

# The MLE Teacher: An Agent of Change or a Cog in the Wheel?

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This article examines the role of the multilingual education (MLE) teacher in the mother tongue-based MLE program for the Juangas, a tribe in Odisha, an eastern state of India, and is part of a broader study of the MLE program in the state. For the specific purpose of this article, I have adopted Welmond's (2002) three-step process: identifying culture-specific knowledge about the role of a teacher; examining the state's education objectives that influence teachers' behaviour and experiences; and focusing on the behaviour and experience of teachers at the local level. These three steps constantly merged into one another during the examination of the subject under discussion. The paper recognises that the MLE teachers are not only first-generation teachers, but also first-generation practitioners of MLE, and therefore need to be resourceful and experimental in their classroom practices. However, given the national imperative to achieve universal elementary education by 2015, within the para-teacher framework adopted by the Government of India, the MLE teacher seems to be just a means to an end.

■ **Keywords:** multilingual education, multilingual education teacher, para-teacher, quality education

This article examines the role of the multilingual education (MLE) teacher in the mother tongue-based MLE program for the Juangas, a tribe in Odisha, an eastern state of India. The program was launched in Odisha in 2006–07 under the Government of India's flagship program called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) or 'Education for All'. For the purpose of this article, I have adopted Welmond's (2002) three-step process: identifying culture-specific knowledge about the role of a teacher; focusing on the behaviour and experience of teachers at the local level; and examining the state's education objectives that influence teachers' behaviour and experiences. These three steps constantly merged into one another during the examination of the subject under discussion. Welmond studied issues of teacher identity in a local context as a result of global trends affecting countries' education systems. The MLE project in India began in four tribal-dominated states (Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh) in a phased manner under the auspices of SSA, as part of the central government's attempts to realise the goals of Universal Elementary Education (UEE). As a signatory to the Millennium Development Goals, the Government of India envisioned the achievement of UEE in the country by 2012, which was extended to 2015. Welmond's three-step process, therefore, provides an adequate framework to study the role of the teacher in MLE, which is primarily

a targeted intervention program for the education of tribal children, guided by international development goals.

In Odisha, nine out of its thirty districts were selected by the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority for the MLE program. They were Kandhamal, Malkangiri, Gajapati, Mayurbhanj, Sambalpur, Kendujhar, Sundargarh and Raygada and Koraput, which have the largest tribal populations in the state. At the time of this study, 10 mother tongues were selected to be languages of education in Class I, of which two — Juanga and Bonda — are endangered languages. In 2006–07, the MLE program was launched in 544 primary schools in the nine districts. Two schools were shut down within 2 years for lack of volunteers to teach in the MLE schools. The number of MLE schools has now been increased to 777. The government plans to raise the number to 1,238 schools in 2014–15.

Almost 100% of the Juangas, who are considered to be one of the 13 primitive tribe groups (PTG) in the State of Odisha, dwell in remote hilly areas and live in a landscape of illiteracy. In India, the PTG was a status accorded to a special category of tribal groups for the first time in 1975 so that they could gain access to welfare benefits. This was

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on the basis of recommendations made by the Dhebar Commission (1961) and Study Team on Tribal Development Programmes (or Shilu Ao team, 1969). Recently, the use of the word *primitive* has been opposed by several civil society groups, including several English language newspapers in India, including *The Hindu* and *The Business Standard*, who argue that the term is a negative identity marker. The draft National Policy on Tribals also calls for a halt to the use of this term in order ‘to boost PTGs’ social image’ (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2006, p. 5). The term currently in use is *Particularly Vulnerable Tribe Groups*.

### The Juangas and the MLE Program

In an international context in which scholarly and political discourse has increasingly centred around the idea of Indigeneity, Indigenous peoples and their rights, whether or not the Juangas qualify as Indigenous (the Indian equivalent of this term is *adivasi*, which means original inhabitants) is in fact nuanced in the Indian context (see Bêteille, 1998; and Xaxa, 1999, for the complexities in the use of ‘Indigenous’ in the Indian context).

An Indian tribal group may be described in various ways, such as a ‘leaf wearing tribe’ (Hunter, 1973), ‘survival of the stone age in situ’ (Dalton, 1872), officially as a PTG (Government of Orissa, 1994), and as speakers of an endangered language (UNESCO, 2009). Other recent characteristics ascribed to Indian tribal groups include: a group whose human rights are being violated; a community with high illiteracy levels; a malnourished/undernourished community with high maternal and infant mortality rates; and a remote hill tribe that has a pre-agricultural stage of subsistence-oriented economy that needs to be brought into the ‘mainstream’ (Rath, 2006). The Juangas are presently listed by the Government of India as one of the 62 scheduled tribes residing in Odisha, and one of the 13 PTGs in the state.

The Juangas themselves identify their race as the first men born on earth. The word *Juanga* means man. They classify themselves into two groups — the *Thaniya* and the *Bhagudiya*. The former are those who live in their own land, called *Juang Pirh*, located in the Gonasika Hills in western Keonjhar (believed to be the birthplace of the first Juanga man), and they are called Hill Juangas. The latter are those who are said to have fled their homeland in Keonjhar to live in the Angul district (an earlier part of the Dhenkanal district) in the state of Odisha. It is believed that they fled their homeland during the Keonjhar *meli* in 1861, a rebellion led by the Bhuyans (a tribe) and greatly supported by the Juangas against the then feudatory ruler of Keonjhar. Some Juangas believe that the Bhagudiya are the progenies of the Juangas who were socially boycotted in the past. The Juangas are not known to reside as a group in any other part of India. There is no documented history of settlement and usurpation of the Juangas, and it is not

known if the Juangas were dispersed over wider regions and were pushed to the hills in the west of Keonjhar as a result of foreign invasion. If ‘[t]he idea of indigenous people must have some basis in the territory inhabited by them in the past and the present’ (Bêteille, 1998, p. 190), and the ‘designation of any given population in a region as “indigenous” acquires substance when there are other populations in the same region that can reasonably be described as settlers or aliens’ (p. 188), then the Juangas of Keonjhar are certainly the Indigenous people of Odisha.

But the criterion of original settlement as a qualification for Indigenous or non-Indigenous status is problematic in India. A case in point cited by Xaxa (1999, p. 3592) is the Dravidian language-speaking communities — the Tamilians, Telugus and Malayalis — residing in the south of India. If the coming of the Aryans is taken as a point of departure for identifying Indigenous populations in India, then the Dravidians would qualify as Indigenous, residing as they were in India prior to the Aryan invasion. But they are neither recognised as tribes, nor do they stake a claim to such a status. They are in fact a socially and politically dominant community and are not dispossessed, exploited or marginalised, traits often shared by Indigenous peoples.

If dispossession and marginalisation qualify a people as Indigenous, then several tribes in India may not qualify as such. India has a long history of co-existence between tribes and non-tribes, as is evident from the following instance of shared existence between the Juangas and the Odia Hindus: Rath (2005, p. 53) cites accounts of tribal/non-tribal contact in the *Garjat* (the 26 feudatory states of Odisha that were outside the purview of the Orissa administration in colonial India) days when the Juangas supplied broom grass and honey to the palace to thatch the state buildings, and supplied *siali* ropes for the Car festival (the famous annual Rath Yatra of Puri, India); and the Bhuyans supplied timber for furniture work in the palace, thick ropes made of grass and sal logs for the Indaparva festival (a Hindu festival in Odisha). Pati and Nanda (2009, p. 114) give an example of such contacts in their historical account of the treatment of leprosy in pre-colonial Orissa when they discuss palm leaf manuscripts, as well as the oral tradition that tells us about the discovery of the *Bhramaramari* (beetle-killer) plant by the tribals, and how the royal order of Keonjhar employs a priestly class among the tribals, the *dehuri*, to worship the plant and to collect parts of the plant to be handed over to the king of Keonjhar. The king then arranges for the *Bhramaramari* medicine with a *Byabastha Patra* (‘information regarding the use of medicine’) to be dispensed among the leprosy patients who throng the palace gates. In his exploration of various dimensions of health and medicine in colonial Orissa, Pati (2001) delineates the dialectical relationship between the Indigenous tribal and the dominant colonial knowledge systems. In this he sees the ‘complex phenomenon of Hinduization of tribal communities’ as involving an ‘acceptance as well as a rejection of

various features of the non-tribal way of life and world view' (p. 2).

Further, in the modern state, Patnaik (1989, p. 8) explains how the Juangas share their *taila* land (land under shifting cultivation) with the Bhuyans and some Harijans (those in the lowest strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy). The former also use the services of the *Raulia* (medicine-man-cum sorcerer) from among the Bhuyans for treatment of diseases and share a symbiotic relationship with the *Gaudas* (milkman caste).

*The Gaudas supply milk and milk products to the Juangas in their rituals. They serve them as liaison agents with the Government officials. . . . Besides these communities the Chasas (cultivating caste) and Telis (oil men caste) also live with the Juangas at the foot-hills and plains. (Patnaik, 1989, p. 8)*

Amid all these, one cannot overlook the gradual dispossession of the tribal groups of their ancestral lands because of their relationship with the *Gaudas*. The Juangas and the Bhuyans give land to the *Gaudas* in lieu of some rent, which is used by the village community to pay the land revenue. But urgent need of paddy or cash has forced many tribal groups to mortgage their permanent paddy lands with the *Gaudas*, who eventually occupied them as the former failed to repay loans. Even then, scholars have broadly described the tribal/non-tribal relationship 'as one of peaceful coexistence rather than one of conquest and subjugation' (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3592). While several tribes in Odisha such as the Bhuyans, who live alongside the Juangas, have shifted to Odia, the Juangas, in particular, tenaciously continue to hold on to their language and culture.

Béteille (1986) stated that 'where one spoke in the past of a "tribal population" of a country, one now speaks more and more of its "indigenous people"' (p. 316). The aspects, however, which render the qualification 'tribe' or 'Indigenous' to a people are not the same. Various scholars have explained what it means to be a tribe in India. Béteille (1986, p. 316), for example, explains the term *tribe* in relation to whether the communities stand more or less outside of Hindu civilisation; that is, their mode of life and social structure is different from the dominant Hindu way of life. Emeneau (1996) identifies certain aspects of the tribal way of life: the importance of kinship in the organisation of social units; the slash and burn agricultural economy; and a fondness for the pleasures of the senses, in contrast to asceticism, which is regarded as the ideal life in Hinduism. The 1901 Indian Census defined tribes as those who practised animism (the term was replaced by *tribal religion* in subsequent censuses). Another aspect taken into consideration in identifying a tribe includes difference in physical features, and community living, which is admired by the Hindu society. But scholars have also studied how tribes have assimilated the Sanskritic tradition and adopted the customs and traditions of the Hindu castes, a particular phenomenon in Indian society.

In short, there are several perceptions but no definition of Indigenous people in the context of India. The Government of India does not recognise the use of the term *Indigenous* to describe a people: if the issue of original habitation is taken into consideration there would be several groups, including the socially and politically dominant groups, that would qualify. Owing to administrative and political considerations, 645 tribes are presently identified as scheduled tribes, which number increased drastically from the 1971 Census to the 1981 Census as more tribes came to be recognised as scheduled tribes. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs lists the essential characteristics of these tribes as: 'indications of primitive traits; distinctive culture; shyness of contact with the community at large; geographical isolation; and backwardness' (Ministry of Tribal Affairs website, n.d.).

The subjects of this study are a tribe indigenous to Odisha by virtue of original settlement, and have been chosen by the Government of Odisha for the MLE program based on the recognition of a high level of school dropouts and a high level of illiteracy among the group. This outcome has been attributed mainly to the gap between the tribal language and the school language, Odia.

The activities in the MLE program in India, however, are circumscribed by the agendas of several agencies — the SSA, the Millennium Development goals, and the Constitution, which calls for imparting instructions in the mother tongue (Articles 21A, 29(1), 46, 350) and has made elementary education a fundamental right (*Right to Education Act 2009*). The MLE program in India is not a language revitalisation program and is certainly not a part of any Indigenous rights movement. Contemporary discourse in the country on the MLE program, however, invokes the varied cultural contexts of the tribal children and the need to protect and preserve languages and cultural knowledge while emphasising the use of the children's mother tongues in the classroom, along with the school languages. At national seminars and workshops currently being held on the MLE, program planners are trying hard to ensure the MLE program is not read as tribal education, but as a preferred mode of education in all schools where teaching and learning needs to begin in the mother tongue. The attempt is not to construct a separate education system for tribal groups, but to achieve quality learning for all children.

The Government of Odisha is continuously striving towards increased participation of various tribal groups in governance. As a first step, it has brought out a booklet on frequently asked questions about the *Right to Information (RTI) Act* in eight tribal languages. Steps are being taken to translate the booklet into more tribal languages. It may also be noted that nine more tribal languages have been brought into the MLE program, raising the number of tribal languages in MLE to 19. In recognition of the specific socio-cultural background and learning needs of the tribal children, as sought by the National

Curriculum Framework 2005 (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2005), and in alignment with the aims of Indigenous education currently in practice globally, program planners in the state have guided teachers towards incorporation of culture-specific elements in the teaching learning materials in MLE. Although it is too early to view the MLE program vis-à-vis Indigenous rights, the program might just give an impetus to such a movement if the learners emerge as empowered citizens to demand positive social and economic changes for themselves as disadvantaged social groups.

This article forms part of a 3-year research study (2008–2011) that set out to analyse the MLE program for the Juangas in four schools of the Kendujhar district in Odisha, following the grounded theory approach. It was observed that in the absence of timely availability of teaching learning materials and textbooks in schools (see National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2011, p. xii), the quality of classroom transaction is largely dependent on the MLE teacher. The article begins by providing a historical and policy context, including culture-specific knowledge about the Indian teacher, the state's education objectives, para-teacher policy and teacher quality, and teachers' behaviour and experiences at the local level. These are pertinent to the discussion about the role of the MLE teacher. The section below on MLE teachers discusses the identity, behaviour and experiences of the MLE teacher and includes observations and findings about MLE teacher training. The article concludes by saying that the cadre of MLE teachers is an arrangement to cope with teacher shortage in tribal areas, and the national exigency of achieving UEE by 2015 leaves little scope for transformative approaches in the area of teacher training, thus making the MLE teacher a means to an end.

## Historical and Policy Context

### Culture-Specific Knowledge About the Indian Teacher

The Indian teacher navigates within a landscape shaped by multiple philosophies, ranging from the spiritual to the market driven. The ancient Indian philosophy about the teacher has been represented in the words of saints such as Adi Sankaracharya, Guru Nanak, Sant Kabir, and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who have hailed the greatness of the *guru* as an enlightened seeker of knowledge himself and who leads his disciple on the path of spiritual evolution. Millions of Indians pay obeisance to the *guru*, singing:

*ajnanatimirandhyasa jnanajanasalakaya / caksurunmilitam yena tasmai sriurave namah / gururbrahma gururvishnu gururdevo maheswara / gurureva param brahma tasmai srigurave namah. [Salutations are to that guru who opened the eyes of one blind due to the darkness (cover) of ignorance with a needle coated with the ointment of knowledge. Salutations to*

*that guru who is the Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer, who is the limitless one.]*

The days of British rule in India saw thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, who emphasised oneness of the teacher and the student:

*The only true teacher is he who can immediately come down to the level of the student, and transfer his soul to the student's soul and see through the student's eyes and hear through his ears and understand through his mind. Such a teacher can really teach and none else. (Vivekananda, 2005, p. 183)*

Sri Aurobindo sees the teacher as one who can lift the disciple to a higher state of being:

*... the wise teacher will not seek to impose himself or his opinions on the passive acceptance of the receptive mind; he will throw in only what is productive and sure as a seed that will grow under the divine fostering within. He will seek to awaken much more than to instruct ... (Sri Aurobindo, 1972, p. 60)*

Stories of the 'sage-teacher' (Kumar, 2005, p. 89) continue to hold sway over the Indian mind, which believes that teaching is a noble profession. Kumar (2005) argues that it was 'lack of an economic interest that gave the teacher and his vocation a glory that no other function in village society had' (p. 90) and that it was this idea which was 'the backbone of the village schools' in 19th-century reports about indigenous education in India (see *State's Education Objectives and Teacher's Behaviour and Experiences* in this article). Our MLE teachers, who are the subjects of this study, have grown up with stories of the sage-teacher, but they are youth volunteers hopeful of a regular job and salary (personal interviews).

It may be noted here that 'Indigenous education' refers to the extensive system of village schooling in pre-colonial India. Mahatma Gandhi called this system of schooling 'The Beautiful Tree', which was uprooted by the British, who started the system of mass education (see in this context, Tooley, 2009). Indigenous education is different from tribal education. Only with the launch of MLE, which is an SSA intervention for the education of tribal children, have we begun to talk about tribal education.

### The State's Education Objectives and Teachers' Behaviour and Experiences

Dharampal's *The Beautiful Tree* (1983), based largely on the famous Adam's reports, brings to light the autonomy enjoyed by the village teacher before he became 'a functionary of the state, working for a salary' (Kumar, 2005, p. 75). The village teacher in pre-colonial India exercised his autonomy in two matters: (1) selection of knowledge — in this, the village teacher was 'guided by conventions of belief and practice in pedagogy and by the needs of the village economy' (Kumar, 2005, p. 74; see also Di Bona, 1981, who makes reference to the 'extensive and well-developed system of practical schooling' that trained students in skills needed to efficiently conduct an



agrarian economy); and (2) pacing his pedagogy according to his pupils' progress. It was such autonomy that Gandhi's Basic Education sought for the teacher, whose status and role at the time was being controlled and regulated by the colonial bureaucracy (for a complete picture, see Kumar, 2005, pp. 75–86). The Basic Education scheme failed. While Kochhar (1967) argued that the scheme did not fail but that it was not fairly tried, Kumar (1995) argued that it failed because of a hostile socio-economic climate and an ambivalent political patronage. Meanwhile, Indian education was in the throes of 'the subject constituting project' of Macaulay (Thomas Babington Macaulay was a law member of the Governor-General's council in 1835) to produce 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (Zastoupil & Moir, 1999, p. 171). With the rejection of Indigenous traditions of knowledge (Dharampal, 1983) began the crossover from the traditional *gurukul* system to the modern school, in which the teacher 'could no longer decide on his own or on the basis of convention what to teach and how to teach' (for an account of the gradually declining status of the schoolteacher under colonial rule, see Kumar, 2005).

Soon after India gained independence in 1948, The Constitution of India 1950 (Article 45) obligated the state 'to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years'. This resulted in a rapid expansion of schools, with little care for 'material and pedagogical conditions prevailing in them' (Kumar, 2005, p. 194). It is in this context that the 1964–66 Kothari Commission began a review of the professional and economic status of the teacher and argued against the differential in scales of pay for teachers in government and private schools (the Kothari Commission Report has been cited to demand 'equal pay for equal work' by para-teachers), as well as in the training schemes for teachers. The Educational Council defines para-teachers as 'full-time teachers, who are para-professionals, paid lower than the government teachers and working with regular schools' (as quoted in Kumar, Priyam, & Saxena, 2001, p. 560). In 2008, the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) defined them as a 'universe of teachers in primary and upper primary schools who have been appointed on contract and/or on terms and conditions which are different from the regular cadre teachers in the state' (as quoted in Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010, p. 60).

Around the time of the Kothari Commission had begun the realisation that qualitative improvements in education were not keeping pace with quantitative expansion (see Naik, 1979), and that universal access did not automatically entail universal achievement (see Prakash, 1993). The teacher had begun to be seen as playing an important role in imparting quality education:

*Of all the factors which determine the quality of education and its contribution to national development, the teacher is undoubtedly the most important. It is on his personal qualities and character, his educational qualifications and professional competence that the success of all educational endeavour must ultimately depend . . . teacher education, particularly in-service education, should receive due emphasis. (Department of Education, 1992, section 4.2)*

Quality attainment continued to remain elusive even as late as the 1980s, and the concern was voiced in the Government of India Ministry of Education (1985) document 'The Challenge of Education'. The subsequent National Policy of Education (NPE) 1986, which focused on a 'child-centred' approach and proposed a national curricular framework, went only as far as calling for the formation of a National Council of Teacher Education to regulate and improve the standards of teacher education. According to Dyer (Little, 2010), the role of teachers in the implementation of the ambitious policy was ignored and was included in the Programme of Action accompanying the NPE only after a question was raised in Parliament. Still, the role of the teacher as one who 'should have the freedom to innovate, to devise appropriate methods of communication and activities relevant to the needs and capabilities of and concerns of the community' (Department of Education, 1992, p. 25) was simple rhetoric, as became evident in Dyer's study of schools in Baroda district of Gujarat:

*The teachers could never make full use of the appropriate items in the kit, and some teachers made use of virtually nothing . . . the blanket national scheme did not allow for local adjustments to fit the TLE (teaching learning equipment) within existing levels of teacher capacity, and the local circumstances of schools. (Dyer, as quoted in Little, 2010, p. 22)*

De and Dreze (1999), in their Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE), cited how teaching aids supplied under Operation Blackboard, a component of NPE 1986, remained locked in trunks or cupboards because teachers did not want to be blamed for their loss or damage. The NPE also included pre-service and in-service as well as orientation training programs for all teachers. 'The scale of the training was enormous' (Little, 2010, p. 23): a number of institutions — a comprehensive structure of 400 hundred District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) in each of India's 400 districts, colleges of teacher education (CETs) and institutes of advanced studies in education (IASEs) were set up to conduct training. The PROBE offered hard-hitting insights into the failure of the training programs:

*Teacher training tells us nothing about the reality of our school. . . . All teaching methods I knew have failed with these children. The only viable method I know is indiscriminate thrashing. (A teacher of a school for working class children in Tughlakabad near Delhi; De & Dreze, p. 75)*

Some years before the 1986 policy, foreign-funded projects had been started in some states to attain universal quality education.

### Para-Teacher Policy and Teacher Quality

A new cadre of teachers called para-teachers came into being with projects such as the Shiksha Karmi Project in Rajasthan in 1987, the Andariki Vidya — Vidya Volunteer Scheme in Andhra Pradesh, the Vidya Sahayak Yojana in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the Shiksha Karmi Programme in Madhya Pradesh, Shikshan Sevak in Maharashtra, and the Shiksha Mitra Yojana in Uttar Pradesh, Shiksha Sahayaks in Odisha. The Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi project began a few years before the rest, which were launched during the implementation of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in the 1990s. Govinda and Josephine (2004, pp. 15–17) noted two categories of para-teachers. The first category are recruited as ‘additional resources’ as part of a coping exercise in the situation of rapid expansion of schools and shortage of teachers and teacher absenteeism, and have come to substitute regular teachers in formal schools. In some states like Madhya Pradesh, official statistics do not differentiate between teachers and para-teachers. The second category is those who are employed in single teacher schools in small or remote habitations. Employment of this category of teachers, according to Govinda & Josephine, ‘is being promoted with central funds as per the norms of SSA and not as means of conserving State government resources’ (2004, p. 17). Thus, while the para-teacher phenomenon is being seen as something to stay, scholars have argued that a ‘dual system’ of para-teachers and regular teachers should be dispensed with and steps be taken to frame ‘a single professional development ladder’ for para-teachers and regular teachers (Govinda & Josephine, 2004; Pritchett & Murgai, 2008; Pritchett & Pande, 2006).

The Indian government’s drive to achieve universal elementary education in a ‘mission mode’ (see Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1999), scholars argue, might just be on its way to show that the teacher is not indispensable (Kumar, Priyam, & Saxena, 2001, pp. 93–94). Para-teachers or ‘teacher corps’ (Welmond, 2002) are replacing regular teachers in large numbers (Govinda & Josephine, 2004; Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010; Ramachandran, 2008; Ramachandran, Pal, Jain, Shekar & Sharma, 2005). And with the open schooling system for girls at the elementary level in states like Madhya Pradesh, ‘even the para-teacher will be replaced by a postman’ (Sadgopal, 2003).

Pandey (2006) and Govinda and Josephine (2004) cite the Government of India Report of the National Committee of State Education Ministers, which recommended the recruitment of para-teachers for the first time:

*Appointment of pay scale teachers to fill up all teacher vacancies as per teacher-pupil norms would require resources that state*

*governments are finding increasingly difficult to find. The economic argument for para teachers is that provision of teachers as per requirement is not possible within the financial resources available with the states. The non-economic argument is that a locally selected youth, accountable to the local community, undertakes the duties of teaching children with much greater interest. The accountability framework is well defined and by making the local authority as the appointing authority, the para teacher’s performance assessment is the basis for his/her continuance. The quest for UEE as Fundamental Right signifies a certain sense of urgency in doing so. This urgency calls for appropriate modifications in National Policy [on Education] in order to respond to local felt-needs. The recruitment of para teachers is a step in this direction. (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1999, pp. 22–23)*

Govinda and Josephine (2004), Kingdon and Sipahimalani-Rao (2010), Kumar et al. (2001), Ramachandran (2008), and Ramachandran et al. (2005) have argued that the para-teacher policy is related to the urgencies of the structural adjustment programs in developing countries in the wake of globalisation. Welmond (2002) explains the para-teacher phenomenon specifically in terms of ‘finance-driven reforms’ (p. 39), also called ‘edlib’ polices (Colclough, 1991), and explains how the teacher is ‘one input among others in the production process or is a worker whose purpose is precisely defined with regards to quantifiable outputs, namely, the learning achievements of students’ (Welmond, 2002, p. 42). Scholars have argued that the para-teacher policy ‘has diluted the identity of a teacher as a professional and has led to considerable erosion in the faith of agency of the teacher in bringing about change ...’ (Batra, 2005, p. 4352).

Discourse on the role of the para-teacher is an evolving field. Govinda and Josephine (2004, p. 21) cite the example of how in Uttar Pradesh, some documents specify that a para-teacher should have *seva bhava* [willingness to serve]. In the para-teacher framework, *seva bhava* is a euphemism for willingness to work without remuneration and without expectations for future regularisation of job. The use of this term is used to motivate unemployed youth to join the para-teacher cadre. DPEP studies apprised us of the high motivation levels and sincerity among para-teachers, largely because of the ‘scope for getting a better-paid permanent job’, but there are concerns about the quality of classroom transactions organised by para-teachers (see Govinda & Josephine, 2004; Kumar et al., 2001). Kingdon and Sipahimalani-Rao (2010), who reviewed a number of studies on the learning outcomes of children under para-teachers, argue:

*... the oft-heard concerns about the harm done by para-teacher schemes to children are misplaced. Those who voice these concerns appear to conflate the issue of equity (of pay and working conditions for para and regular teachers) professional status, esteem and security, with the issue of the efficacy or quality of education imparted by para-teachers. While concerns for equity,*

*professional status and security remain valid, the concerns about condemning children to poorer quality para-teachers are not borne out by the available evidence. (p. 67)*

They also argue, on the basis of 'national data', that 'having lower legal educational qualification requirements for para-teachers than for regular teachers has not led to actually lower qualifications among appointed para-teachers' (2010, p. 66; emphasis in original). That learning achievements of children under teachers and para-teachers are no different has also been argued by several others (Govinda & Josephine, 2004; Leclercq, 2002; Pratchi Trust, 2002). But Govinda and Josephine (2004) do mention 'poor learning levels across the board, whether the focus is para teacher schools or regular schools with fully paid teachers' (p. 23).

### Behaviour and Experience of Teachers at the Local Level

Implicit in the SSA's MLE program is also the awareness of the negative identity contingencies that tribal children face in school classrooms. The mother tongue-based multilingual education program for tribal education might help counter the negative effects of ascriptive identities but might not do much in changing the society that imposes such identities. By segregating the tribal children for mother tongue education, the MLE program seems to be working against multilingual, multicultural dynamics in which people with diversely plural identities interact, but it is the only way out to stave off negative stereotyping that has had damaging effects on the school achievement of tribal children. In the case of Juanga children, for example, negative stereotyping follows from the identities imposed on them, such as belonging to a 'leaf wearing tribe' or 'primitive tribe group', or a 'remote hill tribe' at a pre-agricultural stage of subsistence-oriented economy.

Kumar (1989) shows how negative stereotyping directly impacts classroom performance. In his essay 'Learning to be Backward', he gives the example of a history teacher who discusses 'tantricism' in the class as a sign of backwardness most noticeable in tribal villages. The teacher also explains how the contact between Brahmans (people at the top of the caste hierarchy in India) and tribals led the former to adopt tantric practices. She then asks a Scheduled Tribe (ST) boy: Who did the Brahmans learn tantricism from? The boy gives no answer. Kumar (1989) explains the dilemma of the boy:

*If he answers the question by repeating what the teacher has told the class, he will acknowledge in an articulate manner that tribal groups are the source of those characteristics of Indian society which have already been identified in the class as symbols of backwardness, such as belief in magic and superstition. Taking the other option, if he says nothing, he would show that he has not learnt well enough to reproduce what has been taught only a few minutes ago, and that he is indeed a backward student of this class. In other words, his 'success' as a student of a history lesson would prove his backwardness as a member of a group,*

*and his 'failure' as a student would testify to his backwardness as a student. There is no escaping the label of backwardness. (pp. 67–68)*

One would not need special measures for a particular class of children if there were an attempt to problematise teachers' identities in the classroom. It is all too common for non-tribal teachers to label children as dull or stupid, but they make no attempt to question their own competence in dealing with integrated classes that include children with stigmatised identities. Pattanayak (2007) cites a personal experience during his visit to a rural school with Kandha (a primitive tribe group in Odisha) children. Pattanayak asked the Odia-speaking teacher: 'What do the children know?' The teacher replied: 'Nothing, sir. After teaching them so much, are they able to grasp anything? What is the use of telling things to a Kandha child? I am frustrated. Please get me transferred sir.' Pattanayak spoke with the children in their mother tongue, calling them to his side, asking them to bring a picture chart, and asking them to identify the pictures. The children responded with enthusiasm. The teacher was taken by surprise and said he would try this in his classroom. Besides cost-reduction through the appointment of para-teachers, it was also to fight attitudes such as those of the Odia teacher towards the tribal students that the Government of Odisha appointed tribal teachers, called MLE teachers, for the MLE program. It was believed that such teachers would be sympathetic to the problems and needs of their students in the classroom.

Tribal children in school classrooms across India have been at the receiving end of an essentialist approach to identity that traces classroom behaviour like dullness and incompetence to these ascriptive identities. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) called this the 'stereotype threat', a particular type of identity contingency (Steele et al. used the term to mean the responses a person with a given identity has to cope with in specific settings) that pushes them out of the school system. Jhingran (2005, p. 73) explains the Indian context: 'Non-tribal teachers often carry deep-rooted biases about the tribal children [and] also [are] convinced that tribal parents are not committed to education of their children. This leads to a vicious cycle of low expectation and low performance in the school [and] low self esteem.' The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 enlists certain stereotypes regarding girls and children from marginalised groups (see p. 23 of NCF). In India, the terms 'SC' (Scheduled Caste) and 'ST' (Scheduled Tribe) unmistakably arouse a host of negative identity categories in the minds of people. In a tacit acknowledgment of this phenomenon, NCF chooses to use the term 'first-generation school goers' to refer to SC/ST children.

### The 'MLE Teacher'

With the MLE program for tribal education, a new set of teachers called MLE teachers are now in the picture. These teachers, all of whom are tribal youth volunteers employed

as para-teachers, became necessary for various reasons: (1) to cope with the teacher shortage in tribal-dominated areas — educated trained teachers who often belong to the non-tribal communities are unwilling to work in these hilly remote areas and those who are appointed by the government have often been reported absent for long durations; (2) negative identities imposed on the tribal children by non-tribal teachers which ‘pushed’ tribal children out of school (tribal students, in particular, do not drop out because of their inability to learn, rather are pushed out of school by negative teacher attitudes, according to the MLE teacher training module; Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority, 2007); and (3) the national obligation to achieve UEE in a ‘mission mode’ — in the face of acute teacher shortage for schools in tribal areas and teacher attitudes towards tribal children, the MLE teacher seemed to be the only way to draw tribal children to school and help achieve the goal of UEE. All this makes SSA’s ‘mother tongue based multilingual education programme for tribal education’ a targeted intervention program for the excluded.

There were, at the time of this researcher’s field visits in February 2009 and October 2010, a total of 1,846 MLE teachers, including 40 Juanga MLE teachers, for 544 MLE schools in Odisha. The interviewees were four MLE teachers from four MLE schools (selected through simple random sampling; there is only one MLE teacher for every MLE school) in four Juanga-dominated villages (Ghungi and Jantari [Banspal block] and Samagiri and Nalpanga [Harichandanpur block]) of the Keonjhar district in Odisha. Seventy-nine per cent of the Juangas in the state of Odisha live in the Keonjhar district alone, and are concentrated in the Banspal, Harichandanpur and Telkoi blocks of the district. Data about the teachers and teacher practices were obtained through personal interviews, questionnaire, and direct observation of teacher activities inside the classroom (two classroom observations at each of the four MLE schools) at different times of the academic sessions from August 2008 to October 2010. During these 2 years, only one 15-day training program for the MLE teachers was held at the district office. Of the four MLE teachers interviewed, only one had passed the intermediate exam and had completed a certificate course in teaching. The rest were matriculates and had neither done any course on teaching, nor undergone any teacher-training prior to their appointment as MLE teachers. All the Juanga MLE teachers were bilingual in Juanga and Odia.

The MLE intervention in Odisha is supported by Rupantar, a teacher training program (so far, two teacher training modules, Rupantar-1 and Rupantar-2, have been published for the training of MLE teachers) that starts with the prevailing teacher attitudes and stereotypes about the identity and competencies of the tribal child in the classroom. In it, the teacher is envisaged as an empathetic and conscientious facilitator, and an activist who

is reflexive about his role in social transformation (Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority, 2007). Most importantly, it is cultural empathy that the MLE teacher brings with him to school (Khora, 2005). The modules in *Rupantar* are an important primer, encouraging teachers to introspect on the use of the home language, as well as the local cultural resources to transact curricular subjects.

Functionally, the MLE teachers are para-teachers (*shiksha sahayaks* or *ganashikshaks*) exclusively, meant to take care of the learning needs of the tribal children in the primary classes. All MLE teachers are male youth volunteers from the villages where the MLE schools are situated. Only recently has the state government of Odisha started a recruitment drive to appoint regular MLE teachers called ‘language teachers’ in the MLE schools. These language teachers will teach the tribal mother tongue as a subject and also use it as a medium of instruction in the primary classes, but it is still not clear if they will have some role to play in ‘language bridging’ in the upper grades.

When the MLE teacher, who teaches Grades I and II, is absent for the day, the children are made to sit in the older grade classrooms where the medium of instruction is Odia. In one school, a youth volunteer who was a school dropout was asked to step in for the absent MLE teacher. (There is only one MLE teacher for every MLE school. Therefore, on the days when the MLE teacher goes on leave, the headmaster, in order to keep the children ‘occupied’, calls in a boy from the village to manage the class.) The other teachers in the MLE schools believed the Juanga children in the lower grades were the exclusive responsibility of the MLE teacher. In yet another school, the MLE teacher was found keeping children of Grades I, II and III herded in one classroom, holding the ubiquitous big book meant for Grade I. On probing, it was found that the Grades II and III textbooks had not reached the school (field notes). It was already mid-October, at the beginning of the second academic session (the academic session begins in July and ends in March).

The recruitment of local teachers to teach in the mother tongue has been considered an effective step in reducing the effect of alienation between schools and communities (Dunne, Akyeampong, & Humphreys, 2007, p. 27). At the beginning of the MLE program, workshops were held to identify MLE teachers from among the EGS (Educational Guarantee Scheme) teachers or the *ganashikshaks* who belonged to the tribal communities and who had passed the Intermediate exam. Where the required number of teachers were not available, as in the case of the Juangas and the Bondas, educated local youths from among the community were chosen by the Village Education Committees (VECs), with the approval of the District Collector.

The MLE teachers are trained not in regular training institutes but by an MLE resource group made up of the state resource group (SRG), the district resource group (DRG) and the language resource group (LRG). The SRG comprises linguists, anthropologists and tribal language



experts, including academicians and teacher trainers from the District Institute of Educational Research and Training (DIET). Resource persons from international agencies, such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), also lend support relating to the preparation of teacher training modules and deciding teaching methodologies for MLE. The DRG comprises the MLE teachers, volunteers from among the tribal communities, the Block Resource Centre Coordinator (BRCC) and the Cluster Resource Centre Coordinator (CRCC). The LRG comprises community members, including the villagers and educated members of the tribal communities who are in service elsewhere. The DRG and the LRG are trained in MLE.

At the regular periodic workshops held at the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority in Bhubaneswar (the capital city of Odisha), MLE teachers are invited to participate in curriculum designing. (The blueprint for the exercises in the workshop is provided by the National Curriculum Framework 2005.) The teacher-participants suggest cultural themes, which are discussed among the experts and the teachers, for incorporation into the curriculum. The MLE teacher in the lower primary grades teaches all subjects and hence is expected to build a mother tongue bridge across all curricular subjects. A review commissioned by the European Commission on Foreign Languages in Primary and Pre-School Education recommends that teachers for multilingual schools should have the following attributes: 'proficiency in the target language, ability to analyse and describe that language, knowledge of the principles of language acquisition as well as pedagogical skills specifically adapted for teaching foreign languages to young children' (Van de Craen & Perez-Vidal, 2003). However, curriculum innovations are rarely accompanied by training in 'competencies and strategies needed for working in multilingual classrooms' (Atkins, 1985, p. 60). Teachers do not have to prepare a daily lesson plan. They are expected to follow the annual lesson that is prepared before the start of the academic session.

### Observation of MLE Teacher Training

This section is based on this researcher's field notes taken during the observation of a 15-day training program attended by 10 Juanga MLE teachers from different MLE schools at the DIET office in Keonjhar in October 2008.

One by one, the teachers narrated their early experiences as MLE teachers. All of them said how they had to visit the homes of the children and exhort the parents to send their children to school. The parents, encouraged by the initiative of their 'own' MLE teacher, sent their children to school. The teachers tried to attract children to the school by speaking with them in Juanga and through songs, dance, stories and games known to the children. One of the teachers was very enthusiastic about the children's response to his invitation. The teachers enacted a dance drama on numbers in Juanga for the children to learn. The composition was created by Baidhara Juanga,

who was the MLE teacher of Samagiri primary school and was attending the training program.

The sessions were conducted by a Juanga volunteer who had attended the workshop for MLE teachers at OPEPA in Bhubaneswar. All the teachers, including the trainer, were bilingual in Juanga and Odia. During the whole training session, the trainer was heard using one or two English words while explaining the activities. He trained the MLE teachers on classroom methods for Grade II, such as the total physical response for alphabet recognition, play way methods to teach basic algorithms, and strategies such as the theme web and the word web for bridging Juanga and Odia. The teachers also prepared TLMs. The trainer had with him a set of activity-based materials that he had prepared at the MLE workshop in the state capital. He explained every activity in great detail (he spends almost 5 hours every day on a single activity). The trainee teachers were seen listening to him attentively. They did not have any questions and it was not clear if they realised that they may improvise in the classroom. The trainer made no mention of this.

### Findings

Such 15-day training programs, which are held at irregular intervals, sometimes only once in a year, do not quite yield desirable outcomes in the classroom. Observations of classroom transactions show, for example, no use being made of TLMs. As Panda and Mohanty (2009) observed: 'what has been transcribed in training the MLE teachers is a package . . . Theme web was a concept, an idea that was used to organise the curricular materials and the teaching-learning programs. In practice it was treated as yet another routine in the class, a calendar that has to be followed' (p. 299). The teacher was most often found reading from either the 'big book' or the 'small book' (the two story books in the MLE program and a ubiquitous feature in all the MLE schools).

A critical analysis of this training program may be tempting but it must be remembered that this is a basic program for MLE teachers who are also first-generation teachers. They are still learning what is to be done and are trying to understand how it is to be done. No one has yet hit the 'right' way to teach in an MLE classroom. There is no pool of experience on which to fall back, no books to guide. It has been little more than 5 years since the MLE program was launched in Odisha. In such a situation, having new teachers use the mother tongue, whether for maintenance or for transition purposes (Atkins, 1985) is, in itself, a big step forward. What Gandhi said of his Basic Education teachers could be said of MLE teachers as well. The advice that Gandhi gave to teachers of Basic Education schools on the methodology of correlation in interdisciplinary instruction was this:

*If you come across something that you cannot correlate with the craft [all subjects were to be taught in relation to a craft*

*work], do not fret over it and get disheartened. Leave it, and go ahead with the subjects that you can correlate. Maybe another teacher will hit upon the right way and show how it can be correlated. And when you have pooled the experience of many, you will have books to guide you, so that the work of those who follow you will become easier. (Prakasha, 1985, p. 13)*

The MLE teachers are not only first-generation teachers, but also first-generation practitioners of multilingual education, and therefore need to be resourceful and experimental in their classroom practices.

Only one out of the four MLE teachers interviewed said he had been to the state headquarters to participate in the workshop on materials production. Another teacher said he had wanted to go but was not allowed to by a member of the LRG who regularly visited and participated in the workshops. All the teachers were aware of the bridging component in MLE. While two teachers said they were expected to teach students in Juanga and then 'transfer' them to Odia, another said that they were expected to teach in many languages. Yet another teacher said they should teach in many languages, starting with the mother tongue. When it was pointed out that they had been conducting their lessons entirely in Juanga, they said that they had been 'told' to do so. Three of the four teachers with Juanga mother tongue said learning in the mother tongue is necessary for better comprehension of the subject matter. The other teacher said mother tongue education is necessary to save a dying language. A member of the LRG who attends workshops at OPEPA and trains MLE teachers at the BRC said he was not clear about how to take students from learning in Juanga to learning in Odia in Grade II. He said they had been given no TLMs relating to this. There was a marked ambivalence in the responses of the teachers about using both Juanga and Odia for classroom transaction.

Amid the routine use of the 'big book' and the 'small book' (Panda & Mohanty, 2009, pp. 299–300), one finds good teaching practices, as with one MLE teacher, Baidhara Juanga (mentioned earlier), who brings in students of higher grades to teach a number song, written by himself, to the children in the lower grades, with alternative lines in Juanga and Odia (field notes). In fact, this particular teacher was asked to act out the song for the benefit of the other teachers during the 15-day training program discussed above. It is important that such good practices are documented and brought to the notice of the authorities in the state headquarters. A UNICEF Report on Inclusive Classroom, Social Inclusion/Exclusion and Diversity states:

*While there may be several instances of good practices used by teachers in some schools, the lack of formal documentation, record and evaluation means that potentially good practices are lost. Therefore, there is a need to develop an institutional mechanism for continuous documentation, evaluation, sharing and feedback on the impact of teaching-learning practices on*

*student learning, and its linkage with the teacher support and training system. (Kumar, 2010, p. 12)*

## Conclusion

The right to education was incorporated as a fundamental right in the Constitution of India under Article 21A, on April 1, 2010, with the notification of the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act*. But free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 was a Constitutional commitment made more than 60 years ago. The commitment is yet to be realised. Through all these years, the Government of India has been directly involved in the delivery of elementary education, first by adopting the National Policy of Education 1986, and second by committing itself to the Millennium Development Goal 2 (the achievement of universal primary education by 2015) in the follow-up to the 1990 Jomtien conference for education for all. The delivery of elementary education was first routed through the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in seven states. The felt positive outcomes led to the larger nationwide program called the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The immediate imperative of SSA is thus to achieve universal quality elementary education by 2010, extended to 2015, according to the millennium development goal. The National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) calls for a classroom environment that provides room for 'negotiation of meaning, sharing of multiple views and changing the internal representation of the external reality' (p. 17). Who translates this for the MLE teacher, who, given his educational qualification and the nature of training he receives, may understand all of this as mere 'abstractitis'? This researcher's observations in the field and the study by Panda and Mohanty (2009) deal with the routine practices of the MLE teacher, who takes recourse to the 'big book' and the 'small book' because he knows not what else to do. The MLE teacher needs to be seen in the overall context of the teacher situation in India. The teacher is as powerless an agent today as he was in the colonial days (Kumar's 'Meek Dictator', 2005, pp. 73–94). At the workshops in Bhubaneswar, all the MLE teachers from various language groups were taught to plan lessons in a standardised format 'without disturbing underlying assumptions about knowledge and curriculum' (Kumar, 2002, as cited in Batra, 2005, p. 4351). In this context see also Bedamatta (2013) for the artificial distinction made between teaching learning materials in the MLE program under the heads of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). One also cannot ignore the urgency of the arrangement in the form of the MLE teacher to cope with teacher shortage in the tribal areas. In this context, the capacity of the MLE teacher to empower new learners towards reclaiming and revaluing their languages and cultures stands severely questioned. That universal elementary education be achieved in a mission mode and

that governments do not have funds allow no time and resources to initiate transformative approaches to education, which is why the role of the teacher as an agent of change is best ignored. Within the present system of education delivery, the MLE teacher seems to be just a means to an end.

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