

Developing a Successful Community-Supported Literacy Program: The Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Adult Literacy and Development Project

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Abstract

This paper was presented at the International Literacy Year Colloquium in October 1990, in Washington, D.C. The thesis of the paper is that literacy is the foundation for community development. The paper documents the development and success of the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu literacy program in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. Teachers and supervisors are local people. The importance of timeliness and good teaching is emphasized, as is the importance of adequate literacy materials. Achievement is recognized and rewarded. The close connection between literacy and development is demonstrated. The program achieved a remarkable level of success and is moving toward self-management and self-sufficiency.

1. Introduction

Literacy is the foundation for development. I describe here an active and successful literacy and development project in India. I show how this project integrates literacy with development, as well as discuss the beginnings of self-management and self-sufficiency of this project by the tribal people.* The goal is total literacy of this tribe by the year 2000.¹

2. Background to the Project

My wife and I are members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). We first arrived in this tribal community in India with our two-year-old son in October 1970. The Adivasi Oriya language was not written, though another SIL team did some linguistic work before our arrival. We settled in a tribal village five kilometers from a government development center to study the language. Our involvement has been continuous and intensive for twenty years.

The tribal area is in the eastern hill ranges of India, near the Bay of Bengal in the state of Andhra Pradesh.² The coastal city of Visakhapatnam is the district administrative center of government. The distance from the city to the foothills of the eastern hill ranges is about sixty kilometers. Here begins the government-protected tribal area, known as the Agency Area of Visakhapatnam District. The lingua franca of all twenty tribal groups of the region is Adivasi Oriya, but for two tribal groups, it is the mother tongue, and for another six groups, it has become their mother tongue through loss of their own language. Adivasi Oriya is related to Oriya, the official language of the neighboring state of Orissa. The population of mother tongue speakers of Adivasi Oriya is about 250,000, with 100,000 to 120,000 living in Andhra Pradesh.

These tribal people are agriculturists living mostly at a subsistence level. The few cash crops are rape seed, vegetables, and coffee. In the past twenty years, we saw a marked improvement in farming methods with the aid of government departments. Irrigation schemes, terracing, better crop varieties, and fertilizers brought this improvement. New road construction makes it possible for development to reach interior villages. The Coffee Board of India and other government departments are establishing coffee plantations for the tribal farmers. This counteracts slash-and-burn agriculture and prevents soil erosion through terracing. They also plant new tree saplings for future coffee plantations. The government helps tribal farmers with social forestry tree planting of mangoes, jackfruit, guavas, leechies, and other varieties.

*Uwe Gustafsson, a horticulturalist and linguist, is a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. He and his wife Elke work in India. They began study of the Adivasi Oriya language in 1970. He wrote the book, *Can Literacy Lead to Development? A Case Study in Literacy, Adult Education, and Economic Development in India*, published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in 1991.

¹I would like to thank Professor John C. Cairns, Consultant in Human Resources, whose recommendations and suggestions have influenced project planning and direction. I also thank Mr. Geert de Koning, Manager of the International Development Assistance Department of SIL Canada, for his ideas and input into the project. Funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) of the Government of Canada, and the provincial governments of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba made this project possible.

²The use of the terms 'tribe' or 'tribal' is acceptable in India. I apologize to anyone to whom these seem offensive.

The government is establishing primary schools throughout the tribal area. There are several secondary schools, a polytechnic institute, a teachers' training institute, and an institute of technology. In 1980, the National Adult Education Programme of India began work in the agency area with meager results, mainly due to teaching only in the Telugu language. Telugu is the official state language of Andhra Pradesh. For illiterate tribal adults, to learn to read and write in a language other than their mother tongue is extremely difficult. The past high dropout rate in adult and primary education is certainly due to the use of Telugu. The literacy rate among tribals, including school children, in the agency area is about 10 percent. This will improve rapidly because of the new intensive efforts in primary and secondary education made by the government.

3. Preparations for the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Adult Literacy Program

Beginning with our entry in this tribe, we studied the tribal language, gave it an alphabet (Gustafsson 1991), adapted the Telugu script to the language, and studied the grammar (Gustafsson 1973). The Adivasi Oriya-Telugu-English Dictionary (Gustafsson 1989) was published in 1989 by the Central Institute of Indian Languages. We collected many folklore stories, proverbs, sayings, and other cultural materials. We published some of these as post primer readers.

Serious work on producing literacy materials began in 1976. We tested the Telugu script alphabet for Adivasi Oriya with the publication of the first post primer reader of tribal folk tales. A series of primers, graded readers, more post primer readers, and a teacher's manual was published in succession.

We followed closely the primer construction method of Sarah Gudschinsky (Gudschinsky 1973). This method uses the most frequently used letters of the alphabet in the first lessons, so new words, phrases, and sentences can quickly be learned. The method calls for immediate use of meaningful expressions and sentences in the mother tongue, so the student learns to read quickly. Repetitious learning of the alphabet is taboo in our program. Nearly all of our literacy books were translated into the state language of Telugu and are published in diglot format. Students learn to read and write the Telugu language only after becoming fully literate in the mother tongue.

4. The Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Adult Literacy Project

In 1979, we had all the materials ready for the literacy program. The chief government administrator of Visakhapatnam District gave permission to teach these transitional literacy books from mother-tongue Adivasi Oriya to Telugu. Twelve classes began, and initial progress was satisfactory. It was, unfortunately, short-lived. In 1980, the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) began its work in the agency area of Visakhapatnam. Our twelve centers closed because the NAEP taught in the Telugu language, assuming that this would speed up Telugu literacy for the tribal people.

The director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages at the time supported mother tongue to official language literacy, and he wrote a letter to the government of Andhra Pradesh giving us his support. After three years of visiting several government departments, the government of Andhra Pradesh approved our teaching of the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu literacy books in thirty NAEP villages, starting in 1983. They gave us complete freedom to teach our books. The NAEP handled all administrative matters, including payment for the *organizers* (night school teachers). This gave us a chance to prove the value of mother tongue to official language literacy.

Being our first year, we had much to learn about teaching, supervising, monitoring, and evaluating. All of our staff were tribal people. The organizers had an average of only grade five education, and our supervisors had little more. The highest qualified of our tribal staff was a man with a grade seven education. The results of this first year were encouraging, despite poor motivation for literacy and opposition of some people against mother tongue to official language teaching.

The literacy course takes ten months—five days of two hour sessions per week. Six days of instruction are planned per week, but one day each week is missed for festivals, sickness, severe rains, market day, or holidays. A regular attender will get four hundred hours of classroom instruction. Of the thirty centers started in 1983, twenty-seven remained at the end of the first ten-month period. An average of fourteen regular learners attend each center. Regular learners are those who have a consistent attendance record and who are making expected progress. All centers have occasional attendees who do not make real progress and are not counted in the registers. Of the average fourteen regular attendees per center during the first year, eight (62 percent) achieved full literacy in the mother tongue. Of these, four (50 percent) also learned to read and write Telugu.

During the 1984–1986 project period, the average regular attendance per center increased to fifteen. Of those, 70 percent achieved full literacy in the mother tongue. An exciting improvement was the rise in those learning to read and write the official language, Telugu. It rose from 50 percent to 77 percent.

The literacy program continued through 1989. From 1983–1989, over 5,700 tribal adults achieved full literacy in the mother tongue. Of these, over 3,800 can read and write Telugu. Literacy classes were held in over five hundred tribal villages.

Literacy for tribal women is not yet as successful as for men in our project. Young tribal women were 7 percent of total attendance, and only 4.5 percent of new literates were women. To a large extent, this is culturally conditioned. Young women have many responsibilities; attending a literacy class is just not one of them. They must do housework, gather firewood from the forest, look after children, and do their share of the fieldwork. Even if they manage to come to literacy class, young men often ridicule and laugh at them.

We tried several methods for literacy of tribal women. We tried female centers in the villages where there had been a male center before. This failed because the men complained that we preferred the women over the men, forcing us back to the mixed male and female center. During 1989, we awarded teachers for increasing the attendance of women. This worked much better. Attendance of women rose from a mere 7 percent in former years to 19 percent. But most of the women did not complete the course in ten months, few became fully literate, and even fewer reached the certificate level.

We are working to improve literacy for women in this tribe in the future. In 1991, we plan to have female centers running simultaneously with male centers in the same village, but in different locations. Then the men cannot interfere with the learning of the women and they cannot complain that we favor the women. In addition, we plan to lengthen the learning time for women from ten months to two years, if necessary. Supervision will increase from the normal one night visit per month to at least two nights each month.

We know that tribal women are capable and willing to become literate. Literacy for tribal women has high priority in our project. The following is a translation of a biographical success story written by a young tribal woman, first published in our monthly educational newsletter.

My Story

During 1985, the people from Hattaguda village conducted an Adivasi Oriya-Telugu literacy center for ten months in our village. Kindangi Mohan Rao was our teacher. He taught us well. Kindangi Sabitri and I were the only two women in the class, and we both learned to read and write Telugu. Not only did we learn to read and write Telugu, but we appeared for the examinations at Hattaguda village. After passing the exams, they gave each of us a certificate.

One day, the government project officer of the Child Feeding Programme came to our village. She asked the elders if there were literate women in the village. “No,” they answered, “none of our girls ever went to a Telugu school. But there are two young women in the village who attended the night school.” The project officer called for us. When she saw us, she told Sabitri that she would be too

young for the job, but that I would be eligible. She asked me if I could write the answers to the questions on the questionnaire. I wrote all the answers. She was satisfied with my writing and asked me if I would like to operate a child feeding center. I was very happy to, and she signed me up for a center in Totavalassa.

Before, several of our villagers used to tease us saying, “You are now young women. Why do you need to learn reading and writing? Now the girls want to become ladies, it seems!” Many used to laugh at us. But without feeling embarrassed, we both studied hard and now can read and write. I am now benefiting from being persistent. I have a better life. I am literate and the leader of a child feeding center in Totavalassa and receive a salary. I would like to thank all who have made this possible for me.

There are several such success stories of young women in our project, especially of those who were employed by the project to teach others in their village. We are confident that literacy for women will improve in the future.

4.1 The guru groups

Within tribal culture, there has been a literacy effort of sorts from ancient times. A literate tribal person in the Oriya language would teach a group of young men and women in the village, normally free of charge. His reward was the honor and prestige going with this position. He was addressed as *guru* ‘teacher’, and ever after was the guru, though he might no longer be teaching. My wife suggested that we use this system in our literacy program and have a literate person teach a group of illiterates in his or her village. We discussed this with our staff, and everyone thought it would work. We selected new literates of certificate level from our project and trained them how to teach. Since they had already passed through the primers, this was easy for them. Thus, the *guru groups* became a part of the program. These have been very successful, especially as a follow-up of the first year to help the stragglers become literate, and to help those who had not yet learned to read and write Telugu. New literates were also permitted to attend these classes.

4.2 The Educational Newsletter

In 1984, we started the *Educational Newsletter*. This is an eight to ten page publication of development-related articles translated from government publications in agriculture, animal husbandry, health, child care, education, social forestry, and biographical stories of new literates. The goals of the newsletter were (1) to give reading material to new literates, (2) to supply articles on relevant development issues, and (3) to give new literates opportunity to express themselves in writing. The biographical articles all told of experiences before and after literacy. The reward for each published article was Rs. fifty, about three U.S. dollars. The newsletter is very popular. It is free of charge at this point, but we are exploring subscription possibilities.

5. Factors that Led to a Successful Program

Two basic factors in the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Literacy Program are responsible for much of its success: primary attention to the illiterate and attention to time management.

The entire program focuses on illiterates—to make them fully literate and keep them literate. This is emphasized again and again in the training program, supervision, monitoring, and evaluating. The goal of the program is full literacy for the tribal man or woman. This person will be able to read and write Adivasi Oriya and Telugu and can pass an exam for a certificate.

Everything in the project is time-oriented. The illiterate adult experiences many insults and disappointments in life because of illiteracy. We take utmost care not to disappoint the learners in the program. We do our best to have good quality materials and to have these on time in the hands of the learners. We instruct the organizers to start the night classes on time and to hold them regularly. The organizers are also instructed to give attention to all learners, especially those who have difficulty. We aim for quality in the learners and must, therefore, provide quality in the program.

We ask the organizers to attend the monthly meetings regularly. These meetings are also in-service training sessions. These meetings are held on time. Supervisors must be on time for the evening classes to evaluate, monitor, and teach. They turn in reports to the office well ahead of the monthly meeting, so these can be evaluated. If all program events and materials are kept in a timely fashion and the program is running smoothly, we can expect good results.

5.1 Surveying villages for potential night school centers

Each year, we send our staff to villages that request a center. They also visit potential organizers. This survey discovers the willingness of the village elders to have an adult literacy center in their village and the qualifications of the potential organizer. We want to know the motives of the organizer for teaching and his standing in the community. These surveys are important because, if conditions are not favorable, all later investment will be wasted.

5.2 Training of organizers and gurus

Once the organizers are selected, they come to project headquarters for an initial three-day training course. This course is kept short because the monthly meetings are training periods, too. During the initial training period, the organizers learn how to run a center and teach. We emphasize their responsibility toward the learners and discuss general organizational matters. We teach about the first ten lessons of Primer One in detail and explain the reasons for each lesson. We train them to teach the lessons as written, not to teach the alphabet by rote, as they might have been taught in other schooling.

5.3 Supervision of the centers

The strength of a literacy program lies in effective supervision of organizers and learners. The supervisory program must be well-planned and have a trustworthy staff. Supervisors visit with organizers and learners during class time. The supervisor must be fully literate in both Adivasi Oriya and Telugu. He must be well-acquainted with our program, teaching principles, and the primers and readers being taught. The supervisor and his helper monitor the teaching of the organizer and the progress of the learners, documenting the records during visits. We evaluate the learners, organizers, and the entire program on the basis of these records. Evaluations show where individual learners are having difficulties and where they need help.

When a supervisor and helper arrive in the village, they meet with the village elders and discuss the progress of their village youth. They also question how regular the organizer conducts the class. The class assembles with as many as possible attending. Here, the good relationship between the supervising team, the organizer, and the learners is of great importance. If the supervisor really comes to help and encourage, it is reflected in an eagerness to attend. I have made many nightly visits and have seen new learners line up to have their work checked and recorded in the records. This is especially true after several years of successful literacy work in an area. Word spreads that literacy and learning to read and write Telugu is possible and that exams can be passed for quality certificates. Once a program establishes a good reputation, it attracts quality literates.

In the visits, each learner's progress is checked. The learner reads the lesson last studied. If the student reads with understanding, the supervisor asks the learner to read individual words or phrases at random to check that they have not memorized it. Then he has the learner write dictation. The supervisor determines when a learner needs a new book, so it will be available when needed.

When the supervisors return to headquarters, they discuss and present the records to the manager of the literacy project, who is also a tribal man. The learner's progress sheet is studied, with any abnormalities noted for discussion at the next monthly meeting.

We check the progress of each center from month to month. If progress is good or excellent, the organizer receives praise and possibly an award. If progress is not satisfactory, the organizer is

warned. We replace unqualified organizers during the first two to three months. A center that does not do well after that is closed for the year.

5.4 The monthly meeting

The first Wednesday of each month is gurus' meeting day. The first Thursday is organizers' meeting day. These are busy days for the project staff. All the records must be ready and the materials packed and labeled for each center. These meetings are like workshops. Meetings deal with teaching any new or difficult parts in upcoming lessons and have a question period. Project staff members look at each organizer's performance as recorded on the monthly center progress report form. The organizer then receives payment and the books, pencils, notebooks, and other needed supplies for the coming month.

5.5 Examinations, certificates, and rewards

In many societies, certificates enhance self-esteem and open up opportunities for employment. In our program, we decided to give exams only to learners who had completed all the books and could read and write Telugu. All interaction with government officials requires Telugu. For most development activities to be helpful, literacy in Telugu is necessary. In the tenth month of instruction, learners are tested on their ability to read and write Telugu. If they pass this test, they are invited for an examination at headquarters, or other locations nearer to their homes.

The exams are difficult. There are questions about their country, state, and national leaders. They must translate from their mother tongue to Telugu and then translate a different text from Telugu to their mother tongue. A section of arithmetic problems is also part of the exam. Those who pass are awarded a certificate at a special ceremony. Our certificates have been approved by the government for training courses in trades such as carpentry, masonry, tailoring, beekeeping, and weaving. An example of a tribal tailor's story is given here:

My Story

When I was seven years old, my father sent me to school. But when there was no one at home to look after the cattle, he made me quit. I felt that it was much easier to look after cattle, so I didn't mind leaving school.

In 1985, I attended the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu literacy center in our village and learned to read and write. The following year, I took the examinations, passed them, and received a certificate.

At that time, the government was holding a training course for tailoring at the Samiti office (the office of the former tribal representative to the government). I went there and asked whether I could be admitted since I had become literate. I presented my certificate and was accepted. Each month during the six-month training period, the government gave us Rs. two hundred. Of this, Rs. one hundred was put into a bank account for us, and the other Rs. one hundred was our allowance. After completing this training period, the government took the Rs. six hundred from the bank and added another Rs. six hundred to this amount. The government gave us a sewing machine for the Rs. twelve hundred. I now earn money by tailoring and can look after my family better.

The high quality of our standards is an incentive for the learners. It is literacy with the goal of quality—literacy that qualifies one for a position in the community, literacy that is permanent and immediately applicable in daily life. Once the illiterates see these results in their peers, they are willing to work for it.

We do not award certificates for literacy in the mother tongue. The individual learner might stop right there, feeling satisfied, and not make the effort to learn Telugu. Those with only mother-tongue literacy in Adivasi Oriya are more likely to slip back into illiteracy.

Awards are regularly given to the organizers and gurus of the ten best centers each month. New literates whose stories are published in the monthly educational newsletter are awarded a gift of Rs. fifty (three U.S. dollars). They are invited to the monthly meeting and receive the gift in front

of the organizers and supervisors. For each story published, at least twenty were submitted. Supervisors are also awarded with a gift at the end of the year. These awards and recognition contribute much to the high quality of the program.

The following is a listing of the important factors that have made the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Adult Literacy Project a success:

1. Primary attention is given to the individual learner.
2. Time management is very important—all materials must be in the hands of the learners, when needed, and all meetings must start on time.
3. Cooperation of the village elders is sought and obtained.
4. Mother-tongue literacy, with a transition to Telugu, is the goal.
5. Organizers and supervisors are from the same cultural and language background as the learners.
6. Organizers and supervisors receive training throughout the year.
7. Repetitious learning of the alphabet is forbidden.
8. Learners must never be disappointed.
9. Literacy progress of each individual is closely monitored.
10. Close cooperative work between the supervisor, organizer, and learners is encouraged.
11. Meaningful certificates that open opportunities for employment and advancement are given.
12. Literature is produced (e.g., a monthly newsletter and pamphlets) and local libraries are encouraged.
13. A dedicated and honest project staff is available for support.

6. Literacy: The Foundation for Development

Beginning with the 1988–1990 project extension period, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) asked us to prepare the project for self-management, self-sufficiency, and to integrate literacy with development. This had already been started with the monthly educational newsletter, but the idea was to do this in practical ways, not just talk about it. This would be a difficult task.

It will take several more years to reach self-management and self-sufficiency. The goal is complete self-management and self-sufficiency of the project by the tribal people. They will look after all the income-generating projects and make enough profit to support an ongoing literacy program. This is the final goal in our project; our chief tribal staff are committed to it.

6.1 The registered tribal cultural society

On the recommendation of a high-ranking Indian government official concerned with tribal development in the district, we founded and registered our program as a tribal society on April 7, 1988. This society made us a legal body for all further development. The officers and members of this society are tribal people and are employed by the project. The Executive Committee (EC) meets regularly once a week. I chaired this committee for the first two years. Beginning in 1990, the EC is chaired by the president of the society, alternating with the secretary. I sit as an advisor and friend. All matters relating to the project are brought before the committee, discussed, and then decisions are made. The EC works closely with all government departments. In less than three years, the society, its officers, and members became respected in the community.

6.2 Self-management of the project

A number of project leaders worked with us on language analysis and the production of a dictionary and literacy books. The project employed and trained new staff in typing, bookkeeping, driving, print shop management, carpentry, and electrical work. Many trainees are from the tribe, who became literate in our project. We estimated that the project could be self-managing and self-sufficient by the end of 1995.

6.3 Established businesses of the project

The goals of the print shop and bookbinding business were to meet the printing needs for adult literacy and education and to generate enough income from outside printing jobs to support the printing of adult literacy and education materials. The print shop now works with two treadle presses. An offset press with desktop publishing is planned. The government promised to have all school notebooks for tribal schools manufactured by the print shop's bookbinding department. This would employ up to ten tribal men and women.

The stationery and book sales business operated two registered shops and twenty village sales outlets. Three additional shops were planned for 1991. The main goal for this business was to supply stationery items and books throughout the tribal area for the literacy and adult education program. Up to thirty Adult Education Development Centers were planned for 1991–93, each with a stationery sales outlet. The expected profit from this business would support the adult literacy and education program.

The project purchased about fifty acres of land in the name of the tribal society. It grows crops and sells the produce at the society's own vegetable and fruit stall to government school hostels and to staff. The fruit plantations have over five thousand banana plants, four hundred mango trees, and jackfruit, guava, leechie, pomegranates, as well as papayas. All the fields are fenced in silver oak, eucalyptus, and a variety of bushes. The goals of the plantations are to produce income and serve as demonstration farms for others. The chief supervisors of these plantations are all graduates of the literacy program.

The project's sheep farm has over 130 animals. It is self-sufficient, but not yet profitable. Good fodder grasses are planted, and concentrate feed is bought from the government veterinarian depot. Sheep are sold to village people and at the local markets, contributing to the nutritional needs of the people. The profit goes into the project.

The project's rabbit farm has about eighty animals. The planted fodder grasses are good feed, which is supplemented by concentrate feed. Vegetable leaves from the project's vegetable plantations supply ample free feed for the rabbits. Rabbits also are sold to individuals and the public at the vegetable and fruit stall. A large rabbit barn was built through a tribal staff investment plan to give the members a much closer touch with the business aspect of the project and earn them some extra income.

The project's carpentry shop is making a profit. There is a real need for carpentry work in the tribal area, and this shop is the first of its kind.

Beekeeping is one of the project's profit-making enterprises, with thirty-three hives. It complements the fruit plantations. Social forestry has also been added as a business, planting trees and bushes that will generate an income.

7. Involvement of the Project with Government Development Projects

The project does not exist in isolation. It is closely associated with government development projects. Government malaria eradication and health officials conducted a training course for tribal leaders. The Department of Agriculture asked the society to make land available for demonstration plots. Thus far, our field staff cultivates sunflowers.

The government asked the society to be the agent for their biogas program for tribal families. This project is financed entirely by the Government of India. Biogas will replace firewood and thus, save precious forest growth. Manure will still be valuable fertilizer after gas extraction.

8. Adult Education Development Centers

The Adult Education Development Centers integrate literacy and development. These were first established on a trial basis in 1988. They will be permanent centers for adult literacy, functional education, and development activities. The goal is to have these centers serve in the area of literacy maintenance through small village libraries and distribution of the monthly educational newsletter and pamphlets on specific development issues. The center also maintains a small stationery and book sales outlet, selling needed stationery items and books to new literates and school children. The centers and their activities are being coordinated with government departments. The leaders of these centers will be former organizers who have proven themselves in the project.

9. Conclusion

Literacy is proving to be the foundation for development in the Adivasi Oriya-Telugu Literacy Project. Given the opportunities and shown the way, the tribal people, or any other people, can achieve total literacy and become economically independent. We are assisting the government of India toward this goal.

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