

# Indigenous language and primary education: an ethnographic study

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the linguistic marginalization of the Mannan community in Kerala, India. It specifically probes into the decline of Inavan, the indigenous language of the community in primary education. The study was undertaken across four tribal schools where the students from Mannan community students attend, with data based on participant observation in classrooms and community settings, semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, parents, community members and representatives from government and non-government organizations, fieldnotes and artefacts. The findings show that the regional language is the majority language used in classrooms and peer interactions, accounting for the rapid shift away from the Inavan among younger generations. The absence of culturally responsive curriculum materials and the limited utilization of mother tongue resources further catalyze this shift. Conclusively, the study identifies that the multilingual model, which includes Inavan, Malayalam, and English, is important to achieve the dual goals of strengthening linguistic proficiency, cultural identity, and academic engagement. It suggests that using multilingual pedagogies by giving proper training to teachers and active participation of the community as some of the key strategies to be adopted to preserve the Inavan and for aligning the education practice with the national policy objectives.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Languages are not only means of communication. Globally, Indigenous communities' languages reflect their histories and beliefs and practices, which include cultural identity, knowledge, and heritage of a community. It plays a key role in preserving the cultural identity and their traditional knowledge systems. Moreover, these languages contain information regarding the environment, eco-friendly practices, and the conservation of biodiversity. So, when an indigenous language disappears, it is not just some vocabulary that vanishes. In fact, along with the language, the values, oral histories, and hereditary knowledge that were transmitted through it also become extinct. A fair number of them contain detailed knowledge about various plants, animals, and the natural world, which is very helpful in the protection of the environment and the provision of sustainable living for humans. In addition, the languages keep the songs, stories, rituals, and cultural practices alive that have been passed down through the years from one generation to the next. Thus, the language not only helps the community to maintain its identity but also makes sure that its traditions are continued [1].

Globalization, colonization, and the dominant regional, national, and international languages have weakened many traditional languages. As a result, many of the indigenous languages are getting extinct. Along with them, the unique ways of thinking and the traditional knowledge they have been carrying for centuries were also being removed. The disappearance of these languages does not only take away part of the identity of the native people but also results in a huge loss of the world's cultural heritage. In this context, it is necessary to create educational programs that use the indigenous languages as the main means of communication, bringing about similar localizing initiatives, which can be very important for the revival of languages [2]. The conservation of Indigenous languages is crucial, both for the assertion of cultural identities and the safeguarding of the world's linguistic diversity and the environment-friendly life forms.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Primary education in the mother tongue: a foundation for learning

In primary education, teaching provided in students' mother tongue or first language lays the best foundation for future literacy and learning while learning additional languages later on [3]. A mother-tongue-based multilingual education program starts with instruction in the child's first language but adds the national or global languages, ensuring that learners have more confidence and comfort in the classroom while learning material written in a language with which they are more familiar [4]. MLE is pedagogy delivered through two or more languages with the goal of ensuring student comprehension of the instructional content. The concept was advanced by UNESCO in 1999, recommending that education encompass at least three languages: the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language. Given India's high level of linguistic diversity-part of a group with the highest number of living languages along with Nigeria, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, totaling approximately 19,500 languages or dialects [5] the Indian government instituted the three-language formula to foster multilingualism and advance national unity, enshrined in the National Education Policy (NEP) of 1968 during the Indira Gandhi regime [6]. But this policy is still debatable over its benefits and challenges in India's complex linguistic ecology.

NEP 2020 emphasizes that there must be multilingual learning, and that schools adopt the mother tongue or a regional language as the medium of instruction at least up to grade 5, but preferably up to grade 8 and beyond. Empirical studies confirm that education is more effective and interactive when curricula represent students' language, culture, and experiences [7]. Furthermore, research has established that pupils whose first language differs from the school's language of instruction are less likely to drop out or perform poorly in the early years of schooling [8], [9]. These findings cumulate to place mother tongue instruction as crucial in making learning pertinent and inclusive.

### 2.2. Historical context of linguistic marginalization in education systems in India

The marginalization of indigenous languages in the educational system in India began during the period of British rule, when English was established as the major medium of instruction, while the local languages were marginalized, which disrupted the traditional knowledge systems. This policy, which promoted English-language education at the expense of native languages, is epitomized by Macaulay's minute on education of 1835 [10]. The dominance of English continued after independence, especially at the higher education level, as a gateway to socio-economic mobility. A three-language formula was devised to uphold linguistic diversity and promote regional languages, but it hardly looked after tribal and minority languages, leading to several tribal communities being marginalized and their languages hardly documented or recognized institutionally.

India's remarkable multilingual and multicultural diversity makes addressing the educational needs of tribal populations at an enormous task before the government. Although there have been improvements in providing access to schools in the tribal areas, dropout rates are still reportedly high, and performance is lagging compared to that of non-tribal students. Many tribal children face problems in reading, writing, and keeping pace with their non-tribal peers [11], [12]. One of the main reasons for this is that education often takes place in languages with which students are unfamiliar, using pedagogies and cultural references that are incongruent with their experiences [13]. For example, when learning occurs in a different language from that spoken by students in their homes, the approach by learners tends to shift toward rote memorization rather than deep learning, with consequences of an inadequate approach toward learning and a risk of dropping out of school [14].

The need for instruction in the mother tongue for tribal students has long been highlighted by experts [14]. Only now has the challenge posed by providing education in remote areas, combined with the management involved in handling multiple languages, received due attention. Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) have more recently attempted to implement multilingual education in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Odisha [15], enabling the learning of tribal students. Though 1,652 mother tongue were recorded in the 1961 Indian Census, a large number of tribal languages do not have a written form. Policy measures

often use scripts from more dominant regional languages, which leads to the loss of the linguistic identity of tribal languages. Given the lack of adequate educational support towards tribal languages, it is no wonder that tribal students enrolled in schools show low enrollment, high dropout rates, and poor academic performance, with a greater use of memorization than deep comprehension of lessons. This again is a strong reason why mother tongue education should help bridge the gap in terms of language and [16].

### 2.3. Multilingual education

Evidence over the last twenty years reveals a rapid growth in support for the use of local languages in preschool and primary education. The approach allows for communication, as well as cognitive and reasoning skills, to be developed during the early years of learning in the child's strongest language. Additional languages are subsequently introduced to prepare students for a multilingual society. Multilingual education (MLE) thus offers a sound grounding in the first language/mother-tongue, with additional acquisition of a second language, for example, the state language, and a third language, for instance, either English or Hindi. This framework aims to allow children to be able to use multiple languages effectively throughout their lives [17].

The MLE program is inherently multicultural in that it starts with concepts representing the child's immediate experiences and progresses to the wider world. MLE aligns with the national curriculum insofar as it integrates required concepts and learning outcomes. Therefore, this approach would allow children to retain their home/local language and culture while becoming proficient in regional and national languages. Thus, children would be able to participate in wider society without losing their linguistic and cultural identities. Another observed benefit is increased understanding on the part of learners; this is linked to lower dropout rates, longer sustained school attendance, and better academic performance. Moreover, there is enhanced communication among teachers, students, parents, and the community participating in the teaching-learning process.

### 2.4. Mannan community and its language

The Mannan community of Idukki, Kerala, is a major tribal group that currently faces challenges with language and cultural preservation because of social and linguistic marginalization. The group is noted for its distinctive traditions and its matrilineal monarchy, headed by a monarch [18] called the Raja Mannan, who rules the community from Kovilmala near Kattappana. He assisted in his administration of social and welfare matters by a council of Kanis, or community leaders. The community speaks a language called Inavan or Mannanpechu, which falls within the Southern Dravidian language family and incorporates elements of Tamil and Malayalam [19]. It is incorporated by a collection of unique phonological and lexical words, even though it has no standardized script. Inavan language continues to exist mainly through songs, proverbs, and idioms that reveal historical narratives, values, ecological knowledge, and other culturally salient information of the Mannan people. The songs of Mannan community which is in Inavan narrate the stories of migrations and agricultural practices, besides imploring the nature for plenty. The proverbs provide useful wisdom and way of living standards and, hence, reflect the deep attachment of the community to land and the surroundings. However, the Inavan is threatened because regional languages like Malayalam and Tamil dominate education and social life. The lack of a written script makes documentation and inclusion of Inavan language in school curricula more complicated. As a result, most Mannans now use Malayalam as the dominant language in their homes and schools, which has been dictated by a belief that the ability to communicate in Malayalam and English opens wider opportunities for jobs and social mobility, further marginalizing Inavan. There are some attempts at teaching the mother tongue through educational institutions, but these are very limited.

### 2.5. Scope of the research

The study highlights the challenges both teachers and students of the Mannan community face, along with strategies to integrate their language into schooling that might help in sustaining the language. Mannans are a scheduled tribe in the state of Kerala, living in Idukki with a rich cultural life that is completely bounded by their language, their customs, and their traditions. That heritage, however, is endangered by outside forces and sometimes even by the modern world's fast rhythm of life. The decreasing number of speakers almost leads their language into vanishing, which is not only the loss of the people's means of communication but also the loss of related customs and oral traditions [20], [21].

The Mannan people understand that language is the very basis of their existence. It is also their way of expressing nature, communicating with others, and carrying out their rituals, and eventually it is their identity. Still, the education system has been a turning point of many young Mannans who gradually switched to Malayalam, the dominant regional language [22]. The digital media explosion is another factor that has been pushing Inavan as it has the highest presence of Malayalam and English online. This state of affairs has imposed new difficulties on the continuity of cultural practices, rituals, and the whole community's relying on language to pass the generation and the next through folklore, in fact, language was the main medium for the transmission of beliefs among the people [23]. A lot of things have to be sorted out still, even though there have been attempts made to prevent the loss of the language, such as inadequate technological infrastructure, lack of teachers who

are culturally sensitive as well as having no learning materials suitable to indigenous contexts [24]. The very common nowadays hybrid learning models, that can be seen as both a promise and a risk: they might increase their reach or they might further the digital divide and push towards a non-specific and thus non-indigenous approach to languages that does not meet their needs, including that of the young and the old ones [25].

Language is not just a means of communication. It symbolizes history, culture, and personal identity. The education sector can play a significant role in the conservation of the indigenous languages which in turn will contribute to the enhancement of cultural diversity as well as the support of sustainable development in multicultural societies. The implications of the study are valuable for the policy makers, for the education professionals and for the research who are mainly interested in the use of inclusive education systems for the preservation of endangered languages. In keeping with the National Educational Policy and UNESCO's emphasis on mother-tongue-based education as a pathway toward achieving quality education and sustainable development goal of providing with quality education [26].

## 2.6. Originality and contribution

While prior research advocates mother tongue education at policy level, few studies document how everyday school routine's structure language shift. This study addresses that gap by examining how Inavan and Malayalam are distributed across instructional and informal domains in Mannan schooling. This study makes three different contributions to the research on indigenous language and the schooling in Kerala. First, it provides one of the first in-depth ethnographic documentation of use of Inavan language in everyday school life. Second, it identifies domain-based code-switching patterns across classrooms and informal spaces showing how language shift is organized across school activities. Third, it highlights an internal contradiction between the teacher's perception of no barrier in communication and the community's concerns about language loss. By mapping these tensions, the paper extends debates on multilingual education from "whether" mother tongue matters to "how" institutional routines actively structure language shift in tribal schooling.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1. Research design

This study adopted an ethnographic case study approach to explore how the Mannan community experiences language and education. Through ethnography, cultural practices, everyday meanings of language, and the role of education in daily life have all been closely monitored; besides, the case study method provides the possibility for an in-depth investigation into four discrete educational institutions. By focusing on the primary school teachers, students, parents, and community leaders in Mannan community, the research identifies what prevents the maintenance of Mannan and locates opportunities to bring the revitalization of languages into schooling. Though there is limited research on the Mannan community to support the study, it is claimed to be ethnographic since the study allows insights, challenges, and possible solutions to be brought out by the fieldwork. To conduct this study, a set of 12 semi-structured interview questions were conceived, which corresponded to the purposes of the study. The questions were then reviewed by experts, rewritten for ease of understanding, and then presented from the perspectives of tribal culture. The study is shaped by three research questions:

- What are the linguistic challenges faced by Mannan community students and teachers in primary schools?
- How does primary education influence the language practices of the Mannan community?
- What strategies can support the integration and preservation of the Inavan language in education?

### 3.2. Design structure and stages

The research followed an ethnographic case study approach, progressing from proposal development to pilot testing, and then to extensive fieldwork. The initial proposal was followed by a pilot study, which tested the feasibility of the instruments and helped identify cultural nuances needing attention. Insights from the pilot informed refinements to the interview schedules, making them more sensitive to community challenges, organizational contexts, and the cultural implications of schooling. After finalizing the interview schedule, the researcher took the administrative clearance.

### 3.3. Administrative clearances

As part of the ethnographic protocol, the researcher undertook detailed administrative steps to ethically enter the field. Between 18 November and 1 December 2023, formal documentation was submitted to the Directorate of Scheduled Tribes Development Department, Thiruvananthapuram, and local educational authorities. Permissions were granted by the Assistant Educational Office and District Educational Office, Kattappana, and a formal agreement was executed with the Project Officer, Integrated Tribal Development Project

(ITDP), Thodupuzha, on ₹100 stamp paper. Final clearance from the Directorate of Education and the Deputy Director of Education, Thodupuzha, was obtained by mid-December 2023, enabling full access for data collection.

### 3.4. Fieldwork and case selection

After these approvals were given, there was systematic fieldwork that was done from November 2023 to 17 May 2024. Following the ethnographic case study approach, four schools were purposively chosen as bounded cases because they had considerable Mannan student populations and strong tribal contexts: i) Kanchiyar G. T. L. P. School, ii) Kozhimala G. T. L. P. School, iii) Kattappana G. T. H. S. School, and iv) Murikkattukudy G. T. H. S. School. These cases allowed for rich, contextualized understanding of educational practices within the community.

### 3.5. Participants and data collection

Participants represented both school and community domains, including Mannan community members, parents, students, teachers, local leaders, and government/non-government representatives. Following ethnographic method principles, the researcher was present in the field and engaged with the participants for an extended period, and data collection was through participant observation in classrooms and community settings, semi-structured interviews (96 interviews), artefacts, field notes and reflective memos. The researchers archived all materials, that is, audio recordings, video recordings, transcripts, images, and artifacts, in a systematic way to create a detailed ethnographic record. This allowed us to make thick descriptions that reflect cultural meanings, lived experiences, and the socio-educational transformations within the community. The sample size was determined by the principle of information power where the specific research aims, the richness of participant insights, and the saturation of recurring themes all helped to ensure that the analysis was of sufficient depth. Saturation was assessed when no substantially new patterns emerged across schools and participant groups, particularly regarding language dominance, code-switching practices, and institutional language norms.

Along with thematic ethnographic analysis, this study also closely observed how language was used in daily school life. The researchers went back to field notes and interview transcripts and carefully noted moments where Mannan children shifted between Mannan and Malayalam. Data were analyzed through a staged thematic coding process and later clustered into themes aligned with the research questions. This included the instances of semantic borrowing, lexical substitution, and code-mixing between Mannan and Malayalam. The researchers paid special attention to natural, unplanned speech what children said in classrooms, during peer conversations, and in informal school spaces like corridors and playgrounds. These everyday language choices were understood as signs of how the community's language is adapting, changing, and continuing. To move beyond descriptive reporting, these observed shifts were interpreted through established sociolinguistic frameworks, in order to situate local classroom practices within broader theoretical understandings of domain-based language movement and power relations. Classroom observations were examined to understand how children managed two languages at the same time. While the classroom transactions were done in Malayalam, students often use the language Inavan or a mix of both Mannan and Malayalam language when expressing feelings or showing a sense of belonging. These shifts were not random. They reflected the children's own ways of thinking, understanding lessons, and communicating comfortably across languages. Additionally, language-use patterns were checked across different time periods, that is morning assembly, classroom instruction, breaks, and co-curricular activities and also across other co-curricular activities over the academic term. This temporal mapping helped to reveal the fluctuations in language choice which were linked to activity type, authority presence, and social grouping.

### 3.6. Ethical considerations

Prior to the research starting, the researcher received ethical clearance from the university. To add, approvals were given by the Directorate of Scheduled Tribes Development, Kerala, the Integrated Tribal Development Project Office (ITDP) Office (Thodupuzha), the Tribal Extension Officer (Kattappana), and educational authorities in the area. Every participant gave their informed consent, and the description of their rights, confidentiality, and voluntary participation was very clear. The building of rapport was an indispensable aspect of the procedure, aimed at creating a safe and reliable environment. The audio- and video-recordings were stored in a secure location with password protection, and verbatim transcription has been done and then translated into English prior to the commencement of the analysis.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was collected and analyzed. Then the findings are organized into three analytically linked themes aligned with the research questions. They are i) the linguistic landscape, ii) the primary education system's

influence on language, and iii) strategies for language integration and preservation. This thematic organization allows systematic interpretation rather than isolated narrative description.

#### 4.1. The linguistic landscape

Understanding how children speak Mannan combining their languages in communication is the main step towards knowing their route through the educational system. The change of place for these pupils consists not only of physical location but also of the world created by the two languages. This phenomenon in sociolinguistics is called diglossia: it refers to the situation when two languages have different functions. The home language, which is gradually replaced with Malayalam, is the school language. This shift brings a complicated mix of different opinions and problems, revealing the pressure and complexities that families and students go through. Similar findings have been noted elsewhere, where first-generation tribal learners struggle when education is conducted in unfamiliar languages [27]. Interpreted through Fishman's framework of language shift, this domain separation indicates movement of Inavan from high-status institutional spaces toward restricted interpersonal domains. Hornberger's continua of biliteracy further clarify how Malayalam occupies formal, assessed, and authoritative ends of the educational spectrum while Inavan remains oral and culturally bounded.

##### 4.1.1. The decline of Inavan, the language of Mannan community as a primary language

Our ethnographic findings have shown that the younger generation is progressively moving their linguistic choice from Inavan to others, and the latter one is the one that is being used in less places gradually being completely deserted at some locations. This pattern was consistently observed across field sites, strengthening cross-case validity. Recurring references to Malayalam dominance in both formal and informal school interactions indicate saturation of this theme across participants and schools. The school, which is a miniature society that reflects the wide one, has a very clear preference for Malayalam still even in informal conversations among friends. At Kozhimala G. T. L. P. School, a teacher has noticed that *"Mainly the students speak in Malayalam at school, even among them,"* this is a practice that starts in the morning and goes on till the end of the day. This aligns with broader studies showing that tribal students often face systemic exclusion when their languages and identities are overlooked in education [28]. There are some people in the community who are worried and think that it is a sign of the culture becoming weaker that they are losing their language. A community member who, lamenting, says that *"Even small children don't speak our language now."* But this perspective is not the only one that exists. The Mannan King, Raman Rajamannan, offers a different viewpoint and says, *"No, not at all. Everywhere, whether it's children or adults, our native language is still actively used."* The different points of view within the community reflect an internal discussion regarding the future of the Inavan language and suggest the language shift is a complex and disputed process.

##### 4.1.2. Malayalam as the language of school

Compared to the usual home setting, without a doubt, the school is the space where Malayalam is the only language used. It is the language of instruction in school and of administration and, even more lately, of socialization. The students' testimonies really show what is the case and, at the same time, they give us a glimpse of the students' views which have been influenced by the total immersion in this setting. One student, very clearly says that he speaks "Malayalam" at home and does not know their language, Inavan, which implies that the language shift is now taking place within families. Another student whose mother speaks "Inavan" at home, says he learns in "Malayalam" at school. He also gives an enormous insight into his learning process, mentioning that he finds *"Malayalam is easier to understand."* The fact that Malayalam is regarded as "easier" points to the very successful process of the educational system's linguistic assimilation. It is assumed that this preference comes from a long exposure and the school's normalizing influence, which subtly puts Malayalam in the forefront as the language of academic benefit and advancement. It shows an internal, maybe even subconscious, downgrade of their mother tongue in the formal context of learning which in turn reveals how the assimilation process works at the individual cognitive level [29].

##### 4.1.3. Fluctuations in language use during the school day

School is the main place where rules about language are put into practice every day. It is where children learn not just subjects, but also which language they are expected to use and when. For Mannan children, the school day involves constant shifts in language. These shifts clearly show the difference between the formal language used for teaching and the informal language used with friends. Looking closely at these changes helps us understand the different roles that Mannan and Malayalam play in the school system and a summary of these fluctuations observed is presented in Table 1. Inside the classroom, Malayalam completely dominates as the official language of teaching. All lessons, explanations, and instructions are given in Malayalam. Students' profiles and their own words confirm this, and teachers also clearly support this practice.

One student affirms that his teachers speak Malayalam, a policy that situates Malayalam as the sole language of formal learning and institutional communication. This Malayalam only approach exists within a pedagogical context that, on paper, may suggest otherwise. A teacher notes that while official guidelines recommend mother tongue instruction in early grades, the reality is that *“From first grade onwards, English is being taught”* alongside Malayalam. This effectively positions the Mannan mother tongue outside the formal curriculum, leaving it with no official space in the children’s academic development.

However, the most significant linguistic fluctuation occurs in the informal spaces of the school day. While students are comfortable with Malayalam for academic purposes, another facilitator from Kozhimala settlement clarifies, *“They might speak their tribal language among themselves.”* This observation is crucial. It reveals a dynamic form of code-switching dictated by audience and context. Students adapt their language use, employing the formal, institutionally required Malayalam for teacher-student interactions while often reverting to the more familiar and intimate Mannan for peer-to-peer communication. This demonstrates a sophisticated sociolinguistic awareness, where children navigate different social expectations by switching between their languages. These fluctuations within the school day are not arbitrary; they reflect a broader, highly structured, and domain-specific allocation of language functions that governs the children’s lives. Thus, language use was categorized across instructional (Malayalam), social/informal peer domains (mixed/Inavan), and broader ceremonial spaces (Mannan cultural forms), showing domain-specific strengths and vulnerabilities.

Table 1. Observed language use across school-day activities

| School activity/space                                 | Dominant language (observed)                  | What it indicates for language shift          |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Morning assembly/formal announcements                 | Malayalam                                     | Malayalam as “institutional legitimacy”       |
| Classroom instruction (teacher talk and board work)   | Malayalam                                     | Formal learning domain excludes Inavan        |
| Student responses to teacher                          | Malayalam (often minimal)                     | Performance tied to Malayalam competence      |
| Peer talk inside classroom (low surveillance moments) | Mixed/Inavan fragments                        | Inavan survives in covert peer domains        |
| Break time/playground                                 | Mixed (varies by group)                       | Domain-based maintenance not uniform          |
| Transport/commute (e.g., school vehicle)              | Malayalam                                     | School extends language environment outward   |
| Cultural programmes/annual day                        | Inavan cultural forms + Malayalam scaffolding | Symbolic visibility without curricular status |

#### 4.1.4. Contradictory perceptions of linguistic barriers

The linguistic dichotomy is clearly observable, but its effect on learning is still a matter of disagreement, which brings to light the tension that arises from the different social roles and professional mandates of the educators and the community members. Teachers, for their part, have not felt the impact too much. A linked example is a teacher who just transferred to the Murikkattukudy G. T. H. S. School who makes a rather tentative observation obtained from her first classroom experience: *“I joined this school on June 9th... So far, I have not observed any learning difficulties due to language. However, teachers who have been here for a longer time may have different experiences.”* Her statement, which is expertly qualified and comes from the vantage point of a newcomer whose professional aim is to execute the Malayalam curriculum that already exists indicates that from a functional and assimilative point of view, the students seem to be adapting.

On the other hand, community members offer a powerful counter-narrative. One of the community members asserts that the absence of mother tongue instruction is a “major issue” that fundamentally limits students’ potential. Advocating for a bilingual approach, he reframes the issue not as a “difficulty” to be overcome, but as a vast “potential” that remains unrealized. In a powerful articulation of this view, he claims: *“If the children are taught using a mix of their native language and Malayalam, then by the time they reach 4th grade, they will be performing like a 10th-grade student.”* This perspective comes from a desire for cultural preservation while supporting academic excellence. But it highlights a key tension that is what a teacher might see as a successful adaptation, the community sees as they limit their true potential [30]. These contrasting perceptions illustrate not only ideological divergence but also competing definitions of “success” in education, functional assimilation versus culturally rooted multilingual development. This divergence strengthens the argument that language shift in Mannan schooling is socially contested rather than uniformly experienced.

#### 4.1.5. Semantic borrowing and code-mixing

Looking at things like code-mixing and borrowing of words helps us understand how Mannan primary school children manage their two languages in everyday life. When they mix languages, it is not by accident. These are thoughtful, practical choices that show both the slow shift toward another dominant language and

the continued importance of their mother tongue in certain parts of life. Most Mannan children grow up with two main languages around them: Mannan at home and Malayalam at school. On paper, this looks like a clear separation. But it is much more complicated. Even the home, which is usually the safest place for a mother-tongue, is now changing. People in the community themselves have different views about how strong the Inavan still is at home. One of the community members observes a widespread shift, stating, *“Most people now speak Malayalam at home...even in homes, Malayalam has largely taken over.”* This suggests that the Inavan is losing its main space of daily use. But the facilitator from Anchuruli settlement notes that *“Children still use their own language at home.”* These different viewpoints show that the home is not the same everywhere. Instead, it is a space where two things are happening at the same time: some families are maintaining the Inavan, while others are slowly shifting to Malayalam.

This mixing of languages can also be seen in schools, even though schools officially expect students to use only Malayalam. Teachers have noticed that children sometimes use Mannan words when they speak. One teacher observes that students use the Mannan word *“chorukk”* for vomiting, a term unfamiliar in standard Malayalam. Another teacher provides further examples, citing students’ use of *“vattil”* for a plate and *“kumma”* for food. These examples of lexical borrowing are significant. It is significant that these examples relate to visceral, domestic concepts (vomiting, food, and plate). This suggests that while students acquire the formal lexicon of Malayalam in school, the Inavan retains its primacy for core, home-based semantic domains, leading to this natural code-mixing. This fluid interaction between languages is part of a larger pattern of navigating distinct linguistic environments, a pattern that becomes most structured and consequential during the school day. This aligns with sociolinguistic studies showing that minority languages under pressure often survive through lexical retention while yielding structural and institutional domains to dominant languages [31].

#### 4.2. The primary education system’s influence on language

The formal education system is not aligned with the linguistic world of Mannan community. The fieldwork highlights that it serves as a very strong driver of language assimilation. But through a standardized curriculum with its underlying educational philosophies and the daily rhythm of the school schedule, education gradually influenced how they used their language. The students were guided and fluent in Malayalam. As a result, their own native language has been preferred less in daily communication.

##### 4.2.1. The unadapted curriculum

The ethnographic study reveals that the current curriculum at the primary School is merely a means of standardization, devoid of any important cultural or linguistic adaptation for the Mannan students. It is a general framework applied across the state, Kerala, with little regard for local characteristics. A teacher from Kanchiyar G. T. L. P. School explains the situation as *“The curriculum we follow is a general one; there is no special curriculum tailored to this community. However, the government has provided a handbook for the Inavan... But so far, there hasn’t been a need to use it.”* The existence of a handbook which is thought to support the language that has not been used is very meaningful. It is a representation of a lost opportunity and also a sign of a slow but strong devaluation of the Inavan language in the context of formal education. A tool that was meant for linguistic bridging is still inactive, conveying the message that the native language/mother tongue has no official status or worth in the academic process and that it is a mere holder of the message. And these observations resonate with researches showing that mainstream curricula often fail to acknowledge Indigenous histories and knowledge systems, contributing to alienation and dropouts [32]. The non-use of the Inavan handbook, despite its availability, represents a clear policy-practice gap, highlighting how institutional priorities shape language hierarchies within schooling.

##### 4.2.2. A philosophy of assimilation

The curriculum that has not been adapted has a hidden educational philosophy at its core, which gives more importance to mainstreaming than to linguistic preservation. This approach sees the aim of education as the children’s smooth integration into the larger Malayalam-speaking community rather than the development of multilingual and bicultural identities. A teacher from Kozhimala G. L. P. School makes this view very clear *“There is no need to separate Mannan children from normal Malayalam-speaking children... I feel that this curriculum is sufficient for them.”* This viewpoint has significant socio-linguistic implications. When the current curriculum which is made for general community is considered as sufficient, it slowly becomes the accepted form. This strengthens the dominance of regional language, Malayalam in schooling. Thus, the Mannan community’s native language Inavan is no longer preferred as a useful learning resource. Instead, it is treated as unnecessary that slowdown the assimilation process that mirrors Wolki’s findings that how mainstream curricula prioritize assimilation over Indigenous epistemologies [33].

#### 4.2.3. Cognitive load in Malayalam learning

Mannan children grow up using their mother tongue at home, but in school they are expected to use only Malayalam. This sharp difference between home language and school language makes learning more difficult and mentally tiring for them. From the outside, it can look like students are adjusting well to Malayalam. Many children themselves say they are more comfortable using it in school. For instance, one of the students from Kanchiyar G. T. L. P. School state they “*Understand[s] Malayalam better,*” while another confirms that Malayalam “*Helps you understand better in school,*” framing it as a utilitarian preference. This trend extends to another student from Kattappana G. T. H. S. School, who reports that “*Only my mother speaks [Mannan] and she does not know it herself,*” indicating a language shift within a single generation. But even though students seem to manage in Malayalam, teachers notice serious learning difficulties that tell a different story. A teacher reports significant memory issues, noting that “*If you ask them the next day or after a couple of days, they forget. They are not able to remember as other children do.*” This difficulty with retention is compounded by a gap between oral comprehension and foundational literacy. Another teacher observes, while students can copy text, they “struggle to recognize individual letters and numbers,” suggesting surface-level orthographic mapping without genuine literacy acquisition. Therefore, while students may achieve functional fluency in Malayalam for classroom interaction, the cognitive effort required to learn complex subjects through this second language is critically exacerbated by a near-total lack of home-based academic resources such as books, dictionaries, or a quiet place to study that prevents any reinforcement of learning. This reveals a critical tension where apparent linguistic adaptation masks a deeper academic struggle, a direct consequence of the cognitive tax of subtractive bilingualism in an under-resourced environment [34].

#### 4.2.4. The school environment as a socializing force

A student’s school day which starts from getting onto the bus to the last bell rings, it’s a total immersion of Malayalam environment. This way of daily exposure makes students adapt to new linguistic habits. A teacher from Murikkattukudy G. T. H. S. School said that apart from the “*Vidya vahini vehicle*”, students use Malayalam in their conversations. This continuous exposure not only limits the school, it also has a significant impact on the culture. Community leaders align their loss of cultural identity directly to this language shift. The Ilayarajavu (heir to the throne) expresses this change negatively: “*If you ask a child today, ‘Where are you from?’ they will not know how to respond in the Inavan. They will say it in Malayalam. Our culture is disappearing.*” His words point to a deeper issue. Here, education is not only about learning a new language, but also shaping the future generation on how they think, speak and express themselves. Consequently, their connection to their own heritage which is connected to their language also weakens. This reflects other researches showing the loss of Indigenous languages is associated with the diminishing of ecological knowledge that tend to weaken community resilience [35], [36]. Now that we have studied the system’s effect, we shall proceed to a more detailed and “thick description” of the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning in this intricate environment.

### 4.3. Strategies for language integration and preservation

The teachers, community leaders, parents, and students have provided valuable input. It shows the concrete ways to incorporate the Inavan language into teaching and its preservation for the long term. The new routes outlined here are not just overcoming the issues but are honoring the community’s linguistic heritage. Also, at the same time this contributes to academic achievement.

#### 4.3.1. The call for multilingual pedagogy

In this study, the strongly suggested solution is to introduce a multilingual pedagogical model. According to this, the current single-language method can limit the students’ learning potential. It’s supported by wider literature which indicates that students belonging to tribes are often pushed to the margins as their languages and identities are ignored in the learning process. A teacher said that teaching through a mix of their native language and Malayalam is the cornerstone of this strategy. It is envisioned that the benefits of such a practice would be extensive, spreading throughout the school community like a windfall. The use of the mother tongue as a link to Malayalam would facilitate comprehension and at the same time increase the students’ self-esteem by recognizing their native language and also promote the positive spirit of cultural identity which is already there in the academic environment. This multilingual approach is also accepted everywhere by the research data showing that children make better progress when the mother tongue is the basis of education [37], [38]. This aligns directly with NEP 2020’s emphasis on mother-tongue-based education in early grades and global SDG 4 commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education.

#### 4.3.2. Activating existing resources and forging new paths

Along with the changes in general teaching methods, the government has already issued a handbook of the Inavan language in Malayalam. This handbook, which is thought to be useful for teachers to assist the Mannan

students in their own language, is not in use as this will demand is teacher training said by a teacher from Kanchiyar G. T. L. P. School. Another key move for the formal, permanent integration of any language into the written curriculum is the creation of a common script. The ongoing work by Pavanaatma College to develop a script for the Inavan language is an important project that should get support from both the institution and the government, said the king. The school is already acting as a place for culture to show itself. Activities like the annual day, with students seen singing their cultural songs, give a natural and festive place to promote the Inavan. Such activities should be purposely seen as chances for the language to be used and preserved (Fieldnote, 25 Jan 2024). The NEP 2020's also advocates for mother tongue teaching in early schooling, thus providing a policy base for revitalization. Nevertheless, its success will depend on efficient local application through teacher training, resource development, and community involvement [39].

#### 4.3.3. Addressing community ambivalence

It is very important to recognize that the aspiration for language integration is not monolithic within the community. Any top-down strategy is unlikely to succeed without addressing the nuanced and sometimes ambivalent views held by parents. Every top-down approach is going to be difficult to implement if it does not take into account the complicated and even sometimes mixed feelings of the parents. On one hand, some members of the community strongly support multilingual education, while on the other hand, parents are content with the current system and they even say, *"They have no problems at all."* This view may express mainly the economic side of things, with an argument that the best way of getting economic mobility is through being fluent in Malayalam. *"Not everyone needs to learn our language... this is something we need for ourselves."* This statement suggests that some consider the Inavan language a personal, cultural property, which is different from the public and educationally useful aspect of the language. Therefore, the integration policy must be worked out together with the Mannan community, as it will be impossible to do otherwise with such diverse views and the educational policy will not be effective unless it is aligned with self-determined goals for cultural continuity and socio-economic advancement. These strategies act as a map connecting the existing problems with a more integrated and culturally affirming educational future. Therefore, any integration policy must emerge through participatory dialogue with the Mannan community to balance cultural preservation.

#### 4.4. Recommendations

Incorporating Inavan into the current curriculum can enhance the learning abilities of Mannan students. Based on the findings of this study, integration must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structured pedagogical planning. The development of textbooks and storybooks in their own home language will help children continue their attachment to their culture and elevate their performance in schools. Such materials may include bilingual word walls, parallel-text storybooks, oral narrative documentation, and graded vocabulary bridging tools linking Inavan with Malayalam. Thus, the multilingual approach can equip the students with sound skills in local and global languages, such as Malayalam, Inavan, and English [40]. In the meantime, the teachers must undergo training on how to consider and handle the needs of linguistically diverse learners to ensure an inclusive learning environment [41], [42]. Community involvement is very important in culturally responsive education by inviting the local cultural practitioners, and historians, into the schools [43]. If the ecological knowledge of the Mannan community and their cultural practices are incorporated into the curriculum, then the learning process will be exciting and relevant for the children [44]. This aligns with NEP 2020's emphasis on mother-tongue-based education in early grades and supports SDG 4's commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education. The same is the case with digital preservation: mobile apps and websites could give students access to interactive materials [45]. The application of technology in this way not only helps the transmission of traditional knowledge but also goes with the teaching styles that are common today. Taken together, these can facilitate the protection of both the Inavan language and culture while ensuring better educational opportunities for the upcoming generation. However, successful implementation will depend on sustained teacher training, resource allocation, and participatory engagement with the Mannan community to ensure that policy intentions translate into meaningful classroom practice.

#### 4.5. Implications of the study

The study clearly shows that the linguistic and cultural needs of Mannan students should be considered as a part of educational inclusion and equity [46]. At present, the classrooms are predominantly influenced by regional and official languages while Inavan is pushed to the background. This can affect the student's learning ability and participation in the classroom activities. Such a scenario can be observed in the case of numerous Indigenous groups spread throughout the world [47]. One of the main points is that the incorporation of the Inavan language into the current curriculum may help improve learning and safeguard cultural identity. Teaching in a mother tongue ensures better comprehension, cognitive development, and academic performance [48]. Another important aspect is the role of multilingual education. When well planned, these approaches can support learning

in home, regional, and national languages simultaneously, helping students communicate effectively within their own communities and in broader society [49], [50]. Such models build language skills and ensure students' academic and social confidence while keeping them connected to their cultural roots.

This study has also highlighted the need for culturally responsive curricula [51]. Having a curriculum that includes the cultural practices, values, ecological knowledge, and oral traditions of the Mannan people makes learning relevant. Otherwise, the marginalized communities feel detached from their worldview that is not represented in the mainstream schooling [52]. Such appreciation of cultural diversity in the curriculum design makes education more equitable and interesting for all the students [53]. Community participation in educational planning process is another crucial implication. It not only facilitates the incorporation of cultural and linguistic aspects of the Mannan but also the strengthening of the connection between home and school [54]. The collaboration builds a supportive learning environment wherein students are empowered and do not feel isolated. By the integration of Inavan and their culture into education, students are given a more comprehensive learning experience that is beneficial to their academic growth, cultural pride, and emotional well-being. A sense of belonging is very important for motivation towards long-term success. For indigenous groups, where language and culture are so intertwined, such programs are crucial for the survival of the culture.

#### 4.6. Limitations of the study

The incorporation of indigenous languages and culturally responsive methods in education is a significant concern that the study highlighted; however, it does not cover the difficult but very practical steps of changing things through the current educational system. The creation of suitable teaching materials, the rewriting of the curriculum, and the issue of getting teachers who are good at Inavan all pose policy and operational challenges. Also, even while multilingual education is advocated in theory, the study does not detail specific, region-by-region strategies of implementation regarding local differences or the constraints of government policy.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Teaching Inavan language and culture together in Mannan schools is very valid and convincing. When both are integrated into education, students tend to do better academically, and their cultural identity also remains prominent, with students better equipped for a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural. At present, the Inavan experiences significant instructional vulnerability because Malayalam is the only language used for teaching in formal education. Even when students can speak Malayalam in daily life, they often struggle to understand deeper academic ideas in this second language. This creates a learning gap that affects their overall performance. In order for meaningful progress to be achieved, Mannan needs to be a part of the school curriculum. Preparation of textbooks, storybooks, and reader materials in Mannan would help in ensuring that while learning the lessons in the mother-tongue, the students could relate themselves to their roots and help lift their learning outcomes at the same time. In homes and social life, the language is now mostly preserved by grandparents, who continue to speak Mannan with children. However, many parents are shifting to Malayalam because they believe it will help their children succeed in mainstream society. As a result, the use of Mannan at home is slowly decreasing. A three-language approach, including Malayalam, Mannan, and English, will provide the students with both local and global prospects. Teachers will also require proper training to manage classrooms with linguistic diversity and to teach in Inavan to support the students.

Community involvement is an important part: cultural experts, and traditional knowledge custodians can play a vital role in making learning interactive and meaningful. Updating the curriculum with ecological knowledge and Mannan traditions will be a great way to make education more connected with students' lives. Cultural and ceremonial spaces still protect the language to some extent. Traditional chants, ritual songs like *Koothu Paattu*, and ancestral naming practices continue in Mannan. However, this area is also becoming fragile because ritual experts such as the *Vaathi*, who carried this knowledge orally, are passing away without their knowledge being recorded. The use of digital technologies like mobile apps and interactive websites for providing language learning resources will also help them to preserve their language. Technology can allow traditional knowledge to be passed on to children through modern means of education, thereby making it possible for them to learn their languages without being disadvantaged in comparison with other languages. Even among children, the language still has social value. They sometimes use Mannan as a "secret code" while playing or arguing with friends so that teachers cannot understand them. This shows that the language is still alive in informal peer settings. However, the lack of a written script remains a major challenge, making it difficult to preserve Mannan through books, formal education, and digital communication. These methods will empower the Inavan and culture to be kept alive along with the educational future of their future generations.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state no conflict of interest.

## INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The ethical clearance certificate has been collected from the corresponding university before the study starts. Also, approval was granted by the Directorate of Scheduled Tribes Development, Kerala, the Integrated Tribal Development Project Office (ITDP) Office (Thodupuzha), the Tribal Extension Officer (Kattappana), and educational authorities in the area. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and the explanation of their rights, confidentiality, and voluntary participation was very clear.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JJM], upon reasonable request. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article

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