

## Tribal Languages and Mother Tongue-Based Education in India: Realities and Possibilities in Arunachal Pradesh

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### Abstract

India's language-in-education policy strives to promote mother tongue-based multilingual education in primary schools. However, children from minor or tribal language-speaking communities do not necessarily learn through their mother tongues; rather, the official languages of the states in India become synonymous with their mother tongue and are treated as their 'default' mother tongue. The attitudes and preferences of the people from tribal and minority language communities are some of the multiple complex reasons for such a gap between policy and practice. Therefore, despite the advantages of mother tongue-based education, people's attitudes have to be analysed before planning its implementation. This article reports the findings of a survey on social attitudes towards mother tongue-based education in the tribal majority state of Arunachal Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Tribal languages, mother tongue based multilingual education, language policy, attitudes, Arunachal Pradesh

### Introduction

Language, apart from mirroring individual human life and personality, reflects the thoughts, beliefs and culture of a speech community. In alignment with this inherent characteristic of language, the importance of language in education is undeniable. Echoing the voice of innumerable educationists of earlier years and the recommendation of previous policies, the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, reinstates the

need of mother tongue education for the conceptual clarity of young learners who will gather clear understanding of the knowledge inputs received in mother tongue, nurture them with their ideas and eventually contribute significantly to the domain of knowledge and to their real life. Although the heterogeneous, diverse, multilingual character of the Indian society attracts curious researchers across the globe, ironically only 22 languages in this multitude of language mines, receive the official status and are categorised as 'scheduled' languages (by virtue of being included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India which lists the official languages) while the rest are labelled as 'non-scheduled'. Most of the non-scheduled languages are tribal languages which are spoken by different scheduled tribes in the country. The tribal languages are spread all over the subcontinent, with a considerable concentration in the North-East, a number of which face the threat of extinction. Wurm (1993) maintains that any language is to be considered endangered if children do not learn it fully anymore or not at all. The best possible process of combating this threat and revitalising these languages will be the promotion of mother tongue education which will strategically expose the learners to their respective mother tongues and train them in using these languages both in academic and non-academic spheres. Eventually, these endangered languages are to be maintained.

### **Tribal Languages and Mother Tongue-Based Education in India**

Teaching learners in their mother tongue is not a novel concept in the Indian educational system, but it is implemented in selected regions where major scheduled languages are used. However, the use of mother tongue instructions in formal tribal institutional settings has so far been neglected. The Indian educational policy-makers recognise the requirement of home languages of the learners as the effective mode of instruction at schools. However, the reality differs from the conceptual statements. Meganathan (2015) maintains that the three-language formula does not ensure the use of tribal languages in education. For tribal children in India, the official languages of the states or the regional language become synonymous with their mother tongue (Meganathan, 2015; Mohanty, 2010; Nandi, 2012). According to Panda (2009), these state languages are treated as the "default mother tongue of all children and tribal and minority languages are stigmatised as dialects" (p. 122). Thus, though theoretically recognised, language planning in India failed

to implement the 'mother tongue-based multilingualism' at the practical level, particularly in the context of tribal children. There are multiple complex reasons for such a gap between policy and practice, such as half-hearted attempts at implementation, absence of a script, multiple varieties of tribal languages, non-availability of content for producing materials and sometimes the attitudes and preferences of the people from tribal and minority language communities. In certain contexts, often people from the tribal communities themselves prefer to study through the regional language or English. The preference for English as the medium of instruction among tribal learners is highlighted by Meganathan (2015) who maintains that English as an instructive mode is demanded by the tribal and the minority group of learners, for making themselves equipped for the present economic activities. Further, there is a lack of clear planning for language transition (L1→L2→L3) in the school curriculum (Pattanayak, 2001; Groff, 2007). The problem confuses the minority language-speaking learners and their language performance is affected. The complexity of the situation necessitates the need to scrutinise the attitudes and perceptions of people towards the language-in-education policy. The objective of this study is to investigate the social attitudes and preferences regarding language(s) of education in the tribal majority state of Arunachal Pradesh with an array of tribal languages.

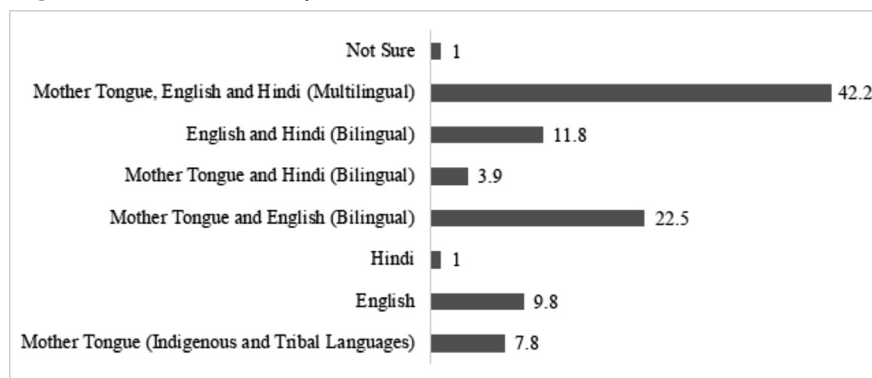
### **Sociolinguistic Context of Arunachal Pradesh**

Arunachal Pradesh is the eastern-most state of India. Indigenous tribes constitute about 70 per cent of its population. A linguistic diversity hotspot, it harbors numerous languages and celebrates their varieties. The exact number of indigenous languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh is difficult to ascertain; however, experts believe that around 50 to 60 distinct languages/dialects and numerous sub-dialects exist in the state, and except for only a few languages, almost all of them do not have a script. Some indigenous languages of the state are endangered, while many of the languages have only a few thousand speakers. Due to the diverse nature of the state, with many ethnic communities and languages being mutually unintelligible, the state has adopted English as its official language. However, Hindi serves as the *lingua franca* or link language for inter-tribe communication, social interaction and transactions. When it comes to the education domain, English serves as

the medium of instruction throughout the state. Consequently, English is the dominant language in formal settings, and students generally acquire competency in English more than in any other language. Hindi is also introduced as part of the three-language formula, and efforts are being made to introduce the indigenous languages in education as a third language from Class VI to Class VIII; however, such measures are still nascent. In recent times, voices and concerns have been raised throughout the world for promoting mother tongue in education. In this light, the multilingual context of Arunachal Pradesh presents a huge potential along with enormous challenges. Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate people's attitudes towards the prospect of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction or introducing it as a language subject in schools. A policy designed considering the attitudes, aspirations and personal preferences of the people is more effective and successful. Moreover, if the attitudes are contrary to the policy, there is a need to address these attitudes for the effective implementation of language planning.

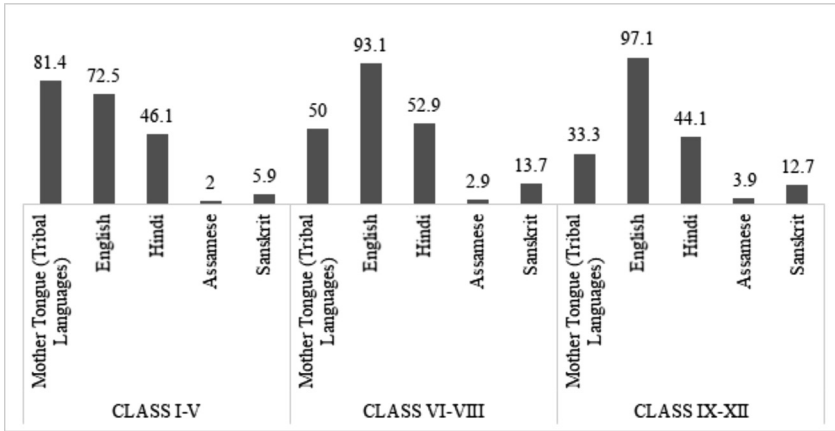
### **The Survey: Analysis and Discussion**

The study adopted a descriptive survey method as per the objectives of the research. The primary instrument used was a structured questionnaire. A total of 102 respondents from diverse tribes and linguistic, occupational and gender groups participated in the study. The design of the questionnaire is based on related literature and existing surveys (e.g. Ellili-Cherif & Alkhateeb, 2015; Tonio & Ella, 2019; Villalba, 2013). The questionnaire was structured as a Google Form and distributed among the participants via online digital platforms. The data was collected during the month of January 2022. Percentages based on frequency count were used to analyse the data. The findings are tabulated using bar charts and tables and are followed by a discussion as presented below.

**Figure 1:** *Ideal Medium of Instruction*

The division of responses in Figure 1 reflects an interesting display of changing perceptions of the ideal Medium of Instruction (MOI), especially regarding multilingualism in education. Generally, the mother tongue is considered as the ideal MOI and in recent times English has also become the preferred MOI in diverse contexts. However, the responses reflected in Figure 1 demonstrate a shift in such attitudes as a significant section of respondents (42.2 per cent) reported a multilingual mode comprising the Mother Tongue, English, and Hindi as the most ideal medium of instruction. 22.5 per cent of the respondents claimed that the ideal MOI is the Mother Tongue and English (Bilingual), while 11.8 per cent of participants consider English and Hindi (Bilingual) as the ideal MOI. Further, the data reveals that the monolingual mode of instruction is the least preferred MOI. Out of the three monolingual options, English is considered as the ideal MOI by 9.8 per cent of the respondents, while solo mother tongue medium was preferred by 7.8 per cent of the respondents. Overall, the responses highlight the perceived importance of English and its role in education as the respondents have preferred a multilingual or bilingual mode only with the inclusion of English. Thus, the data presented in Figure 1 amply reveals that the perception towards a mother tongue based multilingual mode of education is gaining ground, but only with the inclusion of English.

The data presented in Figure 2 highlights the language(s) preferred to be taught as a subject at the lower primary, upper primary, and secondary levels.

**Figure 2:** Language(s) Preferred as a Subject at Different Levels

As evident in Figure 2, the majority of the respondents (81.4 per cent) prefer Tribal Mother Tongue to be taught as a subject at the lower primary level (Class I-V) followed by English with 72.5 per cent and Hindi with 46.1 per cent. In the upper primary level, English (93.1 per cent) is the most desirable language to be taught as a subject. Moreover, a significant number of respondents also preferred Mother Tongue (50 per cent) and Hindi (52.9 per cent). While at the secondary level, English (97.1 per cent) yet again continues to be the most preferred language. This reflects the status of English as the language of higher education. Interestingly the preference for learning Mother Tongue (33.3 per cent) and Hindi (44.1 per cent) at the secondary level is lower compared to the similar preference count at primary levels. A significant number of respondents prefer Sanskrit to be taught at the upper primary and secondary levels as it is presently introduced as a third language in several schools of Arunachal Pradesh. Assamese, which was the MOI in the schools of Arunachal Pradesh when it was a part of the erstwhile undivided Assam is preferred by only a few respondents.

Tables 1-3 below present the responses regarding the attitudes towards mother tongue-based education recorded in the statement forms and presented on an adapted version of Likert scale.

**Table 1:** Attitudes Toward Mother Tongue as MOI

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Dis-agree</i>	<i>Can't Say</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Mother tongue is the best medium of instruction for children	1.0%	5.9%	25.5%	41.2%	26.5%
Teachers can express themselves clearly in the mother tongue	3.9%	13.7%	22.5%	42.2%	17.6%
Students can understand information/concepts easily in their mother tongue	0.0%	10.8%	17.6%	41.2%	30.4%
Teaching through the mother tongue will make lessons interesting to school children	1.0%	7.8%	20.6%	46.1%	24.5%
Mother tongue-based education will enable parents to engage in their child's education	1.0%	4.9%	10.8%	48.0%	35.3%

As revealed in Table 1, the majority of the respondents consider the Mother Tongue to be the best MOI for children. Consensus can be observed when it comes to the Mother Tongue bearing a positive effect in education in terms of teachers expressing themselves easily in the Mother Tongue, learners understanding concepts easily, and lessons becoming interesting to school children. Further, most of the respondents have also accepted that teaching in the Mother Tongue will enable parents to participate in the education of their children.

**Table 2:** Socio-cultural Impact of MOI

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Dis-agree</i>	<i>Can't Say</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The mother tongue is vital to sustain the culture, identity and existence of the tribal communities	1.0%	2.9%	4.9%	19.6%	71.6%
Using the tribal mother tongues as the medium of instruction is important to maintain the language	2.0%	4.9%	10.8%	30.4%	52.0%

As a result of English medium instruction, children are estranged from their cultural roots	7.8%	23.5%	16.7%	33.3%	18.6%
As a result of English medium instruction, tribal children are losing proficiency in their mother tongues	4.9%	22.5%	18.6%	29.4%	24.5%

Table 2 shows the socio-cultural implications of using the Mother Tongue in education. Regarding the issue of sustenance of tribal identity and culture, the Mother Tongue seems to play an important part. This is corroborated in the statement “the mother tongue is vital to sustain the culture, identity and existence of the tribal communities” wherein majority of the respondents are in agreement. The majority also acknowledged the importance of using the tribal mother tongues as the MOI to maintain the language. A mixed response can be observed on whether English medium instruction leads to loss of culture and language. Although the majority of the respondents agree that children are estranged from their cultural roots and are losing proficiency in their mother tongues, the opinion is divided and fractured as an equally significant number of respondents either disagree or are not sure about such negative impact of English medium instruction.

**Table 3:** Perceived Limitations of Mother Tongue-based Education

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Can't Say	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instruction in the mother tongue, instead of English, will create obstacles in higher education	5.9%	19.6%	22.5%	26.5%	25.5%
Mother tongue-based education will reduce the employability and job prospects of the learners	4.9%	18.6%	23.5%	35.3%	17.6%
Mother tongue-based education will lower the quality of education	15.7%	31.4%	26.5%	19.6%	6.9%
Using the mother tongue as medium of instruction will lead to poor proficiency in English	9.8%	27.5%	19.6%	28.4%	14.7%
The indigenous / tribal languages are not adequately developed for formal education	6.9%	11.8%	17.6%	43.1%	20.6%



Table 3 presents the opinion of the respondents towards various associated dynamics of mother tongue-based education where questions related to employability and practicability of mother tongue education are attempted to be understood. A majority of the respondents seems to agree that instruction in the Mother Tongue, instead of English, will create obstacles in higher education. A large section of the respondents also agrees that mother tongue-based education will reduce or restrict the employability and job prospects of the learners. However, it is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents believes that the use of the Mother Tongue in teaching will not lower the quality of education while the response to the statement “using mother tongue as medium of instruction will lead to poor proficiency in English” is fractured.

### Conclusion

The overall findings of the survey highlight the need to revisit the existing language-in-education policy adopted in the context of tribal languages. Instead of striving towards implementing solo Mother Tongue medium teaching at the primary level, the focus needs to be put on a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTBME) that fosters proficiency in the mother tongue, regional, national, and international languages. MTBME can help contribute to the revival/maintenance of the country’s tribal languages. Though the respondents welcome the promotion of mother tongue-based multilingualism, they appear apprehensive about language transition, language proficiency for higher education and language competency for employability. Through workshops and demonstrative short films, the stakeholders may be shown a way to grip the situation and bring about an attitudinal consensus in favor of the mission. It will smoothen the path for implementing MTBME in Arunachal Pradesh. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the shift towards MTBME can be initiated through the production of multilingual instructional materials and their use as supplementary resources within the existing curricular framework.

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