**GIVE THEM A FUTURE**

**Help Educate Poor Tribal Children in India**

**Introduction:**

The current Program seeks to improve school learning for tribal communities who have faced multiple exclusions for generations. It is located in underdeveloped tribal districts of Odisha, and is designed specially for tribal and other girls from economically deprived sections of the population, where a first generation of literates have not yet emerged. Tribal girls are the least literate section in the whole country. The lack of education binds them to a life of toil and exploitation, without even the know how to even count their notes when they receive their pay. This project will provide them quality education, and help them for further education so that they can dream of a brighter future for themselves and their daughters. The dimensions of the overall problem are also alarming. The number of illiterates in just 4 tribal districts of Odisha is more than 2 million as per the national census figures of 2011. If we take into account, the current poor quality of education in the tribal regions, then these numbers can only be predicted to increase, as national studies show that as many as 46% of children in class V are not able to read class 1 text. Detailed micro-studies by Agragamee reveal an even worse picture. As against a census literacy rate of 34.5 in Dasmantpur Block of Koraput District, an Agragamee sample survey yielded a literacy rate of 8%, in Kalahandi District, against 37.16% census figures, Agragamee figures were 12%.

Reading is the foundational skill on which much of all further learning depends. Children without fluent reading abilities cannot understand their textbooks, and are more likely to drop out of school. In the tribal regions, the implications of this are enormous, as entire village communities of children continue with poor reading abilities. Not being able to read also in effect disempowers a person in several ways. Thus, in the tribal regions, with dismal literacy rates, the entire community is disempowered, and unable to participate effectively in any development process. The problem is complex as poor quality school education is not questioned by the parent community. Nor is a tribal family able to take any form of remedial action for their child, being themselves illiterate, and too poor to afford any form of tuition. Low performance in education and poor socio-economic standards are thus self-reinforcing characteristics that tie communities across the world to low income and poverty. It is found that the socio-economic status of students influences school learning outcomes significantly. School education thus tends to reproduce existing socio-economic patterns, rather than create a more equitable distribution of learning opportunities and outcomes. This is more apparent in a large and diverse country like India, where class, caste and geographical divides enable a few to access the best education in the world, while a staggeringly large majority of children struggle with basic learning

According to the Government reports, the number of drop outs and out of

school children has been significantly reduced. The Government data as per the following table indicated that the percentage of out of school children till 14 years of age has been reduced to less than 1%. However, the question remains, how much of this has translated to increased learning, and literacy. As mentioned above the quality of teaching remains dismal with more than 50% children being unable to read even in class V.

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|  |  | **OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN (Source:OPEPA Website)** | | | | | | | |  |
|  |  | **BOYS** | **GIRLS** | **TTL** | **BOYS** | **GIRLS** | **TTL** | **BOYS %** | **GIRLS%** | **TTL %** |
| **15** | **Kalahandi** | **125830** | **119175** | **245005** | **24** | **37** | **61** | **0.02** | **0.03** | **0.02** |
| **20** | **Koraput** | **99242** | **89684** | **188926** | **609** | **491** | **1100** | **0.61** | **0.55** | **0.58** |
| **23** | **Nawarangpur** | **108500** | **102737** | **211237** | **751** | **639** | **1390** | **0.69** | **0.62** | **0.66** |
| **27** | **Rayagada** | **77053** | **69232** | **146285** | **1542** | **1411** | **2953** | **2** | **2.04** | **2.02** |
|  | **Odisha** | **410625** | **380828** | **791453** | **2926** | **2578** | **5504** | **0.39** | **0.36** | **0.38** |
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Agragamee surveys also indicate extremely low reading abilities even in higher grades in the tribal regions. In a sample survey in 7 Panchayats, Agragamee found only 46% of 14 year olds could read, while 22% of the m could not even identify alphabets.

After the passing of the Right to Education Act, there is no repeating of grades, as the Act prohibits that. This along with removal of traditional evaluation systems in terms of strict tests and marking has affected the educational system negatively according to many teachers. National studies have also found that learning levels have decreased after the passing of the RTE Act in 2009. In the tribal regions, it has been Agragamee’s experience that a complex set of factors affects learning, and continuity in schools. Poverty combined with the culture of complete self-reliance necessitates apprenticeship of the children from an early age into the adult routines and jobs for developing the basic skill. Despite this, parents increasingly realize the need for school education and send their children to the Government primary schools. However the poor quality of schooling makes this a costly investment in terms of time, and other basics that are needed to send the child to school, including things like notebooks, pen, pencils, etc. On the other hand, being by and large unfamiliar with the scripted world, parents are little able to monitor the progress of the child. Finding at the end of a year or two that the offspring has little to show for the long hours spent in the class room, parents have little qualms about pulling them out from time to time to lend a helping hand in the family works. All this reinforces the irrelevance of school education in its current form to the child, which eventually results in drop outs. More often than not, the child is not isolated but is part of a larger peer group of irregular students, who eventually drop out having gained little from their years within the institutional space called ‘School’ in their village.

On the other hand, poor educational levels also results in very few teachers from the tribal regions in the schools. There is thus a large gap between the teacher and her students in terms of language and cultural affinity. Teachers find them selves unable to reach out to the children to have an engaged class room, with children involved in their lessons. They often find excuses in the poor abilities of the children, or in language differences, seek escape routes through labelling tribal children in general as poor learners etc. Also to blame are contemporary methods and techniques for which appropriate pedagogy has not been developed. Thus, the Grade I language book, which has been developed for a child centred, and activity based learning method, provides the first obstacle, as most teachers are not able to comprehend how to teach it, being more used to the ‘Barno Bodh’ which is the traditional class 1 primer. Things are even more complicated as the book combines language and mathematics teaching, for which the teachers are even more ill-equipped. The Right to Education Act is further blamed by teachers as also other functionaries at the district and Block level for abolishing punishment in class. Teachers feel that they have no means of control, or enforcing learning. Even though teachers go through several trainings, beginning with professional teacher training courses, and then periodic in-service sessions, by and large the pedagogical understanding is that without fear, and control, learning is inadequate. The ban on punishments is often broken covertly in the class rooms, as reported by many a student, yet, the overall feeling is that the complete ban on corporal punishment hampers teaching and learning, leading to poor student achievements.

Agragamee has made sustained efforts to address these complex problems by primarily ensuring an open and liberal ambience of learning. This encourages a healthy and constructive relationship of friendship and camaraderie between teacher and student, rather than one of fear, and submission. Even though few of the teachers in Agragamee Schools have received professional teacher training, in service training has been taken up on a sustained basis, exposing them to the basic concept and understanding of good teaching methods and processes of keeping students engaged and involved in the classroom processes, increasing keenness and enthusiasm of the students in their lessons, a fundamental necessity for good quality teaching. Sustained effort has also been made in a concerted and systematic manner for developing a pedagogy of early grade teaching for first generation school children through dialogue with linguists and educationists at various levels. This has helped develop teaching and learning material, and primers and story and song books, that facilitates easy and fun learning for the children. This enables stress free, and relaxed classroom processes for the teacher as well as the child. Frequent discussion and dialogue, engaging tribal language teachers for early classes, removing the element of fear has helped to address learning, and even more teaching issues increasing the efficacy of the whole processes. As against the minimum of four to five years taken in Government Schools for the children to begin to read, Agragamee has been able to ensure that all children are able to read comfortably by the time they cross Grade II. By the time, children are in Grade IV, they are able to write small stories and essays, with beautiful and excellent illustrations as well. This has given rise to a newsletter called Dangar Katha written and illustrated by the children.

The Current Project:

The current project will be taken up for tribal girls and boys in the districts of Rayagada and Kalahandi, for children, who would otherwise have joined their parents in stone crushing, or rice transplanting, stared at child birth by 14 years of age due to child marriage, who would have been bonded to local landlords for loans that have been handed down to their parents.

Overall Goal:

To help tribal children from the poorest families have a bright future by ensuring quality education

Objectives:

1. To engender a generational change in tribal villages by providing quality and holistic primary education
2. To enable children in remote villages climb out of the cycle of poverty-illiteracy-poverty, and go for further education
3. To develop a teacher training model that can be taken up at a larger scale for promotion of quality education for first generation school children
4. To develop quality workbooks and guides that can help learning without stress and fear

Activities:

1. Classes for children from Grades I to V
2. Mid-day meal
3. Uniform and shoes for children
4. Supply of notebooks and text books
5. Development of TLM
6. Teacher Training
7. Parent – teacher workshops for promotion of the idea, and ensure regular attendance of the children,
8. Linkages with Government Primary Schools for training and demonstration to improve teaching and learning
9. Workshops for promotion and up-scaling of the idea

Outcome:

1st year:

1. 2000 children learn the 3 Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic through quality teaching efforts in Agragamee Schools
2. Publication of the Children’s Newsletter: Dangar Kathha (Stories from the hills)
3. 25 wall magazines with children’s writing and illustrations
4. 80 teachers trained
5. 100 Govt. Schools made aware of Agragamee School Approach, and demand text books and other TLM

In 5 years:

1. 100 Govt. Schools take up the model of Agragamee School
2. Vast improvement of learning and reading in 100 villages as above,
3. Generational change initiated.