Most tribal education programmes in India teach tribal children through the medium of a language that is not their own language. This denies them a thorough access to education. This situation can also be seen as linguistic genocide, and a crime against humanity.

Robert Dunbar, human rights lawyer, and I wrote, with support from Indigenous colleagues, an Expert paper for UNPFII (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues) (Magga et al., 2005). It contains sociological, educational and legal argumentation where we show that to educate Indigenous/tribal, minority and minoritised (ITM) children (including immigrant minorities), through the medium of a dominant language in a submersion or even early-exit transitional programme prevents access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers it creates. Thus it violates the human right to education.

This right is expressed in many international human rights documents, also in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 29). The Convention has been ratified by ALL other UN member states except one: the USA.

In submersion education an ITM child learns something of a dominant language subtractively, at the cost of developing her own language. Often the dominant language replaces the child’s own language. Submersion education often curtails the development of the children’s capabilities and perpetuates poverty (see economics Nobel laureate Amartya Sen on this, and Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas 2013 on applications). It is organized against solid research evidence about how best to reach high levels of bilingualism or multilingualism and how to enable these children to achieve academically in school. Instead the children should have additive education, in a mother-tongue-based multilingual (MLE) programme where the child’s own language is the main medium of education at least during the first 6 years, preferably longer, and where other languages are taught as subjects by well-qualified bilingual or multilingual teachers who know the child’s mother tongue.

Our 2008 Expert paper (Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008) shows that subtractive dominant-language medium education for ITM children can have harmful consequences socially, psychologically, economically and politically. It can cause very serious mental harm: social dislocation, psychological, cognitive, linguistic and educational harm, and, partially through this, also economic, social and political marginalization. It can also often result in serious physical harm, e.g. in residential schools, and as a long-term result of marginalization - e.g. alcoholism, suicides and violence.
When States, including India, persist in implementing these subtractive policies, in the full knowledge of their devastating effects, the education can thus sociologically, psychologically, linguistically and educationally be termed genocide, according to two of the five definitions in United Nations’ 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the “Genocide Convention”).

Article II(e): ‘forcibly transferring children of the group to another group’; and Article II(b): ‘causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group’; (emphasis added).

Legally, this education can be labeled a crime against humanity. Our 2008 conclusion stated that subtractive education

... is now at odds with and in clear violation of a range of human rights standards, and in our view amount to ongoing violations of fundamental rights. It is at odds with contemporary standards of minority protection. ... In our view, the concept of “crime against humanity” is less restrictive [than genocide], and can also be applied to these forms of education. ... In our view, the destructive consequences of subtractive education, not only for indigenous languages and cultures but also in terms of the lives of indigenous people/s, are now clear. The concept of “crimes against humanity” provides a good basis for an evolution that will ultimately lead to the stigmatisation through law of subtractive educational practices and policies.

Subtractive education through the medium of a dominant language often transfers ITM children to the dominant group linguistically and culturally within one or two generations. It may thus lead to the extinction of Indigenous/tribal languages, thus contributing to the disappearance of the world’s linguistic diversity.

A partial result of this can be the disappearance of the knowledge about biodiversity and its maintenance, and, through this, diminishing prerequisites for human life on earth. Linguistic diversity and biodiversity are correlationally and causally related. Most of the world’s megabiodiversity is in areas under the management or guardianship of Indigenous/tribal peoples. Most of the world’s linguistic diversity resides in the small languages of Indigenous/tribal peoples. Much of the detailed knowledge of how to maintain biodiversity is encoded in their languages. Through killing them we kill the prerequisites for maintaining biodiversity. If we continue as now, most of the world’s Indigenous languages will be gone by 2100.

When States, including India, refuse to grant Indigenous/tribal peoples an unconditional right to the most decisive Linguistic Human Right in education, the right to be educated mainly in one’s own language in a non-fee state school (=mother-tongue-based multilingual education), they are seriously harming both the children concerned, the whole society, and our planet.

What can India and other states do in order not to participate in crimes against humanity? In our book (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010) we sum up today’s
legal and educational situation for ITMs worldwide, with many examples, and present alternatives.

Indigenous/tribal and minority education could be organised so as to promote high levels of multilingualism. This would give better results in terms of school achievement, learning of the dominant language(s) and issues around identity. In addition, not even the initial short-term costs would be more than a few percent higher, and in the long term, mainly mother-tongue medium education would lead to considerable savings, including eliminating much of the “illiteracy” of tens of millions of children, and today’s educational wastage. There are many positive examples of Indigenous/tribal language medium education from many countries and peoples/groups. Some have started recently and have not come very far yet, but are developing. A few examples are Nepal (Hough et al, 2009), Orissa (Mohanty et al. 2009), Peru (Pérez 2009, Pérez & Trapnell, 2010) and many other countries in Asia (e.g. Benson & Kosonen, eds., 2012). In the Saami country, in northern Norway and Finland (Aikio-Puoskari, 2016, Aikio-Puoskari & Skutnabb-Kangas 2007,) mother tongue medium education can continue even at the university level (at Saami University College). One of the smallest Saami people, the Aanaar Saami, is experiencing a spectacular revitalisation (Olthuis et al. 2013), with three language nests and education in grades 1-9 with Aanaar Saami as the main teaching language – there are now some 450 speakers (update from Marja-Liisa Olthuis, 23 October 2016). Country-wide results from education in Ethiopia – see below - show that those children who had 8 or even 10 years of mother tongue medium education, with Amharic and English as subjects, had better results in all subjects (including English) than children who had fewer years of mother tongue medium or who had everything in English from the start (Heugh 2009, Heugh et al. 2007, Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, eds., 2010). Deaf education is also a case in point: Sign-language-medium education really works (Skutnabb-Kangas 2008, Gertz & Boudreault, eds, 2016). Bolivia, Bangladesh, etc. also have positive examples. Likewise, there are many research studies showing the positive results of mainly MTM education for both national and immigrated minorities (see Mohanty et al., eds, 2009, García et al., eds, 2006, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, for summaries). Still, in today’s situation there is a lot of nice talk and far too little action.

The Odisha example shows that this can be done in India. “Odisha Guidelines, India” (2016) contains extracts from various documents. It presents the Government of Odisha Notification of the Recommendations of the MLE Policy & Implementation Guidelines, approved by The Chief Minister of Odisha, March 2014; An Update from October 2015 has been. Similar policy documents and implementation are under development in several Indian states.

The project Multilingual Education Programme for all non-Nepali Speaking Students of Primary Schools of Nepal (Ministry of Education, Nepal, Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi) ran 6 pilot projects where Indigenous and minority children were taught mainly in their mother tongues in primary school. Materials and curriculum were bottom-up, largely planned by villagers (Nurmela et al. 2010). The plan is to extend this to all non-Nepali mother tongue children in Nepal (Nepal has over 100 languages).
Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi, newly appointed Chairperson of the Language Commission (required in Nepal’s new 2015 Constitution, para 281), will work for this goal. The Constitution’s para 6, *Language of the Nation*, states: “All the languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are the languages of nation.” Para 36 (5) states “Every Nepali community living in Nepal shall have the right to get education up to secondary level in its own mother tongue and start and operate school and educational institution as provided in law”, and para 37 (1), *Right to Language and Culture*, states: “Every person and community shall have the right to use own language” (the quotes are from the unofficial translation of the Constitution). Of course the implementation will be difficult, but the political will (which is missing in so many countries) is there.

The Odisha and Nepali projects have had good cooperation, people have visited each other and exchanged materials and ideas – there is a lot to learn from this kind of South-South co-operation.

Ethiopia had an innovative and progressive national education policy, based on 8 years of mother-tongue medium (MTM) education. Regions had the authority to make their own decentralized implementation plans. Some regions transferred to English medium already after 4 or 6 years. A study across all the regions was commissioned by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (Heugh et al., 2008). There is an efficient collection of system-wide assessment data. These show very clear patterns of learner achievement at Grade/Year 8, 10 and 12. The Grade 8 data show that those learners who have 8 years of MTM education plus English as a subject perform better across the curriculum (including in English) than those with 6 years or 4 years of mother tongue medium.

“Every child in the world has the right to education through the medium of their mother tongue”, the Minister of Education in Kurdistan, Iraq Abdul-Aziz Taib said when I interviewed him in Kurdistan 15 March 2006. This right is violated today in most countries, including India. Two of the most harmful myths in ITM education are that starting to teach ITM children early through the medium of a dominant language, be it a regional dominant language or English, and exposing the children maximally to this language, results in good competence in that language. Wrong wrong wrong! The more the mother tongue is used as the teaching language, the better the results also in English, the world’s largest study, with over 200,000 children in the USA showed (Thomas & Collier 2002). The other myth is that knowing English is enough and guarantees a good job. A large-scale European study “Plurilingual competences on the labour market” (1998-2000, random sample panel, 8,232 individuals, aged 20-64) concluded: “The advantages of commanding English will tend to diminish when these competencies become more and more abundant” (Klein 2007: 278). English opens some doors – yes. But a safe way towards good competence in English – or a regional dominant language – starts with mainly mother tongue medium education.

References

Aikio-Puoskari, Ulla / Gáppe Piera Jovnna Ulla (2016). The Status of Sámi Education


Many more references can be found on my home page in my over 400-page bibliography (BigBib) at [www.Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas.org](http://www.Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas.org). Several longer articles about similar issues can also be downloaded there.