

ASSESSING VIDYA VANAM – AN INNOVATIVE SCHOOL FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN

Milind Brahme and M Suresh Babu



Vidya Vanam is a school for tribal and underprivileged children located in Anaikatti along the Tamil Nadu Kerala border in Coimbatore district. It began in 2007 as the first low cost English medium school for the children in this area. Over the past 5 years it has grown organically into an institution that is much more than a private school providing good quality English education to the children of Anaikatti and the surrounding villages.

What strikes one most about Vidya Vanam is the “bottom-up” approach of the school and the vision behind the effort to integrate it into the larger ecosystem of the communities it serves. It shows parallels as well as interesting and instructive contrasts with the “top-down” approach of the public education system, particularly the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) – the flagship programme of the Government of India for universalizing elementary education across the country.

These parallels and contrasts with a larger public education system became important markers as far as our perspective looking at Vidya Vanam was concerned.



Devising a Method:

Vidya Vanam did not seem to be just another institution where the children of the area get schooled. As a “node” where community members, especially women, come together and participate productively in its functioning, as a “knowledge base” and as an “occupational support platform”, the school seemed well integrated into its ecosystem through a symbiotic relationship with the communities it served.

So we decided to begin our assessment by exploring the background and genesis of the idea of a school like Vidya Vanam. Detailed interviews with its director Ms Prema Rangachary and with parents of children revealed that in 2000-2001, local people from about 40 villages in the area – both tribals and non-tribals – had expressed one common wish to Ms Rangachary, who at that time was conducting workshops with Balwadi teachers in remote areas such as Anaikatti: they wanted a good English medium school for their children, which they could afford with their daily labour wages and meagre incomes from small businesses. When the plan for the school was finalized, Vidya Vanam decided against offering free education – basically so that the people to whose wishes the Trust (Bhuvana Foundation) was responding would have a stake and a sense of ownership in their children’s school and schooling.

It became clear to us that our method itself would have to adequately correspond to the holistic vision behind the emergence of this school.

While it would be necessary to empirically observe and record our observations about

parameters such as Infrastructure, Pedagogy and the Nutritional Programme, we realized that we would also need an ethnographic hermeneutic to meaningfully explore the sense of ownership that the communities feel and to understand how and what kind of mutually beneficial relationships have evolved between the school and its overall ecosystem. We would also need participant observers – preferably women because the women of the local communities are the primary stakeholders and movers of Vidya Vanam and the activities around it – with very good communicative competence in at least 3 languages: Tamil, Malayalam and English.

Studying the Ecosystem

Community participation is a key factor in the success of Vidya Vanam as an institution. It was made integral to its functioning right from the beginning – by consensus the local people decided how much fees they would pay when the school started in 2007¹. In cases where parents are going through financial difficulty, the school, through its staff members, keeps in regular touch with the family, many a time playing the role of counsellor. Sometimes, like in the case of Arasi (name changed) from the village Kondanur Pudur (an adivasi single parent of 3 children), parents find work with the school itself, and this completely transforms their life. Today Arasi says the school is much more to her than an institution where her children get education. She feels it has given her the courage to live alone and has empowered her.²

Delving into the life history of parents like Arasi became an important tool to understand the relationship between the school and the community.

At Vidya Vanam, several parents are either teaching or non-teaching staff at the school. Many are involved in other activities of the Self Help Group of local women that has been formed, such as making paper bags, cane baskets, decorative

mats etc. Members of the Irula tribe have the right to forest produce. The school becomes a facilitator by encouraging and helping them to package and market what they collect – filtering and bottling honey, making and marketing herbal shampoos and body scrubs made from local forest produce such as amla, *arappu* etc.

Through interviews, participant observation and focused group discussions with local people we discovered how a sense of ownership and participation in the school's activities and management has organically developed among members of the community. This is an instructive contrast to campaigns such as the SSA, which acknowledge the importance of community participation but incorporate it and define its scope centrally.

Assessing other Parameters

Infrastructure

Simple empirical observation and photographs were the basic techniques of recording available infrastructure.



Low tables, *chowkies*, mats and low shelves that children can handle and manage by themselves are standard, encouraging independent learning. As we move upwards, the furniture becomes more conventional for higher classes. An interesting innovation here is the subject wise separation of the different classrooms as “Zones”. So rather than the children sitting in one and the same room all the time and different teachers and “subjects” coming to them, they move from one zone to the other depending on what they are learning. These are simple innovations that can work in Mixed Age Group learning scenarios, and



we found it important to record and highlight them.

Nutritional Programme

The nutritious and tasty food that is provided to children and staff 3 times a day is easily one of the highlights of Vidya Vanam's good practices.

The state of Tamil Nadu has of course been a pioneer of the hot cooked meal that is now given to children in all government schools across India. Vidya Vanam also provides 2 small nutritious meals/snacks in addition to lunch. What people know about nutrition and sources that are available locally are used to augment the menu. This prevents delegitimization of local knowledge and alienation of the local community.



In depth interviews with the administration revealed that the cost per meal is only marginally above the government outlay for meals in government schools. Vidya Vanam leverages its embeddedness in the community to procure and process rations locally in cooperation with the local people, while ensuring proper storage and minimizing wastage. Here too could be a lesson for the much larger government mid-day meal programme in terms of how much more could be done with the resources that governments lay out every year.

The Learning Process

We needed sustained participant observation to grasp a teaching-learning process that is not constricted by an overarching fixed pedagogical concept. Two field volunteers who became part of the life at Vidya Vanam for one whole week

supplemented by a 3-day visit by the authors provided the observations we needed to make an assessment.

It is based broadly on Montessori and Constructivist principles and allows enough room for child and teacher autonomy, improvisation and innovation. The environment is marked by easy communication between teachers and children. Children are fearless, are encouraged



to ask questions and express dissent; teachers are trained to listen with respect and without prejudice.

Encouraging children to record local histories, introducing theme based learning in science subjects (for example: beginning to learn about plants not from the book but from nature walks, observing, feeling and collecting different types of leaves, grass, seeds, flowers etc.) – these are innovations that are consistent with the overall

importance given by Vidya Vanam to maintaining the legitimacy and validity of local knowledge and knowledge systems even while introducing children to modern scientific thinking.

Reflections

Reflecting upon the entire process of assessing Vidya Vanam as a school for tribal and underprivileged children, we see that our focus was not so much on the use of quantitative methods to gather data on individual achievement levels of children in terms of ability to retain and reproduce information. We tried to understand the underlying holistic vision and the processes and people that make this institution tick. This required an ethnographic qualitative approach.

It was important for us to grasp the key factors behind these processes to see if they are replicable in larger frameworks like the public education system, particularly in Tamil Nadu, which has seen the introduction of very good innovations such as Activity Based Learning (ABL) and Active Learning Methodology (ALM), but is grappling with the issue of sustaining them.

We find that being embedded in its ecosystem as an integral part, a bottom-up approach and a flexible pedagogical praxis – these are the key factors that make Vidya Vanam work. And these could provide a few pointers at the policy level for larger public education systems.

(The authors wish to thank Prof V R Muraleedharan, Gita Jayaraj and Kaveri Murthy, the other members of the team that did the assessment, and T Tamilkani and K Jayashree for their help in summarizing the original report and preparing this manuscript.)

¹*It was decided to keep fees roughly equal to one day's wages per month. Younger siblings would pay half as much. It must be noted, however, that poverty levels among the tribals are such that many families cannot afford even this 'reasonable' arrangement. Whether and how to expand and become more inclusive are challenges the school is bound to face, and the administrators are aware of it.*

²*Arasi (name changed) has had education till class 8 and was teaching children in locally organized extra evening classes. After her husband died in an accident, she came over to the school where her 2 younger children are studying. She was recruited to assist other teachers and is now being teacher-trained on the job.*

Milind has a PhD in German from the Centre of German Studies, JNU. He teaches courses in German language and literature, Literary Theory and Criticism at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras.

Suresh did his PhD from the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum. Currently he teaches economics at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. He works on issues related to the Indian economy, mainly the industrial sector and development policy.