

Education of Scheduled Tribes: A Case study of Hill-top Residential Schools for Konda Reddis, south India

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ABSTRACT

Literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes in India has been marginally increasing as seen from each consecutive census enumeration. Nevertheless, their literacy rate has been far below the national average. This situation has been largely attributed to high drop-out rates in schools. Commonly sighted reasons for this include instruction in regional language as opposed to tribal dialects and teachers being of non-tribal origin. Significantly, research in this area (Nanjunda, D.C. et.al., 2008; Gupta & Danda, 1984) has furthered our understanding by detailing the complexity of the problem. The paper argues that initiating and sustaining literacy among Scheduled tribes is only possible through careful implementation at the micro level taking socio-cultural and ecological factors into consideration. This is demonstrated through the case of hill-top residential schools established for Konda Reddis of Khammam district, Andhra Pradesh.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes in India has been marginally increasing as seen from each consecutive census enumeration (Raza & Ahmad, 1990). Nevertheless, their literacy rate has been far below the national average. This situation has been largely attributed to high drop-out rates in schools for which the commonly sighted reasons include instruction in regional language as opposed to tribal dialects and teachers being of non-tribal origin. Significantly, research in this area (Nanjunda, D.C. et.al., 2008; Gupta & Danda, 1984) has furthered our understanding by detailing the complexity of the problem. Vaidyanathan and Nair (2001) argue that the teacher plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining children in school. It is therefore important that the teachers belong to the same community as the children leading to the motivation of children. Sinha and Mishra (1997) point out the importance of the curriculum being in tune with the cultural milieu as this leads to familiarity providing the necessary stimulus for learning. Jha and Jhingram (2002) discuss the importance of tribal dialects as the medium of instruction and from this perspective advocate for teachers who are from the same community as the students. Many other studies have made similar suggestions (Patel, 1991; Yadappanavar, 2003; Pfeffer & Behera, 1997, Singh, et.al., 1993). These suggestions have also been highlighted through research and implementation programmes carried out by Government of India (GoI) with or without collaboration of international agencies. Janshala is one such collaborative programme carried out with joint funding of GoI and five UN agencies (Gautam, 2008). The underlining fact that has been state is the need to pay attention to the diversity in sociocultural and ecological factors that the scheduled tribes live in and hence the need to take up a micro approach. It is on these lines that this paper explores the case of the hill-top residential schools established for the Konda Reddis.

Method

This research and the data discussed below was collected during the years 2000 to 2005. It is part of a larger ethnographic study using the techniques of participant observation, unstructured interviews and extended case method. Secondary sources as in government records were collected from the Integrated Tribal Development Agency in Bhadrachalam to build the historical sequence of development intervention. 'Konda Reddi', literally means 'hill headman' in Telugu. Literature on the Konda Reddis is limited. The first¹ detailed publication on them is Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's, *The Reddis of*

¹ In fact this community enters the Government of India census records only in 1941 subsequent to their 'discovery' made by Furer-Haimendorf.

Bison Hill: A Study in Acculturation (1945)². The Konda Reddis live mainly in three adjoining administrative districts of the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh in South India. The three districts are East and West Godavari and Khammam. They live in diverse habitats which includes riverside, interior forest, foot-hill and hill settlements. This article is based on the hill dwelling Konda Reddis in Khammam district. It relates to the 31 hill *gumpus* (cluster), with a population of 850 individuals (165 households) and seven resettlement colonies with a population of 448 individuals (92 households) (research census 2001). The region falls within the 'scheduled area' of the state, an administrative category created during 1950-55 to hasten 'tribal' development by bringing regions with more than 50% 'scheduled tribe'³ population under special governance. This special governance further recognizes the Konda Reddis as a 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group' (PTG)⁴, a category created in 1969 within the list of scheduled tribes by the government of India based on recommendations made by the Shilo Ao committee using the criteria of poor literacy, population stagnancy, inaccessible habitation and resource utilisation dependent on hunting, gathering or shifting cultivation.

Development Planning: Konda Reddi Literacy

In 1978, the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCR & TI) of the Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Andhra Pradesh prepared an *Integrated Development Plan for the Konda Reddis of Andhra Pradesh*. During the preparation of this plan it was found that despite decades of development the Konda Reddis remained the most backward tribe in their region, which, comprises the districts of Khammam, East Godavari and West Godavari. They reported that the community and area development programme of the Government benefited only the easily accessible villages inhabited by advanced sections among the tribal population and immigrant non-tribal population.

During Fifth five-year plan (1974-79), the Integrated Tribal Development Agencies were set up in each of the three Konda Reddi districts. Since the regional development approach of the past resulted in group imbalances and widened the gap between relatively more backward tribes and advanced tribal groups, this plan focused on people's development and for the first time in development planning the focus was shifted to the hill dwelling Konda Reddi *podu* cultivators. The TCR&TI identified 52 percent of the Konda Reddis in the three districts as *podu* cultivators. The proposed development agenda was to stabilise settled agriculture, discourage *podu* and replace with horticulture. Livestock development and cottage industries were to be introduced to check pressure on land and to provide as a source of supplementary income.

The Integrated Development Plan of the TCR & TI felt that the Konda Reddis were not sufficiently receptive to development programmes because they were illiterate. Therefore, a programme on education was evolved. Firstly, factors responsible for high dropout rate in formal schooling were identified and secondly the need for adult education programme was suggested. The objective of the adult education programme was to equip the illiterate adults with 'basic knowledge about the state and country, their place in the nation, their rights and duties as citizens, the administrative organisation of the government at district, state and national levels, the concessions and privileges available for scheduled tribes, various protective regulations, tribal development programmes, channels for obtaining government aid and for seeking redressal of grievances' (1978: 224).

With respect to the problem of high dropout rates in formal schooling the plan identified a number of factors which included:

- Absence of pre-primary instruction- the primary education started at age six and the child was made to start with the instructional material of the first standard. With the absence of detention system the child was promoted to a higher class, year after year irrespective of whether he/she was in a position to benefit from the first year's curriculum.
- The curriculum was not specific to their socio-cultural environment and thus failed to attract the children.
- The commensal habits of the Konda Reddis also played a decisive role. As the Konda Reddis do not accept food cooked by members of other tribes and castes it led to withdrawal of Konda Reddi children from the ashram schools where the cooks often belonged to other tribes. Also all vegetables and cereals were consumed only after the first crops of harvest was offered to the hill and lineage gods. Most often the food cooked in the schools did not coincide with this ritual. This led to withdrawal fearing that their children would consume the new crop before the ritual (1978: 220-222).

² Other publications on the Konda Reddis' include Haimendorf (1941), Mallavarapu (2007), Misra (1998; 2002; 2005), Misra and Kumar (2003; 2004), Rao (1981), Rao (2003), Reddy, 2004.

³ See Xaxa (2003), Ghurye (1959) for details on the classification of 'scheduled tribes'.

⁴ In 1969 when the category was created the same acronym PTG stood for Primitive Tribal Group. In 2005 one of the recommendations to the Draft of the National Policy for Scheduled Tribes was to replace the term 'primitive' by 'particularly vulnerable'. See <http://tribal.nic.in/finalContent.pdf>

It was suggested to provide incentives to the parents (supply of agricultural inputs and loans) and students (free supply of books and other educational appliances, dress, bedding material and mid-day meals, and granting non-residential scholarships) to ensure enrolment and attendance in schools. Another package of incentives was suggested for teachers. Wife and husband teams were proposed to be appointed as teachers in interior areas in order to reduce their absenteeism. But the plan did not formulate the education programme on the lines to overcome the identified problems in high dropout rates. For instance with respect to the commensal habits of the Konda Reddis no attempt was made to understand this behaviour as a traditional conservation method that prevented over-consumption of resources.

Though this integrated plan was conscious of development benefits not reaching the remote areas and focused on this sector, most of these schemes failed to reach these areas like the hill villages that the Konda Reddis of this research belong to in Khammam district. The development plan for the Konda Reddis did not change much since the 1978 proposal. It is also important to note here that this plan paid attention to the Konda Reddis as it was at this time that the Konda Reddis were identified and listed as a PTG. And it was only in 1995 that a special PTG cell and a post of special officer PTG was created in the ITDA at Bhadrachalam. Later, during the ninth five-year (1997-2002) plan a *Comprehensive Plan of Action for the Development of the Konda Reddis, in Khammam district* was prepared by the ITDA, Bhadrachalam and submitted to the Tribal Welfare Department of the Government of India.

The plan proposed schemes in housing, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, horticulture, infrastructure, health, malnutrition and food security, nutritional supplementations, fisheries, education, training in model farming, community awareness, and community based training programme.

Hill top Residential Schools: Its success and failure

Seven hilltop model ashram schools were started in August 1999 by ITDA. These schools were elementary schools with provision for first and second standards. The seven-hilltop schools were located in Jinnethogu, Karmankonda, Koperimeta, Chintalpadu, Thotamadipandi, Challakavam and Yeruvada⁵. Each of these schools was structured with two teachers who were to work on a shift of fifteen days each in a month. Being a residential school the support system included a cook and a caretaker. The objective of these schools was to familiarise children with institutionalised schooling. The education programme also had a scheme called the 'best available school scheme'. Under this scheme Konda Reddi children were identified and sent to a few of the best schools in the state.

An important drawback of the ITDA plan is with respect to education programmes where the suggestion for citizen or adult education made by the 1978 plan was not carried forward. The objective of this education was to equip the adult Konda Reddis with the basic knowledge of their place in the nation, the concessions and privileges available for them as scheduled tribes, the purpose of development programmes and the function of extension agencies. This suggestion was made after identifying the lack of this information as responsible for the low receptivity of the community to development programmes. With the ITDA's failure to implement this suggestion, the lack of community participation by the Konda Reddis continued to prove a stumbling block to the success of the development programmes.

The factors contributing to the high dropout rates in formal schooling identified by the 1978 plan were largely resolved by setting up the hilltop model ashram schools. Six main *gumpus* were selected and the schools were setup within these *gumpus*. These schools were constructed with the locally available raw materials not very different from the Konda Reddi houses. Each school had a separate cooking shed and a class room. The main objectives of these schools were to both familiarise and motivate children and parents to institutionalised schooling. This was believed to facilitate a smooth transition of the hilltop children to the schools in the plains with the children of other communities. The activities of these schools could be easily observed by the households of the *gumpu*.

This proximity also helped the children to participate in schooling. Another significant feature of the school was the recruitment of two Konda Reddis from the respective *gumpus* as a cook and caretaker for each school. This allowed the parents to send their children to the school as the food was cooked by a member of their own community and it also allowed them to make sure that their children did not consume vegetables before the first ritual offering to the lineage gods. Being within the village these schools have the advantage of attracting children from a very young age of three years to adolescents. As this school was catering only for first and second standard both school dropouts and those who never attended school benefited from the hilltop school. The other incentives provided were two sets of uniform, two meals a day, free textbooks, writing materials, plates and glasses, blankets and trunks to keep personal belongings. The table below details the different *gumpus* that were attached to the hilltop schools.

⁵ Yeruvada hilltop school is not in research area.

Table 1: Hilltop schools

Sl.no	Gumpu of the hilltop school	Gumpus attached to the hilltop school
1	Jinnethogu	Jinnethogu, Mathigunta, Thatichetlabanda, Karakagandi, Ootabokkapakala, Kaitharigandi, Aaragandi, Addagondi, Marthigondi, Vegisgandi
2	Challakavam	Gottamampaka, Ramedikonda, Vaetimampakka, Chintapakka, Puttagandi
3	Koperimetta	Kindipakala, Koperimetta, Elugulagondi, Pulsmamidigondi, Kalingamedi
4	Chintalpadu	Baibokka, Kormankotlu, Kondapakka, Chintalpadu
5	Thotamamidigondi	Pedavagu, Nallamamidigondi, Thotamamidigondi
6	Koththa Karmamnkonda	Chintagandi, Patha Karmankonda, Kotha Karmankonda, Gabilalgondi

In August 1999 when the school was started all boys and girls from the age of five to twenty who had not attended school were enrolled in the hilltop school. But by 2001 the numbers in the school dwindled indicating that all was not well with the functioning of the schools. The ITDA itself contributed in large measure to the poor functioning when it failed to adequately monitor these schools and their staff which included teachers, cooks and caretakers.

The posts of teachers in these hilltop schools are reserved for scheduled tribes. At first those candidates who had undergone schooling till the tenth standard irrespective of whether they qualified or not in the examination filled such teaching posts. Soon such posts were filled on the basis of ranking in a common entrance test for those tribal candidates who had qualified in the higher secondary school examination. Besides this mode of selection and induction, no further training was given to the candidates who for the first time were venturing into teaching. The hilltop ashram schools failed to attract teachers at first. This was mainly attributed to the fact that this hilly terrain did not have any qualified teachers. The ITDA then called for voluntary teachers who were paid a package of Rs.1,000 for fifteen days of work in a month. Two such teachers were employed for each school. A few candidates who had qualified through the examination were also recruited for these posts. Though training was very much proposed and planned it remained only on paper. The absence of training reflected in the teaching skills and often the teachers lacked focus and motivation. One permanent teacher of the Jinnethogu hilltop school told me that he had no clue that he was posted for a hilltop school until he came looking for it. Though it might be expected that the voluntary teachers, would show better motivation, this was far from being the case. The group of voluntary teachers were those who had failed to qualify in the common entrance test and used their service and experience as volunteers to be accredited as permanent teachers. There were totally twelve teachers recruited for the six hilltop schools who included seven Koya's, four Konda Reddis and one Lambada, all from plain villages and felt out of place with the hill terrain which lacked the communication facility that they were used to in their plain villages. Of the twelve teachers only two were permanent and the remaining ten were voluntary teachers.

The lack of focus and motivation among the teachers, which is in actual a failure on part of the ITDA was reflected in their attendance to the school. Of the fifteen days that a teacher stayed at the hilltop school, usually s/he reached on the end of the second or beginning of the third day. The children coming from different *gumpus* would have gone back to their homes with the absence of the previous teacher who would have left at least a day before his shift finished. The third day is spent in visiting different *gumpus* to bring the children back to school. Most usually, by noon of third day school resumes by taking attendance and then lessons for an hour or two. For the lessons two text books were followed, one was in arithmetic and the other was a book of short poems which was used for recitation. Besides the children were taught to write the Telugu alphabet. The medium of instruction was in Telugu.

The fifth day coincides with one of the three shandy days and the teacher leaves the settlement on excuse of some meeting. He returns on the sixth or seventh day. Eighth day school functions again. Ninth maybe, tenth rest day for the teacher and the children are left to entertain themselves. On the 12th or 13th day the teacher leaves mostly on the excuse of another meeting or urgent work at home. The teacher on the next shift repeats the same. In the few days that lessons do take place, due to discontinuity, the repetition is strong and with no special techniques of teaching it fails to attract the interest and imagination of the children. Also the children fail to develop attachment to the teacher as the vice versa is also true and this discourages their motivation for schooling. This situation also created a negative impact on the adults about the usefulness of school.

I quote here from my field diary recorded in July 2002 on the attendance of one teacher, “the teacher’s shift started on Tuesday the 16th, but he reached on 18th Thursday and went to the shandy on Friday 19th and then went home and came back only on 21st, Sunday evening. On the following Monday and Tuesday he has taken no lessons as on Monday there were only two children and Tuesday when he went to bring the children from their respective *gumpus* they hid at his sight so he came back and slept. By Wednesday evening there were ten children, he could have involved them in some activity but he remained seated idle”.

For the Konda Reddis teaching and learning is practical and involves observation and action as in tuber collection, honey collection, other NTFP collection, cooking, basket making, hunting, cleaning and building a house, maintaining the kitchen garden, etc. Most of these activities can be built into the school curriculum coupled with the lessons. What is important here is that the community is participating, even if from outside in the development activity. This is because the presence of the school in the habitation inevitably makes them the daily witness of its activities. Both absenteeism of the teacher and their poor motivation led to weak interpersonal relationship between the community and the teacher, contributing to the overall failure of yet another developmental scheme.

The responsibilities of the cook and caretaker were to collect and carry provisions and vegetables from the plains once a week to the hills and to cook two meals a day for the teacher and the children. The teacher was responsible for monitoring the overall attendance of the workers and children and also to check that the school was well stocked with these supplies. Both the workers were paid at the scale of Rs.1,200 per month. Payment of salaries both for the voluntary teachers and the workers was irregular. Most usually they received salaries once in three to six months. The irregular salaries demoralised the teachers and the workers. The workers were forced to borrow money and to indulge in other traditional forms of subsistence. This soon resulted in irregularity of workers leading to bad maintenance of stores resulting in starvation of children. This in turn led to absenteeism of children.

The school attendance register maintained by the teachers’ shows regularity in their attendance and of the children, with the number of children enrolled not corresponding to the number of children who actually attend school. Though the scheme of the hilltop schools was well planned it failed drastically in its sustenance. Even after five years of implementation, the impact of this schooling on the literacy of the Konda Reddis is negligible. Though the community was witness to the bad functioning of the school it remained an external spectator. The failure of the ITDA in not facilitating community participation, led to the non-accountability of the teachers. The poor planning of the school curriculum and failure to train and equip the teachers further added to the bad functioning of the school. Faulty management of funds leading to irregular salaries coupled with poor monitoring and evaluation of the schools could only lead to wastage of development funds.

The Way forward

Keeping aside the drawbacks, the setting-up of the hilltop schools showed that the Konda Reddis were not against external intervention *per se*. Though the majority of the Konda Reddis strongly resisted resettlement their attitude to the hill school was contrary to this as they did not restrict their children from attending the school. Of course, this cannot be interpreted as an interest in the school curriculum for often the response of parents was loaded with childcare interests.

The malfunction of the hilltop school programme can be rectified by facilitating community participation in its functioning. Community monitoring of schools must be encouraged and should form the basis for evaluation of the schools. This will ensure the regularity of the workers thereby ensuring the nutrition supplement to the children. This will create space in the knowledge system of the community for institutional schooling of children and will check the absenteeism of the children. Community participation can be further enhanced by inviting adult participation as teachers in the co-curricular activities. This set-up will give space for the community to demand accountability of both the teachers and the extension agency.

The extension agency should ensure regularity in allocating funds as in the case of salaries and improve its accountability by better monitoring of school functioning and evaluating the school based on the response of the community. The extension agency should take up training of the teachers, which could include knowledge of terrain and lifestyle of the community. The teachers should be made accountable not only to the extension agency but also to the community. The teachers should be trained to include co-curricular activities adapted from the daily-life of the community into the school activity. Literacy imparted should not be restricted to the medium of textbooks. Interschool activities could be included both at the level of interaction with other hilltop schools and with schools in the plains facilitating intra-inter tribal students interaction. Such changes can help the sustainability of the programme.

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