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The Impact of Medium of Instruction on Dropout Rates and Academic Performance: A Case Study of Tribal Students in Wayanad District, Kerala

Babuji K R[1]

Abstract- The average schooling duration of Indian children is 6.7 years. It is observed that 47% of students who start in the first standard drop out before completing 10th grade. According to the 2019-20 UDISE data, more than 8 crore children are not enrolled in any educational institution, meaning that one in every four children has never attended school. Despite Kerala having the best education system in India based on statistics and studies, problems still persist. Therefore, our study aims to examine the education system in Kerala from the perspective of the most underprivileged community, specifically children from tribal groups.

In India, out of the 1652 languages spoken, only 47 languages are used as a medium of instruction. Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on English rather than regional languages. The impact of this shift to English as the medium of instruction on the most marginalised sections of society remains a subject of debate.

Thus, we are conducting research to understand how the medium of instruction in schools affects the dropout rate in a specific area of Wayanad district. We believe that the medium of instruction is one of the reasons for the poor academic performance of students from tribal language backgrounds and contributes to their high dropout rates. The study by Jeena Shelly, titled "Adjustment of Tribal Students in Schools: Problems and Perspectives," conducted in collaboration with MG University, reveals that 66% of students face difficulties in understanding the medium of instruction. The Kirtads report of 2020 also supports this finding. All of this evidence highlights the significance of our study.

Keywords: dropout rates, medium of instruction, tribal students, education system, education.

I. Introduction

Education is essential for the advancement of society. It has a vital role in molding an individual, thus leading to the creation of society. Because of this societal impact, almost all societies throughout history have kept a vigilant eye on the kind of education provided to their future generations. According to famous author Gilbert K. Chesterton: education consists of the soul of the whole society, and it's been passed down to each and every generation. It's been continuing to this date. Now the state has taken over the duty of supporting and regulating education for the creation of better citizens.

When we take the case of India, Indian governments have made tremendous effort for the progress of education since independence. They have taken keen interest in reforming education through various programmes called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rastreey Madyamik Siksha Abhiyan and through various committees and their recommendations such as University Education Commission 1948 - 49 or Dr. S. Radhakrishnan Commission, Secondary Education Commission (1952 - 53), University Grants Commission (1953 - 1956), Kothari Commission or The Education Commission (1964-66) etc.[2] Also through constitutional provisions such as The right of children to free and compulsory education Act of 2009.

Despite all these efforts India could only reach 72.98 % of literacy. And only 2 states among 28 states could reach a literacy rate of more than 90%. Even though Kerala holds the first place with 94% of literacy, tribal literacy in Kerala is less than 75%. As all other sectors, in the education field also the least privileged get the least benefits of the system. So in this paper I would like to analyse the education among tribal populations in Kerala.

II. Education at Wayanad District

For the case study I choose different hamlets and schools[3] in Wayanad district of Kerala. Kerala the state of Indian Union that came into form on 1956 november 1. According to 2011 census, the tribal population of kerala is 1.5% of the total population (4,84,839 people)[4]. About half of this tribal population has made the interiors of Wayanad their home i.e.

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[1] I extend my gratitude to the Hume Centre for Ecology and Wildlife Biology, Wayanad for giving a research opportunity on the Education Programme. Furthermore I thank Dr. Suma T R, Head of Education Programme and Manojkumar A, Lead of Education Programme. I Extend my gratitude toward InsideOut Performance Collective and Devendranath Sankaranarayanan Actor, Performance Researcher, Theatre practitioner and Acting Coach for the successful direction of Eco theatre workshops.

[2] Rahi, Sandipta, and Subhasish Sen. "Critical Analysis of Different Committees and Commissions on Education." *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology*, vol. 3, no. 3, Apr. 2023, https://doi.org/ISSN (Online) 2581-9429.

[3] Name of the hamlets and schools are not mentioned due to ethical concerns

[4] "Population Statistics 2011 Census | Scheduled Tribes Development Department." Www.stdd.kerala.gov.in, www.stdd.kerala.gov.in/population-statistics-2011-census.

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1,51,443 people. The tribals were the original inhabitants of Wayanad region. Other groups of people started migrating to Wayand because of the interventions of Britishers. They opened roads to this region and commercial plantations began to sprout, there occurred a migration of settlers to this region. During the 1940s this migration enhanced tremendously, displacing the aborigines or adivasis of the area. The tribes lost their land and dwindled in numbers and now they constitute only 20 percent of the total population of the district.

The native *Adivasis* of the district have divided into various sects namely *Paniyas*, *Kurumas*, *Adiyars*, *Kurichyas*, *Ooralis*, *Kattunaikkans* and *Uraali Kurumas*. The study is conducted among the students of one of these tribal sects, *Paniyas*. *Paniya* tribe consists of a larger population in Wayanad district and in Kerala. Also it has the largest population among all tribes of Kerala. They inhabited the regions of Wayanad district and the adjoining Kozhikode, Kannur, Malappuram districts and Gudalur taluks of Nilgiri. The total population of the Paniyas in Wayanad district as per 2011 census is 88450. They have a literacy rate of 63.2%, in which male literacy rate is 69.9%, female literacy rate is 57.0%[5].

The study focuses on the low performance and dropout rates among the tribal students from Paniya community. As already mentioned, Kerala has one of the best education systems in India. The dropout rate till 10th standard is nearly 0%. Because there is no competition or filtering taking place till 10th. But as per the hamlet facilitator, the education after 10th and students reappearing for the 10th exam are very less. It's been said that students after 8th grade don't show much enthusiasm for attending school. It is important to ask the question of why are all these happening.

III. Dropouts and Educational Backwardness Due to Medium of Instruction

Dropout Rate[6] means Proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given level at a given school year who are no longer enrolled at any grade in the following school year. The following identity is maintained while preparing the estimates of promotion rate, repetition rate and dropout rate: Each of Promotion Rate, repetition Rate and Dropout Rate is non negative and Promotion Rate + Repetition Rate + Dropout Rate = 100 in case of kerala its 5.5 and its shown in the secondary (9-10) level according to the data published by Ministry of education (2021-2022). District-wise Dropout Ratio among scheduled Tribal community students in Wayanad, Kerala in 2021-22 is 0.25%. according to statistics report of Ministry of Education of 2011-2012[7] states the reason for dropouts are lack of interest in studies, Financial Constraints, Engaged in Economic Activities, Engaged in Domestic Activities, distance between school and house, Inability to cope-up with studies, Completed desired level/Class, Marriage, Timings of educational Institution not suitable, unfamiliar language/medium of Instruction, Inadequate number of teachers, unsatisfactory quality of teachers, unfriendly atmosphere at school, preparation for competitive examination and others. Additional reasons for Girls student's drop-out are unavailability of female teachers, unavailability of girl's toilet, etc.

Here in this study, from all the reasons for dropouts I have taken childrens interest, engages in domestic activities, Unable to Cope-up with studies, language/medium of instruction and un-friendly atmosphere of school under my study area. Because it is somehow related to the influence of Medium or Language of instruction, which is a less explored area of research and more measures need to be taken to overcome this language barrier.

It is important to have an opportunity for a person to learn things in their own mother tongue. Indian constitution Article 350A[8] asks for providing facilities for instruction in mother-tongue at primary stage. It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups; and the President may issue such directions to any State as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision of such facilities. According to a world bank study[9] Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This paper discusses the benefits of use of first language instruction. The results of benefits from first language instruction discussed are: increased access and equity; improved learning outcomes; reduced repetition and dropout rates; socio-cultural benefits and lower overall costs. We can clearly understand this finding is correct in the case of Paniya Community in Wayanad.

IV. Impacts of Medium of Instruction

According to my viewpoint, all languages apart from their own mother tongue is nothing but a tool for

[5] Scheduled tribes of kerala, Census 1961-20114. Development studies wing Kerala institute for research training and development studies of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, 2017

[6] Unified district information system for education unified district information system for education

[7] Educational statistics at a glance government of India ministry of human resource development department of school education & literacy statistics division, New Delhi, 2018

[8] Nic, L. P. (n.d.). Constitutional Provision | Government of India, Ministry of Education. https://www.education.gov.in/article-350a

[9] Bender,Penelope A.; Dutcher, Nadine; Klaus,David A.; Shore, Jane; Tesar, Charlie.
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communication, a medium of conveying our ideas to one another. Language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings. So the language is not only the letters or alphabets. Also the arts, signs, cultural activities, life styles, etc. should be considered as a language when we talk about language and medium of instruction.

So, The language of students is not merely the words used in the teaching learning materials in the classroom, but also appreciation of their language and culture. But now we can see that there is no such cultural appreciation happening in the educational system, rather they are compelled to study in the regional language Malayalam or so called world language English. The complete avoidance of their mother tongue Paniya language and over appreciation of other languages as language of knowledge make the tribal students confused, less motivated, less confident, feeling inferior etc. which ultimately let the students feel the school as an alien place.

The second thing is language is not merely a communicative device. It also has a cultural and social background. So if we could see through that cultural lens, then only we can understand those children, their skills, their abilities, their understanding level, their performance level etc.

V. Arts and Cultural Relationship with Education

For this we use the language of Art and performance rather than completely relying on languages like English or Malayalam. One case study was conducted during a forest walk activity in a students' workshop. After the forest walk our team asked the students to draw anything that they have seen on the walk. From this activity they could provide different aspects of their forest in their own way. From this we can understand that the students will be showing their observation skill or other skills at its maximum when it is expressed in their own ways. Most important fact is that rather than excluding these minority language speaking students and taking separate classes in their own languages, the classroom should be a space where every person can speak their own language and share their own culture with pride. For this at least grade 1 to 4 should have an open classroom rather than closed four walls, language of drawing, songs or any other arts as a medium of instruction. Even if you take a small village in Wayanad we could see multilingual languages in tribal communities itself, rather than focusing on the words and letters, we should shift our focus to teaching them how to express. Here comes the crucial role of mentor teacher.

For making such an inclusive classroom teachers should be able to use these multiple languages fluently. And the knowledge of the surrounding like scientific names could be transferred by using the words in their own languages without degrading them. The teacher could also tell them that the so-called standard language is not only a good language, their Language also matters.

And we also notice that the classes separately held for the minority language student are very different from the "mainstream" classes both in content and attitude. This also makes the students feel that the majority language speaking students and minority language speaking students are different from each other. So from this the students feel an inferiority about their language and culture and students tend to hide their identity. Thus the institution of a mentor teacher is a very positive idea, and also has this negative side.

The mother tongue of a person is not only a talking language or alphabets or even only a writing tool it's a part of culture. A person's mother tongue is part of their day to day activity, understanding, thinking, observing, analysing everything related to them. From this we can understand that knowledge making, emotional manifestation, creation of ideas or concepts are processes through one's own mother tongue. So when a new language is introduced to them, they will use the assistance of their mother tongue to understand that foreign language. It shows how important the medium of teaching is to a child.

In the case of tribal communities, they even start their primary and pre primary education in an alien language. In Wayanad, the majority of the tribal students (66.2%)[10] are having problems in understanding the language of instruction in schools. Here most of the teachers are from non-tribal backgrounds. So the style and pronunciation of the language (slang) will be very different from that of language, which students have not had an exposure to. It is not easy for the students from the tribal category to follow these slangs and to understand things. 81.3% of the students from tribal communities are facing difficulty in understanding lessons. Language is the major barrier for them. Some of the students say that they feel more difficulty in understanding lessons in English. The method of teaching and the difficulty in understanding the language of the teachers are the reasons for this.

Apart from this medium of instruction, it shouldn't go unnoticed that the concepts and examples in the textbook are alien to tribal students. So it is evident that the concept and intellectual surroundings of school and textbooks should be relatable to students. Then only the students from marginalised communities feel that they are also a part of the whole system of education and to understand the concepts clearly. For

[10] Jeena Shelly, "Adjustment of Tribal Students in Schools: Problems and Perspectives," SSRG International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, vol. 4, no. 6, pp. 5-8, 2017. Crossref, https://doi.org/10.14445/23942703/IJHSS-V4I6P102

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example, the arts that were mentioned in the school education system don't give space to the tribal arts, rather it only talks about the art form that is taken or owned by the mainstream population. So the students from minority communities, their knowledge, systems, customs and beliefs are excluded from the education system. According to the hamlet facilitator, this exclusion causes disinterest among students. This led to the dropout of students after the period of compulsory education.

VI. Conclusion

In kerala there is a strong collective notion that English is the Language of knowledge, language of development, language of job security etc. In addition to that English became the language of power, language of judiciary. This essentially makes a division between students who studied in Malayalam medium and English medium. If we take the case of tribal students in this scenario, they are double marginalised. Because there is a complete avoidance of their mother tongue as a medium of instruction. So they need to be expert in Malayalam, then only they can learn English which is explained or taught using the language assistance of Malayalam language. So the effort doubled.

To assist tribal students overcome their language barrier, mentor teachers are appointed. This method does not seem to be successful. because children from various tribal groups may be present in a class, and they will get a teacher who is fluent in one of the tribal languages. As a result, despite government actions, students were unable to learn in their mother tongue. Some schools even have mentor teachers who are fluent in tribal languages that are not the language of students' of that school or area. On the contrary, If the tribal students were given separate classes, that makes a division between the tribal and non-tribal students.

As already mentioned, the medium of instruction is completely different from the mother tongue. In addition to this, the teaching learning method also has this disunity with students' environment and culture. The children who lived close to the environment are restricted to a four wall classroom in schools. This becomes a problem for students. and when the same students are exposed to nature and in an open classroom they perform better than in a traditional classroom. They achieve the learning objectives very quickly. and in an environment where students do not fear to express themselves in their own language, they are more creative and productive. So in a single sentence, it would be a revolution in the field of tribal education if we could make school a safe space where students are not afraid or ashamed of their language and identity, where they could express their feelings and thoughts fearlessly.

From the case studies conducted in the various Eco-theatre workshops[11] and hamlet level creative workshops, it is evident that the tribal children have a tremendous knowledge about the environment they live in, organism and ecosystem present there. but the academic institutions are unable to tap and appreciate this magnificent knowledge system. As a result of their habitat the tribal students have developed a skill of observation. but when it comes to presenting their knowledge and observation they feel inferior because of lower language proficiency in Malayalam and English. and they are afraid to express in their own language because of the social construction that their mother tongue is not a civilised language. From the observation it is noticed that the students are less likely to understand even the familiar concepts around their surroundings when it is taught in an unfamiliar language and in a four walled classroom than an open space. Because even the achievers in the classroom are observed to have better observation and communication skills when exposed to a linguistically and environmentally comfortable space for them.

For example, in our case study the students were given a task of drawing the route map to their home. They didn't draw a usual simple route map, rather they drew the root with great details such as trees, posters, birds etc. usually seen in that route. And in the Eco-theatre workshop students were taken for a forest walk without any instruction. So the students enjoyed the walk by playing, taking pictures, having friendly conversations etc. After coming back from the walk they were asked to draw the route map of the path they walked. Despite being a new path, the children drew a route map with details of trees, birds etc they have seen in the path. This clearly shows the observation skill of the students.

When the case study is conducted by asking students to express their thoughts and feelings in the form of drawing, posters, dramas etc. Even the students who were silent in the class were very active and produced stunning ideas. it shattered the notion of tribals being intellectually backward. This shows the necessity of having a totally different approach for teaching-learning atmosphere.

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