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Research Article

Formal Schooling and Community Rights: Engaging with Indigenous Knowledge in the South Indian Context

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Abstract

Indigenous communities across the globe own rich resources of traditional knowledge which have evolved from their everyday cultural practices and livelihood mechanisms developed in constant engagement with nature. These knowledge mechanisms are synonymous with their identities, representing their traditions, values, and claims of indignity. However, if we engage with the position of indigenous knowledge in academia, it is argued that these knowledge systems are oppressed by a culture of epistemological hegemony that divides certain forms of knowledge into valid and legitimate and others as inferior and illegitimate. This contention is not very recent in academia but rather positioned as a pertinent concern among Indigenous populations, i.e., the 'fourth world', as a matter of their pride and cultural autonomy (Manojan, 2017). Significantly, in the realm of education—whether in the elementary stages of schooling or at a higher academic level of research—it is argued that formal learning systems of colonial legacies have not adequately acknowledged the aspirations of Indigenous communities regarding knowledge and its representation. In the context signified above, the present inquiry engages with the Paniya Adivasi community in Kerala and their formal schooling engagement. The arguments of this study are situated within a rationale of the righteousness of Adivasi communities in their educational contexts, where ambiguity of knowledge compatibility perhaps exists. The study ponders the significance of the knowledge practices of Adivasi communities in their everyday lives and asks to what extent formal education systems mediate with the aspirations of Adivasi communities in India.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Formal schooling, Paniyar, Decolonisation, Cultural rights

Introduction

Indigenous communities across nations are referred to by different terms such as 'natives', 'first nation peoples', 'aboriginals', 'tribes', 'Adivasis', and so on. Though their lives and lifestyles differ from region to region, they are unified in maintaining close relations with

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nature and its resources (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999; Burman, 1998; Rahman, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Their ways of being and various operands in different situations pave the foundations of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural formations. Widely, the ethos and daily practices of their culture, identity, language, folklore, medicine, architecture, food processing informs the base of Indigenous knowledge systems. Inevitably, this knowledge is transmitted and propagated through generations with little modern documentation. Instead, it is transmitted through informal educative actions that take place across generations. These cultural practices and knowledge systems are synonymous with their identity and a vital symbol of self-respect (McCarty, 2005).

However, hegemonic socio-politics of the current times have approached knowledge systems with a bifurcated logic, dividing certain forms of knowledge as valid and legitimate and others as inferior and illegitimate (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). This binary of the legitimate superior and illegitimate inferior eventually results in a hierarchical knowledge production that concerns people already contesting with broken histories (Guru, 2002 & 2013; Zene, 2013).

This debate is not very recent in academia but is a pertinent concern among Indigenous populations as a matter of their pride and self-esteem (McCarty, 2005; Smith, 1999; Ilaiah & Vyam, 2007). Significantly, in the realm of education—whether it is in the elementary stages of schooling or at a higher academic level of research—it is argued that formal learning systems have not positively affirmed the aspirations of Indigenous communities in terms of knowledge and representation (Smith, 1999). The protagonists of global formal learning structures tend to be historically obsessed with the hegemony of westernised and colonised knowledge production, which they have also internalised. It is contended that the potential of Indigenous knowledge systems in making learners actively engage with native and traditional ways of knowing is ignored widely without endorsing its political synergy. There have been overwhelming contestations over these concerns and negotiations with national and international forums representing Indigenous communities' aspirations (Burman, 1998; Rahman, 1998). In most of these negotiations, caveats have evolved in the forms of cultural, linguistic, and minority rights to protect, preserve, and recognise Indigenous knowledge systems.

The (South) Indian Indigenous in the 'Fourth World'

Looking at the currents of this debate, I intend to look at the empirical premise of such a contention in the South Indian context about the formal schooling environment. Indigenous communities in India—administratively referred to as Scheduled Tribes—are also called Adivasi, Girijans, Vanavasi, Adim Jathi and so on. Recent academic scholarship uses the term ‘Adivasis’ broadly to convey the meaning of ‘original inhabitants’. The demography of Adivasi communities in India shares 8.2% of the total population, amounting to more than 1.3 billion people segregated in more than 600 communities (Burman, 1998; Rahman, 1998). India has 28 states with regional differences that carry distinct cultural traits, livelihoods, and folklore patterns. The southern region comprises five states including Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and the Union territories of Lakshadweep and Pondicherry. Historically, this segment’s sociocultural formation known as the ‘South’ has maintained a distinct lineage with the Dravidian race, claiming to be the original inhabitants before Aryan immigrants arrived in the Indian subcontinent.

There is a consensus, globally, that education ought to maintain a harmonious relationship with the culture, environment, and knowledge systems by which people live. However, it is argued that the systems and practices of education often tend to create cultural alienation and estrangement among Adivasi children (Kumar, 1985; Balagopalan, 2003a & 2003b; Balagopalan & Subramanian, 2003; Sundar, 2010). The curricula used in schools are usually urban-oriented and have less proximity to Adivasi children and their local knowledge systems. The medium of instruction and textbooks need to acknowledge the sociocultural environment of Adivasi children (Kumar, 1985; Sachidanandha, 1999; Devy & Davis, 2020). It said that along with many other constraints prevailing on Adivasi education, alien content and irrelevant information in the curricula has become the leading cause of students dropping out of school (Sujatha, 1999 & 2002). The high dropout rates and low enrollment status of Adivasi students are not only due to the physical constraints such as access, but also have some relationship with existing patterns of curriculum and knowledge imparted by them (Heredia, 1995).

In these circumstances, the Adivasi student must struggle with difficulties in comprehending learning because their understanding of the world is oriented in an environment distinct from the dominant urban or middle-class imagination. Indeed, this imagination ignores that Adivasi people are cognitively well-equipped in their worldview while constantly having to modify their living cultures in a globalised, sociopolitical economy (Choudhury, 1982; Heredia, 1995).

Adivasi communities in India are victimised by development projects and external interventions and are mainly exploited by taking advantage of their relative state of backwardness (Padel & Das, 2010). Heredia (1992 & 1995) argues that development efforts made in the country have failed to empower Adivasi communities and have arguably created a subjugated consciousness among them. Development efforts have also reinforced the unequal exchange of socioeconomic resources between disadvantaged and privileged sections. This phenomenon is replicated in the educational arena with a more profound impact.

In acknowledgement of these facts, measures have been adopted by the central and state governments to improve the educational status of Adivasi children in terms of preventive and developmental aspects. Those measures have been mainly constitutional safeguards, legislations, financial incentives, educational institution reservations. However, contemporary research shows that Adivasi children are not attracted to the processes of formal schooling and there exists a wide educational gap and inequality between Adivasi and other weaker sections in Indian society (Sachidanandha, 1999; Singh, A., 1994; Sujatha, 1999 & 2002). Irrespective of many expert recommendations of different committees and policies—to the effect that educational equity requires giving importance to Indigenous cultures and languages—this matter has constantly been at peril by the shadows of apathy. The National Policy on Education 1968 aimed to promote national progress through education, the cultivation of moral values, and building a closer relationship between education and the life of the people. The National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1992) also highlighted recommendations in this regard (Agarval & Aggarwal, 1989; MHRD, 1992a & 1992b; NCERT, 2005). Unfortunately, the latest document of National Educational Policy (2020) also fails to provide for Indigenous knowledge systems of traditional communities from a social justice or rights-based perspective (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In the context signified above, this enquiry engages with the Paniya community in Kerala concerning their knowledge systems and the educational processes they are coupled with. The arguments of this study are formed on a rationale of the righteousness of Adivasi communities, whereas in their educational contexts, there is, perhaps, an anxiety of incompatibility (Manojan, 2012 & 2018). This inquiry will qualitatively assess how significant their knowledge practices are in their everyday lives, and to what extent formal education systems attempt to mediate with their aspirations from a social justice perspective (Freire, 1970).

Decoloniality as Epistemological Contestation: Connecting the Global and the Local

Dialectically, there are two analysis regimes for this specific line of inquiry. One is the larger schema of dispossession of Indigenous communities from their spaces of intellectual autonomy, and the second relies on the politics of knowledge production. It is argued that formal educational systems and its structures are exclusionary to the knowledge practices of Indigenous communities. In academia, this schema of inquiry has been debated mainly in disciplines such as cultural and development anthropology, development studies, and disciplines related to educational studies (Ismail & Cazden, 2005; Manojan, 2017). The cultural question of Indigenous minorities and their language rights has been a vital component in recent approaches under postcolonial frameworks and Indigenous cultural studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Upcoming sections have been derived from recent discourses on Indigenous knowledge in development anthropology and related disciplines. The purpose of this review is to make sense and reflect on the rights framework of Indigenous communities from an international perspective, not by limiting its empirical relevance in the specific context of inquiry in Wayanad.

Decolonisation in academia has been prominent in the Indigenous knowledge debate (Frank, 1983; Mace, 1999; Smith, 1999 & 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). It has been argued that the epistemological regime of academic knowledge is dominated by Euro-centric or Western forms of knowledge frameworks, which have abruptly constructed a binary of the legitimate West and illegitimate 'others' (Briggs & Sharp, 2004; Escobar, 1995). This has commonly implicated a hegemony over the Global South regarding knowledge production. This hegemony has further impacted the Indigenous population of Third World countries by subjugating their language, culture, and identity. This has raised questions of indignity that engage with the politics of social justice, human rights, and self-respect of Indigenous populations.

This contention has created certain milestones in academia, remarkably in the movements for an Indigenised curriculum in universities in indigenous regions (Mauro & Harrison, 2000). Movements led by Māori communities at Waikato University are considered the pinnacle in this context, producing a counter-hegemony against New Zealand colonial academia (Frank, 1983; McCarty, 2005). Similarly, there have been movements in various regions advocating

for legitimate recognition and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. This contention has evoked a synergy in the epistemological domain, wherein the international community has started recognising the potential of local community expressions in various domains of academic knowledge. Traditional technologies of many communities have produced promising innovations in science, technology, and agriculture, as well as in domains such as climate change resilience. In the cultural domain, most expressions of Indigenous subaltern populations are derived from the kernel of their rich, varied folklore traditions. This has created pathways in many universities to start academic departments on Indigenous cultures and literature. Along with Māori communities in New Zealand, many other Indigenous groups from Australia and Latin American countries have also raised similar waves of epistemological counter-hegemony, advocating for their representation in academia (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999).

If we analyse the pattern of these movements, they have made no significant interventions in the South Asian region to create currents of similar epistemological contestations. Nevertheless, these concerns are pertinent across geographies and have become a question of reckoning for the Indigenous population. South Asia—as a region representing tribal and Indigenous communities—seems to have similar cultural patterns of experiencing subjugation when asserting their culture, identity, and knowledge systems. Even though the questions are more or less similar across communities, significant movements and collective representation still need to be reported and advocated for as legitimate educational movements which represent the question of what is considered knowledge.

In India, there have been representations from communities pointing out the dominant mainstream or middle-class consciousness hegemony in the school education curriculum. This contention has raised concerns about the limited possibility of children from tribal communities to receive an emancipatory education. Alternative schooling experiments have raised some questions about the ideology of formal schooling which is insensitive to the knowledge concerns of the children of Adivasi communities (Manojan, 2019b). It has been argued that existing schooling systems limit the possibilities of Adivasi community children to articulate themselves and experience democratic schooling. Indigenous and cultural rights of children have been given less concern in the making of the school curricula, which has often represented an urban, middle-class view and delegitimised Adivasi cultures at large.

Methodological Framework

A qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) was adopted for the study by gathering data from four upper primary schools in Wayanad district of Kerala for around two years. The respondents were mainly children, parents, and leaders from the Paniya community, as well as teachers, activists, and experts working in the district and elsewhere. Intensive fieldwork was conducted through ethnographic methods of survey, interviews, and observation. The fieldwork was administered by making each selected school the locus of inquiry, where a proportion of respondents were equally considered. Respondents were divided into six categories: Adivasi students, teachers, parents, community leaders, educational experts, and social activists. Data from students, teachers, and parents was collected in three different schedules using a structured questionnaire. Information from community leaders, educational experts, and social activists was collected through informal interviews and focused group discussions.

Formal Education and Adivasi Children: An Overview

The argument, when taken in the Indian context, laments a range of issues in the knowledge dissemination process for the Adivasi children as mentioned earlier (Government of Kerala, 2005; Manojan, 2012 & 2018). It is argued that the problem in knowledge distribution cannot be addressed in isolation since it is borne from a plethora of contradictions within the structure of pedagogic formation and the social system. (Basheer, 1997). These contradictions include the portrayal of social backwardness in 'mainstream' images and the related deprivation Adivasi children experience throughout their lives. School as a platform for providing knowledge represents the dominant imagery of society, and hence, Adivasi children are exposed to all the exclusionary mechanisms that civil society exercises. Internally and externally, schooling structures and processes exhibit the same social psychology of discrimination towards Adivasi children as do societal structures.

In essence, the historical trajectory of the education of Adivasi children in India indicates that communities have not been able to utilise education as a means of self-expression, self-realisation, and personality development (Shaw, 2005, p. 122). Education ought to be a weapon of liberation for Adivasis since they have experienced continuous exploitation and oppression for generations. Instead, the education they receive is substantially tainted by colonial dialects and casteism supremacy—which is further sweeping them into new forms of oppression

(Larka, 2010; Pinto, 2004, p. 18). One of the major conflicts between Adivasi children and the curriculum and pedagogy they are taught with originates from a lack of concern towards Adivasi knowledge systems which includes a variety of folk, medicinal, agricultural, architectural, and other streams of practical wisdom. The curricular ideals transmitted through teaching methodology, textbooks, and their contents compound Adivasi children's alienated learning experience (Kumar, 1985, p. 331). The urban-centric pedagogy of the Indian education system is incapable of enhancing the ability of Adivasi students to understand their world and changing lifestyles. The role of education becomes increasingly important in circumstances like these, since it is essential to act consciously in life's situations. It is contended that education in Adivasi areas has less to do with literacy concerns than with their culture and identity (Mahanthi, 2004, p. 142). In sum, the Adivasi student may contextualise the school as an alien space which provides knowledge unknown to their worldview, in an unfamiliar dialect. Keerthi (2010, p. 286) suggests that classroom and learning spaces must respond to the diverse contexts of children. It is necessary to negotiate protections for downtrodden sections from dominant exercises thwarting their autonomous learning experiences. Otherwise, they slip through classroom interactions and continue to remain unacknowledged and marginalised in educational endeavours.

Educational Context of Adivasi Communities in Kerala

Tribal communities in Kerala have experienced exploitation and marginalisation throughout their history (Economic Review, 2008). Though these communities have heterogeneous identities and distinct social formations, they all have undergone severe dispossession of material resources. Their autonomy and ownership of public spaces and land has been disadvantaged by land alienation, caste domination, and economic deprivation, coupled with impediments created by colonialism (Kunhaman, 1989). Among the 40 tribal communities in Kerala, Paniyars are considered the most deprived community in terms of social progress achieved in different spheres of social life. Paniyars were one of the tribal groups who were agrestic slaves of landlords from the early 13th century until pre-independence, until as recently as the 1980s (Kunhaman, 1989; Johny, 2006). Therefore, the transition trajectories they have undergone are inseparable from various demographic and sociopolitical changes.

The tribal population in Kerala has recorded an increase in each census document. In 1961, their population was 2,12,762 and ten years later, this figure increased to 2,69,356. In 2001,

their population reached 3.64 lakhs; in 2011, it was 4.26 lakhs, maintaining an average share of 1.2% to 1.4% of the total population. The survey in 1961 enlisted 48 tribal communities in Kerala—including de-notified tribal communities—which was finalised at 36 communities in the 1971 census (Mathur, 1985). Tribal populations have a presence in almost all districts in the state and are concentrated mainly in Wayanad, Idukki, Kasaragod, and Kannur (KILA, 2013). P. R. G Mathur (1985) has divided tribal areas of Kerala into seven sub-regions according to their demographic concentration and sociocultural relations. The first is the Kasaragod Zone in northern Kerala, comprising Koraga and Marathi communities. The second is Wayanad which has more than 12 tribal communities like Paniyar, Adiyar, Kattunaikar, Kurichya, and Mullukkuruma. The Attapady Zone in Palakkad district comprises Irular, Mudugar, and Kurumbar communities of Mannarkad taluk. The Parambikulam Zone—also within Palakkad district—has a population of Kadars (of Kochin) enlisted as a Primitive Tribal Group. Nilambur Zone is in Malappuram district, which is inhabited by communities like Cholanaikans, Kattu Paniyans, and Kurumans. Other than these five zones in the north, there are two others: Idukki and Trivandrum. Idukki—which consists of Peerumed, Udumbanchola, Devikulam, and Thodupuzha taluks—is the second-largest zone after Wayanad, with half of its area comprising reserved forests. Uralis, Muthuvans, Mannans, and Malayarayans are the significant communities found in this region. The seventh zone—Trivandrum district in southern Kerala—consists of Nedumangad and Neyyatinkara taluks.

Kerala's development trajectory earned fame for its strides in education and health. Strong political will for literacy and an effective public education system contributed to educational growth in the state (Isaac et al., 1997). Generally, this image is synonymous with modern conceptions of literacy and education, but it has different implications for Adivasi societies in the post-print era. Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and comprehend, whereas education is the systemic process of learning that enhances overall growth in individuals through knowledge transactions. Literacy provides a way to access knowledge whereas education is a means for attaining knowledge.

In both aspects, the magnitude of learning differs in terms of forming a 'literate' person versus an 'educated' person. This distinction helps us analyse the growth of Kerala's literate population. Even now, a large amount of the tribal population remains merely literate in a language other than their mother tongue, whereas literates in non-tribal populations are

educated in their mother tongue or in a familiar language. The transition from a literate individual to an educated person should have occurred in sites of learning but empirical experiences lament that this transition has not been facilitated in existing practices of schooling (Manojan; 2018 & 2019a).

In the case of Kerala, it must be acknowledged that political entities have been continuously engaged in making education responsive to the needs of the people (Isaac et al, 1997). The Leftist Government in Kerala advocated for public education as a major development issue since it first took charge in 1957 with the famous Kerala Education Bill. Organisations like the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad made remarkable interventions in campaigning about literacy and public education. Their advocacy of ‘neighbourhood schools’ transformed the idea of public schooling into a moral obligation and collective responsibility of the common masses (Parameswaran, 1989). Raising public consciousness about public education was the catalyst that resulted in a more robust public education system in Kerala.

Indeed, the state provided many welfare schemes for improving education for Adivasi children in preventive and development aspects. Nevertheless, at the implementation level improvement has not been as fruitful as needed (Narayana, 2010). Disparities between tribal and non-tribal sections are prevalent and have continued for a long time. Though enrollment rates of tribal children have seen considerable improvement, the retention of these children has been tremendously low with a high incidence of dropouts. The following section provides an empirical analysis of the educational engagement of tribal communities in Kerala in general and Wayanad in particular.

The pertinent question on the dropout issue is that why, even after various efforts to solve it, the status of Adivasi children continues to remain vulnerable in attaining a productive learning experience from schools (Heredia, 1992 & 1995; Sujatha, 1999 & 2002). This concern is relevant across all tribal regions in the country. The alarming rates of high dropout rates among children of Adivasi communities should be seen in the context of their encounters with education as a modernity-led project.

When analysing educational growth in Kerala, it is found that though the state has made remarkable achievements in education, employment, and other public domains, the position of

Adivasi communities remains severely disadvantaged. The universalisation of primary education has not included Adivasi populations. Further, formal schooling structures continue to be incapable of addressing the genuine aspirations of Adivasi children. It can be argued that many predicaments in Adivasi education are yet to be explored. This paper is, in a way, an attempt to contribute to such explorations by probing how Indigenous knowledge of the Adivasi community is essential to their education.

Mapping the Transition from Agrestic Slaves to Unorganised Sector Workers

Paniyars are seen in all parts of Wayanad and contribute to more than 70% of the entire Adivasi population in the district. Other than Wayanad, they are found in Kannur, Kasargod, and Kozhikode districts of Kerala, Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu, and Coorg district of Karnataka. The etymology of Paniyar is derived from the Malayalam word *pani,* which means ‘work’ or labour, since Paniyar means a person assigned to doing menial jobs (Gopi, 2014).

On the origin of Paniyars, plenty of myths and oral narratives are prevalent along with historical evidence and presumptions. Paniyars of Wayanad are considered the ‘Negrito’ type; there are arguments connecting Adivasis and ‘Negros’ (hereafter ‘Black Africans’) of Africa (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909). Their physical features are similar to Black Africans with regard to height, colour complexion, curly hair, thick lips, and physical attire (Nair, 1976). Historically, it is possible that Indigenous communities in Wayanad settled in the region centuries ago during the procession of their nomadic life. One of the major arguments on the origin of Paniyars is that they chose to settle in this region—during their flight from northwest to southeast parts of the Asian subcontinent which ended in Western Ghats—for rich resources and safety. Anthropologists have another narrative: during the Megalithic period, a group of Black Africans from the African continent had reached Andaman Island passing South India, so it is assumed that they had a period of stay in some parts there.

William Logan (1951) gives another account.[1] He contends that the Moors enslaved hundreds of Black Africans and caged them in ship containers which got shipwrecked at the Malabar

[1] Moors were the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula of Sicily and Malta of the Middle Ages, later termed Arabs by Europeans. Here, the Moors are Muslim traders on the path connecting East Africa, the Middle East, and the Malabar Coast.

Coast. This population made its way to the Wayanad region where they encountered a geography like African forests, prompting them to settle there. Gopi (2014) argues that this story is less logical considering this small crowd expanded by combating diseases and calamities to their present population of more than half a lakh. Instead, he endorses the theory that the first flight from the west African region to the south occurred when the African-Asian continents were separated. These narratives—on the origin and presence of Paniyars in the broader territory of Coorg in Karnataka to the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu through Wayanad—give grounds to the claim that Paniyars are probably one of the first Indigenous Adivasi communities in South India (Gopi, 2014).

Regarding demography, Adivasi communities in Wayanad district contribute 17.43% of its total population (Panchayath Level statistics, 2006). The major communities are Paniyan (44.77%), Mullu Kuruman (17.51%), Kurichian (17.38%), Kattunaikan (9.93%), Adiyar (7.10%), and Urali Kuruman (2.69%). They are categorised into three major types based on profession: agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, and forest dependents. Paniyan and Adiyar communities (traditionally bonded labourers) and Urali Kuruman (traditionally artisans) constitute a major share of agricultural labourers (Namboothiri, 2006, p. 8). Paniya are the largest Adivasi community among all 36 Adivasi groups in Kerala which altogether contribute to 22.5% of the total Adivasi population. Paniya inhabit Wayanad, Kannur, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Palakkad, and some parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The overwhelming majority (72%) of the total Paniya population in Kerala is concentrated in Wayanad district (Namboothiri, 2006, p. 8; Narayanaswami, 2011, p. 5).

There is a wide variety of details in the ethnohistory of Paniyars (Santhosh, 2008, p. 62). Historical studies show that Paniyars were first considered 'hidden' Adivasis and led a food-gatherer way of life. When exposed to people from outside, diverse changes occurred in their socioeconomic and political lives. At a later stage, they were made bonded labourers by landlords. Over the years, their living context and surroundings changed due to the influence of migrants, planters, and small-scale farmers who established their dwellings in the district and became settlers. The transformation of the Paniya from being a bonded labourer to a wage labourer occurred during this period. The settlers—more precisely, the Christians and Muslims who migrated from the southern part of Kerala—extracted labour from the Paniyars at

abysmally low wages. This exploitation has had a significant impact on the socioeconomic condition of Adivasi communities in this region (Santhosh, 2008, pp. 62–67).

As everywhere else, Adivasi communities in Wayanad have mainly been de-tribalised by sociocultural transitions in the region since the middle of the last century due to their continuous interaction with settlers and oppressive transactions with market establishments (Reji, 2010). As a result, their traditional lifestyle has increasingly changed and affected their customary laws and practices and brought many problems and insecurities into their lives (Mathew, 2010). In addition, when the market started becoming a middle agent in their lives, their food gathering techniques needed to be transformed to cope with the values of the modern market, further depriving them of substantial material resources needed to run their lives.

Though the Paniya community is submerged into different groups and subgroups, each Adivasi community is heterogeneous. Their culture and knowledge systems are unique. In this context, Reji (2010) observes that:

> They, with no help from the modern system of reading or writing, lend their lives a new reading through their oral tradition. They have unique worldviews and unique life ways that elaborately manifest them in their human-nature relationship, socialization narratives, body movements that creatively renew their lives, and rituals and customs delineating every significant event from birth to death.

The livelihood of Paniyars is based on the forest and their knowledge systems were closely linked to nature. They practice unique models of Indigenous governance during social occasions, like many other regional Adivasis. They have a civil problem-solving mechanism by which they discuss their problems and find solutions by sitting together in the presence of a chief (*Chemmi*), thereby retaining a logical model of social justice (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909, p. 57). This is an example of Indigenous self-governance. A modified or different form of this is common in many rural villages of South Indian states.

The language of the Paniya Adivasi is Paniya, a mixture of ancient Malayalam and Tamil languages which have no script. For any Indigenous community, the role of language is not merely limited to being a medium of communication. Instead, it conveys the history of their culture and knowledge. The historical heritage of any community is mainly confined to their

shared traditions, language, culture, boundaries, and names. The oral tradition of disseminating knowledge accounts for these elements. The legends, myths, histories, and struggles of the Paniya community are conveyed and transmitted by folk songs and storytelling. Animals, birds, trees, and God become the characters of these traditional narratives. These traditional songs are strong narrations of their culture and identity.[2] In many songs, they convey several myths about their origin and exploitations experienced in their history. Their struggle against oppression and exploitation is embodied within these songs as well (Joseph, 2008).

Penappattu is a traditional folk art of Paniyars. It is usually sung at funerals to ensure the well-being of spirits (*Geisst*) of the dead. Likewise, *Vattakkali* is another important form of art. During every momentous and divine occasion, they perform *Vattakkali*. It is remarkable as an ethnic and cultural performance. This art form reflects Paniya Adivasi solidarity. Songs accompany this folk performance and dance is used along with *Thudi* music. *Thudi* is a musical instrument and a symbol of Paniya culture. In terms of other fields, ethnic medicines known to Paniyars can heal many diseases which modern medicines fail to cure (Nair, 1976; Joseph, 2008). Similarly, house construction technology of Paniyars such as roofing walls are ecofriendly and last for hundreds of years without much damage. Likewise, they have maintained unique technologies for farming, irrigation, and storage for paddy cultivation.

Keeping this in mind, let us now consider the specific question of their education. This field study does not presume that Indigenous knowledge has been completely neglected in the regime of public schooling or that this is the sole reason for the disadvantaged position of Adivasi children. Instead, this research aims to map the processes and perceptions of Adivasi folklore pertaining to the educational systems they are attached with. Though this study's methodology draws inferences from teachers and social activists, it prioritises the expressions of children and adults of the Adivasi community and considers them as 'within', which is more significant than external perceptions.

[2] The documentary film *Kanvu Malyilekku* (Journey to the Hill of Dreams) directed by Sasi in 2007 is about a Paniya Adivasi education institute called Kanavu in Cheengode, Wayanad. The documentary also illustrates the folk art and history of Paniyars.

The discussion on the field analysis is categorised into two sections. The first section is inferences from Adivasi children, teachers, and parents on their perception of different elements of the schooling process. This comprehensive understanding drawn from them is a priority to this study since they are at the initial stage of educational engagement. Adivasi children, teachers, and parents are well-informed about microprocesses happening within and outside the school. The second section is an account of community leaders and social activists working for Adivasi education which is elaborated upon contextually.

The Caveat of Schooling: Reflection from Children, Teachers, and Parents

Children respondents to this study principally come from the most vulnerable economic backgrounds and primarily work as agricultural wage labourers. The Paniya community in the selected area traditionally practiced farming, ploughing, and reaping paddy fields. A few have now shifted to construction and other informal labour sectors. Women are still often engaged in collecting forest resources as demonstrated by the 'leisure work' they do. Children who hail from these habitations perceive schools as places that would bring them money, employment, civilised language, and modern culture. Children conveyed an expression that emphasised many hurdles that exist in their everyday schooling. They reported attending school on and off and showed an interest in being absent from school or occasionally being present at home. The study found a prevalence of dropouts among children. Almost every family in the selected settlements had at least two dropout cases in the last 10 years. Everyone shared common reasons such as poverty and related deprivations. A few female children stopped schooling after puberty, and a few stopped when they became siblings to infants.

Other than these structural determinants, when approached with the subject of school lessons, most children showed disinterest and shyness. They expressed school lessons as something tremendously mechanical which is poured on them. When given exercises like dictation and spelling, even older students needed help to answer them correctly. Children stated that they faced difficulties understanding class lessons and Hindi language was the most challenging subject. Malayalam—the state language and medium of instruction—was also considered with a certain uneasiness. Children shared that they couldn't follow and identify specific words whereas their non-Adivasi classmates could comprehend and perform exercises more comfortably. Within the community and among their Adivasi peers, these children communicate only in the Paniya language which is also their mother tongue. In school, they

are not allowed to communicate in Paniya or their Adivasi mother tongues, even though there are no written restrictions. Children shared that they become objects of humiliation if they make mistakes when trying to recite certain Malayalam words in 'authentic' pronunciation. They even experience humiliation when they state their family members' names in the classroom since everybody laughs at the names.

Adivasi children face severe obstacles in comprehending and performing classroom tasks. They self-identified as 'below' the 'smart' kids in the classroom who spoke well, wrote well, and appeared comfortable with the teachers. While interrogating the issue of dropping out, the primary reason appeared to be failing in divisions. Examinations are the primary criteria for promotion from one class to another; when children show poor performance, they fail to get promoted to the next division. Upon the apprehension of failure, Adivasi children stop their schooling of their own accord. As per the latest Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) report, division failure was the primary reason for dropouts (2013). Interestingly, most Adivasi children preferred to avoid the process of examinations since it required hectic exercises like memorising and written reproduction. Additionally, the children felt that their writing and reading skills were not commensurate to enable them to satisfactorily express their understanding in answer sheets, making them doubly vulnerable.

In the case of extracurricular engagements, Adivasi children said that they were fond of playing, singing, and other activities. Most children were interested in playing in school settings, specifically modern games like cricket and football. However, a few were also interested in playing traditional games on the school grounds. Girls were interested in playing folk forms like *Vattakkali* with friends, but they were not used to performing them since other girls mocked them.

Traditional art forms like folk songs and group games are emblems of Adivasi culture and Indigenous knowledge. Nevertheless, the new generation of school students are less fond of acquiring these folk ways. Most of them need special awareness on any of the traditional art forms of their community. For those who know these art forms and are interested in performing them, teachers usually discourage them. It could be said that schools are failing to provide opportunities to enable Adivasi children identify themselves with their own Indigenous art

forms. In due process, these activities will be erased from the schooling experiences of Adivasi children.

Since most children are from a farming background, their interest in agricultural activities has been explored in this study. Children were invited to give suggestions for activities during the Work Experience class. Options like tailoring, pottery making, and embroidery were offered by the school. Surprisingly, 93% of the children instead suggested gardening, banana cultivation, and vegetable farming. These children—who perform relatively poorly in classrooms—expressed interest in their parents' work. They would accompany their parents to the fields and stated that they could do the tasks as perfectly as their parents.

The study's teacher respondents had spent over ten years in the region engaging students with Malayalam, English, Hindi, Basic Science, Social Sciences, and Physical Education. Teachers expressed their experiences engaging with Adivasi children with a complex attitude. Teachers of liberal, traditional, and democratic approaches all had distinct concerns for the education of Adivasi children. Teachers with traditional attitudes believed that Adivasi children possess lower intelligence and a not-so-civilised cultural background and were incapable of perceiving educational knowledge 'correctly'. In addition, they believed their parents were sending them to school to avail grant-in-aid, which they believed would eventually be spent on alcohol. These teachers believed that Adivasi children needed help studying correctly regardless of pedagogical effort. This category of teachers did not aspire to make any improvements in the education of Adivasi children.

Teachers with a liberal attitude seemed to be aware of the issues of Adivasi children and had some concern for them; they offered special care to them to a certain extent in the classroom and during school as well. They had come to a consensus that Adivasi children needed deeper intervention, but they were not keen on exerting intensive effort towards this at their level. Instead, some teachers have strived to make their classroom inclusive, keeping in mind Adivasi children's various sociocultural, economic, and political vulnerabilities. These teachers often attempted to encourage the participation of Adivasi children by trying different methods to evoke their interest in schooling. They thought that collective intervention from teachers as well as the community (and children) at the receiving end can bring in emancipation.

Nevertheless, after compiling all the responses it appears that most teachers agreed that Adivasi students struggled to understand subjects taught at school. Students' disinterest in attending school and classes is a key problem. Issues such as unfamiliarity with the curriculum and its complexity have been stated as major hurdles for Adivasi students. Some teachers opined that students were interested in having elements of their traditional knowledge included in the curriculum. They noticed that Adivasi students participated more actively in the classroom when discussions were held on topics related to their community. More than half of the teacher respondents critiqued the existing curriculum and its suitability for Adivasi students. Incorporating the traditional knowledge base of local Adivasi communities in the school curriculum could be key to more encouraging modes of education for Adivasi children.

As mentioned before, most Adivasi parents are daily wage labourers in agriculture and similarly unorganised sectors, getting around 20 days of paid work in a month. The wage they receive is comparatively less than that of a non-Adivasi worker doing the same work. Economic instability is a major obstacle common among Adivasi families. Houses are in a pathetic condition; most are midway through construction while they await financial assistance from government schemes. Parents shared that they had expectations from their children's schooling; they believed their children would settle their financial troubles when they got jobs after completing their schooling. Most of them expressed that alongside school, their children also accompany them to community engagements and functions and are aware of many of their traditional practices because they have been familiar with them since early childhood. Nevertheless, many parent respondents opined that children of newer generations were only fond of certain traditions as opposed to their own childhood experiences with traditional knowledge. One parent said:

> We have learned many things when we accompany our parents and community people in performing these tasks. We used to go with them into the forest and collect many things, which were used for different purposes in terms of medicines, food, and fuel. Nowadays, most kids need help even to recognise what is for what. These new kids sometimes will not listen to us if we ask something. Now they have their preferences to spend their time.

When asked about the impact of schooling on their community life, no parent said that they found schooling to be a disturbing project. A parent said:

> We are deprived of and experiencing suffering today because we are not educated and have no jobs. Now the conditions have changed too much and there are provisions for our kids to go to school without hunger. Our kids will become respectable persons in my community and will take care of our needs too.

Altogether, parents were widely accepting of schooling processes and expected the system to enrich their children's capabilities to both maintain community traditions and engage with the world beyond, surrounded as they are by modern knowledge and complicated transactions. All parents were well-informed of the relevance and significance of education for their children and did not perceive it as a force that would thwart their culture and knowledge systems. Surprisingly, only a few parents expressed a wish to see their children as agricultural workers in the future instead of steadier office-based jobs or government jobs.

Perceptions of Schooling: Within and Outside the Community

This section analyses responses of community leaders and social activists working in Adivasi regions. They were asked to respond to different questions on how community knowledge was relevant to them and how schooling related to their culture and knowledge systems.

A teacher from the community shared that:

> In the classroom environment, tribal children's problems start with language and then [they] develop difficulty in understanding subjects. In most schools where the Paniya tribes have lived, Malayalam is the communication medium, and these tribal children are taught English and Hindi. Regardless of their best learning skills the tribal students dropped out. The reason is that the Paniya tribe has its dialect or traditional language which they speak in their community. They must be more exposed to mainstream languages such as Malayalam, English, and Hindi. A child in the lower primary class usually struggles to understand Malayalam. There is no provision for a Paniya child to study in their mother tongue. Alienation from one's language frustrates the child when interacting with friends [who use] Malayalam vocabulary. Since there are no other ways for tribal children to exercise existing provisions to learn Malayalam, the only option left for tribal children is to just [drop] out of the school.

She added:

> In actual practice, we create an alien climate in schools by providing them with an unknown language and unfamiliar worldviews which fail to create an identity consciousness among the children. Peer groups, teachers, and the public act in making another identity that I [the Adivasi] am black, uncivilized by language, and should stay in the lower strata of society.

At the outset, community leaders considered their traditional knowledge as an essential part of their culture, and they wanted to preserve it through their younger generations. However, they stated that recent generations of children needed to be more interested in learning Indigenous knowledge practices. The community stated that education of their children was a prime concern for them. They firmly believed that only education could bring progress to their community and youth. They were well-informed about the troubling conditions and problems their children were facing in school, that children were dropping out and starting to work for money instead. Beyond awareness, community leaders expected a change. More precisely, they demanded an educational system that addressed the needs and aspirations of Adivasi children by balancing the community's demands with capabilities required to succeed in a modern labour market. Community leaders believed that the continued existence of their traditional knowledge systems heavily depended on the new generation, particularly school-going children. Keeping this in mind, they wanted an education that doesn't become a channel to deviate Adivasi children from their traditional entitlements, such as different community knowledge systems.

On the other hand, social activists were more concerned about the social exclusion of Adivasi children in schools due to their ethnic identity. They stated that Adivasi students continued to face exclusion because of caste, race, and language. This exclusion was most acutely manifest in school. Exclusion often led to Adivasi students getting demotivated and quitting school. Activists opined that there are many shortfalls in the current formal school environment for Adivasi students. In their view, effective modification of these shortfalls starts with including Adivasi languages and other traditional values in the curriculum.

Activists also stated that teachers were not keen on caring for Adivasi students. This, in their experience, is the primary reason why Adivasi children continue to underperform in the classroom. Activists stated that Adivasi children require a great deal of motivation to come forward because they are coming from a lived history and life experience that have been silenced by political oppression. They perceived that market forces and modern lifestyle have

greatly affected Adivasi culture. The same stigmatising effect is embodied in the education system; Adivasi children are considered second-grade citizens as compared to mainstream children.

Conclusion

'Indigenous knowledge' is the new buzzword in recent development discourses. Different global and local agencies are keen about the possibility of advancing regimes of new knowledge frameworks. Community participation and sustainable development policies in rural and Adivasi areas encounter an extensive resource base in traditional knowledge systems of Adivasi populations. However, it has been contended that recent conservation efforts have accorded negligible or no recognition to Indigenous people who create, own, and preserve these knowledge systems for generations (World Bank, 1998; United Nations, 2009). Indigenous knowledge creators work without any motive of profit or marketability since these notions are alien to their everyday life. They embody these epistemologies in their folklore and in their life organically. At this present juncture, filled with multiple impediments, the rich resources of Adivasi knowledge systems are under threat. Either it is being systematically hacked from their life worlds using legal tools such as Intellectual Property rights or it is being appropriated by external agencies locally and internationally. Education floats in a social milieu where teaching and learning practices and policy frameworks are inadequately concerned about Adivasi needs and aspirations. Given the profound and universal implications of reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems (Seana, 2000), this paper has attempted to understand the extent to which formal schooling structures acknowledge the importance of knowledge systems for Indigenous people and their impact on children from these communities.

Adivasi communities in India are caught in a flux between adapting to market changes and preserving their culture and identity (Larka, 2010). The praxis of education can promise emancipatory possibilities to children from vulnerable communities to raise and contest their survival positions. However, existing practices are argued to be unsuccessful in providing democratic and autonomous modes of learning. Pedagogic processes are framed against the notion of empowerment of the marginalised instead it focuses on the subjugation of the already downtrodden (Freire, 1970) Based on this analysis of Adivasi communities in Kerala, it is argued that educational policies of both state and central governments in the country are failing to address the genuine aspirations and requirements of Adivasi communities; the denigration

of Indigenous knowledge systems in the curricular frameworks is a significant result of this failure. Based on the results of this study, simply including Indigenous knowledge in the curricula is not a solution; local and traditional knowledge must be faithfully utilised for the facilitation of learning itself. An active engagement with practical and theoretical knowledge of Indigenous populations can create a foundation for them to autonomously construct knowledge about themselves and their life worlds and enrich their interaction with modern knowledge systems.

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