

Exploring the role of Home Language(s) in the Schooling of Tribal Children of Rajasthan at the Primary Stage

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Abstract- *The tribals in Indian polity are remarkable for their diverse cultures that feast on widely divergent customs and traditions. A simple dry narrative pushing a particular viewpoint of "educating children through mother tongue" may not become a critical voice for describing ground realities. Indian modernity and humanism are rumbling with cynicism, impassivity, and discontentment in a rumpus of tribal society. The issues in the present study have been interrogated afresh simultaneously guarding against creating a disparate conviction rather gaining an insightful understanding that the tribal languages could become a beacon for providing an enabling experience to tribal children for meeting both the ends of broad streaming and also preserving their identity as well as ensuring the growth of cosmopolitan functional qualities for meaningful participation in the existing global scenario.*

Keywords: home language, the medium of instruction, tribal language, multilingualism, schooling.

Language, Learning and Education

A language is something infinitely greater than grammar and philology. It is the poetic testament of the genius of a race and a culture, and the living embodiment of the thoughts and fancies that have moulded them.

(Jawahar Lal Nehru in *Discovery of India* pp. 165)

Language is an essential human phenomenon and learning is an essentially human endeavor. Language and learning are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to separate them. M. A. K. Halliday (1993) in his paper towards a language-based theory of learning described that the relationship between language and education can be divided into three heuristic categories: (1) learning a language, (2) learning through the language, and (3) learning about language. The relationship between language, learning and education is thus a vital relationship which determines various individual, social and cultural activities of our life. Language is central to all human activities and therefore it is at the core of all educational and pedagogical processes. From elementary level to the highest level of the academic enterprise, language acts as bloodstream to carry the ideas, feelings and thoughts and everything.

In education, language besides its individual place in curricular subjects; functions as a medium of instruction in all curricular and extracurricular activities. Hence, the role of a language becomes even more important. Halliday refers to this role of language in the second category learning through the language. Language acts as a medium of learning and thereby

teaching as well. The role of language in the transmission of knowledge and experience makes it the storehouse of all human knowledge and experience. Language is also the vehicle of social practices and culture in time and space. It enables its user to interpret, understand and add the ideas, feelings, and thoughts to his/her community. Language only makes the culture to be an integral part of an individual or community. Culture or language marks one's social, cultural and national identity.

Language is so pervasive in human life that it cannot be separated from any aspects of one's life. Education as a natural process of learning or experience must take place in one's own language—the mother tongue. In other words, the medium of transmission of knowledge and experience must be in one's own language or mother tongue. Education as a process of cognitive, conative and affective development can only be accomplished through mother tongue. Language is a base for all educational and non-education yet social development of the individual.

Typology of Language

The first language is otherwise called as in many names such as mother language, arterial language, home language, native language, vernacular language, indigenous, or autochthonous language. In most cases, the term first language refers to the language that a person acquires in early childhood because it is spoken in the family and/or it is the language of the region where the child lives. Also, the first language is known as a mother tongue, native language, or arterial language. A person who has more than one native language is regarded as bilingual or multilingual. Contemporary linguists and educators commonly use the term L1 to refer to a first or native language, and the term L2 to refer to a second language or a foreign language that is being studied.

Bloomfield (1933) defines a native language as one learned on one's mother's knee, and claims that no one is perfectly sure in a language that is acquired later. 'The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language'. This definition equates a native speaker with a mother tongue speaker. A home language is a language or the variety of a language that is most commonly spoken by the members of a family for everyday interactions at home. It is also called the family language or the language of the home. Sometimes, the term mother tongue or mother language is used for the language that a person learned as a child at home. Children growing up in bilingual homes can, according to this definition, have more than one mother tongue or native language. A vernacular or vernacular language is the native language or native dialect of a specific population, especially as distinguished from a literary, national or standard variety of the language, or a lingua franca used in the region or state inhabited by that population. Some linguists use "vernacular" and "nonstandard dialect" as synonyms.

Language as already pointed out has a very significant and essential role in learning as well as teaching. In any learning-teaching process, language plays not merely as a medium of instruction but also stimulates the learning process itself. Beginning from individual's family to the classroom transactions, language provides the content, the medium, and environment to facilitate the constructive process of learning.

The Primacy of Language in Learning and Teaching at Primary Level

Learning and teaching at the Primary level are the most lingua centric. At this stage, the child is expected to be facilitated for the most rudimentary cognitive development which involves various neuro-psychological developments. Language is the most evident achievement which promotes their other learning goals along with the language development itself. This stage also marks the Critical Period of language development mentioned by different linguists for the essential acquisition of language abilities. Besides, language development at this stage also leads to the process of socialization, acculturation, development of thinking skills etc.

The universal role of language in the learning process and the primacy of language in learning at the primary level have been repeatedly emphasized by several scholars in the field (e.g. Halliday 1993). Language and education are intrinsically related and all education (i.e. acquisition of knowledge) is dependent on language.

In India, despite its multilingual resources and plural culture, a few dominant languages have always been in vogue in schooling process that impedes the overall growth of the child in general and the rural tribal children in particular. Such marginalized communities are the worst sufferers because their language is not used in the schooling process. It is rightly opined: “though the Indian languages have never been granted their rightful and essentially required status even after the British left, their plight has been worsening further and at a faster pace for the past 30 years or so. The English language is pushing Indian languages out even as a medium of education in schools” (Singh 2013:1).

In the context of the education of tribal children in rural school, even regional languages like Hindi in Rajasthan may not be effective means of communication as this is also the other tongue for them like English. This is a major cause of concern for undertaking the present study.

Linguistic Diversity in India and Tribal Languages

The existing linguistic scenario of the country where a predominance of any particular language or a language which is non-native leads to form a serious constraint for the schooling of child and therefore raises a serious issue how best and what way we can educate all children especially tribal children of India. Rajasthan is a multilingually rich state with 79 Languages and 138 Mother tongues (Census 2001). Of these, some are recognized as tribal languages also related to 7 major tribes namely Bhil, Bhil Mina, Damor, Dhanka, Garsia, Mina, Sehria and several other scheduled tribes. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the state of Rajasthan with its multiethnic and multilingual elements offers both a challenge as well as a resource for school education.

The languages identified as home language associated with different tribes spread across five districts with tribal concentrated population were selected for sampling. These are Udaipur, Pratapgarh, Dungarpur, Banswara, and Baran. The name of the tribes and major languages spoken/used in the region are as follows:

Table 1 Major Tribal Areas of Rajasthan and their Languages

S. No.	District	Tribes	Languages
1	Udaipur	Bhil, Garasia, Damor, Kathodi	Hindi, Mewari, Marwari, Wagdi, Dhavdi
2	Pratapgarh	Bhil	Hindi, Wagdi, Kanthhalee-Bolee, Harauti
3	Dungarpur	Bhil, Damor, Patelia	Bagri
4	Banswara	Bhil, Patelia	Bagri
5	Baran	Saharia	Hadoti

The school language of the tribal is invariably different from that of the home language. Even if he speaks a variety of the dominant language it is invariably different from the standard variety which is the language of the books. The language textbooks in the school seldom teach the skills; even the very primary level books attempt to teach literature, very often badly organized and seldom touching contemporary writing. It is no wonder that the child is taught to learn the textbook by heart. The tribal child coming from a poor socio-economic background and from families where there was no education for generations does not have a chance to use an elaborate code in diversified circumstances. The cognitive skills of abstraction, deduction, argumentation are essentially language based which neither the child is taught at elementary nor till the end of formal higher education.

Language Education Policies

In the present scenario of education in India, no policy is enunciated for use of tribal languages in education. However, National Focus Group on Problems of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children under National Curriculum Framework-2005 has suggested the following recommendations especially in the context of language:

- Home languages must be made the media of instruction/communication in the early years of school education. They must be seen as integral to creating an enabling school environment for children and crucial for the process of learning. The pedagogic rationale is that moving from the known to the unknown facilitates learning. Language is a critical resource that children bring to school and aids thought, communication and understanding.
- Home languages in classroom process are also essential to build child's self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Transition to regional language will be facilitated through learning of home language.
- Where there are more than one tribal languages used in any village, we recommend the use of the regional lingua franca or the majority language after consultation with villagers.
- Teacher training must include the stipulation that teachers pass an exam in a local language. Earlier ICS officers posted to tribal areas had to pass exams in one tribal language. This seems to have died out.

Despite the lack of proper policy initiatives, several scholars and NGOs have made sincere efforts to address the issues of tribal languages in education. With the considerations from

UNESCO on mother tongue and multilingual education in 1953 in its expert report on The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education and Education Position Papers Education in a multilingual world (2003) and many other documents and deliberations, mother tongue education, in general, has been advocated by scholars and experts in the field.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

In the tribal context where the problem of disparity is more prevalent due to the inevitable process of development and mainstream policy intervention, in many parts of world tribal multilingual language and culture is in crisis. In Africa, Asia, and even in American countries, issues of multilingual education including tribal languages as well are emerging as a serious concern for educationists, linguists, and policy makers.

In India, a multilingual-multicultural and multi-ethnic country; tribal language and education are lacking proper policies and practice in spite of the repeated advocacy of mother tongue-based multilingual education. As Mohanty and others have pointed out:

The language barrier that the tribal children face on their school entry is a major factor in their poor educational performance and consequent socioeconomic deprivation. The language barrier also comes with a content barrier since the daily life experiences and culture of tribal children are hardly present in textbooks and other curricular material in the dominant language schools. As pointed out earlier, school practices in respect of tribal children in India have often been predicated on the assumption that there are weaknesses and disadvantages inherent to tribal languages and that maintenance of these languages is a cognitive and socio economic burden. (Mohanty et al. 2009: 285) Mohanty (ibid) has further stressed upon the potential loss of tribal children caused by the exclusion of their mother tongues. He highlights the pedagogical and socio-cultural aspects of education in the following words: The exclusion of tribal mother tongues from education limits tribal children's chances of adequate classroom learning and success in academics and, consequently, limits their freedom and ability to influence the direction of their lives. A number of Indian studies show that tribal children (Saikia and Mohanty 2004, Sema 2008), as well as other groups of children (Nayak 2007), perform significantly better in MT medium classrooms compared to their matched counterparts in classrooms in which the MoI is another dominant language. (ibid: 286)

The exclusion of one's mother tongue from one's life results in more severe socioeconomic and cultural crisis. It leads to deprivation and lack of freedom and a sense of alienation in a democratic society and finally removes a community from the whole process of growth and development and nation building. Dreze and Sen (2002) speak of the substantial problems of 'voicelessness' of the disadvantaged groups in India, particularly the scheduled tribes, arising out of the large-scale illiteracy and lack of education both of which impede economic development. They attribute non-attendance and school push out to lack of interest (of parents as well as children) and to a host of 'discouragement effects' due to alienating curricula, inactive classrooms, indifferent teachers, and social discrimination in the classroom. Linguistic and cultural discrimination, arising out of prevalent inequalities, is central to the relationship between illiteracy and educational failure, lack of freedom, capability deprivation, and poverty. While education is the enabling factor for economic development, mother tongue is the enabling factor for access to quality education.

The mismatch between home and school languages and neglect of mother tongues force the tribal children in India into subtractive language learning in a form of submersion education in the dominant language and leads to poor educational achievement reinforcing inequality and leading to capability deprivation.

Problems and Prospects of Mother Tongue-Based Education for Tribal Children

The system of education in India, which is officially named as human resource development, neglects the most powerful resource that a tribal child comes to school with—her mother tongue—and in the process fails to enable her for a life of choice; rather, it fails to develop human resources and leads to cumulative disadvantages. Exclusion of mother tongues in education limits access to resources and perpetuates inequality by depriving language communities of linguistic human rights, democratic participation, identity, self-efficacy, and pride.

In India, many experimental programs have been initiated however, these do not form part of a policy concern. The National Policy on Education of 1986, revised in 1992, has little to say about any language policy. As though nothing happens in the country over years, the 1986 Policy takes us back to 1968. The Three Language Formula, as it is popularly called, and then becomes the hallmark of a policy. However, the formula has no reference to the mother tongue.

Even after the lack of clear policy guidelines; in recent years, programmes of mother tongue-based education for tribal children in India have started with government initiatives in some of the states with substantial tribal population and are planned in few others. However, the condition of such programmes and initiatives are not satisfactory as D.P. Pattanayak observes:

The tribal schools in different parts of India are run by the Education Department as well as by the Welfare Department. Since the Education Departments have better facilities, their inspection is more systematic. There are tribal schools which have not been inspected for years. Unlike Rural: Urban schools, the tribal schools may be classified as Roadside schools and Interior schools. The Interior schools are seldom inspected and suffer from Teacher absenteeism. Free books supplied by the Welfare Department are seldom in adequate numbers. As a result, the will to do among the tribals are forced to buy books from the market. No book is written in tribal languages. There is no strategy to link the home language with the school language. The double alienation of the tribal child takes its own toll (Pattanayak D. P., Report of a Case Study on Educational Materials in the Learning Environment, 1999, sponsored by the UNESCO). (Pattanayak 1981:56)

Like other states, Rajasthan as reported by Mishra (2011) in a nationwide project on Tribal Languages and Tribal Language Education at Elementary Level in India says that: no tribal language is used at any level of education and training is not provided in the teaching of tribal languages, no textbooks, and primers have been prepared/published. (Mishra 2011: 95)

Ncf-2005 and The Present Study

With the backdrop of NCF-2005 and the policies and practices pertaining to multilingual education, the project to explore the efficacy of home language in schooling of tribal children was undertaken. The data pertaining to the present study has been primarily based on field visits made by the team members carefully constituted with a long span of experience in different dimensions of teaching and learning belonging to different fields of studies providing a basis to

understand relatively insular arena that can best be described as "the world of unknowing and unknown by the world". Although such communities have rich cultural heritage and very significant social structure and order, certainly, the vital concern is to look into various aspects of tribal social life and insights of the tribal mind and simultaneously trying to understand the same in the modern context.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the project included the study of the status of the home language in the schooling of the tribal children at the primary stage and to critically examine the use and impact of the home language in the schooling of tribal children. Based on the observation, the project also aimed at exploring the feasibility of home language in the schooling of tribal children and also to suggest what succinctly works for the quality schooling of the tribal children with reference to policy perspectives.

Research Tools of the Study

The research questions were based on the objectives mentioned above and the study was carried out with the help of various tools developed for the purpose. The tools used in the study were Classroom Observation Schedule, Students' Interview Schedule, Teachers' Interview Schedule, Headmasters' Interview Schedule, Parents' Interview Schedule, and School Observation Diary. The sampling for the study was purposive. In all, 25 Government Primary rural schools from 5 districts of tribal areas of Rajasthan namely Baran, Udaipur, Pratapgarh, Banswara and Dungarpur have been selected based on the available inputs received from the linguistics experts working in the state of Rajasthan.

Findings and Suggestions

The study revealed that students like home language and understand the text better through home Language. Therefore, it is suggested that the textbooks at the Primary stage should have some relevant texts related to socio-cultural aspects of the local people so that the home language may find respectable passage for entry to the class. The study brought out the fact that the reasonable use of Home language in teaching-learning situation adds a great positive value to the enhancement of cognitive and affective levels of the Primary students.

Therefore, it is suggested that the teachers should not only respect the Home language of students but also encourage them to use it to the extent they desire. Further, the Home language should be suitably used across the curriculum. The students should be appreciated for using home language both in curricular and co-curricular activities. Since students are comfortable in the home language, teachers should not hesitate in using the home language even for evaluation purposes. Teachers should focus on what the students have learnt /acquired/ gained, not on how they show their attainment in the second language which may be separately dealt with. The research study proves that home language is a great help in learning a second language. Thus, home language becomes a powerful tool and a meaningful resource for learning.

Thus, the outcome of the present research articulates nothing but reiterates what Sri Aurobindo has said about language. In his illuminating words, "(L)anguage is the sign of the cultural life of a people, the index of its soul in thought and mind that stands behind and enriches its soul in action".

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