

## **Impact of Mother Tongue based (MTB) Education in Tribal dominated schools of Odisha**

**Dr. Ajoy Kumar Panda, Sr. Lecturer in Odia**  
*Upendranath College, Soro, Balasore, Odisha*

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**ABSTRACT :** Mother tongue-based multilingual education is a well-established strategy to address the high dropout rates and poor educational performances of schoolchildren in the tribal regions of India. Odisha is one of the pioneering states to have adopted this policy to reduce the dropout rates amongst primary school students. Odisha is one of the pioneering states to have adopted this policy to reduce the dropout rates amongst primary school students. Though there are problems like shortage of tribal language knowing teachers, lack of willingness of youth in working in villages and remote areas, inadequate funding of schools in villages for development of minimum infrastructure, underpaid and contract teachers appointment, lack of good remuneration even to experienced teachers, etc are perennial problems plaguing Indian education sector. Research papers like this would go a long way in helping government and NGOs to develop education facilities in tribal areas and adivasi children. In Odisha, children are taught in Odia which is challenging for many of the tribal children whose mother tongue is not Odia. The context of textbooks is also unfamiliar to tribal children, leaving them unable to fully comprehend classroom teaching and activities. This has an effect on retention and learning outcomes. Further, there is inadequate training, pedagogy and material support for teachers to deal with diverse classroom environments. Teachers lack the capacity to effectively deal with multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

**KEYWORDS :** Mother tongue-based multilingual education(MTME), Primary education, Santhali, Kisan, Munda, Oraon, Koya, Kui, Bonda, Juanga, Saura, Sarba Sikshya Abhijan, Multi Language Education(MLE), danda mukta

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Crucial findings on tribal education in their own language which , according to famous linguists like Noam Chomsky is the base for understanding in pre-primary schooling. The tribal children should be taught in their native languages even in higher primary classes along with regional Languages. But, unfortunately, teachers who are conversant with native languages are hard to find and the children are forced to adapt to the regional language rather than local or tribal dialect. Hence, the government should train tribals in multi-languages so that they can explain their own community people in advanced education using the native language as well as regional/ national and English language. As Dr. Hargopal opined, local language enhances the learning capacity of a child. Since English is highly developed in various sectors, as Kanche illaiah opined, English medium can be followed for higher education.

Primary education in a child's first language or mother tongue is crucial to early learning and considered as most effective strategy for developing strong academic foundations and a base for acquiring proficiency in other languages. In Mother Tongue based Multilingual Education (MLE) programme, the schooling begins in mother tongue and transits to additional languages gradually. The use of mother tongue as medium of imparting education in early grades enable children to develop a strong education foundation through beginning in the language the learners know best, building on the knowledge and experience they bring to the classroom, and enhance confidence and self-esteem.

#### **Broad Objectives of MLE (Multi Lingual Education)**

To Ensure equity and quality education to tribal children

To improve tribal students' reading, writing skills and learning through use of mother tongue in early grades

To introduce state and national language at early stages

To mainstream the tribal children in state-wide education system

To develop respect among tribal children for their language and culture

Mother tongue-based multilingual education is a well-established strategy to address the high dropout rates and poor educational performances of schoolchildren in the tribal regions of India. Odisha is one of the

pioneering states to have adopted this policy to reduce the dropout rates amongst primary school students. Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE) involves instruction in a child's first language (L1), usually with the intention of gradually progressing to a second language (L2) or third language (L3) at a later point of time in primary school. In a multilingual context, children begin their studies in a familiar language, and later, they are introduced to those same concepts in the dominant state language. A MTB MLE programme is particularly beneficial during early childhood schooling—from Class I till Class V. When children are taught in languages they are familiar with, it generates interest in the subject, increases their confidence, and motivates them towards learning.

**Objective of the study:**

The objective of the study was to understand the issues and challenges involved in the implementation of the MTB MLE programme and to generate information on the impact of the programme on tribal students and on those tribal students who have graduated to senior classes.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research design was adopted in the study for better access and interpretation of data. Face to face interviews, telephonic conversations, focus groups, and observation methods were applied for accessing and generating information. Data was accessed from all the key stakeholders of the study: the students, school head teachers, MLE teachers, subject teachers, hostel superintendents, government officials and policymakers, to understand both the “practical goals” and “intellectual goals” of the programme. Practical goals are aimed at accomplishing something—meeting some needs, changing some circumstances, or achieving some objective; whereas intellectual goals are aimed at understanding something, gaining insight into the issue at hand, and finding out why this is happening .

## **III. LITERATURE SURVEY**

Existing literature (Pattanayak 1981; Fishman 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997; Baker 2000; Cummins 2000, 2001; Magga et al 2004; Skutnaab-Kangas 2000, 2009) is unanimous on the benefits of mother tongue development in contexts where multiple languages are used for a variety of purposes. According to Kelkar (1994) “own language” learning has a “beneficial effect on other language learning and teaching.” Lightbrown and Spada (2013) have also observed that continued education in the home language contributes substantially to a successful acquisition of the school language in the long run. With the 2001 Census accounting for 234 mother tongues with total speaker strength of 10,000 and above, India certainly is a fertile ground for practising a MTB MLE system, for the linguistic and educational development of children. Cummins (2001) even goes so far to say that, “to reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child.”

Implementing the MTB MLE programme as a strategy for addressing the high student dropout rate and the poor educational performance in schools in tribal regions, is a well-established practice today (Pattanayak 1981, 1990; Kundu 1994; Jhingran 2009; Panda and Mohanty 2009; Mohanty and Saikia 2009). Odisha is one of the pioneering states to have adopted this policy, primarily in order to reduce the high student dropout rate among primary schools in the tribal areas. According to the Odisha Economic Survey, 2013–14, the student dropout rate at the upper primary level has reduced from 37.07% in 2005–06 to 3.38% in 2012–13. A combination of several beneficial programmes introduced by the government, like the free mid-day meal scheme, free textbooks and uniforms, and free hostel facilities for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) children, have been instrumental in reducing the high dropout rate amongst students from these communities. The MLE scheme is just one of many beneficial schemes of the government, which specifically targets ST students. It definitely is an important factor in reducing the dropout rate given that language plays a fundamental role in the development of a child as a social being (Khubchandani 1994). When a child's native language (mother tongue) is given less importance and is permitted to be supplanted so fast that the grandparents find it difficult to communicate with the grandchildren, then the very root(s) of a child becomes fragile leading to a lack of any family cohesion, let alone any possible wider social grouping (Bauer et al 2006).

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

Odisha occupies a unique position in the tribal map of India. As per the 2011 Census, the ST population is 95,90,756 constituting 22.85% of the total population of the state and 9.7% of the total tribal population of the country. It has 62 different tribal communities, including 13 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). The state ranks third among all states, in terms of the ratio between the percentage of tribal population to the total population of the state, leaving aside some of the North East states that are predominately tribal dominated. The scheduled areas constitute 46.8% of the total area of the state and 60.65% of the tribal population reside in these areas. The rest are distributed among almost all the other districts.

The tribal communities of the state are either speakers of languages belonging to the Munda family or the Dravidian family. Odisha with 56.58% of its population below the poverty line (BPL), and with a tribal literacy rate of 52.24% as compared to the aggregate literacy rate of 72.87% presents a miserable picture as far as deprivation and distress of the tribal community is concerned. Education is obviously a way out from the serious hardships that the tribal communities face today in their quest for survival. And the medium of instruction that the tribal child faces in school in the preliminary years of learning is one of the key factors that determines how long the child will stay in the school system. Looking at the overall school dropout rates, as per the 2011 Census (Table 1), we can say that a lot still remains to be done to bring parity between tribal and non-tribal students as: (i) for students in Classes I–V the dropout rate is 35.55% for ST students compared with a rate of 26.9% amongst other students; (ii) between Classes I and VIII, 55.05% of ST students dropout compared to 40.51% of other students; (iii) between Classes I and X, 70.95% of ST students drop out in comparison to the 49.15% of other students. With a 100% enrolment at the Class I level, even after 68 years of independence, it is the tribal child who is observed to be suffering the most amongst all categories of children of the country.

Taking cognizance of these issues and to address the language gap faced by the tribal children the Government of Odisha in 2007 started the MLE programme in select primary schools. The idea was to enable the students to “develop appropriate cognitive and reasoning skills and to acquire proficiency in other languages” (School and Mass Education Department Notification 2014). In the selected schools, the child’s mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction for the first five years. Odia is taught as the second language from Class II and English is introduced as a language subject from Class III onwards.

Initially, the programme was conducted in 10 tribal languages—Munda, Santhali, Kisan, Oraon, Kui, Saura, Koya, Bonda, Juanga and Kui. Some of these languages have the largest number of speakers in Odisha, among all tribal groups (Santhali, Kisan, Munda, Oraon, Koya, Kui). And some of the other languages (Bonda, Juanga, Saura) belong to the PVTGs. According to the Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), a regulatory body under the Department of School and Mass Education (DSME) responsible for the successful implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) programme of the Government of India,

Persons from the community with fluency in the respective mother tongues as well as competency in second language (Odia) and third language (English) are given priority as teachers in these schools. In addition to DSME, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Development (SSD) department is the other key government department responsible for the educational and welfare development of tribal students. Free education till Class X in residential schools, where everything is provided for free to the students, is a flagship scheme of this department. The residential schools of the SSD department are highly sought after, and are always full to their capacity. At present in the state, there are 1,670 residential schools with over 4,700 hostels, functioning with an enrolment of 4,50,000 SC and ST students, of which 60% are girls.

## V. FINDINGS

There is absolutely no disputing the benefits of the scheme. My fieldwork reveals that there is a total lack of coordination between the two administrating departments, that is, between the DSME and SSD department. One set of teachers was being paid Rs5,200 while another set was being paid Rs3,050 up until recently, despite the fact that, the nature of work and qualifications for both sets of teachers remain the same. DSME MLE teachers have been assured permanent positions after six years in service, whereas SSD MLE teachers were on a salary of Rs3,050 since 2009 and have no assurance from the government as to when their jobs would be regularised. This has resulted in a total lack of motivation towards their jobs. Some have dropped out while some others are continuing, as otherwise they would be jobless.

Relatively speaking, DSME schools were observed to be functioning in a more organized way than schools under the SSD department. SME school students get their primers regularly from the project office but SSD schools have never received any tribal language primers. Additionally, no SSD official has ever contacted the headmaster(s) of residential schools to collect their primers from the district office.

Some interesting findings were also noted relating to the teaching assignments being given to the MLE teachers in residential schools. SSD MLE teachers teach all subjects, and this is not necessarily only in the primary classes. Due to a shortage of teachers in most schools, the school’s management is forced to take the assistance of these teachers to teach other subjects and assign them to another class. One tribal language teacher was observed to be teaching Hindi and Sanskrit to Classes VII and VIII. In this particular school his role as an MLE teacher was non-existent. To quote the teacher himself, “the school does not have any Hindi or Sanskrit teacher. So I have been assigned the task of taking these subjects.” Another TLT teaches science and maths to all the classes (I to VII) in her upper primary school. She makes use of her responsibility as a TLT only when students specifically ask her about something in the subject books that they do not understand and which are written in Odia. This is only time that she uses the tribal language with her students during class hours.

Another notable fact that was brought to attention by all the headmasters and subject teachers, including MLE teachers, was that by Class III, students were all seen to be becoming well-versed in Odia, irrespective of whether an MLE teacher was appointed to the school/class or not. The presence of a MLE teacher itself made the path to learn a new language relatively smooth for the children—wherever the programme was functioning well. Otherwise, with the help of local teachers, senior students, matrons and cooks of the hostels, the headmasters try to ease the language problems faced by the student(s) in their initial period of stay. Hence within two to three years, as perceived by the teachers, students become well-versed in the regional language and develop the ability and capabilities required to further progress into the more senior classes.

Academic proficiency necessitates that students use their second language in academic contexts, in addition to situations that demand a higher level of logical and analytical skills. BICS, on the other hand, are language skills needed in social situations primarily to interact with other people. According to Cummins (1979), these contexts do not require specialized language knowledge and they do not challenge the speaker cognitively. These language skills have been observed to develop within six months to two years, after exposure to a new language. The question that needs to be asked here is, whether the language skills that these tribal students display, after two to three years of their exposure to the state language, is to be categorized as BICS (fluency)? or is it to be considered as CALP (proficiency)? The high dropout rates and the poor exam results exhibited by these students certainly give us some information on the answer to the above question.

Other important findings from the study suggest that even though the headmaster(s) and teachers of non-MLE schools say that they would prefer having an MLE teacher in their school, it is definitely not one of their priorities. One headmaster was not even aware of the responsibilities of an MLE teacher. He treats his MLE teacher as any other teacher of the school and assigns teaching responsibilities accordingly. The headmasters were more concerned with the infrastructure of the school, lack of adequate number of classrooms, shortage of teachers, lack of proper hostel facilities in the case of residential schools, poor exam results, funding, school management, etc, as elicited from the focus group discussions. During meetings with parents of students who attend DSME schools, they primarily complained about the quality of food and other free benefits provided by the government. The appointment of MLE teachers in the school is not given much importance by the parents, as stated by the headmasters. There have also been instances where parents have called up the district project office to stop the appointment of an MLE teacher as that would have led to the transfer of an existing teacher of the school, which for various reasons they did not want to happen. The parents of these students are mostly uneducated and they prefer sending their children to residential schools, so that the child's basic requirements are fulfilled, up until the completion of high school. In the MLE SSD schools, in the past six years nobody has ever visited the MLE teachers to ask them about their issues and problems. They work as teachers, not as TLTs, and are not accountable to anyone. In DSME schools MLE teacher appointments have been made taking into account the 80% to 100% single tribal language situation. As a result the 109 DSME schools have roughly three MLE teachers each, while other schools with a larger number of tribal students have been left out. As per information gathered, very few schools have children speaking a single language. Children with various mother tongues study together in one school.

Some positive findings: Among the DSME schools that were accessed, wherever MLE teachers were appointed, the programme was observed to be running smoothly. In such schools, there are a less number of students as compared to residential schools for reasons mentioned earlier, and each school had more than two MLE teachers. The students enjoyed the company of these teachers. As a result, the learning process for the younger children was observed to be relatively easy and enjoyable. The primers, with the words in their mother tongues on one side and the concurrent Odia words on the other side, made things clear and comprehensible for the students. In some instances it was seen that the teachers were also learning the language of the students (for example, some Oraon MLE teachers have started learning Sadri from the students).

### **Key Findings:**

Impact on the students: No immediate impact on their studies could be observed. Further research needs to be conducted to understand the benefits of the MLE programme, on the academic growth of these students. It is only recently (since 2012), with the appointment of MLE volunteers and later on with MLE shiksha sahayaks, that the scheme is functional in Sundargarh, in any real sense. However, some social impact could be observed. Certain complex social issues exist at a basic level which the MTB MLE approach has not been able to address. The students were reluctant to admit that they spoke a tribal language at home, or among themselves—they would state that Odia was used at home. The reason for such behaviour could be that since their teachers repeatedly told them to speak in Odia, and even advised their parents to speak to their children in Odia, during the vacations, these students were probably reluctant to admit that they spoke any other language at home. There seems to be a perceived notion among the students that Odia is a much more important language to be used and spoken with, rather than their own home language (mother tongue).

## VI. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Data elicited from all stakeholders reveals that even though the scheme is formulated with all the right intentions, there are still numerous issues that need to be handled at the implementation level for the scheme to be termed as “successful.” At present the whole objective as we understand it is to somehow get the students to learn Odia so that they are able to handle the higher level classes. By class three, majority of the students are perceived to have learnt Odia. The state government’s policy of no exams until Class VIII has also resulted in students not taking their studies seriously. As revealed by the teachers, danda mukta (punishment free) classrooms have also resulted in children not listening to the teachers.

Crystal (2000) suggests that a minority language will progress if its speakers:

- Increase their prestige within the dominant community.
- Increase their wealth relative to the dominant community.
- Increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community.
- Have a strong presence in the educational system.
- Can write their language down.

The question that we need to ask is, are all the above conditions being fulfilled, for minority languages? The need of the hour then is to come up with a strategy that can aim towards building the prestige of various tribal languages; first among the tribal communities themselves, and then among all the other stakeholders involved. Bottom-up initiatives are urgently required with participatory meetings among trained officials, the parents, teachers and headmasters of schools. Such meetings can educate everyone on the importance of mother-tongues in the “ecology of languages” (Haugen 1972). Only when the parent and the teacher can understand the importance of the child’s mother tongue in their academic success, only then can they pass such knowledge on to their children. Proper coordination among programme administering government departments is also urgently required for better implementation of the scheme at the community level. Another positive revision that can be done by the authorities is to follow the Chhattisgarh model primers, where in addition to six mother tongues and the state language, parallel English words are also included to make the children identify different languages and different cultural situations, during the learning process

### Scope for further research:

This study has been conducted on a relatively small scale. More number of schools and other stakeholders need to be studied and accessed to get a clearer picture of the MTB MLE situation in the district and the state. As per newspaper reports on the conditions of primary schools in remote tribal areas of the state, many schools are functional only on government record, but are “closed in reality” (Pattnaik 2016). The reasons cited for the dismal state of affairs are the remoteness of these schools and a lack of knowledge about Odia among the residents of these villages. Further empirical studies also need to be conducted to understand the impact of the MTB MLE scheme on the academic output of the students.

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