

The Significance of Mother Tongue-Based Learning in Primary Education: In the Context of the Santali Language

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Abstract

MTB-MLE is one of the most promising pedagogies that have been developed to enhance the learning outcomes, especially in linguistically diverse societies. Research shows time and time again that learning starts in the first language and goes back to the first language. Tribal and Indigenous languages are not always given due consideration in formal education systems in India where hundreds of languages are spoken. The Santali language is a major tribal language of the Indian subcontinent and a part of the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, and therefore it is a good example of the importance of mother tongue-based education. The present paper aims to discuss the importance of the mother tongue-based learning and its educational, cognitive, socio-cultural and linguistic value in primary education in the context of Santali language. Leaning on UNESCO documents, education theories, and recent research on multilingual education, the paper suggests that the teaching of Santali in primary education will bring about better understanding, lower dropout rate, better cultural identity and inclusive development. The paper also covers policy initiatives, problems and recommendations in strengthening Santali-medium education in India.

Keywords: Mother Tongue-Based Education, Santali Language, Primary Education, Multilingual Education, Tribal Education, Indigenous Languages, Olchiki

1. Introduction

Language is not just a tool for communication, but it also holds the knowledge, identity and culture of people. Language at school is the children's main source of knowledge if they enter school as speakers of the home language. The beginning of formal education in an unfamiliar language can create cognitive and emotional obstacles for learners to progress in their education.

UNESCO has consistently advocated mother tongue-based education, emphasizing that:

“Education in the mother tongue is a key factor for inclusion and quality learning” (UNESCO, 2022). (UNESCO)

The benefits of mother tongue education are more salient in Indigenous and tribal communities where language diversity is coupled with disparities in education. The Santali

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language holds a special position among the tribal languages of India in terms of large speakers, rich literature and being included in the constitution. In the present study authors have taken up the topic of the importance of mother tongue based learning in primary education and specially Santali language. It aims to showcase the potential of early learning in Santali language for enhancing cognitive development and learning outcomes, cultural heritage, and social integration.

2. Conceptual Framework of Mother Tongue-Based Learning

Mother tongue-based learning refers to the use of a child's first language as the medium of instruction during the initial years of schooling. According to UNESCO, mother tongue education involves using learners' primary language as the language of classroom instruction while gradually introducing additional languages. (UNESCO)

Educational psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of prior knowledge and linguistic context in cognitive development. Language functions as the medium through which children construct meaning and acquire new concepts.

Cummins (2000) argues that strong literacy skills developed in the first language facilitate the acquisition of second and third languages. This principle, known as the "Interdependence Hypothesis, " provides a theoretical foundation for mother tongue-based multilingual education.

UNESCO's language policy further states:

“Mother tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction and literacy.” (UNESCO Documentation)

Thus, mother tongue education is not simply a cultural preference but an evidence-based educational strategy.

3. The Santali Language: Historical and Linguistic Background

Santali belongs to the Munda branch of the Austroasiatic language family and is spoken across the states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. Approximately seven million people speak Santali, making it one of the largest tribal languages in South Asia. (arXiv)

A major milestone in the history of Santali was the creation of the Olchiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925. The script provided a distinct written identity to the language and became a symbol of cultural renaissance among the Santals. (The Times of India)

The recognition of Santali in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution under the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act (2003), strengthened the status and legitimacy of the Santali within the Indian educational and administrative system. Even with these success stories, Santali-speaking children face great difficulties in the schools where the teaching is mainly in Hindi, Bengali, Odia and English.

4. Educational Significance of Mother Tongue-Based Learning in Santali

4.1 Enhanced Comprehension and Learning Outcomes

The main goal of learning is learning that is meaningful. When teaching children, it's easier for them to grasp the concept in the language that they are familiar with. Studies have shown that students taught in their native language are more likely to exhibit higher literacy levels, understanding and learning success.

UNESCO reports that children taught in a language spoken at home are significantly more likely to read with understanding by the end of primary school. (UNESCO)

For Santali speaking children, maths, environmental studies and literacy taught in Santali brings the knowledge learnt in the classroom closer to their everyday life. The familiar vocabulary and cultural context help to eliminate cognitive overload and improve conceptual clarity.

4.2 Reduction of Educational Exclusion

Language mismatch between home and school is an important root cause of the educational exclusion of tribal communities. Children may feel anxious, confused and lack participation when presented with an unfamiliar language in school.

UNESCO estimates that approximately 40% of children worldwide do not receive education in a language they understand. (UNESCO)

The use of Santali as a medium of instruction in the STE can lower the dropout rates because it will make learning more inclusive. When children can comfortably communicate with teachers and peers, they are more likely to attend school regularly and to stay engaged.

4.3 Improved Literacy Development

The best starting point for acquiring literacy is in language children already know. The skills acquired in reading and writing in the mother tongue are a basis for acquiring other languages.

The Olchiki script offers a standardized writing system for Santali, making it possible to develop textbooks, storybooks, and educational materials specifically designed for primary learners. Community initiatives promoting Olchiki literacy have demonstrated strong grassroots support for language-based education. (The Times of India)

Therefore, mother tongue literacy can be a stepping stone, not an obstacle, to multilingual competence.

5. Cognitive Benefits of Santali Medium Education

Research in the field of education has shown that learning the first language is beneficial to higher-order thinking. Students' cognitive functions like reasoning, problem solving, and creativity are better developed in the familiar linguistic environment.

UNESCO notes that mother tongue instruction accelerates knowledge acquisition and skill development while improving learning quality. (IBE UNESCO)

Children have a wealth of indigenous knowledge about agriculture, ecology, folk tales, music, and community practices in the Santali community. By teaching through Santali, these knowledge systems can be made pedagogical resources, instead of being marginalized from formal education. Through this integration, there is a greater understanding and learning that is more meaningful.

6. Socio-Cultural Significance

6.1 Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Language is part and parcel of culture. Traditional knowledge and oral literature, as well as cultural identity, are typically lost when a language dies.

UNESCO warns that when languages disappear, entire cultural and intellectual heritages are lost. (UNESCO)

The Santali have a rich heritage of folk songs, mythology, legend, ritual and indigenous ecological knowledge. Mother tongue education helps to pass on this heritage to the next generation.

6.2 Strengthening Identity and Self-Esteem

Teaching in the mother tongue is an affirmation of children's identities and a validation of the importance of their cultural background. Removing indigenous languages from school may lead to a sense of inferiority in a number of indigenous learners. Being educated in Santali medium fosters dignity, self-confidence and positive self-image. Students view language as a tool for learning and thinking, not an obstacle. This is an important form of recognition for educational equity and social justice.

6.3 Community Participation

If education takes place in the local language, parents and community members are involved in children's learning. They can help with homework, talk to teachers and provide local expertise. This "hands on" approach not only improves the relationship between school and community, but also improves educational results.

7. Mother Tongue Education and National Education Policy 2020

The home languages and mother tongues are strongly endorsed in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India. The policy suggests, as much as possible, the home language or mother tongue should be used as the language of instruction until at least Class 5, and preferably Class 8. The policy acknowledges the value of linguistic diversity as a national resource, and is in line with UNESCO's recommendations on multilingual education. NEP 2020 offers a crucial chance for the institutionalisation of mother tongue based multilingual education and formulation of culturally appropriate curriculum for the Santali speaking areas.

8. Challenges in Implementing Santali Mother Tongue Education

However, there are several barriers to the successful implementation of Santali-medium education, despite policy support.

8.1 Shortage of Teachers

There are many shortages of teachers for teaching in school in the Santali language. The shortage of teachers has a major impact on the school teaching.

8.2 Inadequate Teaching Materials

Currently, there are limited quality textbooks, supplementary readers, digital resources, and children's books in Santali. Successful implementation depends on the development of the resources. It is quite difficult for study to find Santali books. Unlike the other books, Santali books are not available in every bookstore. Both the student and the teacher are troubled by this.

8.3 Administrative Constraints

The locally dominant languages are usually given greater preference in the administration of education which leads to lower institutional support for tribal-language education.

8.4 Social Attitudes

Some parents see English or dominant regional languages as means of upward social and economic mobility which may make them reluctant to encourage mother tongue teaching. Raising awareness of the positive role very good foundations in the mother tongue play in relation to multilingualism is essential.

9. Recommendations

The following measures are suggested to promote mother tongue-based learning in Santali:

1. Primary schools with Santali medium of instruction in the areas dominated by Santali tribe.
2. Hiring and training Santali teachers.
3. Production of good textbooks in Olchiki script.
4. Incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems in curriculum.
5. Encouraging the use of digital educational materials among the Santali people.
6. Development of research on Santali pedagogy and multilingual education.
7. Involvement of members of the community in curriculum development.
8. Setting up language resource centres for Santali.
9. Monitoring of learning outcomes in mother tongue programs.
10. Language development partnerships between universities, tribal institutions and government agencies.

10. Conclusion

Mother tongue-based learning is a paradigm shift towards education inclusiveness especially for indigenous/tribal communities. Through the use of the Santali language in education, academic performance is enhanced, cultural heritage is preserved, identity formation is strengthened, cognitive development is fostered, and social justice is promoted. The findings are overwhelming in favour of the use of mother tongue instruction in the early years of education. The use of Santali medium of instruction in the primary schools can bring benefits of understanding, better literacy, less drop-out and meaningful participation in learning process. Besides, it plays a role in maintaining the language and cultural heritage of one of the most significant indigenous communities of India. The implementation of mother tongue language-based multilingual education in Santali is a pedagogical need and more importantly a constitutional and moral obligation as India strives towards equitable and inclusive education. Investing in the education of Santali today will build a more inclusive, culturally diverse and educationally just future.

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