Multilingual Education for Indigenous Children: Escaping the Vicious Cycle of Language Disadvantage in India

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1.0   Introduction

Eminent welfare economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen conceptualizes poverty as 'capability deprivation' and 'unfreedom' (1982, 1985; Dreze & Sen 2002). Capability, according to Sen, refers to 'the ultimate combinations of functionings from which a person can choose" (Dreze & Sen 2002) and freedom to "the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead" (35-36). He relates social discrimination to lack of opportunities and freedom, capability deprivation and poverty. The 'capability' approach has been seen as a powerful interdisciplinary tool to deal with the questions of poverty and the well-being of marginalized communities (Robeyns 2006). Robeyns (2006) suggests that it is necessary to identify capability inputs and obstacles to the realization of capabilities. Education is a major capability input according to Sen who views illiteracy as a major obstacle to economic opportunities and as lack of freedom. School education directly enhances economic opportunities through easier access to jobs and income and, equally importantly, it adds to social and cultural freedom and empowers persons for adequate participation in the exercise of political rights. Inequality of opportunities is related to distributional aspects of freedom – inequalities in respect of freedom, participation and development. In the context of Indian society, where social divisions, based on such distinctions as caste, class, culture, language, and religion, are pervasive, this is particularly crucial. Dreze and Sen (2002) speak of the substantial problem of 'voicelessness' of the disadvantaged groups in India, particularly the scheduled tribes[i], arising out of the large-scale illiteracy and lack of education, both of which impede economic development. They attribute large scale non-attendance and school drop out[ii] 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 (158). Although Dreze and Sen (2002) do not analyze

the roots of the discouragement effects, linguistic and cultural discrimination, arising out of prevalent inequalities, is central to the vicious circle of illiteracy and educational failure, lack of freedom, capability deprivation and poverty.

This paper seeks to analyze the relationship between the languages of the tribal people in India and their poverty and shows that multiple layers of discrimination – in Indian constitution and governance, low instrumental vitality of tribal languages, exclusion and non-accommodation of minority mother tongues in education, and inequalities in the relationship between power and languages – severely restrict their freedom of choice and access to resources, leading to illiteracy, educational failure and capability deprivation. While education is the enabling factor for economic development, language, it is argued, is the enabling factor for access to quality education. The paper shows how the mismatch between home and school languages and neglect of mother tongues forces the tribal children into subtractive language learning in a form of submersion education in the dominant language and leads to poor educational achievement reinforcing inequality. It is argued that education in India must promote an additive form of multilingual development beginning with children's mother tongue as the medium of early education. Recent experiments with multilingual education (MLE) in India and their problems and prospects are briefly discussed.

2.0   Languages in India: Multilingualism and Inequality

Over 10,000 mother tongues (MTs), which were named by the respondents in the 1991 Census Survey of India were rationalized and classified into 3372 MTs out of which 1576 were listed and the remaining 1796 were grouped under the *'other'* MT category. The MTs are variously classified into 300-400 languages belonging to five language families. 22 of these languages are constitutionally recognized as official languages listed in the VIIIth schedule of the *Constitution of India* and, in addition, English is recognized as an associate official language. Large numbers of languages are used in various national domains - 104 languages for radio broadcasting as well as adult literacy programs, 87 for print media and 67 in primary education. The figures are daunting and they do point to mega diversity; India ranks fourth in the world in terms of the number of languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). However, Indian multilingualism is unique in many ways not just because of the presence of a number of languages in different spheres of

social life in India; the dynamics of the relationship between these languages and their users, the manner in which the languages are organized in the society and the way they are reflected in the daily lives of the common people all over the country make the ethos of language use in India quite distinct from the dominant monolingual societies. The psycho-social dimensions of the patterns of language and communication in India are characterized by several unique features (see Mohanty, 1991, 1994a, 2006 for elaboration) which are particularly relevant for understanding the distinctive nature of its multilingualism. With most people and communities using multiple languages in different domains of their daily lives, grass-root level of multilingualism is widespread and languages tend to be maintained in situations of mutual contact. This is possible because of the fluidity of perceived boundaries between languages, smooth and complementary functional allocation of languages into different domains of use, multiplicity of linguistic identities and early multilingual socialization (Mohanty, Panda, & Mishra 1999). With such characteristic features, multilingualism remains a positive force for the individuals and communities. Our studies (see Mohanty 1994a, 2003a for discussion and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995 for a review) have shown cognitive and social benefits associated with multilingualism and mother tongue maintenance. Review of cross-cultural studies on bilingualism/multilingualism (Mohanty & Perregaux 1997) shows that the Indian findings have contributed to the positive view of the psychological and social role of multilingualism.

Despite such positive features and the maintenance norms, many Indian languages are endangered and most of them happen to be tribal languages. For example, 1971 Census showed that Orissa was one of the most linguistically diverse provinces in India with 50 languages out of which 38 were tribal languages. Now, the Government of Orissa official documents put the number of tribal languages in the province at 22. Even when many languages coexist and are maintained in the multilingual mosaic, many more are also victims of discrimination, social and political neglect and deprivation. There is a wide gap between the statuses of languages; while some are privileged with access to power and resources, others are marginalized and disadvantaged and, therefore, Indian multilingualism is characterized as a 'multilingualism of the unequals' (Mohanty 2004).

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Mohanty, 2004, 2006), linguistic discrimination and inequalities are formally rooted in the statutory and political processes of governance. With

constitutional recognition of only twenty-two of the languages as official languages, most of the Indian languages are effectively kept out of the major domains of power. There are also specific official recognitions of languages for many other public purposes, such as for promotion of culture and literature, and for use in limited spheres of governance. The constitutional and governmental recognitions are reflections of the political power of the linguistic groups. In December 2003, Parliament of India passed the 100th Constitutional Amendment Bill to include four languages (Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, and Santali) in the VIIIth Schedule of official languages, a recognition which came to these languages after prolonged movements and political lobbying. Maithili was earlier classified in the Census as a mother tongue within Hindi (which, in fact, has twenty mother tongues grouped under it with over one million speakers). When the Constitutional amendment of 2003 conferred official language status to two tribal languages – Bodo and Santali – it was for the first time since the adaptation of the Constitution that such recognition was accorded to any tribal language. This was possible due to the assertive language maintenance movements by the two tribal language communities. Other less powerful languages and mother tongues are often dubbed as 'dialects' and weak voices for recognition are suppressed in the dynamics of power and politics. Pervasive discrimination and neglect in all spheres of governance limit the scope of democratic participation and effectively deny equality of opportunity to the tribal and other linguistic minorities. The official system of formal education is yet another major basis of institutionalized inequality. As I will show later, only a few of the languages are used for school instruction and most of the tribal and minority languages are left out of the schools and literacy programs.

2.1   *The Vicious Cycle of Language Disadvantage*

As languages, such as the tribal languages, are kept out of major domains of power and development such as official, legal and other formal use, education, trade and commerce, they become vulnerable to shift pressures from the dominant contact languages threatening their survival. In face of such threats, the speakers of these languages seem to adopt what I have characterized as 'anti-predatory strategies' (Mohanty 2004, 2006) to ensure survival by a passive withdrawal into domains of lesser power and visibility. In effect, language shift does not occur; but there is considerable domain shrinkage with languages barely maintained mostly in the domains of home and in-group communication and, in most cases, declining inter generational

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transmission of the mother tongues. The so called 'natural' bilingualism among the tribal and other linguistic minority speakers can be viewed as a form of maintenance strategy which also ensures smooth social functioning and inter-group relations, "but the cost of such survival and maintenance is identity crisis, deprivation of freedom and capability, educational failure (due to inadequate home language development and forced submersion in majority language schools), marginalization and poverty" (Mohanty 2006:266). Unfortunately, most of the marginalized linguistic groups seem to be accepting the low status and exclusion of their languages as *fait accompli*. Their language is perceived as important for identity and integrative functions but, instrumental functions are dissociated from the native languages in favor of the dominant ones (Mohanty 2004); low vitality of their languages is perceived as legitimate by the victims of the processes of exclusion. As I have argued,

> The tribal and minority language speakers are disadvantaged to begin with; they are usually poorer, mostly belonging to rural, backward and economically underdeveloped areas. Prolonged deprivation, exclusion from education, and from domains of official and economic power further weaken these languages which are not allowed to develop and the weakness of the languages are used to justify further neglect and exclusion in a vicious cycle of disadvantage. Thus, the so called poverty of languages, disabilities and disadvantages often associated with minor languages, are not inherent; they are socially constructed by the institutionalized discriminations in educational, political, economic, and other social spheres conspiring to strengthen the association between tribal languages and insufficiency. Sadly, the weaknesses and insufficiency of tribal languages are often cited as grounds for their exclusion from education (Mohanty, in press).

2.2   *Languages and Education in India*

Despite a clear constitutional provision that the state and the local authorities shall endeavor to "provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at primary stage of education to children belonging to minority groups" (Article 350A, *Constitution of India*), a large number of minority languages are weakened and endangered by their exclusion and non-accommodation in school education and literacy programs (Mohanty, 2006). Mohanty (2006) shows that altogether only 41 languages are used in schools either as the language of teaching or the medium of instruction (MI) or as school subjects and this figure actually declined from 81 in 1970 to 67, 58,

44, and 41, respectively, in 1976, 1978, 1990 and 1998. The number of languages used as the MI has also declined. Between the years 1990 and 1998, the number of languages used as MI declined from 43 to 33 in primary grades (I to V), 31 to 25 in upper primary grades (VI & VII), 22 to 21 in secondary grades (VIII to X), and 20 to 18 in higher secondary grades (XI & XII). Thus, only the speakers of a limited set of languages are provided opportunities for education in their mother tongues. Even in adult literacy programs, 104 languages are used for literacy instruction and limited success of adult literacy programs and frequent relapse of the new literates into illiteracy have been attributed to non-use of mother tongues (Karlekar 2004; Mohanty 2005). "The mismatch between home and school languages and neglect of mother tongues, particularly for literacy and schooling, force the tribal (as well as other minority) children into a subtractive language learning experience, and their poor educational achievement limits their future opportunities" (Mohanty, in press)**.** The negative consequences of such mismatch have been documented in several Indian studies (e.g., Jhingran 2005; Mohanty 1994a, 1994b, 2000, 2005) which show that the submersion programs, in which minority and indigenous children are forced to learn in the medium of a dominant language, result in subtractive language learning, have negative consequences, and violate right to quality education:

> "In subtractive language learning, a new (dominant/majority) language is learnt at the cost of the mother tongue which is displaced, leading to diglossic situation and later often replacement by the dominant language. Subtractive teaching subtracts from the child's linguistic repertoire, instead of adding to it. In this enforced language regime, the children undergo subtractive education. … This also contributes to the disappearance of the world's linguistic diversity …" (UNPFII 2005:3).

As pointed out by Tomaŝevski (2004), the use of a dominant official language as the language of instruction in primary schools is a main feature of "collapsed models of schooling" which reinforce inequality. In India, the exclusion of mother tongues from formal education is closely linked to the perception of powerlessness and low vitality ascribed to minor, minority, and tribal languages compared to the dominant majority languages such as English. In fact, English has established itself as the most preferred MI and has a significant presence in school curricula all over the country. The role of English in triggering a power game and a hierarchical pecking order of languages has been discussed elsewhere (see Mohanty 2004, 2006). Preference for

English medium education has relegated Hindi and other major regional and constitutional languages to lesser positions in education (Kurien 2004), considerably weakening them in all spheres of the Indian society. The relationship between language and power and the hierarchy of preferences for languages are socially constructed and legitimated through the processes of language socialization and social norms and a host of complex social psychological processes associated with construal of linguistic identities (Mohanty, in press). Studies of multilingual socialization in India (Mohanty, Panda, & Mishra 1999, Bujorborua, 2006) show that children in India develop an early awareness of the higher social status of English vis-à-vis their own mother tongues, and that schools do contribute to development of such awareness.

Education has been held as a powerful tool for language change. As such, exclusion of languages from formal education does contribute to their marginalization and shift. Apart from the loss of diversity due to what has been characterized as 'linguistic genocide in education'' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), such exclusion has serious consequences leading to educational failure, capability deprivation and poverty. This is particularly evident in case of the tribal groups in India whose languages are disadvantaged due to layers of discrimination and exclusion in the system of formal education. I will now turn to a closer look at the tribal population in India to illustrate this point.[iii]

3.0   Languages, Education and Poverty in the Tribal Population in India

3.1   *Tribal Languages and Education*

With a population of 84.3 million, the Scheduled Tribes (ST), constitute 8.2% of the total population (1028.6 million) of India (The Census of India 2001. The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), in its *People of India* project *(POI)* (Singh 2002), listed 623 tribal communities out of which about 573 are notified or scheduled. The tribal groups speak 218 languages out of which 159 are exclusive to them; 54 languages are used by the tribals for inter-group communication (Singh 2002). Most of the tribal languages do not have a script[iv] and are written in the script of either the dominant regional language or another major language, but some tribal languages, such as Santali[v], have developed their own writing system. Most of the tribal groups are bilingual or multilingual at the community levels. According to the *POI*, out of 623 tribal communities, 500 are bilingual ones. It must be noted that community level

bilingualism/multilingualism reflects the communicative skills of the adults, whereas the children usually grow up with the native tribal language which is the home language and language of early communication.

The *Sixth All India Educational Survey* of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) shows that out of 41 languages used in schools (as MI and subjects) only 13 are tribal languages (see Statement 11.2 in Gupta 1999), all but one (Nicobaree) from the North Eastern States which have a much higher concentration of tribal population compared to the rest of India. The literacy figures for the ST groups are also much higher in the NE States. Incidentally, these states also record a better rate of economic development. Further, out of the 13 tribal languages in schools, only three to four are used regularly as MI (Jhingran 2005) whereas the others are taught as school subjects or used as MI in occasional special programs. Thus, less than 1% of the tribal children have any real opportunity for education in the medium of their mother tongues. This is quite striking since a very large number of classrooms throughout the country have sizable proportion of tribal children. In twenty states for which DISE (District Information System for Education) – a database of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India – is available, there are 103,609 Primary Schools (grades I to V) with more than 50%, 76,458 schools with more than 75% and 58,343 schools with more than 90% ST children (Jhingran 2005) who are taught in a submersion program of majority language education. The DISE does not even have any information on the first language of the ST or other children whose home language is different from the school language.

3.1.1 *School Learning of Tribal Children: The Problem of Exclusion of MTs*

I had described the classroom learning of a Kond girl child in class II of a primary school in a remote village in Raikia Block of Kandhamala (Phulbani) district:

> The child, who has left behind many other children of her age who never came to school, is present in the class with wide-eyed curiosity trying to figure out what is going on. Despite all the pious programmes, improved curricula, Operation Blackboard and many such efforts, she just does not learn to read and write. She is not alone; there are many other such children from Kond families who also do not learn. They are all in each other's comforting company; days pass by but they do not learn. Examinations they may or may not pass but they are

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certainly passing time. .... any common person can tell you that she does not learn because she does not understand the teacher, the texts, and the curricula all of which use a language she does not know; it is not the language of her family (Mohanty, 1999)

Jhingran (2005), in his study of the language disadvantage faced by children with a mismatch between their home language and their school language, also gives similar description of Class I tribal children whose classroom activities are confined only to copying from the blackboard without any oral communication at all since they do not understand Hindi which is the MI and the language of the teacher. Similar observations are quite common in classrooms in many other tribal areas. From the beginning of schooling, tribal children take at least two to three years to learn the language of instruction which the teachers and the texts use (Mohanty 2000). This effectively means that their learning of school content and concepts become quite slow from the beginning of schooling leading to a cumulative learning problem. Jhingran (2005) speaks of the 'double disadvantage' of children having new academic information and concepts being 'thrown' at them in an unfamiliar language. Jhingran's (2005) field work during 2004 in four states − Assam, Gujarat, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh − shows that the tribal children, schooled in second language submersion programs for about six months in Grade I, showed no comprehension of the teacher's language and no recognition of alphabets, except when arranged in sequence (showing rote memorization). Classroom teaching-learning process emphasized passive participation, such as copying alphabets and numbers from blackboards or text books; there was very little conversation or oral work in children's L_2, the MI. Interestingly, the situation was found to be a little better when there was a tribal teacher who knew the mother tongue (L_1) of the children and could 'unofficially' lapse into L_1 in certain circumstances particularly when the children had problems with L_2. In respect of academic performance of the tribal children in Grade V whose first language was different from the MI, Jhingran (2005) shows the following:

(They) read with a lot of effort, mostly word by word ….. Their oral skills in the second language are poor and they are definitely more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue. Such children cannot frame sentences correctly and have a very limited vocabulary. While they can partially comprehend text (of grade 2/3 level), were unable to formulate answer to

simple questions in the standard language. In most schools, the tribal language speaking children could not score a single mark in the reading comprehension test (50).

Definitely, exclusion of mother tongues from early education has serious consequences for tribal children in India reflected in the low literacy and high 'push out' rates and generally, poor educational performance of the tribal groups which leads to their capability deprivation and poverty. I will briefly discuss some selected indicators of poor educational development of the STs in India which can be related to their economic development. In most cases, a comparison is made with the disadvantaged caste groups, the Scheduled Castes (SC), who constitute another disadvantaged group with poor economic development. It should also be pointed out that the SC are marked by a negative comparison in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, whereas the STs, generally, are out of the caste based hierarchy and, hence, less stigmatized on this ground in social comparison.

3.1.2 *School Attendance, Literacy and 'Push Out' Rate among the STs*

The crude literacy rate, i.e., the percentage of literates in the total population, as in 2001, is 38.41% for the STs, whereas the corresponding figures for the total population and the SCs are 54.51% and 45.20%, respectively. Effective literacy rate (percentage of literates among the population aged 7 years and above) is 47.10% for the STs compared to 54.69% and 68.81% for the SCs and the rest of the population, respectively. Thus, the STs show a literacy gap of 21.71% compared to 14.12% for the SCs. In fact, literacy rate for the STs is much lower if one takes out the figures for North Eastern states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Manipur, with much higher rates of literacy. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER, i.e., percentage of children in the age group enrolled in schools) and push out rate between grade I and later grades are shown in Table 1. As the Table shows, more than 50% of the tribal children enrolled in grade I are pushed out before completing primary education, and over 80% before completing high school (i.e., grade X). It may be noted that the enrolment ratio is relatively high in the early grades due to special initiatives and government programs for the STs in recent years. In higher grades, the GER for the STs remains lower than the corresponding figure for the SCs, as well as the national average.

<TABLE 1 NEAR HERE> Table 1. Enrolment and 'Push-Out' Rates (2002-2003) *(Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development 2004)*

3.1.3 *Classroom Achievement of ST Children*

Poor classroom performance of the STs compared to other groups is a common finding in Indian studies. A study assessing classroom achievement of students at the end of Class V, conducted by the NCERT in 2004 with a national sample of 88,271 children (Singh, Jain, Gautam, & Kumar 2004), shows that the ST students scored significantly lower than other students (i.e., excluding the SCs and STs) in tests of learning achievement in Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Language, Reading Comprehension, and Grammar and Usage (see Table 2 for details). The ST students performed better than their scheduled caste counterparts (except in Mathematics), but their performance was significantly below the performance of other students.

<TABLE 2 NEAR HERE> **Table 2. Mean Achievement Scores of Class V Students** *(Source: Singh et al. 2004)*

The performance of the tribal students in high school examinations (i.e., after 10 years of schooling) has also been found to be lower than that of the Scheduled Castes and other groups. Table 3 shows the percentage of failure and of success with different levels of achievement[vi] or divisions in the state level high school examinations for the years 2003, 2004, and 2005 in the state of Orissa (India), the population of which includes over 22% STs. The high school examinations are common examinations conducted by the Board of Secondary Education of Orissa for all the students of government and other recognized majority language (Oriya) medium schools in Orissa, in which over 250,000 students are educated. Table 3 shows that the ST students have a higher failure rate compared to the SC and other students. Their level of achievement, in terms of the division is also quite low. Low achievement of the tribal students effectively reduces their chances of joining institutions of higher education, in which the representation of tribal students is strikingly low, as shown in the next section.

<TABLE 3 NEAR HERE> **Table 3. Percentage of SC, ST and Other Students in Different Achievement Levels in High School Examinations in Orissa (India)** *(Source: Board of Secondary Education, Orissa)*

3.1.4 *ST Students in Higher Education*

The proportion of enrolment of the ST students declines with the higher levels of education. Enrolment figures available for the year 2002-2003 show that out of 122.4 million children enrolled in primary grades (I to V), 9.67% (11.8 million) were STs and 17.70% (21.7 million)

were SCs, proportionate to the size of their respective populations. However, the corresponding enrolment in classes IX to XII drops to 5.37% for the STs (1.78 million) and 13.25% (4.40 million) for the SCs out of the national total of 33.20 million. In higher and technical education, the representation of the STs is even lower, despite measures which reserve places for students belonging to the Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes. Table 4 gives the figures for enrolment in higher and technical education in the years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. The proportions of STs in higher and technical education over the two year period have varied from 2.97 to 4.64 per cent, far below their 8.2% share of the population.

<TABLE 4 NEAR HERE> **Table 4. Enrolment in Higher and Technical Education** *(Source: Planning Commission 2004)*

Large scale educational failure and non-attainment, lower literacy and high 'push out' rates among the tribal people in India are related to a host of complex factors. But the critical role of the neglect of the tribal mother tongues in the areas of education and literacy instruction in leading to such conditions cannot be denied. The exclusion of tribal mother tongues from education limits the tribal children's chances of adequate classroom learning and success in academics and, consequently, limits their freedom and restricts their 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 language of teaching is another dominant language. The educational benefits of the use of mother tongue in regular classroom settings have been shown in studies all over the world.

3.2 *Education, Capability Deprivation and Poverty in the Tribal Population*

School failure and non-attainment leading to lack of access to higher education limit the upward socio-economic mobility of tribal groups in India. As the *Handbook of Poverty in India* (Radhakrishna & Ray 2005) observes, "Due to low educational and skill levels, majority of tribal workers are involved in low quality of employment such as agricultural and non-agricultural casual wage laborer" (23) and "proportion of regular workers is abysmally low at merely 4 per cent among the STs" (24). A report of the Planning Commission Task Group on Development of SCs and STs (Government of India 2004) shows that the percentage of marginal workers, who

find work only for less than six months a year, is 31.1% for the STs, compared to 27.0% for the SCs and 19.8% for others, and most STs are engaged in work which does not require formal education or training based skills. Educational failure, at least partly due to the systematic exclusion of mother tongues, is clearly reflected in the capability deprivation, economic under-development, and general poverty of the tribals in India, which evidently is a complex multidimensional phenomenon and process.

Various economic indicators of poverty in India place the STs at the bottom in comparison even to other disadvantaged groups. An estimation of the Head Count Ratio of poverty (Planning Commission 2001) shows that the proportion of population below the poverty line is highest for the STs (44%) compared to the SCs (36%) and others (16%). The decline in the percentage of poor (below the poverty line) between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 was 7% among the STs as against 12% among the SCs and 9% among other categories (Radhakrishna & Ray 2005). In terms of monthly per capita consumption figures, approximately 50% of the ST households in rural areas belong to the consumption class of less than 340 Indian Rupees. The corresponding figures for the SCs, other backward castes (OBC), and others are 40%, 30%, and 17%, respectively (Radhakrishna & Ray 2005). Health, nutrition, and other indices of Human Development reflect the same picture of deprivation for the tribals. The trends of poverty and deprivation among Scheduled Tribes in India are summed up in the following words:

> Macro-level data substantiates the fact that tribals in the country constitute the poorest category not merely in economic terms but in all aspects of human development. They are deprived of access to quality education and health care; they are resource poor and their traditional sources of livelihood are dwindling; labor market discrimination and lower skills only afford them occupations with low productivity and limited scope for diversification. Therefore, the slow pace of development among the tribals in India, needs to be contextualized in the vicious cycle of deprivation and poverty. This not only impedes their engagement with mainstream development, it also keeps their entitlements and capabilities low. (Radhakrisna & Ray 2005:29)

The relationship between the language of the STs and their disadvantage is undeniable. When education, which is officially named as human resource development in the Government of India system, neglects the most powerful resource that a tribal child comes to school with, her mother

tongue, it sets in motion a process of cumulative disadvantage that is clearly depriving and disabling rather than enabling; it fails to develop the human resource. The critical role of language is summed up in the following words:

> (T)he non-accommodation and exclusion of language(s) in education contributes to these processes by limiting access to resources and denying equality of opportunity. Language(s) that people speak or do not speak can and do contribute directly to poverty in many other contexts of discrimination and the perpetuation of inequality by the deprivations of linguistic human rights, democratic participation, identity, self-efficacy, and pride. In the case of the tribals in India, linguistic discrimination forms a core of their capability deprivation through educational neglect and in many other complex ways, all of which contribute to their poverty in a vicious circle. Their languages are weakened by marginalization and exclusion from education, official use, and other instrumentally significant domains, and then castigated as inadequate forms of language to justify further exclusion. (Mohanty, in press)

4.0   From Mother Tongue to Multilingual Education in India

The system of school and higher education in India has not responded to the prospects and challenges of its multilingual ethos (Mohanty 2008). As pointed out earlier, maintenance of mother tongues, multilingualism and linguistic diversity are cognitive, educational and social resources for the tribal people, their communities as well as the society at large. "The core of Indian multilingualism is in complementary relationship between languages and in the need to bridge the gap between the minor, minority, and tribal languages, and the languages of wider communication, including the regional and state level languages - Hindi and English. Multilingual education holds a central position in planning for a resourceful multilingualism that does not marginalize and deprive the minor, minority, and tribal language groups" (Mohanty 2006:277). Analysis of various programs of school education in India shows that there are only nominal forms of multilingual education in the absence of systematic use of mother tongues and other languages as languages of classroom teaching. Sometimes bilingual transfer programs claim to be programs of bilingual/multilingual education whereas they are, in reality, soft assimilation programs leading to subtractive language learning and language shift. Transitional programs, both early-exit and late-exit varieties, in different parts of the world have been shown to have the same characteristics of

soft assimilation (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984). Unfortunately, the existing systems of public and private education in India do not support the weaker languages nor do they support high levels of multilingual proficiency. The recent National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (NCERT 2005) sets MT based multilingualism as a goal of school education in India but, in the absence of specific formulations on the multilingual education (MLE) methodology, it remains an unrealized framework for promotion of multilingualism through education and for preserving the multilingual character and diversity of the society. It is necessary to have a comprehensive languages-in-education policy in India for empowerment of tribal and minority languages and promotion of multilingualism for all (Mohanty 2004, 2006). MLE in India needs to be developed as a process of education that starts with development of MT proficiency for all children forming the basis for development of proficiency in all other languages with functional significance for specific groups including the tribal peoples. The theoretical foundation of such a process is well developed and supported and need no elaboration in this paper. In recent years some experimental programs of MLE for tribal children have started with Government initiatives in some of the states with substantial tribal population and are planned in few others. The following section gives a brief description of these programs.

4.1 *MLE Initiatives in India: An Overview*

After several aborted efforts to bring in mother tongue based education for tribal children in several states such as Orissa (Mohanty, 2006), some states have now started structured programs of MLE for tribal children whose mother tongues are different from the state majority language used as language of classroom instruction. In Andhra Pradesh, multilingual education program started in the year 2004 in eight tribal languages. The program involves early literacy and instruction in the mother tongue before the second language is introduced. The children are introduced to reading and writing in a tribal language, which is their mother tongue. Classroom instruction for development of language and literacy skills, numbers and mathematical concepts, environmental studies, and all of the curricular areas are carried out in the mother tongue. Bilingual or multilingual teachers, knowing the language of the children are appointed as MLE teachers in the experimental schools in which only the mother tongue is used for classroom instruction during the first couple of years of schooling during which some conversational competence in the second

language are also sought to be developed. The writing system of the state majority language (Telugu) is used to write the tribal language and formal instruction in Telugu as the second language of the child begins from class three onwards. The first batch of MLE children in Andhra Pradesh program is in class four.   From grade three onwards, the classroom instructional time is shared between the mother tongue and the second language.   The program envisages introduction of the third and fourth languages such as the Hindi and English in later grades, while no policy decision has clearly been made in respect of continuation or discontinuation of the mother tongue beyond the primary grades.

From the year 2006, a similar program is in place in Orissa, where 10 tribal languages have been selected for the experimental MLE project now running in 195 schools and the first batch of students is in class two. The Orissa MLE initiative is described in a recent paper (Singh & Mishra, 2008), in which the State Project Director of the Orissa Primary Education Programmed Authority (OPEPA, which is the apex body for planning and implementation of the MLE program) Mr. D.K. Singh and the State Coordinator, Tribal Education, OPEPA Mr. M.K. Mishra, provide some details of the program. The schools selected for the MLE program have nearly 100% children who speak a tribal language. Thus, the classrooms are quite homogeneous with all the tribal children and their teacher speaking a common language. For each of the 10 tribal languages, teachers and language resource persons were selected from among the tribal communities for development of teaching-learning and text materials following the common curricular framework for all the schools in Orissa.   The culture of language community is sought to be integrated into the curricular materials through what is known as the village calendar and the theme web approach. The village calendar approach is used to select the content of the curricular materials. The calendar year is divided into seasonal village activities from which the content of the textual and teaching learning materials are selected. Basic skills in different curricular areas such as language, mathematics, and environmental studies are related to different activities and thematic content. For example, a particular theme is related to writing as a broad skill which is then related to specific skills such as writing a word list, and individual work book writings. The theme web is divided into two tracks or roads, one for accuracy and correctness and the other for meaning and communication. For example, corresponding to these tracks, the instructional materials for language such as alphabet charts and alphabet books are grouped

under the accuracy and correctness track whereas the storybooks are grouped under the meaning and communication track. The instructional material developed through a series of workshops, were pilot tested in schools and through community feedback. Besides the material development, teacher training and attitudinal training of teachers were also undertaken through a series of specific programs. The first batch of MLE students in Orissa have just completed their Class I and a new batch is in the process of joining Class I. Singh and Mishra (2008) report some initial success for the MLE program in Orissa assessed in terms of increased student interest and attendance and community involvement. A special intervention program called MLE+ is also implemented in eight of the Orissa MLE schools in two tribal languages – Saora and Kui. This program uses cultural psychological approach for child and community focused intervention (see Mohanty & Panda 2008 and Panda & Mohanty, forthcoming, for details of the program). Experimental MLE programs are also planned in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and other states.

## 5.0	MLE in India: Some Concluding Observation

The initial evaluation shows that the experimental MLE programs in India are somewhat more successful than the traditional programs of submersion education in the second language, although, more systematic evaluation seems to be required. Further, the nature and methodological groundings of these MLE programs remain unclear. These programs appear to be leaning towards early-exit rather than late-exit models whereas analysis of best international MLE practices clearly show that at least seven to eight years of instruction in MT as the medium of instruction is necessary for development of high levels of multilingual competence (Mohanty, Panda, Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas, forthcoming). Apart from this major gap between theory and practice and absence of rigorous evaluation, these programs have a major weakness lacking in clear policy and material support and government commitment, raising serious doubts on their continuation and expansion. The current experimental projects are very limited in their scope and coverage both in terms of number of tribal languages taken up for MLE and the number of schools in the program. In Orissa, for example, 10 out of more than 22 tribal languages are covered and that too in 195 schools so far whereas there are over 11,000 schools with a majority of tribal children whose mother tongues are different from the language of teaching.

Thus, to what extent the MLE programs in India can succeed in enabling and empowering the tribal people to escape the vicious cycle of language disadvantage in India remains to be seen. MLE has been convincingly shown to be beneficial for the linguistic minorities as well as majorities through out the world. "It now needs to be implemented as multilingual schools developed within the context of Indian multilingualism. The question for these schools is not whether to use the mother tongue OR the other tongue. It is not about whether to use Hindi OR English. Multilingual education in India is about the mother tongue AND the other tongues as it develops multilingualism for all in Indian society" (Mohanty 2006:278).

TABLE 1. <u>ENROLMENT AND PUSH OUT RATES (2002-2003)</u>

GROUP	GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO			PUSH OUT RATE		
	CLASS I-V (6-11 YEARS)	CLASS VI-VIII (11-14 YEARS)	CLASS I-VIII (6-14 YEARS)	CLASS I-V	CLASS I-VIII	CLASS I-X
SCHEDULED TRIBE	98.67	48.19	80.50	51.57	68.67	80.29
SCHEDULED CASTE	95.61	56.28	81.06	41.47	59.91	71.92
TOTAL POPULATION	95.39	60.99	82.51	34.90	52.80	62.60

[Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development (Department of Secondary and Higher Education) (2004). *Selected Educational Statistics, 2002-2003.* New Delhi: Government of India]

Table 2. <u>MEAN ACHIEVEMENT SCORES OF CLASS V STUDENTS</u>

Subject Area	SC (n=18,146	ST (n= 11,424	Others (n=58,701)
Environmental Studies	48.53	49.52	50.99
Mathematics	44.97	44.12	47.45
Language	57.01	58.19	59.54
Grammar & Usage	60.78	61.37	63.00
Reading Comprehension	50.99	52.89	53.78

(Source: Singh et al., 2004)

Table 3. <u>Percentage of SC, ST and Other Students in Different Achievement Levels in High School Examinations in Orissa (India)</u>

Year	2003			2004			2005		
Group	SC	ST	Others	SC	ST	Others	SC	ST	others
Number of Students	30290	26214	183055	33924	30604	199169	37415	34378	210231
1st Division (60+ %)	04.94%	03.34%	12.91%	05.16%	03.41%	13.19%	05.39%	03.65%	13.85%
2nd Division (45-60%)	13.82%	12.53%	19.88%	14.54%	13.79%	20.62%	16.28%	15.83%	22.18%
3rd Division (30-45%)	19.70%	20.43%	21.05%	21.89%	23.02%	20.41%	23.17%	24.38%	23.42%
Fail (<30%)	61.54%	63.69%	46.15%	58.40%	59.77%	43.77%	55.15%	56.13%	40.54%

(Source: Board of Secondary Education, Orissa)

Table 4. <u>Enrolment in Higher and Technical Education</u>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Higher Education</u>			<u>Technical Education</u>		
	All Categories	**SC**	**ST**	**All Categories**	**SC**	**ST**
2000 - 2001	9.937 million	769,000 (9.69%)	236,000 (2.97%)	1.665 million	184,000 (11.05%)	68,000 (4.08%)
2001 – 2002	7.139 million	940,000 (13.16%)	306,000 (4.28%)	1.894 million	191,000 (10.08%)	88,000 (4.64%)

[Source: Planning commission (2004). *Report of the Task Group on Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on Selected Agenda items of the National Common Minimum Programme.* New Delhi: Government of India.]

End Notes:

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[i] The indigenous or the aboriginal communities in India are officially called 'tribes' (ādivāsi) and are listed as 'scheduled tribes' which are identified on the basis of 'distinct culture and language', 'geographical isolation', 'primitive traits', 'economic backwardness', and 'limited contact with the out groups' and also, sometimes, on political considerations. Anthropological Survey of India, in its *People of India* project, has identified 635 tribal communities of which 573 are so far officially notified as Scheduled Tribes. In this paper the term 'tribe' (rather than 'indigenous peoples') is used in its formal/official sense.

[ii] The term 'push out' (Mohanty 2000, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) is more appropriate as it captures the essence of the phenomenon. I will use this term in place of 'drop out' henceforth in this paper.

[iii] The following section is based on my earlier paper (Mohanty, in press).

[iv] 25 scripts are used for writing Indian languages. 11 major scripts are used to write the main scheduled languages and 13 minor scripts are used for writing some minor and tribal languages. Besides, the Roman scrip has been adopted by some languages in recent years.

[v] The Santals, have developed a script of their own – *Ol Chiki* - invented by the Guru Gomke (the 'Great Teacher') Pandit Raghunath Murmu. This script has become rallying point for the identity of Santal tribals. There are other tribal communities where sporadic and uncoordinated efforts are made to evolve language specific writing systems.

vi In the High School Examinations, students scoring above 60% are graded as first division, 45% to 59% as second division, and 30% to 44% as third division. Those securing less than 30% are graded as failed.