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## PEDAGOGY OF NEGLECT AND THE TRIBAL LEARNERS: AN INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING AT SCHOOLS OF EASTERN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The 'empirical reality' of multilingualism in India is reflected in the educational language planning and its consequent pedagogical practices at schools. The language policies and the pedagogical practices with their best intentions curate the language of the marginalised learners in the arena of formal education often ignoring the fact that the pedagogy of the (foreign) language teaching has been based on second language acquisition theories that mostly disregard learners' prior (and simultaneous) language learning experiences and resources (Susanna,2018). This neglect plays a significant role in the language learning of the tribal learners who are by default plurilingual. This paper tries to identify the 'pedagogy of neglect' latent in the educational language planning which shapes the preference of language in education as a subject of study and also the choice of language as a medium of instruction in the schools of Eastern India. This study finds out that the language curricula in the schools are not structured to use the tribal learners' metalinguistic awareness as a springboard for learning other languages and the study also illuminates the linguistic aftermath of schooling on the tribal learners.*



**KEY WORDS :** Multilingualism, tribal learners, plurilingual, Eastern India

### INTRODUCTION

The present population of the scheduled tribe people in India totals 104 million (Census of 2011) comprising the 168 tribes and 20 Primitive tribal groups in Eastern India. This is the largest agglomerate of tribal people in the world whose salient feature is heterogeneity. There are about 700 tribes (with overlapping categories in some States/UTs) as per notified Schedule under Article 342 of the Constitution of India (Annual Report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2012-13 cited in Paltasingh and Paliwal, 2014). The NSSO 10<sup>th</sup> round of survey has found that the literacy rate among the tribals in Eastern India is lower than that of the other regions of India.

According to the School education statistics 2011, the Gross Enrolment ratio of all categories for the (Classes I-V) is 106.5%, at Upper Primary level (Classes VI-VIII), it is 82.0%, for the Classes IX-X, it is 66.6 % and for the Classes XI-XII, it is 45.9%. The same statistics show that the GER for the Scheduled Tribe learners of Classes I-V, VI-VIII, IX-X and XI-XII are 116.7%, 75.5%, 53.8% and 32.3% respectively. (Statistics of school education, 2011-12). The GER of the Scheduled tribe learners at the primary level (classes I-V) is well above the national average of 106.5% but the numbers of the Scheduled tribe learners dwindle in reciprocation to the higher level of school education. The official data reveals that the educational progress of the ST population is quite remarkable, but only if one remains focussed on the quantitative data. (Mona & Sangeeta, 2008). Therefore, it becomes imperative to delve deep and try to find out the qualitative data to interpret the situation. We cannot afford to ignore that the schools and the processes within the schools are based on a 'curriculum that is biased against the marginalised groups' and therefore the schools fail to

mediate the feeling of 'otherness' that the learners from the tribal communities' experience. This 'otherness' in turn affects the language learning capacity of the tribal learners and impede their access to 'meaningful learning experiences'.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

Since historic times the tribal populations have always 'driven their life forward' (Gould, 2009) 'with their own sociocultural distinctiveness and isolation from the 'mainstream' (Dey,2015). This isolation paved way for 'a highly functional plural ethos characteristic of the Indian heritage (Khubchandani,1983) among the tribal communities even in the post- independence era. But with the rise of the 'knowledge hegemony' and the implementation of the prophetic policy of education by the missionaries and the Colonial rulers (in order to fulfil their own proselytizing aspirations and administrative interests) an educational framework for the dominant and of dominance came into existence which was thrust on the tribal learners ignoring the multicultural and plurilingual characteristic of the scheduled tribes.

After Independence, the policy of integration of the tribals to the mainstream continued. A two pronged approach was adopted-one 'protective' and the other 'promotional'. The protective policies included land policies, forest policies etc., whereas the promotional policies included the developmental policies, plans and schemes with the aim of not to "disturb the harmony of tribal life but simultaneously work for their advance, not to impose any thing upon the tribals but work for their integration as members and part of the Indian family". (Dhebar,1961

### The integration and the further marginalisation

In the process of integration of the tribals into the 'mainstream', education became a pertinent 'medium for imparting not only pedagogic instructions but attitudes, values and behaviours" (Black 1996) and one of the major tools for implementing literacy and language packages to create 'equitable participation' for the tribals. With the focus on education to improve the social integration of the tribals, several selectively targeted policies, programmes, schemes and incentives were implemented to provide aid to children from these communities (Secada,1989). But all the policies and programmes failed to ameliorate the further marginalization of the learners from the tribal communities as is evident from the high dropout rate (8<sup>th</sup> AISES) and low literacy rate (Census,2011) among the scheduled tribes. This marginalization is further reinforced by creating a feeling of alienation with the and within the process of formal education. The situation now warrants that the intentions lurking beneath the educational policies, especially, the language policies be reviewed to identify the dominance of mainstream perspectives in the school curriculum, particularly language curriculum. The language policies have a 'pedagogy of dominance' latent in them. Therefore, the tribal learners gain access to an education that is irrelevant, meaningless and aids the creation of an identity alienated from its own language and knowledge, producing (an)other knowledge of 'mimicry'(Bhabha,1994) and the breakout of the "SaginaMahato Syndrome" (Bandopadhyay, 2014)The 'nationalist and the sub-nationalist fervour' that governs the educational language policies at school level 'neglects the mother tongue language literacy' and paves the way for the English becoming the official language of the state as in the case of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh which have a huge tribal population. Moreover, the tribal community in Eastern India have often been collapsed into pan-santal category (owing to the various socio- economic-political factors) which creates marginalisation within the marginalized for the tribal communities of those tribes who do not have a scripted language of their own. This study illuminates the language experiences of the various tribal learners in schools and how it undermines the plurilingual competences of the tribal learners by implementing a pedagogy of neglect which has the latent approach of 'one size fits all' in the language curriculum and weakens their metalinguistic awareness in every possible manner.

### The lackadaisical language planning(s)

The language planning in India, especially, 'the educational language planning' has always considered the empirical reality of multilingualism in India as is evident from the constitutional recognition given to the twenty-two languages 'as associate administrative languages or even as media of primary education' (Pattanayak, 1986 cited in Phillipson, 1992, pp-87). The educational language planning has two aspects—**multilingualism, Mother tongue education**. The Three language formula (TLF) was the strategy devised to put the two dimensions of language planning into practice.

### MULTILINGUALISM

**Multilingualism** is the capability of a person to know two or more languages simultaneously. Multilingualism necessitates the purpose of effective communication (Leena, 2015). "Multilingualism is operationalized in two ways: previous language experience and Perceived Positive Language Interaction (PPLI), the latter being an emic perspective of multilingualism for which learners can only be considered to be multilingual if they can articulate positive interactions between foreign languages studied" (Thompson, 2017)

Multilingualism and Indian 'pluriculturalism are intertwined. Therefore, every imaginable effort should be made by the Indian educational system to sustain multilingualism (Crawhall 1992). According to Pattanayak (1981) the educational system of the privileged has repeatedly tried to enfeeble the advantages which the grass-root multilingualism has and is the characteristic feature of the Indian society. Pattanayak even emphasizes the need to give a voice to the language of every child as it is the only way for the survival of participatory democracy. Illich (1981) cited in Pattanayak also advocates the need to make every possible effort towards the empowerment of the languages of the underprivileged and tribal and endangered languages. NCERT (2005) also urges affirmative action in this domain.

In the context of education, UNESCO in its position paper has referred to multilingualism as the use of two or more languages as medium of instruction (*Education in a multilingual world*, 2003). Empirical research has shown a significant positive correlation between bi/multilingualism, cognitive flexibility and scholastic achievement (Cummins and Swain 1986; Gardner and Lambert 1972; Peal and Lambert 1962). Bilingual or multilingual children not only have control over several different languages but they are also academically more creative and socially more tolerant (NCERT 2005). Language teaching needs to be multilingual not only in terms of the number of languages offered to children but also in terms of evolving strategies that would use the multilingual classroom as a resource (Subhas, 2013). The Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2001) recognizes the importance of languages in promoting cultural awareness and diversity, in addition to being an important element of a person's identity (UNESCO, 2003).

### MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION

In order to use the multilingual classroom as a resource, the language planners have strategically brought mother tongue as first language in school curriculum. Researches have shown that the use of mother tongue in education promotes cognitive, psychosocial and emotional development of the children (Sarajubala, 2017) There is conclusive research evidence that learning mother tongues alongside the language of instruction enhances not only their mother tongue competences but also their competences in the language of instruction. Mother tongue education serves as a means of improving quality in education and helps in bringing social and gender equality in communities which are linguistically diverse. (UNESCO Position Paper on Education in a Multilingual world). NCERT's position paper on Teaching of Indian Languages and NCF (2005) has reiterated that – home language(s) should be the medium of instruction in school and it is imperative that we honour the child's home language(s). As children's understanding of concepts is limited or confused, if learning happens only in second language, it is a fallacy to think that children who are immersed in second language from the beginning learn second language better they do not and in the end we are creating children who are illiterate in both the language. (Thomas and Collier, 2001).

(The situation warrants a review of the language policy practised by English medium schools in India at school level). The level of development of children’s mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development, stronger literacy abilities are found with the children who have stronger foundation in first language as language skills are transferable across languages (Cummins, 2000). Research conducted in many countries show that understanding of concepts is better in mother tongue and learning reading and writing in mother tongue or in a known language yields better academic results(Sarajubala,2017). Sustaining learners in the school system becomes easier when the learners have better conceptual understanding and developed literacy skills which can be achieved when the learning happens through mother tongue(s). Pattanayak(1990) has asserted that the mother provides anchorage to the child to its own culture and helps in expressing one’s “primary identity and group solidarity”. Cross sectional studies and longitudinal studies across countries have shown that a sense of alienation is created with the schooling process when the learners’ voices, especially the marginalized learners’ voices are not heard and the learners are not learning the things relevant to their daily lives. Such an alienating linguistic environment at school develops school disengagement and absenteeism increases which in turn makes the marginalized learners slow learners which may lead to exclusion from the domain of formal education.

**The Three language formula(TLF)**

India essentially being a multilingual country implemented the three language formula in education ‘to realize the Constitutional vision of equality of opportunity, linguistic rights of every linguistic and ethnic community and moving towards the goal of achieving universal access to education (Subhas,2013).By 2002 nearly 91 per cent of schools followed the three language formula at the upper primary stage and almost 85 per cent did so at the secondary stage (Ramanujam,2016). But the implementation of the TLF at different states were uneven. (Leena,2015). To sum up the problems brought forth by the implementation of the TLF are:

- a) The ‘linguistic interests’ of the dominant class were thrust on the people with minority languages.
- b) Mother tongue language education was given preference in the policy documents of the TLF, but the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document (2000)* has iterated, “the spirit of the formula has not been followed and the mother tongue of the people has been denied the status of the first language” due to the ‘uneven implementation’ of the TLF. This situation poses threat to the various minority languages (mainly tribal languages) which are on the verge of extinction.
- c) There is neither any reference to the mother tongue or home language in the formula nor to the classical languages and foreign languages.
- d) Hindi and English language became the preferred languages of medium in the schools.

The TLF therefore created a discord between the educational language policies and the practice. It facilitated the proliferation of English language as the media of instruction, administration and social mobility all over the country. The table below delineates the situation of language curriculum in the Eastern India:

**Table:1**

Number	States	Languages taught in the curriculum	Total languages offered
1.	Bihar	Hindi , English, Bengali, Urdu, Bhojpuri*, Arabic Maithili, Persian, Magahi ,Sanskrit	10
2.	Jharkhand	Hindi*, English , Bengali, Urdu ,Others	5
3.	Orissa	Hindi, Bengali, Urdu ,Oriya*, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, Persian	8
4.	West Bengal	Hindi, English , Bengali*, Urdu ,Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit , Tibetan, Nepali, Santhali**	11

Source: RamanujamMegnathan (2016,pp:6-8)      \*\*a tribal language included in the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule

\*The dominant languages of the respective states

The above table clearly depicts that the states in Eastern India implements an arbitrary language strategy in schools. The tribal languages that are included in the curriculum are Magahi and Santhali in Bihar and West Bengal. Orissa does not have any tribal language in the curriculum and the data for Jharkhand is not clear. All the state language curriculum is based on the assumption of the homogeneity of the tribal groups within the state boundaries whereas the reality is different.

The educational language strategy and the tribal learners

A homogenous language strategy adopted to accommodate efficient implementation of the educational language policies in schools have worsened the situation for the learners belonging to different tribal communities.

#### **Box:1 'The language preference in Education' in North East India**

Perhaps, because of the international concern at the same time the increased awareness and concern of the ethnic group might be the strong reason that education in mother tongue has become a political agenda in North East, people do demand mother tongue to be recognized in the school system. Unfortunately, when it is recognised the language could not flourish as is expected, even sustainability is a big issue. This undermines the educational benefits of mother tongue/ first language education. In the North East states there are a number of so called English Medium schools mushrooming in urban and semi urban areas with a good number of student strength. There is a profound likeness of English Medium schools over the government local language/regional language schools, probably because of the reasons like education is an individual concern and response, so it is the parents deciding where to send their children, which medium to choose? Thus, parent's choice is conditioned by India's language policy and the resultant caste like hierarchy of languages (Bijoykumar, 2005) or the hierarchical pecking order of language (Mohanty, 2009), the value attached to the particular language became the criteria for choosing the medium of instruction or the subject of instruction. Minority languages are devalued not only by the government but also by the community in terms of the usage in the education. The phenomenon is the vicious circle whereby this educational neglect leads to further reason for neglect on the basis of underdevelopment.

Excerpted from : Ch. Sarajubala Devi, 2017

The speakers of tribal languages have a disadvantage within the educational system as their mother tongue(s) is neither represented nor utilised by the languages of the state resulting in shifting of the tribal identities in favour of the dominant languages of the state and privileged classes. (St. Clair Robert N, 2002).

For the learners of the tribal communities in Eastern India the TLF has assumed the 3+1 or the four language formula, (if we consider only language education in schools, especially at the upper elementary level). If we include the language acquisition outside the schools also, then the formula assumes a five language formula with the national language proliferating all walks of our lives. Owing to the 'folk grassroots multilingualism' the tribal learners have an extensive bilingual experience which is quite distinct from the mandatory second language learning at schools (Khumbhandani, 2001). The TLF fails to address the problem of the tribal learners and English becomes the mandatory second language at schools and the dominant language of the region the first language. A study by Pinnock asserts that "Learning in a school language which is not used in children's home, lives is being linked both to poor performance and total exclusion from education" These effects are visible across the domain of school education which accelerate the alienation of the tribal learners from the schooling process and impede their access to 'meaningful learning'. Therefore, it is high time for us to create an 'ownership of learning and an environment which encourages initiative, values innovative ideas and stimulates academic growth' so that all learners, irrespective of their social categories can have access to 'meaningful learning'. But the reality is quite different. With the advent of the

TLF in school education the tribal learners learn their mother tongue, the dominant language of the region, English as second language and a classical language or Hindi at the upper primary level of the school education. The tribal learners are not only burdened with the four language formula, but they are also taught English as second language when English is their third language. The didactics of English as second language is quite different from that of the didactics of English as third language. Moreover, the language curriculum is not structured to use the tribal learners' metalinguistic awareness as a springboard for learning other languages. Added to this, the linguistic aftermath of schooling creates favourable conditions for the rapid loss of languages and cultures of the tribal communities and pushes them to the verge of extinction within two or more generations (Fishman,1990). The language policies adopted and implemented at the school level to ensure 'equitable participation' of the tribal learners only serve to strengthen the Formal Elaboration of Social Hierarchy (FESH) by recreating the 'SaginaMahato Syndrome'(Bandopadhyay,2014)

### Box:2 :The 'SaginaMahato Syndrome': linguistic aftermath of schooling

In Bankura\* I talked with three (tribal) people from three different tribal communities- Santhal, Munda and Bhumij. The person belonging to the Santhal community works in a

to read or write the script. He has studied English as second language (though in reality it is his third language)

Sanskrit as third language ( though it is his fourth language) in school. He is quite comfortable in Bengali (the dominant language of the region and learnt at school as first language) and knows Hindi. He believes that languages in school help the tribal people to become more *civilized* and avail better opportunities of *development*.

The girl from the Munda community works as an assistant in a Beauty parlour after completing her college education. She aspires to open up her own beauty parlour in her native village someday. Her home language is the *normal* language (reminding of Foucault) of the region i.e., the dominant language of the state though her community has a language (with a distinct script) of their own.

The boy from the Bhumij community is pursuing college education and wants to complete higher education. Since his community do not have any language of their own his home language is Bengali and he has learnt English as second language, Sanskrit as third language at school. He knows Hindi (Bollywood proliferation effect) and has enrolled in a Spoken English course.

\*(a suburban division in West Bengal)

### CONCLUSION

Multilingualism is reflected in the educational language policies of India that tends to create multilinguals through schooling. But the pedagogical practices adopted for the implementation have created more inequalities within the educational system by imposing a medium of instruction on the marginalized that is 'militating against the dissemination of knowledge and skills and therefore of rapid social and economic well-being' of the tribal learners (Brock-Ute and Holmarsdottir, 2004). According to Pattanayak (1990) language plays an important role in the creation of 'unequal societies' where multilingualism is prevalent. He further reiterates that "*The assumption that variation is disintegration is unfortunate. Such an attitude equates different with deficient. It must be emphasized that it is not the recognition, but non-recognition of different identities that leads to disintegration. Multilingualism can thrive only on the foundation of respect for the different.*"

In this context the language(s) learning at schools of Eastern India need an overhauling in its didactic principles. A learner-centric language didactics 'enmeshed in the cultural milieu of the society', (Khubchandani,2001) needs to be developed in India. The need to convert the multilingualism prevalent in the Indian society into a 'classroom resource', is urgently felt. This could be achieved by

introducing plurilingualism didactics which “is a response to the needs and requirements of quality education, covering: acquisition of competences, knowledge, dispositions and attitudes, diversity of learning experiences, and construction of individual and collective cultural identities” (Beacco, Byram et al, 2016). To develop plurilingual competence through schooling the ‘language repertoire’ of the learners needs to be recognised, valued and expanded. This could be achieved by ‘organizing methods, materials, teacher training and classroom transaction in a way that the languages of children are never pushed into oblivion...’ (Agnihotri, 2014). Pedagogy of multilingualism should transcend its mere existence within the educational language planning(s) and transform into a pedagogy of plurilingualism which shall be two dimensional-pluricultural competence and inter cultural competence and then only the marginalised learners in school shall have access to ‘meaningful learning’.

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