

Multilingual Education in Tribal Schools of Odisha: Voices from Below

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Abstract

Multilingualism is the original human condition, once egalitarian, but over time, the language of power has dominated, promoting monolingualism. This ideology marginalizes children's languages in education, leading to inequality. However, with migration and inclusivity, many countries embrace Multilingual Education (MLE) to provide equal access to mother tongues, especially for ethnic and linguistic minorities. This shift highlights the importance of linguistic rights and empowers communities. India's enduring multilingualism demonstrates the country's rich linguistic diversity, which has persisted for over 3000 years. This powerful tool empowers them and enlightens society about the importance of linguistics. India's enduring multilingualism, a social dynamic and social reproduction that has persisted for over 3000 years, is a testament to the country's rich linguistic diversity. This diversity is not just a fact, but a treasure that we must appreciate and respect. This paper addresses the use of multilingual education among Odia tribals in order to decrease the gap between mainstream and tribal groups. The latter are marginalized by the dominant culture (which uses the state language, Odia, in education) leading to the loss of education and their (tribal) language and linguistic rights.

Keywords: Multilingualism, equal access, tribal MLE programme, linguistic rights

Agnihotri (2014) argues that all children are multilingual, and classrooms are enriched with multilingual resources such as bilingual books, language learning kits, and culturally diverse teaching materials.

However, the current monolingual ideology often fails to consider these educational issues or the challenges faced by children in learning, leading to social discrimination against marginalized children.

Despite efforts to safeguard the language and culture of tribal people in education and society as per the Indian Constitution (Article 350A), many Indian states have retained their monolingual ideology in the education system, promoting dominant multilingual education in the name of mainstreaming. This has led to a restrictive curriculum ideology, which is a system of education that is primarily designed for the majority culture and language, thereby marginalizing the languages, cultures, knowledge, and identities of tribal communities.

In response to these challenges, the Odisha tribal MLE programme was initiated as a community-based government programme from 1996-2015 to provide meaningful learning opportunities to tribal children and foster linguistic diversity in school education. The program, which is deeply rooted in the community, commenced in 1996 initially in ten tribal languages and has since expanded to include 21 tribal languages and it is institutionalized in the state education system.

The Context

Odisha was granted state status in 1936 during the British regime, based on Odia being a linguistic majority state. Odishā is a state with Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan language families, and the tribal population constituted one-fourth of the total state population. Odia was the state's official language and medium of instruction in schools reinforced in 1936. Till 1947, not many schools had been opened in tribal areas. The schools were initially opened in the coastal belt of Odishā along with the schools opened by the kings in their principalities. Students, irrespective of caste and language, learned in the school language in which enrolment of tribal children was abysmally low.

The non-use of the mother tongue is a significant factor contributing to child dropouts in tribal areas. Tribal children, whose mother tongues belong to the Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian language families, often struggle with the Odia language, which is part of the Aryan language family. The imposition of Odia as the language of power and knowledge in the tribal belt was a burden to tribal children. The dominance of the Odia language had severe consequences for tribal children's education.

They found it challenging to comprehend or speak in the Odia language in the classroom, and the content of the textbooks developed by middle-class educators was often beyond their understanding.

The state language policy, which created a gap between the home and school languages in Odisha, significantly contributed to the low literacy rate among tribal children. Evidently, over the span of fifty years, the literacy rate of tribal students saw a meagre increase from 7.40 per cent in 1961 to 37.40 per cent in 2001, leaving approximately 25 per cent of them without the appropriate education they deserved.

Teachers in tribal areas were mostly nontribal, and their attitude toward tribal children was apathetic. Their teaching in Odia resulted in high dropouts and low achievement of school failure, thus amounting to social discrimination and loss of human resources. The dominant non-tribal teachers serving in tribal areas were engaged in schools over decades to teach them in Odia, where learning in the classroom was almost a pretended labour, knowing that without a communicative language between the teachers and students, no meaningful learning is possible. Education of tribal children in their mother tongue was a taboo in the system. Even the teachers belonging to tribal communities were also hesitant to use the mother tongue of children in the classroom since they were instructed to teach the children in Odia as a prescriptive school curriculum. Teachers also discouraged the tribal children from speaking their mother tongue in the classroom. They were of the opinion that using their mother tongue in school can have a negative effect on children learning Odia as a second language.

Goals

The introduction of the Multilingual Education (MLE) programme in tribal schools was driven by three crucial and interrelated goals. The first goal was to enhance access and retention, thereby improving the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes' children in the school system. The second goal aimed to provide equitable quality language education that respects the culture and knowledge system of tribal children, achieved through a tribal-sensitive curriculum and instructional materials. The third goal was to empower teachers serving in tribal areas with transformative training, enabling them to teach tribal children with meaning and comprehension, thereby providing basic literacy in their mother tongue and second language in classrooms.

Linguistic Survey 2005

To assess the languages tribal children, speak and the teachers speak and understand the languages of the children, the state conducted the first linguistic survey under Child Census 2005 and found 11,479 schools with linguistic diversity in 72,000 schools. Their home language differs from the school language, and the children are unfamiliar with Odia, the state medium of instruction. It indicates six thousand two hundred villages where tribes from different groups have tribal monolingual situations in classrooms. For instance, if the Gajapati district has 815 schools, and 440 schools are exclusively Saora, then these schools are enrolled with hundred per cent Saora-speaking children. They are not exposed to the Odia language at all. It was realized that children up to class III could not achieve the desired outcome in learning Odia as their school language because of their Saora dominance in schools.

Significance of the MLE Programme for Tribal Schools

As we prepare for the Tribal MLE programme, our activities are focused on understanding and addressing the inherent challenges in the system. It's crucial to define clear objectives and strategies, and to do so, we need a team that believes in change. People often resist new things because they are accustomed to the status quo and are reluctant to embrace change due to conservatism or a lack of awareness about the potential benefits of innovation. Therefore, the initial objective of the MLE programme was to comprehend the ground realities and explore the issues. Then, the aim was to transform the situation by creating a utopia, understanding the basics of MLE, and implementing MLE through democratic dialogue (Mohanty et al., 2009).

Language and Culture Matters in Transforming Teachers' Training

In order to provide linguistic access along with the cultural understanding of children in schools, it was essential to foster culturally responsive teacher training through which teachers can understand the importance of children's language and culture in the classroom. Therefore, the training of teachers focused on three components: attitude, knowledge, and skills. Attitude means removing beliefs, negative attitudes, and ethnic superiority, becoming a positive teacher, respecting tribal children as people with self-image, and accepting cultural and linguistic

diversity as a resource. Knowledge means the local knowledge of the tribal society exists in their socio-cultural practices as productive knowledge to be used in school curriculum and develop culturally responsive curriculum. Skill stands for learning in home and school language as cognitive academic language skills that help teachers to know that learning a home language helps in learning a second language effectively. It was a significant innovation in the state academic domain that broke the convention of autonomous monolingualism, which is the practice of using only one language in a given context, into a culture of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the classroom.

The transformative training programme fostered a collaborative environment, where teachers from tribal communities were encouraged to explore and appreciate the significance of tribal culture and language. By using local knowledge and experience in the school curriculum, they were able to connect with new learning. Teachers learned to use oral tradition and community knowledge to create culturally relevant teaching materials and effectively develop curricular texts and language learning skills in ten languages. Each curriculum was developed based on the ethnocultural and linguistic properties of tribal children, making the teachers feel included and part of a team.

Culture and Language of the Tribes in the MLE Curriculum

The state curriculum, designed for a middle-class society, uses Odia as the medium of instruction and focuses on Odia history, culture, and literature. This approach, while suitable for the intended audience, has inadvertently neglected the rich diversity of tribal communities, leading to a significant disconnect. It is crucial to understand and empathize with the impact of this curriculum on tribal communities and strive for a more inclusive education system that respects and values their unique culture and language.

Teachers in curriculum development were ignorant of the values of tribal language and culture to be used in the classroom. Therefore, a culturally responsive curriculum for MLE was conceptualized by adopting the thematic approach. For instance, the themes of the annual cultural calendar of the tribes, such as Earth, tree, water, fire, fruits, flowers, birds, animals, sky, moon, sun and stars, home, family, festivals, fruits, vegetables, seasons, weather, agriculture, and forest-based occupation,

were documented and applied while developing instructional materials closely to the children and communities. This process involved extensive interviews and discussions with the elders, ensuring their knowledge was accurately represented in the curriculum. The seasonal themes in the children's direct experience were selected to develop the curricular materials adopted from their respective cultures to design cultural texts as learning tools.

A community oral tale, legends, riddles, and songs are a treasure of cultural knowledge and are the source the older man, a respected figure in the community, preserves for posterity. They tell the stories to their youngsters on several occasions. When this tale is collected and transcribed into a big book, it undergoes a transformation from a natural speech act and speech event in performance to a structured sentence aligned with the pictures as a written text. The process of abridging the tale from a wider speech communication to a text helps children learn language. These texts empower the knowledge embedded in the community and introduce it into a school curriculum, making tribal children more communicative in their classroom with meaning and comprehension.

The teaching method uses linguistic and communicative competence to encourage effective communication between teachers and students in the classroom. This approach incorporates stories and songs to convey cultural knowledge and teach oral and reading language skills. Linguistic competence, a key aspect, focuses on learning language through a unique approach to sound-symbol combinations, letter identification, and word formation. This method not only enhances learning but also piques and arouses the student's interest in the language.

For instance, in developing the Saora primer for Class I, the Saora knowledge system was conveyed through oral communication in a classroom context. The Saora primer, *Erai Erai* (Come Come), incorporated themes such as the home, paddy field, forest, weekly market, hunting, forest products, sun, moon, stars, weather, seasons, musical instruments, fairs, and festivals. By embedding keywords and everyday familiar words into the communicative language, students were not just learning oral and written skills, but also developing practical skills applicable to their daily lives. This approach to education empowers students, making them feel prepared and confident in their ability to navigate their world.

Instructional Approach

In MLE Odisha, a 'two-track approach to language acquisition was adopted. The Story Track used community stories and narration as curricular texts to facilitate natural speech acts and events using everyday language in the classroom. This track aimed to encourage children's complete expression with spontaneous language acquisition skills such as listening, speaking, understanding meaning, interpreting, reasoning, and creativity through reading. The benefits of this approach include fostering a deeper understanding of the language, promoting cultural appreciation, and enhancing communication skills.

On the other hand, the Literacy Track is based on basic literacy and is focused on correctness and accuracy in reading and writing. This approach was beneficial in teaching the alphabet and words to children. An alphabet book was created using the alphabets of tribal languages, highlighting their unique features. Emphasis was placed on their alphabets, vowels, consonants, and familiar words used in everyday life. The unique nature of tribal languages in terms of limited alphabets compared to Odia alphabets was also introduced in two phases. Alphabet charts and books based on tribal vowels and consonants were introduced in Class I, and Odia alphabets in Class II.

Instructional Design Adopting Cultural Theme

The whole year is conceptualized as a cultural calendar based on which the cultural curriculum is designed in three terms. Term 1 is from July to September; Term 2 is from October to December and Term 3 is from January to March. Each term consists of 60 working days in schools, and each day, the teaching time is 300 minutes. The total teaching time in a week (six days) is 1,800 minutes; it is 18,000 minutes for ten weeks. Thus, thirty weeks total of 54,000 minutes of teaching time, i.e. dedicated to curricular and co-curricular areas.

After each term, we dedicate a week to comprehensive assessments. This ensures that our students' progress is not just measured but deeply understood. With three such assessment weeks annually, we leave no stone unturned in tracking our students' development. The curricular themes are distributed to daily lesson plans, covering a wide range of subjects and activities, from story and literacy tracks to mathematics, EVS, English (introduced in Class III, and other subjects like games,

health, play, music and dance, arts and crafts, storytelling, and library sessions, providing a comprehensive learning experience.

Language Maintenance Plan

Mother tongue is adopted as a subject from Class I to Class V using children's oral literary texts and community funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Molls & Amanti 2005). In Class III, mathematics and EVS were taught in the mother tongue, both oral and written. After that, oral MT with written and oral Odia was introduced in Classes IV and V. Oral Odia was also used in MT class. However, academic Odia was introduced in Class II for basic literacy. English is introduced in Class III using oral and visual activities, with some total physical responses. Thus, 30 weeks of a year was designed using sufficient instructional materials for children in the primary stage. There were 30 big books, 30 small books, and 30 listening stories for Class I and II each. Class I big book was in the mother tongue, and Class II big book was 60, 30 on MT and 30 in Odia. The Class I Big Books in the mother tongue was translated into Odia and taught in Class II to comprehend the known content in an unknown language (Odia). For literacy skills, children were taught alphabet charts, alphabet books, and yuktakshar books, and for second language learning methods like TPR, story books and known context and content were used.

Monitoring and Coordination

The Multilingual Education (MLE) programme was a new concept to the system that the field functionaries were unfamiliar with. The critical MLE approach of using a mother tongue and second language could be straightforward for the tribal teachers to teach children in classrooms. However, the field academic coordinators are not mastering the MLE pedagogy. The reason could be their belief in dominant monolingual ideology or their need to be trained in MLE classroom monitoring.

After using the MLE approach in 1584 schools over five years, the tribal children were active in learning in their mother tongue and second language and mastered the Odia literacy skills with meaning and comprehension. The state engaged teachers from tribal communities willing to teach children in their mother tongues. The classrooms were engaged and teachers were able to teach two languages with a

meaningful dialogue showing the rapid progress in access, retention, and achievement.

Programme Evaluation by NCERT, New Delhi

Considering the strength of the programme implementation of MLE, NCERT, New Delhi, with DFID support, conducted a programme evaluation in 100 MLE schools and 100 non-MLE schools, during 2009-2011 to assess the programme's effectiveness in the field. Children of MLE schools were higher achievers than those learning a second language. Universal access to tribal children, teachers' academic performance in a culturally responsive meaningful classroom, provision of learning materials in children's mother tongue, and adoption of the two track approach in classroom transactions made the teaching and learning process more engaging and effective for both students and teachers. Community organizations' prominent role in claiming the inclusion of mother tongue in schools as a marker of ethnic identity and tribal self-image, conservation of cultural biodiversity and human rights are the outcomes of Odisha MLE.

After a decade of implementation, the state formulated a language policy (2014) that strengthened MLE in scaling up, adopting a teacher recruitment policy; MLE in India is akin to an island of minority mother tongues, a beacon of diversity amidst a vast monolingual ocean. It is more than just a medium of instruction; it is a goal. MLE also plays a crucial role in preserving the ecological knowledge of the tribes, contributing to the aspiration of a sustainable green world. The programme's curriculum safeguards the values of greater humanity, making it a commendable initiative in education. The unintended outcomes of Odisha MLE are a celebration of cultural bio diversity and ethnic identity.

Impact of MLE in Odisha

Odisha's MLE approach, a well-structured theme-based initiative sustained for over two decades, has not only strengthened the current education system but also earned recognition from the NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat as an ideal model. While other states like Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh have also initiated MLE, their programmes were discontinued. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, with the support of the Language and Learning Foundation, New Delhi, have undertaken the MLE programme, with Jharkhand focusing on five

tribal languages and Chhattisgarh on 16 languages. The success and recognition of Odisha's MLE approach by national policies serve as a strong endorsement for other states to initiate similar programmes for minority children, thereby providing them with language access and the opportunity to perform better than ever before, and has gained a global recognition.

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Note: The data used in this paper is based on the Linguistic Survey (Child Census 2005 of the School and Mass Education Department of the Government of Odisha. The tribal languages adopted in the first phase was Santali, Saora, Juang, Bonda, Kishan, Koya, Kui, Kuvi, Oram, Munda and Ho adopted Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE). The remaining eleven languages were undertaken translating the Odia textbooks for Classes I and II which were bilingual primers.

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