

Primary Education in Children's Mother-Languages!
... A Bright Example from Jharkhand, India!

By

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Abstract

The National Education Policy, 2020 promises that primary education would be mostly in children's mother tongues. This is an important child-friendly and learning-friendly decision. Research says that a foundation in a child's mother language enables her/ him to learn new languages and subjects in course of time in a pedagogically sound manner. Multilingual India needs this to prepare all her children in the right way and also to do justice to the nation's rich linguistic and cultural diversity.

At the same time, this new concept requires concrete examples from the field to enable policymakers and educational program managers to understand and promote this. Accordingly, they would familiarize the people who would seek guidance to implement this. Multilingual Jharkhand carries a bright example of this concept. The state has set up a unique center for research and innovations in children's languages in the name of M-TALL *akhra*. M-TALL stands for Mother-Tongue-based Active Language Learning *akhra*. This center of language researchers from 16 languages has designed pedagogical strategies for a mother-tongue-based multilingual education program, a pre-school education program, and a wide range of teaching-learning materials based on a state-wide language mapping and study of children's educational requirements in early grades through a state wide socio-linguistic survey and several other studies on children's experiences related to language learning.

This paper touches upon the key activities undertaken by the M-TALL *akhra* to demonstrate a mother-tongue-based multilingual education as desired by the National Education Policy, 2020. This stands out as a unique example before all the states and UTs in the nation.

Keywords

Adivasi, M-TALL *akhra*, literary, multilingual, picture dictionaries, Bhasha Puliya, education in mother-tongue, textbooks in tribal languages, school museums, literary champions, community resource persons

Context

For around 15 years, the maximum percentage of children from Jharkhand, India used to drop out of their primary schools since the state was carved out of Bihar in 2000-01. This drop-out rate at the primary level was the highest in the nation. This was the time when there was a nationwide drive to set up schools in each village to universalize elementary education (education up to class 8). Each child received free textbooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals. Teachers were trained adequately to a tune of 20 days each year to improve the quality of education and enhance the learning outcomes of students. However, 3 - 4 children out of 10 children who entered class 1 in Jharkhand's primary schools used to leave their school by class 3. This remained a matter of serious concern for the nation for one and half-decade. No one knew why children rejected the rich incentives and left school.

In 2011, the author representing the UNICEF as an education specialist looked into this critical issue in education. He assumed that the multi-lingual fabric of the state might be a factor contributing to children's learning disadvantages in the early grades of their primary education. He set up a center for research and innovations in children's languages involving the researchers from all divisional universities of the state who specialized in linguistics, anthropology, and cultural matters. They represented around 15 *Adivasi* and regional language groups. The center was named as Mother-Tongue-based Active Language Learning (M-TALL) *akhra*.

A Socio-linguistic Survey... an Eye-opener!

At the outset, the center undertook a socio-linguistic survey in all 24 districts (five villages each of 3 blocks in each district) of the state. The language researchers from 6 universities of the state visited these randomly selected villages and interacted with the village head, teachers, children, and parents to understand the language learning experiences of children

in their early grades. The researchers representing the divisional universities knew the local languages of children and adults. Hence the interactions were meaningful and accurately reflective.

The findings of the survey surprised everyone in the state – universities, media personnel, politicians, administrators, civil society, and others. Following are the major findings of this unique survey.

Mother Languages in Jharkhand: Over 96% of the population in Jharkhand communicates in *Adivasi* and regional languages at home. The *Adivasi* languages include Santhali, Ho, Mundari, Kurukh, Kharia, etc., and regional languages such as Nagpuri, Khortha, Panchparganiya, Bangla, Odia, Urdu, etc. Only 4% of the people communicate in Hindi as their mother tongue. A total of 19 major mother tongues are used by people in Jharkhand. Santhali, Khortha, Kurukh, Mundari, and Ho emerged as dominant mother languages in Santhal Pargana, North Chotanagpur, Palamu, South Chotanagpur, and Kolhan division respectively.

Challenges Before Children in School

Learning Challenges for Children: Around 78% of teachers felt that children faced learning challenges due to the language gap. About 52% of key resource persons felt that children of Class I and II faced learning challenges due to differences of languages in home and school. Around 92% of the teachers expressed that children belonging to SC, ST, and OBC faced learning challenges in schools. About 31% of teachers suggested the use of local language to improve reading efficiency in Grade I and II. Around 50% of teachers felt the use of play-way methods, TLMs, and use of Picture charts would be more useful.

Coping Strategies of Children

To address learning challenges due to the language gap around 36% of students took support from teachers, 34% of students took the help of pictures from textbooks while the rest remained either silent or took help from parents and guardians irregularly. Around 70% of villagers wanted *Adivasi* and regional languages to be used for classroom transactions, in school textbooks, and teachers to interact with children. Around 90% of teachers admitted that they needed training for addressing the learning challenges of children due to the

language gap. About 87% of resource persons felt that the learning process of children would be enhanced if local artists, storytellers, and other key resource persons shared their knowledge and experiences with school children.

The survey with ample evidence badly exposed the inappropriate planning of the state in children's education. Children failed in most parts of the state to understand their teachers, textbooks, and pedagogical processes. Their frustration accumulated day by day thereby pushing them one day out of school! It also justified that mother languages are very critical in children's early grades. Injustice done to children's mother languages was reflected in several parameters including student's lack of interest, inactive participation in classroom processes, silent classrooms, regular absence in school, higher dropout, and poor learning outcomes of children.

Public Demand for Mother-Tongue-Based Early Grade Learning

Schools for decades had continued like this and nobody seemed to be bothered about this! The survey clearly reflected the grassroots causes with evidence and convincing numbers. However, the school authorities kept silent about this strategically hiding their own inefficiency. The survey findings generated a lot of interest in civil society and media. Each seminar, or, workshop on education and development in the universities, media, and NGOs discussed this point repeatedly and urged the government to look into this matter to do justice to children.

M-TALL *akhra* understood the cause of this silence. This called for alternative solutions which were not available readymade for the educational managers to implement. Hence the M-TALL *akhra* resource team under the guidance of the author undertook a series of workshops to develop alternative models to address the issues. It also honored the suggestions of the community members who demanded a mother-language-based content development for children's early grades.

Children's World Captured in Bilingual Picture Dictionaries

The first step in this direction was the development of bilingual picture dictionaries titled '*Meri Bhasha mein Meri Duniya*' (My World in My Language) in 9 indigenous languages for use in Anganwadi centers and Primary schools of the state. They were published in

Santhali, Ho, Mundari, Panchparganiya, Nagpuri, Khortha, Kharia, Kurukh, and Kurmali languages. Children's world in rural areas was broadly categorized into forty-eight themes. Each theme was covered through around 20 objects or, incidents that children come across in their locality. Each item was accurately illustrated by professional artists. They referred to real life pictures and drew those for children. These picture dictionaries were published and supplied to Anganwadi centers in all districts. These were used as the starting point for small group discussions among children of different language groups.

Bhasha Puliya: for Children's Early Learning in Mother-Languages

M-TALL *akhra* team felt that it was essential to start a mother-tongue-based pre-school education in the Anganwadi centers to enrich the school readiness of children in the 3-6 year age group. The education team of M-TALL *akhra* developed a comprehensive pre-school education learning content in the form of 12 activity books, Sevika training annual, learning charts, and assessment charts. and published in the name of *Bhasha Puliya* for use in the initial days of children in *Anganwadi* centers and Primary Schools of the state. *Bhasha Puliya* is a children's language readiness package that aimed to bridge the home language/s of children with the language/s of primary schools in Jharkhand. A series of child-friendly activities including stories, songs, games, etc. were integrated into this package in a systematic manner to enable children to actively participate in these activities and acquire the desired skills which form the building blocks of the preschool education program.

The *Bhasha Puliya* pre-school education content initially was piloted in 100 Anganwadi Centers of Angara block of Ranchi district. More than 80% of children of these Anganwadi centers acquired school readiness skills and excelled in early grades in nearby primary schools where they were enrolled. Based on this, the *Bhasha Puliya* pre-school education program was upscaled by the Department of Social Welfare to 7200 Anganwadi centers of 6 districts. In course of time, this was further revised in the form of '*Nanhe Kadam*' and was implemented across the state in all the Anganwadi centers. M-TALL *akhra* also developed the curriculum and position paper on Pre-School Education in Jharkhand.

Steps Towards a Mother-Language-based Primary Education ...

As a follow-up to this, the M-TALL *akhra* worked on possible pedagogical renewal at the Primary level for promoting the mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) program in the state. Under the guidance of the author, the education team of M-TALL *akhra* worked with language researchers, teachers, and community workers of 16 language groups. This included languages of 3 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG) including Sabar, Malto, and Birjia out of the 9 PVTGs of the state. New textbooks were developed for classes 1 and 2.

These textbooks in indigenous languages are quite culture-sensitive, creative, attractive, and child-friendly in totality. NCERT authorities approved these books. The state on a priority basis decided to publish textbooks of classes 1 and 2 in 7 languages. Additionally, the JCERT requested M-TALL *akhra* to prepare the textbooks in two local scripts while the original books were in the Devanagari script. M-TALL *akhra* took this up and developed additional textbooks in Olchiki script of Santhali language and Warangchiti script of Ho language. JCERT started publishing these new textbooks from 2016 onwards annually and supplied the books to the concerned schools in the districts.

Around 3,000 schools were identified by the department in 10 districts for implementing the mother-tongue-based multilingual education program. All these textbooks published by the JCERT, Government of Jharkhand were supplied to the concerned schools. M-TALL *akhra* designed a training module for familiarizing the concerned teachers of these schools, who knew these languages, with the content and processes of these new textbooks. Training programs were undertaken by JCERT using this training module and trainers from the M-TALL *akhra*. The new textbooks and teacher/ community orientation created a lot of enthusiasm in their areas. Communities took a lot of interest in the new textbooks and came forward to assist in school activities. Where ever a teacher showed interest, community members joined hands enthusiastically to assist in their children's education sharing their own knowledge, skills and time.

Community participation in these schools have contributed a lot to school's overall improvement in its physical and learning environment. For example, the author encouraged the Ho Adivasi community to set up community museums by gathering various learning materials from the community in schools. In the schools of Chaibasa, West Singhbhum the *Ho Adivasi Mahasabha* hitherto have set up 12 school Museums collecting and organizing a wide range of learning materials from their localities. It includes old scriptures, models of various handmade equipment used in their communities, various teaching-learning materials made out of soil, wood, paper, leaf, stones and collections including seeds, leaves, roots, etc. for display, discussion and also for use in classrooms.

In the museum, each item is labeled and organized in a scientific way so that one can locate each item, observe it, discuss and understand it. Children from nearby schools and visitors from different lands including foreigners visit these museums from time to time. Children, teachers, and community members feel rewarded when they see the high interest of the visitors in the materials and in their narration, and also they find appreciation from the distant visitors at their museums. This also provides a great learning opportunity to them as they interact with the visitors and explain their experiences with the objects displayed in the museums. The Kolhan university located in the area took inspiration from this innovative work and recently set up a tribal museum on its campus!

When a New Culture of Learning Spreads Roots

Another development in these schools is equally noteworthy. Members of *Baal Sansad* (Child Cabinet) play an important role in strengthening the program. The senior students from these schools use the literary contribution of the community resource persons in a creative manner. *Baal Sansad* members from higher classes document the stories, songs, paintings, toys, etc. shared by the community storytellers, singers, painters, and toymakers in the name of 'Hamare liye Kahaniyan' (Stories for Us), *Geet*, *Chitra*, *Khilone*, etc. in separate documents for each. At the same time, children in these schools observe them and learn from their skills and learn the art from them to grow as storytellers, poets, writers, singers, dancers, toymakers, actors, etc. in an organic manner. Their own stories, songs, paintings, etc. are also being documented a '*Hamari Kahaniyan*' (Our Stories), *Kavitayen*,

Chitra, etc. for use in school's wall magazine. This is educationally and historically quite promising as the little literary champions learn the art and practice it with great joy. They find a lot of appreciation from their peers, teachers, community members, and visitors which contributes to their guaranteed growth (germination) as literary buds. This has great potential for them individually, their community, and their future.

Promises in Store

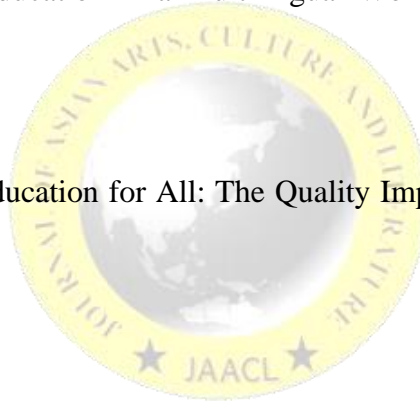
M-TALL *akhra* on the ground coordinates the quality improvement initiatives in the mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) program of the state and all these literary and educational activities in the districts in collaboration with the education department and also indigenous forums. This has not only revitalized and strengthened the literary culture of these indigenous communities and their schools, but also motivates all other communities to demand for promotion of similar initiatives in their area.

Fresh initiatives are being planned to develop textbooks for higher classes and in other languages too. The National Education Policy, 2020 has emphasized on mother-tongue-based primary education for children. This is one of the bright examples in practice in the nation.

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About the Author

Mr. Binay Pattanayak works for United Nations as a specialist in education. Prior to that, he was Chief Consultant (quality education) the to Ministry of Education, Government of India for a decade. He has been instrumental in promoting Mother-Tongue based Multilingual Education in India, through his leading contribution in Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam. He has written and translated more than 300 books for children and teachers on science and education other than his technical inputs into pedagogical renewal in all states and UTs in the nation. He is educated at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA.

