

**The Thousand School Project: Observations from field visits
in Odisha**

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Introduction

India has made great strides in moving towards achieving the goal of universal primary education. The access to primary schools have become almost universal and retention rates have improved. Ever since an overwhelming majority of the age-group children are enrolled in primary schools, the focus of discussions and priority in interventions have shifted towards school quality, learning outcomes and learner achievements.

What is not sufficiently internalized is the fact that there are thousands of children still remaining out of school and efforts to bring them to schools or their alternatives remain a more difficult task at this stage of educational development than at a stage when enrolment ratios were low. A large share of the non-enrolled children not only belong to socially disadvantaged groups but also that they live in deprived regions and come from economically poor families. The governmental interventions alone may not succeed in attracting these children to schools. Very often than not, the NGOs are active in many such deprived localities and they succeed in bringing these hitherto neglected groups of children to schools - mostly government schools.

The Thousand Schools Project (TSP) in Odisha is an effort to bring children from remote rural areas and disadvantaged groups to schools, to retain them in schools and to ensure that they learn while they invest their time in schools. The project is funded by the Tata CSR and is implemented by ASPIRE, New Delhi. I was a member of a team which got a chance to visit the project areas and closely interact with the project functionaries, block and village representatives, educational functionaries of education departments working at the district and sub-district levels, teachers in several schools and villagers and community members at large. This Note is based on the field visits undertaken in the month of May 2018 in the project locations.

The Thousand School Project

The TSP project is conceived and implemented in the overall context of Education for All (EFA). While most children in most localities in India are in schools, a large number of children still remain non-enrolled. The non-enrolled children at this stage of educational

* This note is prepared based on the insights gained during the field visits to TSP project locations in Odisha. I am very grateful to the ASPIRE team, Tata Steel official and members of the visiting team. However, the views expressed in this note may not be attributed to other members of the team or the institute where the author is working.

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development in India live mostly in unreachable areas where schools do not exist, belong mostly to disadvantaged groups and located in the least developed remote rural areas. This project focuses its attention on these locations and the deprived children living in these localities.

The project objectives are:

- a) Widening access to primary education – ensuring no child is left behind
- b) Strengthening school attendance
- c) Improving learner achievement
- d) Creating child labour free villages

The TSP is being implemented in six tribal blocks of Odisha – Danagadi and Sukinda blocks of Jajpur district; Joda and Harichandanpur blocks of Keonjhar district and Koira and Kutra blocks of Sundargarh district of Odisha.

As can be seen from the list of project locations, the project is being implemented in difficult terrain both geographically and socially. Many of the villages covered by the project are located in remote areas which are not easily accessible due to lack of transport and communication facilities. Many of these locations are very sparsely populated and an school does not become an economically viable proposition in many of these locations.

The social composition of the population indicates that these locations are mostly inhabited by tribal groups for whom schooling and structured learning have not yet become a part of their daily life and, certainly, have not become an integral part of their culture. Therefore, the local pressure to open and operate schools is relatively low unless there is an external pressure. This is the space occupied by the NGOs in helping to create a demand for educational services in these deprived localities.

Bringing children from these remote locations to schools and engaging them in classroom learning processes in schools are indeed challenging tasks. The effectiveness of the project lies in its successful efforts in accepting these challenges and work towards achieving success in their efforts. As of March 2018, the project could reach out to more than 10,000 out of school children and succeeded in mainstreaming more than 9,000/ students.

Project intervention strategies

The interventions strategies under the Thousand Schools Project (TSP) project include:

- a) Household surveys and Village Education Registers (VERs)
- b) Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs) and Non-residential Bridge Courses (NRBCs).
- c) CERC – Cluster Education Resource Centers.
- d) Summer Camps mostly for one and a half months duration during the school vacation period.

e) Learning Enhancement Programme (LEP)

Household surveys and Village Education Registers (VERs)

The ASPIRE conducts surveys of households to identify non-enrolled children in the villages of the project blocks. When the surveys started in 2014, there existed no information about the number of children in the villages and their educational status. These surveys became necessary and very useful initial steps to identify who are to be targeted to bring to the schools.

Our interactions with villagers and teachers revealed that most of the non-enrolled children have been engaged in child labor activities to earn a living. The survey identified the non-enrolled children and persuaded them to come to schools. This part of the mobilization needed close interactions with their parents. In areas where schools are not viable, the children are brought to residential hostels and Ashram schools.

Unlike many public initiatives which create supply of education services, the TSP project created social demand for education. Needless to add, one of the most important modalities relied on by the project was tracking the children. The household surveys and development of Village Education Registers (VERs) acted as the most reliable tool to track children. The VERs contain information about all children of 0-18 age group in the selected villages. This information is collected from the households at the village level and forms the basis for preparing the Panchayat Education Registers. As the project activities started attracting School Management Committee (SMCs), they also got familiarized with the VERs.

Over a period of time the SMCs are maintaining these VERs. In other words, the VERs are now managed and used more by the local community - Panchayat members and SMC members – for monitoring educational progress than by the project functionaries. The transfer of ownership and initiative to local people have become an important feature of project implementation. Now it has become a wide-spread process thanks to the participation of parents, local community and members of the Panchayat Samities.

Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs) and Non-residential Bridge Courses (NRBCs).

The bridge courses have been very helpful to overcome learning deficits among children. The project followed two types of bridge courses - short term non-residential bridge courses (NRBC) to bring back the drop outs and residential bridge courses (RBCs) for the non-enrolled children. These two forms of interventions have been successful in bringing back many children to schools and socializing to them to schooling and learning processes.

We visited several RBCs. For example, our visit to an RBC in Godigotha village located in Danagadi Block of Jajapur district was rewarding. This gave us an opportunity to directly see and experience the activities in the centres, programmes planned and witness benefits of hard work put in by the project staff. The efforts by the project team succeeded in bring all non-enrolled children to schools and at present this village is among the several villages declared by the TSP as child labor free village. The information maintained by the project

functionaries show that as of March 2018, the project could reach out to more than 10,000/ out of school children and succeeded in mainstreaming more than 9,000/ students.

Cluster Education Resource Centers (CERCs)

The CERCs are organizational arrangements to take digital literacy and skills in handling computers to rural children. We visited one of the Cluster Education Resource Centres (CERC) in Baragola. This CERC, like other CERCs in the project areas, has many desktop computers. The students come to the Centre all the time – day time and in the evenings. The CERC was very much overcrowded with students when we visited it and we could see that each child was competing with another to work on the computers. We were impressed by the level of enthusiasm shown by the children and equally by the digital competencies acquired by them at a very young age in such remote locations. The children were excited to exhibit some of the digital competencies acquired by them. They have become experts in graphic designing and using software programmes. They used the computers to show us different varieties of designs. The students use these designs on the computer and use them to make the same designs with materials provided to them. The CERC room was filled with different designs they made with the materials provided to them.

What was very impressive was the self-confidence revealed by the children in the CERC. Contrary to the general behaviour of keeping quiet and moving away when they meet with strangers, this group of children were interacting with ease with members of the visiting team. The confidence they showed is an indication of the positive attitude created by the project and the friendly approach of the project functionaries.

Learning Enrichment Program (LEP)

LEP is an intervention to address the issue of learning deficits among children attending schools. LEP has developed better pedagogies than that are followed in the regular schools. LEP is focussing on children of grades III-V and is targeting children with low levels of learning. The LEPs are organized for two hours every day on the school premises, before and after school.

The LEP classes are also organized level-wise. Level-1 course implies competencies to be mastered in grades 1-2 and level 2 implies competencies to be attained in grades 3-5. The additional inputs and support is for six months at each identified level. The subjects taught in level 1 include maths and language while at level 2 teaching includes Science and English in addition to Language and Maths.

LEP teachers are youths selected from the same or nearby village, trained and provided intensive on-the-job support to get a grasp on the teaching techniques. LEP is currently running in 214 schools. As of March 2018, nearly 12,350 children have been covered under LEP. This has a tremendous effect on student performance and their levels of learning in schools.

Summer Camps

Summer Camps are organized in the months of May and June when schools are closed for the summer vacation. The focus is to reinforce the learning levels of children especially in the subject areas of language and maths. The camps also give a large opportunity for children to play, pick up skills in drawing, reading, storytelling and acting. The Camps make learning a joyful experience for the children.

We visited several summer schools during our stay in the project area. One of the summer schools we visited was the summer school organized in Durgapur village, Saliganga Panchayat Dasnagade. This is a forest area and the inhabitants are daily wagers where men earn a wage of Rs. 250/ on days they get work. Women mostly go to the forest to collect forest goods to be sold in the market. We could find a large number of children very enthusiastically attending the summer school and actively participating in various activities.

It is a common practice in the summer camps to conduct pre-test while the students come to the summer camps (at the entry level).The teachers also conduct periodic tests to monitor improvements in learning made by the children and a final test before they leave the summer camps. We got a chance to see the scripts of the test at the entry stage, at different stages while in the camp and at the concluding stage of their stay in the camp. The progress made by children during their stay with the summer camp is really remarkable. One can confidently say that there is fair level of enthusiasm among children, motivation among teachers and the children see summer camps as an enjoyable experience.

This seems to be a very good intervention strategy needed in such localities and helps in translating other efforts into improvements in learning levels. It seems the participation in the summer camps have been very large. The summer camps are becoming a major event celebrated in the villages.

Meetings with teachers, SMC and Panchayat members

We visited Harichandapur village in Harichandapur block in Keonjar district. We could meet and interact with teachers, youth groups, SMC members and Panchayat members in this village. In the discussions and interactions, it was clear that all of them take pride and consider their success in bringing back children to schools as unique and as a result of tireless efforts and initiatives by the TSP project and its ASPIRE functionaries. The Panchayat takes pride, and rightly so, in conducting household surveys to identify the children who are not coming to schools; the household visits the Panchayat members made and their success in bringing the non-enrolled children to schools.

The meetings at the Harichandapur Panchayat School gave an opportunity to meet with teachers from 14 Panchayats of Harichandapur block. They were happy and enthusiastic to report about the positive effects of the efforts put in by the Project and ASPIRE staff and were proud to say that thanks to the project the villages have become child labour free. Not only that all children from the area are enrolled in schools but also that the drop outs are zero. Some of the teachers participated in the summer schools and adopted the teaching methods followed by the teachers in ASPIRE project classes. They feel that with the change in the

teaching methodologies introduced in schools after participating in the Summer Camps, the children are no longer scared of the teachers and they feel welcome and friendly to interact with their teachers.

The teachers, in their interactions pointed out that the NGO activities in the past created conflicting situations where it was felt that the teachers and NGOs are working in different directions. However, closer interactions with project functionaries and participation in summer schools and other project activities have changed their perspectives and developed mutual respect between project functionaries and teachers. The friendly approach of the functionaries of ASPIRE helped changing the attitude of teachers towards the project and its activities. The teachers realize that the ASPIRE team and the teachers are working for a common purpose. The teachers are now happy and willingly cooperate with ASPIRE activities.

We also visited block offices in the Sukunda block. The meetings with the members of the Panchayats and Sarpanchayats were, indeed, interesting. A large number of Panchayat members were present in the meeting. The interactions showed how they have become locally active as a result of the project activities and how the educational aspirations of the local people changed as a result of their active involvement in the various initiatives of the project. While positively responding to all the project activities, they were highly appreciative of the summer schools. Many of the Panchayat members visited summer camps and personally experienced the activities.

There exists bonded labour system and child marriage in the villages. These two issues while common in many tribal villages of Odisha, is particularly important in this block. The system of bonded labour act as a constraint for people to take independent decisions regarding education of their children. Similarly, the child marriage forces parents to withdraw their children from schools.

Another major issue is that many children are orphan or of single parent. It becomes very difficult for many families to afford to send their children to schools. Seeking admission in Ashram Schools pose a problem since it is very difficult to get caste certificates to register and enrol children. It was pointed out that when they approach officials for caste certificate, they ask for property ownership certificate. Since many of them do not legally own landed properties, they have no property ownership certificates. The Panchayat members pointed out that ASPIRE project workers took up this issue and were helpful in getting caste certificates and succeeded in enrolling the children in Ashram Schools.

It seemed that the involvement of the Panchayat members and local community in the project activities has made them aware of their rights and the benefits of education for their children. They have become very articulate in presenting their problems and their capacity to negotiate and bargain with educational functionaries has improved. Needless to add, even in these meetings one could notice how better concerned are women towards social and educational issues and how well articulate they are in presenting their view points.

Visits to Ashram Schools

We visited many Ashram Schools. One of the biggest Ashram schools visited was the one located in Halda village in Sundergarh district. It is located in a very far way place in the middle of the forest. It is an Ashram school for girls and has 77 inmates. Our visit to an Ashram School in Badkegaon was also very helpful in understanding how these schools operate.

We had some unscheduled visits to some other Ashram schools. We visited two schools in the Sukunda block on 20 May 2018 (Sunday). It was heartening to see that the schools were functioning even on Sundays. The ASPIRE project teachers and students were actively engaged in the teaching learning activities and were surprised to see visitors. This was an indication of how the project activities have helped to reinforce a culture of learning in the villages

These are very well-run Ashram schools. The students were neatly dressed and regular in school attendance. The premises are also kept clean and tidy. We were told that the students are given instruction on the need to wash their hands before and after food and also are given instructions on other hygienic aspects. These extra-curricular instructions are over and above the regular teaching learning taking place effectively in the school.

We had time to interact with students, especially those staying in Ashram schools. Many of them aspire to become teachers. Some aspire to become police persons to ensure public services such as water reaches their villages. Many of them have seen the hardships faced by their parents and experienced poor living conditions. They have developed empathy towards helping others who have been suffering like them in their own villages. What is interesting to note is that they not only wanted to improve their future but also of the villagers and community around them.

Meeting with villagers in Rankiya:

We visited the village Rankiya in the morning at around 10.30 hrs. on a Sunday. This area is majorly inhabited by people belonging to Munda tribes. There were more than 100 people assembled in the village. It was interesting to note that a majority of those assembled in the village were women. In the conversations it became very evident that women are more keen in the education of their children than men. This seems to be a general trend in the tribal areas where the project is implemented. We had similar experience when we visited other schools.

During the interactions with villagers it was also noticed that women are more enthusiastic and active in participating in the discussions. Men were mostly calm and quiet and were responding only when they were asked to respond. Schooling of their children continued to be the major concern of women participants and issues related to schooling took a major share of the time in the discussions.

One of the major issues came up during the discussions was about the non-availability of upper primary schools in the locality. The parents felt that many children drop out of the schools after grade 5 since there are no UP schools in the vicinity. While all of them were

highly appreciative of the work done by the project and the persuasion of the ASPIRE functionaries, they felt that the efforts will be reaching its logical conclusion when their children complete at least the elementary level of education. Therefore, the demand for more UP schools to be established in the area needs to be a priority intervention in the next stages of project implementation.

Another important issue came up was the drinking habit of men which adversely affects their health and attitudes towards education of their children. It was pointed out by women (and men agreed) that Handia drinking is a common practice in the area and many men are under its influence most of the day.

Meeting with ASPIRE functionaries

We also met the ASPIRE functionaries at their office in Baragola. It was a very good to know from them how they operate in the difficult terrain. They seem to be happy with the work they have been doing and the positive responses they were getting from the villages. Needless to add, their success is also demonstrated by the increase in the number of new enrolments in the schools.

We met ASPIRE block level functionaries, state core group members and members of the central team at the block headquarters of Sukunda block.. One is impressed with their commitment and familiarity with the issues and people they are working with. In fact the functionaries were eager to know about our impressions about the work they have been doing. All the functionaries are well trained and communicate very well with the rural community. Their commitment and capacity to communicate and interact with the local communities is the core to the success of the project implementation. All the functionaries are doing an admirable job which translates into outcomes of the project interventions.

Some Concluding observations

The project implementation has a very well thought out strategy and clearly laid out steps to be initiated at its successive stages of implementation. The steps followed by the project implementation ensures that the project leads to its logical conclusion. For example the steps involve: i) identifying households with non-enrolled children; ii) bring children to schools; iii) ensure that children attend schools regularly; iv) assess the learning levels and identify the learning deficits; v) extend learning support; and vi) ensure that the children not only attend schools but also learn what they are supposed to learn.

The initial steps to prepare the Village Education Registers (VERs) were in the right direction. The VERs laid a strong foundation for identifying the non-enrolled children and bringing them to schools. The VERs were later aggregated into Panchayat level registers to be managed by the Panchayat members. The capacity development, ownership and sustainability of this process of transfer is a remarkable exercise in developing local ownership of the programme and local capacities. These household surveys were very large since it involved more than 1.5 lakh households.

The community support the project could mobilize was instrumental in bringing children to schools, retaining them in the schools and establishing an ownership of the programme. The NRBs were helpful to bring the dropouts back to schools. The LEPs and summer camps were reliable instruments to overcome learning deficits among children. The summer camps made more effect since the coverage was in large numbers. In 2017 the summer camps covered nearly 360 schools and 16,000/ children. These camps were run by youths selected from villages. A larger number of children is expected to be covered in 2018.

The organizational arrangements under the project are well planned and seemed to be working well. The selected blocks together have 125 Gram Panchayats (GP) and two municipal corporations. The project allocated one community mobilizer (CM) for each GP. The project functionaries contacted households, parents and community leaders. However, their equally important role was in gaining the confidence of the teachers and educational administrators at block and district levels. On previous occasions, the teachers and state educational officers used to look at the NGO activities with suspicion. The ASPIRE functionaries succeeded in gaining their confidence and that has helped implementing the project successfully and attaining the project objectives.

The next step is to ensure that the children are attending schools regularly. This is not an easy task in situations where structured learning is not part of the culture and in situations where opportunity cost of attending schools is very high. Some of the children work in the farms during cultivation season, some work in shops and they engage in other income earning activities. They find it difficult to attend schools since they loose income. Therefore, for them to come to school they should feel that they are gaining and compensating for what they loose in terms of earnings.

Unfortunately, many schools in these localities have not been functioning regularly and it added to the reasons for children not attending the schools regularly. The project interventions have changed the situation. In fact the parents are made aware of the need for their children to attend the schools regularly. The project tried to overcome this problem through the SMCs. The SMC members visited the households to persuade the parents to ensure regular attendance of their wards in the schools. The activization of SMCs acted as an important local intervention to improve attendance in schools. These activities helped to declare many villages as child labour free villages in the selected blocks.

The transition of children from primary to upper primary schools still continues to be a major challenge. In many instances the upper primary schools are 5-6 kms away from their residences and that too in forest areas. The hostels and Ashram schools have limited number of seats. There is a need for investment in creating more upper primary schools in the selected locations and more places in the Ashram Schools.

The local community is mobilized, trained and oriented. This approach has helped strengthening SMCs, activating Parent Teacher Associations, Youth groups, Panchayats. This is an important achievement of the project towards establishing ownership of the programme. More than 10,000/ SMC members are trained and oriented on issues such as RTE, child rights and SMC's roles and responsibilities in promoting education. The SMCs have become active in monitoring Mid-Day-Meals, keeping the school premises clean, developing

vegetable gardens in schools and motivating parents to send their children to schools regularly.

The idea of child labour free villages has caught the imagination of SMCs and Panchayat members. By March 2018, 1234 (55%) villages and habitations in the project locations have become child-labour-free (CLFZ). Many Panchayats have celebrated CLFZ conventions as mass public functions and have taken a pledge to ensure enrolment of all children in schools.

The TSP project has long term and sustainable impact. Education traditionally has been slow to enter into the priority list of those who are struggling to survive. Education rarely becomes a part of the survival strategies of marginalized households. The notion of education as an investment is a middle class value which fits very well with their aspirations. Those living in the remote rural areas, who are economically poor and socially disadvantaged cannot wait for long term benefits that may be derived from education. They invest their time in those activities which bring them short term benefits and relief. In other words, there exists a conflict among the poor between seeking education and looking for short term benefits. One of the important successes of the TSP is transforming the orientation of the people in these deprived regions to internalize the long term benefits of education and schooling.

Equally important is how education has become a socially accepted movement among the poor and deprived. The transition from the slogan of education for all to all for education is a dramatic and sustainable change one witnesses in the project areas. The ASPIRE experience needs to be documented and should be made available to other organisations involved in grass root level educational activities/actions.

The TSP in Odisha is having long term effects and potential for replicability. The ASPIRE has invested heavily in developing capacities of the functionaries on various aspects related to project implementation. The capacity development in the first phase will be a great asset to extend the project activities to other locations within or outside Odisha. The project is now extended to two blocks in Jharkhand; but can be extended to more locations. It can be reliably stated that the collaborations between Tata Steel and ASPIRE have worked very well in realizing the project objectives and achieving its targets.

It may not be out of place to mention that the project implementation by ASPIRE functionaries and their interactions with villages have created a positive attitude towards and a favourable supportive social environment for the Tata Steel.