

The song that changed my life

Stories on Multi-lingual Education from Chhattisgarh

Bibi mendki ri, tu to pani ki rani (2)
Agla nache bagla nache, nache botal khana
Mem sahab ki topi nache, pil-fili sahab ka gaana...
Bibi mendki ri, tu to pani ki rani (2)

--Dada Jokal's grandmother Qurban Bi's lullaby (circa 1950's)¹

Looking for a story to tell

I first heard of Dada Jokal (DJ) soon after I joined UNICEF in Chhattisgarh State in 2011. This was in the context of the work undertaken in Chhattisgarh on the complex issue of language and its role in education. With numerous languages spoken by its people, a third of whom are indigenous, Chhattisgarh surely is a linguist's delight. But is this an educationist's delight as well? I was curious therefore, to find out how this linguistic diversity was being viewed by the education department and by the government. Was it a problem? Or, was it a nice opportunity? These questions first took me to Dada Jokal in Dantewada.

For some, the presence of myriad languages can be a nuisance – it beats the efforts of education administrators at homogenization and centralization of curricula and textbooks and teacher training; for others, such as the enthusiasts and the education romantics, it is a great learning prospect. They will quote examples of countries that have successfully managed a multiplicity of languages with reference to the education they provide their children; they will quote research which supports the idea that education must be transacted in the first few years at least, in the mother tongue, and so on and so forth. When one starts doing things on the ground, one notices that the devil is in the details. It is easier said than done.

The Chhattisgarh state's approach to multi-linguality in education, as I gradually discovered, has been sporadic at best. There hasn't been much discussion on how this can be used as a resource in educating children. There have been some efforts, no doubt, including the aborted attempt at creating a policy for MLE, but these are limited, are not consistent and they have not been tested. I get this sense that the presence of many languages is treated more as a problem than as an opportunity. Anyway, more of that state story later. We have a long way to go in Chhattisgarh is all I can say now.

Dada Jokal, I was told, had done some interesting work on MLE (Multi-lingual Education), sitting far away in Dantewada in the Bastar Division of Southern Chhattisgarh – a heavily forested region of East Central India troubled by civil strife (the government calls it 'Left Wing Extremism --

¹ A literal translation will not help, and will damage the lilt and cadence of the lullaby. So let's just say that the song starts by telling the frog that you are the queen of the waters; then everyone is dancing, this side and that side, even the ones that are drinking, eating and making merry; the madam's hat and Sir's song are also dancing; you, the frog, are the queen of the waters! And that is how it goes on and on...

LWE’) for the past several years. This region, comprising of Dantewada and six other adjoining districts of the state (called the Bastar Division), is predominantly tribal. Its people speak a number of languages – Halbi, Bhatri, Dorli, Gondi, Telugu, Urdu, Hindi. The region borders the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

In the beginning

DJ was born in 1954 in a place called Konta in Sukma district and went on to study in a village called Jagargunda, where he grew up with his grandparents. Both these places are today in the heart of the civil strife problem. “Those days the Adivasis were really gentle and carefree, and there was no tension as such in the communities there”, recalls DJ. “They roamed the forests without any fear. They were routinely harassed by the Forest Department over issues like forest produce and so on, but no one really bothered to protest about it.”

Today, Jagargunda village is no longer accessible, thanks to its heavy fortification by the security forces. And in Konta there is an uneasy calm. The tribal people are caught in an ever escalating spiral of violence unleashed both by the Naxals (the Communist Party of India – Maoist, an Ultra-Left Wing group that follows the ideology of Mao Zedong. Its members are also called the ‘Naxals’ or ‘Naxalites’, in India) as well as the state of Chhattisgarh.

Jokal steps aside from his story to tell me how what is now termed as ‘Left Wing Extremism’ unfolded in his native land. “The Naxals started coming into our communities around 1980 from Andhra in batches of 5-7 persons. They used the exploitation of the local people by the *Patwaris* (village accountants) as an entry point to win over the communities.” Over time, this engagement took on new forms and eventually became a mass mobilization around the issues of *Jal-Jungle-Zameen* (water-forests-land, the three things on which the indigenous people depended squarely for their existence). The Naxals propagated just one message to drive home their point: “The forest, land and water belong to you, the people who have been living here for centuries...so you need to fight for it. Do not let the forest department or the police take these away...or harass you on this account...” But as the years went by, when the locals realized that this outside help was actually very authoritarian and was turning repressive, they organized the *Salwa Judum* (in Gondi, this actually means ‘Peace march’) – this was a spontaneous resistance of the indigenous people against the Naxals. Interestingly, it was led by teachers initially. It took a horrible and violent turn when it started receiving state support. But that is another narrative. Quite a lot has been written about it.

Let’s come back to Jokal’s story and hear him say, “My grandfather was interested in literature and music. We would routinely have ‘Qawwali’ programs in Jagargunda, and singers would come there from as far as Hyderabad.” DJ enjoyed these events and the early exposure influenced his interest in literature. But the one influence that proved to be life changing was the lullaby (known as *Lori* in Hindi) that his granny would sing to him at night. ‘Bibi Mendki Ri...’ which DJ kept recollecting and singing in a lilting way throughout our conversation, which ‘filled him’ completely. He couldn’t quite get over it. Whenever there was a chance, he would sing this *Lori* during festivals. Everyone liked it. And that’s how things moved forward and one thing led to another.

In 1964, Salim Sajid Sahab, the Deputy Ranger of forests in the Jagargunda area visited his village during the Ganesh festival and heard DJ sing his granny's lullaby. Impressed with what he heard, he asked DJ if he could translate the song into Gondi, the local language of the people of Jagargunda. Gondi is very similar to Telugu, the language spoken across the border in Andhra Pradesh, another state. It took just one night for the translation. "Even though I was in class V at that time, we had a very good teacher. So my fundamentals of writing and reading were firmly in place by then", recalled DJ with some pride. He did the entire translation on his own. The Forest Ranger was impressed again, and his granny sounded incredulous when she said '*Sikander, tu ne kya kiya re...?*' ('Sikander, what *did you do...?*'). She probably couldn't believe that a young boy could translate her *Lori* to another language and sing it too.

Meanwhile, DJ surged ahead, riding on his confidence – using the lilting melody of 'Bibi mendki...' he now wrote a four liner that had romantic overtones. "Adolescent pangs got me to do it, you know..." grinned Jokal, as he reminisced. When everyone started happily humming his new creation, he felt very encouraged. He was going places and had started playing around with different languages, not knowing the ways in which his work would be influenced at a later date. "At a young age, I was conversant with Gondi, Halbi and Telugu apart from the Urdu we spoke at home...I also learnt Sanskrit later."

From Hindi to Gondi to Halbi to Dorli and then on to Telugu...Granny's lullaby went places over time. Meanwhile, Dada shifted to another village called Nannihal in Bhopalpatnam block (in present day Bijapur district, also ravaged by LWE) to continue his schooling beyond the 5th. He stayed with his uncle there. Jagargunda only had a primary school then. After finishing his matriculation (the equivalent of 11th std. those days), DJ joined the health department. He was entrusted the task of controlling malaria in a region where many fell prey to the disease. Outside his working hours, DJ looked after his uncle's lands and did agricultural work.

By this time, with some support from the Deputy Ranger Salim Sajid who also happened to be associated with the All India Radio (AIR), Dada Jokal started writing songs and drama scripts for the AIR -- all of this while he was still in high school. His Gondi song was the first to go on air, in 1971. He was 17 then. "I was very nervous recording the song. But it was great to receive a cheque for rupees hundred those days!" He then started writing for the local newspapers as well.

A few years later, in 1974, DJ was invited to a cultural program at the village of Poosvada in Bhopalpatnam. His songs had become popular by then. Salim Sajid had come there too. And this time, he taught DJ the nuances of writing *Sher and Shairis* (a rich tradition of Urdu poetry). "Though I had become quite popular in the area by then, people seemed to have a difficulty pronouncing my name, which is actually Sikander Khan. They would call me Sikdar, Sikendar, Sikat Raj...Salim Sajid asked the group assembled in Poosvada if they knew who I was. There was this old man in the village who was sitting next to me. In response to Salim's question, he held my hands with affection and said '*Ver ma Dada Jokal*', meaning 'He is our Dada (brother) Jokal.' Now 'Jokal' in Gondi means *Saathi*, or companion. Since then, I started using this as my pen name. It felt nice to be called a companion."

Jokal worked for a few more years in the health department before he quit and went back to Nannihal to work on his uncle's lands around 1980. "Those lands belonged both to my father and uncle. They were landlords." This experience brought him into contact with the Naxals who were very active in the area at that time. Some of the locals who worked on his uncle's lands complained to the Naxals that they were not paid properly for their work. When the Naxals came to find out, Jokal explained to them the problems he was facing with laborers who were not regular at work but were still demanding full wages. Convinced with his explanation, the Naxals decided not to interfere further. At the same time, they also realized that he was a very versatile person who wanted to do good work for his community.

Jokal continued to write songs, *Qawwalis*, dramas, poems, and was regularly invited to literary events. Around that time, he also started teaching children at his house free of cost. Starting 1993/94, the state owned television, Doordarshan, and the AIR kept calling him for various programs. Reading was a constant habit, especially novels of various kinds and in different languages. He was very influenced by a magazine called *Akhand Jyoti* that devoted itself to religious and spiritual concerns, almost right wing in its outlook. "I left chewing tobacco as a result and became more disciplined as a person. I learnt to do yoga too, and I also learnt Sanskrit."

In my interactions with him, what struck me though about Dada Jokal was his complete cosmopolitan outlook. Though he comes from the minority community, Jokal straddles different cultures and believes that one needs to draw the best from everything that is available. Perhaps this outlook manifests itself in his love for languages, his sensitivity towards diverse cultures and his thirst for knowledge. In turn, this gets manifested in his work on MLE.

Tryst with education

DJ's first 'formal' entry into the education department was in 2001, when he started working for the literacy mission. Those were the days when the southern part of the state was close to a full blown civil strife situation. He worked voluntarily for the literacy mission in the Konta area, writing their slogans, songs and dramas. Around 2002-03, he applied for a job in the department of adult education and became their coordinator in the Bhopalpatnam area. Later on, he was promoted as Project Director.

"During those days, I had to do everything – administrative as well as program work." For the literacy mission, Jokal wrote folk songs and motivational songs in the languages as well as the *Dhun* (or tunes) of the region, as well as *Aasu Geet* – these are songs that are created on the spur of the moment depending on the immediate context, something that the tribal community routinely does. He also devoted much attention to the environment as a theme in his work. Increasingly, his work started focusing on children as a constituency.

In 2005, he was assigned additional work in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a program of the Government of India for achieving Universal Elementary Education. The District Collector of

Dantewada as well as the Mission Director of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan recognized his potential and wanted him to contribute to the SSA agenda as well.

“Sadly, I get more involved in administrative work in the SSA. This was more the case in the beginning, when there were no Asst. Project Coordinators (APCs) at the district level. The issue of girls’ education was also my responsibility. It’s a little better now, but I will still need much more support to carry on my work.”

Work on MLE

D. Jokal’s stint with SSA provided him the opportunity to develop teaching ideas based on multi-lingual resources. Over the last few years, he has developed a variety of materials and activities that use the home language of the child as a base and starting point. Some of these are described here.

A song book -- For instance, there is this book of songs, which he has now developed in Gondi, Telugu, Dorli and Halbi. It is called *Hamari Geet Kitab* (our song book).

Jokal tells me that the idea is “To create an enabling and fun filled environment for young children as they first enter primary school. I have chosen *Dhuns* (tunes) belonging to popular local songs (*Lokapriya Geet*) that are familiar to the children, which are part of their growing up in their family and community.” So the book of songs begins in Gondi with a few songs that teachers are expected to sing for/with children in the first few weeks. Many of these songs can be sung to the tune of the lullaby of his childhood, ‘Bibi Mendki Ri...’ as well as other local *Dhuns*. That is how Jokal sings them himself. His granny’s lullaby continues to inspire his work and informs many of the teaching ideas he continues to develop.



At first, teachers and children are expected to just sing freely songs that belong to them and that are part of their community. Slowly, Jokal introduces the alphabets through these songs. So he is moving from something that the children know and are familiar with, to a new experience, which in this case is learning another language, Hindi, using the Devanagri script. Hindi is the regional language as well as the language of officialdom in Chhattisgarh and other states in the Hindi heartland. Though there is a multiplicity of tribal languages in Southern Chhattisgarh, all of them (barring Telugu) do not have a script. The language of teaching-learning in schools is Hindi, which is quite alien to primary school going children. So Jokal’s approach is to use the mother tongue (MT) as a resource to move effectively to meaningfully decode other (unknown) languages such as Hindi in this case. The first task, therefore, is to introduce the sounds through a familiar medium (the song). This is followed by a study of pictures of common objects and the words (both in the local/home language and in Hindi) that are used to describe them. MT based

multi-lingual education is an area and approach that has caught on and there is global evidence to show that it is effective. The challenges for MLE, though, in regions that have a multi-lingual profile like Southern Chhattisgarh, are immense. We are just beginning to grapple with this.

“The entire ‘varna-mala’ (or the set of vowel and consonants chart of the Hindi language) is learnt using these songs...” The district administration through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has printed the song book for all the ‘porta cabins’ (residential schools set up for tribal children) in the wake of the civil strife.



Other books -- *Hamari Geet Kitab* is reinforced by the *Akshar Gyan* (knowledge of alphabets) books that Jokal has developed in Gondi. Essentially, these are picture books which relate everyday objects



with the names that local communities use to describe them. For instance, each illustration identifies the letter/sound to be made familiar, has a word in the local language which uses that letter/sound to describe an object and also provides the word used in Hindi that is used to describe the same object. ‘Arr’ would stand for ‘path’ in Gondi, the letter/sound in question would be ‘A’ and in Hindi ‘Arr’ would be ‘Raasta’. Thus, Jokal again uses the MT as a starting point to reinforce the child’s own language and also create an opportunity for the child to learn the regional language which is at a distance from the child’s immediate context.

Interestingly, Gondi does not use all the sounds that Hindi does. This is what Jokal’s study of the language reveals. This is also the case with the other indigenous languages For example, ‘Kha’ does not figure out in Gondi, like ‘Gha’. But he still says that it is important for children to explore and learn the usage of sounds that are not part of the repertoire of one’s language. This is how one gets

to gradually learn other languages. Therefore, the *Akshar Gyan* books are of two kinds and they follow this thinking. The first one only has words that are part of the repertoire of the child. The second book introduces words starting with sounds that are not part of the child's repertoire. Jokal is firm in his belief that 'We need to use *their language* and enable them to learn other languages like Hindi and English. This can happen in school.' Clearly, there is much work to do. This is a small but important beginning.

Another interesting picture book that Jokal has developed is thematic – it is on trees and the names that the local Gonds use for the trees in their community. This has been hurriedly done, since there was pressure for getting it printed quickly. Jokal is therefore not happy with the way it has been produced. Two other picture books of Jokal in Gondi deserve mention. One of them is the story of a friendship between a cat and a dog. Each page has an illustration and a single line in Hindi that narrates the story. After the story concludes, Jokal narrates it in Hindi (but without the pictures). Children are expected to see the pictures, read first in Gondi and then in Hindi. The same book then goes on to describe (in 2-3 lines) a few commonly seen animals, along with their illustrations. These descriptions are rhythmic and can also be sung. Remember the lullaby that inspired him...? The other story is that of a bird. It follows the same pattern as the dog/cat story. Following the story are bi-lingual descriptions along with illustrations of common objects, settings, animals, plants and so on. In short, these are the basics of the Gondi language. Jokal has also contributed to two other large picture story books in Gondi developed by the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT).

Finally, there is a Gondi chart which can be used for display in the classroom. It contains the same stuff that is in the alphabet books developed by Jokal. In addition, it contains a table of numbers from one to ten. We get to learn the words the Gonds use for these numbers. It is interesting to see strong elements of Telugu and some from Hindi, in the Gondi language. A similar chart in Halbi also has been developed.

Testing the idea

As Jokal developed teaching-learning ideas in different languages, based on the mother tongue of the child, he realized the need to try these ideas in schools to see if they were working. So in 2009-10, he selected 10 schools in Dantewada block where Gondi speaking teachers were available. The experiences of using the approaches developed by him, though not documented, have been reported as encouraging and positive so far. "It is not that non-Gondi teachers can't use these materials. They will need a different kind of preparation, one in which they will need to pick up the basics of the home language first." In the context of Dantewada and other adjoining districts, this is an important issue as many teachers currently teaching in the various Ashram Shalas are from other parts of the state. This places an additional challenge for MLE.

Teachers in the 10 selected schools, being locals themselves, have easily taken to Jokal's materials and ideas. In fact, some of them have played a key role in the writing of the alphabet and story books as well as the charts. This is an ongoing process. Secondly, Jokal says from their

experience that the MT focused approach has surely led to increased retention as well as attention and participation of the children in school. This is an area worth investigating further. He has undertaken a rapid survey of teachers, children and community members on this program. The interesting observation made by parents is that the development of teaching-learning materials in their home language enables them to get more involved in their child's learning at school. This is an important observation, for it enables us to say that an MT based approach is a sure shot way of getting parents involved in their child's learning, even where parents may not themselves be literate. In fact, it is this kind of documentation that we need in order to develop strong evidence in support of multilingual education. Such evidence needs to be accumulated more and more for Chhattisgarh.

The challenge with the intervention in the ten schools is that many of the teachers who started working with Jokal have now been transferred. This is out of his control; it also proves to be a setback when one is developing a pilot. "Not all local teachers automatically see value in MT based instruction. They need some convincing, but once they see value in it they develop ownership", says Jokal. Part of the problem is the pressure that is there on the education system to teach children the languages of power (Hindi and English). But this overlooks the tested idea that by mastering one's own language first, one can create a gateway for learning many a concept and language.

Despite the support that Jokal has so far received in the last 2-3 years for his work, thanks to the presence of sensitive district administrators in Dantewada, he feels that more support, motivation, acknowledgement and exposure to initiatives elsewhere (for instance, MLE programs in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa which are now sufficiently mature and where ML textbooks have also been developed...) are necessary for this process to be sustained over a long period of time. Unfortunately, most of the time it is all person-dependent – if a person like the District Collector understands the importance of MLE, he or she would go all out in supporting MLE initiatives. If, on the other hand, the district administration or the state level institutions are lukewarm to the idea, then progress becomes difficult and promising ideas seldom take off.

Encouraged by the experiences so far, Jokal plans to take these ideas to a larger group, even as he is busy developing more teaching-learning resources like the Gondi-English and Halbi-English picture books. The District Collector Devasenapati wants him to work with 100 schools – all the porta cabins as well as 20 other schools in each of the four blocks of Dantewada district.

Institutions like the State Council for Educational Research and Training as well as the District Institute of Education and Training (in Dantewada) will need to get more actively involved in Jokal's efforts and support him in the days to come. Much of the work can progress in an action research mode, involving teachers, children and members of the local community. A key element will be to support Jokal and his team in documenting local folklore, history, culture and so on, as these will form the base for content development. DJ is also keen on developing a film that will showcase the rich and diverse linguistic variety of the region as well as the promising work that he has started on MLE. I tell him that it would be important to document rigorously the work he is doing in schools and the community for assessing his impact as well as for wider sharing and learning.

Jokal finally says: “The mother tongue provides a strong platform for learning other languages, like Hindi and English. Further, by helping children learn through their mother tongue, we are actually respecting the culture they belong to, and are also contributing to its preservation...”

In Bastar district, not far away from Dantewada, Stanley John from DIET Bastar has some research evidence that actually points out to what Jokal is saying, albeit in an indirect way. He has found that students in grade 10 actually score higher in various subjects if they have been taught earlier (in primary school) by teachers who knew their home language. The details of this research need to be understood, and more such studies need to be undertaken. For now, they provide fillip to the idea that children learn best when the school language is the same as that of home, at least in the primary years.

Some larger questions

The issue of language and education, I realized, is intimately linked to another topic that continues to be debated in education – that of decentralization. Decentralization in education is not only about providing more financial autonomy to structures such as Panchayats. It is also about deciding what children should learn. It is about resolving the tension and balance between the local and non-local, regional or national. In specific terms, we are required to respond to questions such as how much children should learn about their local histories, languages, cultures, local heroes, festivals, stories as juxtaposed with a national history, language and so on, given that there is a jostling for content, space and time in school curricula and textbooks. The connect between language and education is thus embedded within this larger question. We should slowly get to this in Chhattisgarh, in the days to come.

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