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SQUARE PEGS IN ROUND HOLES: PERCEPTIONS OF HUNTER-GATHERER SCHOOL DROPOUTS OF KERALA, SOUTH INDIA

Introduction

Though education is considered as a fundamental right of all Indian citizens as per the 83rd Constitutional Amendment, inequality in this regard, prevails among the various castes/tribes/sections of the society. 'Literacy achievements in India depend crucially on the social context: the gender division of labour, the kinship system, caste related norms, economic entitlements and so on' (Dreze 2003). Realizing that Scheduled Tribes are one of the most deprived and marginalized groups with respect to education, a host of programmes and measures have been initiated ever since independence of the country. Education of tribal people is important not just due to a Constitutional obligation to equality of its citizens or special entitlements to Scheduled Tribes, but because it is a crucial input in the nation's strategy of total development of tribal communities. However, despite the nation's efforts to ensure constitutional equality, dignity and development that they themselves wish for, the tribal children continue to lag behind the general population in education and there is a wide gap between the dropout rate of tribal children and non-tribal children (Arora and Mehmi 2006; Mehendale 2008, Nanjunda *et al* 2008; Srivastava 1968, Sujatha 2000; Verma 1990). It is pertinent to note that within the Scheduled Tribes, the dropout rate of children belonging to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs)¹ is observed to be very high. In order to tackle this issue, the Dhebar Commission and the National Policy on Education (NPE), recommended establishing large numbers of Ashram² schools (residential schools) in tribal areas. Consequently, in the State of Kerala *Ashram* Schools have been established exclusively for PTGs: one in Palakkad district (for Kurumbar and Kadar) and the other in Malappuram district (for Cholanaickan and Kattunayakan).

The problem

This study concentrates on the *Ashram* School dropouts in Malappuram district, with special focus on the subjective experiences of the

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dropout children for the exclusive insights from such narratives, set against the narratives of the officials with whom they have close everyday contact in the school system.

The *Ashram* school known as Indira Gandhi Memorial Model Residential School (IGMMRS) for the forest dwelling Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs) like the Cholanaicken and Kattunayakan (including Pathinaicken) was established in 1993 at Manjeri in Malappuram district, which is almost 70-90km away from the tribal settlements to which it caters. Although the children belonging to PTGs who got admission in this school were provided with free food, accommodation, uniforms etc., they were reluctant to return to school once they went back to their settlement during holidays and vacations. Assuming that distance is the main reason for the dropout of the children, the *Ashram* School was shifted to Chandakunnu, Nilambur in 2006, thereby reducing a distance of almost 30-40km between tribal settlement and school. But against expectations, the issue of dropouts not only continued, but was also enhanced. The annual admission and dropout details since the inception of the *Ashram* school (given as Table-1), reveals the same. It is estimated that out of 515 students who took admission between 1993-2006, 103 became dropouts, showing a drop-out rate of 20%. Since 2006, when a total number of 216 students took admission, the dropout rate during the five-year period (2006-07 to 2010-2011) came to 38.8%. As many as 84 children (50 boys and 34 girls) dropped out since 2006 and in the admission register, the 'reason for leaving' was recorded as 'long absence' in the case of 81 students. It is significant that though there was cent percent enrolment of children at primary level of education, the dropout rate came to about 55 percent at the school final (Table 2). The school authorities reported that even after concerted efforts, they failed to check dropout rates. It is in this context that an attempt is made here to examine the issues of dropouts.

***Ashram* School in Malappuram**

The *Ashram* school for the PTGs of Malappuram district was started in Manjeri in the year 1993 in a temporary building provided by the Scheduled Caste Development Department. Later, the Scheduled Tribe Development Department constructed its own building in Jawahar colony in Chandakunnu, Nilambur and the *Ashram* school was shifted to this 5 acre area in 2006. A two-storied building has two mess halls and a kitchen, a hostel each for boys and for girls adjacent to the school, and the school has good infrastructure and modern amenities. It also receives academic support from the department of education, and administrative support from the Scheduled Tribes Development Department through Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP), Nilambur, Malappuram district.

Initially, an Upper primary school was started which was later upgraded to High School in 2004-05. Although with an annual student

enrollment of 35-42 and a total enrolment of 731 with 385 boys and 346 girls from 1993-2010, the school has permanent teachers only up to upper primary level. In the high school section, teachers are on contract basis, but there are 11 non-teaching staff- one clerk, five cooks, two *ayahs*, two sweepers (one full-time and the other, part-time), and a peon. The school is a self-contained one with its own compound wall. Based on the infrastructure facilities and the result of the previous three years (2006-2009), this school has been awarded the 'Best Model Residential School Award- 2010'. The dropout children are a blemish on the school's record.

Methodology

As the focus of the study is on the perspectives of dropout children and their subjective experiences, the fieldwork began by collecting the whereabouts of such children, from their school admission register, who had left the school within a period of five years (2006-07 to 2010-2011). It was found that during this five-year period, the total number of dropouts from various settlements of the Cholanaickan, Pathinaicken and Kattunayakan³ came to 84 (50 boys and 34 girls). Since the settlements of these dropouts are scattered inside the forests (within a radius of 10 to 45km), intensive fieldwork was conducted in the five largest settlements,⁴ such as Alakkal and Myladipotti (Cholanaickan settlements), Mundakadavu and Punchakolli (Pathinaicken settlements) and Appankappu (Kattunayakan settlement) by focusing on 48 dropouts from these colonies.

Out of 48 dropouts (30 boys and 18 girls) from these colonies, only with 41 dropout children, could rapport be established and interviews conducted. This included 6 Cholanaickan, 21 Pathinaicken, and 14 Kattunayakan children. I could not meet 7 drop-outs (4 girls and 3 boys); one girl had died during childbirth, three girls had migrated to distant settlements on account of their marriages, one boy was in jail on charges of putting fire in the forest, and two boys had migrated out in search of jobs. Out of the 41 dropouts thus included in the study, there are 27 boys and 14 girls. Of the 27 boys, 14 are unmarried, 12 are married and one, a widower, whereas in the case of the 14 female dropouts, all except one are married and a few have one or two children.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, the dropouts were reluctant to open their mouths and most of the time, whenever they saw my face, they moved inside the forest. So, I had to follow them to establish rapport and it took some time to earn their trust. In addition to these, many times my fieldwork got delayed or interrupted due to bad weather and threat from elephants. However, I could conduct both individual as well as focused group interviews with these children to understand their experience of their school as well as of settlement life. A schedule was prepared to understand their attitude towards class, syllabus, headmaster, teachers and other staff, food, accommodation, extra-

curricular activities etc. During my stay in the settlements, I observed day-to-day activities of these children. Case studies of these children were taken and genealogies were drawn to understand their nature of family, marital status, their relationship with other dropouts within and between colonies, etc.

Individual as well as focus group interviews were also conducted with the social functionaries, parents, neighbours and friends of the dropout children in order to understand their views on education and also on the dropouts.

I visited the *Ashram* school many times and had discussions with the headmaster, teachers and other staff members. During my visits, I observed the activities of students and staff. An interview schedule was administered to the headmaster and teachers of *Ashram* school to elicit their perspectives on tribal culture in general and on dropout children in particular. I also made visits to the Integrated Tribal Development Department (ITDP), Nilambur and interviewed the officials such as Project Officer, Assistant Project Officer, Tribal Extension Officer etc., to understand their views. The data thus obtained have been analyzed in relation to the perspectives of these categories of officials on the dropout children in order to throw new light on the issue and to come up with practical solutions.

The first section below gives a comparison of a child's typical day in his/her forest habitat and at school. In the next section, one may read through their reflections on the school and on tribal development authorities to understand the sense of alienation that one can glean in the snippets of experiential narratives of the dropouts and their parents. The final section of the paper discusses these aspects before moving on to the concluding remarks.

A Child's typical day in the Forest Habitat:

The habitats of Kattunayakan, Pathinaicken and Cholanaicken are in the Nilambur forest, with deciduous to interior evergreen trees. Despite geographical variations in their habitats, these communities have one thing in common: their livelihoods are closely related to the forest ecosystem. Children have significant roles in their family as well as in their community.

A child's day in a settlement begins with a choice: whether to get up early or laze around is his/her own choice and not imposed. It is not unusual to see many children sleeping in the open with their pet dogs even during the noontime. By comparison with boys, girls get up early and help their parents and grandparents in daily chores like fetching water from the nearby river, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, collecting fire-wood, cooking and serving food, looking after younger siblings, cleaning rooms, yard, etc. When parents go for work, a girl child takes care of the home along with her grandparents (if they stay back) and her younger siblings till her parents come back home.

Boys usually move inside the forest, either with their parents or with their friends, for collection of forest produce. While roaming inside the forests, they eat whatever edible items they get on their way and, whenever they come across a river, they never miss a chance to take a bath and do fishing. They also help their parents in trading collected non-wood forest products (NWFP) items with a tribal co-operative society, agents, or non-tribes for provisions. In addition to this, they help their parents' in house construction. Bringing bamboo from the forests, cutting and shaping them for making walls and doors for houses, making hearths, etc., are some of their jobs in the settlement. Both boys and girls engage in various activities in their settlements, such as climbing on trees, swimming, fishing, making *poonikotta* (bamboo baskets used for the collection of forest resources), singing etc. Small children, irrespective of gender, play kitchen activities by imitating their parents. There is no hard and fast rule or appropriate timing for any of their daily activities. Moreover, elders do not control them. Punishments in the form of scolding, abusing, beating etc. are usually very rare. In the case of Cholanaickan, Bhanu has observed 'The Cholanaickan are very mild and peace loving people. They do not even abuse their children for any wrong they commit. If they commit any wrong, it is taken easily and the elders very patiently and politely teach the young ones and advise them not to repeat it again' (Bhanu 1989: 96). The attitude of Cholanaickan parents does not appear to have changed since his study more than two decades ago.

In any tribal settlement inside the forests, a common scene is that of children playing, fishing and swimming in the river nearby. Children are 'free birds' in their habitat and have unrestricted freedom to move around and enjoy their life. They learn through participation in economic production and other activities organized by adults, beginning as voluntary participants who perform simple and repetitive tasks while having observational access to the mature practices of elders. It may be that no one pays attention unless one does something wrong; they receive instruction only as a corrective feedback and guidance. Gradually they progress to more advanced tasks they see others perform (Behera 2007: 178). In short, a typical day in the forest habitat of a tribal child is care free and uncontrolled.

A Typical Day in the *Ashram* School

Ashram school has separate hostels for boys and girls. Each hostel is a three-storied building with long verandahs that are closed off with iron bars, giving the impression of a prison cell. Inside are the dormitories, which can house 20-30 students. Cots are put together on two sides and the children huddle together in the cots.

A child's day in the hostel begins at 5 a.m. with a long bell. If they fail to wake up on time, they are punished. They have to assemble for morning prayer by 6:30 a.m. and begin to study by 7:00 a.m. They can have their

breakfast between 8:00 a.m. and 9:10 a.m. and then get ready to go to school. Before the first bell at 9:45 a.m., they have to be in school. The morning class begins at 10:00 a.m. with a prayer. One has to wait till 11:30 a.m. for a 10-minute break. Morning class ends at 1:00 p.m. for the lunch break. They stand in queue for lunch. Afternoon classes are held from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. The bell rings at 3:55 p.m. for the National Anthem. Following this there is a long bell at 4:00 p.m. indicating the end of the classes for that day. The children move to their hostel and come back to the kitchen forming a queue, this time, for the evening tea. They are now allowed to play for an hour- from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. After this, one has to be ready for the 15 minutes prayer (6:45 to 7:00 p.m.). This is followed up by study time from 7:00-10:00 p.m., with a 30 minute break for a quick supper part way through. One is allowed to go to bed only at 10:00 p.m. By this time, the children are desperate for their sleep. Another day begins with a bell at 5 o' clock and the routine continues.

The bell is symbolic of a strictly regimented school and residential life. Failure to comply with the rules invites severe punishments such as beatings, ear pinching, impositions, abuse and ridicule. Failure to do homework, making noise in class, and failing in exams all invite punishment. Thus, a child's day in *Ashram* school and hostel are controlled and conditioned by rules and regulations that are in stark contrast to their life in the forest habitat where they are free as birds.

The Problem of Tribal Dropouts: Diverse Perspectives

In the words of the headmaster of the *Ashram* School:

'The parents of these students do not have any relationship with the society outside and are unaware of the importance of education. All teachers are talented. Usually a child comes to the 1st standard with some knowledge about the alphabets. But in the case of the *Ashram* school children, they know nothing when they come to the 1st standard. Teaching such children is a Herculean task'.

A teacher remarked on the children's own lack of exposure to the larger society:

'They do not have any outside exposure. For instance, if a question is asked on a national festival, they cannot answer. They told me that they do not celebrate any festivals in their colony. They only have their rituals'.

Another teacher made the assessment:

'They have less grasping power when compared to mainstream children. They don't know what a computer is and what an ice-cream is!'

Yet another teacher's response was:

'Both the children and their parents are innocents and they are living in their own world. Children do not possess a competitive mentality or have aspiration for reaching places or have goals in life'

Explanations for the dropouts varied from very practical or natural to trivial.

'In the year 2006, a few girls ran away from the hostel. They jumped out of the compound wall of the hostel by tying their shawls together and using it as a rope'.

The reason for this, according to an office staff member, was 'a very simple one: somebody scolded them!'

Another perspective on the dropout is also a practical explanation that also takes the blame away from the system:

'In an academic year we get hardly 200 days for teaching; the rest of the days in a year are holidays and vacation like Onam and Christmas. Students go home during these holidays/vacations. Sadly only 30% children come back to school after vacation/holidays in the first week. The rest 70% return to school after weeks or months of re-opening. So, naturally such students cannot follow the classes as they have already missed several classes. This may lead to dropping out'.

In the case of girl students, a prominent reason for dropping out is their early marriages. A teacher recalled:

'Last year a girl of 7th standard went to her home for vacation and stopped attending the school. One of my students who was good in writing poems and stories also did not come back to school after vacation. Later I came to know from their friend that they got married'.

Many teachers and other staff lack any idea of the life circumstances of the children under their care. Most of them have not visited the tribal habitats even once. One teacher's response is very illuminating:

'I never visited any Cholanaickan colony, but I have seen a television documentary on Cholanaickan recently'.

The teachers from non-tribal background who have no exposure to the tribal ways of life or their habitats cannot appreciate the emotional needs of the children and their value systems. The value of 'mutual trust' that children show in not betraying a friend sometimes makes them come across as disobedient in the eyes of the non-tribal teachers and staff.

A non-teaching staff member narrated an incident that took place some years earlier, when the Ashram school was functioning at Manjeri:

'It was vacation time. After the students left, I noticed that some bulbs were missing. When they returned after vacation, I asked them who had stolen the bulbs. Nobody answered. I punished them all, but still they did not say who stole the bulbs. See, how disobedient are these children!'

While speaking to the dropout children, I asked if anyone remembered this incident. One boy told me that he remembers it. He explained what happened: they had indeed taken the bulbs from the hostel, but it was not a theft. As electricity was not available in their colony those days and they were seeing the bulb for the first time, they had taken them out to show them to their friends in the settlement and bring them back, but unfortunately, the bulbs

were broken. So, all of them agreed amongst themselves ‘not to tell anything’ and they had merely stuck to this agreement despite all the questioning.

Illustrating the ‘disobedience’ of the children, a teacher narrated another incident with children in her class, a couple of years earlier:

‘One day, while I was leaving the classroom after a class, I heard somebody calling me by a nickname. I turned and asked who had done it. Nobody answered. I threatened that I would punish everybody if they won’t tell me who it was. None came forward. I punished the entire class, but my effort to find out the ‘culprit’ did not succeed. See how disobedient these children are! They were not ready to tell the truth even when they would get punishment. But our children are not like this; they are afraid of punishments and tell us the truth if we threaten them. Anyhow, I am happy that the situation is slowly changing.

She had given another example of children ‘changing’: Somebody had broken an instrument in the lab and she could catch him with the help of other students. She is very happy that the students are now listening to the teachers and are becoming more obedient now-a-days. She does not have any idea that one of the very basic values of tribal culture, ‘mutual trust’, is being eroded.

The views and perspectives of the school staff reveal that they do not imagine that they need to tune into the tribal ways of life and their culture to understand the situations better. The teachers and staff locate the problem of dropouts in the parent’s lack of awareness, the children’s slow pace of adjustment, and other such factors, rather than on the need to improve upon their own understanding of the children’s emotional needs and how the system and they themselves might be failing them.

The officials of Scheduled Tribes Development Department also made their views known:

‘Compared to other tribes of Kerala, drop-out rate is very high here. The level of basic education is very low among the Kattunayakan and Cholanaikkan. Some of the students join in the 4th and 5th class, with whom teaching should start with primer. When such students share the class with other students a kind of inferiority complex develop in them which leads to their ultimate dropping out from the school’(Project Officer, ITDP, Nilambur).

The Project Officer suggested that to check the dropout rate, facilities in the school may be improved so as to make teaching methods more interesting. He added that the role of teachers and other staff in the Ashram school is very important in this regard. The Tribal Extension Officer and Former Project officer also voiced a similar opinion.

A tribal teacher hailing from the nearby settlement of Pathinaicken has highlighted the need for teacher-student closeness:

A teacher should show closeness to her students. Attachment between teachers and students is very important. Now-a-days education has become a business and teachers have become less committed to teaching. Of course, there are exceptions.

Interactions with the parents and elders in the various settlements of dropout children revealed the fact that majority of the parents wanted their children to have education, but they do not like to compel them. They feel that if they beat their children for the cause of education, the children will be unhappy. One mother said that when her son did not go to school after vacation, she compelled him to go to school. The son accused the mother of wanting to eat the food brought by his father all by herself, without sharing it with him and that was why she was compelling him to go to school. The mother felt hurt by this and stopped asking him to go to school ever since.

A mother of three children from Appankappu colony, who studied up to Pre-degree emotionally, alleged that teaching was a business for the *Ashram* school teachers. According to her, one day she enquired about the future of the children and asked what could be done for the improvement of the children's education, and apparently, the headmaster of the school replied that they were not bothered about such things and that they need to teach only those who came to study and cannot be bothered about the others who did not return to school. According to the mother, teachers were least committed. She continued:

'In the Ashram school all children belong to one community and therefore they mingle only with their own community members. They do not have a chance to see the students from other communities. Their communication is only about their own culture and nothing else. So there is no change in their outlook and no development socially, mentally and intellectually.'

She complained about the low standard of education in the school also.

'Here, in our colony, a student who has studied up to school final cannot count up to 1000. Their knowledge is limited to their books only. In the *Ashram* school they are living in a cage from 5 years to 15 years. They do not have any love towards their parents also. In the *Ashram* school they live like orphans. We love our children and we would like to be with our children. I think the main reason for dropout is the lack of love from their parents. The children living in the settlement are smarter than those in the *Ashram* school.'

The general attitude of the tribal parents and elders can be captured from their voice as given below:

'Here, in our colonies our children live and work according to their wish. They have total freedom and we never force anything on them'

Perspectives of the Drop-out Children

The views given me by the *Ashram* schoolteachers and staff contrast greatly with the picture I got from fieldwork in the tribal settlements and from interaction with the dropouts.

'I don't like someone forcing me to get up early in the morning. So, I was unhappy living in the hostel . . . Subjects like Malayalam and Science are good for me, but, English, Hindi and Mathematics are very tough. I did not

follow English and Hindi classes. Whenever I commit mistakes in front of others, teachers used to scold, beat and pinch my ears. You ask others; almost 90% of the children have similar experiences. See, their beating caused swelling on my legs. Moreover, the staff ridicule by calling us 'Adivasi' and 'Naicken'. Fed up with all this, my two friends and I decided to run away from the school. One day we climbed on the compound wall and got on to the branch of a tree outside that was almost touching the compound wall, climbed down, and somehow or other managed to reach our settlement', said a 13-year-old, 7th standard dropout boy from Mundakadavu Colony.

Deepak Kumar Behera (2007) has documented similar experiences among the tribal children of Odisha. He writes: 'For the tribal students in Ashram schools, the dominating feature of childhood is that of powerlessness and lack of control over what happens to them. The activities of these children at school are bureaucratized by the adults [teachers].' Mehendale also notes the same thing: 'Research shows that tribal children are often subjected to overt discrimination by non-tribal upper caste school teachers who view them as 'slow learners' unable to learn despite several repetitions . . . Teachers also demean tribal children by calling their parents 'drunken', with no interest in schools and education . . . The tribal children are repeatedly subjected to verbal abuse at the hands of upper caste teachers and this has a critical impact on the way these first generation students view themselves as learners' (2008).

'I fell from a tree while I was studying in the 7th standard and my hand was broken. So I could not go to school for a few weeks. When I went back to school, Ayah told me that I cannot be given admission in the hostel. So, I returned home. Moreover, I don't like the boarding, because they don't allow us to go outside of the hostel and the compound wall of the school', said a 7th standard dropout boy of 15years, from Punchakolli colony.

He also said that he could not follow English and Hindi and remarked that he would like to learn if they are given good teachers who can teach well.

'I came back to my colony during an Onam vacation and could not go back to school soon after the vacation owing to financial problem. But when I went back to school, I could not follow the classes and left the school,' reported a 10th standard dropout boy of 17 years, from Mundakadavu Colony.

He added that he doesn't like the timetable system in the hostel and hates the sound of the school bell. He also recalls that the security person used to scold and beat if he saw children playing in the school ground except during the playtime. Citing the examples of half a dozen of his friends in the settlement, he says that none got any Government job and he is convinced that there is no scope for any job even if one studies well. As Deepak Behera observes in the case of Odisha, 'As the tribal socialization is non-authoritarian, the tribal children dislike the threatening environment in the school. A tribal child would not submit to any physical beating, shouting or insult. Those students who somehow rather manage to continue for some time fail to secure the expected grade and eventually feel humiliated' (Behera 2007:181).

'I had pain on my hands and legs when I was in the 8th standard. My mother came to school and took me back home. When I stayed at home for a long time, I lost interest in studies and did not go back to school.'

This was said by a 20 years old, 8th standard dropout girl, from Mundakadavu Colony.

'While studying for my school final, a proposal came from my own settlement and I got married, giving up my studies. Now I have a child,' explained a 10th standard dropout girl of 19 years-old of Appankappu colony, now a divorcee,

'I studied up to SSLC. I could not finish my school final due to my mother's illness. She had tuberculosis and was admitted to Medical College for treatment and nobody was there to look after her beside me. So, I had to stop my studies,' remembered a 10th standard dropout girl, also from Appankappu colony, She is now 18 years old and married.

There are also instances of children dropping out due to illnesses.

'I had a skin disease (scabies) and came back to my colony. When I recovered, I went back to school. But Ayah told me not to come as the other students will be infected by scabies. So, I returned to my home', tells a 5th standard dropout boy, from Appankappu colony.

There are also instances of a child dropping out following the dropout of a sibling.

'When my brother left the school, I too left the school,' answered a 3rd standard dropout boy of 9 years from Appankappu colony. Similar stories were heard from other colonies also.

As many as 19 children (17 boys and 2 girls) did not turn up to school after holidays/vacation as they hated their life in the hostel as well as in school. In the case of 3 girls, death of one of their parents was the reason for discontinuing their studies. A brother and sister were taken out of the school by their mother after the death of another brother, a student of the same school, who fell ill while in school and died. Three girls discontinued their studies as they got married at the early age of 12 and 13. Among the Kattunayakan/Cholanaickan/Pathinaicken, there is a belief that refusal of a marriage proposal for a girl may cause the girl and her sisters to remain unmarried. If they say 'no', to the first proposal, none will ask her in marriage again. Hence, they seldom reject a proposal even if the girl is only 12 or 13.

The reactions/narratives given above reveal that the issues of tribal dropouts are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional and not as simple as can be captured by the term 'long absence' as can be read in the column titled 'Reasons for Leaving' as given in the school admission register.

Discussion

Field study shows that irrespective of sex, geographical location of the colonies or the identity of the tribe (whether Cholanaickan, Pathinaicken

or Kattunaiken) the problems faced by the dropout children are similar. Marriage and issues related to home were main reasons for dropping out of the girls; lack of freedom was the main issue for boys. Analyses also show that out of 41 cases, apart from issues in the school and hostel which was the most predominant reason for the tribal dropouts in this study (54%), family issues (37%), illness (7%), and cultural issues (2%) also contributed to the dropouts.

While teachers blame students for their disinterest, difficulty in understanding classes (especially English, Hindi and Mathematics) is the major problem of the children. Due to the fear of punishment, none come forward to express their doubts and views to their teachers⁵. Teachers also find fault with parents for the dropouts. The study reveals that 95% of the parents of these dropout children are illiterate and the children are the first-generation learners. Though there is a Parents-Teacher-Association (PTA) in the school, it is not functioning. Teachers say that it is difficult for them to communicate with the parents due to their lack of familiarity with the latter's dialect.

Though the tribes have distinct dialects, they reported that they do not have much difficulty in understanding Malayalam, though they feel Malayalam is their second language. In school, amongst themselves, children use their dialect but, to communicate with others, they use Malayalam. The children told me that teachers discourage them if they speak their dialect and they are asked to communicate in Malayalam instead. In many studies conducted among the tribes, language problem is reported as one of the contributory factors for the increase in the tribal dropout rate⁶. But as far as the tribes under study are concerned, though they face communication problem in the beginning, they do not have much difficulty in conversing in Malayalam. They like Malayalam because the Malayalam textbook contains stories and poems and their teacher is also very good to them. The children also like biology class as the teacher uses the examples of plants and animals found in their surroundings with which they are familiar. They consider English and Hindi as their third and fourth language respectively. Many cannot read English and Hindi textbooks as they only know the alphabets. In the case of Mathematics, even older children, who had dropped out from high school, have little knowledge of addition, subtraction and multiplication. They find the syllabus boring as it does not contain anything that interests them and, to use a term from Freire, the so-called *banking method*⁷ does not appeal to them (Freire 1970). It is a major complaint about the current universal education that the curriculum lacks relevance to the current life of a Scheduled Tribe child, and puts tribal children at a disadvantage (Govinda 2002: 93).

Almost all children are good at extra-curricular activities like sports, arts, drawing, painting etc. and have won prizes in school and the sub-district and district level competitions for various items. The trophies and certificates displayed in the glass almirah kept in the headmaster's room prove this. Running, jumping, and swimming are a part of life for these children. Their

drawing also reflects the beauty of nature in which they are born and brought up.

The female dropouts who got married are having children and are found busy running their family life; only a few showed interest in continuing their studies. But the majority of male dropouts who are currently engaged in forest related livelihood activities expressed willingness to continue their education. The dropout children who would like to continue their studies, have unanimously expressed the opinion that they would like to study if the school is run in their settlement and the teacher can come to the settlement school in the morning and leave the settlement in the evening. The reason they give for such a suggestion is not surprising: *'If the school is in the colony, we can go back to our homes in the evening, we can be with our parents, family and friends; go for swimming and fishing and roam inside the forest. In Ashram school, we feel like living in jails'*. Thus, for these children, like anyone else, freedom is the most important thing in their life and they cannot bear sacrificing it. As Amartya Sen (2000) forcefully put it, development and freedom go hand-in-hand. The absence of freedom or a feeling of disempowerment can lead to a sense of alienation, subjugation, and oppression and this, he contends, limits one's capacity.

The problematic nature of residential school systems has been well documented by dozens of independent researchers. Such systems have had a tremendous negative impact on Native people as a whole, not just on the students. They broke up families, destroyed languages and cultures, and in general, disrupted the traditional ways of Aboriginal people in country after country. Native spiritual traditions were not respected and children were even forced to perform alien religious rituals. Children were physically, sexually and emotionally abused in the schools and often succumbed to sickness and death. Parenting skills were lost among those who went to residential school because they were not at home to learn from their parents. Many children lost the ability to identify with their Native culture and lost their self-esteem as well (Alcorn 2006). Later, realizing the value of the concept of community and communal living, some authorities closed such residential schools; instead local schools were opened, allowing the children to live with their parents.

The residential schools for tribal children around the world – in Canada, America, Australia, Norway and even in Post-Independent India – have not been houses of enlightenment; rather, they have been prisons where tribal youths have been stripped of their self-esteem physically, culturally and spiritually (see A. K. Giri's foreword in Alcorn 2006: 8).

Conclusion

Following the recommendation of John Ogbu (1981), it may be noted that in designing an educational policy, policy makers should adopt a cultural ecological approach. By this, Ogbu refers to the social and economic context of

schooling. According to him, formal education is to be linked, in important ways, to other features of society. Models of social reality influence the behavior of participants. May (1999), too, has highlighted a system of education that stresses localized decision making, and policy reforms that comes from community participation, thus resulting in an education system that reflects the desires and beliefs of the community and its members (cf. Alcorn 2008). In Martha Nussbaum's view, the purpose of education is to cultivate humanity. This can be achieved through developing three capacities: the capacity for critical self-examination and critical thinking about one's own culture and traditions; the capacity to see oneself as a human being who is bound to all humans with ties of concern; and the capacity for narrative imagination — the ability to empathize with others and to put oneself in another's place. Keeping all these discussions in mind and also taking into consideration the essence/spirit of the dropout children's voices and those of their parents, juxtaposing them against the narratives of the officials and staff, it is suggested that instead of taking away and alienating small children from their home and parents, they should be given primary education in their own settlements by appointing committed teachers who can understand the pulse of tribal mind. It is a fact that these children cannot spend their entire life in forest and they should also be familiarized with the world outside. So, they may be taken out of their settlements once in a while to familiarize them with the world outside and they may be encouraged to mingle with students in various schools. Once these children are mentally prepared for formal education, they may be put into the *Ashram* school from 5th standard onwards. The content or kind of education provided now does not take into the consideration of cultural norms of the community to make them proud of their culture, instead it makes them to feel as square pegs in the round holes. Thus, it may be concluded that access to inclusive and quality education alone would help these Particularly Vulnerable Indigenous communities to get empowered to integrate with the mainstream without losing their identity. As regards developments of tribes, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the country, evocatively and insightfully put 'developing along the lines of their own genius'.

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Table 1
Annual Admission and Dropout details of children, Ashram School, Nilambur (1993-2010)

Year	Admission			Drop-out					
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Reason recorded	Female	Reason recorded	Total	
1993	15	15	30	NIL			NIL		NIL
1994	11	20	31	3	Long Absence	1	Long Absence	4	
1995	18	13	31	3	Long Absence	2	Long Absence	5	
1996	21	11	32	2	Long Absence	2	Long Absence	4	
1997	19	23	42	9	Long Absence	6	Long Absence	15	
1998	19	26	45	8	Long Absence (7) Changed Residence(1)	6	Long Absence	14	
1999	24	17	41	6	Long Absence (5) Changed Residence(1)	8	Long Absence	15	
2000	15	20	35	6	Long Absence	5	Long Absence	11	
2001	26	18	44	5	Long Absence	2	Long Absence	7	
2002	29	21	50	4	Long Absence	4	Long Absence	8	
2003	23	23	46	4	Long Absence(3) Death(1)	1	Long Absence	5	
2004	26	24	50	2	Long Absence	3	Long Absence	5	
2005	21	17	38	6	Long Absence	3	Long Absence	9	
2006	23	18	41	23	Long Absence	20	Long Absence (17) Changed Residence (1) Sick(1)	43	
2007	23	23	46	7	Long Absence	8	Long Absence	15	
2008	28	16	44	7	Long Absence	3	Long Absence	10	
2009	21	19	40	10	Long Absence	3	Long Absence	13	
2010	23	22	45	3	Long Absence	-	-	3	
Total	385	346	731	109	Long Absence (106) Changed residence(1) Death(1)	78	Long Absence (75) Changed residence(1) Sick (1)	187	

Table 2
Decadal Dropout rate of children from Ashram School, Nilambur

<i>No. of students who took admission in the 1ststd (year of enrolment)</i>	<i>No. of students who reached 10thstd (year)</i>	<i>No. of students who failed to reach 10th (year)</i>	<i>Drop-out rate (%)</i>
42 (1997)	19 (2007)	23 (2007)	54.8%
45 (1998)	22 (2008)	23 (2008)	54.8%
41 (1999)	16 (2009)	25 (2009)	61%
35 (2000)	19 (2010)	16 (2010)	45.7%
44 (2001)	17 (2011)	27 (2011)	61.4%
207	93	114	55%

NOTES

1. The Government of India in 1976 have categorised 75 tribal groups/sections/communities as Primitive Tribal Groups (now known as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups- PTGs), based on the criteria of Pre-agricultural level of technology, less than five per cent literacy, marginal or stagnant rate of growth etc. The PTGs in India are seen distributed in 15 States/Union Territories. In Kerala there are five PTGs viz., Koraga, Cholanaickan, Kattunayakan, Kurumbar and Kadar. These PTGs form only 5.3 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribes population of the State (For more details, see Kakkoth, 2005). The literacy rates of these communities are as follows: Cholanaicken-39.6%, Koraga-78.5%, Kadar-57.67%, Kurumbar-56.6% and Kattunayakan-59.41% (KILA 2008).
2. The concept of '*Ashram*' is based on Hindu philosophy and, traditionally, an *Ashram* was the centre of learning where the teacher (*guru*) and the students (*shishyas*) lived together as part of the institutional complex. One major objective of this system was to provide the learners with a congenial environment to improve their skills and craftsmanship under the able guidance and supervision of the guru (Behera 2007: 179).
3. In the school admission register, children belonging to Cholanaicken, Pathinaickan and Kattunayakan are given a misleading singular identity, viz., 'Kattunayakan.' (For more details on ethnographic accounts of Cholanaickan see Mathur, 1976; Bhanu, 1989, Kakkoth, 2008, 2009).
4. The Nilambur forests, which cover an area of 760.29 sq.km, are administratively divided into Nilambur south and north forest divisions. The Nilambur south forest division has an area of 366.17sq.km and has two forest ranges viz., Kalikavu and Karulai ranges. The Nilambur north forest division (394.120sq.km) constitutes three ranges viz., Nilambur, Edavanna and Vazhikkadavu ranges (*Kerala Forests and Forestry Handbook*: 1995). Mundakadavu settlement comes under Karulai range of Nilambur South Forest Division. Appankappu, Punchakolli and Alakkal settlements fall under Vazhikkadavu range Nilambur North Forest Divisions.
5. Similar findings are also made among the Saora children of Orissa (Srivastava, Lal and Lal, 1971), Adilabad's tribal community (Rathnaiah 1977) and tribes coming under *Janshala*, a joint programme of Government of India and five UN agencies (Gautam 2003).
6. Change in curriculum would remain incomplete unless patterns of teacher-student interaction also change in the direction of coercion-free involvement of the SC and ST students. The knowledge of social reality that teachers bring to the classroom, and their perception of the role of education are among the key determinants of teacher's behavior. To a great extent, the norms of teacher-student interaction are shaped by the training that teachers receive prior to employment. Knowledge of 'social reality' and role of education under prevailing social conditions do form a part of present training curricula, but like much else in teacher training, these segments receive a ritualistic observance. Teachers cannot be oriented towards new types of classroom interactions without being exposed to specific issues of social reality and functioning of school. This is not happening at present. (Kumar 1983: 1571).
7. 'Banking method' is a term used by Freire (1970) to describe how the oppressor/teacher teaches through relaying information, that is to be obtained by all. There is therefore no growth of the student as they are tested on memorization and reiteration.

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