

Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India

7

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The tug-of-war between the aspiration of the Community and the aspiration of the ones who want to make the world a little better has existed for centuries.

– Ramdas



The Vidyodaya School

Tucked away in the Blue Mountains, close to Ooty, the tourist destination of Tamil Nadu in southern India, is the small sleepy town of Gudalur, the home town of Rama and B. Ramdas. Gudalur is a land of tea, coffee and pepper. The region is home to the Betta Kurumba, Mullu Kurumba, Paniya, Irula, Katu Nayakan tribal communities who have their roots in the forest belts bordering Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It is in Gudalur that Rama and Ramdas have set up a very distinct and unusual learning centre for the tribal children of the area – the Vidyodaya School.

The first person I encounter on reaching Vidyodaya is the friendly face of a teacher who comes out to greet me and welcomes me to join the prayer session that is in progress. I see all footwear neatly placed on cement shelves just outside the building and take the cue. I am introduced as *akka* (sister) who is visiting for the day. The children give me a welcoming glance and the prayer session resumes. A small gathering of six to eleven year olds is reciting the *slokas* with devout concentration, followed by hymns in English, Kannada, Tamil and tribal languages. A session of exercise and *asanas* follows at the end of which, unlike the usual rushing and pushing that one associates with students going to class rooms, these little

ones go silently to their rooms. What is also odd is that there is a marked difference in age in each group that is moving into a particular classroom. I later figure out that the pupils work in groups of about 8–10 persons, the grouping being based on ability rather than age (what is technically now called a mixed age group!) Very soon one can hear the quiet yet constant dialogue between teacher and pupils, engaged in learning.

Surendran, himself a tribal trained at Vidyodaya, and presently a teacher says: 'Though we are a government-recognized school, we follow our own curriculum. Fortunately the authorities see sense in our

choice of curriculum and do not make a fuss about us not sticking to their norms of text, curriculum and methodology.'

Besides tribal children, the school also caters to the education of children with learning disabilities. The medium of instruction initially was English, but the school has now

switched to Tamil. Surprisingly, the children have no difficulty whatsoever in dealing with this. The classes are from preschool to the equivalent of class five, after which, children who wish to proceed further become part of the study circle for older children and pursue their academic education by enrolling as private candidates for the Secondary School Leav-



A classroom

ing Certificate examination of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

Academic classes are conducted from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. with a 40 minute lunch break. Very young pre-schoolers are provided with nutritional supplements in the morning. From 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. all children dedicate themselves to handicrafts, working in small groups, supervised by a teacher. They work with a range of techniques from macramé and painting to embroidery and paper mache and create a number of beautifully crafted items including bead chains, boxes, bags, pillow cases. Remarkably, neither age nor gender gets in the way of them perfecting their chosen art. It is amazing how children as young as five can produce such beautifully finished items. There is equal deftness in boys and girls, giving the lie to the commonly held belief that fine crafts are a feminine forte.

At the end of the year these items are sold at an exhibition. The earnings are shared between the school and the students. Vidyodaya is a good pointer to how small community schools can attempt to be self-reliant, even if only to a small degree. The children are also computer savvy. They make their own story books which tell their personal and community stories. They know one another's tribal music, dance, song and dress.

From 2 p.m. to 3 p.m., all the children are at the playground, engaged in various games. After a day filled with learning, it is time for a snack and then the children head home at 3.30 p.m.

The school has a teacher training programme and



Vidyodaya school assembly

has trained several tribal men and women to be teachers and educators. Many of them are teachers at Vidyodaya. Rama confidently states that if for some reason Vidyodaya has to wind up, ten Vidyodayas



Janaki and Santhi: teachers

will spring up in the area. In fact, Vidyodaya is gradually being handed over to the tribals themselves to run.

How did it all begin?

Says Rama:

We first started work in a school called Sathyalaya in Pondicherry. It was a school for the children of leprosy patients, fisher folk and any one else who desired to admit their children to the school. From there we moved back to Gudalur, which is Ramdas's hometown. Our intention was to live simply, look after the farm and our growing children with no intention whatsoever of re-involving ourselves with education or with a school. We bought a piece of land in Gundalpet in the adjacent state of Karnataka and went across everyday to work the farm.

Our children were sent to the local school. The elder studied in the fifth grade and the younger in kindergarten. Every evening I made time and looked forward to talking to them about their day at school, their lessons, etc. But they, instead, were eager to finish their homework at any cost rather than spend time with me or take interest in my re-explanation of lessons or other connected information I was trying to share. Homework engrossed them so completely that they had no energy or time left for anything else! Our younger son was not at all happy going to school or in doing much written work – his school day was a day filled with anxiety.

This was a very disturbing situation for us, especially since we had been with Sathyalaya for ten long years where teaching and learning was a meaningful and pleasant pursuit for the pupils, the atmosphere non compelling, non competitive and friendly. We saw a great polarity in the experience of our two sons. Our elder son had spent the first three years

of his schooling at Sathyalaya and not a day had been one of anxiety. On the other hand, the younger boy had started school in Gudalur and each day was a day filled with apprehension. This was clearly not what we wanted for the children and it troubled us all the more as we were both teachers and yet watched helplessly our children go through 'schooling'. It seemed like we could teach every child under the sun except our own children.

This prompted us to stop sending them to school from the following academic year of June (1991).

They spent their time at home, as they pleased and any time was study time. There were no timetables to adhere to, no portions to complete and no one to excel over. Most of our relatives and acquaintances were very upset with us because being teachers we were keeping children from attending school.



School chale hum!

But what troubled us about our decision was that the children were missing their peer group.

That problem was soon remedied. In Gudalur, the two children of Stan and Marie (who run an NGO called ACCORD) were very unhappy in boarding school. They requested us to involve their children with ours in activities through the day. Two more children of a doctor couple, Drs. Nandakumar and Shyla, serving at ACCORD, also joined. By the end of the month, I had seven children in my house for the day of which five were not my own!

When we had only our two children to educate, 'lessons' on some days meant reading a story at bed time, writing and drawing in the afternoons and so on. The choice of activity depended on the children's energy levels, receptivity and readiness for work. This changed with others joining in. We could not continue the previous arrangement of any time class and unstructured activity. I had to develop a

structure to engage them for the day and also provide for academic pursuits based on their age, grade and ability. And there – a school was born. We named it 'Vidyodaya'.

Dr. Nandakumar came forward to finance the school, which he did till 1993. It took a while to identify teachers. A year later, in September 1991, the school was officially started in a building provided by Dr. Nandakumar on his property. Getting recognition for a private Tamil medium school was a problem so we decided to open as an English Medium school. We charged fees and were open to anyone. By the end of the first academic year, there were 15 children including the first seven, and three teachers including myself.

Initially, Vidyodaya had no fixed time tables. There were teachers for various subjects and children were given the responsibility of making their own learning targets. On every Monday the children were asked to make their weekly programme with the guidance of the teachers. This gave the children an opportunity to decide their own study time, curricular content and pace.

In the second year, the school grew to a strength of 45. Suddenly we found ourselves in need of more teachers, more staff, extra space and infrastructure. Funds for infrastructure and furniture were raised locally, some of the other expenses we tried to cover with the fees collected.

Once we decided to apply to the Matriculation Board for affiliation (it eventually came in 1995 after three long years of battling with procedures and paper work), it was required that we have a proper functioning body. So the Vishwa Bharathi Vidyodaya Trust was set up in 1993 with founding parents, Stan and Marie, Dr. Nandakumar and Dr. Shyla and



English class

Ramdas and myself as its members. In the meanwhile, Ramdas had started work with ACCORD – part of his portfolio was education among tribals.

In 1996, the first batch of 35 tribal students sought admission. It was the month of May and school year commenced in June. The school already had 55 of its older pupils and suddenly we had to accommodate eighty! The parents pitched in to put up a temporary building. The school also needed extra teachers. We decided to engage three tribal teacher trainees and slowly began giving them management training as well. (This later developed into a full-fledged teacher training programme for tribals.)

When we started Vidyodaya we had thought to close it down in phases by the year 2001. The school was initially started to meet the needs of providing good academic foundation for children of three families. This need would be met by the time children reached grade eight, which they had done by the year 1995 and moved on to high schools outside. We were clear that we had moved to Gudalur for a quiet life and didn't want to run a school as a business. However there were other children now to be considered.

At this time there was a *mahasabha* (mass assembly) of the tribals during the tenth anniversary of ACCORD at which about 200 leaders from the surrounding villages gathered for a review of ACCORD'S work. During the *mahasabha*, one of the subjects of evaluation and discussion was the future of Vidyodaya. The assembly noted that the tribal hospital had made a big difference to the tribals. Keeping this in mind, the *mahasabha* wished that the school also be retained as a tribal school which would be for them a step towards a higher social status. They wanted to show the world that even if the old generation wasn't educated, the new generation

could receive education through their own school. Everyone felt this was a most satisfactory arrangement and that is how Vidyodaya became a school for the tribal children of the area.

Interview with Rama and Ramdas

Ramdas was born in Ooty. His parents owned a small tea and coffee plantation in Gudalur. They moved to Gudalur when he was a small boy. He later went to Chennai for higher studies. On completing his degree in Law from Loyola College, Ramdas started work in a research and training organization named CDRA. The objectives of CDRA were to organize communities, particularly dalits, fisher folk and women, training them to fight for their basic rights.

Rama hails from Karnataka. Her father was a Government official and retired as one of the Directors of the Nuclear Power Corporation. Her mother is a housewife. Rama too went to Chennai for higher studies and later worked as a laboratory technologist. They met each other through a common friend.

Nyla: There is a general opinion that the learning capacity of adivasi children is lower than that of other children. What has been your experience?

Rama: There is absolutely no difference between an adivasi child and anybody else. On entering school the only difference may be that adivasi children get a culture shock. Firstly, adivasi children have never been confined to a space for a structured activity and secondly, an elder or a teacher has never instructed them or supervised their activity. They find it extremely difficult to understand and adapt to such ways.

If you see adivasi children in their natural setting, you will find that even very young ones wander around the community or hamlet joining in some activity that may be going on. The elders naturally make space for them to join in; after a while the kids may leave and wander away on losing interest. Children grow up with minimum restrictions; there are almost no do's and don'ts for a child.

In June, when the new academic year begins, you will find the newly admitted children sometimes wandering around. They just get up from the class and go wherever they like. It is a very peculiar situation. We allow it, because that is how they have always lived. The child doesn't think there is anything wrong. Even if the teacher says, 'sit here,' the child does not understand the purpose or seriousness of the instruc-



Meeting of tribal youth working in different villages

tion. It is not used to instructions other than to wake up in the morning or to clean itself. For the rest, the children just play it by ear. So when they arrive in school they have no inkling of structured activity, instructions, etc. To them, the concept of obedience is non-existent.



Rama

The other problem a tribal child faces is the lack of exposure to the external world. The child of a settler will know much about life around him or her, the tribal child comes as a blank slate. Their knowledge of their life is far more advanced than that of a non-tribal child, but the latter has come to school tuned to formal education, as the parents will have introduced him quite early in the home to alphabets, numbers, art, language, etc. In a way, the tribal child starts with a disadvantage. Even holding a pen or pencil is something strange to him. Maybe the next generation will be equipped in these tasks. It is not a question of capability. It is just the lack of these activities in their homes and community.

Nyla: Isn't teaching in English, a foreign language, to tribal children, inappropriate?

Rama: As far as tribals are concerned, any language other than their mother tongue is a foreign language, but since they use Tamil, the regional language, to communicate with non-tribals, teaching in Tamil would have been a better option. In fact, our initial plan was to have Tamil as the medium of instruction. But at the time the Government regulations did not permit it. Now the rules have changed and the school is being converted to Tamil medium (to the disappointment of some parents). We have made the switch this year, starting with kindergarten.

Nyla: You have developed a new script for one of their languages – have they been introduced to it?

Ramdas: The Paniya language now has a script that we have introduced in a few places. Essentially, it is to enable them to not feel they are learning in a foreign language. Even Tamil, for a four year old, is

a foreign language. Tamil and English are both foreign languages as far as they are concerned! So a starting point in their own language with its own script will make the child feel comfortable with learning.

Right now we have brought out the books only in Paniya language. If one wishes to develop each of the tribes' languages and teach each in their own mother tongue, it will need time and funds. If we are able to achieve this for the four tribes, then it could be introduced in the school. Just now it is being used in the 'tuition' centres for children sitting around in the evenings and reading in the village. The books in Paniya are being used well.

Nyla: The general opinion is that the mainstream curriculum does not prepare a child for life. Yet at Vidyodaya, tribal children study the mainstream curriculum. Have you thought about this?

Rama: This is a debate we have had within the group. The tribal peoples' access to forest has almost gone. Their life-style is changing rapidly. They have already mingled with the non-tribals and imbibed their culture and life-styles. The fact of the matter is they can no longer live like their ancestors, no longer depend on the vanishing forests for their sustenance. It will be to their advantage if they are equipped to meet these changes with a balanced approach; otherwise they will just be swept over. We hope they will retain the tribal values that have relevance even today and accept the good brought in by modernization. It is a question of survival.

At Vidyodaya we have tried to draw the attention of our older pupils to 'non-tribal' behaviour such as competition, aggressiveness, etc. Prayer time is segregated for the juniors and seniors. The adolescents spend time reflecting and debating on issues and problems affecting them. It is a good forum to build values. We would be satisfied if reading skills and an interest in self-learning are kindled in the children.

Ramdas: What we are trying to do, in a sense, is to fulfill both our aspirations and those of the par-



Ramdas

IN DIALOGUE WITH DR. SHYLA



Dr. Shyla and her husband Dr. Nandakumar, founder parents of Vidyodaya School and co-founders of Viswa Bharathi Vidyodaya Trust, work at the Ashwini Hospital established by ACCORD. Vidyodaya School stands on land donated by them. Their child Gauri is one of the student-teachers at Vidyodaya.

Dr. Shyla: When we decided to come to this remote area, our first concern was the children's education. Sending them to a boarding school was out of question. Rama and Ramdas had no intention of being involved with education, but slowly things happened, so to speak. We had thought of it as a meeting centre for the children to learn together. When some of the staff's children and others began to come, we had to get a little serious. We, the founder parents, had no intentions of

making it into a mainstream school. Exams and certification were never a priority for us. We wanted our children to be able to think a little differently and live as good people. My children have got an absolutely excellent foundation, which was what we wanted when we started the school. This view is shared not only by us, but also Rama and Ramdas and Stan and Marie. Our children have learnt what it means to be good human beings. They are very sensitive to social issues.

Our daughter is now 20 years. She is slightly challenged mentally but very active and participates in every activity here with the teachers. She is a big advertisement for the school. We are 200% happy.

ents and therefore we are looking for the best way to do things. We are constantly trying to humanize the whole system, make it more caring to bring out the best in the child, make the child more creative. There is a broad understanding that on receiving certain inputs a child is better equipped to cope in this world. Parents think that if they get a particular kind of education, whatever it is, English medium or Tamil medium, and imbibe certain attitudes, mannerisms and life-styles, they will automatically get

an elevated status in life. The parents don't realize their wards have small chance, if at all, of getting into the mainstream because they have absolutely no idea how the system works. Each parent is hoping that his child will get to the top. But there is absolutely no space up there. So eventually all these people get terribly disappointed in their children and blame everybody else for it.

Therefore we try to see if we can jointly create a situation in which their own creativity, talents, back

grounds will find meaning. The flowering of this self worth, the dignity to be able to say, 'Yes, this is who I am' is much more important. Gaining an understanding of one's history and culture, being able to live with a certain degree of stability is what we believe is worth working towards. We don't want the tribals to remain marginalized. Probably the next generations will benefit, but one has to work towards it now. This is how I see the entire process.

Rama: Even though the school looks structured from one point of view, many unstructured activities are conducted to accommodate the needs of tribal pupils. For instance, the boy who hoisted the flag on 26 January this year comes from a much lower class than most of the other children. Our concern and aspiration vis-a-vis him, is to see him attend school. As long as he comes to school, we can interact with him in many areas. We know he is incapable of passing his tenth or even eighth standard. To us 'passing' is not important, as we are aware of his limitations. But his parents will be disappointed with him. We hope therefore that at some point he is motivated to learn a skill which will be a means of livelihood for him. Then, as a human being and as an adivasi he will work and live with dignity. For us, his being able to live a life of dignity is more important than gaining any kind of degrees. However, we realize that there is a mismatch of aspirations between the parents and us.

Nyla: *At the meeting today, the discussion centred on making sure tribal children attend the Government school daily. Someone observed that children are hiding from teachers and avoiding school. Why compel them to attend school which obviously seems like punishment?*

Ramdas: What would be of most advantage is tuition centres or small other learning facility centres. But there is nobody to manage these places. We have twelve tuition centres managed by five non tribal teachers. Even they are not keen to continue. It is difficult to find people willing to give their time in the evening to tuition centres. A few centres have had to be closed. What does one do, given this situation?

Our seemingly compulsory pushing of children to attend Government school is to accept our own limitations with humility and accept that the child gains at least the basics out of the schooling proc-

ess. I think that somehow, at least up to class VIII, the inter-mingling and exposure will help them to gain some knowledge outside of the community. They are afraid of the community outside; they are afraid of talking to other people. At least schooling will help them get over these fears. On the other hand, it may turn out to be a very negative experience, but that is a chance one takes. We are attempting a dialogue with teachers and head masters of these schools and are hoping for the best.

Rama: Also if children go to school we can compel the Government to see that the teachers deliver. Government believes that if it provides food, clothing, books and stationery, children will automatically come to school. We are trying to make them see these are peripheral matters. The important thing is what happens inside a class room. If that doesn't change, no adivasi child is going to be excited about coming into the school. We may nurture grand notions of their tribal status, but being illiterate will be to their disadvantage in the long run.

Nyla: What are your reflections after having spent so many years in this field?

Ramdas: Frankly, I don't feel we have moved very far away from the mainstream. Had the choice been ours alone, we would have moved out of the mainstream totally. But given the local context and our decision to work with the poor, the adivasis and the children of leprosy patients, we have to look at life from their point of view. They very clearly wish to get into the mainstream. For them, life is in the mainstream; it is we who are already in it that want out.

A person, who by virtue of his disadvantaged status, is already kept out of mainstream, yearns to get in and re-establish his credibility not only in the educational field but more in social, cultural and psychological terms. It is important that he be a part of it, or at least be confident that he has the capacity to participate.

Therefore we are compelled to keep a balance between what 'we' want and what 'they' want. We are involved with their education process because we wish to and not because they want us to be part of it. They never asked us to start an alternative school. It is essential for us to recognize and accept with humility that our involvement is out of our personal need to try out what we believe to be right. Others may or may not come forward to support us.

That depends on the extent to which they identify with our ideas and on our relationship with society.

However, we are not trying to get into the mainstream at all. We have never tried to see whether these people can get jobs there. We do not attempt to procure Government funds or work with the Government. We would like to establish a completely different social, economic and political system. For the tribal communities, their own system exists. The problem is to come back to it at an advanced and sophisticated level because the entire economy has changed. If they don't understand that economy sufficiently, they will be crushed by it completely.

One cannot avoid globalization. The moment an adivasi in the remotest village plants tea or coffee, he is connected with the market in London. He has no choice. He is already living in the global economy. The issue is how to help him understand the global economy because if he can't understand the mainstream, he is going to be at a terrible loss in a few years time. If they are to survive and benefit from the present economic trends, it is essential that they first understand them. Our effort is therefore to help them stay plugged into the mainstream economy and yet remain separate from it. We have talked with them about reorganizing their indigenous social system so that they are more sensitive to the issues they face and can develop a sense of balance to be able to withstand the forces of the mainstream.

There are several common issues that require the community's attention – care of the elderly, the sick, widows, orphaned children, etc. Previously they were looked after by the community, but today with changes in their way of life, these concerns have to be addressed separately. We have suggested establishing a community fund.

Secondly, their economy: the adivasis have lived with the 'plenty' of the forests all these years. Today the forests are no longer accessible; they have no choice but to 'plant' their economy. But when they have to 'grow' their economy, it seems a mammoth task. Their governing system has also become obsolete in today's context. That too will have to be revamped and re-established.

At the social, economic and political level we have tried to re-establish community life, sharing, and non-hierarchical living. These values were fundamental

to all adivasi groups. So, irrespective of us being adivasis or non adivasis, we try to build a certain relationship amongst us – build a community here. If we have problems, we go to each other; we help each other and support each other. If someone is going away and leaving their children behind, they don't have to ask, they can just leave their children with us. Children of our school also can be part of this community, keep their roots very much in these values. If we don't have a community among ourselves, then they don't have a community among them. They are looking up to us as role models. This is how we try to build a 'system' that has moved away from the system and yet is plugged into it at the same time.

Paniya tribal dialect script

The Paniya tribal dialect script is a derivative of Tamil with some slight differences. It was introduced in the tuition centres and other learning centres under ACCORD throughout Gudalur. Kannan, one of the volunteers of ACCORD says, 'People welcomed the idea when we introduced the script for our language teaching. It is like magic – children started to learn very easily and fast!'

Every English speaking visitor is an English teacher here.

Education Network

The nation wide network of educators working with learning centres and alternative schools was initiated by a number of people including Rama and Ramdas, Vasant Palshikar, Malathi of Viskasana, Gurveen Kaur of Centre For Learning, Hyderabad, Valli Seshan and others. The network is a support group for educators. Their first meeting was held at Gudalur. Ramdas coordinates the network's activities, its yearly meetings and publishes its yearly report for private circulation to its members.

Bibliography

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