

Enabling the Voices from the Margin: Rethinking Education Model for Van Gujjar Pastoralists in Himalayan Region of India

*Rubina Nusrat**

ABSTRACT

Van Gujjar community are fully pastoralists who are in the process of transhumance between two ecozones in the Himalayan region. The migration of community for six months, to hilly areas with harsh climatic conditions, has made mobile education model practically not so feasible for them. This issue was further compounded with lack of funding and gender based inaccessibility of education. This paper aimed at assessing intensively the present existing model of formal education amongst Van Gujjar community. It also attempted to present a more feasible working model for education based on the challenges faced by the existing formal education model. From the framework suggested, there emanated innovative strategies which were based on indigenous knowledges of the Van Gujjar community.

Key words: Van Gujjar, Formal education, Indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Literacy is indispensable to raise awareness and gather necessary grass roots participation in our efforts to improve the way we care for our planet and manage its resources. This transformation can only happen if society's most vulnerable youth and adults acquire basic literacy skills that equip them with the knowledge and confidence to improve their own lives and build more resilient communities.

– Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the 2015 UNESCO Literacy Award Laureates announcement, 22 July, 2015.

In Indian society, Tribal societies were enriched with their indigenous systems of educating their kinship. Learning was a part of socialization process with cultural leanings forming the foundation of all knowledge. According to Akula (2013), "This type of transmission of cultural learning from one generation to another has three components: post figurative culture – in which children are essentially educated by their parents; con-figurative culture – in which

* Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025, E-mail: nusratrubina@gmail.com

children and parents learn from their Peer group; and Figurative culture – in which adults also learn from their children.”

The evolution pattern of formal tribal education system in India has majorly marked with three approaches: i) Isolationist approach; ii) Ashram school approach and; iii) Non formal through Anganwadi and Adult education centres.

During the colonial period, the tribal areas were the most neglected due to inaccessibility and low political commitment of British Government which led to an isolationist strategy marked with a mind to pursue the policy of laissez-faire. As per Ghurye (1943), “*This policy helped landlords, many vendors and traders to exploit the tribes by way of depriving them of their lands and forest rights, pushing them deep into the interior. No, attempt was made either to educate the tribes or to strengthen their economic base*”. The beginnings of isolationist policy in India began in the pre independence phase with Christian missionaries establishing Christianity through establishment of educational institutions and health provisions in tribal areas. Though the missionaries carried out impeccable work yet the outreach of these programmes remained limited.

During the Indian National movement, some social workers, like Hakkar Bapa in 1939 and Gandavari Purlakar established Ashram Schools based on the model popular as “Ashram Residential Schools for tribal children along with craft oriented vocational-training.” Though this model of Ashram Schools was widely replicated yet the vast population of tribal population remained untouched of these progressions. The new educational policy document places a lot of emphasis on establishing residential schools for tribal children including Ashram Schools.

The new educational policy document also laid immense emphasis on the introduction of *Anganwadi centres*, non-formal and adult education centres on priority basis in areas predominantly inhabited by the scheduled tribes. It planned that curriculum at all stages of education will be designed to create an awareness of the rich cultural identity of the tribal people along with enhancing their enormous creative talents.

Despite the persistence of existing working models of formal education for tribal education, there are a number of issues and challenges faced by tribals in pursuing formal modern education. The biggest challenge is the language of instruction to be followed in educating the tribals. In most of the cases, language creates problems of communication among children and teachers which in turn causes drop-out of children, (Pradhan, 2010). Since, most of the tribal people belong to poor economic strata, hence there priority lies with the economic involvement of children. A number of tribes in India

are still nomadic in nature so the life of movement leads to high dropout rate amongst the tribal children.

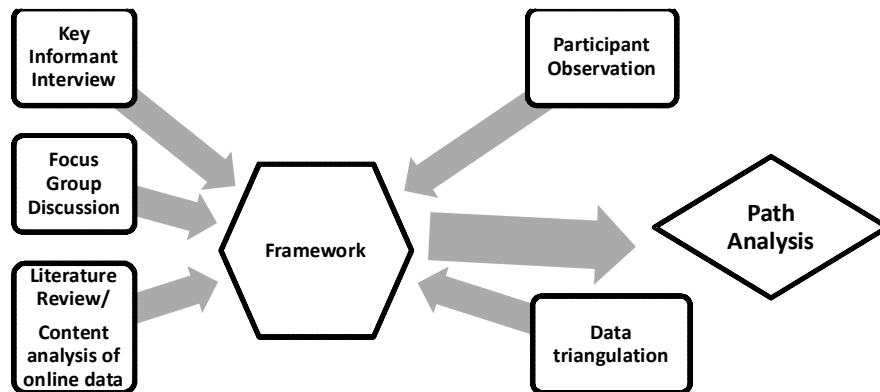
The Third type of model is basically observed to be implemented in Van Gujjar Community by a local NGO RLEK, who have worked extensively for Van Gujjars.

Van Gujjar

Van Gujjars are fully pastoralists following transhumance between two distinct eco zones without much diversification of subsistence strategy. Their passageway lies between two different Indian states. They stay in the foothills for six months and for another six months, they migrate into the hills where majority of pastures have been declared as National Parks. This issue of their presence in two states has further limited the right of migration at the right time from Van Gujjars, indirectly pushing them towards sedentarization. In a study by Nusrat (2015), "The biggest factor that contributes to their marginalization is the lack of Civil Rights i.e. they have no access to domicile rights, policy advocacy, lobbying and education. There is non existence of linkages between them and government services for education, health and veterinary support. This emphasizes on the exclusion faced due to shrinkage of pastures owing to the creation of National parks in their traditional pasture land, traditional view of conservation by forest authorities as being anti people and negative attitude of villagers on the migratory routes."

Research Methodology

The paper aimed at assessing intensively the present existing model of formal education amongst Van Gujjar community and to present a more feasible



Flowchart illustrating interactive-inductive process of framework and Path analysis formation

working model for education based on the challenges faced by the existing formal education model. The framework is an outcome of extensive review of literature, Content analysis through web portal of the NGO, participant observation, key informant interviews, focussed group discussions and data triangulation. From the framework suggested, there emanated innovative strategies which were based on indigenous knowledges of the Van Gujjar community. Based on the narratives, from the interviews of the key informants and focussed group discussion, a path analysis was laid out for the appropriate implications of challenges posed and suggestions made in regards to the challenges.

Discussion

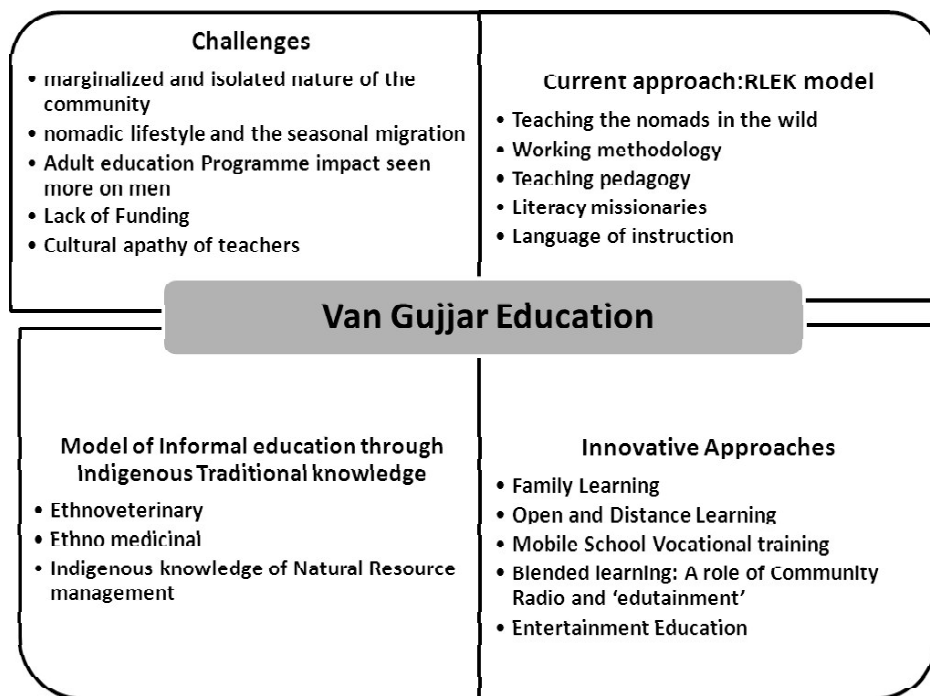
The Van Gujjar community has negligible accessibility to formal education as most of the schools are located far away and the Van Gujjar children need to cross the elephant corridor in order to reach the schools. Van Gujjars feel scared of sending their children through such a difficult forest terrain and hence, the prospects of children getting educated gets all the more remote. This low level of illiteracy has led to low levels of information and awareness levels. With these levels of illiteracy, Van Gujjars are not in the state of seeking for their civil rights or political participation.

To eventually overcome these issues and provide a public domain to Van Gujjars, the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK) - a Non-Governmental Organization - has been working with them for the past four decades. Highlighting the organization's strategy, Kaushal (2015) states, "RLEK aims at *Reaching the Unreached* and *Including the Excluded*. It aims at *achieving a just and sustainable society* and its Mission Statement has been to *empower indigenous groups, marginalized populations, women and children to claim their rights.*"

Under the aegis of the National Literacy Mission, RLEK identified illiteracy of the Van Gujjars to be the root cause of their exploitation. To remedy the situation, in the early 1990s, the NGO started a unique and innovative adult literacy programme - Teaching the Nomads in the Wild. The programme has been praised both nationally and internationally.

Proposed framework for Van Gujjars

The researcher has tried to propose a holistic framework of existing model of formal education and informal model of indigenous knowledges, challenges involved in the present model and the innovative approaches that can be applied in order to arrive at the destined formal model of education for Van Gujjars.



Proposed framework of education by Researcher

Existing Model of formal education in Van Gujjar (RLEK model)

The model of education existing amongst Van Gujjars has to some extent, made them less vulnerable to the exploitation faced by government officials, forest officials, money lenders, middlemen and milk traders in terms of bribery and misappropriation of their milk prices. The illiterate Van Gujjars in their FGDs shared that on account of them not being able to count, they were not able to keep an account of the milk supplied and hence, payments received. Barter system was quite prevalent in terms of the exchange of daily essential items for milk and milk products. The mounting debt were compound further with the high interest rates of the *baniyas* or moneylenders.

As stated by Kaushal (2015), "It is deeply unfortunate that the systemic inequities and injustices have deprived these communities of their fundamental human rights such as the right to access to education. Due to their nomadic way of life and unwillingness to move out of their forest dwellings, the peace loving, vegetarian Van Gujjars have remained dominantly illiterate."

Teaching the nomads in the wild

As the literature available on the initiatives taken by RLEK in terms of education of Van Gujjars illustrates that the initiation of the literacy programme by RLEK was an outcome of a need assessment mini study conducted by RLEK in Van Gujjar community. The most voiced concern of the community was the prevalent feeling of illiteracy being the root cause of their vulnerability, therefore, the stakeholders demanded an education based intervention from RLEK which sounded and appeared a far fetched dream to most of them. To this end, RLEK started an adult education programme in October 1993, in Van Gujjar *Khols* (residing areas), supported by the ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

Teaching the nomads in the wild was an educational initiative which targeted adult education, solely with the viewpoint of inculcating the relevance of education in the adults of the community.

The working methodology, yielded out of mutual consensus, was an amalgamation of both Van Gujjar and RLEK being the major stakeholders at the implementation aspects. RLEK would contribute towards provision of free reading material and teachers whereas Gujjar would arrange for the boarding and lodging of the teachers. The highlight of the literacy programme was the innovative ways of integrating issues of concerns of the community for economic and social empowerment like livelihood and veterinary health of the livestock.

The education strategy started by RLEK was based on the conscious attempt of realizing and emphasizing on the Van Gujjars leading to ecological regeneration by being barefoot botanists owing to the inherent indigenous knowledge about each and every herb and plant in the Gujjar *khols*. RLEK alongside believed in maintaining and retaining the cultural distinction of the community.

Due to migratory character of the community, the biggest challenge was the disruption of the teaching process for long spell of time while the community delved in transhumance between the two ecozones of shivalik foothills and *Bugyals* (pastures). The solution to this issue was resorted through the volunteer teachers migrating along with the community during their transmigratory cycle. So the volunteer teachers moved and lived with the *caravan* (*Herdsmen*) making possible the strategy termed as "Literacy on the move."

Teaching pedagogy

The teaching pedagogy was an amalgamation of a lecture through participatory techniques for maximum engagement of the learners. Most of

the classes were held under the trees based on the convenience and time availability of the learners. For the Van Gujjar males, who were out grazing the livestock for the major part of the day, there was a provision of evening classes. In this context, the learning was made easier through dispersal of solar lamps by RLEK in the community. To encourage the female folks, literacy classes were carried out in the *baithak* (outer homestead) attached to the main *Dera*.

Literacy missionaries

The adult education programme was initiated with highly motivated and trained volunteer teachers who were referred as young barefoot “literacy missionaries” by RLEK. These barefoot teachers were trained and were entrusted with the responsibility of making education accessible to Van Gujjar community within the space of their homestead. The teachers who travelled with the Van Gujjars were volunteers who were unemployed high school graduates with no prior teaching experience. The medical check up formed an intrinsic part of recruitment process as the volunteer teachers needed to be physically fit in order to travel along with the migrating Van Gujjar families. The teachers were also sensitized culturally through rigorous in-house training in terms of survival in the forest area and understand the cultural nuances of the community. The teachers were not recruited against a remuneration but were provided with contingency expenses along with boarding and lodging in the functional field. “Indeed RLEK’s educational campaign deep in the wild was reminiscent of the ancient Indian *Gurukul pratha* where the teacher and taught has a “noble and abiding relationship” (Kaushal, 2015).

The Adult literacy programme emphasized on functional aspects of literacy by developing a sense of self reliance in the community through teaching them about accounts keeping, lodging police complaints, petitioning the authorities for the redressal of grievances and fighting for their rights. It was the effects of functional literacy strategy that once secluded naive Gujjars began asserting themselves at a number of forums. According to Kaushal (2015), “Many neo literate Van Gujjar men and women are now discussing the virtues of a small family and various methods of fertility control. Following the enumeration of the community members into the voters’ list, many Van Gujjar men and women have successfully fought the Panchayat elections. What’s more many of them have become Panchayat *Pradhans* (Chiefs). It is a tribute to the boldness and confidence that the adult literacy programme has helped instill in them, that many Van Gujjar men and women have addressed international audiences in countries such as Brazil and Denmark.”

Language of instruction

The main language of instruction was the local language (*Gojjari*) along with reading and writing of national language hindi and simple arithmetic. The curriculum was in alignment with the social realities existing around the daily life of the community. The content used in the learning process was based on local materials available used a participatory way.

The formal education provided by RLEK has led to an enhancement in the self esteem levels among learners which has eventually led to the elimination of 'culture of silence' especially amongst the female Van Gujjar population as narrated by one of the Van Gujjar woman, Safoora:

"We want our daughters to be educated. If it entails me to accompany the girls through the elephant corridor in order to reach the School, I am even ready to do this and stay there till evening to accompany the girls back. Just convince the males of the community to allow us to do this". (Personal interview)

henceforth, encouraging Van Gujjars to speak about their issues and concerns at various public domains and platforms. However, Field observations suggested that the impact of Adult education Programme could be seen more on men. Awareness campaigns to be done with ICTs as women unaware about the family planning programmes.

Challenges in the present model of formal education

The main challenge of working with Van Gujjars has been the marginalized and isolated nature of the community. Since the community resides in forests which are isolated from the outside world, not only has it been very difficult to reach the community but also to bring their voices and concerns to the policy making level and develop the programmes based on their real needs and demands. One of the latest development in terms of neoliteracy has been the intervention of the *madarsas* (Islamic institution of learning) who send the *maulvis* (muslim clergy men) to the *Deras* for imparting islamic teachings along with learning of local language, hence, bringing School to *Deras*.

In addition, the nomadic lifestyle and the seasonal migration of the community brought its own challenges to the programme. The volunteers had to be very committed as working implied surviving harsh conditions. Moreover, there seems to be a prevalent cultural apathy amongst the teachers as they fail to understand the cultural nuances of the community, therefore, motivation to get young Gujjars to teach in their own community becomes imperative. Earmarked funding is required to ensure the delivery of quality education for indigenous people. This includes ensuring professional-scale remuneration at par with teachers in non-indigenous communities.

Invisible model of Informal education through Indigenous knowledge of Van Gujjars

The Van Gujjars tribal communities have a wealth of indigenous traditional knowledge related to the use of medicinal plants in their locality. Collection of medicinal plants from the wild has been long practise which is conducted by young Gujjar boys and Girls while grazing livestock in the forests and alpine pastures. The Gujjar have a fairly good knowledge of the various diseases their buffaloes suffer from. These diseases are not peculiar to Van Gujjar's buffaloes as the whole investock of the region suffer from them, but what is of special interest is that the Gujjar over the generations have preserved the knowledge of a curative system which is traditional and indigenous. These ethnomedicinal knowledges of Van Gujjars have been the only source of treatment available in the alpine region as earlier little medical assistance was available as there were very few veterinary hospitals or dispensaries within easy reach of Gujjars (Nusrat, 2013).

Despite all the allegations of Van Gujjars exploiting the forests, the Van Gujjars are known for their indigenous knowledge of resource management through the strategy of rotational grazing. Van Gujjars in the true spirit, practice rotational grazing. They graze their animals through the creation of natural feed bunks of different slopes of pastures separated by the streams or rivulets in the alpine pastures. They leave their cattle to be grazed in the open pastures which graze for around 14 to 16 hours and then they are shifted to a different slope after one week allowing the grasses to regenerate in the previous pastures. Rotational grazing with 1,3,7 and 21 days of pasture occupation (21 days rest period between grazing) resulted in greater forage production than pastures that were grazed continuously so there lies little chance of overgrazing as is perceived of the Van Gujjar's cattle (Nusrat, 2013).

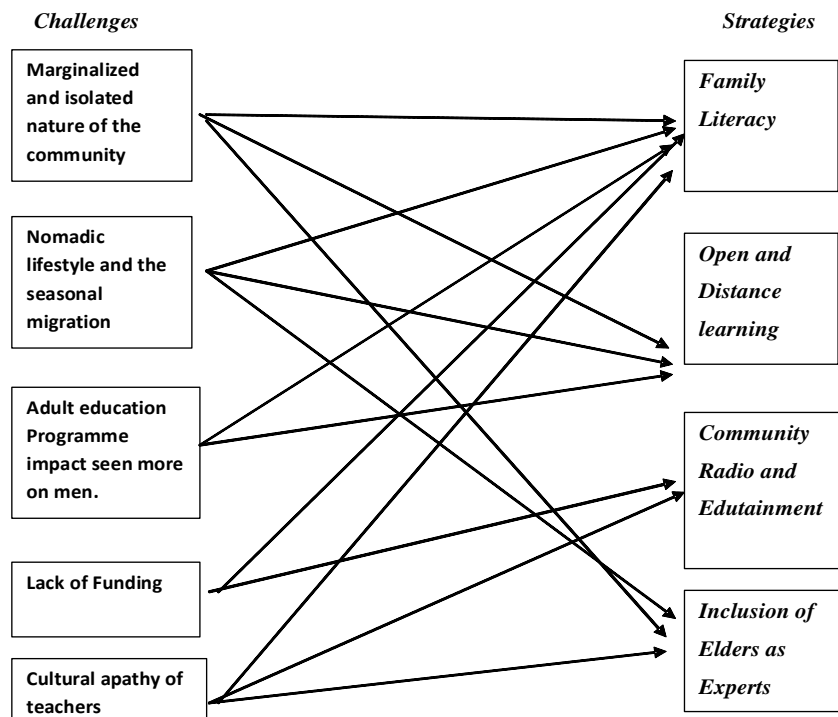
Above all, in regards to the indigenous Knowledges of Van Gujjars, the cultural strategy of the Van Gujjars is that they lop trees in sequence. They start with trees on the ridges where there is less water and which therefore dry out and shed their leaves earlier. As winter proceeds, they move their lopping downhill and the trees lopped last are the trees close to the *rao* (*water stream*) which keep water for the longest time. The very last tree to be lopped is the one nearest to the *Dera* before they begin their migration up to the alpine *bugyals* (Nusrat, 2013). Henceforth, validating Van Gujjars adaptive strategy with scientific evidences.

Innovative Approaches

After critical evaluation of the formal education system introduced for the Van Gujjar community, it was perceived that an introduction of informal

system of education based on indigenous traditional knowledges of the community, can be pronounced apt for them. The proponents of informal learning and education like Jeffs and Smith (1996) have stated, "Informal education is the process of fostering learning in life as it is lived. A concern with community and conversation; a focus on people as persons rather than objects, a readiness to educate in different settings."

There have been a number of strategies that have been reinstated on one hand by scholars like Thomas (2002) who emphasizes on Conversational learning in which a significant proportion of informal learning takes place through communication and is termed 'conversational' learning. This refers to the knowledge, most of which is implicit, that is passed between people through social conversation. On the other hand, scholars like Lave (1993) propagated Situated Learning/legitimate, peripheral participation which is another major pathway of informal learning for children by simply always being around more knowledgeable people. This process has been referred to as 'situated learning' and 'legitimate, peripheral participation'. Based on these two pathways, few strategies laid out by researcher for Van Gujjar community are as follows:



Path Analysis of Challenges and Innovative Strategies for Van Gujjar Education as suggested by Researcher

Family Literacy

In this path analysis, the concept of family literacy is defined as per Hannon (1999) who refers to literacy programmes as “programmes that address the family dimension of literacy learning and combine direct adult basic education for parents with direct early childhood education for children.” This implies drafting of a curriculum from the viewpoint of learners and the contexts that they delve in terms of wider family, community and local literate environment.

If the interpretation of ‘Family literacy’ is contextually made in terms of Van Gujjar community then the deprivation of formal educational opportunities could be compensated through their involvement in socially situated literacy learning activities with least engagement of formal schooling patterns. Family literacy approach seems to be the most viable approach amongst Van Gujjar community as the indigenous knowledges related to ethnomedicinal, ethnoveterinary, Grazing and Lopping are transferred from one generation to another through social role settings and cultural rituals.

Here the curriculum needs to be customized as per the needs and interests of the learners i.e. Van Gujjar community. This involvement of the community as stakeholders has the potential of curtailing the dropout rate from education. In this approach, the emphasis is more on the concept of ‘literacy second’. This concept is given by Rogers. As per Rogers (2000), “Literacy second is where the primary focus is on the enhancement of particular skills, interests and activities through socially situated literacy learning activities.” Henceforth, paving out ways of alternate livelihood generation through usage of Indigenous traditional knowledges, for enhancement of skills of the younger generation, in a formal institutionalised manner of curriculum implementation through NGOs of that area.

Inclusion of elders as experts

As quoted in RCAP Volume 3 (1996), “Elders are keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers. In Aboriginal societies, elders are known to safeguard knowledge that constitutes the unique inheritance of the nation.”

The elders in Van Gujjar communities are gate keepers of these communities especially the womenfolk. They are the reservoir of epistemology and ontologies of the evolution of Van Gujjar community. It becomes imperative to ground the education provided to the present Van Gujjar community in terms of the social constructions framed by their elderly people in order to promote healthy identity. This kind of indigenous education passed on from the elderly Van Gujjars to the younger generation can be described

as wholistic education. This is the education that engulfs emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual learnings. This wholistic education acts as a simulation laboratory where the young Van Gujjars are given hands on experiences of situating their learnings to their social conditions. As the individual learning needs differ, therefore, this flexibility of learning in the situated localised conditions makes it a lifelong learning.

There are varied ways of using ceremonies, festivals, rituals, folklores, dreams and community gatherings which can be employed for making teaching a funtime. This makes learning indigenous knowledges a process that is to be learnt to be implied life long rather than a curriculum to be covered within the stipulated time. Incorporating a diversity of teaching methods amongst time for personal reflection and emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual support can re-focus post secondary education programs from content driven curriculum to process-oriented learning. As Hart (1990) emphasizes, "Teaching Circles can be used to ensure students have the chance to participate in class discussions, while Sharing Circles can assist students in working through emotional aspects of the curriculum." This grounding of educational program to the elderly Van Gujjars of the community shall equip young Van Gujjars to share the responsibilities of the community along with learning and the intergenerational transference of knowledge is the best way of ancestors preparing the future of the community.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

As is observed in the Van Gujjar *kholes*, the successful intervention of *madarsas* has led to enhancement of neoliteracy levels amongst the community. This approach aimed at getting the school to the learners rather than getting the learners to the school. Moreover, this benefitted the children and adults alike. However, this approach is possible at the initial level but at the later level, this issue can be tackled through Open and distance learning. As per Perraton (1982), "the definition of distance education is 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner.'" Open learning has been defined by Perraton (1997) as "an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access or of time and place, pace, methods of study, or any combination of these."

It is of utmost importance that we engage the technology in terms of ICTs in distance learning as poor Van Gujjar living in remote forest areas have no access to new technologies so Distance learning for them should be kept simple, easily affordable and scalable. After all, the quality of ODL will be measured by its educational effectiveness and economic sustainability,

not by its levels of technology. The issue in question while contextualising learning for Van Gujjar is not in terms of theorizing the veterinary science as the core relevant subject but theorizing the foundational subjects of formal schooling like Maths, Science and Language. The foundational subjects need to be taught in the social constructions of the concepts from lived in experiences and day to day realities which are existing on indigenous traditional knowledges of Van Gujjars. This shall also resolve the issue of education being inaccessible to female folk of the community. Several studies (Carr-Hill and Peart, 2005; UNESCO, 2002; Yates, 2000) suggest that the situation of nomadic and itinerant groups (together with gender-biased educational contexts and conflict ridden regions) is a clear case where ODL represents the most effective approach.

Community Radio or edutainment

As per Pringle and Subba (2007), "Community radio (CR) has also opened up opportunities for innovative forms of radio education." Community radio programme can be a good medium of informal education where the Van Gujjars can gain knowledge in their local language and can question their existing social realities through participation. The programmes should be designed in such a way that the community finds it physically, culturally and contextually relatable to their livelihoods. The natural openness in the communication can be maintained in the same way as *e-chaupals* (Community gathering) are conducted. For example, through letters or phone calls to the station and on-air questions and answers, or through visits and on-air discussions by members of the community.

Few studies (Nariman, 1993; Singhal *et al.*, 2004) suggest that the efficacy of Community radio can be enhanced through entertainment education. Media messages can be designed and produced with the specific purposes of both entertainment and education of the Van Gujjar community in their native *Gojjari* language. These media messages can be around any issue for awareness generation, alternate livelihood strategies, about attitude formation around issues like female education or family planning. This can help in subconsciously creating very subtly a mind set with productive social norms and behavioural pattern, in other words, 'informal learning' through the vehicle of entertainment. The many possible uses of media in this way are gathered under the definition of 'entertainment-education'.

Another way of implementing Distance learning has been through radio programmes like *Gyan Vaani* been run by Indira Gandhi National Open University where the subject is subtly explained by the experts in an interactive manner.

Conclusion

In order to achieve the goal of Education for All, we need to emphasize on the improvement of accessibility and quality of education being imparted to the Van Gujjar community. For the indigenous learners, there is a need to customize education contextually and culturally. Formal education should not only teach about the outside world, but should also support and value traditional knowledge, culture, livelihoods, world views and pedagogical methods. To do this appropriately, infrastructure, curricula and pedagogical materials should be tailor made to meet the unique needs of indigenous learners, communities and people. This may include modified schedules, distance learning initiatives, mobile schools and culturally and linguistically appropriate pedagogical materials. Earmarked funding to organisations like RLEK is required to ensure the delivery of quality education for Van Gujjar community. Special emphasis need to be laid on the teachers using local *Gojjari* language for the purpose of conversational and situated learning amongst the Van Gujjar Youth. This includes recurrent upgradation of teachers' knowledge about the community and ensuring professional-scale remuneration which is at par with teachers in other communities.

The informal indigenous education model should propagate practical, hands-on pedagogical methods which aims at active participation of the whole community in order to propagate intergenerational transference of traditional knowledges. There is a need to create a data bank of the indigenous learners so that it enhances the sustainability aspect through recurrent evaluation and monitoring. The indigenous knowledge transference by the elderly in actual simulated social conditions should be substantiated with rigorous adult education programme, vocational training programmes, community radio programmes and usage of ICTs.

The community based organisations working in terms of education with Van Gujjar ought to formulate a holistic strategy of overcoming educational marginalization in the context of their social realities and social constructions. The educational marginalization of Van Gujjars is an amalgamation of social exclusion from their natural habitat, cultural extinction, livelihood insecurity and identity crisis. Therefore, a holistic strategy to address the human and political rights, maintain their cultural identity and overall social development is a prerequisite to enhancing their levels of education.

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