

Achyuta Samanta's Kiss Of Life

A go-getter with a big heart, he is educating thousands of poor tribal kids from KG to PG

By Mohan Sivanand



Samanta, with some of the children at his school. Photo: Mahendra Prasad

At 17, Prakash Chandra Murmu has spent most of his life at a boarding school in Bhubaneswar, where he was admitted as a small child in 2003 with Bikash, his older brother. Recently, his school sent Prakash, who likes science and is a keen sportsman, to a week-long international English-language camp in Taiwan. Earlier he'd been to London to play rugby. "It's been good here," says Prakash. "My school has given me so many opportunities."

It might seem as if Prakash attends an exclusive international school, where his parents pay lakhs of rupees in fees. Actually, his is a free school founded for poor tribals by an unassuming 48-year-old bachelor named Achyutananda Samanta, who lost his factory-worker father when he was five and endured abject poverty. "Educating just one generation of tribal children can change their communities," says Samanta.

Prakash, a Santal tribal now doing his BSc, is just back at his school-cum-college, the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) after the vacations. Housing around 16,500 tribal students this year, KISS is arguably one of the world's largest residential schools. Had Prakash remained in his remote tribal village of Gopiabandha in Odisha, he might never have got any education, or even dreamt about exclusive camps or sports tournaments abroad—all that if he survived childhood. "My village is very backward," he says. "The local school is not good. And when people fall ill, they're taken on a bicycle for long distances to reach a doctor."

"Odisha's tribals, nearly a quarter of the state's population, are grossly neglected," explains Mahendra Prasad, a director with the Kalinga institutions. "And tribal child mortality remains very high."

"Odisha has 62 scheduled tribes," adds Samanta. "They're the poorest of the poor. But give their children an education and they become no different from you and me."

Prakash smiles in assent and introduces some of his schoolmates. There's BCom student Tani Murmu. Seema Hansda is in her second-year MBBS, Saudagar Hansda is doing his LLB, while MA economics scholar Sanjukta Rani Hembram wants to specialize in rural education and return to her tribal roots as a teacher. They've all grown up at KISS with Samanta—who is not a tribal—fulfilling their basic right to an education. "At KISS," says Samanta, who habitually plays with his English phrases, "we offer an education from KG to PG."

As Samanta explains the risks of caring for and managing so many children ("More than 50 may be sick at any time"), in the schoolyard outside swarms of boarders, from tiny tots to teens, are served lunch. They queue up with steel plates before big cauldrons of rice and dalma, a local curry. "The food is simple," says Mahendra Prasad, "but dalma, made of yellow lentil and several vegetables, is nutritious. On Wednesdays they are served eggs and on Sundays, they get chicken curry."

With dorms and classrooms for thousands of students (whose numbers have grown every year), the campus is a large township in northern Bhubaneswar. Spread across 25 square kilometres, it comprises KISS and an even larger mother institution, KIIT—pronounced kit—also Samanta's creation, as are these rhyming acronyms. Samanta first set up KIIT, short for Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology,

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Children here get opportunities they hadn't dreamed of. Photo: Courtesy: KISS, Bhubaneswar

in 1992 as an industrial training institute (ITI) with just two rooms, 12 students and Rs5000 saved from his job as a chemistry lecturer. With Samanta's 18-hour workdays and inborn management skills, KIIT just grew and grew.

"Growing it wasn't easy," he says. "I had to promise jobs to the children of those who sold me land. I once had Rs14 lakh in overdue loans. Moneylenders hounded me and I thought of suicide. But a nationalized bank came to my rescue and lent me even more money." Samanta also had to tackle petty bureaucrats and please them. To get one clerk to push a file for him, Samanta used to take the man's relative on his scooter for weeks to medical appointments.

In 1995, a team of education inspectors asked him for a treat—dinner at a Bhubaneswar five-star hotel. "I had to agree, but they wined and dined so much, when I went over to pay the bill I didn't have enough money," says Samanta, like he's

telling an old joke. "I then frantically rode around town to borrow cash." But as his work became known, all that changed. "Nobody makes such demands anymore." Even so, Samanta's fast-paced, get-it-done style has got him into the news—and it hasn't always been good, as with a recent charge made by the CBI against some staff members of one of his colleges. "Some are jealous of what I do, others may take advantage of us," claims Samanta, countering such negative reports, "I like to trust people."

Indeed, Odisha is rife with such reports. "You can't be a saint here and get things done," one noted social worker from the state told me. "As for Samanta, he's doing a good job for tribals. I too have sent to him many tribal children, who are all getting an education at KISS."

Education, including boarding, clothing, tuition and other needs are free for all KISS students because there's the fee-charging KIIT, one of India's largest private universities. Some 18,000 students attend KIIT's ultra-modern faculties: from art and media studies, law and fashion design to management, engineering and medicine. Besides the tribal school, KISS has colleges offering arts, science and commerce degrees. Tribal kids are admitted free to KIIT if they take up courses there. "It's quite simple," explains Samanta. "KIIT funds KISS."

How someone like Samanta could realize all this is often the stuff of dreams. In 1970, after his father, a Tata Steel employee, suddenly died in Jamshedpur, his mother was left with her seven children to fend for. She moved back to their village of Kalarabank, Odisha, with Achyuta and his two youngest siblings. "Achyuta worked in the fields from age six and sold paddy husk, coconuts and bananas to help support the family," recalls Manoranjan Pradhan, a Cuttack-based lawyer and childhood friend.

"Often we didn't get one square meal for two days," says Samanta. "Mother too did menial jobs and gathered edible weeds by the river to feed us." Things improved only after one of his brothers was given a job in Tata Steel. "But what really saved me was that I liked to study," says Samanta. "I read at my teacher's house when Mother ran out of kerosene for the lamps." Sure enough, he worked his way

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Republic Day parade at KISS. Photo: Courtesy: KISS, Bhubaneswar

up to his MSc in chemistry and then the lecturer's job he held for 10 years.

The hardships he endured were "actually a gift from God," Samanta now believes, because it taught him firsthand the one thing the very poor really needed. "Why am I able to sit across and talk to you on equal terms?" he asks me. "Only because I got an education. That's all I'm giving these children."

Samanta also took some hard decisions. He became a confirmed bachelor and shunned personal wealth. "If I had a wife and children," he says, "it would have been hard not to care for them or have self-interests." And, despite creating his massive educational empire from scratch, he will tell you that his monthly salary is modest, far less than he pays his senior employees. From this, he says, he keeps just enough

for expenses, including rent for the simple house he lives in, away from campus, and donates the rest to the poor. Others who run private universities would treat it as a family business and keep much of the profits. "But reinvesting the income," Samanta explains, "is how we're able to keep on buying land and expand the two institutions."

Samanta takes childlike pleasure in talking about his achievements—which aren't small by any standards. He's also media savvy, enjoys the limelight and likes being "Dr Samanta," which is how everybody addresses him (he has several honorary doctorates). He also talks with pride about the many great personalities—ranging from ambassadors and Nobel laureates to statesmen like former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam—who have come visiting. Yet Samanta's frugality, too, shows. In his simple white shirts worn casually over jeans even at solemn university functions, he looks more like one of his students than an entrepreneur. He has no office on campus, but pores through official papers, or meets most visitors, under the shade of a kadamba tree. His car is a second-hand 1998 Maruti Zen hatchback while some of his employees, who include expat academics from several countries, zip about in swanky new sedans and SUVs. "They need to be well off to be happy," he explains. "They have families. I have to pay well to attract and retain the best academic staff."

Achyuta Samanta looks on proudly as I talk to another of his tribal students. Raj Kishore, 17, has been at KISS since class one. In 2007 the dark, stocky boy led the KISS India rugby team at an international junior tournament in England. His team returned as unbeaten champions. He's also played in Australia. "When our team played in Sydney," says Samanta, "I went over to cheer them on personally at a key match."

KISS students are also encouraged to continue with their tribal traditions. The school buildings are adorned with their tribal mural creations. The children's paintings and embroidery, often using tribal motifs, are sold at exhibitions and any money earned sent to their parents.

One student, Jabes Hajoary, 21, with his oriental features and light complexion, looks different from the others. Jabes learnt about KISS on the internet in his school's lab, back in his native Assam a few years ago and decided to apply for his BA. Being a tribal, he was admitted. "I wanted to experience a different world. I'm glad I came here and adjusted with others from different cultures," says Jabes, sounding like the sociology major he is. To experience yet another culture, he recently moved to Pondicherry, where he is an MA student.

Meanwhile, other KISS alumni, too, are spreading out and merging into mainstream India, just the way Samanta wants it. Ramesh Nayak, 21, had just earned his BTech from KIIT after moving there from KISS. He was back home in Beharamal village in Odisha's tribal-dominated Sundargarh district, after being placed in TCS as a software systems engineer, when I spoke to him, and doing TCS's online training on his laptop. He's since moved to Chennai and started work. What does Ramesh have to say about Samanta? "My living God," Ramesh replies over his cellphone. "Without Samanta Sir, I'd be nowhere."

Like Ramesh and Jabes, their mentor too is now looking beyond Bhubaneswar. Samanta is busy setting up 20 KISS branches in Odisha's tribal areas. That is not all. "I also want a KISS branch in every state," he says, "only then will my dream for tribals be fulfilled." Work has started in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Delhi. And Samanta is in talks with the governments of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. "This is going to be contagious," Dr Samanta laughs. "When you're doing something for others and not for yourself, everybody listens."

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