

Nurturing Linguistic Diversity in Jharkhand

Role of the Mother Tongue

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It is imperative for the Government of Jharkhand to implement the policy of imparting education in the mother tongue at the primary school level to both enhance the learning of young children and maintain linguistic diversity in the state.

In the 1881 Census, the question on mother tongue was included for the first time in the questionnaire and mother tongue was deemed as the language spoken by parents in the household. In various censuses conducted over the last century, the concept has undergone modifications, and in the 2001 Census, mother tongue was defined as the

language spoken in childhood by the person's mother to the person. If the mother died in infancy, the language mainly spoken in the person's home in childhood will be the mother tongue. In the case of infants and deaf mutes, the language usually spoken by the mother should be recorded. In case of doubt, the language mainly spoken in the household may be recorded.

Historical evidence shows that even the most educationally backward nations can achieve high levels of education if it is imparted in mother tongue at the primary school level. The language in which children think, articulate and express fearlessly is in their home

language. It is well known that children understand concepts in language and mathematics better in their mother tongue, or in their first language. But the education system in India has largely failed to provide education to children in their own language.

Though the Indian Constitution provides for education in mother tongue for children belonging to linguistic minority communities, tribal children are forced to study in dominant regional languages like Hindi or English in school. One major reason for children's low attendance and poor performance in school is the problem of comprehension, since the language in which they are taught (Hindi) is foreign to them. This language barrier leads to a high dropout rate among tribal children, and by Class 5, 50% of them leave school, and by Class 10, 80% drop out. According to some statistics, out of 100 tribal children, only 20 manage to appear in high school examinations and only eight of them pass.

However, in a multilingual society like India, children need to learn languages other than their mother tongue to communicate at a regional, national and international level. Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education at the primary level can help to achieve high levels of multilingual competence. Studies from all over the world show that children are more likely to succeed

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in school if instructions in their early school years are in their mother tongue.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, UNESCO's position paper on Education (2003), several linguistic rights documents and National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 clearly say that children participate fully and fearlessly in classroom academic discourse, only if they are taught in their mother tongue. The NCF 2005 calls for the implementation of the "three-language formula" and recognises the need to nurture linguistic diversity and to promote various forms of multilingualism to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity.

Tribal Languages in Jharkhand

There are 32 scheduled tribes in Jharkhand, which comprise 26.2% of the state population. Most tribal groups in the state have their own language. Besides the tribes, there are many ethnic groups such as the Kurmis. Other than Jharkhand, the Kurmis are also found in West Bengal and Odisha and speak a language called Kurmali, which is widely spoken in the region. Out of the 32 scheduled tribes in Jharkhand, eight are classified under primitive tribal groups. The language or dialects of these groups are the most vulnerable and would perish if an effort to save them is not made in time.

Almost all tribes have their own language, and often it is the language that differentiates one tribe from the other. Despite the impact of other cultures over the years, the tribal languages of Jharkhand have survived. Tribal languages in Jharkhand belong to two language families – Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. Kurukh and Malto belong to the Dravidian family and the rest to the Austro-Asiatic family. Languages such as Nagpuri, Khortha, and Panch Pargana have become lingua franca to facilitate communication between tribal groups as well as between tribals and non-tribals.

Other than tribal languages, many languages from Indo-Aryan family also prevail in the region. Being the neighbouring state of Bengal and Odisha, Bengali and Odia are also spoken in several districts of Jharkhand. After Jharkhand was carved out of Bihar, it followed the policy of the Bihar government and

accorded Urdu the status of second state official language. In 2011, the Jharkhand government officially gave the status of second state official language to nine tribal and regional languages (Santhali, Oraon, Mundari, Ho, Kurukh, Sadri, Khortha, Panch Pargana, and Kurmali) along with Bengali and Odia. This was achieved after a long struggle by the different linguistic groups. In 2003, Santhali was accorded the status of a scheduled language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

Kurukh is spoken in the districts of Gumla, Simdega, Lohardaga, and Ranchi by the Oraons, whereas Malto, a Dravidian language, is spoken by the Sauria Paharias and Mal Paharias. The Sauria Paharias are found in the Rajmahal Hills of Santhal Parganas. Santhali language is prevalent in the regions of Santhal Parganas, Hazaribagh and east Singhbhum districts. Santhali is a rich language with its own script called Ol Chiki. Kharia is spoken by the Kharia people in the districts of Gumla, Simdega and Khunti. The Ho language is prevalent in Kolhan region among the Ho tribes, and in many places the people are monolingual. In this region, a lingua franca has not developed.

Kurmali is the language of the Kurmis. In many places such as East Singhbhum, the younger generation has forgotten their mother tongue. Bengali and Odia have replaced the language, as the medium of instruction in schools in this region is either Bengali or Odia. The habitat of the Kurmis is the Subernerekha river basin, which lies on the border of West Bengal. Moreover, the Manbhum part of West Bengal was part of Bihar until 1956, and

this compelled the Kurmis to accept Bengali in schools. In the Kurukh-Kharia-Munda region, Sadri or Nagpuria is the lingua franca, and in the Kurmali-speaking region, there are two lingua francas Panch Pargana, and Khortha.

The Ranchi University set up a department of tribal and regional languages in 1981 for postgraduate course and research. Initially, seven languages, Mundari, Santhali, Kurukh, Ho, Kharia, Kurmali and Nagpuri were taught in this department. Later on, two more languages, Khortha and Panch Pargana, which were basically lingua franca of the Jharkhand region, were included. The Bihar government also published textbooks for elementary level in tribal and regional languages in 1986, but these books were never distributed in schools. The policy of instruction in mother tongue in elementary schools has not been implemented even 10 years after the formation of Jharkhand.

Some tribal languages are getting facilities from the state government and others are not. The language policy of the state is responsible for this predicament. Language politics is also very much in play. Speakers of some languages claim that their language is spoken in a larger area in comparison to others. Every group claims that its language is superior and that is why it should get a higher status, and more facilities.

The Case of Santhali

Santhali, a language spoken by six and a half million tribals across the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal (2001 Census), did not have a separate script until the beginning of the

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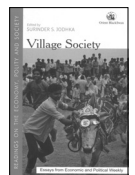
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Pp x + 252 Rs 325
ISBN 978-81-250-4603-5
2012

20th century and was written in Bengali, Devanagari and the Roman script. Lars Oslen Skrefsrud, a Norwegian missionary, used the Bengali script to write the book, *A Grammar of the Santal Language* in 1873 and started the Santali Printing Press in 1879 in Santhal Pargana. His colleague Paul Olaf Boddington used the Roman script to write the five volume Santali-English dictionary in the Roman script between 1932 and 1936 (Troisi 1976: 3-4). In 1925, the Ol Chiki script for Santhali was created by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. The introduction of the Ol Chiki script in the 1920s was part of the effort to define and assert the Santhal identity (Singh 1982: 235).

In 1996, the Chaichampa Sahitya Academy in Bhubaneswar developed a desktop publishing (DTP) solution and a computer application for the Ol Chiki script. An auto machine transcription of different Indian language scripts – Devanagari, Bengali, Odia and Roman, etc – into Ol Chiki script and vice versa was developed by Santhali-Japanese Joint Research Project, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 1998. Recently an online group (wesanthals@yahoo.com) developed Ol Chiki fonts for sending email in Ol Chiki script (Murmu 2002).

The speakers of other tribal languages such as Kharia, Ho, and Kurukh are also trying to introduce their own scripts. Literature in these languages is increasingly being taught in universities today.

Lax Government Attitude

However, the government is not doing enough for minor languages. The government should make adequate efforts so that these languages can survive under the onslaught of other cultures. Only nine tribal and regional languages are being taught at university and college level in Jharkhand. Many languages will become extinct if the government does not take appropriate measures for their survival. The recent Census of 2011 did not record all the languages and dialects prevalent in the country. The policy of the census to not record languages spoken by less than 10,000 needs to be revised. The small or minor languages not only represent the historical traditions of their speakers, but these

languages are also intrinsic to the identity of their speakers, no matter how small their numbers are.

The Jharkhand government has not yet implemented the plan to teach in mother tongue in schools at the elementary level. The state government is planning to recruit teachers through an examination to teach in 18 languages in various districts of the state (Table 1). The languages are Kurukh, Kharia, Santhali, Mundari, Bhumij, Ho, Asur, Birhor, Malto, Kurmali, Nagpuri, Panch Pargana, Kortha, Bangla, Odia, Bhojpuri, Maghi, and Angika.

Table 1: Language Teaching in Jharkhand

Languages	Districts in Which These Languages Will Be Taught
Kurukh	Ranchi, Khunti, Lohardaga, Gumla, Simdega, West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum, Latehar, Palamu, Garwa, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Chatra.
Kharia	Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Simdega.
Mundari	Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Simdega, West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum, Saraikela.
Bhumij	West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum, Saraikela.
Ho	West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum, Saraikela.
Santhali	East Singhbhum, Saraikela, Dumka, Jamtara, Sahebganj, Pakur, Godda, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Koderma, Chatra, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Giridih, Deoghar.
Malto	Dumka, Sahebganj, Pakur, Godda.
Kurmali	Ranchi, Khunti, West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Koderma, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Giridih.
Nagpuri	Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Simdega, Latehar, Palamu, Garwa, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Chatra, Bokaro, Dhanbad.
Panch Pargana	Ranchi, Khunti, Saraikela.
Khortha	Dumka, Jamtara, Sahebganj, Pakur, Godda, Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Koderma, Chatra, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Giridih, Deoghar.
Bangla	Ranchi, Khunti, Saraikela, East Singhbhum, Dumka, Jamtara, Sahebganj, Pakur.
Oriya	West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum.
Bhojpuri	Latehar, Palamu, Garwa.
Maghi	Latehar, Palamu, Garwa.
Angika	Dumka, Jamtara, Sahebganj, Pakur, Godda, Deoghar.
Birhor	Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Chatra.
Asur	Latehar, Palamu.

It may be mentioned here that the Bo language of the Andaman Island became extinct in 2010 with the death of lone person who could speak this language.

There are many unnoticed languages and dialects which still exist in India. Recently, Koro, a language spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, was discovered by the National Geographic Channel Group. A linguist from the Ranchi University, Ganesh Murmu, was a part of this team. This language is hardly spoken by 800 to 1,200 individuals. Expert says that this is different from other languages in the same family. The intervention of this team was timely; otherwise, there was a chance that the language might have become extinct.

According to a study of UNESCO, in the Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand, about 44 languages or dialects are withering away. In Jharkhand, Odisha and Bengal, about 42 languages are endangered (Pankaj 2010). The people and the government should realise that cultural and linguistic diversity do not threaten national integrity but adds to the beauty of the nation. However, the tussle between the major and minor languages will remain and the latter will have to struggle hard to survive.

For documentation and revitalisation of the languages of the indigenous, nomadic and marginalised people, Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Baroda has undertaken People's Linguistic Survey of India, a nationwide survey. In Jharkhand, 18 endangered and marginalised languages have been identified. However, some of these languages such as Asuri, Birhori, Korwa, Sabari, Malto, Angika, etc, including Santhali, are being taught in universities. This is a good initiative, and has given hope that at least these endangered languages will be documented and their vocabularies preserved.

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