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The Right to Mother Tongue-Based Education in Tribal India: A Comparative Perspective

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International human rights law like the UN Resolution A/RES/61/266 calls upon Member States “to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world” and education systems have a critical role in realising this right. India’s constitution protects the rights of linguistic minorities and Section 29(2) (f) of India’s Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 states that “medium of instructions shall, as far as practicable, be in the child’s mother tongue”. Its National Curriculum Framework lays down a three-language formula and emphasises the importance of imparting primary education in the mother tongue. While India’s legal framework protects linguistic rights, 191 (mainly tribal) languages in India are endangered and India’s students continue to be educated in a medium they do not understand. Instruction in schools is usually in the majority state language, a trend complicated by the growth of English. Furthermore, state governments determine the medium of instruction in schools in India. As a result, the extent and modalities of the realisation of language rights vary significantly from state to state.

The present paper examines the language policies of some of India’s tribal states through a human rights lens and identifies some positive interventions to support mother tongue-based education in the public education system. It ends with some recommendations for making India’s education system more linguistically inclusive.