An Evaluation of Multi Lingual Education Programme in Odisha

Dr. Sarbani Sankar Panigrahi

Assistant Professor of English, Odisha State Open University, Sambalpur-768024, Odisha

Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of Multilingual Education (MLE) programs implemented for tribal children in Odisha, India. The MLE initiative, introduced to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap in formal education, aims to facilitate early learning in children's mother tongues before transitioning to regional and national languages. Using a mixed-methods approach, including field surveys, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers, students, and community members across five tribal districts, the research assesses the pedagogical impact, community acceptance, and learning outcomes associated with MLE. Findings reveal that while MLE has improved classroom participation, early literacy, and reduced dropout rates among tribal children, its long-term success is hindered by challenges such as insufficient teacher training, lack of standardized learning materials in tribal languages, and limited administrative support. Moreover, inconsistencies in implementation across districts point to a need for stronger monitoring and localized curriculum development. The study concludes that while MLE holds significant promise for inclusive education, sustained investment, community involvement, and policy commitment are essential for its scalability and success. Recommendations are provided for improving training, curriculum design, and integration with mainstream education systems.

Keywords: Multilingual Education, Tribal Children, Odisha

INTRODUCTION

India is home to a rich tapestry of linguistic and cultural diversity, with over 700 tribal communities representing a significant portion of the population. In Odisha, one of the states with the highest tribal populations, education remains a key challenge for tribal children, largely due to language barriers and culturally disconnected curricula. To address this, the Government of Odisha, in collaboration with national and international organizations, introduced the Multilingual Education (MLE) program. The MLE approach emphasizes the use of children's mother tongues as the medium of instruction in early grades, gradually transitioning to Odia and English. This method aims to make education more inclusive, accessible, and meaningful for tribal learners by valuing their linguistic heritage and cultural identity.

Despite its promise, the implementation and outcomes of MLE in Odisha have been varied and under-examined. There is a growing need to assess how effectively MLE is being delivered and whether it is achieving its intended goals of improving literacy, reducing dropout rates, and fostering community engagement. This study aims to evaluate the MLE program in Odisha, focusing on its impact on educational outcomes for tribal children, the challenges faced during implementation, and the perceptions of stakeholders involved in the process.

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION (MLE) FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN IN ODISHA

Context and Background

Odisha, though officially Odia-speaking, is home to a rich linguistic landscape with **22** officially recognized tribal languages. While the state's literacy rate has improved significantly—from 49% in 1991 to 73% in 2011—a substantial gap remains between the literacy levels of tribal populations and the general population.

Although programs like DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) have led to notable increases in school enrolment among tribal children, retention and learning outcomes remain a concern. A key issue identified is the language barrier. Most tribal children enter school speaking a mother tongue that is different from Odia, which is the primary medium of instruction. As a result, they struggle with comprehension, engagement, and overall academic performance. Additionally, textbook content often lacks cultural relevance, further alienating tribal learners. Teachers are also frequently underprepared to manage multilingual, multicultural classrooms due to insufficient training and support.

Importance of Mother Tongue-Based Education

Research and educational policy emphasize the importance of early education in a child's first language. The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE) model promotes beginning instruction in the child's native language, with a gradual transition to regional and national languages. This approach supports better learning by building on what children already know and understand, while also boosting their confidence, self-esteem, and academic readiness.

The Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009, under Section 29(2), recognizes the importance of the medium of instruction and recommends using the child's mother tongue "as far as practicable."

Objectives of the MLE Programme in Odisha

- Ensure equity and quality in education for tribal children.
- Improve literacy and learning outcomes by starting education in the mother tongue.
- Facilitate **a** smooth transition to Odia and other languages, enabling integration into the state education system.
- Promote respect for tribal languages and cultures among learners.

IMPLEMENTATION OF MLE IN ODISHA

Odisha initiated formal steps towards multilingual education as early as 1997–98, when the Academy of Tribal Dialects and Culture (ATDC) conducted a linguistic survey in the districts of Rayagada, Gajapati, Kalahandi, and Keonjhar under DPEP. Based on this survey, six tribal languages—Saura, Kui, Kuvi, Juang, Koya, and Bonda—were chosen, and primers for Grade I were developed and introduced into schools by 2005.

In 2006, following recommendations from the State Tribal Advisory Committee, the Government of Odisha launched a formal Multilingual Education (MLE) programme under SSA. Initially, 10 tribal languages were adopted as mediums of instruction at the primary level:

- Santali, Saura, Koya, Kui, Kuvi, Kishan, Oram, Munda, Juang, and Bonda.
  In 2013–14, the programme was expanded to include 11 additional tribal languages:
- Gadaba, Ho, Gondi, Paroja, Kharia, Didayi, Bhinjhal, Bhuiyan, Bhumia, Bhatra, and Bhunjia.

Odisha's MLE initiative is a pioneering step toward addressing linguistic inequities in education. By acknowledging and integrating tribal languages into the schooling system, the state not only improves

access and retention but also preserves cultural identity and promotes inclusive learning for some of its most marginalized children.

Development and Implementation of the Multilingual Education (MLE) Programme in Odisha

To address the educational challenges faced by tribal children in Odisha, particularly the language barrier in early education, the state government initiated a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE) programme. The initiative was guided by a **State Resource Group**, comprising linguists, educators, tribal experts, and language resource persons, formed to support and strengthen MLE implementation.

Programme Design and Language Transition Plan

The MLE programme targets primary education from Class I to V, with a gradual transition from the child's mother tongue (L1) to Odia (L2) and English (L3) as per the following plan:

Class	Language of Instruction	Mathematics	EVS	Odia(L2)	English(L3)
I	Mother Tongue-Oral&Written (Alphabet)	MT	MT	Oral & Written (Alphabet)	------
II	MT-Oral & Written Proficiency	MT	MT	Reading &Writing	Oral&Written (Alphabet)
III	MT-Continued Proficiency	MT	MT	Language Subject	Reading &Writing
IV	MT as a Subject	Odia	MT+Odia	Language Subject	Language Subject
V	MT as Subject	Odia	Odia	Language Subject	Language Subject

This phased model enables a smooth transition from 100% mother tongue in Class I to 100% Odia by Class V**.**

School and Language Coverage

The programme currently operates in 1,485 schools across 17 tribal-dominated districts including Mayurbhanj, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Keonjhar, and others. An additional 817 schools have been identified for expansion. The MLE programme supports 21 tribal languages, with 10 introduced in Phase I and 11 more added in Phase II.

Curriculum Development and Teaching Materials

• The curriculum is based on NCF 2005 and SCF 2007**.**
• Textbooks for Classes I to V have been developed in 10 tribal languages (Phase I).
• Class I–III materials have been created for 11 newly adopted languages (Phase II).
• Supplementary reading materials and workbooks have been produced for Classes I & II in 21 languages.
• Scripts used include Odia**,** with Ol-Chiki used specifically for Santhali**.**
• A pre-primary curriculum guidebook, *Nua-Arunima*, has been adapted in 10 tribal languages.

Teacher Recruitment and Training

• 3,400 Shiksha Sahayaks (language teachers) were appointed from a pool of 3,500 advertised posts (2013–14).
• 242 Language Instructors currently assist with implementation, earning ₹3,200/month.
• A proposal to recruit an additional 995 Shiksha Sahayaks is under government review.

- Extensive training modules have been developed, including:
  o Class-wise manuals
  o Induction (10-day)
  o Attitudinal training
  o Primary and early-grade modules
  o Administrator training (3-day)

Support and Monitoring Structure

- At the district level, the Tribal Education Coordinator oversees programme management.
- The State Tribal Education Cell ensures coordination and monitoring.
- DIETs (District Institutes of Education and Training) support academic components, training, and reviews.
- District Resource Groups, including community members and language experts, provide localized guidance.

Community Participation: The Srujan Initiative

The Srujan programme promotes community engagement in schools. Through activities such as storytelling, arts and crafts, music, traditional games, and forest festivals, the community becomes a partner in education. These interactions help create a joyful, culturally relevant learning environment, improve enrolment and retention, and integrate out-of-school children.

Impact and Evaluation

The MLE programme has led to noticeable improvements in attendance, retention, and engagement among tribal students. Classrooms have become more interactive and culturally familiar, using tribal artefacts, local materials, and contextualized content. Tribal museums and learning corners have been established to foster a sense of identity and belonging.

A study conducted by NCERT found that children in MLE schools outperformed those in non-MLE schools in language and mathematics, with significant improvements in oral, written, and overall achievement.

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: A METAPHOR FOR LANGUAGE POLICY

Imagine a scenario where agricultural policy encouraged farmers to abandon traditional organic methods and adopt chemical fertilizers to boost crop yields, without fully considering the long-term damage to soil health. Once the damage became evident, the same policymakers pivoted to advocate organic farming. Farmers were left confused: why were they discouraged from their age-old practices only to be told to return to them later, after suffering financial and environmental setbacks?

This analogy can be extended to language policy in education. Just as the forced shift from organic to chemical farming harmed ecological balance, replacing a child's mother tongue with a dominant language in education disrupts the cultural and linguistic ecosystem. Denying a child the right to learn in their own language not only violates their linguistic human rights, but also deprives them of experiential knowledge rooted in their heritage. Imposing an external language in education, often seen as a step toward modernity, undermines *bhasha swaraj*—language self-rule—and can lead to the extinction of minority languages.

Linguistic Genocide and Language Marginalization

Modern Indian Languages (MILs) have evolved under the influence of nation-state ideologies that promote restrictive language policies. These policies often favor dominant languages and ignore the

linguistic rights of minority communities. The widespread use of a dominant language in schools, government, and media has led to the gradual disappearance of local languages.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1999) and Hough (2009) observe that such homogenizing policies result in self-alienation and a sense of inferiority among speakers of indigenous languages. Literacy becomes synonymous with assimilation, and traditional knowledge systems are sidelined. The first literates within tribal communities, influenced by the dominant education system, often abandon their own languages and cultures.

Parents, motivated by aspirations of social mobility, often prefer their children to be educated in a dominant or global language like English. As Devy (2014) points out, this desire to enter the global labor market comes at the cost of cultural and linguistic loss. Moreover, the use of non-tribal teachers in tribal areas further alienates children from their linguistic and cultural roots, violating Nehru's Five Principles for Tribal Development, which emphasized cultural preservation.

Faulty language census methods also contribute to the crisis. The decline in the number of recognized languages from 1,652 in 1961 to 122 in 2001 reflects systemic disregard for linguistic diversity. Languages spoken by fewer than 10,000 people are not officially recognized, which accelerates language death.

Zone of Cultural Forgetting

In post-colonial India, many indigenous communities are subjected to what Darder (2016) calls the "zone of cultural forgetting"—a process wherein schools systematically erase ancestral knowledge and cultural identities. The prioritization of institutional over community knowledge fosters a sense of inferiority and leads to social and economic disparities, furthering regional disintegration and conflict.

The tribal knowledge systems, deeply rooted in ecological and cultural practices, are often discarded in favour of standardized, dominant models of education. This contributes to a disconnection from cultural heritage, leading to long-term harm both socially and ecologically.

Linguistic Diversity and Education in Odisha

Odisha is home to 62 scheduled tribes, accounting for around 23% of its population. These tribes speak a range of languages, many of which are under threat due to restrictive language policies in the education system. According to *People's Linguistic Survey of India* (2014), only 32 of these ethnic languages remain in active use—30 have been assimilated into Odia.

Despite this decline, efforts toward multilingual education (MLE) began with modest initiatives during the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The government acknowledged the necessity of teaching tribal children in their mother tongues and took steps to incorporate six tribal languages—later expanded to ten—into the curriculum.

IMPLEMENTATION OF MLE IN ODISHA

The MLE initiative began with the creation of bilingual primers and training programs for teachers from tribal communities. The first major breakthrough came with *Erai Erai*, a multilingual primer developed for Saora-speaking students. This was followed by the inclusion of other languages like Santali, Kui, Kuvi, Koya, Bonda, and Juang.

Although early efforts lacked adequate coordination and political support, they laid the groundwork for later expansion. By 2006–07, the Odisha government had formally adopted MLE in 154 schools across 10 tribal languages. By 2016, the program had grown to include 2,300 schools, 3,400 trained language teachers, and over 143,000 students.

Teaching materials were developed in a culturally responsive manner, incorporating oral traditions, fest-

ivals, ecological knowledge, and community practices. A thematic calendar aligned with tribal cultural events guided the curriculum, making education more relevant and engaging.

MLE schools employed a two-track approach to language instruction based on Jim Cummins' theory: the first focusing on communication (BICS) and the second on cognitive and academic proficiency (CALP). From Classes I to III, education was primarily in the mother tongue, gradually integrating Odia in higher classes, creating a balanced bilingual model.

Community Involvement and Resistance

Tribal organizations played a critical role in revitalizing their languages and cultures. Groups such as the Santal Samaj, Bharat Munda Samaj, and Saora Mandali mobilized community support, submitted memoranda, held protests, and even established community-run schools to ensure their languages were preserved and taught.

Media platforms like All India Radio and Doordarshan began broadcasting in tribal languages. The Sahitya Akademi also recognized non-scheduled languages for literary awards. With the rise of digital tools, many tribes developed fonts, published literature, and created websites in their native languages, furthering their visibility and reach.

Evaluation and Policy

The NCERT conducted a comparative study of 100 MLE and 100 non-MLE schools between 2009 and 2011. Despite the MLE program being in its early stages, the findings showed a positive impact on student learning outcomes, engagement, and retention.

In 2014, the Odisha government formalized its support for MLE with a comprehensive policy. However, implementation has faced challenges: frequent administrative changes, inadequate academic support, and insufficient monitoring have hindered progress.

The Way Forward

Odisha's MLE program stands out for its inclusive and culturally grounded approach. Yet, for it to be sustainable, ongoing support in teacher training, curriculum development, and community engagement is essential. Language revitalization must go hand in hand with strengthening the academic and policy frameworks.

Recognition of minority languages in schools not only safeguards linguistic rights but also reaffirms ethnic identity. There is an urgent need for a practice-based, context-sensitive language policy that balances local knowledge systems with global competencies. Only then can schools become spaces of cultural affirmation rather than zones of forgetting.

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH IN A MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM

1. Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Tool

Encourage students to use all their languages as resources for learning English.

- *Strategy*: Allow students to discuss ideas in their first language (L1) before expressing them in English (L2).
- *Example*: Students brainstorm in L1, then share in English in pairs or groups.
- *Benefit*: Reduces cognitive load and builds on existing knowledge.

2. Drama and Role Play with Cultural Contexts

Use skits, storytelling, and role play that draw from students' cultural backgrounds.

- *Strategy*: Students rewrite and act out traditional stories in English.
- *Example:* A Nigerian folktale or a Chinese legend retold in English with local twists.

- *Benefit:* Increases engagement and encourages vocabulary use in context.

3. Multilingual Digital Projects

Leverage tech tools to create collaborative, multilingual multimedia content.

- *Strategy:* Students create bilingual podcasts or digital storybooks.
- *Tools:* Padlet, Flip, Canva, Book Creator.
- *Benefit:* Honors linguistic identity while practicing English in a meaningful way.

4. Cognate Awareness Activities

Especially useful with languages that share Latin roots (like Spanish, French, Italian).

- *Strategy:* Explore word origins and similar vocabulary between English and students' L1.
- *Activity:* Create cognate word walls or matching games.
- *Benefit:* Boosts vocabulary retention and confidence.

5. Language Buddies / Cross-Language Peer Learning

Pair students who speak different languages to collaborate in English.

- *Strategy:* Mixed-language group work with specific roles (e.g., question asker, note-taker).
- *Activity:* Jigsaw reading with summaries shared in English.
- *Benefit:* Promotes real communication and mutual learning.

6. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Use images as prompts to encourage discussion and description.

- *Strategy:* Show a picture and ask open-ended questions in English.
- *Activity:* "What's going on in this picture?" followed by group discussion.
- *Benefit:* Reduces linguistic pressure while building speaking and listening skills.

7. Language Detective Missions

Turn grammar and vocabulary lessons into games.

- *Strategy:* Students find and translate idioms, phrasal verbs, or grammar structures from English media.
- *Activity:* "Find 5 idioms in this video" then explain their meanings in English.
- *Benefit:* Makes learning fun and connects language to real-life use.

8. Culturally Responsive Reading Circles

Use texts that reflect the students' cultures or compare global perspectives.

- *Strategy:* Create reading groups where each student brings cultural insight.
- *Activity:* Literature circles with roles (connector, summarizer, culture expert).
- *Benefit:* Encourages deeper understanding and values cultural diversity.

9. Identity Texts

Students create personal stories or projects that integrate English and their home languages.

- *Strategy*: Write autobiographies, poems, or comic strips using a mix of English and their L1.
- *Activity:* "My Name Story" – students explain their names' meaning and origin.
- *Benefit:* Fosters pride in identity and motivation to express in English.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Multilingual Education (MLE) initiative in Odisha was launched to address the educational challenges faced by tribal children, particularly those arising from language barriers. Odisha, with its high tribal population and linguistic diversity, became a focal point for implementing mother tongue-based education to improve learning outcomes and reduce dropout rates. The evaluation of MLE education in the state reveals several positive outcomes: increased classroom participation, improved early-grade literacy, and

enhanced community engagement in education. By using children's native languages as the medium of instruction in the initial years, the program has helped bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between students and the formal education system. However, the evaluation also highlights persistent challenges, including inadequate teacher training, limited availability of teaching-learning materials in tribal languages, and lack of consistent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Implementation varies widely across districts, affecting the uniform success of the program.

MLE education in Odisha represents a promising step toward inclusive and culturally relevant education for tribal children. While the initiative has demonstrated positive impacts on learning and engagement, its full potential remains unrealized due to systemic and operational challenges. For MLE to be sustainable and scalable, there must be greater investment in teacher preparation, curriculum development in tribal languages, and continuous policy support. Strengthening these areas will ensure that tribal children not only access education but thrive in it.

REFERENCES

1. Devereaux, M. D., & Palmer, C. C. (Eds.). (2022). *Teaching English language variation in the global classroom: Models and practices*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003117860
2. Mishra, M. K., & Mahanand, A. (2020). *Multilingual education in India: The case for English*. Viva Books.
3. Creese, A., & Martin, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Multilingual classroom ecologies: Inter-relationships, interactions and ideologies*. Multilingual Matters.
4. Wright, W. E., Boun, S., & García, O. (Eds.). (2015). *The handbook of bilingual and multilingual education*. Wiley-Blackwell.
5. Adinolfi, L., Bhattacharya, U., & Phyak, P. (Eds.). (2022). *Multilingual education in South Asia: At the intersection of policy and practice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003151635
6. Eklavya Foundation. (n.d.). *Multilingual education in India: Resource book 1 (ELI series)*. Eklavya Publications. https://eklavyapitara.in/products/multilingual-education-in-india-resource-book-1-eli-series
7. Behera, Ajay Kumar, Dr. Ranjan Kumar Rout, and Ashis Dash. *Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Programme: A Panacea for Tribal Learners. South Eastern European Journal of Public Health*, vol. XXVI, no. S1, 2025, pp. 6507–6511. https://doi.org/10.70135/seejph.vi.5714.
8. Bindhani, Basanta Kumar. "Status and Problems of Educational Scenario among the Tribals in Koraput District, Odisha." *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2021pp.1-15.https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0972558X21990627.
9. MacKenzie, Pamela J. "Mother Tongue First Multilingual Education among the Tribal Communities in India." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009, pp. 369–385. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050902935797.
10. Mohanty, Seemita. "Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) in the Indian State of Odisha: Issues, Challenges and Impact." *Academia.edu*, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/30784705.
11. Mohanty, Seemita. "Academician's Word Book to Help Tribal Kids Learn Their Language in Odisha." *The New Indian Express*, 22 Dec. 2024, https://www.newindianexpress.com/good-news/2024/Dec/22/academicians-word-book-to-help-tribal-kids-learn-their-language-in-odisha.

12. Nag, Shivani, and P. Manoharan. "Orissa MLE: Status Report." *National Multilingual Resource Centre*, 2009, www.nmrc-jnu.org/nmrc_img/Orissa-%20MLE%20status%20report.pdf.

13. Panda, M., and A. K. Mohanty. "Overcoming the Language Barrier for Tribal Children: MLE in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa." *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*, edited by A. K. Mohanty et al., Orient Blackswan, 2009, pp. 278–291.

14. Rout, Ranjan Kumar, and Ashis Dash. "Transformative Potentials of Multilingual Education Models in Odisha, India." *European Journal of Education Studies*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1–15. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4003802.

15. Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, et al., editors. *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*. Orient Blackswan, 2009.

16. TISS ELI Series. *Multilingual Education in India Resource Book 1*. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2020. https://eklavyapitara.in/products/multilingual-education-in-india-resource-book-1-eli-series.