The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Education of Scheduled Tribes in India

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Lessons from Sikshasandhan, Odisha

By V Santhakumar and Nazrul Haque

1. Introduction

The progress in human development (including education) among the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India encounters a number of challenges and these have been discussed and documented time and again. We too have documented some of these[1]. Since certain tribal groups speak their own language and not the mainstream language of the state where they live in, which was found to be the main constraint in the education of their children, multi-lingual education (MLE) is attempted in states like Odisha, and some of the challenges in this regard are documented here.

What can be the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in this? Some of these organizations have started residential schools but the effectiveness or impact of such schools is debatable.[2] Another strategy adopted by a set of NGOs is to set up alternative schools which provide the education that they consider appropriate for the targeted tribal group. These

schools have implemented innovative experiments and one such innovative practice is documented <u>here</u>. Since these are not residential schools, they can cater only to a small set of children who live nearby. It is difficult to cover the millions of children from the ST community with only a few, NGO-managed private schools. Hence, a sustainable and effective change in the quality of education for social groups such as the STs can happen only when the public education system transforms itself to adopt and integrate these innovative practices. This requires the NGOs which are interested in the education of STs to work with government schools and bring about qualitative changes in public education.

Sikshasandhan is one of the few organizations working towards this goal. This report looks at its activities in the context of the implementation of MLE for the tribal children in the state of Odisha. This report is based on consultations with its functionaries in Bhubaneswar and the Mayurbhanj district where it operates and also from a visit to an Anganwadi and a school in the latter. There was also a discussion with a set of around 40 parents from the tribal community in the Sarat village in the Mayurbhanj district, which too informs this write up.

2. Major activities of Sikshasandhan

The organization was established as a Resource Centre for education in Odisha in 1995. Anil Pradhan who was working with Agragamee[3] moved out to co-found this organization. It established a set of alternative education centres during the years 1999-2001. The details of the history and the activities of the organization are available <u>here</u>.

Sikshasandhan had developed educational learning materials in tribal languages (Soura, Desiya, and Juang) during the initial years. It started mother-tongue based schooling for the children from the Kolha tribe in a block in the Mayurbhanj

district in 2011. This was the time when the Government of Odisha was trying out such an education in other parts of the state, in other tribal languages. Sikshasandhan developed the primer for grade I in the Ho language for this purpose. In fact, a new primer was made first in Odia as experts felt that the one that was in use was not appropriate, and it was then adapted to the tribal language, Ho. This kind of adaptation requires not only translation but also making the lessons relevant to the social context of the specific tribal group. A person from the Kolha community who was working as a school teacher helped in this process of adaptation.

While working on this initiative, Sikshasandhan realized the importance of having teachers or language assistants from the community. However, the funding agencies did not support this citing that it was the job of governments to recruit teachers. Fortunately, Sikshasandhan received some funding for this purpose and could have MLE teachers or teaching assistants to help with the tribal language as part of MLE in a set of schools. The District Collector of Mayurbhanj developed an interested in this work of Sikshasandhan and took steps to extend the program to 176 other schools within the district. This initiative was subsumed when the Government of Odisha scaled up the MLE in 2014 to cover other districts and other tribal groups. Some of the MLE teachers recruited by Sikshasandhan were also absorbed into the initiatives of the district administration and the state government.

Under the current scheme, an MLE teacher can become a regular teacher after six years if they pass a test conducted by the government. Sikshasandhan has trained MLE teachers and also coached them to pass this test while it continues with its involvement in the mother-tongue based education of the tribal children. For example, it organizes outside-class interactions in tribal language to help the children connect with nature. They also have resource persons to support early-childhood education (ECE) provided through Anganwadies in the Mayurbhanj district. In addition, it operates in the Rayaguda district (Muniguda and Bissam Cuttack) blocks, where they work in the area of both elementary and early childhood education. In the area of elementary education, the primary objective is to ensure age-appropriate learning levels and also to reduce the dropout rate to five percent. Sikshasandhan also works towards enhancing the school-readiness of children in the pre-primary centres by intervening in ECE. It is working with partners to develop a prototype for the Anganwadi intervention in the Muniguda district, which is to facilitate the provision of nutritious food to all children below the age of five years with the participation of the community. This is important due to the issues in the implementation of the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) program that we have witnessed in the tribal belts of Odisha[4] and since some of the tribal

habitations have only a few households, a full-fledged Anganwadi is not functional there, which is bound to affect the provision of nutritious food to both pregnant mothers and infants, and also ECE.

The organization continues to serve as a resource centre and supports other non-governmental organisations involved in education within the state. The centre provides training to teachers, volunteers and development workers in many areas such as ECE; teaching of language, mathematics and science; development of teaching/learning materials; story development and story-telling; and, gender issues. It conducts training programs for other non-governmental organizations in organizational development, leadership, group dynamics, and livelihood management for community workers.

The other activities being carried out by this organization include a school and community science program in selected blocks using innovative ways to popularize and communicate the messages of science. It has also tried to provide a computer-based learning experience in selected ashram schools (residential schools for tribal children). In this program, the attempt is to integrate technology with the school curriculum rather than to provide computer-training as an additional subject. In addition to the work among the Kolha tribes, the organization has started working with another tribal group namely, Lodha and collaborates with the Lodha Development Agency for this purpose. The purpose of this project is to integrate the community with the mainstream society through education and community mobilization. Sikshasandhan also runs a residential bridge course for 100 girls from the tribal community in one district. These girls in the age group of 11 and 14 years have never been enrolled in schools or have dropped out very early. The bridge course is to enable them to complete schooling till grade V by following a compact and accelerated curriculum for one year. On the successful completion of grade V, they transition to

middle and secondary schools.

Sikshasandhan has taken up advocacy on a number of issues, like the adoption of innovative practices which are needed for the universalization of elementary education; transparency, accountability and community involvement in school management; decentralization of education administration; contextualization of learning materials including textbooks; appointment of teachers from the locality and the community; teaching in mother-tongue in the elementary level; and, transparency in appointment and transfer of school teachers. It has carried out research in various areas such as, the assessment on facilities available in schools in tribal areas; financing for the implementation of the Right to Education Act in a tribal district; status of primary education and specific interventions such as mid-day meals in several areas; and, understanding the perception of different stakeholders on quality education.

Sikshasandhan also publishes books and magazines regularly. It has established a press and publishing platform, which is used to translate books from English to Odia and publish a number of well-known books on education. Around 110 books ranging from education, autobiographies and biographies, to books for children have been published. It also publishes books and other materials in the tribal languages. Two magazines, SIKSHA, a bi-monthly magazine in Odia, with articles on problems related to elementary education; and RANSA, a quarterly bi-lingual children's magazine with folk stories, songs, riddles, village histories, paintings and the experiences of children, are also published by Sikshasandhan.

We need to look at the functioning of organizations such as Sikshasandhan in the context of the challenges faced by the education of children from tribal communities in Odisha. Here, we take up the case of the Kolha community with which Sikshasandhan has worked for a number of years and identify some of the persisting challenges in this regard in the

following section.

3. Education of children from the Kolha tribe: Changes and challenges

As part of the University Practice-Connect initiative of the Azim Premji University, we have documented some of the challenges faced in the education of the tribal communities in Odisha[5] (specifically, for the Soura-speaking community in the Gajapati district and the Kond community in the Rayagada district). We have also looked at the challenges in this regard that the tribal groups in India (Mizoram) and the indigenous people in Brazil and Indonesia face. There are similarities and differences between these tribal groups and those in Mayurbhanj that we describe here.

3.1 Kolhas: A community in transition

According to official statistics, there are around 500,000 people belonging to the Kolha tribe in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. They are spread over different parts of East and Central India. It is believed that these tribes have migrated to Odisha from nearby regions like Jharkhand and North-East India. Their current economic situation seems to be relatively better than that of the tribal groups in the Gajapati or the Rayaguda district. They seem to have had more years of exposure to cultivation in relatively flatlands and

wetlands. The houses are located at a distance from each other and are unlike the concentrated tribal settlements in most other parts of India or even in the tribal settlements in the southern parts of Odisha. The houses are well-built with mud and thatched roofs. People cultivate paddy and raise domestic animals (cattle, pigs, ducks, etc.) in addition to collecting different items from the nearby forests. They speak the Ho language (though some of them know and speak Odia too). Boys and girls select their own marital partners (with consent from parents) and they practice a form of bride price.

The Kolhas have access to land. The average number of children per woman has come down but it is still around three to four. Most of them have some level of exposure to education. In a meeting with parents belonging to this group, all of them expressed the desire to educate their children. They wish that their children get jobs such as those of software engineers. We could see schools for all levels in this relatively small area. There is a higher secondary school (pre-university college) which both boys and girls attend. It seemed that the girls too have the aspiration to get educated employment. A small section among them has acquired a higher level of education and some of them have become regular teachers or are in other jobs.

One can also see indications of the reach of a welfare-delivering state and the participation of this tribal community in the process of local governance. The number of schools (of different levels) mentioned earlier is one indication. There are also health-care and related facilities like the ICDS and the presence of Asha workers. Child delivery has almost completely shifted to institutions (local or district hospitals) and there are public ambulance services to transport pregnant mothers for this purpose. Such a transport facility is important given the poor roads and transport between these tribal settlements and the district or block headquarters or towns. Government schemes to support the

construction of houses have encouraged some of them to move away from their traditional dwellings. The formal systems that ensure their participation in governance are also visible. We could see members of the local tribal community, for example, a young woman who passed grade V serving as the Sarpanch of the local panchayat. There are also other activists in the community organisations. Sikshasandhan has engaged (and empowered) a few members from the local community as MLE teachers. We could meet an experienced teacher from the same community who has helped the translation of the learning materials and is involved in other language-based initiatives within the community. He is a resource person for this language for the mother-tongue based education of Scheduled Tribes in Odisha.

Like among the tribal communities in other parts of Odisha, one can see a growing role of wider markets of commodities and labour in the life of people here. Seasonal migration for work to cities (Mumbai) or other Indian states (such as Kerala) are common too. These have also changed their consumption styles and aspirations. The aspiration regarding the education of children could be part of this transition. We could see private schools and their advertisements in this small town. There is also a preference to send children to residential schools among a section of the parents which is based on the thinking that the school would take care of not only education but also the other requirements of children.

3.2 Development: Persisting challenges
However, the Kolha community in this area encounters a number of challenges in terms of human development. There are health issues among people, which may be aggravated by certain practices. Many people, especially women and children, look anaemic and this does not seem to be due to the lack of basic food. Open defecation is widely prevalent here. They use open ponds with stagnant water for washing dishes and clothes, which exposes them to harmful bacteria. These practices may

enhance the possibility of water-borne diseases and worm infestation, malnourishment and possible negative impacts on the cognitive development of children. The consumption of local rice-based alcohol seems rampant. There are many places near the hamlets where women sell this alcohol to both male and female consumers of almost all ages. The number of these sellers of alcohol in a small town indicate that it is an important `economic' activity there and that a greater part of the locally produced food-grains may be used for the production of this alcohol.

There is the prevalence of early marriage — before the age of 18 — and this may lead to a number of consequences, like more children per woman; possible malnourishment among young mothers and children; and, it may also discourage some girls and boys from pursuing higher levels of education. There are other issues related to education that we discuss in the following section.

3.3 Schooling: Major challenges

Teachers in schools who are from the mainstream community agree that the medium of instruction (if it is not the mother tongue of children) continues to be an issue. Though the MLE program exists in a number of schools (and these too have limitations which we have documented <u>here</u>), there are schools in this region where the majority is of the tribal children but they do not have the MLE program. The absence of enough MLE and other teachers from the tribal community creates another set of problems (even if the school follows MLE). The tribal language has an important role in the education of these children. It is easy to understand this if we compare the situation of these students with an example from the mainstream community. Even when the students from the mainstream community study other languages (as the medium of instruction or as an additional subject) or subjects such as mathematics, that are taught to them by teachers who speak their own language. Hence, the communication or transaction

between teachers and students is easier even if the subject is unfamiliar to the students. This is not so in the case of the tribal children, especially those in Odisha whose language is significantly different from that of the mainstream society. Most teachers do not speak or understand the language of the children and there are very few teachers from the tribal communities. Hence, the instruction for all subjects is more difficult. Moreover, it also seems likely that not many teachers from the non-tribal communities are motivated to address the challenges faced by the tribal children in terms of education. There seems to be a prejudice among the former regarding the educational preparedness or learning abilities of these children.

Though there is an improvement in the provision of schooling (in terms of the number of schools, appointment of teachers, availability of materials for mid-day meals, etc.), there are inadequacies in this regard too. One school that we saw did not start on time because of the Head Master who is an alcoholic but has political support. In another school, the

Head Master has noted the lack of an adequate number of rooms in school and also the dilapidated condition of the existing building but neither he nor the parental community seems to have taken any steps to help improve the situation. There is another who commutes a distance of 40 km every day and may not have the energy to make the extra efforts required at the school. Only a few parents are active in the School Management Committee (SMC). There seems to be a lack of a strong social and political will on the part of these people to improve the quality of public services, including the school.

We also saw an Anganwadi in the area. There was provision for food, adequate infrastructure and an attempt to provide ECE. The teacher and the helper were also very active. However, we don't know whether this is representative of all Anganwadies in the region. Since the houses are spread out, Anganwadis may not be easily accessible to all. Hence, there is an arrangement to have sub-centres where infants and pregnant mothers get additional nutrition. However, this arrangement may not be adequate to provide ECE as we have noted in other tribal hamlets[6]. The absence of adequate arrangements for ECE could be a constraint for education at the higher levels too.

What we have discussed so far are the constraints in the provision of education. However, there could be a few issues related to the demand for education. Early marriages affecting the higher secondary or college education are already mentioned. There are also children who drop out in the primary grades (though this number is not high) and parents/teachers do not know what to do about it. We visited the house of one such child, and the parent (father) seems to be interested in sending the child to school, but the child is disinterested. Attendance in schools needs to improve, and currently, it could be less than 70 percent. Parents may discourage children from going to school during certain times of the year, like the harvest time or during festivals. The number of children who do well in terms of learning (based on what teachers say)

is low (according to one school, it is around 30 percent) and there have to be multiple efforts to improve this situation. The remoteness of the area and the absence of opportunities for industrial employment (an issue that we have seen in other parts of the world, documented here) can dampen the excitement for acquiring higher levels of education (unless they see opportunities for migration for educated employment). However, our impression is that the demand for education among the Kolha community in this part of Odisha is relatively higher compared to that of other tribal groups that we have visited in the Southern parts of Odisha. Probably, Kolhas may be closer to Santals, which is another tribal community in the northern part of the state and also in West Bengal, and sections of the latter have demonstrated better achievements in terms of education. The Ho language is also closer to that of the Santals.

4. Key lessons learnt from the interaction with Sikshasandhan

Quality schooling for tribal children can be achieved only when the education provided to them meets two criteria. First, it should be the one that these students can relate to in their local language, social context and culture. Secondly, it should enable these students to deal with the fast-changing world. As noted from recently contacted indigenous groups in Brazil, education for them is to deal with the mainstream society[7]. Moreover, education should enable them to reflect on their life, context and culture without rejecting these.

It is also clear that the provision of appropriate education to the children of the Scheduled Tribes in India requires effective and concerted actions. Hence, the small-scale experiments of alternative schooling by non-governmental organizations have inherent limitations (though these can be successful within their closed space, their applicability in public education system may be limited). There is a need for

government and non-governmental organizations (and other civil society activists) to work together with the objective to provide quality and appropriate schooling to children from the tribal households. NGOs are able to experiment with and come out with innovative and appropriate practices, but it is the government which can adopt and implement such practices in the public education system as a whole.

It is in this context, that the work of Sikshasandhan is important. From its beginning, its attempt to provide an alternative education to the children of the Scheduled Tribes was aimed at making a change at a large scale. They have started interacting with government schools and the public system and government officials have adopted and used the innovative practices of Sikshasandhan in other schools. The functioning of Sikshasandhan shows the importance of the work of NGOs in public education.

However, from our discussion with Sikshasandhan and our understanding of their experience, we came to know of the challenges that NGOs encounter while carrying out the work of improving the education of tribal children in collaboration with the government. On the one hand, certain conventional strategies may not be adequate or sustainable in the context while at the same time, there are new possibilities and opportunities in this. Some of these issues are discussed below.

4.1 Unpredictability and short-term nature of funding
Our interaction with Sikshasandhan brings to the fore again the well-known problems that arise from the dependence of NGOs on funding agencies. Funding organizations may not commit funding for as long durations as some of these interventions may require it. The attitude and approach of these funders may also change unexpectedly and may even be based on individual idiosyncrasies. Hence, NGOs that depend on such funders may have to abandon their efforts before completion and frequently start and change to something new. The way Sikshasandhan has

taken up and ended projects also seems to be driven by the uncertainty in the availability of funding. This may limit the overall impact of NGOs in creating a sustainable impact on the lives of their beneficiaries.

4.2 Availability of financial resources locally

On the other hand, there are locally available financial resources which are untapped or under-utilized for development purposes. We were told by a senior government functionary in Odisha recently that there are resources available under the District Mining Fund (DMF) in the state. This fund is built on the royalty being paid by mining companies to the district administration. Since most of the areas where mining is carried out in Odisha are inhabited by tribal communities (and mining affects their access to forest and other resources) these communities are genuine claimants of a major part of the DMF. It is only legitimate to use this resource to provide quality schooling for the tribal children. Such resources can be used to fund and learn from innovative experiments carried out by NGOs and also to scale up and bring about changes in the public education system[8]. The success of this strategy requires a collective action by NGOs that are involved in developing and experimenting with innovative practices to provide context-specific and appropriate education to the tribal children, the civil society organizations, government officials and academia.

4.3 The Need to create more teachers from the tribal community

Our documentation of the challenges faced by the education of the scheduled tribes and other indigenous groups in India and elsewhere, and also the understanding based on the current visit to the localities where Sikshasandhan operates, underscore the importance of generating an adequate number of educated teachers from different tribal groups. This is important for a number of reasons. It can be a real challenge when the subjects other than the mother tongue in grades I, II and III are taught by people who do not know the language of

the students. They are also not motivated in addressing the challenges faced by these children, especially in government schools which also have a number of other structural limitations. There are not enough role models in these communities. Their presence is also needed to facilitate the political and social mobilization (an issue that we discuss in the following section). As a first step, it may be better to enhance the capacity of the MLE teacher assistants who are from these communities. Their capacity-building should address (a) enabling their knowledge of other subjects so that they can intervene/help effectively in the teaching of these subjects; (b) helping them to pass the recruitment test for teachers so that more among them can become regular teachers in schools. This help should also be extended to those students from tribal communities who are in grades X and XII and who are aspiring to become school teachers.

4.4 The Need for learning materials in tribal languages in higher grades

There is a need to develop learning materials for grades above III in tribal languages. This is necessary irrespective of the government's plan to use tribal language as the medium in the higher grades. The availability of such learning material may make the understanding of concepts by students easier. These can also be used for the self-study or informal learning among the communities and should communicate concepts in science, mathematics and social science in a manner that it relates to the socio-economic context of these communities. There is also a willingness to participate and lead this initiative on the part of the few educated people from the Kolha community (who speak the Ho language). Facilitating the development of learning materials in tribal languages jointly by community insiders and outsiders (academics, NGOs) can be an important initiative.

4.5 Social and political mobilization to address educational challenges

Our own comparative analyses of different contexts of tribal or indigenous groups show that the social and political mobilization of these groups plays an important role in improving the status of education both in terms of enhancing the demand and also the provision of facilities. Moreover, there is a greater legitimacy when the activists from the Scheduled Tribes participate actively in the debates on the nature of education that is required by them. This is evident from the situation in Brazil during the last two to three decades and also in states such as Mizoram. It is also clear that political and social mobilization of the Scheduled Tribes is weak in Odisha and even when there are political leaders among these groups, they either belong to the elite sections within the tribes or become dependents on other elite-controlled parties. Hence, those non-governmental organizations which are interested in enhancing the quality of education among the STs should encourage their political and social mobilization[9]. This may require working with educated sections and with associations of people belonging to different tribal groups.

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