ABSTRACT

Vast numbers of psychological studies have examined development of various mental abilities, such as, development of mathematical ability, reasoning and so on. However, the area of historical understanding (HU) is relatively ignored. There have been some attempts to assess the development of historical understanding but the findings do not project a comprehensive picture of the psychological process of HU. In views of the problems and issues in the existing body of literature on HU, this study sought to explore aspects of HU in two cultural groups. Two studies were undertaken. The first study explored the developmental pattern of Historical understanding among 9-to-14-year old children from two cultural groups- one group of Santali children and another of non-tribal urban children. The second study sought to examine the nature of understanding of history in a group of 25-to-70-year-old Santali adults, illiterate and literate with different levels of schooling.

For the first study children from rural Santali school and urban non-tribal school were taken. Each cultural group consisted of 30 children from three age groups, 9-10-year-olds (grade 4), 11-12-year-olds (grade 6), and 13-14-year-olds (grade 8). The rural Santali children were from a nearby village situated around 25 km away from Jamshedpur city, while the non-tribal children were taken from two government schools in the city of Jamshedpur. The children of both the cultural groups were administered a Test of Historical Understanding (Dixit & Mohanty 2006). This test was a modified version of the test developed and used by us in 2005. Since the earlier test was used on urban children this test was modified to improve its ecological validity. Some items of the earlier test were replaced and others were suitably
modified for use with Santali children. The children were given the test of HU, followed by an intensive interview about their notions of history. The entire procedure of administering the test and interviewing lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes. It was hypothesized that HU will show significant age/grade related changes and that cultural context will have significant effect on HU. The data were analysed in a 2 (cultural groups) x 3 (age groups) ANOVA. The responses on the test items and interview protocols were qualitatively analyzed.

The exploration of HU of children was two fold in this study. It sough to find the psychological processes and developmental pattern in understanding History (as a school subject). Children’s test performance, their interview responses and explanations they provided for their response were used to explore HU. For the entire sample of both the cultural groups combined, the mean scores were 37.0, 43.8 and 48.1, respectively for the 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14-year age groups. The mean for the two cultural groups were 41.5 and 44.4, for the non-tribal and Santali groups, respectively. Thus, The Santali children performed better than their non-tribal urban counterparts. The mean scores for the urban non-tribal children were 36.1, 40.5 and 47.8, respectively for 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14-year age groups. For the rural Santali children the scores were 37.9, 47.1 and 48.3, for the three age groups in increasing order. The ANOVA test showed a significant main effect of age and cultural groups on the test performance. The results showed that there was linear development in HU of children of both the cultural groups. The older children had higher mean score compared to the younger ones. The dimension wise analysis of the responses of children showed that different domains of HU show different patterns of development. Most of the dimensions appear in children
between the ages of 9-12 years. Among these dimensions are: understanding of the temporal aspect of history, understanding simple cause affect connection, drawing concrete information about artifacts and understanding the relativity of historical explanations. However, children's HU on these dimensions get progressively refined with age and maturity. There are some dimensions which are seen to be developing at a later stage, by the age of 13-14 or later. These dimensions are: Imagination, Critical and comparative analysis and Drawing abstract information about objects.

The ANOVA test results showed a significant difference in the performance of children across the two cultural groups. The Santal children do better on the dimension of critical analysis and perform low on the items requiring understanding of dates. On the other hand, the non-tribal children perform better on items related to chronology (specifically dates) and on Imagination (Experiential perspective). On the items of chronology the younger tribal children had problem. The children in the age group of 13-14 years did not have such problem. This improvement in the older children's performance might be due to the schooling experience that has provided them more familiarity with numbers. The dimension wise difference in performance was explained by the concept of "modularity" proposed by Cole (1992). The domain specific processing means that people perform variantly on different domains of cognitive functioning. It implies that performance on a particular cognitive domain is linked with the situation in which it is practiced. People perform better on familiar cognitive modules, than the non familiar modules.
Notion of past in Santali children was neither the mainstream history nor the tribal past, exclusively. The children did relate to the textbook information about past, but they chose to remember those information from their textbook history which were closer to their community experiences. They talked more about the early men, Stone Age and the pre-literate society. When asked about what have they learned about past from their home or elders, they switch to their folk tales and images of history i.e. stories and narrations. The children's perception and understanding of history seems to reflect the adults' cultural beliefs.

The second study explored the notions of history and past among Santali adults. Twenty nine adults were contacted from the different villages of East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state. They were asked questions related to life in past; how people used to live and think in the past, how do people come to know about the past, what things have changed and so on. The responses of the participants were qualitatively analyzed.

The major theme running across the responses of all the respondents were immense faith in their past, incorporation of past stories in their life style and magical thinking. The stories of past are passed onto them during the process of socialization and day to day activities. Santals' belief system is deeply intertwined with their historical belief and the folk stories. They also showed a lot of belief in witchcraft and black magic. Santal adults, especially ones with college level education, showed a sense of community history. They have artifacts which are historically modified and have symbolic value for their culture. They have various traditions and customs, involving practices which transmit their historical knowledge across generations. Apart from
all these community experiences, children learn from their elders, and community members. The structure of Santali cultural experiences and the content that is transferred to the members of this community, together with their individual and collective memory, influence the HU of the Santali people. The Santal's notion of history is, thus, a product of their socio-historically evolved belief system.

The Santali's notion of history seems to show a consistent cultural pattern irrespective of their level of education. Many of the conventional beliefs and superstitions were also prevalent in educated Santalis. They glorified the superstitious practices, witchcraft and black magic prevalent in their community. The HU of Santalis who had schooling between 6 to 10+2 grades, showed a lesser interest and detachment from their community history. They showed a belief that 'these stories' do not have any relevance in their present lives. They however, do not find place of 'these history' in their curriculum. They come to believe that since their history is not taught in schools, it does not have any utility and authenticity. The educated adult Santalis seem to demonstrate a level of objectivity in respect to history which undermined their cultural history.

The two studies show that historical understanding is a multidimensional rather than a unitary process the development of which starts at early age, perhaps even before the age of 9. Many of the abstract dimensions of HU appear by the age 13-14. Thus, the basic psychological processes of HU can be seen in 9-10 year-old children and few dimensions appear increasingly in sophistication from 11-12 years of age through the adolescence age. The Studies have shown that the cultural factors significantly influence
the nature of HU in children and as well as in adults. However, formal exposure to school history and higher level of education were found to influence perception of history.

Thus, it can be concluded that Santals’ understanding of history portray certain culture specific features which are also affected by the years of schooling. The Santals have a system to preserve and pass on their historical understanding across generations. Though education has brought some changes in the nature and mode of preservation and transfer of their knowledge system, the basic features of HU embedded in their experience remain largely unaffected. Interestingly the level of education seems to have influenced Santali’s attitude about the history. However, the most prototypical features of Santalis’ HU such as witch craft and magical thinking continues to influence the HU of all the Santali adults, irrespective of their education. These culture specific features of Santali society have led the children of their society to develop the psychological processes which are more frequently utilizes in their cultural context. The notion of past in Santali children reflected the beliefs expressed by Santali adults to a large extent. The implications of findings are discussed.