



A School with a Difference: “Binapani School” in the District of Malkangiri – A case Study

Dr. Manmatha Kundu

Visiting Professor, National Institute of Science Education and Research, Jatni, Odisha
Bhubaneswar- 752050

Abstract

This essay outlines the history, challenges, and successes of a unique, community-driven school in Malkangiri, Odisha, an economically disadvantaged, tribal-dominated, and Naxal-affected district. Founded in 2007 by a group of like-minded individuals, the school was converted from an English-medium to an Odia-medium institution to emphasize learning in the students' state language. Despite the challenges of teaching tribal students who speak different mother tongues, the school provides instruction in both Odia and English from a pre-primary level, differing from government schools where English instruction begins later.

Operating on limited funds from CSR contributions, individual donations, and modest fees, the school maintains its infrastructure and adopts innovative teaching methods to overcome systemic shortcomings in government education. These include “Map Classes,” “Dictionary Classes,” and “Newspaper Classes,” which foster skills in self-learning, geographic awareness, and general knowledge. The school also emphasizes exposure to diverse reading materials and engages students in practical work through farming, which instills values of physical labor and self-sufficiency. The institution's success is evident in the students' academic achievements and the notable skill level of its alumni, creating a potential model for improving rural education in Odisha. However, resource constraints limit the school's ability to scale this model across the state.

Key Words: *Learning, Map Classes, Dictionary Classes and Newspaper Classes*

A Brief History

The school is about 17 years old, established in 2007. Someone started this school as an English Medium School. As the man who started the school failed to manage. Some like-minded friends took it over and converted it into an Odia Medium School forming a society. The school is recognised by the Govt. of Odisha and it follows Govt. Schools syllabus with minor differences. Unlike Odia medium Govt. schools which start from class one, we have one year pre-primary year. In Govt. schools teaching of English starts from Class III, but we start both Odia and English from pre-primary class strongly believing in the fact, that both the languages can be developed together provided taught highlighting the similarity among language, (All languages are about 80% similar with peripheral differences of 20% especially between Odia and English). We the founding members, are against English medium schools as we strongly believe that mother tongue is the best medium of learning. But unfortunately we have not been able to provide our learners learning through their mother tongues as almost all of our learners are tribal learners belonging to different tribes with different mother tongues. But we help them develop mother tongue-like fluency in Odia which is the language of the state and the medium of instruction. We started with up to Class VI and later added Class 7 and 8 and have no intention to add more classes as most of our students qualify in entrance examinations for free boarding schools run by Govt. and private schools meant for poor and tribal students where they study up to Class 12. The school started as a day scholar school, but currently more than 50% students stay in hostel. The current strength of the school is about 300.

The Locality and the Learners

Odisha is an economically and educationally backward state with a large tribal population and Malkangiri is the most backward district of the state. The school is located in the most backward block of Malkangiri district, Korkonda. The district and the block are in Naxal affected area. The school is located at Tallkota, a tribal area close to MV 37 a village for the Bangladeshi refugees. A few kilometers away are the cut-off area where about 20,000 tribal live in 151 isolated villages/hemlets on mountain tops separate from the district by water bedim created by a dam constructed about 70 years back. The school serves the poor and the tribal students of this Naxal-affected area. This ideal location of the school, we the founders did not choose, but it happened to the best of our intention to educate the most deprived children of the most deprived district of Odisha.

The Infrastructure and Funding

Currently the school has two buildings constructed with funding from the ESSR Company from its CSR money and the first floor of one of the building was constructed with MP LAD money. Initially the school had two acres of land and later three acres were added funded by

Dr. ManmathKundu, one of the founding members of the school, who looks after the academics of the school. The running expenses are met by funding from CSR fund of the ESR Company, individual contribution from the founding members and their friends and very moderate fees from some students who can afford. The school does not have separate hostel for students. The main buildings are used for both purposes – classrooms and hostel.

The Academics

The school follows the syllabus of the Govt. Odia Medium Schools with necessary modifications plus some simple no or low-cost innovations based on commonsense which compensate the pitfalls of Govt. schools. Currently the Govt. Odia Medium School education is in a pitiable state with rampant low-proficiency among learners. In every class more than 90% of the students are much below their class level in skill and proficiency. Even students who pass class 10 exam. can hardly read an Odianews paper and do a simple sum. The problems lie mainly in three major areas – the material, methods of teaching and evaluation. In our school we try our best to set right these problems which is why more than 90% of our students are, unlike the students of Govt. schools, much above their class level in skills and proficiency. First, we modify the materials before teaching and strictly follow a learner-centered interactive approach of classroom teaching. The learners are made to interact with the writers through the text. They are encouraged to learn on their own unlike in Govt. schools where the teacher mostly explain the texts to the students, the students playing a passive role. For this we continuously train our teachers and train our learners as well. We encourage peer learning and peer teaching in our schools. Learners not only learn from each other, the senior students also teach their juniors. The lessons of every text books are examined, adapted, supplemented and modified with the help of students, teachers and specialists in different subject. Similarly we involve learners in evaluation. One a lesson is over, the students in groups, frame questions/tasks from the lesson which are then discussed the defective ones getting eliminated. The final questions are put in Question Bank from where the questions are set in examination. Students are continuously given feedback on their performances and special care is taken of the students who lay behind. These are totally absent in Govt. schools.

This on-going teaching/learning process is further supplemented and complemented by some commonsense-based, no-cost and low-cost simple easy-to-use innovations. Some of them are briefly stated below –

(1) Map class

Map classes, once in two weeks, help students map reads as it is an important aspect of learning especially improving the general knowledge and general understanding of students. For this atlases (both in Odia and English, Oida for lower classes and English for higher classes) are

used as textbooks, each learner having an atlas. In contrast, in Odia medium Govt. schools use of map is only confined to geography or history classes that too often teachers forgetting to take the maps to the class though maps are systematically displayed/stored on map stand in the school office/store rooms. Maps, in our school, are also displayed pasted in classrooms and verandas within the reach of the students.

(2) Dictionary Class

Similarly we have dictionary class, once in two weeks, for learners of all classes to help them develop reference skills promoting self-learning. As our classes are learner-centered classes copies of dictionaries are kept in all classes. Our teachers are restrained from telling the meaning of difficult words from the text to the students. Instead they encourage the students to guess the meanings of the difficult words from the context and then see the dictionary on their own. Like maps, we use dictionaries of Odia and English for the purpose. Our students, therefore, learn to use dictionaries from very early classes.

(3) Newspaper Class

Like Map and dictionary classes we have newspaper class every week once for each class. Newspapers are used as the most important reading materials in our schools. It is not just confined to the newspaper class but reading newspaper is a regular day-to-day habit of our students. We buy multiple copies of about 10 newspapers in Odia and English. Every month we conduct workshops for a student who cut important, interesting and relevant news, often with photographs from old newspapers and then posts them on cardboard to be used as reading materials in reading classes. The most important ones are laminated for long used as reading cards are kept in boxes. Use of newspapers has helped our students improve their reading skills and broadened their general knowledge and both these skills, in contrast, are abysmally lacking in the students of Govt. schools who tend to read only their prescribed textbooks. We also devise interesting activities from newspapers such as matching the news with the title, improving and providing news titles, writing news on local events etc. Because of the day-to-day use of newspapers as part and parcel of our school teaching, most of our students have become newspaper addicts. Missing newspaper reading for most of them, most particularly for the boarders, is like missing their breakfasts.

(4) Exposure Class

The source of all learning is exposure and exposure determines learning. If exposure is less, learning is less. The opposite is also true. Learning in Odia medium school is less because the learners in these schools are only exposed to the prescribed textbooks. Our education is exam-oriented and questions in exam. come only from the textbooks. The students are, therefore, forbidden both by the teachers and parents, to read anything other than the prescribed textbooks.

To overcome this limitation we, in our school have introduced Exposure class. Every class in every week has an exposure class of two-hour duration. For the exposure class students are taken to a hall, close to the library, where about 500 to 1000 reading materials are arranged in rows which suit the level of the students. The two-hour time is divided as follows. The first half-hour is devoted to browsing. Each student is advised to browse at least thirty reading materials – see the covers, the context page and flip through the pages. Once the browsing time is over, each of the students picks up one reading material which s/he finds interesting during the browsing time and reads a part of it for half an hour. While during browsing time students move around the class, during reading time they sit in one place and read mindfully the material chosen in the last half-an-hour. Once this time is over, students, one after another, tell the whole class what they have read. The rest of the students listen to him/her and ask question if they like. This part of the question an answer lasts for one hour.

Once an exposure class is over, students who want to read the material of which they have read only a small portion, are allowed to borrow the material to read at home.

From Exposure class we got the idea and realized the need for an Open Library. Currently a room is devoted for the purpose with about 5-10 thousand books placed in open racks. Students can borrow the books and return them on their own keeping recording on the register placed in the room. Initially we lost many books and we were in indecisive – to keep it open or close it. But we continued to keep it open and the loss became minimum and gradually it has approached nil at present.

(5) Authentic Material Class

A major problem in our education is the fact that we fail to link classroom education with learners experience outside the classroom. This has twin disadvantages. It makes learning theoretical and incomplete, learners failing to get advantages out of education. This is more true of English language education in our country. We have, unlike other countries like Germany, France, Russia, China etc. plenty of English in our environment outside the school and the scope to use English. But unfortunately we fail to link our classroom English with the English outside the class. This not only comes on the way of learning English, but also makes classroom English unusable outside. Our Authentic Material class is to link learning of English in classroom with the English in the environment. Authentic materials in English include all kinds of wrappers in English and also tourist brochures and news papers of English. Students start with reading what is written on the wrappers such as toothpaste and soap covers. Next they write about the toothpaste or soap and finally learn to write for similar covers for other items in English. In higher classes the read tourist brochures, advertisements and also write similar brochures and advertisements in English. Ideally such activities should form a part of the workbook activities the English textbooks.

Besides these innovation classes the other two major differences with the Govt. school are class time and use of both Odia and English textbooks of science and social science.

(6) Class Time

In Odisha, may be in other states as well, the length of a class in school and is of 45 minutes since very long, because the teaching was an lecture mode. But this continues even today though we claim that we have switched over to learner-centred interactive mode of teaching which shows we are still in lecture mode paying only a lip service to learner-centred and activity oriented teaching. In order to allow learners to work on their own following an activity-oriented approach, the class time needs to be at least one and half-hour. As our classes in our school are about 80% learner-centred our class duration is one and half hour. In fact we do not bell at the end of a class. Whenever students need a break they go out and come back on their own after 5 or 10 minutes. After every one and half hour classed change without a bell. We have only three bells – one at the beginning, one at the end of the school and one for midday meal. Only recently our Govt. has decided to increase the class time to one and half hour that too. For classes in three subject – Science, English and Math. ‘This will not work as teachers, still accustomed to following a teacher-centred approach of explaining the texts in’ lecture mode, do not know how to engage a class for one and half hour.

(7) Use of Odia and English Textbooks

We strongly believe that learners can develop competence in both Odia and English if taught following the right approach. And there is also a need for developing competency in English at the school level in Odisha, and in India, as in higher and technical education the medium of instruction is mostly English. One way of improving the English language skills of our students is the use of textbooks of Science and Social Science in both the languages. First to develop basic concepts, we use the Odia textbooks and later they are encouraged to read English textbooks on their own with little help from the teachers. We use the NCERT textbooks for the purpose. It becomes comparatively easy as most of our Science and Social Science textbooks of Odia are literal copies of the English textbooks of NCERT. And we have been successful in improving the English language skills of our students in this way which has helped our students getting selected in the Entrance Examinations for a variety of schools like OdishaAdarshaVidyalay, NavodayaVidyalaya, Ramakridhna Mission Schools, EkalavyaVidyalays etc. which provide free education from Class VI to Class XIII following CBSE syllabus. And our students, because of their strong foundation in English, not only fare well in these examinations, but also getting admitted to these schools, do well in their studies.

Linking Education with Work is another important feature of our school, similar to Gandhi’s concept of Basic Education, the education for the poor, where our children from poor families, both learn and earn in the sense that they consume what they produce, mostly vegetables

and fruits. We have our vegetable and fruit gardens for the purpose. They also look after hens and cows, and arrow fish in our school ponds. Thus, along with education, they have hand-in-experiences in agriculture, pisciculture, poultry and diary. We may not call this vocational education, but a kind of initiation to vocational education, the most important outcome being developing a positive attitude to physical labour. And the education and work in our school are properly blended as while working they learn the basics of geology, geography, botany, chemistry and physics, mixing education with experience. Their learning of math and geometry in classrooms, for example, is tried out in planting saplings in equidistance and measuring the losses and gains from agriculture, poultry, diary and pisciculture. They learn the harmful effects of chemical manures and pesticides. In our organic farming their own health and that of the plants they grow are in a symbiotic relation.

Our Success

The successes of the school are many. It has been successful in laying a strong academic foundation of its students. More than 90% of the students, skill-wise, above their class level in contrast to the Govt. schools where 90% and above students are much below their class level. While in our school there is hardly a student who is low-proficient which is why remedial teaching (first three months of the academic year) has become a permanent feature of Govt. schools. As per our assumption our students are equally good in Odia and English. Their interactive reading skills, the skill to interact with the writer through text, in both the languages are so good that they can read and easily comprehend the textbooks for higher classes on their own. This is the secret of their success in the Entrance Examinations for different schools. As many of our students of class V and VI get through there examinations and join these school we have very less number of students in class VII and VIII. To cite the latest example, the Ramakrishna Mission School selected 18 students from the Malkangiri district for its school through entrance examination. Out of these 18, the students of our school are 9 while the rest 9 are from the 1350 Govt. Primary Schools of the district, which is not a small achievement. Even with regard to a simple and elementary skill like handwriting all our students have good handwriting which we have achieved through meticulous care, handwriting tasks, followed by correction feedback. We too have prepared special handwriting books for our school. Above fifty percent of our students, as stated before, get selected in the entrance examination for other good schools, we have less students in Class VI, VII and VIII. These students who join other schools in Class IX and X, do very well in their studies which is, again, due to the good foundation laid by our school. This we know from our regular tracking of our school learners. Those who fail to study further, they take to small trades, cultivation or live a simple but happy life growing vegetables, keep cows, goats and hens on their land occasionally also working as labourour on the lands. This is mainly because of their experience in our school. Even some of our teachers have taken to part time agriculture in their own small lands. Some of them resigned from our school because of the meager salary we give and now are doing full-time cultivation. The 'work' part of our school

education has helped them do so. But, unfortunately just the reverse is the case in Govt. Schools. Only less than 1% students get selected in entrance examination to better schools of, very few going for higher education. The rest, about 95%, do virtually nothing becoming burden on their poor parents, some leaving for other states on Prabashi Shramiks doing menial work these ashamed of doing this at their own home or village. One of the greatest success of our school is, therefore, positively reversing the negative trends of Govt. Odia Medium Schools whose about 80% of our students from poor families study. We are, thus, successful in creating an alternative model for Govt. School, if followed, there will be sea-change in the field of education for the poor. The rich can look after themselves through their English medium education in rich schools. To some extent we are able to influence the Govt. school of the state through Dr. Kundu's effort when he was the Academic Advisor to the Dept. of School and Mass Education of the State. Many of the innovations we did in our school with regard to material and methods found place in the English textbooks for the primary schools and the training package for the teachers to handle the textbooks. We are also marginally successful in influencing our neighbouring primary schools. We are very successful in our newspaper movement in our locality. People of our locality, because of our efforts, have developed the habit of newspaper reading. Another important aspect of our success is teacher development. Because our school is in a remote backward hills naxal-affected part of our state and because of the low salary we give, we get low quality less qualified local teachers. But we help them develop very fast in teaching and language skills. And they leave for better jobs and higher education. No doubt we face problems as they leave after getting trained, but we don't mind and rather feel satisfied helping some local teachers grow academically. As we keep track of our learners who leave our school, so do we for our teachers. Many of them have joined better schools with better salary and have become excellent teachers. Some, after higher education, teach in colleges. Thus, our school has been really successful in creating an academic ambience. It is, in fact, an island of excellence.

Our Lapses and Limitations

The causes of our success are also the causes of our limitations and lapses. Concentrating all our attention and efforts on the school, we have been successful in making it an island of excellence. But it remains an island without extending it to other parts of the district and state. Money and special efforts matter for expansion which we badly lack. We are bad in advertising and arranging resources. We thought our Govt. would accept our model for its Odia Medium Schools. We tried, to some extent, to impress upon them, but this was not enough. In one National Seminar at NCERT, New Delhi, Dr. Kundu presented a paper on the successes of our school which very much impressed the then Secretary of HRD, Mr. SubashKhuntia. He asked the NCERT Director to send a team of experts to our school. But when Mr. Khuntia left the Department the proposal was dropped and we failed to follow it up. We have also organized some workshops, seminars and teacher orientation programmes on our school, on other method and approach. But these are not enough to impress the Govt. to follow our model. Again due to

lack of funds we have not been able to open similar schools in other parts of the district and state. Private English Medium Schools have mushroomed and prospered, running schools as business, with for the money they earn through school fees. But this is against our principle. We, therefore, refuse to take children of rich parents on our school is meant for the poor and downtrodden. And whatever financial help we have received from outside so far, the donors have given on their own without asking for donation. We are really pained to give less salary to our teachers as we cannot afford to pay what they deserve. Our greatest problem has been so far satisfying the Govt. norms for running a private school, the most important being getting Govt. recognition. Govt. norms are very stiff. There should be standard infrastructure, both for school and hostel which we lack, especially for hostel as, because of lack of funds our classrooms are also used as hostels. Other private schools manage sometimes by adopting wrong methods. At times, we had to make compromises as without 'recognition' our students will not be allowed to sit for the entrance examinations to other good schools. We are not able to avail the kind of cooperation that is expected from government officials for spread of tribal education. Our M.P. LAD money for a building for example, was delayed for about three years and finally with much effort we could not get the entire fund earmarked for the school. Sometimes these problems pain us to a very great extent and we feel like converting it into a learning centre where we would not need Government recognition. This learning centre may exclusively be meant for school dropouts like the open schools. But this is too futuristic as our country and people are not yet ready for such learning centres being too much obsessed with the concept of learning only through formal schools.

