

Linguistic Genocide: Tribal education in India

[My original title was “India, tribal education, and participating in crimes against humanity?” but the editor has changed it, without asking for my permission]

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Most tribal education in India teaches tribal children through the medium of a language that is not their own language. This prevents access to education. It can also be seen as genocide, and a crime against humanity. What can India do in order not to participate in crimes 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 and minority (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 two: Somalia and 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). 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 recent 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 and educationally be termed genocide, according to two of the 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 conclusion states 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 IM 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, 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?

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 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. A few examples are Nepal (Hough et al, 2009), Orissa (Mohanty & Panda, 2007, 2009, Mohanty et al. 2009), Peru (Perez 2009, Perez & Trapnell in press). In the Saami country in Norway and Finland (Aikio-Puoskari, 2009, Aikio-Puoskari & Skutnabb-Kangas 2007) mother tongue medium education can continue even at the university level, at Saami University College. And 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, forthcoming). Deaf education is also a case in point: Sign-language-medium education really works (Skutnabb-Kangas 2008, Skutnabb-Kangas & Aikio-Puoskari, 2003). 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 Orissa example shows that this can be done in India. In July 2007, a project started in Orissa. In 200 schools, Indigenous (“tribal”) children from 10 language groups are being taught through their mother tongues in the first grades, with materials collected from children, parents and teachers. The co-ordinator is dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra. 16 more languages will be added in 2008. The research project “From mother tongue to other tongue: facilitating transition in multilingual education of tribal children in India”, directed by professors Ajit K. Mohanty and Minati Panda (Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi) follows some of the children. They show that there are still huge pedagogical problems, but they also present solutions. Teacher training, methods, materials, and many other issues need attention in addition to changing the medium of education and adding some local context. There are similar projects on a smaller scale in a couple of other states (e.g. Andhra Pradesh), and plans to start them in several other 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) is running 6 pilot projects where Indigenous and minority children will

be taught mainly in their mother tongues in primary school. Materials and curriculum are bottom-up, largely planned by villagers. The plan is to extend this to ALL non-Nepali mother tongue children in Nepal. Nepal has over 100 languages.

The Orissa and Nepali projects have 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 has an innovative and progressive national education policy, based on 8 years of mother-tongue medium (MTM) education. Regions have the authority to make their own decentralized implementation plans. Some regions transfer to English medium already after 4 or 6 years. A study across all the regions was commissioned by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (Heugh, Kathleen, Benson, Carol, Berhanu, Bogale & Mekonnen, Alemu Gebre Yohannes (22 January 2007). *Final Report. Study on Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools in Ethiopia, Commissioned by the Ministry of Education, September to December 2006*). 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.

All the references mentioned here can be found on my home page in my over 300-page bibliography at www.Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas.org. Several longer articles about similar issues can also be downloaded there.

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