



# Indigenous Knowledge in Education: A Study among Paniya Tribes in Kerala

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of the marginalised sections, education is claimed to be the weapon for their liberation and an agency that enhance their radical expressions and negotiations. But rendering of education is observed to be the reproduction of certain hegemonic power structure in the society. In this context, present study examines the relevance of indigenous knowledge in tribal education.

The study is an attempt to formulate an analytical framework for the educational system with a view to address shortfalls in knowledge distribution using mixed methodology. The study was conducted in Wayanad district of Kerala among the Paniya tribe. Universally it is debated that the denigration of indigenous knowledge is a product of a dominant power exercised over the knowledge regime which has serious implication over the tribal children. When concerns the domain of Indian tribal education it can be seen that, along with the negligence of their traditional knowledge and culture the schools itself as a platform caters a wide range of constraints against an effective learning process.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Knowledge, Education, Exclusion, Tribal children, Learning conflicts.



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## 1. Introduction

Education as a process, it has a supreme importance in empowering people, especially the weaker sections of the society. Through which one becomes politically responsible to the fellow beings and thereby enhances their individual and collective well-being in the society. In the context of the marginalised sections, education is claimed to be the weapon for their liberation and an agency that enhance their radical expressions and negotiations. But rendering of education in the present contexts are observed to be the reproduction of certain hegemonic power structure in the society. The paternalistic natures of the urban and middle-class consciousness are deep rooted in the pedagogical operations by providing little concern to the knowledge systems of the marginalised section legacies by the influence of the colonial education.

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In the whole educational processes the values of democracy have been violated by providing no equality in terms of knowledge and culture. The long histories of exploitation and oppression continue to operate in the tribal mindset and consciousness in the very corner of their lives. As such, emancipation from these exclusionary mechanisms requires a negotiating and contesting self-determination from the oppressed voices. To materialize this ideal, the process of education has to perform an important role. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision becomes extremely importance in this scenario. He envisioned education as an instrument to liberate the marginalized sections from illiteracy, ignorance and superstitions and thereby enable the tribal people to fight against injustice, exploitation and oppression (Pradhan, 2004).

It should be understood that education has an inherent relationship with the culture and locality of the specific people since their way of life is very much bound with it so that it has to perform particularly a major role in the tribal societies. As Choudhury (1982) points out, the tribals are victimized by development projects and external interventions and have been exploited to a large extent by taking advantage of their relative state of backwardness. Those measures have been mainly in the form of constitutional safeguards, legislations, financial incentives, reservation in educational institutions and so on. Nevertheless, contemporary researches show that the tribal children are not really attracted to the processes of formal schooling and there exists a wide educational gap and inequality between the tribes and other weaker sections in Indian society (Sachidanandha1999; Singh, 1994; Sujatha, 1999).

There is strong consensus that development efforts made in the country have not succeeded in empowering the tribal communities, but in fact, have arguably created a subjugated consciousness among the tribal people. It also reinforced the unequal exchange of socio-economic resources between the disadvantaged and privileged sections (Heredia, 1992). This phenomenon is applicable to the educational arena also to a large extent. Researchers have founded that along with many other constraints prevailing in tribal education, the alien contents and irrelevant information provided by the curricula have become the main cause of students' disinterest towards the schools. The high dropout rate and low enrollment status shown by the tribal students are not only due to the physical constraints such as access to schools, but also have some relationship with the existing patterns of curriculum and knowledge imparted thereby (Sundar,2010).

Hence, the present inquiry on the school education system among the tribal people is done by analyzing the different contexts which finds critics in the existing patterns. The learning environment in school, the socio-economic profile of tribal students, their own stated preferences and perceptions, and hindrances faced by them are examined in this study. The inquiry tries to assess qualitatively how far the indigenous know-how is important to the tribal people in the present context and how much the formal education system has recognized the importance of such indigenous values.

## 2. Locating Tribal Education in Kerala

Tribes in Kerala constitute 1.14% of the state total population, and 0.43% of the country's total ST population (GoI, 2001). The status of education in empirical realm can be evaluated through certain indicators like literacy, enrolment, dropout, retention rate and so on. These empirical facts would help us to comprehensively understand basic picture of tribal education in Kerala. In terms of the attainment literacy is an important and primary mandate of educational development. The literacy rates of scheduled tribe always therefore vary significantly from the non-tribal sections. In Kerala in the year 2001, the tribal literacy rate was 60.4% against the general rate of 90.4%. In 1991, it was 57.22% against the total literacy rate 89.81% (GoI, 1991 and 2001). A comparison of literacy rate of tribes with general population reveals the widening gap between them Even though the literacy in Kerala stands better; the ideal of 'education for all' remains unfulfilled.

The enrolment of students in public school is decreasing especially in the case of tribes. It is in the case of non-tribal students too due to the demographic change in the society. There is an overall absolute decline in the enrolment of students from 47.19 lakh in 2006-07 to 46.26 lakh in 2007-08 (GoK (DPI), 2009). This progression is proportionally maintained in the lower primary, upper primary and high school sessions. In the case of SC/ST students, in 2007, students from SC communities contributed 10.74% whereas students from tribal community enrolled 1.46% of the total enrolment (GoK, 2008). The trend in this aspect sidelines the target of universalization education in the state. In the case of dropout, Kerala is the state which has the lowest dropout rate among school students. During 2005-06, the dropout rate was 0.59% at lower primary level, 0.52% at upper primary level and 1.29% at high school level. In the year 2006-07, it was 0.59%, 0.52%, and 1.38% respectively. Among the 14 districts of Kerala, Wayanad has the highest dropout ratio having a dropout rate of 4.18 % among the tribal students (ibid). Narayanaswami (2011: 7) comments that the State had never made any attempt at equitable distribution of education and the access to it was virtually barred to the children of the marginalized groups like scheduled tribes.

Here we have to locate particularly on the dropout cases. The causes of dropout are largely confined to poverty and its related manifestations. Beyond poverty, there lies a wide range of other constraints that withdraws the tribal children from the schools. The school atmosphere as a whole provides the children a sense of 'othernesses among the other students. In the classroom, most things taught to the children are culturally unfamiliar and disinteresting. They talk about, for instance, the mechanisms of airplanes instead of telling them how the communities produce food out of crops.

In addition to these factors, there are many more hurdles for the effective functioning of education for tribal students. This includes the structure of the school system, nature of text books, adjustment problems in the hostels, administration, supervision and its conflicts in the multiphase service delivery systems and so on. Insufficient infrastructure in school buildings, lack of trained and motivated teachers, uneven teacher-student ratio etc. are also causes for the high dropout rate (Pradhan, 2004: 152). The attitude of parents towards schooling of their children is also

another factor. A lack of support in this regard creates a discouraging atmosphere for studying at home usually.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives.

1. To conceptualize different arguments related to indigenous knowledge and its importance in the education of tribal communities.
2. To understand the role of the formal education system in the educational attainments of tribal students in Kerala.
3. To analyze the relevance of indigenous knowledge in tribal education in Kerala.

### 4. Methodology

The present study uses a mixed methodology. The data collection is done from both primary and secondary data pertaining to the various aspects of education among tribal children in Kerala.

The primary data has been collected during an intensive fieldwork conducted in Wayanad district. The techniques adopted for data collection are ethnographic methods of survey, interviews and observation. Data was collected from five categories of respondents through different tools. The five categories of the respondent are students, teachers, parents, community leaders and social activists. The data from students, teachers and parents were collected through three different schedules in a structure questionnaire. Information from the community leaders and social activists were collected through interview method in an unstructured questionnaire.

Secondary data has been collected from the census records, handbooks, district gazettes, school's records, tribal welfare department, souvenirs of educational institutions and also from public relations.

#### 4.1 Sampling Design

The primary data was collected through field study conducted from two tribal populated panchayats i.e. Mananthvady and Panamaram of the Mananthavady block in Wayanad district, particularly among the Paniya tribe. Two schools from each panchayat were taken as the locus of the study. The Mananthavady Government UP School (MGUPS) in Mananthavady and the Nehru Memorial UP School (NMUPS) in Valliyurkavu both from the Mananthavady panchayats, and Sarvodaya Higher Secondary School (SHSS) in Echome and Roman Catholic UP School (RCUPS) in Pallikkunnu both from the Panamaram panchayat were chosen for the study.

##### Selection of the Respondents

Data have been collected from five categories of the respondents. These respondents were students from Paniya community studying in the upper primary (5th, 6th and 7th) classes; teachers of upper primary classes, parents of the tribal children, community leaders from the habitations/villages where the sample school is located, and the social activists. The details of the respondents are given below.

Table 1.1: Details of the sample of respondents

S. No.	Respondents	Number of Respondents				Total
		Schools				
		Mananthavady Panchayat		Panamaram Panchayat		
		SHSS	RCUP	MGUP	NMUP	
1	Students	15	15	15	15	60
2	Teachers	6	6	6	6	24
3	Parents	15	15	15	15	60
4	Community Leaders	1	1	1	1	4
5	Social Activists	4				4
Total						152

#### 4.2 About the field setting

Wayanad district has the largest tribal population comparatively with other districts in the state. The district was selected based on demographic location, socio-economic conditions of the tribal people in the area. Wayanad district which accounts for 5.48% of Kerala's total land area, is known for its evergreen forests, plantations, wildlife, mist clad mountains and valleys. The forest in the area is rich in resources and cover 37% of the total area of the district. It has a total geographical area of 2131 kilometres. In the cultural heritage of Wayanad, the land of hills and spices, the tribal society claims an inevitable position. In terms of demography, Wayanad is the largest tribal settlement in Kerala. They constitute about 17.43% of the total population of Wayanad. There are altogether 36 tribal groups in Kerala and 12 of them inhabit in Wayanad itself. Out of the total tribal population of Wayanad, almost half of them belong to Paniya community (Namboothiri, 2006: 24; Narayana, 2010; Rajasekharan, 2003: 5; Santhosh, 2008: 63).

#### 4.3 The Paniya Tribe

The major communities in the district are Paniyan (44.77%), MulluKuruman (17.51%), Kurichian (17.38%), Kattunaikan (9.93%), Adiyar (7.10%) and UraliKuruman (2.69%). They are categorized in three major types, as agricultural laborers, marginal farmers and forest dependents. Paniyan and Adiyar communities who were traditionally bonded laborers and UraliKuruman, traditionally artisans constitute the major part of agricultural laborers (Namboothiri, 2006: 8). The Paniyas are the largest scheduled tribe in Kerala among other 36 tribal groups in Kerala in which altogether contribute 22.5% of the total tribal population. They spread in Wayanad, Kannur, Kozhikode, Malapuararam and Palakkad districts and in some parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states. The overwhelming majority (72%) of the total Paniya population in the state is concentrated in Wayanad district (Namboothiri, 2006: 8; Narayanaswami, 2011: 5). According to anthropological descriptions, they are dark in skin, long headed with broad noses, short physique and curly hair (Thurston and Rangachari, 1909: 57).

There is a long wide variety of features regarding the ethno history of Paniyas (Santhosh, 2008: 62). Historical studies show Paniyars were first considered as hidden tribes and led a food gathering way of living. When they were exposed to people from outside, diverse changes

occurred in their socio-economic and political life. In a later stage, they were made bonded labourers by the landlords. Over the years, the living contexts and surroundings had changed by the influence of migrants who being planters and cultivators established their dwellings in the district as settlers. The transformation of Paniya from being a bonded labourer to a wage labourer occurred during this period. The settlers more precisely the Christians and Muslims who migrated from the southern part of the state extracted labour from the Paniyas at abysmally low wages. These exploitations have created the major shuffle in the socio-economic condition of the tribes in this region (Santhosh, 2008: 62-67).

The livelihoods of Paniyas were based on forest and their knowledge systems were closely linked to nature. They practice unique models of indigenous systems against their social occasions like many other tribes in the region. They have a primitive model of problem solving mechanism in which they discuss their problems and find solutions by sitting together in the presence of a chief (Chemmi) and thereby retained a logical way of maintaining social justice (Thurston and Rangachari, 1909:57). This is one of the examples for indigenous self-governing system. A modified or different form of this is common in many rural villages of south Indian states about their own practices to solve the issues.

The language of Paniya tribe is 'Paniya'; a mixture of ancient forms of Malayalam and Tamil which has no script. For any indigenous community, the role of language is not merely limited as a medium of communication rather it conveys the history of their culture and knowledge. The legends, myth, history and struggles are conveyed and transmitted by folk songs and stories through oral communication. Animals, birds, trees, God etc. are become the characters of these traditional chants. These traditional songs can be seen as the strong narrations of their culture and identity. In many songs, they convey several myths about their origin and exploitations experienced in their history. Their struggle against oppression and exploitation is embodied within these songs (Joseph, 2010).

In terms of the schooling of the children it is observed that School dropout is one of the major problems prevailing in the study area. The dropout rate for the Wayanad district in the three stages of schooling (lower primary, upper primary and high school) put together is 6.6%, which is the highest in comparison with all the other districts. For the lower primary school level as well as upper primary school level, the dropout rate is highest for Wayanad district. However, dropout rate for ST students of Wayanad district at high school level is lower than many other districts (Namboothiri, 2006: 71; Narayanaswami, 2011: 7). It is very common in the area that most of the parents prefer to stop their children's education in the midway. There are some habitations where the Paniyas did not even think about sending their children for schooling. When the children reach the age of six, they participate in the income earning processes of their household. Boys will go for working as agricultural labourers, and girls will assist in household activities like looking after the infants in the home. In short, the schooling of children in these communities is so much dependent on the household's decision. The child's interest is the underlying causes which thwart them to withdraw.

## 5. Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis here is mainly done in three levels. The first level is the representation of attitudes and opinions of students, teachers and parents gathered through survey schedule. The second level is the reports of the interview conducted with two types of respondents; community leaders and and third with social activists.

### *Responses from the perspective from students, parents and teachers*

- The Paniya tribe in the area were traditionally dwelled in agriculture and related occupations as bonded and waged labourers. The legacy from that culture still dominant among the group, clear from which the 75% of the parents of students are involved in waged labour and farming
- Majority of the students are facing difficulty in understanding subjects taught in class. It is quite surprising that the major difficult subject is Hindi, which signifies the role of language in the learning process. Alienation from their traditional language is very problematic. Also "Paniya" being their indigenous language for them Malayalam, English and Hindi holds the choice of importance as second, third, and fourth respectively and have to strive more than other students to understand things.
- A good number of tribal students are failing in the divisions which are not much common for non-tribal students. So, in the school structure itself their lies some issues concerning their understanding level or in the mandates in passing criteria.
- Majority of the tribal students are unable to read and understand text books or any other books. Some of the students cannot read books because they don't know the letters
- Children's interest towards traditional games is declined in a large extend and the modern games such as cricket and football are interesting to them. Indeed, a quarter portions of the tribal students are still interested in playing traditional games
- Traditional art forms like folksongs and group games are emblematically represents the tribal culture and the very part of indigenous knowledge. But the new generation here the school students are very weak in acquiring these folkways. A majority of the students are not aware of any of the traditional art forms of their community. For those who know these art forms and interested to perform in the schools but the teachers usually discouraged the students in doing so
- A big majority of the students have a good interest in their traditional occupation like farming and agriculture. It is evident from their suggestion for activities to be included in the work experience period.93 percentage of the respondents interested to include their traditional occupations in the school curriculum. Also, this taste is very tied up with their parental occupations which they are very much familiar. Also, the whole students are interceded to accompany their parents in one form or any other. Students are highly satisfied in the indigenous occupations of their community.
- 95.8% of the teachers agreed that tribal students are facing difficulty in understanding subjects. Students disinterest in attending school as well as classes is the main problem. The issues such as unfamiliarity of contents in the curriculum, difficult topics in the subjects are also the main hurdles for students. The problems discussed here are already founded out by many researches since long back. But the question here is why there lies apathy from educational planner and other responsible people in addressing this.

- Students are interested to have the indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. The majority of the teachers observed that tribal students participate more actively in the classroom when the discussions are being held on community related topics.
- More than half of the teacher respondents have their own critiques on the existing curriculum and its suitability for tribal students. Also 91.7% of the teachers strongly accepted the suggestion of inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum for the effective practice of education for tribal children.
- Majority of the respondent group (70%) of parents are not facing any problem with regard to their schooling of their children which gives the inference that they are giving much importance to education.
- The majority of the parent's impression is that children are not enough aware about different knowledge in their community according to their age.
- Parents giving a wide acceptance for the schools in their community and expects the system is capable for bringing progress in their community.

Responses from the perspective of community leaders

- The community people considered traditional knowledge as an important part of their culture and they want to preserve it through their younger generations. But the new generation people are showing disinterest in learning those knowledge practices.
- The community gives prime concern for the education of their children. They strongly believe that education is the only thing that can bring progress in their community as well as the youth.
- The children are facing problems in the school premises and they drop the courses and started earning money by doing jobs. The community leaders know the children's facing problem and they expect change from these situations. More precisely it required an education that can address the need and aspirations of the tribal children.
- The existence of traditional knowledge system of the Paniya community is heavily dependent on the new generation particularly the students. So being an agent of that transmission process, education should not be the channel for deviating them from their entitlement in different knowledge systems of the community.
- Being settled in a much-civilized society, tribals have right of belonging in the same civilization and to enjoy all the privileges that it provides. So, education must be readily attentive to ensure the presence, attendance and make sure that he completes and receives an education that make him/her stable to earn his bread for him/her and his family.

Responses from the perspective of social activists

- The tribal students still facing social exclusion in the name of caste, colour and language from the society. The school is a best example for a place where people faces it in a large level. These practices often leading to students get demotivated and quit the school due to the suffering from his/her experience.
- There lie a lot of shortfalls in the current formal school environment to the tribal student. There requires effective modification which starts from the inclusion of traditional language and other traditional values in the curriculum
- Teachers are not shown much interest care tribal students in the classroom in many

schools. This is the reason because the tribal children are continuing as backward children in the classes. Tribal children require a great deal of motivation to come forward, because they are coming from a situation that silenced by nature and political suppressions.

- The influence of market and modern life style affected the tribal culture in a great deal. The same effect is embodied in the existing system of education and hence not having much attention for the tribal culture.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The opinion collected from the students establishes the fact that majority of the students are facing difficulties in understanding subjects taught in the class. It is quite surprising that the major difficult subject is Hindi, which signifies the role of language in the learning process. The perception as such negotiates for the inclusion of indigenous language for their learning process. The traditional art forms like folksongs and group games emblematically represent the tribal culture and the very part of indigenous knowledge. However, the new generations of school going children are weak in acquiring these folkways. A majority of the students are not aware of any of the traditional art forms of their community and no encouragement is given for those who interested to perform in the schools. The majority of the students have a good interest in their traditional occupation like farming and agriculture.

From the teachers' point of view, it is authentically substantiated that tribal students are facing difficulties in understanding subjects. Students' disinterest in attending school as well as classes is the main problem. The issues such as unfamiliarity of contents in the curriculum, difficult topics in the subjects are also the main hurdles for students. Teachers strongly agreed that students are interested to have the indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. The majority of the teachers observed that tribal students participate more actively in the classroom when the discussions are being held on community related topics. Moreover, the teacher respondents have represented their own critiques on the existing curriculum, and agreed to include the indigenous knowledge in the curriculum for the effective practice of education for tribal children.

As the study reveals, parents are not facing much problems with regard to the schooling of their children. This clearly shows that parents are interested to send their children to the school, whereas the issue that hampers them most is their financial status. In terms of the community knowledge, their children are not well aware of it.

The community people consider traditional knowledge as an important part of their culture and they would like to preserve it through younger generations. However, the new generation children are not showing much inclination in learning it the community knowledge. The community gives prime concern for education of their children. They strongly believe that education is the only aspiration that can bring progress in their community. The sustenance of the traditional knowledge system of the Paniya community is heavily dependent on the new generation particularly the students. In the same way the social activists explored the socio political aspects of the problem which becomes very relevant in the tribal educational regime. Tribal students face social exclusion

in the name of caste, colour and language from the society and the school as well. These practices often lead students to get de-motivated and humiliating through the pedagogical practises.

The aspiration from the different viewpoints, for example by parents and the community leaders poses a political question with regard their children's educational attainment. The children would like to be in a position in future that attaches them in the traditional environment wherever they make their earning. In the concerns of parents, they seek a value position for their children that make them reputed and recognized among the community, being a crucial channel of preserving their knowledge systems. However, the community leaders represent the view on education that it is a liberating weapon to their new generation to attain the power to compete and struggle within the status quo. They said that indigenous knowledge is important in education, but with the exposure to the mainstream society the present generation is not able to learn it properly. In this context, they said that preservation of the knowledge system is the way to impart this system to the future generations. Due to the interventions of the external forces the present generation rejects the demand for an inherent way of learning. As such we can say that the public intelligentsia is still reluctant to accommodate the tribal as an equal part of the general and democratic society. The scenario strongly demands a restructuring and analysis of the present practices of education. It is also remembered that education is the only way by which they can effectively resist the mechanisms that thwart their social and political well-being.

Contextually the study makes an inquiry into the pedagogical aspects of tribal education in framing the subjectivity in the tribal children. The different proponents of knowledge which inherited through a colonial and the dominant culture ideologies contradicts the children in framing one's consciousness about the social, cultural and political aspects of one's immediate nature and the surrounding world. The crux of the argument is that there is a requirement for modifications in the curriculum and pedagogy for the tribal children. The various aspects of the problem are seriously engaging us with the above-mentioned critiques of educational frameworks. The teacher, the school and the community as a whole have expressed their dissatisfaction with the on-going methodologies of learning process. The issue of the relevance of indigenous elements in education cannot be framed into a need assessment project; rather it should be studied along with multiple elements that operate in the society on the pedagogical circle and public intelligentsia that unfortunately impresses upon the tribal that their knowledge systems are inferior to that of the mainstream society.

Finally, it can be said that there is a twofold social exclusion which operates in the whole education backwardness of the tribal children. The school as a whole fails to accommodate the tribal children in many aspects with regard to the delivery of knowledge and acceptance of the children. Simultaneously, on the other hand the tribal children cannot identify and relate themselves with the school practices and environment since the latter deny their full and active participation.

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