SUMMARY

Oxfam India (OIN) has been part of a nation-wide process working towards improving the delivery of public education system. It has engaged in working to influence the mainstream education by reaching out to the most marginalised children and communities like Dalits, tribals, Muslims and girls. At the same time, it has also engaged with the schooling system to create opportunities for a creative learning environment for all children. It has also been part of a national network to bring in larger policy reforms through a call for greater accountability of state, greater investment through a regular budget tracking and build a constant pressure for an equitable Right to Education for all.

OIN aims that children especially girls from Dalit, tribal and Muslim communities, in all partner locations will have increased access to quality and inclusive elementary education in the mainstream public education system. The focus of OIN’s initiatives on education is with these four focus groups, recognising the need to address the historical discrimination and exclusion these groups have faced. It is around this premise that the Essential Services- Education Programme has been based, one of the objective being to improve their chances of completing quality elementary education without anxiety and discrimination.

Recognising the need for special measures to include the children from socially excluded groups, one of the outcome in OIN Annual Operational Plan says ‘Government adopts improved learning and inclusive practises in schools demonstrating possibilities of government schools delivering high quality, inclusive education.’ In order to achieve this outcome, Oxfam supports a number of initiatives across the country working on different aspects of social inclusion. This practice note documents the experience of three partners, working in different context across three states, with socially excluded children. The initiatives are-

- **APCL in Bihar** focuses on education of Dalit children
- **Sikshasandhan and SPAR**, in Odisha and Jharkhand respectively, on linguistic and caste based exclusion
- **MARG in Odisha** on Muslim children education

The subsequent chapters will document the process, strategies adopted and the lessons learned in towards inclusion of socially excluded children in the mainstream education system.
INTRODUCTION

Access and equity need to go hand in hand for the attainment of universalization of primary education. As seen historically, this is not the case. While access has improved substantially, equity is still an issue across the country. Children of socially excluded communities still find it difficult to exercise their right to education, free of discrimination and stigma. There a lot of data, including official government statistics, which proves that exclusion in education, has led to social group-based educational inequalities. Though there have been various schemes and programmes designed to address the issues of social exclusion, these children are still lagging behind not only in terms of educational opportunities but also in terms of discrimination free environment.

WHAT IS SOCIAL EXCLUSION?

Though the concept of social exclusion had originated in the north, nowhere else can it be seen so distinctly than in India. Social exclusion and discrimination has been the focus of development discourse and legal framework for some time now. But changes have not been very drastic and there is still a large population of the country that are at huge disadvantage, because of their ethnicity, caste, gender, language, religion etc.

Social exclusion denies an individual or a group of individuals, the right to access and equal participation in a society. This not only leads to emotional/mental turmoil but also leads to material and other forms of deprivation, significantly reducing the quality of life. Certain communities like Dalits, tribal and Muslims have been historically deprived not only because of government negligence but also have been excluded because of poverty and exploitation. These individuals face bias and prejudice because of their social identity and differences in practices from the accepted majority. This bias and prejudice is entrenched across all sectors be education, health, livelihoods and at multiple levels. For example, in education, the vast majority of children out of school are from socially excluded communities. The situation becomes even worse once they enrol in the schools. Stigma and discrimination from peers, teachers and even the government officials become the norm in which these children go to school with. Furthermore, there are wide differences in the learning opportunities available to these children. Girls bear the double burden of gender and belonging to a particular community. Drop rates are high, even more higher among girls, due patriarchy, neglect and social conditions.

EDUCATION: A DRIVER FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Education is known as one of the best triggers for empowerment. It helps communities acquire the required information and confidence to assert and access their rights. It also helps prepare one for life. But the status of education among the traditionally excluded groups has historically remained poor. They have been at the fringes of the system, with a fortunate few being able to reap its
benefits. Large proportion of these communities continue to be discriminated in terms of opportunities and access on basis of their social identities (such as religion, caste, gender, ethnicity etc) and other forms of discrimination like disability, language, health status etc. In education, it is these children, who are largely out of school. There are also a number of studies that have shown that learning opportunities to these children are also limited, with wide differences in the percentage of children who can read and write. For example in the age group of 6-14 years, the percentage of SC children who can read and write is 58.2%, for ST children it is 52.5% whereas for children from other social groups it is 72%\(^1\). The recent census shows that Scheduled Castes (SCs) comprise 16.2% of the total population\(^2\) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)\(^3\) comprise 8.2%. Within these communities, girls are even more likely to suffer from exclusion and neglect due to the double burden of gender and social identity. Dropout rates are consistently higher for girls than boys with clear discrimination seen within the schools and classrooms, in terms of lack of gender appropriate infrastructure, absence of gender sensitive curriculum and textbooks etc. The RTE Forum reports have pointed out that there has been discrimination experienced by Dalit and tribal children in classrooms in terms of assigning of monitor responsibilities and overall seating arrangements.

**CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE**

India has not ratified the International Convention on Discrimination in Education in force since 1962. The Constitution of India has given a fair space to the issues of social exclusion. Article 21A of the Indian Constitution states that “the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age 6 to 14 years in such a way as the state may, by law, determine”. It is in line with this obligation, that the central government had passed the Right of All Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) in 2009, providing all children aged 6 to 14 years, free and compulsory elementary education covering classes 1 to 8.

Article 46 of the Constitution, one of the Directive Principles of State Policy, directs the state to have a special focus on the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, in particular, the scheduled castes (Dalits) and scheduled tribes (Adivasis). Similarly, the Prime Minister’s 15 Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities, was formulated to provide a comprehensive programme for the development of minorities with one of the core objectives being improving the opportunities for disadvantaged minorities in education. Likewise, the Education Policy of 1986 and 1992 emphasised on education as an agent of basic change in the status of disadvantaged groups like SCs/STs/Muslims, and focused on the bring their education levels on par with other social groups. The recent National Policy for Children 2013, focusing on education for disadvantaged groups by creating an enabling environment, which calls for addressing discrimination of all forms in schools and fostering equal opportunity in education.

**RTE ACT AND INCLUSION**

As mentioned above, the RTE Act does not allow any form of discrimination and seeks to provide equal opportunity to all children regardless of class, caste, religion, gender, etc. It lays down a universalist frame, prohibiting discrimination against children from specific marginalized communities. The RTE Act recognizes two broad categories of children who are vulnerable and at risk of not completing elementary education; the Dis-Advantaged Groups\(^5\) and the Weaker Sections\(^6\). The RTE-SSA Framework, 2011 identified Girls, Children from SC, ST and Muslim communities, children belonging to most under-privileged groups\(^7\) as being vulnerable and at risk of not accessing their rights to education. Children affected by HIV-AIDS are further recognized to be vulnerable and deprived of their education rights\(^8\). While there are many limitations, there are certain steps towards achieving these values. Guidelines against discrimination has been circulated by MHRD. On the other hand, the NAC working group had also issued a series of recommendations on how to tackle discrimination within the school system.

Despite the above, large sections of India’s young population continues to be discriminated in terms of

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2. It is estimated that India has the population of 1.2 billion people, of which 421 million (approximately 38%) are children (i.e. below 18 years of age); Population Projections for India and States 2001-2026, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, December 2006.

3. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are disadvantaged communities that are accorded special status by the Constitution of India. The former term refers to those who, according to the caste system, are considered “outcastes”, while the latter refers to the Indigenous peoples of India living mainly in forests and hilly regions.

4. http://www.censusindia.net/t_00_005.html

5. Disadvantaged groups are recognized as children from SC, ST, CWSN, and other socially and educationally backward class or such other groups having disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economical, geographical, linguistic or such other factors as may be specified by the appropriate government. Children with Special Needs were incorporated through Amendment.

6. The Weaker Sections are defined as those belonging to such parent or guardian whose annual income is lower than the minimum specified by the appropriate government. Children with Special Needs were incorporated through Amendment.

7. Urban deprived children, child labour particularly bonded child labour, children in ecologically deprived areas, children in poor slum communities and uprooted urban habitations, children or manual scavengers and other stigmatized professions, children of itinerant or seasonal labour, children of landless agricultural labour, nomadic and pastoralists, forest dwellers and tribes in remote areas and children in desert hamlets, children in areas affected by civil strife.

8. RTE Status report 2004
opportunities, resources, respect and recognition due to belonging to certain caste, class, religion or tribe. Exclusion is thus cited as “the single most important challenge in universalising elementary education”.9

**IMPROVING ACCESS OF EDUCATION FOR DALIT CHILDREN**

The Mushahar community is one of the most marginalised communities in India, both socially and economically. They are amongst the poorest of the poor and are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy amongst the Scheduled Castes or Dalits. Out of 4.5 to 5 million Mushahars in Bihar, ninety-three percent of them are landless and mostly work in agricultural fields of other farmers as manual labourers or do other hard physical labour. Traditionally, they are known to catch rats from the agricultural fields which were also supposed to be their food. The name, Mushahar, literally means ‘rat catchers’. Several studies in past have highlighted their plight.

As per the census figures of 2001, the general literacy level of Mushahars was less than 10 percent10. Oxfam India’s partner Association for Promotion of Creative Learning (APCL) has been working on issues of education among Mushahar community.

About APCL- APCL had begun in the year 1997 with the aim of promoting creativity in society. APCL’s mission is Universalisation of Quality Education, Development of full Creative Potential of all human beings and Evolution of a Learning Society. The efforts of APCL are geared towards developing new methods of creativity and developing pedagogy for creatively mainstreaming it. This new teaching learning methodology developed is called Creative Learning. It has been successfully used for ensuring inclusion through mainstreaming in the education system. The details are discussed in the subsequent sections.

**APCL’S MODEL**

Through the years, the research and experiments of APCL have led to establish a new teaching/learning methodology called ‘Creative Learning’ as mentioned above. It is based on the premise that every child is born creative and therefore learning systems should develop his/her intrinsic natural learning process. It attempts to develop seven basic competencies called Core Creative Competencies (C³) – Concentration, Power of Observation, Memory, Thinking, Imagination, Emotional Management and Power of Expression/ Communication based on the information processing model of learning. This approach takes into account different learning styles of children based on the concept of Multiple Intelligence while designing teaching learning materials and methods.

APCL’s School of Creative Learning established in Patna and affiliated with Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is based on the very foundation of creative learning principle. The school has been successful at developing a number of teaching learning tools with its focus being largely on the children from rural areas and on to those children who have been declared as being unsuccessful under the formal education system. The school has a modern library, information and computer centre11. APCL develops teaching-learning materials and conducts long term and short term training and orientation programmes for teachers and resource persons. All this is with the goal of using creative learning to bring equity in learning. There are no entrance examinations held in the school and neither there is detention.

As mentioned above, APCL works with children from the Mushahar community who are extremely deprived and marginalised. The dropout rate among these children has always been high. In some cases, it has been observed that despite the close proximity of schools to their homes, children still drop out of schools. One of the main reasons as observed by APCL, why the children were dropping of schools is lack of interest towards what was being taught in the schools. It is in this situation above, APCL had devised creative ways to teach the Mushahar children and renew their interest on education.

The two main principles that APCL’s model largely derives from are that of multiple intelligence and broad streaming. A major problem of our learning system is a lack of appreciation of the importance of multiple-intelligence. APCL had observed that the marginalised children have abilities like– natural, kinaesthetic, interpersonal and rhythmic. Therefore, it was important to engage them in activities like sports, songs and nature based activities like swimming in a river.

The second principle is of broad-streaming as against mainstreaming. APCL believes that it is because of mainstreaming that local languages of the marginalised communities are not part of the education system. Therefore, there is a need for language broad streaming by bringing in the culture and traditions of these community in the school curriculum to help achieve children learning outcomes.

This concept of broad streaming has been adopted as a strategy for inclusion by the State Government of Bihar in the 12th five year plan.

10 Land, Dignity, Rights , Awakening of Eastern India’s Musahars
11 Ritu Sinha Knowledge Centre for Creative Learning
SALIENT FEATURES OF CREATIVE LEARNING SOLUTIONS

As mentioned, Creative Learning Solutions have been developed by APCL to address the problem of social inclusion in education. These include developing interesting teaching learning materials (TLM’s), to make learning an enjoyable exercise for the Mushahar children.

Some of the TLMs developed are— Alphakshar— which is a drawing made of circles, triangles, squares etc. All the alphabets of Hindi and English language are incorporated in the drawings. This is an innovative way of teaching children alphabets of both languages. Another example Sankhya Yantra— which is a wall paintings of flowers used to teach addition to children. Numbers are written on the petals and different combination of numbers can be added to obtain a particular series of numbers. Similarly, children are taught to count numbers in an innovative approach. For example, instead of the academic methods of teaching counting, the children are asked to count the number of fishes during the day. Since these children enjoy playing with leaves they are encouraged to do the same and to further learn at the same time, they are asked to write about its uses. Children are made to play games with objects they can relate to in their every day like tyres, mud, leaves instead of unfamiliar badminton and football.

As mentioned above, instead of using conventional methods of teaching, efforts are made to relate learning and studies with children’s day to day life. Activities like making toys and play material out of mud, playing with leaves, etc. are encouraged to make learning interesting for the children. Moreover, regular exhibitions are held by the school to display articles made by the children. It has been observed that children speak with immense confidence while talking about the things they made for the exhibition.

Language is a major challenge in the schools for most of the children. In many schools, answers written in the local language are not accepted by teachers, even though they are right. To make it possible for the children to write in their local language, APCL has advocated for a local language dictionary with the State Government of Bihar, which was subsequently brought out by SCERT12. They have their own local language dictionary as well. A brain wave mapping tool was developed to assess and monitor level of concentration, memory etc. in slow learners. This can also be used to understand the right learning method to overcome learning difficulties.

One of the stigma faced by the Musahar community is their food habits, i.e. rat meat. APCL has been making efforts to end this intolerance towards their food so that the intolerance towards their community comes to an end. In this direction, they have started an Abhiyan to increase the acceptability of rat farming.

12 The National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), and its counterpart councils at the state level (SCERTs), were created with the specific mandate to identify and act on key priorities for improving education quality through curriculum design and reform.
All of the above activities have helped create an enabling and inclusive environment for learning. While creative ways of teaching using wall paintings and various other activities are much needed to inculcate their interest in learning. Elevating the status of their customs, language has given recognition and respect to their community and culture. Both of which are equally important to create social inclusion in education and the larger community.

Oxfam India’s support to APCL in the current project phase is implemented in 13 villages in 2 Panchayats (Hathiyakand & Jamsuath) in Danapur block, Patna district. The focus of their project is on drop out children, non-school going girls and slow learners. Some of the activities that they have undertaken under this project have been described below.

School Chalo Bahna is a campaign geared towards encouraging out of school girls back to school through peer pressure and motivation. Training is provided to motivate fellow girl children and their parents in pursuing education in the schools and also creating awareness on the provisions of RTE. Forty regular school going girl children from the community were identified. These girls have been able to identify 262 drop out and never enrolled children and were successful in helping 88 students to continue their studies in school until today.

Adhikar ki Ghanti is another important activity, which is a forum aimed at spreading awareness and also connecting the community with the Government on RTE related issues as well women and children’s rights. This initiative has been quite successful at increasing people’s participation in the education system. There has also been increase in awareness of other government welfare schemes. The Adhikar ki Ghanti tricycle is successful at drawing the attention of the parent, children and other villagers while moving through project areas. It has provided a platform to the communities mostly from the excluded communities, wherein they can discuss their grievances as well as concerns about the implementation of RTE.

Finally, a Shikshadhikar Report Card that comprises details of the status of the implementation of right to education in the Panchayat has also been developed. These reports are regularly shared with the stakeholders to initiate discussion on the importance of right to education.

SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS:
The development of an inclusive teaching learning model which gives importance to the traditions, culture, language of a marginalised community like Mushahar community is an achievement in itself. This also helped to a large extent in improving the learning levels of the children. Children are doing well in the School of Creative Learning that establishes the effectiveness of their creative methods of teaching and learning. APCL’s advocacy initiatives with the State government has helped bring out a local language dictionary with the SCERT endorsing it.

LEARNINGS:
APCL’s experience highlights the importance of creativity and inclusion in education which is currently limited in our education system. It is through creative methods of teaching that the socially excluded children can learn and perform on par with the other so-called mainstream children. Only if the school curriculum incorporates activities of interest of the marginalised children, will they develop an interest in attending school. Furthermore, using creative methods of teaching makes learning a more interesting and enjoyable exercise than it otherwise might be. It develops curiosity and the interest of children in studies.

Innovative initiatives like School Chalo Bahna, Adhikar ki Ghanti, Shikshadhikar Report Card, which are quite different from conventional methods have played a larger role in the success of the project which is aimed at addressing social exclusion in education. APCL’s experiences prove that the issue of social inclusion can be addressed through creativity and innovation in education.

IMPROVING ACCESS OF EDUCATION FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN
Oxfam India partners Sikshasandhan and SPAR work on ensuring education in a tribal context. While Sikshasandhan works in Odisha, SPAR works in Jharkhand, some of its areas of operation coming under conflict zone.

About SPAR: Society for Participatory Action & Reflection (SPAR) was started with the objective of working for the upliftment of the rural poor, especially marginalised and underprivileged with focus on rights and dignity. SPAR believes that recognition of the inherent dignity, equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of social justice, freedom and peace in the society. Peoples’ participation and empowerment aiming at sustainable overall development lead to the emancipation of humanity.

SPAR has been working with Oxfam India since the year 2007. The focus of the project is right to essential services, especially education and health. The area of operation is Manoharpur block of West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand. It is one of the remotest areas of the state with no government officials want to be placed there due to its remoteness which has resulted over the years in it being neglected. Due this, there was very little developmental work undertaken by the government with majority of the area and people, mainly tribal communities remaining underdeveloped and marginalised. This vacuum gave an
entry to the Maoists, who over the years established a strong hold and safe zone for themselves. Ironically again, no government official wants to work here because it has now become a conflict zone. In the history of naxal violence in Jharkhand, the biggest attack on police force took place in Manoharpur block area in which more than 30 police persons killed. But SPAR through its initiatives on education and health has gradually built a good rapport with the local community which is imperative for working in a conflict zone.

**STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY SPAR IN CONFLICT ZONE:**
In order to smooth implementation of the project activities in a conflict zone SPAR adopted specific strategies given below:

- **Participatory and community based approach:** Keeping true to its name, one of the most important strategies adopted is participatory approach, which helps not only in building ownership among the communities, but also helps in tackling the local problems—including naxal related ones, by themselves.

- **Appointment of local staff for field level work:** SPAR gives priority to local staff especially for field level work for obvious reasons like - a local staff can understand the local condition better as they are acquainted with local people, culture and the community. As the local staff are also known to the local people, this helps build trust among the community people faster. This mutual confidence among local community and the staff also helps in minimising misunderstanding with the Maoists.

- **Transparency in the work:** SPAR believes that being transparent and open helps develop trust, so they try to practice this value with the community they work with.

- **Being apolitical:** It is challenging to strike a balance between the Maoists and the paramilitary forces. SPAR being apolitical, helps maintain the balance by maintaining a distance from both ends of the spectrum. Whenever bandh is called by the red groups, keeping in view the safety and respecting the local sentiments, important project activities are not organised on the day.

- **Focus on inclusion:** Since the project area is riddled with conflict and crisis, an inherent need to address the trauma that children face and the low education levels in areas was identified quite early on by SPAR. They started off by assessing the ground situation and simultaneously planning for the scope of intervention. It was observed that children were the most vulnerable and needed support. Though education is largely seen as a non-controversial issue in these zones, the impact of conflict on education has been immense. Militarization by the state and constant activity of conflict groups, have adversely affected the status of education of children in these areas.

The passage of RTE Act 2009 has given the opportunity of using education as a medium of inclusion of the tribal children under the mainstream education system. The implementation of RTE Act has seen an increase in enrolment and retention in the tribal area. As in most tribal areas, language is one of the barriers in access to education
among the linguistic minority groups, especially the tribals. A recent study says that in Rural Jharkhand, around 96% of children speak their mother tongue at home which is other than Hindi and English\textsuperscript{13}, whereas the schools they go are either Hindi or English medium. This is making it extremely difficult for them to understand and absorb what is being taught at school.

Another issue is the lack of preparedness of children for class one when they enrolled in the formal school system, especially in rural Jharkhand. Though there are ICDS centres which have a provision of Early Childhood Care and Education, and these centres hardly function; let alone practice it. As result majority of children start their schooling process directly from Class 1, making it difficult for them to follow and understand what is being taught at school. Therefore, SPAR’s focus has been on multilingual education and Early Childhood Care and Education to ensure inclusion of the tribal children in the mainstream education system in conflict scenario. They are making this possible by working both at the community and government level by bringing in a change in attitude towards education.

\textbf{About Sikshasandhan:} Sikshasandhan was established in the year 1995 in Bhubaneswar, Odisha and has been working in the field of education, especially for tribal children since its inception. From the years 1998 to 2008, the organisation functioned as a resource centre and undertook an experimental project on tribal education. They covered around eight to nine districts of the state in this project, in which they tried to contextualize the curriculum, school timings and holidays based on the culture and daily schedule of the tribal community. This project achieved a significant impact in their project area. However, with RTE Act in place and its specific provisions in place for every school, the project had to be discontinued. They initiated work in the tribal district of Mayurbhanj, trying to bring changes within the context of the RTE Act directly implementing their strategies on ground instead of working through other organisations.

With support from Oxfam India, Sikshasandhan aims to improve access to education for marginalised children in line with the Government Policy on the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act in Nota Gram Panchayat (GP), Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. The project is called, Project Bisra- Palao Suder Lagid, which means Education for Change in the local Ho language. The target groups are children, parents and teachers from 11 primary schools in 30 villages of GP. Besides the low level of literacy, tribal groups are also culturally alienated from mainstream education especially with regards to curriculum and medium of instruction, as they have their own languages, traditions and ways of living. This has further led to low enrolment and high dropout rates, as the local community cannot connect with the present education system. Although elementary education is now a fundamental right of every child in India, the reality for tribal children is that they are deprived their educational rights, as well as other child rights.

\textbf{ABOUT THE MODEL}

Odisha has a large number of tribal communities (about 62), constituting about 23 per cent of the total population. A large proportion of this tribal population live Mayurbhanj district, about 53 out of the 62 tribal groups in Odisha of Mayurbhanj district. Infrastructure such as road, health and school facilities are negligible and diseases such as malaria are endemic. Around 65% of the population of Mayurbhanj live below the poverty line and for most months of the year depend on agriculture and forest resources for their livelihood. For the remaining months they migrate in search of wage labour. When Sikshasandhan began its work, it found that most children helped their parents by working on their farm or collecting forest produce.

Besides the low level of literacy, the tribal community faces a language and cultural alienation, which Sikshasandhan

\textsuperscript{13}Language Diversity in Jharkhand by Tribal Research Institute (TRI) Ranchi and UNICEF
realized is one of the biggest reasons for the high dropout rates among tribal children. The language of many of the tribal communities is very different from mainstream Odia, used in the schools. Further, the cultural context and way of living of these communities is often quite different from the context that the curriculum in the schools is based on. Most of the teachers in the tribal areas are non-tribal, with neither the knowledge of the tribal language, customs and history, nor the training to be sensitive to such contextual differences. Therefore, young children find it extremely difficult to understand and comprehend the concepts taught to them. This became core of Sikshasandhan’s initiatives, which is to reduce the dropout rates and ensure retention of tribal children in schools.

In the baseline survey conducted in the year 2011, it was found that language barrier was a main issue in the first and second grade, as young children are hardly exposed to the outside world where Odia is spoken. As such many of children drop out at the early stage of schooling and the ones that stay on either lack the basic concepts or have limited learning. Thus, the common obvious concern of parents’ is that their children are not really learning anything in the schools and education was of no real value for them.

Therefore, in the above context, Sikshasandhan, appointed 10 language teachers in the project schools. These teachers began conducting remedial classes support to the learning of the children who have left school early and to focus on their retention in school. These language teachers played an active role in bridging the language gap between the children and the teachers and act as models for stimulating child friendly practices in schools. In, the first year of implementation itself, there was huge progress made in the increase of the attendance rate of the children to 64% from the baseline figure of around 45%.

The language teachers are not only a bridge but also act as models for the regular teachers on ways of stimulating child friendly practices in schools. Further, while Sikshasandhan demonstrated the importance and the positive impact of having teachers from the tribal community well versed in the local language, it had also simultaneously worked towards building the capacity of the government teachers. Teachers were oriented and trained on rich tribal history and culture, issues in tribal children’s education and how can they be addressed and most importantly on child friendly pedagogy in a multi-lingual context. These initiatives are aimed at sustainability of the impact achieved and mainstream the effort into the larger system.

Another important aspect is the development of local Teaching and Learning Materials: Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) like picture cards, story books along with Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Materials like posters, wall painting and also supplementary reading materials based on the specific socio-cultural needs of tribal children in each school have been developed to improve the curriculum transaction process. Sikshasandhan had oriented teachers in the schools on learning to use these teaching aids so that they can use them independently in the future. Discussions have been initiated with the government for translating textbooks in local tribal language for adoption in all government schools. The IEC materials focused on Right to Education Act, National Curriculum Framework 2005, Child rights and roles of SMCs and parents in local tribal language as well as in Odia to inform communities, PRIs, and teachers. All these materials were developed in close consultation with teachers, education experts and the state education department, District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs). While there are a number of innovative concepts in the field of education that have been developed by NCERT and other agencies, no systematic efforts have promoted these concepts in the project area. The idea is to integrated all the material prepared with campaign activities and communications to ensure a coherent and consistent approach. Having the state education department, DIET on board is to help towards building a common ownership and a willingness to share and disseminate across the state. All of the above efforts have helped improve the classroom practices by addressing the issue of language barrier. This most importantly has helped in increasing not only enrolment but also retention of children in the school.

Government teachers are now consistently using improved teaching methods and giving individual attention to teach the tribal children. The language teachers have also helped bridge the cultural gap between the teachers on the one hand and the child and their parents on the other. Since these teachers are from the local community itself, the parents who until now felt a bit inferior to the government teachers who are outsiders and earn much more than they are, now feel proud as a community and have a greater sense of ownership and say in the school activities.

Last but not the least, Sikshasandhan also builds capacity of the community and SMC for sustaining the work initiated. This also helps in addressing inclusion to a certain extent. They work towards covering the entire panchayat and collaborate and network with other important stakeholders to sustain the initiatives.

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14 District institutes of Education and Training are district level-tier support system to provide academic and resource support at the grass-roots level for government programmes being undertaken in the areas of elementary and adult education

15 NCERT - The National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), and its counterpart councils at the state level (SCERTs), were created with the specific mandate to identify and act on key priorities for improving education quality through curriculum design and reform.
IMPROVING ACCESS OF EDUCATION FOR MUSLIM CHILDREN

Oxfam India’s partner Multiple Action Research Group (MARG) is working towards legally empowering the vulnerable and marginalized communities. MARG core belief is, ‘Justice through Legal Empowerment’ as a good way to ensure justice is to legally empower people to demand it. They achieve this through a four-fold approach involving—legal awareness, legal assistance, legal implementation and policy development.

MARG with the support of Oxfam India is working improving access to right to education of Muslim children in Cuttack district of Odisha. The focus is to ensure inclusion of Muslim children in the mainstream education system by increasing enrolment and retention children in selected schools of intervention. A comprehensive visioning exercise between MARG, local partner BIRD and Oxfam had resulted in identification of limited access of Muslim children to education as the core problem, with institutional linkages as a means to remedying this situation. The specific issues to be dealt were mindset/resistance of community/parents to have their children complete education, schools not being sensitive to the specific needs and culture of Muslim children, especially girls, poverty which further impedes access to education and lastly poor quality of schools which discourages continuation of education.

The following strategy was devised to address the above issues:

► Mindset of the communities, schools to be challenged through awareness programmes, engagement with opinion maker, community and religious leaders, media advocacy, etc.

► Constraints of poverty to be countered by ensuring education are actually free and there are no hidden costs, and children have access to schemes of education designed for them.

► Quality of schools to be improved by strengthening SMCs.

THE ABOVE WOULD BE IMPLEMENTED AT 2 LEVELS:

(a) Community - children, parents, selected change agents/RTE justice workers

(b) Institutional- the State Legal Services Authorities, State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights, State Education Department and State SC/ST Department16 (for implementation and redress).

16 In Odisha, there is no Department for Minority Welfare. Minorities come under the purview of the Department of SC/ST.

SOME OF THE SUCCESSES OF THE INITIATIVE HAVE BEEN

► Increasing access to RTE in Cuttack, particularly among students from Muslim communities: One of the first steps was to increase awareness among Muslim parents and the larger communities on importance of education. Baseline survey was conducted in rural and urban Cuttack to map the access to and quality of education particularly among Muslim children. A cadre of RTE justice workers was created who made important interventions ranging from increased allocation for school infrastructure to appointment of teachers. These justice workers along with MARG’s team ensure access to free education in government schools and education schemes for Muslim children.

► Improving the quality of education in the schools: The focus here was to build the capacity of SMCs so that they can take up the issues of quality of government schools where Muslim children are studying in Cuttack. Teachers were sensitized on the issues of Muslim children especially girls, so that they would be enabling and friendly environment for children in the schools.

► Strengthening the functioning of Orissa State Legal Services Authority (OSLSA) and Strengthening the State Commissioner of Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) with reference to implementation of the RTE Act: An increased interest on education (especially Muslim children) among institutions like OSLA, SCPCR was created at the state level. The objective was also to strengthen the OSLSA and increase their capacities to deal with issues of education of Muslim children. Joint trainings of RTE justice workers and the paralegal volunteers of the District Legal Services Authority in Cuttack. Networking meetings were held with the SCPCR as well as the NCPCR representative in Odisha.

► Creating legal literacy materials to facilitate increased awareness on RTE Act among stakeholders: The RTE manual in English and Odia were finalised. Fliers and posters were also prepared.

► A referral system between community and institutions (OSLA and SCPCR) was initiated so that increased number of cases of violations will be referred for action for and follow up. Workshops were also held for lawyers and law students to spread awareness on RTE issues and Muslim children education to examine redress avenues.

CONCLUSION AND LEARNING

The above sections detailing the experiences of four Oxfam India partners highlights the importance of ensuring inclusion of marginalised communities in mainstream education
system. Though the context and the form of exclusion varies across the different project locations, the change in the education status of the children is clearly visible. The different approaches adopted from focusing on an enabling classroom environment, to overcoming the barrier of language to building institutional linkages to address the violations, have been successful in helping children access their right to education. Although there are policies and guidelines prohibiting discrimination of any form in schools, experience from the ground says that there still huge gaps in implementation of the same. Schools and the education system continue to covertly discriminate children on basis on their identity, be it class, caste, religion or gender etc. These children bear the double burden of poverty and social identity and unless a conscious effort is made to bring them out of this vicious cycle, there would continue to bear the brunt of their inheritance.

APCL’s efforts with children from Mushahar community have helped build classrooms which are not only creative but also inclusive. SPAR’s initiatives with tribal children in a conflict zone, has helped create hope and motivation for better education despite the despair and violence. Sikshasandhan’s initiatives on helping children overcome the barrier of language and ensuring respect for local context, has seen a remarkable change in the status of education in the area. Lastly, MARG unique initiatives of working both at the community and the institutional level with premise of legal empowerment, has helped bring focus on the issue of the education of Muslim children.

As education is recognised as not only as right in itself, but as an enabler for other basic rights. It is important to ensure all children especially from marginalised communities have equal access to the education system. It is through education that these children overcome discrimination and stigma they face as result of being born in a particular community. Education also helps promote larger social change among communities thereby ensuring equity and justice.

Therefore, education can be viewed as the most successful enabler for social change and empowerment.

**A FEW IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM THE ABOVE INITIATIVES ARE:**

- An inherent acceptance that all children are equal and deserve an equal access to education.
- There should be a zero tolerance to any form of discrimination and stigma in the schools and at the community levels.
- An enabling and inclusive environment should be created in schools, so that children feel free and have the right to express themselves openly.
- Teachers should be sensitive towards the specific needs of marginalised children especially girls. It is important for teachers for understand and respect the local culture and tradition.
- Develop and advocate for context specific curriculum, taking into account the local needs and context.
- Conscious efforts should be made to make classroom practices inclusive and taking into account the diverse needs of children.
- There should be equal space for the participation of marginalised communities in a transparent and accountable education system.
- Education should lay the foundation and build confidence of the children and communities to help overcome the years of socio-economic exclusion they have faced. The communities should understand the importance of education as enabler for this change and be willing to invest adequate time and interest for driving this change.
Similarly, the onus also lies on the education system to help identify and address issues of discrimination in the schools. The need and importance of inclusion in the education process should become an essential element in all trainings and orientations of teachers, school officials, SMCs, parents, PRI members etc.

Finally, inclusion should become an important mandate of not only all stakeholders in the education system but the larger community itself. As the ability of children to access a school, participate in school activities, learn, grow and most importantly develop self-worth and self-esteem is influenced by not only only school and family but also the society they live in.¹⁷

**REFERENCES**

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¹⁷ What It Means To Be a Dalit or Tribal Child in Our Schools- Vimala Ramachandran et al.

This learning note is prepared based on Oxfam India’s partners APCL, Sikshasandhan, SPAR and MARG experience, processes and lessons learned towards inclusion of socially excluded children in the mainstream education system for wider sharing. It was documented by Ms. Shirin Naseem during August 2014 to October 2014. We would like to thank the entire Essential Services team and Oxfam India’s Education partners for their inputs given during the process of documentation.

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