

## Adivasis and Schooling: A Critical Reflection on Perspectives

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### *Abstract*

This paper is an attempt to reflect on the ways in which the ideas like ‘adivasi’ and ‘education’ have been conceived in the Indian context and its implication on the policies and programmes related to the social transformation of the adivasi communities including schooling. A critical reflection on the existing literature on these two themes in relation to the life context of adivasi communities is attempted in this paper. Inputs from the interventions in schooling, especially from the state of Kerala, have been used to demonstrate the arguments. This article explores the contours of possible future course of action especially in the context of a democratic education in a multicultural society.

*Key words: Adivasi, Colonial Positivism, Critical Modernity, Rational Liberal Model, Schooling*

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### **Introduction**

The *adivasi* question is not new to us. Academicians, policy planners, civil society organisations and state agencies have been deliberating on this theme ever since the colonial period and there have been divergent views since then. The debates continued even after Independence. However, the state adopted a policy of ‘integration’ as a desirable form of social change for the adivasi communities. The idea of integration was derived from the ‘Panchasheel Principles’ proposed by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru himself. This means that the state neither wanted to isolate adivasis from the rest of the communities nor wanted to assimilate them. Integration was adopted as a middle path. This rejected the bipolar extremes like isolation or assimilation in the context of adivasi social change. Moreover, this position assured that adivasis will be allowed to develop according to their own genius. Many of the administrative measures for tribal development especially from the Fifth five-year plan were influenced by the Panchasheel Principles. Even before the Panchasheel Principles were proposed,

Indian Constitution granted special provisions for more autonomy and rights to the Scheduled Areas<sup>i</sup> where privileged access was granted to the tribal people through reservation in educational and employment institutions. This special thrust was the result of two reasons: first, the distinctive and somewhat autonomous social, cultural and economic structure maintained by these communities despite relationship with the outside society; second, the deprived social conditions of these communities owing to a variety of historical injustice suffered by them at various points of history.

However, seven decades of our experience as an independent nation shows that many of these measures that we had were largely inadequate (if not a failure), not only in doing away with the inequality but also in preventing these communities from further deterioration. One can identify many reasons as to why positive discrimination and other protective measures failed to deliver the expected results. An important point that emerged from an enquiry hits at its very design, the manner in which it was primarily conceptualised and executed *by* the state *for* the communities.

In such a top down model, the conceptualisation of programmes and its execution was influenced by the way the state and its machinery understood who the adivasis are and what is desired for them. The developmental question of the adivasis was often posed in comparison to the ambient society. A yardstick of this sort automatically resulted in a deficit model in understanding inequality and the focus was to fill this deficit by bringing them into the standards of the ambient population. With such an orientation, measures to undo the historical inequality suffered by these communities or to develop the independent agency of the adivasis to deal with the larger social changes happening around them were never given priority. The focus was inexplicably centered around ‘developing’ them at par with the regional reference group.

Education is the foremost example of this failure. In education, integration was just understood in terms of access without a concrete plan to enrich the social, cultural and life skills brought in by the students of adivasi communities (or communities from the under privileged section for that matter). The ideals of education were shaped earlier by the nationalist state and of late by the liberal capitalist imaginations of the society. An inherent contradiction of such conceptualisation is that students from adivasi communities were looked down upon in these institutions. Their different cultural background and skills were

considered as a symbol of primitivism, underdevelopment and an obstruction to the 'modern'. Later, even when such education projects met with crisis, ironically most of the assessment studies in tribal education and development blamed the victim. The central understanding of these studies was framed around the question of 'why adivasis failed in attaining' specific goals. It was a question asked from the point of state and put the onus of failure on the subject.

On the political front, autonomy to decide on their affairs was very limited and availed only by a few. Most of these communities became estranged islands among regional linguistic societies in Post-Independent India, except in Northeastern regions (which account for only 13 percent of adivasis in India). This posed a challenge in protecting their rights and resources. In Northeastern communities, where considerable political autonomy was granted through 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule, they attempted to negotiate with the larger social changes in multiple ways. For example some of them adopted English as their official language. Roman scripts were employed to represent their languages including publishing of newspapers and books in those languages. However, Northeast witnessed violent ethnic conflicts, not just between tribals and non-tribals but among various tribal groups themselves. This means a broad identification of a collective identity as 'adivasis', beyond the specific group identities as in peninsular India, is limited at least in the Northeastern context. In its economy, the educated Northeasterners are finding scarce opportunities to accommodate them. An alternate economy which is rooted in the traditional philosophy of Northeastern communities or their social ecology is yet to evolve and shows no sign of one such full-fledged alternative in near future.

The current discourse of development is inclined towards intensifying the capitalist projects to resolve the issue. The experience of Jharkhand also gives similar signs. Despite having many chief ministers and a considerable number of legislative members from adivasi communities, the policies and programmes are adopted along a capitalist line, resulting in the displacement of large masses of adivasis from their own land in the name of development. The multinational capitalists indiscriminately invaded into the resource rich regions inhabited by the adivasi communities, and in the last twenty years in some states adivasis constituted around 40 percent among those who were displaced for various development projects (Government of India, 2002). This indicates the vulnerability of these communities and the need to uphold their political, social, economic and cultural life.

Therefore, it is evident that mere political autonomy is not enough to offer an alternative. To take the example of Kerala, one of the leading states in the development indices in the country, adivasi communities constitutes only 1.5 percent of the total population of the state. When compared to their counterparts especially from central Indian states, adivasis in Kerala fared better in many of the human development index parameters including access to school and literacy (Government of India, 2019). But their marginalisation, deprived social and economic conditions and vulnerability to exploitation continue even today. The dispossession of land of adivasis in Kerala is not associated with the present phase of neoliberalism. It is the result of colonial forest policies in the first place and peasant migration from plains to their tracts that put them in a disadvantageous position. Though Kerala has addressed the question of land to some extent, issues of adivasi's right over land and forest remain unresolved. This has accentuated over a period of time and systematically eroded their livelihood base with a lasting impact on their health, social organisation and their very existence itself. On the educational front, with the large network of schools along with many other supporting mechanisms, majority of them have got a 'potential opportunity' to access school. However, these communities are yet to make a meaningful gain out of schooling due to variety of reasons. Officially school dropout rate of adivasis is measured as 3-4 percent in Kerala. However, many field studies have raised question about this claim and some pointed out 20-22 percent of drop out/non-attendance among adivasi communities at primary and secondary levels combined (Rights Report, 2011). Besides this, in districts like Wayanad where 18.5 percent of the total population is adivasi, their participation in higher education is less than 2 percent. This happens despite the fact that many of the seats reserved for adivasis are left vacant in higher educational institutions. The serious mismatch between those who are coming out of the schools and those who are going for higher education or employment along with a considerably higher rate of drop out/absenteeism is indicative of a much deeper problem which demands a critical inquiry.

With the experience so far, in any further inquiry the questions that are posed needs to be qualitatively different from what have been asked so far. So, the focus of this paper is on the system and why it has failed to address the needs of the adivasis. In such an attempt the first point that struck my mind is the complex and divergent ideas existing among the functionaries and people at large about who is an adivasi and what kind of social change for them is desirable. With such complexity, what has been done so far for the 'best interest of adivasis' is often

done from the outsider's perceptions about the adivasi communities without bothering what these communities think about it. Thus, it is important to reflect on the 'basic assumptions' at work. Keeping this in mind, this paper tries to engage with some of the following questions especially in the context of the education of adivasis, such as: who is an adivasi?; what kind of education should be envisaged in the context of the adivasis?; what will be the implication of such an education on the adivasi communities?

### **'Tribe' or 'Adivasi'?**

Usually we use the words tribe and adivasi interchangeably to represent the communities that are identified based on a set of criteria and listed under the 'Scheduled Tribe' category by the Indian Constitution. There are many other usages like *vanjati*, *girijan*, *janajati* with ontological reference to the communities categorised under the term tribe. However, from the time of Independence, official usage is categorised as 'Scheduled Tribe' for those tribal communities listed under article 342 of the Constitution. On the other hand, the activist groups and communities especially in the 5<sup>th</sup> schedule areas identify themselves as adivasis<sup>ii</sup>. In the following section, I have briefly discussed some of the political, administrative and developmental significance of these usages. I am aware that these usages are highly contested among social scientists for empirical validity and coherence. However, by posing these usages in this way, I think it will certainly help us to address certain practical issues.

The idea of tribe, at least in the Indian context, was constructed by the British for their own administrative and political interests. Colonial Anthropology which is basically premised on the racial theories of 19<sup>th</sup> century was effectively used for this purpose. The earlier initiatives in this direction were taken by the British administrators themselves. For example, in 1901 as per the decision of Government of India, the then civil service officers Herbert Risley (1892) and Edgar Thurston (1909) carried out surveys in Bengal and Madras presidencies. The images of adivasis in these surveys were portrayed as primitive and uncivilised. Besides these official attempts, there were other studies that produced images about these communities with different interests. Bhangya Bhukya (2008) classified these early anthropological attempts into three categories: first, 'missionary anthropology' that emphasised on the 'primitiveness' of adivasi life and considered missionary activities as an important means in their civilising mission; second, 'romantic anthropology' that emphasised on the 'simplicity',

‘relative autonomy’ and ‘closeness to the nature’ as the way of life of these communities and wanted them to be protected from any external intervention; and the third, ‘Hindu nationalist anthropology’ that considered adivasi communities as backward Hindus, and wanted them to get assimilated in the Hindu society through the process of sanskritisation<sup>iii</sup>.

Later, Lokur committee (Government of India, 1965) who worked out the criteria for identifying a community to be declared as Scheduled Tribe in Post-Independent India was largely influenced by the imageries created by these studies. The criteria proposed by the committee were, i) Tribal origin, ii) Primitive way of life, iii) Remote habitation or geographical isolation, iv) Shyness of contact with other groups or communities, v) general backwardness in all respects. To identify tribal origin, traits like physical features, simple technology and living, tribal language and practice of animism were used. However, these criteria were not uniformly applied across the country (there were practical limitations for applying it in the strict sense). These criteria which are still in official use were created primarily out of the colonial-racial ideals and have deep rooted impact on the design of programmes and policies for the adivasis. In this perception, the adivasis were often understood in relation to the other communities, but never considered on their own right.

On the other hand, the usage of the term adivasi is rooted on a different set of assumptions about the communities in reference. The word adivasi originated from the region that belongs to the present state of Jharkhand and today is widely used as a functional equivalent to the word ‘indigenous people’ which is used by international bodies. However, this is also contested for academic and administrative reasons. Indigeneity is used to refer to those communities and state of affairs prior to the European colonisation. This may be true for countries like Australia or North America. But in Asian countries like India such a reference point is not possible as this may include many other communities including ‘Brahmins’ or ‘Syrian Christians’.

However, certain broad indicators are available for consideration as Benedict Kingsbury (2012) suggests. There are at least three sets of indications with different degree of emphasis to them: the first, ‘essential requirements’ that is constituted by the factors like ‘self-identification as a distinct group’, ‘historical experience of, contingent vulnerability to, severe disruption, dislocation or exploitation’, ‘long connection with the region’ and the ‘wish to retain distinct

identity'; the second, 'strong indicia' that is constituted by 'non dominance in the national or regional society', 'close cultural affinity with a particular area of land or territories' and 'historical continuity with the prior occupants of land in the region'; the third, 'other relevant indicia' which is constituted by 'socio-economic and socio-cultural differences from the ambient population', 'distinctive objective characteristics such as language, race, material or spiritual culture' and are regarded as 'indigenous by the ambient population or treated as such in legal and administrative arrangements'.

I am not suggesting that these are ideal set or non-problematic to be implemented, but for us what is important is the shift in 'basic assumptions' that constituted these criteria. Some of the notable features in these considerations are: i) it considers adivasis as communities on their own right, ii) understands their features in terms of the specific social-ecology they are rooted in, iii) they were taken out of the stigma attributed on them by the colonial racial theories and offered them a dignified self in the society. These considerations are important in liberating these communities from the burden of stigmatised identity attributed on them by the mainstream discourses.

### **Education**

The aftermath of the 'tribal' conception in education is that, these communities were looked down upon by others, considered as primitive and under developed. Money was pumped in to bring them to the 'mainstream'. An appraisal of the developmental and educational programmes after Independence clearly shows that what was practiced in reality was assimilation which is a direct result of the way 'tribal' communities are perceived by the government and its machineries. This was close to an urge shown in other parts of the world like North America and Australia. In North America, the purpose of Indian American's education was considered to be a tool to kill the Indian in Indian American and to make them fully American. In Australia, the young aboriginals were taken to hostels in the cities to 'develop' them. Such aboriginal generations in Australia later came to be known as the 'stolen generation'. In a similar vein, in India, the adivasi students who were encouraged to attend classrooms met with severe estrangement with a system that urged to uproot them from their history, collective memory and every day experience. In other words, adivasi students found it difficult to survive in a relatively alienated system which considers their worldview irrelevant. So, the creation of a sense of inferiority in students was inherent in the design of our

educational system. Many studies have later pointed out that drop outs and absenteeism are in response to this estrangement in schools (Veerabhadranaika et al., 2012).

There may be different views on the nature and content of education, but everyone agrees on the need of education as a major tool of empowerment for any community or society. As it is widely recognised, there is nothing called an unbiased education. Every society imparts education with certain futuristic ideal in mind, i.e. an ideal which the society wants to achieve. It is this very ideal that makes the education project a field of power. It is important not just as a form of training, but also as a means to produce new knowledge. Colonialism used it in both ways during its reign over other societies. It used Anthropology to produce knowledge about other societies so that it could frame policies and programmes that will better facilitate their dominance. As Edward Said observed, 'Knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge' (Said, 1979, p. 36). At the level of training it also used its schools as an instrument to produce employees who are Indian in their blood and British in their thinking. Thus, the knowledge produced or the training imparted is not innocent but carries the political interest of those who are in power. The above discussion on the idea of 'tribe' clearly testifies this argument. In the following discussion, the focus is on the implication of the nature of education we envisage especially in a multicultural society like India.

Amita Sharma (2003) has traced the contemporary education models into two types of epistemologies. The first type is what she calls 'colonial positivism' which does not grant any room for human creativity and possibility of different interpretations. Such a knowledge building process makes some people subservient to those in power with the set of standards it creates. Under this system, equality is understood just in terms of access. In education it possesses a view that knowledge can be known equally by everyone, what we need to do is to create equal opportunities for everyone to get an education. A capitalist economy prefers this model as it cannot afford to tolerate an education which allows its takers to develop their own genius and imaginations or getting influenced by unpredictable results of numerous engagements of people from variety of social experience. Homogenisation of interests and straitjacketing of subjects to its pre-fixed models, based on the demands of market, is inevitable to capitalism. The second type she identifies as 'rational-liberal' and this considers knowledge as

something more than physical and the result of active and creative principles of human beings. In this position, education should be able to ‘facilitate the continuous development and expression of creativity’. This model enables human beings to discover their full potential and evolve a relationship with the world based on critical enquiry and empathy. In this approach, equality is not forcing everyone to be alike and accept what is given, but acknowledge the value of differences. It is an educational philosophy where students can only have a mere appreciation of differences and will not be able to change the system in which s/he is also a part of.

In plural societies like India, it is important to teach every member to critically appreciate one’s own experiences along with an exploration of differences of experiences out there in the society. Given the fact that the differences in society does not exist in isolation, education should also help these differences to co-exist, co-evolve and to negotiate with each other whilst keeping the respect for differences. Keeping such factors in mind, a brief reflection on some of the educational experiments in the context of Kerala has been presented in the following section.

### **Reflections on the Rational-Liberal model of Education in the context of Kerala**

Education in a society is the indicator of the political and economic aspirations of that society. Kerala, with its long history of left political presence and anti-capitalist struggles, has always been a brewing ground for experiments in Rational-Liberal Educational model. In Kerala, this has two strands. One is the initiatives by civil society and progressive individuals. Kanavu in Wayanad and Mithra Nikethan in Thiruvananthapuram are institutions in this line. Second came from the government itself, as an initiative of Left Democratic Front in Kerala. The critical pedagogical experiment was launched in the state in 1997 which was later widely known as DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) model and this has been further developed with the introduction of State Curriculum Framework in 2008. In the following section, I will briefly reflect upon the potential of these models in addressing the question of education to the adivasis.

In the first variety, Kanavu was established in 1993 in the Wayand district of Kerala by a writer-activist KJ Baby, and Mithra Nikethan was started by a community-educationist Viswanathan in 1956 in Thiruvananthapuram. These

institutions basically tried to address the incongruence of curriculum and pedagogy of mainstream schooling with the life and experience of communities, especially marginalised social groups like the adivasis. They carved out an alternate curriculum and pedagogic model that can ensure a meaningful life worldview and engagement for students. These institutions definitely offered an experience which was qualitatively different from those who attended mainstream schools.

However, two major apprehensions can be raised about these models. First is about the replicability of the models due to the following reasons: i) it envisions a completely different societal model to build, and ii) it demands ‘teacher-philosophers’ as a key component in its functioning. Second and the most crucial one is its exclusionary emphasis on particular social groups like the adivasis though they are residing in a close relation with non-advansi communities in everyday life. I do not consider the first set of factors as a disqualifying factor for being an ‘ideal model’. But certainly the exclusionary social character of the school population will not help to address the needs of a multi-cultural society as discussed earlier. If we are emphasising on the need for education of the adivasis as an isolated and separate project, we are merely talking about an education for ‘training of certain skills’ at the cost of education as a process of socialisation for ‘complete citizenship’. However, this is not a suggestion about having an education where the adivasi students and non-advansi students are put together just to teach adivasi students about the life and ways of ambient population. It is equally or more important to teach the ambient population about the adivasi communities and their life. It is for the same reason special schools like Asram schools run by the government with a state syllabus may not be able to go beyond the level of a ‘training institute’ in a co-existing multicultural society from a sociological point.

In the second model, the government aided schools, which draw students from all communities and background, managed to create an ideal situation where students can bring their personal experience and knowledge as a resource to the school. Though there is a pressure from the ‘English medium private school’ models, these government and government aided schools, with its own curriculum and pedagogy, encourage their students to have a critical appraisal of other communities’ experiences and differences. This has been further strengthened with the increased participation of the local community in the school management. There is no doubt that this has redrawn the contours of power in

schools. But how this ‘potential opportunity’ in Kerala has benefited the marginalised groups including adivasis is a matter of inquiry.

A year-long ethnographic fieldwork<sup>iv</sup> in one such government school in Kerala shows that the actual implementation of the curriculum and pedagogy in school is not upholding the spirit of rational-liberal philosophy of critical pedagogy. The new textbooks and other learning strategies provided ample opportunities for the adivasis to bring in their experiences and skills to the centre of the learning process. However, the perception among a large majority of teachers and students about the adivasis is determined by the colonial and racial imageries. Besides, the rat race for securing grades is re-surfacing in different manners due to continuing influence of the neo-liberal perception of education among a section of parents and teachers in school. They consider critical pedagogy as an impediment to achieve the neo-liberal aspirations which they wish to fulfill through education. There is a strong feeling and ‘innovation’ in schools to bring back ‘the good old days’ of ‘colonial-positivist’ model. As a result, text books with more ‘content orientation’ were brought back to Kerala schools with the support of United Democratic Front from 2014-15 academic year. If this trend continues, the re-launch of colonial-positivist model is not so distant. Such attempts will deepen inequality and marginalisation of communities, especially of the adivasis. The Left Democratic Front Government, which came in to power in 2016 in Kerala, tried a public participation model in pooling the resources for government and aided schools. More significantly the government also initiated developing school text books in the adivasi languages and appointed teachers from the adivasi communities, especially for the primary classes. Therefore the ideological disposition of the ruling government becomes so crucial in ensuring the continuity of education policies in the state of Kerala.

### **Conclusion**

Uni-directional and dogmatic considerations of progress and primitivism have been seriously revisited by many scholars in recent times for its regressive effect on the life of the people. Though some of them completely rejected the legitimacy of progress and modernity from cultural relativist positions, some of them took a prudent approach and suggested for a ‘critical modernity’ (Peet & Hartwick, 2010) as an improvised form of modernity that can accommodate democratic politics and plurality of discourses. The conception of the adivasi as proposed by Kingsbury (2012) is actually an attempt in this direction. It establishes their right

to get back the land and forest from which they were uprooted, to rebuild a life which is rooted in their social ecology<sup>v</sup>, to develop their course of life in relation with the world out there keeping their dignity of life. It repeals the racial imagery of ‘primitive’, or ‘uncivilised’ and establishes the fact that the backwardness they suffer is the product of centuries-long oppression they suffered under colonialism and its later incarnations including neo-liberal capitalism. A couple of state programmes of recent times like Forest Right Act (FRA) and Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) have imbibed this renewed understanding of the adivasi communities.

To further this trend, it is important to develop an independent agency of the adivasis to make their voice heard and to push their cases in the larger discourse of social change. This is nothing new because the adivasis had fought great battles with colonisers, they are fighting with the neo-liberal capitalists against occupying their land and resources, and they are also fighting with various other socially degenerating practices like abuse of alcohol, abusing their women and anything that degrade their dignity. The governance and popular perceptions have to be sensitised on this change of context. The political implication of such a conception may be that all oppressed classes will join their hands in fighting against larger forces of oppression like capitalism, but at the same time will also be aware of the nuanced difference in the forms of oppression and aspirations of different sections within the front. At the societal level, the co-existence of the adivasi communities with the ambient population and co-evolution within the society keeping the dignity and rights of their communitarian self needs to be given due space.

To come back to the questions with which we began, any programmes or policies on the adivasi communities should clarify the basic assumptions about these communities. These assumptions with an effect on the imagination of programmes and policies will have ramifications on the political, social, economic and cultural change of these communities. With the backdrop of the critical reflections on the experience of these communities in both colonial and post-colonial Indian society, there is a dire need for a shift from the ‘tribal’ imagery of these communities which is founded on the colonial and racial understandings. It should move ahead to an ‘adivasi’ imagery founded on more liberal and democratic ideals. This is suggested not just to root out the stigma created by the colonial depiction, but to redress the regressive actions it mooted in the policies and programmes for the adivasis. On the educational front, a rational-liberal

model of education would be a better alternative given our plural social context. In the context of development a comprehensive project that touches the economic, social and cultural aspects and stems from the adivasi worldview could be the vantage point for the mainstream development discourse.

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Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Under the 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution, in the areas with preponderance of Adivasi/tribal population, the President of India in consultation with the Governor of the concerned state declares an area as a Scheduled Area. This provision applies to states outside Northeast India. In the latter, the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule applies.

<sup>ii</sup> Certain groups do not use the term adivasi to refer themselves, for e.g., those who are in Northeast India, i.e. the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule Areas. However, it is proposed as a competent equivalent for 'indigenous people' in international forums. For details, see Uday Chandra (2014), Virginius Xaxa (1999).

<sup>iii</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Bhangya Bhukya (2008).

<sup>iv</sup> An ethnographic fieldwork was carried out from June, 2013 to March, 2014 in a government higher secondary school located in the Thirunelli Panchayat of Wayanad district in the state of Kerala. Along with the teaching and learning activities of the school, the school-community relationship was also studied in detail.

<sup>v</sup> For a detailed reading on this, see Ramachandra Guha (2003).

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