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English

## The language factor and the impact of the project 'Gothra Bandhu': A case study of Thirunelly village, Wayanad, India

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According to the SSA <sup>1</sup>Wayanad unit, 1,140 Adivasi children dropped out of schools in 2016-2017 and 1,331 in 2015-2016. In June 2017, the government has implemented a project called 'Gothra Bandhu', in order to strengthen schools attended by Tribal children by appointing tribal youths as mentor teachers for communicating and teaching in their own language and therefore creating tribal friendly schools. This research study is an attempt to find out the impact of the project Gothra Bandhu and the role of language in connection with the dropout among tribal students in Thirunelly village. The study is carried out using direct interview method in Thirunelly a tribal dominated village lies in the border of the states of Kerala and Karnataka. The village consists of twelve schools including two tribal schools and one alternative school and out of eleven, eight schools (two high schools, two Upper Primary schools and four Lower Primary Schools) come under SSA. The research study also discusses Alternative school facility among tribal communities focusing on the impact of using mother tongue with the support of a qualified teacher who has knowledge in both, tribal and the official language.

Français

## Le facteur linguistique et l'impact du projet « Gothra Bandhu » : étude de cas du village de Thirunelly, Wayanad, Inde

Selon l'unité SSA Wayanad, 1 140 enfants adivasis ont abandonné l'école en 2016-2017 et 1 331 en 2015-2016. En juin 2017, le gouvernement a mis en œuvre un projet appelé « Gothra Bandhu » afin de renforcer les écoles fréquentées par les enfants des tribus en nommant des jeunes issus de ces dernières aux postes d'enseignants-tuteurs pour communiquer et enseigner dans leur propre langue et ainsi, créer des écoles adaptées à ces populations. Cette étude vise à déterminer l'impact du projet Gothra Bandhu et le rôle de la langue dans l'abandon scolaire chez les élèves tribaux du village de Thirunelly. Elle a été réalisée sous la forme d'interviews directes dans le village de Thirunelly, situé à la frontière des États du Kerala et du Karnataka, qui compte douze écoles, dont deux tribales et une alternative, et dont onze écoles (deux secondaires, deux primaires supérieures et quatre primaires inférieures) relèvent du programme SSA. Cette étude aborde également la question des écoles alternatives au sein des communautés tribales, en se concentrant sur l'impact de l'utilisation de la langue maternelle avec l'aide d'un enseignant qualifié ayant des connaissances dans les deux langues, tribale et officielle.

Español

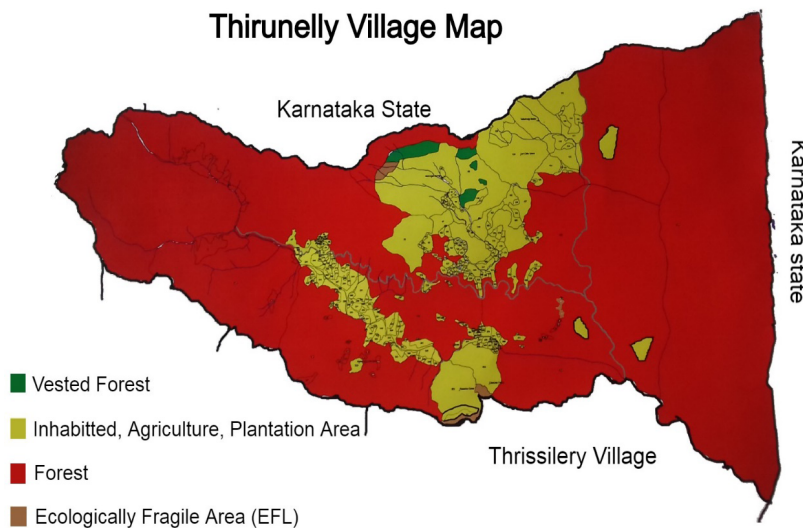
## El factor lingüístico y el impacto del proyecto «Gothra Bandhu»: Un estudio sobre el pueblo de Thirunelly, Wayanad, India

Según la unidad Wayanad de la SSA, había 1140 niños adivasi que abandonaron la escuela entre 2016 y 2017 y 1331 entre 2015 y 2016. El actual Gobierno ha puesto en marcha un proyecto denominado *Gothra Bandhu* en junio de 2017, con el objetivo de reforzar la escolarización de los niños de las tribus nombrando

1 Indian education program launched in 2000 making free and compulsory education for the children between the ages of 6 to 14.

a jóvenes de las tribus como maestros mentores para que se comuniquen y enseñen en su propio idioma y, por lo tanto, creando escuelas tribales amigas. Este estudio de investigación es un intento de averiguar el impacto del proyecto *Gothra Bandhu* y el papel de la lengua en relación con la deserción escolar entre los estudiantes tribales de la aldea de Thirunelly. El estudio se lleva a cabo utilizando el método de la entrevista directa en Thirunelly, una aldea dominada por las tribus que se encuentra en la frontera de los estados de Kerala y Karnataka. La aldea consta de doce escuelas, incluidas dos escuelas tribales y una escuela alternativa, y de once, ocho escuelas (dos escuelas secundarias, dos escuelas primarias superiores y cuatro escuelas primarias inferiores) dependen de la SSA. En el estudio de investigación también se examina el alcance de la instalación de escuelas alternativas entre las comunidades tribales que se centran en la educación a través de su idioma materno con el apoyo de un maestro calificado que tiene conocimientos tanto en el idioma tribal como en el idioma oficial.

## 1. Introduction



Kerala which tops in literacy among other Indian states and often offers a dissenting view to neo-liberal economic model with its distinguished Kerala model development has been lauded for contributing significantly in strengthening the education and health sector throughout the state, which has resulted in commendable growth in Human development Index markers that can be compared to that of developed nations. Recently published annual status of education reports hail state's achievement in public education, from various programs from digitalization to awareness campaign Kerala allotted 16.2 per cent of the budget for education and 970 crores (131.5 million USD) for school education alone. Among many other schemes to supplement growth in public education, the Kerala government launched *Gothra Bandhu* in 2017 to curb the dropout issue that has been predominant in Tribal areas of Kerala. In May

2018 Kerala state tribal welfare minister, A K Balan, announced plans to scale up the project to all the tribal areas of the state, as he claimed the numbers of dropouts have dropped down due to ongoing efforts. The paper attempts to provide the reader with a general overview of the region, about the tribes of the region and their culture and language, then goes on analyzing the project and about the Alternative school system that was put in place initially to resolve the issue. The study was conducted across the eight schools where the project was implemented and in one alternative school in Thirunelly village through primary research; interviewing teachers, parents, tribal promoters, historians and students.

## 2. Tribes of Thirunelly – language and education

Thirunelly is a tribal dominated village in the Wayanad district of Kerala which lies in the Kerala- Karnataka border. As per the census of 2011, the total population of the village was 12,878 and among them, 6,746 are from the Scheduled Tribes, representing 52.38% of the total population. Adiya, Paniya, Kattunaikka, Urali kuru- ma, Kurichya are the tribal groups who live in the village. Each tribe has its own languages which are different from each other. The literacy rate of Thirunelly is 74.8 percent with male 81.16 and female 69.12 percent.

Often, government policy decisions on education aims for national integration of tribal communities and results in altering their cultural practices. Tribal youth often feels that teachers attempt to undermine the attitude towards one's own custom, language, and mannerisms (Sharma, 2012). This study found that teachers sidelining tribal students have undergone change although we observed how the notion of 'otherness' was still persistent. Education failure of linguistic minorities is directly related to the conflict between the language of instruction and home language (Mohanty K, et al, 2009). Thirunelly offers a similar scenario where teaching occurs in the dominant Malayalam language (State language) leaving Adivasi children speaking their own language to be stigmatized among their peers and end up alienated due to their lack of fluency in Malayalam. The dissonance felt when interacting with the curriculum which does not resemble or even contradicts the culture and lifestyle of tribal students often result in stress and tension. The content of the curriculum is often a barrier as tribal daily life are rarely included in the syllabus. The first words taught generally for primary class students are *Thara* which means floor and *Para* which is a traditional measuring device for rice, both being alien to tribal students.

As soon as a tribal child starts to go to school, he/she ends up confused as he is taught to learn and imagine things which they can never relate to in their own life. How worthy education is, is determined by multiple factors including what one teaches and how one teaches, it is also vital to be aware of how a child perceives its education and it is the responsibility of the teacher to take note of it (Kumar, 2009). In situations where teachers attempt to focus on the student's needs, it still remains

extremely difficult as the curriculum offered is centered on the dominant ideology endorsed by the state. Althusser describes that the state with its Ideological State Apparatus functions in propagating a dominant ideology through various institutions including education and religious knowledge (Althusser, 1971). This comes into play in this particular context as well. The prominent figures in Malayalam literary tradition such as Ezhuthachan<sup>2</sup> are celebrated throughout the curriculum, allowing exams and holidays to match the arrival of mainstream religious festivals leaving out any scope for inclusiveness for tribal festivals and cultures. The syllabus revolves around the mainstream notion of 'Malayaliness' choosing to install this notion using Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) by state.

Throughout the study, we found that the educational apparatus uses colonial notions of mainstream integration including subtle notions of civilizing while it addresses the issue around 'drop outs'. One of the prominent reasons for tribal members to espouse the dominant language in recent times is essentially to gain school education, most often after tribes acquire fluency in the dominant language they often feel ashamed of their own language and become reluctant to use it anymore (Fuchs, 1982). In one situation a parent of a tribal student voiced his concern as he described his own child's aversion was obvious when they talked in their language in the presence of non-tribal classmates. It was evident that the usage of tribal language brought stigma and shame. If education brings along self-depreciation of one's culture, language, and confidence as presented in this case, the belief that education that leads students from darkness to light needs to be carefully re-examined. When identity and culture are undermined early on, the school syllabus should act as a tool to enhance the self-confidence of tribal students who are often stereotyped in popular culture (Sharma, 2012). Topics including history of land grab, the slave trade, as well as poems, proverbs, tribal festivals in Wayanad have been absent in the curriculum. The oppressed should liberate themselves and understand where the oppression comes from (Freire, 1993). The tribes should first identify these chains of cultural assimilation which would enable them to move towards liberation.

<sup>2</sup> Ezhuthachan was a devotional poet has been called the father of modern Malayalam.

### 3. Gothra Bandhu

Gothra Bandhu is an educational project which aims at bringing appropriate education for tribal children. It was launched in June 2017 at Wayanad by the Tribal Development Department in collaboration with the State Education Department and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The Scheduled Tribes Development Department of Kerala has defined the project as a space for mentors from the tribal community along with teachers to address the language problem that torments tribal students. The project was implemented in 241 schools of Wayanad which included mentors from Adiya, Paniya, Kattunaikka and Urali tribes. Gothra Bandhu employs youths from tribal communities preferably with TTC/B. Ed3 qualification who is knowledgeable in both tribal dialects and Malayalam. They should come from the same

locality and should function as education facilitators in the first and second standard of Aided and Government schools of Wayanad district in order to improve thanks to the help of their own mother tongue. The project envisions forging a bond between communities and mentors as social workers who can ensure prolonged involvement with the communities. Thanks to the program, the government intends to curb the language barrier that alienates tribal students and results in school dropouts. The project is in its second year and the government plans to replicate and expand the same model in other tribal areas in Kerala. In May 2018 Kerala state tribal welfare minister, A K Balan announced plans to scale up the project to all tribal areas of the state and claimed that the numbers have dropped down due to ongoing efforts.

No.	Name of school	No. of Students (1st Std 2018-2019)	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	7	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	1 Km	TTC
3	GLD School Aranapara	9	*General	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	20 Km	D.Ed
4	GLD School Chekadi	9	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	9 Km	D.Ed
5	CALP School Tholpetty	14	Paniya & Kattunaika	Urali	Urali & Malayalam	31 Km	D.Ed
6	GLP School Panvally15	15	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	10 Km	D.Ed
7	SAUP Thirunelly	32	Kattunaika	Adiya	Adiya & Malayalam	7 Km	TTC

Data collected from schools, teachers and ST promoters. "Majority belong to upper caste category

The table presents an overview of the data collected during the two-month long field study. The data reveals that every mentor meets the required educational criterion prescribed by the state government, although the recurring pattern observed in all seven schools mentions that the teacher mentors could only speak one tribal dialect while students present in each school came from multiple communities. Although the project was set up in accordance that teacher mentors would help students to comprehend subjects in their own language, the study found that none

of the mentor teachers had the linguistic ability to fulfill the job profile. As each community in the region has different languages and none of the teachers has the capacity to cater to the needs of students from different tribes. It is crucial to note that mentor from Ashramam school, Thirunelly doesn't have proficiency in any of the tribal languages, which questions the efficiency of the selection process itself. Out of the seven schools, none of the schools showed the majority of students and teachers belonged to the same tribe. Even if the majority of students and teachers could

3 TTC (Trained Teachers Course) and B Ed (Bachelor of Education) professional degrees which prepare students to work as school teachers.

facilitate a better understanding of the curriculum, the rest of the students bear the brunt of not being able to comprehend or understand better. If the aim of the programme is to reduce the number of dropouts, there should have been a comprehensive policy decision to guarantee that no one was left behind. The notion of inclusive education seems to be absent in the current scenario. The program guidelines detailed by Kerala State Scheduled Tribe Development Department opts for teachers from the same locality, but the study found that six out of seven were from the distant areas (07 – 32 km) and quite far away from areas where students reside. Thus, we found that the possibility of acting as a liaison is skewed in these cases. 'The underlying philosophy of the state behind the project is to integrate tribal students to the mainstream', said the tribal minister during the inauguration of the programme.

The extent to which a child's acceptance of home background and formal education is correlated to how cultural practices are recognized and how inclusive they appear 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 found throughout the study. A teacher from Thirunelly Ashram residential school remarked even though it is mid-January, most of the students haven't returned after Christmas vacation" reflecting the lack of interest felt by tribal children regarding these government incentives. The government should look further into what motivates these children to attend school.

## 4. Alternative schooling

Alternative schools are child centered and offer interest-based learning opportunities. Alternative schools for tribal children practice experiential learning with the help of their culture and language. The 'one –teacher' or Alternative school system was launched in Kerala by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1997 and later came under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) with the aid of the Department of Education and Scheduled Tribes Development Department of Kerala (Sudheesh, 2012). According to the study by the Centre for Socio-economic & Environmental Studies conducted in 2002 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 self- learning materials of alternative schools consist of learning cards- from which tribal children can identify the card as per the instruction of the instructor, lessons of basket making, honey collection, fishing, the collection of forest produce for the beginners. Apart from this, the syllabus includes Language, Maths, English and Environmental Studies (Centre for Socio-economic & En-

vironmental Studies 2003). Interviews concluded with ST (Scheduled Tribe) Promoters who are in-charge of tribal affairs in the ward where they reside, revealed that the project was designed and implemented without any ground-level research. During the academic year of 2016 - 2017, two schools in Thirunelly village recorded dropouts. While Tholpetty GHS recorded four students dropouts in Upper Primary and sixteen students in High School, Tholpetty GUPS school had five dropouts in Upper Primary. Many students from Thirunelly village rely on Kattikulam Government Higher Secondary School in the nearby village of Thirunelly for higher secondary education. Our study found that nineteen students from High School and ten from Upper Primary dropped out during that academic year from the same school. It's imperative to note that while there were no dropouts recorded from Lower Primary during this period. While analyzing the data from 2017 – 2018 the only Ashram school recorded dropout including five students from High School, seven from Upper Primary and one from Lower Primary.

Analyzing the trends in dropouts from data gathered and input from tribal promoters, the study found that the majority of dropouts came from Upper Primary, High School and Higher Secondary. This is in contradiction with government statements that Gothra Bandhu which was implemented in Lower Primary prevented to stop the numbers of dropouts. The state's motivation to bridge inequality and provide opportunities to tribal students was not met with success as planning was inadequate and at the end detrimental to students.

vironmental Studies 2003).

Our study in Thirunelly village found that the Alternative school of Kunniyoor started in 2001 and provided education to Adiya and Kattunaikka children. The textbook includes proverbs, rhymes, stories, culture, festivals, and tribal arts from Wayanad. Being a non-tribal instructor Lalita Kumari, the teacher cum instructor learned Adiya and Kattunaikka languages through community involvement.

This study revealed that the instructor communicated with the children in both their mother tongue and Malayalam. A teacher in a government school in Thirunelly village told us that "in last June the tribal children were running and shouting *Koolu* during lunch breaks. We did not understand what was happening". *Koolu* means food in tribal language but in Malayalam, it is *Bhakshanam*, it is difficult for a teacher who does not know the tribal language to understand and converse with them. The usage of both tribal and state languages during pre-primary and primary level ensures appropriate education for tribal children

(Upmanyu, 2016). Lalita, the instructor reports, “by showing a picture of the head, I asked them what the picture on the card is, they shouted *Thilai* “(head in tribal language). She did not say that it was wrong or that they should say Thala (Malayalam word for head) but she told them it was correct although it could also be written as thala.

The medium of instruction cannot only be in the local language, because of practical constraints (Ibid, 2016). It is important to educate students in their mother tongue but since tribal languages of Kerala have no scripts they are read and written in Malayalam, the official language of Kerala. Alternative schools ensure them an education in both tribal and state languages. “Lalita teacher” (as she is known) pointed out that, “when I asked them to write *thamara* (lotus) they wrote it and told me that they’ve finished drawing. They say we draw *thamara*, we draw ‘elephant’ and for them everything is drawing not writing. Most of the time they try to write tribal language words into Malayalam. When they are asked to write *poysi* (gone), they write *po ee* (tribal dialect)”.

## 5. Conclusion

The fieldwork conducted for the study which lasted two months reveals the discrepancy which exists between government policy and its implementation. The project itself was initially presented in the Kerala state assembly by Tribal welfare minister in 2017 to address the high unemployment figures among tribal youth in Wayanad. The study revealed the government’s attempt to stop the rising unemployment rate among the educated tribal youth in the region. The state’s not so whole-hearted efforts and at times lack of knowledge about its tribal populations can be noted even through the title of the project. The name Gothra Bandhu implies that the tribes in Wayanad are Gothras. During our study, we found that none of the tribes can be attributed as Gothras<sup>4</sup>. Our study revealed that the linguistic diversity of the region and the socio-economic factors that result in dropouts are being overlooked. The factors responsible for the

Alternative education is intended for community participation, informal relation with teachers and students, this system allows the instructor to be an activist for the community and to be able to interact with them and mobilize them (Centre for Socio-economic & Environmental Studies 2003). The perception of the state regarding tribal education is the assimilation of them to the so-called ‘Malayaliness’. Gothra Bandhu seems to bring tribal students to assimilation which brings down mentors to become essentially assistants to teachers. The state should provide tribes to live and follow their own culture without forcing them to follow the so-called ‘high culture’: the ‘Malayalee’ culture. Alternative education enables tribal students to assert their confidence in tribal culture, art and language which would help them to move away from cultural hegemony that exists in present society. As Kant (1784) suggests, one should smash the self-imposed immaturities instead of merely obeying of others. Tribes should be empowered in their own understanding rather than relying on guidance from the state.

alienation in the curriculum and classroom are due to content and socio-economic barriers which needs to be taken into account by the state. This study found that the highest number of dropouts are from high school (age 8 to 10) and higher secondary school (11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Pressure coming from the family while peers engage in employment opportunities offered by the tourist sector is one of the primary reasons for dropouts in High and Higher Secondary schools.

The state should consider addressing this issue and attempt to engage with the problem from a different perspective. The state should modernize the educational system and should include in its curriculum a clear understanding of the socio-economic factors that alienate tribal youth and perpetually deprive them of the fruits of a modern democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Gothra means lineage in Hindu culture.

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