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Working with Communities

CONTENTS

Reflections & Opinions

- 03 शिक्षा में समुदाय की भागीदारी
ब्रजेश वर्मा
- 08 **Sahodaya: Ways of Sustainable Living and Learning**
Rekha Kumari, Himanshi and Anil Kumar
- 13 **Thirty Years of Working with Communities**
ASTHA's Story
Pratik Aggarwal

Interview

- 17 **Education in the Context of the Adivasi Way of Life**
Community Organizing for the Community's Education
In Conversation with B Ramdas
- 22 **Tribal Communities, the Governmental School System and Non-Profits**
Learnings from Odisha
In Conversation with Anil Pradhan

Photo Essay

- 29 **Being There for Communities**
Samuhik Pahal Team

Ground Zero

- 33 **Working with Communities**
It Takes a Village to Educate a Child
Aastha Maggu

शिक्षा में समुदाय की भागीदारी

ब्रजेश वर्मा

इस लेख में 'समुदाय' से हमारा आशय बच्चों के पालकों और ऐसे लोगों से है जो बच्चों के आस-पास के परिवेश में निवास करते हैं और उनकी शिक्षा को लेकर चिन्तित होते हैं। इसमें हम हाशिए के बच्चों की शिक्षा में उनके समुदाय की भूमिका और भागीदारी को सुनिश्चित करने के लिए हमारे द्वारा किए गए प्रयासों पर चर्चा करेंगे। हाशिए के समुदायों से हमारा तात्पर्य दलितों, आदिवासियों, विमुक्त समुदायों और अन्य सामाजिक-आर्थिक दृष्टि से पिछड़े समुदायों से है।

हाशिए के बच्चों (marginalized children) की शिक्षा में उनके समुदाय की भूमिका पर ज्यादा चर्चा नहीं होती क्योंकि उन्हें मुख्यधारा की शिक्षा के अनुसार 'पढ़ा-लिखा' नहीं माना जाता है। लेकिन इस तबके के बच्चों की शिक्षा से सरोकार रखनेवाले हम जैसे लोगों के लिए यह समझना जरूरी है कि इन बच्चों के भविष्य की चिन्ता सबसे ज्यादा उनके पालक ही करते हैं और वे यह सुनिश्चित करने के लिए जी-जान लगा देते हैं कि उनके बच्चे पढ़ सकें। इसलिए इन बच्चों की शिक्षा में इनके पालकों की भूमिका को एक सकारात्मक नजरिए से देखा जाना चाहिए और पालकों की पृष्ठभूमि को उनके बच्चों की शिक्षा में रुकावट नहीं माना जाना चाहिए।

हाशिए के समुदायों के प्रति मुख्यधारा के स्कूलों का रवैया

हम देखते हैं कि हाशिए के समुदायों और स्कूल के बीच के आपसी रिश्ते बराबरी के मूल्य पर आधारित नहीं होते। समुदाय के प्रति स्कूल का रवैया उदासीन और गैर-बराबरी वाला होता है। यदि समुदाय से कोई पालक अपने बच्चों के स्कूल जाते हैं तो उनके साथ भी सम्मानपूर्वक व्यवहार नहीं किया जाता है। समुदाय के लोग शिक्षकों से स्कूल के दैनिक क्रियाकलापों और अपने बच्चों के शैक्षिक स्तर के बारे में भी नहीं पूछ पाते। यही नहीं बच्चे के सीख नहीं पाने, कक्षा का कार्य पूरा न कर पाने अथवा स्कूल नहीं आने के लिए सिर्फ माता-पिता ही दोषी ठहराए जाते हैं और इसके लिए बार-बार उन्हें स्कूल में अपमानित किया जाता है। बच्चे अपने पालकों का अपने सामने अपमान होता देखते हैं जिससे उनका भी आत्मविश्वास कमजोर होता जाता है और वे हीनभावना से ग्रस्त हो जाते हैं।

स्कूलों के द्वारा समुदाय और स्कूल के बीच की दूरी को पाटने के कोई प्रयास नहीं किए जाते। इस प्रकार इन समुदायों के लोग अपने बच्चों की शिक्षा में भागीदारी से पूर्णतः उपेक्षित ही रहते हैं। हालाँकि उन्हें स्कूल की व्यवस्थागत प्रक्रियाओं में थोड़ा बहुत



unsplash.com/Loren Joseph

शामिल किया जाता है पर यह केवल खानापूर्ति होती है। राष्ट्रीय पाठ्यचर्या रूपरेखा 2005, शिक्षा का अधिकार कानून 2009 व राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति 2020 जैसे दस्तावेजों में भी इस समस्या को रेखांकित किया गया है और शिक्षा में समुदाय की भागीदारी और कक्षा में स्थानीय संसाधनों के उपयोग का सुझाव दिया गया है।

पाठ्यचर्या-निर्माण व समुदाय

शिक्षा से हम यह अपेक्षा करते हैं कि यह बच्चों को स्वतंत्र अभिव्यक्ति, आलोचनात्मक चिन्तन, वैज्ञानिक सोच व तार्किकता का प्रदर्शन करनेवाले और अपने आसपास की परिस्थितियों पर प्रश्न उठाने वाले एक संवेदनशील इन्सान के तौर पर विकसित करे। इसके साथ ही उनमें अपने समुदाय को लेकर चिन्ता और अपनी संस्कृति, रीति-रिवाजों और अपनी पहचान को लेकर गर्व का भाव विकसित होना चाहिए। बच्चों को ऐसा इन्सान बनाने में पाठ्यचर्या की महती भूमिका होती है और ऐसी पाठ्यचर्या की जरूरत होती है जो उपरोक्त मुद्दों को सम्बोधित करे लेकिन मौजूदा समय में पाठ्यचर्या-निर्माण की प्रक्रिया में समुदाय की कोई भागीदारी नहीं होती। इसके पीछे की मुख्य वजह यह धारणा है कि पाठ्यचर्या-निर्माण विशेष दक्षता रखनेवाले लोगों का काम है और इसे इसी तरह से प्रचारित भी किया जाता है ताकि आम लोगों को इससे अलग-थलग रखा जा सके।

इससे धीरे-धीरे आम लोगों में भी यही धारणा बन जाती है कि वे पाठ्यचर्या-निर्माण में सहभागी होने के लायक ही नहीं हैं, वे अज्ञानी हैं, वे खुद को छोटा और हीन समझने लगते हैं। बाहरी लोगों द्वारा तय पाठ्यचर्या को ही महत्वपूर्ण और उपयोगी मान लिया जाता है और शिक्षक भी आँख मूँदकर उसका अनुसरण करते हैं। स्कूल में, पाठ्यचर्या-निर्माण में व शिक्षण-प्रक्रिया में समुदाय की कोई दखलान्दाजी नहीं होती है और न ही इसकी स्वीकार्यता होती है।

हाशिए के लोगों का ज्ञान

आखिर 'ज्ञान' क्या है और किनके 'ज्ञान' को 'ज्ञान' माना जाता है, यह एक बड़ा सवाल और एक राजनीतिक मसला है। प्राचीन काल में ज्ञान किसे माना जाएगा यह अधिकार सवर्णों के पास सुरक्षित था जबकि वर्तमान में यह उच्च वर्ग और सत्ता पर आसीन लोगों के पास है। ये लोग बाजारवाद के लिए उपयोगी ज्ञान को ही ज्ञान का दर्जा देते हैं और ऐसे ज्ञान को ही पाठ्यचर्या में शामिल करते हैं। यही कारण है कि हाशिए के लोगों के ज्ञान का मुख्यधारा के ज्ञान में कोई स्थान ही नहीं है, उनके ज्ञान को तो कभी ज्ञान का दर्जा ही नहीं मिलता और इसे पिछड़ा व अनुपयोगी कहकर खारिज कर दिया जाता है।

हाशिए के लोगों के ज्ञान का एक समृद्ध इतिहास रहा है। इनके पास ज्ञान व कौशल का असीमित भण्डार है जो इन्होंने अपने जीवन के अनुभवों से सीखा और सहेजा है व अपनी अगली पीढ़ी

को स्थानान्तरित किया है। कई आदिवासी समुदाय जंगल की बहुत सारी औषधियों के बारे में जानते हैं, जैसे— टूटी हड्डी को जोड़ने के लिए जड़ी, नीम की छाल से त्वचा के रोगों के इलाज की दवा, पुराने बुखार के इलाज के लिए खास बेल से काढ़ा बनाना, आँखों के इलाज की दवा आदि। छोटे बच्चों की पसली चलने पर ये जानवर की सींग का उपयोग करते हैं, इनके पास खेती का भी विस्तृत ज्ञान मौजूद है, मौसम का अनुमान लगाने के इनके अपने तरीके हैं, ये जल संरक्षण और जमीन को उपजाऊ बनाने के परम्परागत तरीकों, फसल की बुआई के समय का निर्धारण करना जानते हैं। यही नहीं लोहे को पिघलाकर औजार बनाने का हुनर भी इनके पास है। वे गीले चमड़े को उपचारित करना, उसे सुरक्षित रखना और उससे जूते बनाना जानते हैं, चमड़े, घास से मजबूत रस्सी बनाना, छीन्द से झाड़ू बनाना, मिट्टी से घड़ा बनाना, बाँस को कई सालों तक कीड़ों से सुरक्षित रखने के लिए बाँस का बिना रसायन के बहते पानी में परम्परागत तरीके से उपचार करना जानते हैं। वे बाँसों को छीलकर अलग-अलग बर्तन और औजार बनाने का हुनर भी जानते हैं। यह सदियों पुराना ज्ञान इन समुदायों ने खुद के अनुभवों और अभ्यासों से सीखा है और आज तक इसे संरक्षित रखा है।

आज सारी दुनिया में पर्यावरण संरक्षण को लेकर चिन्ता जाहिर की जा रही है लेकिन यदि हम सचमुच पर्यावरण संरक्षण के कुछ ठोस उपायों को अपनाना चाहते हैं तो हमें आदिवासियों व बहुजन समाज के ज्ञान और उनके जीवन जीने के तरीकों को तवज्जो देनी होगी। यदि हम इस ज्ञान को स्कूलों की पाठ्यचर्या में शामिल करेंगे तो यह बच्चों में पर्यावरण के प्रति संवेदनशीलता और उनके व्यवहार में बदलाव लाने में बहुत कारगर हो सकता है। हमें यह समझना होगा कि आज की परिस्थितियों को देखते हुए आदिवासियों का ज्ञान ही मानव संस्कृति और पर्यावरण को बचा पाएगा।

इन समुदायों के पास इतना ज्ञान व कौशल है जिसे यदि हम दर्ज करने बैठेंगे तो कई पन्ने भर जाएँगे। यह विडम्बना ही है कि इनके हुनर व ज्ञान ने मानव सभ्यता के विकास में बहुत महत्वपूर्ण योगदान दिया है किन्तु इनके इस ज्ञान व हुनर को वह स्थान नहीं मिला जिसके वे हकदार थे। अब यह ज्ञान उपेक्षित और पिछड़ा माना जाता है।

उपरोक्त मुद्दों को ध्यान में रखते हुए हमने मुस्कान द्वारा संचालित स्कूल— 'जीवन शिक्षा पहल' और बस्तियों में चल रहे शिक्षण केन्द्रों में समुदाय की भागीदारी को सुनिश्चित करने के लिए कुछ प्रयास किए हैं। हम अपने इन्हीं अनुभवों को यहाँ पेश कर रहे हैं :

- 1) समुदाय से कहानियों का संकलन : हम समुदाय से कहानियों का संकलन करते हैं। इसके लिए हमारे कार्यकर्ता बस्तियों में जाकर वहाँ की महिलाओं व पुरुषों से बात करके कहानियों को एकत्र करते हैं। इन कहानियों पर बच्चों से चित्र बनवाकर, इन्हें

टाइप करके व इनका प्रिंट लेकर इन्हें कक्षा में पाठ्य सामग्री के रूप में उपयोग किया जाता है। बच्चों द्वारा लिखित व समुदाय से संकलित की गई चुनिन्दा कहानियों को किताब की शकल भी दी गई है, जैसे— कामचोर डोकरा, बारिश का एक दिन, धूप और पानी, नया स्वेटर, सुनो कत्थी, मिट्टी, पायल खो गई, बस्ती में चोर, बैल की सवारी, गन्ने का बँटवारा। इसके अलावा समुदाय की मदद से अँग्रेजी की कुछ शिक्षण सामग्री भी तैयार की गई है।

- 2) अनुवाद और शब्दकोष-निर्माण में समुदाय की मदद : हमने अपने अनुभव से जाना कि छोटे बच्चों को मानक भाषा में लिखे हुए पाठ को पढ़ने और समझने में बहुत मुश्किल होती है लेकिन यदि उन्हें उनकी भाषा में लिखी हुई किताबें दी जाएँ तो वे पढ़ने में काफी रुचि दिखाते हैं। अजीत कुमार मोहन्ती अपने लेख 'बहुभाषी शिक्षा— एक ऐसा सेतु जिसमें अभी वक्त है' में लिखते हैं "आदिवासी समुदाय भारत की आबादी का 8.2 प्रतिशत हैं और इनमें से 830 लाख से भी ज्यादा अपनी खास (लगभग 159) तरह की भाषाओं का प्रयोग करते हैं। उनकी भाषाओं में बमुश्किल तीन से चार ही ऐसी हैं जो स्कूली शिक्षा में जगह बना पाई हैं और अधिकांश विलुप्त होने की कगार पर हैं।" अतः बच्चों को उनकी मातृभाषा में कहानियाँ उपलब्ध कराने के लिए हमने अलग-अलग प्रकाशकों की कुछ कहानियों का बच्चों की मातृभाषा में अनुवाद करने में समुदाय के वयस्क लोगों और युवाओं की मदद ली। हमने कामचोर डोकरा, सन एंड द रूस्टर, मैं भी, मेंढक का नाशता, बीज, द्रौपदी जैसी कहानियों का गोंडी और पारधी भाषा में अनुवाद कर उनका बच्चों के साथ उपयोग किया। बच्चों ने इन कहानियों को बहुत ही रुचि के साथ पढ़ा और अपने घर में जाकर भी ये कहानियाँ सुनाईं।

इसके अलावा समुदाय की मदद से हमने गोंडी और पारधी भाषा के शब्दकोष भी बनाए हैं। इन शब्दकोषों में दैनिक जीवन में उपयोग होने वाले शब्दों व वाक्यों का संकलन किया गया है जिससे शिक्षकों को शिक्षण में सहायता मिलती है। कई बच्चों को भी अपनी भाषा के शब्दों के अर्थ नहीं पता होते तो वे बच्चे भी इन शब्दकोषों का उपयोग करते हैं। इस तरह के प्रयास समुदाय की भाषा को स्कूल में स्थान देने के साथ-साथ भाषा के संरक्षण में भी मददगार साबित हो सकते हैं।

- 3) समुदाय की मदद से पाठ्य व शिक्षण सामग्री का निर्माण : स्कूल की अजनबी दुनिया में बच्चे को ऐसी पाठ्य सामग्री को पढ़ना पड़ता है जिसका उसकी वास्तविक दुनिया से कोई भी वास्ता नहीं होता है। इन अनजान सामग्रियों से जुड़ाव बनाने में बच्चों को बहुत कठिनाइयाँ पेश आती हैं जिससे उनमें पढ़ाई के प्रति अरुचि पैदा होती है। इन्हीं वजहों से कई बच्चे स्कूल छोड़ भी देते हैं किन्तु यदि बच्चों को उनके जीवन, उनकी पहचान,

उनकी संस्कृति और उनके रीति-रिवाजों से जुड़ी कहानियाँ और पाठ्य सामग्रियाँ दी जाएँ तो न केवल शिक्षण-अधिगम प्रक्रिया रोचक बन सकती है बल्कि इससे बच्चों के स्कूल में ठहराव को भी सुनिश्चित किया जा सकता है। हम समुदाय को विभिन्न शैक्षणिक गतिविधियों जैसे शिक्षण-अधिगम सामग्री के निर्माण और कक्षा-शिक्षण में शामिल कर पाठ्यक्रम व कक्षा-शिक्षण को दिलचस्प व समृद्ध बना सकते हैं। इसी के तहत मुस्कान के स्कूलों व बस्ती में स्थित केन्द्रों में शिक्षण-अधिगम सामग्री का निर्माण करने में और इस बारे में विचार-विमर्श करने में समुदाय और बच्चों दोनों की मदद ली जाती है। शिक्षाविद रमाकान्त अग्निहोत्री ने भी अपने लेख 'बहुभाषिता— एक कक्षा स्रोत' में इस बात का उल्लेख किया है। वे लिखते हैं, "बहुभाषिता के सन्दर्भ में बच्चों के माता-पिता एवं समुदाय विशिष्ट को पाठ्यक्रम के संकलन, पाठ्यसूची तथा शिक्षण संसाधनों के विषय में विचार-विमर्श हेतु आमंत्रित करना एक महत्वपूर्ण कदम होगा।"

- 4) समुदाय के अनुभवों को कक्षा में स्थान देना : समुदाय के अनुभवों को कक्षा में स्थान देने के लिए निम्नलिखित प्रयास किए गए हैं :

हम समुदाय के प्रतिदिन के अनुभवों जैसे कचरा बीनने के दौरान, कबाड़ी की दुकान के, पुलिस के साथ के, बाजार के, कहीं बाहर कमाने के लिए जाने के या उनकी पलायन की यात्राओं के अनुभवों को बच्चों की मातृभाषा में लिखित रूप में संकलित करते हैं। बच्चे भी इन अनुभवों के बारे में खुलकर लिखते हैं या बात करते हैं। इस सामग्री को बच्चों के साथ कहानी के रूप में या फिर सामाजिक अध्ययन की पाठ्यसामग्री के रूप में उपयोग किया जाता है। इससे बच्चे पाठ्यक्रम से जुड़ाव महसूस करते हैं और यह सीखने में बहुत प्रभावी रहता है।

हमने समुदाय के ऐसे अनुभवों को भी दर्ज किया जो गणित की अवधारणाएँ सीखने में मददगार साबित होते हैं। इसके तहत हमने समुदाय के लोगों के साथ मिलकर बस्तियों में घर बनाने की प्रक्रिया के विभिन्न पहलुओं जैसे— जगह का माप, जगह के चुनाव के मापदण्ड, घर बनाने के लिए उपयोग में आने वाली सामग्री का अनुमानित व्यय, अनुमानित मजदूरी, घर का नक्शा बनाना, इत्यादि को समझते हुए अभ्यास तैयार किए जिन्हें कक्षा में उपयोग किया जाता है। इस प्रक्रिया में समुदाय ने इस ज्ञान को भी साझा किया कि कम से कम खर्च में घर कैसे बनाए जा सकते हैं और इसके लिए सस्ता और पुराना किन्तु पुनः उपयोग में आ सकने वाला सामान कहाँ से मिल सकता है।

समुदाय के लोगों की संख्या की समझ को समझने के लिए हमने उनके साथ एक अभ्यास किया। हमने समुदाय के लोगों से पूछा कि 'संख्या' सुनने पर उनके मन में क्या विचार आते हैं। हमने पाया कि समुदाय के ज्यादातर सदस्यों के द्वारा दिए गए उदाहरण उनके खुद के कार्यक्षेत्र या गाँव की दूरी से जुड़े थे। कुछ उदाहरण अपराध की धाराओं से तो कुछ दैनिक जीवन में उपयोग की चीजों से जुड़े थे। उदाहरण के लिए 25 बोलने पर लोगों की ओर से 25 आर्म्स एक्ट, 70 रुपए की चप्पल खरीदने और 130 रुपए गाँव जाने का टिकट लगता है जैसे उदाहरण निकलकर आए। इन्हीं को आधार बनाकर इबाराती सवाल बनाए गए और हम उन्हें कक्षा में उपयोग करते हैं।

ब्याज की अवधारणा को समझने के लिए बस्ती के लोगों के साथ शिक्षकों और बच्चों के संवाद को कक्षा में स्थान दिया जाता है। बच्चों के पालक कक्षा में आकर बच्चों को बताते हैं कि बस्ती के लोग किस तरह ब्याज की गणना करते हैं या वे कितने रुपए मासिक ब्याज देते हैं। इससे बच्चे न केवल ब्याज की गणना के तरीके जान पाते हैं बल्कि ब्याज के कुचक्र को भी समझ पाते हैं। बस्तियों में लोग जरूरत पड़ने पर साहूकारों से या किसी समर्थ व्यक्ति से 5% से 10% मासिक दर से ब्याज लेते हैं जो वार्षिक 60% से 120% दर तक पहुँच जाता है जबकि बैंक 12% वार्षिक का ब्याज लेते हैं। कई बार तो बस्तियों के लोग बहुत जरूरत पड़ने पर साहूकार से पैसा ले लेते हैं और शाम तक उन्हें दोगुना पैसा वापस करना पड़ता है। कबाड़ बीनने वाले बच्चे भी अपने अनुभवों को कक्षा में लेकर आते हैं। जैसे— कबाड़ बीनने के दौरान बच्चों व बड़ों को मिलने वाली विभिन्न सामग्रियों को कबाड़ी वाला कितने में खरीदता है। इन अनुभवों से अलग-अलग अवधारणाओं (जोड़, घटा, गुणा, भाग) पर आधारित इबाराती व अंक गणित के सवाल बनाकर उनका अभ्यास कराया जाता है फिर बच्चों को अवधारणाओं के अगले स्तर पर लेकर जाया जाता है। उदाहरण के लिए— एक किलो रद्दी पेपर की कीमत 7 रुपए है तो 8 किलो रद्दी पेपर कितने का होगा? या रौशन और जित्तू ने मिलकर 120 रुपए का कबाड़ बेचा तो एक के हिस्से में कितने रुपए आएँगे? यह समझने के लिए कि कौन सी चीजें कबाड़ में महँगी बिकती हैं और कौन सी चीजें सस्ती बिकती हैं कक्षा में कबाड़ में बेची जाने वाली अलग-अलग वस्तुओं की कीमतों का तुलनात्मक अध्ययन भी किया जाता है। जैसे— दो किलो लोहे और पाँच किलो पुड्डे में से कौन सी चीज ज्यादा रुपए में बिकेगी इत्यादि।

दूरी की अवधारणा को समझने के लिए भी समुदाय के अनुभवों को कक्षा में स्थान दिया जाता है। जैसे— कबाड़ बीनने के लिए निकलते हैं तो दिनभर में कितनी दूर चल पाते हैं? घर से बालवाड़ी कितनी दूर है? बोरी में कितने किलो कबाड़ होगा

इसका अनुमान लगाना इत्यादि नक्शे और पैमाने की अवधारणा को समझने के लिए बच्चों से अपनी बस्ती का नक्शा बनाने और माता-पिता की मदद से घर के क्षेत्रफल और वर्ग फीट की अवधारणा से सम्बन्धित अभ्यास भी किए जाते हैं।

5) समुदाय के लोगों को स्कूल में आने के मौके देना : समुदाय से महिलाएँ व पुरुष नियमित रूप से कक्षा में आते हैं। वे बच्चों को लोक कथाएँ सुनाते हैं व अपनी यात्राओं के बारे में और अपने जीवन के अन्य अनुभवों के बारे में बताते हैं। समुदाय के लोगों के द्वारा उनका इतिहास, जीवनशैली, संस्कृति को बच्चों के साथ साझा करने की एक गतिविधि कराई जाती है। समुदाय से बुजुर्ग लोग आकर बच्चों को बताते हैं कि पुराने समय में वे लोग काम के लिए कहाँ-कहाँ घूमते थे? वे जंगलों से कौन सी दवाइयाँ उपयोग किया करते थे? उस समय काम की कितनी मजदूरी मिला करती थी? उन्होंने भोपाल को स्थाई तौर पर रहने के लिए क्यों चुना? वे किस तरह के घरों में रहते थे और किस तरह के काम किया करते थे? उनके द्वारा मनाए जानेवाले त्यौहार कौन से थे और वे किन देवी-देवताओं की पूजा किया करते थे? बच्चे अपने बुजुर्गों से सवाल-जवाब करते हैं और इस प्रकार एक रोचक बातचीत के माध्यम से बच्चे अपने समुदाय के संघर्षशील इतिहास व समृद्ध संस्कृति को जान पाते हैं। अपने समुदाय के किसी व्यक्ति के जीवन के बारे में सुनकर व समुदाय का इतिहास जानकर बच्चे काफी खुश होते हैं और अपने अनुभवों के बारे में बताकर पालक भी आत्मविश्वास का अनुभव करते हैं तथा उनमें आत्मसम्मान का भाव भी आता है। बच्चे कोशिश करते हैं कि उनके घर का कोई सदस्य जैसे उनके दादा, जिनसे आमतौर पर उनकी ज्यादा बातचीत नहीं हो पाती, आकर अपने अनुभव बताएँ। इस तरह, यह गतिविधि एक तरफ तो समुदाय की लोक कथाओं को जीवित करने का काम करती है, दूसरी तरफ कहानी सुनाने की परम्परा को भी बढ़ावा देती है जो आज के समय में बिल्कुल ही खत्म हो चुकी है। इस पूरी प्रक्रिया से अभिभावक बच्चों की मौलिक अभिव्यक्ति में मदद कर पाते हैं। बच्चे घरों से कहानियाँ सुनकर आते हैं और कक्षा में उन कहानियों को सुनाते हैं।

6) स्कूल का समुदाय के पास जाना- राष्ट्रीय पाठ्यचर्या रूपरेखा, 2005 के अनुसार "यह जरूरी है कि सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक संसार के अनुभवों को भी पाठ्यक्रम का हिस्सा बनाया जाए। समुदाय के पास के किसी अनुभव या ज्ञान को पाठ्यक्रम का हिस्सा बनाने या न बनाने को लेकर प्रश्न हो सकते हैं। इसलिए स्कूलों को समुदाय के साथ एक रिश्ता बनाने को लेकर तैयार रहना चाहिए, उनकी आशंकाओं को सुनना चाहिए और उन्हें ऐसे निर्णयों के शैक्षणिक मूल्यों के बारे में समझाना चाहिए। इसके लिए आवश्यक होगा कि शिक्षकों को पता हो कि क्यों किसी चीज को शामिल किया जाए और किसी को नहीं।"

हम बस्तियों में जाकर समुदाय के लोगों के साथ चर्चाएँ करते हैं ताकि वे व्यापक समाज और मुख्यधारा की शिक्षा में अपनी मौजूदगी को समझ सकें और अपने वंचित रहने के राजनीतिक कारणों को समझ सकें। उनसे इस बारे में भी बात की जाती है कि इस समझ को वे अपने बच्चों के लिए कैसे उपयोग करते हैं, उनके लिए क्या सपने देखते हैं और उन सपनों को पूरा करने के लिए वे किस तरह के प्रयास कर रहे हैं? बच्चों को आगे ले जाने में उन्हें किस तरह की मुश्किलें आ रही हैं? अपने बच्चों के लिए वे कैसा स्कूल और कैसी शिक्षा चाहते हैं और इसमें समुदाय की क्या भूमिका हो सकती है? इन सभी चर्चाओं से बच्चों के स्कूल का समय निर्धारित करने में, कहानियों का अनुवाद करने में कौन मदद करेगा और स्कूल या कहानियों के मेले में समुदाय की तरफ से कौन कहानी सुनाएगा और कौन सी कहानी सुनाएगा यह सब तय करने में काफी उपयोगी सुझाव मिलते हैं।

बच्चों को आगे ले जाने के लिए इस तरह की चर्चाओं में समुदाय की भागीदारी बहुत जरूरी है। समुदाय के साथ मिलकर शिक्षा के उद्देश्यों और मुश्किलों पर चर्चा होनी चाहिए ताकि समुदाय के लोग अपने बच्चों के भविष्य के बारे में सपने देख सकें और उनके उन सपनों को पूरा करने में स्कूल क्या भूमिका निभा सकते हैं इस बारे में स्कूलों को भी एक मार्गदर्शन प्राप्त हो।

बच्चों की शैक्षणिक प्रगति, उनकी उपस्थिति और अन्य मुद्दों को समुदाय से साझा करने के लिए हमारे स्कूल द्वारा समुदाय के लोगों से नियमित तौर पर बातचीत की जाती है। बच्चों के कक्षा-कार्य और गृह-कार्य, उनकी प्रगति को पालकों के साथ साझा करने से पालक बच्चों की प्रगति देख पाते हैं और बच्चों के अनियमित होने पर उन्हें नियमित स्कूल भेजने के लिए सामुदायिक स्तर पर प्रयास कर पाते हैं।

स्कूल का पालकों के साथ रिश्ता

पालक मुस्कान द्वारा संचालित स्कूल को अपना मानते हैं। यदि उनके घर में कोई मुश्किल होती है तो वे एक दो दिन के लिए स्कूल (हॉस्टल) में रुक जाते हैं। एक तरह से स्कूल उनके लिए एक ऐसी जगह होती है जहाँ आकर उन्हें घर-बार के तनावों से बाहर आने में मदद मिलती है। इस दौरान शिक्षक साथी पालकों का पूरा ख्याल रखते हैं और उनसे बातचीत करके उन्हें हिम्मत देने का काम करते हैं। आम दिनों में भी जब पालक स्कूल में आते हैं तो वे कक्षाओं में जाकर शिक्षकों से बातचीत करते हैं। यदि वे देखना चाहते हैं कि कक्षा में उनके बच्चे कैसे सीख रहे हैं तो वे कक्षा में कुछ देर समय भी बिताते हैं। कई बार बच्चों की माँ भी कचरा बीनते हुए स्कूल आ जाती हैं, अपना थैला बाहर रखकर पानी पीकर थोड़ा आराम कर लेती हैं, बच्चों से मिल लेती हैं और फिर थैला उठाकर काम पर वापस चली जाती हैं।

इस प्रकार हम देखते हैं कि समुदाय, शिक्षा और शिक्षा व्यवस्था के बीच एक महत्वपूर्ण कड़ी हो सकता है। इन प्रयासों की वजह से समुदाय के लोग सीखने की प्रक्रिया से खुद को जोड़ पाए हैं। उनके अन्दर आत्मविश्वास बढ़ा है कि वे भी बच्चों के सीखने की प्रक्रिया में योगदान दे पा रहे हैं। इससे समुदाय का अपने बच्चों और शिक्षकों पर विश्वास व भरोसा और भी मजबूत हुआ है। कक्षा में अपनी भाषा का उपयोग होता देख समुदाय के लोग इन प्रयासों की सराहना करते हैं। उनके अन्दर अपनी भाषा, अपने ज्ञान व अपनी संस्कृति के प्रति सम्मान का भाव भी बढ़ा है। इन अनुभवों के आधार पर हम कह सकते हैं कि समुदाय और शिक्षा वास्तव में एक दूसरे के पूरक होते हैं और इन्हें अलग-अलग नहीं माना जाना चाहिए।

ब्रजेश वर्मा वर्तमान में मुस्कान संस्था द्वारा संचालित स्कूल जीवन शिक्षा पहल में शिक्षक के रूप में कार्यरत हैं। हाशिए के समुदायों मुख्यतः आदिवासी, दलित, विमुक्त और मुस्लिम समुदायों के बच्चों के साथ सीखने-सिखाने की प्रक्रिया में शामिल हैं। बच्चों को कहानियाँ सुनाना, उनके साथ खेलना पसन्द है।

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Sahodaya: Ways of Sustainable Living and Learning

Rekha Kumari, Himanshi and Anil Kumar

Background and Community

Sahodaya was founded as an organization on 5th of December 2016, in Patna, in formal legal terms. Its process, structure and objectives are being co-created by a couple, Rekha and Anil, and the inhabitants of a village in Bihar.

Rekha and Anil had been living, studying and working in Delhi until 2015. In 2015, they quit Delhi and their jobs to come to Bihar to try and live sustainable lives in a rural area and work at their native place or any other suitable place.

Seven acres of Bhoodan land, at a village in Gaya, Bihar, was donated to Sahodaya Trust in 2017. This land was formerly held by Bihar Bhoodan Yagn Committee. It was donated to Sahodaya with the understanding that the organization would work with Bhoodan farmers' children for their education, and with the rural community for development of the village.

Land was allotted after Rekha and Anil had held several meetings, had conversations with the villagers and received their consent (verbally as well as in written form) to work in their village with the objectives and principles of the Trust. Since 2017, they have been living there with their children and working with other children of the village.

Sahodaya has been primarily working with children of the most deprived and oppressed community, called Manjhi or 'Mushhar', at a village called Kohabari, in Barachatti block of Gaya district in Bihar, since 2017. Rekha and Anil, along with their own two kids, have been living, learning and working with children to develop a holistic system of learning. They try to live a community life together, in a close relationship with nature.

Principle and Objectives

Rekha and Anil chose the domain of education to work on because it concerns them the most for their own child as well as for the community they live with. They think that the current system of education is the primary, systemic cause and source of the changes we see currently in human life and the world around us.

The current condition of human life, especially in the urban, and so-called modern, educated and developed areas, reflects various gaps. Examples of these gaps include those between living and learning, learning/thinking and working, reason and emotion, 'self' and 'other', 'home' and 'world', and 'individual' and 'community'. Sahodaya is an attempt to develop ways of responding to these gaps and facilitate an alternative system of learning and education.

One of the ways Sahodaya tries to do this is through community living. Sahodaya is a community of people, plants and animals which prepare themselves to co-exist as sustainably as possible. Here, people try to live their relations with each other, learn and grow as a community, without any disrespect and discrimination for the so-called 'other'. In Sahodaya we also try to live with and learn from nature. Here, the space, infrastructure and activities have been developed in such a way that people live in a close relationship with nature in its native conditions, and learn from it as much as possible.

Some of the learning is to keep evolving, diversifying, being locally grounded, and to work toward preparing better conditions of life, with unconscious immediate attention to the present, and without causing any unnecessary

harm to other beings for survival. Here almost all the houses have been built mostly with mud to feel connected to the soil and nature. These structures are surrounded by local, native flora and fauna. Forest walks are organized regularly to develop a feel for a sense of wilderness. Cleaning our houses, utensils, teeth and body is mostly done with ash, soil and cow dung.

Children make toys with soil, wood, bamboo, paper and leaves. They have made diyaas with mud, baked them with wood, and coloured with brick powder, on the occasion of [Diwali](#). Children have also made rakhis with local indigenous seeds, thread and paper, and tied these to each other, and to dogs and plants, to celebrate Raksha-bandhan.

The third aspect of this process is to live what one believes in and thinks, through activities, experiences and explorations. People involve themselves with, and try to learn about, most of the activities and skills required for living in households, farming, environmental conservation, and rural community development.

The fourth way is to live, promote and conserve our indigenous systems. People here mostly speak in their local language, Magahi. They sing songs in it. They even write songs and their diaries in Magahi. They try to eat the local food, and prepare some new varieties with indigenous grains, millets, leaves and vegetables. For example, they prepare delicious sweet *ragi laddoos* with finger millet produced at the Sahodaya farm.

In agriculture, organic and natural farming is practiced and indigenous seeds are used. We also try to conserve indigenous seeds of vegetables, grains and lentils. We plant trees of indigenous species. All the children participate in and involve themselves with all of these activities.

Another way in which we at Sahodaya try to foster an alternative way to learning is by exploring, examining and expanding our perceptions and horizons. Travelling is a very regular activity of Sahodaya. In the last four

years, the Sahodaya community, comprising of facilitators and some children, travelled to various places, particularly villages and other places where similar alternative constructive activities are being practiced.

They travelled in the states of Odisha, Delhi, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Karnataka and Maharashtra. In 2021 and 2022, Rekha and Anil along with eight children, had the longest tour of almost three months in South India and a one-month long tour in Maharashtra.

Travel bridges the gap between self and the other in fulfilling ways. Community-based co-existence, living and co-evolving in close relationship with nature, giving primacy to collective actions, experiences and explorations, conserving and celebrating local language, food, and seeds, and exploring, examining and expanding perceptions and existence through travelling constitute Sahodaya.

Children here do study textbooks, prescribed at government schools, at their own pace, at their own fixed timing and spaces, but in groups. They also read books and magazines from other publications, like Eklavya, Ektara, Children's Book Trust, National Book Trust, Kalpavriksh, and others.

Mostly children ask their more experienced companions, if they need to clarify anything in/about the texts. There is no fixed teacher who sits with them all the time while they study to monitor them. Children ask the facilitators when they feel like. The facilitators explain and clarify concepts or questions of the books that children find difficult to comprehend.

With this method, children study with their group, with the least sense of fear and competition. No child here compares herself with anyone. Children [write diary](#) in their local language, Hindi and English about what they do and experience every day at Sahodaya. Children also write poems, [songs](#), stories and narratives of their experiences of forests, villages and other organizations when they visit these.



Photos: 1. Sahodaya community with diyaas, and various toys, made with mud; 2. Children with their own creative materials, made of bamboo; 3. Happy Sahodaya community, pointing toward a compost pile; 4. Children planting vegetable saplings; 5. Celebrating a pond built with natural materials for geese/swans, with them, and 6. Children with saplings of diverse indigenous species of trees. **All Photo Credits:** Sahodaya Trust

Local Community and Public Education

The Sahodaya team has always been actively engaged with local community of Kohabari village, which is, for most, their second home. We also work with villagers to respond to the problems and challenges of the village. Our presence seems to strengthen villagers' confidence, stabilize their stay and increase the village's population. Earlier when the Sahodaya team came to the village and started their work, the village was less densely populated and even the inhabitants used to stay at the village irregularly.

Before 2017, many villagers used to come to work at their Bhoodan land at Kohabari. But they used to go back to their village in the evenings, because of bad conditions of the roads, lack of electricity, forest animals and conflicts with the Forest Department. The villagers and the Sahodaya team also experience conflicts with affluent villagers of neighboring villages due to land related issues.

Earlier no one wished to settle on the land surrounded by forests. But now after some people from deprived communities started living, and particularly when the Sahodaya team came and started working at the village, people from other neighboring villages started creating pressure and threatened villagers and Sahodaya to vacate the land and leave. So far, both the villagers and the Sahodaya team have worked hard to support each other and tackle this problem.

Anil from Sahodaya, wrote several letters to many officers, including the District Magistrate, Commissioner, Chairman of the Board of Revenue, the Chief Minister, and the Human Rights Commission's office, to solve this problem. But it remains unsolved yet. However, villagers and Sahodaya have been able to get documents for the land. They have prevented local affluent folk and powerful villagers from destabilizing both and forcing them into legal problems.

Even some elements of the local administration support these local affluent residents despite

many media publications on these issues. However, villagers have now been feeling more determined than ever before to stay and respond to any problems in the village.

For Sahodaya, it is an important part of the curriculum that children, along with the team, engage with the community and learn about, and from, them. Rekha and Anil, along with the children, hold regular interactive conversations with villagers, share their experiences, and seek their suggestions and feedback.

Children of Sahodaya regularly visit the village and talk to the villagers about their well-being and current engagements. Children have, so far, had [long conversations with several villagers](#), particularly old ones, to understand the history of our local community, culture and ecology.

They ask villagers to share their experiences, knowledge and wisdom, on the issues of village life, including agriculture, family relations, gender system, community work, rural skills, education, medicine, environment, food system and marriage. Villagers also share their views on how life was when they were kids and how it is now.

These conversations enlighten children but sadden them as well, when they get to know the values of the local culture that we have lost and now need to imbibe and revive. These include, chemical-free natural farming, relationships based on trust and solidarity in the community, simplicity of life, richness of local flora and fauna and good food. These conversations, with local community and villagers educate the Sahodaya children more deeply and richly than books.

Sahodaya's work stems from the following understanding. Our education system needs to include the significance of collective physical involvement, activities and experiences of children, with the world in general. Local natural environments, farms and rural community life need to become a part of curricula.

The balance between, head, hand and heart, and the real experiences of relation with the



Sahodaya

natural environment, community life, and collective activities will enable human beings to achieve much more in life, than what pure, exclusive academic systems of education can provide.

Rekha Kumari is a founding trustee of Sahodaya Trust and plays a pivotal role in managing all the activities of the organization. She loves exploring creative ways of responding to the challenges at Sahodaya, with ease and farsightedness.

Himanshi has been working as a facilitator at Sahodaya for the last eight months. She is from Rajasthan. Her passionate involvements

with Sahodaya have added a new level of rigour, vigour and colour to the Sahodaya community and its work. She loves exploring and facilitating ways of learning with children, which are based on real grounded experiences, joyful activities and experiments.

Anil Kumar is a founding trustee of Sahodaya Trust and plays an important role in managing its activities, especially those related to documentation and finance. He loves facilitating the experiences of beauties of life and relations with children and co-workers.

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Thirty Years of Working with Communities

ASTHA's Story

Pratik Aggarwal

ASTHA is a cross-disability organization, working with children and persons with disabilities and their families for more than 30 years now. It started as a centre for special needs children.

However, it has gradually evolved into a rights based and community centred organization. In 1993, ASTHA started with a very clear understanding and focus to reach out to children with multiple disabilities and high support needs.

It is in its work within communities that the organization's approach has broadened. While it has retained its primary work with children and persons with disabilities and their families, the focus and thrust has shifted to inclusion within the community and processes of development. Working within communities has enabled ASTHA to understand the importance of the context in shaping strategies that will work for the development of very young children with disabilities.

ASTHA strives hard to keep its ears to the ground and undertakes bottom up planning processes. Persons with disabilities, family members of persons with disabilities and people from the communities we work with are encouraged to join in.

Participatory decision-making processes and people directly working with communities are at the heart of our work. The organization's most senior people have years of community experience. They have slowly developed understanding of the relevant organization development processes and are now pillars of ASTHA.

“Apart from getting the Disability certificate for my child, I helped four other mothers get it for their children. Earlier, I wasn't aware of the disability pension. But as soon as I got the information, I applied for it. I have started receiving the pension and I am saving that money for my child's education.”

- A Community Member

Why Work in Communities?

The evidence and legal framework now striving for the right to community life for children and persons with disabilities is paramount. Article 5 of the RPWD Act, 2016, talks about the right to live in the community. Children with Disabilities continue to be excluded from networks of friends, families and larger institutions, facing isolation and neglect.

ASTHA's community level engagement has enabled children and their families to be included in various institutions starting from inclusion at home, in localities, enrolment in Anganwadis and schools to employment.

Living in urban slums with disabilities brings many challenges for the children and their families. Physical inaccessibility, small and

often ill-ventilated homes, open drains and lack of sanitation and water facilities are just some of the hazards that families must contend with. In such situations, families struggle between earning and caring for the child. Children are often ignored, spending all the time inside the four walls, getting sick often, catching illnesses that sometimes lead to early deaths.

“My husband had given up on hopes for our child. He did not allow me to speak with the ASTHA team. After a lot of effort, I saw a ray of hope when I first visited the hospital with the team. I go to the hospital with them for regular check-ups and give medicine to my child. Subsequently, it has increased my visits outside the house, and boosted my self-confidence. I get to share my worries with other mothers and if needed, I go to the hospital. The extended support has given me strength and faith. It has also helped me bond with my children better.”

- A Community Member

Poverty, lack of nutrition, sudden loss of jobs in the informal economy along with the disability of the child pose challenges to childcare processes, as healthcare is still inaccessible and unaffordable for these groups. People living with more severe or complex limitations and functional difficulties face higher levels of multidimensional poverty. This makes people

with severe disabilities more vulnerable and prone to chronic poverty.

ASTHA's strategies and work with the child includes working on the multidimensional factors affecting the child's development. Over the years the organization has learnt that working in communities and addressing issues which matter to people are important. First, it builds resources and networks for the child with disabilities and their families. Second, the disability issue starts getting looked at as a community development issue as well, instead of being an isolated one.

How Do Our Strategies Acknowledge and Deal with Contexts?

While services may not be far off, negotiating the service can become a barrier for families in cities. Urban areas are often alien spaces for families where they have to take their child to tertiary level hospitals where language and cultural differences persist. Lack of extended family networks is another major part of the context of urban slums. Identification of children with disabilities takes place by a collaborative approach, through focus group discussions with leaders in the community, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers and other organizations working in the field.

Regular home visits for understanding contexts, actively listening to mothers and sensitizing communities towards needs of children with disabilities are undertaken. Home visits remain an important mechanism for the team to understand the resources in the child's environment and to use them for the child's learning, play and development. Inclusion starts right from home by ensuring that the child is not always lying down. Opening up opportunities for the child to sit, communicate and strengthen relationships with their siblings is also important.

Working with Children

Identification of children is one of the outcomes of community mobilization. ASTHA, in addition to community surveys, engages in capacity

building of Anganwadi workers, ASHAs and communities, which in turn enable them to identify children in need. Experience shows that surveys are not the best tool for identifying children with development delay or disabilities.

Families of children with development delays may not take the delay so seriously when the child is young. Families also do not easily disclose the presence of children with disabilities. As we begin to work with children, and families see changes or acknowledge the support that they get, we are able to build up trust and reach out to the child. The organization does not wait for children to come. Rather it proactively penetrates in urban settings to reach out to children who are confined in their homes.

Working in Inclusive Groups

Further, ASTHA focuses on children's development through engaging them in groups in communities and in the center in various activities. Inclusive, play-based creative art activities like painting, pasting, clay, drama, and theater etc. are organized for the children which enables their development. Working in communities ensures that children with disabilities are not excluded and get multiple chances of being with everyone. Similarly, children without disabilities interact with disabled children, which is often a crucial step to bridge gaps and end discrimination.

The Family as an Ecosystem

Regularly reaching out to families with the knowledge that every family will not trust the organization or feel the need of its services at the same time. Over the years ASTHA has identified its own parameters of identifying families with high support needs, i.e., families and children who may need intensive support for a period of time.

These include: single parent led families, grandparent led families/ families in crisis, families where the child is very severely disabled or families with more than one child or person with disability etc.

Building Partnerships

It is often seen that the family has migrated from their villages to cities in search of treatment for their child. Distance from their native homes, lack of family support structures, and economic vulnerabilities in cities make their lives much more difficult.

In times like these, the women of the family often have to bear the entire caregiving burden for the children. They are at times left alone to navigate the city's healthcare systems.

There is a recognition of all these factors and of the fact that the mother is the sole caregiver, prone to mental health concerns. Active non-judgmental listening, constant support and working in groups have enabled increased mobility for women.

“When the ASTHA team suggested that my child gets enrolled in a school, I found it to be impossible. I thought if they got admitted, I would not be able to help them with their coursework, and my mother-in-law would never allow this. When I heard the experiences of other mothers, I committed to convincing my family to send my child to school. Now, I accompany my child to school and engage with the teachers about their studies.”

- A Schoolteacher of a Mainstream Government School

Enabling Institutions to Open Doors

ASTHA's thirty years of experience has shown that the ICDS has never been able to enrol children with disabilities. The school system too has remained ignorant of disabled children's needs, although incremental changes have been visible post the RTE and RPWD Acts.

“I had never paid attention to children with disabilities before. Earlier, some children were associated with us. But we gave them only food ration supplies. ASTHA encouraged us to connect with the disabled children and shared some techniques and strategies to engage better with the children. Presently, I'm working with four disabled children. There are mothers of two disabled children who connected with us. During the covid lockdown, we prioritized giving the food ration supplies to their families. I now connect disabled children and their families with the ASTHA team.” - An Anganwadi Worker

Working in communities, training of teachers and Anganwadi workers, empowering families, and constant handholding enables the ASTHA team and parents to constantly knock on the doors of these systems to become responsive towards children. Work with School Management Committees ensures that

communities become aware of their role in the functioning of schools and voices of the parents of disabled children get included in the process.

Rights and Entitlements

ASTHA's social workers are creating awareness and facilitating access to governmental schemes. As the work is with the migrant population, getting the disability certificate is a long process. A lot of time goes into making the Aadhaar, Birth Certificate and Ration Cards of children. These documents pave the way for other governmental entitlements and create an economic safety net for families. The organization does on-ground networking with government officials to understand the process and advocate for strengthening systems for the disabled population. As a part of many state and national level alliances like RTE Forum, Right to Food Campaign, etc. ASTHA advocates disability rights being integrated into broader systems change advocacy.

According to a Lancet review, India is home to more than ten million children under five with developmental disabilities, caught in the vicious cycle of poverty, migration, deprivation and mis-information. ASTHA is attempting to create family-centered, community-based support systems to give a head-start to children with disabilities.

Pratik has been associated with ASTHA for over five years now. His core interest is in integrating disability into intersections of health, homelessness and poverty.

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An Inclusive Community-based Group Session

Education in the Context of the Adivasi Way of Life

Community Organizing for the Community's Education

In Conversation with B Ramdas

B Ramdas has been working in education for four decades. He is a trustee of the Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT), Gudalur, the Nilgiris. In this interview with 'Samuhik Pahal' he narrates the interface of community action and education in the initiatives of (VBVT) and the Adivasi Munnetra Sangham.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the challenges of working with tribal communities in the field of education that arise from a specifically linguistic context?

B Ramdas: Let me begin with our context. We don't have just one language to contend with but four different ones. This makes it quite challenging.

Right at the beginning, that is, on day one, when we took on adivasi children from the different linguistic backgrounds, we also took on 15 young persons from the different tribes – all school drop-outs except one, and started to train them in the school as teachers. Part of their on-the-job training was to interact with the children.

Before we had brought the children to our school, we had been working with the Ashram schools in the vicinity. We found that the main reason for children not willing to go to school or dropping out was language. The teachers did not know their language and the children could not communicate in Tamil – the medium of instruction in the schools. Therefore, to have teachers who are trained from the community is essential to make

an impact and also for them to build good relationships.

Secondly, besides languages, there are many cultural customs, norms etc. that someone from the community can understand better and therefore relate to them. It may be festivals, rituals or even family issues. The adivasi teacher can also straight away attempt to build a dictionary or even a language book, a song book, books of stories and a calendar of seasonal activities of the community to which all the children and community members can relate. The involvement of parents and community elders in the school can improve tremendously if there are teachers who can liaison between communities and schools.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the challenges of working with tribal communities in the field of education that arise from the social-cultural and political contexts?

B Ramdas: Here let me break this up into three different aspects – social, cultural and political. I will talk about each of these aspects separately.

Let me begin with the cultural aspect. Culturally adivasis are different from mainstream Hindus. In fact, I always say that they are civilizationally different. This is something that the average Indian finds difficult to understand that they can be civilizationally different. I say this, because their worldview is different, their philosophy

of life is different from ours, their regard and respect for both animate and inanimate things around them is different from us. Their spirituality is different and their rituals that allow them to communicate with their spirits are also different. Above all, their ideas of life and death are different.

We have never tried to understand them or take them seriously because we have always seen them as junglis...people without any culture, just another kind of animal. That said, we seem to have so many projects to save tigers, elephants and so on. But all this is at the cost of the survival of those who have lived with them and preserved them over the centuries.

Socially too they are different from the rest of Hindu society. They are unlike us because they do not have a hierarchy amongst them. Here even in some of the tribes women and men have equal status. This is not to say that the tribes have lived together. Rather, they have lived separately and with little to do with each other. It is we who have brought them together under the banner of 'adivasi'. Whatever the reasons, they had little to do with each other.

Their social system is very harmonious within each of the tribes. Their songs and dances and other rituals have helped to maintain this unity. Although many of the systems that allowed for sharing don't exist anymore, they still try in one way or the other to share whatever they have. They support each other and take care of each other.

No children who lose their parents feel orphaned in any way. Although, Hindu society considers them at the bottom of the social ladder, adivasis generally seem quite unaware of this and continue to have an amazing dignity about themselves.

Politically they have been marginalized by rest of the society. They are in most places too small in numbers to make a political difference. As a result, they are generally

left out of political processes. It is only now after the Forest Rights Act has come into force that they have been given a place and a voice in the political sphere through the Gram Sabhas.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the ways in which your own work has responded to such linguistic, social-cultural and political challenges over the years while working for education of ST communities?

B Ramdas: As mentioned earlier, our first response was to take on youth from the community and train them as teachers. They could communicate with the children and parents, besides the elders. Above all, they understood the underlying issues in the communities and their response to education.

The second step we took was to encourage speaking their languages in the school at all times, not only among children but also between the teachers. So even today, if you come to our school, you will hear an array of languages being spoken during break times. This has encouraged the community to also take pride in their language and speak it wherever they are.

So all the tribal languages are freely spoken in the area without any sense of inferiority. I mention this, because this is not so in the neighboring states of Kerala and Karnataka where the more educated people are, the less they speak in their mother tongue.

Thirdly, we invited linguists from Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysuru, to come here and conduct a three-week study to develop scripts using the Tamil language as a base for each of the languages.

Based on this, we developed a primer in Paniya, which is the most widely spoken tribal language in the area in which we work. We also brought out a book of stories and songs in Paniya and Tamil. All this has helped to boost their self-image and their language.

The work with the adivasis began with organizing a land rights movement. The adivasi community had been deprived of their lands by large estates, local landlords and by the Forest Department. Our parent organization, ACCORD, which works exclusively on community organization and livelihood, took up these issues across the two talukas.

It formed a community-based organization called Adivasi Munnetra Sangham (AMS) – Organization for the Development of Adivasis. This was a hugely successful movement. Although the initial struggles are practically over, the structure of the movement is in place. Developmental services like health and education actually rode piggy back on this movement.

The Sangham has a strong political presence here. Today no police station will handle a matter regarding adivasis unless the local AMS unit approves. The Revenue Department also will not issue a community certificate unless the AMS President issues one first.

Therefore, whatever issues arose in the Ashram schools at a later stage, whether with regard to discrimination or abuse, the local AMS leaders would be informed and they would take this up. When VBVT started its drive to put children in schools in the year 2000, it was the Sangham that appointed elders from each village to take children to the schools and bring them back.

At one point we had as many as 75 elders taking over 1,400 children on a daily basis. As schools were quite far, they would stay on at the schools and bring the children back in the evenings. Any issues that arose in the schools would be communicated thorough these people to the village Sanghams. Nowadays, with the FRA Gram Sabhas in place, a number of villages have allotted space to build Balwadis and schools etc. in the vicinity.

It must be said that bringing all the tribes together was a job in itself, as they had not

really felt that they were one community. It was ACCORD that brought them together using their cultural aspects.

Even before AMS was set up and the land rights movement began, the cultural work started. It began with organizing a festival on an annual basis where all the tribes could come together, sing and dance and have their traditional games and so on. This would last a day and a night. This helped to bring all the tribes together.

This festival continued for over 20 years till people started to have such festivals in their own villages and not bothered about non-tribals looking on. Unlike in many other places in the country, non-tribal villages are all round these hamlets cutting into their privacy and their sacred spaces.

These songs and dances were later incorporated into the school. This was a huge step that was much appreciated by community leaders. These elders and leaders were given the space to come to the school and tell their history, their stories, sing their songs and get involved in the school in many ways. The school was a continuum of the village and barriers were taken down.

Samuhik Pahal: How has the space of education of ST communities shaped up over the last three decades? What are the opportunities for such work that the present context throws up?

B Ramdas: In a place like TN where only one percent of the population is tribal, there is only one seat in any higher education place for STs. This does not leave much to hope for. VBVT's concentration has been to get all the children to complete schooling. This has been possible since the year 2000, until the Covid-19 pandemic took a good section of the older children out of school. But our pressure on the government has helped. The tribal welfare department has established a vocational training institute exclusively for STs here.

Overall, the scope for higher education is poor. Gudalur has only one college. Tribal students get put into subjects not of their choice. Otherwise they have to go to Ooty which is 50 kilometers away or to Coimbatore that is located 160 kilometers away.

They can't afford these places and so desist from going for higher education. This also leads to other children and parents wondering if there is any purpose in sending children to school, if there is no scope for their future.

VBVT has had a scholarship and counseling program for the last 10 years. We try as best as we can to bring together children from class nine upwards to help them choose subjects that they are interested in and to deal with examination pressures. We also provide them with scholarship support - mainly with travel, hostel, etc.

But as an NGO, it depends a lot on the funding available for this. On an average, we have been spending around five lakh rupees a year on this. Today more and more children are finishing school. The demand for scholarships has gone up to over 15 lakhs.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the general learnings from the work with tribal communities that we can possibly use while working in education on the one hand and working with communities elsewhere, on the other?

B Ramdas: It really helps to have a community-based organization which can form the foundation of all the developmental work. Often, issues like health or education can never be the rallying point for such a movement. One needs a more livelihood related issue.

One must start from what the people want the most and then use that itself as an educational process. Land, wages and bonded labor were all issues that we used, based on a Freirein technique, to educate the adults even before dealing with children.

For adivasis in particular, but for all other communities as well, their culture is central to their lives. As developmental activists, who are founded on Marxism or capitalism, culture is always given the least importance. Economic and political issues are given more salience. But we have learnt that culture is a rallying point as it touches deeply the feelings of the community and shows that we respect them as a people.

Even if the government says that education is free, there is still a lot of investment for the parents in terms of money, time and effort. All this is not easy. Our schools begin in June which is really the worst month as May is drought in the country and work is at its lowest ebb.

In the Hindu calendar, learning begins in October, when the rains are over and there is plenty of work. Schools start at 10 a.m., by which time parents have to be in their work places. There is usually no one to take the small ones to school or to bring them back. Helping parents to adjust to the school system is a task at hand.

Education can never be a starting point in community action. In our experience, only when their livelihood and health issues were sorted out, did parents have adequate surplus resources to send their children to school.

Someone from the community needs to follow-up with schools to ensure that the children are not discriminated or abused one way or the other. Spaces and time need to be created in the village where children can come back and work.

Teachers from the community need to be trained so that they can communicate with them. Even if they are partially trained, they can teach up to the primary level in the villages. Financial support needs to be provided to parents to send children to school, sometimes just to buy chappals, bags or books. Some kind of arrangement has to

be made wherein parents and the institutions can share these expenses.

Teaching spaces must have cultural inputs and encourage local community members to participate without hesitation. If the school / centers are hierarchical like the government schools, then community members will find that they don't have any place there. Rather, they have to be organized democratically.

A lot of individual attention needs to be given to children, especially when teaching concepts. Adivasi children prefer the outdoors. Therefore, many activity-based learning strategies, especially in the early years, needs to be thought out.

There is very little scope for children to go for higher education. Even if they do so, there is little scope for them to be gainfully employed. All these factors need be looked into if one wants to create role models within the community.

There are two general learnings that have been of great importance for us. Firstly, education is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of our intervention is to build a resilient, sustainable and harmonious society, much of which already existed, but needed to be reworked given the changing times.

Our present education system builds individuals and competition, both of which go against the basic norms of the adivasi way of life. How does one contest these aspects of the modern education system that can help build a dignified life for these communities is a challenge, but must be done.



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Secondly, from the very beginning we have maintained that we are withdrawing and that this school and program is theirs. They have to take ownership of it from the beginning. This pertains not just to the assets, but more importantly to processes as well.

We made it clear that whatever training, inputs, support they required, they would get these for as long as they wanted; but it was their baby, not ours. This changed the entire attitude and outlook of the staff. It made our task so much easier. Today we are happily out of the functioning of the project.

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Tribal Communities, the Governmental School System and Non-Profits

Learnings from Odisha

In Conversation with Anil Pradhan

Anil Pradhan is a social activist. At present, he is Member-Secretary, Sikshasandhan, a resource center for education based in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He has more than three decades of experience in the field education, especially in mother tongue based multilingual education.

Samuhik Pahal: What are some of the challenges that you have faced while working with tribal communities in the field of mother tongue based multilingual education in the public school system?

Anil Pradhan: Twenty three percent of Odisha's population is tribal. A large number of tribal communities, numbering sixty-two, live in the state. Out of these, thirteen are PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). Linguistically speaking, the situation of these tribal communities in the thirty districts of

the state varies quite a bit. In many districts they have lost their language completely.

However, in the districts that are demographically dominated by tribal communities, we do face linguistic challenges while addressing their children's educational needs within the formal education system. Around 25 tribal groups still have their own languages. It's difficult for those children to interact in Odia, the state language.

Therefore, working with different tribal groups, one faces a variety of challenges. Communities living within the easy reach of markets, have an interface with Odia and face lesser linguistic issues. Children from communities living in the more interior areas face greater linguistic challenges in education because of lack of exposure to Odia. In schools where there are children



from Odia speaking communities as well, as from those speaking tribal languages, the linguistic problems are lesser. However, even in these contexts, cultural differences persist that make it difficult for children to learn. Tribal children tend to be shy and gentle. They find it difficult to fit into the rigidities of the existing formal schooling system.

Different areas have different problems. We cannot have a monolithic solution for these. For an organization to work on the education of children from tribal communities, cooperation from the schools is critical. Especially, teachers need to be cooperative. The government also needs to extend a helping hand. The state government does not easily grant permission to work in schools, especially those in tribal areas. The standard response seems to be, “We have our own teachers. We have our own MLE Program. What would you do?”

Whereas, on the ground, Government of Odisha’s MLE program is limited in its implementation. There are approximately 12,000 schools in the state in which at least 80% of the students come from ST (Scheduled Tribe) communities. The number of schools with 100% tribal children is around 5,000-6,000. The state government’s MLE program is operational in only 1,500 schools. So, when the government says that they have an MLE program running, they generally don’t share the proportion/number of the schools in which it is functional, and the quality of the processes and outcomes of this program.

Therefore, getting permission to work in government schools with tribal children is one big challenge. The other one is getting the necessary cooperation from the teachers. Wherever we have worked, we have done so by involving all the teachers in the schools. This is a problem area in the implementation of the MLE Program.

Even in schools where the MLE Program is functional, sometimes most other teachers (those not directly involved in the program)



Sikshasandhan

do not have any idea what it is about; only the MLE teacher knows about the program. However, according to our understanding of the issues at hand, if all the teachers do not have a common understanding about the implementation of the program and are not oriented towards working it out, it is not possible to implement the MLE Program.

Another problem is the transfer of the concerned teachers. We spend a considerable amount of time working with the teachers. We facilitate their growth through training programs etc. And then they get transferred.

Schools in tribal areas must have teachers from the same local communities. This has been one of our key demands. Our experience is that training Odia speaking teachers is not often very effective. Then it boils down to the attitude of the teacher. Perhaps the ethnic background of the teacher is not that critical. However, she must know the language of the community from which the students are coming from to the school.

If the teachers do not stay in the school for at least 5-7 years, then it’s difficult to work with them consistently and produce any results on the ground. This is because we need to work on multiple fronts with the teachers for making a dent in children’s learning.

These include attitudinal training of teachers and building their perspective to actual hands-on work on using TLM. Therefore, if the

teachers keep on getting transferred, then we may continue to work; but it would not be possible to show the required results.

Therefore, it's a good strategy to negotiate with the government to have a freeze on the transfer of teachers in intervention schools in tribal areas. Getting motivated and interested teachers transferred to understaffed tribal schools through a process of incentivization would also help, as a policy tool.

There also needs to be a special drive for recruitment in schools with tribal children, as these are often chronically understaffed. The government must also build in a clause for at least ten years of mandatory service in these schools following recruitment. This is to address the fact that we have seen cases where teachers on joining schools with tribal children have got a transfer on the next day or the next week.

I have listed out these problems of working with the system, as we do not usually face any problems in our community interface in the areas in which we work. In some areas where there has been a slightly greater spread of literacy because of many different kinds of interventions, there seems to be a loss of faith in their own language and culture. Leaders and elites in these communities sometimes challenge the wisdom of education in their own languages.

They have often lived outside for some time, have been exposed to the formal education system, and seem to have developed some kind of an inferiority complex about their own language and culture. These elites and leaders do not seem to see the benefit of education in their own languages that is culturally contextualized.

However, the areas in which we work, that is not the case. These are mostly inaccessible regions with very low levels of literacy. When we talk to community people in these areas, they get what we are trying to do and are cooperative. These conversations and

negotiations then end up becoming a part of the process of creation of their linguistic and cultural identity as well.

Therefore, we have not usually faced any problems in working with tribal communities with an MLE approach in the areas in which we are active. Even in the other kind of regions that we discussed earlier, engaging with communities and their elites/leaders in a sustained manner most probably would result in their acceptance of the broader MLE approach.

Sociocultural challenges of working with tribal communities in our intervention context include the sheer physical



Sikshasandhan

inaccessibility of these areas. Because of this, teachers often do not want to be posted in the schools in these areas. Processes of economic development are yet to reach these regions. Because of lower level of economic attainments, education of children is still not a priority for a large number of households. This is true for some families of course, especially those who are economically more vulnerable.

A large number of such communities have also not been able to develop their voice for articulating their interests and demands related to teacher absenteeism and the quality of classroom transactions. One way in which families are dealing with situations of sub-optimal teaching learning in their local schools is to send their children to ashram

schools. This is a result of their inability to raise their voice to fix matters in the local village schools.

Sometimes even local MLAs who belong to tribal communities are not politically empowered enough to raise and make the shortcomings in the school education system in their constituencies into a matter of public debate.

But some ST groups such as Ho, Munda, Saura, etc. have been able to develop a sense of community identity related to their language and culture. Now these communities want their children to be educated in schools in their own languages. Especially the Hos have been agitating of late. Their representatives have gone and met the President of India, with petitions for inclusion of their language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. This is surely a positive development.

Samuhik Pahal: How have you addressed these challenges in your work on education with the tribal communities of Odisha? Please share with us the wider systemic context of your interventions.

Anil Pradhan: When the World Conference on Education for All took place in Jomtien in Thailand in 1990, its declaration pledged for the universalization of primary education and to reduce illiteracy significantly by 2000. In this context many programs such as DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) were started at the national level. Organizations like Agrabamee were working in Odisha's tribal areas in the field of education and were innovating with using tribal languages as the medium of instruction. They had facilitated a conference in Kashipur in Odisha. Its report titled 'Education for All in Tribal Areas' was circulated widely. This report was key in changing mindsets in Odisha, especially for many working with the government.

When DPEP was being implemented, a special program for tribal areas was also

started. Government of Odisha (GoO) took initiative to develop material in a few tribal languages and created a training module for teachers posted in tribal areas. Before this, some NGOs were involved in similar initiatives in a limited scale. Then Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) was started in 2001. As a part of SSA, GoO started a full-fledged MLE program in 10 languages in 1,500 schools.

In the meanwhile, NGOs had started a movement for mother tongue based preschools for children from tribal communities. We were also a part of the process; we had started our work in Mayurbhanj by then. Slowly a momentum was building up towards an MLE policy. Because of significant momentum built up by civil society organizations, GoO finally formulated and approved a policy for MLE in the state during 2014-15. Prior to this, the number of tribal languages covered under the state's MLE Program was extended to 11 more languages (21 in total now) in 2012-13.

But the number of schools covered under the program has not increased, whereas, the recommendation of the MLE policy is to do so. Another provision of the policy was to make MLE into a full-fledged program and to have training, research and evaluation as integral components of the process. However, none of that seems to be happening on the ground. The number of schools still stays at around 1,500. The government have recruited 3,500 teachers for the first time; this is in addition to routine reservation, just to ensure the implementation of the MLE policy. Material has also been developed till the fifth grade. But the implementation is not what the policy envisages.

When the policy and its guidelines were being formulated, we as an organization tried to play a proactive role. There were groups who were arguing for translating pre-existing material into tribal languages. We wrote to the government saying that the teaching learning material needs to be sensitive to

the socio-cultural context. We argued that such material must include stories, songs and festivals of tribal communities. Mere translations will not do. We need to develop material in tribal languages that speak to the experiences of tribal children and the specific communities they belong to.

Initially the conversation in the government circles was to only have a set of guidelines and not a policy. As a part of the drafting committee, we argued in favor of formulating a policy rather than just having a set of guidelines. We also argued for recruiting teachers from local, tribal communities and the need to take cognizance of constitutional provisions such as that of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution while drafting policies and guidelines, and creating programs.

To ensure proper implementation of the MLE policy we have been doing advocacy with local MLAs. We have also held meetings with local communities. We have had consultations with the various jati mahasabhas (community federations) of the ST groups as well.

We started working in the field of education of tribal communities in the year 2000. From the year 2000 to 2008, we ran an alternative education program. In this program we worked with local curricula and local teachers. Even the timing of the teaching learning processes were decided by the communities. From deciding the timings of the students coming to the learning centers to selecting the teachers, the local community had a central role in everything. We feel that this intervention was quite successful on three counts – preparing locally relevant curricula and pedagogic processes in tribal languages, community involvement, and preparing a cadre of local teachers.

When the RTE Act came into being, we started working on proper implementation of this law in tribal areas. We also began experimenting with the same set of processes that we

have been innovating with in our alternative education centers in government schools in a single panchayat in Kaptipada block in Mayurbhanj district. This work was successful and we expanded it to five panchayats in the block with the support of different funding agencies. Around this time the MLE policy and its guidelines came into being and the recruitment of teachers and the policy's implementation started. We have shared our learnings widely and are using it as an advocacy tool for furthering the cause of MLE.

Samuhik Pahal: What have been the similarities and differences of working with tribal communities through your own institutional frameworks and that of working with government schools?

Anil Pradhan: When one works with one's centers, as in the AECs, there is a lot of freedom to innovate with curriculum and pedagogy. When one works with government schools, one has to work in a way that fits in with the preexisting structures and processes. In the latter case one needs to continuously negotiate. Teachers often do not listen to you. After you work for a while with them, they get transferred.

However, when you work with the government, its impact is perhaps more longlasting. Now we would want to work in government schools implementing the MLE policy itself. If we are able to work on its implementation and show where it lacks and what are the limits so to speak, then perhaps the government can be induced to take the next steps.

Samuhik Pahal: Given the way things have shifted in the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts, what is your sense of the changed educational landscape in the regions that tribal communities live in?

Anil Pradhan: Earlier it was unthinkable that tribal languages can be the medium of instruction in schools, that TLM could be

developed on the basis of tribal culture, that learning could be facilitated in the languages of tribal communities. There was opposition when these ideas were broached. That opposition exists even now. However, over the last thirty years or so, it has become muted.

At least there is a debate now. Those opposing MLE are not as vocal now as earlier. Even the tribal communities were mostly unaware of the facilitative constitutional provisions that provided protection to their languages and way of life and envisaged the use of their languages in education of their children.

Various education policies have also consistently argued for these positions pertaining to making education available to tribal children in their own languages. The difference over the last three decades is that there are now substantive debates and discussions on how to make this possible on the ground.

Now a large number of children come to schools or at least want to come to schools. Apart from some children from particularly underprivileged backgrounds, e.g., those who are orphans or come from very poor families, there is a real interest in education and schooling now.

There is a demand for residential schools. This is especially so, because the condition of the village schools in tribal areas has

deteriorated. The number of village schools has gone up. But the provisioning of teachers and infrastructure has not kept pace. There are many schools which still don't have buildings after so many programs, and where teachers have not been capacitated. The number of single teacher schools is also substantial in tribal areas.

This is vital because at the primary stage, ideally students should not have to leave their homes for education. If at all, it's perhaps all right at the upper primary or high school level. Now GoO has this policy of opening hostels.

Coupled with the fact that parents and other community members don't have the voice to demand effective teaching learning processes in their own village schools, they seek the easiest way out, which is to send their children to hostels. These hostels provide children with free boarding and lodging. But separating small children from their parents has obvious psychological costs.

The school closures that are now taking place across the state will especially affect tribal children adversely. School consolidation will result in a large number of out of school children from tribal communities. Because of the mergers that have taken place till now, many tribal children have already dropped out of school. This will only increase with the proposed school consolidation process.

We need to strengthen village schools in tribal areas and teach tribal children contextualized curriculum in their languages. We need to develop a preschool system in their own languages as well. If tribal children are taught for eight years in their own languages (three years in the pre-primary stage and five years in the primary level), this will aid in their learning processes. It will facilitate the development of their languages and culture as well. Those children who have studied as their own languages as the medium of instruction, their Odia is quite



competent. Whereas, those who have studied in Odia medium, their Odia is not that good.

Samuhik Pahal: Given your three decades long experience of working with education in tribal communities, what are the learnings that you think are of relevance to working with these communities in particular and various other communities across the state and the country in general?

Anil Pradhan: In many tribal areas, local communities seem to suffer from some kind of an inferiority complex. This needs to be worked on by continuously dialoguing with them to create a sense of confidence in their own language and culture. This helps children to learn better as well.

One strategy, that seems to work, is to train teachers and volunteers from tribal communities themselves. This is effective both for awareness building as well as for pedagogic interventions in classrooms. Therefore, apart from classroom specific work, one has to work on an associated set of issues related to tribal language, culture and identity building.

One also needs to work in a decentralized manner. If we could capacitate resource persons at the block level to create textbooks and other TLM for their own areas and schools, then that would go a long way in meeting the learning needs of tribal children. In fact, this was a key, relevant recommendation of NCF 2005 – for each school to have its own syllabus.

Creating TLM and textbooks is not that difficult. We have facilitated processes for the same. And when teachers create their own textbooks, they start feeling confident and empowered. We have made TLM and textbook creation into some esoteric, specialized, expert area of work, when that is not the case.

There are quite a few issues in the way children are made to learn in the public education system in non-tribal areas as well.



Sikshasandhan

There is a need for interventions based on a child-centered, activity-based approach in schools in these areas also.

Now CRCCs (Cluster Resource Center Coordinators) provide training. DIETs, generally speaking, are disconnected from teacher training processes. Therefore, even when innovative curricular changes are made and textbooks are produced, these end up being used in a traditional manner.

We have found that, like in tribal areas, teachers elsewhere need both training and handholding in the classrooms. Otherwise, teachers continue to teach in a traditional way even after participating in training programs.

In Odisha, there is a lot of variation in language and culture across the state. The same approach that we have followed in tribal areas – of contextualizing the curriculum, for example – should be followed in non-tribal areas as well. The only large difference being, language might not be a differentiating factor in many regions.

The pedagogic approach of child-centered, activity-based, contextualized learning has to be the same for learning the first language, for the second language, for math, or for any other subject – for both tribal and non-tribal children.

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Being There for Communities



Shiksharth Trust

Empowering Adivasi Communities

📍 Sukma, Chhattisgarh

The Shiksharth team believes that the community needs to be at the forefront of children's learning journeys. The organization often conducts home visits to apprise parents of the happenings in school. The team has onboarded 35 youth volunteers from the community as well, to support single-teacher schools.

Ayang Trust

Building Community Learning Spaces

📍 Majuli Island, Assam



Ayang Trust collaborates with local communities to set up community libraries where children can uncover the joy of learning through stories, games and fun activities. Through various training workshops and activities, it supports communities in running community library spaces to accelerate children's learning while ensuring the sustainability of these spaces.





Ashray Akruti

Creating Inclusive Spaces

 Hyderabad, Telangana

Ashray Akruti (AA) has set up Multi-Disciplinary Centers at Borabanda, Hyderabad. Free services provided at these specialized centers include assessment, speech therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and behavioral therapy. Catering to children in different areas of the spectrum, these centers are a sanctuary for parents to get the right help for their kids without worrying about the cost.

Ashray Akruti

Guiding with Passion and Compassion

 Hyderabad, Telangana



Rachuri Sarika, a mathematics teacher taking a session. Ashray Akruti (AA) has been working towards holistic interventions and rehabilitation of children and youth affected by hearing loss. They have adapted to fit in the latest forms of therapies by hiring and training certified teachers and therapists.

Photo Credits: Ashray Akruti, Ayang Trust and Shiksharth Trust

Working with Communities

It Takes a Village to Educate a Child

Aastha Maggu

What are the contours of the relationship of organizations with the communities they work with? How has this evolved over the years? How do different people in the community perceive organizations and their work? How do organizations look at their role with respect to a particular community?

In this article, we speak with four non-profits working across geographies and with different vulnerable groups. These organizations work with community members in their search for dignified lives by helping them break the cycle of systemic injustices. They are building partnerships with communities by capacitating members from communities and envisioning sustenance of initiatives.

Karunar Kheti Trust (KKT)

Founded in 2019, Karunar Kheti Trust (KKT) is a non-profit organization based in a tea

plantation in Jorhat, Assam. KKT primarily works with the tea plantation and traditional village communities in the interconnected areas of education, healthcare and livelihood.

After the Indian Railways and the Armed Forces, the tea industry of Assam is the [third largest employer in India](#). More than 150 years ago, colonial rulers established the tea plantation industry. People hailing from varied rural regions, tribes, and speaking different languages were brought to Assam to work on these plantations.

Arjun Trivedi, co-founder of KKT shared, “In both the colonial and postcolonial times, people working in these tea plantations have remained trapped in an intergenerational cycle of disempowerment. They have been given little or no opportunities for social, economic and political growth.”

In 2018, Arjun started teaching local children across age groups. He was, in due course



Karunar Kheti Trust

of his other volunteer efforts of engaging with matters of livelihood and health in the area, approached by a few relatives of the children and other community members. They requested him to set up a school that could provide quality education.

This request and the consequent discussions sparked interest in the community to start thinking about how to build the school and the required human and material resources, etc. A few local youths also stepped up to anchor the efforts.

Arjun shared, “The youth and other community members who joined the efforts became the embers in this movement of empowering the tea plantation workers community.”

He added that when a community has faced cyclical oppression for so long, a way to participate in an empowered way with the public system is by starting with the smallest possible step and bringing together those who share the same vision.

In January 2020, through collective efforts, Selenghat Valley School was established. Children in grades Nursery, Lower Kindergarten and Upper Kindergarten were enrolled.

KKT also runs a Student Resource Centre. This center supports local children enrolled in government schools. Those who have dropped out also come to the center to attend classes.

The trust reposed by the community in their work has been organic. Arjun recounted, “There is still some skepticism about our pedagogy and its impact on children’s learning. Parents, of their own accord and through systematic processes to engage them, observe how we conduct our classes. They are unsure about how this new model of experiential learning is used in schoolwork and how the children will learn by following their curiosity. It must be proven that children can joyfully learn in a stress-free environment.”

In the coming years, Arjun wishes that the community members lead the efforts of the organization. For that to happen, he recognizes that capacity building in modern systems is important.

For instance, capacity building processes, particularly in systems of management, administration, finance and accounts, governance, etc. need to be established. Development of the community’s confidence is critical. This is especially so, as these communities have been historically marginalized.

Arjun shared, “I am currently leading the organization in such modern systems and raising financial resources. I think we will start planning how in the next five years, people can anchor such efforts. Then we will have taken even huger strides towards becoming an organization built by the people and for the people.”

KKT presently continues to function as an organization independent of the tea-plantation management. Arjun shared that matters between workers and the management are complicated and complex. While they wish to facilitate conversations, they are not able to do so directly yet, as this would need a tremendous effort.

However, indirectly, because of the community-rootedness of their work where both the management and workers are in various direct and indirect ways connected with their work, each side is seeing the other in a positive and human perspective. This indirect conversation seems enough for now and something to be grateful for that they have been able to come so far.

This is the first time in the history of tea plantation workers’ community that a formal school built by the people of these communities is running. Their rights to access quality education have been ignored and marginalized for decades. Their reclamation of this fundamental freedom is gradual but empowering.

Klorofeel Foundation

Klorofeel Foundation is a non-profit organization working with tribal communities in the Rayagada district of Odisha. It focuses on improving the quality of education of children belonging to underprivileged families.

Prior to founding Klorofeel Foundation, for more than a decade, the team members in their association with different organizations were working in the region on livelihood related interventions. The team was aware of the socio-economic context of the region and it was already familiar with the community members. Jiten Nayak, co-founder of Klorofeel Foundation shared that since the foundation of the trust built earlier was strong, they were able to capitalize on that in their interventions in education.

According to Jiten, “Students belonging to underprivileged sections of our country struggle to get an enabling learning environment. At Klorofeel, we believe that to guarantee a good learning experience, efforts inside the schools, at homes, and in community spaces are vital.”

Klorofeel runs learning centers that are based on a community-led education model. Community learning centers are envisioned

to nurture students, by supplementing and complementing governmental efforts inside the schools, to become socially and ecologically responsible and financially independent. Klorofeel works with stakeholders across the community – children enrolled in the learning centers, their parents (especially mothers), and local youth facilitators (*saathis*) at the centers.

Mothers of the children enrolled have organized themselves into voluntary Mothers’ Education Committees. The Klorofeel team actively encourages them to partake in decision-making activities such as identifying *saathis* for the learning centers, spaces where the centers could be set up, etc. They are also encouraged to develop an interest in closely engaging with and monitoring the learning activities of their children, both at the centers and at home.

Jiten shared, “Community members trust our intentions because we involve them in decision-making and honor their decisions. If a *saathi* is not coming regularly to the learning center, or if they feel a *saathi* is not performing well, they reach out to our team, and we try to address the issue. They have also started sharing their own aspirations and expectations from us. For instance, an intern from Kerala was working with us and



Klorofeel Foundation

interacting in English. The mothers shared that they would also want their children to be fluent in English.”

Jiten recounted that when they set up the learning centers, they encouraged the mothers to visit and observe the activities. A few months later, the Klorofeel team set up a festival where the children had to sell mangoes in their community. These children, aged less than ten years, were confidently interacting with everyone and kept track of the transactions. Parents realized that gradual changes in children’s learning levels have taken place. Their initial perception of education that it has only functional values is changing.

The Klorofeel team envisions that community members move in the direction of managing both financial and institutional sustainability of the learning centers. The team tries to involve community members, especially the mothers’ committees, proactively in planning activities and in engaging with *saathis* in the learning centers. They also wish that members gain the confidence to engage with the school system through School Management Committees and reach out to other relevant people in the government system to demand quality educational resources. The team believes that a quality education ecosystem can thrive only when community members are actively involved and empowered to lead the efforts.

Sajag

Set up in 2016, Sajag Trust works with children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Kalyan town located on the outskirts of Mumbai. Sajag runs a learning center and a community library that focuses on building foundational literacy, numeracy, reading habits and familiarity with computers for children in primary grades.

The parents are engaged primarily in daily wage labor as waste-pickers, domestic workers, drivers, contractual labor, etc. These families have migrated from the drought-



Sajag

prone regions of Maharashtra and more recently, from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The children are enrolled in semi-private or government-aided schools.

Sajitha, co-founder of Sajag shared, “Most of the parents did not have the opportunity to seek education beyond primary schooling. Consequently, students in the community have little or no support for learning. We were thus clear from the beginning that we must directly work with children to improve their learning outcomes. To make the children trust our vision, it was important to make learning joyful for them.”

At Sajag’s learning center, the team encouraged children to do theatre, and participate in read-aloud sessions and other engaging activities. Children enjoyed these activities and sessions. They started reaching out to the team in matters related to their education as well.

The Sajag team felt that to build trust, it was important to listen to and incorporate children’s expectations. During one of the discussions, it realized that the children enjoy Ganesh Chaturthi festivities. Their experiences around it have been enriching for them.

With support from the Sajag team, children wrote a story around the festival and performed it in their school. It boosted their confidence and helped in building self-esteem. They became excited to share their learning and volunteered to mentor new students joining the learning center.

The team also closely works with parents. The latter were initially concerned that at the learning center children should not be engaged in anything harmful. Their fears were slowly allayed.

Sajitha shared, “When we noted that a child was irregular, we used to visit their family. Interacting with the parents helped a lot. Monthly parents’ meetings paved the way to share their feedback and strengthened the efforts as well. Communication is important when you are working with communities. Parents used to be surprised when we visited, sat and chatted with them.”

Parents were also concerned that children at the learning centers play games and there is no concrete impact on their learning. In one of the parents’ meetings, parents were made to solve puzzles where they were required to solve math problems that included basic addition or subtraction and to make words using alphabets. They enjoyed doing these activities and could see how these could be relevant for their children’s learning and growth.

Sajitha shared that the efforts to develop a communication channel with parents has helped as they have started approaching the team without any hesitation. For instance, if parents have doubts about the school they need to send their children to, or the process of applying for seats reserved under the RTE Act, they reach out to the Sajag team.

On the question of when the community could lead the initiative, Sajitha shared that the Covid-19 pandemic has made them realize that it is important to have members of the community partake in efforts. During the pandemic, with travel restrictions and fear of infection, one of the older children in the adult literacy program volunteered to take classes for the younger ones. The team hopes that more members of the community will join and lead such efforts.

Sajitha added, “Over the years, teachers at the learning center have also developed

a sense of responsibility. They take the initiative to identify children who have not been enrolled in school and inform parents if the child is irregular in school or at the learning center. Earlier, the team used to help facilitate their home visits and share relevant information with them. However, recently the teachers confidently advise parents about schooling, admissions, etc.”

The Sajag team believes that quality education can become a reality for children from underprivileged backgrounds, when members of the community and other stakeholders in the ecosystem collaborate.

Vardhishnu

Vardhishnu is a non-profit operating in Jalgaon town in the state of Maharashtra. It provides foundational formal and informal education and skills to children from vulnerable backgrounds - especially child waste pickers and child laborers enrolled in schools - as well as to out-of-school children.

Pranali, co-founder of Vardhishnu shared, “In 2013, we were assisting another organization with a study analyzing the socio-economic background of 400 informal waste-pickers in Jalgaon. We asked them about their education levels, well-being, income, substance abuse, access to government services, what they think about society and how they think society views them. We realized that the preceding generations of this community had been deprived of a dignified life. We committed to working with the younger generation to help them break out of this cycle of intergenerational deprivation.”

The community learning centers set up by Vardhishnu called ‘Anandghar’ are spread across Jalgaon, and nearby towns. These centers try to bridge the learning gaps for children who have never gone to school or those who have dropped out of the formal education system. The first community learning center was set up in an open space in a temple visited by waste-picker families

and other community members. Since this center was located in an open space, Pranali shared that parents were gradually able to build trust in their work and vision because they used to frequently drop by and observe the activities.

Pranali added, “It was heartening to see that during the time of classes from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., community members ensured that no one sits near the center and drinks, and that no one interrupts the sessions.”

The Vardhishnu team intended their relationship with the community to be one of partnership. After the initial months, their efforts to build rapport with community members bore fruit and they were able to develop a friendly relationship. If parents insisted that their children be re-enrolled in schools, the team visited them to ask a few things and to orient them to the support their children would require.

Pranali shared that when they visit homes, parents get happy with small gestures of the team accepting the tea or water being offered. Gradually, they have gained access to the homes and the lives of community members where they are often invited to celebrate festivals or join on somber occasions.

Pranali says, “The team has female educators who sometimes stay till late in the evening. There has never been any untoward incident against them. The community offers a protection balloon to all our team members. We have never faced any problems. Community elders also keep checking with us to see if classes are going smoothly and whether we require any support.”

Substance abuse by children is a huge problem that Vardhishnu is trying to address. Pranali shared that a couple ran a grocery shop in the community and they used to sell tobacco. The team convinced them that they should not sell tobacco to the learning centers’ children. After some convincing, they obliged. The cooperation offered by

community members for Vardhishnu’s vision is commendable.

In the last few years, parents have proactively reached out to the team to convey instances where if they felt that any educator was not performing as per expectations, and the kids were not being taught well. The team is confident that the waste-pickers community is reimagining a future where the next generations lead dignified lives.

In Conclusion

Organizations working with communities have realized that this journey of improving quality and access to education is an arduous one. They all admit that envisioning the community at the forefront of leading efforts, respecting their decisions, and partnering with them, can bring sustainable and systemic changes.

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Vardhishnu



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