BILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN INDIA

Indigenous people, known as ‘tribals’ in common parlance in the Indian context, concentrate by and large in surroundings isolated from the rest of the population. With the advent of colonialism two centuries ago, the term tribe acquired a pejorative sense: ‘a race of people in a primitive or barbarous condition’ – the aborigines: Indian terms ādivāśī, vanajāti, janajāti, janajamāti, also carry a similar connotation.

The 1950 Constitution of independent India lays down special provisions for Tribal areas, “considering the specific needs of protection and development, and for special care of the education and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and all forms of the Scheduled Tribes” (Article 46). The scheduling of tribes in the Constitution by its Founding Fathers (cf. Fifth and Sixth Schedules) anticipated in many respects the Convention of the Indigenous Peoples drawn up by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In the midst of cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the Indian subcontinent, many tribal communities are gradually opening up for intense interaction with the non-tribal world. Their lifestyles and communication patterns are going through a rapid change as hitherto ‘segregated’ tribal populations participate in modern institutions, such as education, industries, urbanization, elections, and so on.

Though guided by the statutory recognition in favour of mother tongue education to linguistic minorities (Article 350 A, Constitution of India), languages associated with tribals are, by and large, charged with minimum functional load and they primarily serve as a mark of group identity. Educational needs of tribals are either catered for through the languages of dominant cultures or by introducing bilingual education with a blend of ‘ancestral’ language as a preparatory medium followed by a gradual switching over to either the languages of respective regions or to Hindi/English depending on their response to various modernization processes (see the reviews by Agnihotri in Volume 2).

TRIBAL AREAS

As per the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1976, there are nearly 300 tribal groups, spread in different parts of the country, with major concentra-
tion almost in a contiguous belt from Thana district in Maharashtra to Tengnoupal district in Manipur (INDIA, 1988). The 1981 Census records 53.8 million tribals out of the 685 million then in the country. Thus, 79 persons per one thousand Indians are notified as belonging to the Scheduled tribes (Padmanabha, 1983). Tribal awareness has significantly grown over the five decades in Independent India. The post-Independence safeguards enshrined in the Constitution have served as a strong impetus for asserting the ‘tribal’ identity.

Regional or geographical classification of the tribes in India has been made by Guha (1955), Majumdar & Madan (1956), Dube (1960), Atal (1965), Roy Burman & Harit (1971), and Vidyarthi & Rai (1979). Tribal population is not evenly distributed in any region or state. Out of 31 states and Union territories, tribals comprise the majority in four states in the north-east (Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh) and two Union territories namely Dadra Nagar Haveli on the Western coast and Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea. In the north-eastern region there is a greater degree of awareness among tribal people of the need to promote their language and culture in everyday life. In the central region, tribal populations intermingle with or are surrounded by non-tribal populations, setting aside a few pockets at the district or taluka (county) level where tribals constitute a majority. In the southern states, tribal communities are in small numbers, and they show signs of assimilation in the dominant culture of the region (Khubchandani, 1992: 11–25).

The largest concentration of tribes is in four states of the centre-west – Madhya Pradesh (12 million), Maharashtra (5.8 m), Gujarat (4.8 m), Rajasthan (4.2 m) – and three states of the centre-east – Orissa (5.9 m) Bihar (5.8 m), West Bengal (3.1 m), besides Assam (2.2 m as per 1971 Census). Tribal population is recorded in 365 districts (out of total 412 districts). Tribal communities are spread over 200 districts; they constitute a majority in as many as 47 districts, and form over twenty per cent of the total district population in almost 90 districts.

Many tribal groups carry a strong sense of distinct identity, by attributing an ‘ingroup’ label to their members and the mother tongue spoken by them. Many tribe labels literally mean ‘us, men people’: the tribe Korku means ‘men’; kor ‘man + -ku plural suffix’; the general label Naga can be traced to the term nok ‘people’. This distinct self-conceptualization of tribals in the context of natural, social and historical processes is referred as ‘tribal consciousness’ (Minz, 1987). It pervades over the tribal ethos in relation to its own tradition and history and in relation to outsiders; such as in the Chotangapur region the term, diku: di ‘that + -ku’ plural ‘those’ carries the connotation of ‘outsider’, often stereotyped as an ‘exploiting outsider’ (Sinha et al., 1969).