OXFAM IN ACTION

Promoting Multi Lingual Education in Odisha's *Adivasi* belt

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India

Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality. In India, it works in seven states[1]. Oxfam India believes that right to education (RTE) is important to close the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. As a founding member of the RTE Forum, it is working towards increasing peoples' access to quality, universal and inclusive elementary education in mainstream public education system, with special focus on the *Dalits, Adivasis,* Muslims and girls. In Odisha, Oxfam India supports Sikshasandhan's work to improve the quality of education, influence the functioning of government schools, and campaign to ensure effective implementation of the RTE Act.

O disha is one of the seven states in India that collectively houses 40 per cent of the country's poor[2]. *Adivasis*[3] comprise nearly 22.8 per cent of Odisha's population. Compared to other social categories, *Adivasis* fare badly in most of the education indicators. The literacy rate for *Adivasis* at 52.2 per cent is much lower than the state literacy rate of 73.5 per cent. The gender gap in literacy amongst *Adivasis* is wide: while it is 63.7 per cent for men, it is 41.2 per cent for women[4]. The dropout rates[5] among *Adivasis* are also high. 28.5 per cent children drop out of school by class V while 72.7 per cent by class VIII and 77 per cent by class X[6]. The national average dropout rate is at 40.8 per cent [7].

The state has the highest percentage of out-of-school children between ages six and fourteen in India[8]. Though there is an improvement in the proportion of enrollment of children from socially marginalised groups, there remain problems of retention and quality of education.

One of the key reasons identified for high dropout rates is the language barrier in the *Adivasi* belts of the state. Most of the children, particularly in the *Adivasi* dominated areas, have inadequate exposure to *Odia*, which is the main medium of teaching[9]. In Odisha, there are 62 *Adivasi* groups that include 13 primitive tribes, and 29 *Adivasi* languages[10].

Odisha notified a policy on Multi Lingual Education (MLE), on July 1, 2014, extending to all *Adivasi* children in the state. This policy ensures that the mother tongue of *Adivasis* is used as a medium of instruction for the first five years of schooling. It is a big step in realising the long-term benefits of education by addressing issues related to dropouts, absenteeism and enrollment especially in the *Adivasi* areas.

MLE is substantiated by an Odisha District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) assessment, which shows that it takes three years for a child enrolled in class I, to understand either the textbooks or what the teachers say. The problem of 'non-comprehension' makes the initial learning years difficult for the child, leading to maximum number of dropouts in classes II and III. It also leads to a cumulative learning deficiency[11]. A 2012 study by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi showed that both the attendance and learning achievement of children of *Adivasi* communities was high in case of MLE schools in the village[12].

In order to ensure access to quality, universal and inclusive elementary education, Oxfam India along with Sikshasandhan, an NGO based in Odisha, initiated Project Birsa in 2011. The Project is implemented in 11 primary and upper primary schools across 30 hamlets of *Adivasi* dominated Noto Gram Panchayat, Kaptipada block of Mayurbhanj district[13]. Teachers, parents, children and community level institutions are the primary stakeholders in this initiative.

ODISHA'S MLE TIMELINE

1996
DPEP prepares books in six *Adivasi* languages

2007-08
Odisha incorporates MLE under the *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan* (SSA)

2007
Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA) initiates mother tongue based MLE in 10 languages*. It is introduced in 544 schools with 384 MLE teachers and 428 *Siksha Sahayaks* or language instructors

2013
MLE programme expands to 941 more schools in 11 additional *Adivasi* languages

Please refer to end note 14

Kulay Singh Sundhi with his students of classes I-III at Bandhashahi New Primary School in Mayurbhanj in Odisha. Kulay is a *Bhasa Sikshak* appointed by Sikshasandhan

KULAY AND BIRSA – "BHASA SIKSHAK" (LANGUAGE TEACHERS)

Twenty-four year old school teacher Kulay Singh Sundhi is in a classroom filled with children at the Bandhashahi New Primary School. The class is decorated with charts of alphabets, numbers, names of fruits and vegetables, birds and animals. The students, from classes I to III, in their white and blue school uniforms stand in a semi circle reciting a poem. The poem is about a tiger invited to eat food, is asked to sit on a chair and, as soon as he sits, the chair breaks and the tiger falls. It's a cue for all the children to jump and squat. The children are thrilled and so is the teacher. The poem is in Ho[15], which is their mother tongue. Kulay is happy; his class has an almost 100 per cent attendance.

When Sikshasandhan launched Project Birsa, a survey of the Gram Panchayat showed that attendance in these schools was 30 per cent. They found that due to the language barrier, children didn't go to school and there was hardly any communication between teachers and students. The School Management Committees (SMCs) were not functional and the parents were not interested in participating in these platforms. As part of the project in Mayurbhanj, Sikshasandhan appointed Ho and Santhali teachers in the primary government schools. A subsequent survey showed that school attendance had increased to 85 per cent.

The Bandhashahi New Primary School, established in 2010, has 50 students and one teacher[16]. Sikshasandhan appointed Kulay, as the Ho teacher (Bhasa Sikshak), in 2011. Bhasa Sikshaks are language teachers appointed by Sikshasandhan. "Earlier the teacher couldn't understand what the students were saying and vice versa. They used to come, eat and leave. Students of classes I and II were usually left to fend for themselves. This led

to more instances of dropouts. But since Kulay started teaching in the school, dropout rate has reduced and children from other schools are enrolling here," remarked Padmalocha Bhanja, Headmaster In-charge.

Bhasa Sikshaks are the key to success of MLE. Kulay and other Bhasa Sikshaks have helped bridge this gap as they provide instructions in Ho and Santhali and, in the process, built a strong foundation for the students. The basics are first taught in Ho and then, in both Ho and Odia. The strategy is to start with the mother tongue in class I, introduce Odia and English as subjects in class II and III respectively, while continuing with Ho or Santhali. This makes the transition to Odia and English in the higher classes easier.

In 2013, when the MLE programme was expanded in the state, there were plans to translate textbooks in Adivasi languages. This included translating ARUNIMA (pre-school handbook and work-book) from Odia to Adivasi languages. According to Anil Pradhan, member secretary of Sikshasandhan and convenor of Odisha RTE Forum, they were not in favour of this step. "Through the Odisha Right To Education (RTE) Forum, we reiterated that appointment of MLE teachers was more important as mere translations, without any contextualization, would not help if teachers were not trained in the language," he explained. The government did go ahead with the translations and instead of translating word for word they contextualised the text books to suit the Adivasis. They included information regarding their festivals and folklore.

PROJECT BIRSA – PALAO SUNDER LAGID
(EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE)

Eleven-year old Kuwar Jarika joined Bandhashahi in class III. Kuwar, a Ho, was a potential dropout case. The school he first went to was far from his village and the medium of teaching was Odia. When his parents learnt about the appointment of a Ho language teacher in Bandhshahi, which was also closer to their home, they were relieved. A year of classes in Ho and some Odia helped Kuwar grasp basic concepts better. Now in class V, he is able to identify alphabets and numbers in English.

Not far from Bandhashahi is the Haldishahi Upper Primary School where Birsa Singh Biroli is a MLE teacher appointed by the state. Though he belongs to the Munda tribe, Birsa teaches in Ho[17]. He started as a *Bhasa Sikshak* with Sikshasandhan and applied for state selection of MLE teachers in 2014. He was selected as a *Siksha Sahayak* the same year. *Siksha Sahayaks* are government-appointed language teachers from the *Adivasi* community.

Out of 11 Sikshasandhan language teachers, six applied for government positions and three cleared it. Birsa is one among the three. However, they are yet to receive their training.

It is important to note that of the 11 schools in the project area only three have government appointed *Siksha Sahayaks*. This number is inadequate to support the large number of students and has forced Sikshasandhan to retain their *Bhasa Sikshaks* in these schools.

Prior to Project Birsa, Sikshasandhan began its experiment with language teachers through its Alternative Education Programme for Tribal Children between 1999 and 2008. Teachers from the community taught children for a couple of hours in villages that had no schools and adopted a cultural curriculum.

Anil Pradhan stresses upon the need to integrate *Adivasi* songs, stories, riddles and games in the curriculum. He insists that the academic calendar should be aligned with the local festivals as it is one of the reason for high absenteeism. Holidays unrelated to their culture too should be removed. For instance, *Adivasi* children should be taught about their festivals like *Maghe Parab*[18] rather than mainstream festivals like Durga Puja. "This is important to ensure that children don't miss school and have a sense of integration and importance."

When the government schools were set up, the teachers opposed *Bhasa Sikshak*s fearing that their ways of working would be scrutinized. As it is, the government teachers could not teach much due to the language barrier. Explaining this, Zila Parishad teacher, Dilip Kumar Behera said, "We had no official information of their appointment. But when they started working with us, it was very smooth." To allay such fears, Sikshasandhan held joint workshops with the District Project Coordinator, Block Resource Coordinator, District Inspector of Schools, Panchayat, Government Teachers and parents. These workshops discussed the project and examined teaching techniques.

The process to appoint language teachers has been consultative. "In order to appoint *Bhasa Sikshaks* to schools, the permission of the SMC is paramount. In fact, when an SMC in another panchayat refused appointment of language teachers, we did not go ahead with it," says Anil. The *Bhasa Sikshak* meets the parents, shares the work plan and teaching techniques. Only when the parents are satisfied do the teachers get appointed. This is followed by a consultation with the school principal, who confronted by staff crunch and language barrier, readily agrees.
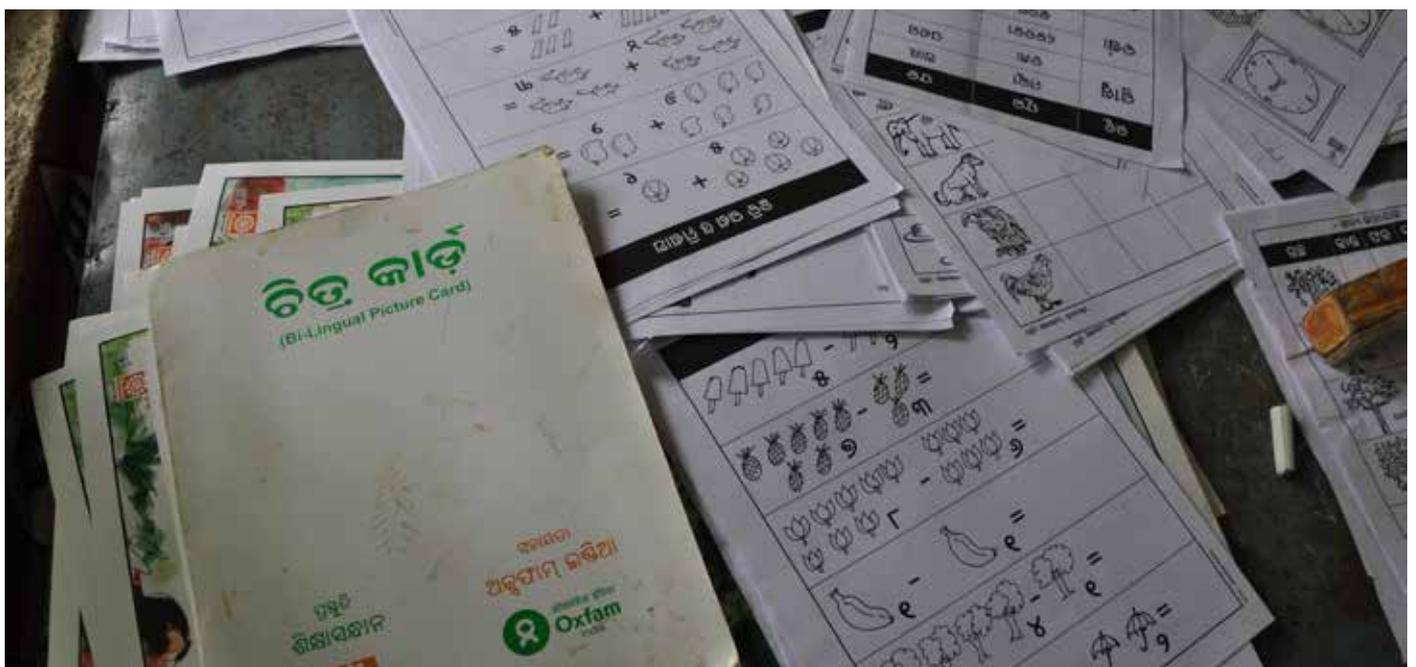
Books in Odia and Ho made available, by Oxfam India and Sikshasandhan, to students of the 11 primary schools in Noto Gram Panchayat in Mayurbhanj district

Bhasa Sikshaks are matriculate and fluent in their mother tongue as well as in Odia and are knowledgeable about their culture. They are selected from within the community and the vacancies are advertised on the Panchayat notice board. A test is administered to rate skills in language, mathematics and general knowledge followed by an interview. Selected candidates undergo a daylong orientation before being posted in schools. The *Bhasa Sikshaks* are paid around Rs 4000 a month.

Sikshasandhan also holds refresher courses for *Bhasa Sikshaks,* develops Teaching Learning Material (TLM) such as charts and learning cards, supplementary reading materials in different *Adivasi* languages, and provides material for libraries.

Bhasa Sikshaks help getting dropouts back to the classes by counseling parents to enroll their wards in schools with *Bhasa Sikshaks*. The teachers monitor attendance and keep a track on whether they have missed school for even a couple of days. If needed, they visit homes every morning to ensure that students come to school. In order to keep *Bhasa Sikshaks* motivated, outstanding teachers are felicitated by Sikshasandhan.

The schools where Sikshasandhan works have now been equipped with hygiene kits (phenyl and Dettol), mirrors, filter water, globe, and maps. Oxfam India has supported the schools by providing charts, play cards, posters, school diaries, note pads, and library books in Ho for these 11 schools. Apart from the providing these inputs, Oxfam India has also facilitated forming childrens' clubs, organising creative workshops, children festivals, exposure visits and regular interaction with SMCs, PRIs and students.

At the moment, Sikshasandhan is working with government schools from classes one to three. "It is difficult for an organisation like ours to teach all classes. But we are planning to appoint language teachers for up to class five in two villages," says Pradhan.

The government notification opens up employment opportunities for *Adivasi* youth, including women. Five out of the 31 MLE teachers appointed in 2014 were women. "This is a welcome move. In order to make the policy effective, the state will have to provide coaching to *Adivasis* to train them to be able to appear for the Teachers Eligibility Test (TET) exam," says Birsa.

In the meantime, Sikshasandhan continues to develop and conduct training programmes for teachers to help contextualize the curriculum, use innovative techniques of pedagogy to promote indigenous knowledge alongside modern sciences. Both Oxfam India and Sikshasandhan encourage teaching practices that imbibe *Adivasi* values and gender concerns in order to reduce alienation of *Adivasi* children. It is also proposed that gaps in the SSA training would be identified and addressed by Sikshasandhan in an attempt to make the training *Adivasi* friendly and *Adivasi*-sensitive.

Notes

1   Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Assam
2   http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/pov_rep0707.pdf
3   Adivasis is the commonly used term for Scheduled Tribes
4   Census 2011
5   Dropout rate is defined as the percentage of school leavers or pass-outs out of total enrolment who do not pursue studies in the same or some other school during the following academic session
6   MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines for Odisha
7   http://www.indiastat.com/table/education/6370/dropout/366820/898292/data.aspx (as viewed on June 15, 2015)
8   Unicef data on education, http://www.unicef.org/india/state_profiles_4346.htm
9   MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines for Odisha
10 Challenges before Odisha government to implement mother tongue based early childhood education in tribal areas (Tuesday, November 04, 2014) http://www.orissadiary.com/ShowOriyaColumn.asp?id=54728#sthash.lkKfQmrv.dpuf   (as viewed on August 26, 2015)
11 MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines for Odisha
12 Correspondence to chief secretary Bijay Kumar Pattnaik by Anil Pradhan, convener, Odisha RTE forum
13 The literacy rate for Adivasis in Mayurbhanj at 38.8 per cent is among the lowest in the state
14 The languages covered under the MLE programme were Kui, Saora, Kuvi, Juanga, Koya, Kissan, Santhali, Oram, Munda and Bonda according to the MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines for Odisha
15 Ho belongs to the Austroasiatic family of language and is spoken by the kolha tribes
16 According to RTE norms there should be at least two teachers
17 Ho is one of the languages belonging to the Mundari group
18 Harvest festival of the Ho tribes and one of their key festivals

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