Agastya International Foundation — The Mobile Lab That Arrived When No Teacher Could

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In a government school in rural Karnataka, a science teacher stands at a blackboard and describes how electricity works. The description is accurate. The students take notes. The textbook is open. And virtually no one in the room has ever touched a wire, a battery, or a light bulb in a context that allows them to understand what is actually happening when current flows.

This is not a failure of the teacher or the curriculum. It is the specific educational poverty of resource-stripped schooling: the gap between knowing about things and knowing things. Agastya International Foundation was founded in 1999 to close this gap — not by replacing the school or the teacher, but by bringing into the school the hands-on experience that the school cannot generate for itself.

Who They Are

Agastya International Foundation is a Bangalore-based education trust founded in 1999 by Ramji Raghavan — a businessman who returned from abroad with a specific diagnosis about Indian education — and Mahavir Kumar. Their founding mission: to spark curiosity (Aah!), nurture creativity (Aha!), and instil confidence and caring (Ha-Ha!) among underserved children and teachers through hands-on STEAM education.

Twenty-five years later, Agastya has positively influenced more than 20 million students and 300,000 teachers across more than 22 states in India. Their 172-acre Campus Creativity Lab in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh is a physical demonstration of what hands-on learning looks like at scale — a campus where every building, every pathway, and every garden is a science experiment that students build, use, and explain.

The Mobile Lab: Science Brought to the Door

Agastya's core innovation is the mobile science lab — a van equipped with low-cost models, experiments, and materials covering Physics, Chemistry, and Biology — that travels to remote government schools rather than waiting for students to travel to a fixed facility. The mobile lab is staffed by a trained instructor who facilitates hands-on experiments using materials that students can replicate at home.

Where vans cannot reach, Agastya deploys labs-on-bikes: motorcycles carrying portable experiment kits, a laptop, and internet connectivity to remote rural and forest-adjacent schools. The technology adaptation is deliberately minimal — the point is the experience, not the equipment.

Their Lab in a Box (LIB) programme, initiated in 2009, provides government school teachers with ten boxes containing experiments covering different Physics, Chemistry, and Biology concepts — a resource for executing hands-on activities regularly without waiting for the mobile lab visit. The LIB is the after-visit infrastructure that makes curiosity sustainable between visits.

The Young Instructors League

Agastya's Young Instructors League (YIL) trains older students — typically Class VIII to X — as peer educators who guide younger children during science fairs and model demonstrations. This design choice reflects a specific understanding of peer learning: a nine-year-old who watches a twelve-year-old demonstrate an experiment and explain it in the local language learns differently than when a trained adult does the

same. The twelve-year-old also learns — teaching is the most powerful form of learning — and builds communication confidence that carries beyond the science fair.

The YIL has produced documented outcomes: Class XII graduates from Agastya's programme winning district and state science competitions, including a student whose Agastya Virtual School video on the manometer helped him win first place in Madurai's science model competition.

The 2024 Milestone: 25 Years and the AI Frontier

Agastya turned 25 on April 2, 2024. Their stated vision for the next phase: impact 100 million underserved children and 1 million teachers by 2032. In 2024, they collaborated with Class Saathi — an AI-powered education platform — to impact over 75,000 students across 700 schools through AI-enabled assessments and interactive learning modules. Their phygital (physical + digital) model is the framework through which government school partnerships are being deepened at state level.

Why This Matters for Odisha

Odisha's tribal district schools face a specific version of the hands-on learning gap: teachers are often from outside the community, science equipment budgets are near zero, and student engagement with abstract curriculum content is low. Agastya's mobile lab model, LIB boxes, and YIL peer educator programme are all directly applicable and have precedents in similar tribal district geographies. For Odisha NGOs supporting government schools in Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, or Keonjhar: Agastya's state-partnership model in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh is the replication template.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: agastya.org | **Campus:** Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh | **USA:** agastyausa.org

Key evidence:

- Wikipedia: Agastya International Foundation — 20 million students, 300,000 teachers, 22 states, 172-acre campus
- Grokipedia: Class Saathi partnership 2024 — 75,000 students, 700 schools; 25-year milestone
- The Borgen Project: *Agastya International Foundation: Sparking Curiosity via Science* (June 2024) — mobile lab methodology, LIB, YIL
- Give.do Agastya profile: programme descriptions across mobile labs, labs-on-bikes, YIL, LIB

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