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For 30 Years, This Nilgiris Forest School Has Used Local Culture to Educate Adivasi Children

At Vidyodaya School in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris, Adivasi children from PVTG communities learn through forests, culture, and mother tongue-based teaching instead of rote textbooks. Run with strong community involvement, the school blends ecology, local food knowledge, arts, and traditions into the curriculum while supporting first-generation learners with free education and holistic care.

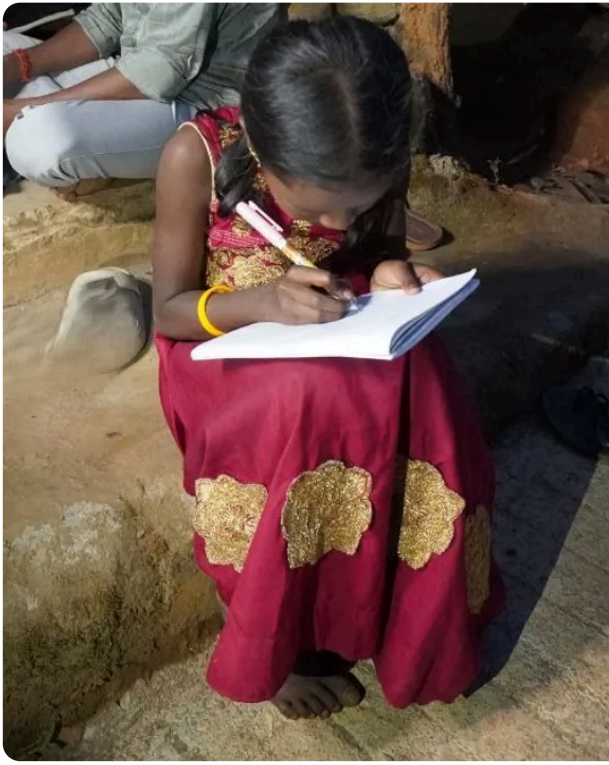


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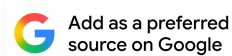
The Vidyodaya School is run by the Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust and focuses on providing children from Gudalur's Adivasi communities with a holistic education.



Every object in teacher Shanthi Kunjan's classroom has life. Branches and sticks serve as measuring scales; leaves from the forest teach children symmetry, and seeds assume the role of currency.

The Vidyodaya School, where she has been teaching for 25 years, falls in the Gudalur *taluk* of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district — home to the Betta Kurumba, Kattunayakan, Mulla Kurumba, and Paniya Adivasi communities recognised by the Government of India as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

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Integrating the forest into the children's curricula works well, the teacher shares, explaining, "These children come to school with a deep knowledge of the forest, its plants,

trees, animals, and rivers. We build on this understanding to connect school learning with their everyday experiences.”

And this ecological thread runs through the different subjects.

Lessons on culture are modelled around Adivasi festivals; in the arts and craft period, children channel their creativity into making baskets, chains, and wire bags using coconut shells, beads, and bamboo. Environmental studies is taught using *The Food Book*, which documents the food culture of the Adivasis of the Gudalur valley – including hunting, honey collection, and the nutritional and medicinal value of local tubers, greens, fruits, and berries.



Teacher Shanthi explaining Adivasi medicinal practices; here she is describing how tree resin is extracted and used to make a cast for

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Even the school's morning assemblies are unique: science videos on Mondays, storytelling on Tuesdays, Adivasi songs on Wednesdays, 'show and tell' and science experiments on Thursdays, and Adivasi dances on Fridays.

Culture is the fulcrum around which every activity revolves. And the 125 students studying at Vidyodaya School are thrilled with this. The state board-affiliated school has grades ranging from LKG (lower kindergarten) and UKG (upper kindergarten) to Class 5.

'Don't force-fit children into academic frameworks.'

What is now Vidyodaya — a launch pad from which the dreams of Gudalur's children take flight — started out as a passion project of a couple, Ramdas Bhaskaran and Rama Sastry.

In 1975, Ramdas began advocating for communities in Chennai. These included fisherfolk fighting against large trawlers along the coast, people who were still living in the shadow of the caste hierarchy, and women's groups fighting for equal rights.

"In 1980, Rama and I moved to Puducherry to support a young couple who had started a school for children of fisherfolk and leprosy patients. The children from both

these communities were not at all inclined to attend school. So, we started devising activities to involve the children in the learning programmes. This was the first attempt at what is now called activity-based learning,” Ramdas shares.

He adds that in its nascent stages, this formed one of the country’s first ‘alternate schools’. “You see, the curriculum was reorganised to suit the children, and not the other way around.”



At the Vidyodaya School, students learn different concepts through hands-on activities.

Driven by the success of this model, the couple moved to Ramdas’ hometown, Gudalur, in 1990. Starting Vidyodaya wasn’t planned. It started as a homeschooling initiative for their own children. Eventually, their brood expanded to include children from Gudalur’s communities, who loved this new school.

The genius lay in the couple’s unique teaching methodologies. So much so, in 1995, a *mahasabha* (large gathering) of 200 Adivasi elders — organised by ACCORD (Action for Community Organisation Rehabilitation and Development), a Gudalur-based NGO supporting Adivasi communities — pitched the idea of taking charge of the learning centre.

“They wanted a space where they could pass on their knowledge and traditions to the next generations. They asked whether the Vidyodaya School, which we wanted to wind up (after our children had graduated out of school), could be handed over to the Adivasi community,” Ramdas shares.

The following year, in 1996, the Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) (founded by the couple, Ramdas Bhaskaran and Rama Sastry) decided to convert the school into an Adivasi school and took the first batch of children, 36 in total.

Where caste isn't a bar for big dreams

At midday, if you peek into the children's lunch boxes, you'll find *ragi* (finger millet) porridge, eggs, and sprouts. The mix underlines the school's commitment to tackling malnutrition, which, according to a UNICEF report, is the reason for 40 percent of under-five tribal children in India being stunted, and 16 percent of them being severely stunted.

This could also be a factor that contributes to meagre participation in private schooling, which, according to a report, is lowest among children belonging to Scheduled Tribes, standing at 12.7 percent.

While this is unfortunate, it isn't unusual.



In cases where the teacher is simplifying a tough concept, often it is done in the child's mother tongue.

In a society where academic conversations are dominated by the privileged, PVTGs are alienated. And this is where teacher Shanthi says, the Vidyodaya School is different. "The caste system has long shaped access to learning and opportunity. For us at Vidyodaya, education is about reclaiming a voice for our communities."

The staff and children belong to the community. "Many of our children are first or second-generation learners, so when one child receives an education, it gradually uplifts their entire family and, over time, their whole village and community," the teacher adds.

She underscores Vidyodaya's story as an example of a village coming together to send a child to school. "It's a community effort. Most of our trustees are community members. Parents participate in work camps, where they help the school with campus cleaning, cooking, and gardening. They also come to school on special occasions like Adivasi Day (the tribes of Gudalur celebrate it on 5 December), to teach children and teachers dance and songs."

Where once educational equity was tucked away in the drawers of development, Vidyodaya is helping it reemerge through models that support free

transportation and stationery expenses. No fees are taken from the students; the school runs on donations by community members, foundations, and CSR (corporate social responsibility) funds. The average cost per child per year amounts to Rs 60,000.

If you'd like to sponsor a child, you can approach the school [here](#).



Games are an integral part of the curriculum to help the child understand concepts.

Nothing is conventional here.

“Instead of relying on a single fixed textbook, we carefully select content from multiple textbooks and reference books. So, children only need to carry notebooks, keeping their school bags light,” teacher Kamalachi explains.

The 1:10 teacher-to-student ratio allows for individualised attention. “Nor do we rank students on exam scores,” Kamalachi adds. Instead, the child maintains a portfolio where they keep a track of their work, improvement over time being the primary metric of success.

The staff team shares that over 500 tribal students have graduated from the school.

Teaching children using vocabulary that they recognise

An assessment conducted across four lakh first-grade students and 30,000 teachers across government schools revealed that three-fourths of students and nearly half the teachers reported minimal or functional understanding of the medium of instruction. The mapping was conducted by UNICEF in partnership with the Language and Learning Foundation in Chhattisgarh. This beckons attention towards the importance of teaching a child in their mother tongue in their formative years.

As Ramdas shares, at Vidyodaya, they were able to overcome the language barrier by hiring teachers from the community who conversed in the child's native tongue. "In cases where the teacher did not know the child's language, they would take the trouble to learn at least one of their languages," Ramdas shares.



Stories from the Paniya community are translated into English with illustrations by the students.

While Vidyodaya is an English medium school, with English and Tamil being the medium of instruction, the teachers' knowledge of the community languages helps them converse with the child when the latter does not understand a certain concept.

Another challenge was the subject expertise. “No one from these communities had been to college. To even get them to enrol in a university was really difficult, as many of them believed that they were not capable of such studies,” Ramdas shares, following this up with how they found a solution. “Once we were able to convince them that they had responsible roles, they started to take more ownership.” Eventually, through training, their subject matter expertise improved.

Currently, there are six senior teachers and eight assistant teachers part of the school staff. They receive a salary of Rs 15,000 per month.

The other ways children are eased into education are by encouraging lessons from elders of the community. “They are asked to make presentations about their lives. When parents, community members, and elders are present in the school to observe or teach about their cultural forms, it helps boost the self-image of the child,” Ramdas remarks on their observations.



The curriculum is centred around helping children become more aware of their culture.

Sijithra (20) grew up in the Paniya tribe, the youngest of three siblings, both of whom dropped out of school. She is on her way to becoming a nurse.

She credits her love for learning to her educators, Karalan and Prasath at the Kootat Learning Center, one of the many that the Trust operates. With scholarship support from Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) – the trust under which Vidyodaya School falls – she passed Classes 10 and 12 with flying colours.

There are numerous students like Sijithra – 3,500 across 320 villages in the Gudalur and Pandalur *taluks* – who are benefitting from the Community Education Programme, a village-owned education model where children are supported through learning centres, camps, scholarships, care counselling, and mentoring.

As Karalan explains, “The sessions take place at the village during evenings and on weekends. We conduct spoken English classes for all children. We have a math subject support system for those who find the subject tough.”

The goal, through these centres and the many arms of VBVT, is to raise children who take pride in their Adivasi identity while being recognised and valued for their skills and talents.



Through the learning centres, children are helped to study, evolve and pursue their dreams.

It's a routine weekday morning, and teacher Shanthi's class is brimming with enthusiasm. The topic of the day is

geometric patterns, and the children are setting out on a nature walk to learn about this.

Their teacher watches on proudly as the students can now not only decipher geometry, but also the names of leaves of trees that the community reveres.

“Being part of this school has allowed me to witness, firsthand, the steady progress of my own people. Seeing the first batch of students complete their schooling and move on to higher education inspired me to remain committed to the journey of future batches as well,” she shares.

What’s kept teacher Shanthi at the school for 25 years?

“A strong sense of belonging,” she shares. “It feels like a family, and working here continues to give me purpose and joy.”

All pictures courtesy VBVT

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