

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2021-08033553

Volume: 8

Issue: 3

Month: January

Year: 2021

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 28.09.2020

Accepted: 21.11.2020

Published: 01.01.2021

Citation:

Manuraj, Siyar. "Ekalavya Model Residential School [EMRS] and Inclusive Education in Kerala." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2021, pp. 102-107.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i3.3553>



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Ekalavya Model Residential School [EMRS] and Inclusive Education in Kerala

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Abstract

Tribal people who are the original inhabitants of India are the poorest and the most vulnerable in Kerala. Kerala, with its world-famous 'Kerala Model of Development' has achieved spectacular social development that is the best among the third world countries in the world and her social development indicators are justifiably comparable with many developed nations too. This bright and rosy picture of Kerala has been shadowed by the abysmally low socio-economic development of its tribal people. Social exclusion, cultural alienation, poverty, low economic development, lack of political will and administrative apathy bundled with low enrolment in schools and the shockingly high dropout rate among tribal children signify the need and importance of Ekalavya Model Residential School [EMRS] in realizing socio-economic integration and mainstreaming of tribal population in Kerala. In this article, the investigator explores various problems and prospects of EMRS in Kerala.

Keywords: Inclusive education, EMRS, New Education Policy, Social exclusion

Introduction

Replacing the National Education policy of 1986, a new National Education policy was approved by the parliament of India, and it came into force on 29th July 2020. It envisions far-reaching and comprehensive changes in the existing education system of India from kindergarten to higher education. The new education policy of 2020 visions to restructure the Indian education system to suit the needs of a modern India that has been unfolding under the broad framework of neo-liberal economic policies for the last 30 years. Pre 91 Nehruvian socialism was an experiment to uplift marginalized, poor, and downtrodden people from their historically determined socio-economic backwardness and placed them in a new space of constitutional morality. Indian constitution dreamed of building a new India of "justice liberty and fraternity".¹ A socialistic society, fulfilling the needs of everyone as envisioned in our constitution, is now an aborted baby in this new liberalized capitalistic India. Governments, at all levels, have been quickly withdrawing from their constitutionally defined status of 'social security providers.' Public institutions built in a socialistic era of the Indian economy have been vanishing like a bad dream. Private players are appropriating more and more socio-economic spaces where once the state had been a dominant player. A 'sovereign state' with all its mightiness envisaged in our constitution has now become just a weak and powerless facilitator of private capital. In these dark, bleak, and grim socio-economic and political realities, this article explores the greater role of EMRS in uplifting the life and livelihood of the tribal population in Kerala in realizing their integration and mainstreaming in fruitful ways.

1 The Constitution of India [as on 1st February 2011]

Tribal Population and Kerala Model of Development

Kerala, popularly known internationally as God's own country, is, in reality, a land of the devil for Dalits - scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The history of Kerala is nothing but denial of rights - social, political, economic, and even human rights to Dalits and other backward communities in the erstwhile feudal state. The transition of Kerala from a feudal state to a democratic state of the modern world has become a reality when we compare the level of achievements the state has gained in social development. The social development of Kerala is not only the best among Indian states but also other third world countries. Many of the social development indicators of Kerala are surely comparable with even developed nations. What is curious about Kerala's achievement in social development is that she has achieved all this glory comparatively with poor economic growth. If we casually examine just the hundred years back history of Kerala, we will be wondered and even shocked in witnessing the pathetic and deplorable state of social interactions among different sections of people. Today national media and sections of progressive people highlight Kerala as a heaven of social harmony where people of different castes and religions live amicably, respecting each other and ensuring their due shares in socio-economic and political spheres. It is a politically constructed pseudo-reality, equally shared by all political parties in Kerala dominated by so-called upper castes across religions. Behind that overt, much-publicized, and wilfully maintained fake social reality, there lies less explored and culturally and politically suppressed caste realities of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes or politically known as Dalits.

Kerala had been once described as a land of lunatics by Swami Vivekananda when he visited the erstwhile feudal state and witnessed the demonic nature of caste people. People who do not belong to the Varna system of Hindu Caste System were denied all rights, including human rights. Their very existence of being a human-being was denied. They were treated like animals. They were denied land, education, jobs, access to public places and amenities like police stations, the court of justice, public ponds,

wells, and other water bodies, access to even public roads and markets. The most pathetic and inhuman aspect of the caste system prevailed in feudal Kerala is that it denied people even basic human rights to cover their bodies with respectable clothes. Men of all lower castes and women of all castes were denied the right to cover their bodies with clothes as they wished and felt fit. These had been the socio-political realities of today's disproportionately glorified god's own country just a hundred years back.

Caste organizations of lower castes and political consolidations of all progressive-minded people in Kerala worked side by side to overcome the socio-economic and political disadvantages the caste system placed upon the lower castes. These relentless efforts helped the state to usher into a new age of 'rights and respect for all' irrespective of their caste, religion, class, and gender. The abolition of slavery, gradual opening up of many schools and colleges and giving former untouchables access to those institutions, emergence of political and spiritual consciousness among lower castes created by great leaders like Ayyan Kali and SreeNrayana Guru, socio-political pressure for lifting caste restrictions exerted upon the caste rulers by the British in general and white missionaries in particular, positive responses to those calls by the native rulers, temple entry proclamation and land reforms in Kerala after independence are the major contributory factors that created a new socio-political atmosphere of a renaissance in the state.

Land reforms and political consolidations of lower castes, though under upper-caste leadership, have helped all lower caste communities except the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes to move forward and free themselves from the socio-economic deprivation they had been experiencing for centuries. Land reforms and the newfound political consciousness did not help SCs and STs. Land reforms did not give them sufficient land enough to meaningfully utilize their expertise in farming and thereby overcoming initial stages of financial deprivations that all lower castes experienced in the years followed after land reform initiatives in Kerala. Land reform had given only 3 to 10 cents of homesteads to SCs and STs. They were forced to live in state-sponsored caste colonies where Dalits

of the same castes or in some colonies different Dalit castes live together. Most of the SC's and ST's were trapped in barren rocky mountainous lands, marshy areas, or interiors of forests. When new political consciousness of equal rights for all and social equality among all emerged in Kerala, that did not help SCs and STs because of their apparent continuation of social exclusion through land reforms and the emergence of caste colonies. Lakhs of Dalits have been living in more than thirty thousand caste colonies spread across the state. The very existence of caste colonies of SC's and ST's indicates that the social inclusion of Kerala is only a political myth. M. Kunjaman, Professor of Economics, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, in his autobiography "Ethiru" writes "Communist party in Kerala raised only emotional slogans [Land to tiller] without doing anything substantial to change the economic backwardness of Dalit communities in Kerala even after the historical land reforms life of people like my father continued unchanging, subjecting upper-caste dominations and living as their slaves."² This critique about the communist party in Kerala is equally applicable to all other political parties in the state. Dalits are still mere data in government records and vote banks for political parties in Kerala. In this backdrop, this article analyses the need and significance of strengthening and extending the coverage of the existing Model Residential School System for ST's in Kerala.

Ekalavya Model Residential School [EMRS] System for ST's and scope of Inclusive Education

As compared to STs in Kerala, SC's are well integrated into the education system and mainstream socio political spaces. In this respect, the tribal population except for a few castes among them is still lagging, all including SCs. Schedule Tribe people are completely locked in the outskirts or interiors of forest areas. This geographical disadvantage has prevented them from integrating into schools and colleges situated in towns or areas inhabited by non-tribal people. Language barriers, cultural differences and social alienation, lack of social acceptance from others, untouchability and casteism experienced from others, economic backwardness and scarcity

of resources of tribal families, lack of demonstration effect for economic uplift, lack of financial support from the government and above all societal apathy towards tribal people and the consequent denial of their rights at all levels are the major factors that prevent their educational integration and mainstreaming. Social exclusion, cultural alienation, economic deprivations, non-access to the corridors of political power, inability to unknot the red-tapism or bureaucratic excess, and apparent lack of assertiveness and fighting urges rights due to years of institutional oppression, and systematic denials can be overcome to a certain extent through education. Ensure access to excellent quality education is the surest way for tribal people to overcome their socio-economic and political deprivations.

Ekalavya Model Residential School for tribal children of remote areas is a classic initiative on the part of the government of India to realize social integration of tribal population into mainstream social spaces. "Ekalavya Model Residential Schools are designed like Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and the Kendriya Vidyalaya. They are set up in all states and union territories in India and funded under Article 275[1] of the Indian constitution. State governments are free to use apportion funds out of their Article 275[1] Grants to construct and run additional EMRS over the number of schools sanctioned by the Ministry of tribal affairs"³ "Till 2017-18 financial year, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has sanctioned 271 EMRS, and out of them, 190 have been fully functional. Rest are in different stages of execution"⁴ In Kerala, two EMRS are working-one in Idukki district and the other in Wayanad district. Third EMRS was sanctioned to Kerala way back in 2013, but nothing was materialized to that cause till the date. EMRS are technically modern and advanced versions of old 'ashram schools' for tribal children started in the '60s. 'In Kerala, twenty schools, including the two EMRS, are established for meeting educational needs of tribal children."⁵ the department of tribal affairs manages these schools, Government of

³ *EMRS Guidelines*, Government of India, 2010.

⁴ *List of EMRS Schools in India*, Ministry of Tribal affairs

⁵ List of schools for ST's managed by the Department of Tribal affairs, Government of Kerala.

² Kunjaman, M. *Ethiru*, DC Books, 2020.

Kerala. Kerala has thousands of state-funded private schools run by caste and religious management. All expenses of those schools, including the salary and pension of the employees, are disbursed from the public exchequer. In this circumstance, why the government is not starting a few more residential schools for the uplift of the tribal children is nothing but deliberate and wilful negligence on the part of the political class.

National Education policy 2020 foresees two kinds of developments in labor markets. Intensive mechanization and subsequent massive loss of jobs is the one area of concern. The other is the emergence of new employment opportunities related to rising new issues like climate change, increasing pollution and depleting natural resources, and the human search for alternative energy sources and new life styles. New jobs expect new skills and abilities from laborers. Old conventional education is not sufficient to meet the requirements of a new world. National Education Policy envisions providing such a new skilled labor force to make India a developed nation among the three largest economies in the world. National Education Policy, barring its empty, noisy, clinging, and flowery rhetoric, actually proposes ways for making the education sector another additional area of corporate profit-seeking. The policy seems to envisage education, a joint-stock company that works for share- holders profit maximization. Multiple exit options, probably forced exits, with given hierarchical skills are nothing but old caste formation in new ways. Special education zones, performance-based funding, and graded autonomy aim at a single objective that “education is a commodity” that you can buy if you have a thick purse. We have skillfully linked the nation with parochial nationalism, democratic governance with glorified military and autocracy, and now education with profit and Manusmriti. The enlightened role of the state ‘as a loving father taking care of the needs of all members equally,’ enshrined in the constitution is no longer exist in our country in this liberalized regime. The state itself has been reduced to the aid of the corporates. Large scale privatization and formalization of jobs have made a reservation a farce in India.

In this bleak scenario, the role of ERMS as an agent of inclusive education is prominent and significant. “Inclusion is not a privilege for a select few.”⁶ “Providing all students within the mainstream appropriate educational programs that are challenging yet geared to their capabilities and needs as well as any support and assistance they and their teachers may need to be successful in the mainstream. But an inclusive school also gives beyond this. An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by their peers and other members of the school community in the course of having their educational needs met.”⁷ Inclusion is not mere admission to a school or college but belonging to that community and institution. The concept of “goodness of fit” is pertinent in any program of inclusive education. Tribal children are living in a dominant socio-political system that alienates and excludes them. So a mere integration of tribal children into formal education through government-run schools and colleges is not enough to realize the ultimate mainstreaming of them how society views and values providing quality education to tribal children is so important. If the mainstream society with all its political power and resources think that dropping out of tribal children from formal education chains is not a social issue, no positive changes we can expect from the pitiable life of tribal children.

Low economic conditions of tribal families, social exclusion and cultural alienation tribal people experience from others, isolated living, the unfriendly medium of instruction, society’s inability to accommodate even an educated tribal youth in a meaningful and respectful way, living in constant threat and humiliation, living with a feeling of ‘unwanted and unwelcomed’ and anti-tribal mind set of the society are the major contributory factors that hinder educational progress of tribal children. All these problems could be effectively addressed and redressed through EMRS. It solves issues related to remoteness of tribal dwellings, poor financial resources of the parents, social exclusion,

6 Allen, K. Eileen, and Glynnis E. Cowdery. *The Exceptional Child: Inclusion in Early Childhood Education*, Cengage Learning, 2012, P. 5.

7 Ibid, P. 5.

cultural alienation, and societal insults. EMRS can accommodate children of different tribes, giving them golden opportunities to meet with their brothers and sisters. A feeling of brotherhood and unity can be generated in the minds of tribal children, so negative feelings of alienation and dejection could be removed. EMRS can provide an atmosphere of social equality that instantly removes the social inferiority tribal children have been experiencing in the presence of non-tribal people. EMRS can ensure the psycho-social development of tribal children, effectively insulating them from such socio-economic environments that make them more vulnerable and leading them to the abysmal pit of drop outs.

Psychosocial and academic strengthening of tribal children under the protection of an EMRS will surely help them to face and cope with more complex challenges they have to face later in higher education and hostile work spaces. If the governments at the center and state level are a little more imaginative and concerned about poor tribal children, EMRS model residential education can be extended to higher education. Residential learning facilities for tribal children at all stages from Kindergarten, as envisaged in Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] of National Education Policy 2020, to higher education can produce excellent human capital from them. EMRS is not merely a school that imparts formal education to tribal kids but a great institution that helps them to grow academically brilliant and free from all feelings of shame and inferiority. EMRS aims to produce not just an educated tribal youth but a man confident in his/her identity-an identity of being a tribe or the original inhabitant of this country. Erik Erikson, in his celebrated book "Childhood and Society," describes what is identity in the following way "An optimal sense of identity..... is experienced merely as a sense of psychosocial well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's own body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going' and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count."⁸ Erikson's definition of identity truly reveals the ultimate aim of EMRS.

Kerala has all ideal socio-economic conditions to realize the above-stated aim of EMRS. Impressive literacy rate, the high political consciousness of the people, progressive government, absence of overt casteism and untouchability, and above all well-established connectivity of government departments with all tribal settlements are favorable conditions in the state. EMRS is a residential school, so if teacher couples are appointed in the school, that would be more beneficial to the students. The government can easily find qualified teacher couples from state-run and state-funded schools and depute them to EMRS. New Education Policy 2020 has adopted a directive principle in Article 45 of the Indian constitution. Article 45 states that the state shall endeavor to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete six years. At present, the EMRS is functioning as a middle school enrolling students to class 6th to 12th. If the central government make suitable amendments in EMRS guidelines to accommodate the educational needs of ST students from Kindergarten to Higher education under the EMRS model, Kerala can implement it because of its above stated favorable conditions. Article 244 and 6th schedule of the Indian constitution allowing the government to establish autonomous tribal regions to facilitate the socio-economic development of tribal people, including them at the helm of affairs from decision making to execution. Kerala has to seriously think of the possibility of constituting autonomous tribal regions in parts of Kerala. Infrastructural deficiencies are the other major area of concern in the working EMRS. An adequate number of teachers, administrative staff, supportive staff, properly furnished buildings, playground, gym facilities, and well-equipped library with sufficient E-learning facilities are minimum requirements for an EMRS. Inadequacy in any of these requirements will defeat the purpose of the school, and the aim of ensuring mental, physical, and spiritual development of the tribal pupil will exist only in the EMRS guideline.

Conclusion

Tribal people who are the original inhabitants of India are the most deprived and vulnerable communities. The majority of the tribes have been living in remote areas, so naturally, socio-economic

8 Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.

developments may not reach their doorsteps. Special attention and care are needed to help them integrate with the changes that have been happening outside their hamlets. EMRS is one of such initiatives that attempt to address many socio-economic factors that prevent the economic development of the tribal population. Tribal settlements are disconnected from the world of development. Not only bureaucratic and administrative lacunae but also cultural values and life style of tribal people block their course of development. Social exclusion and cultural alienation are the two most important factors that hinder the integration process of the tribal population. EMRS facilitates a protective environment in which tribal children can learn and interact with others who share the same socio-economic status. This environment of

equality creates a feeling of oneness and brotherhood among the children. A friendly atmosphere in EMRS promotes learning and saves children from unhealthy peer pressure and competition. EMRS is the best available way for tribal children to enhance their skills and capabilities that are essential and indispensable for a living in this modern neo-liberal capitalist economy. Capitalism, with its corporate monsters, has been conquering and exploiting the lives and livelihoods of tribes or indigenous people across the globe. India is not an exception in this case. In the absence of state protection, care, tribal friendly policies, and their execution, indigenous people cannot survive in the corporate regime. So state-sponsored programs like EMRS are the only way that shows tribal people in Kerala a bright future.

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