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## Performing Identity: The Role of Drama and Theatre in Shaping Oraon English Writing Skills

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### Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical and cultural significance of drama and theatre in developing the English writing skills of the Oraon community, one of the largest tribal groups in central and eastern India. Situated at the intersection of performance studies, sociolinguistics, and postcolonial pedagogy, the study explores how performance practices act as a bridge between oral traditions and written literacy. By analysing drama as both an artistic and educational practice, the paper argues that theatre enables Oraon learners to negotiate hybrid identities, enhance bilingual competence, and transform English writing into a culturally embedded skill. Drawing upon theories of performance and identity, classroom observations, and community-based initiatives, the article highlights the transformative potential of drama and theatre in democratizing literacy for marginalized communities.

**Keywords:** Oraon community, Drama pedagogy, Theatre-in-education, English writing skills, Orality and literacy, Performance studies.

### 1. Introduction

Language education is never a neutral enterprise; it is always situated in cultural, political, and historical contexts. For indigenous communities in India, including the Oraons, learning English is both a pathway to opportunity and a site of tension. On the one hand, English offers access to higher education, employment, and national visibility. On the other, it risks displacing mother tongues such as Kurukh, the Dravidian language spoken by the Oraons, and distancing learners from their cultural identity. Writing in English is particularly challenging for Oraon learners because it requires mastery of unfamiliar grammar, syntax, and rhetorical forms, which are often far removed from their oral traditions. As Walter Ong notes, writing restructures consciousness, moving thought “from the world of sound into the world of visual space” (77). For communities deeply invested in orality and performance, this transition is neither automatic nor culturally neutral.

Drama and theatre, however, offer a unique bridge between these two worlds. The Oraons have a long history of performative traditions—ritual enactments, dance dramas, seasonal festivals, and

communal storytelling – that embody cultural values and collective memory. When these traditions are adapted into English pedagogy, they create fertile ground for writing practice. Scripts, dialogues, and reflective essays allow learners to translate oral narratives into written form, while performance provides motivation, context, and embodied learning.

This article argues that drama and theatre are not simply extracurricular activities but powerful pedagogical tools that can reshape English writing skills among Oraon learners. More importantly, performance provides a space for performing identity, where cultural heritage and global literacy converge.

## 2. Objectives of the Study:

- To examine drama and theatre as pedagogical tools
- To analyse the role of performance in identity formation
- To explore the integration of drama-based activities
- To evaluate the challenges and limitations

## 3. The Oraon Community: Language, Culture, and Literacy

### 3.1 Historical and Cultural Context

The Oraons, also known as Kurukhs, are among the largest Adivasi communities in India, numbering nearly two million according to the 2011 Census. They are concentrated in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh, with significant migrant populations in Assam and the Andaman Islands. Traditionally agrarian, the Oraons have preserved a rich oral culture that includes myths of origin, ritual songs, and communal performances. Their language, Kurukh, belongs to the North Dravidian family, though it is surrounded by Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi, Nagpuri, and Odia. As a result, most Oraons are multilingual, often shifting between mother tongue, regional language, and Hindi in daily communication (Lakra 112). English, however, entered their lives primarily through missionary schools during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

### 3.2 Literacy and English Education

Missionary educators saw English as a civilizing and modernizing tool. While it provided upward mobility, it often devalued indigenous knowledge systems. Writing, in particular, became a stumbling block because it demanded a shift from communal oral traditions to individualized, text-centred expression. Augustine Toppo observes, “For tribal learners, English writing often appears as a foreign, lifeless exercise unless it is tied to lived experience” (56). Drama-based pedagogy, by contrast, ties English literacy to cultural experience. It leverages the Oraons’ performative traditions, transforming writing from an abstract requirement into a lived, embodied practice.

## 4. Drama, Theatre, and Identity: Theoretical Perspectives

### 4.1 Performance as Identity Formation

Drama allows learners to inhabit roles, rehearse scenarios, and articulate identities. Richard Schechner, in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, emphasizes that performance is “restored behaviour” (28) a reenactment of cultural patterns in new contexts. When Oraon learners dramatize folk tales in English, they are not abandoning their heritage but translating it into a new linguistic medium, thereby shaping both identity and writing practice.

Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” (37) is also instructive. In this liminal space, cultural negotiation occurs, and hybrid identities are forged. Theatre in English classrooms creates such spaces where Oraon learners can perform their indigenous stories in a global language, simultaneously resisting erasure and embracing linguistic empowerment.

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## 4.2 Drama in Pedagogy

Educational drama theorists such as Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton have long argued for the pedagogical potential of drama. Heathcote's "Mantle of the Expert" model positions students as active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Heathcote and Bolton 91). Bolton insists that drama fosters empathy, creativity, and collaboration key elements in language acquisition.

For Oraon learners, drama achieves more than language practice. It makes writing culturally resonant. Script writing becomes a way of preserving heritage; reflective essays become tools of identity construction; and performance motivates the careful crafting of written text.

## 5. Drama as a Pedagogical Tool for English Writing

### 5.1 From Orality to Literacy

One of the most persistent challenges for Oraon learners in English education lies in the shift from orality to literacy. Oral traditions songs, folktales, ritual chants are fluid, situational, and community-based. Writing, however, demands individual authorship, fixed structure, and abstract conventions. As Walter Ong notes, "Oral expression tends to be additive rather than subordinate, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant rather than sparse" (Ong 37). These characteristics often clash with the linear, thesis-driven expectations of academic writing in English.

Drama offers a way to mediate this transition. In dramatization, learners begin with oral performance dialogues spoken, stories narrated, roles embodied. These are then written down as scripts, notes, or reflective pieces. In this way, drama does not sever learners from their oral roots but transforms oral practices into written literacy. Writing becomes the continuation of performance, not its opposite.

### 5.2 The Performative Cycle of Writing

The integration of drama into English pedagogy for Oraon learners can be visualized as a three-stage cycle:

#### a) Script Preparation and Drafting

- Students collaboratively adapt folk stories, everyday conversations, or social issues into English scripts.
- They practice writing dialogues, stage directions, and scene descriptions.
- This process encourages correct grammar, spelling, and sentence construction in a meaningful context.

#### b) Performance and Oral Reinforcement

- The written scripts are enacted in classrooms or community spaces.
- Performance reinforces memory, allows peer feedback, and enables learners to embody language.
- Mistakes in pronunciation, vocabulary, or expression are corrected naturally through rehearsal.

#### c) Reflection and Writing Expansion

- After performance, students engage in reflective writing journals, reviews, or essays.
- They evaluate their performance, describe their experiences, and express emotions.
- This consolidates their ability to structure essays, use descriptive vocabulary, and write persuasively.

The cyclical relationship between writing and performance ensures that literacy development is dynamic and iterative rather than static and linear.

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## 6. Classroom Applications and Examples

### 6.1 Adaptation of Oraon Folktales

Oraon myths and folktales, such as the origin of the sacred tree or the story of Karam Puja, are rich in narrative and symbolism. Teachers in Gumla and Simdega districts often encourage students to translate these stories into English scripts. In doing so, students practice:

- **Narrative sequencing** (beginning, middle, end)
- **Characterization** (describing roles and attributes)
- **Dialogue writing** (creating conversations between characters)

For example, when retelling the myth of how the Oraons migrated from the Rohtas plateau, students must find English equivalents for indigenous terms. This translation process enhances vocabulary and cultural reflection simultaneously.

### 6.2 Role-Play of Everyday Situations

In some classrooms in Ranchi and Sundargarh, teachers employ role-plays of common life situations market exchanges, school interactions, or community gatherings. Students enact these scenarios in English, learning practical vocabulary and expressions. Later, they write dialogues or short narratives describing the experience. This approach is particularly effective because it connects English to lived realities rather than abstract textbook examples.

### 6.3 Improvised Theatre

Improvisational exercises are used to encourage creativity and quick thinking. For instance, students may be asked to enact a sudden situation—like a village meeting discussing migration or a family preparing for a festival. The spontaneous oral performance is later transformed into written short stories or reflective essays. Such exercises develop both fluency in spoken English and confidence in writing.

## 7. Case Studies and Field Observations

### 7.1 Jharkhand: Theatre-in-Education Models

In several Jesuit-run schools in Gumla and Simdega, theatre has been introduced as part of English learning. Teachers ask students to dramatize seasonal rituals such as the Sarhul festival, writing scripts in English and then enacting them. Field reports suggest that students not only improve their writing but also display greater confidence in speaking English publicly.

NGOs like Eklavya Foundation and SPIC MACAY workshops have also experimented with integrating theatre into school curricula. In one workshop, students created bilingual scripts—half in Kurukh, half in English—before performing them for an audience. The writing tasks following this performance demonstrated significant improvement in sentence formation and creative expression.

### 7.2 Odisha: Community Theatre Initiatives

In Sambalpur and Sundargarh districts, community-based theatre projects have involved Oraon youth in scripting and performing plays in English. These plays often deal with themes of migration, displacement, or cultural preservation.

One notable project in 2022 involved students dramatizing the struggles of migrant workers from tribal villages. Students first wrote reflective essays about migration, which were then adapted into a play. The final step required them to write reviews of their own performance. Teachers noted that these reflective writings showed better narrative coherence and emotional depth compared to earlier assignments.

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### 7.3 Benefits of Drama-Based Pedagogy

- a. **Motivation and Engagement** – Students find writing more meaningful when it is tied to performance.
- b. **Cultural Validation** – Indigenous stories are not excluded but celebrated through English.
- c. **Collaborative Learning** – Script writing fosters teamwork and peer support.
- d. **Holistic Skill Development** – Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are integrated in one activity.
- e. **Identity Affirmation** – Performing in English while enacting Oraon culture allows learners to embrace hybrid identities rather than feel alienated.

## 8. Sociolinguistic Implications

### 8.1 Empowerment Through Performance

Drama and theatre not only enhance English writing skills but also act as tools of empowerment. For Oraon learners, performing in English creates visibility in a system where tribal voices are often marginalized. As Paulo Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education should be “a practice of freedom” (54), enabling learners to articulate their experiences rather than passively absorbing dominant discourses. Performance-based pedagogy aligns with this vision by transforming the English classroom into a site of voice and agency.

When Oraon students perform English plays based on their cultural narratives, they demonstrate linguistic competence without erasing their indigenous identity. This act challenges the stereotype of tribal students as “weak in English” and repositions them as creative producers of language. The validation they receive through theatre often carries over into greater confidence in academic writing tasks.

### 8.2 Bilingual and Bicultural Competence

Joshua Fishman (1991) argues that minority communities can successfully maintain their mother tongues while learning dominant languages, provided that education values both equally. Drama exemplifies this principle because it allows bilingual expression. Bilingual scripts, where Kurukh and English alternate, encourage translation, vocabulary expansion, and reflection on linguistic structures.

This bilingual performance strengthens bicultural competence: students learn to navigate both their indigenous cultural framework and the expectations of English literacy. In writing, this manifests as improved narrative skills, the ability to contextualize cultural metaphors in English, and a richer expressive vocabulary.

### 8.3 Hybrid Identity and the “Third Space”

Homi Bhabha’s concept of the third space helps explain how Oraon learners negotiate identity in performance. By staging indigenous rituals in English, they occupy a hybrid cultural zone that resists both assimilation and isolation. Their writing, too, reflects this hybridity: essays and scripts often combine indigenous worldviews with English narrative forms.

In this sense, drama and theatre not only teach writing but also reshape identity – making English not a tool of domination but a medium of cultural survival.

### 8.4 Challenges in Implementation

Despite the promise of drama-based pedagogy, several obstacles hinder its full integration in Oraon education.

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### 1. Institutional Constraints

- State curricula still privilege rote grammar exercises and textbook writing over creative, performative tasks.
- Teachers often lack training in drama pedagogy and view it as extracurricular rather than central to language learning.

### 2. Resource Limitations

- Many rural schools lack auditoriums, props, or even basic classroom space for performance.
- Funding for theatre-in-education projects is minimal, leading to sporadic rather than sustained implementation.

### 3. Cultural Translation Issues

- Certain Oraon metaphors, rituals, or expressions have no direct English equivalent. Students often struggle to render these meaningfully in scripts.
- This can lead to oversimplification, where rich indigenous imagery is reduced in translation.

### 4. Societal Prejudice

- Tribal learners continue to face discrimination within mainstream institutions. Even when their plays are creative, they may not always be taken seriously by non-tribal teachers or peers.

## 8.5 Overcoming the Barriers

Possible solutions include:

- **Teacher Training:** Workshops in drama pedagogy for teachers in tribal schools.
- **Curriculum Reform:** Including drama and script writing as examinable components in English courses.
- **Community Collaboration:** Involving local theatre groups and cultural leaders in school activities.
- **Digital Theatre:** Using smartphones or digital platforms to record and share performances, making them accessible beyond the classroom.

## 9. Conclusion

Drama and theatre are not simply creative exercises; they are transformative educational practices with profound sociolinguistic and cultural implications. For the Oraon community, whose heritage lies in orality and performance, theatre serves as a natural bridge to English literacy. Through the performative cycle of script writing, enactment, and reflective writing, students acquire not only technical skills but also confidence, creativity, and cultural pride. Most importantly, drama allows Oraon learners to perform identity to inhabit the space where indigenous heritage and English literacy converge. Their English writing, enriched by drama, is no longer a lifeless exercise but a vibrant expression of hybrid identity. This approach challenges the deficit model of tribal education and demonstrates that literacy can be democratized, participatory, and culturally rooted.

In the long term, integrating drama and theatre into English pedagogy for Oraons (and other tribal communities) can create a more inclusive educational system. It ensures that indigenous voices are not erased in the march toward global literacy but instead find amplification and legitimacy in the global linguistic landscape.

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