

Towards A Mother-Language Based Multi-Lingual Education in Jharkhand

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Abstract: Jharkhand is a highly multi-lingual Indian state, which is home to at least 33 indigenous communities, who speak around 20 mother languages. The new state used to experience the highest dropout of children at primary level in India. The author set up a research centre on children's languages, M-TALL *Akhra*. The mother-language based centre focused on research and innovation in language and education. It conducted a state wide linguistic survey, which revealed that 96 percent children in the state spoke in indigenous languages, which are very different from the school's Hindi language. Children failed to understand the language of textbooks, teachers and examination. Hence, they left school. M-TALL *Akhra* developed bilingual picture dictionaries in 9 indigenous languages for children in early grades. Then '*Bhasha Puliya*' (language bridge) with content for pre-school education was developed. The piloting enabled around 80% children to acquire desired school readiness. It led to expansion of the programme to 7,200 pre-school education centres. Finally, it was upscaled across the board with improvised contents. Then M-TALL *Akhra* developed culture sensitive primary textbooks in 16 indigenous languages in five scripts. These textbooks, published in 7 languages since 2016, are used by indigenous children in around a thousand schools. A second linguistic survey was conducted recently by M-TALL *Akhra* for the state to design a foundational literacy numeracy (FLN) roadmap for children as desired under the National Education Policy, 2022.

Keywords: Indigenous, M-TALL *Akhra*, Picture Dictionaries, *Bhasha Puliya*, Mother-language, Textbooks, School Museums, Literary Champions, Community Resource Persons



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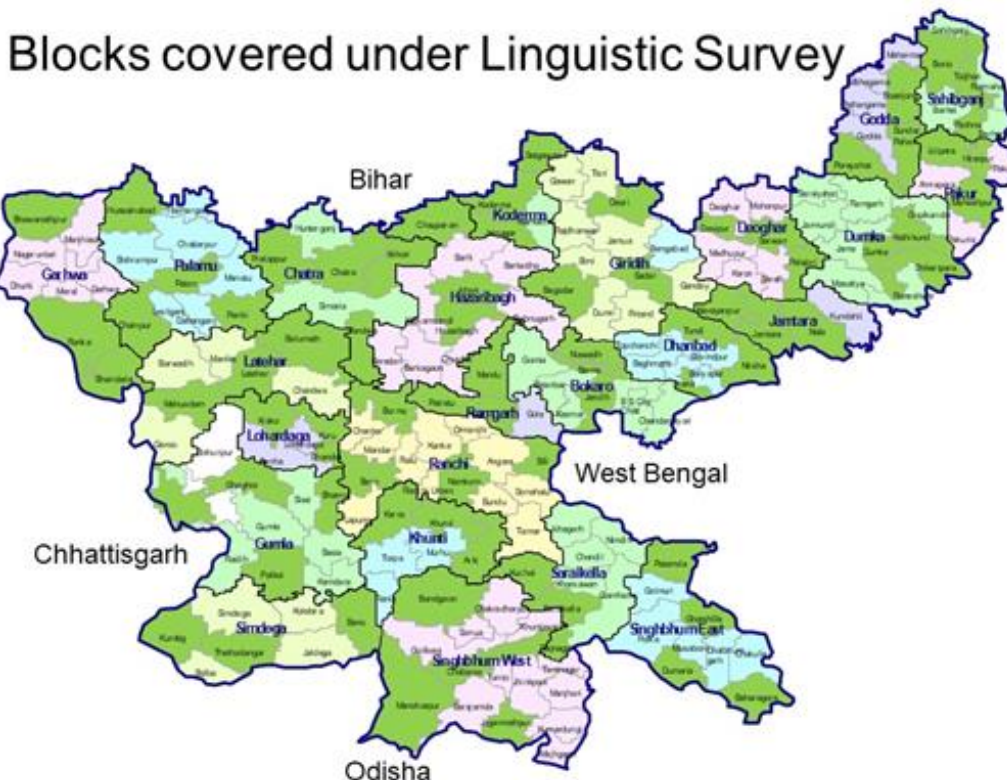
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1. INTRODUCTION

The M-TALL *Akhra* is a centre for research and innovation in children's languages. This centre was set up in Jharkhand in 2011 to study the language experiences of children in early grades. In those days the dropout rate of Jharkhand's primary school children was the highest in the nation. More than 3 out of 10 children who entered class 1 used to leave their school by the end of class 2. To understand the cause of this high dropout, the M-TALL *Akhra* partnered with language researchers from 7 regional universities, which were proficient in the local languages of the villages in the five divisions of the state. Other partners of the M-TALL *Akhra* included representatives from the Government departments concerned with children's languages, school teachers,

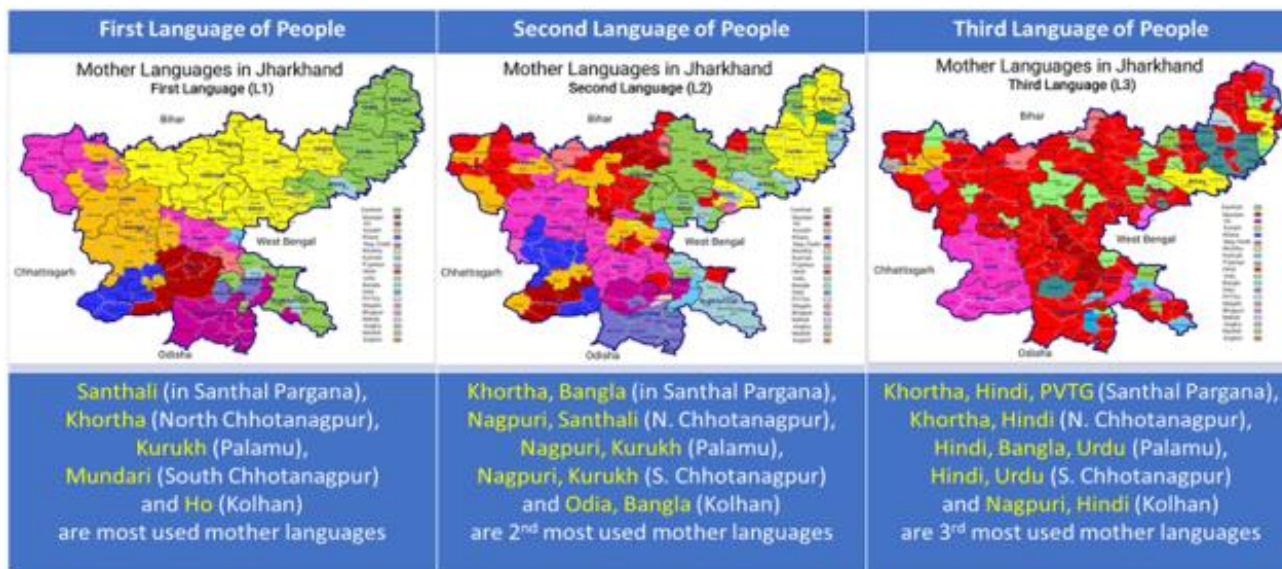
language experts from different language groups, civil society organisations, media and children.

A series of consultations were held in different universities to plan for activities to understand the issues related to children's learning and to collect learning resources from different language communities for developing learning materials for children. At the outset a state-wide socio-linguistic survey was undertaken. Tools for the survey were designed by a team of linguists from universities under the guidance of the author to understand the types of languages used by children in different parts of the state and the learning experience of the children in their schools and communities. The research scholars were familiarised with the tools of the survey.



They visited 360 villages of 72 blocks of all the 24 districts of the state and interacted with village heads, pre-school education teachers, primary school teachers, children and their parents. They knew the local languages and could interact with the children and adults and could relate to their experiences and expressions with good understanding. They collected rich information about the languages and children’s experiences around languages. Findings of this survey turned out to be an eye opener for the policy makers, educational managers and leaders of civil societies.

It was found that Hindi, the official language of the state, was used as the medium of instruction in all the 55,000 schools of the state from class 1 onwards. However, this was not the language of the majority of the children in the state. Around 96% children spoke in their indigenous and regional languages at home, playgrounds and local markets. These languages are their mother-languages they used in interactions with friends and other people concerned. Only 4% of children spoke Hindi as their mother language. In the classrooms, children with different home languages failed to understand their teachers, textbooks and test papers (3 Ts).



Their learning gaps accumulated day by day with increasing content load adding to their frustration in the schools. They could not get acquainted with the pedagogical processes beyond a point and the undermining attitude of the teachers helped them little. So, they had to leave school forever! The system being clueless about this issue continued the Hindi based approach. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, commonly known as Right to Education Act, 2009, emphasised the use of mother-languages in the primary schools to the extent possible. Children’s basic right to education was violated in a number of these schools. The planners did not know the strategies to address the issues related to children’s learning in the multi-lingual context.

It may be noted that the new state of Jharkhand carved out of Bihar in 2000 was created to do justice to the language, culture and dignity of indigenous people of the state. Interestingly the state declared 12 of its languages as second official languages of the state and set up a few research institutes including the Tribal Research Institute and department of Tribal and Regional Languages. However the state could not do justice to children’s languages and did not allow the use of any of the local languages in schools other than Hindi and English. This affected presence, participation and

performance (3 Ps) of students in the whole state, particularly in the rural areas as in no way they could relate to the 3 Ts discussed above. Structurally Hindi differed significantly from the indigenous and regional languages making learning for children in schools extremely difficult.

2. HINDI AS A BARRIER TO LEARNING

Jharkhand was home to 33 indigenous communities who spoke around 20 mother languages. The study noted five prominent indigenous languages: Santhali, Mundari, Ho, Kurukh and Kharia. Other than this, 9 particularly vulnerable indigenous communities, known as PVTGs, communicated in Malto, Sabar, Birjia and other languages. These languages belonged to three prominent language groups including Indo-Aryan languages, Dravidian languages and Munda languages. They differed from each other significantly and drastically from Hindi. Hence the state had a good number of regional languages which functioned as link languages for people from these indigenous communities (26.3% of the state’s total population) and other people in the state. This included Khortha, Nagpuri/Sadri, Kurmali, Panchparganiya, Bangla, Odia, Bhojpuri, Angika, Magahi, Maithili, Mahali, etc.



The study also threw light on the experiences of children in the classrooms. Majority of the children indicated that they failed to make out meaning from the contents of 3 Ts (teachers, textbooks and test papers). They looked at the pictures of the Hindi textbooks to get some meaning and thereby relate to the text. This was not easy - the pictures were not much related to their experience. Without knowing the text, it was not possible to interpret the pictures. They also consulted their peers to know what they understood from the textbooks and teachers. However, it was never meaningful as Hindi differed significantly from their languages.

Added to this, the attitude of their teachers, educated in urban areas, towards the children was found negative and callous. Many among them believed that children from indigenous communities are not good in mathematics, and languages! Hence, they did not bother about the situation of children and did not engage deeper with children to assist them in their learning process. They neither developed any contextual material in children’s languages nor did they try to learn the languages of children. Consequently, the gap between children and teachers kept on increasing with children being at the losing end!

In their villages, the culture of reading and writing was found to be very poor as the indigenous societies depend heavily on oral traditions. They talk to each other and undertake various socio-cultural activities throughout the year. Reading and writing proficiency of the people there is very low. Hence children could not reach out to their adults in the families or colonies for assistance in their learning. Nearly all parents indicated that they sent their children to school with a big hope that teachers will assist the children in their reading-writing activities. They requested their teachers from time to time to help their children in their learning of 3 Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). However, the children struggled to learn because of inadequate support from teachers. Parents also indicated that children gradually lost interest in school and many children wanted to keep away from school!

3. A NEW CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNERS

Findings of the study indicate that majority of children did not understand textbooks, teachers and test papers that posed a new challenge to the state's educational planners. Till this point of time the state used the textbooks developed centrally by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in New Delhi. Those books were far from contextual for Jharkhand and hence children could not relate to the texts effectively.

Several challenges emerged before the state. 1. State needed to develop own textbooks. This was challenging for the relatively new state. 2. State needed to develop textbooks in mother-languages of children. The state did not have the expertise to do so. 3. Teachers needed to know children's languages. It called for a teacher rationalisation and fresh teacher recruitment. 4. Teachers needed to be trained for a new pedagogy to facilitate effective learning collaborations among teachers and children in and around classrooms. 5. Assessment processes called for a change. This was closely related to textbooks, teacher's interest in children and the pedagogical processes. 5. The state needed to work on students' absenteeism, dropout rate and attendance in schools. This was a huge task.

All these emerging issues compounded the challenges for the state's educational planners. With little experience and expertise in the state, they felt it risky to discuss the issues in public as it badly exposed the limitations in educational planning and management. Consequently, it violated the basic rights of children to education. Department kept silent for more than a year after the study report was published. However, civil society organisations, media, universities and the language leaders from different communities discussed the findings of this study again and again. In seminars, conferences and workshops, the language issue popped up and created ripples all around.

4. NEEDED: A NEW APPROACH FOR MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

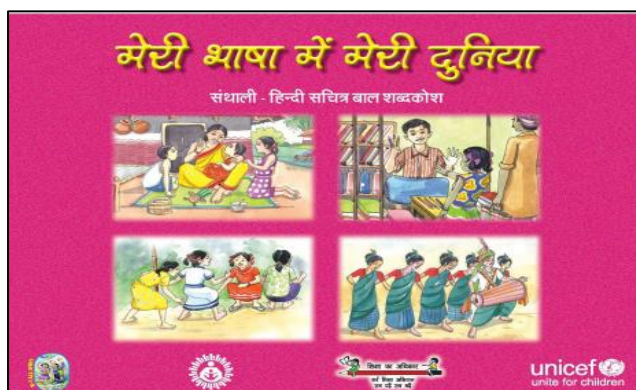
Findings of the study empowered the indigenous communities who were demanding contents and processes in mother languages in school. With the support from media, universities and civil society organisations, they felt empowered and approached their political leaders to do justice to their children. Researchers of the M-TALL *Akhra* knew the limitations of the local government in addressing the emerging issue. They planned to create possible solutions to assist the children and their teachers who had demanded a mother-language based multilingual early grade education programme with appropriate contents, processes, teacher training and assessment.



The Ministry of Education, Government of India, also kept on asking the state to initiate appropriate strategies to address these issues of school education. They wanted the state to develop own textbooks in collaboration with NCERT and other subject experts. They asked the state to devise appropriate strategies to improve attendance rate of both students and teachers and also to reduce dropout rate of students. The state accordingly initiated processes for addressing these issues. For developing content in mother-languages the state depended on M-TALL *Akhra*.

Repeated consultations and reflections in the state on the issue of mother-language based education gradually created higher interest and confidence in the state. The department showed interest in taking up the issues in an integrated manner and needed assistance from M-TALL *Akhra*.

5. BILINGUAL PICTURE DICTIONARIES IN CHILDREN'S MOTHER-LANGUAGES



Initially, the M-TALL *Akhra* team developed bilingual picture dictionaries titled ‘*Meri Bhashamein Meri Duniya*’ (My World in My Language) in 9 indigenous languages for use in Anganwadi centres and Primary Schools of the state. Children’s experiences around various materials and incidents in rural areas were organised under 48 broad themes. They were published in Santhali, Ho, Mundari, Panchparganiya, Nagpuri, Khortha, Kharia, Kurukh, and Kurmali languages. 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.

Language experts from each language community worked with the illustrators to let them draw the pictures accurately for their children. The illustrators with their help referred to real life pictures and drew those for children. After a lot of research and consultation, these picture dictionaries were finalised and published. These were supplied to Anganwadi (pre-school education) centres in all districts as per the languages used by children in their areas. These were used as the starting point for small group discussions among children of different language groups. Hitherto the Anganwadi centres did not have any text for children of 3 – 6 years of age in their mother-languages. The picture dictionaries generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm among children and community members. For the first time, they saw their own incidents and experiences printed in the books. They liked this very much. They looked at each picture with great interest and discussed it in their languages. Children shared their experiences associated with the picture in their own words enthusiastically. They listened to and commented on each other’s experiences. The classrooms turned active and dynamic with the

enthusiastic interaction of children. Children interacted with peers, teachers and community members.

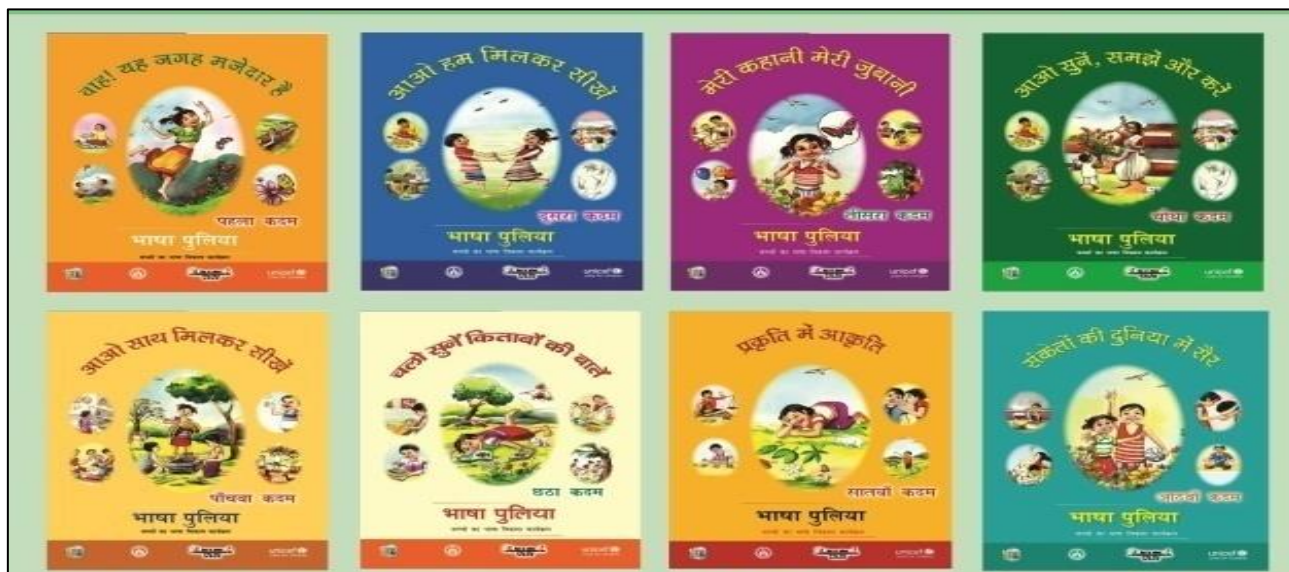
The interest spread to the communities. People visited the Anganwadi centres and sat around the books and discussed the contents with the children in languages they understood. Rich interaction of children with a wide range of people contributed to their language learning, interest in subjects, confidence and leadership abilities. Each child had a different experience with the big picture dictionaries. This significantly contributed to their learning readiness in the centres. The community level interest also rose. People started saying that such activities should have been initiated in their communities and schools long before!

5.1 *Bhasha Puliya*: Children’s School Readiness in Mother-Languages

As a follow-up on this, the M-TALL *Akhra* team felt that it was essential to start a mother-language based pre-school education in the Anganwadi centres to enrich the school readiness of children, 3-6 years in age. The education team of M-TALL *Akhra* developed a comprehensive pre-school education learning content in the form of 12 activity books, teacher training manual, milestone-based learning charts and assessment charts.



UNICEF published this learning package in the name of *Bhasha Puliya* for use in the initial days of the children in Anganwadi centres and Primary Schools of the state. *Bhasha Puliya* is a children’s language readiness package that aims to bridge home language/s of children with the language/s of primary schools in Jharkhand. A series of child-friendly activities including stories, songs, games, paintings, riddles and toys were integrated in 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 pre-school education programme.



The other aspect of the *Bhasha Puliya* was promotion of 21st century learning skills among children from early years. It touched upon 4 key aspects of the 21st century learning skills – acquisition of knowledge about surroundings, acquisition of skills, application of knowledge and skills and bringing in a change. For example, cats have pointed nails and teeth. Parents hesitate to take children near cats fearing that it may bite or, scratch them with its sharp nails. When children play with a pet cat, they touch it, move with it, feed it, observe it, and know about the different body parts and behavior of the cat. They acquire the basic knowledge about the cats.

While working with the cat they know where and when to touch, how to keep the cat happy, how to feed the cat, how to play with the cat, etc. They build a good relationship with the cat and through this, necessary skills of handling a cat. Applying the useful knowledge and skills, the child lives with a cat comfortably. It contributes

to the child’s healthy development and brings in a healthy relationship between child and cat. The cat also is properly cared for. In the *Bhasha Puliya* learning package each child participates in a wide range of learning activities based on the interest and context of the child to enable her/him to acquire necessary knowledge and skills appropriate to her/his age.

5.2 A National Conference for further Enrichment

M-TALL *Akhra* in collaboration with the Department of Women and Child Development and Department of School Education, Government of Jharkhand, organised a National Conference on Quality Pre-School Education in Rural Areas at Ranchi to share the content and experience of *Bhasha Puliya* with the experts from concerned departments of Government of India, managers/ specialists from majority of states/UTs, experts from more than 15 resource agencies, and bilateral agencies including UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, etc.

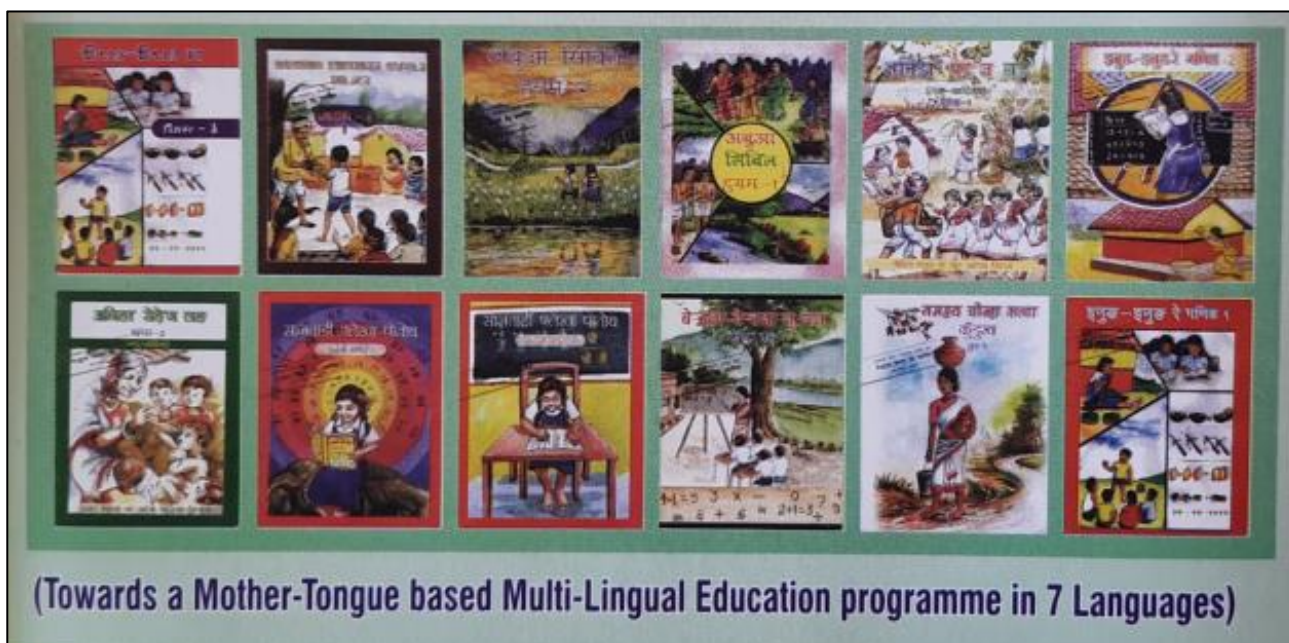
These agencies appreciated the efforts of M-TALL *Akhra* in developing culture sensitive, rich content and an appropriate programme for doing justice to children growing in multilingual contexts. The Ranchi conference recommendations were published by UNICEF, India as a Ranchi Declaration on Pre-School Education, which received accolades from national and international agencies concerned with children’s pre-school education.

The *Bhasha Puliya* pre-school education content was initially piloted in 100 Anganwadi Centers of Angara block of Ranchi district. More than 80% children of these Anganwadi centres 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 programme was upscaled by the Department of Social Welfare to 7,200 Anganwadi centres of 6 districts. In course of time, this was further revised in the form of ‘*Nanhe Kadam*’ for 3-4 years and 4-5 years

old children. It was implemented across the state in all the Anganwadi centres. M-TALL *Akhra* also developed the curriculum and position paper on Pre-School Education in Jharkhand.

5.3 Preparations for a Mother-Language based Primary Education

As a follow-up to this, the M-TALL *Akhra* worked on possible pedagogical renewal at primary level for promoting mother-language based multilingual education (MLB-MLE) programme 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 indigenous groups (PVTG) including Sabar, Malto and Birjia out of the 8 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. They centred on children’s experiences in villages in different seasons. The content development team identified the activities of children in rural areas in different seasons. They chose which activities from these could be useful for children in learning languages and mathematics. Interesting activities in the form of stories, songs, riddles, skits, do-it-yourself, dances, etc. were designed to enable children to participate in a wide range of learning activities which would familiarise them with their surroundings and enrich their foundational literacy and numeracy skills. National curricular framework and textbook development guidelines were followed keeping in view the learning theories related to children’s language learning and mathematics learning.

NCERT authorities reviewed these contextual books in indigenous languages and approved them for publication. The state on priority basis decided to publish textbooks of classes 1 and 2 in 7. Additionally, the JCERT requested M-TALL *Akhra* to prepare the textbooks in two local scripts while the original books were in 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. Other than these, M-TALL *Akhra* also developed graded storybooks for early grades in different indigenous languages. Children liked these illustrated storybooks related to their cultures very much.

Around 3,000 schools were identified by the department in 10 districts for implementing the mother-language based multilingual education programme. All these textbooks published by the Jharkhand Council of Educational Research and Training (JCERT), Government of Jharkhand, were supplied to the concerned schools. M-TALL *Akhra* designed a training module for familiarising the concerned teachers of these schools, who knew these languages, with the contents and processes of these new textbooks. Training programmes 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 keen interest in the new textbooks and came forward to assist in school activities. Wherever a teacher showed interest, community members joined hands enthusiastically to assist in their children's education sharing their own knowledge, skills and time.

6. COMMUNITY ASSISTED SCHOOL MUSEUMS

Community participation in these schools have contributed to school's overall improvement in its physical and learning environment. For example, the author encouraged the Ho Indigenous community to set up community museums by gathering various learning materials from community in schools. In the schools of

Chaibasa, West Singhbhum the *Ho Indigenous Mahasabha* hitherto have set up 12 School Museums collecting and organising a wide range of learning materials from their localities. The materials include old scriptures, models of various handmade equipment used in their communities, teaching learning materials made out of soil, wood, paper, leaf, stones and collections including eeds, leaves, roots, etc. for display, discussion and also for use in classrooms.

In the museum, each item is labeled and is organised in a scientific way so that one can locate the item, observe it, discuss it and understand it. Children from nearby schools and visitors from different places, including foreigners visit these museums from time to time. Children, teachers and community members feel rewarded when they see 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 around the objects displayed in the museums. The Kolhan University located in the area took inspiration from this innovative work and recently set up an indigenous museum on its campus!

7. WHEN LANGUAGE FLOURISHES CREATIVELY IN CLASSROOMS



Another development in these schools is equally noteworthy. Members of *Baal Sansad* (Child Cabinet) play an important role in strengthening the programme. 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 'Hamareliye Kahaniyan' (Stories for Us), *Geet*, *Chitra*, *Khilone*, etc. At the same time, children in these schools observe the community members and learn from their skills and arts 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 as '*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 appreciation from their peers, teachers, community members and visitors which contribute to their guaranteed growth (germination) as literary buds. This has a great potential for them individually, their community and their future.

8. LOCAL SKILLS ENRICH SCHOOL'S LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

M-TALL *Akhra* on ground coordinates the quality improvement initiatives in the mother-language based multilingual education (MLB-MLE) programme 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 revitalised and strengthened the literary culture of these indigenous communities and their schools, but also motivated 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 emphasised on mother-language based primary education for children. This is one of the bright examples in practice in the nation.

9. ANOTHER LINGUISTIC SURVEY FOR PLANNING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

The National Education Policy, 2020 of India has provided a moral support to the promotion of mother language based primary education. Accordingly, the state in collaboration with the M-TALL *Akhra* has recently undertaken another state wide linguistic survey in 2022 to understand the status of mother-languages in the districts and also to design a roadmap for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) programme in all districts. The survey findings are very similar to the findings of the linguistic survey undertaken a decade ago. Processes have been initiated for formulating a mother language based FLN programme for the whole state. The state education department has found these language maps of each block very useful. They are clear about the language and context of children in each block. Accordingly, contents and processes are being designed to enable children to acquire the foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

झारखण्ड भाषाई सर्वेक्षण 2022

जानकारी संग्रह अनुसूची

1. ग्राम्य मुखिया (पृष्ठ : 1-12)
2. प्राथमिक शिक्षक/शिक्षिका (पृष्ठ : 13-18)
3. आंगनवाड़ी सेविका (पृष्ठ : 19-20)
4. प्राथमिक विद्यालय के बच्चे (पृष्ठ : 21-23)
5. समुदाय सदस्य (पृष्ठ : 24-26)

सर्वेक्षण योजना एवं प्रबंधन : M-TALL अखड़ा, राँची
सहायता : रुम टू रिड इंडिया ट्रस्ट

सहभागी संस्थाएँ : डॉ. रामदयाल मुन्हा आदिवासी कल्याण शोध संस्थान; जनजातीय और क्षेत्रीय भाषा विभाग, राँची विश्वविद्यालय; नीलांबर पीतांबर विश्वविद्यालय (पलामू); कोल्हान विश्वविद्यालय (चाईबासा); सिद्धू-कान्हू मुर्मू विश्वविद्यालय (दुमका); विनोबा भावे विश्वविद्यालय (हजारीबाग); बिनोद बिहारी महतो विश्वविद्यालय (धनबाद); और स्कूली शिक्षा विभाग, झारखण्ड सरकार।

This stands out as an example before the multilingual states of India. With appropriate research data the state authorities feel confident to design contextual educational strategies for their children. More and more states are inviting M-TALL *Akhra*'s representatives to assist them in their content designing and teacher training for their multilingual context. Recently Government of West Bengal took their technical support for designing learning content for children for foundational stage and teacher training module in Olchiki script for children and teachers in Santhal belts of the state.

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