

How an adivasi community in Gudalur reclaimed its culture, language and dignity through the running of a school.



A village worker with kids at Gudalur. Pic: ACCORD

by Ramdas

"What is your son's name?" the Head Master asks the adivasi father who has come to admit his child in the Govt. Tribal Residential school. "Karalan" replies the father. "What kind of a name is that?" retorts the Headmaster. "His name is Govindan," the Head Master tells him and changes it in the register. The father tries to explain that to the child in his language. Immediately the Headmaster shouts, "Don't speak that jungle language here, only Tamil, you understand? Leave the child and go." The father leaves the child in the hostel and goes home only to find that by the end of the week the child is back in the house and refuses to go back, ever. Ask any adivasi here as to why he or she dropped out and this story will be repeated with minor variations.

This was the kind of attitude that we faced when ACCORD began work in Gudalur Block 20 years ago. The language, the culture, the people were all denigrated. They had lost their access to the forests with the coming of the wild life sanctuaries, they had lost what little land was in their possession to large estates and migrants; they had no education, no understanding of how the money economy worked. Every effort to get into the mainstream was met with the kind of derision that the Headmaster meted out to them.

Twenty years of sustained and persistent work has changed the situation radically. No teacher, official or public will dare to run down an adivasi in public or private. The Adivasi Munnetra Sangam has seen to that. From the odd child here and there in the early 90s, today we have over 3000 children in school with 100% enrollment!!! So, how did this happen?

In 1995, at a Mahasabha of over 200 village leaders, it was decided that the only answer to the problem of education was to have a school owned by the Sangam which recognised adivasi culture and language. In 1996, Vidyodaya, a small alternate school began taking in adivasi children. It also took in 12 young adivasis to train as teachers. The school was not so much to convince the govt about the abilities of adivasi children as it was to convince the community about their own children. As adivasi children studied alongside non-adivasis in Vidyodaya and coped with everything, the community realised what was being denied to them. In the year 2000 the Sangam geared itself to get kids into school. There was no campaign, no drive, and no posters. A ridiculously simple solution was suggested by one of them during a planning session – Get the grandmothers and grandfathers to take the children to school! And so for the cost of a cup of tea everyday each village or group of villages appointed an old woman or man from the village to take the children and bring them back. The numbers grew in leaps and bounds from a mere 737 on school rolls in 1999 to over 2781 who actually attend school regularly today.

Now the issue is how to keep them in school. We run camps where children come in batches of 30, discuss their culture, social and economic situation and why it is important for them to preserve their spirituality. They sing songs and tell stories in their language, challenge each other with riddles and finally spend a good part of the night dancing to their music. These camps have made a huge difference to the lives of the children. We have village libraries, basically boxes or cupboards with reading cards, books, puzzles and indoor games. These libraries are located in a house that the village has decided on. Children can sit on the veranda of the house and read or play games.

While the word librarian sounds big, it is usually a school-going child above class 7, who is interested in running this voluntarily. All these student-librarians undergo intensive training on weekends not only to manage the library, but also to tell stories, sing songs, enact stories, help children with their reading and writing. Our approach has been that the problem is that of the community and the solution must also be theirs. They know best what will work and what will not. They have to take responsibility for their community and take it forward. Whatever support they require for this, the institution will provide. And the Sangam has responded very positively. They have taken up issues with the teachers and with the govt about the quality of education. They have seen for themselves what quality education is at Vidyodaya where 100 adivasi children study.

The govt. has in turn introduced activity-based learning at primary schools. Where the teachers have taken interest, the children learn well, but in most cases the situation continues to be pathetic. The Vidyodaya school is now a model that shows that given the right ambience, no child will drop out. It provides a non-competitive, non-aggressive atmosphere. Children can speak in their language and learn according to their pace. Elders from the village come to talk about their struggles and the need to preserve their way of life. They tell them stories and teach them songs. We are now in the process of having an interactive cultural centre in the school.

The present education compels the child to straddle two worlds and do well in both. This is not easy as all of us know. The community elders are afraid that as children go to school it will be at the cost of their culture. This is indeed a challenge for us – preserving the dignity of a people while giving them the wherewithal to survive and prosper in an alien culture.

Ramdas is the founder of the [Vidyodaya School](#) at Gudalur. Ramdas and his wife Rama Sastry have been working on alternative education for almost three decades now.