CREATIVE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN

Project Proposal by Agragamee

Introduction:

The Creative Language Development For Tribal Children (CATCH) is an effort for improving reading and language abilities in tribal districts of Odisha, where the community has no history of literacy or school education. Government primary schools in these pockets have poorly qualified and under-motivated teachers, resulting in a the majority of students completing elementary school with almost no reading skills. This is a serious shortcoming, as reading fluency is fundamental to all school education, and affects learning and proficiency in every subject. The problem is compounded, as these first generation school goers receive little or no support for class room learning at home. Despite several years of schooling, the majority of children in the tribal regions fail their board exams, and end up as cheap unskilled work force, subject to socio-economic discrimination at all levels.

CATCH seeks to address the complex set of problems which affect reading, and education of a very large number and proportion of children. The program will be taken up through 2 Model Schools and 20 primary schools in as many villages in 3 tribal districts. These districts have some of the lowest literacy rates in the country. Youth who have passed the 12th Grade will be engaged for the effort. These young persons will be provided orientation training and supportive Teaching Learning Material (TLM) to work as “Shiksha Sathies or Support Teachers.

The CATCH approach has several unique features. While most innovations in education in India, have remained confined to the authors, or at best gone marginally beyond, the current effort takes on the challenge of addressing issues of scale and quality simultaneously. It seeks to make literacy learning as intuitive as language learning for the child by reversing the alphabet-centric method. It will equip children to comprehend the phonetics of reading through exposure and immersion in the written language through meaningful words, sentences, and ideas, beginning with the family and home, familiar objects, rhymes, and stories. Connections between the sound of the word or sentences and their letter phonemes are established by encouraging the child to write. Thus writing and literacy development go hand-in-hand. The effort seeks to scale-up theimpact through teacher training, and development of supportive material, facilitating a method which is efficient and fun at the same time.

The program is thus a key intervention that facilitates demonstration of a unique constructivist model of literacy and reading development that can be subsequently replicated to benefit the entire tribal region in Odisha. The demonstration on a scale of impact that positively affects education and literacy across 3 districts can be leveraged for support for a larger pilot from the Government and other funding agencies covering the entire KBK regions. In addition, the project can also be scaled up to other tribal districts in Northern Odisha. This pilot thus also provides an opportunity to better comprehend the problems and concerns in scaling up.

If the material can be translated into other state languages, the potential is there for scaling to all under-literate tribal pockets of the country. Several surveys indicate that there are problems of reading and comprehension across the country. This model has the potential to tackle this problem across the country.

Objectives of the Project:

* To develop reading and literacy skills in first generation school going children of Grades I and II in Government schools in Tribal areas through innovative and stress free approach
* To address problems of poor reading skills in children of grades III to V
* To develop appropriate teaching and learning materials (TLM) to facilitate easy and fun reading and literacy development for children of first and second grade,
* To take up orientation and training of teachers to help them give up the traditional rote learning approach, and adopt child-friendly methods and approach using appropriate TLM.

**Specific Early Grade Reading Challenges that Will be Addressed:**

* **First generation school goers who get little support from their parents in studies:** According to UNICEF, children whose parents have had primary school education or less, were more than three times as likely to have low test scores and grade repetition than children whose parents had at least some secondary schooling. While educated parents can monitor their child's progress and address poor teaching problems, children with parents having no school education are severely handicapped in this regard. The latest Education For All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) by UNESCO, reports that India has the largest population of illiterate adults in the world at 287 million. This population also constitutes the majority of the poor, unable to afford any private schooling for their children.
* **Inadequate Curriculum and Material Development:** A well developed curriculum backed by supportive material is of crucial importance
* **Poorly Trained Teachers:** This is the biggest challenge which has to begin with ‘de-schooling’ teachers to give up the repetitive, memorizing approach for a more child-centered approach
* **Lack of skills in Children from Grades III to V:** Most Grade V children of Government Schools have poor reading abilities. The project will seek to address needs of these children as well
* **Cycle of illiteracy and poverty:** PISA (Program of International Student Assessment) 2012 reports that the current school education does little to address socio-economic disparities. Increasing reading competencies is fundamental to changing this situation

**Program Budget:**

Total Budget of the Programme: $75000

**Project Overview:**

* 1. Number of Primary beneficiaries during the entire program cycle. 4000 Children
  2. Age Group of the Children: 6 years to 10 years
  3. Where Program will be conducted: The Program will be conducted in Government Primary Schools, run by the Department of School and Mass Education.
  4. Specific Grades targetted by the Program: Grades I to V
  5. The language that the program focuses on: Odiya
  6. Area of Operation: 18 Government Primary Schools will be taken up in 4 Blocks, in 3 Districts as detailed below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **State** | **District** | **Block** |
| Odisha | Rayagada | Kashipur |
| Odisha | Rayagada | Rayagad |
| Odisha | Koraput | Dasmantpur |
| Odisha | Nabrangpur | Tentulikhunti |

**Description of The Target Group:**

Specifically, the Program seeks to address issues of poor reading ability and literacy as they affect first generation school goers, in the tribal districts in Southern Odisha. The specific problems that these children face can be outlined as under:

* 1. Children from Isolated and Remote regions: The districts of Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada and Kalahandi in Odisha where the project will be taken up have had little or negative exposure to forces of modernisation, and remain highly isolated. The difference in male /female literacy rates in the districts under the project, as well as the difference in overall literacy rates of these districts, compared to the overall literacy rates of Odisha and India are striking.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Literacy Percentages in KBK Districts and Odisha | | | | |
| Sl. | Districts | Female Literacy | Male Literacy | Total Literacy |
| 1. | Nabarangpur | 35.8 | 57.3 | 46.4 |
| 2. | Rayagada | 39.2 | 61.0 | 49.8 |
| 3. | Malkangiri | 38.3 | 59.1 | 48.5 |
| 4. | Kalahandi | 46.7 | 71.9 | 59.2 |
| 5. | Koraput | 38.6 | 60.3 | 49.2 |
| 6. | Balangir | 53.5 | 75.9 | 64.7 |
| 7. | Sonepur | 64.0 | 84.4 | 74.4 |
| 7. | Nuapada | 44.8 | 70.3 | 57.4 |
| 8. | Odisha | 64.1 | 81.6 | 73.9 |
| 9. | India | 65.5 | 82.1 | 74.0 |

If we look at the different regions of the state, the above districts, which comprise all the districts of South Odisha and almost one third of the districts of Odisha State have a literacy rate of 57.6 and a female literacy rate of 45.9, against corresponding figures of 81.5 and 74.1 for coastal Odisha.

* 1. **Poorly-performing Government Schools:** On the other hand, these figures hide a much grimmer reality of non-performing government schools, where reading levels of the students are near zero even beyond the primary school stage.
  2. **Parents unable to Monitor Children’s Learning:** The project thus primarily caters to children from villages with near zero literacy rates, where parents are able to check the timings and regularity of the teachers, but unable to monitor the learning levels of the children. Community based institutions like the School Management Committee and the Parent Teachers’ Association also perform very poorly in these regions due to ignorance and poor understanding.
  3. **High Levels of Poverty:** The majority of the children come from families with high levels of poverty, resulting in inadequate food and affected by chronic malnutrition. Many of these children work with their parents, either in agricultural operations, or wage labour, helping to increase the family income. The parents of these children find it difficult to invest even in the minimum slates, note-books, and pens necessary for ‘free and compulsory’ education provided by the Government. The investment of time that the child is required to make is a costly investment, as it costs the child and the family the extra income that could supplement their meagre diet, or provide for other essentials like warm clothes for the winter etc. Often, a tribal family is able to afford education for only one child, while the others have to work to earn.
  4. **Negative Incentive For Education:** These necessary investments combined with the poor learning level of the child act as a negative incentive, and any contingency, like illness in the family etc. result in the child dropping out. This is specially true for girls, as women are inevitably overburdened with poorly remunerative work, whether it is in their own fields or house work, or as wage labour, and feel very much the need to have their daughters as helping hands.
  5. **Linguistic Barriers:** In the tribal districts, many communities have mother tongues different from the mainstream Odiya. These children find it extra hard to cope with school education, where teachers are insensitive to linguistic difference. Special provisions need to be made to enable these children to learn in the mainstream language.

**The Secondary beneficiaries or stake holders:**

* 1. Children’s parents, as well as the entire community. Improving the reading abilities of children, will lay an educational foundation for the entire community, facilitating informed action, increased participation in governance and decision making, better access to information on Government schemes, provisions, policies and facilities, increased ability for further education and employability.
  2. The Government School System: The schooling and education system in the country has been negatively viewed because of the persistent problem of poor learning levels. The current project, which has been tried, tested and proved out in primary schools, catering to first generation school goers will enable a universal jump in learning levels. This will address a lot of problems of learning and literacy that affects school children across the state.
  3. Teachers: Often, teachers are at a loss to address learning problems, and blame the children. The Program will persistently work with teachers engaged in primary schools, helping them take up the current approach, and facilitate their work.

**The Intervention:**

The program will work with children in 20 Government Primary Schools, in the tribal districts of Rayagada, Koraput and Nabrangpur, and two model schools, 1 each in Rayagada and Kalahandi Districts. Early grade reading improvement will be taken up through educated local youth, selected specifically for the current program. The youth, identified as Shiksha Sathies, will be trained in the use of specific material designed to improve early Grade reading. The specific activities under the program are as follows:

* Selection of Government Schools, in consultation with concerned Govt. Officials
* Design and Production of appropriate Teaching Learning material
* Training Of Shiksha Sathies
* Classes by Shiksha Sathies
* Review and monitoring
* Running of 2 model schools, to provide training, demonstration back up.

**Past experience of the Organisation:**

Agragamee has been involved in the implementation of Programs of primary education in the tribal regions for the last 25 years. In these Programs, it has been supported by the Ministry of Human Resource Development for Programs of Non-formal and Innovative Education, covering 200 villages, in 5 tribal districts, Ministry of Tribal Welfare for a Residential Complex for Tribal Girls, providing primary education to 50 tribal girls, and International Funding agencies including Action Aid, and Terre Des Homes covering 70 schools in two tribal districts.

These efforts in education, were essentially through single teacher learning centres, which sought to provide education in some of the remote tribal regions, where schools did not exist or did not run. Initially, the schools ran during the night, when working children as well adults had free time for the pursuit of literacy and learning. Subsequently the teachers were encouraged to take up the schools in two shifts, to cater to different age groups. These schools were based on the felt need of the community, keen that their children learn to read and write. Thus these Programs had immense participation of the community, wherein they provided a space and a school building, as also participated in the schooling process. Initially, this participation was in the forms of silent observation. Subsequently, many adults and adolescents also brought their slates and chalk to these learning centres to pick the basics of literacy. In course of time, these centres also became active and vibrant places for discussions on socio-economic issues affecting the village, including alcoholism, wage work, and other government Programs, etc. Essentially, the major highlights of these efforts can be outlined as follows:

* Historical and social analysis of the tribal identity
* Total self-expression of the students through co-curricular activities
* Development of value-based curriculum
* Experiments on child to child development
* Development of teaching aids with locally available material
* Teachers as an Activist for social change
* Inculcation of attitudes promoting common endeavour and critical thinking

The schools taken up with the above mentioned innovative approaches have thus been part of Agragamee’s holistic and integrated development efforts. From just places in the centre of village lit with a lantern, the schools blossomed into lively dynamic centres of collective growth with shared learnings where the development history of the village unfolded. The attendance in these centres had not been limited to the children and adults and adolescents have been coming with interest and enthusiasm, some regularly, to learn the secrets of alphabets and number, others off and on, out of curiosity first and then with growing interest to share in the may discussions.

Achievements:

* The Program has enabled a learner achievement at the primary level much more than that facilitated by than qualified teachers in formal Government Schools.
* It has helped children develop a critical understanding of the socio-economic situation in the villages and make active interventions to fight exploitation and corruption.
* Techniques of improved farming and cultivation were also developed in the villages where AIE schools were located since that has been a part of the curriculum.
* Children also begun to ask questions of their adults, and checked social evils like illicit liquor brewing, and excessive alcoholism, as also begun to question child marriages, which frequently take place within the community.
* The Program had also able to help tribal children join the mainstream educational processes to a significant extent.

**Mukta Gyana Kutira**

Seeking to build up and consolidate its past experience in education, Agragamee started the series of schools called “Mukta Gyana Kutira” or Centres For Learning With Freedom, in some of the remotest regions of the tribal districts in Odisha. These schools focused on girls as a necessary effort to address the huge gender gap in education in the tribal regions. This vibrant Program of primary education located in Adri and Padepadar in Kalahandi District, and Kashipur in Rayagada District has helped produce matriculates and graduates in villages with almost zero literacy a few years back. The interventions include primary schools for tribal girls, primers and guides for easy and fun language development and teacher training. These efforts have helped establish child centred processes, where learning, fun and play merge into one another, helping teachers enjoy their work almost as much as the children. These schools have also been centres for innovation and creative efforts, leading to the development of the model of language and literacy teaching described under the current project. This project thus offers the opportunity for up-scaling this unique model which have helped its students make significant progress in a short time.

Over the decade of their existence, these schools have been able to prove their worth, and develop a keen interest for education in the villages. Taking into consideration, the extremely low level of education of girls and women in the tribal districts of Odisha, the Agragamee Schools have been able to break the taboos and barriers to girls education in the tribal villages. They provide education to 350 girl children from 15 villages, and have been greatly appreciated by the local village community for the learning levels achieved by the students.

Some of the achievements of these schools can be outlined as follows:

* Production of the newsletter, ‘Dangar Katha’ or Stories from the Hills written completely by the children for last 5 years,
* Children’s Monthly Wall Magazines: 3 wall magazines with illustrated stories and essays and art by the children of all classes are put up every month,
* 260 children have passed out of Agragamee Schools, and gone for further education
* 65 children have passed matriculation. Out of them, several are pursuing higher studies,
* In 2014 parents of Kumbharasila village admitted 43 children between grades 5 to 8 who were studying in Government school because of they could not even write their own names. In 2016, 10 of them will pass out of Class V in Agragamee School.
* Agragamee’s special workbooks and text books for grades 1 and 2 have helped children pick up reading and writing with ease
* Agragamee’s methods have also helped slow learners catch up and take keen interest in their studies by grades 2 and 3,
* Students from Agragamee School teach their parents and sibling at home.
* Children in classes IV and V read newspaper regularly improving their world view and general knowledge
* The Agragamee Schools have created a demand in the villages for better quality education from the Government Schools and regular teacher attendance
* In addition to academic learning, children of Agragamee Schools have won several prizes in inter school cultural competitions.

This initiative has generated a sense of right to education that has started a process of reforming the state school system. This is clearly visible from the sudden waking up of the state school teachers from their long hibernation, and this has brought at least one change: they have become more regular in attending the school which has resulted in some enhancement of attendance of the children (as there was no teacher, children would also not come).

Apart from exerting a direct impact on the overall education scenario of the area the achievement of the Agragamee School has created among the students a sense of empowerment that has been applied for larger good: the higher class children (4 and 5) have involved themselves in their respective villages in playing a monitoring role. For example, they have been instrumental in cheeking the muster rolls for MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act), generating awareness about the right wage rate and benefits involved in the Programs like public distribution system, the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme), etc.

According to Dr. Kumar Rana of Pratichi Trust (A non-profit founded by Professor Amartya Sen), ‘The increased demand for education among the parents and the village community in general has also instilled among the team of Agragamee a need to be more innovative and proactive towards educational expansion in general and the Program in particular’.

Some of the children have already started teaching their mothers alphabets. As a mother shares, “my child has been after my life. She has a vow that she won’t relax without teaching me how to read and write”. The visible pride in her daughter is tinged with just a little bit of exasperation as this a difficult skill to learn at this age.

The initiatives has already established itself as a model for expanding primary education among the disadvantaged girl children in a way which is at the same time highly attractive and joyful for the children and also immensely effective in building up a bridge for eliminating the gaps that prevents these girls from acquiring education and place finding in the mainstream milieu with equality and dignity.

The Program, has not only had multidimensional impacts on the socio-cultural and economic settings of the localities where the schools are set up but also has tremendous potential of replication and policy modifications.

Agragamee is also supported for a State Resource Centre for Adult Literacy and Continuing Education by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. They are also developing a model based on the principles outlined in the current approach for adult literacy. The objectives of SRC are to provide academic and technical resource support to adult education Programs mainly through organization of training Programs, material development, innovative projects, research studies and evaluation in 8 districts of Odisha.

In the past, Agragamee has included many Alternative Education Centres (AECs) and District Resource Units (DRUs) as part of its Adult literacy Programs. The Village Education Committees (VECs) too took up advocacy projects on education in tribal areas. Political literacy has always been an inherent aspect of the training at the AECs. Income Generation Programs (IGP) and their training have been facilitated in over 9 districts through the AECs. This also attempts at making the schools a self-sustainable initiative.

Agragamee has constantly focused on the capacity building of progressive youth and women for their socio-economic development. Over the last three decades, many workshops and training have been conducted to impart education on different vocations, government schemes and Programs and health and hygiene. The training Programs have also focused on leadership, communication skills, use of land, water and forest. The trainings emphasise on the villagers' role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, forest protection, education in tribal areas, credit groups and entrepreneurship development, health and improved agriculture.

From the 1990s to the present, Agragamee has conducted various camps around issues like voter awareness, women's rights, environment protection, legal aid, motherhood and child literacy amongst others. It has stretched across all of Agragamee's outreach areas in Rayagada, Kalahandi, Nabarangpur, Mayurbhanj, Koraput and Ganjam.