

Mother Tongue Education for Revitalising Endangered Languages: Miju and Digaru

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Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of multilingual education and mother tongue in the context of Miju and Digaru, two endangered Tibeto-Burman languages of Arunachal Pradesh. According to the Census (2011), in the State of Arunachal Pradesh, the three districts, Lohit, Namsai and Anjaw have more than ten languages. Of these, Miju and Digaru are dominant languages in the three districts. The multilingualism of these regions has increased, with Hindi widely used as the lingua franca. Hindi is also popularly used in day-to-day conversations irrespective of the language environment. In this light, the paper grapples with the question of revitalising the two languages. Mother tongue and multilingual education is seen as a critical way of revitalising endangered languages and bringing about a positive attitude and contributing to language revitalisation.

Introduction

UNESCO, in the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2017) categorises Miju and Digaru as two endangered languages of Arunachal Pradesh. Both languages are traditionally grouped under the language subgroup Mishmi. Miju and Digaru people are concentrated in Lohit, Namsai and Anjaw districts (Census, 2011). These languages are not used in schools. The question of ways to revitalise these endangered languages comes up.

The Census of India (2011) reports Lohit district¹ as a region with eighteen mother tongues. The total population of the district is 145,726. Of these, 22,200 speak Nepali, 17,013 speak Mishmi (Idu, Miju and Digaru), 16,320 speak Assamese, 8,286 speak Hindi, 7,425 speak Bengali, 6,707 speak Miri/Mishing, 5,381 speak Chakma, amongst others. The 2011 Census also reports that Anjaw is home to three major indigenous tribes—Miju, Digaru and Meyor—without detailing the population of the said tribes. This immense language variance in the mother tongue justifies the necessity of having a link language or lingua franca in these regions, and Hindi has successfully captured that position. Apart from these languages, the official language of Arunachal Pradesh is English. As noted earlier, English is also the medium of instruction in the educational institutions in this part of Arunachal Pradesh. Hindi is taught as a language subject in the Primary schools² in this region. However, the indigenous languages of this part of Northeast India are yet to be introduced in the school curriculum.

Miju and Digaru tribes are natives to three districts, Lohit, Namsai and Anjaw of Arunachal Pradesh, though researchers such as Mills (1926), Bhattacharjee (1983), Barua (1960) and Blackburn (2003) have forwarded a migration theory for the Mishmis³. The literacy rate of Lohit is 68.2 percent, and of the Anjaw district, 56.5

percent. The district of Lohit has a total of 146 pre-primary schools, 185 primary schools, 80 middle schools, 16 secondary schools and 7 senior secondary schools, including both government and private schools in Lohit district (Namsai district included). Anjaw district has 39 pre-primary schools, 60 primary schools, 26 middle schools, 2 secondary schools and 1 senior secondary school.

Arunachal Pradesh has two boards of school education, the DSEAP (Directorate Education, Arunachal Pradesh) and the CBSE. It must be pointed out that no school is affiliated to DSEAP in any of the studied districts, which means all schools studied come under CBSE. Since all the schools in these regions are affiliated to CBSE board, there is very little scope for the inclusion of mother tongue (indigenous languages).

Multilingual Education

The question is, what can be done to revitalise Miju and Digaru? Education is the most critical means to revitalise endangered languages. These languages, however, are not used in education. There are other consequences of not using the mother tongue in education. Education through the medium of a dominant language reduces the expected cognitive growth of the children belonging to indigenous, tribal and minority communities (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2013). To offset this, studies on multilingualism and multiliteracy emphasize the importance of mother tongue-based multilingual education (Mohanty, 2006, 2008; Panda & Mohanty, 2011, 2015; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2013). A study conducted by Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy, and Ramesh, (2009) on ten tribal languages of Orissa, claims mother-tongue-based multilingual

education as being of utmost importance for the holistic development of the children belonging to a multilingual region. Multilingual education can be offered even in conditions where there is a lack of resources. It can be implemented successfully, even in a challenging environment as long as it is backed by a sound policy (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2013).

Language attitude of a speaker acts as a catalyst for either maintaining a language in a wider range of domains or approving it within the boundary of a village or a home. Hinton (2001) mentions that though a mother tongue may be elaborately used in a home situation, it can still be an endangered language. The younger generation gradually becomes so inclined towards the majority language or the lingua franca spoken in the surrounding environment that they cease to use their mother tongue. Bradley and Bradley (2013) talk about the power of a government in this regard. According to them, with government initiative, a domain where a minority language could not be used earlier can be brought into existence and vice versa (Bradley & Bradley, 2013). Such influences of government policy are entirely relatable to Arunachal Pradesh. For example, a circular was passed on 5 December 2016, by the Director of Secondary education of the Arunachal Pradesh Government, directing teachers and students of government schools in Arunachal Pradesh to use only English in the classroom and on the school campus. The circular also allowed Hindi to be used in the classroom and campus, wherever necessary. The purpose of the circular was to improve fluency in English, leading to an overall improvement in the performance across all subjects, it has possibly shaped the current indifferent attitude of the native speakers of both

Miju and Digaru communities towards their mother tongue. During my field visit to Lohit district, speakers of both Miju and Digaru pointed out that English and Hindi were more important to them than their mother tongues as it impacted their career and growth. This attitude towards their mother tongues has led to a decrease in its use in their daily life as well as at home, which in turn has possibly contributed to endangering them further.

When government education policies/programs do nothing to support minority language children to develop competence in the mother tongue, it devalues the culture, the language and the knowledge associated with the mother tongue of these children (Ball, 2011) and obstructs these communities from exercising their Linguistic and Cultural Rights. This disregard towards minority languages builds a negative attitude in the mind of the native speakers towards their mother tongue, which adds to its endangerment. Thus, to bring about a change in the speaker's attitude towards their mother tongue, mother tongue education has to be adopted as a means of revitalising the endangered languages.

With more planning, a multilingual education policy can be adopted in Arunachal Pradesh. The state can implement the three-language formula so that children start their education through either Miju or Digaru as their first language, apart from learning English and Hindi. However, this requires a collective effort on the part of researchers, linguists, native speakers as well as teacher trainers and policy makers, along with commendable government initiatives. The Mishmi-speaking society has taken a strong initiative in this regard. During my field visit to Lohit (as a part of my ongoing Ph.D. work in 2018), members of the NGO, Culture and Literary Society of Mishmis

(CALSOM) informed me that they, in collaboration with the Linguistic Department of Gauhati University, have done some work on Miju and Digaru orthography. They also claimed that it is due to the lack of a proper language trainer, teacher trainer and government initiatives that orthography is yet to be introduced in the schools of the discussed regions. Thus, it is quite apparent that proper planning and implementation of multilingual education by the government is required for the schools of Lohit, Anjaw and Namsai.

Further, since the curriculum development process is very important for a successful education policy, CALSOM or the community members should take the initiative to design a proper curriculum under the guidance of language trainers

or teachers. The selection/appointment of teachers and providing them with adequate training is also equally important for a favourable result. This can be achieved with the support of the community members as well as the government.

Conclusion

The use of Mother-tongue multilingual education is critical to revitalising the two endangered languages, Miju and Digaru. It helps in cognitive development of children as well builds positive attitude towards these languages. To implement multilingual education, the support of the Government and proper planning are essential requirements.

Endnote

1. Includes Namsai as it became an independent district only on 15th July 2014.
2. All the schools of Lohit, Anjaw and Namsai district are affiliated to CBSE board.
3. According to the migration theory, the Mishmis have migrated from Myanmar and China.

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