By bringing out this volume, NFSC has posed a question to folklorists about the role they play for the non-literate society they work with. A.K. Ramanujan has aspired to connect folklorists with educationists to explore the process of cognition system in folklore. That is still ignored in our educational domain. I am grateful to the authors for their kind contribution to the Indian Folklife. I am thankful to Mr. M.D. Muthukumarswamy for kindly offering me this opportunity to choose a topic like multilingual education for indigenous communities for the NFSC newsletter to strengthen the efforts of policymakers, theoreticians and practitioners of indigenous education in India and outside India.

Endnotes

1 National Curriculum Framework 2005, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 2005

Linguistic Genocide: Tribal Education in India

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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 language genocide.

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 of 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 marginalisation. It can also often result in serious physical harm, e.g. in residential schools, and as a long-term result of marginalisation - 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

... 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 mega biodiversity 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 the children concerned, 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 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 coordinator is Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra. Sixteen 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, Alelu Gebre Yohannes (22 January 2007). Final Report. 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.

UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Applications for MLE from Nepal to India and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper explores how multilingual education (MLE) programmes for indigenous peoples in Nepal and worldwide can benefit from adapting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into their national language and planning structures. In particular it notes how Articles 13 and 14 can be used to design MLE programs which are controlled from the bottom up by local indigenous communities. The author is Professor of Communication at Shonan Institute of Technology in Fujisawa, Japan. He was the Chief Technical Advisor to the Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports for MLE from January 2007 to May 2008.

Introduction

In her article in this issue, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas correctly argues that teaching indigenous children in languages other than their mother tongue prevents education and can be seen as genocide and a crime against humanity. In support of this, she cites numerous international human rights documents, expert papers and reports, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [Art. 29], and the United Nation’s 1948 Genocide Convention. Obviously, these are all necessary arguments for promoting MLE programmes among indigenous and minority language peoples. But is this argument sufficient? Particularly if it does not address the issue of education itself — of what education is for?

Even the best MLE programmes—if they are based on assimilative top-down educational standards that reflect the norms of the dominant culture—may fail to do the job. Indigenous peoples also need to have the right to control both the teaching content and methodology of their children’s education. Here, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDPR) may be of added help.

Although a non-binding resolution—with the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand voting against—it has been hailed by many as the most powerful instrument to date for indigenous rights worldwide. Ways of implementing UNDRIP dominated discussions at the 8th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held from late April to early May, 2008, at UN headquarters in New York. Native Hawaiian activist Mililani Trask received a loud ovation from seated delegates and observers at a full session when she stated that UNDRIP is the single-most valuable instrument indigenous people have to reclaim their rights.