

Looking Inward, Looking Forward: Articulating Alternatives to the Current Education System for Adivasis, by Adivasis

Contemporary Education Dialogue
1–17

© 2023 Education Dialogue Trust
Article reuse guidelines:
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india
DOI: 10.1177/09731849231212111
journals.sagepub.com/home/ced



Chinmayi Jayakumar¹ , Suganya Sankaran¹
and P. Gangadharan¹

Abstract

This article explores the conceptualisation of alternative education based on the lived realities of marginalised indigenous communities. By amplifying the voices of the Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan, Mullakurumba and Paniya communities, the article explores their vision for an alternative education system that promotes equality and justice, and the implications of such an alternative to the larger discourses on alternative education. The study foregrounds the lived experiences and perspectives of community members, utilising qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions and workshops involving 165 participants. The participants demand for an education that enables their children to navigate both their traditional environments and the modern world, fostering knowledge, dignity, character and contentment. Recognising that schools alone are inadequate, the article suggests reclaiming the village as a learning space and strengthening leadership within these communities. Furthermore, it

¹Vidyodaya Adivasi School, Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust, Gudalur, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding author:

Chinmayi Jayakumar, Vidyodaya Adivasi School, Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust, Gudalur, Nilgiris 643212, Tamil Nadu, India.
E-mail: chinmayi.jk@gmail.com

outlines specific educational practices that can facilitate the development of a culturally relevant education system for Adivasi children.

Keywords

Alternative education, marginalized communities, education of indigenous communities, purpose of education, social justice

Introduction

In the deep chasm that exists between the expectations placed on the Indian education system and the realised outcomes that fall short of meeting the diverse educational needs of Indian society, there emerges various 'alternatives' that strive to bridge this gap. Over the years, 'alternative education' has come to signify varying degrees of deviation from the traditional schooling system, influenced by the changing social, economic and political contexts of the country. Initially, alternative schools in India were pioneered by social reformers such as Gandhi and Tagore, who recognised the transformative potential of education in driving the process of social regeneration. However, in the present era of neoliberal globalisation, 'alternative' is often reduced to a label that increases the competitive edge of schools in an education sector that is gradually being steered by market forces. While there still exists alternative schools that strive to stay true to the cause of social transformation envisioned in the past, the meaning of 'alternative' in the popular consciousness is increasingly defined by schools that deviate slightly in methodological approaches while still being within the purview of the mainstream. The transformative potential of education thus remaining unrealised contributes towards further perpetuation of cycles of inequality and injustice. Consequently, children from marginalised communities continue to struggle to attain an education that seldom delivers on the promise of a better life. This study is an exploration into the possibility of an alternative education that is founded on the voices and experiences of the four Adivasi communities in the Gudalur valley of Tamil Nadu and an examination into the implications of such a conceptualisation of the alternative in larger discourses.

The forests in and around Gudalur valley in Tamil Nadu have been home for the people of the Paniya, Bettakurumba, Kattunayakan and Mullakurumba Adivasi communities for thousands of years. Over the course of time, each community has traversed a unique set of conditions

and contexts that has shaped their distinct languages, cultures and ways of life. However, starting from the early 1960s, people from near and far migrated to the valley over the years, bringing along prejudices that cast its first inhabitants as primitive. Government Acts¹ that restricted access to the forests and increasing private ownership of land pushed the Adivasi communities into the unfamiliar territories of modernity and disenfranchisement, estranging them to the land that had always been their home. While each of the four Adivasi communities experienced these changes in different ways, the common thread of deprivation and alienation connected all of their lived realities.

At this juncture, the Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD) recognised the shared plight of the Adivasi people and mobilised them. This culminated in a land rights protest led by the people in 1988 where 10,000 Adivasis came together to demand for their rights. The protest marked the beginning of a larger movement – the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam – against oppression and towards self-reliance for the Adivasi people. This movement in turn spawned the establishment of community-driven institutions in various key areas such as health, education and livelihood. This study is strongly grounded in the work of a community-driven organisation that emerged from the larger movement—the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT). VBVT has been working with the aforementioned four Adivasi communities on matters pertaining to their education and identity over the last 25 years. The organisation has been striving to establish culturally relevant learning spaces for Adivasi children with active participation from the community. The Vidyodaya Adivasi School, a key intervention of VBVT, has played a vital role in informing people’s imaginations of an alternative vision for education.

Here, while education is often posed as a crucial component to the attainment of social mobility and progress for the future generations, it is seldom experienced as such. The Adivasi communities of Gudalur started accessing schools in the late 1960s with the establishment of the Government Tribal Residential (GTR) schools in the area. Currently, the majority of Adivasi children attend government schools near their village, followed by the GTR, the private and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) schools.² In our examination of the educational experiences of the four communities, we see that while most children enrol in first grade, only a minority complete 12th grade, and even fewer graduate. Various factors such as discriminatory school environments, teachers who are unequipped to deal with the educational needs of the Adivasi children, exclusionary curricula and highly competitive assessment practices that

value scoring over learning contribute towards the Adivasi children experiencing schooling as alienating. The sense of self that gets shaped for the Adivasi children in the process of schooling becomes one riddled with insecurities and a feeling of inferiority. Consequently, we see low levels of learning, attendance and increasing dropout rates amongst Adivasi students over the grades. Furthermore, the current education system also weakens the link between Adivasi students and their cultural roots by excluding their traditional knowledge forms, propagating harmful stereotypes about Adivasis and diminishing the validity of the village as a site of learning. Thus, the current education system fails to recognise and accommodate for the diversity of educational needs and aspirations of the Adivasi community by imparting an education that is culturally decontextualised and historically uninformed.

While the mainstream education system perpetuates cycles of injustice, it is also a crucial site in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality. Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples highlights the principles of equality and self-determination in the realm of education, acknowledging the right of indigenous communities to access a non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate education (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2007). Although India is among the 144 signatories to the declaration, progress towards implementing these principles has been minimal and the path to achieving equality, justice and self-determination within mainstream education is a ceaseless and precarious one.

The concepts explored by Paulo Freire and other proponents of critical pedagogy delve into the emancipatory potential of education, where education is understood to play a vital role in restoring the oppressed groups' sense of identity and establishing themselves as subjects, rather than objects, of history. Crucial to achieving this sense of identity is the elevation of the voices of the people above all else and ceding agency to the oppressed to determine their own path forward. As stated by Freire, 'No pedagogy which aims at liberation can remain distant from the oppressed by considering them as unfortunate and by presenting models from among the oppressors for them to imitate. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their liberation' (Freire, 1970, p. 54).

Drawing from the principles of critical pedagogy, this study builds on this possibility of the people deciding their path ahead to conceptualise an alternative vision for education that is geared towards greater equality and justice for themselves. It is based on a larger research study under the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures³ (TESF) network

that examined the experiences of four Adivasi communities within the current education system and articulated an alternative for Adivasi education based on the community's perception of the need and purpose of education. This article explores the alternative vision and practices that emerged from the community's voices and its place in the broader landscape of alternative education in India.

The methodology of the study is informed by the critical ethnography approach in order to bring to the forefront an awareness of our own positionality questions within the processes of research, and be ethical in our interactions with the community. Qualitative data on the experiences, perceptions and expectations of community members regarding the education system was collected through 17 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and two workshops. In total, there were 165 participants involved in the process, out of whom 151 participants were from the community. The workshops were held with a subset of the FGD participants in order to facilitate further deliberation on certain key points that emerged from the FGDs. The discussions were recorded, transcribed directly into English and coded using thematic analysis.

Literature on Alternative Education

The existing literature conceptualises alternative education based on two prominent strands of thinking. The first is grounded in the idea that 'some students may learn better in an environment structured differently than that of traditional academic public schools' (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). The underlying assumption here is that the traditional education system is working well for the majority of the population, thus eliminating the need to problematise or change it. This line of thinking informs alternative schools and programmes meant for students who are at the risk of school failure and aims to prevent dropouts. Such alternatives are usually meant for students from disenfranchised backgrounds whose assimilation into mainstream schools is deemed difficult due to various reasons. The second strand of thinking challenges the efficacy of the traditional education system and its methods, identifying the need to adapt 'the process of learning to better suit the child's inclinations, interests and abilities' (Vittachi & Raghavan, 2007, p. 15). It deviates from mainstream schooling in shifting the focus of schooling away from examinations, results, ranking and acquiring conventional measures of success such as wealth, status and fame. While such an approach has the potential to be transformative, it is also at risk of being an alternative to

traditional pedagogical methods without being an alternative to traditional systems.

Alternative education in India has evolved over time in accordance with the changing social, economic and political realities of the country. In the late nineteenth century, visionaries such as Vivekananda, Rokeya Shekawat Hossein and Jotirao and Savitri Bhai Phule established educational institutions as a means to social regeneration. In the early twentieth century, alternative education in India was influenced by Gandhi, Tagore, J. Krishnamurthi and Gijubhai Badeka, who placed a strong emphasis on ethical commitments and the interplay between school and society (Vittachi & Raghavan, 2007). From the 1970s onwards, there have been various experiments in the landscape of Indian alternative education such as the Sita school and Kanavu that focussed on creating opportunities for those who were excluded from the mainstream schools socially and economically. However, as schooling evolved into a commercial activity in the post-liberalisation era, the increasing intrusions from the state and other private players in the 'market for education' limited the scope of operation of these alternative schools (Nair, 2022). In contemporary times, the term 'alternative education' primarily denotes schools that employ child-centric methods, often catering to privileged urban clientele. Within this context, the notion of 'alternative' primarily pertains to the pedagogical methodologies employed rather than structural aspects of schooling.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also regards the term 'alternative' as a departure from traditional approaches primarily in terms of methods (Government of India, 2020). This is evident in section 3.6 of the policy, which states, 'to allow alternative models of education, the requirements for schools will be made less restrictive. The focus will be to have less emphasis on input and greater emphasis on output potential concerning desired learning outcomes' (*ibid*, p. 11). Furthermore, NEP 2020 limits alternative education to being a temporary solution that will prepare students who are on the verge of dropping out to return to the mainstream system when it states 'alternative and innovative education centres will be put in place in cooperation with civil society to ensure that children of migrant labourers, and other children who are dropping out of school due to various circumstances are brought back into mainstream education' (*ibid*, p. 10). Here, we see that there are varied meanings and implications embedded in the term 'alternative education' as it has been defined in diverse ways within different contexts over time. Hence, the discourse around alternative education in India has strayed away from achieving social transformation

in the direction of greater equality and justice, and the term ‘alternative’ itself has been co-opted into the mainstream.

The Purposes of Adivasi Education

The realm of alternatives is also a realm of possibilities. However, to envision an alternative aligned with people's needs and values, strong teleological foundations must emerge from the voices of the intended community, grounding it in the relevant context and time. Thus, in this study, the purpose of Adivasi education that emerged from the participants’ perspectives acts as the bridge between the current situation and the alternative vision.

The purpose of Adivasi education articulated by the participants foregrounds the role of education in enabling Adivasi children to grow as autonomous, knowledgeable, financially self-sufficient and compassionate individuals who are able to navigate the traditional Adivasi lifeworld and the modern world with dignity and character. The community’s vision for education centres around the key principles outlined below:

- Education should foster autonomy in Adivasi students, equipping them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to understand the world, think independently and make informed choices.
- Education should cultivate a deep understanding of both the Adivasi community and the modern world.
- Education should guide students in developing a strong value system that enables them to be resilient, confident and compassionate members of society.
- Education should not limit students’ learning based on predetermined hierarchies but instead accommodate their diverse interests and aptitudes through giving them exposure to various ideas and ways of life.
- Education should promote financial self-sufficiency for Adivasi children that prioritises the living of fulfilling and dignified lives over the accumulation of wealth.

The self-reliance that emerges from such an education is crucial for Adivasi children and the community to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world that is uncharted territory for the older generations. As a village elder summarises,

We are not saying that our children with their education should become a big person or earn lots of money or even become a big doctor or teacher. We are saying that we want our children to have dignified work and good character at the end of the day. Basically, education should enable them to create opportunities and lead their lives with pride and dignity. (FGD14)

The community's notion of education values the processes of education as much as its outcomes and is strongly tied to the development of the collective, rather than the development of individuals alone. As stated by a participant,

If we look at other communities, they don't think about communities. They think about their own individual development. For them, it is a lot about 'I should develop, I should be in a good place'. But for the Adivasi community, we think about the community's well-being and to develop together as a group. It is difficult and challenging when we think of developing together, but we should plan.' (FGD14)

Since the fundamental values and beliefs that inform these purposes of education differ from those of the current education system, the solution cannot be to change the community and children through assimilation into the mainstream schools. Building from the purpose of education outlined by the community for their children leads us to a culturally appropriate and contextually relevant education system for Adivasi children that promotes self-determination.

Adivasi Culture

Central to envisioning an education that is culturally relevant is the establishment of a shared understanding of the notion of culture. Often, mainstream discussions present a superficial view of Adivasi culture, focusing solely on language, dance, music, traditional clothing and rituals. While these practices are culturally significant, focusing solely on them limits our overall understanding. The artistic forms and rituals serve as a medium for fostering unity and shared experiences that cultivate a sense of solidarity. The community's understanding of culture extends beyond these practices to include essential values and beliefs that are intrinsic to their way of life.

The Adivasi worldview positions individuals within a network of connections with other beings and their natural environment, emphasising

a non-hierarchical and non-transactional perspective. Unlike the modern notion of changing the world, the Adivasi perspective prioritises its preservation, be it the surrounding nature or their memories of existence. This lens enables them to perceive themselves as integral components of multiple wholes, nurturing a sense of community and harmony with the natural world and each other. Values such as cooperation, conservation and contentment with what is sufficient occupy central positions in their way of life. This starkly contrasts with the mainstream consciousness of ‘progress’ or ‘development’, which revolves around individualism and material accumulation. When participants express concerns about losing their culture, it primarily revolves around the potential loss of these values and worldviews. As an elder participant puts it,

Our people are good because we don't have desire for wealth, no thoughts like that. Apart from alcoholism, everything else is good. So, this is what we should teach our children about our culture—this connection, helping those in need, helping each other in a community and affection for others. The children who are growing up now won't know this. So, we might need to have a class about this, whether it's a school or a study centre ... that tribals are like this, they help those in need, without expecting anything in return. We have seen in so many places that if there is no rice in one place, they can get it from other's houses. ... In old times, there were quite a few good values, so we need to give awareness about these practices. They have almost stopped, so we must revive them by starting with the children now. (FGD04)

Hence, Adivasi culture is not limited to its superficial manifestations in dance, music and rituals, and encompasses the underlying philosophy that informs these practices. The artistic expressions and rituals serve as vehicles for instilling and embodying this philosophy, while the village becomes a space where these sensitivities and knowledge are cultivated through communal togetherness.

The Alternative Vision

True to the spirit of self-determination, the participants emphasise the importance of educational institutions and learning spaces that are led by the people of the Adivasi communities. The demand for an Adivasi school is particularly strong, with the Vidyodaya Adivasi School serving as an influential model for alternative education that focuses on cultural relevance. At Vidyodaya, half of the teachers are from the Adivasi

community, fostering caring relationships with the students. Adivasi songs, dance, languages and other cultural practices are integral to the school's daily routines. The curriculum incorporates the children's context, histories and stories. The decision-making process at Vidyodaya reflects Adivasi values, giving space for everyone's voices to be heard. These aspects create a strong connection between the school and the Adivasi child's home (Madan, et al., 2019). Vidyodaya is currently operating as a primary school with approximately 120 children enrolled.

Drawing from British philosopher Harry Brighouse's treatise on education (2005), the participants' vision for a school attended by Adivasi children can be categorised into three aspects: composition, ethos and curriculum. The ideas of the participants are streamlined into these three categories to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of their vision for an alternative.

Overall, the participants emphasise on the importance of diverse and culturally sensitive teachers, a curriculum that reflects Adivasi context and values while also preparing the child to interact confidently with the modern world and an inclusive and nurturing ethos that fosters the students' growth and well-being. With regard to the composition of the school, the participants emphasise the importance of having Adivasi and non-Adivasi teachers who have an understanding of the community's history and context to address their own biases. Teachers from the Adivasi community are seen as better equipped to help Adivasi children transition into school by communicating in their own language and providing a sense of security and comfort. They also bring perspectives that ensure the school practices remain relevant and culturally appropriate. Furthermore, teachers from the Adivasi community help foster stronger relationships with parents and villages.

While participants express a desire for exclusive schools for Adivasi children in the earlier grades, they also see the benefit of having Adivasi and non-Adivasi students studying together in later grades. This inclusive environment fosters mutual learning, where students can understand each other's similarities and differences, building meaningful friendships. It also provides an opportunity for the outside world to gain a better understanding of Adivasi culture. Thus, encouraging diversity and inclusion among teachers and students creates learning spaces that promote autonomy and challenge misconceptions.

The school ethos encompasses the values, beliefs and attitudes that create an emotionally stable and physically safe environment for genuine engagement between students and teachers (Brighouse, 2005). According to the participants, a school should not instil fear in children but rather

provide a sense of freedom. As a participant states, ‘Kids need freedom. Their hearts must be free. Only when that happens, can they listen and absorb what the teacher is teaching with no fear’ (FGD06). Furthermore, all students should be treated with equal respect, and there should be no comparisons based on academic performance. In the words of a participant, ‘Everyone should be equal. The children should never feel inferior. Students should not be compared based on their marks’ (FGD01). Eliminating discrimination and fear is crucial for the active engagement of Adivasi children with their teachers and peers.

The participants also believe in recognising and nurturing the unique talents of each child, especially when they are not academically oriented. Schools should identify these talents and encourage children in pursuing their interests and developing their capabilities. As a participant remarks,

Not everyone has all the talents. Each person is differently skilled and we need to facilitate their learning based on their skillset. Some may write well, some may have good hands-on skills, some may sing well; still others may be good at sports. We should recognise them and encourage them besides their academic pursuits. Instead of telling the children what to do, we must create a system that allows the children to choose for themselves what they want to do. (FGD06)

Lastly, schools should promote cooperation over competition and foster unity among students, encouraging a disposition to help others without expecting anything in return. According to a participant, ‘Children should learn about their communities and culture. Together with reading and writing. Their heart and thinking should also get developed through the education system. [It should be] one that builds unity’ (FGD14).

In line with the outlined values, teachers should exhibit kindness and compassion towards Adivasi children, treating them equally and understanding their home contexts. As a participant remarks, ‘Everybody should be treated equally. Just because a child does not study well, they must not be scolded or beaten. Also, because a child studies well, they should not be spoken of too highly. We need teachers who can do that’ (FGD01). Teachers should support students emotionally first and then academically, remaining open to learning themselves. As a participant states,

Teachers should be able to teach what is in the book as well as what is needed for life. Teachers should know how to make the child understand—be it a lesson from the textbook or a life lesson. Teachers must never feel like they are the best and they know everything. Teachers must know what the child needs.’ (FGD01)

Teachers who uphold these values and beliefs create a learning space where the children will want to come to of their own will.

To create an inclusive environment for Adivasi children, it is crucial to value and build upon their existing values, knowledge and worldviews rather than trying to change or 'civilise' them through schooling. The participants emphasise the importance of acknowledging and nurturing what Adivasi children bring to the school, allowing them to feel valued and engaged as active learners. The goal is to make school a happy and safe place where children's aptitudes, interests and abilities are recognised and explored. The community believes in offering a diverse range of learning opportunities, both academic and vocational. They advocate for the integration of sports, vocational training, crafts, dance, music and other cultural practices into the curriculum, considering them equally important as academic subjects. In a participant's view, 'They need to be taught to courageously move forward. Not just going by academics alone, knowledge on how to live life well will help us lead a joyful life' (FGD06).

The participants stress the need for a curriculum that encompasses useful knowledge, allowing Adivasi children to understand the world around them. According to a participant, 'They should learn a lot about the outside world. They should have it in them to put in effort at work and whatever they do. They should have self-confidence. They should also have intentionality to develop themselves' (FGD14). This involves focusing on the 'why' behind learning and fostering conceptual understanding instead of merely exam-oriented education. A culturally appropriate curriculum that draws from what the material life offers is central to overcoming the fear of the unknown. Additionally, accurate narratives about Adivasi communities and their histories should be included in textbooks to provide a comprehensive and culturally relevant education.

To ensure that the suggested changes result in meaningful learning experiences, it is important to incorporate relevant pedagogical practices. Teachers should value the knowledge, skills and worldviews that Adivasi children bring to the classroom, avoiding alienation and instead connecting lessons to their context and interests. They should employ pedagogic methods that engage students through activities and curated experiences, promoting critical thinking and deep understanding. Teachers need creative autonomy in conducting their classes and making decisions about the school's operations, free from bureaucratic constraints. In the words of a village education coordinator who works closely with schools, 'We can't create anything meaningful based on the specifications of the government or an outside entity. The teacher has

that talent. Not with how the government prescribes things. The extent of a teacher's capability is what will shape a child's growth' (FGD06).

The assessment system should align with the school's purpose of providing valuable feedback for student and teacher improvement. It should not hinder the learning process or lead to comparisons. Instead, it should be a means for students to understand their own capabilities and progress. The grading system should focus on growth and improvement rather than solely pointing out mistakes, ensuring a transparent evaluation that helps each child realise their true standing. Grades should not define children, and instead, gentle guidance should be provided to help them understand their mistakes without fear of scolding or punishment. In the words of a participant,

Like S (another participant) said, the grading system is necessary. For a child to understand their own talent and capability, they needn't be told of it by others.... The grading system mustn't be set up in a way where it affects others. Kids need to understand their own capabilities. We need to figure out a way to properly grade them. That's when it will be transparent to them. It'll help each child realise where they truly stand. (FGD06)

Overall, the pedagogical practices and assessment system should create an environment that values learning over scoring, promotes engagement and fosters continuous improvement for Adivasi children in their educational journey.

The changes in ethos, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment outlined above cannot be fulfilled through teachers who are trained in the current conventional teacher training system that has been seen to create teachers who are often indifferent to the cause of Adivasi education. The participants emphasised the need for a teacher education programme that specifically prepares Adivasi teachers to impart a culturally relevant curriculum. They expressed concern that Adivasi teachers, after undergoing formal training, often become similar to non-Adivasi teachers and fail to add value to the education of Adivasi children. It is essential to tap into the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the Adivasi community and empower these teachers to pass on this knowledge to the children. As a participant shares,

I think teachers are important. Many aspects are encapsulated in a teacher, not just teaching. Only a teacher can really guide a student, what to study, what to become, and so on, not parents. We need to get involved in teacher training too to train this kind of teachers.... Our people have knowledge accumulated

over generations, they are intelligent, wise, but we don't take it forward. Our people are simple, and I don't blame them. But we don't talk about this knowledge to outsiders. This can be done only by Adivasi teachers.... A teacher has to know all aspects of taking the child forward. They must know how to interact with the village and in the school with the children. These teachers must be Adivasis and then we can see the change. (FGD10)

The participants also highlighted the importance of a community-led hostel that would provide a residential space for Adivasi children from remote villages and challenging home environments, ensuring their access to education while preserving their cultural identity.

The participants recognise the importance of an education that embraces inclusivity and nurtures the Adivasi identity while enabling the child to navigate modern society. They acknowledge that although schools can bring about significant changes, it is still a product of modernity with its limitations. Adivasi cultural practices and knowledge are deeply rooted in the context of observation and apprenticeship, where learning occurs within the specific ecosystem of the forest and the village. For instance, the knowledge of herbal medicine goes beyond understanding the healing properties of plants as the ecosystem of flora and fauna it grows in is equally important. Adivasi children acquire this knowledge through first-hand experiences in their villages with their families. While schools can provide information about this knowledge, they cannot fully replicate the authentic learning experience. In the words of an elderly participant, 'Now our children are studying government education. Our education is different from theirs. Our education is connected to the community and culture. We learn about forests, culture, a hill, a river and also about our leaders. We include all this in our education. But their education is an individualised education' (FGD14).

Additionally, each tribe possesses its own customs, traditions and knowledge systems, making it impractical for schools to incorporate all of these into their curriculum. Therefore, there is a strong need to reclaim the village as a learning space, as schools alone cannot meet the diverse educational needs and aspirations of Adivasi communities.

Discussion

In examining the degrees of deviation from the mainstream present in the alternative articulated above, we see that it questions the very ideas

and principles that form the foundation of the mainstream education system. The modern values of individualism and competition that drive the mainstream education system are replaced by the Adivasi values of communal living and cooperation. Productivity is exchanged for presence, and the needs of the people take precedence over the needs of the economy. Children develop as individuals within the community, rather than facing the trade-off between the two aspects.

The alternative paradigm that takes form here has the community as its primary locus rather than the individual child, the economy or the nation-state. However, it still enables the Adivasi child to navigate the realm of the individual, economy and the nation-state from a space of strength. This approach recognises the significance of contextualising education within the community's lived realities. By doing so, children and older generations within the community can establish a meaningful connection to the educational process, transcending the confines of school walls. Here, education is not a one-way street but rather a transformative process that involves both the community members and the school learning from each other. The reciprocal relationship between the two is vital for the alternative system envisioned here to keep evolving according to the changing needs of each generation.

While this perspective focuses on the Adivasi communities, it does not become a catalyst for further social division. The values of community-focused education align with democratic values in a way that promotes unity and harmony. In this sense, alternative education also becomes a value-centric system that takes an exploratory rather than prescriptive approach. It places emphasis on transformative values that can create a microcosm of the world we aspire to see. This microcosm then forms the blueprint that guides students to working towards the present and future they value for themselves, their community and the world.

While it is true that the scope of alternative education is limited in the current socio-economic scenario by the increasing commercialisation of education and state regulations, the alternative based on the lived experiences and culture of the Adivasi community outlined here shows that there is still space for hope and change. Given the humanitarian crises and climate emergency facing us, the need for an alternative education that equips younger generations with the imagination of possibilities and the skillsets required to create a better world is more pressing than ever. An alternative education that is truly liberatory goes beyond surface-level distinctions in teaching methods, worldviews, individuals involved or even curriculum choices in order to impart an

education that restores the agency of the oppressed. It believes in the possibility of a different kind of society; a world that is just, equitable and humane by design.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This includes the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, which was passed in 1969 to gain control of the land from a raja in Kerala and the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980 that declared forests as wildlife sanctuaries and prohibited human entry into them (Karthik & Menon, 2016).
2. From data collected from a private survey done by the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust.
3. This study was funded under the Early Career Researcher grant from the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures network.

ORCID iD

Chinmayi Jayakumar  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4297-4801>

References

- Brighouse, H. (2005). *On education*. Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
- Karthik, M., & Menon, A. (2016). Blurred boundaries: Identity and rights in the forested landscapes of Gudalur, Tamil Nadu. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 51(10), 43–50.
- Kim, J. H., & Taylor, K. A. (2008). Rethinking alternative education to break the cycle of educational inequality and inequity. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 101(4), 207–219.
- Madan, A., Ramdas, B., & Shastry, R. (2019). Social movements and educational change: A case study of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 54(5), 45–52.

- Nair, J. (Ed.). (2022). *Un/common schooling: Educational experiments in twentieth-century India*. Orient BlackSwan.
- UN-DESA. (2017). *State of the world's indigenous peoples: Education*. United Nations.
- UNGA. (2007). *Declaration on the rights of indigenous people*. United Nations.
- Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust. (2019). Survey on school-going children 2015-'16 to 2018-'19 [Unpublished data].
- Vittachi, S., & Raghavan, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Alternative schooling in India*. Sage Publications.