Social Movements Leading to Educational Change Among Marginalized Social Groups

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Lessons from the work of Adivasi Munnetra Sangam

By: Amman Madan, Rama Sastry and B. Ramdas

1. Introduction

The debates on making Indian education more inclusive and egalitarian tend to revolve within two kinds of paradigms: (a) educational content and method, viz. improving the curricula, textbooks and teaching methods, linking them with educational goals which may variously range from creating skills and human capital at one end of the spectrum to an emphasis on self-discovery or good citizenship at the other; (b) enhancing organizational and systemic processes, which may range from improving teacher colleges to the privatization of schools to strengthening the roles of leaders. In contrast with the above two, a voluble but smaller group of voices have emphasized the role of politics as an independent force for improving education in India and elsewhere (Saxena 1998, Bowles and Gintis 2011/1976, Anyon 2005, Apple 2007). It is argued that the key and primary factor missing in the furthering of educational change is the lack of political will and not the technical abilities and resources. Social movements are one of the main expedients of creating that political will. It is through social movements and shifting of the balance of power within the political system that the normative orientation of

the key actors will change. Only then shall strategic institutions generate the will to pull attention and effort away from competing demands and put them into improving the education system instead.

It is in this context that this article looks at the experience of one such social movement.

2. Adivasi Munnetra Sangam

ACCORD (Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development) is an organization which began work in 1985 in the Gudalur Block of the Nilgiris District in Tamil Nadu, abutting the border with Kerala and Karnataka. ACCORD built a cadre of Adivasi youth who in turn formed a community-based organisation, the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), which has led protests for the recovery of land for the Adivasis which had been taken over by outsiders. Over the years, the organization has established itself as an important and effective voice for the protection of the Adivasis. This mass base is significant since it has led to a different trajectory in its educational work than that is being done by NGOs which work directly with the state and government schools. Their educational work was studied through extensive interviews of teachers and activists, classroom observations and by drawing upon various documents generated by both, ACCORD and AMS.

The Gudalur Block lies in a valley of the Nilgiri hills and has forests, plantations and homesteads. It is home to five Adivasi communities — Paniyas, Bettukurumbas, Mullukurumbas, Kattunayakas and Irulas. They number around 20,000 people and constitute about 10% of the population of Gudalur and its adjoining territory. The Paniyas, the single largest tribe that constitutes around 40% of the tribal population, was for several centuries, bonded to a landowning group called Chettis, migrants from Karnataka. The Mullukurumbas have small landholdings which they supplemented by hunting. The remaining three tribes have primarily been hunter-gatherers.

The five Tribes

- Paniya
- Mullukurumba
- Bettakurumba
- Kattunaicken
- Irula
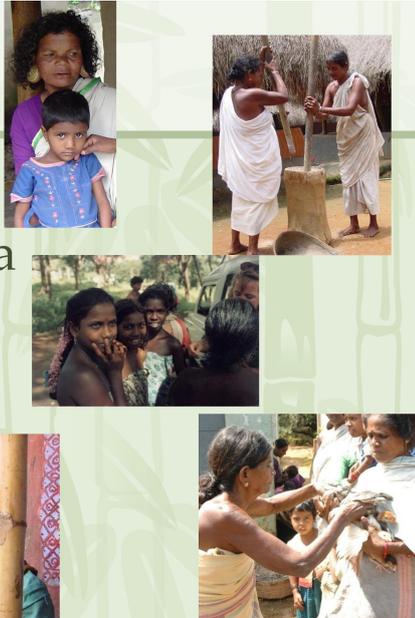
Gudalur has been growing tea and coffee since the mid-19th century. The British planters started the process of clearing the forests and this compelled the Adivasis who lived in them to constantly be on the move. There was no protest as the forests in which they dwelled stretched into Kerala on the one side and into Karnataka on the other. In the 1960s, the forests started being occupied by migrants from Kerala who became small landowners. The next decade saw another wave of migrants — Tamils from Sri Lanka. Both these migrants were, unlike the earlier occupants, aggressive in taking control of the land. This compelled the Adivasis to withdraw deeper into the forest even as the boundaries of the forests itself shrank. The passing of the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act in 1969, to acquire land from a Raja in Kerala resulted in almost the entire land area of Gudalur coming under litigation which remains unresolved to this day. This, in turn, meant that unoccupied, including forests land, was up for grabs and the Adivasis' habitat came under further pressure. Then came the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, which eventually led to the declaration of the forests as wildlife sanctuaries and prohibited human entry into them. Overnight, the Adivasis had become trespassers and encroachers in their own homes. They were denied access to livelihood, water, fish, firewood, medicinal herbs, housing

materials and above all, their gods. Some Adivasis had procured land titles in their names from the British but not knowing better, had entrusted those documents in the safekeeping of the landlords under whom they now worked. When the clamour for land grew, it became difficult for them to recover those land titles.

It was this context that triggered ACCORD's work. The Adivasis were on the brink of starvation and there was endemic hopelessness and despair. The AMS activists speak of visiting villages where individuals just sat slumped over, not knowing how to carry on. ACCORD's work took off in 1985, initiated by Stan and Mari Thekaekara and an Adivasi youth leader, KT Subramani, it aimed at building a cadre of youth who could get back the land that the people had lost. The youth were organized into groups called, 'sangams' in every hamlet, and which were later federated into the organisation called, the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam.

The AMS was able to bring all the different Adivasi communities under one umbrella. The Adivasi culture and festivals were important for cementing this partnership. The AMS activists would visit a hamlet and over two-three days of interactions, would develop a dance-theatre performance on the injustices of their existence. This had a dramatic effect on the local community and helped in mobilizing them. The Adivasi festivals were a time for dance and for the joy in togetherness. So, these easily lent themselves to becoming the settings where the conditions of the Adivasis could be discussed, leading to further consolidation of their political power. Thus, for political action, the Adivasi identity and revival of their culture became as important as the land issue. In 1988, the AMS called for its first major demonstration in the town of Gudalur. Several thousand men, women and children came together. This shocked not only the local people but the Adivasis themselves who had no idea that so many of them existed.

The efforts of the AMS within the community led to the redeeming of over 1500 acres of land from landowners, estates and the forest department and giving each family a piece of land. This was the most pressing need since all the other sources of livelihood had been taken away from the Adivasis. Subsequently, work on agriculture, health, education and housing cooperatives was also initiated. All of these were built on the substratum of the highly decentralised organisation of the AMS. The Adivasi activists had a decisive voice in what was needed and how it was to be operationalised. There was a conscious decision not to centralize power and thus avoid the fate of most NGOs. It meant keeping alive a culture of grassroots democracy and never becoming just the service delivery personnel for the government. This implied continued and deliberate efforts to enhance the Adivasis' decision-making powers, their culture, their unity and their values. This was in sharp contrast with many other NGOs' trajectory of consolidating power within a narrow bureaucratic structure and building firm client relations with their beneficiaries, which eventually debilitated the local community and its sense of agency.

The emphasis on the community and its culture as a political strategy came partly from the previous experiences of some of the non-Adivasi activists. They had been exposed to community-based mobilization while at college in Chennai and Bangalore in the 1970s and from their student days had been involved in working as equals in and amongst the rural and urban poor. When they came to Gudalur, they already had several years of experience in bonding with local communities; identifying in a participative manner their main concerns; and, building community-based organizations through which they could negotiate with state functionaries and create networks with allies.

3. Educational intervention

Given the importance of the Adivasi identity, culture and

language to AMS's methods of mobilization, it was inevitable that education drew their attention. The first challenge was how to straddle the two worlds — that of the Adivasis and that of the region's dominant cultures. The elders contended that if the children go to school, they would lose their language and culture and end up with low self-esteem. Yet, they knew that without modern education they would not survive in this world. The second challenge was the nature of education that they should get so that it does not again dump them at the bottom of the social and economic heap. They wanted instead, an education which could set them up as independent, self-respecting community members.

In 1999, a survey conducted by ACCORD showed that only 27% literacy existed among the Adivasi community and the rate among women was as low as 17%. There were only 737 Adivasi children enrolled in the school registers which was 25% of the total number of children in the school-going age. There were 14 Ashram Shalas or government-run residential schools for tribal children in the block, but the state of affairs there was pathetic. Non-Adivasi teachers and staff showed little empathy or concern for the Adivasi children.

An investigation of reasons for children not going to school or dropping out showed that language itself was a huge barrier as each of the four tribes spoke a language different from Tamil, which was the medium of instruction in most local schools. This created a serious mental block to any kind of learning. Language, it was realized, was the vehicle for the carrying forward of the culture and so the fear that the next generation would not speak the native language and therefore not respect their culture was reason enough for the community to either not send their children to school or to actively encourage dropping out. One of the first programs that the movement took up was to work with the Central Institute of Indian Languages to develop a script for each of the tribal languages. Then, with the help of the community elders, they

used one of the most-widely read scripts to create a primer — a book of songs and stories.

Given the fact that the community's own systems of transmitting knowledge had collapsed with the destruction of their homesteads and environments, the school was rapidly becoming the only space for their education. The question that arose was what kind of education would they get?

The support of sympathisers within the state led to an early initiative which demonstrated the political strength of the AMS. Adivasi volunteers were selected and placed inside the government's Ashram Shalas, to try and get them to function properly. As an activist said, they thought that anyway the principals of these Ashram Shalas only rarely showed up, so it should be possible to control the Ashram Shalas and coerce them to improve. However, this did not work out as they had expected, because there was a sharp reaction from the staff of the government-run schools against these 'class X-pass' Adivasi volunteers. As the volunteers began to expose malpractices, the resistance to them began to stiffen even further. In one incident, volunteers caught a truck with food meant for the Ashram Shala which had been diverted to a local shop. The staff members complicit in this became even more determined opponents of the AMS. While it had been possible to get support from the higher levels of the education bureaucracy, getting the lower levels of the same system to cooperate was proving to be a much more difficult proposition.

The AMS volunteers found themselves in a fix. They felt unequipped to teach the children by themselves; stonewalled by the government staff; and, blocked from instituting any reform. They withdrew for a two-year intensive course on teaching and education run by ACCORD and then moved to focus on an alternative school which had been taken over by the AMS. The penetration of the AMS volunteers right into the power structure of the school was a remarkable feat, helped by the support the movement had garnered even within the government

bureaucracy. However, the local structure of the school blocked them from being able to achieve all that they wanted. This is an indicator of some general limitations of social movements' approach to interventions, to which we shall return later.

It was around this time that the AMS took over an alternative school called, Vidyodaya, which had been started by Rama and Ramdas[1] for the children of the ACCORD staff. They were aware of the current literature on progressive education and had experience in running a similar school in Puducherry. In 1995, at a Mahasabha meeting of the Adivasi leaders, it was asked for Vidyodaya to be handed over to the AMS. This, the activists felt, would be a space where they could model the kind of education they wanted.

The taking over of the school led to the entry of a number of Adivasi youth into it who began to learn to teach and to manage educational spaces. A teacher training curriculum was set up which introduced them to the history of the Adivasis in India. It also established why they were at the bottom of the social and economic order for no fault of theirs. It discussed ways of getting out of the cycle. Into the school curriculum for children were introduced the history of the land rights movement, the geography of their villages, their food and living practices. Elders from the community came into the classroom to talk about their experiences, their rituals, customs, values and the way forward. They taught their stories, their songs, and dances. These became part of the daily routine of the school, breaking some of the barriers between home and school.

Today, it is the Adivasis who run the school and they have been able to further develop the curricula to integrate their lives into the school context better — not just in terms of the content, but also in terms of values. Among other things, in keeping with the ethos of the Adivasi community, there is a

very non-hierarchical system of functioning in the school. For instance, there is no principal's office and in the room in which visitors meet school teachers and administrators, there is no desk across which they sit to talk. The symbolism of bureaucratic power is avoided to create a more egalitarian space for the parents of the Adivasi children to come into and feel comfortable in.

AMS's political stance on the centrality of the Adivasi culture underwrites and encourages pedagogic innovations that support that culture. The respect and compassion of the teachers, para-teachers and activists for the Adivasi students have led to several remarkable practices in the Vidyodaya school which go a long way in helping the children make the best of school life. For example, when children join in the first grade, they are not compelled to speak in the official language of the state, Tamil, which the teachers say is still a foreign language for them at that stage. Nor are the new entrants compelled to sit in class. The teachers call them 'wanderers' as they are not used to sitting and focusing on an instructor for long periods of time. They are, therefore, allowed to move around in the school. The school's design is deliberately such that it has no doors separating the classrooms so that the children can move in and out freely from one room to another. It is after about six months that the teachers begin to make them start sitting down to learn for longer periods. This approach of the teachers is very effective in getting the children to integrate more easily with the school environment. It can be contrasted with the bewilderment and increasing irritation of teachers in conventional schools at children from the marginalized social groups who arrive in grade one but seem to find it difficult to pay attention or even sit quietly in one place.

Along with the school, AMS has set up an extensive network for supporting children to get into and then stay in school. A common problem was that the local Adivasis found it difficult

to get children to school on time. The mothers often had to themselves leave for work in the plantations by 7:30 or 8:00 am. Getting children ready, organising their meals and then ensuring that they reach school by 10 am was a task which called for strange new logistic and time management skills. AMS organised the elder members of the local community who took up the responsibility of getting the children out of their homes every day and escorting them to school and then bringing them back in the afternoon. AMS now ensures that every Adivasi child goes to school and so over 3000 children are now in the various panchayat, tribal welfare and private schools. They continue to train 'para teachers' at the Vidyodaya through an intensive residential two-year course. These para-teachers teach in the government schools, Ashram Shalas or in the study centres of the Sangam. The AMS activists in the government schools no longer seek to seize control of them, but instead, try to work as partners with the local government teachers. One of the important programs of the Sangam is to conduct regular camps for Adivasi children during weekends and holidays. These camps are used to motivate them, discuss their problems in school and at home and to bring in an assertion of the Adivasi culture so that their self-esteem is not lost in the schools they go to. A recent development in the increasing trust of AMS by the state has been that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has asked the AMS to run a residential school for tribal children.

The processes involved in all these educational activities by ACCORD re-affirm the importance of local democracy and participation to avoid the passivity that comes from handing over the agency to the bureaucratic machinery of an NGO or the state. Empowerment and mobilization are deliberately cultivated and protected. Each cluster of villages decides what they want for the year and it is sent to the various educational, livelihood, and other bodies under ACCORD. For instance, if they want an Anganwadi, a study centre, a teacher, or scholarship for a student, it is brought up at the

cluster-level meeting and after approval sent to the relevant AMS body to implement. The institution does not have a veto power. All school and para-school staff are selected by AMS leaders and sent to Vidyodaya for training. The AMS leaders also have a say in the admission of students to the school. Therefore, the cultivation of a substantive democracy with the continued participation of the people is a keystone of AMS's work.

4. Possibilities and limitations of social movements

AMS and its work present an opportunity to reflect upon the possibilities and limitations of the social movements approach over the currently favoured approach of working directly upon curricula, pedagogy, school organization and teacher education through state institutions or NGOs. There are obvious difficulties in generalizing on the basis of just one case study and yet the benefit of a case study is the insights it may offer for generalization and subsequent testing. The AMS study does seem to support the notion that a substantial change in the nature of political control over educational institutions is very important for moving them into more egalitarian directions. This political change must include relevant shifts in the normative orientations and cultural beliefs of the elites who control the education system. It may or may not actually be a change of classes or groups or in the composition of the elite, but at the very least their ideas and culture must change for significant improvements in a static education system. Social movements offer a way of achieving such a political change.

In consummation, perhaps the greatest achievement of the AMS movement has been its affirmation of the Adivasi identity and dignity. In their educational work, they have propagated a narrative of oppression rather than backwardness. This reinforces that belief in the Adivasis that though they have been unfairly treated, they have the capacity to be equal to

all others. This is something which a movement could achieve much more easily than, say, a teacher education institution, because of its reach within the community. The origin myths, stories, the respect for the community's dress, ornaments and food practices have provided the movement with the space in which to debate and re-interpret meanings. The drama and emotional energy of these cultural elements are sometimes conveyed through demonstrations and meetings and much more frequently produced and reproduced through the myriad forms of daily interactions. The effect upon the ideas of selfhood and self-esteem of the Adivasi teachers and students is significant. This is much more difficult to achieve through bureaucratised processes of teacher education and conventional schooling, with their impersonal and formal structures, fewer spaces for the enactment of and the participation in powerful cultural narratives.

The cultural message of the movement carries through with ease into all its institutions, particularly into its model school, Vidyodaya. The Adivasi dignity is all pervasive and affects many aspects of the school's functioning. Clear messages from the school authorities convey a tone of support for the Adivasi identity and strengthen its legitimacy. This is in sharp contrast with the way most other public institutions in the region operate. Vidyodaya clearly illustrates the effects of political control on school functioning. Many of the pedagogic practices of the school bear the mark of the values and beliefs of the movement.

However, the limits to what social movements can achieve are also evident from this case study of AMS. A key role in implementing the school's innovations was played by pedagogic knowledge and expertise which came from outside the movement. This was brought in by individuals who had gained relevant theoretical and practical knowledge at other locations before they came in touch with the Adivasi movement of Gudalur. It is difficult to say that the movement alone could have created

the same pedagogical innovations if these individuals had not been present. Perhaps social movements cannot be the answer to everything. The cultivation of educational knowledge and practices may need to be carried out through various institutional processes that do not necessarily follow the logic of the movements. Organizational structures that give primacy to knowledge cultivation and building of professional teacher and researcher identities rather than to activism and political mobilization may yet have a constructive role to play in educational change.

Another limitation seen here is in the degree of control the movement was able to achieve over the educational institutions of the region. The impact of the movement on the local education bureaucracy is far less than what can be seen in the institutions directly under its control. The initial attempt to take charge of the government tribal residential schools had failed in the face of resistance from the government teachers and staff members. ACCORD volunteers presently work alongside teachers in local government schools in a much more collegial manner. Vidyodaya is just one model school. Considering the numbers and distances involved, it is to government schools and now the burgeoning low-fee, private schools that a large number of Adivasi children must go. The movement has not been able to assert too much control over them and without that there are sharp limits to how much they can achieve. The AMS has responded by working intensively outside the schools, but that does not lead to transforming the school system itself. The SSA's asking AMS to run a tribal residential school does show an increasing trust between the state education bureaucracy and AMS, but the transformation of the state bureaucracy is still a distant goal.

From the difficulties of AMS in transforming the entire local school system, two further inferences may be drawn regarding the place of social movements in creating more egalitarian educational systems. Firstly, the inability to transform all

the government/private schools in its region may not be a limitation of the social movement approach itself, but that of the specific conditions from within which this particular movement has emerged. It represents the voice of a small number of people within one block, which is a small part of a large state. The political muscle it is able to command is limited to just outside its immediate neighbourhood. Its resources are rather sparse too so, even getting an adequate number of graduate tribal teachers is a challenge. The demographic constraints merge with the cultural politics of the larger world to make it quite difficult to gather a sufficiently large number of people needed to work at the scale needed to touch each and every school in the region. The decision-makers at the district, state and national levels control many aspects of schooling and influencing them is beyond the resources of this small group.

Lastly, it may be suggested from the AMS experience that efforts very distinct from those that emerge within the logic of bureaucracy and organizations to improve school organization and the administrative system still continue to be important. While political movements may be able to lean upon them, the resistance by school teachers reaffirms that bureaucratic organizations are remarkably resilient and resistant to external pressure. The transformation from within must go hand in hand. This may mean all the usual processes of organizational reform — getting better people, building cultures of putting organizational goals before other things, having sufficient resources, acquiring the required technical knowledge, having effective feedback loops and so on. Social movements may not be able to replace education bureaucracies and efforts to improve the latter from within their own logic must still be made.

5. Lessons for building democratic movements

Meanwhile, building social movements still does emerge as an important and under-emphasized component for changing

educational systems, particularly for tilting their activities in favour of the marginalized. There are several lessons that ACCORD's work holds for those who may want to build movements that seek to empower the powerless and to have the clarity of who the intervention aims to benefit. If it is a community, then the intervention must be conducted according to their ideas and the decisions taken by them. In the present case, most community members will not have heard the names of ACCORD or Vidyodaya. The school is known as the 'Sangam school' and all the activities are Sangam activities. People's participation should not be to carry brick and mortar but to imagine, design and plan.

Secondly, it is important that people who have been historically marginalised realise that they are where they are because of others and not because of themselves. The sense of failure and oppression that has been internalised has to be brought to the fore. For this, one must use what Paulo Freire calls, 'the material that life offers' and make it into their learning materials.

Thirdly, one must recognize that people in such situations have never been in decision-making positions and therefore have to learn to do so often, by making mistakes. This concession must be available to them. They have to learn to be unafraid of making mistakes. Having been physically and psychologically assaulted for minor mistakes, fear remains drilled deep into their minds.

Finally, AMS's experience of working with the Adivasis has shown that even the least educated people are capable of handling educational institutions and difficult challenges. One only needs to make available to them the necessary inputs. In the final analysis, highly motivated people can learn anything by themselves. Motivating them and getting them to believe that they are not less than others but are the subjects creating and recreating history, is the most important facet of the work.

At the level of educational systems as a whole, the present case study supports the idea that shifts in the composition of or at least in the cultures of those holding the reins of power are important to ensure that substantial educational change takes place in the direction of greater equality. Trying to improve participation in educational systems without this runs the risk of it remaining a token gesture towards education reform. If political cultures change to permit greater voice to the weaker sections, then it seems reasonable to expect that the new equation of power would insist on at least some self-expression. However, the AMS and Vidyodaya experience also points to the importance of cultivating technical expertise along with political strength. Pedagogic knowledge and the ability to formulate new curricula are key abilities for changing the education system and these may be developed at sites other than the social movements alone. While social movements can give them momentum, the cultivation of teachers requires more effective teacher education institutions.

Social movements for greater democratisation have the capacity to change the overall climate within which institutions function. Without such a change the cultural milieu and goals of institutions may continue to remain under the influence of dominant groups. And yet, it would appear that institution-building continues to be important, whether it is for the strengthening of teacher education institutes; for the effective functioning of school bureaucracies themselves; or, for improving teaching and research in the higher education system which generates potential teachers who know their subjects well. For those who want to work for egalitarian education systems, it is worth asking whether democratic social movements may well be a necessary ingredient for educational change that empowers the oppressed. At the same time, it also seems plausible that while necessary, they may not be sufficient to ensure that such change takes place.

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