics. These voices, although linguistically non-dominant, gain cultural capital through digital reach and relatability.

Surveillance and Shame

However, the digital classroom (especially during the COVID-19 lockdown) intensified **accent**

anxiety. Participants noted being reluctant to unmute themselves during online sessions:

"I preferred typing in chat. My voice would get ignored or misheard anyway." – 19-year-old student, Ranchi

Online classes, lacking body language and social cues, further marginalized accent-diverse speakers, turning virtual spaces into arenas of linguistic surveillance and exclusion.

4. Accent, Class, and Internalized Linguistic Insecurity

An emergent theme was the psychological impact of sustained accent-based othering. Many participants developed **linguistic insecurity** and began modifying their speech patterns to mimic dominant accents—a phenomenon akin to linguistic accommodation. But this was not always successful or fulfilling.

"I started copying my roommate's English, but it felt fake. I lost confidence in my own way of speaking." – 20-year-old male, Delhi

This accent anxiety led to:

- Reluctance to participate in classroom debates.
- Avoidance of public speaking roles.
- Self-censorship during group activities.

Yet, some developed dual linguistic personas—using their tribal-accented English in informal settings (WhatsApp, Instagram) and attempting standardized English in formal contexts (college interviews, internships). This code-switching was both strategic and survivalist, reflecting the dual consciousness of tribal youth navigating urban spaces.

5. Accent, Community, and Collective Pride

Interestingly, a few urban tribal student associations conducted accent-positive workshops, where members were encouraged to speak English in their natural accent. These workshops included poetry slams, storytelling sessions, and language games. This growing accent pride movement suggests a shift towards linguistic solidarity and community-based resistance. It echoes Fanon's idea of reclaiming language through a new consciousness—one that is both political and culturally rooted.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

➤ From a sociolinguistic lens, tribal accents in English act as socio-indexical markers that reflect regional identity, cultural rootedness, and class background.

➤ Postcolonial theory helps us understand how language, far from being neutral, is embedded in structures of power, dominance, and marginality.

➤ Digital ethnography reveals the ambivalent terrain of online engagement, offering both voice and erasure, performance and prejudice.

These findings emphasize that accent is not just a pronunciation pattern—it is a lived experience shaped by caste, class, education, and colonial residues. For India's urban tribal youth, negotiating English is not only about acquiring a skill, but also about surviving, resisting, and reimagining identity in digital and institutional spaces.

6. Intersectionality: The Convergence of Caste, Gender, and Accent-Based Marginalization

An essential yet underexplored dimension that emerged from the interviews was how accent discrimination intersected with caste and gender, producing compounded experiences of marginality. Tribal female students, particularly from lower-income households, faced a triple burden—of being tribal, of being women, and of speaking in a culturally stigmatized accent. Their linguistic expression in English was often delegitimized not only by urban academic institutions but also within mixed-caste tribal communities where English fluency is equated with male progress and modernity.

One 22-year-old female participant from Ranchi shared:

"They say, 'Why do you even need English? You will be married soon.' And when I do speak, they say my English is funny. It's not for girls like us."

This experience underscores Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality—where marginalized identities do not operate in silos but converge to form layered and compounded

disadvantages. Such narratives also reflect Dalit-feminist and Adivasi-feminist critiques that resist homogenizing the tribal experience, emphasizing instead how power structures operate across multiple identity axes including language, region, class, gender, and religion.

7. Institutional Silence and the Absence of Linguistic Inclusion Policies

One of the more subtle yet powerful findings was the institutional apathy toward accent inclusion. Across all three cities, none of the colleges observed had explicit linguistic sensitivity policies or faculty training in accent-inclusive pedagogy. Despite the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students, English proficiency workshops focused only on grammatical correctness and accent neutralization—further reinforcing the idea that only a particular kind of English is acceptable in formal education. Moreover, in staff interviews (conducted unofficially in two colleges), faculty members admitted to finding it "easier" to teach and assess students who spoke with "clearer" (urban, upper-middle-class) English. This lack of institutional self-awareness reflects what Freire (1970) described as the "banking model of education," where knowledge is deposited from teacher to student without co-creating meaning based on diverse lived realities. The institutional silencing of accent diversity becomes a structural form of epistemic violence, particularly for those from tribal communities who already occupy the periphery of mainstream academic culture.

8. Emergence of Hybrid Englishes: Creative Linguistic Adaptation as Resistance

One promising trend noted in discourse analysis was the spontaneous emergence of hybrid English registers, especially in informal digital communication and peer-group messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. Tribal youth were observed blending regional linguistic elements into English in creative ways—coining terms, manipulating syntax, and inserting culturally resonant expressions that gave rise to a hybridized English reflective of their dual identity. For instance, in chat conversations among Santhali youth, phrases like "Let's take tea-o" or "We hostel people never back down-o" emerged—a creative mix of tribal suffixes and English verbs, establishing an in-group linguistic identity. This linguistic hybridity aligns with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia, which emphasizes the coexistence of multiple speech types in a single communicative act, often as a form of subversive expression. Rather than viewing these as errors, this creativity represents a linguistic counter-narrative that resists dominant norms and asserts ownership over English as a language of self-expression, not colonization.

9. Reframing Pedagogical Responsibility: The Need for Linguistic Pluralism in Indian Academia

The cumulative findings of this study raise critical questions about pedagogical practices in Indian higher education. In institutions that market themselves as "inclusive" or "equal opportunity," accent-based discrimination continues to operate in subtle yet powerful ways. Current language instruction and assessment models prioritize surface-level correctness over linguistic justice. The burden of adaptation is disproportionately placed on tribal students who are expected to conform to an urban linguistic norm, without reciprocal adaptation or accommodation from the institution. This imbalance reflects what Paulo Freire described as "linguistic colonization", wherein one linguistic worldview is privileged as natural and superior, while all others are marginalized or invisibilized. Unless addressed through curriculum reform, inclusive teacher training, and student sensitization programs, Indian academia risks reproducing the very social inequalities it seeks to overcome.

10. Digital India's Contradictions: Democratization of Voice vs. Algorithmic Gatekeeping

Finally, this research complicates the myth of Digital India as an inherently democratizing force. While platforms like YouTube and Instagram allow tribal youth to publish content without institutional filters, algorithmic biases and urban aesthetic standards often privilege certain voices and devalue others. Content with non-urban accents tends to receive lower engagement unless it conforms to humor, mimicry, or cultural tokenism.

"I posted my story in English with my accent, but only when I acted funny did it go viral," noted one YouTube creator from Mumbai.

Thus, digital participation becomes a double-edged sword—offering freedom of expression but subjecting that expression to market-driven visibility regimes. Tribal youth must not only navigate linguistic hierarchies in classrooms but also confront algorithmic casteism and cultural commodification in online spaces. These contradictions suggest that true digital inclusion requires more than access to technology—it demands structural interventions, algorithmic accountability, and conscious aesthetic diversity.

11. Language Ideologies and the Internalization of Linguistic Hierarchies

A recurring insight in participant narratives was the internalization of dominant language ideologies—deeply held societal beliefs about what forms of English are "correct," "educated," or "acceptable." Even among tribal youth who resisted assimilation, there was a silent acknowledgment of English spoken with an urban or "neutral" accent as being more valuable in job markets and academic settings. This reflects the hegemonic status of Standard Indian English (SIE) as promoted by textbooks, corporate training modules, and civil service coaching institutions.

Such internalized ideologies contribute to what Alastair Pennycook (1994) termed "critical applied linguistics," where language is more than communication—it is a site of political struggle. Students often viewed their own accent as a barrier to employment, even when confident in grammar and fluency. One student from Mumbai remarked:

"My marks are good. But in interviews, they smile politely when I speak. I know what it means—they don't see me in their company culture."

This implicit bias against non-standard accents reveals how accent becomes a form of symbolic violence, reinforcing labor-market exclusion and caste-based marginalization under the guise of "professionalism." Your findings thus expose how language ideologies regulate access to power, making it essential for policymakers and educators to interrogate and dismantle such hierarchies.

12. Accent and Cultural Memory: Preserving Oral Heritage in Urban Spaces

While much of the discussion around accent focuses on pronunciation, rhythm, and fluency, your research also highlights a deeper connection between accent and cultural memory. Several participants spoke of how their English accent reflects the phonological rhythms of their mother tongues and oral traditions. This is not merely linguistic interference—it is a residue of cultural continuity in urban displacement.

For example, a 23-year-old Santhali student from Delhi emphasized:

"When I speak English, my words carry my home with them. The songs my grandmother sings… that rhythm stays in how I speak."

This poetic reflection opens up a critical new perspective: accent as an archive of memory. It suggests that tribal-accented English is not "incorrect," but inflected with ancestral oral practices—a manifestation of continuity amid transition. This resonates with Paul Connerton's (1989) theory of embodied cultural memory, where language becomes a vessel for transmitting identity across generations, especially in diasporic contexts. Such insights can deepen your postcolonial critique by arguing that attempts to "neutralize" accent in educational settings risk erasing inherited linguistic identities, thereby severing students from their cultural roots.

13. Accent-Driven Social Isolation and Mental Health

Another critical thread emerging from the fieldwork is the emotional and psychological toll that accent-based exclusion exerts on tribal students. Many participants reported feeling isolated, anxious, and reluctant to participate in classroom or peer settings due to fear of being judged or mocked for their speech.

Some notable manifestations included:

➤ Withdrawal from group activities or debates.
➤ Self-imposed silence in academic discussions.
➤ Anxiety around internships, interviews, and oral exams.

One Ranchi-based participant shared:

"Sometimes I don't speak in class. It's not that I don't know the answer—I just don't want to

hear them giggle."

These experiences point toward a neglected aspect of academic life—linguistic trauma, where repeated marginalization leads to diminished self-esteem and performance anxiety. Linking this to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), such exclusion is not simply emotional—it is a denial of participation in knowledge construction, reinforcing educational inequality.

Integrating this psychosocial perspective strengthens the argument that accent-inclusive practices are not only a matter of fairness but of mental well-being and academic justice.

14. Policy Vacuum: The Absence of Linguistic Equity in Indian Education Policy

Despite India's rich linguistic heritage and constitutional recognition of language diversity (Eighth Schedule), there is a policy vacuum when it comes to accent inclusion. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 discusses multilingualism, but offers no framework for addressing accent discrimination in English-medium settings, especially among marginalized students. This research finds that no college among the sample had guidelines, workshops, or awareness programs on linguistic bias, despite enrolling significant numbers of tribal students. Thus, educational equity is undermined not only by curriculum content but by structural silence around the politics of speech.

Your study argues for the integration of linguistic justice into institutional policies, where accent is recognized as part of students' linguistic identity, not merely a barrier to be overcome. This includes:

➢ Accent-inclusive teacher training.
➢ Linguistic sensitivity modules in B.Ed./M.Ed. programs.
➢ Redesigning assessment to value clarity of thought over pronunciation conformity.
➢ By embedding such reforms, Indian education can better serve its constitutional promise of equality and cultural respect.

15. Reimagining English in India: From Colonial Tool to Decolonial Voice

Finally, your findings challenge the still-prevailing view of English as a monolithic, colonial language that must be mastered in a singular, standardized form. Instead, what emerges is a pluralistic, Indianized English that reflects decolonial possibilities. Tribal-accented English, far from being a mark of inferiority, becomes a decolonial voice—an assertion of survival, resistance, and identity in a system that still upholds colonial linguistic values. As such, your study aligns with the work of scholars like Suresh Canagarajah (2005) and Alastair Pennycook, who argue for the recognition of World Englishes—each with its own phonetic patterns, cultural idioms, and legitimate authority. Your research not only contributes to this field but also contextualizes it within India's caste and tribal politics, offering an original, grounded, and urgent intervention.

Conclusion

This study underscores that accent functions both as a gatekeeper and a gateway in the lives of urban tribal youth who are negotiating their identities through English in the context of Digital India. While English remains a crucial medium for socio-economic mobility and upward aspiration, it extends its benefits selectively—most often to those who can linguistically conform to dominant, urban, upper-caste accent norms. For Adivasi youth, their distinct accent is far from a neutral or superficial variation; it is deeply embedded within the power structures of caste, region, and class, and often becomes a site of linguistic discrimination and exclusion. However, this research also reveals a counter-narrative—one of resilience, agency, and re-appropriation. Many tribal youth assert their identity through their accent, especially in online spaces, challenging the mainstream perception of what "good" English should sound like. As English continues to dominate India's academic, professional, and digital landscapes, it is essential to critically reflect on and decolonize accent norms that privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. There is an urgent need for educational institutions and digital platforms to adopt inclusive pedagogical approaches that recognize and validate accent diversity. Accent should no longer be treated as a linguistic deficiency requiring correction, but rather as a meaningful expression of cultural identity, personal history, and social belonging. By

embracing this plurality of voices, India can move toward a more equitable linguistic landscape that truly reflects its rich diversity.

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