Mother-Tongue based Education a way forward for vitalizing indigenous languages in Jharkhand

Binay Pattanayak
Senior Education Consultant, World Bank, India

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ABSTRACT

Jharkhand is known for its multilingualism. It is home to more than 19 indigenous and regional languages. It also includes endangered languages of 8 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). Languages in the state have proved a big point in the state. It is related to the development in the state. Although naturally Jharkhand is a rich state and contains around 40% of India’s minerals, yet it remains pretty low in development parameters. Most analyses and discussions blame the instability in the government, rise in Left Wing Extremism, corruption and poor service facilities as key factors of poor development in the state. One critical point emerged in 2013 as a strong deterrent to the state’s education and development when the findings of a state-wide socio-linguistic survey created strong ripples across the state. It questioned the approach and effectiveness of the whole education system that violated the basic rights of a majority of children in the state. This paper aims to discuss the genesis of this historic study and implications it made for policy changes in favour of children, their languages and learning. Narrated below is this story of this historical transformation in state’s education system and its implication for development in the state.

1. Context

Jharkhand is known for its multilingualism. It is home to more than 19 indigenous and regional languages. It also includes endangered languages of 8 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). Languages in the state have proved a big point in the state. It is related to the development in the state. Although naturally Jharkhand is a rich state and contains around 40% of India’s minerals, yet it remains pretty low in development parameters. Most analyses and discussions blame the instability in the government, rise in Left Wing Extremism, corruption and poor service facilities as key factors of poor development in the state.

One critical point emerged in 2013 as a strong deterrent to the state’s education and development when the findings of a state-wide socio-linguistic survey created strong ripples across the state. It questioned the approach and effectiveness of the whole education system that violated the basic rights of a majority of children in the state. This paper aims to discuss the genesis of this historic
study and implications it made for policy changes in favour of children, their languages and learning. Narrated below is this story of this historical transformation in state’s education system and its implication for development in the state.

2. Setting up of M-TALL akhra, a language research center

It was in 2011 when for the first time a team of educational practitioners under the guidance of the author analyzed the educational data of the state to understand the possible cause of high dropout in early grades. The state did not have any logical answer to the cause of its highest dropout rate except blaming the teachers for their poor performance. The education team assumed that inadequate justice to the multilingual background of children might be one of the main causes of children’s poor learning and dropout from school. To understand the possible causes the team set up a research cell in Jharkhand Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Government of Jharkhand.

Named as Mother-Tongue based Active Language Learning (M-TALL) akhra, the cell consisted of language researchers from all divisional universities, civil society organizations working on language and culture, community language specialists from different language groups, media, teachers and students. M-TALL akhra conducted series of consultations to reflect on children’s languages in the state and importance of languages in children’s learning and development. The experts planned to undertake a state wide socio-linguistic survey to understand the nature of languages used in different divisions and also children’s language experiences at home, school and society.

3. A State-wide Sociolinguistic Survey

Using newly developed study tools, a socio-linguistic survey was undertaken in all 24 districts of the state. Around 150 research scholars and their teachers visited 15 villages of 3 blocks in each district to interact with community leaders, teachers, Anganwadi Sevikas, mothers and children in local languages using the structured questionnaires. The consultations were very inclusive, democratic and participatory.

The research scholars interacted with around 1080 community members, 216 teachers, 2160 children and 432 community resource persons to understand the mother languages used in different parts of Jharkhand, language in day to day life of community, language in life of children, language in education of children with focus on language in classroom transaction, learning challenges among children and their coping strategies. The key findings of the survey are discussed below.

a. Mother tongues used in state
- Over 96% of the population in Jharkhand communicates in tribal and regional languages at home. The tribal languages including Santhali, Ho, Mundari, Kurukh, Kharia, etc. are spoken by about two-third (65.7%) of the population and regional languages such as Nagpuri, Khortha, Panchparganiya, Bangla, Odia, Urdu, etc. are spoken by 30.6% of the population.
- Only 3.7% of the people communicate in Hindi as their mother tongue.
- A total of 19 major mother tongues are spoken by people in Jharkhand.

b. Language in Life of Children
- Around 97% of the respondents shared that tribal and regional languages are used by children for communicating with parents.
- Only 5% of the respondents said that Hindi is used by children while playing.
- Around 85% of the children interact in their day-to-day lives in their tribal and regional languages.
- Over 95% of the local resource persons including PRI members and community leaders reflected that children use tribal and regional languages while interacting in their villages and localities.

c. Learning Challenges
- In survey of teachers, around 78% felt that children face learning challenges due to the language gap.
- More than 52% of the village resource persons including PRI members and community leaders felt that children of Class I and II faced learning challenges due to language problem.
- Roughly 92% of the teachers expressed that children belonging to SC, ST and OBC faced learning challenges in schools.

d. Coping Strategies
- To address learning challenges due to language gap around 36% of the students take support from teachers, 34% of the students take help of pictures of textbooks while rest remain either silent or try to take help from parents and guardian.
- Around 70% of the villagers want tribal and regional languages to be used for classroom transaction, in school textbooks and teachers to interact with children.
- More than 90% of the teachers admitted that they need training for addressing learning challenges of children due to language gap.
- Around 87% of local resource persons including PRI members and community leaders feel that learning process of children would be enhanced if local artists, story tellers and other local resource person share their knowledge and experiences with school children.

(Source: Language Diversity in Jharkhand, M-TALL akhra, JTWRI, Govt. of Jharkhand)

Community leaders, parents and teachers in all divisions clearly indicated that difference between children’s home languages and school’s Hindi language was main cause of their learning disadvantages. Everyone demanded that children’s early education from pre-school level needed to be in their mother languages. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 also clearly articulated that mother-tongue based primary education needed to be provided to the extent practicable.

4. A strong violation of children’s rights

The state violated this very strongly across the state depriving children of their fundamental right to learning in mother-tongues. State authorities never paid any attention to children’s languages in spite of children’s highest dropout rate in nation and also poor learning outcomes. Findings and recommendations of the socio-linguistic survey was printed in form of a book titled ‘Language diversity in Jharkhand’ in English and Hindi and was widely circulated. Summary of the study was translated into all major languages for informing community members across the state. The survey findings were widely discussed in all universities, seminars of civil society organizations, media including social media. Every forum demanded children’s early learning in children’s mother-tongues as desired under the RTE Act. M-TALL akhra engaged the research scholars in collecting various local learning resources in the form of stories, songs, idioms, puzzles, paintings, skits, riddles, jokes, games, toys, etc. in children’s languages.
5. Bilingual Picture Dictionaries for children

M-TALL akhra categorized all these learning contents under 48 broad themes around children’s experience in villages. With accurate illustrations each theme was systematically organized. Thus were developed bilingual picture dictionaries for children titled ‘Meri Bhasha mein Meri Duniya’ (My world in my language) in 9 indigenous and regional languages. These picture dictionaries were supplied to all districts for use in Anganwadi centers and early primary grades.

Children, teachers and community members found these picture dictionaries very useful as a learning tool. It enabled children sit around the pictures and narrate own experiences related to each illustration. Their interaction created a lot of lively discussion and thereby facilitated effective learning about those concepts. These picture dictionaries also found high appreciation from national and state level academic bodies. MHRD, Government of India approved these picture dictionaries as supplementary readers for early grades under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for all schools in the state.

6. Bhasha Puliya for children’s school readiness

Gradually it was realized that it was essential to enrich children’s early education in their mother-tongues from their pre-school level in a systematic manner. The state did not have a organized pre-school education package. M-TALL akhra worked on a pre-school learning package titled ‘Bhasha Puliya’ (language bridge) to enrich children’s school readiness. The Bhasha Puliya package consisted of 12 learning booklets, guidebook for Sevika, story books in children’s mother tongues. It also included learning chart and assessment chart to track learning and school readiness of children. This package contained a wide range of child friendly learning activities using local resources collected from villages in mother tongues.

Initially Bhasha Puliya was piloted in 103 Anganwadi Centers of Angara block of Ranchi district. More than 80% children in these centers acquired school readiness through this learning package. They excelled in the early primary grades against the children who started early grade learning without similar experiences. Success of this pilot encouraged government to aspire for its implementation in higher number of Anganwadi Centers. Now the Bhasha Puliya programme runs in 1200 Anganwadi centers of 6 multilingual districts.

7. A mother-tongue based early grade learning programme

This also motivated the department of education to plan for a mother-tongue based early grade learning programme in children’s mother tongues. By this time M-TALL akhra worked with the teachers and language specialists from various language communities to develop draft textbooks for classes 1-2 in 16 languages. This included 3 PVTG languages including Sabar, Malto and Birjia. Government on priority basis chose to start the mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MMLE) programme in 5 tribal (Santhali, Mundari, Ho, Kurukh and Kharia) and 2 regional (Odia and Bangla) languages. Under the guidance of the author the textbook writing committee finalized the books after the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) reviewed and approved the books.

Initially these books were drafted in Devanagari script. In course of time the new textbooks were also developed in local scripts of two tribal languages. It included Olchiki script of Santhali language and Warang Chiti script of Ho language. All these books illustrated by local indigenous artists centered around various types of socio-cultural, science and mathematics related activities in villages where children took active interest. These new textbooks were published by the department of school education, Government of Jharkhand under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. These books were supplied to around a 1000 schools in 10 districts where children mostly spoke in these languages.
For effective use of these new books in children’s mother-tongues training programmes were conducted at state level and then in the concerned districts for teachers and community members. As a part of environment building the community resource groups were guided how to form resource teams and develop academic calendars to support children in the concerned schools in their learning processes. These resource groups visit the schools as per the academic calendar to support teacher and children in different subjects as storytellers, toymakers, singers, painters, dancers, magicians, riddle-makers, actors, musicians, comedians, designers, etc. They also support health, nutrition, protection and sanitation in their schools.

8. Culturally sensitive content: learning-friendly pedagogy

Children are taking great interest in these schools now. These were the schools where children used to be mute observers as they did not understand their teachers and Hindi textbooks in past. Now they are active learners. They are enthusiastic to interact with the community resource persons who bring a lot of culturally sensitive and child-friendly learning resources to their classrooms. While observing their activities and participating in those, children also pick up the art of story development, storytelling, toy making, singing, dancing, acting, etc. So a few schools have started compiling the learning resources from community in the name of ‘Bacchon ke liye Kahane, Kavita, etc.’ (Resources for Children). They have also started compiling resources developed by children in the name of ‘Bacchon ke Kahane, Kavita, etc.’ (Resources of children) for use in pedagogical processes in school.

9. Institutionalized revitalization of endangered languages

These new educational activities have revitalized the socio-linguistic and cultural activities in both school and communities. Now community members see a lot of hope for the future of their languages as children carry their experiences and aspirations further. They also feel dignified as equal partners in school and are respected as resource persons. School’s appreciation for their skills and contribution before their own children gives them greater identity and dignity. Documentation, use and improvisation in their community learning resources also gives them the hope that their languages would be further used and polished through the school and community based activities. This will certainly enrich and revitalize their languages further.

In West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, the Ho Mahasabha is actively working with the schools where the new Ho textbooks are used both in Devanagari and Warang Chiti scripts. They are regularly visiting schools and are enhancing community collaboration with the schools in a systematic manner. It is interesting to note that they have already set up 10 community museums in the schools. For this they have gone to jungle to collect forest products, leaves, stones, etc. they have also collected ancient scriptures from the villages. They have painted the walls of the schools with traditional painting techniques. Also they have made a lot of small equipment related to fishing, agriculture, and rural technology for display and studies in the schools.

After their hard efforts to set up these museums, they celebrate the inauguration of these museums by inviting dignitaries for near and far. Children are encouraged to be familiarized with each item in collaboration with the community resource persons. Children learn the practical knowledge by working with these equipments and then they explain their experience to the visitors. This provides them a great opportunity to learn and narrate and thereby acquire higher order knowledge and skills.

10. Conclusion

In this process each of these language groups are continuously benefitting in their further enrichment and revitalization. Many a times the short measure documentation does not succeed in revitalizing the
languages on a long term basis. This process of education based revitalization carries a higher potential to institutionalize the documentation and revitalization processes of the concerned languages. M-TALL akhra through its continuous enrichment process has managed to institutionalize the language revitalization in the concerned communities in a systematic manner. Now, each other language community in the state is congregating and aspiring to enrich own language through similar processes. They are approaching M-TALL akhra and the state Government for desired support.

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