

The language link

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Shanti gets her homework done. Photo: Sumit Sharma

The bright light of the day has faded, bringing in a quiet, calm evening to this village in the Similipal hills of Odisha. Shanti sits on a cot near her verandah, revising the lessons she has learnt in school. A young goat nearby is chewing on fresh leaves. Shanti is wearing her school uniform, a comfortable blue frock that is a little too long for her. She is an 11-year-old Kolha tribal child, whose mother tongue is Ho.

Shanti's soft singsong voice is the sound of change in this community. In her home on the outskirts of the Similipal National Park in Mayurbhanj district, education has a central place in family life. For a while, the child is wrapped in her own world, reading aloud from an Odia textbook, a language she has newly learnt to read and write in.

"Where do you see your daughter a few years from now?" I ask Shanti's father, Manik Sing Boipoi. "She will complete school, she may go to Udala for high school and if she studies well, she will go to college," he says. "I will send her to the University in Bhubaneswar."

Shanti's mother has just returned from the fields after a day's work. Her toddler peers at us from behind her sari **pallu**. We are joined by a young man who smiles with his entire face. His name is Kulai Sing Sundi and he is Shanti's schoolteacher.



"Children ask so many questions everyday," says Kulai. "This inspires us. To answer their questions, I have to keep learning everyday and enhance my teaching skills." Photo: Sumit Sharma

Both Kulai and Manik are Bhasa Sikshaks or language teachers, who work alongside primary school teachers in government schools in Odisha's tribal areas. These language teachers drawn from the tribal community, and trained to teach children in their mother tongue first and later introduce Odia and English as they go to senior classes, helping make school a familiar, supportive space. They are key to the success of Odisha's multi-lingual education programme that seeks to transition children from over 62 tribal groups into the mainstream education system.



Children learn through play and laughter.

Photo: Sumit Sharma

Seeing Kulai in his classroom is like watching a magician perform before a group of entranced children. Kulai has a teaching rhythm that has his students hooked throughout the day. He sends them out to collect different types of leaves that will be used as teaching aids. He talks about plants, animals and insects that the children recognise, drawing on the familiar to create confidence in the children before he introduces new concepts. A classroom interaction is followed by an outdoor memory game, which finishes with songs and clapping. Children learn through play and laughter. For Kulai, every interaction with the children is a stand-up act that leaves his audience satiated, entertained and informed.



Coloured stones for study tools, and bilingual picture cards. Photo: Sumit Sharma



Kulai Sing Sundi talks about plants, animals and insects that the children recognise, drawing on the familiar to create confidence in the children before he introduces new concepts. Photo: Sumit Sharma



Eager-to-learn children strike a pose. Photo: Sumit Sharma

Kulai's day starts with cycling into the village to ensure that all the primary school children are on their way to school. He chats with parents, some of whom are his own schoolmates. He reminds them to attend the scheduled School Management Committee (SMC) meetings. Parents are motivated to participate in SMCs because they see their own person sitting on the other side, someone who belongs to the community.

"The introduction of language teachers has facilitated enrolment, retention as well as robust attendance," says Jitendra Kumar Rath, who leads Oxfam India's intervention to improve the quality of education and the functioning of government schools in Odisha's tribal belt. "Teachers like Kulai and Manik hand-hold primary school children as they transition from speaking only Ho, their mother tongue, to learning to be fluent in Odia, which is the medium of instruction in schools. As a result, schools with language teachers have almost 100 per cent enrolment."

Odisha is unique from many perspectives — 40 per cent of the tribal population of India lives in Odisha. Almost 23 per cent of its population consists of over 62 tribal communities who speak 29 different languages. The State has a robust lineage of many educationists who have documented their efforts to create an alternative educational framework that meets the needs of Odisha's multi-lingual population.

At the Sikshasandhan office in Bhubaneswar, an Odia translation of John Holt's seminal book, *How Children Learn*, is stacked next to *Letters from a Forest School* by Chittaranjan Das, the freedom fighter and social psychologist. Both books are detailed first-person accounts of how pedagogies need to evolve to meet the unique needs of primary school children.

Anil Pradhan is the secretary of Sikshasandhan, an organisation that works towards innovating alternative modes to fill gaps in the education system. As convener of the Odisha Right to Education Forum, he has been advocating for the need to change the holiday schedule in tribal schools, incorporating local festivals and the rhythm of the people's lives according to their own seasons and rituals. He talks about the need to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum. Activists from Sikshasandhan join with experts from Oxfam India and Utkal University to train language teachers in Mayurbhanj's Kaptipada block.

Kulai breaks down multi-lingual education to its very essence. "There are many aspects to language. Language includes our songs, dances, games, riddles. We sing many songs in our language and play many types of indigenous games. In the beginning we don't speak in Odia. We don't start with writing, we use pictures to learn. Say, for example, I show a picture in class. It is a tiger. A tiger is called a bagho in Odia and kulai in Ho. In class, I will first teach the name kulai, then bagho, then 'tiger'. Like this, step by step, children use pictures and words to learn."

"Within two years of coming to school, tribal children begin to talk about growing up to become teachers and doctors. This is the power of having role models that children can identify with," says Jitendra Kumar Rath.

At home with Shanti, the results of the interventions made in school are apparent. Shanti is as much at ease feeding the goats and bringing water from the hand pump as she is when she settles down with her school books.

"What do you want to become after studying," her father Manik asks.

Shanti says something softly to him. He asks her to repeat herself so that I can hear her.

"A doctor," says Shanti.

"Where have you seen a doctor?" her father asks her.

"When I go to the weekly market, I see the doctor's clinic," she replies.

Oxfam India's Farrukh Rahman Khan provides a wider perspective for this scene. "Odisha has the highest percentage of out-of-school children in India. Among the tribal population, the literacy rate is even lower and the gender gap wider. The chance of a girl born into a poor Dalit or tribal family in a remote village ever achieving material equivalence with someone from a middle-income upper-caste family raised in a metro city is infinitely small. The multi-lingual education programme is the best way to create a bridge between communities and the school system."

"Children ask so many questions everyday," says Kulai. "This inspires us. To answer their questions, I have to keep learning everyday and enhance my teaching skills. The teaching-learning material we have is very good."

In Kaptipada block, the presence of language teachers like Kulai has created a transformative support structure for parents, children and teachers. Kulai has a natural flair for teaching and he draws inspiration from the wisdom and collective knowledge of his own community. It is the collective stories of individuals like these that create the fabric of progress that we want to see.

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