



ASHRAYA INITIATIVE FOR CHILDREN: A LEAP TOWARDS INCLUSION

Rizwana Daulatabad

(HOD, Jr. College of Education), English Medium D.El.Ed. College, Azam Campus, Pune



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“Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty, and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, it is an agent of family health and nutrition. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential.”

- Kofi Annan

This can be achieved through inclusive education which is a foundation for the dynamic and equitable societies. A socially inclusive society is defined as one where all people of religious and linguistic minorities as well as Denotified Tribes feel valued, their differences are respected and basic needs are met to live in dignity.

Mission Statement:

Ashraya Initiative for Children was founded in 2004 by Liz Sholtys and six university students from around the world who had been high school classmates in India. It is dedicated to improving the lives and shaping the futures of vulnerable children from the slums and streets of Pune, India by advancing educational opportunities, nurturing holistic development, and building healthy, empowered communities.

AIC's core programs were developed and expanded organically between 2005 and 2008 based on growing needs and priorities, expressed community aspirations and assets, and an attempt to more deeply address the roots of the issues that affect vulnerable children's lives in meaningful, collaborative ways.

Background:

The history of India's indigenous communities is rife with conflict and oppression. There are estimated to be 104 million *adivasis* (indigenous peoples) in India. Representing 8.6% of India's total population, these heterogeneous ethnic tribes comprise the highest concentration of indigenous peoples of any country in the world. Within the overall *adivasi* classification there are three main sub-groups: Scheduled Tribes, Nomadic Tribes, and Denotified Tribes. At the most marginalized end of the spectrum are the Denotified Tribes, who have not only been excluded from mainstream society, but actively criminalized.

Ashraya Initiative for Children (AIC) works with two Denotified Tribe (DNT) communities in Pune, India. Unlike other tribal populations in India, Denotified Tribes were legally criminalized by the government and their members were classified as "criminal by birth" under the British government's Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. For decades, people were rounded up, harassed, arrested, extorted, and even killed with impunity under this Act. Though the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 (and Criminal Tribes were reclassified as "Denotified Tribes"), a new Habitual Offenders Act was enacted in its place the same year. Despite ongoing pressure from the United Nations and India's National Human Rights Commission to repeal the Habitual Offenders Act, its discriminatory effects persist to this day.

AIC focuses its programs on two such Denotified Tribes— the *Waghri* and *Sikligar* communities, located in the urban slums of Yerwada, Pune.

With the prejudices they face and a lack of government aid, most of the *Waghri*s and *Sikligar*s live in abject poverty, and remain profoundly disadvantaged in every sense of the word. In these slums, it is not uncommon for extended families of ten or more to live on a collective household income of less than \$2 USD per day. Typical housing consists of one or two-room structures made of corrugated metal, with illegally tapped electricity connections, outdoor communal taps that provide water for only a few short hours each day, and overcrowded public toilet blocks.

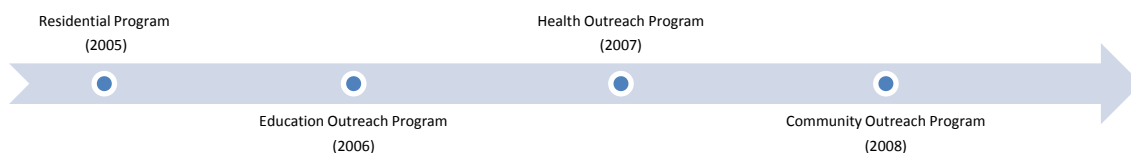
The mindsets of *Waghri* and *Sikligar* community leaders tend to be traditional and often conflict with mainstream society's norms and values. These communities generally operate outside of the Indian legal system and have their own traditions for marriage, divorce, and resolving conflict through the *panchayat* (tribal council) system. Rigid patriarchy, child marriage, dowry traditions, and early pregnancy are extremely common, while education for girls and outside employment for women have been rejected until recently. Furthermore, the *Waghri*s and *Sikligar*s have historically considered higher level education to be unnecessary

as the tradition of children continuing caste-ordained occupations (ironwork for the *Sikligars*; selling old clothes for the *Waghris*) is standard. However, traditional tribal livelihoods are quickly becoming obsolete and these communities are caught in a cycle of unemployability and extreme poverty. Many attempt to make ends meet on the streets as hawkers and peddlers, roadside laborers, street performers, and begging when other means of survival have been exhausted.

As historically marginalized tribes without land, representation, or even the legal documentation to prove their identities, Denotified Tribe communities such as the *Waghris* and *Sikligars* find themselves trapped between the forces of rapid urban growth, social change, and economic marginalization. These circumstances often have severe mental, physical, and emotional effects that reinforce these communities' position on the fringes of society and set them apart as permanent outcasts.

Programming:

AIC's main activities are divided into four distinct yet interconnected programs: Residential Program, Education Outreach Program, Health Outreach Program, and Community Outreach Program. AIC's core programs were developed and expanded organically between 2005 and 2008 based on growing needs and priorities, expressed community aspirations and assets, and an attempt to dig deeper to address the roots of the issues that affect vulnerable children's lives in meaningful, collaborative ways.



Although AIC's four core programs have not changed since 2008, services and activities within the programs are constantly evolving and developing in response to changing needs and available resources.

Residential Program

Funds boarding school education at nearby residential schools for a small "family" of fifteen children. Residential Program staff provide additional care (counseling, medical care, clothing and personal items, weekend visits, vacation programming) and a social and emotional support system to allow each child to grow, develop, and to be loved and cared for.

Education Program Outreach:

Serves 200 students, ranging from toddlers to university students. Fifty children attend the AIC pre-primary school and 150 students are enrolled in local schools. AIC provides a holistic web of services to ensure these students' success, including daily transportation to and from school, uniforms, shoes, provisions for hygiene (e.g., sanitary products, undergarments, toothbrushes, haircuts), full access to preventative health care as well as curative and emergency medical treatment, daily meals (breakfast, lunch, snack), remedial support services, college counseling, extracurricular offerings on weekends, and tutoring by trained educators before or after school five days per week.

Health Outreach Program:

AIC's Health Outreach Program was born out of a recognition that working on the root causes of poverty necessitates a service to the health needs of the community. AIC provides comprehensive medical care, including routine health check-ups, immunizations, emergency medical care, hospitalizations, surgeries, and nutritional supplementation for all.

Community Outreach Program:

Facilitates microfinance opportunities for community women, provides advocacy services, professional family and individual counseling, emergency financial and material assistance in crisis situations, adult literacy classes and vocational training programs to address the development of the family unit as a whole and to empower community members to build additional earning capacity and utilize available resources

In 2014, a pilot initiative called the *MotiMulgi* 'Big Girls' Project was started, which entailed maximized resource investment and close tracking of girls in standards 8 - 10 to prevent dropout and underage marriage which was 100% successful.

The Trailblazing Girls Project:

This project intended to address the tremendous challenges faced by girls in vulnerable tribal communities, including high drop-out rates in secondary school, child marriage, and early motherhood, domestic violence, unemployability, social and emotional health concerns, and an overall lack of familial support and public awareness of their struggles.

The pillars of the Trailblazing Girls Project are a direct result of the experiences and voices of AIC's girls, who have expressed clearly and consistently through interviews, surveys, and counseling sessions that they worry about being pulled out of school or pressured into giving up their educations, or who have begun junior college or even university but find it difficult to stand out as applicants for jobs in a hypercompetitive

employment environment because they lack technical skills (computer skills, spoken English), soft skills and overall confidence.

The Trailblazing Girls Project is also a response to the primary reasons cited by girls formerly in the program who have not continued their educations over the past five years, namely:

- Lack of confidence in school – insecurity and embarrassment in the classroom, low self-esteem
- Lack of community/parental support (pressure to help at home, early marriage, parents refused to allow her to continue)
- Lack of motivation to continue (sense of futility or belief that education will not be relevant or important in her future life as a wife and mother)
- Harassment from teachers or male peers
- Lack of interest (prefer to do something hands-on or vocational in nature).

The Trailblazing Girls Project aims to prepare AIC's girls for successful futures and more empowered lives. The primary goals of the project are:

Goal 1: Improve educational outcomes

The first objective is to increase services for girls who are struggling academically and require additional support. This will be accomplished by employing two remedial support teachers who will provide intensive, individualized support to girls who have been identified by AIC teaching staff.

Furthermore, girls who have been identified as exceptionally promising students may be eligible for more rigorous educational opportunities (United World Colleges, *Avasara Academy*), are prepared for competitive entrance processes. This is achieved by arranging weekly sessions for up to 20 girls at any given time who are AIC's highest-achieving students. These sessions focus on public speaking, creative/analytical writing, and skills that provide additional opportunities for growth and college preparation.

The second objective ensures that each girl's educational trajectory is tailored to her interests and strengths through ongoing support and mentorship for pursuing junior college and university admissions or vocational training programs.

Goal 2: Encourage self-expression and empowerment

Here the objective is to provide social and emotional support and nurture leadership potential.

To accomplish this, a trained clinical counselor has been hired for individual counseling, group sessions, and family counseling.

The Trailblazing Girls Project also includes a community exposure component to familiarize AIC's girls with new ideas, settings, and individuals that will serve to build their confidence. This includes a monthly guest speaker series wherein positive female role models visit the Education Centre to hold motivational talks about their experiences and opportunities available to girls. Local field trips and outings will further serve to expose AIC's girls to opportunities and resources beyond their slum communities.

Goal 3: Eventual economic self-sufficiency

To improve future employability and self-sufficiency of AIC's girls, relevant professional and technical competencies are developed which will be achieved through the launching of bi-weekly computer classes for girls at AIC's newly inaugurated computer lab.

Another powerful mode of developing professional skills is having the opportunity to work in a professional setting. In mid-2015, an internship program was launched that allowed college students from AIC's Education Outreach Program to apply for paid internships at AIC. This opportunity allowed them to develop their professional skills and play a role in the development and administration of AIC's programming and a regular source of income that further motivated them towards their career goals. Feedback from the first three *Waghri* and *Sikligar* interns (all female) has been exceptionally positive, and the Trailblazing Girls Project would fund 3 paid internship placements for *Waghri* and *Sikligar* college girls per year.

Goal 4: Home and community environments that is conducive to success

Here the objective was to strengthen parental commitment to girls' education and sensitize local community leaders and key stakeholders about the unique pressures and needs of girls from tribal communities. Pilot seminar sessions have been held with TFI fellows and Mahindra United World College administrators and both have been very well received

In addition to outreach efforts to teachers and school administrators, there are several other local officials who are instrumental to shaping dynamics within the local landscape. Last year, AIC staff and students took a successful trial trip to the police station to celebrate a local holiday and began building positive relationships of exchange and dialogue between community members and the local police force.

Vision

The goal has always been deep, transformational change within a single generation. At present, AIC is ten years into that vision, and has started to truly witness

significant outcomes. Most notably, increased involvement and investment in the mission is by the students themselves, who are now old enough to have opinions about the work and values that they see at AIC and visions for their own communities' futures. As the current student population grows up to become the next generation of *Waghri* and *Sikligar* leadership, a strong believe that the primary issues identified by the Trailblazing Girls Project – lack of strong role models, lack of leadership experience, lack of parental and community support – will improve drastically because nearly every family in the *Waghri* and *Sikligar* communities will eventually be headed by at least one adult who went through the AIC programs from conception to college.

By virtue of being “trailblazers,” the girls will pave the path for those who will come after them, making the experience of being female in the *Waghri* and *Sikligar* community a less oppressive reality. It is safe to say that this will almost certainly be the generation that breaks the cycle of child marriage in the *Waghri* and *Sikligar* communities.

Economic equality and leadership opportunities within the community will be slower marches to victory. As these communities become progressively more educated with each passing year, we anticipate that AIC’s work and the impetus for change will be largely community-driven and internally-sustained within the next 15 years.

IMPACT

Annually, AIC impacts hundreds of men, women, and children in Pune. Over 90% of AIC’s beneficiaries are members of the *Waghri* and *Sikligar* communities, representing a strong organizational focus on maximizing investment within small, clearly-defined communities, resulting in deep, transformative change within a single generation.

Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 slum areas covered• 600 community members
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 50 expectant and new mothers• 200 Education Program students• Nutritional support, medical care, counseling for 250 highest-needs community members
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15 playgroup toddlers and 50 pre-primary students• 150 primary and secondary school students• 30 current college students and recent graduates
Residential	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15 children (7 boys, 8 girls)

In the future as programming capacity grows AIC aims to continue to solidify service provision to existing beneficiaries, as well as to reach additional *Waghri* and *Sikligar* beneficiaries who reside in neighboring slums and do not yet receive support from AIC.

Furthermore, broader public education about the challenges faced by Denotified Tribes has already been initiated.

AIC is a fantastic and simple example of social inclusion which could inspire most of us to realize the dream of an inclusive society.

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