

Education of tribal children in India and the issue of Medium of Instruction: A Janshala experience¹

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Abstract

Janshala is a joint programme of the Government of India and five UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO and ILO) for the universalisation of primary education among educationally underserved communities. The programme is being implemented in nine Indian states.

Records collected in schools in the Janshala Programme areas indicate continuing high “dropout” rates among tribal children. A major reason for this is that in most states the medium of instruction is the regional language. Most tribal children do not understand the textbooks, which are generally in the regional language. The appointment of non-tribal teachers in tribal children’s schools is another problem: the teachers do not know the language the children speak and children do not understand the teacher’s language.

The issue of language is being debated in the context of tribal education. While some researchers argue for a uniform policy with respect to language use in schools, others perceive it as a constraint in the process of schooling. This paper examines the current policy framework of the participating states with regard to the medium of instruction in government schools in tribal areas and meeting the needs of sound education of tribal children in terms of the posting of teachers, development of textbooks and curricula, training of teachers, etc. The paper also presents a statistical analysis of the responses of parents, children and teachers on the issue of using the mother tongue as medium of instruction in schools and other language issues. The responses of the stakeholders have been gathered through a survey carried out recently in fifteen Janshala blocks of five states.

Introduction

The Janshala Programme is a collaborative effort of the Government of India (GOI) and five UN agencies – UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, ILO and UNFPA – to provide programme support to the ongoing efforts towards achieving Universal Elementary Education (UEE). Janshala, a community based primary education programme, aims to make primary education more accessible and effective, especially for girls and children in deprived communities, marginalised groups, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes/minorities, working children and children with specific needs. A unique feature of Janshala is that it is a block-based programme with emphasis on community participation and decentralisation. The blocks have been selected on the basis of different indicators such as low female literacy, incidence of child labour, and concentration of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) populations.

Target group and primary beneficiaries

The GOI and the UN system recognize that certain sections of the population remain marginalised. Therefore it is the goal of the Joint GOI-UN System Education Programme to target girls and the marginalised population of children in selected areas and to improve their attendance and performance in primary education. Children who are marginalised by the formal education system are usually scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, working children, those belonging to minorities, disabled children, and children in remote areas. Girls from these groups are severely marginalised.

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Coverage

The Programme is being implemented in nine States of India - Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh - with a total of 139 blocks including ten cities under the Programme. The Programme covers nearly three million children, and 58,000 teachers in 18,000 schools. Out of 139 blocks more than 75 blocks have substantial tribal population. The proportion of tribal children is 33% of the total target group children in the project area.

Education of tribal children

The Indian Constitution assigns special status to the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Traditionally referred to as adivasis, vanbasis, tribes, or tribals, STs constitute about 8% of the Indian population. There are 573 Scheduled Tribes living in different parts of the country, having their own languages, which are different from the one mostly spoken in the State where they live. There are more than 270 such languages in India. According to the 2001 census, the tribal population in India is 74.6 million. The largest number of tribals is in undivided Madhya Pradesh (16.40 million), followed by Orissa (7 million) and Jharkhand (6.6 million).

There were 16 million ST children (10.87 million of 6-11 years and 5.12 million of 11-14 years) as of March 2001, out of the total child population in India of about 193 million in the age group of 6 to 14 years (*Selected Educational Statistics – 2000-01, Government of India*). Education of ST children is considered important, not only because of the Constitutional obligation but also as a crucial input for total development of tribal communities.

An important development in the policy towards education of tribals is the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, which specified, among other things, the following:

- Priority will be accorded to opening primary schools in tribal areas;
- There is need to develop curricula and devise instructional material in tribal languages at the initial stages with arrangements for switchover to regional languages;
- ST youths will be encouraged to take up teaching in tribal areas;
- *Ashram* schools / residential schools will be established on a large scale in tribal areas;
- Incentive schemes will be formulated for the STs, keeping in view their special needs and lifestyle.

The NPE, 1986 and the Programme of Action (POA), 1992, recognized the heterogeneity and diversity of the tribal areas while underlining the importance of instruction through the mother tongue and the need for preparing teaching/learning materials in the tribal languages. A working group on Elementary and Adult Education for the Xth Five Year Plan (2002-07) emphasized the need to improve the quality of education of tribal children and to ensure equity as well as further improving access.

The interventions being promoted in States under Janshala include:

- Schools, education guarantee centres and alternative schools in tribal habitations for non-enrolled and drop-out children;
- Textbooks in the mother tongue for children at the beginning of the primary education cycle, when they do not understand the regional language. Suitably adapted curriculum and the availability of locally relevant teaching and learning materials for tribal students;

- Special training for non-tribal teachers to work in tribal areas, including knowledge of tribal dialect;
- Special support to teachers as per need;
- Deploying community teachers;
- Bridge Language Inventory for use of teachers;
- School calendars in tribal areas appropriate to local requirements and festivals.
- Anganwadis and Balwadis or crèches in each school in tribal areas so that the girls are relieved from sibling care responsibilities;
- Special plan for nomadic and migrant workers;
- Engagement of community organizers from ST communities with a focus on schooling needs of children from specific households;
- Ensuring sense of ownership of school committees by ST communities through increasing representatives of STs in VECs / PTAs etc. Involving community leaders in school management;
- Monitoring attendance and retention of children;
- Providing context specific intervention e.g. Ashram school, hostel, incentives etc.

Universalizing access

One of the challenges in providing education to tribal children relates to setting up school facilities in small, scattered and remote tribal habitations. The majority of the Scheduled Tribes live in sparsely populated habitations in the interior and in inaccessible hilly and forest areas of the country. Nearly 22 per cent of the tribal habitations have populations of less than 100 while more than 40% have population of 100 to 300. The rest have population of 300 to 500 (*Sujatha, 2000*).

Relaxed Norm for Setting up Schools

One of the reasons for poor access to schooling in tribal areas before the 1980s was the high norm on population, number of children and distance for opening new schools. Most of the states have relaxed these norms to enable setting up schools even in small tribal hamlets. This, along with other measures has improved access in tribal areas. For instance, Andhra Pradesh has relaxed norms to set up schools in habitations even with 20 school-age children. Some states have lowered the population size norm, especially for tribal areas. EGS centers can now be established even with 15 children. In remote tribal habitations in hilly areas of North Eastern states and Jammu & Kashmir, EGS schools can be opened with only 10 children.

The *Sixth All India Educational Survey (1993)* showed that 78 per cent of the tribal population and 56 per cent of tribal habitations have been provided primary schools within the habitation. In addition, 11 per cent of the tribal population and 20 per cent of tribal habitations have schools within less than 1 km radius. About 65 per cent of rural habitations covering 86 per cent of the total rural population have primary schools within the habitation or within a distance of half a kilometer, as against 56 per cent of tribal habitations with 79 per cent of tribal population. Mizoram and Gujarat have the highest percentage of population and habitations covered by primary schools within the habitations. Up to 95 per cent of the tribal population and 85 to 90 per cent of the tribal habitations in the states are provided with schooling facilities within the habitation.

Quality improvement

Development of culturally relevant materials in local languages

Most of the states recognize the need to address issues related to teachers' attitudes, medium of instruction, textbooks and materials, curriculum and pedagogy and teaching- learning process in tribal areas.

An increasing number of researchers strongly advocate the use of the mother tongue or home language as medium of instruction in early stages of education. This assumes greater significance in the context of education of tribal children because their mother tongue is often quite distinct from the prominent languages in the state or regional languages. ST children face problems wherever teachers do not speak their dialect at all. From the perspective of language, it is desirable to have a local teacher from the same tribal community (Jha & Jhingran, 2002).

Although research evidence has demonstrated the positive consequences of bilingual or multilingual schooling on cognitive development and social interaction processes, tribal children would require special programs to be able to cope. The Constitution of India allows the use of tribal dialect (mother tongue) as the medium of instruction if the population of the tribe is more than 100,000.

Assam was the first state to prepare teacher training modules and separate teaching learning materials for the Bodo tribal language in 1995. Bodo is also a medium of instructions in some districts of Assam. The work on tribal language materials was undertaken through DIET staff and BRC/CRC coordinators who belonged to the tribal community. Resource material in Bodo language has been prepared and all workbooks at primary stage have been translated/adopted in Bodo language. In Golpara district, Garo medium workbook has been translated/adopted and distributed in the schools.

Most of the states have taken up activities for quality improvement of tribal area schools. One of the issues identified by the states was the problem faced by tribal children whose home language was very different from the regional language, which was the medium of instruction at the primary level.

In **Madhya Pradesh** teachers' handbooks called Bridge Language Inventory (BLIs) have been prepared in 3 tribal languages viz. Gondi (Shahdol and Betul district), Kuduk, (Raigarh) and Bhili (Dhar). Identified teachers were given training in using BLISs in their classrooms. The teaching-learning package called *Dham Dhama Dham* was translated into Gondi and supplementary reading material, *Kopal*, was developed for tribal children. The class I textbook *Bharati* has been translated into tribal languages. Supplementary TLM for tribal children has been developed in Jhabua district using local cultural form i.e. folk tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, to make the learning process interesting. In all, 450 teachers of 311 schools have been trained to use the supplementary materials.

Researches have underlined the need to develop culturally sensitive programmes of school education that can ensure the dignity of tribal groups by providing them with economically viable options for life (*Sinha & Mishra, 1997*). Some attempts have been made for linking curriculum with the local needs of the communities. Such curriculum would make tribal children more sensitive to local contexts and sustain them in their respective environments instead of forcing them to move out in search of another life.

In **Karnataka** a textbook for class I & II has been developed and introduced for *Soliga* language. A handbook has been developed for sensitisation of teachers towards social and cultural specificities of tribal societies. In **Maharashtra** tribal language dictionaries have been developed. Language resource groups have been set up for Bhili, Pawara, Madia, Gondi, etc. Bridge material has been developed in

Dhule district. **Kerala** has developed bilingual language materials at district level in Kasarkode, Waynad, Malappuram and Palakkad.

Orissa took the initiative to develop a comprehensive strategy for education of tribal children as early as 1997. The state has initiated a number of activities for addressing the quality improvement of tribal education.

Andhra Pradesh has developed bilingual dictionaries and teacher training has been organised in Warangal and Vizianagaram districts. Research studies have also been undertaken on the issue of language and maths learning by tribal children. It has been decided to use the multi-level kits developed for tribal areas in Vishakapatnam district and also in other tribal areas.

Gujarat has developed dictionaries in Dangi and Bhili dialects. A local word glossary in Dangi has been prepared and distributed in schools for class I-IV in Dang district. Similarly a local word glossary in Adivasi dialect has been prepared for class I-IV in Banaskantha district and distributed in schools. The Vidyasahayaks were given training on the use of these dictionaries. Gujarat has also initiated extensive work for preparation of TLM in tribal languages. The TLM developed include flash cards for different languages and also cards for mathematics. These have been supplied to all schools in tribal areas. A Bridge Language Inventory has also been introduced in Ho and Mundari languages in Ranchi district of **Bihar**.

Use of Local teachers

The acceptance of teachers by the community as one of them is critical for increasing schooling participation in tribal areas. An understanding of and respect for tribal cultures and practices and some amount of familiarity with the local language are important for teachers to gain this acceptance:

The presence of tribal teachers, especially from the same community, has shown and improved school participation of ST children. Coming from the same community, it is believed that the teachers would understand and respect the culture and the ethos with much greater sensitivity. Studies suggest that teacher motivation contributes more to teaching – learning process than teacher competence (Vaidyanathan and Nair, 2001).

Realising the importance of having teachers from the local community, many states have appointed community teachers or para teachers as they are popularly referred to. The deployment of community teachers was first experimented in the late Seventies in NFE and later in the formal school with the Volunteer Teacher Scheme of Himachal Pradesh (1984). Nineties saw spurt in the appointment of community teachers, who are from the local community and appointed by the gram panchayat or Village Education Committees. Different states have different schemes for appointing community teachers – Shiksha Karmi Scheme (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan), Shiksha Mitra Yojna (Uttar Pradesh), Lok Shikshak (Bihar), Andariki–Vidya Volunteer Scheme (Andhra Pradesh). Vidya Upasak Yojana (Himachal Pradesh), Shikshan Sevak (Maharashtra), Guruji (under EGS in Madhya Pradesh) Shikshak (under Basti Shala Scheme in Maharashtra) etc. It is estimated that there are about 220,000 para teachers engaged in full time schools in the country (Ed.CIL, 2001).

The issues relating to classroom transactions are difficult as they deal with well entrenched attitudes and prejudices of teachers as well as seemingly intractable problems of the huge difference between home and school languages. Attempts have been made to address the first issue through training programmes for teachers. However, more emphasis on attitudinal training of teachers on the lines of Orissa is required in most of the states. The second issue has been addressed mainly through the BLIs

and primers in tribal languages. There may be a problem of acceptance of the tribal language as a medium of instruction in the tribal communities, therefore, adequate dialogue with tribal communities and their leaders is required to prepare them on this issue.

Conclusion

The discussion presented above gives us two important lessons. One is that the cognitive qualities of tribal children have to be viewed and evaluated taking into consideration their ecological and cultural contexts that place very different demands on day-to-day life. Because of differences in the demands of tribal ecology, the patterning of their cognitive abilities shows considerable variation from those of other groups. A related and more important lesson is that tribal children are neither culturally inferior nor cognitively less competent than the children of other groups. Instead many of their skills and abilities are highly developed and extremely sophisticated.

The implications of these findings for schooling of tribal children are clear. A programme of schooling, which does not pay attention to the ecological, cultural and psychological characteristics of tribal children is highly unlikely to make any significant impact. The educational system of the dominant non-tribal population is of very limited value in the tribal cultural milieu because it does not match with the lifestyle of individuals and the needs of the tribal community. Linking school education with life in general and the needs of the tribal communities in particular is a most important step that requires serious attention.

The evidences suggests that tribal children do possess the basic cognitive abilities and psychological dispositions necessary for successful participation in school. Yet tribal children have very low levels of participation and success in school education programmes. This points to our failure to develop a sensitive model of education that is rooted in the psychological strengths of tribal children. Studies indicate that, in comparison to other groups, hunters and gatherers possess a high level of visual and tactual differentiation; they demonstrate capacity for fine judgment of shape and size of stimuli as well as spatial relations and they produce fine categorization of an array of objects (Mishra et al 1996). These abilities are required for success in science, art, music, dance, athletic activities, and vocations like carpentry, tailoring, wood and stone crafts. These skills need to be utilized not only for education of tribal children in schools, but also in the broader economic spheres of tribal life. Such attempts will be helpful in generating and promoting the sense of competence, self-efficacy, self-respect and positive self-image among tribal children in general.

Such attempts are also highly likely to provide tribal children with a culturally meaningful, ecologically valid and economically viable alternative to life by reinforcing the dignity of their culture and identity. Ever increasing contact of tribals with the outside world over the years has introduced several changes in their culture and life. These changes are reflected in their psychological characteristics also. Studies (e.g. Mishra et al 1996) indicate that their ways of perceiving the world, categorizing objects, interpreting pictures, and strategies of learning and memory become more similar to those with whom they interact and negotiate their life in these changed circumstances. This suggests that tribal children can acquire all those skills that the members of other groups of the society possess. What is important on our part is to develop a positive frame of mind about tribal children.

This is possible only through sensitivity to tribal culture and life, recognition of the cognitive strengths of tribal children, and appreciation of their personality qualities. Efforts in these directions will be very helpful in organizing the programme of tribal education as well as promoting economic and other aspects of tribal development.

Similarly a clear policy for language use in schools has to be developed. Research evidence suggests that significantly fewer students drop out of schools in which the language of tribal groups is used for instruction at the primary level. Development of primers in the tribal dialect involving content from the local context will go a long way in ensuring children's active participation in the learning process in school.

While there is a general need for improvement in physical facilities in all schools in remote tribal regions, change in perceptions and outlooks of teachers about tribal children are equally important. Teachers must be sensitized to the cultural and behavioral strengths of tribal children and motivated to do their best for them in schools. Incentives should be initiated to attract effective teachers to work in tribal schools and to retain them there. Only such motivated teachers are likely to generate interest among tribal children towards schools education by attempting to link the contents of the curriculum with the existing realities of tribal communities through the use of innovative technologies.