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*Special Collection: Limitations and Possibilities of Justice
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INTERVENTIONS: POLICY AND PRACTICE

Taking charge of change: building community ownership for educational change with Indigenous communities

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Education is often posed as the harbinger of progress in discourses related to the development of marginalised Indigenous communities. However, since they entered the mainstream schools in the 1960s, the four Indigenous communities of Gudalur, India have experienced various forms of injustice in seeking formal education. This article draws from the work of the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust, a community-driven organisation that has been working on matters related to the education of these four communities since 1996, and two research initiatives that captures the community's voices on their experiences and aspirations related to education, to put forth recommendations for practice that is geared towards greater equality and justice for the children of Indigenous communities. Rooted in the belief that the active participation of the community is crucial to devising solutions that truly address in a sustainable manner the historical injustices faced by them, the article outlines various interventions at different sites of learning that builds community ownership and nurtures a meaningful continuum between the home and school environment of the children.

Keywords education of Indigenous communities • education for social justice
• critical pedagogy

Key messages

- Education systems reflect and perpetuate existing power structures, disadvantaging marginalised communities. Transformative approaches are needed to make education culturally relevant and promote justice.
- True liberation in education occurs when communities have power in decision-making processes. Community-based solutions are essential to adapting education to suit the needs of the community.
- Initiatives like the Vidyodaya Adivasi School demonstrate how reorienting education objectives to address community needs can empower marginalised communities. By

involving Adivasi teachers and integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum, these interventions promote community ownership to create meaningful learning environments.

- Building community ownership requires understanding community needs, involving community members in decision making, establishing the village as a site of learning, and creating culturally relevant curricula and assessment practices. Policy changes are also needed to support community ownership in education.

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Introduction

In a world marred by persistent injustices and stark inequalities, our education systems stand as both a reflection of these disparities and as a potential catalyst for social change. However, the complex interplay between institutions and identities in our prevailing reality results in education reproducing paradigms of power rather than rewriting them. Our current education system is influenced by existing power structures and mirrors the knowledge, cultural norms and values of dominant groups. Consequently, children from marginalised communities find themselves systematically disadvantaged while struggling with an education that is culturally irrelevant and historically uninformed about their needs and realities. Nevertheless, driven by the hope for a better future through formal education, people from marginalised communities continue to seek schooling at the cost of their culture and values. Hence, education remains a site of injustice, underscoring the persistent need for transformative approaches that honour diversities and promote justice.

Currently, most endeavours towards social justice in education continue to operate within the confines of the inequitable structures that they are trying to reshape. It remains true that ‘So long as educational personnel, processes, curricula and pedagogy continue to be controlled by groups that maintain oppressive relations with the rest of society, there is little hope of change’ (Madan et al, 2019: 45). Redistribution of power is key to creating educational processes that are culturally relevant and contextually meaningful for children from marginalised communities. True liberation remains unattainable as long as the communities’ voices are systematically silenced in the decision-making processes that shape their lives and futures. Therefore, embracing community-based solutions is imperative. To empower communities to reclaim their agency, education must adapt itself to better suit the needs and realities of the community, not the other way round.

This article draws on the work of the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust, a community-driven organisation dedicated to the education of four Indigenous communities in Gudalur, India since 1996. It incorporates insights from a research project capturing the community’s voices, reflecting their experiences and aspirations related to education. The article presents insights geared towards fostering greater equality and justice for the children of Indigenous communities through building community ownership in educational initiatives.

The context and philosophy of the work

The forests surrounding the Gudalur valley in Tamil Nadu have been home to the Indigenous Adivasi communities of Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan, Mullakurumba and Paniya¹ for centuries, each with its distinct language, culture and history. Despite a shared Adivasi² identity, these communities have unique socio-economic positions shaped by their individual historical trajectories. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, various government acts that regulated access to the forest, as well as the influx of migrant populations, created fundamental shifts in the way of life of all four of these communities, estranging them from the land that was home and pushing them into the alienating world of modernity. Free movement in the forests were restricted and many of them were forced into exploitative agreements with members of the dominant classes.

Amid this adversity, the trust Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation, and Development (ACCORD) recognised the common struggles of these communities. In 1988, a massive land rights protest march by a few thousand Adivasis marked a turning point, uniting the four communities and voicing a collective demand for their rights. The Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) was established in the same year as a people's collective for members of all four tribes. The AMS aimed to enhance the quality of life for the Adivasis, focusing on health, education, community organisation and livelihood. The vision was to empower the community towards autonomy and self-reliance, fostering a movement towards self-determination and dignity.

The founding principle of the AMS was that power and decision making should rest with the community. Non-tribal facilitators should offer the necessary to develop the capacities of community members and gradually step back from active participation, enabling the community to drive initiatives independently. Thus began the journey of the community towards shaping their own narrative.

Riding the wave created by AMS, the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) came to being in 1993. In 1995, a *mahasabha*³ of 200 Adivasi leaders expressed a demand for an Adivasi school. Since then, VBVT has been working with members of the community to create a culturally appropriate and contextually meaningful ecosystem of learning for their children. While the nature of issues faced by the organisation has changed over time, the fundamental aim has always been for the community to experience education as an emancipatory force. Critical pedagogy presents a framework for transformative education that challenges the traditional role of schooling and emphasises the importance of fostering critical thinking and social awareness. As Richard Shaull articulates in the foreword to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a seminal text in critical pedagogy,

Education either functions as an instrument used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, fostering conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, a means by which individuals critically and creatively engage with reality and learn to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaull, 2014: 34)

In the current landscape, the growing privatisation of education tends to view it merely as a service to be delivered, diminishing its status as a public good. When education is reduced to a transactional service, its potential for fostering critical thinking and social transformation is limited as it maintains the power imbalances

within an unperturbed status quo. Instead of encouraging diversity, this approach often emphasises integration and conformity, especially in the case of marginalised communities like the Adivasis. For these communities, education is often perceived as a tool for assimilation, a charitable endeavour designed to mould them into mainstream societal norms. In addition to undermining the intrinsic value of education, this perspective also reduces the community to the role of a beneficiary.

The nature and extent of the community's involvement in decision making determine whether it is as beneficiary, participant, consultant or owner. Education becomes a site of social change only when the community are owners of the initiative and hold power in making and implementing decisions. Recognising and drawing from the community's lived experiences to inform the curriculum and ethos of learning spaces is vital to strengthen the potential of education to enable larger social and development goals. It is established that introducing structured democratic voice through community participation builds accountability, strengthens the enabling environment, increases trust in the system and improves policy ownership (Smith and Benavot, 2019). This leads to the transformation of education and subsequent transformation of society through ensuring that education addresses the authentic needs and aspirations of the people it serves. In alignment with the principles of critical pedagogy, it facilitates the liberation of the oppressed, by the oppressed. However, there is no, single-step solution to achieving community ownership that concludes with transferring power to the disempowered. The process of ceding agency has to be supported with the process of building agency.

In the almost three decades of VBVT's work to date, the organisation has striven to build community ownership in various ways. Initially, VBVT's work started with the Vidyodaya Adivasi School at its centre. However, education operating at an institutional level alone was limited in its reach and catered only to nearby villages. Hence, VBVT also started simultaneously working in the villages in order to broaden its reach, as well as to meet and understand people where they are. Since the two sites of work differ greatly in nature and scope, the insights from them are addressed separately in the next two sections.

Institutional level interventions

The Vidyodaya school originally started as a homeschool for the children of the founders, Rama Sastry and B. Ramdas. As the founders were already working in the AMS ecosystem, children of the Adivasi staff from other AMS institutions also started sending their children to Vidyodaya school. The Adivasi parents were struck by the enthusiasm with which their children studied in Vidyodaya, and how they were able to engage actively in academic learning with ease. This stood in stark contrast to the experiences of Adivasi students in public schools and challenged prejudiced notions about their inability to learn. Hence, in 1995, when the founders were considering closing down the school, leaders from the community asked that it be handed over to the AMS in order to be reshaped as an Adivasi school instead. Subsequently, the trust reoriented its objectives to address matters of education pertaining to the four Adivasi communities of Gudalur. At the time of writing, Vidyodaya Adivasi School operates as a nursery and primary school for 120 Adivasi children from nearby villages and continues to inform and expand the imagination of the community regarding an alternative model of education for their children.

Since the 1960s, when the four Adivasi communities began formal education through the public school system, the experience has been markedly disconnected from their home environment. Schools have failed to recognise that Adivasi children face significant challenges, especially in adapting to the dominant language used in schools, as their first language is their tribe's native tongue. Moreover, these children, accustomed to the freedom of movement within their villages, are suddenly expected to confine themselves within classroom walls and adhere to strict discipline from their very first day in school (Jayakumar et al, 2023). Consequently, the Adivasi child begins their education in an environment with an alienating culture, putting them at an immediate disadvantage. Hence, one of the founding principles of Vidyodaya school was that it would establish and strengthen the continuum between the school and the home environment of the child. Increasing the community's connection with school is also a widely advocated means of improving learning levels, quality and accountability of learning spaces (Dyer et al, 2022).

The year Vidyodaya reoriented itself to be an Adivasi school, a batch of young people from the four communities who had some degree of schooling were recruited to be trained as teachers. In addition to learning the technicalities of teaching, they also learned to understand the history of the community, the prevailing injustices faced by them and ways to escape the cycle of oppression. The teacher training programme at Vidyodaya enabled the young Adivasi individuals to become not only teachers but also agents of change within their community. Additionally, it played a vital role in bridging the gap between home and school. Through this training, these young people acquired the skills and knowledge needed to contribute meaningfully to both the educational development of their community and the integration of their cultural values into the practices and processes of the school.

Along with the young Adivasi teachers, various changes were made to the ethos, curriculum and pedagogy of the school in order to create a better learning environment. The history of the land rights movement, the geography of their villages, traditional food and living practices became integral parts of the curriculum. Moreover, the wisdom of the community's elders found a place in the classroom, where they shared their knowledge, experiences and perspectives with the children. Origin stories, songs and dances, intrinsic to the cultural fabric of the Adivasi community became a part of the daily routine. Here, this was balanced with the requirements of the mainstream school system, where the curriculum also ensured that the students had strong academic foundations in mainstream school subjects.

Crucially, the school embraced a non-hierarchical approach, defying the traditional bureaucratic structure found in most educational institutions. There is no office that separates the principal from the rest of the school, and meetings with school staff occur without imposing bureaucratic barriers like desks, fostering an egalitarian atmosphere. This deliberate avoidance of symbols associated with bureaucratic power creates a space where parents of Adivasi children feel comfortable (Madan et al, 2019). In addition, the decision-making process in the school itself is guided by a collaborative approach where all the teachers come together to discuss and decide on various aspects of running the school. Together, they strive to create a learning environment defined by joy and freedom for the children.

The educational philosophy of the AMS, which underscores the centrality of Adivasi culture, profoundly influences pedagogical innovations at Vidyodaya. Teachers approach their work with immense respect and compassion for the Adivasi students

(Madan et al, 2019). The school also promotes cooperation over competition, deviating from hierarchising methods of assessment. These practices play a pivotal role in enabling Adivasi students to thrive academically and emotionally, fostering an environment where they can make the most out of their school life.

In addition to the school and teacher training, VBVT also runs a residential programme for adolescents from the community studying in mainstream schools, as many of them were unable to continue schooling post primary and middle school due to constraints placed by access, finance and difficult home environments. The programme is led by a team of seven youth, five of whom are community members who joined the initiative after completing their teacher training at VBVT. The residential initiative is also founded on the philosophy of the AMS, and promotes collective decision making, mutual compassion and a cooperative environment that enables the adolescents to navigate the pressures of the mainstream while being firmly grounded in their Adivasi identity. In a world where residential spaces for Adivasi students have been a historical site of violence and assimilation, the hostel run by community members at VBVT presents the possibility of a culturally sensitive and nurturing residential space.

In alignment with the philosophy of community ownership, the board of trustees itself has changed its composition over the years to include more members from the community in its highest decision-making body. The trust board, when first established, consisted of six non-Adivasi members. Currently, there are five Adivasi members and only two non-Adivasi members, with the managing trustee himself being a senior Adivasi leader.

Although the journey towards achieving complete community ownership in these educational initiatives is not complete and not without challenges, the evident growth of both children and the community within these spaces underscores their potential for fostering self-determination. It reaffirms the possibility, promise and prominence of instilling community ownership in educational transformations. In this context, institutions like Vidyodaya are not isolated initiatives but essential means to a broader vision of autonomy, dignity and liberation from oppression for the community. The enduring efforts of AMS reflect a commitment to social transformation, and the institutions it creates drive change rather than vicious cycles of oppression.

Field level interventions: village as a site of learning

A culturally relevant education for Adivasi children depends on an educational ecosystem that nurtures Adivasi identity while preparing children for modernity. Schools and other institutional interventions alone cannot fulfil the diversity of educational needs: Adivasi knowledge, rooted in specific settings and traditions, cannot be learned entirely in institutional settings. Hence, the village becomes a vital site of learning. Recognising the need to establish an ecosystem of education beyond the school, VBVT has been working to reclaim and strengthen the village as a site of learning through its community education initiative.

The village-level work is anchored by education coordinators who are community members as well as leaders. They work closely with a cluster of villages in order to understand the issues faced by children in accessing and attending school, and help create networks and structures that support the growth and well-being of children. They help establish village learning centres, support the volunteers who run them,

organise children's camps and liaise with the government schools to strengthen the learning of children.

The work of the learning centres is at the core of VBVT's efforts to reclaim the village as a site of learning while also building community ownership. Once a village identifies the need for a learning centre, the people of the village select a volunteer to run the centre and the education coordinator supports in training them. The village also comes together to provide space in one of its member's homes to run the learning centre in. Children gather in these spaces after school and on the weekends to engage in a multitude of activities, ranging from completing their homework to learning the songs and stories of their community.

Since the majority of the children at the field level attend government schools, regular children's camps are an effective way to build a sense of identity and unity and support them in making sense of their experiences of schooling. Children also develop their imagination of education through various activities that promote learning through curiosity.

Ultimately, the community education programme is characterised by deep listening and observation. Participants strive to understand the issues of the community and then formulate solutions with them rather than entering the space with a preconceived model. The deep interconnectedness of the initiatives at the community level with the lived realities of people ensures that it remains dynamic and flexible.

Implications

Building community ownership in educational endeavours has profound implications for policy and practice. In practice, the following changes can facilitate community ownership:

- Devoting time and resources to understand the issues faced by the community within its particular context, establish trust and co-create possible interventions with members of the community.
- Having community members actively involved in key decision-making spaces within the institution.
- Establishing the village as a site of learning through volunteer-driven learning centres.
- Strengthening the relationship between the school and villages through the flow of persons, ideas and information.
- Creating culturally relevant and meaningful curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices.
- Supporting community members in accessing opportunities and resources through navigating complex educational bureaucracies.

In the realm of policy, the following changes can create a more favourable context for community ownership:

- Adivasi teacher training programmes that prepare teachers who are culturally sensitive and agents of change within their community.
- Incorporation of modules on the cultural context and educational needs of Adivasi communities in the general teacher training programme.

- Advisory bodies with representatives from diverse Adivasi communities to ensure that the impact on Adivasi students is always considered in the creation of education policies.

Conclusion

The development of community ownership was not as smooth as might appear from this account. We were asking communities who for centuries had been denied agency in their personal, social and economic lives to take ownership of an institution which they did not at that point understand, and to administer it in all its complexity. It took years of work on psychological blocks to studying, to taking leadership, to expressing opinions and making decisions, to taking on governmental structures, and to challenging non-Adivasi landowners, before the community could come together and decide collectively what they wanted for their children.

Work at both the community and institutional levels is needed to create a nurturing and meaningful ecosystem of learning for the Adivasi child. Community ownership emerges through ceding agency and building the decision-making capacities of community members. But the very process of ceding agency, unless it involves the whole community, risks the unintended consequence of allowing power to be concentrated unduly within one or other subgroup of the marginalised.

We firmly advocate that true transformation emerges when the community spearheads the educational journey based on their lived experiences. Meaningful learning environments for marginalised Indigenous children require community-driven leadership in shaping educational personnel, processes and content. It is this fusion of community wisdom and educational expertise that strengthens agency, so that a nurturing and culturally sensitive educational ecosystem can be developed. Communities enabled to control their educational ecosystem can pave the way for a future where the marginalised reclaim their voices and redefine the very foundations of education, ensuring an equitable, inclusive and emancipatory educational and social landscape for generations to come.

Notes

¹ All four groups are categorised as ‘particularly vulnerable tribal groups’ (PVTGs) by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

² The Indigenous people of India are referred to as ‘Adivasis’. The term literally translates to ‘the first inhabitants’ and is widely used as an umbrella term for all Indigenous groups in the country.

³ A great congregation.

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Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. The anonymised data is available to other researchers upon request.

Experimentation on humans and animals statement

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements. We confirm compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and obtained informed consent.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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