The language factor and the impact of the Gothra Bandhu project: a case study of Thirunelly village, India
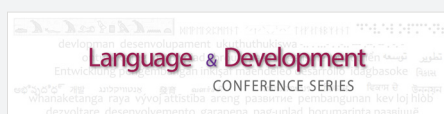
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Introduction

Kerala, which tops in the literacy tables in India, offers a dissenting view to neo-liberal economic models with its distinguished Kerala Model development. The high literacy rate and healthcare have resulted in its growth of the Human Development Index (HDI) that can be compared to that of developed nations. According to the SSA[1] Wayanad unit, there were 1,140 Adivasi children dropped out of schools in 2016–17 and 1,331 in 2015–16. The present government implemented a project called Gothra Bandhu in June 2017 with the aim of strengthening school-going Tribal children by appointing tribal youths as mentor teachers for communicating and teaching in their own language, and therefore creating tribal-friendly schools. This paper, based on a research study, is an attempt to find out the impact of the Gothra Bandhu project and the role of language in connection with the dropout among tribal students in Thirunelly village.

The project has been implemented in 241 schools of Wayanad with mentors from Adiya, Paniya, Kattunaikka and Urali tribes. Mentors are used to assist tribal students in lower primary, especially for students in first standard, to learn better in school with the help of their mother tongue. Our study was designed to find the impact of the Gotra Bandhu project in Thirunelly, a tribal-dominated village in Wayanad. It was conducted across seven schools in seven wards of Thirunelly where mentors had been appointed. Across two months, the approach was primary research based on in-depth interviews of project mentors, teachers, parents, students, ST (Scheduled Tribe) promoters and local historians along with participant observations. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents, owing to limitations in accessibility to the remote regions, and permission obtained from the police department, as location of study comes under areas affected by left-wing extremism. This paper attempts to provide the reader with a general overview of the region and about the tribes of the region, their culture and language. It then provides an analysis of the project and of the Alternative School System that was put in place initially to resolve the problem of tribal dropouts.

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[1] Indian education programme launched in 2000 making free and compulsory education for the children between the ages of six to 14.

Tribes of Thirunelly

Thirunelly is a tribal-dominated village in the Wayanad district of Kerala, at the Kerala-Karnataka border. As per the census of 2011, the total population of the village was 12,878, of which 6,746 belong to Scheduled Tribes, which constitutes 52.38 per cent of the total population (Census Report of Kerala, 2011). Adiya, Paniya, Kattunaikka, Urali kuruma and Kurichia are the tribal groups who lives in the village. Adiya themselves like to be known as *Ravuller*, which was their tribe name. Adiyas were supposed to keep six feet (adi) distance from the upper castes to avoid pollution, hence their name became Adiya. They were the slaves of landlords and involved in agrarian works. Adiya were staying in groups near the land of landlord, and which is known as 'kunt'[2]. The landlords used to sell and exchange Adiyas during Valliyoorkavu Ulsavam[3]. Coffee planters began to settle in Wayanad in the fifties and they purchased the land with the paniyas living on it, who were practically slaves of the land owners (Thurston, 2013). *Pani* means work, therefore paniya means workers; they were the workers of coffee planters. Kattunaikka used to live in dense forest and hilly terrain and they were lesser exposed to outsiders. The name kattunaikka derived from *Kaadu* (forest) and *nayakkan* (leader), therefore 'leader of the forest' (Singh, 1994). Hunting, fishing, collection of honey and forest produces are the traditional occupations of Kattunaikka.

Urali Kuruma has a history of struggle against the British Empire. They are traditional artisans involved in crafting bamboo products, basket making and pottery making. They used to live in groups in order to guard themselves from wild animals. Kurichias were the warriors of King Pazhassi who fought against British Empire. Kurichia themselves divided into two, Jati Kurichia and Kurichia. Jati Kurichia believe that they would get polluted by the approach of other tribes and they are known as the Brahmins among tribes (Thurston, 2013). They are considered as the 'developed' group among Adivasis due to their living standard and white-collar jobs (Singh, 1994).

[2] An Adiya term used to refer a group of people who live together.

[3] A festival where landlords come along with their slaves and sell or exchange them with other landlords once a year

Culture and language

The concept of 'tribe' emerged from a political situation, which involved the dominance of colonisers, colonial power and industrialisation. Such groups became known as 'folk' from primitive and pre-literate, tribal societies (Channa, 2008). Tribes are often considered as 'others'. As a result, 'mainstream' society has been trying to assimilate them instead of involving them in a process of national integration. The tribes make their own cultural boundaries in order to keep themselves separated from outsiders. They have their own cultural practices, language system, dress and food patterns, and do not want to assimilate with anything apart from this. While non-tribal people come to their living area, Kattunaikka tribes used to run and hide from incomers. There is an assumption that tribes are isolated and non-tribes are mainstream people. However, tribes are not at all isolated. In reality, they simply do not want to assimilate with the so-called mainstream. Channa (2008) points out that the concept of 'mainstream' originated in Indian Anthropology in the post-independence era, as part of the integration of tribes. The concept was synonymous to 'national culture' and it seemed like a universalistic approach. 'National culture' itself is a hegemonic concept and it would always make supreme non-tribes or the so-called 'mainstream society'. For some, the existing concept of 'mainstream' is not only inclusive, it is also elitist.

The adoption of Dravidian languages causes the decline of tribal languages, but it is the natural result of culture change and cultural progress (Fuchs, 1982). There will be no cultural progress, he suggests, if a community loses its language, and no other language, he asserts, can replace the mother tongue. He further states that the tribes who have given up their language now speak a language of people who have superior culture. He points that the tribal culture is considered to be inferior and thus they tend to adopt others. One of the respondents of our study told us that: 'We have been speaking Kattunaikkan basha[4] from our childhood and it have not changed. Our language is neither a dialect of Kannada nor a dialect of Malayalam, we have our own language which is given by our ancestors'.

The language of Adiya is Adiya bhasha and also known as Ravula basha, which is a dialect of Kannada (Singh, 1994). The language of Paniya is a degraded Malayalam and they also speak Kanarese (Thurston, 2013). Kattunaikan speak Kattunaikan dialect, which is close to Kannada, and Urali kuruma speak Kuruman basha, which is a dialect of Kannada (Singh, 1994). According to KS Singh (1994), the Kurichia speak Malayalam and use Malayalam scripts, but, in fact, Kurichias have their own language known as Kurichia basha. However, they also speak Malayalam. The study conducted by the Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies (2003) says that the language of Kattunnaika is very close to Kannada and the Paniya, Kurichia, Kuruma and Adiya speak variations of Malayalam. During the interview, 'Nanu', a scholar of tribal language who knows almost all tribal language in Thirunelly opined that:

Tribal languages have not changed, tribal languages are neither Malayalam nor Kannada; it have originated as a result of Adivasi- nature relationship. The adoption of words from other languages have also not taken place but new words were born in tribal languages; for instance, they say 'ushkoolu' instead of school, which is neither Malayalam nor Kannada.

[4] Basha means language both in tribal languages and Malayalam.

According to Fuchs (1982), tribal men are more exposed to the 'outside'. They are better educated than women, and so started adopting new languages. Shukla (1985) emphasises another reason for the decline of tribal languages: the socio-economic world would not accept tribal languages, and the social inadequacy of tribal languages would make tribals bilingual. Hence the decline of tribal languages. According to Sreenathan (2008), the 'civilized' consider tribes as primitive because of their socio-cultural differences, including their languages. He opines that 'tribes' speak dialects and the 'civilised' speak languages because languages are more prestigious than dialects.

Education

According to the Tribal Ministry's Annual Report (2017–18), Kerala has high numbers of HDI marks with around 94 per cent literacy rate and ST marks around 75.8 per cent. Thirunelly has a literacy rate of 74.8 per cent with male 81.16 and female 69.12 per cent. Government policy decisions in education are presented as being part of a national integration of tribal communities, but, in reality, this ends up altering cultural practices. Tribal youth feel that teachers often attempt to undermine the attitude towards one's own custom, language and mannerisms (Sharma, 2012). This study found that the level of bias and sidelining towards tribal students by teachers have undergone change, but the presence of 'otherness' in obtrusive levels was observed during many interactions. Education failures of linguistic minorities is directly related to conflict between language of instruction and home language (Mohanty, K, et al., 2009). Thirunelly offers a similar scenario, where the medium of instruction remains the dominant language, Malayalam, and children of Adivasi groups with their own language finds themselves stigmatised among the peers, alienated due to lack of linguistic capability in Malayalam.

Festinger argues that cognitive dissonance acts in the same way as that of tension or stress (Festinger, 1957). The dissonance, or discord, created when interacting with the curriculum contradicts the culture and lifestyle of tribals, often resulting in stress and tension among tribal students. The school dropout and non-attendance can be attributed to several factors ranging from lack of interest of parents and students to 'discouragement effects' such as discrimination in the classroom, biased behaviour from teachers and an alienating curriculum (Dreze and Sen, 2002).

This multifaceted nature is examined from the lines of language barrier even though relevant content, such as the daily life experiences of tribals, are rarely included in the syllabus. The State tends to interpret the dropout scenario from the perspective of difficulty in comprehending texts in Malayalam; it rarely considers the socio-cultural factors that have resulted in dropouts. Alienation due to failure to comprehend the dominant narrative is overlooked. According to some, diversity is considered a nuisance, and multilingualism a socio-economic burden, whch adds to the process of homogenisation (Mohanty, K, et al., 2009).

Assimilation of identity results in gradual stripping of rights ensured in a country's constitution. For instance, the first words which are often taught in Malayalam curriculum are *Tara* (floor) and *Para* (a device for measuring rice). So, for some, from the moment where education is offered, a child ends up confused in trying to learn and imagine things they can never relate to in their own lives. It is vital to be aware of how a child perceives and it is the responsibility of a teacher to take note of it (Kumar, 2009). What is worthy of being featured

in syllabus is debatable; some content is ignored, and other material is introduced to the voiceless and marginalised communities who are forcefully immersed into a dominant narrative that produces unfavourable results which hamper their collective consciousness. The state, with its Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), propagates dominant ideology through various institutions from educational to religious (Althusser, 2001). The prominent figures in Malayalam literary tradition such as the 16th century poet Ezhuthachan have been celebrated throughout the curriculum. Even exams and holidays are arranged to match the arrival of mainstream religious festivals[5] at the expense of the inclusion of tribal festivals and cultures. The syllabus revolves around the mainstream notion of 'Malayaliness' and it is seen by many as an attempt to ingrain these notions using the ISA.

Our study found that the state spreads colonial notions of integration to the mainstream, and the so-called civilisation process, through educational apparatus while addressing the droput issues. The most prominent reason for tribals to adopt the dominant language in recent times is for school education. Often, after tribals acquire fluency in the dominant language, they feel ashamed of their own language and refuse to use it any more (Fuchs, 1982). One of the cases was where parents of a tribal student pointed out the dislike generated by students when parents talk with parents of non-tribal students in tribal Malayalam dialect; the stigma and shamefulness was evident in the use of the tribal language.

The education system deprives tribal children of the powerful resource that is one's own language (Mohanty, K, et al., 2009). If education promotes self-depreciation of one's culture, language and confidence, the notion that education leads a student from darkness to light needs to be carefully re-examined. There are grounds to contest the argument that the light offered by the modern education system is only to those who are privileged or those who willfully, or unwittingly, submit to the underlying dominant culture. The identity and culture are from the start undermined, but a school syllabus should act as a tool to enhance self-confidence of tribal students who often are prey of stereotypes instilled by popular culture

(Sharma, 2012). The history of land-grab by the slave trade in Wayanad, for example, is absent in the curriculum and any attempt, even inadvertently, to initiate selective amnesia is disgraceful. The purpose of the state should be to revitalise the curriculum to present the wrongdoings of the past rather than to present the notion of assimilation. The task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and the oppressor (Freire, 1993). The tribals should first identity these chains of cultural assimilation; this would be the first step towards liberation.

[5] State government offers ten days of vacation for schools after Onam and Christmas.

Gotra Bandhu

Gotra bandhu is an education policy intending to ensure appropriate education for tribal children. It was launched in June 2017 at Wayanad by the Tribal Development Department in collaboration with State Education Department and the SSA. The Scheduled Tribes Development Department of Kerala defines the project as a programme where mentors along with teachers address the language problem that torments tribal students. The project envisions forging a bond between communities with mentors, such as a social worker, that can ensure prolonged involvement with communities. Gothra Bandhu employs youth, preferably with TTC/BEd qualifications, with knowledge in tribal dialect and Malayalam from the same locality to function as education facilitators in first and second standard of Aided and Government schools of Wayanad district. The government intends to limit the language barrier that alienates tribal students and results in school dropouts through this programme.

No.	Name of School	No. of Students (1st Std 2018–19)	Majority Students	Community of the mentor	Languages Known (Mentor)	Distance from residence (Mentor)	Qualification (Mentor)
1	Ashramam School Thirunelly	7	Paniya	Adiya	Malayalam	32 Km	TTC
2	DCM UP Appappara	67	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	1 Km	TTC
3	GLP School Aranapara	9	*General	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	20 Km	D.ed
4	GLP School Chekadi	9	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	9 Km	D.ed
5	LP School Tholpetty	14	Paniya & Kattunaika	Urali	Urali & Malayalam	31 Km	D.ed
6	GLP School Panvally	15	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	10 Km	D.ed
7	SAUP Thirunelly	32	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	7 Km	TTC

Table 1: School data collected during the field study

Table 1 presents an overview of the data collected during the two-month-long field study. The recurring pattern observed in all seven schools was that the teachers could only speak one dialect while the students from multiple communities were present in each school. The project was built on the premise that teacher-mentors would help students comprehend subjects in their own language, but the study found that none of the mentor-teachers had the linguistic ability to fulfill the job profile. Each community in the region has different languages and none of the teachers could cater to the needs of students from different tribes. It is crucial to note that one mentor from Ashramam school, Thirunelly, did not have proficiency in any of the tribal languages, and this poses a question as to the appropriatenes of the selection process itself.

Out of the seven schools, none had a majority of students and teachers belonging to the same tribe. And, even if the majority of students and teachers could facilitate better understanding of curriculum, the rest of the students would not be able to comprehend or understand what was being taught. If the programme is to reduce the number of dropouts, there should have been comprehensive policy decisions to guarantee that no one is left behind. The notion of inclusive education seems to be absent in the current scenario. The programme guidelines detailed by the Kerala State Scheduled Tribe Development Department opts for teachers from same locality, but the study found that six out of seven were 7-32 km distant from the school. The extent to which a child's acceptance of home background and formal education correlates to how cultural practices are recognised, and how inclusive it is in the curriculum (Bourdieu, 2015). The curriculum offered by the state neither appears to be inclusive nor relatable to tribal students. The gradual assimilation of tribal culture is what appears to be be happening according to the results of our study. A teacher from Ashram school pointed out: 'Even though it's mid-January, most of the students haven't returned after Christmas vacation,' which is a true reflection of how tribal youth does not find the incentives provided by government worthy. In addition, governments do not appear to try to find out what motivates these children to attend school.

During interviews, tribal promoters in charge of tribal affairs of the ward where they reside were of the opinion that the project was designed and implemented without any ground-level research. This has resulted in a contradiction of the claims made by government about reducing the dropout rates among school tribal students under the control of the Gonthra Bandhu project. During the academic year 2016–17, two schools in Thirunelly recorded dropouts, while Tholpetty GHS recorded four students dropping out in Upper Primary and 16 students in High School. Tholpetty GUPS school had five dropouts in Upper Primary (as per school records).

Many students from Thirunelly rely on the Kattikulam Government Higher Secondary School in the nearby village of Thirunelly for higher secondary education. While analysing data, our study found that 19 students from High School and ten from Upper Primary dropped out during that academic year from the same school. It is crucial to note that there were no drop-outs recorded from Lower Primary during this period of time. Analysing the data from 2017–18, only Ashram school recorded dropouts with five students from High School, seven from Upper Primary and one in Lower Primary.

Analysing the trends in dropouts from the data gathered and input from tribal promoters our study found that the majority of dropouts were from Upper Primary, High School and Higher Secondary, contradicting claims by government that Gothra Bandhu, which is implemented in Lower Primary, helped in arresting the problem of dropouts. The initiative was presented as an opportunity for unemployed tribal youth to attain economic stability. Even if the motives of the state were to bridge inequality and provide opportunity for the tribal students, careless planning and execution has been detrimental for the students.

Alternative schooling

India witnessed several popular movements in the 1970s with the aim of ensuring democracy, inclusive development and empowerment of marginalised people. Tracing the history of the Alternative Schooling concept in India Mehrotra suggests that alternative schools are child-centered and offer experiential learning with the help of their culture and language originated in India during the 1970s. Several initiatives have been adopted focusing on tribal children. Gopalakrishnan and Vijaylekshmi, a teacher couple in Kerala, started Sarang, an alternative school for tribal children, in Palakkad. The school was situated in deep forest and was a place for tribal children who had been marked as 'backward' by the public school system to get appropriate education. Adharshila Shikshan Kendra, founded by activists Jayashree and Amit in Madhya Pradesh, intended to bring tribal children from the inflexible mainstream education through cultural heritage and practical skills (Mehrotra, 2007). Vidyodaya school, located in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, offers education to tribal students through their culture and practices. Every day the classes begin with tribal prayer. Children have a textbook called *The Food Book* that includes knowledge of hunting, fishing, culture and cultivation traditions of local tribes, and another called *Kilinga Penga*, that consists of stories of the Paniayan tribe. The parents of the tribal children come and give lectures on tribal customs (David, 2018).

The One Teacher school system was launched in Kerala by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1997, and later came under SSA with the aid of the Department of Education and Scheduled Tribes Development Department of Kerala (Sudheesh, 2012). It started in three phases. The first phase of One Teacher, or the alternative school system, was started in Wayanad, Malappuram and Kasargod. According to the study by CSES (2004), Kerala has 307 alternative schools including schools for tribes and fisher folk, out of that 263 tribes. The Wayanad District has three divisions, Mananthavady, Sultan Bathery and Vythiri, which consist of 60 alternative or One Teacher schools, and all are located in tribal areas. The total pupil enrolment in 2002 was 1,212, of which 633 were boys and 579 girls (CSES, 2004). The self-learning materials of alternative schools consist of learning cards. The tribal children can identify the card, as per the instruction of the instructor, with lessons of basket making, honey collection, fishing and the collection of forest produce for the beginners. Apart from this, the syllabus includes Language, Maths, English and Environmental studies (CSES, 2004).

The alternative school of Kunniyoor started in 2001 by giving education to Adiya and Kattunaikka children. The textbook includes proverbs, rhymes, stories, culture, festivals and art of the tribal of Wayanad. Being a non-tribal teacher, Lalita Kumari has learned the languages of Adiya and Kattunaikka through community involvement. The total number of her students was 28 and later reduced to 15, including six Kattuaikka and nine Adiya. Lalita stated that: 'The number of students has been decreasing due to two reasons: 'Gotra saradhi' a initiative by Kerala government to provides transport facilities to tribal children from remote areas; and the aided school convinces parents to make the children turn from alternative or other tribal schools'. She also noted that the tribal peripatetic school in Akkollikunnu has closed recently due to the lack of students. The total number of alternative schools in Wayanad has reduced into 33 from 60.

Lalita communicates with the children in both their mother tongue and Malayalam. A teacher in a government school in Thirunelly, who wished to remain anonymous, told us that 'in the last June the tribal children ran and shouted *Koolu*[6]. We did not understand what was happening'. *Koolu* is food in the tribal language, but in Malayalam it is *bhakshanam*; it is difficult for tribal children to comprehend many Malayalam words. The use of both tribal and state languages during pre-primary and primary level ensures appropriate education for tribal children (Upmanyu, 2016). Lalita said: 'When I asked them what is the picture on the card by showing a picture of head, they shouted *Thilai*[7]. I have not said it was wrong or you should say *Thala*[8], but told them it is correct but we can also call it as *thala*'.

According to Upmanyu (2016:58), the medium of instruction cannot just be the local language, because of practical constraints. Likewise, it is important to give education in the mother tongue, but since tribal languages of Kerala have no scripts they read and write in Malayalam, the official language of Kerala. The education system of Kerala has been trying to bring the tribal children to so-called mainstream by forcing them learn Malayalam. The alternative schools at least ensure education through both tribal and state languages. Lalita pointed out that: "When I asked them to write *thamara* (lotus) they drew a picture of it and showed me. They say we write *thamara*, for them everything is writing not drawing". Most of the time they try to write tribal language words into Malayalam. When they are asked to write *poyi*[9] they wrote *po ee*[10].

The Lida Jacob Commission for Right to Education advocates a school development plan and suggests infrastructure facilities including, for example, a laboratory, library, playground and furniture. Since the alternative or One Teacher schools lack the aforementioned facilities, all are on the verge of closure. Alternative education aimed to provide community participation, informal relations with teachers and students; the system wants the instructor to be an activist for the community and to be able to interact with them and mobilise them (CSES, 2004). The perception of the state regarding the tribal education is the assimilation of them or bringing them to so-called 'Malayaliness'. Gotra Bandhu tries to assimilate them, but the mentors are simply teaching assistants and not teachers. The state should allow pupils to live and follow their own culture and not to force them follow the so-called 'high culture'. Alternative education makes them mature and if tribal culture, art and language was a part of the education, they would be able to shatter the cultural hegemony that exists in present society. The cultural capital of tribes should determine their academic capital, which is also social capital. As Kant (1784) suggests, one should smash the self-imposed immaturities. Tribes should have the courage of their own understanding rather than accept guidance from others.

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[6] Koolu means food in Kattunaikka language

[7] Head in tribal language

[8] Head in Malayalam

[9] Malayalam for 'gone'

[10] The way tribal students pronounce the word *poyi*

Conclusion

This study found discrepancies in the Government narrative published through media sources. The project itself was initially presented in the Kerala State Assembly by the Tribal Welfare Minister in 2017 to address the unemployment among tribal youth in Wayanad. Throughout the study, we found that focus was to arrest the rising unemployment rate among the educated tribal youth in the region. The state's not-so-whole-hearted efforts and unfamiliarity about its own population can be noted. The study found that the linguistic diversity of the region and socio-economic issues that result in dropout are being overlooked. The factors pertaining to alienation in the curriculum and classroom due to content and socio-economic barriers need to be noted by the state. Analysing the data along with interviews from tribal promoters in Thirunelly indicates that large numbers of students from Thirunelly rely on the Kattikulam GHSS school in Thrissilery village for Higher School and Higher Secondary education. Pressure from families, as peers engage in employment opportunities offered by the tourism sector, is one of the primary reasons for dropout in Higher Secondary classes. State neither addresses this issue nor attempts to engage with the problem from a different perspective.

Our study points to the fact that rather than designing and implementing programmes with no input from ground-level reality, the state should look into factors in the modern educational system that alienate tribal youth and perpetually deprive them of the fruits of modern democracy. The setting up of alternative schools, and schools that offer bilingual languages, is needed right away.

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