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**IS THE RAINBOW AN ILLUSION?  
Educational Programmes and the Adivasi Peoples during the  
COVID-19 Pandemic in Kerala, India.**

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“For the first peoples of these hills of Wayanad.”



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## **Abstract**

Just like any other field, education was drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic all over the world. In the state of Kerala, the Adivasi peoples were the most impacted peoples by the pandemic and its ramifications. The normalised underlying disparities were exacerbated with the crisis that emerged at the onset of the pandemic and exposed the social inequalities in place regarding the state's marginalised sections including the Adivasi peoples. This research project focuses on this critical juncture, interrogating the diverse aspects pertinent to the current situation of Adivasi education. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the project looks at the state's programmes and policies on Adivasi education and seeks to generate a nuanced understanding of the problem.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic and the ‘First Bell’**

In India, the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic (hereinafter: COVID-19) has devastated the economy and social life. Although the state of Kerala put up a good fight with COVID-19 for approximately 6 months, it started to see a spike in the number of affected people due to the influx of a large number of expats back to the state. In response to this influx, the current state government has been resilient and developed strategies, effectively equipping the health system to curb the pandemic (Spinney 2020). The lockdown measures have been considered as an effective way of controlling the spread of the virus, however, they have led to long-lasting economic and social impacts on a big segment of the population, especially the majority of the daily wage labourers whose subsistence is under threat. The experiences of the Adivasi peoples have not been different. The real impact of the pandemic over the Adivasi peoples of Kerala is yet to be discovered. The lockdown also has drastic effects on the education sector, as most of the institutions and schools in Kerala have been completely shut down, since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.

In 2020, the state came up with an online education programme called the ‘First Bell’ which was the first among such initiatives in the whole country. The ‘First Bell’ is an education project launched by the Department of Public Education to provide education to school students online. The programme telecasts episodes of teaching modules on television (‘Kite-victers channel’), websites and social media in the mother tongue of most people in Kerala, Malayalam (‘Government Order for the ‘First Bell’ 2020). The episodes are universal, and the local teachers complementarily act as mentors to make the process more fruitful, aiming to secure the students’ attention.

While being appreciated as one of the earliest and successful educational initiatives in response to the pandemic in India, the First Bell presented some serious challenges with regards to the Adivasi and Dalit people of Kerala. The problem became palpable and discussed only when a saddening incident happened on the first day of the online class on June 1st, 2020. Devika, a 10th standard Adivasi student ended her life on the first day of her online class. Her inability to attend the online class, as she didn’t have access to a smartphone or television in her house,

is allegedly the reason. The television set was damaged, and her family could not afford to arrange the necessary equipment on time(Naha 2020).

This incident reflects the difficult conditions experiencing the majority of *Adivasi* and *Dalit* children during the lockdown, as the state continues to ignore the needs of these peoples even after many such repeated incidents. While the state authorities are cognizant of the fact that many children have not access to the new platform, online courses continue to be launched Today. many of these families in Kerala remain without access to the Internet, smartphones or even a television. Some *Adivasi* hamlets are located in remote areas where there is not a road, electricity or mobile network. The state seems to overlook this critical problem by seeing the children from these communities as secondary citizens. The state has failed to ensure participation for all children in the new online platform by providing access and infrastructure before the launch of the ‘First Bell’ online classes on June 1, 2020. The circular issued along with the launch ordered the local self-government offices to ensure the participation of all state’s students by providing support infrastructure and access to every student (‘Government Order for the ‘First Bell’ 2020). However, in reality, the classes started even before these children being informed about the new reform. This approach enforced by the state towards marginalised communities points at a more critical problem that extends beyond the lack of access and infrastructure, but it reflects the continuum of the historical injustice towards the *Adivasi* and *Dalit* communities and the society’s systemic expulsion of the downtrodden.

The newly formed scenario of the pandemic along with the shift to online education have completely or partially disabled *Adivasi* children to continue their education in many of the hamlets located in remote areas in the *Attappady- Palakkad* district, Wayanad district and others. In addition to the issue of lack of access to services and infrastructure, the *Adivasi* children in these hamlets are facing new challenges which the *Dalit* children are not facing. The *Adivasi* communities have a distinct language and way of living from that of the *Dalit* communities who are more scattered culturally and geographically. The homogenous nature of the online classes becomes even more challenging for the *Adivasi* children in primary schools who have a different mother tongue from the others. Without the assistance of teachers as mediators to ease the transition, the *Adivasi* children have been completely lost in the ether.

## 1.2 Mazhivilpoovu (Rainbow flower)

After the introduction of the initial modules of ‘First Bell’s’ online classes, several *Adivasi* children, who had access to or were able to get the devices, with the help of NGOs and local self-governing bodies, were confronted with a new challenge, since they were not able to follow or understand the telecasted episodes which were shot in the Malayalam language. The ‘offline mode’ of teaching they used to receive in their local public schools was at least comprehensible to these children as the teachers were local or, in many cases, *Adivasi Gothrabandhu* teachers. The teachers’ understanding of the cultural nuances and the diverse backgrounds of the communities was vital in keeping the children in these schools, as the dropout cases in these hilly districts are critical.

However, a group of *Adivasi* youngsters gathered in the name of a WhatsApp group ‘Our village is our school’ recognised this issue and organised an initiative to translate the telecasted episodes in *Adivasi* languages to make them available to communities speaking different languages (Interview with Robin). The group prepared the episodes within a short period of time, however, soon the government officials of ‘*Samagra Siksha Kerala*(SSK)<sup>1</sup>’ intervened to stop them from this venture. Eventually, after negotiations with the group, the government officials agreed on collaborating with the group in creating the episodes (‘STDD | Scheduled Tribes Development Department’ n.d.). However, over the passage of time, the officials completely excluded the group’s participation, and the department decided to come up with a new set of episodes shot in 7 different *Adivasi* languages, a month after the initial telecast of the Malayalam episodes (*Dool News* 2020). The programme was named ‘*Mazhivilpoovu*’ (The rainbow flower) and telecasted episodes in *Paniya, Kuruma, Kattunaikka, Adiya, Uraali, Kurichya* and *Mannan* languages. The telecast was not shown on television as the audience was a micro-minority. So, the mentor teachers and the other teachers had to take the responsibility to make it available to the *Adivasi* children at their houses and temporary arrangements called ‘*Samoohya padanamuri* (local learning centres)’ placed in areas adjacent to their settlements. However, the newly designed episodes comprised the direct translations of the previously made episodes in Malayalam language, fact that raises several concerns regarding the design of these episodes. Yet, the programme ‘*Mazhivilpoovu*’ managed to appease the criticisms temporarily.

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<sup>1</sup> *Samagra Shiksha Kerala* is an overarching programme for the school education sector extending from pre-school to class 12. The programme is prepared in accordance with the broader goal of improving school effectiveness measured in terms of equal opportunities for schooling and equitable learning outcomes.

The responsibility of the ‘*Mazhivilpoovu*’ programme had thus been ascribed to the mentor teachers since it is a matter of the *Adivasi* children. The experiences of the *Adivasi* mentor teachers – the ‘*Gothrabandhu*’ – constitute a significant point of departure to help us understand the main challenges afflicting *Adivasi* education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 1.3 Research questions

As part of the institutional framework of Western academia, research is guided and represented by the interests and needs of the dominant population. As in any other field, the representation of Indigenous – and in this case *Adivasi* – research methods and knowledge systems are minimal or completely absent. “Research still ignores, marginalises and suppresses the colonised other’s knowledge systems and ways of knowing” (Chilisa 2012 ,p15). My research, therefore, lies in the conjuncture of the homogenous state policies and self-determination of *Adivasi* communities in the context of online education in pandemic times. In order to understand the challenges for the inclusion of *Adivasi* children in education during the Covid-19 pandemic, I have developed the following research questions:

1. Focusing on the experiences of *Gothrabandhu* (mentor) teachers, how has the ‘First Bell’ policy functioned with regards to *Adivasi* children? Has it helped, include or exclude them from education during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Has the *Gothrabandhu* project succeeded to include ‘Indigenous ways of knowing’ in the education system?

**In order to answer these research questions, I have been guided by the following objectives:**

1. To understand the challenges *Adivasi* children, face through the newly introduced online learning programme ‘First Bell’.
2. To assess whether the current models are inclusionary or exclusionary with respect to *Adivasi* children.
3. To articulate the level of inclusion of *Adivasi* epistemologies in the modules.



4. To delineate the scope of *Adivasi* participation in the decision-making processes today.
5. To explore the possibilities of incorporating alternative histories and commemorations of *Adivasi* realities into the mainstream education discourses.

My ultimate objective is to open the window for alternative imaginations of the *Adivasi* identity in the modern Indian context.

The research is located in a larger discourse of pluriversality of epistemologies. In a highly stratified society like India, it becomes significant to understand the diverse socio-political factors that culminated in today's situation.

## Chapter 2: Project Background

### 1.4 Dalit history of exclusion

In the Indian context, the term Dalit has been widely used as an umbrella term, encapsulating the diverse Scheduled Castes (SC)<sup>2</sup>, other marginalised communities and the *Adivasi* peoples as they are bounded by common socio-political factors and experiences. Even when the *Adivasi* peoples are distinct concerning the caste communities, the spectrum has not been well defined and their societal status is still debated in specific occasions. Thus, the lived experiences of the Scheduled Caste communities and *Adivasi* peoples may overlap in many contexts. In this paper, the umbrella term ‘*Dalit*’, and ‘*Adivasi peoples*’ are interchangeably employed in accordance with the changing context of each forthcoming section.

In Indian society, the dominant discourses and narratives constantly ignore the marginalised sections of society. The dominant discourses are aligned with the Brahmanical value systems and their philosophical foundation. The Indian social consciousness and societal engagements are dictated by the ubiquitous Brahmanical hegemonical power structures. The histories are built on the same hegemonic power structure and are mostly written by the ruling class. These histories consciously and unconsciously negate, silence and arrest the *Dalit* histories and multiple histories of all other the marginalised sections of the Indian society.

At this historical juncture, it is important to make contributions to the alternative discourses on creating alternative histories and alternative imaginations of *Dalits*, which could give a lot of impetus to reclaim their erased past and assert their own identities. Hence it is important to produce knowledge and reclaim the public domains with multiple stories of *Dalit* contributions, *Dalit* heroes, *Dalit* aesthetics, art and their cultural affluence. The loss of social capital has catalysed their marginalisation and, thus, in order to reclaim the social capital, there is a need for reclaiming and strengthening their symbols, spaces, languages, cultures and epistemologies.

My hope is that this thesis would contribute to the ongoing efforts to instigate discussions and practices commemorating the *Dalit* histories and epistemologies at large. The thesis would specifically focus on the social exclusion practices in the context of education and would help

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Scheduled Castes’ is a term used in the constitution of India denoting the lower castes.

shed some light on the particular context of *Adivasi* education in Kerala. The research is situated and timed, at the vulnerable juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic that exacerbated the underlying discrepancies in the *Adivasi* education. Hence, the research would investigate the intricacies of the institutional practices in education and would aim at generating a nuanced critique on the ongoing *Adivasi* emancipatory projects and policies deployed by the state government. The thesis would advocate for the need of asserting the *Adivasi* self-determination, especially in building their own future with their right to education as they aspire.

## 1.5 The Adivasi peoples of Kerala

There are a few important factors led to the current situation of *Adivasi* peoples. In the past, a large section of Indian society was governed by the Brahminic supremacy, and the sacred normative foundations derived from the sacred Hindu scriptures had patrolled the social engagements. As observed by Bose and Varughese,

“The nineteenth century Kerala showed traits of a theocratic state under Brahminic supremacy, where the legal, social and customary norms derived authority from the sacred texts and *Dharmasasthras*<sup>3</sup>, and the right to interpret those texts were solely vested on the Brahmins. The low castes (Dalits) were treated as untouchables, unapproachables and unseeables were deprived of certain basic rights and privileges such as entry into public areas, markets, schools, temples, hospitals and judicial courts” (Bose and Varughese 2015, p. 61).

The *Varnashrama*<sup>4</sup> system stratified the society in multiple levels with graded inequality justified by the Brahminic philosophical foundation. This belief system had its distinct features that made the people in caste communities at each level to self-impose a sense of duty in their social affairs and made them believe that it is a natural social order and there is no escape from it. It is also founded on the belief that only the dutiful in their current life would be reborn in the higher caste in the afterbirth and would attain their privilege; otherwise, they would be reborn in the same caste or worse depending on their Karma (duty). This philosophy has also justified the ruthless slavery of the untouchables during that period. In this social order, caste was the primary criterion for possession and distribution of land (Bose and Varughese

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<sup>3</sup> The *Dharmasastras* are Sanskrit texts, that teach the right behaviour concerning caste, religious and legal duties.

<sup>4</sup> *Varnashrama* is an ancient Hindu social hierarchical system of people. It stratifies the people in to 4 levels from the top to bottom in order as follows, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The Dalits and Adivasis are untouchables and unapproachable and they don't belong to the Varnashrama structure.

2015,p.59-70) and it made the upper castes to gain control over the social capital. This situation was challenged by the lower castes (*Dalits*) arguing for their civil social rights. In the first half of the 20th century, several social reform movements followed, including the uprising of the *Dalit* and *Adivasi* peoples.

With the British in power, modernity had arrived in Kerala. At this time, it is important to recognise, how the *Dalit* and *Adivasi* peoples got excluded from the Kerala modernization project fuelled by the marginalised people themselves. After India gained independence from the British Raj, and Kerala became a linguistic state 1956, the communist party of India, Marxist CPI(M), came into power with EMS *Namboothiripad* as chief minister. The communist party gained momentum in Kerala, as its people were the pioneers who envisaged the liberation of the working class. In 1970, the 'Land Reform Act' was implemented. Since then, the dominant narratives regarding land reform portrayed the event as a historic milestone, which revolutionised the land issue of Kerala. In these terms, the dominant discourses until the 1990s projected Kerala's model of land reform as something substantial to be considered as an ideal model for the other states of India, and even for some third world countries. However, in the 1990s, *Dalit* and *Adivasi* movements became rampant with regards to the issue of landlessness. The legendary Land Reform Act's failure to address the problem of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities was exposed to such movements.

The reason was lying with the caste social order which was falsely addressed by the communist class politics. The state failed to recognise the real problem of the land issue, although the Act was legislated to distribute the excess land seized from the landlords (*Janmi*) to the peasants who cultivated their fields through lease agreements. In this process, the low castes, *Adivasis* were excluded as they were never peasants. They just were just slaves or waged labourers who worked in the fields. None of the people who worked in the fields was subject to the benefits provided by the new law. On the contrary, the beneficiaries were the middle castes, as well as some Christian and Muslim sections who were at the time the leaseholders of the lands. The low castes and the *Adivasis* continued to be marginalised, and they only received a right to live on these lands, yet without having any ownership of them. To relocate the landless *Adivasi* peoples and low castes, the government built 4645 colonies in Kerala of (3-5) cent<sup>5</sup> settlements. This situation explicitly implies that the people who were denied land ownership in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cent is a unit used to measure land which is equivalent to 435.56 square feet.

*Varnashrama* social order continued to remain landless in the modern democratic governing order (Kapicaud 2017).

The secondary aspect of the history of land dispossession of *Adivasi* peoples is witnessed during the colonial invasion, when new plantation complexes were established, particularly in the *Adivasi* populated hill districts of *Wayanad, Kottayam, Idukki* etc, pushing the *Adivasi* people out of their lands to the margins. Following the British colonisation, a significant internal invasion occurred, with the Christians from the lowlands violently occupying the lands of the *Adivasi* peoples, who, in turn, were forcefully relocated. Consequently, the *Adivasi* communities, whose relationship to the land was not organized in the Western foundations of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘ownership’, suddenly found themselves thrown out of their lands.

There have been a few legislations and acts adopted by the state in support of the *Adivasi* self-determination under the fifth schedule<sup>6</sup>, and other provisions relating to the landless issue. However, particularly the state government of Kerala seems to ignore such developments and continues to delay the implementation of the existing acts. Similarly, different forest conservation policies and laws came into existence, with adverse impacts on many forest-dwelling *Adivasi* communities that were eventually evicted from their forest lands.

The Restriction of Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands Act of 1975 extended the existing provisions by reclaiming the dispossessed lands up to 40 acres for the *Adivasi* peoples. However, the state continues to be reluctant to address the act. As a result, to date, the *Adivasi* people have not been granted any land rights except a very few communities located in some southern districts.

The *Adivasi* people’s demand for the implementation of PESA [The Provisions of the *Panchayats* (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996] is still being ignored, whereas the Act is arguably already under implementation in the other states of Indian. PESA provides as follows;

Scheduled Areas in India are predominantly inhabited by the tribal population who have been managing their natural resources and governing social, economic and political life in

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<sup>6</sup> The fifth schedule of the constitution deals with the administration and control of Scheduled areas as well as Scheduled Tribes residing in any state other than the states of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Tribal habitations in the states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamilnadu, West Bengal Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir have not been brought under fifth or the sixth schedule of the constitution. The Fifth schedule provides special privileges to the Scheduled areas under the schedule.

their habitat through a well-knit system of ancient customs and practices. In the era of this unprecedented social change, the imperative need was felt to usher the Tribals in the mainstream of development efforts without disturbing or destroying their cultural identity and socio-economic milieu to meet this challenge ('Constitution of India|Legislative Department | Ministry of Law and Justice | GoI' 1950).

## 1.6 Adivasi identity and the struggle for survival.

Since the 1900s, there has been an increasing amount of *Adivasi* and *Dalit* protests requesting the acknowledgment of their rights to land and resources. In 2001, the *Adivasi Samara Samithi*, led by CK Janu, asserted the *Adivasi* people's right to their livelihood resources and land during the 'Kudi ketti samaram'<sup>7</sup> in front of the secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. According to the 'Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands Act' of 1975, out of 75000 *Adivasi* families, 45000 were landless and the granting of five acres to each of these families would require the distribution of 2.25 lakh acres (Raman 2002,p.916). There were ongoing struggles against the government due to their persistent reluctance to resolve the issue. The *Muthanga* conflict in 2003 was a significant milestone in the *Adivasi* land struggle and *Adivasi* self-determination. The cruel massacre and the police brutality during the incident can be conceptualized as an indicator of the state's attitude towards the *Adivasi* peoples. The police atrocities that occurred in the *Muthanga* conflict have been characterized as 'unparalleled' in the history of modern Kerala (Surendran 2019,p.61-65). The act was later revisited, including several amendments, such as the permanent removal of the word 'alienated', in favour of the illegal plantation owners and Christians migrant's interests. Even after 20 years of continuous rebellion by the '*Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha*'<sup>8</sup>, the state of Kerala, as well as the local society, have been unwilling to take into consideration the voices of the *Adivasi* people. Instead, the state hastily decides for them, perpetuating, thus, its colonial assimilatory attitude towards the *Adivasi* peoples.

Ironically, the discourses on the self-determination of *Adivasi* peoples, as provided by the constitution, are perceived as 'secessionist' by the mainstream society and the state. Hence, such discourses continue to be undermined by the state consciously over the years. For

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<sup>7</sup> *Kudi ketti samaram* was a symbolical protest held in Thiruvananthapuram by the *Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithi* by constructing huts in front of the secretariat.

<sup>8</sup> *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha* is first of its kind in bringing diverse *Adivasi* communities under the same hood, aiming at bringing forward the different *Adivasi* matters and demands.

instance, both the *Adivasi* peoples and their allies were charged with the problematic UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) in 1967. The act has been allegedly used against groups with interests antithetical to the state ones, and has led to the arrestment of many such movements all over the country. The argument for implementing PESA in Kerala has been grounded on the perception that the *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha* is a secessionist movement. Departing from these conceptual premises, they accused *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha* for being affiliated to Maoist secessionist ideologies which threaten the sovereignty of the Indian state (Interview with K K Surendran).

### 1.7 The Adivasi peoples of Wayanad and education

There are fundamental problems in the field of education in Kerala, and it is a complex discourse with multiple dimensions of social, political and economic engagements. I would limit myself drawing on certain perspectives within the context of the existing research project. My research focuses on the Adivasi communities geographically located within the Wayanad district which is generally characterized by a great degree of diversity in their cultural, historical, and social characteristics. It has been a difficult challenge to reach the research objectives of this project with a limited amount of time and resources and given that the issue of ‘*Adivasi* education’ is pertinent to a wide range of distinct *Adivasi* peoples. However, the the scope of this research also demands the need to critically address the research questions on a holistic level, as education is perceived and is being operated as a homogenous project in Kerala, presupposing that the *Adivasi* peoples are singular group regardless of their internal differences.

The *Adivasi* peoples in Kerala are, however, stratified and the experiences of the *Kurichya*<sup>9</sup> do not correspond to that of the *Paniya* or the *Kattunayka* communities. Their cultural and social differences are far greater in comparison to those of different non-*Adivasi* populations. This integrated policy was adopted only after the British classification which put all the *Adivasi* peoples under the term ‘Scheduled Tribes<sup>10</sup>’ for the ease of administration. This has continued to dictate the social and institutional engagements, disregarding other established provisions that ensure community rights in the constitution. For instance, *Adivasi* peoples in Kerala, have

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<sup>9</sup> Kurichya Paniya, Adiya Oorali and Kattunayka are the Adivasi communities in the district of Wayanad.

<sup>10</sup> Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution; see Article 366, Indian constitution.

different languages and dialects. All the languages are exercised orally, arguably except a few languages originating from the hills that have a script that represents their oral lore (Asees 2020). Even though Article 350A of the Constitution encourages primary education for each person in their mother tongue, the policy has not been implemented on a large scale for the *Adivasi* people (Susamma 2011,p.17).

Wayanad, a hilly district in Kerala constitutes 37.36 percentage of all *Adivasi* peoples in Kerala (Asees 2020). The research would be focusing on the *Adivasi* peoples of the Wayanad region, as it was considered an ideal location with some particular characteristics, favouring the research context: Many of the education projects are first implemented in Wayanad; the district has the highest population of *Adivasi* peoples; and the Wayanad region has been the location of several *Adivasi* movements, and the history of invasion makes it a place of constant conflict even today with the internal non-*Adivasi* migrants. Hence, Wayanad became the ideal departure point of my research project and seems to be, to a great degree, reflective of the totality of Kerala's *Adivasi* affairs.

There are 36135 *Adivasi* family units in Wayanad according to the 2011 census('Census of India Website: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India' 2011). According to official documents, there are 11 *Adivasi* communities namely, *Paniyar*, *Adiyar*, *Kurichyar*, *Kattunaykar*, *Vettakurumar*, *Wayanadan Kadar*, *Ulladan*, *Thachanadan mooppan*, *Malarayar*, *Karimpala*, and *Paniyas*. The *Paniyas* are the group with the highest population and the poorest among the *Adivasi* peoples when it comes to their social and economic status. The social parameters of education, employment and health expose the social disparity of the *Adivasi* peoples, compared to that of the dominant population (Asees 2020). While the *Adivasi* literacy rate in Wayanad is 71.3 percentage, the literacy rate of *Paniya* and *Kattunayka* are 64.72% and 60.15% respectively. These results are derived from the official statistic sources, but the real numbers could be much worse. In general, the *Adivasi* hamlets are located remotely, closer to the margins of Forests, and are far from the Government schools. As the distance to the schools becomes higher, their school attendance decreases (Asees 2020). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 provides for the right of every child to have formal education in LP(Lower Primary) school within 1km and UP(Uppper Primary) school within 3 km (Susamma 2011,p.13). From my own research experience when visiting the *Adivasi* populated schools in Wayanad, there were testimonies of teachers highlighting the inaccuracy in the official accounts of the student enrolment, as it is a matter of job security for



the teachers to project the full enrolment. Dropout rates are a significant indicator of disparity and the Wayanad district has the highest dropout rates, to which the Adivasi children constitute the highest fraction. Several studies have reiterated that poverty, lack of parental motivation, ill-health and insensitivity of teachers leads to dropouts, absenteeism and failures that are the major reasons for tribal children's educational marginalization in the area (Susamma 2011,p.11). However, these criteria are mostly structural and are based on the presupposition that formal education is the only means of *Adivasi* emancipation and has been operated on an *etic* perspective. The juncture of the dominant and the Adivasi interaction in the education sector at a societal level is to be studied from the *Adivasi emic* perspective to generate a nuanced understanding, beyond the framework of formal education.

The *Adivasi* employment and their participation in the administrative key positions are inadequate. The state's focus rests on filling the reservation<sup>11</sup> seats to appease the constitutional rights without addressing the intent behind the reservation. Studies with the statistical report of the percentage of *Adivasi Dalit* people in the hierarchy of administrative positions are exemplifying this situation. One could see the same old *Varnashrama* system of caste being reproduced in the modern democratic system. *Adivasi* students are either dropped out or are back to the settlements, doing agriculture or paid labour after their studies. The students who managed to continue in higher education are shunt by state instruments that push them to disciplines of low demand to keep them outside the realm of power. The *Adivasi* individuals who survived their education with high qualification too find themselves in a place where they are intelligently excluded with the bureaucratic lobbying (Kapicaud 2017,p35-56).

## **1.8 Adivasi education and epistemic violence.**

The *Adivasi* identity is located in a vulnerable juncture with multiple tensions in and around their social milieu. Primarily, their identity is being threatened by the Hinduisation<sup>12</sup> which is rampant in the contemporary Indian society. They find themselves in a place where the only

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<sup>11</sup> Reservation is a term used in Indian constitution that is used synonymously to the affirmative action.

<sup>12</sup> The term was originally popularized by M.N. Srinivas in his dissertation, where he used it to characterize the gradual upward movement in the social status of a caste by means of the deliberate adoption of social and religious practices (such as vegetarianism, employment of brahmin priests, use of meatless offerings, Sanskrit mantras, and other elements of Brahmanical cultic practice) that are associated with Brahmins or deemed prestigious because they are approved or promulgated in Brahmanical literature (or by Brahmin authorities in other fora), regardless of whether the Sanskrit language is used to express those ideals.

means to move forward is by adopting homogenous cultural symbols and be part of the homogenous dominant population. A large number of *Adivasi* people are polarised due to their differing positions, having to assimilate to the mainstream Malayali identity, and, thus, leaving behind both the *Adivasi* identity and the other community members who continue to adamantly resist and strive for the acknowledgment of their rights.

There are two dimensions to the concept of education. Education is perceived as ‘reformative’ by many, as it is considered as a tool to emancipate the people who are oppressed. In the international development discourse on Indigenous and marginalised communities, education is recognised as an agency that enhances their political expressions and negotiations as well empowers such peoples to emancipate from oppressive mainstream state mechanisms (Freire 1970). While the proposed dimension of education is to be operated to act as an impetus for the oppressed class to challenge the caste and other forms of oppression, in Kerala’s context, the education is experienced as a paradox. The social reproduction theories in education show that the institutions and processes could help to reproduce social inequalities in the society, contrary to the previous argument (Susamma 2011,p.2).

Education is, therefore, used as a tool to further oppress marginalised people, by institutionally assimilating them to the dominant population. Even though the system is presented as favourable on the outset, by providing government jobs, jobs in the industrial sector etc, the caste system ingrained in the people of bureaucracy would ensure that the communities’ positions remain limited to the lowest strata (Kapicaud 2017, p35-56). Dr BR Ambedkar who led the drafting committee of the constitution of India had forecasted this social reality, and, hence, added the provision on ‘reservation’ to ensure the adequate participation of the *Dalit* and the other socially backward communities. Reservation becomes, therefore, critically important as the system is deeply engrossed in the caste prejudices even after 70 years of Independence.

The situation of *Adivasi* students in different MRS (Model residential schools), hostels and government aided/unaided schools has been exemplified in several studies in the past (Susamma 2011). The major complaints about the current universal education relates to the fact that the curriculum lacks relevance to the current life of Scheduled Tribe children, and puts them at a disadvantage (Govinda, Unesco, and National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (India) 2002). Like in many tribal residential schools around the globe, the residential schools in Kerala have been operated as ‘prisons’ for the *Adivasi* children in the post-independent India (Kakkoth 2014,p.445). The teacher-student dynamic and interaction in

the schools is problematic, as the teachers are non-*Adivasi* and are not educated in the cultural and social milieu of the *Adivasi* children and, thus, in many cases are unaware of the problems they face.

The state governments in the past have been addressing the issue of *Adivasi* dropouts with several programmes in the name of ‘upliftment of the *Adivasi* peoples’. The welfare politics of the changing governments in Kerala cater to the argument of granting more access and infrastructure for availing the formal education to the *Adivasi* children. Contrary to this trend, the current Communist government has introduced a new scheme named ‘*Gothrabandhu*’ addressing the *Adivasi* situation of increasing dropouts.

## 1.9 Gothrabandhu

In many studies conducted among the tribes, the language problem is reported as one of the contributory factors to the increase of the tribal dropout rate. The STDD (Scheduled Tribes Development Department) introduced the scheme *Gothrabandhu*<sup>13</sup> primarily to address the issue of dropouts and ensure student enrolment (‘STDD | Scheduled Tribes Development Department’ 2020). Initially, the government issued an order to appoint 241 mentor teachers from the Scheduled Tribes, in order to instruct at the government aided/unaided schools with primary standards in Wayanad district, on the basis of daily wages. The project is aimed at the educational upliftment of the students from the backward *Adivasi* communities namely, *Adiya*, *Paniya*, *Kattunayka* and *Oorali* (Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016).

Noticeably, the *Gothrabandhu* project extends a vague criterion for the selection of the candidates, stating ‘The dexterity of the candidate in *Adivasi* artforms, culture, and Tribal languages could be considered as an extra merit for the candidates. Another criterion for this selection is that the candidate should be selected from the backward *Adivasi* communities present in the area of the school(Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016).

*Gothrabandhu* is an ideal meeting point drawing parallels from the past, present and future to reflect on the nuances of the *Adivasi* experience in the Kerala society. The mentor teachers

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<sup>13</sup> The *Gothrabandhu* project is introduced to ensure proper education to tribal children, one educated tribal youth (men or women) with TTC/B.Ed qualification from the same locality with knowledge in tribal dialect and Malayalam is selected and trained to function as mentor teacher in Primary Schools. These teachers are entrusted to address the language issues of tribal children, reduce drop outs and ensure the increase of per cent enrolment. In response to the scheme 241 qualified tribal youth were appointed in Wayanad district during 2017-18.

represent the educated elites of the *Adivasi* peoples and most of them belong to the first generation of the *Adivasi* people who successfully received education. The project incorporates the multitude of dimensions of *Adivasi* experiences over the last few decades and reflects the dynamics of the social interaction in the realm of education.

As the research project takes place in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, these mentors are the pioneers who are experiencing the transition of schooling to online platforms. Hence, the research would navigate through their lived experiences and perspectives. The research would serve as an area for them to express their stories and imaginations.

## 2 Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

### 2.1 Conducting research in Wayanad

The situation of Indigenous research and scholarship is a complex issue, as the research subject is often over-exploited or inappropriately treated in many cases across the globe. My initial investigation and enquiry into the context of *Adivasi* education in Wayanad were revealing a similar story of the homogenous nature of the research and scholarship in the field of *Adivasi* matters. My initial interactions with many of the concerned parties had a particular pattern, as many individuals were initially dispassionate in the conversation and shared an introductory account of their perspectives ruminating a story told many times before. Further down the discourse, they started to see the difference in the way the conversation was going, as I was focusing on intentionally breaking the usual conduct of a researcher's mode of inquiry. Many had shared the story of previous researchers who came and eventually vanished, using the collected data mainly for academic purposes, without any actual impact on the communities. Such research projects are, therefore, located in a sensitive context and there is a need for critical introspection especially from the researcher and the concerned institutions. Researchers and their initial inquisitive interactions may have admittedly raised important questions and often ignited critical discourses, however here in Wayanad usually such efforts end up favouring only the people in the dominant positions, who are often the researchers themselves affiliated with powerful institutions. The resentment by Indigenous peoples and activists in Wayanad was palpable when I introduced myself as a researcher undertaking a 'Masters of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies'. Many of them asked me the same question: "What will the thesis do on the library shelf, and who is going to read those documents? What benefit will we/they have if you conduct research and write about us/them?"

From these accounts, I realised how important is it to disseminate the knowledge produced in the research process. Very few researchers publish articles related to their research findings in newspapers and are often ignored. Given that, in academia there needs to be a multi-disciplinary approach even in disseminating the research findings. The scope for disseminating knowledge cannot be limited to the textual forms. Kerala's institutions are lacking a well-defined ethical framework for conducting research and I have realised the lack of awareness regarding the Indigenous research paradigms, particularly in Kerala's institutions, and the need for decolonising the research methodologies. Such values are not only important for the

ongoing research project, but constitute a subject of discussion to sensitise academia for preventing future exploitation.

Secondly, the ‘ease’ of conducting research in *Adivasi* communities in Kerala is something that drew my attention. Nowhere have I encountered any hurdles on ethical concerns regarding Indigenous peoples, whereas I faced many hurdles because of bureaucratic institutions, noticeably, however, not related to the welfare of the rights of *Adivasi* peoples. The only and repeated concern raised by many, and in various degrees, during different stages of my research process was the issue of relating the research scholarship to Maoist movements. Activist research scholarship particularly in Wayanad with *Adivasi* peoples bears the burden of being accused of affiliation with Maoist ideologies and Naxalite movements.<sup>14</sup> The sensitivity of the *Adivasi* matters and the nature of such discourses which is often against the interests of the state’s government produces grounds for suspecting activist scholars as anti-governmental agencies that insinuate anti-governmental ideas into the *Adivasi* communities. Appadurai has written on the continuing rancour the state is showing against such intellectuals and he states that,

“To translate all dissent into violence is vital to their sense of how to win, and thus their biggest enemy is to be found in the spaces, disciplines and events in which non-violence threatens to transform the vocabulary of dissent and debate (Appadurai Arjun 2021,p.12).”

In my experience, the fear can be demonstrated through the wording of the ‘letter of permission’ I received from the ITDP (Integrated Tribal Development Programme) for conducting interviews and collecting data for this thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, Kerala became a hotspot for the Naxalite movements against the feudal oppressive social system following the communist politics in the state, mobilizing the marginalized and poor especially in the *Adivasi* areas. The movement was primarily based on the Maoist ideology and its violent manifestations have been interpreted as terrorist in nature and are banned in India. Maoism and Naxalism go hand-in-hand and the terms are used simultaneously representing Naxalite movements in India.

From

The Project Officer  
ITDP, Kalpetta,  
Wayanad

To

Athul Sarala Nanu  
Souparnika, muchukunnu PO  
Koyilandy, Kozhikode, Kerala- 673307  
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Ph: 9712671637 email: [anao50@uit.no](mailto:anao50@uit.no)  
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Sir,

Ref. Your letter dt. 24/02/2021.

As per letter referred to above, Sri. Athul Sarala Nanu requested permission to conduct a research on 'Adivasi Education and the struggle for their equal opportunity'. The data collection, it also demands, a few Interviews with the Mentor teachers, who are an integral part of Kerala's Adivasi education. In the circumstances permission is hereby granted to conduct interviews from Mentor Teachers to fulfill his study in the topic on following conditions.

The work and study should abide by the Covid 19 protocol.


A copy of the findings should be given to the undersigned.

The study shall be purely for the academic purpose of the applicant on the purpose specified in his request and should not deviate into other objectives which adversely affect the safety of the community; otherwise this permission shall be void without notice.

While interviews it shall not be permitted to indoctrinate ideas which may adversely affect the policy matters of the State or Union Government.

With the above conditions permission is hereby granted to conduct interviews of Mentor Teachers to Sri. Athul Sarala Nanu for his academic study purpose.

Kalpetta  
24/02/2021.



Project Officer  
ITDP Wayanad.

It is stated in the letter that “While interviews shall not be permitted to indoctrinate ideas which may adversely affect the policy matters of the State or Union government”. As mentioned earlier, the letter explicitly tries to protect the interests of the state and omits to address the ethical concerns related to the *Adivasi* communities of Wayanad. The letter was provided to me after the due process of scrutiny on personal grounds with the project officer’s enquiry on

my background to ensure that I have nothing to do with the Maoist movements or any such ideologies, although it was not directly mentioned. He was a kind officer who seems to be a well-wisher of the *Adivasi* peoples and willing to express his concerns openly. However, the fear was evident in the interactions with the officers, since they were concerned of the consequences of any possible propagation of Maoist ideologies in the name of research and scholarship under their watch. The rational grounds of such a fear remain unclear. Were there any researchers before whom they recognised as supporters of Maoist ideologies? This is an important concern that needs more enquiry, but extends beyond the scope of this study. There are many such instances in contemporary politics, which show the possibility of such a trend of suppressing the dissent by charging activists and social workers using UAPA and arresting them for insinuating anti-governmental ideas to the people.

Overall, the violence that has been perpetrated during this past year against academics, poets, literary critics and journalists in India has received considerable attention. There have been a number of cases that demonstrate the ruling regime's fear of individuals who have suffered most from these attacks, including their typical support for *Dalits*, Muslims and women, their openness to wide-ranging philosophical and conceptual explorations, their support for numerous movements for social justice and political inclusion, and their shared abhorrence of the cultural fundamentalism, anti-intellectualism and indifference that characterize the current regime (Appadurai Arjun 2021,p.11)

## 2.2 Researcher's positionality

Before I delve into the methods I employed in my research, I find it is significant to position myself first, which is important both for me and the reader to understand where my identity is located in the context of my research subject. My positionality impacts the research process itself and is reflected in my constant moving back and forth, introspecting the choices I make and interrogating the factors influencing my choices. Currently, I am a student of Indigenous Studies at the (UiT) – The Arctic University of Norway. Formerly, I was a design<sup>15</sup> student and a filmmaker. My family identifies themselves as a member of the '*Thiyya*'<sup>16</sup> community, a backward caste in the popular perception of the Hindu religion. However, I grew up with

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<sup>15</sup> Design education completed at NID (National Institute of Design)

<sup>16</sup> *Thiyya* is a backward caste identity in Kerala. It belongs to the OBC (Other Backward Castes) category according to the social classification in India.



constant exposure to communist ideas which have been prevalent in the state, and I slowly developed to a state of a confused identity defying my caste and religion. It was something considered as progressive in Kerala renaissance discourse in my school days. “*One caste, one religion, one god for mankind*,” by Sri Narayana Guru,<sup>17</sup> was a popular slogan then, and remains popular nowadays in 2021. Though later in life, it gets better with Sahodaran Ayyapan’s quote “*No caste, no religion, no god for mankind*”.

Both my parents’ families originated from the *Thiyya* community, but they represented economically different classes. My paternal grandfather did multitude of daily wage labour including collecting medicines from the forest, working as a helper in the fish market, etc. My maternal grandfather was engaged with agriculture and related jobs. No one else in the family went for any outside jobs other than household work. My parents are the first generation who got a high school education and found government jobs as teachers in a faraway place from their ancestral homes. That’s how our nuclear family was formed and historically this was a social phenomenon that was rampant then. Today our family is situated under the middle class, while Kerala’s socio-economic spectrum is built centering the middle class. Hence, it comes with certain privileges.

I grew up with a skewed understanding of the *Adivasi* people, since the *Adivasi* stories/heroes/social contributions/culture/aesthetic or art were never a part of anything I was exposed to in my schooling or at home and social life. My understanding about the *Adivasi* people was limited to an extent that I was only aware of the presence of certain sections of people who were considered poor and primitive, and they were to be civilized to live like us, the Malayali aggregate population. Who is a Malayali and what exactly is expressed through the Malayali identity is a complex topic. However, the need for upliftment was a common notion in reference to the *Adivasi*. Being a boy from the plains, I had little access to the *Adivasi* people, and, even if I did, I would never have known it. The broken<sup>18</sup> *Adivasi* people must have been around me while I was growing up, but it is highly improbable to be cognizant of their culture and identity status, beyond their perceived societal identity conceptualized as someone who is poor and broken. As the identity of *Adivasi* is associated with shame, they still seize to exist anywhere else other than their collective communal identity. Once they are broken, they

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<sup>17</sup> Sri Narayana Guru is a social reformer in the Kerala renaissance.

<sup>18</sup> The term ‘broken’ is used to denote the *Adivasi* people who are displaced or forced to migrate and are unable to keep the integrity of their identity.

are invisible. The second factor is the images of their exotic art and folk songs which were alien to my understanding then. Only later in my life, I started questioning my own identity and realized that similarly I have become an alien to my identity, culture, stories, epistemologies, and history. I was consumed by an imaginary new identity of a Malayali Hindu.<sup>19</sup> Brahminic hegemony and the caste system has been expanded beyond the religion and their value system has extended its appendages to all the domains including the *Adivasi* peoples. It, therefore, becomes important to acknowledge the perpetuating values undermining the cultural and social fabric of Kerala beyond any individual or peoples. The binary becomes blurred. The decentring of the scholarship is an appropriate approach in such circumstances. From the perspective of an Indigenous scholar, Martin Nakata states that not only the non-Indigenous scholar need to be faced with ‘suspicion’, but also Indigenous intellectuals (Olsen 2018,p.209). Olsen explicitly states “Neither privilege/oppression, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, nor insider/outsider are binary relations” (Olsen 2018,p.206). He argues for an intersectional approach to privilege, decentering the scholar and negating existing privileges (Olsen 2018,p.206).

### **2.3 Research methods**

Regardless the limitations that the pandemic’s ground realities brought to the scope of the intended research process, I decided to ensure that a participatory methodology is employed in my project, and, therefore, decided to build a focus group consisting of individuals representing different dimensions of *Adivasi* education such as community members, teachers, *Gothrabandhu* teachers, officers in nodal institutions and departments, activists, collaborators etc who were able to connect to me in any convenient online platform. I was trying to explore tools to make it practically possible to connect to a large group such as the above-mentioned group of people, given that the Covid-19 prevention measures were enforced. However, I acknowledge the drawback of project in terms of including many participants outsiders, who possibly have a higher visibility and privilege over the Mentor teachers who themselves are *Adivasi* people. The main disadvantage of Western-based focus group interviews is that a few assertive individuals may dominate the discussion. What follows is a discussion of Indigenous interview methods that promote equality among participants (Chilisa 2012,p.181). I decided to engage in the role of a facilitator in the group to see how the participants themselves would

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<sup>19</sup> Malayali Hindu is an imagined identity adhere to the linguistic state identity and the religious identity of being in a Hindu religion. The Hindu term is debatable and is considered to have originated from the colonial rule.

want to express their concerns. The investigation became time-consuming as I progressed, and many trips had to be made to meet important people other than the community members. I visited the '*Kanavu*' and '*Tudi*' which are two significant educational institutions in Wayanad focusing on *Adivasi* education. *Kanavu* is an alternative school set up by K. J. Baby with a distinct curriculum and an alternative model of schooling. The school stopped functioning in the last decade. *Tudi* claims to be a socio-cultural movement and the school is aimed at incorporating *Adivasi* cultural development along with formal education. At *Tudi*, I managed to find a group of mentor teachers who were working there and were willing to collaborate in the process. I collected their contacts and started to communicate with them. After a few days of consistent efforts, I realised that there is a palpable tension in our communication as some participants were trying to avoid the interview we had agreed upon. The obscure nature of it was not working in my favour. I continued my search to build a different group on my own and the efforts initially kept failing.

The primary intention of the research is to generate insights on the *Adivasi* educational programmes by the state, especially during the pandemic, and the mentor teachers who are the bridge between the state and the *Adivasi* peoples. Thus, it becomes important that the mentor teachers may voice the concerns of communities that are often unheard. The focus group interviews could be an ideal setting for them to listen to each other's story and, hence, it would potentially create a stronger voice in solidarity.

Due to time limitations, I was forced to limit my research methods to personal interviews with the mentor teachers and the officers holding strategic positions. I managed to find a group of mentor teachers in *Vellamunda* in *Mananthavadi*, Wayanad. With the permission of the TEO (Tribal Extension Officer, Vellamunda) I got the chance to speak to them and we shared our stories and decided to continue collaborating in the process further through online means of communication. During my interviews, except a few, I started to feel that there is some sort of inhibition and disinterest shared by the participants, since an untold boycott followed, and they stopped responding and replying to my calls/messages. For undisclosed reasons, I was asked to get a permission from the ITDP which is shared above. However, the journey was insightful as I realised that, although could bring uninvited problems, the right questions would help to shed more light on the context.

Finally, for the data collection, I decided to conduct informal interviews/conversations and discussions with the mentor teachers online through mobile phone calls and 'WhatsApp voice

calls' which happened to be the most convenient choice for them. I also made sure that they had read the content and were aware of the scope of the research before the conversation. They were also asked for their free prior and informed consent (FPIC) when conducting interviews. In total, I had conversations with 7 mentor teachers and among them I have chosen 4 interviews for the following analysis. 2 of the interviews were done in multiple sessions via mobile phone and lasted approximately 30 min. The interviews/conversations stand relevant to the context of Adivasi education and the mentor teachers who participated were keen on ensuring their voices are heard. The interviews were conducted in Malayalam language and happened over the span of three months from November 2020 to January 2021. Many of the rest of the interviews, especially the ones with the activists, were not recorded, as they disagreed to record the conversation in fear of getting into trouble for expressing dissent and attracting the suspicion of being affiliated with Maoism. The scope of the Indigenous paradigm in research methodology gets limited in such an adverse environment. However, an honest and informed analysis of the interviews considering their context could bring about valuable insights into the subject.

I met many officers and people in strategic positions in the nodal institutions and governmental projects, in order to generate more information regarding the state's perspective on the research context. The *Adivasi* representation among administrative offices and other related institutions is negligible. It is critical, though, to know how the system of bureaucracy is functioning in this context. The important institutions regarding the Adivasi education are as follows: The ITDP (Integrated Tribal Development Programme) is the institution responsible for a large number of developmental programmes organised by the state including educational projects. The *Gothrabandhu* scheme is such an important contribution to this department. Then, significant role plays the Department of Education, and the SSK (Samagra Siksha Kerala). This department is responsible for the design and execution of the 'First Bell' programme and the '*Mazhivilpoovu*'. The DIET (The District Institution of Education and Training) is another institution built for training teachers preparing the modules, monitoring the functioning of the programmes etc. I have conducted interviews with two DIET officers, one ITDP project officer, two Tribal Development Officers (*Mananthavadi, Sultan Batheri*<sup>20</sup>), the DDE (Deputy Director of Education, Wayanad) and two project officers of *Mazhivilpoovu* (SSK). Many of this

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<sup>20</sup> Mananthavadi and Sultan Batheri are sub districts in Wayanad.

project's research objectives navigate through the functioning of these institutional frameworks and, thus, these officer's perspectives are critical in answering the research questions asked.

### 2.3.1 Interviews/Conversations

It was the hardest thing for me to boil down to using personal interviews as part of my data collection, because of certain aspects of the interview method. Primarily, I conceive of the act of interviewing itself in an inorganic setting as problematic in nature, since it projects an asymmetric power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee. When the researcher, as an extension of a powerful institution, interacts with people from an oppressed community, may generate intense tensions. As highlighted by Olsen, "As the conditions of meeting are not equal, hybridisation can involve differentiation and the reproduction/reconstitution of dominant identities" (Olsen 2018,p.210). Indigenous peoples, therefore, have good reasons to be sceptical towards non-Indigenous scholars in the field of Indigenous studies (Olsen 2018,p.206). Given that many Indigenous issues are researched and then shelved, the *Adivasi* people expressed their disappointment towards previous research projects, as no actions followed, disseminating the knowledge they co-produced. Also, the research projects conducted by institutions often reaffirm the oriental representations adhered to the *Adivasi* identity tantamount to condescending perspectives. In Kerala, where an ongoing policy of exclusion and marginalisation has been in force, how could an *Adivasi* member trust a researcher representing the dominant society? Even if they trust her, the privileges and the oppression may function in invisible ways. Other factors, including the language of communication, the vocabulary used, and the means of communication, may also have played a role, in making them agree to be in conversation with me. I have seen many instances when an officer in charge would direct the mentor teachers to talk to me, without even thinking a possibility that they might not want to talk for personal reasons. Driven by the fear of upsetting the officer or not being able to resist the paternalistic request, they might not even see a possibility of saying no to their request to co-operate with me. A researcher must be aware of the possibly vulnerable position of the participants. It may not be an easy choice to not exploit favours extended from the friends/officers for providing us with access to *Adivasi* community members. However, the sagacity of a scholar should recognise this unjust action and would find an ethical method to communicate with the participant, although being an arduous task. There is a possibility that, as scholars, we will never realize when we are exercising our privileges and, thus, there is need to be vigilant. An interview, particularly a personal interview,

is loaded with such possibilities, and conversing over a phone makes it even more opaque. The limitation of conducting an online interview also brings a few other critical concerns. A mentor teacher, for instance, may be using a mobile phone at work and this phone may need to be used by the other members of her family in the afterhours of work. So, it becomes difficult for her to manage extra time for an interview. Drawing on my experience this issue is mainly pertinent to women mentor teachers. I experienced instances where a mentor teacher was away for some other job, while her father was using the phone when I made a call. In other cases, mentor teachers had not access to network in the settlement/colony<sup>21</sup> where they stayed, and, with overburdened work at school, they found it hard to spend time with me for an in-person online interview being at the school.

I, thus, decided to carry out interviews with mentor teachers who expressed their genuine desire to be heard rather than agreeing to help me complete my research.

From my experience, interviewing mentor teachers, even via a continued dialogue, is often not enough to transcend to a dimension of an open dialogue, as the need for active participation is inevitable in the *Adivasi* education and other sensitive matters. Many of the mentor teachers shared their stories to an outsider, with a preconceived notion of what an outsider would want to hear from them. The fear or mistrust must have been derived from multiple factors. Amongst other factors, significant is the uncertainty of their job security now invested rested on the hands of certain political parties in power and the fear for confrontation or displeasing the people in power for speaking up, which would, in turn, bring further uninvited consequences. In addition, the dilemma of taking a position in an assimilative environment and the pressure of being looked at from an outsider's perspective may also play a role. In the data presentation section, I would discuss this further building on my own experiences with the mentor teachers.

In this regard, I position myself as a researcher, an ally of the *Adivasi* peoples. I think it is important to wait and see how the dissemination of the research is getting manifested and received both by the *Adivasi* peoples and myself. Hopefully the process would be succeeded by future collaboration and programmes, aiming to eventually contribute to the creation of a constructive democratic space for nuanced discourses on *Adivasi* matters and, not least, encourage the participants to do their own research.

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<sup>21</sup> The term 'colony' is a problematic word to use as the word has been exercised in the society with a derogatory connotation. However, a large number of *Adivasi* people are living in state-sponsored colonies often built after displacement or forced eviction from their ancestral lands/forests.

### **2.3.2 Analysis of governmental policies and programmes.**

There are a large number of governmental programmes and projects every year for the *Adivasi* peoples organized by the state of Kerala and the Union Government of India. A common critique by the nodal officers regarding these programmes is the lack of an integrated framework for effective internal communication between the various departments, to effectively execute and disseminate the programmes. However, a large amount of money and resources are being spent in the name of *Adivasi* peoples and their development. As some *Adivasi* activists argued, corrupted and inefficient officers are wasting valuable resources and the flawed system is incapable to function effectively (Interview with Geethanandan).

The research navigates through a few integral governmental programmes, namely the ‘*Gothrabandhu*’ project and the ‘*Mazhvilpoovu*’ project. Unlike other previously employed schemes, these two programmes have tried to address the diversity of the *Adivasi* peoples for the first time. *Gothrabandhu* is a scheme being implemented in the district of Wayanad for testing the scope of the programme for further expansion to the remaining districts of Kerala. It carries great significance, as the success of the programme is expected to bring about a fundamental shift in *Adivasi* education, ensuring for the first time *Adivasi* representation. The monitoring data and other statistical data have been important in this context and have helped in creating a nuanced understanding of the consequences of the programme. Accordingly, the research is going forward with the analysis of the data available from the various departments, and interrogate the legitimacy of the data with that of the testimonies of *Adivasi* peoples. The research would also focus on the analysis of the programmes’ documents and the processes followed the inception of these programmes, as they are notably developed in a bureaucratic environment where the *Adivasi* representation is nil or negligible.

### **2.4 Research during a global pandemic**

Academic research as a process could be perceived as ostentatious in the context of a global pandemic, while the same being imperative. Particularly in the context of Indigenous peoples, conducting ethnographic research/fieldwork must be done with highest care. The new and challenging situation of the pandemic demands thorough introspection of the research process and its implications.

In this research, my university declared explicit restrictions on limiting the fieldwork, and, out of necessity, the data collection was restricted to be conducted only through online

communication. There were local travel restrictions in Kerala during the data collection period of this research, and the state limited the access for outsiders to engage with the *Adivasi* people in Kerala. In addition, the situation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe anxiety and stress for the people, the mental health of whose is a critical aspect in conducting research for both the participants themselves as well as the researcher.

During the course of this research, the lack of an intimate interaction with the participants impeded the process in various levels. The communication with the mentor teachers who participated in this research was limited to WhatsApp and phone conversations. Undoubtedly, the trust and reciprocity are, to a great extent, affected with such online interactions and the much-needed perspectives of the *Adivasi* children were finally absent as any contact to these children was restricted.

Indigenous research methodologies buttress on the agency of the participants and their roles in the research process. However, the limitations of the pandemic debilitate such an interactive democratic space, weakening the efforts to reduce the existing power dynamic between the researcher and the participants. The *Adivasi* people in this context lack access to technologies that enable them to participate in equal terms during a crisis such as in this case of a global pandemic. The existing paradigm derived from the social inequality once again gets manifested within the process of research and is reflective of the subject that is being interrogated here.



### 3 Chapter 4: Theoretical framework

#### 3.1 Overview of the theoretical perspectives.

The policy makers design programmes and envision the development of the *Adivasi* peoples and their futures. Who are the policy makers, and what policies they create, is a significant question that has to be asked. For the *Adivasi* peoples, it has always been the others who made the policies for them, and their agency was always ignored. The primary approach in this research will be focused on reclaiming the agency of the *Adivasi* peoples by adopting theoretical approaches that are critical towards the populist theories on Indigenous peoples and are empathetic of the culture and self-determination of the *Adivasi* peoples. As argued by Linda T. Smith,

“We don’t need anyone else developing the tools which will help us to come to terms with who we are. We can and will do this work. Real power lies with those who design the tools – it always has. This power is ours(L. T. Smith 2012,p.73).”

The theoretical framework of the research is conceptualised through a set of approaches that explore how the educational programmes are functioning and how the different socio-political and historical factors are engaging with these policies and programmes.

The theoretical perspectives in the scope of this research are complex as there exist multiple factors engaging with the subject in varying degrees. To facilitate the process of inquiring and interrogating the research subject, I decided to emphasize on certain aspects of the *Adivasi* education, pivoting *Gothrabandhu* as a window, where these multitude of factors meet. The theoretical perspectives used also show an intersectional approach in dismantling the complex and long historical process of the marginalisation and exclusion of the *Adivasi* peoples, culminating to the current condition of *Adivasi* education.

#### 3.2 *Gothrabandhu* and cultural discontinuity

*Gothrabandhu* is derived from a deliberative process by the Department of Education and Tribal department of the government of Kerala, acknowledging that the problem of cultural incongruence is causing educational challenges for the *Adivasi* children in Kerala. Even after many educational programmes and schemes introduced by the state in response to the constant

dropouts of the students, the dropouts increased and, thus, demanded a nuanced inquiry. That is how they arrived at a decision to incorporate *Adivasi* teachers to act as a bridge, connecting the *Adivasi* homes to the schools (formal educational system). Enforcing a 4 year-long *Gothrabandhu* policy has been believed to be the key to reduce the dropouts of primary school students. However, the online pandemic educational programmes showed a different and grave illustration of the *Adivasi* education, which seemed to regress. Against this background, it is important for scholars to investigate the aspects and design of *Gothrabandhu*, through the lens of the theoretical framework being discussed here. It could be assumed that the inception of the *Gothrabandhu* programmes has not been successful in recognising the real barriers to *Adivasi* education. Based on this theoretical framework, my project reflects on the state policies and teacher-student relation in the pre-Covid-19 and pre-*Gothrabandhu* situation and looks at how the same paradigms are repeated post-*Gothrabandhu*.

Kathryn Au relates that “the theory of cultural discontinuity centres on a possible mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of the home, which results in misunderstandings between teachers and students in the classroom” (Au 1993, p.8). The cultural discontinuity theory addresses the complexity of a cultural interface, in this case, between teacher representative of the dominant Malayali culture and the *Adivasi* children from the so-called disadvantaged, socially and economically marginalised sections of the society. The *Adivasi* children face several challenges at school, with a foreign language (Malayalam) as the medium of instruction, unlike the rest of the non-*Adivasi* children, who have received the pre-primary education in their mother tongue Malayalam. The theory suggests three aspects,: Primarily, the cultural incongruence between the native (*Adivasi*) homes and the schools may cause serious problems for the students; secondly, the cultural discontinuity damages the teacher-student relationships; thirdly, the communication differences may indicate larger complex forms of cultural conflict (Huffman 2010,p.24).

The disconnect between the *Adivasi* peoples and the schools is expressed in different forms in Wayanad. The schoolteachers do not understand why the children are silent in the classrooms, why are they preferring to stay outside fishing, basking in the sun, or doing other traditional activities. They also do not understand the reasons why the *Adivasi* students stay together in a group shying away from other children etc. The obvious answers are often expressed by the teachers as they are unaware or disinterested to see how a child from an entirely different cultural environment may perceive a non-familiar space i.e., the school. They lack knowledge

about the cultural nuances and life conditions of the *Adivasi* children. What most teachers report is the *Adivasis'* impoverished background, the lack of motivation among the students, the lack of awareness of the parents regarding the educational benefits/rewards and the economic backwardness of the *Adivasi* peoples as a driving force behind the children's failure at school. At the same time, the *Adivasi* children and parents are finding it difficult to engage with the system, while, with several factors acting against them; their concerns are often ignored or unheard.

The *Adivasi* communities and their approach to the schools are not limited to a mere contrasting cultural juxtaposition and its derived conflicting outcomes. The conflict points are mostly attributed to the fact that the authorities do not recognise the social realities of the *Adivasi* peoples and their diverse lived environments. Even when the *Adivasi* people express the desire to get education and go beyond their abilities to ensure education for their children, they are often helpless, as the system does not welcome them and is not designed by or for them. The cultural discontinuity becomes inadequate to explain this conundrum and seeks a different approach that points at the larger societal factors. As observed by Huffman,

“...cultural discontinuity itself is underdeveloped as a theoretical construct, and an emphasis on microlevel social phenomena deflects attention away from understanding the impact of persisting inequalities created by social structural conditions” (Huffman 2010, p.39).

The *Gothrabandhu* teachers are appointed to resolve the educational gap that, according to the state's estimations, stems from the cultural mismatch and the language alienation among the other factors (Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016). However, certain aspects of this appointment raise a few concerns; a single teacher from one of the *Adivasi* communities is appointed at a school composed of diverse *Adivasi* communities. The position of the teachers is temporary, and they have not allowed to decide the classroom activities, the pedagogy, or the curriculum.

### 3.3 *Adivasi* peoples and the imperial state

During colonial times, the *Adivasi* peoples were considered primitive and were not given any value for their agency. After independence, the ambient population of Kerala was not only carrying the structures derived from the European colonialism, but also the Brahminic hegemony structures. This change came as a double blow to the *Adivasi* and Dalit peoples. This backdrop provides valuable insights to the theoretical aspects of the *Adivasi* education being discussed here. For an *Adivasi* child and its community, the experience of a school resonates the similar social realities they encounter. The teachers, the officers and the institutions built for the *Adivasi* peoples are represented by the non-*Adivasi* elites.

The most common themes to be identified here are:

1. The curriculum and pedagogy are homogenised by the state and do not express any local cultural or linguistic nuances.
2. The content of the curriculum does not address the history, epistemologies, or cultural aspects of *Adivasi* peoples, except a few trivial instances.
3. The *Adivasi* are not represented in the design or administrative positions in education.
4. The economic systems are built to satisfy the needs of the dominant population. Education has been among the main emancipatory tools for *Adivasi* peoples, who are often caught up in a vulnerable state of choosing assimilation in the name of integration, as expressed by the state policy, at stake of their own cultural identity. The *Adivasi* children are forced to follow the system built to serve the needs of the dominant society. This observation is similar to Hoffman's assertion that,

“larger social, economic, and political inequalities are duplicated in the very way the educational system works. From this view, mainstream education operates according to values and procedures advantageous to the most powerful social interests in society” (Huffman 2010, p. 67).

Adding to the theory of cultural discontinuity described above, the theory of structural inequality helps us further understand the context in which the *Adivasi* children participate in education. Scholars working within structural inequality theory suggest three general themes: (1) historically created structural conditions have produced unequal opportunities for educational and economic success; (2) the educational institution is designed to serve the interests of the dominant society; and (3) minorities do not passively accept their daunting

social and economic disadvantages but actively challenge the assumption that education will improve their lives (Huffman 2010,p.73).

The *Adivasi* people constitute 2 % of the state's population, and the majoritarian democracy shunts their ability to raise their concerns. It is to be noted that there are reserved positions for *Adivasi* people, which are represented by *Adivasi* individuals usually chosen by the political parties according to their political loyalty to ensure they serve the party's interests. Hence, the representatives fail to raise *Adivasi* concerns (Steur 2017,p.21). The theory demonstrates that institutions fail to serve the needs of the people with less political power. The state policies are, thus, formed without the representation of *Adivasi* voices. As argued by Huffman,

‘Structural inequality scholars contend it is crucial to recognize the historically generated social conditions that frame current educational practices and policies’ (Huffman 2010, p.74).

It could be assumed that the educational programmes including the *Gothrabandhu* would only reflect the state's interests and not the interests of the people for whom these programmes are built for. The approach the dominant population has on *Adivasi* matters reflect the Brahminical social consciousness, as it dictates the people in frames according to the Brahminic interpretation of how each caste should function and what it should aspire for. The term ‘Tribe’ commonly used in Kerala even by the scholars is reflective of such a perspective. ‘Tribe’ as a term is used in other contexts to denote parochial, sectarian, and primitive notions, and has been used as a derogatory term. In this context, the societal consciousness feels right to dictate for the *Adivasi* peoples towards the appreciation of the dominant societies’ generous concerns.

### **3.4 The exclusionary nature of mainstream education**

‘The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curriculum, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnership with their communities’(‘Samagra Shiksha Kerala).

The above information is provided on the SSK (*Samagra Siksha Keralam*) website stating how inclusive education needs to be. The term ‘integration’ is used as synonymous to the term

‘inclusion’ and the interpretations of the concept in praxis is questionable. The programme, in practice, focuses significantly on the access to education and infrastructure, though it fails to address the *Adivasi* children needs even today. Inclusive education, on the contrary, should be able to reform the school to fit the needs of the children (Hegarty, Meijer, and Pijl 1996, p.2).

The *Adivasi* peoples have become extremely vulnerable and the latest policies of the state particularly on education perpetuate an assimilationist approach. The pandemic educational programmes of the state of Kerala and the ground reality show acute discrepancies. While the state was boasting of its effective stance on adopting an online mode of education with the ‘First Bell’ programme, the *Adivasi* children were completely left unaware of what has been happening. The constitution ensures the right to education for every child, and it is the responsibility of the state to ensure the inclusion of each single child. However, current concerns of the *Adivasi* children seem to be out of this realm. Programmes for resolving this issue like the *Mazhvilpoovu* campaign and other facilities came a month later and failed within a few months.

Structural inequality theorists contend major institutions, such as education, and operate primarily to serve the most powerful social interests. Notable in this regard is the conception that schools prepare students for participation in the capitalist economic system (Huffman 2010,p. 66).

The state policies buttress the fact that the only solution to resolve the *Adivasi* problem is to ‘integrate’ them to the mainstream society. That is in praxis no different from assimilation, given that the *Adivasi* self-determination has been never addressed. The integration policy aims at the economic participation of the state’s people which is possible only through the formal education designed for the dominant population. As it is not inclusive of the *Adivasi* people, the integration would only produce the same power structures and the progress of *Adivasi* members would be limited to what the dominant culture dictates. Once again, as observed by Huffman,

“The result is that while educational success ultimately results in economic rewards, the situation is perpetually biased in favour of the dominant society. Faced with an economic reality of what John Ogbu refers to as a “job ceiling,” minorities conclude that educational advancement for them has little meaning” (Huffman 2010, p. 67).

The homogenous education and the universal examination entrance tests and PSC<sup>22</sup> exams for governmental positions exemplify the injustice that the *Adivasi* and *Dalits* peoples face. Indigenous education scholars emphasise on how the schools reflect and reproduce social disparities (Huffman 2010). The system is invested to make the children ready to be employed in the labour market and the education implants the body of knowledge and a specific view of the world which never corresponds to *Adivasi* aspirations and determination. Thus, the school and the system of education destroy the multiculturalism and plurality we celebrate in India which is integral to maintain the social justice as provided by the constitution.

This research project focused on the online educational programmes designed for the *Adivasi* children expresses similar paradigms that will be below analysed using the theoretical framework discussed here.

The translated meaning of the term '*Gothrabandhu*' is 'A relative to the Tribe'. However, it seems that the neighbour knows better what this relative should be doing. The saviour complex is what these governmental programmes are built with. The perception has its roots in the oppressive societal structure, as described in the previous sections. The obscurantist approach derived from these perceptions undermines any attempts to see the structural elements at the school and society related to the existing problems in education.

The *Gothrabandhu* and *Mazhavilpoovu* projects reflect such a compensatory nature of education that would lift the *Adivasi* children, by focusing on building skills and attitudes, rather than looking at the caste prejudices, teacher attitudes and the social inequality that puts students in a difficult position. To borrow Valencia's words,

“Blaming the Victim proved especially valuable in exposing the ideological base of deficit thinking (i.e., the more powerful blame the innocent) and in showing us how deficit thinking translates to action. First, victim- blamers identify social problems. Second, they conduct a study in order to find out how the disadvantaged and advantaged are different. Third, once they identify the differences, they define these differences as the causes of the social problem. Fourth, they set governmental intervention in motion to correct the differences (i.e., deficiencies)” (Valencia 2010, p. 8)

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<sup>22</sup> PSC – Public Service Commission is responsible for conducting examinations for recruitment for the administrative positions and services.

Valencia points out why the policy makers and scholars adhering to the state rules get attracted to such a perspective as it is more parsimonious (Valencia 2010, p.9). It could be assumed that, in the case of the *Adivasi* peoples, the state finds it easier to assimilate them to the mainstream society and resolve the issue, than addressing historical injustices. The state is not ready to upset the people who appropriated the *Adivasi* lands and resources and finds it ensconcing to oppress the demands of the *Adivasi* people and stand firm with justice. On the other hand, the state also finds itself putting up a benignant facade when it projects the *Adivasi* upliftment as philanthropic.

### **3.5 Telling the story right**

There are certain assumptions about why the *Adivasi* children remain outside the realm of education. It is, therefore, critical to examine the conditions under which *Adivasi* children participate in education and to interrogate how these assumptions are formed and perpetuated. Many of these assumptions resulted from the intersections of many historic processes, and, therefore, it is an arduous process to tell the story right. The above discussed theoretical frameworks would help to analyse and understand the context, ensuring that a democratic process is followed by diverse voices represented righteously. With the *Gothrabandhu* teachers being at the centre of the *Adivasi* education today, a nuanced understanding is required to successfully expedite the programme in favour of *Adivasi* aspirations. The field is politically tensile with vested interests, while the need to understand how these factors are engaged with the programme is critical and the analysis of the *Gothrabandhu* voices against the state's voices would help generate a critical understanding of the situation, that could, in turn, be a meaningful contribution to the field of *Adivasi* education.



## 4 Chapter 5: Presentation of data

### 4.1 Voices from the Gothrabandhu teachers.

In this section a few terms are used alternatively respective of the context:

Colony<>Hamlet: The term ‘colony’ is commonly used by the officers to refer to a group of similarly built houses by the state often after displacing and rehabilitating *Adivasi* communities. The term has its origin in the colonial past. The term became synonymous to ‘Hamlets’ and is used as a common term, denoting the house complexes of *Adivasi* people. Colony is also used as a derogatory term and a curse word.

Tribal<>*Adivasi*: Usually, we use the words tribe and *Adivasi* interchangeably to represent the communities that are identified based on a set of criteria and listed under the ‘Scheduled Tribe’ category of the Indian Constitution. There are many other usages like *vanjati*, *girijan*, *janajati* with ontological reference to the communities categorised under the term tribe. However, from the time of Independence, official usage is categorised as ‘Scheduled Tribe’ for those tribal communities listed under article 342 of the Constitution. On the other hand, the activist groups, and communities especially in the 5th schedule areas identify themselves as *Adivasi* (Charles 2020). However, I use the compound ‘*Adivasi* peoples’ in reference to the compound ‘Indigenous peoples (P. L. T. Smith 2021), with the term ‘peoples’ denoting the group of collective identities.

*Gothrabandhu* teachers<>Mentor teachers: Both terms are being used interchangeably and do not have any specific connotations that make them different from each other.

‘Backward’ is a term that is used by the officers and the state to denote deprived sections of people. The term is regularly engaged in the administrative affairs of the state.

The analysis would navigate back and forth to the pre-pandemic and the pandemic times respectively, for the convenience of discussing the themes which essentially underlie the same paradigm in both times, yet in varying degrees. We would find out this paradigm in the discussions here. The term ‘*Adivasi* children’ used in the forthcoming sections does not imply

that the term is referred to all the *Adivasi* children in Wayanad in absolute terms. A small section of *Adivasi* children who belong to the second or third generation of *Adivasi* peoples might not be sharing the same experiences as the first generation of *Adivasi* children attending school. However, the overarching themes are to varying degrees relevant for *Adivasi* children and peoples.

It is important to remember, the nuances in the relationality of the many socio-political factors engaged in the context of *Adivasi* education in Wayanad, which are significantly different from the Indigenous peoples in the other parts of India, particularly in the eastern region. There are certain points of references one needs to have in mind to rightfully analyse the context. Foremost, the relationality of the *Adivasi* / non-*Adivasi* binary in particular in Wayanad, is different from that of the contexts in the other parts of India and the settler nations. Kerala has refused to let the *Adivasi* peoples exercise their forest rights and is delaying the implementation of PESA.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, the social structure ingrained in the graded inequality prevalent in India and Kerala is unparalleled to any other nation's policy. Thirdly, particularly in Kerala, the history and interventions of the Communist Marxist governments further muddles the context, unlike it is in the other states of India. What derived from these policies, is the landlessness of the many *Adivasi* peoples, along with the severe displacement, making any emancipatory efforts like it needs for the education, more challenging for the *Adivasi* peoples. The landlessness is also an aftermath of the continuing colonial forest policies and is exacerbated by the internal migration and the severe encroachment by the migrants to the *Adivasi* plains, eroding their cultural and social fabric. In a certain sense, the experiences of the *Adivasi* peoples against the ambient society are of colonial nature. The above-mentioned factors help us to be informed of the local context as the analysis would explicitly focus on the *Gothrabandhu* and *Mazhavilpoovu* projects.

In this enquiry, I emphasize on listening to the voices of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers being the representative of both the *Adivasi* peoples and the educational/administrative Institutions.

The four mentor teachers who shown benevolence to collaborate with my research project, voicing their stories, are called Amala, Mayna, Mathu and Laila<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. Technically it is meant to provide for the extension of the provisions of part 9 of the constitution, relating to *Panchayats*, the scheduled areas. At the same time, it gives radical governance powers to the tribal community and recognises its traditional community rights over natural resources. With this, active tribal communities and their movements will be strengthened in their struggles on the issues of natural resources, mega projects, displacement and self-governance (Mukul 1997).

<sup>24</sup> The names of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers are replaced with pseudonyms for anonymizing their identities.

I would unravel this context starting the enquiry from the programme *Mazhavilpoovu*. For the ease of understanding the functioning of the programmes in context, it is primarily important to look at how these programmes operate in practice, particularly in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4.2 Who are the *Gothrabandhu* teachers?

The *Gothrabandhu* is a project initiated by the left government of Kerala, that focuses on *Adivasi* education, and it was first implemented in Wayanad in 2016-17, appointing 241 tribal<sup>25</sup> teachers in the district of Wayanad. The '*Gothrabandhu* guidelines' published by the DIET<sup>26</sup> was the primary document that defines who is a *Gothrabandhu* teacher and what are their responsibilities. The guidelines were later subject to small amendments in accordance with the state's policies as stated in the guidelines,

“The individual to be appointed for the project shall be a member from the community, which should be from the main ‘backward’ community in the region where the school is located. This will be an honour for the community and would be an incentive for them to work towards educational development of their own community. Not only that, but it would also help incorporate, their distinct artforms, languages, customary practices and lived experiences, to the educational activities” (Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016).

An important section in these guidelines encompasses the criteria for the selection of mentor teachers and includes the communities from which the teachers shall be selected. The section explicitly states that the communities must belong to the ‘backward’ communities Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayka and Oorali. In case the candidates are not available, the criteria could be extended to include the other tribal communities in the *Gothrabandhu* Government Order. I will discuss the policy level implications of these programmes in the following section.

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<sup>25</sup> 'Tribal' is a term commonly used in administrative affairs.

<sup>26</sup> DIET - District Institute of Education and Training.

The responsibilities of the mentor teachers according to the above-mentioned document are stated as follows:

Teachers must get the Tribal students to reach the schools. Help the tribal students in their studies.

Along the class teacher, Set the stage for making the Tribal children interact with the other children at the school.

Provide the necessary aid and give the teachers an understanding of the Tribal language, Culture, tribal artforms, will be the main job in their field of work.

However, they shall not be made an alternative for the head teacher nor the class teacher.

The communication between the school and the colonies, the consolidated activities and the awareness activities would also come under their responsibilities.

They shall be called mentor teachers as they act as the extended parent at the school helping them with the children's welfare" (Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016).

By 2019, a total of 275 *Gothrabandhu* teachers were appointed. As described in the guidelines, the mentor teachers were supposed to be appointed according to the community's composition of children at school. However, the community composition criteria were not followed as there was lack of eligible candidates from the 'backward' communities particularly from Paniya and Adiya, according to the official sources from DIET and ITDP. There are many instances where in a school of mainly Paniya or other 'backward' community students, the appointed mentor teacher comes from a Kuruma community or a Kurichya community that are considered to be economically and socially advanced classes. A critical reflection on this paradigm is to be discussed further in the later sections.

### **4.3 'First Bell' for whom?**

The Government Order (GO) for the 'First Bell' was released on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. According to the GO, the 'First Bell' education programme on digital platforms was scheduled to be starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020.

The recommendations listed in the programme include a section addressing the children having no access to the television, mobile phone, or internet. It is advised that the class teacher must communicate with these children to understand their issues and discuss with the head teacher to arrange alternative facilities. Depending on the local standards, the arrangements must be

organised in the local libraries, Akshaya centres<sup>27</sup> or any other appropriate institutions in the area. It is also advised that the SSK coordinators, SPC<sup>28</sup>, NSS<sup>29</sup> volunteers and the ‘Little kites’<sup>30</sup> members should ensure the employment of projectors and laptops to project the downloaded episodes in convenient places. School’s IT services could be used to share with the children the downloaded videos of the whole week together in 1 or 2 days (‘First Bell’ Government order’ 2020).

The teachers are advised to contact the children through social media, telephone, or any other means, before and after the telecasted episodes, to motivate to watch the episodes and ensure that any doubts are being addressed.

It has to be noticed that, nowhere in the order, the ground realities of the *Adivasi* children are addressed in pragmatic terms while no hint has been included regarding the *Mazhivilpoovu* in the document, although the *Mazhivilpoovu* is part of the online education programme. The *Mazhivilpoovu* project commenced a month after the introduction of the ‘First Bell’. A critical analysis of the terms in the document will be discussed ahead.

As mentioned above, the *Samoohya padanamuri* (community learning centres) established by STDD, were already partially functioning, while other *padana kendras* (local learning centres), which are temporarily built nearer to the colonies, were used as spaces for the *Adivasi* children to get access to TV for viewing respective online classes. Primarily, the *Gothrabandhu* teachers were employed to look after these children with tribal promoters<sup>31</sup> to help them. General teachers also visited the learning centres to give adequate assistance to the children.

As mentioned earlier, the suicide of the *Adivasi* student Devika stirred up the discourses on access to digital devices that is a severe issue in the state, and the government took up the concern and speeded up the efforts to make the facilities available for the students without

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<sup>27</sup> The *Akshaya* centers are a government initiative to build a network of centers directed to the disadvantaged communities to help them access the Internet and other IT services, bridging the digital divide.

<sup>28</sup> The Student Police Cadet (SPC) Project is a school-based initiative by Kerala Police, implemented jointly by the Departments of Home and Education, and supported by Departments of Transport, Forest, Excise and Local Self-Government.

<sup>29</sup> National Service Scheme for youth volunteers.

<sup>30</sup> Little KITEs’ IT Clubs is a unique initiative of KITE, which feature over 1 lakh student members for promoting ICT(Information Communication Technology) activities.

<sup>31</sup> Tribal promoters are *Adivasi* members who are appointed to act as a bridge between the administration and the *Adivasi* peoples for different governmental programmes and other governmental services.

access to devices and internet. The state government, the other political parties and the civil society joined forces collected and distributed laptops, tablets, and other devices to the disadvantaged children. I wonder if the child would not have taken her own life, would the state have responded to this matter? The question is whether the state considers these children to be an integral part of the society or not.

When the pandemic hit and schools were shut down, the children were sent back to their homes from the residential schools and all the children had to stay at their hamlets. When the 'First Bell' programme started many *Adivasi* children were not aware of the existence of such a programme, directed to them. They learned about the 'First Bell' months after it 'rang'. *Geethanandan*, an imminent *Adivasi* activist and scholar who runs 'Adishakthi Summer school' for the *Adivasi* children, shared his experiences visiting the colonies. As he informed me,

“Nothing is happening in any of their colonies during online education. They are not watching anything on TV. There are children who don't even know that there are online classes for them (Interview with Geethanandan 2020).”

Listening to the experiences of the mentor teachers regarding the 'First Bell' demonstrates how the system kept these children outside the education for the whole year ahead and forth. Below, there are a few extracts from different conversations shared by the mentor teachers.

“For us, online classes started on Jun 10th or June 15<sup>th</sup>. About 19 children came from the Nellikachaal colony. Now, one or two children are only coming. The problem arises, as the children who are coming are from different schools. Some children don't even have a book or pencil. They may not know which chapter they are studying. No one calls them or ensures that they come and attend the classes (Interview with Amala)”.

“Another difficulty that children face is that they do not have a bag or any books. There is a male teacher who used to buy many notebooks for giving it to these children. Pencils too. Also, some people used to provide bags and umbrellas for the children. Now that the schools are closed, no one minds ( Interview with Amala).”

After the classes started, since there were no devices and TVs at their homes, a meeting was held, and many parents bought smartphones. The teacher tried to show them the downloaded episodes shared on WhatsApp.

“I started a WhatsApp group and used to share content. But the phone will be with the parent [during the day], so children get access to phone only at night. Many children don’t know how to read or write. That is the main problem. They think that nobody is there to take care of them (Interview with Amala).”

After the concerns were raised by civil society and concerned parties, the state took some steps to resolve the access issue by building an ‘archipelago’ of supporting institutions nearer to the hamlets, namely *Samootha padanakendras* (local learning centres) and *Samootha padana muri*, respectively established by the Department of Education and Tribal department (STDD). On a convenience basis, some local libraries, *Anganwadis*,<sup>32</sup> and other buildings are used to provide access to TV, gathering the children who do not have access to TV or any means for online learning at home. To an extent, the problem got resolved in the initial stages, with the help of the mentor teachers, tribal promoters, and officers. However, things took a turn for the worse again.

In an investigative report by ‘True Copy-Think’, an online news portal on the digital divide, a few *Adivasi* hamlets near to the *Karapuzha* reservoir are shown, reflective of the condition of the *Adivasi* hamlets in Wayanad during the pandemic.

A few high school girls shared their experiences. After the online classes started, they couldn’t study at all. They did not have laptop or any devices of their own. The schools and the learning centres which were set up later were too far from their colony. Before the pandemic, there was a ‘*Gothrasarathy*’<sup>33</sup> vehicle which used to come and pick up the children. Now, this scheme has also stopped.

In the hamlets, most of the houses do not have electricity, and the few mobile phones available have not been adequate. In a family of three children, there was one phone for all, while another family of two children also had only one phone. Many other families do not have phones at all. They charge their mobile phones with a solar cell installed in the colony. Some of them go to a shop nearby for charging, which is time-consuming and costs 3 rupees for a single charge.

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<sup>32</sup> The *Anganwadi* system is a type of rural child care centre in India. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.

<sup>33</sup> *Gothra sarathy* is a scheme initiated by the STDD granting funds for the vehicles for the *Adivasi* children to travel to school and forth.

During the lockdown, they were not able to do that either. With solar batteries, they will be lucky if they could get some light for the night.

The mentor teacher who visits this colony, shared another instance of how she manages to do teaching in a learning centre temporarily arranged with a plastic sheet as a roof. She carries a full charged laptop and her personal phone with downloaded episodes for the past days. She gives her laptop to the 6 children from the 8<sup>th</sup> standard, her personal phone to the 9<sup>th</sup> standard students and the tribal promoter's phone to the 10<sup>th</sup> standard students. The class ends when the battery gets empty ('Unbelievable story of the digital divide between Kerala and the Hamlets/Think Stories' 2021).

Laila, the mentor teacher shares a similar story experienced with her students.

“What I got to say is, if you see, there are three colonies nearer to the Pdanamuri that I am going now. Only a few students from the 1st to the 10th standard would watch television, or they will be compelled by their parents to watch. The rest of them, don't even watch tv. Their ability to read and write has left them, after the online class commenced... Today, when we went the colony, their classes are going on online. Their homes do have TV now, but none of them is watching TV. They were all playing. When they were asked, they would say <teacher, we have watched the episode. We are playing after that but we are going there when the classes are running> (Interview with Laila).”

Mayna, however, manages to make her students to watch the episodes they miss. She told me that, at the beginning, the children used to not watch television and never had questions. Now, thanks to her efforts, if they miss some episodes, she downloads the missed episodes and sends them to the one phone with access to WhatsApp, in the colony. Since all the children are from the same colony, the children can watch it together and learn from it (Interview with Mayna). Mathu sees the new learning programme in practice as something not helpful for her children. She described,

“Now as you know, the teaching has been done through Padanakendras (local learning centre). In my opinion, it is not effectively happening, as many children don't reach the class. For instance, the 10<sup>th</sup> classes have started, but before that, even the 10<sup>th</sup> standard students were not going to their classes.

Before, there used to be a 'Gothrasarathy' vehicle. So, the mentor teachers used to go to the hamlets and collect the children at hand and make them reach the school. Along with



the mentor teachers, other teachers also had the responsibility, hadn't so? But, now that we are going to Padanakendras near to the hamlets or in the hamlets, as the children get a glimpse of us, they disappear. Then we will have to search them in the forests, or the fields, where they will be hiding. By the time, we find them it will be sunset ( Interview with Mathu).”

Laila shared her version of the same context as,

“We arranged televisions at the nearby Padanakendras and other Anganavadis. Initially, except one or two, all the children used to come for the classes. Eventually, almost everyone started to come in time of the online episodes. Then, later, when the children realised that the classes are not so much, as it is just half an hour mostly, they stopped coming for even to watch the small sessions. When we gather a few and go to watch the sessions, the children would leave with their friends for playing.

Now, I am going to a Padanakendra near to my own house. It is a forest area. Many of the houses have television now. The ones, that doesn't have TV would run away, while they see us coming. When we ask them to join, they would say that they will watch later. If you miss that day's class, then that day's class is lost. Whatever we tell them they don't seem to understand. Now, a very few students come to these classes.

In Vellamunda side, no one had televisions. They all started watching these, eventually after the televisions were installed in Anganvadis and Padanakendras, they started watching it. Many classes were over by then, but we used to show them the classes on mobile phones, saying these many classes are here. (Showing them the episodes together). They will just see and leave, without even realising what they just saw (Interview with Laila).”

All the mentor teachers who participated in this research echoed the idea that the way the classes were going is ultimately not beneficial for the children. Amala sees her children coming and watching TV for the sake of it, and, thus, this is not a meaningful exercise for the children. She shared,

The children are mechanically coming and watching TV and going back. It is not a meaningful process for them. They used to tell <We will not come here simply to watch Television> ( Interview with Amala)”

The digital divide that exists in this state is being explicitly reflected in the stories that are shared here. The general paradigm that we can see across these stories adhering to the lack of access and infrastructures are the following:

1. There is a lack of owning devices such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets and televisions.
2. There is a lack of access to Internet
3. There is not electricity in remote colonies.
4. The distance between the colonies, the schools, and the *Padanakendras* discourages the teachers from coming to the colonies and the children reaching their schools.
5. There is a lack of institutional support like *Gothrasarathy* transport.

However, the problem is much larger as we look closer. Even when the children are getting access to televisions and devices, they are not interested in taking part in the process. It could be assumed that the problem goes beyond the access. I would further elaborate on this, after sharing these mentor teachers experiences before the pandemic, and a comparative reflection would bring about a clearer picture.

#### **4.4 Walking with Gothrabandhu: The Gothrabandhu programme in practice**

The *Gothrabandhu* project has brought a tremendous change in the education of the *Adivasi* peoples, without a doubt. However, the current state of the *Adivasi* education is still abysmally critical. There are several concerns about its future and the scope of progressing towards the right education, as the *Adivasi* peoples aspire. We will look at the diverse aspects of the *Gothrabandhu* project and its implications in the context of Wayanad.

Foremost, the presence of an *Adivasi* member at school is the first and most important step in the *Adivasi* education from time memorial. A person at the school is familiar to the lifeworld of the *Adivasi* children. Such person could communicate with them in their mother tongue, and with their community and parents. Mentor teachers express their happiness with the experiences they had at the schools.

“The other teachers used to say, when they say I am arriving at the school, the children would run towards me. They younger ones would approach me and tell me whatever they got to say.

There is a major change for the students. When I interact with the students from the 1st to the 4th standard, they do respond as well. They wouldn't hesitate to share anything with me, for example, matters at their home, or if they didn't have pencil or book or anything, they would share with me. So, I have become a teacher whom they can talk openly"( Interview with Laila).

"They had difficulties in recognising the letters along with difficulties in reading and writing. The other teachers did not have a good attitude towards these children. They talked to us as like they were talking to someone at their home. There is a positive change in the academics also. They can now recognise letters and symbols. The children behave well with other teachers and other children. Dropouts are less now compared to the past" ( Interview with Mayna).

"Some children were very reluctant or lazy to come here. Children of class 10 used to come to my class on alternative days. They were quite interested in attending my class. Earlier, LP(Lower Primary) children were not willing to participate in any of the events here, but once I joined this school, things changed. I joined in September, so I couldn't do much that year, because the exam started in February. Those children didn't know any alphabet. But last year I taught three ST (Scheduled tribe) children of class 1. Two of them know how to read and write very well now" ( Interview with Amala).

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the status of the *Adivasi* children would have been much worse than it is now without the *Gothrabandhu* teachers. In the previous section we can see how the mentor teachers are going out of their ways to ensure the children are taken care of, although it is a much bigger problem than what they could handle.

"If we are inactive, they won't be able to learn anything. They are getting whatever they are getting only because we are trying to make the classes available. Otherwise, there will be none" ( Interview with Mathu).

There are certain critical concerns raised beside the positive changes that these stories present. One concern rest with the condescending attitudes of the other teachers. A second one is the learning gap they still do have with the other children. Third, another concern pertains to whether the reduced number of dropouts is a phenomenon that gets extrapolated to the higher

standards. The fourth and most critical concern is whether *Adivasi* epistemologies are being recognised or not. We will interrogate these concerns later individually.

#### **4.4.1 One Gothrabandhu teacher for all?**

The criteria for the selection of the mentor teachers explicitly state that their appointment should be based on the composition of the children in the area the teachers are appointed. The office of the (STDD) Scheduled Tribe Development Department denied my request to provide any statistical information regarding the appointment of the mentor teachers, even after I exercised my right to file an RTI.<sup>34</sup> However, according to official sources, a large number of the appointees in Wayanad come from the Kuruma and Kurichya communities. It is said that there were not enough eligible candidates appeared for the selection process from the Paniya or the other ‘backward’ communities. The selection committee had to give priority to the eligible candidates, who were mostly originally from the Kuruma and Kurichya community.

A few instances from this context before the pandemic are presented here that reflect the implications of such a discrepancy in the process. In most of the schools of Wayanad, there are children from distinctly diverse *Adivasi* communities studying in one school and, thus, the student composition in most of the classes is diverse. Ideally, with the guidelines of the *Gothrabandhu* project, the mentor teacher appointed in the first standard must be from the largest ‘backward’ community in the area. Even in the ideal scenario, where the appointed teacher is of the largest ‘backward’ community in the area, the appointed teacher will be equipped to only communicate to the children in their own community. The other communities speaking different languages are left unaddressed. Although being the most critical concern that the *Gothrabandhu* project is built on, the situation demonstrates that it is getting sabotaged here.

Mayna, Mathu and Laila explained how they have managed their children in this situation.

“Teachers used to talk about the language gap. Some teachers don’t understand Kurumba language which is spoken by some children. There is a communication problem that exists

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<sup>34</sup> RTI- Right To Information. The ‘Right to Information’ is an act of the Parliament of India which sets out the rules and procedures regarding citizens’ right to information. A citizen can file an RTI for any information accessible to the public by a simple request.

between the teacher and the children. I belong to the Paniya community. Children belonging to Kurichya community are also there but, they don't need our class. They already know how to read and write" (Interview with Mayna).

In Laila's school there are children in the first standard from Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayka and Kuruma. She belongs to the Kuruma community, and she only understands the Paniya language, though she can't speak it. She finds it difficult, therefore, to communicate, however she tries her best to help the children. Mathu reported that, although she belongs to the Kuruma community, fortunately she knew how to speak the Paniya language. So, it was not hard for her to communicate with Paniya children, who comprised the only community represented in the class. There is no further discussion on this discrepancy as the state has no plans ahead to resolve this problem. It remains currently unaddressed.

#### **4.4.2 Mentor teachers and their overburdening responsibilities**

What should the day of a mentor teacher look like? The guidelines explicitly state the schedule a mentor teacher has to follow:

“9.30: Bring the Tribal students from the colonies.

9.30-10.00: Check whether all the students are attending. Enquiring in case of absence. Understand the challenges and issues faced by the students. Share this information with headteacher and colleagues. Communicate with the parents of the absentees over the telephone.

10.00: Act as the additional teacher in 1<sup>st</sup> std. Make the tasks in the cognitive learning process for the students. Help the children let out their vocal expressions, give support in the group activities. Framing the parallel modules in their language in need. Help them read. Help them relate the learning activity to their lived environment.

13.00-14.00: Pay special attention to healthy eating habits during the lunch hour. Clean hands and mouth, ensure the utensils are washed, eat without spilling, ensure a clean environment for this also are their responsibilities. Also to observe, how the other children interact with the other children and vice versa, help them socialise. Find the challenges, difficulties and limitations faced by the children and document this information, also share with the other teachers to design activities that resolve the issues.

14:00-16:00: Preparations for the Balasabha which has to be held weekly. Total Balasabha could be organised once per month. Organise the Balsabhas in respective classes ensuring everyone's participation. Tribal artforms and songs are to be thought about. Formation of equal groups must happen in every classes. Games, fun activities must be organised using these groups.

16:00-17:00: Visiting the colonies/homes of the absentees. Activities involving attracting parents to CPT has to happen in this time." (Scheduled Tribes Development Department 2016).

By looking at the chart, it is clear that the mentor teachers have no break during their shift, and their responsibilities are much more than those of the regular teachers at schools. While the regular teachers start their day at school at 9.30 am at the earliest, the mentor teacher has to start much earlier. They must go with the *Gothrasarathy* vehicle and collect the children from their respective colonies. In practice, they will have to start early. There are many mentor teachers in Wayanad, who start as early as 6 am in the morning to reach the school on time. In the previous sections, the mentor teachers have mentioned how they help the higher standard children as well for learning the fundamentals. In practice, they take care of not only the 1<sup>st</sup> standard children, but their responsibilities extend to up to the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. As the mentor teachers stated,

"There are more ST children in higher classes. Before, they had difficulty in reading and writing. Sitting in other classes used to be meaningless for them without knowing how to read or write. So, I used to take extra sessions in the morning" (Interview with Amala).

"When I was appointed, there were children from the higher standards (like 2,3,4 standards) who didn't know to read and write. So for them there was a special session after 3 pm to help them read and write" (Interview with Mathu).

These two examples demonstrate that the teachers need to dedicate additional sessions before or after the official schedule.

From the experiences during the pandemic and the online learning shared by the mentor teachers in the previous sections, the extent of their efforts in ensuring the education of the children is evident. They are taking care of not only of the primary standard children but every child in the colonies ('Unbelievable story of the digital divide between Kerala and the Hamlets/Think Stories' 2021). As pointed out by Amala,

“I have the responsibility to take care of all classes. To teach them subjects like Hindi is difficult for me since I don’t have command over the language. Children do not attend the classes meaningfully. The situation is so bad that even children in class 9 and 10 do not know how to read or write well. In this time of COVID-19, it would be very useful for children if they are taught alphabets and how to read or write in English, by the time the school reopens (Interview with Amala).”

Despite their hard work, their wages are delayed and there are no incentives or additional benefits like it is for the other teachers. During their summer vacation, the mentor teachers are not getting any salary like the regular teachers too. Consequently, many teachers seek for other jobs during the vacation period to curb their financial struggles.

An officer of DIET once shared,

“One of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers once told me that their posting is from June to March 30<sup>th</sup>. After March, what will they do? In simple logic, we could think like they could save money for the April-May months, and it could be managed. But that’s not what is happening. They go for other jobs. I have teachers who asked for permission to go for climbing Arecanut trees<sup>35</sup>. Even if they do that, will the people allow them to climb? They would say, <hey, aren’t you a teacher? Should you be doing all these?> This is how the society would handle these situations”( Interview with Sebastian).

The mentor teachers are appointed on daily wages (‘*Gothrabandhu* Government Order’ 2017). Many of the mentor teachers complain that they are not getting the deserved salaries in time. Many instances demonstrate that the salaries were delayed over 3 months (‘Unbelievable story of the digital divide between Kerala and the Hamlets/Think Stories’ 2021). Another instance was shared by a DIET officer regarding the *Gothrabandhu* teachers says,

“While the *Gothrabandhu* teachers are given more responsibilities during the pandemic, they were not given the priority to be vaccinated, where the general teachers and other frontline health workers were all prioritised” (Interview with Sebastian).

The amount of work they do should be awarded much higher recognition and a more competitive salary. The overburdening responsibilities of their position should also have been taken into account when determining the latter. The position is temporary now and has been

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<sup>35</sup> Kerala’s topography is favourable for arecanut trees and there are many arecanut plantations in Kerala. The arecanuts are used in variety of products such as mouth fresheners and also to chew with betel leaves.

under consideration. The process seems to be stuck once again in the bureaucratic embezzlement.

Mathu is a mentor teacher from Kuruma community, and she expressed her anxiety over the probable repercussions she is anticipating happening, regarding the teachers' demand for making their posts permanent. According to official sources, she worries that, as the project *Gothrabndhu* belongs to a government scheme particularly devoted to the 'backward' communities, ie, Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayka and Oorali, these communities will be given preference, and, thus, her job might be lost in the process, as she doesn't belong to these communities. She responds to what the officers says as, "*We have developed economically. That's what the state is saying (giggles with sarcasm)*" (Interview with Mathu).

#### **4.4.3 Other teachers' attitudes**

The teachers who get appointed at the schools in Wayanad are the representatives of the dominant population, as the *Adivasi* representation has been minimal. They reflect the perspectives of the dominant narratives, perceiving the *Adivasi* peoples as people who are primitive and in need of development. The view that tribal peoples are inferior, as they lack cognitive abilities necessary for acquiring modern knowledge and skills, is pervasive (Susamma 2011,p.13). In Susamma's article on 'Socio cultural reproduction', the author explains how the other teacher's perceptions are reproducing social inequalities.

In this research, the mentor teachers who shared their experiences regarding the other teachers were cautious of not demeaning the work of their colleagues. However, it is evident that many of the other teachers were not showing their best, when it comes to the matters of the *Adivasi* children. Below, a few instances from the mentor teachers' stories are following.

Laila shared her memory of an incident that happened earlier,that haunted her for long:

"It was in 2019, when something of that sort had happened. There was a meeting held regarding a problem related to a teacher at the school. If they would have informed me that I should not participate, I wouldn't have taken part in that meeting. Then when I was attending the meeting the manager of the school told me that I should not participate in the meeting and should leave the premises. I left. Later the teachers were planning a tour. None of the teachers called me for the tour. Two or three teachers came to me asking whether I



am going for the tour. I said <Yes, I want to>. One of the teachers was given the charge to organise the tour. She did not ask me. I felt they are knowingly distancing me” (Interview with Laila).

Mayna shared how the teachers were treating the children when she was appointed for first time at her school:

“Some teachers think that these children will not understand what they teach, and they don’t know letters. Usually, these teachers make the children sit in the backbench of the class” (Interview with Mayna).

Laila further stated:

“Not only that, In Adivasi matters, they are not really considering, our children as much as they do with the other children. Especially after when the online classes started” (Interview with Laila).

Mathu as well shared that, the teachers think the matters of the *Adivasi* children are the sole responsibility of the mentor teachers:

“My house is 25 km away from the school. So, if I start at 7.30 in the morning, I will only be able to reach the school at 10am. On many such days, when I reach the school, the children wouldn’t have reached the school. But if you see, the houses of these children are on the other side of the road in front of the school. So, the teachers at the school would wait for me to call the children, whereas they could have easily done that too. The teachers are staying nearby the school, and many of them have vehicles. However, I have to come from that far and get the children from the colonies. So, this has caused distress to me, as it seems to be my only responsibility to look after the *Adivasi* children. They too can go and call these children at least once. But they have the understanding that these children are my only responsibility, which is painful” (Interview with Mathu).

During the pandemic, while the ‘First Bell’ was running, many mentor teachers shared their experiences with other teachers not taking care of the *Adivasi* children as they would for their own children. Amala told me that when she was in charge of 3 learning centres, she couldn’t manage them alone, and there was no other available mentor teacher who could come and help her.

“Even if a mentor teacher couldn’t pay attention, the other teachers who come for duty could have paid attention to the children from their schools. But they don’t do that. They

come to class, but they don't pay much attention. They come and go only for the sake of completing their duty" (Interview with Amala).

In another centre established in a forest office, her experience with other teachers was similar.

"These teachers take classes till noon. Then teachers leave the classes to people in the forest office and go home. They only started to stay in the forest office till evening after we intervened in this matter. Still, they would make up silly excuses like they didn't have food, in order leave the place sooner. I have stayed there many times without having food" (Interview with Amala).

There are many cases where the teachers come to the centres and show the episodes of the whole week together in a row and, then they leave the centre early with the laptop left open assuming the children would watch. Though the participation of these teachers is not only dependent on their approach towards the *Adivasi* children, but there have also been cases that they are unable to reach the remote areas that are not easily accessible. However, largely their behaviour is dictated by their prejudices, reflecting the dominant common perception that the *Adivasi* peoples are inferior to them in the caste structure. We will come back to this in the later sections.

#### **4.4.4 Does Gothrabandhu erase the learning gap?**

According to the vision explained in the guidelines of the *Gothrabandhu* project, the scheme aims at the socialisation of the *Adivasi* children and the reduction of the learning gap caused by the language barrier. However, has this learning gap been reduced and moved towards a future where there won't be a learning gap between the *Adivasi* children and the non-*Adivasi* children? Why are there no discussions of individual development of the *Adivasi* peoples, independent of a comparative judgement?

There are some insights to this context shared by the mentor teachers during this research, which are significant and related to the experiences of the children. Mathu talks about how her children in first standard felt inferior compared to the non-*Adivasi* children.

"Because these children never went through a pre-primary education in any Anganwadis or nurseries before they reach the first standard, they directly get introduced to schools. So, when they reach the class, they are not able to take the books, hold a pencil or any other

basic skills like that of the other children. What is happening is, here at our school there is a nursery, and one or two children comes there. But most of the parents are disinterested in sending them to the nursery. The reason is that the nursery demands a fee, which their parents cannot afford. I don't really know about the conditions of all the other schools here. But here only one or two children comes to the nursery” (Interview with Mathu).

Mathu like all the mentor teachers ensure that these children will learn their basics in the first standard. But, by the time these children learn, the non-*Adivasi* children must have moved ahead.

“When the teachers attend the other children, we help the rest, our children. The other teachers are not able to take care of them, because even after the other children have already finished with their writing, etc. our children are failing to write or even pick up the books. Also, when the other children write what's on the board to their copies, our children are unable to do that. So, we sit with them help them to cope up with other children. By the end of the year, they are able to write, however it is difficult for them to read like the other children do...The other children are coming after finishing firstly the Anganvadi, then the nursery, LKG and UKG to finally join the first standard, where our children are entering the school right away. The other children are already well versed with alphabets, and English skills before joining. These children are not able to compete with the other children as by the time they pick up writing and reading by the end of year, the other children who are already well versed with the language have progressed further. The gap remains even after the mentor teachers' appointments” (Interview with Mathu).

In the larger picture, in Kerala, a state long now focused on education policies, education is given a high priority among the people. It has nowadays become normative for the children of the non-*Adivasi* population to receive their pre-primary education. There is adequate infrastructural support and aid by the state through *Anganvadis*, pre-primary schools, and nurseries, while today there are also pre-primary classes in the aided, unaided<sup>36</sup> and private schools. Some of the aided and unaided schools ask for a fee, as the staff appointed would be temporary and has to be paid. However, for the *Adivasi* children the support is inadequate.

In the section ‘One *Gothrabandhu* for all?’ Mayna tells about the Kurichya children in her class not in need of her help in their studies. She said they already knew Malayalam well. Within the

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<sup>36</sup> An unaided educational institution, is a class of private educational institutes in India. They are distinct from so-called ‘aided’ and private educational institutions. The term covers institutes ranging from primary schools to higher education colleges.

*Adivasi* peoples, this divide is evident. Kuruma and Kurichya, children are living in a more socially integrated environment unlike the ‘backward’ communities, such as Paniya, Adiya, Oorali and Kattunayka, that are more marginalised than the rest of the sections. Particularly the Paniya children are challenged the most compared to the others (Susamma 2011).

Laila draws her understanding of the situation of the Paniya children being challenged in the class over the other children:

“It could be because the Paniya children are the first generation to access school. Other communities are more forward as their children now are mostly coming from the second generation or, in the case of Kurichya Kuruma, the third generation to get education” (Interview with Laila).

Similarly, Amala draws on her own experience:

“Children from different communities like Kurichyar, Paniya, Kadar are studying here. The children from Kadar community know how to read and write more than children from other communities. The children belonging to Paniya community struggle more than others in almost every aspect” ( Interview with Amala).

The children feel inferior to the other classmates from the beginning of their education. It could be assumed that this is one of the reasons for their reluctance to attend the schools or participate meaningfully in the learning process.

#### **4.5 Out of school.**

Dropouts are a critical concern with the *Adivasi* children. As the number of dropouts was not declining, the matter gained attention from the departments to study and resolve the problem. The outcomes of such a deliberative process gave rise to the inception of the *Gothrabandhu* project. Has the programme been successful in reducing the dropouts?

**Tab.1 Number of the Out of school Adivasi children from 2016-17 to 2020-21 in Wayanad, Kerala<sup>37</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
2015-16	1331
2016-17	1140
2017-18	968
2018-19	1200
2019-20	1232
2020-21	902
2021-22	693

The *Gothrabandhu* project was pioneered in 2016-17 and has been running since then. The data on the number of dropouts after the introduction of *Gothrabandhu* shows a slight decrease in the number of dropouts. However, it is important to critically look at the statistics which demonstrate that the total number of children remaining ‘out of school’ is still significant, although the project has been running for 5 years. My interviews with the mentor teachers showed that they teachers also agree that the number of ‘out of school children’ in the primary standards has been significantly decreased, however, the number of the ‘out of school’ students in the higher standards remains high.

In Amala’s school, for example, there were no dropouts after she joined. Similarly, the other mentor teachers said that the children from the primary standards started to increasingly come to the school after the teachers joined.

“Last year there were no dropouts. When I visited the colony of the children who were absent and asked them to come to school, they started to come back to school. Dropouts are happening more among high school children” (Interview with Amala).

“We still have dropouts. However, the young ones are coming to school. Even when they are hesitant, if we go at their colonies and call them, they will appear the next day. The 8th and 9th standard students ought to go for other jobs. Even if we go or other teachers go to colonies to request them to come to school, they will say, <whatever you would say, we wouldn’t com - no matter what you say>. We wouldn’t have any words at that moment” (Interview with Laila).

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<sup>37</sup> The list was provided by SSK after my continued requests. They have not been able to provide a comprehensive report as requested by RTI, during the data collection of this research.

The *Gothrabandhu* teachers visit the colonies every day to ensure the children are coming to school. Their experience from these visits shows how these students from higher classes are disinterested in participating in any school-related activities.

“The parents would say, disregarding the parental pressure, and also when there is a vehicle available, the children don’t want to go to school. They would say that the children don’t listen to them” (Interview with Laila).

Furthermore, Laila shared with me that the children would not respond to the mentor teachers, unless they first talk to them to gain their trust.

“It could be that when we interact with them closely, they would respond well. But when we talk about school, they don’t enjoy that.

We too have the higher standard students who do not know how to read and write at Vellamunda school. But they never come or approach me for help. Also, when I approach them, they deny to collaborate with me and learn.

Now, if you see the children, they would tell me, <I have younger siblings, I have to look after them, how will I be able to come, teacher?>. This happened when I visited the colony.” (Interview with Laila).

There are a few significant factors that came up in the research process regarding the problems faced by the *Adivasi* children, possibly causing their reluctant attitude to attend courses. I will discuss those in the following sections.

#### **4.6 “Ashamed to be me”**

Mentor teachers Mathu, Mayna and Amala narrated a very significant experience shared with many *Adivasi* children. A sense of shame was prevalent among many *Adivasi* children particularly from the Paniya, Adiya, and Kattunayka communities.

“Children think that they will be a laughing stock if they use their mother language at school” (Interview with Amala).

“In general, when we speak their language, they feel some kind of shame. When they hear us speak their language, they are seeing it in some other way. Initially, when I used to speak, they would giggle. Eventually, they started responding. It seems to not be a problem for the young ones. But the older children seem to have an issue when listening to their own language spoken by others. There was a teacher from their own neighbourhood who used to talk in their dialect. Then, those children used to feel ashamed for some reason. For them, the formal education should be instructed in Malayalam, but along with that, it is ok to use their own language to clarify what is not understood.

See, they use their own language among themselves and outside the class. Even inside the class between them they speak in their own language. Inside the classroom, they are in their own world and hesitate to interact with other children. Even when we forcefully mix them, they still keep it to themselves, without interacting with other children” (Interview with Mathu).

When I asked her why the children feel this inhibition, Mathu shared her understanding of how the children may be feeling.

“For sure, they do have an inhibition when interacting with the rest of the children. They have this self-doubt, of making a mistake while they talk, or do something that might attract negative consequences. When I go, I try to let them mingle, play games and showcase their talents. I was even successful in making them participate in the school election and one Adivasi child was once elected to be the second leader at the school. So, these children were able to do things like the rest of the children, thanks to our active intervention. So, basically, if we appreciate their work, they are able to execute things, but still there is an inhibition even after all our effort”(Interview with Mathu).

In Mayna’s experiences there are instances where the other children made fun of the Paniya children talking in their mother tongue.

“There is a situation where they stay away from other children. When ST(Scheduled Tribe) children speak in their language, other children make fun of them”(Interview with Mayna).

Mathu responds to my question regarding why the children may be adopting this inhibition and the sense of shame from their lived experience and she explicitly shared her perspective on this paradigm related to the larger picture.

“You know, wherever they go, you can see them moving aside towards the margins, without participating. Even their parents do the same. It may be because of the history of such experiences they had to endure” (Interview with Mathu).

The *Adivasi* people, particularly the “backward” sections, such as Paniya, Adiya, Oorali and Kattunayka, have a history of slavery (Susamma 2011). Until the 70s, the region of Wayanad experienced a symbolic custom of slave trade during the festival of *Valliyurkaavu* temple. The Paniya and other slave communities used to be sold along with the land they were living in, or were sold as a commodity by the landlords in recent history (Santhosh 2008, p.67). The social discrimination still continues, and the shyness could be assumed to have derived from this. The shyness experienced by the children listening to their mother tongue is a paradigm which became more apparent in the stories shared by the mentor teachers in the context of the *Mazhavilpoovu* programme. The discussion would continue in the following section.

The mother tongue directly indicates the cultural identity of the speaker. The non-*Adivasi* children reflect the perceptions of the dominant society which are derogatory as they consider the *Adivasi* children as inferior beings. At school, the children receive education only in Malayalam language, which reproduces the attitude of conceiving of the *Adivasi* languages as something of lesser importance. To my question on how they feel about not learning anything in *Adivasi* languages at school, and whether this fact can cause the demise of these languages and the culture, they were not feeling strongly about it. On the contrary, Amala does not think this can damage the *Adivasi* languages:

“The children usually speak in Malayalam language only at school. The children communicate in their own language when they reach home. So, there is no change in that. During class intervals, ST children talk with other children from their own community, like they used to talk with their family members. They use Malayalam language while communicating with the non-*Adivasi* children” (Interview with Amala).

As presented in the previous section on ‘Out of school’, Mathu also echoes the idea that such problems pertinent to the adverse environment at school and the language barrier may not be causing the dropouts. Instead, it is mainly economic aspects that keep these children engaged and discouraged from going to school.



Languages also represent cultures, and the *Adivasi* knowledge is embedded in their language. The curriculum does not address the *Adivasi* histories, contributions to society, heroes, or epistemologies. I asked the mentor teachers whether they try to do anything in their further engaging with the *Adivasi* language in classroom. They have not done much in that regard. There is no scope or space for such an intervention as the *Gothrabandhu* teachers are limited to act as merely a bridge for the teachers to communicate to the children. However, some of the teachers in isolated cases have tried to address the *Adivasi* culture inside the classroom.

“I will share a personal experience from my classroom. I tried to draw a pot and named it ‘kudam’ (the Malayalam word for ‘pot’). But the children never agreed with me and they called it in their language- ‘cheppudam’ (cheppulla kudam)”(Interview with Amala).

These significant acts of recognition of *Adivasi* cultural elements were, however, not warmly appreciated and could, thus, not be seen as a big step towards an improvement of the *Adivasi* self-esteem.

In a visit I made to a ‘Single teacher school<sup>38</sup>’ in Wayanad, there was a poster on the notice board where local names of different mushrooms were written. The teacher did it in response to the training she received. When I asked her about the reasons, she said it is a one-teacher school and only *Adivasi* children attend. Therefore, she designed this poster as everyone could relate to the content. However, nowhere else I saw such an attempt during my whole research process.

Usually, the cultural dimension of *Adivasi* identity is displayed at school during occasional *Adivasi* festivals and art performances. The *Vattakkali*<sup>39</sup> dance is a significant artform among Paniyas *Adivasi* children performed by the children at their school. However, the children also wanted to perform other non-traditional dances.

“Boys like it very much. They like to play ‘thudi’ (a musical instrument). I think the girls are reluctant to do so. I taught them a tribal song and they asked me to change the song to

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<sup>38</sup> For improving functional literacy and reducing dropouts, the peripatetic centers and single teacher schools were set up by STDD.

<sup>39</sup> *Vattakkali* is a ceremonial dance practiced among the Paniya community of Wayanad. *Vattakkali* is also practiced among other *Adivasi* communities as well.

dance. They said that they would rather wear some other dress (non-traditional). The children told me that they have bought some other costumes. So, for the last year's annual day celebrations, I taught them another dance. Maybe it is because of shame. When they see those other children dancing in beautiful dresses, they feel reluctant to dance wearing 'mundu'<sup>40</sup> and other costumes" (Interview with Amala).

Mayna feels strongly that there is a need for the dominant population to know about the *Adivasi* culture and celebrations. She says that there is currently nothing in the pedagogy regarding the *Adivasi* culture, history or celebrations (Interview with Mayna).

Though the few mentor teachers who participated in this research may not constitute a sufficient amount of samples for generating conclusions about the entire section of mentor teachers, I found it surprising that the project' participants were not strongly vocal about incorporating the *Adivasi* knowledge, culture, and history in the pedagogy.

#### **4.7 The economic aspect.**

Mathu disagrees with the fact that dropouts may be not related to the students' adverse experiences at school. Her understanding sheds some light onto a different aspect of the experiences of the elder *Adivasi* children. She calls it the 'economic aspect'. There are several instances the children are prioritising (or are forced to prioritise), instead of attending the school classes. In the previous sections there are instances that state that the children prefer to go for fishing, take care of their siblings, or do other activities rather than go to school. There are a few perspectives related to their choice. It could be assumed that the children enjoy to do what their parents are showing them. The environment they are familiar with and the culture they have been practicing demands a different set of activities they enjoy to do. However, the economic aspect is a critical concern among these possibilities.

"See, the dropouts are... hmm...there are economic aspects related to them. For instance, in the case of a male child, after a certain age, there is a need for being able to cover their own needs. So, their happiness will be to get a job for covering their immediate expenses. If you see, when the arecanut harvest season comes, mostly the male children would be

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<sup>40</sup> A traditional wrap around, a rectangular piece of cloth with occasional borders, commonly used among *Adivasi* people. *Mundu* is also worn by the dominant population, but the way it is worn is distinct for different communities.

going for that. So, that way, a certain amount of money comes to their hands, which takes their interest away from education. In other cases, when the parents are going far from their villages, they don't have a space to leave the children behind, so they take them along with them. Then, they will be back after months. So, then we fail to get them to the schools. These kinds of issues are there related to the issue of dropouts" (Interview with Mathu).

"See what is happening is that the mothers go for work. Before they come back, the child has to prepare the food for them and fetch water for them to take shower. The mothers will ascribe their responsibilities to the daughters when they leave. So, these children are doing all these chores until the mother comes back. In this case, they are ought to give more importance to their responsibilities at their hamlet over schooling" (Interview with Mathu).

"Now, if you see the 7<sup>th</sup> standard students, they used to go for arecanut plucking. Then, they would tell us <we are not coming. We have to go for plucking arecanuts>. I stay near to a colony. So, when I go there to call the children, they would say the same. In another instance, there is a girl whose mother was pregnant, and she had to take responsibility to look after her younger siblings while the mother is pregnant.

I think that this is the situation at their homes. Last year, there was a child named Jishnu, studying in class 10. He wasn't interested in coming to school. He said that the situation at his home was not good. His mother is remarried and both his parents are alcoholic. Children don't receive much care from their parents. Nowadays during the pandemic, online classes are going on. Early in the morning, parents go out for work. So, the child will be left alone back home. They don't make sure that the child is participating in online classes" (Interview with Amala).

I asked whether the mentor teacher sees any potential for communicating with these children regarding attaining a more secure job after successfully completing their formal education which might interest these children to go to the schools. Some of their responses were as follows:

"See, what their parents do is to consume the daily wage they get for their immediate expenses. There is no concept of saving money for later on. They don't think about the possibility of covering their tomorrow's expenses with today's savings. The same mentality gets reflected on to their children. So, the children too don't think about gaining a job to secure their future" (Interview with Mathu).

“The children would say, when asked about getting a job after school, <teacher, what about the other elder students who have learned so much at school before? None of them got any job. Then, how would we expect us to get a job then?>. Those are the words of the 7th and 8th standard students. They do not have ambitions” (Interview with Laila).

Amala, while visiting the colony for getting the students to school, was told by their parents that,

“if a teacher wants to take our children to school, take them. Because the children reaching class 10 generally want to earn something for their living rather than continuing their studies” (Interview with Amala).

Another example is that the parents could have been thinking that the mentor teachers are taking the children to school, in order to secure their jobs. The parents don't see any benefit for the kid otherwise.

Across all the discussions with the mentor teachers in this research process, there has been a common understanding that there is a strong ‘disinterest’ expressed by the parents particularly the Paniya once, in ensuring education of their children. It is not right to assume that they don't want their children to be educated. Yet, “*parental apathy in educating their children is perceived by school authorities as one reason for the Paniya children's absenteeism and dropout*”(Susamma 2011). Susamma in her studies showed that this perception is wrongly constructed, and her investigation demonstrated that such accusations are false.

#### **4.8 Mazhaviipoovu (Is the rainbow an illusion?)**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, the state government announced the introduction of the digital mode of education that started from the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2020, on the platform *KITE Victers Channel*. We have discussed earlier in the *Introduction chapter* regarding the late introduction of the programme *Mazhaviipoovu*, which is, according to the state, caused by the technical delay that happened in securing adequate resources to produce the modules in multiple *Adivasi* languages (Pramod 2021). On the contrary, the reality was that the programme *Mazhaviipoovu* was never there in the first place from the department's side. I briefly mentioned in the introduction chapter about the dissension that happened between the officers and the *Adivasi* youngsters, creating a controversy. Anyhow, the state only recognised the need for such a programme much

later, but they prefer to hide this fact for unknown reasons. However, what the *Adivasi* group ultimately wanted was that such a programme runs along with the state's universal education infrastructure, benefiting not only the local people, but all the *Adivasi* peoples in the state.

These new online classes in *Adivasi* languages in Wayanad were declared to be commenced on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July. The Malayalam modules for the first standard children that aired on the 'First Bell' was translated to 10 *Adivasi* languages in the name *Mazhivilpoovu* (Rainbow flower). In Wayanad, SSK produces the *Mazhivilpoovu* episodes for the four subjects of the first standard: Malayalam language, environmental studies (EVS), English and Mathematics. The previous two subjects are combined as one module and are only accessible through YouTube and social media platforms. Sindhu SS, the state programme officer (Access and Retention), and the SSK of general Education Department said the following to the press:

“Since it is for the tribal kids alone, classes are not streamed on VICTERS channel, which covers a wider population. Nearly 5000 children will benefit from this” (Athira 2020).

The implications of such a policy put most of the *Adivasi* children who never had any access to basic electricity - if not internet - to be excluded in the system. The irony is that the population who already had access to TV, devices, and internet gets to watch the episodes on TV, while the disadvantaged *Adivasi* people who never had these facilities get access exclusively through internet. If the *Mazhivilpoovu* programme is exclusively made for the *Adivasi* peoples, but the *Adivasi* children cannot access it hassle-free, then whom is it actually made for?

Another critical concern is that the episodes mostly encompass the direct translations of the 'First Bell' episodes which are following a homogenous/universal pedagogy, representing mostly the non-*Adivasi* dominant narratives. Watching these episodes reveals that, in designing learning modules for *Mazhivilpoovu*, there was not much effort spent to reconstitute these episodes with cultural nuances of the *Adivasi* communities, neither there was a recontextualization of these modules making changes in the material culture or names used. The process seems to have reduced to mere translation from one language to other.

#### 4.8.1 When the rainbow touches the flowers.

In Wayanad, the *Mazhivilpoovu* programme started in 6 *Adivasi* languages: Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayka, Kurichya, Oorali and Kuruma. The mentor teachers were given the responsibility to make it available to the first standard students. There are several challenges they are still facing. Amala, shared her experience with *Mazhivilpoovu* as she could only share one single episode of *Mazhivilpoovu*:

“We were showing the usual classes on TV. A colleague sent me the first episode of *Mazhivilpoovu* in Paniya language on WhatsApp. The child never showed up. I went to the child’s home at night along with my husband. Then, I showed to it one episode on my phone. That is the only episode I was able to show. Then nothing followed. I really don’t know how it works” (Interview with Amala).

From what the teacher told; she was not able to access the episodes being a mentor teacher. In the ‘*Samoohya padana muri*’ she works now, she only has access to television and, thus, the children who are coming there do not have access to TV or internet at home. Since the episodes of *Mazhivilpoovu* are only accessible on YouTube and WhatsApp groups, which demands internet data, it becomes more difficult for the teacher and the students to access them, particularly in remote areas. Her words were trickling of guilt for not being able to do her work as she wanted.

The *Mazhivilpoovu* classes stopped in a few months after they started. Laila said the episodes were inconsistent and not all the contents in the first standard were translated on time. She also said that the episodes were not easily available. The initial momentum was lost within a few months and the number of views of these videos were eventually ranging from as less as 10 views to maximum of 80 views. Currently, there are only 10 episodes available online, respectively for the 6 communities on the *Mazhivilpoovu* playlist on the portal ‘SSK whiteboard<sup>41</sup>’ for the whole year of 2020-21(SSK Whiteboard *Mazhivilpoovu* 2020-21). The SSK Whiteboard is a separate online class portal for the ‘specially abled’ children, for whom the ‘First Bell’ classes are challenging. The *Mazhivilpoovu* programme is also available on this platform with a total of 166 videos for all the children from *Adivasi* communities who study in the first standard.

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Mathu and Laila's experiences show the diffidence that the children experience, when listening to their own language through these episodes. In Laila's learning centre, when she showed the *Mazhivilpoovu* episodes to the children, they would laugh listening to the classes in their own mother tongue. However, she noticed that eventually the children started to enjoy the process and get benefited. She, therefore, wishes to extend further the *Mazhivilpoovu* classes to higher grades, as she sees *Mazhivilpoovu* as a promising change in the field of education regarding the recognition of her own language.

In Mathu's learning centre, the children were keen on listening to the classes in their mother tongue. They feel ashamed in general to listen to their own language in the educational activities.

In response to my question regarding how the mentor teachers see the learning experience of these children in their own mother tongue, instead of only using *Adivasi* languages as a bridge, Laila said,

“To an extent, I think it will do good for the children to learn in their own language at school. If you see, the children who are living in the margins of the forest are the ones who speak in their own mother tongue, whereas the other children who live nearer to roads and towns speak Malayalam and they do understand Malayalam” (Interview with Laila).

As she argued, what the children demand is to get educated in Malayalam. She shared her experience, stating how some *Adivasi* children responded to the *Mazhivilpoovu* episodes.

“Recently, while we were visiting a colony for showing *Mazhivilpoovu* classes, the children responded saying <teacher, we don't want to see this, could you show us something else?>. It was not because they don't understand the class. They told we just don't want this” (Interview with Laila).

To my question regarding the possibility that the children may find studying in their own language a meaningless exercise, she agreed. From this section could, thus, be generated that the children feel meaningless to see their own languages getting used at the school in the section 'Ashamed to be me'. The patterns continue to reflect the same paradigm during the online classes as well.

#### 4.9 Made in the office.

There are certain critical concerns that are raised by the *Gothrabandhu* teachers here. From the design to the ground reality of the programmes *Gothrabandhu*, 'First Bell' and *Mazhavilpoovu*, there are many discrepancies that pose a few critical questions. It is important that we know, to which extent, the many departments recognise the concerns of the students and whether these concerns are reciprocated. Who is responsible for the challenges that the *Adivasi* peoples face with education?

The important nodal institutions engaged in the domain of *Adivasi* education in Wayanad are STDD/ITDP, Department of General Education, DIET, and SSK. These departments collaborate in different capacities with each programme, though there is not a single body that integrates all the departments. From the discussions I shared with the nodal officers from each of these departments, it can be generated that their perceptions converse with the concerns of the mentor teachers and the *Adivasi* children.

The officers I was led to were mostly sensitive regarding the context of my research approach. It is though important to keep in mind, that, when they saw that I am a scholar working with the *Adivasi* peoples, the officers directed me to other officers informed of the *Adivasi* context, with the latter probably not being the case with most of the officers working in these departments. The bureaucratic system followed in Kerala has not been reformed for the needs of the *Adivasi* peoples and the representation has been minimal. During my visits to these offices, I did not come across many *Adivasi* people working in these offices other than some individuals who occasionally looked estranged with the space. An incidence during my research indicates how bureaucracy is a major cause of many problems that exist. It happened to have a conversation with a highest ranking official of the Department of Education of Wayanad, who is the apex officer in the district regarding the educational affairs. During our conversation, as I started talking about the language problem that is troubling education, she asked me: "*Do these Adivasis have more than one language? So, that means they are not speaking a single language. Right?*" I was startled at the comment made by the officer who is appointed in a district of 18.5 percent of *Adivasi* peoples. However, I realised that the officer was transferred from another district, and this incidence exposes how the dominant cultures are unaware of the *Adivasi* peoples who live among us. Before I got interested in the field of Indigenous research, I wasn't aware of their cultural nuances other



than the stereotype of the exotic, primitive or “backward” characterization of the *Adivasi* peoples that was repeatedly shown in media and movies.

This is one of the most relevant insights in this research, as it extends the focus from the upliftment of the *Adivasi* peoples to the upliftment of general education. We must explore not only what is wrong in *their* education but also, what is wrong in *our* education as well.

I had conversations with the SSK programme officers, DIET training faculties, TDO (Tribal Development Officers) and a project officer from ITDP (Integrated Tribal Development Programme). These officers are designated in the positions of the execution of these programmes and, thus, their approach becomes critical as these programmes are getting pioneered in Wayanad.

There are many programmes directed to the *Adivasi* peoples that are getting released every year. The SSK officers share how these projects get sanctioned for a year and then dropped. The next programme will start maybe in a slightly different name, following the previous. Related to the *Adivasi* culture and epistemologies, the questions are always misinterpreted as directed towards the programmes addressing the *Adivasi* festivals and artforms, sports activities, medicines etc. There are many such short programmes and camps conducted, such as the programmes *Choonda*, *Choott*, *Nattarang*, *Onnanu nammal*, and others. This approach explicitly portrays the perceptions of the dominant narratives of *Adivasi* exoticism, and it could be assumed that they do not perceive the *Adivasi* knowledge systems as important enough to be considered in the creation of these core curricula. To my queries regarding why the *Adivasi* languages aren't recognised and used in the higher classes, the answers were presented with the excuse that there is a lack of a script for all the *Adivasi* languages. They, therefore, do not consider the option of a bilingual mode of education. All the officers were stressing on the inevitability of the *Adivasi* assimilation as the only way ahead.

## 5 Chapter 6: Analysis

### 5.1 The challenges facing the *Gothrabandhu* teachers

The selection category as discussed in the section ‘Who are the *Gothrabandhu* teachers?’ explicitly states the directions for the selection criteria and how they got implemented. The initial document of the guidelines for *Gothrabandhu* limits the forward *Adivasi* community members to take part in the selection process, by exclusively reserving such posts for the ‘backward’ communities, that is Paniya, Adiya, Kattunayka and Oorali. However, in the Government Order, the selection was extended to the forward communities, after prioritizing the ‘backward’ communities exacerbating the problem.

The most critical concern here is the implications of such a criterion. How does it affect the *Adivasi* communities and the education at large? According to the findings in this research, most of the appointments are of members from the forward *Adivasi* communities that is Kurichya and Kuruma. Both communities are socially and economically in a much better state than the other *Adivasi* communities. Also, they were in a better position historically within the societal structure (Asees 2020). This paradigm reflects the social inequality within the *Adivasi* peoples. The aggregate population of Kurichya and Kuruma is 59676, much lesser than the 88450 Paniya people (Kirtads 2011). With respect to the population, the representation of the Paniya people is showing a great disparity which is reflected in all institutions, including education. The officer from the DIET explained the reasons why they were not able to find eligible candidates for the posts from the ‘backward’ communities. This reflects the grave social inequality, which is reproduced through these appointments once again. How could it be resolved is a question that remains. Should there be reformed and nuanced criteria inclusive of the *Adivasi* social realities, to ensure the purpose of the programme is uncompromised? Is the merit rightly interpreted? Should there be an affirmative action in this case? ‘Micro-reservation<sup>42</sup>’ as a solution was suggested by an officer in the DIET. However, if micro-reservation will be implemented - though it seems unlikely to happen - the rights of the Kuruma and Kurichya to attain jobs will become more blurred. The *Adivasi* peoples correspond to 2 percent of the total population and respectively their reservation is 2 percent. Considering the diversity amongst the *Adivasi* peoples, the already miniscule reservation gets more challenging for them. Micro-reservations may take away opportunities from the forward communities and

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Micro-reservation’ as term implies the affirmative action within the reservation.

give them to ‘backward’ communities. Instead, the state must take steps to ensure that both parties are considered by creating newer job opportunities for the *Adivasi* elites, which would also be helpful to resolve the existing disparity and strengthen their social status.

Another aspect of this situation demonstrates that more appointments are necessary. The disparity of the number of teachers appointed versus the community composition of the classes are evident. The schools in Wayanad have a diverse community composition of *Adivasi* children. Many of the schools have more than 3 communities. A single mentor teacher is appointed in a class of many communities and, according to the data gathered in this project, it is evident that the teachers fail to communicate in their mother tongue with children of communities other than their own. In certain cases, the mentor teacher comes from a certain community and there are no children of the same community in the class. Here, the primary objective of the appointments fails. How can it be resolved? Should there be a greater number of appointments per school respective of the number of communities in the class? The DIET officers responded saying that such a direction would make the situation worse, as it leads to segregation of the children.

In a highly stratified society like Kerala with graded inequality, equal treatment to all becomes a travesty of justice. In this context, as the pedagogy and infrastructures favor the Malayalam speaking children, a Paniya speaking child is at a disadvantage and should, thus, be treated with extra support to avail the education they deserve. Not recognizing this injustice in the name of a potential segregation is not the right solution to the problem. While ‘inclusive education’ has been the latest moto of the Department of Education, are they rightly interpreting Inclusive education?

Ensuring the physical presence of the children at the school, seems to be the focal point of the *Gothrabandhu* programme. Inclusion, however, is not just the implementation of a new learning arrangement; it demands innovation and reform of schools (Hegarty, Meijer, and Pijl 1996). The *Gothrabandhu* programme depicts the state’s approach for inclusion and its wrong interpretation. The state doesn’t not address this understanding of ‘inclusion’, as a total reform of the mainstream education system. Instead, all the attention is placed at the upliftment of the *Adivasi* people to bring them at par with the ambient population. In this approach, the assumption is that there is nothing wrong with the conventional education system and what is to be reformed is the *Adivasi* peoples. In theory, this deficit understanding of the *Adivasi* peoples is the fundamental basis that all other programmes are built on.

However, the *Gothrabandhu* teachers have become an integral part of today's *Adivasi* education. It would be more appropriate to call it 'education for *Adivasi* peoples' over '*Adivasi* education' in this context. The mentor teachers have been acting as a bridge for the school to effectively communicate to the *Adivasi* children and their families, however, the interviews above demonstrated that the extent of successful communication can be questioned. However, the lived experiences are familiar for the *Adivasi* teachers, and thus the children finds the school more homely than it used to be. The important question here is which exactly are the contributions of the mentor teachers in addition to their communication tasks, acting as agents to help the children to adopt an alien language.

As per the excerpts from the guidelines of the *Gothrabandhu* projects presented here related to the vision and responsibilities of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers, it can be concluded that the mentor teachers are limited to act as an assistant to the class teacher for translating and recontextualizing the meanings for the *Adivasi* children attending the first standard. In the pedagogy or the learning programme their participation is, thus, limited. They are not bound to actively interact with the other students in the capacity of a teacher. It is clearly stated in the guidelines that the mentor teacher cannot replace the actual class teacher or the head teacher. The representation of the mentor teachers is completely absent in any decisive roles, committees or governing bodies. It seems that the non-*Adivasi* people know better what the *Adivasi* people should be doing, and the trend is evident with the way the system functions. This is a critical aspect of the *Gothrabandhu* project and need to be brought out.

On the other hand, the responsibilities assigned for the mentor teachers are mainly affiliated to needs of the first standard children. However, in practice, they need to take responsibility of the rest of the *Adivasi* children participating in the higher standards. This kind of social situations makes their work harder, in addition to the existing difficulty of bringing to school the children from remote colonies which can not be easily accessed. During the pandemic, these responsibilities dramatically increased, given that many *Adivasi* hamlets had not access to basic necessities such as power, network or devices. Many mentor teachers have been assigned the responsibility of multiple learning centers. Because the other teachers do not come or actively intervene for various reasons, the mentor teachers are managing the children from the higher standards as well. However, are they getting rewarded accordingly?

The mentor teachers participated in this project also shared their experiences about being treated with disrespect. In practice, they are often considered as secondary in comparison to the regular teachers. There are a few other concerns acting to contribute to this notion. The

*Gothrabandhu* teachers are not placed along with the other teachers, even when their educational qualifications/eligibility criteria match. The mentor teachers are not employees of the Department of Education, instead they are appointed by the STDD. Their jobs are not yet permanent, but are based on daily wages. Even when they are working, they are not paid during the summer vacation. Their roles are, as explained, to function as assistants. The social structure and the dominant narratives that treat the *Adivasi* peoples as people with lesser intellect, get strengthened once again with such a positioning of the mentor teachers, even when they share the same merit as the other teachers. The state must take immediate steps to make their positions permanent and give them the aid they deserve.

## **5.2 The Children of the *Gothrabandhu* programme.**

Looking at the so-called achievements of the *Gothrabandhu* programme, primarily, the officers claim the programme has been successful in reducing the number of dropouts in the primary standards. However, 4 years after the beginning of the *Gothrabandhu* programme, there have not yet carried out any studies or meticulous monitoring (Sebastian 2021). The statistics show a slight dip in the number of dropouts, however, the findings of the research illustrate a disturbing picture.

Before the pandemic, and after the introduction of the programme, the experiences of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers show that many students from the *Adivasi* hamlets particularly the ‘backward’ communities are unable to meaningfully participate in the educational process. There are two-dimensions pertinent to the challenges these children face: The first is related to the lack of access and infrastructural support. The other is the social inequality that produces various tensions in all fields of social engagement, which is, in fact, the contributing factor of the former issue as well. There is an evident learning gap between the *Adivasi* children and the rest of the children. The reluctance of these children to participate in school-related activities is assumably related to certain factors, as portrayed by the mentor teachers during the interviews. Even after the *Gothrabandhu* programme was implemented, the *Adivasi* children particularly from the ‘backward’ communities were finding themselves challenged in the class in comparison to the non-*Adivasi* children. My research reveals that the learning gap continues to exist as the initial divide is too large for the *Adivasi* children to cope up eventually. The primary reason behind that is the fact that the *Adivasi* children are not receiving pre-primary education. The distress caused by this gap could be the reason for the children’s reluctance.

There is also a sense of shame that these students express while listening to their own language and cultural elements in the class. Furthermore, other students often make fun of the *Adivasi* students. This unjust engagement reflects the discriminatory attitude of the ambient population towards the *Adivasi* peoples that continues to exist even today. Their economic ‘backwardness’ and marginalization are also forcing these children to get engaged in other activities, such as economic and traditional livelihood practices to survive . Even the mentor teachers are often sharing similar difficulties and are forced to do other activities to ensure their subsistence.

During the pandemic, the state undoubtedly failed to recognize and address the social realities of the *Adivasi* children. The experiences of the mentor teachers discussed in this research show that the *Adivasi* children are ignored and excluded from the educational system. From the way the ‘First Bell’ programme was introduced and functioned, it could be assumed that the programme was designed only considering the social and cultural capital and the needs of the dominant populations. In reality, the ‘First Bell’ programme reached the *Adivasi* children after weeks or months. Initially, there were problems with lack of devices, as well as internet and TV for the *Adivasi* children. As a solution extended by the civil society and the departments, temporary arrangements in the local buildings and institutions were set up along with a network of local learning centers for the children to get-together and access the televisions. Many devices were donated to the students, but the problem remained. Many of the hamlets do not have electricity, although they were donated a few devices. In many of these hamlets, the students were all dependent on a single phone for watching the classes.

Other issues pertinent to the *Adivasi* children’s education are the distance to the school centers, the difficult terrain conditions, the lack of basic expendable supplies like books and pencils, the termination of the vehicle support provided by *Gothrasarathy* and the meals they used to receive at school. All of these factors culminated to making the situation worse. Even the teachers who are keen on helping these children gave up, after not being able to handle many of these issues. If the children were receiving any support, that was done by the hard work of the mentor teachers. However, from the experiences shared in this research, evidently, the efforts of the mentor teachers are inadequate, given the level of severity of the situation in the *Adivasi* hamlets. The scale of the problems is much larger than what the mentor teachers could handle. While there are nowadays WhatsApp groups and several classes are running via them for the non-*Adivasi* children, the marginalized sections particularly the *Adivasi* children are left with a glimpse of the picture.

### **5.3 The invisible wall.**

This thesis shows the socio-political condition and struggles of the *Adivasi* peoples, particularly of the communities with the history of slavery. Their marginalization, displacement and poor economic and social conditions are nowadays reflected in their ability to participate in the education. On the other hand, the state is reluctant to accept and address the historical injustice towards the *Adivasi* peoples and they do not protect the existing rights of the *Adivasi* peoples. The oppressive colonial and Brahminical perceptions and value systems continue to inform the ethos of the dominant societal conscience that excludes the *Adivasi* peoples from participating in the society and pursuing a dignified life. However, did the *Gothrabandhu* and the *Mazhavilpoovu* open any new opportunities for the *Adivasi* peoples to make any progress?

The *Gothrabandhu* teachers reflected the diverse aspects of it, as they are the closest link between the *Adivasi* children and the formal education system. The mentor teachers are probably the first generation of educated elites from their respective communities with a few exceptions from Kuruma and Kurichya communities who got their schooling prior to the other communities. The presence of an *Adivasi* member at school is a significant step towards the *Adivasi* self-determination. It becomes significant as the state recognizes that the problems of the *Adivasi* students can only be addressed by the *Adivasi* representation at school. It can only be considered as the first step, but to move towards the right direction, there are a few critical concerns need to be addressed which are condescending in the implementation.

### **5.4 The *Mazhavilpoovu* project mirroring the *Gothrabandhu*.**

For the *Adivasi* children of first standard, the ‘First Bell’ was completely unreachable both due to lack of access and its problematic design. The issue of the language was recognized much later by the state and the *Mazhavilpoovu* project came about a month after the ‘First Bell’ on the platforms that were only accessible through internet, which were though inaccessible for the children without access to the net. The *Mazhavilpoovu* programme, as a programme designed to address the language barrier, failed to reach out to the *Adivasi* children. The programme was made with translated versions of the ‘First Bell’ modules in 6 *Adivasi* languages in Wayanad, but the episodes were limited in numbers and scope. There are three major instances from the chronology of the programme *Mazhavilpoovu* which are relevant to

understand the state's approach towards the *Adivasi* peoples. First is the delay that happened as the state has ignored the needs of the *Adivasi* children due to its unawareness of their current status,. It cannot be considered as an innocent mistake as there was a programme that was running exclusively to address the language barrier for the Adivasi peoples, and still the state chooses to ignore the needs of these children along with the 'First Bell'. Secondly, the execution of the *Mazhivilpoovu* programme which came on YouTube and social media completely inaccessible for the *Adivasi* peoples, shows how the programme was just a 'tokenistic gesture' and not well built on the basis of *Adivasi* needs. Finally, the third point is that the *Mazhivilpoovu* project ignored the cultural nuances and epistemologies of the *Adivasi* peoples, being just a meaningless translation to appease the existing dissents. The experiences drawn in this project showed that the state has not yet understood what it means to make meaningful reforms in addressing the *Adivasi* needs and rights.



## 6 Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored the functioning of the ‘First Bell’ programme and, through the experiences of the *Gothrabandhu* teachers, I seek to address why this system excludes the *Adivasi* children in the district of Wayanad, Kerala. An important aspect of my enquiry was to find out whether the *Gothrabandhu* project widens the scope for inclusivity of the ‘Indigenous ways of knowing’ in the educational system, looking at the multiple contexts of the interventions of the ‘*Gothrabandhu*’ programme before and during the pandemic. The methodology employed in this context was limited, given that the existing imposed restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow a more desirable ethnographic inquiry. However, I managed to contact with the mentor teachers and nodal officers who participated in my research through mobile phone conversations. To understand the state’s approach and policies, the documents adhering to the discussed programmes were analysed.

The *Gothrabandhu* programme has been at the center of my research, talking about how the *Adivasi* education is evolving in the changing times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Gothrabandhu* reflects the diverse aspects of *Adivasi* lives, and contributes to the critical meeting point of the state and the *Adivasi* peoples. Looking at the findings of this research, the *Gothrabandhu*, thus, acts as a microcosm of *Adivasi* experiences, taking into account the sociopolitical and historical aspects of the *Adivasi* peoples.

The primary enquiry of the research was to find how the programme ‘First Bell’ was engaged with the *Adivasi* education and whether it reflects the exclusion of the *Adivasi* children from education opportunities. Secondly, with *Gothrabandhu* being the first ever programme seriously engaging with the *Adivasi* languages and *Adivasi* representation, the research enquires into the programme with respect to the needs of *Adivasi* peoples and find out whether the programme is widening the scope for inclusivity of the Indigenous ways of knowing. One of the findings of this research is that the underlying paradigms in the *Adivasi* education before *Gothrabandhu* and before the pandemic is getting reproduced in newer forms.

The state policies are reflected through the *Adivasi* education programmes evidently as they call them ‘integration policies’ to the mainstream society. For the state, integration does not lead to assimilation; instead, it should allow the independent development of *Adivasi* peoples. However, in praxis, the integration is manifested in different forms of assimilation. Integration

is centered in bringing the *Adivasi* peoples at the same level as the ambient population. Universal education is a tool to ensure this process which did not successfully operate in the case of the *Adivasi* peoples in Kerala. The *Gothrabandhu* and *Mazhavilpoovu* projects are essentially following the same paradigm, although they, at first glance, looked favorable for the *Adivasi* self-determination, but it becomes a condescending factor as it appeases the opposing voices with the disguise.

Looking at the action of both programmes, it can be concluded that the *Mazhavilpoovu* follows the same paradigm of the *Gothrabandhu* programme. There are no attempts to address the *Adivasi* languages in their merit in both programmes, except using those languages as a tool to assimilate them. Neither were the *Adivasi* ways of knowing given any respect or space in the pedagogical discourses. The representation of *Adivasi* peoples is inadequate, or absent and the state instruments are deliberately keeping them at the bottom of the hierarchy in the institutional framework, thus, denying their right to participate in any decisive roles. It looks like the non-*Adivasi* part of the society knows better what is best for the *Adivasi* peoples.

The experiences of the *Adivasi* communities, particularly the so-called 'backward' communities, are reflected on their children at school. The social structures oppressing and marginalizing the *Adivasi* peoples are marginalizing their children at school and exclude them. Through the education, the state is trying to erase the *Adivasi* identity and assimilate them to the mainstream society, learn their culture, symbols, languages and so on. The children are subject to universal education, to ensure their education is aligned with the neoliberal economical aspirations of the state. While it is important that the *Adivasi* peoples should have an opportunity to participate in the socio-economic realm and the mainstream, it is important to acknowledge their agency and own aspirations for development. Universal education cannot ignore the social realities that exist today, as a result of the long historic process of subjugation and systemic oppression. As long as the caste system and the colonial administrative structures are continuing to be at the center of the societal engagements and without addressing those, it is unlikely that any progress will be made towards the improvement of *Adivasi* education. These realities haunt the *Adivasi* peoples on a daily basis and in different degrees and forms.

What *Adivasi* children need is to be treated with equal respect. This is an unattainable task until the non-*Adivasi* population gets informed on the beauty and cultural richness of the *Adivasi* people, their knowledge systems, histories, and societal contributions. At the same time, it

becomes important to acknowledge the historical injustice and the need for compensatory or affirmative actions which is the responsibility of the state and the dominant population. The state needs to reform their archaic colonial policies that are derived from the enduring colonial perceptions of colonized peoples. For any reform to work, the *Adivasi* peoples' deprivation social and cultural capital has to be restored. This is only possible if the state is ready to recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples over their lands and resources, as well as their rights to cultural, linguistic and educational self-determination. The existing implemented acts, like the FRA and PESA, are not sufficient to give a significant impetus to the acknowledgment of the self-determination of the *Adivasi* peoples. In light of the existing reality, any efforts to resolve the issues facing the *Adivasi* would end up being a tokenistic theatrical performance as they do not touch the core of the problem.

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## 8 Appendices

### 8.1 Where we started (Interview discussion pointers and questions)

#### 8.1.1 Questions relating to the Gothrabandhu programme

1. How relevant do you think is your post for our children? How do they receive your presence?
2. How do you manage other communities other than yours?
  - 2.1 Do you speak their language?
3. Do you think that after your appointment at school there have been changes with respect to the dropout rate of the children?
  - 3.1 How was the induction training prior to your appointment? What were the important discussion points?
4. What could be the primary reasons for dropouts drawing on your experience?
5. What are your responsibilities at school? Are you doing extra work in addition to your official responsibilities?
6. How are the other teachers engaging with you?

After your appointment, have you noticed any changes in the way other teachers engage with our children?
7. How are the staff members treating you?
8. Do you have any specific incidence you would want to share related to the above-mentioned questions?
9. Do you have any suggestions to improve the current situation? If any.

#### 6.1.1 Questions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'First Bell'

1. How is the 'First Bell' programme functioning at your location?
2. After the online classes started, do you think our children are getting adequate education?
  - 1.1 If not, what could be the reasons?
3. After the commencement of the 'First Bell', what responsibilities do you have? What are the changes in comparison to the previous conditions?



- 2.1 Are you doing any extra work in addition to your officially assigned responsibilities?
4. How are the other teachers engaging with the children now?
  - 3.1 If they are not participating, which do you think that are the reasons?
5. Do you have any specific incident or incidents you would like to share related to this context?
6. Do you see any positive changes with the new online classes?
7. Do you have any suggestions to resolve these issues? If any.

### **6.1.2 Questions relating to the *Mazhivilpoovu* programme**

1. When did the programme start? What is your comment on this new programme?
2. How do you access this programme, while it is not available on TV?
3. How do the children receive this programme?
4. How do you manage the multiple language episodes among different language communities? How do the children feel?
5. Do you think the current system of *Mazhivilpoovu* is effective?
6. If there is a problem, do you have any suggestions?

### **6.1.3 General questions**

1. Do you think our schooling has any content on Indigenous languages, knowledge systems or imaginations?
2. Do you try to incorporate any of your own local knowledge inside the classroom?"
3. Do the children speak their language in the class?
4. Do they play their games or do other local activities at school?
5. How do the different communities interact at school?
6. How do you see the relevance of teaching Indigenous knowledges and languages at school?
7. What do you think are the reasons that currently the Adivasi languages or knowledges are not being recognized and used in the schools?
8. How was your schooling and how is it different now?
9. Do you have any suggestions to make on Indigenous education and what is your imagination on the *Adivasi* education?

#### **6.1.4 Questions for the Officers**

Each officer was having a different set of responsibilities and was asked a different set of questions respectively. Since there is not a common question pattern deployed in this process, the relevant excerpts from the interviews will be used respectively to explain the themes in the data presentation section.

.....END.....