

Balamitra Tribal Education Programme

Site Visit Report

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1 The Problem

The literacy rate for Scheduled Tribes(STs)(47.1%) in India is quite lower than that of the overall population (65.38%). Adivasis in AP are no different in that respect and their literacy level is about 37.04% making them one of the least literate groups of people in India [1]. The education facilities available to the tribals are Ashram Schools [2] (residential schools run by the Government exclusively for STs) which can be categorized into

- Ashram Primary School (APS) – 3rd to 5th class
- Ashram Upper Primary School (AUPS) – 3rd to 7th class
- Ashram High School (AHS) – 3rd to 10th class

There are separate schools for girls and boys. It should be noted that Ashram Primary Schools do not cater to classes 1 and 2. In addition to these there are regular government schools one can go to. But in quite a few villages these do not exist, the nearest primary school is anywhere between 2 km and 10 km. The children of these villages do not have any chance of going to school. This has led to low literacy rate in the community. Furthermore, part of the Ashram school educated generation has lost touch with its tribal livelihood and culture. Samata's Balamitra Education Programme is an effort to correct this situation.

2 Project Details

Organization: Samata

Samata is a “social justice organization working for the rights of the tribal Adivasi people of Andhra Pradesh, India and for the protection of the natural resources and ecology of the Eastern Ghats (hills).”



Figure 1: Model School Classroom



Figure 2: Playing an arithmetic game

Project: Balamitra Tribal Education Programme

This programme consists of 40 single teacher Balamitra schools in remote hamlets of Visakhapatnam (Vizag) district, and a training and curriculum development centre located in Vizag city. The only way to reach these schools is by trekking¹ in the beautiful Eastern Ghats.

The goal [3] of this project is *to provide creative and joyful education to all the children of the hills.*

3 Model School – Day 1, 21 Aug 2008

The first day we (Santha Kumar Nowpada and Siddhartha Chinthapally) visited the model school in Sagarnagar Colony, Vizag. The model school is a curriculum development cum training center in addition to being a residential school. There are 34 children at this school in classes 3, 4 and 5. The teaching staff includes four permanent teachers and three volunteers from Germany, who are trained in the Waldorf teaching methods. The German volunteers teach art, music and English in addition to training the teachers in Waldorf methodology. Extra-curricular activities are integrated into the lessons. For example, a Telugu lesson on Mahabharatha includes sketching and colouring characters from the story; multiplication tables are taught by making songs and games out of them, while addition is practised as a game (see Fig 2).

Ms Bhanumati, Project Director, and Ms Sushila Marar, Project Coordinator, explained the concept of the Balamitra Badis in detail and showed us around the class rooms, various lesson plan materials, teaching aids and the small farm where children grow vegetables. We got to witness firsthand the teaching methodologies employed at the school.

3.1 How it works

The Balamitra *badis*² are run with the help of the local people and Community Based Organizations (CBO) with technical and financial support from Samata. CBOs are the field

¹The trek could be anywhere from an hour to half a day depending on the location

²Badi is Telugu for school

organizations which help identify the villages, teachers and also serve as a liaison between the villagers and Samata whose coordinators also monitor these schools from time to time. These 40 villages are split into three regions with a CBO or two per region.

1. Killoguda Resource Center. CBO: Sanjeevini. Caters to 14 villages
2. Poolabanda Resource Center. CBO: Adivasimitra(6), TERDS(7).
3. Kamayyapeta Resource Center. CBO: Adivasimitra(7), RKSS(6).



Figure 3: Balamitra Badis map prepared by Ms Prabhavati

The Balamitra Badi resource centers are co-located with the offices of these CBOs. These serve as nodal agencies for the schools. Resource centers help teachers with preparing the lesson plans and in documenting the tribal culture, songs and their languages. Resource persons also monitor the functioning of the school by visiting each of these schools every week.

Every month teachers of all the schools associated with a particular CBO assemble at the resource center for training and to plan activities for the next month. Teachers' salaries are also paid on this day. They share with each other their experiences of the past month and bring to the notice of the CBO any issues that might have come up. Every quarter teachers from all the schools meet at the model school for training and to plan activities for the coming quarter.

4 Field Visit – Day 2, 22 Aug 2008

Mr Seetharama Raju, Field Coordinator, arranged a cab for us and we started at 6am in the morning for the hills, accompanied by Ms Ammaji who works with Sanjeevani CBO. The journey took us past Tyda jungle resort, Ananthagiri hills and many beautiful views of the valley beneath. We stopped at Araku for some breakfast³ en route to Killoguda resource center which is co-located with Sanjeevani's office.

4.1 Killoguda Resource Center



Figure 4: Killoguda Resource Center

Killoguda resource center is a small two-room building. The bigger hall is the resource center while the smaller one is Sanjeevani's office. A small tribal hut serves as the guest house. The tribes in this area primarily speak Adivasi Oriya and Kodu (also known as Kuyi). Adivasi Oriya (different from Oriya) is the lingua franca of the tribes of Eastern Ghats. Telugu is spoken by most of the elders owing to the trade with people from the plains.

At Killoguda lesson plans are prepared in Telugu and to some extent in Adivasi Oriya. We observed charts with numerals, days of the week and commonly used terms in the three

³If you are travelling to these hills you have to carry water from the plains. Apparently the water here is not very safe.

languages. Work is also in progress to compile dictionaries for Adivasi languages – Adivasi Oriya, Kodu and Konda Dora. These dictionaries already have at least four times more vocabulary than the government prepared dictionaries *Konda Bharathi* and *Kuyya Bharathi* each of which has about 250 words.

Monthly staff meetings are held at the resource center. Four resource persons are employed at this center for monitoring schools, training teachers and reviewing work and finding out requirements. They also help prepare teaching aids out of locally available material. For instance, seeds are used for counting, vegetables/flowers are used to prepare colours and clay is used to make models of objects. A corner of the center is the Season Table (see Fig 13), a display of various seasonally available flowers, fruits/seeds and leaves on a bright cloth. This is said to raise children's awareness of their surroundings.



Figure 5: Some teaching aids

4.2 Koyyamamidi School

Ms Seetha (resource person from Killoguda), Ms Ammaji, Mr Seetharama Raju, Mr Santha Kumar and I drove to Sagar which is the last point one can drive to. From there, Koyyamamidi, a small hamlet of 14 houses, is about an hour's trek through the scenic hills.

The school at Koyyamamidi is a semi-permanent structure with mud walls, wooden beams, and tiled roof built with the help of villagers. The land is donated by the village too. The school operates from 8am to 3pm with a lunch break at 12:30. There were four



Figure 6: Typical Balamitra Badi



Figure 7: Koyyamamidi School



Figure 8: Clay models made by the children



Figure 9: Koyyamamidi School

small benches which the children use as writing desks. Out of the 20 enrolled only seven were present on this day (partly because Friday is the market day there), five in first class and two in second class. In most of the Balamitra badis the instructor has completed high school or intermediate education and comes from the same village or a nearby village. Mr Dombu, the instructor here, is from Sagar and has studied till class 10.

The children at the school were quite shy at the beginning but opened up soon and sang a few songs in Adivasi Oriya and Telugu and played some arithmetic games.

Children who finish second class are sent to the nearest Ashram school. The education level is quite basic and not all children can read or write yet. Those in the first class only sing songs while those in second can just about write the Telugu alphabet and do basic arithmetic.

Each village has a *Vidya Committee* which is the liaison between the teacher and the village. The committee helps enroll children in the school and prevent students from dropping out. Each school maintains a visitors book which is also used to give feedback to the instructor. We noted regular entries made by the visiting field resource persons from the resource center and occasional visitors.

We bade goodbye to Dombu master and the kids and set off for Kooda. It started to drizzle lightly as we walked past paddy fields, vegetable fields and waded across a couple of

mountain streams. We made it to Kooda just in time before the rain intensified.

4.3 Kooda School

The school at Kooda is a little bigger but has the same set up as the one at Koyyamamidi. It is a semi-permanent structure with mud floor, two foot high mud walls, and tiled roof. There is a small room at the back which serves as the store room cum teacher's room. The instructor here is Ms Lakshmi who has completed her graduation at a nearby town and stays at Killoguda with her baby and husband, Potharaju who works at the resource center. The teacher treks for about 3 hours every day, sometimes with her young kid (about an year old) in tow, to teach the children. There are 32 children enrolled in the school, 23 from



Figure 10: Kooda School



Figure 11: Children

Kooda and 9 from Kotha Kolli, a village one kilometer away. At the time of the visit only 17 children were present in the school.⁴ Efforts are on to get the mid-day meal started again.

Though these are not government schools, Samata has petitioned the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) to provide mid-day meals in these schools as there are no other schools around. ITDA has sanctioned only rice under the mid-day meal scheme. The villagers contribute vegetables and other requirements as well as prepare the meals themselves for the children.

Of the 17 children present 9 were boys and 8 were girls. Except for three all of them were in first standard. The mother tongue of the children is Kodu and they can understand Adivasi Oriya. Only a few understand Telugu though. They sang a few tribal songs for us in Telugu, Kodu and Adivasi Oriya.

The children at the school are very active and showed us the toys they had made out of clay. They also made some charts and drawings using locally available material like red mud, flowers, leaves, coal etc for colours. The school is equipped with colour chalks, basic teaching aids, slates and notebooks. They also maintain a Season Table at one corner of the classroom.

The school also had a first aid box and some basic medicines. The health and well being of the children is also periodically monitored.

⁴ Apparently the children from Kotha Kolli stopped attending the school when the mid-day meal program was stopped owing to non-delivery of food supplies from the government.



Figure 12: Typical Balamitra Badi



Figure 13: Season Table

Mr Potharaju cooked a delicious lunch for us using locally available leaves and rice. After lunch at 3 pm we started back for Sagar in the rain. On our way back we happened to pass by a government school in one of the villages and wanted to see what was happening there. I was shocked to see no sign of activity there – dust covered black board and desks, no chalks, no students nor a teacher. All we found was a leave letter dated 12 Aug pinned to the door stating that the teacher was on leave.

Mr Seetharama Raju informed us of the rampant proxy teaching that happens in most of the hill area government schools. Apparently teachers “appoint” someone from the village as their substitute for a “salary” of about 1000 rupees per month while they stay in a nearby town. Samata is also trying to educate the villagers of the perils of proxy teaching.

5 Financial Status

Balamitra Badis programme was funded by Sir Dorbajee Tata Trust (SDTT) and by Asha for Education in the past. This year, however, there is a funding crunch with no institutional supporters or sponsors.

Samata has submitted a proposal to SDTT for the entire project which is currently under review. A sum of Rs 74 lakhs has been requested in this proposal for the following:

- cost for the village schools (this is the part that was funded by Asha previously)
- budget for model school cum training centre in Vizag
- budget for advocacy programme for education
- budget for infrastructure and equipment, maintenance, programmes, documentation requirements of tribal culture like songs, stories etc at the four village resource centres
- budget for adolescent education programme

6 Impressions from the visit

6.1 Positives

Balamitra Tribal Education Programme uses innovative methods while blending local tribal culture into the curriculum for primary classes. Activities which are usually perceived to be extra-curricular like drawing, singing, dancing, farming etc are beautifully blended into lesson plans. At the same time teachers are not constrained by the lesson plans and have ample freedom to improvise.

In most of the villages this is the only educational facility available. It is quite hard to run schools in such remote places without the support of local population, which Samata and partner CBOs have built over the last two decades. Despite the obvious physical effort one has to put in just to reach the school, Samata and the CBOs have been able to find willing teachers and coordinators, which is a proof of their reach and support within the community. All the schools are constructed with the support of the villagers which instills a sense of ownership in the village.

Enrollment rate is 100% in both the villages that we visited. We were told that this is the norm in most villages.

All the schools are provided with basic first aid boxes and medicines (both allopathic and homeopathy) and the teachers are given training before hand on the usage of these. Apart from this, all the Resource Centres also have a stock of medicines which are periodically updated when Mr Seethrama Raju goes for field school inspections. Health check ups and vaccination programmes are done every three months. Heights and weights of children are monitored, their deficiencies noted and if required concerned doctors at Primary Health Centers are consulted.

Documentation of tribal songs, stories, art, language and culture is quite impressive. A healthy gender ratio (close to 1:1) among students as well as teachers staff is also noted.

6.2 Concerns

There are few things which need to be addressed however. The lack of a role model in the village probably makes it hard for the villagers to appreciate the importance of education. Some of the parents seem to perceive the school more as a day care center and less as an educational institution. We have observed about 50-60% attendance in schools on the day of the visit. Teachers informed us that the attendance is low on Friday as it is the market day, but is usually higher(70-80%) on other days. We see absenteeism as an issue that needs to be addressed.

In a single teacher school there is a lot of responsibility on the teacher's shoulders. The teachers have shown a lot of enthusiasm and are quite friendly with the children. However, we were told that some of the teachers needed to work more on their basics. They also need to be trained on time management especially for those teaching multiple classes in a single room.

Most of the schools teach only till second class. The children who pass out have been successfully transitioned to Ashram schools. But to achieve the goal of providing creative and joyful education I wish more schools would have classes 3, 4 and 5.

While the passion to expand and serve a larger part of the tribal community is appreciated, one however feels that Balamitra program seems to have expanded without an assured near term financial backing. Samata should now look at ways to secure the future of the existing schools.

7 Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Ms Bhanumati and Ms Sushila Marar who took the time to explain the programme in detail, to Mr Seetharama Raju for arranging the entire field trip and for the general introduction to the tribal culture he gave en route, to Ms Seema Mundoli for providing info and answers to numerous questions, to Mr Gopi and Mr Potharaju for the delicious lunch and to Ms Seetha and Ms Ammaji for their company and the yummy seethaphals :)

References

- [1] <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/>
- [2] <http://www.aptribes.gov.in/html/education.htm>
- [3] <http://www.balamitra.org>

APPENDIX

Some key statistics:

Number of villages	40
Number of children	834 (421 B, 412 G)
Number of teachers	40 (22 W, 18 M)
Number of resource centers	3
Number of partner CBOs	4
Number of students transitioned to Ashram schools	188
Average Enrollment	~ 100%
Average Attendance	70% - 80 %