

An endeavour to improve the reading skill of tribal children through revival and usage of indigenous Adivasi Languages: My experience in Mayurbhanj district, Odisha

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1. CONTEXT:

The State of Odisha situated in the eastern part of India consists of 30 districts, of which Mayurbhanj is the largest one. According to 2011 census the percentage of scheduled tribe population to the total population in the district constitute 58.58percent as against 22.85 percent in the State. Mayurbhanj is known for various tribal community, they are Santal, Ho, Bhumij/Munda, Bhuinya, Mankadia, Kharia and others.

The existence of diversified linguistic scenario in the district has led to a bilingual/multilingual situation in the classrooms of the Government schools. The presence of Odia speaking teachers in the multilingual classrooms made the situation quite unfavourable. This had a negative impact on the reading skill of tribal children. Considering this negative impact and further worsening conditions, CARE India (an International Development Organisation) intervened in 5 Blocks of Mayurbhanj through its Girls Education Program to test an innovation in government schools to improve early grade reading skills (Grades 1-4) among the most marginalized children in selected formal schools of Odisha. In order to materialise the program objective, some strategies were adopted, which are as follows.

- Developing School as an enabling system
- Developing Teacher as a Catalyst
- Strengthening Teacher Support Institutions (Block Resource Centres and Cluster Resource Centres)
- Engaging with School Management Committee (SMC)
- Creating Reading Culture in the community
- Linkages and Networking with System and Functionaries

The above strategies involved certain activities to revive and promote the beliefs, values, morals, ethics and languages of Indigenous Adivasi culture.

2. ABSTRACT:

Research says that language is the vehicle of communication. A person is able to express his inner feelings through his mother language. During the intervention of CARE India in Mayurbhanj, It was noticed that the languages such as Mundari and Ho were at risk of falling out of use due to the abundant use of the state language in the tribal area. It was clear from the earlier studies conducted by CARE India that oral language and vocabulary development is the base for improving the reading skill of children. CARE India also strongly believed that the reading skill of children can be improved by accessing the children to the age and grade specific supplementary reading materials developed in their mother tongue. Keeping this in view, an initiation was taken to develop some bilingual reading materials for the tribal children with support from the community people. Development of these materials not only helped improve the reading skill of children but also preserved and revived the Tribal languages from being extinct. This paper clearly states the methods adopted for conservation of the languages.

3. KEY WORDS:

Reading skill, revival of Tribal language, CARE India, Mayurbhanj and bi-lingual children reading resources

4. INTRODUCTION:

CARE India worked in 5 blocks.48 clusters and in 516 schools of Mayurbhanj district to reach out to nearly 27000 Govt. school children through its START EARLY: READ IN TIME project. The project acknowledged that sociological and pedagogical barriers were the main reasons that hindered acquisition of early reading competencies in learners from marginalized context- focusing on children from tribal context. Early reading strategy followed an inclusive approach, some important and relevant approaches are given below.

- The early reading strategy used pedagogy and teacher instruction methods that valued the home/ mother tongue of the children and ensured their gradually transition to standard medium of instruction (main stream language). At the child level, the focus was to build conceptual understanding through encouraging use of mother tongue and simultaneously building a sound vocabulary base and exposure to the medium of instruction.
- The strategy focused on respecting the linguistic and cultural diversity of children that existed in a classroom. Thrust was to ensure that teachers and children appreciate the diversity that existed in the classroom and use it as part of an effective context based linguistic approach to foster early reading ability in children. Teacher were encouraged to use that as a positive dividend not as a deficit.
- The strategy focused on creating enabling reading environment (availability of reading resources, creating print rich environment, ensuring use of library in classroom, development of various kinds of materials, display of children material).

As a part of the intervention, steps were taken to establish community libraries in villages to link the communities with the schools to create a reading culture in the villages and to bring the tribal culture in to the classroom to retain and improve the language skill of the tribal children. The adoption of an inclusive approach for every reading strategy induced to respect and revive the tribal culture by encouraging the use of mother tongue in the classroom, creating bi-lingual children reading resources and advocating for recruitment of tribal teachers in the schools from the communities.

5. CARE INDIA'S ENDEAVOUR FOR REVIVAL OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES:

The 4 year long "START EARLY: READ IN TIME project witnessed much efforts undertaken by CARE for the restoration of tribal languages at multiple levels. Activities under each reading strategy clearly explains about thoughtful planning, implementation techniques and periodic evaluation principles to a larger extent.

5.1. At School level:

- The baseline study conducted by CARE made it clear that there was lack of conducive environment for the tribal children in schools. In order to create an enabling environment, focus was on the use of tribal languages in the morning assemblies. Classroom processes and sports activities etc. Instructional charts were prepared in tribal languages with the use of Odia scripts for the reference of Odia speaking teachers. The tribal children were encouraged to tell stories, riddles and jokes in their mother tongue during morning assembly activities. Some Adivasi model antiques were either developed or brought from the communities to display in the classrooms to bring a homely environment in schools. The school libraries were

made accessible to children. Sufficient numbers of age and grade specific bilingual library books (stories, songs, riddles, jokes) were made available for the children. Provision was made for a separate library period in the school time table every day. The purpose was to create an opportunity to have an easy access of the children to the libraries. The books were at an appropriate height in the classrooms. Storytelling, role play, story writing, creative writing and poem recitation were the main and regular activities in the library periods. Children were at their discretion to use any language of their interest. Every item or object available in the school campus was named bilingually with appropriate font size. There were regular co-curricular activities (debate, speech, storytelling etc.) every week to create a multi-cultural environment in schools. Language was not a barrier for the children to participate in any of



the activity.

Use of Bi-lingual books in classroom

5.2. At Teacher level:

- CARE India emphasised on building the capacity of CRCCs and teachers on early language and literacy. Trainings were imparted at a regular interval to equip them with knowledge, skill and attitude towards solving the day to day pedagogical issues faced during early grade language periods. The teachers were made aware about the importance of mother tongue for the early grade children. During monthly cluster meetings, the teachers were taught to develop bilingual instructional charts, bilingual word charts and dictionaries for supporting children in the classroom. Developing these materials in schools with the help of children became a practice in course of time. The teachers started using bi-lingual materials during classroom transactions to make the children more comfortable. This created an inclusive environment. The existence of multi-lingual situation in a classroom gradually became an asset for the teachers to develop a metacognitive language skill of children.



Teachers developing bi-lingual material

5.3. At community level:

- With the passage of time, it has increasingly been felt that the relationship between school and community is inevitable. Community participation accelerates the school development process. The current scenario depicts the non-association of schools with communities. Based on different earlier researches, CARE India realised that the association and support of the tribal communities was highly needed for improving the learning level of children. It was also felt that there was dearth of tribal literatures as supplementary reading materials in schools. Development of tribal literature for children was the need of the hour. According to the research findings, the tribals of Mayurbhanj were very rich in oral culture. They had stock of tribal resources like stories, songs and riddles in oral forms. Some of their cultural practices

were on the verge of extinction. In this context, CARE India took an initiative to collect the old oral stories, songs and riddles from the villages through story telling festivals. The objective of collecting these stories was to revive the Adivasi languages from being extinct and to bring their culture into the classrooms in the form of stories.



Bi-lingual books developed by CARE



Storytelling festival at community

- Nearly 50 numbers of storytelling festivals were organised in 50 tribal villages. The senior most persons, children, women. Village leaders, teachers of the adjacent schools were invited to the festival. The objective of the festival was shared with the participants. All the participants were encouraged to tell small, old, relevant and interesting stories or riddles on the occasion. Stories were told by the participants one by one. These were brought to the written form by young children of the villages. After the end of the storytelling session, the written stories were collected from the villagers. These stories were again scrutinized and examined by a screening committee formed by CARE INDIA. The committee consisted of pedagogy experts, tribal language experts. writers, illustrators and editors. Special care was taken to avoid the kind of stories based on violence, gender discrimination, castes and religion sensitivity. After a thorough examination and edition these were made Grade and age specific. With the consent of the pedagogy experts, nearly 20 types of monolingual and bilingual books were published. Later on, the books were distributed to the Community libraries and adjacent schools as supplementary reading materials for tribal and non-tribal children.
- During the 4 years' project period, 50 community libraries were established in 50 villages for linking the communities with schools. A consensus was taken in the villages to engage the Educated Kishories of the villages on a rotational basis to run the library on Saturdays and Sundays. The Kishories of the villages organized role plays, thematic drawing, painting, storytelling, story writing, and different reading activities for 2 hours with the early grade children using their mother tongue. The International literacy day and International mother language days were celebrated in the villages to create an awareness among the community people for restoration of tribal languages.

5.4. Advocacy at different level:

An exhibition of children's literature was organised by CARE India at the district head quarter in Mayurbhanj to apprise the district education officials about the creation and promotion of children created literature. The children from different communities displayed their traditional handmade tribal story books in the festival. These stories were widely accepted by the academicians, community people and education officials. An official decision was taken

for creation and promotion of children created tribal stories in schools.



Exhibition of children created Literature

- Similarly, a reading festival was organised by CARE India at the national level to let the education officials know about the essential components of early grade reading. The academicians, multi-lingual experts, faculties from NCERT, SCERT, DIET and civil society organisation were invited to be a part of the festival. A demonstration was made to address the reading issues in a multilingual classroom situation with the use of mother tongue and tribal reading materials. The secretary of Ministry of HRD appreciated the multilingual classroom model and issued a circular to the states for replication of this model in their respective area.
- Apart from these, discussion was made with the district authority to appoint multi-lingual teachers in the schools having more than 80% tribal children. Text books were developed in Mundari language for class-1 to class-3 children for easy classroom transaction. A class-wise standard principle was adopted by the district education department for gradual transition of mother language to the state language.

6. CONCLUSION:

With a view to improving the reading skill of tribal children, CARE India tested some innovations. Realising the importance of mother tongue as the base for the language development of children, it revived the tribal languages in the community through establishment of community libraries in the villages.

Collecting stories, riddles and folk songs from the tribal communities and bringing them to the classroom in the form of books was one of the endeavours of CARE India. Attempt was made at all levels for promoting mother tongue based education for early grade children. Trainings were imparted to the CRCCs and the teachers on the development and usage of bi-lingual literatures in schools. The school and community libraries were provided with bi-lingual/multi-lingual books for reference and use. Revival of Tribal languages and their abundant usage in oral and written forms not only created an inclusive environment but also supported in improving the reading skill of tribal children to a larger extent. The results are quite visible in the Custer study report published by a Delhi based research agency "KARAK".

7. REFERENCES:

- Cluster study report prepared by "KARAK", a Delhi based research Agency
- Multilingual Education in Odisha: A report by Dr. Mahendra Mishra
- Project brief report prepared by CARE India

