

Interpretations Through Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida in the Digitization and Documentation of Tribal languages in India: A NEP-2020 and Digital India Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The rapid digitization of linguistic resources in India has opened new pathways for the preservation and revitalization of tribal languages, many of which face endangerment. This paper examines the processes of digitization and documentation of tribal languages through the theoretical lenses of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, situating the discussion within the frameworks of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Digital India initiative. Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and his emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign, provide a foundational approach to structuring and systematizing tribal languages in digital archives. In contrast, Derrida's critique of fixed meanings and his concept of *différance* challenge the notion of linguistic stability, highlighting the fluidity, contextuality, and cultural embeddedness of tribal expressions. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the paper argues that digitization is not merely a technical act of preservation but also an interpretative process shaped by ideological, cultural, and epistemological choices. NEP 2020's emphasis on multilingualism and mother tongue education, combined with Digital India's technological infrastructure, creates a policy environment conducive to linguistic inclusivity. However, tensions arise between standardization for accessibility and the preservation of linguistic diversity and orality. The study underscores the need for ethically grounded, community-centered digital practices that acknowledge the dynamic nature of tribal languages while leveraging technology for sustainable documentation. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary approach reveals that digital archives are not neutral repositories but evolving sites of meaning-making, negotiation, and cultural representation.

Keywords: *Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Language Digitization, Language Documentation, Tribal Languages of India, NEP 2020, Digital India.*

India is home to an extraordinary diversity of languages, many of which belong to tribal and indigenous communities. These languages, often transmitted orally across generations, face increasing threats due to globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of major languages. In response, digitization and documentation have emerged as key strategies for preservation. However, the act of digitizing language is not merely technical; it is deeply theoretical and interpretative. India's tribal communities represent some of the world's richest linguistic diversity. With over 750 dialects spoken by tribal groups, language is not merely a

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communicative tool but an embodiment of cultural memory, ecological knowledge, rituals, and collective identity. However, many tribal languages are endangered due to limited documentation, modernization, migration, and educational policies favoring dominant languages. From a sociological viewpoint the problem is not only linguistic but structural and cultural. As we go through the philosophical interpretations in sociology, Durkheim explains language as part of *collective conscience — a social glue. Weber emphasized the importance of *Verstehen*—understanding meaning within culture and Marx highlighted cultural suppression under dominant groups. Tönnies described traditional communities where language preserves kinship and solidarity. This paper evaluates the process of tribal language documentation in India, the major sociological challenges, and the cultural implications of losing linguistic heritage, its characteristics and importance. Lévi-Strauss suggests myths, kinship systems, and cultural symbols are encoded in language. Without documentation, these structures remain inaccessible. The digitization and documentation of tribal languages in India represent a critical intersection of linguistics, technology, and policy. This paper engages with this intersection through the theoretical frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. By situating these perspectives within the policy contexts of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Digital India initiative, the study interrogates how meaning, representation, and power operate in the digital preservation of marginalized linguistic traditions. While Saussure offers a systematic model for encoding and structuring language, Derrida destabilizes such fixity by foregrounding the fluidity of meaning and the politics of representation. The paper argues that the digitization of tribal languages is not a neutral act of preservation but an interpretative and ideological process that must balance standardization with cultural dynamism. It concludes by advocating for community-centered, ethically grounded digital practices that align with both technological advancement and linguistic plurality. Thus, this paper explores how the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida can illuminate the processes involved in documenting tribal languages. It further contextualizes these processes within India’s contemporary policy frameworks—NEP 2020 and Digital India—which emphasize multilingualism, inclusivity, and technological integration. By synthesizing structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives, the paper aims to critically assess the epistemological and ethical dimensions of digital language preservation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1 Saussurean Structuralism and Linguistic Systematization

Saussure’s structural linguistics provides a foundational model for understanding language as a system of signs. His distinction between *langue* (the abstract system of language) and *parole* (individual speech acts) is particularly relevant to digitization efforts. In documenting tribal languages, linguists often attempt to extract a stable *langue* from diverse and context-dependent *parole*. Furthermore, Saussure’s concept of the sign—comprising the *signifier* (sound/image) and the *signified* (concept)—emphasizes the arbitrariness of linguistic meaning. This arbitrariness allows for the systematic encoding of language into digital formats, such as scripts, dictionaries, and corpora. Structuralist methodologies thus support the creation of standardized linguistic resources that can be stored, searched, and disseminated. However, this approach also risks imposing rigid structures on languages that are inherently fluid and context-sensitive, particularly those rooted in oral traditions.

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2 Derridean Deconstruction and the Instability of Meaning

Jacques Derrida challenges the structuralist assumption of stable meaning through his concept of *différance*, which highlights the endless deferral and differentiation of meaning. From a Derridean perspective, any attempt to fix meaning—such as through digital documentation—is inherently incomplete and potentially reductive. Derrida's critique of logocentrism—the privileging of speech over writing—has particular implications for tribal languages. While many tribal languages are primarily oral, digitization often necessitates their transformation into written or coded forms. This shift may alter the very nature of the language, privileging certain interpretations while marginalizing others. Deconstruction thus invites us to question the authority of digital archives and to recognize them as sites of interpretation rather than objective repositories of truth.

DIGITIZATION OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA

The digitization of tribal languages involves multiple processes, including transcription, translation, annotation, and archiving. Technologies such as speech recognition, natural language processing, and mobile applications have expanded the possibilities for linguistic documentation. However, these processes are not neutral. Decisions about orthography, grammar, and vocabulary often reflect the biases of researchers, institutions, or dominant cultures. For example, the choice of script—whether to adopt Devanagari, Roman, or a native script—can influence how a language is perceived and used. Moreover, the transformation of oral traditions into digital text may result in the loss of performative, contextual, and cultural nuances. Songs, myths, and rituals, when stripped of their embodied contexts, risk becoming static artifacts rather than living practices.

NEP 2020 AND LINGUISTIC INCLUSIVITY

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of mother tongue and regional language instruction, particularly in early education. It recognizes linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier and calls for the preservation of endangered languages. From a Saussurean perspective, NEP 2020 supports the formalization and institutionalization of linguistic systems, enabling their integration into curricula and educational materials. However, from a Derridean standpoint, the policy must be critically examined for its potential to standardize and homogenize linguistic diversity. The challenge lies in implementing NEP 2020 in a way that respects the fluidity and plurality of tribal languages while making them accessible within formal education systems.

DIGITAL INDIA AND TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION

The Digital India initiative aims to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. It provides the infrastructure necessary for large-scale digitization projects, including those related to language preservation. Digital platforms can facilitate the creation of online dictionaries, audio-visual archives, and interactive learning tools for tribal languages. They also enable community participation, allowing speakers to contribute to and shape digital resources. However, technological mediation introduces new forms of power and control. Algorithms, data structures, and interface designs can shape how languages are represented and accessed. A Derridean analysis reveals that these systems are not neutral but embedded with assumptions and hierarchies.

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6. Tensions Between Structure and Fluidity between Saussurean and Derridean perspectives

The interplay between Saussurean and Derridean perspectives highlights a fundamental tension in the digitization of tribal languages: the need for structure versus the reality of fluidity.

- **Structure (Saussure):** a necessity for documentation, standardization, and accessibility.
- **Fluidity (Derrida):** essential for preserving the dynamic, evolving nature of language.

So balancing these dimensions requires a nuanced approach that avoids both rigid codification and unstructured relativism.

For example “While **Santhali demonstrates** a Saussurean consolidation of linguistic structure, Gondi and Bhili resist such closure, embodying Derridean *différance* within the Indian linguistic landscape.” Here we will refer some of the studies for better understanding the perspective - First example that well elaborates the perspective is from Santhali Language (Ol Chiki Script Movement & Digital Expansion) in Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal region among the community of Santhal tribe as shown in Development of Ol Chiki script by Raghunath Murmu. We see why it’s important? It is “One of the most successful tribal language standardization efforts, that has Included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and is part of active digitization (fonts, keyboards, e-learning apps). Now if we consider the theoretical relevance here according to Saussure and Derrida we observe :

- Saussure’s: Clear example of constructing langue via script standardization
- Derrida’s: Questions arise—does fixing script reduce oral plurality?

In this connection we observe satisfactory Policy connection too. Firstly NEP 2020 promotes mother tongue education, aiding Santhali inclusion. Digital India enables Unicode encoding, digital pedagogy

Here is yet another example of Gondi Language (Fragmentation vs Standardization) in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra in Gond tribe community where the issues of Multiple scripts (Devanagari, Telugu, Gunjala Gondi, Masaram Gondi) and Lack of a single standardized form is prominent. But it has become important to illustrate linguistic diversity within a single language identity and recent efforts to digitize Gunjala Gondi manuscripts. Here we see the theoretical relevance of Saussure’s idea as difficulty in defining a stable langue and Derrida’s views on perfect cases of *différance*—meaning varies across regions. Thus forming a policy in this regard has its relevance to NEP 2020 supports inclusion but implementation struggles due to variation. Digital India projects trying to build digital dictionaries and archives are good in this regard.

Similarly if we take the example of Bodo Language (Institutional Success Story) in Assam region in Bodo tribe community we find that it is recognized in the Eighth Schedule and as a medium of instruction in schools and universities now. Now, it was important to understand as a strong example of successful institutionalization + digitization and availability of digital textbooks, media, and literature. Here the theoretical interpretation of Saussure is that it is now a highly structured linguistic system and according to Derrida Raises question—does institutional control limit alternative meanings. As well the policy implications are good for -

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direct beneficiary of NEP 2020 multilingual education goals and digital India supports content creation and dissemination.

SUGGESTIVE

Towards Ethical and Community-Centered Practices and to address these challenges, the paper proposes the following principles:

1. **Community Participation:** Tribal communities should be active agents in the documentation process, not merely subjects of study.
2. **Plural Representations:** Digital archives should accommodate multiple dialects, interpretations, and contexts.
3. **Multimodal Documentation:** Audio, video, and interactive media should complement textual records to capture the richness of oral traditions.
4. **Reflexivity:** Researchers and technologists must remain aware of their own biases and the interpretative nature of their work.
5. **Policy Integration:** NEP 2020 and Digital India should be implemented in ways that prioritize linguistic diversity and cultural sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

The digitization and documentation of tribal languages in India represent a complex interplay of linguistic theory, technological innovation, and policy intervention. Through the lenses of Saussure and Derrida, this paper has shown that language preservation is not merely a technical task but a deeply interpretative and political act. While structuralist approaches enable the organization and dissemination of linguistic data, deconstructive insights remind us of the limitations and implications of such efforts. Together, these perspectives offer a more holistic understanding of digital language preservation—one that acknowledges both the necessity of structure and the inevitability of fluidity. In aligning these insights with the goals of NEP 2020 and Digital India, India has the opportunity to develop a model of linguistic preservation that is both technologically advanced and culturally grounded. Such a model would not only safeguard endangered languages but also affirm the epistemological richness and diversity of tribal communities.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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