

# Language, A Garbled Lesson for Koraput's Tribal Children

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In Odisha's Koraput district the tribal population does not speak Oriya, the state language. But schools continue to use Oriya as the medium of instruction. Having attended such schools, the author writes how tribal children struggle to overcome this barrier. And, most often, fail.

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**Lost in Translation:** Students from the Bonda tribe in a Koraput school  
 Source: <http://maverickbird.com/20140727/bonda-tribal-truths.bmp>

I am from Laxmipur village in Koraput district. I belong to the Bhottada<sup>1</sup> tribe. We speak Bhatri

(an admixture of Paroja and Oriya language)<sup>2</sup> at home, but since both my grandfather and father were government employees I grew up among people who spoke Oriya and Desia (a dialect of

<sup>1</sup> Bhottodas are a class of Oriya cultivators and labourers. According to Senapati and Sahu this tribe is the subdivision of the great Gond tribe. Bhottodas have a population of 78,649 (2011 Census) in Koraput and they are also found in Nawarangpur, Kalahandi and Malkangiri districts of Odisha.

<sup>2</sup> Demography of Bhottada, Academy of Tribal Language and Culture, Orissa (accessed from: <http://as1.ori.nic.in/atlcdemo/?refid=Tribes&pgid=showtribe&tribe=Bhottada>)

Oriya) and was thus fluent in both. I had to shift many schools, as is common in the villages, till class 10: a primary school up to class 5, to the Middle English Secondary School up to class 7, in the Sanganna High School up to class 8—these three were in Laxmipur—after which I moved to the G.C.D. High School in Rayagada for class 9 and 10. Next I headed to Cuttack and the Ravenshaw College for my graduation and Masters studies. And if it had taken all the support of my family to get to Rayagada and then to Cuttack, while many of my schoolmates left their education midway, it took even more for me to find myself pursuing and completing my MPhil and getting accepted as a PhD student in Delhi University.

That my father, a retired headmaster, was a teacher who taught in the Tribal Welfare Residential (TRW) schools in Koraput district, contributed considerably to my educational opportunities and attainments. I was nurtured in an educated environment, with the necessary guidance to further my educational aspirations.

But for most tribal children from Koraput who do not have these advantages, the journey ends long before they have even completed school. And though the Scheduled Tribes (ST)<sup>3</sup> comprise over 50 per cent the 13.79 lakh population<sup>4</sup> of this southernmost district of Odisha, the ST literacy rate lags at a meagre 36.35 per cent, lower than the district's overall literacy rate 49.87 per cent, and also lower than the that of the Scheduled Castes (SC) at 52.64 per cent.<sup>5</sup> This despite the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan's (SSA) mandate to make free and compulsory education

a fundamental right for every child between the ages of 6 to 14 years. Despite government schools providing free education to all children and the existence of School Management Committees (SMC) comprising school staff including elected members of PTA (Parent Teacher Association). Despite private schools admitting at least 25 per cent without any fee.<sup>6</sup>

Different reasons, and certainly more than one, have been identified for why the tribal children of Koraput continue to remain conspicuously absent in the district's school, poverty being primary among them. Sure, many more tribal families, compared to families from the general categories, are BPL (Below Poverty Line) in Koraput. And this indeed contributes towards many more tribal children dropping out of schools as compared to their peers from the general categories.

Having said which, one must seek to understand why even those tribal children who do manage to get into school cannot be retained in the system for long. A significant reason, in my experience, as will be corroborated by local tribals, is language. Even as SSA seeks to include all children in the country's classrooms, whatever their caste, religion or community, it pays little heed to their language.

There are about seven major tribes, and some smaller tribes, that inhabit Koraput.<sup>7</sup> They speak variety of languages: Kuvi (Kondh tribals), Saura (Saura tribals), Gond (Gond tribals), Koya (Koya tribals), Gutab (Gadaba tribals), Bonda (Bonda tribals) and Paroja (Paroja tribals). The Paroja tribe is further classified into seven types based on the language they speak which are, Bonda Paroja, Jhodia Paroja, Dhruva Paroja, Konda Paroja, Paeng Paroja, Pengo Paroja and Didayi Paroja.<sup>8</sup> There is little similarity between these tribal

<sup>3</sup> The essential characteristics, first laid down by the Lokur Committee, for a community to be identified as Scheduled Tribes are – indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation and backwardness.

<http://tribal.nic.in/Content/IntroductionScheduledTribes.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Census 2011: Koraput.

<http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/422-koraput.html>

<sup>5</sup> Census 2011: Odisha.

<http://www.stscodisha.gov.in/Population.asp?GL=abt&PL=5>

<sup>6</sup> <http://ssa.nic.in/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://orissadiary.com/orissa\\_profile/tribal/index2.asp](http://orissadiary.com/orissa_profile/tribal/index2.asp).

<sup>8</sup> Orissa District Gazetteers, Koraput, by R.C.S. Bell, Orissa Government Press, Cuttack, 1945.

languages, and they are all completely different from Oriya (the majority language in Odisha). In fact, no one understands these tribal languages except for the concerned tribe in and outside Odisha. Inversely, these tribes do not understand Oriya.

It is in this context that one must understand the feeling of alienation felt by the tribal children (mostly in the tribal concentrated areas) who are enrolled in Koraput's schools where the medium of instruction is Oriya.<sup>9</sup> According to a research undertaken by the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), around 748,000 ST children in classes 1, 2 and 3 encounter a classroom language other than their mother tongue.<sup>10</sup> Schools use Oriya for teaching and communication, which is most often not familiar to a tribal child at the pre-primary and primary levels. These children are therefore unable to fully comprehend classroom teaching and activities, read or understand the texts properly. They recite many things along with their teachers (e.g. in class I) without even understanding its meaning. As Mohanty (2000) says, 'No language is inherently deficient or illogical... Disadvantages accumulate to speakers of some languages not because their languages are substandard or deficient, but, because their exclusion from significant social domains, from schools...'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In Odisha, The District Primary Education Programme assessment showed that most of the ST children (particularly those who are in the high tribal concentrated areas), have very less exposure to Odia when they are enrolled in to school.

<sup>10</sup> OPEPA documentation: 'Sustainable Community Based Multilingual Education Program Strategy', Orissa, cited in, Soumya Kapoor Mehta, 2011. *Including Scheduled Tribes in Orissa's Development: Barriers and Opportunities*, IHD - UNICEF Working Paper Series, No. 9, UNICEF India, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Mohanty, Ajit K. (2000). Perpetuating Inequality: The Disadvantage of language, Minority Mother Tongues and Related Issues. In Mohanty, Ajit K. & Misra, Girishwar (eds). *Psychology of Poverty and Disadvantage*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 104-117.

My personal experience while growing up in Koraput had me witness rampant language problems in the school that I studied in. For instance, a tribal student in his class VI examination, while attempting to answer a history question — (which the question paper had instructed be answered in the examinee's "own words" (*nijo bhasha*) — wrote in the tribal language that he spoke at home; the answer was supposed to be in the examinee's "own words" in Oriya. He scored a zero.

Another misunderstanding caused by limited understanding of Oriya, had a class 6 girl student writing about herself as a cow when asked to author an essay on the "Autobiography of a Cow" (*Gai ro Atmokotha*). She too scored zero.

While interacting with some high school tribal students in the year 1994, I recall discussing 'podu cultivation' (Shifting Cultivation). We were speaking in Oriya and I remember using words like slashing, burning, conservation etc. The students did not understand the meaning of most of these words, though they knew what 'Podu cultivation' is much better than I did. The irony is that if I had been an examiner testing their knowledge of podu cultivation, I would certainly have failed them. In another instance, while discussing different parts of a particular flower, I remember the students identifying the flower and its parts but not knowing the names for these in Oriya.

Local experiences and anecdotes apart, there is little in terms of data, quantitative or qualitative, that substantively links language and dropout rate in Odisha.

A rare academic effort in this direction is made by Mohanty (2000) where he links the mismatch between mother tongue (MT) and the medium of instruction (MoI) of Koraput's tribal children as making for a major cause for school dropouts.<sup>12</sup> The work concludes that this has

<sup>12</sup> Mohanty, Ajit K. (2000). Perpetuating Inequality: The Disadvantage of language, Minority Mother Tongues and

resulted in the marginalisation and exclusion of tribals from the mainstream societies and contributed to their poverty.

State policies with respect to languages in education often recognise but ignore in practice the problem of exclusion of languages. Even though it has been established that exclusion of languages from education has direct negative consequences for educational performance, socioeconomic well-being, and development, as in the case of the tribal languages.<sup>13</sup>

To improve the educational standard and capacity of the tribals, the Government of India (GoI), in 2003, reached out to all the state governments (mostly in tribal concentrated states) through SSA to introduce a mother tongue based MLE (Multilingual Education) programme for tribal children. In 2007 the Odisha government started the MLE programme at the primary level (class 1 to 5) as a pilot programme, it was to be implemented in phases. The programme aims to teach the tribal children in their mother tongue in the early classes (I to III) and moves on to include other languages such as Oriya (as second language) and English (as third language) in class 4 and 5 respectively. As a result, tribal children are expected to be mainstreamed in the state wide educational system.<sup>14</sup> The Odisha government reports that the programme has successfully been implemented in classes 1 to 3 up until 2012-13. Encouraged by the success of the programme in classes 1 to 5, now the government now plans to prepare a roadmap to implement the programme

as a medium of instruction for the tribal children till class 5.<sup>15</sup>

However, the percentage of educational failure and dropout among the STs remains very high. As per the study in 2008 done in Kandhamal district<sup>16</sup> of Odisha, which lies in the same tribal belt as Koraput, by Class 5, over 50 per cent of the ST children are out of school and 80 per cent by Class 10. This means that out of 100 tribal children joining Class 1, only 20 stay on to appear in the class 10 Board Exams, of which only eight pass.<sup>17</sup>

The government's relief at having found a way to overcome the language barrier might be too early yet. Interviews conducted with Koraput-based (tribal) teachers and (tribal) parents<sup>18</sup>, in fact, indicate that the MLE programme is still far from successful, even though the government's data gives an impression that progress among the ST children has been made. Those interviewed, on the contrary, were emphatic that the tribal children of Koraput continue to lag in

<sup>15</sup> *The Hindu*, July 6, 2014, Bhubaneswar, Odisha. [accessed from: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-otherstates/odisha-to-extend-mothertongue-based-education-to-all-tribal-students/article6182063.ece>

<sup>16</sup> Kandhamal district, which is bordering KBK districts, is among the most backward districts of the 69 identified most backward districts of India. It has a Scheduled Tribe population of 53.6 per cent (Census 2011) which is very much similar to Koraput district. Average literacy rate of the region is 64.13 per cent out of which Schedule Tribe literacy is 58.34 per cent. Mahananda, Ramakanta. 2011. *Tribal Communication Technology: A Case Study of Kondhs of Kandhamal of Odisha*. <http://orissa.gov.in/e-magazine/Orissareview/2011/Dec/engpdf/51-61.pdf>; "Census 2011: Kandhamal District."

<http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/414-kandhamal.html>; *Census 2011: Odisha*. <http://www.stscodisha.gov.in/Population.asp?GL=abt&PL=5>.

<sup>17</sup> Ajit Kumar Mohanty, *Multilingual Education: A Bridge too Far?* in Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, Ajit K. Mohanty and Minati Panda, 2009 (ed.) . *Social Justice Through Multilingual Education*, Multilingual Matters, Bristol, p. 3

<sup>18</sup> Three teachers and four parents were interviewed for the IDF Newsletter in March 2015. They agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity.

Related Issues. In Mohanty, Ajit K. & Misra, Girishwar (eds). *Psychology of Poverty and Disadvantage*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 104-117.

<sup>13</sup> Ajit Kumar Mohanty, *Multilingual Education for Indigenous Children: Escaping the Vicious Cycle of Language Disadvantage in India*, paper presented in *UNESCO-UNU International Conference*, Tokyo, August 27 - 28, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The Odisha Gazette, No. 1058, Cuttack, Thursday, July 3, 2014, Government of Odisha.

understanding and communicating in the mainstream languages, which is reflected in their poor performance in the class 10 examination.

Numbers bear out these impressions. If the MLE programme had indeed been successfully implemented in Koraput district, the retention of the tribal students in class 9 and 10 should be at par with non-tribal children. Instead, the dropout rate for ST children in class 9 and 10 is still higher than the other children. In 2012-13 the dropout rate for Koraput's ST children in class 9 and 10 is 26.67 and 53.02 respectively.<sup>19</sup>

The current experimental MLE project in Odisha is quite limited in its scope and coverage both in terms of the number of schools in the programme, it's being limited to class 3 and lack of eligible teachers to teach in the tribal languages. Also, there are glaring omissions: though the percentage of Kuvi spoken population in Koraput is higher than the other (tribal) languages and has extensive literature in this language, still it doesn't have a place in the MLE programme.

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<sup>19</sup> Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), government of Odisha.