

Language and Culture: About a Saora Class One Primer

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Introduction

This article reflects on the process¹ of producing a class one primer for the Saora children, and its subsequent field trial. The socio-cultural context of the child is seen as the foundation of learning. In the primer, Saora folklore was used as the content, and Saora language as the medium of learning, thus ensuring an inbuilt context drawn from the children's environment. Our work showed that it was possible for a child to learn two or more languages at the same time if her own language is actively used in the learning process; it also seemed possible to engage children in analytical activities which enhance their logical and cognitive abilities.

Schools in the Saora context: Issues and challenges

Saora is a scheduled tribe from the Gajapati district of Odisha, India. The tribal population constitutes 50 per cent of the total population of Gajapati. They speak Saora, a language belonging to the southern Mundari language group. Out of 895 villages with schools, in 440 villages Saora speaking children constitute over 90 per cent of the population. While 332 schools have 90-99 per cent Saora speakers, the rest of the 118 villages are completely (100 per cent) inhabited by the Saoras. Children in these villages have little exposure to Oriya, the school language. Therefore, teaching and learning become a major challenge in these villages since there is a wide gap between the language of the teachers, the children and that of the textbooks.

For this project, about 30 schools were taken up on pilot basis where there were only Saora children. Teachers from the Saora community were identified and trained to write bilingual primers. Community tales and songs were collected from the Saora villages. The Saora teachers, along with resource persons², conducted workshops on preparation of bilingual primers in Saora and Oriya.

The primer for class one was culturally identifiable by the children and teachers. The book was entitled *Erai Erai* (Come Come), since it opened with a Saora poem that meant 'Come come children, let's play'. This book took shape in a workshop (see endnote '1') that focused on the preparation of materials which recognized the linguistic potential of children and valued their cultural practices as a resource. The primer comprised 34 lessons that were based on cultural themes provided by Saora resource persons. These included home, garden, village, mountain, fruits, folktales about birds and animals, cultivation, hunting, market, and many more themes that represented the experiential knowledge of the Saora children and community.

The experience was a departure from the conservative pedagogical texts and practices. It was a space where the content and process, context and language were from the Saora community. A new discourse of indigenous knowledge had been created for the Saora children. The thirty-four lessons of *Erai Erai*,

composed and illustrated in collaboration with the Saora teachers, perhaps for the first time privileged the linguistic and cultural practices of the children in the formal domain of school. This acknowledged the existence of the historically denied language and content of Saora knowledge system by the dominant school and social system. For the Saora teachers and children, it was indeed a new dawn.

The tale is as follows

Saora ³	English	Oriya
<i>Aboi aaniblin baagu anti daakunlinji</i>	In a tree, two birds were living.	Gotie gachhare duiti chadhei rahuthile.
<i>Badina aaninji rudilinji</i>	One day they had a quarrel.	Dine semane kali kale.
<i>Arudilinji aasele jaitaa galuliji</i>	As they quarrelled, they fell down.	Kali kari semane tale padigale.
<i>Aboi dukriboi daakuli</i>	There was an old woman.	Jane budhi thila.
<i>Anin bindiaan bindiaanlin kumaabaan aaboi mungbaa daakuitin.</i>	After she had finished cooking, she stored the ash in one place.	Se randhi sari,paunsaku gote jagare rakhila.
<i>Aasaajan baraan aaboi mungbaa daakuitin</i>	She stored the charcoal in another place.	Angara ku au gotie jagare rakhila.
<i>Aayinte aawanti kumablingan lagtule, ani paludun deyle.</i>	One of the birds fell into the ash and became a heron.	Gotie chadhei paunsa upare padila o бага hela.
<i>Buinte aashaajan asailingan laagtulli aani yegaadun deyle.</i>	The other bird fell into the charcoal and became a crow.	Anya chadhei ti angara upare padila au kau hela.

The field testing of *Erai Erai* took place over seven days across twenty-four pilot schools in the Nuagada block. The textbook writers demonstrated all thirty-four lessons in these schools and gathered the responses of the children.

I went to the village of Titising to observe the field testing. Philip Mandala, the Saora teacher narrated the tale to the children, and the children grasped the tale in one go. Next, he showed the children pictures depicting the story and asked them some questions based on the story. The children exhibited very diverse reactions to the pictures. The pictures of the story were speaking much more than the written text.

Using local myths

Out of the thirty-four lessons, an aetiological myth, *kadan da kaka* (the Heron and the Crow) was used in one of the lessons of the primer. This Saora tale tries to explain how the heron and the crow were born. I have attempted to reproduce the classroom transaction of this tale, as observed by me during the field testing of the class one primer.

Children's construction of texts out of text

The Saora children reacted enthusiastically to the text, and there was a distinct sense of ownership. They provided refreshing perceptions of the tale and the pictures. They even formed new tales out of the picture, which, until now, had been inconceivable for a teacher. A child looked at the picture of the text book and said, "That tree in which the birds hang about has a hollow. A snake lives there. When the birds are away, the snake will go to the nest and eat the eggs." (Of course this was text was not from the textbook.)

I noted that the children knew about snakes eating eggs from the nests of birds, and did not

hesitate to talk about it if an appropriate context was provided. However, what was particularly striking was that the high levels of silence that one usually associated with formal schooling in the early classes was completely absent.

Another child looked at the picture and remarked, “The hut is under the tree, and because the hearth is outside the hut, the hut will catch fire.”

The teacher asked, “Why will that happen?”

The child replied, “The old woman will cook food and go for her bath to a brook nearby. While she is away, the hut will catch fire. The woman will have no house when she comes back from her bath.”

These two creative events narrated by the Saora children were clearly experiential, and had been derived from their cultural context. The snake eating the eggs of the birds, or huts getting burnt in fires, are events which originated in the imagination of the Saora children looking at the situation in the picture. Their priority, after looking at the picture, was not the text that the teacher had narrated, but a recollection from their memory. This in turn helped the teacher construct new knowledge from their past events. The teacher (Philip Mandal), puzzled by the responses of the children, was not ready to accept the new narratives of the children. However, on being prompted that children learn from the known to the unknown, and the fact that they were right when they spoke about the bird, the tree and the fire, he got an insight into the fact that children had the ability to create new texts from a given text. Philip’s eyes were bright with a sense of wonder and he confessed, “I thought that children got distracted from the main text.”

Therefore, allowed to construct from their knowledge, children could create a text within a text. Their language of thought helped them discover their own experience, based on which they constructed new knowledge of their own.

In this case, they connected their previous experience with the pictures given in the book.

Needless to say, the whole class participated animatedly in the discussion between the teacher and children conducted in Saora as the children did not feel oppressed by a language they did not know. The primacy of using languages that children were familiar with was firmly established.

Teachers’ language pedagogy

In the workshop, there were several sessions in which participants focused on the analysis of the patterns that had evolved from related words and sentences. The bilingual words and the grammatical patterns that were deconstructed from the text were easily accessible to the school teachers and children; even the non-Saora teachers were able to handle them.

Some words from the tale: From Saora to English

aboi - one, *bagu* - two, *anin* - she/he, *anib* - tree, *badina* - one day, *aninji* (plural), *dukri* - old woman, *bandin* - oven, *kuma* - ash, *assaj* - charcoal, *dakuitin* - stored.

Once the grammatical markers were brought to the notice of the children, they were able to grasp them easily. Some grammatical patterns learnt from the text:

1. ‘ji’ is used as plural after the verb in past tense.

Rudilin + ji = Kali + kale (quarrelled)

Dakulin + ji = rahu + thile (living) (in the case of singular it is *dakulin*, for plural it is *dakulinji*)

Galul + li + ji = padi + gale (fell down, plural) *galuli* (singular)

Once they had learnt the principle of using ‘ji’ in Saora for past tense, the Saora children learned the Oriya verbs very easily by following the Saora verbs for past tense. They inferred that the equivalent of ‘ji’ in Saora is ‘le’ in Oriya.

The verbs were hence transferred spontaneously from Saora to Oriya in the mind of the child. They understood that 'ji' was used in the plural form and it corresponds to objects.

2. Similarly, another principle of grammar was explored by the children. They understood that the Saora suffix 'aan' became 'ku' in Oriya, and that 'lingan' meant 're' in Oriya, and that it corresponds to location in space.

Kumab + aan = paunsha + ku (to ash)

Assaj + aan = angara + ku (to charcoal)

Kumaab + lingan = pausnha + re (on the ash)

Assaj + lingan = (angara + re) on the charcoal

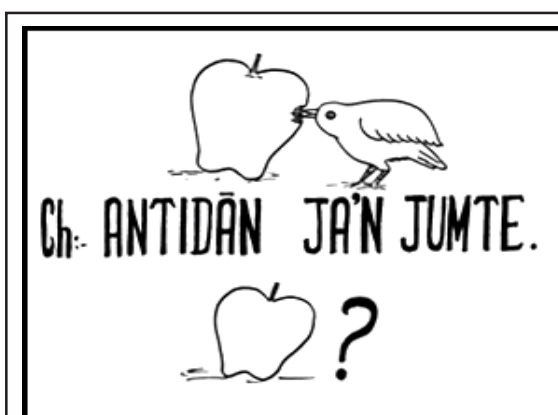
The grammatical principles were compared with the Oriya sentences in the given Saora tale. The Saora children had the content and the language to learn a new language through a few words, i.e., association of words and objects in both languages. Thus, the text, context and texture were analysed to unfold new processes of learning.

Once this lesson was taught:

- Children could read Saora words that were known to them;

- They could understand the different forms of related words from their language;
- They could understand the Oriya words in the picture, and also learnt their spoken and written forms;
- They were able to read, comprehend, and write a few words in both languages;
- They were able to explore the principles of grammar in both languages and arrive at the conclusion that a language is governed by rules. They also recognized that Saora was in no way inferior to Oriya;
- The teachers participated actively in the preparation of the material.

Enam Gomanga, an experienced Saora teacher drew a picture of a bird eating an apple. This picture was shown to a child. The child recognized the bird, but the fruit was not familiar to her. The child uttered the word *Antidan* (bird), and then stopped. I asked Enam to change the picture and draw a mango instead of an apple. Now the new picture was shown to the child. Under the picture, there was a sentence. We wanted to see how a child was able to read out a text just by looking at a picture. The idea was to help the child to develop confidence in picture-reading, which could subsequently become guessed picture-sentence reading in any other language.



Situation I: Non-contextual

Antidan jaan jumte.

The bird is eating the fruit.



Situation 2: Contextual

Antidan *uda* jaan jumte.

The bird is eating mango fruit.

In situation I, the text was presented to the child and she was expected to read the sentence.

In situation II, the child framed a new sentence using the word *uda* (mango), which although not given in the text, was read confidently by the child. This was not word reading, but picture reading with understanding.

These pictures were not created by teachers, but by artists who were not familiar with the children's visual culture. In Saora villages, people are familiar with mangoes but not with apples.

Observations

When the Saora villagers and parents visited the school, to their surprise they heard the teachers narrating stories in their spoken language. They could not believe that their language could be taught in school. For the part of the children, since they could easily grasp what was being taught, they did not remain absent from school. The classroom became culturally responsive, and the teachers were happy to see that each and every child was participating in the class.

The Saora children were talking to the Saora teachers in the classroom; they were asking questions, giving answers, taking part in discussions and thinking about the text from a metacognitive point of view. They were exploring their own experiences individually as well as in small groups, focusing on the events in the story. It was possible for them to articulate their real life experiences as well as their imagined tales and fantasies.

When a tale is written down and made into a text for the children, it is accepted as a part of recognized curricular text. This reminds us about the power equation between oral and written texts in our society. The whole process provides an agency to the teacher which is completely absent from the superposed normative textbooks. For the children, the teachers and the parents, there was clearly an assertion of self-identity in this whole process.

Conclusion

Respecting diversity means accepting the healthy democracy in a society where co-existence of man, animal and environment is maintained. The globe is sustained through cultural diversities. Perhaps the most constructive way of engaging children in language and knowledge construction is to give place to their linguistic and cultural practices in the class.

¹ *I have been interested in the cultural and linguistic practices of various tribal communities of Odisha, India. A series of workshops were held during the late 1990s by several educationists, sociolinguists and psychologists including Prof Rama Kant Agnihotri and Dr Minati Panda. I was deeply influenced by the work and perspectives of Prof Agnihotri and Dr Panda, which encouraged me to focus on the potential of the child and his/her cultural and linguistic repertoire. It also became clear to me that the most meaningful materials for children must be in their own language, and folklore could best be produced in collaboration with the teachers who were going to teach those books. It was against this background that a workshop was held in Gumma, near Parlakhemundi in Odisha.*

² *Prof Rama Kant Agnihotri tried to analyse Saora grammar in Guma Block. Prof Agnihotri participated in 5 workshops in Odisha during 1998-1999.*

³ *The story teller was Sri Ghasi Sabar, a teacher and a cultural resource person from Rayagada district, engaged in writing the Saora primer.*

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