



The Magic of the Mother tongue: Lessons with Koya children

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In 2006 October I went for a field visit to Malkangiri, the southern most district of Orissa. In Malkangiri I went to Kambeda, whose population is comprised of 100% Koya speakers. There I found an upper primary school where 6 teachers were teaching 180 children from seven classes. (*As a result, Class I is always neglected.*) There they teach from the state prepared textbooks. I visited Class I who were sitting on a verandah. There were no teachers to teach them.

There I met one Mr. Chaudhury, a non-tribal teacher who was engaged in the teaching of Class III children, and was also looking after Class I. Our conversation went like this:

MkM: “How well are the children are learning and to what extent do they understand the textbook language?”

Mr. C: “Whether they understand or not, that does not matter, but the state has ordered me to teach them in the textbook language. How else will they be mainstreamed?”

MkM: “But if the children are unable to understand the text in a language that they don’t speak or don’t know...”

Mr. C: (disturbed) “I teach them and they are able to understand the text book language.”

Then I asked him to open the second lesson of the language book, which, since my visit was in the month of October, had already been taught in the month of July. The teacher started to read the lesson before the children and many children were silent. They were completely unable to understand the story told by the teacher. What is more, they also could not read the text.

MkM: “Why don’t you teach the children in their language.”

Mr. C: “After all the students will face examination in the textbook language.”

MkM: "Do you take examination for class-I children?"

Mr. C: "Yes, if we don't keep the examination record how these children will be upgraded?"

MkM: "Do you retain any children in the same class more than a year for his poor performance?"

Mr. C: "No."

MkM: "So why then you say that examination is necessary for class I children?"

Mr. C: "This is the order from the superiors."

MkM: "Do you take oral examination to the Class I children?"

Mr. C: "Yes, but I take oral examination in Oriya language so that they can be evaluated perfectly."

MkM: "Can you tell me in what language the children understand better and answer better?"

Mr. C: "In their mother tongue. But, their mother tongue is not allowed in the schools."

MkM: "Who told you that?"

Mr. C: (Unhesitatingly) "The Sub - Inspector of Schools."

MkM: "So you don't like to use their language for teaching and learning?"

Mr. C: "No, how can we use their mother tongue in the school? There is no written order for that."

MkM: "Tell me who is the best teacher – the one who teaches in the language of the children or the one who teaches in the language unknown to the children.?"

Mr. C: "Of course, language of the child."

MkM: "So why don't you use the language at least for children's understanding and then to teach in Oriya so both the content and language can be understood?"

Mr. C: "Sir I have served here for 18 years in this school and I also know Koya language. But I don't use it in school."

MkM: "Why not?"

Mr. C: "Because this is the not the government-approved language and nothing can be taught in their language."

[At that point I understood the problem. The National Curriculum had not reached them.]

MkM: "Can I help teach the children?"

Mr. C: "Yes, go ahead". [He thought that I had come to conduct research on tribal children.]

I asked him to help me. I called a class VI student from the same school. The Koya student came to me and was able to understand Oriya language. I gave him a piece of paper and asked him to translate lesson 2 from the textbook. The lesson title was "Why is the Goat Afraid of Water?"

The Oriya language belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family where as the Koya language is belonging to Dravidian Language family. By examining the story text from line to line, it becomes quite clear that these are very different languages. If an Oriya teacher listens to the Koya version of the text he will neither understand the content nor its meaning. Similarly a Koya child is also unable to understand the Oriya text.

Oriya (State language)	Koya (tribal language)
1. Pahada tale jharana.	1. Metet madal tang metaa.
2. Panijhara jhara bahijauthae.	2. Yer talki talki aadut.
3. Jhalamala pani.	3. Telang yer.
4. Machhamane phuk phuk deunthanti.	4. Kike parak parak langutaa.
5. Chhelitie jharana pakhare Jauthila.	5. Me-eka tang dung sang peng angja mattaa.
6. Se jhalamala paniku dekhilaa.	6. Aad telanger ding urtaa.
7. Pani bhitaraku deinpadijaa.	7. Er middan laangtaa.
8. Machhare chheliragoda bajilaa.	8. Kike meeka dektak talta.
9. Machharagijai chhelira kanaku Kmudi delaa.	9. Kikukapaa aasmen meketmarkatin kaastaa
10. Chheli darigalaa.	10. Meka Werit.
11. Sehidinu chheli pani bhitaraku jae nahin.	11. Aaddinang mekayeraadaa aan.

Next I asked this class VI student to tell the story to the Class I children. It was a traditional classroom, with all the children facing the black board. I asked the children to make a circle. They made a circle. The Class VI Koya student stood in the middle of the children and started telling the story in his mother tongue.

*There was a stream at the bottom of the hill.
The water was flowing –
transparent and jewel like water.
Fish were jumping in the water.
A goat was going aside the stream.
He saw the clean water.
He jumped into the water.
His leg stepped on the body of the fish.
The fish was angry and bit the ear of the goat.
The goat became frightened.
Since that day goats have been afraid of water.*

The Koya children listened the story in their own Koya language. Their eyes were bright, their faces were bright and they were ready to talk. After telling the story, the older student asked them questions.

Each of them answered the questions he asked. Within ten minutes all these children who had been earlier sitting silently just staring at the blackboard and noting down meaningless letters -- were now vocal, and comprehending the text in their own language. There was not a single word or a sentence that was difficult for them.



My next step was to ask the children two questions – one factual and one requiring some reasoning. Interestingly the children answered more than my expectation!

At that point I began to teach them reading, identifying words and letters from the words. Using the Oriya script I wrote a sentence from the story on the black board. The sentence was:

Metet madal tang metaa.
“At the bottom of the hill there was a stream”

One by one the children came and read the whole sentence pointing to the words. Then they started reading the words, one by one. Then they identified the letters from the words.

Next was the identification of identical letters. Children were comfortable to follow the words and then letters. My observation was that children knew automatically that reading takes place from left to right. A combination of words makes a sentence. Each word has some letters. Teachers do not teach this general principle to children. Rather, children naturally learn this from the order of the sentence.

After this I noticed the children could easily identify the symbols for *ta, da, ma, me, te* etc.

Mr. Mr. C and some other teachers were observing me. They said to me, *“We can easily teach this. We can speak Koya and use the Koya language in the classroom. We didn’t think it was possible.”* Moreover, Mr. Chaudhury, said, *“If I would have known this seventeen years ago, I would have taught the Koya children in this way.”*

I was happy that teachers could understand this. The magic of mother tongue really helped the teachers to know how the language of the children can bring a great change in learning. After that I asked Mr. Chaudhury, *“If a person truly wants to offer a child-centered education to children then what is the non-negotiable?”* Mr. Chaudhury replied *“The child’s language. Unless the language of the children is there, there can be no child-centered learning.”*

(Excerpt from my “Educators Diary” 2006)
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