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Attitude towards Mother Tongue – A Study of the Tribal Students of Orissa

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Abstract

Many tribal languages of Orissa are already dead. Many are on the process of dying. Tribal languages can survive only when its speakers want to retain the language. As many acculturated tribals are switching over to Oriya and English, the future of the tribal languages seems to pose certain threats for survival. This paper aims to study the attitude of the tribal students towards their own mother tongue.

Key words - tribal, attitude, mother tongue

Introduction

“In every society, the differential power of particular social groups is reflected in languages variation and in attitude, towards these variations. Typically, the dominant group promotes its pattern of language use as the model required for social advancement and use of a lower prestige language, dialect or accent by minor group

members reduce their opportunities for success in the society as a whole. Minority group members are often faced with difficult decisions regarding whether to gain social mobility by adopting the language patterns of the dominant group or to maintain their group identity by retaining their native speech style.”

(Ryan et al, 1982:1)

The tribes of Orissa in India can be divided into the following three tribal groups.

1. Primitive Tribal groups.
2. Tribes in transition
3. Assimilated tribes

Out of the 62 tribes in the state, Juang, Bhuiyan Hill Kharia, Mankirdia, Birhor, Lodha, Didayi, Saora, Lanjia, Saora, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh and Bonda have been declared as primitive tribal groups. (*Tribal Education in Orissa*, 1994). Census of India 2001 records total number of 8,145,081 scheduled tribes population constituting 22.13 per cent of total population of the state out of which 4,066,783 are male (3,837,410 rural + 229,373 urban) and 4,078,298 are female (38,60,948 rural + 217,350 urban). While Bathudi, Bhuyan, Bhumij, Gondo, Kharia, Dongaria, Kisan, Kolha Munda, Oraon, Paroja, Santal and Lodha tribes have more than 1,00,000 population each, Baiga, Birhor, Chenchu, Ghara, Mankidi, tribes have less than 1000 population each. Sinha (2005a: 155-56) records the following tribal mother tongues (MT) most prominent in Orissa.

Austro Asiatic Family

Bhumij, Birhor, Didayi, Ho, Juang, Kharia, Korcu, Koda, Mundari, Perenga, Santali, Saora.

Dravidian Family

Gondi, Konda, Kui, Kuvi, Kondh, Kisan, Koya, Kalami, Naiki, Oran, Ollari, Parji, Pengo.

Indo-Aryan-Family

Desia, Halbi, Jharia, Kurmali, Sadri, Sounti

Some tribals specially the more advantageous ones are bilingual as they come in contact with the mainstream. In spite of linguistic convergence and assimilation, language loss and shift are evident in case of many tribal languages. A good number of tribal group like Bhil, Bhuyan, Bhumij, Muriyas, several branches of Gond, Lodha etc. have recorded to have given up their languages in the past and there are some which reveal greater instability and shift in favor of the dominant languages. The

rapid social change as a result of modernization and urbanization, uniform educational opportunities, linguistic practices and pragmatic desire for better socio-economic conditions and increasing pressures by dominant groups on geographically isolated and dispersed linguistic minority groups make a dent on the language maintenance and behavior Sharma *et al.*, 1988 gives the profile of vulnerable ethno-cultural groups of Orissa such as Birhor, Bondo, Chukti Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Kharia, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan and Saora.

These groups are not only socio-economically backward; their languages are also at risk. Mahapatra (1998) notes that tribes such as Lodha, Mirdha, Bhumija, Jatapu, Bagata, Pentia, some section of Gond etc. do not have distinctive linguistic identity. Mahali, Kondh and Kisan tribes have only dialectal distinctions from autonomous languages like Santali, Kui and Krurux.

Although scripts have been developed for Santali, Saora, Ho, Kui and Mundari authorship as well as leadership of good literacy work are still confined only to few as there is limited scope for learning reading and writing in tribal scripts.

Tribal Identity

Tribal identity is intrinsically connected with their languages (Sinha, 2005c). Language interweaves the individual's personal identity with his or her collective identity (Liekind, 1999). There are several conditions that promote this connection. First, language is very significant to the individual as an instrument for naming the self and the world. Second, the upbringing of a child is dependent on linguistic interaction. Third, spoken language is one of the most salient characteristic of ethnic groups. The dominant group friendly imposes its own language as the only legitimate one and pursues a policy of minority assimilation (Sinha, 2005c). Conversely, the more literate tribals show a deviation towards maintenance of the mother tongue. For example, many well placed Santal can't read in mother tongue.

Tribal Literacy

The growth of tribal literacy has grown substantially over the years. Mohanty (1998:40-41) makes a comparative statement of the tribal literacy rates recorded in different census years with total population in table 1 and 2.

Table-1
Percentage of Literacy

Sl. No.	Year	Total population			ST population		
		M	F	T	M	F	T
1.	1961	34.70	8.60	21.66	13.00	1.80	7.36
2.	1971	39.30	13.90	26.20	16.40	2.60	9.46
3	1981	47.10	21.12	34.75	23.27	4.76	12.96
4.	1991	63.09	34.68	44.09	27.93	8.29	18.10

M = Male; F = Female ; T = Total

The table shows that during the period (1961-1991) the percentage of tribal society has increased from 7.36 to 18.10, although the comparison with the total population of the state, a wide gap is noticed in respect of male, female and total literacy.

Table-2
Decadal growth of Literacy among Tribal Women

Sl. No.	Inter census periods	Percentage growth of Literacy	
		Total women	Schedule Tribe Women
1	1961-1971	61.6	44.4
2	1971-1981	51.9	79.2
3	1981-1991	64.2	74.2

Tribal literacy among women is increasing. But the growth rate varies among various tribal communities and district. While Sundargarh District has 30.47% of tribal women literacy, Koraput district shows only 7.27% of tribal women literacy. Similarly, Santal, Ho, Bhatudi, Bhuyan, Gond, Kharia, Kui, Pentia, Tharua, Munda tribes have maximum number of literate people.

It was expected that as the tribal people gets more and more education they will try to preserve, retain, maintain and develop their mother tongue by developing script, literature etc. But unfortunately, many tribal mother tongues are in dying state today at the cost of dominant state language.

Pattanayak (1981:47) argues that in a multilingual situation, beginning from the dialect to many national and transnational languages, all of them work in defined domains complementing each other. When one language group tries to be dominant at the cost of others, conflicts ensue and language becomes a subject of politics... Language maintenance or attitudes resulting from language promotion, language imposition and language preference vitally affect cultural identity of individuals and groups. Languages compete to become access points to rank, status and wealth in

society. When one threatens other languages from acquiring such instrumental value, language becomes a political issue”.

Objectives of the Present Study

Language maintenance of the tribal minorities is possible only when the educated tribal elites will have a desire to maintain their mother tongue. Many tribal elites argue that in a country where there are many mother tongues, learning through medium of mother tongue is uneconomical. One must choose among the regional, national and international languages which will enhance economic condition of a person. The peaceful and successful co-existence of linguistic minorities depends upon their acculturation with the dominant culture and their proficiency in that language (Balasubramanian, 2006). Hence, attitude towards retention of mother tongues, will decide the future of the vast number of tribal mother tongues.

Annamalai (1979:37) claims that attitude of a speaker is determined by socio-cultural, political and historical factors which are external to the language.

After independence, due to implementation of various programs by the Government, many tribals are getting better jobs and educational opportunities in the cities. In other words, there is a gradual inflow of tribal migrants into the cities. These tribal migrants become the role model and trend setters for the other tribal people in their community.

There are also second and third generations of tribal migrants who have completely assimilated with the mainstream and have already abandoned their languages, but still avail the special opportunities and special financial assistance in educational institutions and in government jobs reserved for them. As the Government and many private organizations are working towards making all the tribals of the state educated and cultured, sooner or later all will migrate to the cities.

There is a consensus among the intellectuals that even the language Oriya is slowly decaying out among the elite mass, specially as the younger children prefer to speak and write in English language these days, ignoring their native tongue (Sinha, 2005d). There is a growing desire among younger Oriya generation to shift towards English language which offers greater mobility, self-confidence enhancing self-esteem and better future prospects.

Under such conditions, survival of tribal mother tongues remains a big question. The present study aims to find out the attitude of urban tribal students towards their mother tongue. An earlier study by Sinha (2005e) revealed that tribal people in primitive areas with very little or no exposure to outside world would prefer mother tongue medium of instruction.

Samples

For the present study, one hundred randomly selected tribal students of age group 13-24 of Bhubaneswar and Berhampur cities constituted as the samples. All the samples are residing in school, college and University hostels and are getting special assistance. The samples from Bhubaneswar reside in special tribal hostels for school and college students.

All the school children (13-15 years) are first generation immigrants with 2/3 years of contact with the mainstream. They have still retained their mother tongue to a large extent. The older group of 16-24 years are either second or third generation of immigrants or have more than five years of contact with city dwellers.

Table-III
Sample profile according to tribal mother tongue

Sl. No.	Name of the Tribe	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total
1.	Santali	10	10	14	14	48
2	Saora	3	3	2	2	10
3	Bathudi	-	-	2	2	4
4	Kolha	-	-	1	1	2
5	Gadaba/ Ollari	-	-	1	1	2
6.	Kui	2	2	4	4	12
7	Ho	2	2	1	1	6
8	Gond	-	-	2	2	4
9	Oram / Sadri	1	1	-	-	2
10	Mundari	1	1	-	-	2
11	Munda	1	1	-	-	2
12	Kisan	-	-	1	1	2
13	Sudho Sabar	-	-	1	1	2
14	Saunti	-	-	1	1	2
15	Total	20	20	30	30	100

A1 = Boys (13-15 years)

A2 = Girls (13-15 years)

B1 = Boys (16-24 years)

B2 = Girls (16-24 years)

It may be mentioned that most of the tribal students who come to city for education are Santal, Saora, Ho and Kui speakers.

Table-IV
Sample profile according to years of contact with mainstream

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Sl. No.	Years of contact with mainstream	A1	A2	B1	B2
1.	Between 3-5 years	20	8	--	--
2.	Between 5-15 years	-	7	10	5
3.	Since birth	-	5	20	25

Table-V
Sample profile according to socio-economic status of parents

Sl. No.	Years of contact with mainstream	A1	A2	B1	B2
1.	LIG	20	10	8	--
2.	MIG	-	10	12	5
3.	HIG	-	--	10	25

LIG = Lower income group
MIG = Middle income group
HIG = Higher income group

Tools and Measures

I present a number of critical dimensions along which to compare language attitude studies conducted through questionnaire methods.

Standardization, vitality, status and in group solidarity are presented as primary evaluative dimensions of language attitude study.

Whereas the standardization represents the condition of statuesque, vitality more directly reflects the forces for shifts in language use and in symbolic values (Fishman *et al.*, 1971; Ryan *et al.*, 1982). According to Fishman (1971) when a language/dialect has been codified and accepted by the speech community it is said to be standardized.

Once, the elite mass accepts the standard variety, it is used in formal education. In Orissa, all the tribal languages do not have standard varieties. Most of them have only oral culture.

Standardization is a characteristic of the social treatment of a variety, not a property of the language variant itself (Ryan *et al.*, 1982).

The second socio structural determinant of the present study is the degree to which the tribal languages have visible vitality, i.e., interaction networks that actually employ it natively for one or more functions, such as in education, mass media or administration. The more numerous and more important the functions served by the variety for greater number of individuals, the greater is its vitality (Ryan *et al.*, 1982:4).

As the tribals become multilingual survivals of their mother tongue is threatened to the extent that they slowly assimilate with the dominant Oriya culture. The degree of official support of a tribal language provides an important index of its current and future vitality. The official support depends on various factors like whether a particular tribal language is used in education, administration, trade and commerce, communication and publication etc.

Strong vitality enhances potential for achieving standardization. Brown and Gilman (1960). Fishman (1971), Ryan (1979) suggested status and in group solidarity as two major dimension of socio structural determinant of the language attitude. Attitude to standardize a tribal language also reflects the relative social status the speaker gives to the native tongue.

Similarly, factors contributing to the solidarity value of a language are precisely those forces responsible for its vitality. Moreover, standardness and status are much more stable than vitality and solidarity with regard to diachronic changes across time as well as synchronic variation across speech communities and subgroups within speech communities and situations (Brown and Gilman, 1960; Fishman, 1971, Ryan, 1979).

The language of one's family life, intimate friendship and informal interactions acquire vital social meanings and group identity. Keeping the above determinants in mind, the questionnaire was designed. All the hundred samples were asked to fill the questionnaires (Annexure-I), after which the data was analysed to draw significant conclusions.

Results

Table-VI
Number of tribal students knowing and using M.T.

Sl. No.	Question type	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	Those who can speak in M.T.	16	20	8	26	70%
2.	Those who speak in MT at home	16	15	8	26	65%
3.	Those who speak in MT with friends of same tribe	10	15	8	26	59%
4.	Those who can count numbers 1-20 in MT	14	15	10	13	52%

Table VI shows 30% of tribal students cannot speak in their MT. Only 65% of the samples use MT at home. Rest speaks in Oriya. Similarly, only 59% use MT with friends from tribe same shows a decreasing tendency towards in group solidarity.

The fact that 48% of the sample cannot count in MT and count in Oriya numerals speaks of the unconscious desire to abandon MT as numerals must be learned and developed if we want to standardize a language. The importance of knowledge of counting in numerals to identify someone with a speech community cannot be ignored. We have heard of Assam Government using this linguistic feature to identify the illegal Bangladeshi entrants in Assam by asking the suspected illegal entrants to count numerals in their mother tongue! There are interesting stories in Indian languages on how the police would identify the background of the culprits using techniques relating to the specific features of Indian mother tongues!

Numerals (especially 1-20) play an integral part of our daily interaction. Therefore, knowledge of numerals in mother tongue speaks of language attitude and language loyalty.

Table-VII
Number of sample attributing high status to MT

Sl. No.	Types of preference	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	English	19	18	6	6	49%
2	Oriya	1	2	14	10	27%
3	MT	--	--	10	14	24%

Table VII shows English language gains most prestige and MT gains least prestige.

Table-VIII
Number of samples preferring MT as the language of administration

Sl. No.	Types of preference	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	English	2	13	11	17	53%
2	Oriya	7	7	18	11	43%
3.	MT	1	0	1	2	4%

English is the most preferred language in administration followed by Oriya. Mother tongue is the least preferred language.

Table-IX
Number of tribals preferring MT in education

Sl. No.	Language preference at primary school	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	English	--	1	20	25	46%
2	Oriya	17	16	8	3	44%
3.	MT	3	3	2	2	10%

Table IX again shows that MT is the least preferred as language of instruction at the primary level.

Table-X
Number of tribals preferring to be multilingual

Sl. No.	Language preference	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	Multilingual	18	17	30	30	95%
2	Only MT	2	3	--	--	5%

Table X shows that most of the samples are aware of the benefits of being multilingual.

Table-XI
Number of samples willing to retain MT

Sl. No.	Language preference for their future off spring	A1	A2	B1	B2	Total percentage
1.	Oriya / English	12	11	29	15	67%
2	Native tongue	8	9	1	15	33%

Table XI records only 33% who want their offspring to learn M.T. Among the older girls with more exposure and education and awareness about fundamental rights only fifty per cent want to their children to learn mother tongue. Whereas, among the more educated and exposed boys only 3% want their children to learn M.T. The economic benefits attached with Oriya and English justify their attitude.

For most of the younger students, English stands as the most prestigious language. It is yet to confirm through more research whether the older tribals who value M.T. as most prestigious language actually believe so.

It is also observed that many educated Santali elites in Bhubaneswar who regularly attend the meetings of the Santali people to promote their language and culture speak in Oriya or English with their own children. Invariably, all the one hundred informants want to develop their M.T. which contradicts their own language of preference.

The suggestions for developing MT by all the samples are through:

1. Publication of journals, newspapers, magazine in MT. Roman alphabets may be used for it.
2. Through telecasting
3. By introducing MT as a compulsory subject paper at all levels of education.
4. By organizing get together of the members of a tribal community at regular intervals to discuss their problems.
5. More than anything the tribals themselves should be sensitized to agree to learn.

What looks like though is that they will be happy to develop MT but due to the market value of Oriya and English they themselves are interested in shifting to the mainstream language.

The study further revealed that although only 10% would like MT as the medium of instruction at the primary level, all the Kui and Munda speakers are ashamed of their MT.

The second or third generation tribal immigrants speak in Oriya or English at home and with friends. Even a large section of Santali students, Mundari, Kui, Kisan, Sudho Sabar, Saunti, Gond, few Saora, Gadaba, Bhatudi and Gond students cannot count numerals in M.T. Instead they use Oriya numerals. It is essential to know the numerical system of a language, to retain it in the society.

Ho speakers seem to be more conscious about their MT and all of them want Ho to be introduced as medium of instruction in primary schools and all can write in their script.

Even though Santali has been included in the VIIIth schedule of the Indian constitution, most of the Santali speakers are switching over to Oriya and English for status and market value.

Almost fifty per cent of the students are facing problems in learning languages like English, Oriya, Hindi and Sanskrit which are different from M.T. Crash courses are offered these days (both formally and informally) in Munda, Kui and Santal languages.

It is unfortunate, that those who have attended the course too have forgotten the script and numerical system. All the Saora students are not even aware of the existence of script in their M.T. All the Munda, Mundari, Saora, Sadri, Kui, Saunti, Gond, Bathudi and few Santal want their children to be proficient in Oriya and English and to completely abandon the tribal languages / dialect, as the MT has no market value.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study shows ethnic solidarity and assimilation with mainstream are inversely proportionate i.e., more the primitiveness, more is the in group solidarity, or more the tribals gets assimilated with mainstream and lead better living standards, more they get detached from their ethnic language and culture.

This means in course of time the tribal mother tongue which have been acted for long, the symbol of group feeling and medium to share emotion and has served as expression of group identity and cultural and emotional security will lose its charm and prime functions. When it will no more be used for daily interaction either it will be dead for ever or be preserved as a heritage language.

According to Sinha (2005c) mother tongue medium of instruction at initial stage will help to develop tribal language and will help the society by promoting pluralism and mutual understanding. Pattanayak (1981:35) mentions that disuse of language not only creates cognitive imbalance and cultural anomaly, it also creates an economic subservience.

While multilingualism creates both economic and cultural independence, destruction of language with a view to promoting dominant monolingualism leads to the dwarfing of the cultural personality of the country.

Sinha (2006) suggests that the policy of assimilation to dominant culture should foster the retention of cultural heritage of different ethnic groups and promote intercultural understanding. Speaking about the role of teacher for maintaining minority child's language and culture while making the child a global citizen, Lea Lee (2006) says that the teacher's caring and understanding attitude will have a positive effect on mainstream students keeping them to be more open minded and interested in minority cultures. This will help all students become global citizens and develop biculturality and bilinguality. Although she spoke this for the minority Korean American children in US, the same can be applied in Indian context for tribal minorities. Tsai (2006) claims that our society can benefit only from the individuals, who can function effectively in multiethnic, cultural and linguistic contexts.

Therefore, retaining and developing the vast number of tribal mother tongues in Orissa should be considered a high priority action by the language planners before these mother tongues are completely destroyed. Once market value is attached, the tribal languages will gain their status and the tribal students will develop positive attitude towards their own mother tongue.

Thus the planning decision will play a very crucial role in determining the fate of the tribal language and the tribal people of India. Official neglect may result in letting the languages die (language genocide) by simply not doing anything to keep them alive. The powerless social position of the tribals in the society does not give them a chance to formulate a different language policy for their children. The tribal child in the present system is deprived of mother tongue medium of education as his or her mother tongue is seen useful only for their auxiliary use (Sinha 2006:35).

The affected people need to be sensitized to preserve, maintain, and develop their mother tongue so as to prevent mother tongue genocide.

Appendix-1

The language attitude survey form

Name _____ village _____ Age _____
Sex _____ Occupation _____ Language known _____

1. How well you can speak Oriya?
Very good, good, very bad, bad
2. How well your can write in Oriya?
Very good, good, very bad, bad
3. Should you learn Oriya?
Definitely may be, will think over, not required.
4. Is Oriya a prestigious language?
Highly prestigious, prestigious, little prestigious, not prestigious at all.
5. How well you can write in your mother tongue (using own script)
Very Good, Good, very bad, do not know to write
6. Are you aware of various incentive offered to you?
Very well, well, a little, not at all.
7. Do your face problems in selling goods because of language?
Always, sometimes, rarely, not at all.
8. How well your want your children to learn Oriya?
Very well, well, little not required.
9. How often you take loans from the Oriya speaking Pano / Domo.
Very often, often, rarely, not at all.
10. Are you happy as an isolated ethnic community?
Very happy, happy. Little happy, not at all happily.
11. How well you will prefer if your mother tongue is taught from primary school to college levels?
Very well, well, a little, not prefer at all.
12. Will you send your children to schools if your mother tongue is taught at all level (primary to colleges)?
Certainly, may be may not be, not at all.
13. How much your dislike the Pano / Domo?
Very much, much, a little, not at all.
14. Are you unhappy that you are not able to maintain good life style?
Not at all unhappy, little unhappy, much unhappy, very much unhappy.
15. Are you willing to learn Oriya?
Not at all little, much, very much.

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