



A Study on Knowledge, Attitude and Perception of Youths Belonging to Kondh Tribe Towards Kui Language

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Abstract: Dialects and languages are the vehicles of culture. Over the years, India may have lost about 220 languages since 1961, and another 150 languages can disappear over the next 50 years. Most dying languages are from the indigenous tribal groups spread across the country. The causes of language extinction are many, and the impact of the death of a dialect and language is varied. The different processes of social change in the 20th and 21st centuries, like globalisation, modernisation, and urbanisation, are a few causes. The impact of the extinction of one's own dialect and language also leads to loss of indigenous knowledge, folk music, folk tales, stories and the rich history of origin of that tribe. The young population of any community plays an intrinsic role in carrying the culture and language further. They are the agents of preservation and transmission of their culture. The present study is done among the Kondh students at Maa Manikeshwari University of Odisha. The paper aims to examine the knowledge, attitude towards, and use of Kui in the educational and social life of students belonging to the Kondh tribe in Maa Manikeshwari University, Kalahandi, Odisha. Data for the present study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for the collection of primary data from the samples. As the tribal community navigates between their mother tongue and state or national languages, do they actively retain or drift away from Kui? This paper also asks the question of whether only educational policies are enough to ensure the development of an endangered language.

Keywords: Dying languages, Educational policies, Globalisation, Young population, Indigenous knowledge

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Introduction

India, as an amalgamation of diverse cultures, has long baffled invaders, travellers, and foreign colonisers for its rich linguistic diversity. Even to the present day, it is common

for most Indian citizens to be bilingual or even trilingual. Since the British, the prevalence of one dominant language throughout the country was seen as a unifying factor in their imagination of a nation; they were the first to attempt the categorisation and standardisation of the vast array of Indian languages. Although British officials and missionaries tried to standardise selected languages like Hindi and Bengali, India has still retained its multilingual characteristics (Benedikter, 2013). Initially, British officials broadly categorised Indian languages into ‘vernacular languages’ and ‘classical languages’. While the vernacular languages were used by the common people, the classical languages were used among the educated upper class (Benedikter, 2013). Language holds political power, and classification of languages into vernacular and classical languages holds political implications of standardising the more culturally important classical languages, which ultimately manifests itself in governance and education. Vernacular languages spoken by people in hilly and tribal areas, which historically never received any state patronage and protection, were thus diminished to the category of minority language, even though a large number of the population in the given area used it as the dominant language. Even after independence, these minority languages were not recognised officially by the government at both the national and state levels (Groff, 2017).

Odisha is home to a large number of tribes with their own unique oral traditions. These tribal languages have over time been reduced to minority languages and thus are devoid of state patronage and support. Tribal languages in Odisha can be broadly divided into Indo-Aryan languages (Desia, Bhuyan, Matia, Bhulia), Dravidian languages (*Kui*, Oraon, Pengu), and Austro-Asiatic languages (Gata, Gutob, Santali, Sora) (Mohanty & Tripathy, 2023). These languages mostly act as the mother tongues of these tribes. The gradual shift of the mother tongue language to the regional state language, i.e. Odia, as a result of diffusion, convergence and adaptation suggests the need to preserve these oral traditions. Further, among these tribes, four communities have even developed their own writing scripts. The Santals use the Ol Chiki script, the Saora use the Soran Sompeng script, the Kondhs use *Kui* Lipi (Odia script), and the Ho tribe uses the Warrang Chiki script (Mohanty & Tripathy, 2023).

Kui, or Kuinga, is a South-Central Dravidian language which is predominantly used by the Kondh tribe in Odisha. Although the Kondhs also use Odia, *Kui* remains the dominant language. *Kui* is mostly spoken and uses the Odia script in its written form. With over 941,988 registered native speakers, *Kui* figures at the top of the list of numbers of native speakers between 10,000 and 1,000,000 in the 2001 census (Census

of India, 2001). Even with such a significant number of native speakers, there is a dire need to preserve and protect *Kui* as a language because of the same factors that almost all tribal languages face. Threat to the tribal language because of the prevalence of the standardised regional language, use of regional language over tribal languages in the administrative sector and education, problems of migration, globalisation, invasion of modern technology, and the reluctance of the young tribal population to carry on the language are some primary problems. With many of these problems having close to no solution, a detailed linguistic survey and education policy become important in preserving these endangered languages.

We will also dive into the Census and the Three Language Formula, which subsequently influences the new National Educational Policy 2020. Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) was the first of its kind linguistic survey conducted between 1894-1903 and compiled by George Grierson. The survey noted 179 languages and 544 dialects used in India during the British Raj. After independence, the Census became the most relied-upon survey of languages and came to be used by the state for planning and preservation of endangered languages. Owing to the complexity in defining languages and dialects, the Census categorically avoids using the term ‘dialect’, replacing it instead with the term ‘mother tongue’. These ‘mother tongues’ further go through a process of rationalisation, which is then regrouped under ‘languages’. The Census thus identifies ‘mother tongue’ as the language spoken by a child during his childhood or the language primarily spoken in the family. Many such languages or mother tongues spoken by less than 10,000 individuals are classified as ‘others’, thus pushing these languages further into oblivion.

During the last census (in 2011), the citizens of India provided 19,569 names of ‘mother tongues’. Authorities deduced that 18,200 of these (mother tongues) did not match “logically”, based on previously available linguistic and sociological information. These 18,200 excluded responses accounted for nearly 60 lakh Indian citizens, whose linguistic citizenship was just axed and rendered as not worthy of consideration. 1,369 of these mother tongues were termed as “name of language” and were further grouped under a total of 121 ‘Languages’ or ‘group labels’. Of these, only 22 languages were included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution: the ‘Scheduled Languages’. The remaining 99 were described as the ‘non-scheduled’ languages (Dev, 2020). Rao says a “classification protocol” that reduces 19,569 “mother tongues” to a meagre 121 “group labels” does not inspire confidence (Rao, 2014a). On the other hand, classification of a language as a scheduled language meant state sponsorship. The government, here, becomes obligated to develop the language so that “they grow rapidly in richness and

become effective means of communicating modern knowledge” (Benedikter, 2013). Scheduled languages hold more political influence than Non-scheduled languages. For example, Sanskrit is one of the 22 scheduled languages despite having just 24,821 native speakers, while *Kui*, with 941,988 native speakers, still finds itself excluded from the list of Scheduled languages. Moreover, while Scheduled Languages receive support from the government and are well represented in government offices and administration, their mother tongue languages do not. Bhojpuri, with 50.6 million speakers; Rajasthani with 25.8 million speakers and Chattisgarhi with 16.2 million speakers are still not considered languages in spite of these mother tongues making up the bulk of the Hindi language (Census, 2011).

The Three Language Formula was first introduced by the Kothari Commission (1964-66) on education and was first adopted in 1968. It was subsequently modified and amended in 1986, 1992, 2005 and has been re-introduced in the National Education Policy, 2020. The primary focus of the Three Language Formula is the “study of a modern Indian language, preferably one of the southern languages, apart from Hindi and English in the Hindi-speaking states, and of Hindi along with the regional language and English in the non-Hindi-speaking states” (National Policy on Education, 1968, p. 40). The NEP 2020 continues with this previous formula while promising greater flexibility to the three-language formula and that no language will be imposed on a state as a means of education. On paper, the “Three Language Formula” is robust, but its implementation has many loopholes. As Jhingran notes, the Three Language Formula is not being implemented “in the right spirit” (Jhingran, 2009). In Hindi-speaking states, Sanskrit is being taught as a third language, while in South Indian states, Hindi is being excluded and only the regional language and English are being included. Private institutions mostly use English as the first language (L1). Also, the Mode of Instruction (MoI) is usually the regional language and not the mother tongue of the children. The regional language serves as a second language for most of the children in primary grades, and the Three Language Formula does not require that children must receive primary education in their mother tongues. As we can conclude, “... the TLF was too superficial and inconsistent to offer a comprehensive policy framework for India. Reducing the complex relationship between education and multilingualism of India to a simple ‘three-language’ formula was an unrealistic goal right from the beginning” (Mohanty, 2019).

“Apart from English and the 22 scheduled official languages, very few figure as languages of education. In fact, the number of languages used in Indian schools as

languages of classroom teaching/learning or as language subjects in the curriculum is on the decline, and it is now down to less than half of what it was in 1970” (Mohanty, 2019, p. 73). As a result, a large number of children begin their schooling in a language they are unfamiliar with. A rough estimate indicates that more than 25 per cent of children in state run primary schools face problems in the initial months and years of primary education because their mode of instruction differs from their mother tongue (Jhingran, 2009). These difficulties are further compounded by socio-economic factors such as migration of a child from an area speaking in an indigenous language to an area speaking in a mainstream language, the lack of study materials in their mother tongues, unavailability of teachers of indigenous languages, attitudes of teachers towards the languages, and therefore the culture, of children speaking in non-indigenous languages (Jhingran, 2009).

The Three Language Formula carries forward into the National Education Policy 2020 (National Education Policy, 2020) along with the previous unsolved problems, particularly:

Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language / mother-tongue / local language. Thereafter, the home / local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools. (Government of India, 2020)

Here we can see that instead of framing the issue of implementation of mother language as a matter of linguistic rights for the linguistic minority, NEP 2020 presents it as merely desirable. This gives private educational institutions and even the state mechanism ample loopholes to skirt around this issue.

Another issue that the NEP 2020 sets to solve is the availability of study materials in indigenous languages. NEP 2020 recommends setting up an “Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation” (IITI) (Government of India, 2020). But the creation of quality reading material has not gained any momentum due to a lack of sustained state and institutional support. The state of Odisha is one of the few states with sustained government support. Initially, only 10 Indigenous languages were taken, and gradually 11 Indigenous languages were added as mediums of instruction for primary education. The project aims to provide a “strategy to facilitate transition from 100% tribal language in class- I to 100% Odia by class- VI over a period of five years” (OPEPA). Thus, even this project treats education in the mother tongue as “transitional”. Once the children learn the dominant language of the area, their Indigenous language is of no educational use to them (Rao, 2014 b). The SCSTRTI (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Research

and Training Institute), in association with schools run by the ST & SC Development, Minorities & Backwards Class Welfare Department, Odisha, seeks to impart education to students coming from different tribes and regions in their mother tongues. A wide variety of bilingual and trilingual dictionaries, teacher training guides, and picture books of popular folktales in mother tongue languages are regularly produced and maintained as open-source study materials by the SCSTRTI.

Objectives

The objective of the paper is to investigate the knowledge, attitude, perception and practice of the *Kui* language among the students of Maa Manikeshwari University, Kalahandi. Kalahandi and Kandhamal districts in Odisha have one of the densest populations of Kondhs (particularly Kutia Kondhs). Since the students belong to either the Intermediate, Undergraduate or Post-graduate courses, it would give us an accurate estimation of the prevalence of *Kui* in their daily lives and in years beyond their primary education.

Methodology

The present study adopted a mixed-method approach. Data for the present study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. A structured interview schedule was used for the collection of primary data from 215 samples. The interview schedule was prepared, including both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The schedule was framed to include socio-economic information of the students to have a better understanding of their relationship with the *Kui* language. There were a total of 24 objective questions ranging from education to occupation, residence, economic condition, knowledge of the *Kui* language, and the degree to which the student uses it. The questionnaire also tried to gather information on the students' perspective on the language. The open-ended questions provided the students with the liberty to express their views on the language's present state and give their opinions on what could be done to keep the language alive. The results from both kinds of questions were carefully analysed together to have a better understanding.

Results

- Of the total number of participants, 37.7% were females and 62.3% were males.
- About 54.4% have enrolled on the Arts stream, 33.3% in Science and 12.3% in Commerce. 32.8% of respondents are from intermediate level, 32.7% from undergraduate courses and 34.5% from post-graduation courses.

- A majority (73.7%) of the students come from rural areas, while 21.9% come from urban areas and only 4.4% from semi-urban/semi-rural areas.
- About 34.5% responded that their fathers were college graduates, 28.3% had studied till class 10th, 23% till class 5th, and the rest 14.2% were illiterate. A large number of the students (55.8%) answered that their father is a farmer or engaged in agricultural-related jobs. 14.2 % of the fathers have a government job, while 13.3 % own their own business. Only 3.5% of their fathers work at a private job and only 4.4% work as wage labourers. The remaining 8.8% of the students marked the option “Others” when asked to specify the occupation of their father.
- An overwhelming 65.8% of students had responded that they knew nothing about *Kui* language, whereas only 18.4% knew about the language. The rest 15.8 % of the students had basic ideas about *Kui* through limited use of *Kui* in their households.
- Only 19.3 % of the participants understood *Kui* when spoken to or in conversations, while 19.3 % of the participants understood it to some degree. An overwhelming 61.4 % of the participants said that they have no understanding of *Kui* either in the spoken or written form.
- Only 13.4% can speak fluently in *Kui*, whereas 71.4% cannot. 12.5% can speak *Kui* to some extent, and the remaining 2.7% have an average level of ability. *Kui* doesn't have a script of its own and uses *Kui* Lipi, which is heavily derived from the Odia script. As it would be, 78.9% didn't know how to write in *Kui*, and only 10.5% did. The rest 10.6 % have an average to below-average skill in writing in *Kui*.
- Of those who know how to speak *Kui*, when asked where they usually speak in *Kui*, only 14.9 % of the students said that they converse in *Kui* at their homes, and only 34.2 % spoke in *Kui* inside their village. A majority of the students (50.9 %) responded that they mostly speak in *Kui* outside the confines of their home or villages.
- When asked why they do not speak in *Kui* at home, 46.9 % said that they are unable to speak in *Kui*, and 36.3% said that they do not understand *Kui*. While 11.5 % and 5.3% of the students said that they are not interested in speaking in *Kui* and do not like speaking in *Kui*, respectively. When asked why they do not speak in *Kui* with their relatives, we find somewhat similar responses. 49.1 % said they were unable to speak in *Kui*, 29.8 % do not understand *Kui*, 10.5% are not interested in speaking in *Kui*, and 9.6 % don't like speaking in *Kui*. Only one respondent (0.9%) answered in the affirmative that they talk with their relatives in *Kui*.

- When asked why they do not speak in *Kui* with their Kondh friends, the majority (53.5%) are simply unable to speak in *Kui* properly, while 32.5% of the students find it more comfortable to speak in Odia. The remaining 14 % of the students are either not interested (5.2%) or do not like to speak (8.8%) in *Kui* even with their fellow Kondh friends. We find a similar response when asked why they do not speak in *Kui* with outsiders; 49.1% answered that they are unable to speak in *Kui*, while 33.4% preferred to talk in Odia rather than *Kui*. While the remaining 17.5 % either do not like to speak in *Kui* (10.5%) or are not at all interested in speaking in *Kui* (7%).
- When asked about the language they would prefer to speak, an overwhelming number of students preferred Kalahandia (48.2%), followed by Odia (44.7%). Only 5.3% of the students preferred to speak in *Kui*, and the remaining 1.8% preferred English.
- When asked about their concern about whether they think the *Kui* language will vanish soon, 42.1% had no opinion. 28.1 % of the students agreed that *Kui* will vanish, while 29.8% of the students did not think that *Kui* would vanish. When asked if the *Kui* language should be preserved, 68.4% of the students answered that it should be preserved, but 31.6% of the students did not want the *Kui* language to be preserved.

Discussion

The results refute any claim that could be made to suggest that urban living is a primary cause behind the present state of the language, as the majority of the participants come from rural areas. It also rejects the idea that only those children who grow up in educated households tend to use the mainstream language (in this case, Kalahandia and/or Odia) as their medium of communication over *Kui*. On average, roughly 10% -15% of the participants could understand, speak and write in *Kui*. The reason behind these depressing stats could be understood by looking at the frequency of their conversation in various social circles. Language has a very intimate relationship with an individual, and the language that a person is most comfortable in occupies the more concentrated inner mental sphere, then slowly expanding outwards into the close circle of family, village/community and then the outer social space. Surprisingly, more than half of the participants who use *Kui* use it outside their more personal space, outside their villages, in their more formal social space. The reason being the lack of usage of *Kui* in the household. This takes away from the sense of belonging that an individual feels for

a language. The language here becomes quite alien, something that doesn't belong to the individual's private space and therefore the speaker doesn't feel very responsible towards keeping it alive and flourishing.

While a very small number of students responded that they converse in *Kui* with parents and relatives to some degree, even fewer use it in conversation with siblings, implying that the usage of the language is gradually reducing. The majority of their conversation in *Kui* takes place among Kondh friends and others. Language here stops being very personal as its overwhelming usage reduces in private spaces (i.e., household). More than 45% of participants responded that it is their lack of understanding of the *Kui* language that discourages them from speaking either at home or outside. And therefore, an overwhelming number of students prefer to speak in either Odia or Kalahandia. In the majority of the households, the parents themselves do not understand *Kui*, and for those who do, most of them rarely use the language. This makes it very clear as to why many of the Kondh students have little to no knowledge of *Kui*. During the research, we also found out that many of the students lacked a sense of belonging to the language; therefore, when asked about their views on whether they feel that the *Kui* language will vanish soon, more than 40% of the participants had no opinion. However, it is the general sense of empathy towards any language that made almost 70% of the participants opine that *Kui* should be preserved, but surprisingly the rest of them thought quite the contrary.

Many of the respondents answered that *Kui* should be preserved as it would help in the development of the Kondhs and it is one of the oldest languages and such.

Participant 1: *"Each language offers unique linguistic structures, phonetics and grammatical features. Preserving Kui allows linguists and researchers to study and document its characteristics, leading to a better understanding of human language as a whole and potentially inspiring new insights into linguistic diversity and cognition."*

Participant 2: *"Language is an integral part of any culture. Preserving Kui language helps maintain the unique identity, customs, and traditions of the Kui community."*

Some of the participants had interesting takes on how *Kui* can be preserved.

Participant 3: *"Utilising digital tools and technology can play a significant role in language preservation. Creating Kui language learning apps, online resources, and interactive platforms can enhance accessibility and engagement. Online forums and social media groups can also facilitate language use and collaboration among Kui speakers, regardless of their physical location."*

On a community level, the participants answered that regular awareness programs should be organised, steps must be taken to “foster a sense of pride and identity in the language”, use social media for propagation, organise events and competitions, introduce books and structure the curriculum accordingly.

Participant 4: *“By speaking in this language and writing literature like stories, novels and poetry, we can preserve Kui.”*

Participant 5: *“Collaborate with educational institutions to introduce Kui language programs in schools, colleges and universities. This includes developing age-appropriate curriculum, textbooks, and learning materials. Language instruction should focus on developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to ensure comprehensive language proficiency.”*

Conclusion

Language is an essential part of an individual's/community's identity. It isn't merely communicative but emotionally communicative. Loss of a language means loss of a culture, an identity and simultaneously loss of the rich repertoire of knowledge and philosophy that the language has carried so far. Language isn't a specimen, rather a living system in its own right. For an ethnic community, much of the knowledge has been passed down in the oral form. But our policies look at these languages as they would look at other mainstream ones, which mostly have their own script, a history of written documentation and also a large number of speakers. Sambalpuri or Kalahandia is a language without its own script but has a considerably large number of speakers and is used extensively in households. Its free usage in private spaces has kept this language alive and growing. *Kui*, on the other hand, is slowly receding from usage in private and public spaces. It is being replaced by other mainstream languages. The research also highlights that the Three Language Formula, which, as mentioned before, treats *Kui* and other tribal languages as only transitional. Thus, we see students in Intermediate, Undergraduate and Post-graduate courses slowly moving away from their mother tongues and towards the mainstream language. Many Kondh students also seem to lack a sense of association with the language and therefore do not really identify with it. The influence of social media and wide availability of content on popular platforms, often in Odia or Hindi, makes these mainstream languages readily available for consumption. Content in *Kui*, on the other hand are less likely to be found on such platforms. People tend to make choices based on the utility factor, which many sadly do not find in *Kui*. For centuries, *Kui* has served as a carrier of folklore, rituals, knowledge of medicine and much more. It has served as a vehicle to facilitate its speakers with the wisdom to live sustainably and in sync with nature.

There is a need to engage with the tribal population not just through educational policies but through ground-level social engagement. The inclusion of the Shantali language of the Shantal tribe in the list of Scheduled Languages and its subsequent support by the government led to the introduction of Shantali in higher education. These departments boost research on tribal languages and population and help the government in future policies. A similar hybrid (both social and educational) approach to *Kui* language is also necessary to help in the active preservation and its development.

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