

**Title** : Adivasi neighbourhood and its' school: A critical ethnography of aspirations and contours of marginalisation in Kerala

**Name of the author** : Charles Varghese, Assistant Professor, Dept. Of Sociology, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak. Madhya Pradesh 484887 (*Corresponding Author*)  
[comc.varghese@gmail.com](mailto:comc.varghese@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper looks into the school-neighbourhood interactions in one of the adivasi dominant villages in Kerala. It explores how the educational aspirations of adivasi community are placed in the local development discourse. A brief review of the neighbourhood-school relationship, especially in the context of existing social inequality, is explored in the introduction. Then the paper is divided into two parts. The first part of the essay focuses on the historical experience of marginalisation in the regional mainstream and the local imaginations of adivasi development. The second part focuses on how the school has historically evolved within this regional mainstream and how it responds to the educational aspirations of adivasis. This essay tries to understand how the experience of marginality is created and sustained in adivasi neighbourhoods that are sandwiched in the regional mainstream in Kerala? How adivasi communities articulate their educational aspirations? And how the school in the neighbourhood responds to these aspirations? The empirical observations of the paper are gathered through a year long fieldwork conducted in 2014 and a revisit conducted in 2019.

**Key Words:** Neighbourhood Schooling, Adivasi, Marginalisation, Ethnography, Kerala

## Introduction

Neighbourhoods represent the habitus for primary socialisation. The material and non-material resources available in the neighbourhood influences the quality and quantity of social and cultural capital available to a child coming to the school. On the other hand, school act as a meeting point for children from different neighbourhoods to interact and exchange their experiences. This social process is a crucial function to be performed by the schools in a society aspiring for equity. Studies about the neighbourhood-school relationships indicate that neighbourhoods are crucial in deciding an individual's life chances. Social inequalities are often embedded within the social, geographic and housing patterns. In the American context, Mullis et al., (1991) observe that African-American children in their formative years are more likely to spend their childhood in a racially segregated neighbourhood known for their inequitable possession of resources. This has had severe effects on the educational progress of people living

there. Crowded and low-income neighbourhoods also influence the learning levels of the students (Ainsworth, 2002; K. B. Clark, 1965).

Peer group interaction in the neighbourhood is another significant influence on children. Studies on the significance of peer group influence suggest that peer pressure is more significant than the guidance and sustenance from the parents (MacLeod, 1987; Rainwater, 1970). The values, qualities, and behaviour generally prevalent in the neighbourhood will directly impact the younger generation and their outcomes. This means the neighbourhood can influence a child's orientation towards learning, opportunities and access to critical information.

A dominant perception is that if students from the marginalised communities study in the mainstream school, they will benefit. From this perspective, inclusive education is understood as a situation where the children from the local community studying in the mainstream schools (Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995). It is believed that inclusive schools give exposure to unfamiliar experiences and plurality of voices (Corbett & Slee, 2000, p. ix). In India, section 12(1)(c) of Right to Education Act (R.T.E.), which makes the private unaided schools offer free education to the children from the disadvantaged section of the society, operates in this premises. However, the dominant imagination in contemporary times is driven by neoliberal market agenda where the entire idea of human development is narrowly defined to cater to the agenda of producing a workforce with the skills and aptitude required for the market economy of profit-making (Connell, 2013). In such a situation, the school's focus is to impart the 'dominant ideals' of regional or international mainstream that they deemed as desirable rather than intercultural dialogue or search of multiple possibilities and meaning. It can create a false universal where many of the experiences, especially the marginalised, are excluded (Majumdar & Mooij, 2011).

In this process, the school may legitimate certain values and norms and delegitimise or do not recognise others. Few may receive reinforcement, while others feel estranged (England & Brown, 2001). Dominant caste or middle class' ideals becomes the ideal of the school. This hierarchically arranged situation makes the dialogue between different experiences impossible. It can also create a marginal self among the underprivileged as the self can exist and have meaning in relationship to the other (Bakhtin, 1984). The more hierarchically they are arranged, the sharper and pronounced the inequalities would be. There are higher chances for marginalised self for those who come from disadvantaged locations. Rosenbaum (1991, 1995) reported difficulty adjusting to the new schools in the cities by those from the margins, compared to those who went to suburban schools. In India, students who got admitted to elite private schools under the R.T.I. act had to face discrimination. Their parents had to work hard to pay for the extra facilities available in school so that their children did not feel discriminated (Chudgar & Creed, 2016; Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; NT, 2021; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

Given the aforementioned context, this paper tries to address the questions like how the experience of marginality is created and sustained in adivasi neighbourhoods sandwiched in the regional mainstream? How adivasi communities articulate their educational aspirations? And how the school in the neighbourhood responds to these aspirations? The discussions are based on the empirical data obtained through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2014 and a revisit in 2019 in a school and the adivasi neighbourhoods nearby it, in the Thirunelli Panchayat of Wayanad district of the state of Kerala in India. All names of people and that of the school are false to maintain anonymity. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part analyses the social construction of marginality in the adivasi neighbourhood, and the second part focuses on the changing social location of the school. The comments of different actors are translated by the author and given in quotes.

## **I**

### **Hamlets to 'Colonies' – The ways of making physical and Social Margins**

The adivasi villages discussed below are located in the Thirunelli panchayat of Mananthavadi block of Wayanad district in Kerala. It is in the foothills of Brahmagiri hills, sharing a border with the Nagarhole tiger reserve of the state of Karnataka. This panchayat has the highest concentration of adivasi communities in the district, which amounts to 36 per cent of the village's total population. Rest of the population is constituted by small scale farmers and agricultural labourers (most of them are Christians migrated from plains during the 1920s-70s) along with Chetti community who belongs to OBC Hindu and some land owning Hindu upper-caste groups who migrated much earlier.

### **Hamlets in the spatial margins**

Among the local community, the marginal spaces are marked and understood in terms of the lack of modern means of communication and transportation. However, such margins are not so for intrinsic reasons but have been made one through years of unjust historical and social processes. Though there is special emphasis on making cemented roads to the hamlets, many were far away from the 'main roads' and relatively difficult to access. During my visit in June and July (rainy season in Kerala), the footpaths leading to the hamlets in the hilltops were slippery, and those through the paddy fields were flooded. The 'colonies' as the hamlets of

'adivasis' known were congested with increasing houses over a period. Many hamlets were not exclusively for any particular communities. Their forced displacement at different points of history and the government policy of establishing colonies for adivasis (even for dalits) in small patches of land contributed to the mixed nature of hamlets at present. The recent land struggle by the adivasis in the region also created such settlements where multiple linguistic groups had to come together and stay. Most of the time, two or more communities stayed together; however the extent possible, they tried to maintain boundaries with other communities with bush fencing or a footpath inside the 'colony'. This is important for them as their internal communications are in their language. Outsiders' imagination of 'adivasi colony' often conflates intra-community differences, but they try to remain as a linguistic group to the extent possible. Visiting families in distant locations and staying with them for an extended period is common practice among many community members in the region. Such visits are made to find a support network that can help find work, offer personal care during a health crisis, or have a family reunion. Thus adivasis in the region became a scattered community. They are in constant flux across geographical spaces to remain united as a community with a common language and family ties. This directly impacts the schooling of children as they also move with their families and remain absent from school for prolonged periods.

The 'margins' in the adivasi hamlets is created through the successive alienation from land and forest and the exploitative labour mechanisms in the village. Their hamlets are located in the small patches of land in the fringes of the forest, landholdings of the regional elites or plantations owned by big companies. Their access to these lands for some leafy vegetables, jackfruit, firewood or one or two areca nut, which they use to chew, made them 'thieves' among the regional community. They are vulnerable to epidemics due to congestion and lack of proper waste management mechanisms, especially during rainy seasons.

Although the Adivasi 'colonies' were electrified, they were installed with low voltage bulbs and had a faded light. Common property resources like wells are also not well maintained, and many are abandoned. The Tribal promoter<sup>i</sup> who came with me once said, pointing to these buildings, *"Look sir, whatever **we** do for **them** will not work. **They** are least bothered about these things. They are irresponsible"*. Though she is from the adivasi community, she shares the views of the government and the mainstream about her fellow beings. The government functionaries are

disappointed, especially in the case of communities like Paniya, as they believe this community is not positively responding to the initiatives taken by the department for them. According to the tribal extension officer "The department is trying its best to *develop the Paniya community. But when we pull them two steps forward they will go one step back. It is very difficult to make changes among them in such condition.*" Gopi, a former panchayat member, was furious about this attitude of Tribal promoters. To him, "*Once they become promoter they think they have become the District Collector. Then they start accusing their own people. They forget that they are bound to represent the interest of us. Development projects are designed by the 'officers in the government' and implemented on us often miss our needs and values*". The cycle distribution for the school going children testifies Gopi's arguments. I have seen many cycles in the hamlets students received from the school but were not using it. When clarified one student responded, "*We have to go through forest and often there are elephant and other animals around. It is not safe to go to school in cycle.*"

On the other hand, the paddy fields wherein adivasis constitute most of the labour force, adivasi hamlets, streams and forests made the region a perfect location for 'tourism' business. All across the region, the tourist resorts occupied the living spaces of adivasi communities and created pressure on their resources like water and forest. At the same time, the adivasi life and villages are used as living museums to woo customers to such resorts. Adivasi communities sole dependence on unstable and crisis-ridden jobs like agriculture labour has created a grave survival crisis.

### **Alienation from land and depleted stock of local food basket**

The cheap sources of rich protein and nutrients got affected by the loss of local food baskets. In one of my visits to a Paniya hamlet, I met Ramesh, a 32 year old man engaged in fishing in the small stream near a paddy field. His basket had a variety of fish and to him, "*These things are very rarely seen these days. Crabs were available in abundance once, but are also became a rare sight.*" On another day, I met Vellanki, a Paniya woman in her 60s, collecting edible plants and leaves from the paddy fields. She also had a similar story of the non-availability of such plants with reducing paddy cultivation in the region. Some of the studies on

the region also noted the richness of adivasis' local food basket. Paniya community alone knew about ten food classes with its 265 varieties (Narayanan et al., 2003). However, this knowledge has depleted across generations drastically. At the time of my visit, their diet pattern was far from the local food basket. Most of them used to take tea and snacks for breakfast that are locally produced and not subjected to any quality control. They were sold in petty shops close to the hamlets. Very rarely, such shops were run by adivasis, and in most cases, they were owned by people from non-adivasi communities. Most of the households cook rice in the evening, and sometimes they eat the leftover. Otherwise, they depend on these tea and cheaply available snacks before proceeding to work. Alienation from their land affected their diet pattern seriously.

### **Status of work, education and social support system in the hamlet**

Premature death out of illness, suicide and issues related to alcoholism were relatively high in many of the colonies. In many places, alcoholism created tensions in the social relations within the community. To the tribal promoter who herself is from the community, "*They drink regularly and eat less. This really affects their life. For those who work in ginger or banana plantations, liquor is given like part of their wage.*" Alcoholism is an aftermath of continuing labour exploitation among the Adivasis, and they constitute the bulk of the labour force in the predominantly agriculture-dependent region. It costs heavily on their health and social harmony. Competition and petty clashes between members combined with alcoholism often affect the peaceful ambience of the 'colony'. An increased population over a period in a small patch of 'colonies' escalated conflict and competition for a resource among the members. Job diversification is also not the same among tribal communities. Communities like Kurichyas, who were traditionally landowning communities, diversified their jobs. On the other hand, Paniya community almost wholly depends on agriculture-based daily-wage labour. Kurichyans were also tried to 'market' their traditional healing practices, especially orthopaedics. One of such healers in the community is so famous and has clients even from nearby districts. It is also true that the joint family land ownership pattern among the Kurichya community is shifting towards nuclear family structure and resultant division of land.

Kurichya hamlets have more non-working women who can look after the household affairs compared to that of Paniya. In the survey conducted among students in the school, the average number of working members in the Kurichya household is 1.71 against 2.52 in the case

of Paniya. Out of 92 Paniya students surveyed 82 have their mothers working (85 per cent), but in the case of Kurichya, out of 53 students surveyed, only 31 are working (58 per cent). This means the parental care expected by formal schooling is almost impossible in many colonies, especially among communities like Paniya. Among 53 Kurichya respondents, only five have siblings working, but 26 out of the 96 Paniya students' siblings are working. The non-availability of parents due to various reasons like death, long-distance workplace, participation land struggle in different locations and resultant jail life made it impossible to meet school's expectations from family. Many of the children from these communities start working from a very early age.

Many youths from these communities are either dropouts or just completed their school education and were trying to find a job. Some of the students attending school were also trying for jobs due to the unstable economic condition. Elders in the community complained about the loss of traditional authority of elders on the younger generation due to their economic independence at an early age. To one elder in the community, *"They go for daily wage work and earn some money. Then they live in their own world and carried away by the fantasies of T.V. and mobile"*. Studies also show that the fruitful use of I.C.T. depends on class background, and disadvantaged households often use I.C.T. for entertainment purposes (Tewathia et al., 2020).

As per the sample survey among students number of illiterates among Kurichya's parents is five, but there are those with pre-degree and degree, and 26 of the students have siblings with pre-degree and four of them have siblings with graduation including B.Tech. On the other hand, among Paniyas, 30 of their parents are illiterates. None of them is higher secondary or above, and among siblings, only 12 are higher secondary, and no one is a graduate. Thus the critical mass of educated people available to help aspiration for education is low. Other support mechanisms like tuition centres or village libraries are also not easily accessible to the children from the adivasi community. Tuition centres are plenty in the region but one has to pay Rs. 600 to 900 depending upon the subjects and standard to which they are admitted. The public resources like village libraries with an excellent rural network act as knowledge centres of villages in Kerala by providing news Papers, computers, television, and internet services. However, these shared resources are often under the control of village elites. Given the power structure of the village, Adivasis, especially those communities like Paniya, have little stake in those libraries. In a conversation with one of the secretaries of the library, he replied, *'What we*

*can do? We are open to all. We have not restricted anyone in using any of our resources. What we can do if they are not coming and utilising it?’* However, to Shankaran, a 20 year old Paniya boy, *‘The key is always with secretary or committee people. They won’t give the key when we want, even that of the common hall, saying that we will spoil things. But for their people they can come at anytime and use those facilities’*. In mechanisms like tuition centres which are used to compensate the parental attention, the entry of adivasi students to such facilities are also restricted through the relatively high fees.

### **Aspiration for education and adivasi identity**

All most all adivasi community members whom I met in one year consider education an essential means for social mobility and better living. However, within the mainstream development imagination in Kerala, they have to disown their identity markers like land or language to achieve this. Rajan, a forty-five year old Kurichya man, left his cultivable land, which is located at the relatively interior locations of the forest and shifted to the small town where there is a school and his wife and two children. He joined as a daily wage construction labourer. The family shifted their residence from the forest village, especially for their children's education. He put one of his girls with his relative in another villager with better access to a government school. The younger one they put into English medium school in the town expecting a better prospect for her.

On another day, I visited Paniya hamlets and met Latha, an 11 year old girl from the school where I was doing my fieldwork. She was excited to see me visiting her hamlet and introduced me to her parents, peers and other relatives around. She spoke in Paniya language, and I could feel her joy and confidence in her entire interaction, unlike in school. The places where I interacted with the villagers, like a small tea shop, playground and household conversations, lullabies of grandmothers, were all in Paniya language. However, among the school going children and teenagers, the use of ‘Malayalam’ – the regional language of the state of Kerala is more, although they converse in their language at home. In one of the teashop conversations with villagers, the issue of teaching Paniya in school came up. Then the shop owner and former panchayat member, who himself was from the Paniya community, said



*'We all know Paniya then what is the use of learning it in school!? What we need is the knowledge in what these 'general people' has proficiency. Then only we can compete with them in life.'*

This has been the sentiment shared by many of the community members. To them, only by learning the regional mainstream's ways and means they can do better in their lives. Any emphasise on their own identity would cost them heavily. The Member of Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) from Kurichya adivasi community agreed that the students from Adivasi communities, especially in primary classes face difficulty in the classroom due to the language problem. However, to him, it is a problem with their own identity and language. He suggests a complete dismantling of the community identity and getting assimilated in the regional mainstream as the viable solution. To him;

*'They will never develop if they continue to be in these colonies. If possible they should be distributed among the 'general people' then they will develop.'*

In another meeting of tribal leaders with academicians, bureaucrats and activists working on tribal issues, leaders from the community pointed on the non-tribal people in the meeting. They tried to explain the aim of the meeting.

*'To put it simple the aim of our meeting is to make people sitting in this side [all of them were from adivasi communities] like you'* [people sitting on their opposite were from non-advasi communities].

Responses from various levels indicate that the regional mainstream successfully convinced even the political leaders within the community that their community identity is the biggest obstacle in achieving development. This attaches a stigma to the language and identity they possess. They try to give away these identity markers and get the privileges enjoyed by their immediate neighbours. This idea has percolated down far deep, and people tried to associate their difficulties with it. Geetha, who works in a ginger plantation in Coorg in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, used to leave their home around early morning 6.30 – 7.00 am for work. She used to prepare breakfast for children early and send them to school. However, unlike the daughter, her son used to roam around and did not go to school. She accused the other children in the

hamlet of spoiling him. She wanted to go out of the colony as she believed, *'That is the only way that we can progress. To the extent we live in this colony we will never be able to develop'*.

Such preferences have created a deep divide among the children in the hamlets themselves. One Kurichya girl from class four studying in the nearby English medium school had all her friends from the non-ativasi communities. She went to the school in a specially arranged private vehicle, unlike the other adivasi children from the locality. She took exceptional care not to interact with adivasi children of her age from the hamlet. Otherwise, being a frequent visitor of the place where I was staying, she took special care not to visit when the other adivasi children from the hamlets were around. Another boy studying in plus-two class who is also residing in the same locality never used to visit the playground as his parents insisted not to mingle much with the children from the hamlet. His father is from the Kattunaika community and works as a carpenter, and mother is from the Kurichya community working as a homemaker. They have built a home of their own which is a bit away from the hamlets. To the boy, *"I wanted to play with them, but my parents won't allow me. They are afraid that I will get spoiled if I make company with the boys from these hamlets."* While talking with his mother, she complained, *"We are doing the best possible for our children's education. Babu is having a sister studying in ninth standard and both of them were given a separate room for study. When Babu was in residential school he was better, after coming here he wanted to play with these children in the hamlet and lost his interest in studies. There is a residential school in Thrissur<sup>ii</sup> for girls and I wanted send his sister there. Let them go out sir, only then they will be all right. They get spoil if they continue to stay here. There is a gang in Second Gate [name of a nearby hamlet] if he join them that is the end."*

Adivasi parents consider education as the only way to achieve social mobility and are ready to send their children even to faraway places to get education benefits. Ratheesh a 17 year boy who belongs to the Kurichya community have his father running the ration shop in the small town near the hamlet. His mother died when he was in high school, and he also has a brother. His father never remarried but took care of them. Ratheesh and his brother helped their father in almost all household chores along with their studies. Their father studied up to 10<sup>th</sup> in Mithra Niketan School in Trivandrum, which is especially dedicated to the education of marginalised children. However, to his father, *"I studied there, but I couldn't continue further. I couldn't bare*

*the pressure of being away from home so I started a business here. But one should learn to be away from family otherwise we cannot survive in these days.”*

A continuing cycle of marginalisation in terms of alienation from land and forest disrupts the very co-existence and affects the support mechanisms one must obtain being a community member. Historical processes induced by capitalism, like the migration of marginal peasants, plantations and the agrarian structure, devised its local strategies of exploitation of labour like alcohol. The changed land use pattern also affected their food pattern. The kinship network being disrupted because of continuous dislocation, the linguistic and social needs are challenged. The community does not have enough social capital available within the community. Due to the existing deep-rooted social hierarchy, the potential remedial sources like village libraries are not easily accessible to the community members. The aspirations for education among adivasi communities appear as the only way to escape from the black hole of underdevelopment. However, ironically, the assertions are not happening for self-respect and dignity. The whole discourse in the regional mainstream is dominated by the view that adivasis should give away their identity markers to achieve fruits of development. People from the community and even political leaders share this view of the 'need for urgent assimilation'. The economic impoverishment resulting from the historical exploitation structures is effectively blinded using cultural and social reasoning in the local consciousness. This has created a 'stigma' attached to their own identity of being an adivasi. As a result, the parents and younger generation wants to distance themselves from their own community in many instances of their everyday lives. Stigma is understood as negative regard, inferior status or powerlessness (Herek, 2009) and originates at the societal level (Fine & Asch, 1988). It is a collective experience in the case of 'marginalised communities' like racial or ethnic minorities (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006) and a result of being denied equality and differential treatment (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Stereotypes – often decided based on the membership of people in stigmatised groups (Devine, 1989)- harm the individuals' performance (Spencer et al., 1999). They earn less income and get fewer opportunities and get fewer leadership roles (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The present case indicates how historically constituted social and economic oppression is covered under hegemonised cultural reasoning and articulation. This creates perpetual stigma and a resultant downward spiral of marginalisation.

## II

### **The School: Changing Social Location**

Brahmagiri Government Higher Secondary school is located in Thirunelli panchayat and under the management of Wayanad District Panchayat as per the devolution of responsibility of the school management to local self-governments in Kerala. Department of Public Instructions, Govt. of Kerala governs the educational systems, and it follows a Kerala State Syllabus. The school came into existence on 22 November, 1955 under the Malabar district board as a single teacher school. It was primarily an initiative of the local community, who were keen to tap educational opportunities for their younger generation. The local landowning elites took the lead in this process. The Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the school had a list of upper caste landowning class men who contributed to this effort. The school had begun in a rented building, but later the local elite successfully persuaded two British brothers who owned the Coffee Estate in the village to donate land for school (Govt. Higher Secondary School, 2005). By the 1980s, the school became a high school with the continued efforts of the local people. While recording the efforts during this period, few names of the migrant peasants from southern Kerala also figured in the souvenir along with the upper caste landowners of the region. This reflects the participation of the peasant migrants in the educational process of the locality. The school also brought modern social actors like teachers into the fabric of the village. The souvenir mentioned the names of many teachers who were instrumental in the further development of the school. Most of the trophies for competitions were sponsored in the name of the landowning upper cast people and teachers who took the lead to establish the school. They are still used in school arts and sports festivals. However, the souvenir has not mentioned any adivasi names. However, many of them contributed in multiple ways, including voluntary labour for infrastructures like a playground.

By explaining the importance of starting the school, one of the then activists noted in the school souvenir, “Till 1980s students from the valley has to travel 20-30 kms to get secondary education” (Govt. Higher Secondary School, 2005). So Brahmagiri school was the epitome of aspirations of the entire community in the village. Apart from teaching-learning, midday meals, arts and sports were highlighted as the school's major attraction during its inception. The local elites sponsored many trophies to motivate students who participated in

various events. The locality or even the whole district was not able to supply teachers to the school. Due to this, in the earlier days, almost all the teachers were from the Southern districts of Kerala. The memoir also offers glimpses of issues faced by the school in those days as teachers were appointed temporarily, even those appointed were inadequate in number. Teachers who got appointments were given accommodation and other facilities by the elites in the community. They considered it as a matter of pride. School timings were divided into two sessions [forenoon and afternoon] due to the scarcity of faculty. Irregular attendance among students and inadequate travel facilities were identified as hurdles to effective schooling. The first batch of 10th class students passed out in 1983 from the school, but only one student passed out from the school. Such poor performance was attributed to the poor facilities and hurdles faced by the community.

However, such conditions changed to a far better situation at present. Now the school have its building, and class in shifts stopped long back with improved infrastructure. Another vital resource of Government schools is its teachers recruited through a transparent mechanism. Unlike the earlier decades, Brahmagiri school has a strong contingent of regular and qualified teachers whom the government recruits through its public service commission mechanism. Most of the teachers in each stage have higher qualifications than the minimum prescribed for their posts. Some of them are taking extra diplomas and degrees while being in the service. Most of them worked in more than one school; for some, it is up to ten. About 75 per cent of the teachers are from the same district and taluk, unlike the early phase. School also has teachers from southern districts like Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, northern districts like Kannur Kozhikode, and central districts like Idukki. Some teachers have been working in Brahmagiri school for more than 18 years few others were recently joined. Few teachers were from the same locality and studied in the Brahmagiri school itself. This shows that a cross-section of people from different regions, experiences, ages and gender makes a good combination of resource availability for students in the school. Infrastructure and other facilities were improved compared to earlier periods. The major source of income and infrastructural development is government aid through programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (S.S.A.), Backward Regions Grant Fund (B.R.G.F.) and Local Self-Governments aid. Member of Legislative Assemblies (M.L.A.s) and Member of Parliament (M.P.s) are also contributed to the infrastructural development of Govt. schools from their fund for development in constituencies. The school Souvenir has listed the names of M.P.s and M.L.A.s who had contributed to the infrastructural development of the

school in various types, including building, computer lab, water connection, library etc. In 2004, the school had upgraded to higher secondary, but the infrastructural facilities were not completed. In the last five years, there has been a huge public investment in the government school infrastructure in Kerala and Brahmagiri school also benefited from it.

Despite improving the physical condition, the school's relative social position as the sole source of educational mobility for the village has changed drastically. In 2013-14, during the period of fieldwork school's location has grown to a small town on the interstate highway. There are both bus and jeep services to different parts of the villages and hamlets around. The emergence of private English Medium School in the region had a bearing on the type of students coming to Brahmagiri School. The village's rural elites and lower middle class send their children to the nearby English Medium School. During my stay in the village, I could see the school buses of many English medium schools and private jeeps fetching students from the remote villages. They were in their westernised uniforms with ties and shoes. These vehicles honked to school amidst another flock of students who were walking to Brahmagiri school. This is a typical image representing the divide the differential schooling systems have created within the village community. Brahmagiri School, which was once the epitome of aspirations of the whole community, carries an image of 'school for the 'poor and adivasis' today.

The school has students from many nearby villages. The survey among students shows that most of the students are walking to school, covering a distance maximum of 3 km. Few were coming in the bus from a distance of 2-7 km. A large majority of the adivasi students are from the nearby locality, especially those from the Paniya community. The survey reveals that most of the students are from a working-class background and adivasis. Adivasi community constitutes 45 percent of the total student strength of 1490 including higher secondary. O.B.C.s (Including Muslims), Adivasis and few students from Dalit communities constitute a major chunk of the school population. The school primarily caters to the students from marginalised social groups, daily wage labourers, agricultural labourers and small peasants.

Few students are there from service class employees like clerks, teachers (of the same school), or drivers and petty businessmen like shop keepers or small traders of the locality. Most of these students have been admitted to the English Medium classes of the Brahmagiri School initiated in Kerala to address the elite apathy to government schools. On the other hand, the

adivasi students are discouraged from joining the English medium class. Teachers consider this a 'tough option' that they cannot afford without educated family or social support. The English medium classes were given special attention and better available resources than the 'Malayalam' medium classes. The Malayalam medium classes are mostly occupied by those students from the marginalised, including adivasis. This difference in favour of the comparatively elite is reflected in how they offer support to avail fellowships and scholarships.

There is an eventual marginalisation in terms of the preference by the rural elite. The ideological hegemony of the market and its impact on the imagination of the regional mainstream has created a condition of exclusive networks of elites for better gains. This includes the teachers working in the same school sending their children to English Medium Schools where the teachers are less qualified than their school. The interaction within the school shows that the preference for school is not only for the actual facilities or resources available with a particular school but also for an elite peer network. This shift of elite's preference to English Medium School leaving Brahmagiri behind also impacted the available resources, especially people with power and influence with its disposal to gather resources and lead the developmental work unlike the time of its origin.

Therefore the school choice is not just about infrastructure or facilities available or qualification of teachers, but also about the peer group that exists in the school. This is not just there among the public but even shared by the teachers of Brahmagiri School themselves. During a lunch break in an informal discussion among teachers, they warned one of their colleagues for sending the child quiet early before class timings.

*“Can’t you see with whom he is playing in the morning?! It will spoil your child. Don’t send him that early; bring him only when you come to the school. ”*

The apprehension about social mixing is not an exception to the area. Similar confrontations were there for teachers who had sent their children to Govt. Schools especially where more number of students from socially and economically marginal groups are studying. A teacher who is an activist of Kerala School Teachers Association (K.S.T.A.) – a left lenient teacher organisation shared his experience.

*“When I decided to send my child to a Government Lower Primary School in my neighborhood many of my colleagues and relatives blamed me for spoiling the future of the child. Because this was the school where the adivasis from my locality used to study. Do we need only doctors or engineers? If my child does not become doctor or engineer because he studied in a government school, I will take the blame for it.”*

Such seclusion is observed the world over with the emergence of private schooling. For Eg. separation of upper economic classes from the rest of the society was pointed out as a reason to challenge private schooling in England, and separation of different religious and racial groups was observed in the United States. Coleman's paper found more Hispanic students in Public schools, on the other hand, more national merit scholarship finalists in private schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The new elite of the village constituted an enclave of its own in the new private school and projected itself as the 'desired type of society'. So an aspiration for networking with a peer group of the elite is considered essential. Schools with the working class and adivasi students are not preferred to exclude such peer groups.

However, such processes are not challenged or questioned in the wider society except for some organisations like Kerala Shashtra Sahithya Parishad and some of the politically oriented teachers in Kerala. According to one of the lady teacher whose child is studying in 4<sup>th</sup> Std. Malayalam medium in the school

*“I bring my child here as I think it shows my integrity. I see a paradox in sending the children to private school while teaching here [in a govt. school]. If I do that, it shows my lack of confidence about the system I am working. I don't have any moral right to continue here as a teacher then.”*

Such political motivations operate as an important resistive instrument that channelises people with resources to government schools by not allowing them to perish as the only choice of hapless people.

The influence of community members associated with school over time sheds light on the change in the social positioning of the school within given political-economic conditions. Earlier, the school represented the entire village community. At present, the elite has withdrawn from the government school. This has posed a greater challenge in the capacity of the school to mobilise resources or to protect its interests. The divide between private unaided and government schools



has not just grouped the students into privileged – unprivileged. However, parents who were potential resources in the development of school has also grouped. This loss of privileged group for influence is plugged by the political character of the Parents and Teachers Association (P.T.A.). In Kerala, political parties have always shown interest in capturing school P.T.A. as a potential source of their activism. In Brahmagiri School P.T.A., the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [hereafter C.P.I. (M)] sympathisers had the upper hand. However, sympathisers of other parties like the Muslim League and Congress are also members of the body. Political animosities were never hampered everyday affairs, but they were all keen to use their political linkages to negotiate more government resources. The development of school often emerged as a strong political debate in the locality. For example some office staff in the Brahmagiri School accused the P.T.A. for not taking the concerted effort in bringing funds. On the other hand P.T.A. blamed the minister for tribal and youth affairs who belonged to the ruling front lead by congress in 2014 due to the political alliance of the local panchayat to the C.P.I. (M). In 2019 during my second visit, Panchayat President from the Kurichya community became M.L.A. of the ruling front lead by C.P.I. (M). He took a special interest in bringing funds for the school under the school infrastructure rejuvenation programme initiated by the C.P.I. (M) lead government and mobilised around two million rupees.

Brahmagiri school representing the social context in which public education is operating in contemporary Kerala society. Its history shows how the local elites retained their dominance over education across periods. Earlier, they were dominating the affairs of the school and deciding its agenda. In a neo-liberal social context, the local elites aspire to form more rigid, and exclusive class groupings and education is effectively used as a tool for this. The social division is not just operating between schools, but English medium classrooms started within state schools cater to the aspiration for exclusive social networks.

On the other hand, a high level of political literacy and consciousness is instrumental in facilitating the resistance of the marginalised. The public investment in education and comparatively fair appointment system of teachers brought both material and human resources of better quality at the students' disposal. The local level political activism is directed towards negotiating for resources with the state and can put up their aspirations as a political agenda of the ruling parties. However, hegemony of the rural elite in the social and cultural sphere and

abuse and belittling of adivasi identity in the neighbourhood reproduced in the school discourse. There is no conscious attempt from the school to counter it. Therefore even with better material and human resources, the marginal identity of the adivasi students continue in the school and hamper the development of confident and assertive personality among them. The more they get 'educated', they want to distance themselves from the adivasi identity as it is projected as the stumbling block for future prospects.

## **Conclusion**

The case of the Brahmagiri school and the surrounding village offers insights about the undercurrents that changed the social character of society and its school. Parsons viewed school as an institution to impart both skills and morals required by society (Parsons, 1959). Studying the school's values offers deeper insights into the nature of development discourses that shape people's everyday lives at the margins. School is silent about the historical process of oppression and subjugation and hides them under the cultural narrative of underdevelopment at the local level. The social and linguistic features of adivasi society are identified as the obstacle for development. The resultant stigma is effectively used as a tool for oppression and marginalisation. Differential schooling, which draws students from the same neighbourhood, works as an instrument of social division. In this context, it is reasonable to argue that the English medium preference is not just about learning the language but an attempt to form elite social groups. The same is reproduced even in the government school with its 'English medium' classrooms. As a result, both in the village and school, exclusive peer group networks are consolidated. However, on the one side, adivasis are forced to compromise on their social network mechanism and linguistic identities. Edward Said viewed (Said, 2001) intermixing as the only way to know each others' world view and avoid the marginalisation of a particular group's views. However, schools in the neighbourhoods seem to be operating in the opposite direction, indicating a huge social divide among the future generation of society. As far as adivasis are concerned, their school choice and aspirations for mobility is seriously affected by the growing 'elite network' aspirations in society. Marginality is understood as preventing people's access to resources, opportunities, and freedom of choice (von Braun & Gatzweiler, 2014). However, this study suggests the forced choices due to unequal social relations perpetuate marginality as well.

Contrary to the dominant perception of 'disinterest of adivasis' towards education, the empirical observations from the field suggests a highly spirited aspiration among adivasis to avail the fruits of education and make lots of sacrifices in their personal life to achieve it. However, they are met with preconditions at the entry level and have to compromise on their social networks and language to achieve it. The elite shifts to private school and resultant resource crunch in the government schools are addressed by grassroot political activism. In Kerala, the politically motivated teachers and P.T.A. members take conscious efforts to counter resource impoverishment of the school by sending their children to the government schools and makes school development an agenda for the local political parties. However, even such efforts are not directed to counter the hegemonic cultural narratives that define the underdevelopment of adivasi communities. Although they are successful to an extent in addressing the resource problems the efforts at times facilitate the assimilative cultural project of the dominant.

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<sup>i</sup> A semi - permanent worker appointed by the government to coordinate with government agencies and the community.

<sup>ii</sup> A city located in central Kerala