

VILLAGE LEARNING CENTRES
Addressing Poor Education and Illiteracy In
Remote Tribal Districts Of Odisha

Proposal

By

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Background

School education after all these years of various policies and programmes is still not the norm in tribal regions, and majority of tribal villages continue to be victims of illiteracy, exploitation, poverty, hunger and blind faith. Most tribal children grow up learning and supporting their parents in the household work including agriculture, but can in no way look forward to a better future, as they are by and large unlettered. However, of late, tribal communities have begun to realise the value of school education, and are keen that their children acquire academic qualifications and aspire for a better tomorrow. The formal Government Schools on the other hand, are affected by poor quality of teaching, low teacher-student ratios, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate learning spaces, in addition to language barriers, as most teachers have little knowledge of tribal languages. Thus teachers have the extremely challenging task of doing multi-level, multi-grade and multi-lingual education in spaces, where there is not even enough room to stand. Inevitably most schools fail to live up to the parents' expectations, and also fail to engage and interest the child. Being unlettered, tribal parents find it difficult to assess and much less support the school learning of their children. But they do have expectations, that the child, after a few years in school, will be able to write out names, begin to read, recognise numbers and add and subtract, and so on. Very often even after 4 to 5 years in school even these expectations are not met. Illiterate and poor, parents in tribal areas are unable to provide for any private schooling or tuition, or take up home schooling when even these basic expectations are not met. Quite justifiably, these years of schooling are perceived as years wasted.

Thus the cycle of poverty – poor education – ignorance and exploitation – poverty continues from generation to generation. The challenge is to break this cycle by creating a generation of literates who are aware and capable of taking forward the development of their community.

On top of all this, the pandemic has created its own set of problematic issues. It is now widely recognized that the pandemic has affected children's education very seriously all over the globe. In India, the recently published '**Locked out**' Report provides a dismal picture, pointing out that while some children have managed to continue their education through online facilities, school learning of a very large proportion of children have been seriously affected for the simple reason that these facilities are not accessible to them. There are several reasons why this has happened, beginning with age (how can children in early grades be expected to study online courses) to location, as several regions specially in hilly upland tribal districts do not have networks, to the inability of poor parents to

afford an appropriate phone/tablet, etc. This has led to a significant widening of the already existing digital divide. Even in the larger cities and metropolises, children from working class families have suffered during the time of the pandemic due to poor access to mobile and internet technologies.

As the Governments continue their lockdown of schools and other educational institutions, in their anxiety to protect children and youth, there are several children in imminent danger of dropping out and/or are finding it too difficult to cope with studies. This is specially so in the tribal regions, where school education has as such been quite far below the mark. Here, all the factors mentioned above have come into play during the pandemic, and brought school education to a virtual standstill. Parents on their part are hard put to find a way for taking the education of their children forward, as they themselves are unschooled, and can provide little or no support for their offspring's learning.

At this point of time, it is of crucial importance that there is concerted and planned effort for primary education in the tribal regions. Without this effort, education in the tribal regions will tumble back several paces, with children dropping out, youth becoming disheartened and disillusioned, and the tribal regions sliding back something like 20-30 years in terms of socio-economic development. Primarily the exclusion of the tribal communities would be increased manifold, and distress migration bonded labour and indebtedness would once again be the only recourse left.

The solution:

Aragamee has sought to address this crisis through Village Learning Centres, which provide quality education to children and youth below 18 years of age. Youth volunteers from the village, with minimum qualification of 10th pass are provided training, and guidance to develop as Edu-volunteers to provide quality education in the learning centres. Further supports are provided to the Learning Centres in terms of TLM to the learners, solar lighting, and teaching aids, so that the Edu-leaders can provide quality education which would attract learners, and ensure lessons are interesting and engaging. This ensures that children come regularly and become eager learners.

This effort has not only helped to bridge the learning gaps brought on due to the pandemic lead lock-down, but also enabled learners to develop a love of learning, and a sense of joy in reading. Within a few months children who were dropouts or had poor attendance records and were lagging behind, not being able to read, or write, unable to do even basic maths, have been able to catch

up with their studies, and have become eager to attend the learning centres. The sense of fear and stress that children often felt in going to normal schools has quite disappeared, and children are now eager for their lesson. Much before their teachers enter their class, children are ready and waiting for classes to begin.

The effort has had much success with dropouts in different age groups, including older youth who had despaired and given up studies. A learning atmosphere is thus being created encouraging many to read and study. Thus the Learning Centres have impacted significantly beyond just addressing pandemic related issues and initiated a long term educational change in underdeveloped tribal villages. They have been able to reach out of school children, addressed long term pedagogic issues affecting school learning in first generation and specially tribal children, and also created a learning atmosphere in the villages.

The Project:

It is proposed to take this effort for bringing excellent and joyful learning to remote tribal villages with the following objectives:

- ◆ Help children and youth catch up with literacy and education appropriate to their levels as the first step towards creating a generation of literates,
- ◆ Increase knowledge and awareness in tribal villages on the relevant issues,
- ◆ Create a learning and knowledge centre in remote tribal villages which will increase people's awareness, and provide a reference for relevant matters,

Though the Learning Centres have met essential emergency requirements for learning during the time of the pandemic and ensuing lockdown, there is a need to continue the LCs beyond the lock down period to help children make up for lost time, supplement school education which is of dismal quality, and help tribal children reach age appropriate learning levels as soon as possible.

Activities to be taken up:

- a. Support to Edu-volunteers to teach in learning centres
- b. Support to students for Learning material
- c. Training of Edu-volunteers
- d. Teaching aid support to Learning Centres
- e. Monitoring and handholding support to Edu-volunteers.

Outcome of the Project:

- The project would reach out to all children and youth between the age of 6 to 14 years in the villages;
- Children and youth would begin to read and write and achieve near grade level learning in the village which has less than 10% literacy;
- With literacy, the tribal community would be able to fight exploitation and extortion from money lenders and middle men
- They will be able to read essential functional information like MRP (minimum retail price) expiry dates, Panchayat resolutions, work boards on village work sites, as also wage roles, write their own checks, and manage their bank accounts, etc. and so avoid getting cheated.
- The impact will inspire other villages also towards efforts for learning and freedom from exploitation and hunger.

Budget for one learning centre:

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Budget for 1 Learning Centre for 1 Yr. period	
Programme	Costs
Edu-Leader @5000 for 12 months	60000
Learning Material support to students @500 per child for 50 children	25000
Teaching Aids	5000
Teacher Training @850 Per day per teacher for 25 days	21250
Monitoring and handholding to Edu-volunteers @ 1000 per centre per month	12000
Coordination and Management @Rs.2000permonth	24000
Total Programme Costs	147250
Admin Cost @ 10% of total cost	16361
Total Costs	163611
Per child per year cost	3272

