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LOOKING INWARD, LOOKING FORWARD

Articulating Alternatives to the Education System for Adivasis, by Adivasis

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ABSTRACT

The education question for the four indigenous communities of Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, has been shrouded in silence by those in power and on the rare occasions that the shroud has been lifted, the people have seldom had their say. This report explores how the Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan, Mullakurumba and Paniya communities of Gudalur have experienced the current education system so far, their understanding of the purpose of Adivasi education, and an alternate conceptualisation of educational practices geared towards greater equality and justice as understood by the people of the community. To achieve this, the lived experiences of the people and their perspectives on the needs of their children are at the centre of our research. Qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions and workshops with 165 participants from the communities, who are also stakeholders in the education system in various ways.

The report confirms that the current education system fails to accommodate the diversity of needs and aspirations of the Adivasi communities, meting out an education that alienates their culture and values. It puts forth the purpose of education, as demanded by the participants, and foregrounds the need for an education that enables their children to navigate their home worlds and the modern world with knowledge, dignity, and character, and lead contented lives. Since school alone is insufficient to meet these educational needs, there is a need to reclaim the village as a site of learning and strengthen the leadership in the villages. Finally, the report outlines certain educational practices that will facilitate the creation of a meaningful and culturally relevant education system for Adivasi children.

Keywords: marginalised communities, education of indigenous communities, purpose of education, alternative education, quality education, social justice.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the experiences of the Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan, Mullakurumba and Paniya Adivasi communities of Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, in the mainstream education system and its implications for the future of the Adivasi community. It also examines the community's perceptions of the purpose of Adivasi education and articulates alternative educational practices that are culturally appropriate and geared towards greater equality and justice. This report considers culture in its wider sense to include not only rituals and artistic forms of expression but also the values that are central to the Adivasi way of living that inform the way in which they interact with each other and with the natural world.

The study was conducted adopting a critical ethnography approach and is centred around capturing the voices of the community. Qualitative data was collected through 17 focus group discussions that comprised 165 participants across tribes, occupations, generations and gender. In addition, two workshops were held with a subset of 31 participants to develop a deeper understanding of the ideas that emerged from the focus group discussions. The discussions were recorded and transcribed from the local languages to English, thereafter coded using thematic analysis.

Previous literature establishes that private ownership of land, stringent forest protection acts and rapid development of the surrounding areas have led the Adivasi communities to a point where the possibilities of returning to their traditional ways of life are highly limited. Education is often suggested as the bridge that will help them access and navigate the modern world. The following were the key insights that emerged from the participants' experiences with the current education system:

- Participants reported that the current education system is failing to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for the Adivasi child to find their footing in modernity.
- The Adivasi child enters the school from a position of disadvantage, as the mainstream system does not accommodate their needs as a second language learner of the dominant language, Tamil.
- The ethos of the school is coloured by discrimination against the Adivasi community from their teachers and peers. The existing curricula depict the Adivasi communities through misinformed narratives and stereotypes and do not make space for the knowledge and varied perspectives that the Adivasi child brings to the classroom.
- The assessment system in schools promotes a culture of competition inconsistent with the Adivasi values of unity and cooperation that the children grow up with.

All of these factors result in low levels of confidence, low attendance, and lower attainment and ultimately lead to the Adivasi child dropping out of school.

In deliberating on the purpose of education, the participants foregrounded the need for an education system that develops autonomous, knowledgeable, financially independent and compassionate individuals. Subsequently, these individuals should lead their people in a participatory manner so that the community as a whole can navigate their Adivasi identity and the modern world from a position of strength. Participants strongly felt the need for education to create space for diversity among children while also building a sense of togetherness.

The participants outlined the following recommendations:

- There is a strong need to reclaim the village as a site of learning, as schools alone cannot fulfil all the educational needs and aspirations of the Adivasi communities.
- Schools should strengthen the foundational learning of the Adivasi child by building conversational fluency and basic literacy in the medium of instruction while supporting their learning in the mother tongue.
- There is a need for both Adivasi and non-Adivasi teachers in a school to cater to Adivasi children. These teachers must be aware of and sensitive towards the culture and context of the communities.
- Schools must create learning spaces that facilitate autonomy and challenge misinformed narratives.
- The ethos of the school should be characterised by the following guiding values and beliefs:
 - > Schools should not be a place that invokes fear in the child.
 - > All children must be treated equally.
 - > All children are unique and they have innate talents that are not necessarily academically oriented.
 - > Schools must facilitate learning through cooperation, not competition.
- The school should be a place where the children feel valued for who they already are—this enables them to engage with the school as active learners.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the identities that weave together the richly diverse cultural tapestry of India, the ones held by its indigenous communities have been coloured by oppression and injustice. Despite being referred to as Adivasis or the “first inhabitants,” India’s indigenous communities are often the last to be considered in discourses of development. In the name of progress, they are meted out an education that is alien to their life, history, and experience in all aspects. This study is an effort to understand the experiences of four Adivasi communities in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, in the current education system and an exploration into the possibility of envisioning an education that is truly emancipatory and founded on the needs of the communities, as articulated by them.

Popular thinking about tribal development in India has been informed by anthropological theory centred around the belief that the tribe becomes a caste upon its loss of isolation and its assimilation with Indian society (Xaxa, 1999b). This thought was strengthened by the work of sociologists like GS Ghurye, who advanced the position that tribes are backward Hindus. Ghurye influenced the trend in tribal development policy that argued for the assimilation of tribes; a process where they gave up their culture in favour of the dominant majority (Xaxa, 2005). The contrary strand to this ideology was influenced by the work of anthropologist Verrier Elwin, which argues for the isolation of tribal communities (Xaxa, 2005). The Constitution of India takes the middle ground between these two approaches and promotes a process of integration that also provides space for diversity. It aims at bringing Adivasis closer to Indian society through provisions such as proportionate representation in legislatures, the right to use their language for education and other purposes, and development according to their abilities (Xaxa, 2005). However, while the Constitution takes this stance on paper, the lived realities of tribal communities reflect a narrative of state neglect. Indigenous researcher Virginius Xaxa (2005) notes:

Tribes... have never been put or seen in the same footing as members of the larger society in terms of their access to rights, whether civil, political or social. They have been seen invariably as those who have had to make place for the larger society and the agencies that spearhead their interest, viz, the state. (p. 1367)

Hence, Adivasi communities across India find themselves navigating mainstream social and political systems that are indifferent to their needs from a position of social, economic and political disadvantage. Education is often posed as a key driver of progress and integration in Adivasi communities and in enabling them to navigate modernity. While there has been an increase in the enrolment rates of Adivasi children over the last two decades, low attendance, poor performance and high dropout rates call into question the efficacy of the current education system in liberating the Adivasi communities (Xaxa, 2011). The blame for these outcomes is often directed towards the students, their parents and the community, but several recent studies indicate that dysfunctional schooling systems play a much more central role in keeping children out of school than poverty or lack of interest in education (Vasavi, 2003).

A study from the National Institute of Advanced Studies on the education of Adivasi groups highlights that “the mainstream education system does not recognise the contemporary conditions, predicament, diversity of aspirations and needs of most Adivasis” (Veerbhadranaika, Kumaran, Tukdeo, & Vasavi, 2012,

p. iii). The report notes that the current system fails to provide adequate, relevant and quality education to most Adivasis on account of the systemic marginalisation of their interests.

The neglect and devaluation of Adivasi knowledge forms, languages and cultural practices have an adverse impact on their socio-cultural identity and further the propagation of detrimental stereotypes against them. While India's National Education Policy emphasises the need "to empower learners...to become active promoters of more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure, and sustainable societies" (NEP, 2020 p. 37), there are no formal educational policy initiatives that leverage indigenous knowledge systems towards equity and social justice (TESF, 2023). All of these factors significantly influence the everyday experiences of an Adivasi student in various ways.

In school, Adivasi students face discrimination from teachers who blame the child, parents and their community for not providing an environment for studying (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003). This shifts the responsibility of ensuring an equitable and just space for learning onto the shoulders of the Adivasi community, enabling those in power to ignore the lack of institutional mechanisms to deal with social differences as well as the role of structural factors in impeding the learning of these children.

Balagopalan & Subrahmanian (2003) also note that this leads to the teacher's role being redefined as that of a low-level bureaucrat rather than as an educator, resulting in the reinforcement of structural hierarchies. Krishna Kumar (1989) observes that teachers were usually from an upper-caste background in the 70s and 80s and were ill-equipped to handle diversity due to a lack of understanding about the tribal child's milieu. Teacher training institutes also fail to orient teachers to the social bases of educational deprivation in the country that stem from larger structural factors and hierarchical social relations (Vasavi, 2003). The conditions of capability deprivation thus created through the teacher's lack of faith in children's abilities aggravate educational inequalities. Consequently, this maintains an education system that is dominated by upper castes and forward sections of society and tends to strengthen the status quo instead of questioning it (Batra, 2005, 2015).

Furthermore, the absence of indigenous knowledge forms and sociocultural contexts in the shaping of the curriculum creates an education that is not informed by culture (Kumar, 2005). Here, the school curriculum becomes another site of discrimination, where textbooks and other curricular materials are riddled with misinformed narratives about tribal communities that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Consequently, the tribal child "learns to be backward" (Kumar, 1989).

While the current education system mirrors the various injustices suffered by Adivasi communities, it is important to acknowledge that it is a crucial element in the continuing struggle for equality and justice. Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People emphasises the principles of equality and self-determination in the area of education, recognising their right to an education that is non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate (United Nations (General Assembly), 2007). While India is one of the 144 signatories to the declaration, there has been a negligible movement towards realising these principles. Nevertheless, the recognition of these rights provides the possibility of starting dialogues that can give direction to the larger discourses surrounding Adivasi education.

The works of Paulo Freire and other advocates of critical pedagogy deliberate deeply upon the emancipatory role of education, which restores the sense of identity of the oppressed groups and helps establish themselves as objects, rather than subjects of history. Central to realising this identity is amplifying the voices of the people above everything else and ceding agency to the oppressed to chart their path ahead. In the words of Freire, “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (Freire, 1970, p. 54).

Thus, this study builds on this possibility of the people deciding their path ahead in its venture to understand how four Adivasi communities in southern India experience the current education system and the issues they have been facing, in order to develop an alternate conceptualisation of educational practices that could be geared towards greater equality and justice, as understood by the people of the community.

This study is strongly grounded in the work of the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT), a community-driven organisation that works with the four Adivasi communities of Gudalur, in the Nilgiris, on issues related to their education and identity. Over the last 25 years, VBVT has been working with the vision of establishing culturally appropriate and relevant learning systems for the Adivasi children with the active participation of the community.

The forests of the Western Ghats in and around the Gudalur valley in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu have been home to the Adivasi people of the Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan, Mullakurumba, and Paniya communities for thousands of years. Until the nineteenth century, they largely remained in isolation and exercised full freedom of movement over these territories. Over the years, each group developed their distinctive language and culture—traversing its unique history.

Bettakurumba is one of the seven communities with the “-kurumba” suffix in the Nilgiri region. Traditionally, they were forest gatherers who practised shifting cultivation. However, as private ownership of land grew in these regions and access to the forests became restricted, they were absorbed into the informal labour force of the region as plantation workers and elephant mahouts. They were also recruited by the British in clearing the forests with the help of elephants to establish teak plantations (Coelho, 2003). The Bettakurumba are socially organised as patrilineal, exogamous clans (Bird-David, 1994).

The Kattunayakan are forest-dwelling, food-gathering people known for their honey-collection practices. They are known as Cholanayakan in the Wayanad area and as Jenu Kurumba in the Karnataka region. Kattunayakans are observed to have an egalitarian political organisation and their social organisation is centred around territory-based, local groups (Bird-David, 1994). They are known to work skilfully with forest materials and supply a wide range of forest produce to the local economy. Prior to the advent of the state government regulations regarding forest access and private ownership of land, the Kattunayakans used to move frequently and freely through the forests in the region, across the borders. Their basic needs were met through gathering for consumption and trade, fishing, honey collecting and hunting. As these movements were restricted, primarily by government officials, they started working in the fields and plantations on a contractual payment basis. Of the four Adivasi communities discussed in this study, the Kattunayakans are the most recent group to access formal schooling systems.

Mullakurumba is another one of the seven Adivasi communities subsumed under the Kurumba name. They live on the western slopes and the Wayanad plateau of the Nilgiris. They are known for their expertise in hunting and agriculture. Given that they had excellent command over the bow and arrow, they fought alongside one of the local rajas against the British. This led them to become the first among the four tribes in this study to own land and progress faster than the other tribes, rendering them socially and economically better off in the present. Socially, the Mullakurumba are organised as four exogamous matrilineal clans, with several patrilineal lineages. Their well-knit social organisation is maintained through religious beliefs and the authority of a council of elders. (Bird-David, 1994). Currently, the Mullakurumba continue to practise agriculture on their individually owned land and identify it as their primary occupation.

The Paniya were a gathering community enslaved by the dominant castes of the region to do agricultural labour till the turn of the twentieth century. The etymological root of the word Paniya comes from the Malayalam word "*pani*" which translates to "work"; the word itself refers to workers. Earlier, Paniya families were bought and sold in a prominent temple fair in Wayanad. Since the transaction occurred in a place that they deemed sacred, the practices of slavery gained legitimacy through the involvement of their deity and continued in the form of bonded labour well into the twentieth century. Paniya are spread across the Wayanad district in Kerala, as well as the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris. The Paniya are socially organised as matrilineal exogamous clans. Currently, they work as wage labourers in plantations and fields. While the "Adivasi" identity is widely shared in India, it is far from being a homogenous one. Each of the four communities of Gudalur has a distinct identity shaped by its history, which has led to each occupying a different socioeconomic position in the present. The Adivasi thread that brings them together acknowledges the commonalities between these communities in having a unique language, culture, way of life and a long-standing relationship with the land. The past few centuries also add oppression and denial of basic rights by dominant communities to this list of commonalities. All four of these communities are categorised as "particularly vulnerable tribal groups" (PVTGs)¹ by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

The wave of modernisation² reached the Gudalur valley in the early 1960s with strong currents of discrimination and exploitation, threatening the cultural essence and existence of these four Adivasi communities. Dominant communities of the area took over their life and land, reducing them to bonded labourers on the very land they had lived on earlier. At this juncture, Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD)³ recognised the shared plight of the four Adivasi communities and brought them together. This culminated in a lands rights protest led by the people in 1988 where around 10,000 Adivasis across Gudalur marched through the town demanding for their rights. This marked the beginning of a larger movement towards self-reliance, reclaiming their power and asserting dignity. Central to this was the establishment of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) in 1988 as a people's collective representative of all four tribes. The vision was to improve the quality of living for Adivasis through a focus on health, education, community organisation, and livelihood in a way that enabled the community to move towards autonomy and self-reliance.

¹ PVTGs are identified by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs from 2019-20 based on four criteria: existence of a pre-agricultural level of technology, stagnant or declining population growth, extremely low level of literacy, and a subsistence level of economy. This is outlined in further detail in the *Scheme of Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)* document released by the ministry in 2014.

² This was driven by waves of migrants coming in from Kerala and Sri Lanka, land grabbing resulting in increasing private ownership of land, a growing market-based economy, government regulations restricting access to forest and so on. This is further elaborated in Chapter 3.

³ ACCORD is VBVT's parent organisation under the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam's network of community-driven institutions. ACCORD's work was central to mobilising people for the land rights movement and they focus on reclaiming the community's agency and dignity in various ways.

In 1995, a *mahasabha* consisting of 200 Adivasi leaders called for a culturally appropriate and nurturing learning system. In response, VBVT set up a school with a mission to recognise and value Adivasi culture and languages. Over the years, the community has faced a multitude of issues related to the education of their children, varying from low enrolment to the lack of inclusive learning spaces. Over several years of work in the field, VBVT has tried to address these issues with interventions ranging from the Vidyodaya Adivasi School to village-based learning initiatives including camps, study centres, and early childhood education centres. Members of the communities play an integral role in the process of decision-making and implementation across all these programmes. This is informed by the belief that since it is the community that is facing the problem, the community must also be actively involved in formulating solutions. Thus, the decisions that shape the course of VBVT's work come from the ground and the necessary support is provided by the organisation. This process of participative decision-making and design ensures that only interventions seen and accepted as solutions by the community members are taken up rather than what the dominant perspective dictates.

Previous academic literature on Adivasi education offers critiques of the current education system at the structural level with a focus on systems and policies. At the school level, the focus is primarily on the skills and attitudes of the teachers. However, there is a dearth of community-level research that brings out the lived experiences and perspectives of the people towards whom these policies and schools are oriented. There is also space for exploration around the effects of intersectionality of gender and class identities in shaping the Adivasi experience of mainstream education, the purpose of education as conceptualised by the people of the community, and the articulation of an alternative practice that reflects this conceptualisation. Practitioners need to situate the experiences of these communities and the work done with them in a wider framework of organisations that face similar issues and thereafter address the issues identified in the literature.

This study aims to contribute towards filling the gaps in literature and practice by addressing the following questions:

1. How do the four Adivasi communities of Gudalur experience the current education system? How do these experiences influence their participation in the different areas of society?
2. How does the current educational system perpetuate and sustain various forms of injustice against them? How does this influence the learning experience and journeys of Adivasi children?
3. Which spaces of power does the government create for Adivasi people through inclusive policymaking?
4. What is the purpose of education as conceptualised by the Adivasi communities of Gudalur? How do they envision quality education?
5. What kind of educational practices can bring about greater equality for the Adivasi communities?

To address these questions, qualitative data regarding the lived experiences of the community and their expectations from the education system was collected from 165 participants through focus group discussions (FGDs) and workshops. Chapter 2 gives a detailed understanding of the methodology used to conduct the research and the specifics of the sample. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 discuss the findings of the study—Adivasi experiences in the current education system, the purpose of Adivasi education, and an alternative conceptualisation of education articulated by the Adivasis. Chapter 6 concludes the study and lays out possible future directions.

METHODOLOGY

The questions that set the direction of this research are deeply intertwined with the lived realities of the Adivasi communities and the historical context within which they exist. To forefront the power relations that are socially constituted within this context, this study takes the methodological approach of critical ethnography. Critical ethnography enables the study to factor in the interplay between hierarchical social structures and individual agency in the design, analysis, and process of the research. This necessitates a sense of reflexivity within us as researchers, to be aware of our positionality while conducting the research, face our assumptions and biases, be ethical in our practice with the community, and understand the subtleties of oppression in the process.

Over the last year, qualitative data on the experiences, perceptions and expectations of Adivasi people regarding the education system was collected through 17 FGDs, two workshops, and informal discussions. The informal discussions were initially held with participants from within the ecosystem of people associated with the Adivasi Munnetra Sangham to identify participants for the FGDs and inform its design. FGDs were chosen as the main method of data collection as they helped us elicit the ideas of a larger group of people while also drawing on shared contexts and previous relationships to build a dialogue. Since the FGDs could only reach a certain depth of conversation within the given time, two workshops were held to deliberate more deeply on the ideas that emerged during these discussions. In addition, the research team also maintained field diaries and shared reflections from the day-to-day work on the field within the team (see Appendix A for further details on data collection).

Participants for the FGDs were chosen through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, i.e., there were selection criteria and participants who met these criteria were selected based on their availability. Overall, we wanted the participants to be representative in terms of age, tribe and gender. We also wanted to achieve a balance between those immersed in the AMS ecosystem and those who were not, since the former group has years of experience working for the community while the latter brings forth the ground realities of people in the villages. Neither group alone would be able to provide a clear understanding of what the community is experiencing as a whole. People associated with the education system in various ways—teachers, parents, dropouts and students—were included in the study as well.

In total, the FGDs involved 165 participants across the community: 89 members from the Paniya community, 28 from the Bettakurumba community, 12 from the Kattunayakan community, 22 from the Mullakurumba community, and 14 non-Adivasi participants. The non-Adivasi participants were all teachers who worked closely with Adivasi children. In terms of gender, there were 110 female participants and 55 male participants. Table 1 below shows the tribe and gender-wise composition of the participant group.

Table 1: Tribe and Gender-wise composition of the participant group⁴

Tribe	Male	Female	Total
Paniya	63	26	89
Bettakurumba	18	10	28
Kattunayakan	6	6	12
Mullakurumba	10	12	22
Non-Adivasis	13	1	14
Total	110	55	165

Of the 165 participants, 96 had had long-standing relationships with the AMS ecosystem as current or former employees.

The workshops were conducted with a subset of 31 participants. They were divided into two groups of 15 and 16 each, based on the generation they belonged to. These workshops were conducted over two days. This subset of participants had 17 members from the Paniya community, 5 from the Kattunayakan community, 5 from the Bettakurumba community, and 4 from the Mullakurumba community. Here, 22 of them had long-standing relationships with the AMS ecosystem.

The data was collected as audio recordings. As the conversations happened in a mix of the Adivasi languages and the local tongues of Tamil and Malayalam, they were transcribed into English before coding. Given the large volume and range of data, the data was analysed through thematic analysis. The themes were initially identified in accordance with the research questions and later modified to respond to the ideas emerging from the data in the process of coding. A fuller account of the thematic analysis is given in Appendix B.

⁴ Source: Record of participants maintained for the research study.

THE CURRENT SCENARIO

The lifeworlds of Adivasis in the Gudalur valley existed largely unperturbed for centuries till tea and coffee estates were established by British planters in the nineteenth century. The 1960s and 1970s came with waves of migrants from Kerala and Sri Lanka, who disturbed the traditional Adivasi ways of life further. These new groups were quite aggressive in gaining control of the land and forced the Adivasi groups to withdraw deeper into the forests. The Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, which was passed in 1969 to gain control of the land from a raja in Kerala, led to the entirety of Gudalur coming under the blurry boundaries of litigation. Consequently, unoccupied lands and forests were up for grabs, threatening the Adivasi habitat further. In 1980, the Forest (Conservation) Act declared forests as wildlife sanctuaries and prohibited human entry into them. Overnight, the Adivasi communities became trespassers in their own homes, forced away from the ways of life they had followed for centuries (Karthik and Menon, 2016). Without their land and livelihood, they found themselves in a place where there was no going back to the familiar. For the Adivasi communities to make sense of the strange world of modernity that was thrust upon them and navigate through this new world without losing themselves, education was crucial.

The Adivasi communities of Gudalur started accessing schools with the establishment of government tribal residential (GTR) schools in the late 1960s. While these schools were initially populated with teachers who were sympathetic towards the cause of Adivasi education, in the 1970s, there was an influx of teachers who were a part of the movement that sought to promote the Tamil language, thus suppressing the local culture. This fundamentally changed the learning experiences of Adivasi students and their relationship with the formal education system.

During the early years of VBVT's work, the organisation was entering a community that had extremely low levels of literacy and enrolment. A survey conducted by ACCORD in 1999 recorded 27% literacy amongst the Adivasis in this region, with women's literacy being substantially lower at 17%. At the time, only 25% of the children of school-going age were enrolled in school registers (Madan, Ramdas, & Shastry, 2019). While enrolment rates have improved substantially over the years, low attendance and lower levels of learning continue to persist. Currently, the majority of the children attend government schools near their village, followed by the GTR schools, the private schools, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan⁵ (SSA) schools.⁶

⁵ These are schools built under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's provision for residential schools for children in sparsely populated, hilly, and densely forested areas. There are two such schools in Gudalur, with around 100 children enrolled from classes 2 to 8.

⁶ Source: Survey of school-going children conducted by VBVT.

Participation in the Education System

An Adivasi child's interaction with the formal schooling system usually begins at the age of six when they are enrolled in the first grade at a nearby primary school. While the land rights movement has been instrumental in getting children to the threshold of the school, what happens beyond is orchestrated by larger systems and structures that are seldom accommodating of the diverse needs and aspirations of the Adivasi community (Madan, Ramdas, & Shastry, 2019). Consequently, a significant proportion of those enrolled in the first grade does not make it past the 12th grade.

Table 2 shows the number of school-going children by grade and the number of children who discontinued formal schooling (i.e., did not enrol for the next grade) over the four academic years from 2015–2016 to 2018–2019.

Table 2: Number of school-going children and those who discontinued schooling from 2015–2016 to 2018–2019.

Grade	No. of school-going children	No. of children who discontinued formal schooling	Percentage of children who discontinued formal schooling
1	1,219	15	1.23%
2	1,282	31	2.42%
3	1,281	38	2.97%
4	1,341	66	4.92%
5	1,302	67	5.15%
6	1,361	134	9.85%
7	1,181	135	11.43%
8	1,087	249	22.91%
9	808	237	29.33%
10	536	181	33.77%
11	307	65	21.17%
12	228	55	24.12%
Total	–	1,218	–

Source: Survey of school-going children done by VBVT

In Table 2, the second column is a sum of all the children who were enrolled in the corresponding grade over the four years, the third column indicates the number of children who discontinued schooling either during the corresponding grade or right after, over the four years, and the fourth column indicates the percentage of children who discontinued formal schooling. Looking at the number of school-going children across grades, we see that after remaining consistent at around 1,200 in the earlier grades, the number of children dips to 228 by the end of Grade 12. Examining the trends in the numbers and percentages of children who discontinued formal schooling,⁷ we see that the rate of discontinuation is quite low in Grade 1 but gradually increases till Grade 5. The first sudden jump in the percentage occurs between the 5th and 6th grades from 5.15% to 9.85%. A possible explanation is the transition between schools that occur at this point. Most Adivasi children attend primary schools in or near their village till Grade 5. After that, they need to move to a new school, which is farther away from their villages in most cases. The difficulties posed by this transition in terms of accessing and adjusting to a new and strange environment farther away from home could be leading to Adivasi children discontinuing formal schooling.

The percentage of children being pushed out steadily increases between grades 6 and 7, then doubles between grades 7 and 8, increasing further till Grade 10. There are three factors which might be contributing to this increase. Firstly, the academic pressures mount with the fast-approaching public exams in the Grade 10. With widening learning gaps and indifferent teachers, the Adivasi student might find it difficult to cope without the external academic support that is seldom accessible to them. Consequently, the child is pushed out of school. Secondly, similar to the transition between schools in the 5th and 6th grades that results in more children discontinuing schooling, children might have to shift schools again after Grade 8 to continue their studies in a high school that may be farther away. Thirdly, the informal labour market in and around Gudalur enables the child to start earning as a daily wage labourer working in coffee plantations and tea estates in the area. The family feel they make use of the additional income and the child too feels a sense of freedom and power now that they have their own money. This might decrease the child's likelihood of returning to school. Furthermore, higher educational attainment does not lead to better employment opportunities in the eyes of the Adivasi people. This weakens the role of education as a necessity towards gainful employment. Thus, the number of children going to school decreases substantially, with Grade 10 exams, accessibility to schools, and employment opportunities acting as a sieve.

In the Grade 11, the percentage of children who discontinue schooling reduces and then increases in Grade 12 but not to the same extent as it does in Grade 10. The decrease could be because those who graduate 10th are more determined to continue their studies and could have academic or financial support from external sources like NGOs or specific individuals. Possible reasons for discontinuing schooling at this level could be academic complexity and lack of support.

⁷ These numbers are more popularly known as "dropout rates". However, we refrain from using the popular terminology due to the negative connotation associated with it in terms of placing the onus of "dropping out" on the child and their family without looking at the larger structural forces at play.

Overall, Table 2⁸ demonstrates that while a substantial number of children are enrolled in the Grade 1, only a small fraction of them went on to graduate from the Grade 12. Parents send their children to school wanting the best for their child and children also come to school with interest. However, there are processes within the school that are floundering and failing to ensure the continued learning of the Adivasi child. The sections below examine the role of the various aspects of the current education system that define the schooling experiences of the Adivasi child in leading to unequal outcomes.

Language

Regardless of whether an Adivasi child enrolls in a GTR school, which is meant for children from the community, or in a government school, one of the major barriers to the child's learning is that of language. The early years of an Adivasi child's life are spent primarily in their villages, alongside their people, where communication mostly occurs in the native tongue of the tribe. In this case, since all four of the Adivasi languages are devoid of a writing system, the written word and reading are seldom a part of the environment in which the child grows up. This means that emergent literacy practices, such as being read aloud to and writing, are not necessarily a part of an Adivasi child's upbringing.

However, the school system and its practices fail to acknowledge this context and expect an Adivasi child to start schooling at the same level as their non-Adivasi counterparts. Hence, an Adivasi child who is entering a Grade 1 classroom without conversational fluency in the dominant language or prior exposure to emergent literacy practices is navigating their learning from a disadvantaged position from the very first day of school. As one of the informants shared, *"...in other villages, where there are little children who grow up speaking their language alone, when we directly put them into a school where their language is not spoken, it is difficult for them"* (FGD05).⁹ This also has an adverse impact on the development of content area literacy and creates wide learning gaps across the grades.

The problem of language poses various hurdles in the path of an Adivasi student's learning. First and foremost, language becomes a marker of difference for Adivasi children. In most schools, there are no teachers or other adults who can converse with the Adivasi child in their language to make it a comfortable space for them. Unable to communicate with others freely, the Adivasi child withdraws. In the words of a participant, *"If you live in a Kattunayakan village, you can talk only in that language. If you see someone who speaks to you in some other language, we will run and hide"* (FGD08). Adivasi students encounter a space resound with Tamil—the dominant language—and see no space for their language, which limits the extent of their engagement with the school.

Language also stands in the way of the child's learning. Since the educational transactions in the school happen through the dominant language, and at a pace that is inconsiderate towards Adivasi students, they are often unable to fully understand what is being taught. This adversely affects the confidence

⁸ It is important to note that this data is from the pre-pandemic years. The pandemic amplified these inequalities and inequities in the system further through online classes, which very few children could access, leading to further widening of learning gaps.

⁹ See Appendix A for further details on the participant group for each FGD.

with which the child interacts with their surroundings in the school. Professor of language development, Jim Cummins (2000), outlines the concepts of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which examine this issue. BICS refers to the basic language system used in the context of face-to-face communication that is necessary for conversational proficiency, while CALP refers to the formal and academic registers of the language. An Adivasi child is entering school with BICS developed in their native tongue and faces the need to develop BICS in Tamil—the medium of instruction. However, the school curriculum presupposes that Tamil is the first language of the students and focuses on developing the CALP from the get-go. As the syllabus uses increasingly specialised vocabulary with each passing grade, the Adivasi child is forever left to play catch up, as the curriculum does not recognise them having to learn Tamil as their second language before they can understand what is being taught. As one of the participants observes,

When you go to school, you are asked—'Where do you come from?' The same question is asked to non-tribals, they say they are coming from Devarshola without hesitation. They will tell their village name, their name and everything else...this is because they speak Tamil and have already learnt some things. A Kattunayakan child does not know anything about school or the language. We can speak only when we learn about all this, they can speak without learning! So language has become a huge stumbling block for our children. We cannot have balwadis everywhere. So where will our children learn Tamil? If someone like M asks in Kattunayakan language to the child 'Where are you coming from?' won't the child answer? This is the real question. (FGD08)

Thus, an Adivasi child whose native tongue is their tribal language struggles to learn basic Tamil and then develop academic proficiency in it within a school system that does not accommodate their needs as a second-language learner of Tamil. This limits the extent to which they participate freely in school and understand the content being taught.

Ethos

Another axis along which the discontinuity between an Adivasi child's home and school affects their experience of education is the ethos of the school. Adivasi children seldom experience school as a nurturing space that fosters learning and growth. In the words of a participant,

When children start going to school they are very happy to do so, but it seems that there is no affection for them in the school. In the schools, our children are differentiated. Teachers don't call out to children as Hindus, Muslims or Christians. Why is it that they only call out to our children as Adivasis? At a very early age itself, children are affected psychologically. (FGD08)

A combination of discriminatory forces from the teachers, peers and the structure itself work in tandem to craft this reality for Adivasi children. Teachers contribute significantly towards defining the schooling experiences of Adivasi students. Though some teachers have been able to support Adivasi students and motivate them to persevere and reach a good position in life, very few participants have had access to such teachers. More often than not, teachers have been found to be discriminatory and unkind towards Adivasi children. As a young participant recalls,

[The teachers] tell us 'Why do you even come to school? Why don't you just stay away?' If we come back after a sick leave they would say 'Did you just find out where the school is?' Without any provocation, they would yell at us or hit us. It was so because it was a government school. They would stand far away and speak to us. (FGD01)

Teachers enter shared spaces with the Adivasi child with preconceived, stereotypical notions of their educability and identity, such as their inability to study and lack of interest. This eliminates the possibility of creating a nurturing space of learning for the Adivasi students. In her study of the Adivasis belonging to the Baiga community, Padma Sarangapani (2003) notes the following regarding teachers,

... The teachers, all of whom come from the plains, are not only unaware of, but also do not think very highly of the culture of tribal peoples in this interior area. Many of them feel that the primary lessons the children need to be taught are regarding cleanliness and proper ways of eating and dressing. (p. 3)

The lived realities of the four communities in Gudalur do not seem to vary greatly from this. The supportive teachers encountered by the participants were all able to provide meaningful experiences of education to Adivasi students because they were aware of the communities and tried to connect with the child beyond their Adivasi identity. However, most teachers do not put in the effort towards understanding the context of Adivasi children and fail to build a relationship with them as students. Teachers have been reported to constantly compare them with their non-Adivasi counterparts to demonstrate their "lacking" in different areas. While such comparisons are detrimental for all children, they affect the Adivasi child worse, as they do not come from a space that normalises a culture of competition. As a participant exemplifies, "Suppose one child in class understands a lesson well and another doesn't. The teacher would compare these two students saying 'He was here too. While he can understand well, why not you?' Such things make the children feel inferior" (FGD01). Hence, Adivasi students experience both verbal and physical abuse at the hands of the teacher for reasons that are often outside of their control, leaving the child feeling demeaned. Consequently, teachers become figures who invoke fear and create a prejudiced atmosphere that limits the engagement of Adivasi children in school.

In treating the Adivasi children differently, teachers also enable further inequitable behaviour towards them from their peer groups. The Adivasi child is left humiliated when the teachers hit them or berate them in front of their peers on the basis of their Adivasi identity. This, in turn, makes it acceptable for the other students to treat the Adivasi students differently. From an elder participant's view, "[Adivasi children] are dropping out because they are teased by other children. This affects them emotionally and mentally and so they drop out" (FGD08). This also leads to some of the children hiding their Adivasi identity from their peers in order to avoid taunts. As a participant empathises, "... if I was a school-going Adivasi child, I would worry if my peers would accept me if I'm a tribal so I would speak in Malayalam" (FGD04). Adivasi children feel as if they are being ridiculed because of their identity and where they come from. Since this is something they cannot change about themselves, they internalise the notions of inadequacy and inferiority associated with the Adivasi identity by the people in power around them. Therefore, the set of beliefs and ideas that is dominantly shared in the school system works against making the school atmosphere inclusive and meaningful for Adivasi students.

The discriminatory atmosphere in schools roots the Adivasi child's sense of identity in feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. According to the symbolic interactionist approach, a person's self and identity emerge through social interactions and the meanings individuals attribute to these interactions. We form perceptions of how others perceive us through certain symbols that are picked up during our interactions with them. These perceptions, in turn, inform our inner conversations and shape our future behaviours (Madan, 2020). When an Adivasi child enters the school, the interactions that take place there play a significant role in shaping their sense of self-worth and identity. A closer examination of the symbols at play in these interactions unveils how schools can plant the seeds of doubt and shame in the inner conversations of an Adivasi child regarding themselves and the community they belong to. An Adivasi child's home environment provides scope for them to exercise various freedoms from a very young age and in a supportive environment. The children are free to move about and interact with anyone and anything they take interest in, as long as it does not pose an imminent danger to them. The schools practise a culture of power¹⁰ that values discipline and compliance over freedom and exploration. Hence, when an Adivasi child enters the classroom, unaware of these demands, the walls, classroom cultures, and norms of the school take away their sense of being free. The child experiences this as a sharp transition in their environment and the unfamiliarity can instil fear in them at a young age. As a participant states,

Normally, kids go to school. But the word "school" evokes fear in them. They feel free at home where their parents and grandparents take them wherever they wish. There's plenty of freedom and happiness. But when it comes to school, there's fear. (FGD06)

From a very young age, Adivasi children are coerced into believing that they are different. The absence of the guidance of a nurturing adult who can help them understand that difference does not mean "deficit" results in them internalising the notion of not belonging. In the words of a participant,

The children feel listless going to school. You can see it on their faces. It provokes the children to think that they are different from the more privileged ones. The thought takes root deep inside them that they are disadvantaged, hence, the fear and insecurity. If they wanted to socialise with the more privileged kids, they know they should be like them. But they know their own families and community are not like these others. (FGD06)

The discriminatory environment in schools instils a sense of inferiority in the minds and hearts of the Adivasi child early in life. A participant remarks,

When Adivasi children go to other schools, it is mentioned that there is a hierarchy there among the children. When we admit our children to other public schools, the schools should be happy to take these children but, instead, if they look at them as poor, ignorant children, then that attitude remains and other children also look at them as second class. This feeling of inferiority creeps into the mind of the child too. And, responses such as 'Oh you all are people who sleep on the floor, you have no clothes, so walk around half naked...'—this inferiority grows and when they can't handle it any more, they drop out of schools. (FGD08)

¹⁰ In her 1988 paper titled "Silences Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Teaching Other People's Children", educationalist Lisa Delpit talks of the "culture of power" as the codes or rules that are implicitly necessitated in hierarchical structures in order to participate in power. Here, it is important to remember that the culture of power is often the culture of those in power.

The arduous curriculum and assessment system in schools that the Adivasi student is often left to navigate without the support of teachers contributes further towards deepening this feeling of inferiority and insecurity. In the words of a participant, *"The kids are insecure about their academic potential. When the feeling gets reiterated by teachers saying they don't know things, they feel inferior and not capable of handling the school work"* (FGD01). The teacher expects excellent academic performance from the Adivasi student while not putting in any effort towards building their capacities and supporting them in their schooling journey. When they are not able to obtain sufficient marks, the teacher scolds or beats them instead of understanding why the child is scoring poorly and how they can guide them better. Furthermore, the teacher's narrative about the Adivasi child is one of what the child lacks, not what the child knows and has achieved. As a participant elaborates,

The teachers compel the students to study. If they don't study they scold them or hit them. This makes the children fearful of the school and the teachers. The child stays away from school. When the teacher goes to the village to look for them, the children run away at the sight of them. At the parents' meeting, the teachers only complain about the child playing truant. Even if rarely they say something good about the child, they also make sure to disparage him regarding his apparent bad behaviour. Like, 'He plays sports well but does not study well'. We hear more complaints about the children but never hear any good things about the children. This will affect the children as no one talks good about them. The teachers do not engage well with the children. They are always finding fault with the children. (FGD06)

Adivasi children are constantly made aware of the differences between them and others and in a way that vilifies these differences instead of celebrating them. The symbols of discrimination that colour their interactions with their teachers and peers leave them feeling inadequate, inferior and alienated. Even though the child has autonomy in how they are making sense of these symbols, prejudice from places of power seldom leads to self-affirming inner conversations in the absence of nurturing and supportive elders. The feeling of inferiority undermines the child's self-confidence and plants doubt in their choices, abilities and actions. This, in turn, leads the Adivasi child to associate fear and unhappiness with their school and think of it as being a burden.

Even though an Adivasi child, like any other child, has many facets to their identity, it is the identity of being an Adivasi that the school system amplifies in a discriminatory manner. The insecurities and inadequacies that an Adivasi child feels are also extended towards how they perceive their community. As an older participant puts it,

When children go to school, they read [and] learn something new. They learn from other kids their language and also how to interact with them or the teachers. When our children go home with the knowledge they thus gained, they are disappointed at what meets them there. They find their homes are needy in terms of material possessions. (FGD06)

Hence, the Adivasi child often starts looking at their community as a space of deficit.

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

A vital parameter to evaluate while examining the experiences of Adivasi students in the current education system is the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes that take place in the school. In this assessment, we hear multiple questions being raised by the participants on the efficacy of the curriculum and pedagogy that is employed in schools. Teachers work under the timelines set by higher authorities and prioritise the completion of the syllabus over building understanding in students. As summed up by one of the younger participants,

Teachers never bother to find out if we understood. If one child in the class gets it, that's good enough for them and they just move on to the next thing. Some teachers do make the effort but only just enough to make us pass the exam, saying that it is enough if you learn that much. (FGD01)

Neither do the teachers ensure that the child learns, nor is the Adivasi child able to seek clarity and understanding from the teacher. Teachers who teach for the sake of teaching without ensuring that learning follows are least bothered or aware of the plight of the Adivasi students, who try and want to understand but have no one to turn to for support.

GTR schools and other government schools that are situated in or near remote villages also report high rates of teacher absenteeism. Most teachers live far away from the school and are often inconsistent in taking classes. As one of the community members asked,

The teachers in the GTR schools come only on Tuesdays and leave by Thursday evening. Children are very happy. The teachers all live in Ooty, 80 kms away. They also mark attendance for the days that they are not there. I know of two or three schools where they did this. What kind of education can the children get here? (FGD08)

The high student–teacher ratios in these schools mean a large number of Adivasi students depend on a handful of teachers for their learning, as they cannot expect academic support from their home environments. When these teachers fail to fulfil their responsibilities towards these students, the latter suffer while the former continue to get paid.

Here, obstacles to an Adivasi student's learning are not circumscribed to the matters of pedagogy. The fault lines run deeper—into the realm of the curriculum. The existing school curriculum does not give space to the voice or knowledge of Adivasi communities. In the rare instances when they claim to do so, the narratives propagated are stereotypical and misinformed. As observed by a participant,

The history textbooks say "Adivasis" still inhabit the jungle. The books claim they do not wear clothes but rather barks of trees and the skins of animals and are still confined to the jungles. When Adivasi children come across such text material in school, they are embarrassed and humiliated. (FGD02)

Since this information is coming from a place of power, it raises questions of self-doubt within the Adivasi child.

The communities too struggle to comprehend how formal school knowledge imparted in schools adds value to the lives of their children. The content and purpose of teaching and studying seem to be solely driven by the need to score marks and pass the exams. In such a circumstance, education fails to prioritise building understanding in the child about the world around them and navigating their way through it in an informed manner. According to a participant,

When it comes to school, everything hinges on the grading system. Marks dominate everything. When Adivasi kids go to school, they're not aware of what they're studying. The teachers themselves are not aware if the kids can comprehend it or not. We just go to school and come back from school. That's all. The focus is never on what we learn there. For instance, they learn something from 1st grade, all the way to 12th grade. But they have no idea "why" they learn these things. The teacher isn't focused on the "why", either. Also, from our side, we find it hard to understand things. Why do they teach us this? When it comes to how things we learn end up being useful in our daily lives, I have no idea if they are or not. Many things we study seem to be solely for grades. I think we need to try to change that system. The things we learn must be necessary to us. It must be a part of our life. It would be great if it would help us lead our lives better, in my opinion. (FGD06)

Thus, the knowledge imparted in the school and the processes through which it is done are highly driven by grading systems that seek to present standardised numbers that value conformity more than learning. For an Adivasi student who is new to formal, academic ways of learning, there is no attempt made by the school and teachers to connect what is being taught to their lived realities. In this way, the curriculum alienates the Adivasi child from their culture and context, thus failing to enable the child to improve their lives or the lives of their community. This contributes towards making the assessment system highly competitive and driven by scoring rather than learning.

The curricular, pedagogical, and assessment practices in the current school system also exert enormous academic pressure on the Adivasi child. The syllabus is also changed constantly and with each change, it becomes more complicated and inaccessible. According to a young participant,

They keep changing the textbook. That's a big problem. When we were in school, the books were easier. Now I am unable to understand my younger brother's textbook. Even the teachers do not understand the lessons. The people that come up with these textbooks do not understand the limitations on the ground for us. (FGD01)

Teachers also send home vast amounts of homework and severely reprimand Adivasi students if they are unable to do it, without understanding the context of their homes. Hence, the students resort to either copying the correct answers or taking leave from school to avoid facing humiliation. Neither of these facilitates learning. Inevitably, exams too add to the mounting pressure on Adivasi students. When marks become the sole basis of rigidly defining and deciding the capabilities of an Adivasi student, and no feedback is meaningfully communicated to them, the student is left helpless and with no idea of how to improve. Instead, children are scolded, hit, and punished in various other ways for scoring low marks.

A participant summarises,

Whatever children study should be of practical use to them, whether it is maths or science. Not just for our children but generally for all children, education has become a burden. The school has become a place of fear—whether it is to do with classes, homework or exams. Children need to be free from the fear of school. (FGD08)

Initially, children start staying away from school due to fear and unhappiness, which then contributes towards low attendance. Over time, low attendance, in addition to a lack of academic support, leads to wide learning gaps between what the Adivasi students require and their actual levels of education. According to one of the younger participants,

When I was in school, up until 8th class, the teacher would just read aloud from the book, not really teach us. They would never even ask us if we understood anything. I believe the situation is much the same even now, based on my observation of my brother, who I believe has not gotten much out of school. He has trouble speaking or reading. He is in 9th grade but it looks like he is still at the 1st-grade level. Not just my brother, the other kids from my village too do not know things up to their grade levels. (FGD01)

As the pressure of exams builds up with each passing grade, children either resort to rote learning or discontinue schooling to deal with these learning gaps. This means that the pass certificates held by Adivasi students do not reflect the underlying knowledge that the curriculum calls for at that grade level.

Families

Field data found that parents strongly echo the sentiment of not wanting their children to suffer as they have. They perceive education as a way for their children to access better opportunities and, consequently, better lives. However, most Adivasi parents and villages are unable to support their children beyond enrolling them in school. Most of them are daily wage labourers with fluctuating incomes throughout the year. They stretch their financial resources to send their children to school with all the necessary books, uniforms, transportation and other requirements.

As in many deprived communities, the Adivasi communities here have their struggles with alcoholism that can interfere with the child's experience of schooling, by reducing the money available for education and creating an unstable home environment for the child. This, in addition to the child's responsibilities of household chores, can make it difficult to create space and time in the home for schoolwork. Since unfinished homework and low marks in exams lead to beatings and other punishments, this can lead to lower attendance as well.

Parents are also limited in the extent to which they can support their children academically, as their children are studying at higher levels of academic complexity than they did. As a participant observed,

Our tribal children's parents are not educated and hence they cannot support them. There is no one to teach the students at home. For the non-tribal children, their parents are educated and they are able to support them with their lessons and provide them with a motivation to score better marks. (FGD01)

Furthermore, even if an Adivasi child's parents want to get involved or contribute to their learning at the school, their voices are seldom heard or amplified by the teachers and other parents. Since most of these parents are not formally "educated", the others look down upon them and think of them as being incapable of adding value to the school ecosystem. They are expected to go to parent-teacher meetings, sign the report card and listen to the complaints the teachers have about their child, without having any space to hold the teachers or the school accountable.

Culture

In observing children going through school, the older participants raise questions regarding what education is truly doing to the community and its culture. The traditional Adivasi ways of living valued the village as a site of learning and the educational processes that took place there ensured that cultural knowledge and values are passed down from one generation to another. However, as the school started claiming the space of education in the lives of Adivasi children, it denigrated Adivasi knowledge forms and culture and also required the student to spend several hours a day to school. Slowly, the village lost its credibility as a site of learning, as the children coming back exhausted after a long school day had no time or will to observe, listen to and learn from their elders. There are no structures that facilitated this process of transfer of knowledge and culture either. Additionally, the school system also promotes values of individualism and competition that stand in direct conflict with the Adivasi values of community and unity. Thus, there are fundamental trade-offs that an Adivasi student must face in the modern school system.

For an Adivasi child, accessing higher education comes at the cost of becoming increasingly distant from their culture and community in the current scenario. In the words of a parent, "*The more education we give our children, the more they become like non-tribals*" (FGD05). With each additional level of education, the child needs to move farther away from their community—both literally and figuratively—to access it through hostels, other cities and so on. The time spent in the village becomes limited and in the run to fulfil the demands of the current education system, the child is also unable to put in time and effort towards strengthening their cultural roots. Young Adivasi graduates, who are finding their way in the world, feel that in pursuing higher education, they find themselves in a cultural limbo where they neither fully belong in modern society nor find the same grounding in their villages. They express feelings of facing a challenging dilemma. In the words of an alumni from Vidyodaya School,

My top priority was to join M.Sc. so that my career will improve. What I think is that my community has given me something. I am an M.Sc. graduate because of my community, there were so many helping hands. I have to come back to pay it back or something. By seeing me, if one or two people improve and think 'I can also study and do well' and if they get influenced then that will be good. But, I have never gone to or got involved in any village activity because I went outside to study. Now, my situation is such that even if I go, they'd ask my mother 'Who is this?' They've seen me until 12th standard. They only think S, R, and A are in the family. They have totally forgotten me. That is my situation. (FGD03)

Ultimately, this raises the question of who is going to carry the culture and the ways of the Adivasis forward. Traditionally, villages have strong leaders who hold the families together and ensure that everyone lives in harmony and peace. Village leaders have a thorough understanding of their own culture as well as the world

around them. However, most of the older participants are concerned about who will take up these leadership roles after their time. The youth who have moved away to seek higher education will be treated differently in the village. These graduates doubt whether they will be able to command respect the way a leader needs to in their villages as well. On the other hand, those who are staying in the village are doubtful of whether they will be deemed educated enough to lead. The role of the leader is also being redefined as the community engages more deeply with modern societies. For instance, earlier, it was the responsibility of the leaders to settle disputes and resolve conflicts in the village. Currently, most matters are immediately taken to the police. Hence, there is a very real concern amongst the community regarding losing their ways of social organisation and culture.

Moreover, higher education is not yielding the promised employment opportunities and “good lives” for Adivasi students. Despite reservations, they are not able to access “good work” due to various bureaucratic obstacles such as corruption and document forgery. The schools are also not inculcating the useful knowledge, skills and attitudes in them that will enable them to lead their lives with dignity, regardless of whether they get a job that directly aligns with what they studied. As a participant states,

When a child completes 10th, the child should have some skill to earn a living. At present, a child who completed 10th std is not capable of doing simple work—like in a textile shop where they have to measure cloth, they are not able to do it. (FGD08)

The community also slowly starts losing faith in education when they see a school graduate working as a daily wage labourer alongside a child who discontinued school in Grade 8. For more and more parents and students, it will slowly start making more sense to have the child leave school and start working in order to support their family. In the words of a participant, “*The present system and syllabus in the school is beneficial for other communities and not for us*” (FGD08). Hence, people see value in the idea and promise of education but not in the experience of it.

The Role of Government

In the end, the education of marginalised communities occurs against the backdrop of various social systems and structures. The government plays a key role in regulating the extent to which these larger forces disadvantage the community through exercising power in areas of education, health, livelihood, forest rights and so on. In the lived experiences of the Adivasi people in Gudalur, we hear a narrative of neglect when asked about the role of government in their upliftment. As one of the younger participants noted, the government refers to Adivasi people using the Tamil phrase ‘*azhivin vizhumbil irukkum Adivasi makkal*’ that directly translates to “*Adivasi people who are on the brink of extinction*” (FGD12). This reflects the assumption that the loss of culture and identity of the Adivasi people is gradual and inevitable. When the government itself is operating with these discriminatory beliefs, it seems that the fate of these communities has already been decided. With this lens, it is no surprise that there is no space for Adivasi knowledge and voices in the formal curriculum or teacher training.

While the government has various provisions set in place to make up for the historical injustices perpetrated against the Adivasi community, the extent to which they reach and influence the lives of the Adivasi people for the better is limited. As a participant shared,

If you compare our community with the rest of society, we are backward in every regard. If there are 100 steps, we will have climbed only 10; while they have gone from 100 to 200, we will still be at 10 steps. Not just in education but in livelihood and everything else, we are still at that level only. We are not able to move in spite of all the support we get from the government too. It looks like we are not allowed to move up. This is something to think seriously about. The government has set aside many crores for our development but it has not helped us. These funds are always given back and not utilised. If such funds are used for education properly or for livelihood it would make a difference. There is no one to help us to access these funds and ensure that these are utilised. We only see that allocation in papers, not in reality. (FGD08)

The complexity of the regulatory processes initiated by the government makes it difficult for the parents to apply and attain all the necessary documentation the children need to access schools and other provisions such as scholarships and reservations. The community members are also often unaware of what exactly the child will need and how they can navigate these bureaucratic spaces. Furthermore, most of the integrated child development services (ICDS) centres and *balwadis* attract children based on their nutrition programmes and are deemed as spaces for the distribution of food rather than early childhood education.

GTR schools or *ashram shalas* are another channel of governmental intervention that has the potential to create educational change in the direction of greater equality and justice but falls short of realising it. Similar to the *balwadis*, GTR schools do a better job of providing food rather than actual education. The high student–teacher ratios, teacher absenteeism, and inadequate teaching-learning transactions in these schools result in its students having low levels of foundational learning and facing even more difficulty in transitioning to other public schools. The teachers in these schools are also not trained in how they can support the learning of children from Adivasi communities. They also face immense pressure from higher authorities to finish the syllabus and perform other administrative tasks related to education, which diverts their resources away from fostering the children’s learning and growth. The parents rely on the school and teachers to know better and, thus, are not able to hold them accountable in any way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that the current system excludes Adivasi voices, perspectives, and knowledge in various ways, creating an uncompassionate learning environment for Adivasi students that adversely affects their perceptions of themselves and their community. Mainstream schools fail to understand the Adivasi child’s context and impart a culturally relevant education. In doing so, they perpetuate the cycles of inequality, which put the Adivasi communities at a disadvantage. The existing system has its drawbacks for children from most communities. However, given the history of injustice faced by the Adivasi communities and their current socioeconomic position, the Adivasi children are left worse off than their non-Adivasi counterparts. The instances of success and support that are heard of within the current education system are an exception and not the rule. Hence, the way forward cannot be to increase enrolment within the already existing system. Change must be brought forth sustainably and equitably, such that children discontinuing schooling is the exception, not the expectation. There is a need to start from scratch, listen to the people from Adivasi communities, and build learning spaces that are based on what they want for their children.

THE PURPOSE OF ADIVASI EDUCATION

The Adivasi communities of Gudalur find themselves in a situation where education is often alluded to as an emancipatory force but seldom experienced as such. The persistence of the status quo in the present education system points towards a future where the currents of modernity will ferry the younger generations away from their cultural roots and identity to a larger society that is alienating and exploitative. There is an active and urgent need to address the issues within the current education system in order to create one that is inclusive and nurturing towards children from Adivasi communities. Education is a site of injustice for marginalised communities, but it also holds the power to correct these injustices. In order to enter the realm of possibilities and create anew, one must return to the teleological foundations of education as a bridge between the present situation and the prospect of an equitable future.

Any inquiry into the purpose of education is influenced by the lived experiences and beliefs of the thinker. It is important to examine whose perspectives are being amplified in these investigations, especially in matters pertaining to the education of marginalised communities. It is paradoxical that the community's voice is the least heard in matters related to their children and their future. This study attempts to change that by placing their voices and perspectives at the forefront.

First, the community wants education to build autonomy in Adivasi students. Currently, the lifeworlds of Adivasi communities are changing substantially with each passing generation. Parents and elders cannot support the younger generations adequately just by referring to their own experience. Hence, they rely on the education system to build the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for an Adivasi child to understand the world and their place in it, think for themselves, and make informed choices. Thus, education becomes a way to move towards self-reliance and the assertion of dignity, and to enable Adivasi children to adapt and survive in a rapidly changing world. In the words of an older participant,

We have a need to interact with the outside world in so many different ways, like for instance, booking a gas cylinder. To even make a simple dress purchase, there's a need to use a plastic card. There's a need to use the ATM or mobile phones. Even asking directions is out of trend now. Our grandfathers found their way around by asking people. Now even educated people are neither ready nor have the patience to even give directions or provide help in any way. So we need to be educated, as we have to get out of the village and into the town for even our basic needs. So there is a need for formal education. At the garment shop or market, people will be on the lookout to fleece us. We need to be prepared to not be swindled. Not many people are willing to help anymore (FGD02).

Secondly, education should develop Adivasi students' knowledge about their communities and the world outside. Schools should impart pragmatic knowledge about the social, economic, political, and natural systems that are shaping the reality around them. Since the current curriculum excludes Adivasi knowledge systems and has consequently reduced the scope for the village to be a site of learning, there is also a need for the Adivasi child to acquire knowledge about their own community as well as other Adivasi communities through the school. As a participant puts it: *Every year things change in the world and accordingly exposure should be given, not just about technology, but also about the world and government, politics, economics, and the changes taking place. They need to know about their community. The place where they were born, the village where they lived, the people who brought them up, they should not forget these things. Education should foster these things too (FGD10).*

Here, learning about both the modern world as well as their own communities is crucial to building autonomy, as a child cannot make well-informed decisions about how to lead their lives if they only know about the dominant aspects of modern society. The community's voice thus addresses the majoritarian assimilationist agenda by putting forth the demand for an education system that integrates them without costing them their Adivasi identity.

Thirdly, the community wants education to enable an Adivasi child to be financially self-sufficient. Currently, many members of the community work as daily wage labourers with incomes that fluctuate throughout the year. Parents want education to give their children access to better work opportunities so that they can avoid financial struggles like the ones they faced. Here, the expectation is that education will endow children with the skills to manage their finances in the best possible way. However, the community also feels that education should not be driven by economic interests, and getting a job should not be its central focus. As a participant remarks,

In my opinion, our focus must not be on job seeking when we study. Many people are of the opinion that only if they study, can they find a job. Even if we believe it will take us further in life, some people may be into agriculture, while some others may be into construction. If they study about that, they needn't worry about looking for jobs. Education must be a tool to help someone in their existing choice of work. I believe it will be good if the education system is configured in that manner. We're fixated on getting a government job when we start studying. Or an office job. We don't know how much we can afford to pay to study to get to that level. But if we focus on studying the things that we're interested in doing, I believe we will be able to progress further (FGD06).

Hence, while the community wants education to enable economic participation, their primary focus is not on the children being able to accumulate wealth and go into high-paying jobs. They want their children to have financial security that will help them lead fulfilling and dignified lives, regardless of the nature of work they do. The non-negotiable aspect is that the Adivasi youth feel happy and free in whatever job they have. As a participant said, "We want an education that will help us to live well and to earn enough to live that lifestyle. It is enough to get an education that gives an income to live" (FGD08).

Furthermore, education should open the doors to multiple kinds of opportunities for the Adivasi child. In the opinion of a participant,

I believe children need to be developed in many ways. We must not focus on just one. Be it from a vocational aspect or an academic one, we need to provide a path forward in many ways for the children (FGD05).

By narrowing down the opportunities available for learning various subjects and skills, the school fails to accommodate the varied interests and aptitudes of its students, setting some up for failure. Children should have the opportunity to access various kinds of knowledge and skills without the school hierarchising them. Exposing children to various ideas and ways of life is also central to building autonomy.

Alongside the purpose of an education that focuses on the individual child's growth and learning is a strong demand for education to build the character of the Adivasi child. Education must inculcate good values and confidence in them. Schools should reflect Adivasi values—which maintain that all children are equal—and foster unity between them. Here, it is important to note that these are universal values that create harmony and peace for all.

More significantly, children should be able to navigate society without fear, and be confident in themselves and their interactions with others. As a participant states, *"They need to be brave. They need to study... Wherever they go, no matter what problem is encountered, they need to be able to face it. They need to keep pushing. Refuse to give up. They must believe in themselves that they surpass any obstacle"* (FGD06). The Adivasi child should also be confident of their own identity and *"have the confidence to tell that we are Adivasi, no matter where"* (FGD02). Furthermore, the participants envision an education system that will help its students accept failures and learn from them. Education should also facilitate the learning of good behaviours, like integrity. They must live their lives with discipline and learn to respect others.

In the end, all of this should contribute towards creating a strong value system for the Adivasi child that will help them discern between what is right and wrong so that they can make decisions for themselves. In the words of a participant, *"If we go to school, we'll know what is good and what is bad, what we need and what we do not. When they look at others and see what they get for themselves, they will realise what they also need. School offers these experiences and they will learn several things from it"* (FGD01). At the end of the day, the community sees that one has to be a good person in order to lead a good life, and this necessitates an education system that is able to define learning and growth beyond academic knowledge. The community wants Adivasi children to experience schools as spaces filled with joy and freedom, which curate various kinds of learning experiences to ensure that the process of schooling itself is valuable for the Adivasi child regardless of the outcomes. As a participant states, *They need to be taught to courageously move forward. Not just going by the curriculum alone, knowledge on how to live life will help us lead a joyful life* (FGD06).

Defining the purpose of education along the lines of developing autonomous, knowledgeable, financially independent, confident, honest, and compassionate individuals who navigate their Adivasi identity from a space of strength also has larger implications for the kind of society we are creating and the role of education in it. For instance, Adivasi youth who possess these qualities can challenge the harmful stereotypes that are perpetuated about the Adivasi community in mainstream society and change perceptions. They can also rewrite the narratives around what the community considers itself to be capable of and find footing in both the Adivasi world as well as the modern world. In facilitating this, education becomes instrumental in Adivasi students' ability to reaffirm their culture and preserve a sense of community in an increasingly individualistic world. The community thus wants education to facilitate the process of building leaders who are able to help their villages and people navigate the modern world while staying true to their cultural roots. Ultimately, *a child who exits from [the school] should be of value to society and home* (FGD04).

On a superficial level, what the Adivasi communities here specify as the purpose of education seems to be applicable to all children. However, on deeper examination, there are significant nuances that set

apart the purposes of Adivasi education from the mainstream ways of thinking. The values that are central to Adivasi culture play a significant role in the importance of each objective of education. Adivasi culture promotes values of equality and cooperation, while the mainstream foregrounds hierarchies and competition. These values are reflected in the way the community prioritises the role of education in building character and autonomy over and above economic participation and the accumulation of wealth. Furthermore, the purpose of education that we outline here makes space for the Adivasi child's autonomy without sacrificing the sense of community in the name of individualism. The community expects education to enable the Adivasi child to be well versed in their cultural ways as well as the ways of the modern world without having to trade one for the other. They want education to enable the Adivasi child to make informed choices based on their knowledge about both the systems. In this, the community ensures that educational interactions become exploratory in nature rather than prescriptive. The participants also strongly believed that each child is unique in their capabilities and perspectives. The purpose of education that they outline allows the emergence of these diversities rather than their homogenisation. As an elderly participant who led the community during the land rights movement sums it up,

We are not saying that our children with their education should become a big person or earn lots of money or even become a big doctor or teacher. We are saying that we want our children to have dignified work and good character at the end of the day. Basically, education should enable them to create opportunities and lead their lives with pride and dignity (FGD14).

Thus, we see that the Adivasi communities of Gudalur envision an education that enables their children to navigate their home worlds and the modern world with knowledge, dignity, and character, and lead contented lives. Since the fundamental values and beliefs that inform these purposes of education differ from those of the current, mainstream education systems, the solution cannot be to change the community and children in order to make them fit in better in the mainstream schools, as most efforts are presently directed towards assimilation. In order to create a meaningful education system for Adivasi children, we need to build from the purpose of education that the community itself sees for its children. It is easy for the problematisation of the current system and its complexities to impede further movement in thought and practice. However, there is a realm of possibilities to be explored beyond that of critiques. In the next chapter, the purpose of Adivasi education that we outline here leads to an alternative vision for Adivasi education, as understood by the community.

THE ALTERNATIVE VISION

Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2008) states the following regarding the education of indigenous people:

1. "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language."

In our examination of the experiences of the Adivasi communities of Gudalur in the current education system, we see that none of these principles are reflected in their lives even though India is a signatory to the Declaration. The mainstream schools that most Adivasi children attend promote neither equality nor self-determination. The voices of Adivasi communities are not heard even in conversations about the education of their own children. The decisions that determine the processes and outcomes that define the schooling journeys of Adivasi children are made by distant bureaucrats who are ignorant of, and indifferent to, Adivasi reality. However, any system that respects the spirit of the UN Declaration must listen to Adivasi communities in order to reveal the possibility of a culturally relevant education that is geared towards greater equality and justice. In the previous chapter, we articulated the purpose of Adivasi education through the voices of the community. This chapter builds on this articulation to collate the community's views on what an alternative practice would look like.

Central to envisioning a culturally appropriate education is establishing a shared understanding of the notion of culture itself. A superficial understanding of Adivasi culture that is often present in mainstream discourses limits it to the community's language, dance, music, traditional attire, rituals, and so on. While all of these factors are important cultural practices of the community, approaching them alone limits our depth of understanding, as they are means to an end. The art forms and rituals act as a way of bringing people together to create shared meaning and experiences that build solidarity. Hence, the community's understanding of culture extends beyond these practices to include certain values and beliefs that are fundamental to their way of being.

The Adivasi worldview situates the individual in a network of connections between other beings and their natural environment, that is neither hierarchical nor transactional. While modernity has the perspective of changing the world, the Adivasi perspective values preserving it—whether it is the nature around them or their memories of being. This lens helps them see themselves as a part of multiple wholes, fostering a sense of community and harmony with nature. The values of cooperation, conservation, and not accumulating more than what is enough become central to such a way of living. This stands in stark contrast to what mainstream consciousness regards as "progress" or "development", which is driven by material accumulation. When the participants expressed a fear of losing their culture, it was primarily about losing these values and worldviews. As an elder participant puts it,

Our people are good because we don't have desire for wealth, no thoughts like that. Apart from alcoholism, everything else is good. So this is what we should teach our children about our culture—this connection, helping those in need, helping each other in a community and affection for others. The children who are growing up now won't know this. So we might need to have a class about this, whether it's a school or a study centre—that tribals are like this, they help those in need, without expecting anything in return. We have seen in so many places that if there is no rice in one place, they can get it from others houses... In old times, there were quite a few good values, so we need to give awareness about these practices. They have almost stopped, so we must revive them by starting with the children now (FGD04).

Hence, Adivasi culture is not just about the practices of dance, music, and rituals but also about the philosophy informing these practices. The former becomes a way of inculcating the latter and the village becomes a space where these sensitivities and knowledge are built through being together as a community.

Within the paradigm of enabling self-determination for the Adivasi communities, the participants expressed a critical need to have educational institutions and other spaces for learning that are primarily owned and directed by the community members. The strongest among these demands was the one for an Adivasi school. Here, the Vidyodaya Adivasi School, run by VBVT, plays an integral role in informing and driving the imagination of the participants when it comes to exploring the possibilities of an alternative school. As a young participant states, *"Schools must be like Vidyodaya. Teachers must be able to make the school feel like home"* (FGD01). Ever since Vidyodaya reoriented itself to be an Adivasi school in response to the demands of the community, the school deliberately integrated aspects of Adivasi culture into its day-to-day functioning. Half the teachers are from the community, and teacher-student relationships are strongly guided by an ethic of care and compassion. Adivasi songs, dance, languages, and other cultural practices are essential to the regular routines of the school. The curriculum also draws heavily from the daily context of the children and includes their histories, folk tales, and so on. The decision-making system at Vidyodaya is also firmly rooted in Adivasi values, with a non-hierarchical management system that enables everyone's voices and opinions to come forward. All of these factors work in tandem to create and maintain a continuum between the school and home of the Adivasi child. Vidyodaya is currently operating as a primary school and has around 120 children enrolled. Since 1995, it has continued to impart meaningful experiences of education to Adivasi children in a way that allows the community to keep alive its imagination of the possibilities for an inclusive and nurturing school.. As the parent of a Vidyodaya alumnus puts it, *"We have Vidyodaya till fifth and we can see the eagerness to study in the kids. After the fifth they wish to continue in another school to study further. We don't see this eagerness among children who go to other schools, especially those who study in Government Tribal Residential (GTR) schools"* (FGD05).

In his treatise on education, British philosopher Harry Brighouse identifies three aspects of the school that those running it have the power to change in a meaningful manner—its composition, curriculum, and ethos (2005). We streamline the participants' ideas into these three categories for a more comprehensive understanding of their vision for a school attended by Adivasi children.

Composition of the School

Regarding the composition of the school, the participants state that the school will “*need a mix of tribal as well as non-tribal teachers. The non-tribal teachers should have gone to the tribal village and learnt about our context and culture before they teach our children*” (FGD01). Teachers from the Adivasi communities will be better equipped to ease the Adivasi child into the ways of the school by communicating with them in their own language and extending them the kind of security and comfort that only a fellow community member can. They can bring in perspectives that ensure that the practices of the school continue to remain relevant and culturally appropriate to the Adivasi child. In addition, teachers from the Adivasi community also help maintain a stronger relationship with the parents and villages. In the words of a participant,

The teachers themselves have to be changed. People among us have to become teachers. When that happens, the kids will learn properly because when other teachers teach, there's a language problem. The kids are unable to properly understand it. But when we teach, it can be done in our own language, which I think the kids can follow and comprehend what is being taught. The teachers must not look at them as students, but as children, and then proceed with teaching (FGD06).

Teachers from the non-Adivasi communities introduce the modicum of discontinuity between the children's home and school experiences that will enable them to learn about different ways of life and build autonomy. However, it is necessary that these teachers are well aware of the history and context of the community in order to address their own assumptions and biases. In this way, the students will have teachers who are different from them, along with teachers they identify with, who work together to facilitate learning. When it comes to the qualifications of these teachers, the main demand put forth by the community was that they should be kind towards the students and knowledgeable in the subjects that they are teaching.

Children from the Adivasi community need specific kinds of support in their initial years of schooling owing to the differences in language and culture they encounter when they begin school. Considering this, most participants wanted schools that cater exclusively to Adivasi children, at least in the earlier grades. The participants also saw value in Adivasi children studying alongside non-Adivasi students and suggested that the latter can be admitted in higher grades. In having students from Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities in the later grades, students can learn from each other about their similarities and differences, and create meaningful friendships in an inclusive learning environment. As a young participant views this: “*We definitely need non-tribal students. Now we go to non-tribal schools where we learn about them. If they come to study at our tribal school, they will learn about our way of life. This is an opportunity for the outside world to learn a little bit more about us*” (FGD01). Thus, encouraging diversity and inclusion in school among teachers and students leads to the creation of learning spaces that facilitate autonomy and challenge misinformed narratives.

Ethos

The ethos of the school refers to the values, beliefs, and attitudes that can foster genuine and serious engagement among students and teachers in an environment that is emotionally stable and physically safe (Brighouse, 2005). Firstly, the participants strongly believe that a school should not be a place that evokes fear in the child. They should be able to retain their sense of freedom in schools. As a participant

states, *"Kids need freedom. Their hearts must be free. Only when that happens, can they listen and absorb what the teacher is teaching with no fear"* (FGD06).

Secondly, all children in the school must be treated with equal respect. In the words of a participant, *"Everyone should be equal. The children should never feel inferior. Students should not be compared based on their marks"* (FGD01). Only in the absence of discrimination and fear can the Adivasi child actively engage with the teachers and their peers in school.

Thirdly, the participants shared the view that all children are unique and that they have innate talents that are not necessarily academically oriented. Schools should identify these talents and encourage each child in their pursuit of their interests and in building their capabilities. In the words of a participant, *"Not everyone has all the talents. Each person is differently skilled and we need to facilitate their learning based on their skillset. Some may write well, some may have good hands-on skills, some may sing well; still others may be good at sports. We should recognise them and encourage them besides their academic pursuits. Instead of telling the children what to do, we must create a system that allows the children to choose for themselves what they want to do"* (FGD06).

Lastly, schools must facilitate learning through cooperation, not competition. Schools should foster unity¹¹ among children and encourage in them the temperament to help those in need without expecting anything in return.

Schools should inculcate and encourage certain dispositions in students and teachers that align with the guiding values we have just outlined. Teachers should be kind and compassionate towards the Adivasi children so that they feel welcome in school. They should treat all children equally while also being understanding about their home contexts. As a participant remarks, *"Everybody should be treated equally. Just because a child does not study well, they must not be scolded or beaten. Also because a child studies well, they should not be spoken of too highly. We need teachers who can do that"* (FGD01). They should not discriminate against children. Furthermore, they should be able to support the child academically and otherwise while also constantly being open to learning. As a participant states, *"Teachers should be able to teach what is in the book as well as what is needed for life. Teachers should know how to make the child understand—be it a lesson from the textbook or a life lesson. Teachers must never feel like they are the best and they know everything. Teachers must know what the child needs"* (FGD01). Teachers who practise these values and temperaments create a school environment where the children will want to come to school of their own volition.

Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment

In order to create and sustain a caring and inclusive environment for Adivasi children, there is a need to see, acknowledge, and value what the children and communities bring with them into the school. Instead of believing that Adivasi children need to be "changed" or "civilised" through schooling, it is important for teachers to build on and nurture the values, knowledge, and worldviews that Adivasi children bring with them. Thus, the school then becomes a place where the children feel valued for who they already are and this enables them to engage with the school as active learners. As a participant sums it up: *"Instead of being wary of school they should be happy there. School should be a happy and safe place"* (FGD09).

¹¹ Here, "unity" is a rough translation of the Tamil word 'otrumai' that implies a sense of solidarity and unconditional mutual support.

The community believes that the educational processes in schools should speak to the child's aptitudes, interests, and abilities by enabling them to explore various forms of learning in a guided manner. The knowledge and experiences they can gain through this approach should add value to the child's life and enable them to view the world from a lens of wonder and curiosity. Furthermore, the participants believe that in imparting an education that is meaningful to the child, schools must not hierarchise the various knowledge forms involved and push children towards something they do not find interesting. Currently, the school systems value academic pathways of learning over vocational ones, and this limits the possibilities available for learning. As a participant shares,

All children do not have all talents. Not everyone has the inclination to study academically. Some of their talents will lie in technical or vocational fields. If they do not study these things in school, we will lose them. If we note this and nurture those talents, these children will not drop out. We might think that these children dropped out because their parents did not take care of them, but that is not the reason. Some children don't like it when people tease them at school, some will not have the talent to pursue the academic way even though they may have many other talents. If we can work with these kids and counsel them, we can find out their talents and guide them towards that route. Things can change then (FGD05).

The participants shared the view that the school curriculum should consist of useful knowledge that will help the Adivasi child understand the world around them. This will spark the child's interest, as the "why" behind what they are learning will be clear. A culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum prepares children for life, not exams. This will enable them to strengthen their confidence and conceptual understanding rather than worry about understanding what is happening in their surroundings. A curriculum that is based on what material life offers is central to overcoming the unknown and transcending fear. Such a curriculum is dynamic by design and enables Adivasi students to move from being objects of history to subjects of it.

The community also strongly believes that schools should incorporate various things in their curriculum, like sports, vocational training, crafts, dance, music, and more. The learning imparted through these activities should not be seen as secondary to that of academics. The inclusion of cultural practices and knowledge forms is vital to a culturally appropriate curriculum. Schools should include accurate narratives about Adivasi communities in their textbooks and address their histories. Table 3 shows specific areas that participants from the workshop identified as necessary for education to address and which aspects of it the schools can fulfil.

Table 3: Thematic breakdown of the responsibilities of the school

Themes/Areas	Responsibilities of the School
Building traditional leadership¹²	<p>Take responsibility as leaders.</p> <p>Invite traditional leaders to events and programmes; have guest classes as exposure.</p> <p>Teach students about respect and keeping the village together.</p> <p>Make children find out and interview leaders from their villages.</p>
Leadership for development	<p>Understand and learn about the outside world.</p> <p>Teach vocational skills.</p> <p>Teach leadership skills to children.</p>
Cultural events and rituals	<p>Have details about the events in textbooks.</p> <p>Invite guests with knowledge and experience of the events to teach the students about them.</p> <p>Teach through skits and role plays.</p> <p>Learn about 5 December, Adivasi Day, and the history behind it.</p>
Traditional livelihood and livelihood related skills (weaving mats, agriculture, house construction, etc.)	<p>Teach through crafts.</p> <p>Teach agriculture to children by making them experience it hands-on.</p> <p>Teach children to plan.</p> <p>Teach livelihood skills in classrooms.</p> <p>Invite those from the villages with these skills to teach children in schools.</p>
Adivasi rights and histories	<p>Have government staff teach the students about the rights of Adivasi societies.</p> <p>Source books and literature that includes these.</p> <p>Invite elders and leaders from the community to share their lived experiences.</p> <p>Teach the students about their histories.</p> <p>Teach the students about the Forest Rights Act and child rights.</p> <p>Have students make videos and use music and art to learn about histories and culture.</p>

¹² Traditional leadership refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes reflected by the village leaders who bring the people together in various ways. These leaders are central to resolving conflicts and maintaining harmony. Such a leadership style is participative and collaborative.

<p>Knowledge about forest and nature (herbal medicines, honey gathering, food gathering practices, sacred groves, catching fish and crabs)</p>	<p>Reinforce the names and uses of things in the forest and create spaces to share knowledge across tribes.</p> <p>Compare the forest and urban spaces, like towns.</p> <p>Take students to currently inaccessible places of worship in the forest by liaising with the forest department.</p> <p>Grow a herbal medicinal garden.</p> <p>Teach students about honey gathering.</p> <p>Teach students Adivasi food practices.</p>
<p>Languages</p>	<p>Make children speak all languages—both Adivasi and other languages should have space at school.</p> <p>Anchor the documentation process for tribal languages.</p> <p>Develop a writing system for the Adivasi languages.</p> <p>Build pride in the Adivasi languages.</p>
<p>Values</p>	<p>Conduct festivals, sports and other activities that will bring everyone together and teach unity.</p> <p>Encourage students to help and learn from each other.</p> <p>Reflect the values of unity and harmony that exist in the village.</p> <p>Teach children to share food.</p>
<p>Music dance, stories, riddles, drama</p>	<p>Include these activities in school programmes.</p> <p>Have Adivasi children teach these to others.</p> <p>Create books to capture these practices.</p>
<p>Learning environment</p>	<p>Ensure that there is no fear in the learning environment.</p> <p>Make children comfortable.</p> <p>Create opportunities for all children to participate.</p> <p>Build classrooms in the open that are connected to nature.</p> <p>Have libraries and books.</p>
<p>Solving finance-related issues and other issues that act as barriers to learning</p>	<p>Start savings programs at the school level.</p> <p>Teach trade.</p> <p>Create awareness about government schemes and entitlements.</p>

In order for these suggestions to create meaningful experience and impart the intended learning, they should be complemented by relevant pedagogical practices. As we have mentioned before, the teachers should value the knowledge, skills, and worldviews with which the Adivasi child enters the classroom. They should teach classes in a way that does not leave the child feeling alienated from the content. Class material should be based on an awareness of their context and interests. Furthermore, teachers should

employ pedagogic practices that call forth maximum engagement from the students through various activities and curated experiences. This will encourage children to think critically about the content they are being taught and develop a deeper understanding of it. In the words of a participant, *“Teachers should be able to connect a lesson to real life. Even if the syllabus is tough, if the lessons are taught as activities, the students will understand them better”* (FGD01). While children will be taught in groups, teachers should still be able to ensure that each child grasps the concepts. They should be able to identify the specific level of learning that each child is at and support them according to their needs. As a participant states, *“As far as our kids are concerned, every child’s individuality must be understood, and based on that, they must be taught. If there are 15 kids in one classroom, there’ll be different types of learners and different levels... Each level must be given special attention, like how we do at Vidyodaya. We need to have separate methods and teach them. Sometimes, a fifth grader must have to be seated in a second grade class. Based on that, methodologies must be created”* (FGD06).

Ultimately, for all of this to be successful, teachers must be freed from the limiting clutches of bureaucratic requirements and given complete creative autonomy in the way their classes are conducted. They should be given the collective authority to make key decisions regarding the way the school is run. In the words of a village education coordinator, *“We can’t create anything meaningful based on the specifications of the government or an outside entity. The teacher has that talent. Not with how the government prescribes things. The extent of a teacher’s talent is what will shape a child’s growth”* (FGD06).

The assessment system that the participants envision for the school stays true to its principal purpose—to provide valuable feedback to both students and teachers regarding how they can better themselves. It must not deviate from this objective; it should complement the learning of the Adivasi child rather than impede it. It should be a basis for improvement rather than comparison. As a participant states,

Like S said, the grading system is necessary. For a child to understand their own talent and capability, they needn’t be told of it by others. They can understand it by themselves. The grading system mustn’t be set up in a way where it affects others. Kids need to understand their own capabilities. We need to figure out a way to properly grade them. That’s when it will be transparent to them. It’ll help each child realise where they truly stand. It shouldn’t be open (FGD06).

Children should not be defined by their grades. In the words of another participant, *“As far as grades in exams go, we should look at the improvement they have made from one test to the next. We must not be just telling them about all the mistakes they made in the exam. Otherwise, not wanting to get scoldings or beatings at school, the child might stay back home. The children should be gently made to realise the wrong they have done, instead of scolding them for it”* (FGD01).

A school with the composition and ethos we have outlined, which follows the practices of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that impart a culturally appropriate and relevant education, inevitably establishes and strengthens the continuum between the Adivasi child’s school and home. From a young age, the Adivasi child can interact with a diverse set of people and ideas, and learn in depth about their home worlds and the modern world in a non-disruptive manner, as the transition from home to school will be eased through the continuity that the school will maintain between the two.

Teacher Training Initiatives

Aside from the school, the participants also voiced a strong demand for a teacher training initiative that will prepare Adivasi teachers to impart a culturally relevant curriculum to Adivasi children. Often, what we see is that after training through the formal teacher training system, Adivasi teachers become similar to their non-Adivasi counterparts and are unable to add further value to the Adivasi child's education. However, there are certain aspects of an Adivasi child's education that can only be fulfilled by well trained Adivasi teachers. The community recognises the centrality of this role. As a participant remarks,

I think teachers are important. Many aspects are encapsulated in a teacher, not just teaching. Only a teacher can really guide a student, what to study, what to become, and so on, not parents. We need to get involved in teacher training too to produce this kind of teachers... Our people have knowledge accumulated over generations, they are intelligent, wise, but we don't take it forward. Our people are simple, and I don't blame them. But we don't talk about this knowledge to outsiders. This can be done only by Adivasi teachers and they should teach children all this. A teacher has to know all aspects of taking the child forward. They must know how to interact with the village and in the school with the children. These teachers must be Adivasis and then we can see the change (FGD10).

Hence, it is not only important to have Adivasi teachers, but also to inculcate in them the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will ensure that the Adivasi child benefits from their presence in the school. Moreover, the participants also mentioned the need for a community-led hostel that will enable children from remote Adivasi villages and difficult home environments to access education without losing their cultural roots. The residential space thus created can also support the school in expanding its reach.

The Village as a Site of Learning

The purpose of Adivasi education, as understood by the participants, highlights the need for an inclusive and nurturing education system that will enable the Adivasi child to traverse modernity without compromising their Adivasi identity. While the school can contribute to this through significant changes on various levels, it cannot balance out the aspects of modernity and Adivasi culture in the learning it is facilitating, as it will inevitably lean more towards the former. Adivasi cultural practices and knowledge are deeply intertwined with the context in which they are learned through observation and apprenticeship practices. For instance, the knowledge of herbal medicines cannot be taught as the healing properties of certain plants alone. Each plant grows in the forest surrounded by a particular ecosystem of flora and fauna that is crucial to the medicinal properties it holds. Adivasi children acquire this knowledge in the time that they spend in their villages with their parents and grandparents. While schools can teach them about this knowledge, they can never impart the knowledge itself in its true form. Furthermore, each tribe has unique customs, traditions, and knowledge systems, and it is simply not practical to rely on the school to accommodate all of these in its curriculum. Hence, there is a strong need to reclaim the village as a site of learning, as schools alone cannot fulfil the diversity of educational needs and aspirations of the Adivasi communities.

In order to rekindle the community's active participation in the education of Adivasi children, there is a need to establish various avenues that can channelise the child's learning. The village should be able to anchor the education of cultural aspects while also supporting the child in their formal schooling. Table 4 shows the aspects of a culturally appropriate education that falls under the village's responsibility according to the workshop participants.

Table 4: Thematic breakdown of the responsibilities of the village

Themes/Areas	Responsibilities of the Village
Traditional leadership	<p>Have children observe and learn when cultural rites and events happen at the village level.</p> <p>Observe and learn from the village leaders as to how they resolve conflicts and solve problems.</p> <p>Teach children about local histories.</p> <p>Community members should take the ownership to teach students about cultural aspects.</p> <p>Teach consensus as a decision-making tool.</p>
Leadership for development	<p>The village youth should take the initiative to lead in matters concerning development like housing and documents.</p> <p>People at the village should come together and choose leaders who will take initiative in the aspects of development and interacting with the government officials.</p>
Cultural events	<p>Attend the events, observe and learn how they are ways of bringing people together.</p> <p>Under the guidance of the elders, the youth should take the initiative to learn more about cultural events.</p>
Traditional livelihood and livelihood related skills (weaving mats, agriculture, house construction, etc.)	<p>Demonstrate the way these practices are done.</p> <p>Create and sell these items and save the money for common use at the village level.¹³</p>
Adivasi rights and histories	<p>Invite those who understand the law to take sessions at the village level.</p> <p>Bring people together and discuss rights.</p> <p>Cooperate and fight for rights during crises.</p>

¹³ This is already happening at the village level and those who are interested in learning observe. We can encourage this in all villages.

<p>Knowledge about the forest and nature (herbal medicines, honey gathering, food gathering practices, sacred groves, catching fish and crabs)</p>	<p>Teach names of trees, birds, animals, insects, reptiles, spinach, mushrooms, flowers, and more in the native languages.</p> <p>Teach the uses and the processes of the various things the students find in the forest.</p> <p>Teach students to identify and understand the behaviour of animals.</p> <p>Teach herbal medicine.</p> <p>Have students learn by growing a hive.</p> <p>Elders should spend time with the children in the forest.</p> <p>Teach students to look at not only their needs but also at others'.</p>
<p>Languages</p>	<p>Speak only in the native tongue of the village.</p> <p>Teach in Adivasi languages.</p> <p>Teach children about other languages also.</p> <p>Reclaim old words that are currently being replaced by Tamil and Malayalam words.</p>
<p>Values</p>	<p>Teach students to solve problems by talking together.</p> <p>Share consensus building processes that involve men, women, and children equally.</p> <p>Talk about these ways of life at the village level; promote unity, honesty, being one with nature, and not harming other beings.</p>
<p>Songs, music, dance, stories, riddles, drama</p>	<p>Involve students in related events happen at the village level.</p> <p>Teach children how to make <i>thudi</i> and <i>cheenam</i> (Adivasi musical instruments) and allow them to practice in the village.</p>
<p>Learning environment</p>	<p>Create a place specifically meant for the children to learn, such as a learning centre.</p> <p>Take children to other villages and teach them about their communities.</p>
<p>Solving financial and other issues that act as barriers to learning</p>	<p>Conduct village-level savings programmes.</p> <p>Teach children vocational skills.</p> <p>Stay united and help those who are facing challenges financially.</p>

The learning centres in the villages can also be a space for the children to come together and spend time studying for school. Young members of the village who have completed school can facilitate the learning in this space and support the children with their studies. This will help the children strengthen their learning while also creating a space for the active involvement of the community.

Currently, owing to various hurdles posed by limited livelihood options, alcoholism, and other circumstances, there are parents who are unable to actively support their children's learning. While the participants acknowledge that this is a significant issue, they do not see value in blaming the parents. Some of them felt that the indifference of some parents to their children's education is an issue that will be resolved across generations, and that the community as a whole should do whatever it can alongside

the people who are there to support them in order to ensure that their children are leading good lives. The participants felt that there must be initiatives that sensitise parents to their children's educational needs. Parents must have a clear understanding of why it is important that their child goes to school. They should actively maintain good communication with their children to keep the continuity of the culture and relationships across generations. As one participant states,

This is 2022, and these days children have a different attitude to life. For example, children have access to mobile phones and they spend so much time on it. Parents are also allowing this. If we share with children our past experiences, they will listen. They may not accept immediately, but they will think about it and accept slowly. There may be children who will not accept their parents and their difficulties. What we have to realise is that there is a gap between us and the children in our communication and we should overcome this gap with our children. Even if we give all the support they need it will not be beneficial to them without good communication. We should stop with this now and think more about filling this gap... We must have youth meetings and try to communicate with them and talk to them about such issues. We have to build them up and help them to take the work forward. We have to hold their hands and do things like we did in the past and help them go forward (FGD08).

By improving their communication, parents and children can understand each other and eliminate practices like hitting, to which parents resort in the absence of good communication. This plays a significant role for the parent—or other primary caregivers—to enable a good life for the Adivasi child. Elders in the village also need to come to the understanding that they will not marry the children off at a young age or let them go to work. They must practise this without curbing the freedoms and autonomy of the child.

The Role of Government

At the end of the day, the Adivasi child's education still takes place within the larger context of existing social, political, and economic systems. It is important for those working to improve the state of education in Adivasi communities to acknowledge and understand this surrounding ecosystem and think of the ways in which it can be supportive. One of the most significant actors in this larger ecosystem is the government. Currently, the extent of support that the community receives in matters regarding their education is minimal. However, the participants saw that it was necessary to work with the government in order to bring about lasting change that can influence the lived realities of all Adivasi children. Community-driven schools are limited in their reach but can function as model schools, which can concretise the community's vision of education for the government. The government also needs to create a space where it actively listens to the community members and designs spaces and policies for Adivasi education based on what they hear from the people. For instance, endowing members of the community with decision-making power in GTR schools is a substantial change in the direction of greater inclusion and equality.

The government can also play a key role in lowering the cost of education for children from Adivasi communities. While there are certain scholarships for Adivasi students, very few are able to access it due to the sophistication of the processes involved in availing them. Simplifying these processes and making them more accessible to the Adivasi communities can also contribute significantly towards lessening the financial burden of education. Furthermore, there is a need to rectify the misinformed narratives propagated by textbooks regarding Adivasi communities and ensure that they are represented in the curriculum accurately. This will help those from other communities gain a better understanding of Adivasi communities and not hold onto their biases. The government also needs to reorient its teacher training programmes in order to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work in a just and equitable manner with children from Adivasi communities.

Conclusion

In a world that chases perfect outcomes, the Adivasi communities in Gudalur value an education system that is intrinsically meaningful owing to the quality of the processes involved. They envision an education that is deeply rooted in the community's culture, history, and values while also enabling their children to understand the modern world around them and make decisions for themselves as they preserve a sense of community and togetherness. In the current scenario, the involvement of Adivasi parents and communities in the education of their children is limited owing to the discriminatory forces in mainstream schools that deem them as uneducated and illiterate. However, the ownership and active involvement of the community in educational activities is central to imparting a culturally relevant education to Adivasi children, and our exploration into their views on the education of their children challenges the notion that the communities are unable to contribute significantly to the education of their children. Even amidst all the injustices that the community faces in matters of education, they are still able to explore possibilities and prioritise the future of their children. The objective of education has never been for the student to change and become someone else, but to adapt while holding their Adivasi identity close. Hence, we see that the rights of equality and self-determination in Adivasi education, recognised by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, holds immense potential to transform the education of Adivasi communities if the government and other structures are able to create a space for it.

CONCLUSION

We undertook this study to explore the educational experience of Adivasi communities by listening to their voices and building an understanding of the purpose and possibilities of education as they envision it.

This study confirms many previous insights into the lifeworld of the indigenous peoples of South India—particularly that the current education system fails to recognise the diversity of needs and aspirations of the Adivasi communities in matters concerning their education. It fails to contribute to the development of a knowledgeable, confident, and skilled Adivasi child who is able to navigate the world from a space of strength and dignity. This is a result of various inadequate mechanisms within schools, including, but not limited to, an exclusionary curriculum, a discriminative school environment, and ineffective pedagogical practices. Consequently, the Adivasi child develops a sense of self coloured by insecurities and inferiority. We demonstrate that the tribal communities in the area of study have a well-grounded and nuanced understanding of their predicament. This is particularly evident in their concerns regarding the mainstream education system contributing towards the loss of Adivasi culture. Mainstream schools promote individualism and competition that stand in direct opposition to Adivasi values of solidarity and cooperation. Education seems to be taking children away from their community rather than bringing them closer to it. This has long-term implications on the shared identity of the communities, as it leads to weakened leadership and participation within the villages.

We have also shown that the communities have a clear agenda for change arising from their own experiences. The foundations for this agenda is set by the community's understanding of the purpose of Adivasi education, which foregrounds the need for education to enable their children to navigate their home worlds and the modern world with knowledge, dignity, and character, and to lead contented lives. We identify schools as well as the villages as key sites of learning; operating in tandem, they meet the need for a culturally relevant education for Adivasi children. Some of the important elements in this vision for schooling include the establishment of a contextually appropriate curriculum, compassionate teachers who are well aware of the context of Adivasi children, and assessment practices that contribute to learning. We establish the need to reclaim the village as a site of learning by creating channels of learning in both academic and traditional Adivasi knowledge forms, thereby strengthening relationships across various generations and building leadership within the Adivasi youth. Thus, schools and villages act in a complementary manner to create a meaningful educational experience for the Adivasi child.

So far, education has been a site of injustice and widening inequalities for the Adivasi communities. However, acknowledging the historical injustices committed against the Adivasi communities and starting anew by opening up larger power structures for deep listening and ceding agency to the communities themselves, allows for a future filled with hope, equality, and justice.

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APPENDIX A: NOTE ON DATA COLLECTION

As we indicated in the methodology section of the report, the data collection for this study occurred in three phases. Here we provide further details about the group involved in each phase and the questions we posed in the conversations with them.

Phase 1: Discussions at the Area

The study spanned the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris. For administrative purposes, the AMS divided the two taluks into eight areas to facilitate focused work and increased coverage. The AMS ecosystem primarily consists of three community-driven sister organisations – ACCORD, VBVT, and Association for Health and Welfare in the Nilgiris (ASHWINI) – working in the areas of community mobilisation and livelihood, education, and health respectively. Each of these organisations has representatives at the area level. The community members working in these eight areas with ACCORD are referred to as “animators”, those working with VBVT are called “education coordinators”, and those working with ASHWINI are called “health animators”. These community members, trained in their respective fields by their organisations, have years of experience working closely with the community at the village level. Together, they constitute the area team. They facilitated our access to the villages and the community members.

The initial discussions regarding the research occurred with the area teams, where we presented the research questions and took into consideration their views on how we can take them to the community in a meaningful manner. We did not record these informal meetings but the field notes from these meetings are one of the data sources that informed the design of the focus group discussion (FGD) and our analysis.

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs were conducted by one facilitator and one note-taker. Additionally, other research team members were present for some of the FGDs to assist with translation and the coordination of other operational aspects. We provide further details about the participant groups across the 17 FGDs in Table 5.

This table enumerates the focus groups from which we collected material. Groups 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 17 are from members of the community; they do not have a long-standing and immersive relationship with the AMS ecosystem.

Table 5: Participant Groups and Facilitators of FGDs

Group	Composition	Facilitator(s)
FGD01	Facilitator trainees	Rahul
FGD02	Vidyodaya teachers	Ramdas
FGD03	Vidyodaya alumni	Chinmayi
FGD04	Pandalur health animators	Ramdas
FGD05	Gudalur health animators	Rama
FGD06	Education team (education coordinators, administrators)	Chinmayi
FGD07	Hospital staff	Ramdas
FGD08	Accord animators – group 1	Ramdas
FGD09	Young education volunteers	Rama
FGD10	Accord animators – group 2	Ramdas
FGD11	One-all and communication team	Rahul
FGD12	Ponnani area	Gangadharan
FGD13	Teachers from the SSA school	Chinmayi
FGD14	Sri Madurai area	Suganya
FGD15	Nursing students – second year	Suganya
FGD16	Nursing students – first year	Ramdas
FGD17	Erumad area	Chinmayi, Suganya, Gangadharan, Karalan

We presented FGDs 15 and 9 with a scenario to stimulate the discussion. We gave the rest were a structured list of questions. They are as follows:

- (The meeting starts with all the participants having to imagine a scene in the village in the evening. The facilitator describes the scene as others listen with closed eyes. They are instructed that the scene will end with a question; the answers will be shared in the group discussion.)

The scenario:

You are getting ready to take your evening class in your village. You come out of your house and notice that all the children are running here and there on their return from school. They all seem extremely happy. They come to you and tell you to come with them and start the class as fast as possible. You wonder why they are so keen on you starting class so early, as this has never been the case so far. You hesitate, thinking that they might have something special in store for you. Then they go back to their homes. On the way from your home to the learning centre, you notice some children playing together with a ball. Some other children are working on the kitchen gardens around their homes, digging and watering. A few children are helping their parents with daily chores in the house, like washing clothes and vessels or carrying water. Some others are listening to their grandmothers telling them stories and songs. Noticing all this, you wonder why today feels so different. There is a newness in the air and children are doing things that you haven't noticed before. You reach your centre. As you open the door to your centre, a few of the children drop what they were doing and come to help you set up class – they spread the mats and organise the books. Soon all the children come to the centre. So you ask them the obvious questions: "What's happened to all of you today? You seem very eager to come to class today. Did anything happen in school?" You try to prod them for answers by prompting them: "Did they send you home early today or announce a holiday?" No, they say. "Did they give you some sweets?" Again the answer: no. Then, one by one, they start giving you answers. But what could those answers be? This is something you have to think about for a minute or so – what is it that made the children so happy that they were in school?

A minute's gap and then the facilitator asks – what do you think could have made the children so unusually happy? What do you think could make a child so happy in school?

The structured questions for the other groups are as follows:

- To start with, each of us have different opinions on what constitutes a good life, don't we? What do Adivasi children need to have a good life?
- Think about the society we want to create, and think about the kind of education that will help us reach that state. What makes up this education? What must they children learn?
- Are our children facing problems or difficulties in school because they are from an Adivasi community?
- Let us forget about the current school system. If the government gave you full power to create an education system, what kind of system would you create?
- Do you think culture is important for the upcoming generations? Do you think schools should give importance to it?

Phase 3: Workshops

We held two workshops with a subset of participants from the FGDs. We selected these participants on the basis of their age, tribe, gender, and availability, so that the groups were diverse. The first workshop had participants from the older generation ranging from 40 to 70 years of age, many of whom were leaders and activists during the land rights movement. The second workshop had younger participants ranging from 19 to 39 years of age. We conducted the workshops over the course of one and a half days, and designed them on the basis of the insights that emerged from the FGDs. The details of the workshop structures are as follows:

Table 6: Detailed plan of Workshop 1
Workshop 1

Session	Brief description
Presentation of summary	We presented a summary of the insights from the FGDs to refresh their memories of the discussion and gave them time to share their thoughts, suggestions, and questions.
Culture	Aim: To develop a deeper understanding of the notion of Adivasi culture, the space that it currently occupies, and the space that it needs in the education system. Entry point: How does the current education system challenge Adivasi culture?
Video screening and discussion	We screened a video on a community-run alternate school for indigenous children in the Philippines in order to push the participants' imagination on the possibilities for an Adivasi school. We held a discussion afterwards to share their takeaways from the video. Link to the video: Tugdaan - AN INDIGENOUS SECONDARY SCHOOL
Purpose of education	Aim: To understand the participants' notions of the purpose of education.
Group discussion	We divided the participants into four groups according to their tribe identities and asked them to fill out a table. It had rows mentioning various themes/areas that came out of the discussion about the purpose of education, such as leadership, values, relationship with the forest and columns asking what the responsibility of the school and village would be in relation to each theme. We present these tables in chapter 5 of the report.

Table 6: Detailed plan of Workshop 2
Workshop 2

Session	Details
Presentation of summary	We presented a summary of the insights from the FGDs to refresh their memories of the discussion and gave them time to share their thoughts, suggestions, and questions.
Experiences of education	Aim: To understand the participants' experiences of the education system and how it has influenced their lives. Entry point: Everyone has dreams for themselves and their communities. Think about your own experience with education and about your dream for yourself and your society. How has education enabled it? Or has education not enabled these dreams for you and your society?
Group discussion 1	We divided the participants into groups and gave them a set of questions to discuss within their groups. The session concluded with the groups sharing the highlights of their discussion with each other. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who is a leader? How can education build leadership in the community? 2. What will help children learn without fear? 3. What aspects of your Adivasi identity do you want to keep and what are the aspects you want to leave behind?
Video screening	We screened two videos that presented the idea of an alternate school and discussed their thoughts on them. Links to the two videos: Tugdaan - AN INDIGENOUS SECONDARY SCHOOL The Man Challenging India's Caste System
Purpose of education	Aim: To understand the participants' notions of the purpose of education.
Group discussion 2	We divided the participants into four groups according to their tribe identities and asked them to fill out a table. It had rows mentioning various themes/areas that came out of the discussion about the purpose of education, such as leadership, values, relationship with the forest and columns asking what the responsibility of the school and village would be in relation to each theme. We present these tables in chapter 5 of the report.
Responsibility	Entry point: Whose responsibility do you think it is to bring this vision into reality? Do you think that you have a share in it?

APPENDIX B: CODING AND ANALYSIS

We coded the transcripts with a combination of inductive and deductive coding methods and analysed them through thematic analysis. We derived the root themes from the research questions and identified the corresponding themes, categories, and subcategories through inductive coding. We made the final grouping with reference to the literature review. The principal investigator carried out most of the coding and analysis. In order to establish the robustness of methods, we carried out a validity check by having an external, independent researcher code a sample of the transcripts and cross-check it against the final coding scheme. We used Dedoose software for the coding (Sociocultural Research, 2023). The final coding scheme is as follows:

Table 7: Codebook

Id	Parent Id	Depth	Title	Description
1		0	Alternate vision	What alternate educational practices can bring about substantial changes in the direction of greater equality for the Adivasi communities?
2	1	1	Assessment	
3	1	1	Community ownership	Excerpts where the community has expressed the need for institutions and spaces owned and run by the community
4	3	2	Adivasi hostel	
5	3	2	Adivasi school	
6	3	2	Initiative	Other areas where the participants felt that the community has to take initiative
7	3	2	Other community-owned institutions	
8	3	2	Reference to Vidyodaya	
9	3	2	Teacher training	
10	3	2	Village learning centres	

11	1	1	Composition of school	
12	11	2	Student composition	
13	11	2	Teacher composition	
14	11	2	Teacher qualifications	
15	1	1	Curriculum	
16	15	2	Co-curricular activities	
17	15	2	Cultural activities	
18	15	2	Cultural knowledge	
19	15	2	Foundational learning	
20	15	2	Language	
21	15	2	Learning about life	Learning knowledge and skills that are useful in navigating the world – for example, financial literacy, how to get an Aadhar card
22	15	2	Textbooks and academic syllabus	
23	15	2	Vocational training	
24	1	1	Ethos	The attitudes that colour the school culture
25	24	2	Attitude towards learning	How must the school approach learning spaces and processes?
26	24	2	Easing transitions	Practices that will help the child adjust better when they will have to interact more with the outside world – for instance, when they have to go to school for the first time after having been at home; when they have to go to another school after having been in Vidyodaya

27	24	2	Guiding values and beliefs	What virtues does the school value and what guides the practice of the teachers?
28	24	2	Student dispositions	How should students be in this space? What behaviours should be encouraged?
29	28	3	Building leaders	
30	24	2	Teacher dispositions	How should teachers conduct themselves?
31	24	2	Valuing the Adivasi identity	
32	1	1	Pedagogical practices	
33	32	2	Activity-based learning	
34	32	2	Enquiry-based	
35	32	2	Experiential learning	
36	32	2	Grouping	
37	32	2	Ways of presenting information	
38	1	1	Surrounding ecosystem	Various other supportive factors that will complement the school
39	38	2	Geography of the school	Where should the school be located? What else should be nearby?
40	38	2	Infrastructure	
41	38	2	Others learning about Adivasis	
42	38	2	Parents and community	
43	42	3	Building awareness	
44	42	3	Learning in the village	How can learning be facilitated in the village?

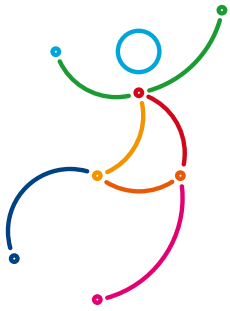
45	42	3	Role of parents	What do the participants envision as the role of the parents in this alternate space?
46	38	2	Working with the government	
47		0	Current scenario	
48	47	1	Comparison to other systems	The participant makes sense of the current system by comparing it to others – for example, they mention how the Kerala government has better provisions for Adivasis than the Tamil Nadu government
49	47	1	Culture	
50	49	2	Adivasi knowledge not valued	
51	49	2	Conflicting values	
52	49	2	Erasing Adivasi identity	
53	49	2	Losing Adivasi culture	
54	47	1	Education system	How do the Adivasi communities perceive and experience the current education system?
55	54	2	Adverse outcomes	What are some adverse outcomes that arise out of the shortcomings of the current education system?
56	55	3	Accessibility issues	
57	55	3	Discontinuing education	
58	55	3	Fear and insecurities	How does the current education system and society make children feel?
59	55	3	Learning gaps/deficits	
60	55	3	Low attendance	

61	55	3	Poor quality of schools	
62	54	2	Curricular factors	
63	62	3	Academic pressures	
64	62	3	Language as a barrier	
65	54	2	Ethos of the school	
66	65	3	Attitude towards learning	
67	65	3	Discrimination	
68	65	3	School atmosphere	
69	54	2	Pedagogical factors	
70	69	3	Pedagogy and assessment	What are some pedagogical and assessment practices in the current education system that do not enable Adivasi children to participate better in their education?
71	54	2	Transitions between schools	
72	47	1	Good aspects	
73	47	1	Problems and consequences	
74	47	1	Socio-political context	What are other structural and systemic factors that affect the experiences of education in the Adivasi communities?
75	74	2	"Backwardness"	Mentions of how the community is "backward" or made to seem so
76	74	2	Documentation	Mentions of government documents, such as Aadhar and community certificates, the difficulties in procuring them, and how this hinders access to certain provisions
77	74	2	Employment opportunities	

78	74	2	Intersectionality	
79	74	2	Lack of awareness	
80	74	2	Lack of government support	
81	74	2	Livelihoods	
82	74	2	Technology	
83	47	1	Support systems	What are the support systems that enable an Adivasi student to navigate the education system better?
84	83	2	Organisations	
85	83	2	Parents and community	
86	83	2	Self-driven	
87	83	2	Supportive teachers	
88	47	1	Village	What happens in the village, among parents and the community, that influences the experiences of the Adivasi communities in the current education system?
89	88	2	Alcoholism	
90	88	2	Home environment	
91	88	2	Parental participation	
92	88	2	Relationships and marriage	
93		0	Health	
94		0	Narratives	Anecdotes, stories, examples
95	94	1	Experiences	People sharing their own experiences or the experiences of someone really close to them that they were a part of

96	94	1	Observations	People's observations of people around them; these may or may not be directly connected to them
97	94	1	Questions	
98		0	Notions	People's ideas regarding certain ideas
99	98	1	A good life	What is a good life in their view?
100	98	1	Culture	
101	98	1	Development	
102	98	1	Education	
103	98	1	Generational change	Perceptions of one generation about another
104		0	Purpose of Education	What should education do for our children? What knowledge, skills, and attitudes should it build in them?
105	104	1	Accessing opportunities	
106	104	1	Acquiring knowledge	
107	106	2	Learning about others	Learn things that will help them navigate the world outside better
108	106	2	Learning about ourselves	Education to learn about Adivasi history, culture, and other aspects of their community and its ways of life
109	104	1	Adapting in a changing world	Education should prepare students to adapt according to their circumstances and utilise the opportunities that come their way.

110	104	1	Autonomy	The ability to think for themselves and make informed decisions; they must be independent and capable of utilising opportunities and navigating a complex world.
111	104	1	Build character	Inculcate skills and attitudes that will help them grow as a good person.
112	104	1	Changing perceptions	Education as a way of changing how other people perceive Adivasis, as a way of demanding respect, and exercising dignity in society
113	104	1	Economic participation	Education should enable the student to participate in the workforce and make a living.
114	113	2	Dignity	The demand for economic participation driven by the need to enable Adivasi children to lead dignified lives
115	113	2	Managing money better	Education for economic participation should also lend itself towards building financial literacy in the child.
116	113	2	Wages	Economic participation is important because it helps the child earn wages.
117	104	1	Preserving Adivasi identity	
118	104	1	Serve society	Help their community and larger society be a better place.
119	104	1	Thinking and planning ahead	



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