

Mother Tongue Education for Tribal Children

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the status, problems and issues relating to tribal children and their languages through an exploration of policies, curricular frameworks and practices at state and national level. The paper also tries to explore the intricate relationship between tribal languages, culture, society and literature in the development of STs in a pluralistic society like India. However, the paper mainly focuses on the importance of mother tongue education in tribal schools, the position of the tribal languages in India, innovations in the development of tribal languages and education, identifying current problems and issues and to suggest suitable measures in helping tribal children to bridge the gap between the home language of the tribal children and the state language by sustaining mother tongue in tribal schools. The paper suggests the need to shift from the stage of advocacy to the stage of empowerment in dealing with the issues of tribal communities.

"I am convinced that children who receive education in a tongue other than their own commit suicide."

– Mahatma Gandhi.

WHO ARE SCHEDULED TRIBES?

Scheduled tribes are communities who are notified as STs under Article 342

of the Indian Constitution. They are based on the following characteristic features: primitive traits, geographic isolation, distinct culture, shyness of contact with other communities at large and economically backward¹. The main issues concerning the development of the tribal population

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at present are: (i) lack of awareness regarding the specific problems of STs and always clubbing them with other disadvantaged groups, (ii) low level of human development index as compared with the rest of the population, (iii) poor infrastructure leading to low capacity of the economy in tribal areas to effectively absorb institutional finance, (iv) inaccessibility of tribal areas and tough terrain, mostly forests, (v) non-marketability of social sector programmes leading to increased vulnerability in liberalised economy, and (vi) food insecurity in spite of food production².

It is a regrettable fact that adivasi children are deprived of their basic rights. Rehabilitation of adivasis through education of their children is not taken seriously. In fact, the tribal children were made victims in the name of development. Tribal children have lost touch with their language, culture, traditional life-style, ethics and values. If this situation continued, they could go extinct. Implementation of the Right to Education Act, and Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers Act is the only panacea to restore their basic rights, such as education of the adivasi children³.

The adivasis should make all efforts to avail of government schemes. Child rights should be protected and the parents should prevent migration in order to prevent children from dropping out of school. Tribal panchayats should perform

the protective role and so any violation of the rights of their children should be brought to the notice of the government. As the government supplies adivasi children with learning materials, such as school bags, uniforms, notebooks, pens, textbooks and other materials, they should grab such opportunities and make the best use of it. In addition, the government should implement RTE Act in tribal areas rigorously⁴.

Extracurricular activities help children improve their academic performance. Likewise, efforts should be made to encourage tribal children to involve in extra-curricular activities, as these exercises will help contribute to their overall growth as well. Extra-curricular activities will also help children to learn more effectively as children become more active if they are involved in group/cultural activities. At the same time, children in tribal schools should be encouraged with multi-talent awards so as to encourage them to participate in extra-curricular activities with enthusiasm and exhibit their talents. Participation in various tribal dances, sports, games and other activities can help retain the students in schools and hence help arrest the dropout rates⁵.

MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN TRIBAL SCHOOLS

India promotes multiculturalism in view of its rich cultural diversity. Indian Constitution has recognise the right to mother tongue education.

Therefore in order to honour our Constitutional vision and spirit, there is a need to enrich tribal education, safeguard tribal culture and tribal heritage. The constitutional vision is essentially of a society in which every community and every individual will be in charge of shaping her/his life with full dignity. Tribals in the country constitute the poorest category not merely in economic terms but also in all aspects of human development. They are deprived of access to quality education and health care. They are resource poor and their traditional resources of livelihood are dwindling. Therefore there is slow pace of development among STs in India. STs are contextualised in the vicious circle of deprivation and poverty⁶.

ROLE OF UNESCO IN PROMOTING MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

UNESCO is committed to assist in creating a platform for inclusion of tribal mother tongues especially in the initial stages of education and to enhance multilingual competence. It is committed in promoting mother tongue education among all tribal communities. UNESCO's studies have shown that multilingualism is an asset and mother tongue based education remains the best alternative in Indian tribal context⁷.

VIEWS OF NCERT IN SUPPORT OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

National Council of Educational Research and Training supported

the issue of mother tongue education in its draft National Policy of Education 1986, 1992, 2000, and 2005. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 based on the 21 position papers specified its policy in the Focus Group Report on the Problems of Education of SC/ST Children with regard to teaching of Indian languages⁸. Prominence is given to multilingualism, centrality of language in the curriculum, language across the curriculum and education of the disadvantaged groups particularly the tribal groups in India. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 stated that learner's own mother tongue should be used as the language of instruction, especially, in the earlier years of education. Children acquire language informally and naturally from their environment, including home. They bring their verbal reposition, language and culture as a resource to school. The national Focus Group Report on the problems of education of SC/ST children further stated that: "the tribes are living under different conditions and depending on levels of cultural absorption and adaptation; however, several STs may not look to schools to teach in their home language. Indeed, for many ST parents, the main advantage of schooling is that it gives access to new languages, new occupations and a new life and enables interaction with the non-tribal world. But wherever STs have been politically mobilised to celebrate ST identity, they have been

clearer and open in their demand for education in indigenous languages⁹.

UNICEF'S VIEWS ON MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

UNICEF is an advocator of mother tongue approach in tribal schools. UNICEF strongly believes in multilingual education. It has a very critical role to play in the quest for universalisation of elementary education. UNICEF advocated that given the large-scale socio-cultural and linguistic heterogeneity in India and the accompanying problem of social exclusion there is a need to involve the communities and experts to promote mother tongue education¹⁰.

EFFORTS MADE BY CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF INDIAN LANGUAGES, MYSORE (CIIL)

CIIL is very much committed to work with the scheduled tribes for the development of their languages in turn their education. Its main focus is to build up the pressure for equality and justice to all speech communities and use the collective wisdom with responsibility, to endeavour for a common vision of development of tribal languages¹¹.

ATTITUDE OF PARENTS TOWARDS THEIR MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION

The issue of education of tribals is linked with the native knowledge of their languages. In some states,

textbooks for adivasi children were prepared by some adivasi children refused to use these books for they wanted to learn English. Some of the tribal parents questioned "Do you want us remain backward forever"? This is the paradox. However, Government of India is committed for the development of tribal languages, local languages, mother tongue and minor languages¹².

HOW TO EMPOWER SMALLER LANGUAGES IN INDIA?

India has a large number of languages. There is a huge linguistic network functioning. The linguistic network system is running across language families and speech areas. There are differences and inequalities persisting with regard to minority languages. There is an urgent need to protect the linguistic rights of adivasis. They contribute a large share to enrich the linguistic heritage of India¹³.

USE OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN SCHOOLS

The home languages of the tribal children are generally not used in tribal schools. In some cases the school language is completely alien language to tribal children. Most of the teachers do not speak or understand the children's language. So there is no communication between teachers and children. Even when the teachers come from the children's home, community, they often do not use the local language in teaching the

curriculum as the textbooks are in the state language. Classes are teacher-centered. Teachers do all the teaching. Children copy from the chalk board or from the textbook. Children in Classes IV and V read with difficulty and with little comprehension¹⁴.

HOW TO CONSERVE THE CULTURAL TRADITION OF THE ADIVASIS?

A conspicuous feature of Indian culture is the survival of tribal society and culture in the midst of rapidly changing society. In post-Independence context, education has successfully served as a key instrument of change and emancipation for the SCs and STs. It has brought them self-respect and socio-economic advancement raised consciousness and empowered their identity struggles. Tribals have suffered large scale land alienation and dispossession from natural resources. Scheduled tribes appear to lag behind the scheduled castes in most of the states barring the North Eastern States, due to specific socio-historical factors. Curriculum has served as mediator of ideological dominance and hegemony. It does not acknowledge cultural rights of STs. They are denied of their own culture and history. Despite several policy documents, there is no imparting of education in tribal languages. This includes even those like Santhali, Bhili, Gondi or Oraon which are spoken by over a million people. Primary teachers are predominantly from non-ST background that does not bother to learn the tribal languages.

This causes an impediment in the education of the tribal children¹⁵.

CORE ISSUES IN MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Through language and culture, community relationships are established. The three language formula was an experiment solution to a language discord situation in India. Every school-going child learns a new language once she/he goes to school. Mother tongue education is available to a large majority of children all over the country. Our education system does not pay much attention to mother tongue education of tribals, linguistic minorities and others. There is lack of studies with regard to mother tongue education in tribal schools in Indian context. Government of India has not formulated any draft national policy on tribal languages¹⁶.

The parents of tribal communities are also indifferent to mother tongue education in tribal schools. They feel the policies of the government to teach and educate tribal children in their mother tongue may keep them more backward, while other children who are more privileged to learn English move forward further. In this context, the parents of tribal children should understand that mother tongue education at the primary level is done only to make the learning process easier for the child. Article 50 of Indian Constitution gives special provisions to protect the interest of tribals in the country, however, in practice

this is yet to achieve. In real sense, multiculturalism is not practiced in the country. On the contrary, it appears that the country's agenda, over a period of time, eventually is to assimilate smaller cultures into the mainstream. The multilingual character of Indian society should be seen as a resource for the enrichment of school life¹⁷.

ISSUES CONNECTED WITH MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN INDIA

Bilingualism at the grass root level is a maintenance strategy. Multilingualism is a positive force. Complementaries of languages help early socialisation for multilingual functioning. There is now sound evidence from a variety of cultural settings supporting the positive role of bilingualism in cognitive development, which can be attributed to the meta linguistic and meta cognitive advantage of bilinguals and to the social context of bilingualism particularly in multilingual countries. The voiceless minorities are suffering from the exclusion of their mother tongues. The hierarchical pecking order of the languages in our educational system is keeping the tribal languages in a disadvantageous position. Children are taught in school through dominant/second foreign language at the cost of their mother tongue. Studies have shown that the Bodo children in Bodo medium schools perform better than Bodo children in state medium

schools. This may be true of other tribal children as well¹⁸.

PLACE OF ENGLISH IN TRIBAL SCHOOLS

English ranges from first, second to third language across the school curriculum. Language is learnt when learning opportunities are created. Very often the school curriculum is a restrictive framework. Implementation of mother tongue education in the classroom is even more restricted. Language is learnt at the initiative of the child, in her/his own pace, not because somebody else is telling the child to do something. Tribal children, who have difficulty in picking the local language, find much more difficulty in learning English language. This does not mean that English should be kept away from them. Rather they should be provided with effective teaching learning environment to enable them to master this language¹⁹.

HOW TO PLAN FOR MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN TRIBAL SCHOOLS?

Mother tongue education will enable tribal children/communities to achieve the educational goals. It will act as a strong supportive language for the tribal children. To begin with, the first two years of schooling could be in the mother tongue and, during the third and fourth, it could be bilingual that is mother tongue and State language and thereafter State language gradually taking over²⁰.

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

In India, many of the tribal languages are endangered. If nothing is being done, 90 per cent of world's living languages would pass out of use very soon. Several measures are suggested to protect tribal languages which are as follows: (1) tribal people should take pride in their language and use them, (2) they should understand and promote the wealthy treasure of their languages, and (3) adivasis should empower themselves through education. The Universal declaration on the rights of persons belonging to ethnic groups emphasised rights of learners to be taught in their mother tongue. Tribals should write in their own language. They should be trained to make use of electronic technology. A strong presence of tribal languages should take place in the educational system. These steps can help in protecting the endangered languages of the tribals²¹.

Efforts made so far to Promote Mother Tongue Education in India.

North-Eastern Region: Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have more than 80 per cent of tribal population. They have showed a strong bond for mother tongue education. Church has played an important role in the spread of education among the different tribal groups in the region. Angami in Nagaland (Tenyidie), Mizo in Mizoram, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya are taught up to post-graduation level²².

Arunachal Pradesh: 60 per cent of the state population belongs to adivasis.

The state has more than 24 tribal languages. In schools, tribal children are taught in English and Hindi at all levels. The State government is seeking the intervention of the Central government and NGOs for the support and promotion of tribal languages²³.

Assam: Nearly 13 per cent of population is tribals in Assam. The state is using Bodo language. Devanagari script is widely used in the state. Bodo-language is included in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Mishing/Mirmi is used as the second language in schools in the Roman script. Karbi/Mikir is also used in schools²⁴.

Nagaland: The state has 17 recognised tribal languages. Tribal languages are used in tribal dominated schools. English is considered as the official language. Among Ao community, there is 100 per cent literacy. The State government had set up literature committees for the promotion of tribal languages²⁵.

Meghalaya and Mizoram: Tribal languages taught in these states are Khasi Garo and Mizo respectively. Tribal languages are standardised. They have succeeded in orthography. But the problem of dialects needs serious consideration²⁶.

Manipur: The state has several tribal groups comprising of one-third of the total population. Some tribal languages are taught at high school level but not at primary level. Naga Communities, such as Poumai, Mao and Tangkhul are showing their

support for the development of tribal languages²⁷.

Tripura: The state has undergone a dramatic change in demographic profile as the tribals are now reduced to minority status. Kok Borok is recognised as associate official language but support for tribal languages is still required in the state²⁸.

Central India: There are several languages belonging to different population groups — Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic (Munda Group). The adivasis belong to marginalised group and their languages are still neglected. There is apathy from all quarters towards inclusion of tribal languages in schools. This way, many tribal languages in Central India are endangered²⁹.

Chhattisgarh: There are 16 districts in Chhattisgarh out of which 7 districts are predominantly tribals and nearly 88 blocks out of 146 blocks are occupied by adivasis. In schools, the medium of instruction is Hindi. The local tribal dialects/languages are yet to get introduced in formal education³⁰.

Madhya Pradesh: There are 82,000 primary schools and 27,000 upper-primary schools in the state. Bhili and Goandi are widely spoken but they are not included in formal schooling. Over two-third of Gonds use Hindi as mother tongue, consequently causing a shift in tribal language use and language loss in this process of assimilation. Tribal languages like Bhili and Korku are neglected³¹.

Jharkhand: Santhali has been included in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Despite this, the language is not strongly established in the domain of education. Mundari and Ho are taught along with Santhali up to post graduation level. Oraon speakers are inclined towards speaking Sadari as the link language or *lingua franca*. SSA has prepared primers in five languages and distributed the same in tribal schools for implementation³².

East-West and South: States like Orissa, Gujarat, and Maharashtra have sizable tribal population. Orissa has as many as 62 tribes speaking over two dozen languages belonging to Austro-Asiatic group. Gujarat and Maharashtra have different tribes, many of them speaking varieties of Bhili. Attempts are being made to include the Bhili language into the state language. Gondi is also spoken in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. States like Karnataka and Kerala did some efforts to promote their tribal languages. However, the overall picture with regard to promotion of tribal languages and tribal education is very dismal, and still several smaller languages are considered as endangered³³.

Andhra Pradesh: The state government has neglected the issue of mother tongue language teaching-learning in schools for a long time. Now, different agencies are coming forward to work with the tribal communities to protect their languages³⁴.

Karnataka and Kerala: Both the states have many tribal communities

but the state governments have given very little importance in promoting tribal languages. In the state of Karnataka, primers were prepared on Jenukuruba (Jenu-Nudi) and Soliga Siddhi for Soliga tribal children. On the other hand, the Kerala government started a project on environmental literacy in mother tongue. Likewise, the state governments should continue to encourage and support mother tongue education in their respective states³⁵.

Orissa: The state government of Orissa has prepared primers in many languages and conducted some studies on tribal languages. Since 1996, many efforts have been made to promote tribal dialects/ languages. Some of the activities in this direction are linguistic mapping and survey, commissioning of an agency for protection of tribal languages and dialects, training of tribal teachers and gathering of experiences from teachers who were already working in tribal areas. Besides, the state government has appointed teachers from the local areas in Koraput district, especially from the tribal communities, to develop Kuvi dialect. This experiment was started in 33 centres. In consequence, over a span of two years, the government has achieved 12.3 per cent increase in the literacy level among tribal children³⁶.

Gujarat: Tribal population accounts for 14.76 per cent in the state. Out of 224 blocks, 45 blocks are filled with tribal population where there are also tribal schools close by. There

are 3351 clusters, out of which 749 clusters belong to adivasis. Dang is a rural district having 100 per cent tribal population. Glossaries, dictionaries were prepared in Dangi, Bhili, Panchmali and in Rathoa³⁷.

North India: *Jammu and Kashmir:* Greater emphasis is given to Urdu, which is the official language of the state, and indigenous languages like Dogri and Kashmiri received less attention as compared to Urdu. Besides, there are nomadic communities like Gorjis/Gujjars living in the state that also need special protection. Thus, in an attempt to protect the interest of minorities, the government should preserve the culture and languages of all tribes³⁸.

HOW TO PROMOTE TRIBAL EDUCATION AND TRIBAL LANGUAGES?

Promotion of tribal languages and tribal education is progressing at a slow pace, and this calls for a change to demonstrate the importance of multilingual education in tribal schools. The government should find a way to succeed in the mission by providing proper encouragement. There is a need to move beyond the experimentations done so far. Government policies should reflect on the common concern and shared vision. The value of mother tongue education should not be undermined. Tribal people should not be deprived of their languages at the cost of dominant languages³⁹.

MOBILISATION OF SUPPORT FROM TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Mobilisation of support from all sections of society matters a lot for the promotion of tribal languages and tribal education. The support from the community members, Gram Panchayats, Gram Sabhas should be taken into consideration in order to sensitise the adivasis on this issue. Top educational institutions/ organisations should come forward to take up this issue on effective lines. Leading role must be taken by SSA/ NGOs/DIETS/BRCs/CRCs and the community leaders. The role of the mass media can be emphasised in this connection⁴⁰.

PRODUCTION OF CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE MATERIALS

Use of mother tongue in education can play an important role in transmitting knowledge to students from the viewpoint of effective learning process. In this context, tribal children may be made to learn their first language in school too as it will prove advantageous for a child to make her/his learning more effective. The materials prepared by different organisations for children and teachers must enliven tribal culture. The materials used in tribal schools must be appropriate and suitable to the needs of tribals. Therefore, documentation of indigenous knowledge system in tribal languages is imperative to encourage the non-tribal children also to access the knowledge known to tribals; teachers

working in tribal schools should at least know their language to enable them communicate better with tribal children; tribal teachers recruited by the government should be posted in their own locality so that teachers can use their language more effectively. In addition, supplementary reading materials should be made available to all tribal children in primary grades for effective learning⁴².

WHAT NEEDS TO BE REFLECTED?

1. Tribal communities must be encouraged to work with professional bodies such as SSA/ CIIL/ DSERTs/ SCERTs/ NCERT/ DIETs/ Ministry of Tribal Affairs and lend their support to promote multi-lingual education.
2. All the tribal languages are worthy to study and worthy to use in school domain. The government should nurture their growth by providing appropriate support.
3. Mother tongue must be made as the medium of instruction at primary level. It must be linked with other languages at school level.
4. There is a need to promote sound research to characterise the problems of tribal people emerging from various problems related to tribal development.
5. The issue of mother tongue education needs encouragement in the country. Two important issues should be taken up seriously by the government with regard to mother tongue

education in tribal schools: (i) the role of research, (ii) educational planning, curricular planning and pedagogical reforms in the context of tribal education⁴³.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The unity of the country can be understood in the linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity is an asset. Tribal culture should be understood in the context of pluralistic diversity of Indian life. Mother tongue education for the tribal children should be at the centre of national educational planning. The spirit of Indian Constitution is empowerment of minority and marginalised communities. Based on the above analysis, a few suggestions can be made to improve the educational needs of tribal children: (i) mother tongue education must be implemented in tribal schools on priority basis, (ii) the linguistic rights of STs must be protected by

introducing mother tongue education in tribal schools, (iii) materials prepared by the State and Central government organisations must be modified to suit the needs of tribals, (iv) co-operative networks must be developed with government and non-government organisations to work with tribal communities, (v) action plans must be prepared with regard to quality education in tribal schools, (vi) baseline surveys must be conducted with regard to the educational status of various tribal communities, (vii) special training programmes must be arranged for tribal teachers, school complex resource persons and district education officers (agency) for active implementation of mother tongue education in tribal schools, and (viii) teaching-learning materials, such as textbooks, glossaries, dictionaries, bridge inventories and other resource materials must be made available to children in tribal schools.

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