

**The Need for Mother Tongue Primary Education among the
Preliterate Oral Tribal communities in India:
A Case Study of the Dungra Bhil Language Community in Gujarat**

Ruth Susan Mathew
M.A. in English with Communication Studies
Christ (Deemed to be University)

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Abstract

This research will attempt to understand the position of a multilingual community like India that faces various hurdles in providing education to the preliterate oral tribal communities in the country. The Government of India mostly provides education in the dominant state language which leads to immense difficulties for the tribals to understand the medium of instruction and leads to high rates of drop-outs, especially in the primary class. However, if the tribal communities are provided primary education solely in their mother tongue, it will be an impediment for them to join higher studies and enter into jobs. Keeping this in mind, this paper analyses the case study of Dungra Bhil tribal community in Gujarat and provides five steps to achieve bilingual education among them. This study uses a standardised interview method with a sample size of 50 participants. For this, Dungra Bhil language phonemic representation, the frequency of vowel and consonant phonemes, and practical orthography in Gujarati and Devanagari scripts for the Dungra Bhil language will be provided.

Keywords: Bilingual education, Mother tongue, Primary education, Tribal communities, Dungra Bhils

Introduction

India's rich multilingual, multicultural society poses a humungous challenge to address the educational needs of its tribal communities. Although access to schools has increased and enrolment rates are improving, the dropout rates are still alarmingly high and achievement levels are low compared to their non-tribal counterparts (Nambissan, 1994). One of the reasons for this is that education is conducted in a language they do not understand using an unfamiliar cultural context. Many scholars agree that having a strong mother tongue foundation leads to a much better understanding of the curriculum as well as a more positive attitude towards school (Benson, 2004). It becomes vital that children maintain their first language when they begin

school in a different language as the development of their mother tongue simultaneously foster a whole host of other essential skills, such as critical thinking and literacy skills. The importance of mother tongue education also holds true for tribal children in various parts of India.

To understand this, the case study of Dungra Bhil ethnic group, who lives in the Vindhya Satpura mountain ranges, is taken. They are scattered in the Baroda district of Gujarat, Alirajpur taluk in the Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, and also in some parts of Dadgaon taluk of Maharashtra. The total number of speakers is about 100,000. Their language is one of the dialects of Bhil, a western Indo-Aryan language. The people call themselves as Adivasi Bhil. But others refer to them by the name Dungra Bhils (Bhils living on the hills). For the purpose of this study, the name Dungra Bhil is chosen to describe the people and the language.

Sociolinguistic survey reveals that there are three dialects of Dungra Bhil. The first one is in Gujarat, the second one is in Madhya Pradesh, and the third is in Maharashtra. Nevertheless, these dialects are mutually intelligible; each is influenced by the state language respectively. This study is based on the Dungra Bhil spoken in the Baroda district of Gujarat. The Dungra Bhil children are denied education in their mother tongue and are forced to study in their state medium, Gujarati. This usually adversely affects their language development and leads to a sharp drop out rates.

In 1956, the Indian Constitution through Article 350A recognised the need to provide facilities for primary education in the mother tongue to linguistic minorities. However, today, almost four decades later, education is being imparted primarily in the 15 'official' languages that are listed in the English Schedule' of the Constitution as well as in English. Languages of communities such as the Scheduled Tribes do not figure in the Schedule and remain outside the precincts of the school. The denial of schooling in the mother tongue to children from tribal communities gives a reason for concern in view of the growing volume of research that highlights the crucial role played by languages of the home in processes of early learning (1994, p.1).

The poor response of tribal children to formal education and their high rates of attrition, especially in the first few years of schooling, assume significance in this context. What is of special significance in the context of the present discussion is that the majority of children who enrol in Class I drop out within a few years of entering school. Official drop-out figures of tribal children between Classes I and V was as high as 64.50 per cent as compared to 47.90 per cent for the general category of students. Class wise enrolments at the primary stage reveal that the sharpest drop in enrolment of tribal children occurs between Class I and 4 (1994, p.1).

The criticality of language as the medium of school education becomes particularly relevant in pluricultural, multilingual societies. The singling out of some languages as the 'standard' and appropriate media of education sets aside the rest as 'non-standard' and inappropriate for schooling. The implications that follow are pertinent for pedagogy and curriculum transaction, as well as for teacher attitudes and expectations that underlie the social processes of schooling and influence educational outcomes (1). As Pattanayak observes, "where multiple languages and cultures co-exist, the notion of one dominant language as the medium of instruction leaves thousands illiterate in their mother tongue and fosters low achievement level in the dominant language itself (1994, p.5).

Methodology

This research uses quantitative standardized interview method to analyse the efficiency of transitional bridge education in primary education among the Dungra Bhils. A Standardized interview was conducted in two phases among ten literacy coordinators to understand the need and efficiency of transitional bridge education in various villages, where the Dungra Bhils reside. The first phase of the standardised interview was conducted to analyse the results of providing primary education in Gujarati, which is the state language, without giving adequate training in their mother tongue. The second phase of the standardised interview was conducted to analyse the efficiency of the transitional bridge education, which is achieved in 5 stages.

Observations of the First Phase

The first standardized interview revealed that out of 50 students enrolled for primary education, only 5 were able to read and write after the academic year. Observation of the researchers during their stay in the village confirmed that Dungra Bhil is being spoken by the tribals. Parents were observed speaking with their children in their own language, which gives support to the continuance of the vernacular. Even outside homes and villages, it is spoken in certain domains. Dungra Bhil can be heard at bus stands, on buses and in the market. Although other languages may be used and valued in such domains as education and occupation, there are strong indications of the maintenance of Dungra Bhil as the language of the family and home, which are important domains for the vitality of a mother tongue.






Advantages and Disadvantages of Mother Tongue Education among Dungra Bhils

The advantages of instruction in tribal language are that the process of education and learning is made easier and more natural. By affording a sense of assimilation, such a practice can aid in reducing drop-outs. This can also help increase a child's participation in learning processes at school. However, the disadvantage is that often, tribals themselves perceive local content and tribal language education as a way to keep the community backwards. The importance of the tribal language as the foundation of a child in the early years and the underlying benefits of increasing achievement/learning levels by granting familiarity cannot be

over-emphasized. In a multilingual society geared towards the default state language, reliance on the local tribal dialect solely can entrench the differentiation between the tribal and non-tribal community hindering the process of mainstreaming. Using the tribal dialect as a medium to transact the state curriculum, particularly for the first few years, and introducing the state language gradually as the child becomes comfortable in the school environment, can yield positive results.

Five Stages of Bilingual Education

Bilingual education in Dungra Bhil community in Gujarat can be achieved in five stages. In stage one, pre-primer which include lessons to teach alphabets, syllables and words in the mother tongue Dungra Bhil is taught. A frequency count is done for the phonemes in Dungra Bhil and they are taught from the most occurring phonemes to the least occurring one. In the second stage, primer one which includes lessons to teach phrases, clauses and sentences in the mother tongue is taught. Next, in the third stage, prime two which includes lessons to teach alphabets, syllables, words, phrases and clauses using the phonemes in Gujarati (State language /Language of wider communication) which are not found in the Dungra Bhil is taught.

૧		ક	નક
૨		કા	કાકુ
૩		કી	કીવાળો
૪		કુ	કુકળુ
૫		કે	કેલે

(1)

In the fourth stage, Dungra Bhils are made fluent in their mother tongue through various reading materials. And in the final stage, they are made fluent in the state language, Gujarati using various reading materials in Gujarati. Thus, in this method, primary education is done in the mother tongue and at the later stage; the student is bridged into the language of wider communication. This method of education is sometimes referred to as Transitional Bridge Education. The government initiated programs among Dungra Bhil people is provided not in their mother-tongue but in the state language (Gujarati). So for the smooth transition into the state language, Gujarati and Devanagari scripts are used for preparing materials in the Dungra Bhil language.

Phonemic representation, the frequency of consonant and vowel phonemes, and orthography in Gujarati and Devanagari scripts are used to make the reading materials for the literacy program

Phonemes of Dungra Bhil

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A phonemic representation of Dungra Bhil would need to include the following phonemes

Vowel Phonemes

i	ĩ		u	ũ
e	ẽ		o	õ
		a	ã	

Consonant Phonemes

	Labio-dental	Dental\alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d	ʈ ɖ		k g	ʔ
Asp. plosive	ph	th	ʈh		kh	
Nasal	m	n	ɳ			
Fricative		s				h
Affricate		dz		dʒ		
Flap		r	ɽ			
Approximant	v			j		
Lat. Approximant		l				

The Frequency of Consonant Phonemes (from 1500 Dungra Bhil words)

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Phonemes	Word Initial	Word Medial	Word Final
/p/	118	27	6
/ph/	27	12	2
/b/	74	49	4
/m/	85	52	8
/v/	73	74	9
/t/	55	76	17
/th/	7	11	2
/d/	53	51	8
/n/	77	108	8
/r/	33	178	25
/s/	111	85	8
/l/	9	165	14
/ʈ/	17	68	12
/ʈh/	8	7	5
/ɖ/	27	45	6
/j/	29	54	6
/z/	3	8	3
/y/	3	106	10
/ŋ/		52	11
/ʀ/		149	14
/k/	110	69	9
/kh/	43	33	7
/g/	62	65	8
/h/	80	106	10
/ʔ/		82	5

Practical Orthography

Vowels

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a	ã
आ / अ	आं / अं
i	ĩ
इ / ँ	ई / ँ
u	ũ
उ / उ	उं / उं
e	ẽ
ए / ऐ	एं / ऐं
o	õ
ओ / ओ	औं / ओं

Consonants

k	kh	g		
क / ङ	ख / ञ	ग / ङ		
		dʒ		
		ज / ञ		
		dz		
		ज़ / ञ		
t	tʰ	ɖ	ɳ	
ट / ढ	ठ / ढ	ड / ढ	ण / ण	
t	th	d	n	
त / त	थ / थ	द / द	न / न	
p	ph	b	m	
प / प	फ / फ	ब / ब	म / म	
y	r	l		
	र / र	ल / ल		
v	s	h	ɽ	ʔ
व / व	स / स	ह / ह	ड़ / ङ	अ / अ

Dungra Bhil Orthography

The above table shows the symbols chosen to represent consonant and vowel phonemes of Dungra Bhil. Since Dungra Bhils are living in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the Devanagari and Gujarati scripts are listed to represent the phonemes. This will ensure maximum transfer to the language of wider communication.

In Dungra Bhil there are five vowels, three front and two back. Since Dungra Bhils are living in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra the Devanagari and Gujarati scripts are used to represent the phonemes. This will ensure maximum transfer to the language of wider communication. The glottal plosive which is absent in Hindi and Gujarati languages is

represented by (अ / अ). Also the nasals and the homorganic plosives are represented by nasalisation on the preceding vowel.

According to Eugene Nida, an alphabet which is to be used by ordinary people must take into consideration the two principles that alphabet (systems of writing) are largely cultural matters, and the value of existing systems of writing which may be known to the people in greater or lesser degree must be taken fully into consideration. Next, reading consists of complex kinds of reactions to visual symbols; and these visual symbols should be related to speech sounds, there are certain exceptions to the rule of one-to-one correspondence and the requirement that writing must follow the precise manner in which people speak (Key, 1966).

Evaluation of the Second Phase of Standardised Interview

In the second phase of the standardised interview, the efficiency of the transitional bridge education, which is achieved in five stages, is evaluated. For the evaluation, the standardised interview was conducted among ten primary education trainers in seven villages, where the Dungra Bhil language is spoken. The observation is provided below:

1) Village: Jaminiya (Teacher: Dundiniya bhai)

Number of Students:	12 (7 men & 5 women) (7 are regularly attending)
The number of classes in a week:	3 days (Wednesday, Sunday & Friday) classes were conducted at night. (advised to teach 2 hours/day)
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: partially completed
Attendance register	Well maintained
Result	5 out of 7 who are regularly attending started reading Dungra Bhil materials
Comments about the teacher	He is highly motivated: Doing a very good work

2) Village: Ambadunger (Teacher: Hindiya bhai)

Number of Students:	12 women
Number of classes in a week:	2days(Wednesday, Sunday) classes were conducted at daytime: advised to increase the

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	frequency to 3 days in a week: Suggestion accepted(advised to teach 2 hours/day)
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: partially completed
Attendance register	Given the advice to maintain the register
Result	7 out of 12 started reading Dungra Bhil materials
Comments about the teacher	He needs frequent guidance

3) Village: Kadulimoodi (Teacher: Mahesh bhai)

Number of Students:	6 (4 women & 2men)
The number of classes in a week:	2 days(Wednesday, Sunday) classes were conducted at daytime: advised to increase the frequency to 3 days in a week: Suggestion accepted(advised to teach 2 hours/day)
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: Did not receive (Steps were taken to send 10 copies of book2 immediately)
Attendance register	Given the advice to maintain the register
Result	2 out of 6 started reading book 1
Comments about the teacher	He needs further motivation, he needs to improve his performance: Needs constant guidance

4) Village: Sakad (Teacher: Babu bhai)

Number of Students:	13(4 men & 9 women)
The number of classes in a week:	3 days(Wednesday, Sunday and Friday) classes were conducted at daytime: (advised to teach 2 hours/day)
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: Dungra Bhil section is completed (Requested 5 copies of book 2. Steps were taken

	to send them immediately)
Attendance register	Maintaining the register well
Result	6 out of 13 started reading Dungra Bhil materials
Comments about the teacher	He is highly motivated, Doing very well

5) Village: Reliamba (Teacher: Hunji bhai)

Number of Students:	10
Number of classes in a week:	2days(Wednesday, Sunday) classes were conducted at day time: (advised to teach 2 hours/day and increase the frequency to 3 days /week)
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: Dungra Bhil section is completed (Requested 5 copies of book 2. Steps were taken to send them immediately)
Attendance register	Could not meet the teacher/ so don't know about the register
Result	4 out of 10 started reading Dungra Bhil materials
Comments about the teacher	He is not motivated/ needs further motivation and guidance

6) Village: Verajimatha (Teacher: Sanker bhai)

Number of Students:	7
Number of classes in a week:	3days(Wednesday, Sunday and Friday) classes were conducted at night time
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: Dungra Bhil section is completed
Attendance register	Well maintained
Result	5out of 7 started reading Dungra Bhil materials

Comments about the teacher	He is highly motivated. Doing good work
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7) Village: Kundenpur (Teacher: Ramesh bhai)

Number of Students:	10
Number of classes in a week:	3days (Wednesday, Sunday and Friday) classes were conducted at night time: Sometimes they gather 5 days /week
Books covered:	Book 1: completed, Book 2: Dungra Bhil section is completed
Attendance register	Well maintained
Result	7out of 10 started reading Dungra Bhil materials (they have read very well)
Comments about the teacher	He is highly motivated. Doing a good work: This group is highly motivated:

Analysis of the Evaluation Results

Analysis of the second phase of standardised interview reveals that the total number of students enrolled in 7 villages for primary education is 65. The total number of students who learned to read and write is 36. The percentage of students who benefited from the transitional bridge education is 55.38%. After the second phase of the analysis, a sharp rise in the number of students who were able to read and write at the end of the academic year was recorded. This proves the efficiency of the bilingual education achieved in five stages, proposed in this research.

Conclusion

Though it is difficult to measure the cultural pressure of an orthographic system which is employed by a dominant cultural group, it can be said that the greater the feeling of insecurity the more intense will be the response to the cultural pressure of the dominant language. When efficiency and cultural prestige are pitted against one another, the latter almost always wins out in the end. It is not what is easiest to learn, but what people want to learn and use which ultimately determines orthographies. A practical orthography may be just as scientific as the

strictly phonemic one- it is just that in the case of the practical alphabet we must employ not only linguistics but also psychology and anthropology since all these types of factors are present.

Thus, through these five stages of bilingual education, Dugra Bhils would be well-versed in their mother tongue as well as their state language, Gujarati. The mother tongue education in the primary level helps the process of learning to be easier and reduces drop-outs. And the education in the state language paves the way for higher education and jobs.

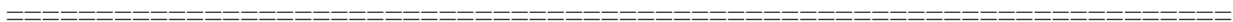
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Ruth Susan Mathew
M.A. English with Communication Studies
Christ (Deemed to be University)
Bengaluru
Karnataka, India
ruthsusan97@gmail.com

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