

School Ostracism and Social Anxiety among Tribal Adolescents in Attappadi, India

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Abstract

School ostracism is a subtle form of social exclusion. It shapes how adolescents see themselves and relate to peers. For tribal adolescents in India, school life unfolds across cultural and linguistic boundaries. These gaps can intensify experiences of being ignored or misunderstood. This study examined the link between school ostracism and social anxiety among tribal adolescents in Attappadi, Kerala.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 150 adolescents aged 14–18 years from the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities. Data were gathered using the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A) and the Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adolescents (SAQ-A30). Both instruments showed internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$ and $.93$). Pearson's correlation and linear regression were used for analysis. The results showed a clear association between ostracism and social anxiety ($r = .871$, $p < .01$). Ostracism accounted for 75.9% of the variance in social anxiety. More than half of the participants reported high levels of both experiences.

The findings indicate that school ostracism is a psychological risk for tribal adolescents. They call for culturally responsive teaching, greater teacher sensitivity, and accessible mental health support.

Keywords: school ostracism; social anxiety; tribal adolescents; inclusion; culturally responsive education

Introduction

In many classrooms, exclusion does not announce itself through overt hostility; it unfolds quietly, through moments of being passed over, unheard, or unseen. This form of school ostracism—enacted through subtle social and academic neglect—represents a muted yet psychologically corrosive mode of rejection. Unlike bullying, which is visible and often institutionally sanctioned as deviant behavior, ostracism is embedded in everyday interactions and thus remains largely unaddressed. For adolescents, whose developmental task centers on securing belonging and peer recognition, these experiences gradually erode self-assurance and compromise socioemotional adjustment. Empirical research consistently shows that when students perceive themselves as invisible within classroom life, their participation diminishes and social anxiety intensifies (Williams, 2007; Wesselmann et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2024).

This pattern assumes sharper contours among socially marginalized groups, for whom school-based exclusion mirrors broader cultural hierarchies. Educational spaces routinely privilege dominant linguistic codes and cultural norms, rendering minority identities peripheral to institutional life. In India, tribal adolescents often encounter classrooms that neither reflect nor validate their indigenous languages, traditions, or epistemologies. Such symbolic erasure translates into psychological strain and weakened

academic affiliation, reinforcing feelings of non-belonging (Nair & Chandran, 2022; Menon & Rao, 2023). Nowhere is this tension more evident than in Attappadi, Kerala, where Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba adolescents navigate schooling conducted primarily in Malayalam or English. The dissonance between home and school cultures is not merely linguistic; it is experiential. Regional studies suggest that ordinary incidents—being ignored during group tasks, receiving minimal teacher attention, or remaining on the margins of peer networks—accumulate into enduring patterns of social apprehension and withdrawal (Joseph & Varma, 2021; Zachariah & Sreedharan, 2020; Patel & Singh, 2024).

Although international scholarship has firmly established the association between ostracism and anxiety-related outcomes (La Greca & Lopez, 1998; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2024), empirical work focusing specifically on tribal adolescents in India remains limited. This absence of systematic evidence constrains both theoretical understanding and the design of culturally responsive interventions, thereby weakening efforts to translate the inclusionary vision of the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) into practice. The present study responds to this gap by examining whether school ostracism significantly predicts social anxiety among tribal adolescents in Attappadi, Kerala. Through stratified random sampling across the three major tribal communities, it seeks to render visible the psychological consequences of everyday exclusion. In doing so, the study situates individual distress within its cultural and institutional context, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of equity, belonging, and mental health in indigenous schooling environments.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between school ostracism and social anxiety among tribal adolescents in Attappadi, Kerala.
2. To test whether school ostracism significantly predicts social anxiety across the Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities.

Hypotheses

- H1: School ostracism will show a significant positive correlation with social anxiety among tribal adolescents.
- H2: School ostracism will significantly predict levels of social anxiety, such that higher experiences of ostracism will be associated with greater social anxiety.

Literature Review

Understanding the consequences of school ostracism, particularly for marginalized adolescents, requires connecting psychological theory with grounded empirical evidence. Scholarship in this area converges on three themes: (1) ostracism as a pathway to social anxiety, (2) the interplay of vulnerability and resilience among tribal adolescents, and (3) the persistent gap between inclusive policy and classroom realities.

Ostracism as a pathway to social anxiety

Ostracism is increasingly recognized as a subtle but damaging form of social adversity, distinct from overt bullying. It undermines core needs for belonging, esteem, and control (Williams, 2007), often leading adolescents to withdraw, lose confidence, and experience anxiety (Wesselmann et al., 2015). Longitudinal studies confirm this link: repeated exclusion predicts social avoidance through lowered self-esteem (*Frontiers in Psychology*, 2024), while Zhang et al. (2024) found that classroom ostracism significantly

predicted social anxiety across diverse cultural contexts. Similar dynamics are reported among Indigenous adolescents in Australia, First Nations youth in Canada, and multilingual classrooms in South Africa, where cultural and linguistic invisibility has been tied to heightened withdrawal and distress (Dobia & Roffey, 2023; Greenwood, 2022; Mampane, 2023). Together, these findings reinforce Baumeister and Leary's (1995) view that belongingness is a fundamental human motivation, and its denial produces distress.

Vulnerability and resilience among tribal adolescents

While these psychological pathways are critical, ostracism also intersects with broader vulnerabilities faced by tribal adolescents in India. Studies in Kerala show that when schools fail to affirm cultural and linguistic identities, students report alienation and disengagement (Nair & Chandran, 2022; Menon & Rao, 2023). Yet these studies, often based on small self-report samples, leave resilience processes underexplored. Evidence from Meghalaya indicates that community disorganization heightens distress, but peer solidarity buffers its impact (Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 2024). In Attappadi, a qualitative study found that traditional practices—songs, rituals, and collective activities—helped adolescents withstand exclusion (IJFMR, 2025). Such practices validate identity, build peer bonding, and cultivate cultural pride, easing the psychological weight of ostracism. Intervention research adds further promise: a positive psychology program tailored for tribal adolescents in Tamil Nadu reduced stress and enhanced well-being (Science Gate, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that vulnerability and resilience operate side by side, with cultural affirmation serving as a powerful protective factor.

Policy visions versus classroom realities

At the policy level, India's **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)** emphasizes inclusion, equity, and multilingual education. In principle, its call for mother-tongue instruction addresses the invisibility of tribal learners. In practice, however, the gap between vision and reality is stark. Studies show that schools often privilege dominant languages, marginalizing tribal students (Zachariah & Sreedharan, 2020; Patel & Singh, 2024). Teachers, too, face barriers: inadequate training and limited resources in tribal languages make it difficult to translate policy into practice. Curricula rarely include indigenous knowledge, and shortages of tribal-language textbooks and qualified teachers further reinforce exclusion. These systemic gaps translate into daily classroom experiences of ostracism, where tribal adolescents often feel unseen or undervalued. This disconnect underscores the importance of localized, data-driven research that makes visible the everyday exclusions faced by marginalized learners.

In summary, the literature shows that ostracism is a powerful antecedent of social anxiety, that tribal adolescents face unique risks but also draw strength from cultural resilience, and that policy aspirations remain only partially realized. Building on these insights, the present study examines the predictive role of school ostracism on social anxiety among adolescents in Attappadi, thereby addressing a critical empirical and policy gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theories to explain how school ostracism affects the psychological well-being of tribal adolescents across individual, social, and systemic levels. The Need to Belong Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) posits that acceptance and social connection are basic human needs; when students are ignored or excluded in school, these needs are unmet, increasing the risk of

emotional distress and anxiety, particularly in tribal contexts where belonging is already fragile due to cultural and linguistic differences. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) further suggests that adolescents derive self-worth from group membership, and when tribal identities are marginalized in classrooms, students may experience reduced confidence and disengagement. Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) situates these experiences within broader institutional and cultural structures, highlighting how peer exclusion is shaped by factors such as language hierarchies, school practices, and uneven implementation of inclusive policies. Together, these perspectives indicate that ostracism is not incidental but reflects unmet psychological needs, identity devaluation, and structural inequities, providing an integrated framework for interpreting the present study's findings within the lived realities of tribal adolescents and wider debates on educational inclusion.

Method

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between school ostracism and social anxiety among tribal adolescents in Attappadi, Kerala. This design enabled systematic measurement of exclusionary experiences and their psychological outcomes through standardized self-report instruments and statistical analysis.

Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 150 tribal adolescents (75 boys, 75 girls), aged 14–18 years, enrolled in government schools and pre-/post-matric hostels. A stratified random sampling method ensured equal representation of the three major tribal communities: Irula ($n = 50$), Muduga ($n = 50$), and Kurumba ($n = 50$). Gender balance was maintained within each group (25 boys and 25 girls).

This approach provided analytical visibility for smaller groups such as the Muduga and Kurumba, who are often underrepresented in broader surveys. However, as the Irula population is larger in Attappadi, the sample should be interpreted as analytically balanced rather than demographically representative.

Measures

In the present study, data were collected using two standardized self-report tools:

1. **Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A)** – an 11-item instrument assessing experiences of being ignored or excluded in social and academic contexts, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*). Internal consistency was strong in this study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).
2. **Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adolescents (SAQ-A30)** – a 30-item tool capturing anxiety across five domains of social functioning, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely*). Reliability was similarly high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Both instruments were translated into Malayalam using a translation–back translation procedure. A pilot test with 12 adolescents from Attappadi led to minor wording modifications to reflect local classroom practices.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Committee of Aligarh Muslim University. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with parental consent for those under 18 years. Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with school authorities and community leaders to ensure cultural sensitivity. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained throughout.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) summarized sample characteristics. Pearson's correlation assessed the association between ostracism and social anxiety, and simple linear regression tested the predictive role of ostracism. Statistical assumptions of linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were checked and satisfied. Effect sizes were interpreted following Cohen's (1988) guidelines.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The final sample comprised 150 adolescents with equal representation of boys ($n = 75$, 50%) and girls ($n = 75$, 50%). Stratification ensured analytical balance across the three tribal communities: Irula ($n = 50$, 33.3%), Muduga ($n = 50$, 33.3%), and Kurumba ($n = 50$, 33.3%). More than half of the participants (58.7%) reported high levels of both ostracism and social anxiety, suggesting that exclusion and distress were widespread across groups.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Descriptive Statistics

Mean scores indicated moderate to high levels of both school ostracism and social anxiety. Considerable variability was observed, reflecting individual differences in experiences and psychological outcomes.

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics.

- **School Ostracism:** $M = 32.4$, $SD = 7.8$ (range: 11–55)
- **Social Anxiety:** $M = 65.7$, $SD = 12.3$ (range: 30–120)

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation revealed a strong positive relationship between school ostracism and social anxiety ($r = .871$, $p < .01$). Adolescents who experienced greater ostracism were also more likely to report higher social anxiety. The correlation represented a very large effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria.

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression tested whether school ostracism predicted social anxiety. Results showed that ostracism was a significant predictor ($\beta = .871$, $p < .001$), explaining 75.9% of the variance in social anxiety ($R^2 = .759$). The model was statistically significant, $F(1,148) = 466.36$, $p < .001$.

- **Constant:** -6.48 ($SE = 1.20$, $p < .001$)
- **School Ostracism:** $B = 2.71$ ($SE = 0.13$, $\beta = .871$, $p < .001$)

Table 4 presents the regression model, and Figure 1 illustrates the scatterplot with regression line.

The scatterplot revealed a clear upward trend: as ostracism scores increased, social anxiety scores also rose. Data points clustered tightly around the regression line, underscoring the strength of the predictive relationship.

Discussion

The present study reveals a strong association between school ostracism and social anxiety among tribal adolescents in Attappadi, indicating that classroom exclusion is not a peripheral experience but a central determinant of psychological well-being in marginalized school contexts. Acts such as being ignored during group work or overlooked by teachers appear to translate into heightened fear of social interaction and negative evaluation.

These findings are consistent with the Need to Belong framework articulated by Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary, which holds that unmet needs for acceptance generate emotional distress. From a social identity perspective (Henri Tajfel & John Turner), ostracism also signals the devaluation of minority cultural identities, thereby intensifying vulnerability (Menon & Rao, 2023; IJFMR, 2025). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework further situates these experiences within broader structural conditions, including language hierarchies and limited cultural representation in school curricula (Patel & Singh, 2024).

The magnitude of the observed relationship ($r = .871$) is unusually high for psychological research. Although this pattern is consistent with recent studies linking classroom exclusion to social anxiety (Zhang et al., 2024), the possibility of shared method variance or conceptual overlap cannot be excluded. Future research would benefit from multi-informant or mixed-method approaches to strengthen confidence in causal interpretation.

While equal representation of Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba adolescents was ensured, exclusion is likely to be experienced differently across communities. Smaller linguistic groups such as the Kurumba may encounter more direct communication barriers, whereas Irula adolescents may be exposed to subtler forms of neglect. Gender also warrants closer examination, as prior research suggests that tribal girls may experience compounded marginalization (Joseph & Varma, 2021). Future studies should therefore explore how tribal identity and gender intersect in shaping both ostracism and social anxiety.

Policy and practice implications

The findings resonate with the inclusive vision of **NEP 2020** but also highlight implementation gaps. Schools continue to privilege dominant languages and cultural norms, leaving tribal students at risk of invisibility (Zachariah & Sreedharan, 2020; Patel & Singh, 2024). To address this, practical steps include:

- Training teachers in **culturally responsive pedagogy**.
- Incorporating **tribal languages and knowledge systems** into curricula.
- Establishing **peer-support programs** to foster belonging.
- Providing **school-based mental health services** tailored to tribal adolescents.

These strategies can transform classrooms into spaces where tribal students are recognized and supported, not sidelined.

Limitations and Future Directions

Like all research, this study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although equal representation of Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba adolescents ensured analytical comparability, this sampling strategy does not reflect the actual population distribution of Attappadi, where the Irula community is larger. The findings therefore support group-level comparison more than demographic generalization.

Second, the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot of adolescents' experiences. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how school ostracism and social anxiety develop and interact across different stages of schooling. Third, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures may have contributed to inflated associations. Future research should incorporate multiple sources of data, including teacher reports, peer assessments, and qualitative methods, to obtain a more nuanced understanding of exclusion in school contexts.

The study also did not directly examine gender or other intersectional influences. Subsequent work should explore how overlapping identities, such as gender and tribal status, shape vulnerability to ostracism and

its psychological consequences.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes rare empirical evidence from a tribal region and draws attention to a form of school-based exclusion that often remains invisible. The findings underscore the need for interventions that promote belonging, recognition, and dignity within classrooms. More broadly, the results suggest that ostracism is not merely a matter of social discomfort but a challenge to adolescents' sense of worth and identity. Creating school environments where tribal students are seen, heard, and valued is therefore essential for both their emotional well-being and their capacity to engage confidently with education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that school ostracism is a significant psychological risk factor for tribal adolescents in Attappadi, Kerala. By showing that ostracism explains nearly 76% of the variance in social anxiety, it highlights that exclusion in classrooms is not incidental but central to understanding adolescent well-being in marginalized communities.

The findings contribute three important insights. First, they provide robust quantitative evidence that everyday acts of being ignored or overlooked can have profound emotional consequences for adolescents. Second, they reveal how cultural and linguistic invisibility in schools magnifies the distress of tribal learners, aligning with broader concerns about equity and inclusion in Indian education. Third, they underline the urgent need for interventions that are not only psychological but also cultural and systemic. Practical steps include training teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy, integrating tribal languages and knowledge into curricula, and establishing accessible school-based mental health services. Such measures are consistent with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) but require committed local implementation.

Ultimately, addressing ostracism is about more than reducing anxiety—it is about ensuring recognition, dignity, and belonging for every child. When tribal adolescents feel seen and valued, they are better equipped to learn, grow, and carry their cultural heritage forward with pride.

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