

‘Kui’ And ‘Kuvi’ Kondhs Of Odisha: A Comparative Study Of Their Language And Culture

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Abstract:

Odisha represents one of the most linguistically diverse regions of India, where tribal languages play a crucial role in shaping indigenous identity and cultural continuity. Among the major tribal communities of the state, the Kondh or Kandha tribe is distinguished by the use of two closely related Dravidian languages, ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’. This article undertakes a comparative study of the ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ speaking Kondhs of Odisha, focusing on their linguistic characteristics, geographical distribution, and socio-cultural life. The study analyses the structural features of both languages, including phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns, highlighting their shared South-Central Dravidian origin as well as region-specific variations. It examines the spatial distribution of ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ speakers across different districts of Odisha and adjoining areas, noting the influence of bilingualism and contact with dominant regional languages such as Oḍiā and Telugu. The paper also explores the social organization, economic activities, belief systems, and cultural traditions of the ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ Kondhs, emphasizing the central role of language in maintaining collective identity and transmitting indigenous knowledge. In the contemporary context of modernization, formal education, and socio-economic change, both languages face challenges of marginalization and gradual language shift. The study argues that a comparative understanding of ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ is essential for appreciating intra-tribal diversity among the Kondhs and contributes significantly to anthropological and linguistic research on tribal societies in Odisha. The article concludes by stressing the importance of documentation, mother-tongue-based education, and supportive language policies for the preservation of these indigenous languages.

Keywords: *Kui language, Kuvi language, Kondh/Kandha tribe, Tribal languages of Odisha; Dravidian languages, Language, Culture, Indigenous identity, Comparative study.*

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I. Introduction

India is recognized globally for its immense linguistic and cultural diversity, shaped by centuries of historical interaction, migration, and indigenous continuity. Within this pluralistic framework, tribal communities occupy a distinctive position, preserving some of the oldest living traditions of the subcontinent. Odisha, located on the eastern coast of India, is one of the foremost states in terms of tribal population and linguistic heterogeneity. According to census and ethnographic records, the state is home to sixty-four Scheduled Tribes, many of whom speak languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Austroasiatic language families. Among these tribal groups, the ‘Kondh’ (also spelled ‘Khond’ or ‘Kandha’) constitute one of the largest and most culturally significant communities. The Kondhs are particularly notable for their linguistic diversity, expressed primarily through the ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ languages, which serve as crucial socio-cultural markers of identity, social organization, and cultural continuity.

The Kondhs inhabit the hilly and forested tracts of central and southern Odisha, regions that have historically remained relatively isolated from mainstream socio-political institutions. This geographical setting has enabled the Kondhs to preserve distinctive linguistic and cultural practices, even as they have interacted with neighbouring non-tribal populations over time. The Kondh community is not a homogeneous entity; rather, it consists of multiple sub-groups differentiated by territory, dialect, livelihood patterns, and ritual practices. Within this broad ethnographic category, ‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ speakers represent two major linguistic groupings whose similarities and differences offer valuable insights into processes of language diversification and cultural adaptation within a single tribal tradition.

‘Kui’ and ‘Kuvi’ dialect belong to the **South-Central branch of the Dravidian language family**, a group that also includes tribal dialect such as Gondi, Koya, and Pengo. Linguistic scholarship has long

recognized the close relationship between 'Kui' and 'Kuvi', often describing them as sister languages that share a common historical origin while having evolved distinct features due to geographical separation and differential language contact. While 'Kui' is spoken by a numerically larger population and enjoys relatively greater visibility in education and administrative contexts, 'Kuvi' is used by relatively smaller, more localized communities and remains largely confined to oral domains. Despite these differences, both languages play a central role in shaping the worldviews and cultural lives of their respective speaker communities.

Language among the Kondhs is not merely a tool for communication; it is deeply embedded in social relations, ritual life, and ecological knowledge. Oral traditions such as myths, folktales, songs, proverbs, and ritual chants transmitted in 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' encode collective memory and indigenous epistemologies related to land, forest, agriculture, and ancestral spirits. These linguistic expressions also function as mechanisms for socialization, teaching younger generations about moral values, kinship norms, and community responsibilities. Therefore, a study of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' cannot be limited to linguistic structure alone but must be situated within a broader anthropological understanding of culture and society. However, it is need less to mention here that the 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' have one script, it invented by Dayanidhi Mallick of Betikhala Village in 1982. This script is known as "*Kui Lipi*". The script consists of characters/ alphabets representing human body structure, and it is designed for the 'Kui' people to read and write in their native language. The '*Kui Script*' is derived from the local term '*Kuinja*' which means human. The '*Kui Lipi*' plays a crucial role in preserving the Kui language and has contributed to the cultural identity of the Kondh community of Odisha.

The present study adopts a **comparative perspective** to examine both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' speaking Kondhs of Odisha. Comparative studies are particularly important in tribal contexts, as they allow researchers to identify both shared heritage and localized innovation within related communities. By comparing 'Kui' and 'Kuvi', this study seeks to highlight how language variation emerges within the same generic ethnic group due to factors such as migration, ecological adaptation, inter-community contact, and exposure to dominant surrounding regional languages like Odiā and Telugu. Such an approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intra-tribal diversity, challenging simplistic representations of tribal communities as culturally or linguistically uniform.

In recent decades, the linguistic ecology of Odisha has undergone significant transformation due to processes of modernization, formal education, state integration, and economic change. The expansion of schooling in Odiā, increased mobility, and participation in the wider market economy have led to growing bilingualism and, in some cases, language shift among tribal populations. Younger generations of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' speakers often acquire Odiā as the primary language of literacy and public interaction, while their indigenous languages are increasingly restricted to domestic or ceremonial contexts. These developments raise critical concerns about the long-term vitality of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' and the potential erosion of associated cultural knowledge.

At the same time, there has been growing recognition at both national and state levels of the importance of preserving tribal languages and cultures. Initiatives such as mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), documentation projects by Tribal Research Institutes, and debates on the inclusion of tribal languages in constitutional schedules reflect changing attitudes toward linguistic diversity. Within this broader policy context, scholarly studies that systematically document and analyse tribal languages and cultures acquire added significance. They not only contribute to academic knowledge but also provide empirical foundations for language planning, educational reform, and cultural preservation.

This article, therefore, aims to contribute to both **linguistic and anthropological scholarship** by offering a detailed comparative account of the 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' Kondhs of Odisha. It focuses on the structural features of the two languages, their geographical distribution, and the social and cultural life of their speaker communities. By situating language within its cultural and ecological context, the study underscores the inseparable relationship between linguistic practice and tribal identity. Furthermore, it highlights the challenges faced by these languages in the contemporary period and emphasizes the need for sustained documentation and supportive policy interventions.

In essence, the study of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' serves as a window into broader questions concerning language, culture, and identity among indigenous communities in India. It demonstrates how closely related languages can evolve distinct forms while continuing to reflect a shared cultural heritage. By foregrounding the voices and traditions of the 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' speaking Kondhs, this study seeks to affirm the significance of tribal languages as living repositories of knowledge and as vital components of India's cultural mosaic.

II. Features Of The Kui Language

The Kui language constitutes one of the most significant indigenous languages of Odisha and serves as the primary linguistic marker of identity for a large section of the Kondh or Kandha tribe. As a South-Central Dravidian language, *Kui* reflects both the structural characteristics common to the Dravidian linguistic family and distinctive features shaped by the socio-cultural and ecological context of its speakers. The study of *Kui* is

therefore essential not only for linguistic classification but also for understanding the cultural history, social organization, and worldview of the Kondh community on the whole. This section examines the major features of the 'Kui' language, including its linguistic affiliation, phonological and grammatical structure, lexical domains, oral traditions, and sociolinguistic characteristics.

Linguistic Affiliation and Historical Background

The Dravidian affiliation of 'Kui' is evident in its agglutinative morphology, preference for suffixation, presence of retroflex consonants, and syntactic structure. Unlike Indo-Āryan languages dominant in Odisha, 'Kui' does not rely heavily on inflectional changes within word roots; instead, grammatical relationships are expressed through the systematic addition of suffixes. This feature places 'Kui' firmly within the typological framework of Dravidian languages and distinguishes it from neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages such as Odiā.

Phonological Features

The phonological system of Kui exhibits a rich inventory of vowels and consonants characteristic of Dravidian languages. Vowels are generally classified into short and long forms, with vowel length playing a phonemic role in distinguishing meaning. The consonantal system includes stops, nasals, laterals, trills, and fricatives, with particular prominence given to **retroflex sounds**, which are a hallmark of Dravidian phonology.

Nasal sounds occur frequently in 'Kui', both as independent phonemes and as part of morphophonemic processes. Assimilation and nasal harmony are common, especially in verb conjugation and noun inflection. Stress patterns in 'Kui' tend to be relatively even, with no strong lexical stress, and intonation often conveys pragmatic meaning rather than grammatical distinction.

Phonological variation can be observed across different 'Kui' speaking regions, reflecting dialectal diversity within the language. These variations are influenced by geographical distance, contact with Odiā-speaking populations, and interaction with speakers of related tribal languages. Despite such variation, mutual intelligibility remains largely intact among 'Kui' speakers.

Morphological Structure

'Kui' is an **agglutinative language**, meaning that words are formed by stringing together a sequence of morphemes, each carrying a specific grammatical function. This feature is particularly evident in noun and verb morphology.

Noun Morphology

Nouns in 'Kui' are inflected for **number and case**. Singular and plural distinctions are typically marked by suffixes, and pluralization often reflects semantic categories such as animacy. Case relations—such as nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, instrumental, locative, and ablative—are expressed through postpositional suffixes rather than prepositions. Possession is indicated through genitive markers, and kinship terms occupy a central position in the nominal system. The richness of kinship terminology in Kui reflects the importance of clan structure, lineage, and marriage rules within Kondh society.

Verb Morphology

The verbal system of 'Kui' is complex and highly developed. Verbs are inflected for **tense, aspect, mood, person, and number**, with suffixes indicating agreement with the subject. The primary tense distinctions include past, present, and future, though aspectual markers provide finer nuances of time and completion (Anderson, 2008, pp. 435–470).

Auxiliary verbs play a significant role in expressing modality, intention, obligation, and ability. Negative constructions are formed through the use of specific negative particles or suffixes, and imperative forms vary according to levels of politeness and social hierarchy. This grammatical sensitivity to social context reflects broader cultural norms governing respect and authority within the Kondh community.

Syntactic Features

The basic word order in 'Kui' is **Subject–Object–Verb (SOV)**, consistent with other Dravidian languages. Modifiers such as adjectives and relative clauses typically precede the nouns they qualify, and adverbs usually appear before the verb. Postpositions are used instead of prepositions, further reinforcing the head-final nature of the language.

Complex sentences in 'Kui' are formed using relative participles rather than relative pronouns. This syntactic strategy allows for compact sentence structures and is widely attested in Dravidian languages. Coordination and subordination are achieved through conjunctions and participial constructions, enabling speakers to express complex ideas with linguistic economy (Steever, 1998, pp. 90–96).

Lexical Features and Semantic Domains

The vocabulary of Kui is deeply rooted in the ecological and cultural environment of the Kondhs. A substantial portion of the lexicon relates to **agriculture, forest resources, flora and fauna, seasons, tools, and traditional technologies**. These lexical domains provide insight into indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable resource management practices developed over generations.

Kinship terms form another important semantic domain, reflecting intricate social relationships and marriage alliances. The language also contains a rich set of terms associated with ritual life, religious beliefs, and cosmology. Many of these terms lack direct equivalents in Odiā or English, underscoring the unique conceptual framework embedded in 'Kui'.

Over time, 'Kui' has incorporated loanwords from Odiā, Telugu, and Hindi, particularly in areas related to education, administration, and modern material culture. Despite this influence, the core vocabulary remains predominantly indigenous, and speakers often adapt borrowed terms to fit 'Kui' phonological and morphological patterns.

Oral Tradition and Literary Expression

'Kui' is primarily an **oral language (a dialect)**, with a rich tradition of storytelling, folk songs, ritual chants, proverbs, and riddles. Oral literature plays a vital role in transmitting cultural values, historical memory, and moral codes. Myths narrated in 'Kui' often explain the origin of clans, sacred hills, and ancestral spirits, reinforcing the spiritual connection between the Kondhs and their environment.

Folk songs accompany agricultural activities, festivals, and life-cycle rituals such as birth, marriage, and death. These songs not only serve aesthetic purposes but also function as collective expressions of social solidarity. Proverbs and riddles are commonly used in everyday conversation, reflecting wit, wisdom, and experiential knowledge. The absence of a long-standing written tradition has not diminished the expressive power of 'Kui'; rather, it has fostered a dynamic oral culture where language adapts creatively to social contexts.

Sociolinguistic Characteristics

'Kui' is spoken primarily within domestic, community, and ritual domains. In formal settings such as schools, government offices, and markets, Odiā often dominates. As a result, most 'Kui' speakers are **bilingual or multilingual**, with varying degrees of proficiency in Odiā and sometimes Telugu or Hindi.

Language choice among 'Kui' speakers is influenced by factors such as age, education, and social mobility. Older generations tend to use 'Kui' more extensively, while younger speakers increasingly shift toward Odiā, especially in urban or semi-urban contexts. This trend has implications for language transmission and long-term vitality. Attitudes toward 'Kui' are shaped by broader socio-political dynamics. While the language is a source of pride and identity within the community, external perceptions often associate it with marginalization. Such attitudes contribute to language shift and underscore the need for positive recognition and institutional support.

Script, Literacy, and Education

Literacy in 'Kui' remains limited compared to Odiā, largely due to the dominance of Odiā in formal education. However, educational experiments have demonstrated that early instruction in the mother tongue improves learning outcomes and strengthens cultural identity. These initiatives highlight the importance of integrating 'Kui' into the educational system.

III. Features Of The Kuvi Language

The 'Kuvi' dialect on the other had occupies a distinctive position within the linguistic and cultural landscape of southern Odisha. Spoken primarily by the 'Kuvi Kondh' communities, 'Kuvi' represents a significant branch of the South-Central Dravidian language family. Although closely related to 'Kui', 'Kuvi' has developed its own linguistic identity shaped by geographical isolation, ecological conditions, and sustained contact with neighbouring linguistic communities. A detailed examination of 'Kuvi' provides valuable insights into the processes of linguistic diversification, cultural continuity, and identity formation among the Kondh tribes of Odisha.

Linguistic Affiliation and Historical Background

Kuvi belongs to the **South-Central Dravidian subgroup**, sharing its closest genetic relationship with Kui. Linguistic scholars have often treated 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' as sister languages derived from a common proto-form. However, the structural and lexical distinctions observable in 'Kuvi' justify its recognition as an independent language rather than a mere dialect of Kui.

From a historical perspective, 'Kuvi' speaking *Kondhs* are believed to have occupied forested and hilly regions extending across present-day southern Odisha and parts of northern Andhra Pradesh. This geographical spread has facilitated interaction with speakers of Telugu and other Dravidian languages, influencing the linguistic evolution of 'Kuvi' while retaining its core Dravidian structure.

Phonological Features

The phonological system of 'Kuvi' exhibits characteristic Dravidian traits, including a well-defined vowel inventory with distinctions between short and long vowels. These vowel length contrasts are phonemic and can result in differences in lexical meaning. 'Kuvi' also possesses a rich consonantal inventory, featuring stops, nasals, laterals, trills, and fricatives.

Retroflex consonants are prominently used in 'Kuvi', reflecting its Dravidian lineage. Nasal consonants play a significant role in both lexical formation and grammatical inflection, often participating in assimilation processes. 'Kuvi' phonology also exhibits regional variation, particularly in pronunciation patterns influenced by contact with Telugu in border areas. Stress in 'Kuvi' is generally non-phonemic, and intonation patterns are used primarily for pragmatic and discourse-level functions. Such features are typical of oral Dravidian languages and contribute to the rhythmic quality of spoken 'Kuvi'.

Morphological Structure

'Kuvi' is an **agglutinative language**, with grammatical relationships expressed through the addition of suffixes to lexical roots. This morphological structure allows speakers to convey complex grammatical meanings in a transparent and systematic manner.

Noun Morphology

Nouns in 'Kuvi' are inflected for number and case. Singular and plural distinctions are marked by suffixes, and pluralization often correlates with animacy and social relevance. Case marking is achieved through postpositional suffixes that indicate grammatical roles such as nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, instrumental, locative, and ablative.

Kinship terms occupy a prominent position in 'Kuvi' nominal morphology, reflecting the importance of lineage, clan affiliation, and marriage rules in 'Kuvi' *Kondh* society. Possession is expressed through genitive constructions, and relational nouns are frequently used to encode social relationships.

Verb Morphology

The verbal system of 'Kuvi' is elaborate and reflects fine distinctions of tense, aspect, mood, person, and number. Verbs agree with the subject and are inflected through a series of suffixes. The basic tense categories include past, present, and future, while aspectual markers indicate completion, continuity, or habitual action.

Auxiliary verbs are extensively used to express modality, intention, obligation, and possibility. Negative constructions are formed using specific negative markers, and imperative forms vary according to social context and degrees of politeness. Such grammatical sensitivity to social hierarchy aligns with cultural norms of respect and authority within *Kuvi Kondh* society.

Syntactic Features

'Kuvi' follows the **Subject–Object–Verb (SOV)** word order typical of Dravidian languages. Modifiers precede the head noun, and adverbs typically appear before the verb. The language employs postpositions rather than prepositions, reinforcing its head-final syntactic structure. Complex sentences are formed using relative participles instead of relative pronouns. This syntactic strategy allows for compact and flexible sentence construction. Coordination and subordination are expressed through conjunctions and participial forms, enabling the expression of complex ideas within a cohesive grammatical framework.

Lexical Characteristics and Semantic Domains

The 'Kuvi' lexicon is deeply influenced by the ecological and cultural environment of its speakers. A significant portion of the vocabulary relates to forests, hills, agriculture, flora and fauna, seasons, and traditional tools. These lexical items encapsulate indigenous knowledge systems and reflect a close relationship between language and environment.

Kinship terminology is highly developed in 'Kuvi', mirroring the importance of social relationships and clan systems. The language also contains specialized vocabulary associated with rituals, festivals, and cosmological beliefs. Many of these terms lack direct equivalents in dominant regional languages, highlighting the unique conceptual framework embedded in 'Kuvi'.

Contact with Oḍiā and Telugu has resulted in lexical borrowing, particularly in domains related to administration, education, and modern technology. Nevertheless, such borrowings are typically adapted to 'Kui' phonological and morphological patterns, preserving linguistic coherence.

Oral Tradition and Expressive Culture

'Kui' is predominantly an **oral language**, with a rich tradition of folk narratives, songs, proverbs, riddles, and ritual chants. Oral literature serves as a key medium for transmitting cultural knowledge, moral values, and historical memory. Myths narrated in 'Kui' often recount the origins of clans, sacred landscapes, and ancestral spirits, reinforcing community identity.

Folk songs accompany agricultural activities, seasonal festivals, and life-cycle rituals. These songs function not only as artistic expressions but also as social instruments that strengthen communal bonds. Proverbs and riddles are commonly used in everyday conversation, reflecting wisdom derived from lived experience. The vitality of 'Kui' oral traditions underscores the resilience of the language despite the absence of a long-standing written literary tradition.

Sociolinguistic Context

'Kui' is primarily used within domestic, community, and ritual domains. In formal settings such as schools, markets, and administrative institutions, speakers often rely on Oḍiā or Telugu. As a result, bilingualism and multilingualism are widespread among 'Kui' speakers. Language choice is influenced by factors such as age, education, and socio-economic mobility. Older generations tend to use 'Kui' more extensively, while younger speakers increasingly shift toward dominant regional languages. This pattern poses challenges for intergenerational transmission and long-term language vitality. Language attitudes play a crucial role in shaping language use. While 'Kui' is a strong marker of identity within the community, external perceptions often associate it with marginalization. Addressing such attitudes is essential for promoting positive language maintenance.

Contemporary Challenges and Prospects

'Kui' faces challenges similar to those confronting many indigenous languages, including reduced domains of use, migration, and limited institutional support. The erosion of intergenerational transmission threatens the survival of both the language and associated cultural knowledge. However, there are also opportunities for revitalization. Increased scholarly interest, community participation, and supportive language policies can contribute to the preservation of 'Kui'. Digital documentation, inclusion in educational curricula, and recognition of linguistic rights are essential components of sustainable language maintenance.

IV. Comparative Analysis Of 'Kui' And 'Kui' Kondhs: Language And Culture

Table No. 1 - Similar words in 'Kui' and 'Kui'

English	Oḍiā	'Kui' (Kandhamal Region)	'Kui' (Rayagarh, Koraput Region)
Eye	ଆଖି akhi	କାନୁ kanu	କାନୁ kanu
Rain	ବର୍ଷା barṣā	ପିଞ୍ଜୁ piṅju	ପିଞ୍ଜୁ piyu
Wheat	ଗହମି gahama	ଗହମି gahama	ଗହମା gahama
Black Gram	ବିରି biri	ବିରିଙ୍ଗା biringā	ବିରିହି birihin
Horse Gram	କୋଳଥ kolatha	କଡ଼ତାକା kaḍṭākā	କଲ୍ ତାକା tal tākā
Sesamum	ରାଶି rāśi	ରାଶି rāśi	ରାଶି rāśin
Cotton	କପା kapā	ପାର୍ଡା pārdā	ପାର୍ଡି pārdin
Tree	ଗଛ gacha	ମାହୁଣ୍ଡି mrahṇḍi	ମାରୁନୁ mārunu
Mango	ଆମ୍ବା āmba	ମାହା mähā	ମାହାଆ mähāināā
Mahua	ମହୁଲ mahula	ଇପି irpi	ଇରିପି iripi
Plough	ଲଙ୍ଗଳ laṅgal	ନାଙ୍ଗେଲି nāngeli	ନାଙ୍ଗେଲୀ nāngeli
Eat	ଖାଇବା khāibā	ତିନ୍ଦା tinbā	ତିନ tina
Learn	ଶିଖିବା śikhibā	ଗ୍ରାମ୍ବା grāmbā	ଗ୍ରାପିନ grāpina

Table No:- 2 Same meaning but difference pronunciation

English	Oḍiā	'Kui' (Kandhamal Region)	'Kuvi' (Rayagarh, Koraput Region)
Mountain	ପର୍ବତ parbata	ସରୁ saru	ହରୁ haru
Vegetable	ଶାଗ śāga	କୁସା kusā	କୁଚା kucā
Went	ଗଲେ gale	ସାସେରୁ sāseru	ହାଚେରୁ hāceru
Flower	ଫୁଲ phula	ପୂଜୁ pūju	ପୂୟୁ pūyu
Water	ପାଣି pāni	ଏଜୁ eju	ଏୟୁ eyu
That person	ସେ ଲୋକ se loka	ଏଞ୍ଜାନ୍ପୁ evānpu	ଏଞ୍ଜାୟିନ evāyuin
Chicken	କୁକୁଡ଼ା kukudā	କାଜୁ kāju	କୟୁ kayu

Table No.3- Similar words in Kuvi-Telugu

English	Oḍiā	'Kuvi' (Rayagarh, Koraput Region)	Telugu
House	ଘର ghara	ଇଲୁ (ilu)	ଇଲୁ (ilu)
Milk	ସୀର kṣīra	ପାଲୁ (Pālu)	ପାଲୁ (Pālu)
You	ତୁମ୍ଭେମାନେ tumbhēmāne	ନୀରୁ (Nīru)	ନୀରୁ (Nīru)

The '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' speaking Kondhs of Odisha represent two closely related yet culturally and linguistically distinct segments of the broader Kondh tribal population. While both groups share a common ethnic origin and belong to the South-Central Dravidian linguistic family, historical processes, ecological settings, and patterns of social interaction have shaped their languages and cultures in distinctive ways. A comparative analysis of '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' reveals not only their shared heritage but also the internal diversity that characterizes tribal societies in Odisha.

Linguistic Affiliation and Degree of Relatedness

Both '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' belong to the **South-Central Dravidian subgroup**, and linguistic evidence suggests that they originated from a common proto-language. This shared origin is reflected in similarities in phonology, morphology, and syntax. However, despite these commonalities, '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' have evolved as **separate linguistic systems**, each with its own norms of usage and regional variation.

Kui exhibits greater internal standardization due to a larger speaker population and relatively wider exposure through education and documentation. '*Kuvi*', in contrast, retains more archaic linguistic features, which can be attributed to the geographical isolation of its speakers in hilly and forested regions. Thus, while mutual intelligibility exists to a certain extent, it is limited and context-dependent.

Phonological Comparison

Phonologically, both languages share typical Dravidian features such as vowel length distinction, retroflex consonants, and nasal sounds. However, '*Kuvi*' tends to preserve older phonetic forms, whereas '*Kui*' demonstrates greater phonological variation influenced by contact with Oḍiā.

Kui speakers often simplify certain consonant clusters and show a higher degree of phonetic borrowing from Oḍiā, particularly in administrative and educational contexts. '*Kuvi*' phonology, on the other hand, shows influence from Telugu in border regions but remains relatively conservative in core vocabulary and pronunciation patterns. This distinction highlights the role of **language contact** in shaping phonological change.

Morphological Structures

Morphologically, both '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' are agglutinative languages, employing suffixation to express grammatical relationships. Nouns in both languages are marked for number and case, and verbs exhibit complex inflectional patterns indicating tense, aspect, mood, and agreement.

A key difference lies in the **complexity of verbal inflection**. '*Kuvi*' displays a more elaborate system of verbal morphology, particularly in expressing aspectual distinctions. *Kui*, while morphologically rich, shows signs of simplification in certain grammatical constructions, likely influenced by prolonged bilingualism with Oḍiā. In both languages, kinship terms are morphologically marked and semantically rich, reflecting the centrality of family and clan structures in Kondh society. However, '*Kuvi*' kinship terminology often retains older forms that have either disappeared or undergone semantic shift in *Kui*.

Syntactic Patterns

Syntactically, '*Kui*' and '*Kuvi*' follow the **Subject–Object–Verb (SOV)** word order typical of Dravidian languages. Despite these similarities, '*Kuvi*' syntax tends to be more rigid, adhering closely to traditional Dravidian sentence structures. '*Kui*' syntax, in contrast, demonstrates greater flexibility, partly due to

influence from Oḍiā syntax. This flexibility is evident in spoken 'Kui', where code-switching and mixed constructions are increasingly common, especially among younger speakers.

Lexicon and Semantic Domains

The lexical composition of both languages reflects the ecological and cultural environments of their speakers. Vocabulary related to agriculture, forests, hunting, seasons, and rituals forms a substantial part of both lexicons.

However, 'Kuvi' retains a larger corpus of **indigenous vocabulary** related to traditional ecological knowledge, whereas 'Kui' has absorbed a greater number of loanwords from Oḍiā. These borrowings are particularly noticeable in domains such as governance, education, and modern technology.

In contrast, 'Kuvi' borrowings are more selective and primarily sourced from Telugu in border regions. This difference underscores the varying degrees of integration of the two communities into mainstream socio-political structures.

Oral Tradition and Cultural Expression

Both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' possess rich oral traditions encompassing myths, folk tales, songs, proverbs, and ritual chants. Oral literature serves as the primary medium for preserving historical memory, moral values, and cosmological beliefs.

Kui oral traditions have undergone partial transformation due to exposure to written forms and external cultural influences. Kuvi oral traditions, on the other hand, remain deeply embedded in ritual contexts and everyday life, reflecting a stronger continuity with ancestral practices. Songs and narratives in both languages play a crucial role during agricultural cycles, festivals, and life-cycle rituals. However, 'Kuvi' ritual chants are often more elaborate and linguistically conservative, reinforcing the sacred dimension of the language.

Social Organization and Cultural Practices

Culturally, both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' Kondhs share fundamental social institutions such as **clan-based organization, exogamous marriage rules, and village councils**. Agriculture forms the economic backbone of both communities, supplemented by forest-based livelihoods.

Nevertheless, variations exist in ritual practices and belief systems. 'Kuvi' Kondhs tend to maintain a more elaborate ritual calendar, closely tied to natural cycles and ancestral worship. Kui Kondhs, while retaining traditional beliefs, have incorporated elements from neighbouring non-tribal communities, leading to syncretic practices.

These cultural differences are mirrored in linguistic practices, as ritual language in 'Kuvi' remains relatively insulated from external influence compared to Kui.

Sociolinguistic Situation and Language Use

Language shift is more pronounced among 'Kui' speakers due to greater exposure to mainstream education and media. 'Kuvi' speakers, particularly in remote areas, continue to use their language extensively in daily life, though younger generations increasingly adopt dominant languages. Language attitudes also differ. 'Kui' is gradually gaining recognition through educational initiatives, whereas 'Kuvi' remains underrepresented in institutional contexts, making it more vulnerable to marginalization.

Identity and Cultural Continuity

Language functions as a powerful marker of identity for both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' Kondhs. While both communities identify themselves as Kondh, linguistic distinctions contribute to sub-ethnic identities and social boundaries. The comparative analysis demonstrates that 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' represent **two trajectories of cultural and linguistic adaptation** within the Kondh community—one shaped by greater interaction with dominant societies, and the other by relative isolation and cultural conservatism.

V. Concluding Remarks

The comparative study of the 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' speaking Kondhs of Odisha offers important insights into the intricate relationship between language, culture, and identity within tribal societies. This research has demonstrated that although 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' originate from a common South-Central Dravidian linguistic ancestry and are spoken by communities sharing a broader Kondh ethnic identity, both languages and their associated cultural practices have evolved in distinct ways. These divergences reflect variations in historical experience, geographical location, ecological adaptation, and degrees of interaction with surrounding non-tribal populations.

One of the most significant findings of this study is that linguistic diversity within the Kondh community should not be perceived as fragmentation but rather as an expression of cultural richness and adaptability. 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' are not merely linguistic variants; they represent two parallel cultural trajectories

shaped by different socio-political and environmental contexts. While 'Kui' has undergone relatively greater influence from dominant regional languages such as Oḍiā due to increased exposure to formal education, administration, and market economy, 'Kuvi' has retained a higher degree of linguistic conservatism as a result of geographical isolation and continued reliance on traditional livelihood systems.

From a linguistic perspective, the comparative analysis reveals that both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' preserve core Dravidian structural features, including agglutinative morphology, SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) word order, postpositional syntax, and elaborate verbal inflection. At the same time, subtle differences in phonology, morphology, and lexicon highlight the independent evolution of the two languages. 'Kuvi's retention of archaic forms and ritual vocabulary underscores its importance as a repository of historical and cultural knowledge, while Kui's openness to lexical borrowing illustrates the dynamic nature of language in response to changing social realities.

The cultural dimension of the study further emphasizes the central role of language in maintaining social organization, belief systems, and collective memory. Among both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' Kondhs, oral traditions serve as vital mechanisms for transmitting knowledge related to ancestry, cosmology, moral values, and ecological practices. Myths, folk songs, ritual chants, and proverbs not only function as cultural expressions but also reinforce social cohesion and intergenerational continuity.

The study also highlights the significance of kinship and clan systems in shaping linguistic and cultural practices. Both 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' societies are organized around exogamous clans, lineage-based identities, and customary laws that regulate marriage, inheritance, and social conduct. Linguistic expressions of kinship in both languages reflect these social structures, though Kuvi often preserves more elaborate terminologies and symbolic meanings. Such findings reinforce the anthropological understanding that language is deeply embedded in social institutions and cannot be analyzed in isolation from cultural context.

A critical issue emerging from this research is the impact of modernization, education, and socio-economic transformation on the vitality of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi'. Increased mobility, formal schooling in dominant languages and exposure to mass media has altered patterns of language use, particularly among younger generations. While bilingualism and multilingualism offer certain advantages in terms of social integration and economic opportunity, they also contribute to the gradual erosion of indigenous languages when institutional support is lacking. The study indicates that language shift is more pronounced among 'Kui' speakers, whereas 'Kuvi' remains relatively robust in certain regions, albeit increasingly vulnerable.

From a policy and developmental perspective, this study underscores the importance of mother-tongue-based multilingual education as a means of promoting both academic achievement and cultural preservation. Research consistently demonstrates that children learn more effectively when instruction begins in their first language. Integrating 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' into early education not only enhances learning outcomes but also affirms the cultural identity and self-worth of Kondh children. Such approaches can serve as powerful tools for bridging the gap between indigenous knowledge systems and formal education.

The findings of this study also contribute to broader debates in anthropology and linguistics regarding the classification and status of tribal languages. The tendency to label 'Kuvi' as a dialect of Kui overlooks its distinct linguistic features and cultural significance. Recognizing 'Kuvi' as an independent language is essential not only for scholarly accuracy but also for ensuring appropriate policy interventions and resource allocation. Linguistic recognition is closely tied to issues of cultural rights, representation, and social justice for indigenous communities.

In addition, this comparative study highlights the urgent need for systematic documentation of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi'. As oral languages with limited written traditions, both are at risk of losing valuable cultural knowledge embedded in oral narratives, ritual language, and everyday speech. Documentation efforts, including audio-visual recordings, dictionaries, and grammars, should be undertaken in collaboration with community members to ensure cultural sensitivity and sustainability. Such initiatives would not only preserve linguistic heritage but also empower indigenous speakers as Oḍiāns of their own knowledge.

At a theoretical level, this research reinforces the view that language and culture are mutually constitutive. Changes in economic practices, social organization, and belief systems are reflected in linguistic patterns, just as linguistic change influences cultural expression. The comparative approach adopted in this study demonstrates the value of examining intra-tribal diversity to gain a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics within indigenous societies. It challenges homogenizing narratives that treat tribal communities as culturally uniform and instead emphasizes diversity, adaptability, and agency.

In conclusion, the present study of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' Kondhs of Odisha reveals a complex interplay of continuity and change. While both communities face similar challenges arising from marginalization and modernization, their responses to these challenges differ in meaningful ways. Recognizing and respecting these differences is crucial for designing effective cultural, educational, and developmental interventions. The preservation and promotion of 'Kui' and 'Kuvi' are not merely linguistic concerns but are intrinsically linked to the survival of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and social dignity.

The present study ultimately argues that the future of *'Kui' and 'Kuvi'* depends on sustained scholarly engagement, community participation, and supportive state policies. By documenting, analysing, and valuing these languages and cultures, scholars and policymakers alike can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of India's linguistic heritage and reaffirm the importance of indigenous voices in shaping the nation's cultural landscape.

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