



## IMPACT OF LANGUAGE POLICY ON PRIMARY EDUCATION OF MISING AND TEA-TRIBES OF ASSAM

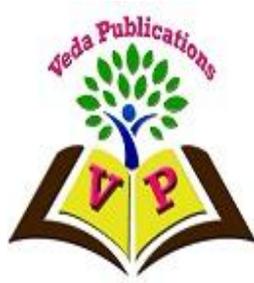
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### ABSTRACT



Linguistic diversity and multilingualism though diametrically opposite in context are the prevailing reality in India. Multilingualism is must in the meaningful participation in the socio-political and economic system of the country. Languages are related to the social status of the respective language groups. Minority languages have tended to be maintained over generations. Maintenance is the norms and shift is a deviation in India. Bilingualism / multilingualism are the result of the communities maintaining their languages by linguistic accommodation. Becoming bilingualism is an adaptive strategy for individuals and communities for stable relationships between individuals, communities and languages.

Choice of medium of instruction is a major language problem in a multilingual nation. The state language and the several ethnic group languages in their predominant respective areas are the choices of medium of instructions in schools. The national policy of mother-tongue-medium education of India is encouraging to instruct students through their first languages. Implementation of a rational language policy is very important for effective education in the state.

The situation of teaching-learning problems in the Assamese medium lower primary schools of two ethnic groups—the Mising and the tea-garden dominated areas of Assam is discussed in this paper. It focuses on the problems faced by both the teachers and the learners in their teaching-learning activities because of the medium of instruction. Bilingualism/Multilingualism, change of medium of instructions and training of the non-ethnic school teachers of these languages are the alternative and workable solutions to the problem.

Primary data is collected through purposive sampling method by interview schedule from school teachers of Assamese language working in these ethnic minority areas of upper Assam.

**Keywords:** *Linguistic Diversity, Minority Language, Bilingualism/Multilingualism, Language Policy.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism though diametrically opposite in context are the prevailing reality in India. Multilingualism is must in the meaningful participation in the socio-political and economic system of the country.

Human Development Reports of the United Nations 2004 finds links of cultural liberty with language rights and human development. Human development is related to the choice between one's mother tongue and one's future. Limitations on people's ability to use their native language can exclude people from education, political life and access to justice. In this global world it is important to build on and to support the multiplicity of languages. There should be the scopes and possibilities of using one's own languages. People want schools where they can have both their mother tongues and a future to cope with the global world. Formal public education for minority ethnic group students is a passive learning from authoritarian teachers teaching the cultural capital of the dominant language and class. This includes students to reproduce the dominant culture leading to their own subjugation. It is difficult for the minority ethnic people to attract respects and to promote their rich linguistic diversity and cultural heritages. Right to learn and maintain one's native language is leading to the concept of bilingualism and multilingualism in schools.

The first chair of United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues Ole Henrik Magga sums up the connections between the concepts of human rights, language, language policy and education. Choice of medium of instruction is a major language problem in a multilingual nation. The state language and the several ethnic group languages in their predominant respective areas are the choices of medium of instructions in schools. The national policy of mother-tongue-medium education of India is encouraging to instruct students through their first languages.

Andersson and Boyer have given a classic example of bilingual education as one in which two languages is being used as languages of instruction of subjects other than the languages themselves. This means the using of number of languages of instruction in schools. In multilingual education more

than two languages are used by the teachers for giving instructions to students other than the language subjects themselves. Multilingual practices are influenced by social, political, historical, economic and linguistic factors.

William Mackey has subdivided the teaching of languages into four categories. The relationship between the languages of the home and schools; curriculum; the linguistic character of the immediate environment as compared with the wider national environment; and the function, status and differences between the languages.

Widespread use of two or more languages in different domains of daily life leads common people to communicate among themselves and with members of different speech communities. Khubchandani and Pattanayak opine that despite linguistic diversity, communication across the country remains open and unimpaired. Pattanayak says that if one draws a straight line between Kashmir and Kanyakumari and marks every five or ten miles then one will find that there is no break in communication between any two consecutive points. This is possible because of the local and regional level bilingualism in India.

In dominant monolingual societies language contact is associated with language shift. In such societies, bilingualism is a transitional matter from monolingual situation in native language to monolingual situation in the dominant contact language. In India minority languages in contact have tended to be maintained over generations. In India, language maintenance is the norms while in contact of several and the dominance languages. Such maintenance norms are supported by the multilingual ethos and the non-competing roles of languages in the lives of the common people. Though this is a norm and characteristic of Indian societal contact, the minority languages suffer from marginalization and negligence for the hierarchical nature of multilingualism in India. David Gradded opines, "Multilingualism becomes the norm of postmodernism". Again he defines, "Postmodernity is the age of the multilingual speaker".

In Indian context, multilingualism involves in different social interactions and different domains of daily life. Bilingualism and multilingualism are the



situations of the outcome of communities maintaining their languages. People maintain their languages not by rejecting the contact languages, but by linguistic accommodation. Adopting bilingualism and multilingualism is an adaptive strategy for individuals and communities and this effectively stabilize the relationship between individuals, communities and languages. Maintaining the mother tongues along with bilingualism and multilingualism at the individual and the community levels, social, psychological and educational level lead to increase the benefit of the minority ethnic groups. Sir George Grierson opined in his 'Linguistic Survey of India' that India enumerated 875 languages as languages in use. The Indian Constitution has recognized twenty two languages in the Eight Schedule as of May 2007. According to the 1971 census, the country has 1,652 languages belonging to five different language families: Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese and Semito-Hamitic. Hence, the subject of multiplicity of languages has become a matter of research for scholars in linguistics and languages in India.

The present study deals with the problems faced by the teachers in the ethnic group dominated arealower primary schools. The medium of instruction in these schools is Assamese, the regional language of the state whereas the home language of these minority group students differs from the medium of instruction at schools. As the home language and the medium of instructions at schools are different from each other, the situation leads to some difficulties in both the teaching-learning situations in these schools. This is the sole focal point of the study. Further studies can be carried out on some relevant aspects in different levels of education on the educational language policy of Assam.

## DISCUSSION

The investigator tries to focus on the language used in the lower primary schools of ethnic or minority group dominated areas in Assam. It is found that there is a gap between the teaching and the taught in some of the schools of such areas. The study tries to investigate the implementation of the policies of some committee which try to bridge the gap.

The sixth All India Educational Survey shows that only 41 languages are currently used in schools,

either as medium of instruction (MI) or as a school subject. This number has declined from 81 in 1970 to 67 in 1976, 58 in 1978, 44 in 1990, and 41 in 1998. The use of minor languages and the use of tribal languages as languages of teaching are declining very fast. Although the three-language formula recommends the use of the mother tongue or regional languages as the medium of instruction or as the first language in schools and as a school subject, but in practicality less than 1% of the tribal or minor ethnic group students get the opportunity to be educated in their mother tongues, mismatch between school language and home language leading to subtractive language development of these students. This is a problem to analyze and discuss for the balance of ethno linguistic diversity and for individual freedom.

Dr. C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar opines in favour of instruction being imparted in one's mother tongue until the secondary stage. The Indian democracy is a committed one with the determination of responsibility, duty and rights which each individual would enjoy for the growth of his personality and obligations towards the country and society.

Assamese, which is the regional language of the state, as the medium of instruction in the primary level schools in the minority and ethnic group dominated areas deprive students of their home language subtracting them from language development. The issues of language education policy are universal. Teachers and students of Assam have faced some problems because of the three-language policy in education. The three-language formula was the official policy of the government of India of 1957 which recommended the use of regional language or mother tongue as the first teaching-language for five years; Hindi in non-Hindi areas and any other language in Hindi areas as the second language for three years; and English as the third language subject from the third year onwards. This policy recommended regional language or mother tongue to be implemented as a medium of instructions (MI). Further, the distinction between regional languages and mother tongue was not clear. This led to forced imposition of the majority regional language on the minority and tribal language groups. This policy was applicable to the government



sponsored education only. The private educational institutions were free to introduce their own system in respect of languages.

In 1964 the three-language formula was modified. Hindi was no longer compulsory for non-Hindi areas, and English could be taught either in place of Hindi or as a foreign language. According to this modified formula, the three languages to be studied as subjects in school curriculum regardless of the medium of instructions: mother tongue or regional language; Hindi or English; and one modern Indian language not covered under the first two language categories, and not used as medium of instructions. In addition, for the tribal children this modification also proposed the use of the tribal language as the medium of teaching for the first two years and oral instructions in the regional language and use of regional language as medium of instructions from the third year onwards. The three-language policy under went several modifications, and different versions were applied depending on how the formula was interpreted in various states and school systems.

With respect to minority languages, a significant policy recommendation was made in The Ramamurti Committee Report. It recommended setting up minority-language-medium primary schools in the areas with at least 10% minority language speakers. It also suggested that having parallel sections in the same schools for instructions in the minority and majority medium so that the minority children are not to be segregated from the other children. In such areas it is recommended to appoint minority language speakers for teaching the minority children. But these recommendations mostly remained unexecuted.

In the language policy of Assam which is based on the Indian language policy differentiate the minority ethnic languages from the majority regional languages of the state. From the policy perspectives in India, and in practice, use of different languages in a succession of phases mainly with monolingual instruction through the medium of one language first, then through another, and even a third is sometimes considered as multilingual education. There are two types of multilingual education in

Assam and India: informal multilingual education and formal multilingual education.

In some schools, the medium of school instruction needs to be supplemented or supported by another language. The lesson may be read in the medium of school instruction and explained, discussed and clarified in another language particularly when the medium of instruction is not the mother tongue of some or all students.

Sometimes when teachers are not familiar with the students' mother tongue, mostly when tribal and ethnic group students are taught by non-tribal teachers, who do not know the students' home language, then the classroom interactions are being conducted in a local language. In such cases a simplified register is being informally used for classroom communications. In such situation the language of the majority student becomes as formal medium of instruction.

The medium of instruction is the majority language of the region or the state and other languages are taught as school subjects. These programs follow the three-language policy. But the implementation differs from state to state.

There are some issues regarding the status of languages in education policy. James Tollefson and Amy Tsui opine on the key issues of language policies in education (2004): medium of instruction policies; the gap between the pluralist discourse and the monolingual practice; the importance of resources; the relationship between ethno-linguistic diversity and social conflict; the potential rights in education; and the tension between global and local concerns.

Assam is a state of multiple languages. Assamese is the medium of instruction of the government aided schools and some of the private schools are taught in the state or regional language. The medium of instruction is English in most of the private schools in the state. There are some schools which are taught in Hindi and Bengali media. In the Bodoland territorial areas Bodo is the medium of instruction in schools.

The schools in these two tribes and ethnic groups dominated areas are having the lower primary schools where Assamese is the medium of instructions. The students of such schools belong to these tribes whose home language is different from



the language of the medium of instruction. Somewhere there is a language gap between the teachers and the students as some of the teachers do not belong to the students' communities. The instruction is given in Assamese which is neither the mother tongue nor the home language of the students. In such situations teachers have to use multilingualism as the medium of instruction in the schools. Partial bilingual education is the most convenient means of instruction in such schools. As the students of class I and II in these schools cannot follow the instructions in the regional language, teachers have to learn the language of the students to teach them in their own accord. Most of these teachers have to take help of the students of the upper classes of the school or from their colleagues and the elderly people of the village to learn the tribal and the ethnic languages.

The investigator found from the study that in the tea-tribe student schools, the teachers use Sadree language, the lingua-franca among the different tea-tribes. It is known fact that different tea-tribes in Assam have their own dialects and they have to use Assamese to communicate with the mainstream Assamese people and Sadree language to communicate among themselves. Teachers not speaking the tea garden languages have to learn this language to impart instructions in the first two classes in the lower primary schools. In the Mising students dominated schools also the same situation prevails. The teachers not speaking the missing language have to learn the language themselves to instruct students in these two classes. The method of instruction used by the non-Mising and non-tea-tribe teachers in these lower primary schools is, Assamese—>Mising/Sadree—>Assamese.

The method of instruction is a two way process as the teachers have to use both Assamese and the home language or the lingua-franca of the ethnic and the minority groups in the state. Some training for teachers may be helpful in such situations.

The difficulties in teaching-learning situations for the language gap between the teachers and the students can be bridged by the recommendation of the Ramamurti Committee Report. The study exposes the problem faced both by

the students and the teachers in such schools. But it is found from the study that the Ramamurti Committee Report is not being implemented by the Assam government for an effective teaching-learning situation in such lower primary schools.

The attitude of the teachers regarding the ethnic language is that the students to be taught in Assamese language so that after attending two years in schools the students of the ethnic groups will be able to understand the medium of instruction in Assamese. All the teachers belong to the ethnic communities opine to teach students in the regional language so that they can keep pace with the students from mainstream medium schools in the state. It is the opinion of these teachers that Assamese is an important language to learn in this modern and advanced global world. The knowledge of this state language can give opportunity for higher education, social status and better job options.

- (a) The investigator finds from the study that in the ethnic or minority student dominated schools, in the first two classes, students find difficulties to follow the instructions in Assamese.
- (b) Teachers who do not speak students' home language learn the language of the students from their colleagues, upper class students and villagers etc. for better communication with these small children.
- (c) The state language Assamese is an important language in this academic process.
- (d) State government is not implementing the policies to impart education to the ethnic and minority students in their mother tongue or home language.

## CONCLUSION

Multilingualism and bilingualism is an indispensable factor in the lower primary schools of Assam. Though Assamese is the regional language of the state and the medium of instruction is Assamese in state-run schools a difficult situation exists in the teaching-learning situations in the lower primary levels. It is an unavoidable language of instructions in the teaching-learning processes where Assamese is neither the mother tongue nor the home language of the Mising and the tea-tribe students of Assam.



These two groups of students along with the students whose mother-tongue is not Assamese face difficulties in the learning process. Teachers speaking Assamese as first language also face problems in teaching situation to these students.

Partial bilingual education is the solution in the lower primary classes in the Mising and the tea-tribe area students' schools. It is found that the three-language formula of using mother tongue in lower primary classes is yet to be implemented by the government. State government has an important role to play in this academic sector.

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