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A Humane Approach to Designing a School in and for Tribal Communities

Abstract

This paper is based on the experiences of 5 schools run by the Kaigal Education and Environment (KEEP) program (Krishnamurti Foundation India), in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, and will frame it in the context of education for marginalized communities in India. The schools studied as part of this paper are from 5 remote tribal villages. The paper explores an approach to developing a school that is accommodating to, and enriched by the cultural and knowledge diversity of the communities. This is analyzed along the dimensions of curriculum, teacher development programs and community engagement. Autonomy for the schools to develop a learning program, contextualized to the local environment and sensitive to the community needs is critical to creating an inclusive, empathetic learning environment. Formalizing local knowledge into the curriculum means that the schools become natural places for learning, relevant to the community.

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our life in harmony with all existence

– Rabindranath Tagore

The Constitution of India guarantees every Indian citizen social, economic and political justice, with the vision of a pluralistic, egalitarian society with liberty and equality for all. It is widely acknowledged that education has a significant role to play in the attainment of social justice. Several policy and curriculum documents have underscored the importance of an education system that must be designed such that the highest ideals of social justice are achieved. However, education systems are set in the social context they are a part of and often the inequalities and marginalizations in the society impact access to and participation in education. While changing economies and structures of society are demanding newer skills and capabilities, assessment of learning levels of students show that educational attainment levels are low, despite achievement of near universalization of elementary in terms of enrolment. In a stratified society like India, divided along caste, socio-economic, linguistic lines, these attainments also vary across these divisions.

Context of tribal education in India

India has a tribal population of 10.42 crore accounting for about 8.6% of the total population of the country (Primary Census Abstract, 2011). Development and education of tribal communities

have been a long standing challenge, starting from the times of the colonial administration. Faced with uprising in the context of development in the colonial rule, the then administration decided to adopt a "well-left" strategy that justified itself on the basis of the already isolated nature of these societies. However, expansionary pressures of trade and market continued, resulting in exploitation of tribals and loss of their natural context. Post independence the socio-economic and educational outcomes of tribals received renewed attention.

The Constitution of India declares that "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Tribes and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation".

Amidst a divided sociological debate on tribal development, the first Prime Minister of India articulated a set of tribal policies that articulated among other factors two key principles based on recognizing the knowledge system of the tribal communities and preserving the land and forests of the tribal communities. Several administrative measures have been taken up in the decades since independence based on these policies, including the setting up of a Ministry for Tribal Welfare and the Integrated Tribal Development Authority. The Tribal Sub-Plan which has a long term objective of improving the socio-economic condition of the tribal communities sought to build capabilities and end exploitation. Recognizing the importance of elementary education for working towards these objectives and acknowledging the ineffectiveness of primary schools in addressing these challenges, "Ashram schools" which were residential were set up.

Educational outcomes of scheduled tribes

According to Sujatha, K. (1999)

"Social development through formal education and transmission of higher skills, through the institution of schools, was something new to tribal society. Education, in its formalized structure, was never a part of traditional tribal culture; therefore, it took a longer period for this group to realize its importance."

It is therefore not surprising to see that the literacy rates of tribal communities have remained lower than their counterparts. The following tables give some data on participation of children from scheduled tribes in the formal school system.

Table 1: Enrolment in schools

In million	Class 1-5			Class 6-8		
All	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2009-10	69.7	63.9	133.6	31.7	27.8	59.5
2010-11	70.1	64.6	134.8	32.7	29.2	61.9
2011-12	72.64	67.2	139.9	33.1	29.9	63
Scheduled castes						
2009-10	13.49	12.52	26.01	5.75	5.12	10.87
2010-11	14.03	12.90	26.93	5.98	5.32	11.30
2011-12	14.80	13.89	28.69	6.32	5.92	12.24
Scheduled tribes						
2009-10	7.71	7.21	14.92	2.75	2.41	5.16
2010-11	7.67	7.18	14.85	2.84	2.58	5.42
2011-12	7.86	7.42	15.28	2.91	2.70	5.61

Source: School education statistics, 2011-12, MHRD, India.

Table 2: Drop outs from schools

Percentage	Class 1-5			Class 6-8		
All (%)	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2009-10	31.8	28.5	30.3	41.1	44.2	42.5
2010-11	29.0	25.4	27.4	40.6	41.2	40.8
2011-12	23.4	21.0	22.3	41.5	40.0	40.8
Scheduled castes						
2009-10	33.7	25.6	30.0	50.8	51.5	51.2
2010-11	30.2	23.4	27.1	46.8	39.1	43.4
2011-12	22.3	24.7	23.5	43.3	36.4	40.2
Scheduled tribes						
2009-10	38.1	35.4	36.8	54.6	59.1	56.8
2010-11	37.2	33.9	35.6	54.7	55.4	55.0
2011-12	36.1	34.4	35.3	57.3	57.1	57.2

Source: School education statistics, 2011-12, MHRD, India.

The literacy rates among the scheduled tribes shows the following trend:

Literacy rates	2001 (M)	2001 (F)	2001 (Total)	2011 (M)	2011 (F)	2011 (Total)
Total	75.3%	53.7%	64.8%	80.9%	64.6%	73%
SC	66.6%	41.9%	54.7%	75.2%	56.5%	66.1%
ST	59.2%	34.8%	47.1%	68.5%	49.4%	59%

(Source: Census of India, 2001 and Primary Census Abstract, 2011 India).

Andhra Pradesh has the lowest literacy rate of ST at 49.2%. Of these, the Yenadi tribals have the lowest levels of literacy above primary level.

The following trends have been observed in educational outcomes of scheduled tribes:

1. Lower enrolment figures of ST as compared with general category students and SC students

2. Higher drop out rates of ST as compared with general category students and SC students

3. Literacy rate lower among ST as compared with general category students and SC students

4. The literacy rates among girls lower than that of boys, in all categories of students

A study of the literature on tribal education reveals that the causes for the low levels of attainment have to do with the design of the educational processes, administrative limitations and the psycho-social conditions of the tribal people.

Objectives of this study

It is in this context, that this paper seeks to explore if and how an alternative approach to curriculum and school can be imagined, in a marginalized tribal community, with empathy as the cornerstone. The study attempts to delineate the development of an educational context which includes the students, teachers and the local school community and how such an approach can develop aspirations for an empowering model of education. This study focuses on the aspects of educational design and the psychosocial aspects of first generation learners from tribal communities.

Inferences have been drawn from the experiences of schools run by the Kaigal Education and Environment (KEEP) program[1], in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, perspectives shared

from other community supported schools and have been framed in the context of education for tribal communities in India. The schools studied as part of this paper are from 5 remote tribal villages. The communities here are marginalized, belonging to the scheduled castes/ tribes and many households are below the poverty line. The Yanadi tribal community is the predominant tribal group in this area. Majority of the community members around these schools are forest produce collectors, with a deep knowledge of the local biodiversity and traditional medicinal practices. The schools emerged as a response to the demand of the community to have a formal and appropriate educational environment for their young. When the schools started in 2004, all the students were first generation school-goers with no access to any formal school system nearby.

The study has defined empathy to include all participants in the educational process – the students, parents and teachers – and explores aspects of educational design that results in the development of all these actors. Teacher development, a context-sensitive curriculum and conservation of the tribal habitat are the three strands explored in this study. This is analyzed along the dimensions of curriculum, teacher development programs and community engagement.

For the purposes of this study, parents, teachers and students were interviewed to understand their perspectives on the educational process. Key informant interviews were also conducted with select educational initiatives which worked with similar or comparable contexts. This allowed us to abstract out common principles and challenges.

The workings of the school
Basic demographic profile

The Kaigal village is adjacent to the Kaundinya Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS), in the Palamner Ghats, Chitoor District, Andhra Pradesh. The people living here and other neighbouring villages are marginal farmers, shepherds and daily wage earners employed in growing rain-fed crops, tending flocks or seeking seasonal employment as farm hands or stone cutters. They belong to the most backward communities, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes and most of them live well below the poverty line. Yanadi is the most common ST community living in these villages.

The program began in 2002 with an in-situ conservation and afforestation program to protect the local biodiversity. Interactions with the community on various conservation aspects led to the awareness about the need for a school (primary level) and based on the request from community elders the school began operations. These are called 'Sanctuary Schools' and today there are about 50 students in the age group of 3 to 14 attending the school. Apart from free education and lunch the students are also given clothes, books and all the required school supplies.

While originally the program started out as 5 schools in 5 different tribal villages, currently two[2] schools are operational in two tribal villages of Kalligutta and Mugilupodarevu.

The main objectives of the schools include the following:

1. providing meaningful education to children in tribal villages who have no easy access to school education

2. addressing the overall development of the children

3. helping children grow into healthy, happy and responsible adults

The schools are for the children from the age group 3-12 and the classes are conducted in mixed age groups where

the students are grouped according to their learning levels. The language of instruction is in the child's first language and the pedagogy is based on exploratory activities to construct knowledge. The school activities have consciously been developed so as to draw from the child's and the community knowledge of the local environment and the classroom is structured to allow for peer learning and not a mere transmission from teacher to student.

The schools completed their 13th year in March 2017, from the time they began in response to the need felt by the community for a good environment for their children. Over the years the schools have grown in their operations in Kalligutta and Mugilupodarevu. All children above 3 years of age in these villages come to schools and almost all of them continue with their studies by joining a Government High School - day school or residential - once they reach 11 or 12 years of age when they leave the Sanctuary Schools. A few students also continue their studies after class 10. Both the schools are registered under the Right to Education Act (2009)[3] and are staffed by qualified teachers. All the teachers have finished their graduation/post-graduation followed by a B.Ed degree. They either belong to the community or are from the neighbourhood villages.

Curriculum development processes

It has been documented widely in educational literature that young children learn best when the learning is situated in their context. One of the challenges of education in tribal contexts is the relevance of the curriculum to their everyday contexts. Curricular development in Indian school system has proceeded as a series of incremental changes, starting from a western knowledge system that created a homegenized curriculum for all students and contexts.

In the schools studied here, the challenge was in terms of developing a curriculum that made sense to the community and their ways of living and working. In a community that until about 30 years ago was living in the forests, the challenge of introducing formal education was enormous. The tribal communities were knowledge holders and possessed a large amount of indigenous knowledge about the local forests and intuitively understood the connection between the local ecology and their life. However, with the mainstreaming of tribal communities– through education, development programs and more recently, the media – there was a perceived need to read and write and get meducation.

The challenges therefore, were three-fold:

1. Developing a curriculum that was relevant, interesting and engaging for the students while at the same time valuing their knowledge, lived experiences and traditional skills

2. Introducing the processes and demands of areas of formal schooling in a community with no literate adults and introducing subjects that had no apparent bearing to their everyday life

3. Developing an educational process that allowed the children, the teachers and the parents in the community to flower and grow as human beings who can be happy, healthy and responsible

Key principles of curriculum design

To address these challenges, the curriculum was developed with the following key principles:

i. Integration of the the care of, and responsiveness to, the local ecology and environment, where the community elders share their

knowledge of the local ecology as part of the school learning.

ii. Educating in the child's first language, with an integrated approach to art, craft and other school subjects

iii. Providing spaces for play, community service, creative pursuits, silence, reflection and introspection (not fitted into a defined structure) for the students and adults. The spaces for quietness and reflections may not have visible, measurable outcomes but are crucial for the development of empathetic people

iv. Autonomy and flexibility to the teacher in order to be creative and to be able to explore with the students

v. Designing experiences for the teachers and adults who are empathetic towards the children -accepting children as they are–help them discover their strengths so as to build their self esteem and experience the joy of understanding and succeeding – however simple and small it may be

vi. Participatory designing of the curricular materials with teachers along with resource persons and educators with experience in similar contexts. It is important to note that the curriculum of every subject evolves continuously with addition of new ideas, newer concepts, novel approaches and tools.

vii. Structured experiences of participating in events with the world outside their village – through academics, art and sports

viii. Games and physical activity along with quiet time are to be an integral part of the curriculum

Progressive pedagogies

The processes in the schools were designed for the teachers and students to learn in an atmosphere of inquiry, where there was no authority of the teacher. This aspect of relationship building between the teachers and students has been emphasized as the core principle of the school and the teachers have been encouraged to understand the students, their lives, their interests and structure learning experiences accordingly. These ideas are also constantly reinforced as teacher development processes.

The key pedagogic principles are as follows:

1. The schools were based on a mixed age grouping with children grouped according to their learning levels

2. Subjects were introduced in an integrated manner through exploratory activities that originated in the context around them and experiential learning was prioritized, thus combining the learning of local ecology with other subjects. There was no textbook used until the child is at the level equivalent of Grade 5.

3. Child centred approaches like the Montessori method, Kindergarten -which respected the autonomy of the child – were adapted to the school context

4. Creation of a resource rich classroom where the living world of the teacher became important and the teaching was not limited to the textbook ; materials were made and adapted to suit the local context

5. Conscious structuring of activities to include forest walks, seed collection and documenting biodiversity that changed the direction of classroom discourse where the students share the knowledge with the teachers

6. Resource persons from the community were brought in to share

their experiences and knowledge, through structured activities

7. Participatory activities introducing art, pottery, music and craft to allow students and teachers to express themselves in multiple ways

8. Continuous, formative assessments and individualized learning plans were developed for the students

9. Peer learning and sharing have been emphasized between students, between students and teachers and between teachers; peer feedback and evaluation has been an important process of teacher development

10. Introduction to skill based work – like stitching, macarame, that was connected with a local women's enterprise where students and teachers could see the value of meaningful work

Teacher development programs

The role of the teacher, as a facilitator and change maker, has been very critical in the functioning of these schools. Teachers have been identified from the local communities and nearby villages, and have been mentored through a continuous process of workshops, peer interactions, training with external resource persons and exposure visits to other organizations. The focus has been on development of teachers as individuals and professionals in addition to supporting them for classroom transactions. All the teachers working in these schools have a basic degree in arts, language and mathematics in addition to a B.Ed qualification.

1. Participatory workshops were conducted for teachers to make materials for teaching that introduced them to the idea of multi-level materials for transacting in a mixed age setting.

2. The teachers are trained to develop their own materials, contextualized to the learning needs of each individual child. The classrooms are structured as mixed age groups and the teachers are assisted by the older students teaching the younger ones. Teachers are mentored regularly and peer evaluation and feedback constitute an important process of continuous teacher professional development.

3. Observing children, recording their progress and making individualized lesson plans were introduced to the teachers.

4. Teachers carry images of themselves, of the students they work with and the communities they are a part of. Through reflective workshops, teachers are encouraged to interrogate their beliefs about learning, learners, especially tribal children.

5. Academic strengthening of the teachers is a key priority. Over time it becomes possible that the students, who have been introduced to child centered approaches for learning, become confident learners and are ready for receiving more inputs. Strengthening the teachers' own academic capabilities for them to facilitate the students' learning thus becomes paramount.

6. The teachers in these schools are from the local community, familiar with the ways of life of the students and their families. This allows them to be sensitive to the needs and rhythms of the local community, their work practices, their food, as well as respond to individual needs.

Reflections from the stakeholders

An educational design that is participatory and contextually relevant

can be an empowering model. The objective is to create a mutually empathetic environment across all stakeholders. To understand the impact of these processes, parents, teachers and students were interviewed. Other similar programs were also studied to learn from other experiences of curriculum design.

Students

The students - young and old – were interviewed to understand their relationship with the schools, with one another, with the teachers. During conversations with the students, we attempted to find out how a non-hierachical classroom and an empathetic teacher can help alter the psychosocial context of first generation school going children from a tribal community.

The students articulated subjects and activities they like to do in school. Some of the subjects the students have reported liking include mathematics, art, music and Telugu.

Several of the students interviewed spoke of an aspiration linked to the education received in school – some of them wanted to change their village, some wanted to become good teachers and yet others spoke of good jobs. One of them said she wanted to contribute to society's well-being.

All the students reported discussing about the school with their parents, an act that could produce change of a more lasting kind. It suggests the child finds the school important enough to speak about and the school becomes relevant to the community.

Teachers

Teachers from both the schools were interviewed. We also interviewed two teachers who have now moved on to supporting a community led enterprise. Teacher reflections were sought broadly along four areas – the curriculum and pedagogy of the school, their relationship with students, parents and the school community, their own development and their vision for education in these schools and its contribution to the village community.

All the teachers interviewed were able to draw parallels from their own school experiences – either as a student or as a teacher and spoke about the individualized learning experiences of the schools as the most significant change. One of them remarked "What kind of school is this I thought when I first joined" when she spoke about a non-textbook-based method of teaching suggesting the extent to which education gets submerged and ideas on education are influenced by the administrative rigidities of a school.

The teachers were able to articulate the importance of understanding the child as an individual – her feelings, her interests, her family and her capabilities – before proceeding to teach them. Observing, planning and record keeping were described as the process of instructional delivery (though this was acknowledged by many of them as a challenging process which they needed to improve upon). This is not surprising either, as traditional teacher training programs until recently have had a behaviourist orientation and education has often been considered as a set of inputs to get some desired outcomes.

Teachers were also self-reflective when they spoke of their own journey of learning as teachers. They spoke of their learning on how to make resources, how to plan and transact in a mixed age group and the difficulties in preparation. One teacher who had only finished her "Inter" (Class 11) when she started teaching, described how the desire to be prepared to teach gave her the interest and motivation to

complete her own graduation in arts. The teachers exuded confidence when asked about their own growth and spoke with aspirations to do better as teachers and learners.

Their own journey of teaching has helped them develop their understanding of methods of teaching and the psycho social processes of learning. Though none of the teachers themselves are from the tribal community, they belong to the same or nearby villages and are able to relate to the community and the children. For example, all of the teachers were accepting of the absence of the children during specific harvest periods and often made the accommodation necessary for these children to learn.

All the teachers spoke of the importance of understanding the tribal community, their needs and priorities and spoke of how their understanding developed. One of the teachers expressly articulated that when she made the effort to relate to the community, the school benefited as the parents became more trusting of her. This shows that when a teachers' interest extends beyond the classroom it improved relationships with the community members. They spoke of the development of the community. They articulated aspirations for the school to provide learning opportunities for the parents, addressing addiction and related health problems in the community, skill building for the community, reviving traditional music and drumming to include in the school curriculum and formally bringing in traditional practices of forest produce collection as part of the curriculum. Two of the teachers expressed very clearly the need to document and preserve traditional knowledge.

Parents

Parents of students presently in the schools as well as those who have finished studying in these schools shared their views. The parents were interviewed to get their ideas on what their children are learning, their understanding of the importance of education as well as their own aspirations for learning.

None of the parents had been to school themselves and were very happy to send their children to school. They seemed to believe that a formal education would help their children to get better jobs, perhaps as teachers and help in the development of the village. A few of them believed that schooling and reading and writing will enable them to work in better jobs other than being a "coolie". All of them reported that their children are very keen to come to school; a few of them said that the children cry if they cannot come to school. Many of them shared that their children discuss about school at home. This has the potential to change the discourse of knowledge when in a tribal community, the child is able to talk about her learning in school and possibly bridge knowledge systems.

Several parents were keen to come to school for themselves to learn "at least basic reading, writing and signing my name" as well as skills like stitching and embroidery. They were happy that their children were now being introduced to computers. The parents seemed to implicitly believe that the school will not and could not teach their children their own traditional knowledge and even seemed to suggest that their children should learn things other than what they are doing. This perhaps suggests a sense of devaluation of their own knowledge. One of the grandparents shared with one of the teachers that he feels that the students may not like his work (of honey collecting) after he finishes his schooling in the government schools. While the environment and their local

context is integrated within the regular school processes in these two schools, when these tribal children go to government schools for classes 6 and above, they are introduced to a formal knowledge of the letters and numbers without much connection to their own ways of life and work. This alienation has also emerged in a key informant interview we conducted with the team member from a learning centre to which Adivasi children come. The need to develop an inclusive curriculum with non-judgemental, non-discriminatory practices gets underscored when we are dealing with education of children from marginalized communities.

Outcomes from the schools

1. There are no drop-outs and all the children in the community above the age of 3 come to school.

2. Students are engaged with multiple activities in the school and have developed an aspiration for their learning – many students seek to become teachers in their careers

3. Many students who have completed their elementary level school proceed to the government residential schools for further studies. The students who are not able to leave the village come back to finish their NIOS exams.

4. Increasing community ownership of the schools and growing recognition in parents of the value and possibilities of education

5. Schools are embedded within the community and are seen by the community as their resource

6. The discourse around learning is changing in these communities as the school becomes a topic of conversation at home when the child talks to the parent about school

7. Parents are able to articulate learning needs for themselves as well as for their children

8. The education of girl children has become more important; this assumes particular significance in the context of lower levels of participation of tribal girls in formal education

Conclusion

It seems that a participatory approach to educational design that includes teachers, students and the local community could lead to better educational outcomes in terms of retention and student engagement. A sustained relationship also gives the legitimacy of the school to fashion itself as a resource institution that can take on a more integrated approach to development, education and skill building in a tribal community. The continuing pull of the market and the incentive of "work-based' programs could result in erosion of the local community knowledge making it all the more important for local, community based initiatives to develop alternative frameworks. It also seems that for the education programs to sustain their relevance, they must be rooted to the local communities. Community ownership and participation are essential for a sustainable education program in tribal areas; it is important to adequately resource such initiatives.

Every tribal community – by virtue of their own self-contained life, occupations and habitats – tends to be unique in terms of the knowledge it has, skills that need to be developed and the imperatives of ecological conservation specific to the community. For the Panchsheel principles of tribal development to be actualized, it is important to recognize this diversity in the framing of a curriculum for tribal communities. Autonomy for the schools to develop a learning program,

contextualized to the local environment and sensitive to the community needs is critical to creating an inclusive, empathetic learning environment. Formalizing local knowledge into the curriculum means that the schools become natural places for learning, relevant to the community. Pedagogical innovations and associated teacher development are the complementing aspects of developing an inclusive curriculum. Building linkages with educational institutions and share learnings is important for the innovations and models to be sustained and replicated.

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[1] Krishanmurti Foundation of India, Bengaluru Education Centre.

[2] One of the schools were closed when the communities were promised the opening of a government school nearby. Two other schools could not continue for lack of availability of teachers.