

Continuing Low Literacy

The Case of Orissa

Orissa's disadvantaged tribal groups have historically shown low literacy rates. Yet the state in its mechanical replication of all central government schemes to raise literacy levels, has neglected the needs of this group. There has been little attempt to draw in teachers from these groups who have a ready cultural empathy with tribal students.

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The problem of primary education has so far been looked at in terms of infrastructure, number of teachers, teacher training and teacher absenteeism. The strategies have been to provide for basic infrastructure (Operation Black Board, begun 1988), various literacy campaigns (since 1991) to raise awareness, midday meal schemes to attract children, teacher training and appointing temporary teachers (or para teachers) to meet the shortage. India, however, still has a long way to go to attain universal functional literacy.

Operation Black Board did not deliver the desired results because teaching-learning material remained unutilised. The midday meal in some cases turned out to be simply providing dry rations to the children [PROBE 1999]. Literacy campaigns and adult education programmes too did not deliver because neo-literates soon 'relapsed' [Kothari 2003:19, CYSD 1990]. Therefore regular schooling will continue to remain the mainstay to ensure durable literacy till adult education programmes and literacy campaigns are effectively linked to the livelihood of the people.

Orissa, which has implemented all important central programmes, presents a case similar to that of India (Table 1). Of a total 30 districts in Orissa, 11 districts had literacy rates of 70 per cent or more in 2001. On the other hand, 10 districts had literacy rates lower than 55 per cent. Improvement of literacy in these districts has a bearing on the overall literacy of Orissa. Two factors seem to be important to explain the low literacy in these

districts: their historical disadvantages and the inadequate presence of women and SC/ST among teachers as compared to their numbers among pupils.

Historical Disadvantage

The progress of education in Orissa has been simultaneous with the movement for a separate state of Orissa (that was partially fulfilled only in 1936). The centres of educational activity were the coastal districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore. Education in these districts received a boost here also because of missionary activities.

Western Orissa, with areas of low literacy rates, were the erstwhile princely states that joined Orissa only after independence (1948-49). In the pre-independence years, there was no pressure on the feudal lords to improve education in their areas. In 1906, the British commissioner was deemed the head of education in the feudal states [Dwivedi 1968]. The British commissioner could warn but not force the feudal states and education thus remained underdeveloped in western districts of Orissa.

Literacy in Orissa was 15.80 per cent in 1951. Literacy rates among SCs and STs was 3.3 per cent and 1.5 per cent respectively before independence [Das 1970]. Unfortunately, illiteracy was not the only big problem in post-independence Orissa. Poverty and natural calamities like floods, droughts and cyclones have been a constant concern of the government of Orissa. Speeches by the early finance ministers emphasised irrigation and industry; they referred to floods and drought. Only of late have finance ministers referred to

education in any significant way. The policy that followed was to increase schools and teachers in a mechanical fashion and follow the central government programmes. These programmes have certainly led to an increasing expenditure on education since 1974-75 and more rapidly after 1984-85 [Mishra 2002]. But merely increasing expenditure without qualitatively changing things in the education system cannot provide the additional push required, especially for tribal districts.

Availability of teachers per school, considerations of teacher vacancy, proportion of female and SC/ST teachers among the teachers – are some important factors relevant to primary education and therefore literacy. Literacy is also influenced by the programmes designed to cater to students outside the formal system like the availability and setting up of non-formal centres. If one does not consider factors like an effective administration and corruption, then these are some of the structural factors that should exercise an influence on literacy. But how far is this true? Table 2 arranges districts according to the availability of teachers per school, non-formal centres and proportion of women and SC/ST teachers as compared to their proportion among pupils.

The districts in bold in Table 2 represent low literacy districts in Orissa (less than 60 per cent). Table 3 shows their characteristics as compared to other districts more literate (18 in numbers):

Averaging is certainly not the best way of understanding the variations across factors in all districts. Nevertheless Table 3 points out the significance of the presence of women and SC/STs among teachers as compared to their presence among pupils. This is the factor on which there is a clear difference between low and high literate districts. On the average, low literate districts have rather less teacher vacancy and more non-formal centres than high literate districts but do not differ so widely as regards teachers per school. But there is a

Table 1: Orissa and India-Education Indicators Compared

	Orissa	India
Literacy percentage	63.61	65.4
Percentage of rural population served within 1 kilometre for primary stage	93.74	93.76
Percentage of schools having pucca and partly pucca buildings	88.42	83.73
Percentage trained among full time primary teachers	91.99	85.13

Source: NCERT, 1998.

stark contrast in the proportion of SC/STs and women among teachers as compared to their proportion among pupils. When districts are ranked according to the combined score of the degree of less representation of women among teachers as compared to girls among pupils plus the degree of less representation of SC/ST among teachers as compared to SC/ST among pupils, only three districts (Dhenkanal, Anugul, Samabalpur) violate the assumption, i.e., these districts have high literacy but a similar level of combined scores. All the low literate districts, on the other hand, have 45 or more of the combined scores that represents the degree of less representation of women and SCs/STs among teachers as compared to girls and SC/ST among pupils.

What has the contribution of different programmes been? Most of the early entrants to the DPEP programme (Bolangir, Baragarh, Dhenkanal, Gajapati, Keonjhar, Kalahandi, Rayagada and Sambalpur) in

1996-98 were low literacy districts and still remain so except Baragarh, Dhenkanal and Sambalpur. These early entrants, except Rayagada, have improved 15 and 16 percentage points over that of their 1991 literacy rates which is at par with the all-Orissa situation. But according to this rate it will take about another 40-50 years for the low literate districts to achieve full literacy. So evidently a new thinking in policy is required. The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan has as its objective the goal of bridging all gender and social category

gaps at primary stage (enrolment) by 2007 (OPEPA 2001 cf CYSD 2003). But this policy does not include a strategy to also

Table 4: Growth of Female and SC/ST Primary Teachers in Orissa

Year	Per Cent Female Teachers	Per Cent SC/ST Teachers
1978-79	7.88	12.51
1980-81	8.21	12.24
1984-85	9.43	13.67
1986-87	13.78	14.27
1988-89	21.00	14.68
1995-96	24.74	15.60

Source: Government of Orissa, 1989.

Table 3: Education Indicators – High and Low Literate Districts Compared

Average	High Literate Districts (17)	Low Literate Districts (11)
Teachers per school	2.75	2.35
Average teacher vacancy in 1998	396.76	342.63
Average teacher increase between 1995-96 and 1998-99 (per cent)	6.68	12.40 (Kandhmal included)
Non-formal centres 1994-45	512.11	556.72
Degree of less representation of female and SC/ST among teachers as compared to girls and SC/ST among pupils 1995-96	30.58	59.14

Note: Deogarh has been excluded because its literacy is 60.78 per cent, which is neither high nor low; Kandhmal was excluded because of lack of data regarding SC/ST teachers and teacher vacancy.

Table 2: Education in Orissa – Districtwise

Districts	Literacy Rate 2001	Change Over 1991	Teachers Per School (1995-96)	Vacancy on December 31, 1998	Growth of Primary Teachers (1995-96 to 1998-99) (Per Cent)	Non-Formal Centres 1994-95	Degree of Less Representation of Female among Teachers as Compared to Girls among Pupils (Percentage of Girl Pupils Percentage of Female Teachers) (1995-96)	Degree of Less Representation of SC/ST among Teachers as Compared to SC/ST among Pupils (Percentage of SC/ST Pupils Percentage of SC/ST Teachers) (1995-96)	The Combined Score
Jagatsinghpur	79.61	13.83	2.43	510	24.04	400	6.26	1.5	7.76
Sundergarh	65.22	12.25	2.59	403	-13.19	842	8.89	3.36	12.25
Cuttack	76.13	10.69	2.78	744	-24.07	773	0.8	22.36	23.16
Balasore	70.94	13.3	2.8	320	16.21	596	13.37	11.36	24.73
Kendrapada	77.33	13.72	3.27	288	-10.34	399	19.65	5.32	24.97
Sonpur	64.07	21.45	2.24	123	21.23	302	9.86	15.3	25.16
Jajpur	72.19	14.19	2.38	276	33.25	581	15.26	11.62	26.88
Nayagarh	71.02	13.82	3.49	280	-18.81	396	18.29	9.13	27.42
Ganjam	62.94	16.22	3.01	1288	-0.75	1167	14.72	12.77	27.49
Khurda	80.19	12.47	3.3	580	0.05	490	11.85	16.04	27.89
Puri	78.4	15.1	2.73	324	17.35	497	12.44	18.02	30.46
Bhadrak	74.64	14.1	2.7	289	7.22	390	20.65	15.55	36.2
Bargarh	64.13	16.48	2.51	153	18.73	579	26.64	12.36	39
Jharsuguda	71.47	18.83	2.59	56	5.65	256	15.39	25.71	41.1
Dhenkanal	70.11	15.2	2.69	693	24.33	234	20.2	24.83	45.03
Angul	69.4	17.87	2.47	363	29.89	383	28.42	17.04	45.46
Kalahandi	46.2	15.12	2.24	248	5.75	712	27.96	17.62	45.58
Gajapati	41.73	12.36	1.94	120	32.76	385	22.26	30.55	52.81
Nuapada	42.29	14.77	2.79	277	5.88	216	27.34	25.99	53.33
Mayurbhanj	52.43	14.55	2.29	1006	24.03	1321	19.66	33.97	53.63
Sambalpur	67.01	15.45	2.89	55	-17.26	421	9.66	45.38	55.04
Boudh	58.43	17.45	2.56	321	19.19	105	30.2	24.99	55.19
Nawarangapur	34.26	15.64	2.01	85	-12.68	522	9.71	46.01	55.72
Deogarh	60.78	16.33	2.22	26	-1.30	182	13.28	44.1	57.38
Keonjhar	59.75	15.02	2.55	370	21.71	723	30.64	27.06	57.7
Bolangir	54.93	16.3	2.68	367	-7.96	670	27.89	30.5	58.39
Rayagada	35.61	9.6	2.42	577	-4.00	386	16.13	50.53	66.66
Koraput	36.2	11.56	2.55	230	3.62	775	8.5	60.19	68.69
Malkangiri	31.26	11.22	1.92	168	25.77	309	24.85	58	82.85
Kandhmal	52.95	15.72	1.99		34.77		24.55		

Note: In the above table – degree of less representation of women among teachers as compared to girls among pupils has been arrived at in this fashion; assume the percentage of girls among students as 50 and the percentage of women among teachers is 20, then the difference is 30. The calculation on the SC/ST category was done similarly. It is an attempt to represent to what extent female and SC/ST representation is lower among teachers as compared to their representation among pupils. In the next column these were added to give a combined score. All the districts are arranged according to the ascending order of combined score obtained.

Source: Districts at a Glance, 2001, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Orissa. Education in Orissa 1995-96, Statistics Cell, Directorate of Mass Education.

enrol teachers from the disadvantaged groups. The SSA only has a broad policy of having 50 per cent teachers as women. But, so far, there is silence about teachers from the disadvantaged groups. The numbers of SC/ST teachers in Orissa has been stagnant though there has been a perceptible growth in numbers of female primary teachers since 1986-87 (Table 4).

Disadvantaged Groups

Orissa also includes 62 tribes who speak 25 dialects. One-third of Orissa has been declared a scheduled area where 56.85 per cent STs live [Das 1970]. These are mostly the state's western districts. SC/ST teachers are more likely to bring with them the cultural empathy necessary to understand tribal pupils to entice them to school and make them stay. The real problem seems to be the lack of cultural empathy which is often misunderstood simply as difference in language [Mishra 1968]. A teacher of a school run by the welfare department observed the following problems with regard to schools run by welfare department exclusively for SC/STs after studying the reports submitted by the headmasters [Mishra 1970]:

(i) Training does not seem to be a problem. 90 per cent of the headmasters never felt the lack of trained teachers; (ii) only 20 per cent of head teachers know the local tribal language; (iii) about 90 per cent teachers are from the coastal area or the plains; (iv) there is a Rs 200 prize offered for learning the tribal language; (v) there is no extra pay though the workload in these schools is greater than in others; (vi) it is very difficult to manage things like food, and other essentials like kerosene, soap, etc, with the Rs 28 a month made available for a student and (vii) irregularity of pay.

The author also mentions: "Surprisingly, there are some teachers, teaching for many years in these schools, specially in tribal dominated areas, who have never felt (the need to learn) the tribal language" (ibid:8). This shows a distinct lack of cultural empathy.

The lack of concern to inculcate cultural empathy among teachers emerges from a technical view about teaching. But teaching is something more than that. Teachers as agents of change are dependent to a significant extent on where they come from. Ensuring some teachers from minority groups has become a concern in the US [Villegas 2003]. Villegas opines in the context of teacher professional development that "teacher education cannot be a

substitute for high quality beginning teachers or other basic conditions for teaching in schools" (ibid:143). Drawing from this it can be said that simply increasing number of teachers cannot substitute for the representation of disadvantaged groups.

In India, the presence of female teachers to ensure greater enrolment and retention of girl children has been emphasised [World Bank 1997, PROBE 1999]. But there has not been much advocacy of the need to increase representation of SC/STs as a strategy to ensure more enrolment and retention of SC/ST children. PROBE (1999) makes a case for female teachers but does not make a case for SC/ST teachers with equal force. Another study suggests "increasing the share of female teachers and teachers who speak local language which is especially important for girls and students from scheduled tribes" [World Bank 1997:10]. Jha and Jhingran go a little further. "Tribal teachers in general are more sensitive towards tribal children, though those from the same community extend themselves more" (2002:120). We are still at a stage short of advocating more proportion of teachers from disadvantaged communities. ■■

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