

# Rebuilding Self and Identity in Adivasi Schooling

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The sociological study of everyday life experiences in the classroom has enriched our understanding of how students learn and or do not learn. Children are not mechanical beings. They construct their emotions and ideas regarding teachers and school subjects through a series of social interactions. The experiences of a child within a society are what may lead her to begin to feel that geography is a boring subject, while history is exciting. A child from a home where the language of the school is spoken and where ideas of history are discussed and debated may find that it catches her interest in school as well. She will speak up in front of the teacher and the rest of the class and say things which the others might not know and gain their respect. Her self-esteem will rise. Meanwhile, a child from a family which does not speak the language of the classroom will struggle and stumble. If he has not heard about, say, *Aryabhatta* before, he may be silenced and may feel humiliated by the excited chatter of others.

The meanings and feelings which are created in such encounters slowly accumulate and shape a student's orientation towards school and its knowledges. The challenge for teachers and educators is how to shape the meanings and interactions of a classroom so that they encourage and enrich a child's learning. At the same time, one must beware of constructing such meanings and interactions which push the child into a shell and paralyse learning.

Several theoretical approaches have been developed in Sociology and Anthropology to understand the everyday life of students and the classroom. A theoretical approach is a way of looking at the world which has typical concepts and ways of imagining what is happening or not happening. Drawing from theoretical approaches, we too can start seeing the things which we did not notice before. In this article, one major theoretical approach is outlined and the work of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) with adivasi children of the Nilgiri hills is discussed to show how it helps us to understand the challenges in education.

## Adivasi Munnetra Sangam

### *Background and history*

The AMS has been working for several decades with adivasis in and around the forests of Nilgiris. There are five tribes there – the *Paniyas*, *Bettakurumbas*, *Mullukurumbas*, *Kattunayakas* and *Irulas*. Earlier, their livelihoods ranged from hunting-gathering to farming and working in plantations. Forests were integral to their lives; they drew sustenance, both material as well as spiritual, from the forests. The arrival of increasing numbers of outsiders from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka into their region pushed them deeper into the forests. Things became bleak as the forests began to shrink and then, the government denied access into the forests altogether. Malnutrition and depression became widespread amongst the adivasis of this area. The Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD) began to work there in the 1980s and the AMS began to mobilise the adivasis to demand land and the right to use forests. Over the years, these have worked on strengthening and enriching adivasi culture and helping the forest-dwellers to come to terms with the city people and the government.

The AMS believes that culture is at the heart of the adivasi struggle for dignity and livelihoods and so education is an important concern. The adivasis' older ways of learning to be adults and being full participants in their world are now confronted by a very different kind of world. In the schools set up by the Tamil Nadu government, their children felt alienated and lost. Not surprisingly, only a few would manage to stay on to graduate.

Two educationists, Rama Shastry and B Ramdas of the AMS, set up an alternative school, initially, for their own children and then, for the children of activists. This school was taken over by AMS to promote a model of schooling that would give respect and strength to the adivasis. It has become the centre for AMS's efforts in training teachers and in intervening in existing government and private schools.

## Symbolic Interactionism

*Symbolic interactionism* says that all humans develop and grow through their interactions in the world. We slowly develop a *self* by interacting with our parents, friends and so on. We begin to look within and become aware of our *self*. This awareness of *self* does not exist in full, at birth, nor does it grow automatically. Instead, it changes and takes form through social interactions. We learn our place in the world, with respect to our parents, neighbours, friends, teachers and so on, through our interactions with them. This awareness develops slowly. A child growing up in a family begins to slowly start seeing itself as a 'girl'. This comes from how its parents look at the *self* and name it, how someone with it comes to play with dolls and not guns. Slowly a sense of the self being a *girl* emerges. Such an interpretation of the self further shapes other interactions and choices of how to behave or not to behave. Our identity and self are not fixed; they emerge through social interactions.

The self emerges, particularly, through the meanings we give to situations. Take for example the student's relationship with the teacher. As students, we never fully understand how a teacher looks at us, we only see him through symbols. An adivasi child may be familiar with certain symbols through which it understands that adults look at it 'warmly'. Symbols of warmth include the use of certain words, gestures, touch and so on. In a school controlled not by tribals, but by caste society, the student may see these symbols lacking. The child then begins to conclude that it is not 'warmly appreciated' in school. She may begin to dislike going to such a school and may start keeping to herself when there. C.H. Cooley called this process the looking-glass way of building the self. We imagine how others look at us and we build our own responses to that perception. Our perceptions rest upon symbols and, through our reflections upon those symbols, we develop our feelings and choose our future behaviour. Such an approach that highlights our interactions with symbols to build our identity and self is called *symbolic interactionism*.

According to symbolic interactionists, an important aspect of learning to be a good teacher is learning to use symbols in the way students are familiar with and are able to understand. For example, if I want to tell my students that the day's class and topic are the

key to understanding everything else, I need to find the right symbols – gestures, tone of voice, words, blackboard work, etc.—and use these so they will understand. For this, I too, as a teacher, need to know their symbols. I may say it in a way which just does not resonate with the students and then they do not pay attention to me. I may blame the students for being dull and unintelligent, but actually, the failure was in the symbols I had used.

A big part of learning to teach well is beginning to recognise which symbols the students understand and then, to choose and use the most effective ones out of those. When the students begin to respond with interest in my class (or I begin to see symbols that I think represent interest), that shapes my own self. I begin to see myself as a competent and proud teacher. We are always interacting through symbols and the study of this process throws important insights into teaching and learning.

### *Autonomy in symbolic interactions*

The self is constructed through social interactions, but that does not take place in a mechanical fashion. We do not always accept how others look at us. When a teacher from a dominant caste looks at an adivasi child with contempt and with an expression that this person here is a useless student who should not have come to school at all, the child may pick up the meanings of that expression. The child, then, tries to work out how to feel about those meanings. The child may start thinking of *itself* in that same way: I am useless, I have come to the wrong place, etc. Or may build another interpretation: I need to be like the others here, I should seek the teacher's approval. Or yet another interpretation: I am being wronged here; the teacher is denying me my place in the sun.

Symbolic interactionists tell us that we have many inner conversations after seeing how others look at us. These inner conversations are where we identify and create different responses and choose between them. Symbolic interactionism directs us to pay attention to inner conversations and the way they unfold. While initially, it tended to look only at our inner life, today this perspective has been adapted to show that our inner lives are connected with larger issues and struggles of social life. Our inner conversations are what lead us to challenge the stereotypical image of being a dumb woman or an adivasi.

## **Building a confident self**

### *Vidyodaya school*

The experience of AMS in working on school education shows how struggles in the larger society are echoed in the classroom and in our inner conversations. The AMS argued that adivasis were decent and good people. They had been wronged by powerful groups which had exploited them and impoverished them. Adivasi groups were formed in several places to come together to talk about their problems and to strive for greater justice. They pushed to rebuild adivasi self-respect and get adivasis to become active in improving their conditions.

This was the process which had led to the establishment of the *Vidyodaya* school, as the AMS school was called, and to all their other interventions in local schools and education administration. This inserted a powerful narrative into the inner conversations of the adivasi students of the Nilgiris. It gave them a way of dealing with the way teachers from powerful communities looked at them.

### *Rebuilding identity*

To rebuild adivasi identity, Vidyodaya school consciously built itself around adivasi teachers, though others too taught there. Initially, there were no adivasi graduates who could join the school as teachers, so the school set up its own process of training its teachers. They studied and mastered the school textbooks and learned about pedagogy. Adivasi leaders and elders talked to them about their struggle and the place of education in it. The danger that schools could lead the adivasi community to actually lose its children to another culture was highlighted – adivasi students who did well in conventional schools could begin to despise themselves and their relatives and friends. It was reiterated that this was not the kind of education which they wanted their children to get.

Vidyodaya school freely permitted the use of adivasi languages in its premises. Other private and government schools in the region would suppress the language of the adivasi children and ask them to speak in Tamil. One of the teachers of the Vidyodaya school told me that when she came there as a teacher, it was the first time that she heard her own language in a school. It was a strange, new experience for her. Her language felt

out of place within the walls of a school and yet it also seemed so right and correct. In this school, children no longer entered to get the message that the language of their home was something to be ashamed of. Tamil remained the official medium of instruction and was still taught but was introduced gradually. For instance, teachers would talk to the students about how the different adivasi languages had their own words for red and what the Tamil word for it was.

### *Connecting with the self*

Symbolic interactionists would say that in this school, the children were building a sense of self which did not have a dark secret that had to be hidden and silenced. Instead, they were building conversations between different parts of their *self*. The relation of power between different languages was not ignored. Children and teachers were aware of these differences, as well as the power of Tamil. English too was taught and taught quite well – these children actually stood out in their ability to speak English. A relationship was being built between their own identity, being Tamil and being an English speaker. This was a new kind of identity, different from the older one of being an embarrassed Tamil speaker, who furtively spoke in another language with friends and family. Instead, children were heading towards creating a confident and active sense of the self.

The educational work of the AMS engages with a situation where conventional schooling led to the creation of an identity of being inferior and incompetent. Symbolic interactionism gives us a way to understand how Vidyodaya school and AMS's activities contribute to changing children's notions of self. Inner conversations of a different kind were made possible. These are slowly empowering students' actions and helping them work out a new sense of identity and a new, dignified place in the world.

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Curious young minds inhabit the classrooms, specially the early primary classes. It is up to the teacher to sustain the sparks of experimentation or further the spirit of questioning. Teachers' methods of participation and rich content presentation can have magical effects on children's comprehension. The crucial elements for learning lie in appeal and engagement with the content, free of fear.

*Asha Singh, Animating Children's Energy and Engaging Minds, p 15.*