

An International Peer Reviewed and Referred Journal
Council for Teacher Education

(CTE, Gujarat Chapter)
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# Cultural Identity Formation: An Issue in the Schooling of Adivasi Children

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### **Abstract**

The education of Adivasi communities in India presents a number of issues which need a careful analysis keeping in view the specific contexts of the Adivasis. While the popular notion has seen the culture of Adivasis as a barrier to their participation in education, our paper attempts to challenge this notion by presenting an analysis of the curricular practices employed for the schooling of Adivasi children. The paper further highlights the inadequate representation of culture of Adivasi communities in the schooling of their children and shows how schools with even a predominant Adivasis demography deliberately propagate the cultural capital of the dominant groups putting the identity of Adivasi students at stake, leading to increasing number of schools drop outs, unsatisfactory educational attainment and the formation of an identity which alienates the children from their own culture and language.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Adivasi Children, Culture and Schooling, Identity Formation

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#### **Introduction: Cultural Identity**

Individuals are born into societies that are distinguished from each other by the individuality of patterns of social interactions, behaviors and beliefs of people. As a member of society, the individual acquires its knowledge, art, faith, morals, laws, customs, language, and various other skills and habits. This "particular (social) way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values — not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior", is what Raymond William calls "culture" (William, 1962). According to R. Firth culture is "the element of accumulated resources (material as well as immaterial) which individuals inherit, use, transforms, improve and transmit" (quoted in Bottomore, 1962). It is "the intellectual aspect of civilization" (Bottomore, 1962).

'Identity' is the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make an individual or group different from others. It is a sense of self in relation to others (Weis, 1990) and therefore is all about difference (Bourdieu, 2002). The term identity is derived from the work of Erik Erikson in 1950s who explained identity as a sense of self-sameness and stability in diverse places, circumstances, conditions, settings and state of affairs over time. Thus, identity may be conceptualized as a set of qualities, beliefs, desires and principles that differentiates individuals from each other and orients the behavior, and their absence would impede individual to act or do anything or change even if s/he aspired to (Fearon, 1999).

Therefore, taken together cultural identity can be seen as the individual's sense and awareness of a kind of collective "one true self", as it is informed by an embedded culture shared and passed down from generation to generation (Simpson, 2017). It is the identification and sense of belonging of individuals to a particular cultural group (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005) due to their formal or informal affiliations (Sussman, 2000). It reflects shared historical experiences and cultural codes that provide us, as a unique people, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning (Hall, 1994). Thus, cultural identity can be

thought of as the affiliation of individuals to a particular group based on various cultural categories such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, nationality, etc. which is constructed and sustained through the process of sharing knowledge, language, traditions, norms and customs through formal institutions like family, community, school etc.

### **Cultural Identity in Life and Education**

Cultural identity is important in all aspects of life of every individual. It has an effect on how one interpret and respond to circumstances (Berry, 2005). It enables individuals to understand their own history, break barriers, connect with each other and to build a sense of trust between people. It helps to understand people sharing common cultural trait leading to broaden relationships and advancement of cultural acts. This contributes in building personal growth and well being. It gives people feeling of belonging and security. These can help break down barriers and build a sense of trust between people.

Further, researchers like Stets & Burke (2000) and Stryker & Burke (2000) say that cultural identity engenders self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-worth, self-evaluation, status etc. It provides individual with the ability to manage stress or pressure and overcome challenges of societal and organizational barriers, ultimately leading to overall academic success. It enhances academic achievement by strengthening optimism, self-efficacy, interpersonal sensitivity and emotional control says Weaver (2009). Thus, cultural identity has a direct impact on the learning and educational performance of children. Grantham & Ford (2003) in their research on gifted African American say that development of cultural identity has a significant impact on achievement, motivation, and attitudes towards school. Eleuterio (1997) and Hoelscher (1999) observe that the teachers and students of a classroom who share common cultural identity build high trust and quality relationships between them; enhance motivation and excitement about learning together. Powers (2006) says that the school programmes based on promotion of cultural identity enhance outcomes of education by promoting safe and positive school climate, involvement of parents in school and quality instruction. Therefore, schools should act towards promotion of cultural identity in their students.

### **Cultural Identity Formation and Schooling**

Cultural identity formation involves making choices about the cultures one identifies with and deciding to join the cultural community to which one belongs. Cultural identity develops from birth and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and the surrounding (Collier, 1996). It is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs. It is socially

constructed, negotiated, co-created and reinforced in relation to others when we socially interact within a unique social context. It arises from the relationships that individuals maintain with cultural groups, with which they struggle and cooperate (Woodward, 1997).

However, cultural identities of young people at modern time are constructed as much through a sense of 'what they are not' and notions of how others see them (Reay, 2010). As Karl Marx had observed, 'we make ourselves but in conditions that are strongly influenced by more powerful others'. Similarly, Charles Cooley also says that a child can not develop his/her self or social identity in the absence of others. Thus, cultural identity formation of individuals is primarily grounded in one's culture but is affected by institutions established by society (family, religion, school, politics etc.).

Earlier the task to teach culture rests with the family. However, in contemporary era (mainly after industrialization) the task has been transferred to educational institutions (Saal, 1972). Thus, school is the institution that affect cultural identity of young children as it often changes the process of cultural identity formation. Formal schooling as a cultural setting allow learners master a set of cultural tools that activate a new ways of arguing and thinking (Wertsch and Minick, 1990 and Tulviste, 1991). The acquisition of cultural instruments mainly reading and writing allow learners to become aware of language structure through which they explore and appropriate cultural resources of their society in a new ways (Olson, 1994). Thus, the participation in formal schooling produces cognitive change that has a clear effect on the way individuals construct their cultural identity (Sanchez, Marco, & Amian, 1998). Schooling, therefore, 'plays a critical role in cultural identity formation. School norms, practices and expectations provide key symbolic materials that students draw on to make sense of their experiences and define them-selves' (Reay, 2010). However, in Indian context the formal schooling is in hands of so called mainstream society and controlled by the urban middle class. Thus, the process of cultural identity formation at formal school become problematic for Adivasi children as their community have no control of institution and social power to project their cultural symbols.

### Schooling, Adivasi Culture and Identity of Adivasi Children

As discussed above, school is an important institution to transfer cultural capital. Schools are organized around the culture of the society it serves. Thus, schooling provides opportunities to young learners to strengthen their cultural identity. Schools in India have been organized around the culture of dominant mainstream society. After the isolation of Adivasi communities was broken their children -even with different culture, were placed into the schools which were meant for children of the mainstream society. Further, the culture of

Adivasis find no place in school campuses as they are considered as undeveloped, backward, primitive, not worth learning etc. It is even considered as barrier by some in the process of formal schooling of Adivasi children. Thus, schooling for Adivasi children in formal schools becomes cultural identity deformation. The process of cultural identity formation of learners from mainstream society becomes the process of acculturation for Adivasi learners.

#### Adivasi Culture as Barrier to their Education

Culture of Adivasis occupies an important place in analysis or discussion of researchers about the education of Adivasi communities in India. Among many other factors culture of Adivasi communities have been classified as preventing factors in meaningful participation of Adivasi children. Researchers like Pathy (1999), Sujatha (2002), Rani (2009), Sengupta & Ghosh, (2012) etc. have classified factors affecting the process of education of Adivasi children as external (factors related to policy, planning, implementation and administration); internal (factors related to school system; content, curriculum, language etc.); socio-economic (factors related to poverty and poor economic conditions, etc.); and cultural (factors like social customs, cultural ethos, value system, tradition, festival, language etc.). However, the researchers of educational process of Adivasi communities seem to miss out or leave out some important aspects in their explanation. A big number of researchers have been vocal in classified Adivasi culture as an important factor affecting the education of Adivasi children. However, very few if any, have attempted to provide explanation to their assertion. They do not provide evidence or fail to specify the cultural practices, traditions, or values that prevent Adivasi children from attending schools. Except Kumar (2008) who attributes 8% drop-out in Jharkhand to socio-cultural reasons, no one has provided the number of Adivasi children shun from going to school or drop-out of schools due to culture they profess.

Celebrations of festivals related to Adivasi communities have been considered as cultural factor that keep Adivasi children away from school. Pradhan, (2013) says that beside vacation of academic calendar around 38 days in year Adivasi children do not come to school due to the local Adivasi festival celebration. However, the allegations have not been seen in relation to celebration of festival in mainstream groups. There is sanction holidays for *holi, diwali, durga puja, eid, Christmas* etc. for children of affiliating communities to enjoy. However, there are no government's sanction holidays for any festival related to Adivasi communities. Another argument at surface among scholars with this regard is Adivasi communities in India 'lack culture of education' (Xaxa, 2011). However, such statement must be supplemented as 'the Adivasi communities in India 'lack tradition of formal schooling' because like all other traditional societies they too educated their youth but informally. The way Adivasi

communities educated their children the similar way as Ornstein & Hunkins (1993) described about the non literate and traditional societies they educated their young 'through ceremonies, rituals, stories, observation of older children, parents and elders, and by strict enforcement of codes of conduct and behavior'. Until recently, Adivasi communities in India and their counterpart (known as indigenous communities) around the world had informal educational institutions identified as 'youth dormitory' to prepare their youth for adult roles. *Dumkuria* of Oraon, *Giti-Ora* of the Munda, *Ghotul* of the Gonds, *Morung* of Konyark, *Champo* of Lotha, etc., are the examples of youth dormitory which have started disappearing with the emergence of modern formal educational system (Toppo, 1979).

Therefore, this type of perception is the result of prejudices against Adivasis (Sujatha, 1996) derived from the supposition that Adivasi cultures are "deficient". This perception also emanate from the formal schooling objectives of creating ideal self or on modern ideals of rationality and progress to which Adivasi culture comply (Balagopalan, 2003). Such belief ignores the fact that Adivasi children come to school with their own cultural wealth (knowledge, skills, capabilities and contacts) that go unrecognized even with potency to transform the school experiences of Adivasi children (Yosso, 2005).

### Struggle for Survival and Cultural Identity

Since hoary antiquity, the Adivasis have lived in relative isolation and separate from the wider Indian society, which has saved their unique cultural identity from the onslaught of a powerful and dominant culture. While this isolation is considered by many to be the main reason for their backwardness, it has also been claimed that advances in industrialization, transportation and communications have led to a massive invasion of their natural habitats, resulting in large-scale eviction of Adivasis from their natural habitats. The phenomenon encouraged the entry of more enterprising people from dominant society into the lands previously occupied by Adivasi communities making the life of Adivasis complicated. Trees in large number were cut down by the non-Adivasi entrepreneurs for profit. The national projects of dam construction submersed the forests and fields; extraction of minerals desolated forests, establishment of industries demolished their homes (Nambissan, 2000; Sinha, 2000; Xaxa, 2011). Their woe was further aggravated by state's failure to provide training necessary to engage with formal institutions and cope with rapidly changing economy. These acts taken together firstly put the survival of Adivasis at risk and secondly place their cultural identity at stake.

Therefore, the struggle of the Adivasi communities in India turned to the questions of survival and cultural identity. However, traditionally their intense struggle has been for survival. The

struggle for identity is comparatively new, rooted in factors such as modern education, the threat posed to their ways of life by other dominant groups, and developmental needs (Sahay, 1968). This struggle for Adivasi identity aims to ensure the protection and development of Adivasi languages, customs and culture, as well as to seek a certain degree of autonomy (Xaxa, 2005).

### School Ideologies and the Cultural Identity of Adivasi Children

Education, generally perceived as neutral, can be used as a powerful means to achieve both constructive and destructive cultural goals; promote one type of ideology or another (Young, 2011). The types of education offered to Adivasi children make education what Althusser calls an "ideological state apparatus" (1971, cited in Cole, 2008). To clarify this, I present an overview of the three different types of schools available to Adivasi children: public schools, schools run by religious groups, and schools run by commercial groups. The three types of schools represent three ideologies.

#### The Public School

The first ideological group that provides education to Adivasi children is state. An analysis of the schooling process of public schools shows that until now no Adivasi language has been used as the language of instruction, even at primary level. As a result, the language of the teachers and the textbooks remain alien to the Adivasi children, which prevents them to clear their doubts and make sense of what is taught in the schools. Besides above mentioned disadvantages Adivasi children receives physical punishments as well as verbal abuses from school personnel for using their mother tongue in school campus (Kundu, 2003 and Rani, 2009). Due to which they come to regard their mother tongue as 'another language' and develops a negative attitude towards their language and cultural identity.

The curriculum of the schools of Adivasi children is generally based on the experiences of the urban middle-class (Kundu, 2003). It includes the life, history, knowledge and culture of the mainstream dominant society. The life, history, knowledge and cultures of Adivasi communities do not find adequate representation in the curriculum and textbooks. Even the useful pieces of knowledge possessed by Adivasis do not find their way into curriculum (Sundar, 2010). Instead, this knowledge is appropriated by the mainstream intellectuals and government agencies, formalized and returned back to them without acknowledgement (Jha, 2008). This widens the gap between school culture and the home culture of Adivasi children (Kundu, 2003; Rani, 2009) and create confusion about cultural identity formation.

Moreover, most of the teachers working in schools of Adivasi children are usually non-Adivasi who do not have a favorable attitude towards Adivasi children and their culture

(Nambissan, 2000; Kundu, 2003). These teachers often perceive them as culturally deficient, which develops a negative attitude in the Adivasi children towards their own culture (Sundar, 2010). We know from the observation of schools that even Adivasi teachers have developed unfavourable attitudes towards their culture and language. They do not promote Adivasi languages as a medium of instruction and even discourage Adivasi students from communicating in their mother tongue (Kundu, 2003 & Rani, 2009). This may be because these teachers are products of an education system that viewed Adivasi culture and language as "backward" and "substandard".

The above discussions lead us to conclude that the state-run schools have made no real effort to strengthen the cultural identity of Adivasi children. The state's educational goal for Adivasi communities appears to be literacy rather than education. The state ideology of education was not to increase the self-esteem, self-confidence, self-esteem and abilities of Adivasi children, thereby freeing them from the shackles of backwardness and oppression, but teaching them to maintain their state of submission. As a result, the state has not been able to address the multiple social problems of the Adivasi communities. The failure of state in providing education the absence of substantial educational initiatives within the communities have left the educational space open to communal ideologies and private actors who further problematize the cultural identity formation of Adivasi children.

#### The Religious Run Schools

The second ideological group offering education to Adivasi children are the different religious groups. In this section, I will highlight the confusions the schooling initiatives of religious groups create in the minds of Adivasi children about cultural identity formation. I will discuss the initiatives of two religious groups -viz. Christianity and Hinduism, as sample. The first religious ideology offering schooling to Adivasi children is Christianity. Christianity has a long history of providing educational facilities to Adivasi communities in India. While they championed the cause of the Adivasi by educating them, the education they introduced was foreign to the Adivasi social system. They openly rejected the Adivasi religion as 'animist', cultural practices as unethical, courage as barbaric. Thus, they propagated the dominant Western and Indian culture through education. The youth dormitory system mainly in the Chhotanagpur region ran towards its dead end due to the spread of Western Christian (Sahay, 1968; Toppo, 1979; Xaxa, 2011)). They preferred Hindi and English values languages -both alien to Adivasis, in the schools they opened (Bara, 1997). Therefore, the Christian schools initially made the stable cultural identity of the Adivasi children unstable in a state of confusion and fluidity. Additionally, through a better understanding of

Christianity, successive generations of educated Adivasi Christians began to reassert their cultural identity. The process included amalgamating new ideas with old ones, rationalizing and re-adopting many old beliefs and practices that were initially abandoned (Sahay, 1968). The second religious ideological group active in the education of Adivasi communities is Hinduism. It works through organizations like Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams, Vidya Bharti, Sewa Bharti, Ekal Vidyalaya, etc. (Sundar, 2004). Among all, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams are worth mentioning as they were established to provide school facilities with hostels for Adivasi children, with the aim of bridging the gap between the Hindu communities and the vanvasi (meaning Adivasi) communities. The organization recognizes the cultural differences of the Adivasis but works for their assimilation into mainstream society (Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, n. d). The school's curricular and extracurricular activities aim to absorb Adivasi children into a Hindu herd by eliminating their cultural distinction (Sundar, 2004). It cannot, therefore, be wrong to say that these schools are part of a conscious attempt to inculcate the dominant Hindu culture in children. This implies shedding of Adivasi cultural identity to adopt another.

#### The Commercial Schools

The third ideological group that invests in the education of Adivasi children are private initiatives. Due to the growing demand for quality education that public schools are failing to provide, a number of elite and low-cost private schools have been established by large corporate groups, small businesses groups and individuals. The number of private elementary schools increases every year. As per the state report cards (Elementary Education in India) of NIEPA, the number of private schools in the country was 334,468 in 2015-16 which rose to 349,412 in 2016-17. The problem, however, is not the growth in the number of private schools, but the inability of the state to encourage philanthropy and inculcate a sense of social responsibility and allow them to do business in the education, sometimes giving them grants. The profit motives of private actors often conflict with the educational goals of establishing schools. They make no difference between education and car manufacturing as long as it guarantees profits (Tilak, 2010). Thus, often identities in these schools are shaped by neoliberal and managerial values. The values of competition, individual excellence, accumulation of wealth, etc. that these promote are different from the Adivasi cultural values of egalitarian, community-based economic systems, symbiotic with nature, accommodative and so on (Bijoy, 2003).

The three ideologies -state, religion and market, that have been discussed in the endeavour to educate Adivasi children have at best created identity confusion among Adivasi children

rather than help shaping their cultural identity. All have done little to preserve and promote the distinct Adivasi culture and language guaranteed by Article 29(1) of the Constitution. It naturally follows that in our effort to educate Adivasi children, we have made them Indians, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, laborers (factory and domestic) but not "Adivasi Indians" who possess a distinct culture that adds beauty to Indian culture.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

Schools emerged as an institution with the particular cause of facilitating the younger generation to accumulate knowledge that their homes are not able to provide. This type of knowledge is context-independent but powerful; obtaining which students would elevate themselves at least intellectually (Young, 2011). Disadvantaged students like Adivasi in India who are constrained by material requirements, schools are the only place to gain powerful knowledge. However, schools in India provide young Adivasi learners with a wide range of planned and unplanned, formal and informal, explicit and hidden experiences (Ornstein and Hunkins, 1993) that are neither context-specific nor context-independent. The entire school environment and curriculum of Indian schools represents the culture of the dominant segment of society, which facilitates the maintenance of the cultural dominance of the dominant and cultural submission of the weak; thus perpetuating the prevailing social inequalities (Sundar, 2010). Such schooling arrangements have high impact on the cultural identity formation among Adivasi children. This I call issues in identity formation because this locate Adivasi children in dilemma whether to skip the process of identity formation presented to them by schools and be called primitive or accept and lose the original identity of 'Adivasi'.

This raises the question of whether an education devoid of elements of Adivasi culture, tradition and their everyday problems can prepare Adivasi children become "citizens for meaningful and productive lives" as NCF 2005 envisions. The answer is a firm no! The education insensitive to the realities of Adivasi communities would not promote a balanced development of all aspects of the personality of young Adivasi learners. The practices of discrimination and exclusion are not the solution but including aspects of Adivasis life and culture as this would smoothens cultural identity formation thereby develop capabilities of Adivasi learners. Therefore, if schools are to help Adivasi children learn to the best of their abilities, must create an environment in which Adivasi children and their culture are recognized, respected, acknowledged, valued, accepted, not ridiculed or rejected.

There is a need to break the vicious circle of considering culture of Adivasi groups as primitive, backward, worthless or as an obstacle to their education. Educators (teachers, policymakers, curriculum designers and administrators) require developing a deeper

understanding of the particularities of the life and culture of Adivasi children that would help to prepare the curriculum of school inclusive and Adivasi culture sensitive. An inclusive curriculum creates a classroom culture, in which every child is respected, would help Adivasi children to develop as Adivasi.

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Paper Received : 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

Paper Reviewed : 11th Jun, 2017

Paper Published : 1stJuly, 2017

