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[Primary education]

Teaching Santal children

India is seen as an emerging major player in the global economy, but this progress has not yet reached the country's tribal people. They comprise eight percent of the population. Many tribal children cannot cope with the dilemma of either sticking to their own culture or accepting schools' middle-class values. This conflict results in high dropout rates, low educational aspirations and degraded self-esteem. A non-formal school project run by an NGO of tribal Santals in West Bengal proves that matters need not be that way.

[By Boro Baski]

According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development Report of India (2004–05), the dropout rate among tribals in India from class I to X is 79 %. In the states of West Bengal and Jharkhand, both of which have substantial Santal populations (see box), the rate is even higher: 88 % and 89 %, respectively. The figures suffice to gauge where tribals stand with regard to education.

There are several provisions in India's constitution designed to raise the educational level of tribals. These include free and compulsory education for all until the age of fourteen. The educational difficulties faced by tribals have been addressed through bilingual or multilingual programmes that start with education in the child's mother tongue, then transit to the regional or state language, and finally progress to the study of English. This three-language formula, however, remains in an experimental stage, and its practice is limited to isolated pilot projects.

The challenges of tribal education are daunting. There are 418 different tribes in India, with even more languages and dialects. Each group is also associated with a specific region through language, food habits, occupational characteristics and geography. To accommodate these diverse and culturally distinct communities with a single educational policy is a mammoth task, verging on the impossible.

Thus, despite good intentions, tribal-education policies are mostly dysfunctional. And when such systematic dysfunction continues for years or even generations, social unrest erupts. Due to extreme dissatisfaction, a large section of the tribals in the Lalgarh area of West Bengal declared a non-cooperation movement against the local establishment last year. The media spoke of a "tribal revolution". The assessment of *The Statesman*, a Kolkata-based daily, was accurate: "The 'Lalgarh incident' ... was the result of years-long ineffectiveness of the government's development policies in the tribal region."

Rising to the challenges

One of the main problems in Santal education is the conflict between the state's policy of assimilating minorities into the mainstream culture and the tribal people's reluctance to abandon their identity. Santal children face a severe dilemma when they are forced to reject their own culture and accept schools' middle-class values. This conflict results in high dropout rates, low educational aspirations and degraded self-esteem.

The primary goal of formal education boils down to getting a salaried job through competitive examinations. The Santals, however, live with minimal commodity requirements. Their concept of pleasure differs from the mainstream. They have hardly any urge to compete for success. Santal life is not marked by the sense of formal discipline and punctuality that schools require both at the individual and the family

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levels. The Santals' village culture gives more scope for moving around at random than is typical of mainstream Bengali life. Hunting, fishing, roaming, drinking, singing and dancing all play a role.

Other problems lie in the medium of instruction, the curriculum, the method of evaluation, a lack of quality teaching and a defective administration. Everything seems set up against Santal children. For example, school tends to become painful for children when faced with a teacher who does not understand Santali and who speaks in a language the children do not understand. Children have to memorise lessons without understanding them. They become bored and, instead of going to school, prefer to look after the family's cows or goats.

Most teachers are from non-Santal communities. They hail from a middle-class background and are hardly aware of the socio-cultural life-world of the children. This lack of understanding creates serious problems.

Understanding the gravity of these problems, the Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha (GASS), a non-governmental organisation, started the Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV), a non-formal Santal tribal school, at Ghosaldanga village in 1996. It was named after an astrophysicist from Munich, who donated the money needed to start the project in his will. At present, it has five classes – kindergarten to class IV. Moreover, it runs a hostel for secondary school students.

I am a co-founder of the school and continue to teach there. The school is situated about ten kilometres away from Rabindranath Tagore's university Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, and 150 kilometres northwest of Kolkata. The RSV is one of the educational projects of GASS, the NGO that was started about 25 years ago by a German writer and Tagore scholar, Martin Kämpchen, along with an educated Santal man, Sona Murmu, and fellow villagers.

Children come to RSV from eleven different villages. The school has a big campus with a playground, a bio-orchard garden, a fishery pond, agricultural land and a bakery. The children are first taught in their mother tongue, Santali, not in Bengali, the dominant regional language. After 18 months of schooling, teaching gradually switches to Bengali. The Bengali alphabet is used right from the start. Learning in their mother tongue at first gives the children confidence to cope with the Bengali and an educational world most of their parents are not familiar with.

We have prepared several Santali primers to teach Bengali letters and numbers through traditional Santal melodies. Santals traditionally learn their customs and rituals from their elders in the family and society through oral and informal methods. Most learning takes place during group activities in a pleasurable atmosphere. We have also adopted dance, music, Santal myths, folklore and history in our method of teaching. School starts in the morning with prayer and meditation in the Santal manner. Then the children study, garden, play, sing, dance, paint, eat lunch and return home.

Our methods of education have drastically reduced the school dropout rate, and children discover a lot of joy in and enthusiasm for learning. While our villages were basically illiterate up to my generation, all children now learn to read and write. Many ex-students of our school are doing very well academically in upper-level schools. Santal villagers are beginning to understand that education makes a difference.

The hostel serves students who graduate from our school with enthusiasm and the dream of progressing in their education. Often, they find it difficult to pursue that dream because of family duties and village customs. Their illiterate parents can neither guide them in studies nor support them financially. There is a lot of farmwork to be done, and village people are engaged in celebrating various kinds of festivals and rituals during the entire year. This environment does not suit serious study.

Role models

In light of these problems, we started a “students’ home” in 2006, housing 15 students. The goal is to prepare some model students in our villages, so that others will be inspired to follow them. We are also aware of the problem that educated Santals are often isolated from their community after adopting a different value system through formal education. Therefore, the RSV school and the “students’ home” are situated within one kilometre from the villages, so that the students can go home to spend weekends with their families.

In our government schoolbooks, students read about the lives and work of great Indians like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and in the present generation, Amartya Sen, whose residence is just six kilometres away from our school. We, however, feel that in addition to knowing great national and international figures, it is important to know about the lives of good and successful people in our own community. This will encourage self-confidence and a sense of pride for one’s community and heritage. Santal students need role models with whom they can identify.

The parents of the students have a forum in the school, where they come together once every two or three months to discuss the development of their children and the school. They also tender free service on the school campus, such as cleaning the bio-orchard, working in the vegetable garden or levelling the road and the playground. Parents also pay a small monthly fee. Those who cannot pay in cash may pay in kind with rice, potatoes, vegetables and so forth. Parents also actively take part in the various cultural activities of the school.

The school receives friends and well-wishers from various parts of India and abroad, who come to experience the life of our children. Last year, some former visitors of our two villages and the school formed a registered society, Friends of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati (Freundeskreis Ghosaldanga und Bishnubati e.V.) in Frankfurt. Many friends, schools and social organisations from Bangladesh, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom are in regular contact with us. In this way, our very local problems and efforts on behalf of Santal children receive a window that opens up to the wide world around us.

The Santals

Santals are the largest homogeneous tribal community in Eastern India. In the 1991 census, more than 5.2 million Santals were counted. People of this ethnic group are also found in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan.

Santals have an oral tradition; songs and rituals play an important role in cultural maintenance and transmission. Originally, Santals were jungle-dwelling hunter-gatherers, who occasionally cleared forests for agriculture. Presently, they are small- and medium-scale farmers. The Santals have been living for centuries as neighbours of other communities, maintaining a cultural and social distance. Economically, the Santals are among the poorest communities of India.

The social organisation of the Santals is very clearly structured. Each village has its headman (Manjhi), supported by his assistant (Paranik); the Jogmanjhi is in charge of the young men and women; the Naike is the village priest; the Godet is the village convener. A group of villages is controlled by the Pargana or tribal chief, and a group of Parganas is controlled by the Disom Pargana. Santals are divided into twelve exogamous clans and sub-clans, and they observe complex social rules, relating to different age groups, clans et cetera.

Santals are nature worshipers. In their worldview, spirits (bongas) are everywhere around them: spirits of their ancestors, the spirit of the

house, the spirits dwelling in the patch of primeval forest preserved in each village. Every hill, tree and rock may possess a spirit. These spirits are propitiated by elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices, which generally end in dancing and rice beer drinking. The Santals are great storytellers too. (*bb*)

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