The Nature School:
Providing Primary Education in a Safe and Protected Environment to Children in Need

Progress Report
April 2017 to March 2018

Submitted to:
Asha for Education, Bangalore
Section 1: Background

The Timbaktu Collective is a grassroots non-profit organisation which works towards the sustainable development of marginalised people across 175 villages in the drought-prone and ecologically challenged Anantapur District in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. The Collective, which was established in 1990, currently partners with about 22,000 families through its various thematic programmes.

The mission of the organisation is to enable marginalised sections of the population, such as small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, people with disabilities, children, women, Dalits, and Backward Classes to enhance their livelihood resources, get organised and work towards social justice and gender equity and lead life in a meaningful and joyous manner. The values dear to the Collective are the celebration of life, gender equity, and faith in people and their wisdom and excellence.

With community participation and ownership as its underlying theme, the Collective develops and implements programmes that address the rights of disadvantaged, rural people. The operational strategy across the majority of its programmes is the creation of independent people’s organisations (in the form of Cooperatives) in order to build solidarity, engage with market forces, and address issues of poverty, food security and livelihood promotion.

Our programmes and their areas of intervention:

- Chiguru (tender leaf): child rights and alternative education
- Timbaktu Organic: organic farming among small holder farmers and marketing of produce
- Swasakthi (power of self): alternative banking via thrift and credit, legal aid and counselling for rural women
- Militha (inclusion): enhancing rights and livelihoods of People with Disabilities
- Gramasiri (wealth of village): expanding livelihoods of landless labourers through animal husbandry
- Kalpavalli (source of abundance): natural resource management and ecological restoration of common waste lands in partnership with local communities

The Chiguru programme implements two projects:

- The Nature School (called as ‘Prakruthi Badi’ in Telugu): a semi-residential, alternative primary school (class 1 to 5) for underprivileged and disadvantaged children. The Nature School is an officially recognised educational institution under the provisions of the Right to Education Act (RTE)¹.
- Mogga: outreach work and experiential education among children and youth. A key component of the Mogga project is the Children and Youth Resource Centre (CYRC) in Chennekothapalli.

¹ The Right to Education Act is a federal legislation (passed in 2009), which mandates the provision of compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14 and regulates the primary and secondary education sectors in the country.

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Section 2: Project Summary

The purpose of the project is to provide primary education in a safe and protected environment to 50 children from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds across three mandals (administrative units) of Anantapur District. The project will provide education and support to children, who otherwise would drop out of school or perform below their potential, to effectively access the public education system from class 6 onwards.

Objectives

The project objectives are as follows:
1. To enable 50 children annually to attend the Nature School and gain access to quality education, to healthy and nutritious food, to appropriate and timely health care services, and take part in extracurricular activities which facilitate life skills enhancement, creative engagement, cultural expression, ecological awareness and play
2. To develop and implement a comprehensive programme development plan for the Nature School which focuses on the diversification of its funding base among institutional and individual donors.

Section 3: Activity-wise Report

3.1 Conducting academic sessions (class 1 to class 5)

The academic year\(^2\) for 2017-18 began on June 1, 2017 after a month long break for the summer holidays. While the student body numbered 57 at the start of the academic year, 3 students dropped out in the first few weeks based on their parents’ wishes. Therefore, 54 students are now on the verge of completing the academic year in April 2018.

We began the academic year with an emphasis on improving teaching quality and ensuring that each student reaches his or her potential. In addition, increased emphasis was put on the use of teaching tools such as worksheets, atlas’, flash cards, dictionaries and audio-visual infrastructure. In November 2017, the pedagogy of the School was boosted by the upgradation of the technology infrastructure to include a desktop computer, speaker, and projector.

Academic sessions were conducted for four groups – Grade 1 & 2 (we admitted only two children in Grade 1), Grade 3, Grade 4, and Grade 5, with each of the four mandatory subjects - Telugu, Mathematics, Environmental Sciences and English, being covered in four 45-minute slots before lunch. The Grade V students enjoyed making use of sight words in the English class. All the children revised and strengthened their foundations in Mathematics and English phonetics through group exercises. Several students are beginning to devise and solve their own Mathematics equations, and are on their way to overcoming their fear of the “monster number – 9”.

Starting with this academic year, classroom management was prioritized to ensure optimum utilisation of time and avoid distractions. The teachers carry stationary bags to class which contain pens, pencils, crayons, gum, scissors, staplers, scales etc., for distribution to children.

\(^2\) The Indian academic year lasts from June to April the next year.
The class does not begin until the teacher verifies that the students have their textbooks, notebooks, and stationary, and that all children have drunk water and completed ablutions.

There were also challenges. The majority of these children are first-generation learners and come from disadvantaged backgrounds, which results in several interconnected issues: varying levels of understanding, very poor attention levels, difficulty remembering topics discussed and not able to use writing tools such as pens and pencils properly. There is also a clear link between academic performance and the number of years spent at the school. These difficulties were handled with patience and care, since the children are able to pick up concepts pretty fast once they get used to life in the school.

Performance assessment of students was undertaken in two phases – for one-week each in August 2017 and February 2018. While services of Ms. Sayonika was sought on both phases, Ms. Duhita was involved in the first phase assessment. In phase one, we administered the ASER Survey\(^3\) on all the students alongside our Child Assessment Format (CAF), which covers prowess in academics and extra-curricular activities. In phase two, the CAF was conducted to examine improvements, if any. This will also help fine-tune the teaching methodology and identify children in need of additional support. The class-wise details of the students\(^4\) and their academic performance as per ASER are listed in Annex 1.

Finally, the students were provided with textbooks, notebooks, and stationery, both at the start of the academic year (June 2017) and in October 2017. This ensured that academic session were able to be conducted without any hindrance.

Since February 2018, the academic schedule for Grade V was revised to include two sessions on each school day to prepare for the Andhra Pradesh Model School\(^5\) examination, which will be conducted on April 8, 2018. The preparatory sessions were conducted by Mr. Ashok Kumar Ganguly, Communications Officer at the Timbaktu Collective, who had previously trained three Grade V students to write the entrance exam in 2016-17.

### 3.2 Organizing learning visits to the Children's Resource Centre

The students visited the Children and Youth Resource Centre (CYRC) on 11 occasions as part of the School's focus on expanding opportunities for experiential education. The students, who were accompanied by the teaching staff, were supported to make best use of the facilities at the CYRC, which include books, craft materials, computers, games and other resources. The staff of the CYRC also conducted activities in the School.

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\(^3\) ASER, or the Annual Status of Education Survey, is an educational survey and methodology developed by the NGO Pratham, and used by public and private agencies to ascertain the basic learning levels of students.

\(^4\) The students graduate from their class in April 2018.

\(^5\) The Model Schools are high-quality public schools located at the sub-divisional level which provide free education from Grade VI to Grade 12 for underprivileged children (those whose parents earn less than Rs.100,000 a year). Since the School has a limited capacity, it conducts an entrance exam, after which admission is secured based on performance and the social category that they represent. There is a limitation in terms of how many students from one particular community can attend the school – this is part of the affirmative strategy employed by the government.
3.3 The provision of nutritious food
The School kitchen was merged with the Mayasabha community kitchen in Timbaktu. This was done to ensure optimum quality of food, and to benefit from the culinary expertise of the chef of the Mayasabha kitchen as well as the support of its staff. The variety of green leafy vegetables and lentils have been introduced to the menu, along with unpolished rice, which has higher nutritional quality compared to fully polished rice.

Changes were made to the early morning nutrition intake, with cow milk being provided along with ragi (finger millet) porridge. For other meals, egg was introduced on a bi-weekly basis, with chicken curry being served on Sunday afternoon. While meat and eggs were provided earlier as well, this was not done in a regular manner week by week. A snack or fruit is provided pre-lunch, and juice is provided at 4pm. As part of the common kitchen an organic garden is also maintained, which produces various vegetables and greens. These are again added to the nutritious food cooked for children.

3.4 Maintenance of high standards of health and hygiene
The School was able to maintain high standards of health and hygiene by closely monitoring the health of students, ensuring timely medication and hospitalisation, and the provision of support from two caretakers and a recently hired matron. Students with health issues were taken to the Public Health Centre in Chennekothapalli, Spandana Hospital in Dharmavaram, Savera Hospital in Anantapur, the Rural Development Trust’s Hospital in Bathalapalli and the Baptist Hospital in Bangalore.

3.5 Arts and Crafts
The students spent an hour each School day engaged in various arts and crafts activities such as papier-mâché, mask making, collage, drawing, knitting, hemming, spray painting, clay work and painting. The group is supervised by a teacher for the entire duration of an activity. The earlier practice of having different craft sessions monitored by individual teachers has been replaced by a focus on just two crafts per week supervised by two teachers, with a weekly rotation. This was done to ensure deeper engagement with a specific craft and to free up time for the teachers to prepare for the next day’s classes. The staff from the CYRC also visit once a week to work with the children.

3.6 Sports and Games
The students enjoyed themselves at the end of each day with a hour dedicated to play, both in-doors and outdoors. The children are free to choose any sport or game and the session is monitored by the teachers, matron, and care-takers to ensure fair play and that the children are on their best behaviour.

The main activities that the children engaged in were Cricket, Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, tenni-coit, Hop-scotch and board games such as caroms, snakes and ladders and chess. In addition, the children were enthralled by the mini-trampoline and four geared children’s cycles, that were purchased by the School from the Decathlon store in Bangalore. Not surprisingly, they prefer trampoline jumping and cycling to regular activities, and therefore, the School ensures that every child gets equal chance to take part. Considering the interest of children in playing on Trampoline, it is planned to buy a bigger one in the next semester.

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3.7 Performing Arts
During the year, the students participated in five training sessions on the performing arts, with a 5-day training on the kolattam (folk dance performed with sticks), two 10-day training sessions on chakkabajana and pandari bhajana (folk dances performed with jingles and kerchiefs), a 5-day training in Indian classical music, and a training on dappu (a local percussion instrument) for 5 days. The children spent two hours on the relevant activity on training days, and get an opportunity to take part in the performing art of their choice for one hour on each school day.

3.8 Organizing events and festivals
The children celebrated festivals and events of national importance such as Independence Day, Gandhi Birth anniversary, Deepavali (festival of lights), Christmas, Sankranti (harvest festival), Republic Day, and Shivarathri (a local festival). On these occasions, the children are responsible for cleaning up the space, organising the functions, and putting up cultural performances. The cultural performances are attended by members of the Timbaktu community and staff of the Collective. On Shivarathri night, a group of Grade IV and V students put up a pandari-bajana dance performance at the local temple. Their performance was highly appreciated by the 1000-strong audience.

3.9 Promoting ecological understanding and awareness
Ecological understanding and awareness is a core component of the Nature School, since these are crucial values for future adults. The children spent an hour on each School day tending to the School garden, alongside other plants surrounding the school and their dormitories. Members of the Panchavati team (who maintain the Timbaktu agro-forest habitat) were also roped in to conduct two training sessions on animal care and gardening.

3.10 Hosting Quarterly Parent Teacher Meetings (PTMs)
During the reporting period, quarterly Parent Teacher Meetings (PTM) were conducted for a day each in November and January. The parents/guardians who attended in November and January were 28 and 26 respectively. All parents/guardians were invited, but only half could attend. We will work towards ensuring at least 75% attendance in the PTMs. The discussions were primary on academics, health, Aadhar\(^6\) card application and updating, record sheets, cloths, absenteeism, problematic behaviour etc.

3.11 Assessing teacher performance and training
In October 2018, a two-day teacher training was conducted by Ashok Kumar Ganguly, Communications Officer at the Collective. The training focused on ensuring academic excellence and the fulfilment of potential, monitoring and evaluation of learning outcomes, online resources, visualization of an ideal school, innovative teaching methodology, personality development and lifelong learning among teachers. In addition, a comprehensive analysis was undertaken on the effectiveness of the daily time-table, role of support staff, and other administrative matters, and several important changes were made to the same in order to create the conditions for teachers to perform well.

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6 India’s National ID card, which is mandatory to access to range of government services.
Section 4: Miscellaneous

4.1 Infrastructure Development
The infrastructure at the Nature School was ramped up with support from Asha and other donors. The entire premises of the Nature School was painted and whitewashed. Iron bunk beds were installed in all the student dorms with resized and reworked mattresses. A complete round of repairs was undertaken at the dormitories, the main Assembly room was renovated and two adjoining class rooms were added, and the roofs of two classrooms were re-done. Two new rooms were constructed for the staff of the Nature School.

A 2 K.V solar energy system was setup at the School, and this has ensured adequate and continuous power supply. A new classroom for Grade V students was constructed next to the old kitchen, which in turn has been reimagined as the Department of Fun (DF). The DF will comprise of a library, toys, computers, a satellite TV setup, and high-quality speakers. While the necessary architectural changes to the building were nearing completion in March, the School will be purchasing the equipment mentioned above during the summer break in May. Most of these could be done with funds raised from various individual donors.

4.2 Staff Changes
The teaching staff was consolidated to a four member team. The new team comprises of Mr. Bayapa Reddy (Head Master), Mr. T. Ramanjineyulu, Ms. Gayatri and Ms. Punyavathi (additional responsibility as House Parent). One of the long-time teachers Ms. Gangamma was promoted to be the centre in-charge for CYRC at Chennekothapalli.

Mr. Madhusudhan, an experiential educator with more than 20 years of experience have joined in to provide leadership to the entire Chiguru programme. He has proved to be a capable and creative leader, and is someone who understands children. We propose to hire two more local teachers during the summer break based on a rigorous criteria, and provide necessary orientation and support before the next academic year begins. Preliminary discussions are underway with Mr. Ashok Kumar Ganguly, to continue to provide support in teacher training, English, and preparation for competitive exams.

4.3 Visitors
The Nature School hosts a regular stream of visitors, both from India and outside the country. The children look forward to these occasions since they have a lot of questions, have lots to say, and want to put up cultural performances. Twenty four primary and middle school children from the Puvidham School in Tamil Nadu visited the Nature School in October 2017 and spent a week with the children. During the Collective’s quarterly Visitors’ Days7, 40 and 55 individuals, in September 2017 and January 2018 respectively, spent an evening interacting with the children.

7 Three-day events for individuals who are interested to learn about our work, are interested in sustainable, are exploring alternative ways of living etc.
Mr. Shankar Srinivas, a former volunteer with Asha for Education and old friend of the Collective, along with his wife, Ms. Tomoko, both of whom are Professors at the Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics at the University of Oxford, held a fascinating two-hour session on the human anatomy and genetics in January 2018. In November 2017, some visitors to Timbaktu contributed to the overall aesthetics of the school. Mr. Allan from Canada painted the walls of the Assembly with a silhouette of the local fauna, with the leopard featuring prominently. Ms. Anna and Mr. Denis (UK), Ms. Laurie (Zimbabwe), and Ms. Jessie and Ms. Sneha (India) helped restore the two school turtles to their natural habitat.

4.4 Legal and Statutory Compliances
The Nature School was able to meet all legal and statutory compliances including structural soundness certificate, fire safety certificate and accreditation as Child Care Institute. The students’ details were updated on the website of APSCERT as per the instructions of the Mandal Education Officer (immediate Government authority for the school). Finally, a nomination was submitted for the ‘Swaccha Vidyalaya Puraskar’ (Clean School Award).

Section 5: Conclusion
The School has been steadily making progress with the assured support from Asha and other donors, which has also enabled the Collective to utilise funds raised through donations and contributions to improve the infrastructural facilities that has been long pending. Academic improvement in each child is monitored at an individual level and the school thrives to make sure that all of them attain the optimum potential in their learning process.

Annexures
Annexure 1 – List of children and ASER test results

8 Asha for Education is a charitable, chapter-based organisation comprised of Indian students studying abroad who contribute to improving primary education in rural India. Asha for Education has been a key donor for the Nature School for several years.

9 Andhra Pradesh State Council of Educational Research and Training

10 The Swachh Vidyalaya Puraskar was instituted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India in 2016 to recognize, inspire and celebrate excellence in sanitation and hygiene practice in schools.