Against Schooling: Viewpoints of Tribal Students of Kanavu, India

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Abstract

Achieving what we believe to be the true purpose of education is a challenge in any society, particularly so in a society as diverse as contemporary India. Most attempts in this field are focussed on improving the access of children to education, but substantive questions such as: What is a school to a child? Does he/she enjoy learning? – are seldom addressed prior to drafting any curriculum or policy. Even where they are, the exploration tends to be qualitatively poor and devoid of stake holders' views. Alternative educational organisations might offer a perspective on the crisis education seems to be in today, with children lacking lifeskills, governments grappling with retention, disparities across gender and caste and declining standards of education.

'Kanavu' is an educational organisation managed by tribal youth in Cheengode village of Wayanad, a hilly district in the southern state of Kerala, India. These are children who dropped out of mainstream schooling. In the light of efforts to mainstream tribal students into government schools and to control escalating dropout rates, this paper tries to understand the perspectives of the tribal students of Kanavu on schooling and their reasons for resisting

mainstream schooling. This paper is a result of a 4 day visit and extensive correspondence the authors have had with this alternative learning organisation.

"Why cannot schools be places where learning is fun? And if the schools out there cannot have fun while learning, is our learning at our own pace and having fun wrong? What are schools then for?" – *Manglu, student at Kanavu*

The Cambridge dictionary defines 'school' (Hoad, 2010), as a place where children go to be educated. The word 'School' comes from the Greek word 'Skhole,' which connotes leisure, employment of leisure in disputation, lecture and (later) school. Given the drudgery that school education has become for millions of children today, it is difficult to imagine that it might have any connection with leisure. Schools as they exist today are based on a model developed to cater to the needs of an industrial society.[1]

Just as humungous apartment blocks continue to choke our city spaces, we continue with factory schooling systems churning out conditioned minds mostly unaware of their latent intelligence and creativity. Attempts to innovate schooling are termed hazy, fanciful, sometimes fleeting ideas, and are often viewed as idiosyncrasies. Somewhere we are still comfortable with the banking concept[2] (Freire, 2000), of teachers delivering knowledge and students depositing them in their brains, churning out, in the name of preparation for the

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[1] Quite like the domino type housing structures that sprang up in the same period, the concept of schooling too was, at that time, envisioned to contain, position and limit functionalities. The restraint of modernism stripped back the ornamentation of 19th century European houses. But in its place it left angular structures which made human beings feel at/on the edge. Though initially designed to organize and minimize the use of space, such structures also contain and segregate. Our preoccupation with rectilinearity is very evident in the shapes of housing structures, and objects around us. The correlation with factory schooling should be evident.

[2] Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits

world out there, unquestioning minds that are ductile and docile. India, in particular, is still trying to get out of the colonial mind-set that pervades its educational system (Nieuwenhuys, 2009; Vallgårda, 2011; Sircar & Dutta, 2011) and faces the challenge of designing an education system that can serve the mainstream as well as the marginalised.

Increasingly though, mainstream schooling is being questioned (Carnie, 2003; Kumar, 2007), and it has become imperative to understand the various alternative schooling movements that have arisen as responses to these questions, as well as the reasons for their departure from the mainstream.

Torsten Husen (1974) in his essay "The School as an Institution" describes this as a symptom which should be read as failure of mainstream schools:

> The mere fact that in different parts of the world so-called alternative schools, free schools—whatever their labels—begin to emerge is a symptom that we in the rich and highly industrialized countries have failed to create a school which stimulates young people to learn relevant things and which permits them to develop according to their individual needs. Let me accentuate that statement by saying that I am afraid that where catering for today's youth is concerned, the school is now clearly set on a collision course. It will be imperative for us to take our bearings before the collision occurs. (p. 15)

Not only do alternative schools offer an option to those who prefer to learn at their own pace and avoid the rat race, they also try to redefine what we believe is the true purpose of education—the holistic development of the child. Such alternative methods bring back the wholeness/totality of the educational experience, which is perceived to be fragmented due to the instrumentalization of education. It is part of the realisation that education and life should

not be divorced from each other that has spearheaded these movements. As John Holt (1970) says in his book *How Children Fail*, school children too become aware of this disconnect of what they do in school with life outside very quickly (p. 10). This becomes pertinent while discussing educational innovations for indigenous groups. Not only do they see through the disconnect of what is taught in school and their daily life, they are also expected to give up lifestyles, that over generations have been in contact with their physical and cultural surroundings, for something called modern education.

What is Schooling today?

In the present Indian society, any place that teaches a 'skill' is colloquially referred to as a school, be it driving school, dance school, martial arts school, or music school. So any organisation that imparts any skill training is a school. School hence, is viewed as an institution with an instrumental purpose, a place where skills are imparted, by an expert, within a particular time frame.

In a globalised world where man is basically conceived as a consumer of goods, the school also is perceived as a place which provides certain services, delivers knowledge as a good, leading to 'tangible' outcomes. Foucault (1975), in *Discipline and Punish* draws parallels between the school and the 'Panopticon.'[3] A student in a classroom is like a man inside the Panopticon. The structure of an annular building is such that it facilitates the monitoring of the child and hence controls her/his behaviour. The child is constantly reminded that s/he is being watched. This impression remains permanently in the mind of a person and all her/his actions are marked by attempts either to escape the watching eye or to

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[3] Bentham's Panopticon described in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is an architectural figure in the form of an annular building designed to isolate human b(India, 2012)beings.

comply and pass scrutiny.[4] The seating arrangements in a classroom—all facing the teacher in neatly arranged rows—serve the controlling function of the teacher. No one escapes the teacher, who in exercising total control with minimal effort such as a gaze or body language, fulfils the role of the agent of state policy. Such is the fear that this structure imposes that learning has ceased to be an activity of pleasure for students. Further, evaluations and assessments constantly prepare one for external validation and approval. Hence learning mostly perpetuates a fear of failure and becomes a test for survival and ductility. School today is an institution that teaches the child basic concepts and facts that will prepare him/her to secure a job 'out there.'

Paulo Freire (2000) challenges this notion of education when he talks about education being a process of transformation from nature to culture. For many the concern today is whether this whole process requires any assistance at all and would it not happen involuntarily and organically even without schooling.

Our visit to Kanavu was to understand a group of students who, through their achievements were attempting to answer similar questions on education.

This paper, in three parts, tries to understand from the viewpoint of the students at Kanavu

1) What schooling means to them?

2) Why they resist mainstream schooling?

3) And how successful they have been in resuscitating their culture through this resistance?

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[4] Kafka's parable *Before the Law* is a wonderful literary illustration of this phenomenon.

But before we begin our exploration we would like to explore a bit more on our theoretical understanding of the whole problem. We wish to position Kanavu's story not alone as an achievement of alternative pedagogy that survived but also from quays of multiple childhoods within India of which Kanavu is one. This is important because the story of Kanavu is not the story of their education alone but also voices from their childhood. Since the interviewees of Kanavu were children who dropped out of mainstream schooling and carved a learning space for themselves resisting the mainstream, their agency over their childhood is definitely of importance to this study. The following passages attempts to link the notions of Indian childhood and education before moving to the story of Kanavu.

The Indian Childhood

"Multiple childhoods was an exciting epistemic shift precisely because its social constructionist lens released the concept of 'childhood' from its normative moorings, thereby making it available as an object of historical, sociological and ethnographic study" (Balagopalan, 2011). Though it has not salvaged the Indian child from the category of 'suffering children as an aesthetic adornment' (Holland, 2004) it definitely has ignited a movement that has succeeded in denaturalizing the universal claims on childhood and the 'affective investment' made by adults on children (Balagopalan, 2011). A fair example of this is given by Balagopalan—much agreed upon by many other childhood researchers in the Non- Western countries, regarding the narrow world view of Convention on the Rights of the Child's (CRC's) definition of a child as a person under 18 years of age. While we admit that in Non- Western communities the notion of childhood ends way before the age of 18, this is a definition forced upon these communities in the name of universalization of rights of children.

At the same time we must be aware that accepting the notion of multiple childhoods and questioning the normative ethics inherent in a universalizing (single) definition of childhood, opens us to the risk of condoning the 'exploitation' of children within a culturally relativist register (Balagopalan, 2011, James, 2010). An apt example of this in the colonial context is cited by Vallgårda (Vallgårda, 2011) who discusses the Danish Missionary Society's work at a boarding school for low-caste 'heathen' children in South India in the 1860s and 1870s: how children became a site for the production of difference that sustained colonialism in the name of a 'civilizing mission' characterizing the native population as 'child-like', and how a normative ethic formed the rationale for missionaries to convert and educate the native children to be at par with their western counterparts. Childhood studies from independent India reflect on the latent subtext of a re-articulation of this Western myth that lingers in the post-colonial mind, while discussing activities organized and sponsored not only by religious-cultural entities but by the state as well. This is the main reason behind the skepticism prevalent among many, which views global charities, civil society movements as a recolonization of the "native" Indian through the terrain of childhood (Manjarekar, 2011, Vallgårda, 2010, Nieuwenhuys, 2009, Sircar and Datta, 2011).

The images portraying the lives of Indian children, their education and issues in day to day life are no different from the images of the nation itself. The advertisement of adversity has cast the Indian childhood in binaries of happy-innocent vs. struggling-squalor-violated, both ways attracting attention for funds from external agencies, constantly reminding the world that Indian childhood is either non-existent or at most in such a distressed state as to need urgent intervention. A few pointers that need to be reiterated at this time with regard to childhood research in India have been explicated below. This explication borrows from the editorial of Childhood, 2009. Nieuwenhuys has stated here her opinions regarding how she

makes sense of what she encounters as a foreigner and childhood researcher in India, and how she feels her colleagues in this area wish to explain it to the rest of the world:

1) Firstly, perhaps the greatest injustice done to children is claiming authorship of / authority over what childhood is or ought to be. The answer to the question: 'Is there an Indian childhood?' is positive, though there are many childhoods, being either de- or reconstructed; and it is difficult to settle the question how many and which they are.

2) Secondly, the role of critique is limited. Childhood studies in the West have long been hindered by the formidable power of disciplinary strongholds that monopolize and solidify their 'irrefutable truths' about childhood by presenting them as natural 'facts.' The Indian experience with childhood studies suggests that 'reading the other side of the picture against the grain,' to borrow from Robert Young, is not only a highly inspiring, refreshing and optimistic way forward, but also one that can provide a much firmer future base to the field of childhood studies than the preoccupation with critique (Young, 2004).

3) A third lesson from the Indian experience is that the future of childhood studies will critically depend upon the openness with which debates are pursued. Two consequences that need more attention are: that the NGO-induced saving operation of the Indian child should be critically assessed for how they mesh with this active construction, to use Said's happy expression, of 'contrapuntal' childhoods (Said, 1994); and that by opening our eyes to the contrapuntal in our own histories and cultures we [the West] can learn from India how to rescue our own children from modern childhood.

While discussing Kanavu, the resistance to schooling in the light of other attempts made to reform indigenous communities, we believe it is very important to read the efforts of Kanavu also as an answer to 'colonial' notions of success, merit, culture, and childhood imposed onto the imagery of Indian education and childhood. Education that the state prescribes turns out to be a perpetuation of the colonial myth that leaves no space for alternative ways of learning just as it does not favour celebration of multiple childhoods. And while we admit that many such efforts do fail for several reasons, efforts like Kanavu are a ray of hope—an apt example of celebration of a childhood that need not be constrained into the binaries of abject poor versus cute-innocent, always in need of rescue. Such examples deserve to be discussed and recorded for the mainstream to learn and accept the possibilities of multiple ways of learning as well as childhoods.

Tribal education

The Indian Constitution assigns special status to the Scheduled Tribes (STs). There are 573 STs living in different parts of India, having their own languages, which can be quite different from the one mostly spoken in the state where they live. STs constitute about 8% of the Indian population. According to the 2001 census, the tribal population in India is 74.6 million.

There were 16 million ST children (10.87 million of 6-11 years and 5.12 million of 11-14 years) as of March 2001, out of the total child population in India of about 193 million in the age group of 6 to 14 years *(Selected Educational Statistics – 2000-01, Government of India).*

While there is growing consensus among educators and policy makers on providing education to tribal, there are serious pitfalls in implementation. Some of the educational programmes for tribal children are heavily funded by UN agencies and are well formulated,

keeping in mind the facts of dropouts/retention, context based interventions and so on. However, there seems to be little understanding of the resistance from tribals in many cases, and of the dynamics of what happens within the classrooms.

An important policy feature in the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 (National policy of Education: Government of India) is the opening of primary schools in tribal areas and the development of instructional material in tribal languages at the initial stages with arrangements for switchover to regional languages. The NPE, 1986 and the Programme of Action (POA), 1992, recognized the heterogeneity and diversity of the tribal areas while underlining the importance of instruction through the mother tongue and the need for preparing teaching/learning materials in the tribal languages. Yet students drop out. And the government is trying to grapple with the challenge of 'merging the walkways of both the worlds' (Henze and Laurens, 1993)[5].

What is Schooling to Kanavu?

Kanavu[6] is mostly referred to as an alternative school or commune. Kanavu describes itself as a "Basal vidyabhasa sthapanam"[7]—an alternative educational institution. Their definition is broader than it seems. They resist the mainstream and hence are an alternative school. This is explicated in their alternative modes of learning. There is a conscious effort to impart knowledge in an unconventional way (unconventional to us and conventional to them) retaining both aspects of the original Skhole: instruction and leisure/joy. They understand that

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[5] Walking between two worlds is a metaphor borrowed from Henze and Laurens: To walk between two worlds, symbolizing the crises of indigenous peoples in adjusting to the mainstreaming of their culture.

[6] 'Kanavu' means dream

[7] Badal vidyabhyasa sthapanam means an alternative educational institution. This term became popular with the initiatives of Sarang and alternative schooling movement in Palakkad district of the state of Kerala.

knowledge presented in texts but out of context makes no sense, especially when it is evidently coupled with obeying the pedagogic authority that grants this knowledge legitimacy.

> **"**When we began mobilising the tribals for street plays, we saw many children gathered to watch us, who were supposed to be in schools; slowly through interaction we learned they were apprehensive and fearful of schools. Many were punished for not answering correctly in class. Humiliation, fear and frustration of not understanding the medium of instruction made them want to drop out."—Shirley Baby discussing the origin of Kanavu.

In the initial days of Kanavu some teachers who volunteered to be with the students full time came over to be with them. The process was transactional, the students taught them something they knew, be it tribal dance or music or agriculture and the teachers taught them what they knew in return. The senior batches of Kanavu hence benefitted from artists, writers, scientists who lived with them and taught them various skills.

There were no exams and students progressed into higher studies if they wished, through open schooling and distance learning institutes. Kanavu believes in self-sufficiency and raises funds by selling cards, calendars, and conducting stage shows. They resist any form of funding or grants from outsiders and believe they should sustain themselves along with their education. K.J Baby and Shirley Baby brought up both their daughters Geethi and Mala at Kanavu. Geethi is now learning various dance forms and aspires to be in the creative field. Mala got a scholarship to learn sound engineering in U.K., which Geethi feels was possible only because of the interests nourished through the film workshops at Kanavu. Santhosh who is one of the managing trustees of Kanavinmakkal (The managing board of Kanavu) is an excellent potter. Chathi another student and trustee learnt Ayurveda from an

Ayurveda college nearby. He agreed to teach Yoga to the students of his college instead of paying fees. This is an alternative way of living he says where a student can pay for her/his education in exchange of offering the skills s/he knows.

Chipran, another student decided studies never interested him as much as painting. He designs Warli art cards and calendars and raises funds for Kanavu. He dreams of teaching painting to children.

Every year Kanavu organises a tour to different parts of India. They believe this is the best educational experience. They plan programmes comprising tribal dances and songs and other performances. Chathi says,

> We mobilise a lot of money and earn the rest by performing. Sometimes these trips are even unprepared. This teaches the children a lot through cultural interaction. Many of us picked up languages this way. We often learn art forms of other cultures and teach them our art forms in return. What could be more educative? And we take with us students outside Kanavu who wish to join us.

On the other hand their way of living and responding to the environment becomes an alternative to schooling. In a sense they cannot be defined as a school where the purpose of learning is instrumental, with the means leading to a definite end. Chathi elaborates,

> We decided we would learn science from the environment. We cultivate paddy and vegetables in this land and in that process we educate the younger ones on plant life, types of soil, weather, and climate. We also make different kinds of manures. When we wanted to learn about the human body we went to a doctor and learned from him about the mysteries of the human body. When we learn Kalaripayattu [8] we learn our

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[8] Kalaripayattu is an Indian martial art from the southern state of Kerala.

own bodies. What could teach us more about the human body? One who knows his own body can use it to the fullest potential.

Hence for educators the former definition of an alternative school serves best while Kanavu chooses the latter. School for them is not a place they come to for a few hours and learn something new in a different way. Neither is Kanavu a residential school where they live for a long time following a regime. Kanavu is a dream, nurtured by Kanavinmakal[9]. Chathi says,

"We don't use the term school, and I think school and education have nothing in common, but people in our own community tend to describe us similarly, so we just accept it."

Kanavu gives to each student the openness to decide what they want to make of themselves at the end of their time at Kanavu. There are elders who work and contribute to Kanavu, some train students while many others branch out opening new learning spaces within their tribal belt.

The routine at Kanavu begins with household chores. Kanavu questions the conventional definition of a school as a place for academic work alone by taking up household chores as part of the curriculum. Like many other alternative schools, sewing, cooking, cleaning and gardening becomes a part of the syllabus. But what differentiates them from many other alternative schools is that they are rooted in their very own indigenous culture and do not differentiate between education and life. Kanavu does have a vision—the dream of providing an education to their community rooted in their own culture so there would be no dropouts.

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[9] Kanavinmakkal means children of dream. Kanavu was initially registered by the founder K.J Baby but now he has left the organization to the students. They have registered a new society and named it Kanavinmakkal.

The words curriculum and syllabus cause much discomfort to everybody at Kanavu. Chathi says,

> Maybe for your understanding you could say so, but this is how we live. We do not consciously plan and formulate this as a syllabus. I cannot understand why there should be any hype on learning any of these activities segregated from other subjects when it is so much a part of life.

Like other small alternative schools, Kanavu also believes in the philosophy of experiential learning. While embracing values of modernity there is a careful winnowing of values in one's own tradition. In other words, new concepts are assimilated by comparing with existing schemas of one's own culture. This becomes a constant process of evaluation. Even while adopting new things there is a constant dialogue between the indigenous and mainstream values—between tradition and modernity.

Students at Kanavu are taught every subject a student at a normal school learns but they learn it differently. They are in no hurry to finish a syllabus or learn everything. Every student is encouraged to discover her/his interests and goals in life and studies what s/he believes will help attain them.

At Kanavu there is no systematic time table or syllabus. Students sit in mixed age groups. Senior students teach younger ones and they switch groups every half hour, learning new subjects. Field visits undertaken by students and community interactions mark the beginning of history as a subject; working in paddy fields is an introduction to geography and botany. Math and literature is learnt through peer guided work and interaction with literary figures and/or exposure to literary texts. Students compose plays and poems and publish

handwritten magazines. Film making, criticism and appreciation are subjects, and there is much exposure to internationally acclaimed movies.

Judging by the way students from Kanavu have been assimilated into different cultural and linguistic surroundings, one can say that they are not misfits. They have learnt to relate to different cultures, learn different languages and work in different parts of the country, many times carving a niche for them without suffering from an outsider syndrome/identity crisis. Kanavu has gained popularity among tourists who visit them to have cultural interactions. They take their visitors along with them to their fields where they cultivate seasonal crops for their daily use, teach them Kalaripayattu, yoga, tribal folk dance and songs and in return from them they learn their culture, language and skills. And this has become their strength because they have established contacts with the outer world by assimilating and adapting their culture.

Looking at their ability to write and express their ideas, and having had a fair bit of email correspondence with them, one could also say that they have acquired good communication skills—certainly not inferior to children from mainstream schools. These are evident in their ability to converse and communicate and travel around the country, learning new skills and teaching their own to others.

Chathi a student at Kanavu asks, "How do we learn history from teachers who are biased about us? Who don't interpret history with cultural relevance, whose views about us are prejudiced?" This points to the failure of sensitization of teachers to tribal knowledge systems, history and way of life. Ms Shirley Baby says,

> Understanding the tribals and their culture is very difficult. The world view of
> the tribals is blended with the myths and folklore and history of their tribes.

What often happens is that people come and learn these cultures and go without contributing to the tribes. Sometimes they impose alien ideas and disrupt the status quo. This has made them detest the external world. The tribals have their own stories and folk tales about their slavery. They believe they are destined to be slaves and any plans to escape will be thwarted because they would be devoured by their gods. There are songs and stories of people who tried to escape and were bought back by the demons. Hence the histories of tribals in Wayanad are the story of submission and subservience. The unexplored Wayanad was found by settlers, mostly families who migrated from and nearby districts of Kerala. They introduced alcohol and betel nuts to the tribals, used them as labourers and slowly made them slaves. Their histories are those of betrayal and wrong portrayal. Some history texts in Kerala history describe the story of the pulayas[10] who informed Tipu Sultan[11] about the hide out of Pazhassi Raja[12] and hence they became traitors. The tribal who were slaves feel they never had any right in decision making and hence they were misled to act in ways that made them appear as traitors.

Henze and Vanett use the metaphor of the 'dissatisfaction of walking in two worlds' while critiquing the goals of education for indigenous groups in the United States (Henze and Vanett, 1993). It is often taken for granted that the indigenous groups need to be mainstreamed if they need development. And it is left to them to cope with the identity crises

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[10] Pulaya is a tribe

[11] Ruler of Mysore who occupied Wayanad part of Malabar province of Pazhassi Raja under his rule. Mysore is in the state of Karnataka today.

[12] Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja was a prince of Kottayam (Malabar) dynasty under whose province was Wayanad

they go through in the process. What is undermined is the fact that many indigenous groups do not enjoy this friction between their culture and the mainstream. And they feel that their identity is erased by the process of mainstream schooling. Many tribes do assimilate to the mainstream completely in the hope of a better living only to find themselves ostracized.

Why the resistance?

> Any child going to a state school is prey to a threat. A threat he assumes is his fate and inevitable and for some it's hard to accommodate. While some succeed by complying, they would later keep grappling in darkness. The fortunate ones resist and drop out. Why become a cog in the wheel, when you can be your own master? Santosh, student and managing trustee at Kanavu

Looking into one's own history and the struggle to maintain one's own identity with changing times has been a matter of concern to the students of Kanavu. Students of Kanavu, who have attended government schools, have experienced discrimination and a sense of alienation. However, alongside this experience there is also a concern regarding what the outcomes of state monitored education system would be.

Fiona Carnie (2003) in her book on 'alternative schooling' expresses similar views:

> The introduction, over the past two decades, of market values into the state education system—as expressed in..... League tables and competition between schools— threaten the essence of what education should be about, namely the development of the individual child. As a consequence growing numbers of young people are being side-lined by a system which does not respond to their needs. (p.161)

John Taylor Gatto (2005) too lays out some of the "hidden agenda" in the mainstream school curriculum in his book *Dumbing us Down*. This could be equally baffling to the tribal children who understand from day one that they are outcasts**.** The very label of reformatory programmes arouses disinterest and disbelief in them. And what no programme can ensure is an attitudinal change in the minds of pedagogues. Well entrenched concepts of castes and tribes are not what can be driven out in five year plans. This existed in the Boston schools of African American ghettos [13](Kozol, 2005); tribal schools of Maori [14]children in New Zealand (Ashton- Warner, 1963) and is a crisis in Indian tribal schools too.

Leela, another student from Kanavu echoes similar views,

> Our needs and wants are simple. We believe mother earth will take care of our needs. We don't worry about tomorrow. We live in today. We have survived worse. We don't mind toiling but we don't understand the hurried nature of the world out there. At times I wonder why we are forced to learn all this to toil for the rest of our life. Look at these children around us who have been lured to government schools. They understand nothing. Our culture has a different way of learning. These children come to us for tuitions. We teach them how to cope with studies and also lessons from our culture that they are not taught in school.

With the opportunities made available at Kanavu, students have become more open and confident to challenge the education system imposed on them. And while accepting that they need to be part of the world out there, students of Kanavu also prove a point that learning

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[13] Kozol, in Amazing grace describes his first year as teacher in Boston school with African American students

[14] Sylvia Ashton's 'Teacher' describes her experience with Maori children

need not happen in state led schools alone and that an alternative form of learning can help students learn more meaningfully, keeping their cultural values intact.

Sustaining a dream—Resuscitating Cultures

(Kumar, 2007) writes, "Systems of education evolve when alternatives to the mainstream are absorbed by it. When this does not happen and the mainstream resists assimilation of new ideas, the system ossifies." Stories and models of initiatives like Kanavu deserves assimilation rather than resistance to mainstream system of education. But for this it is important that we pay close attention to the message they have for the mainstream system of education.

K.J. Baby remarks what makes Kanavu distinct from other communities and a positive learning community.

> Even today tribal here live differently from us, the 'modern men.' I would say they have better life skills than us. What upsets us seldom upsets them. How many tribal do you hear committing suicide out of poverty? Or how many tribal women or men have you heard filing a petition for domestic violence or divorce? They have their own leader and a sabha[15]. Issues like marriage and divorce are handled quite normally in their community. No one is depressed or has any issues meeting their spouses after divorce. Children are taken care of by the community. It feels awkward to impose our rules and moral dictates on them. It used to confuse us as to where we should draw a line so as not to disturb or disrespect their traditions. They have their superstitions, some of

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[15] Sabha is a village level body where the elders gather and a public hearing is conducted.

which we felt were reasons for their social status. We worked on some but left the others untouched.

From the above, it follows that a system must be created which makes learning the only escape hatch from various unpleasant alternatives that fence the pupil in: low marks, reproaches, complaints and so on.

Vanett and Henze while exploring the metaphor of walking in two worlds discuss five assumptions people have about this metaphor. The study, though done among native Alaskan and Indian tribes, has insights that can be generalised to other indigenous populations. Two of the assumptions might be closely related to the students of Kanavu.

First, the assumption that children in the region have available to them two cultural worlds, (their own and the culture of the mainstream) which although different, can merge in an individual who is bi-lingual and bicultural. This definitely was not what the students experienced in the government schools and it is this inconsistency and confusions that led to many dropouts, in spite of the government's special programmes to check this very phenomenon. This leads us to an extension of the authors' assumption—being forced to give up one's own language, culture, and identity in the name of getting educated would be detrimental to individuals who have the ability to confidently and competently straddle two or more cultures through non-coercive learning and adaptation, as demonstrated by the children at Kanavu.

Although Kanavu was initiated by a non-tribal (K.J Baby), it is being carried on by students of Kanavu themselves and continues to function despite financial limitations. Fishman (1985) writes,

> Language shift of any kind ... is an indicator of dislocation ... Such dislocation is to be expected among intruders, be they immigrants or occupants. After all, they have left their old homes, their familiar places, and, often, their cultural self-sufficiency ... What, then, must we conclude if we find this same picture among indigenous populations, populations who have not left their old homes, nor their familiar places, nor the territorial bases of their cultural integrity and continuity? What we must conclude... is extremely great dislocation: the dislocation of conquest, of genocide, of massive population resettlement such that locals are swamped out, engulfed, deracinated and decimated by intruders, be they conquerors or settlers. (p.66)

Students at Kanavu belong to four tribes and speak four different dialects. Among themselves they speak a common dialect. Malayalam and many Indian languages are learnt but not at the cost of leaving one's own language and there is a constant effort for resuscitation of indigenous knowledge. "How do we study in schools where we know, we are not understood?" asks Leela a student at Kanavu. "So we decided we would learn our own histories first."

"We watch Malayalam movies, we read Malayalam literature, we also read Hindi and Tamil, but we can't feel we are Malayalees, and we don't think it is wrong," says Chathi another student.

While discussing their views on religion, morality and ethics, Manglu, a student, says:

> You feel or the government feels it is necessary to group us somehow, so you do it as ST's or scheduled tribes. But we have hierarchies even within these tribes, some are dominant and derive benefits and some are always left behind.

> But for government we are all same. It is true that we have not taken up the identities of 572 tribes as uniquely as we have demarcated the 28 states. It is also true the constitution clubs them together for convenience. We are not Hindus but how do we explain that. We do not believe in any Hindu gods, we have our own deities. But that comes nowhere in any syllabus. We don't have holidays on festivals and neither are our marriages and other celebrations based on any Hindu traditions. But for the convenience of all we call ourselves Hindus and outcastes among Hindus.

While discussing mainstream schooling Manglu, who has been teaching dance and Kalaripayattu to students and visitors at Kanavu, says:

> Education alone does not solve problems, neither does providing mid-day meals. Look at this girl, she comes from a family of five kids, left there to starve she would not go to a school for mid-day meals and return and would soon be a bonded labourer. Government might be implementing mid-day meals to retain students but what they cannot do is change the society. They cannot stop poverty. Here she will live with people like those at home and learn to build her own life with dignity. Does education happen only in schools? We offer tuitions to students going to the government schools. We know how ignorant these children are despite attending school and we without any formal schooling manage three languages and also what is taught at any other schools.

Life outside the school is no doubt as rich in information as that inside the school walls. This means that to the same extent that the traditional elements of learning in school are reinforced so is the conflict exacerbated between theory and practice, between education and life.

Present day schooling resembles a factory assembly line, where the imparting of knowledge is based on the assumption that teaching is highly correlated to learning. Kanavu questions the very rationale of prolonged regimented instruction.

Leela, a senior student appearing for her bachelor's exam in Sociology at an open university, puts things in perspective:

> We were trained to live, to survive. Why do so many students commit suicide when they fail exams? Is life not an exam, we fail and pass daily. We feel pity on them and this system. Look at those fields, we cultivate and manage our schools. We have made mistakes that cost us a lot like we invested in honey beekeeping but it was not successful. For us this was an expensive mistake but we made it a point to learn where we went wrong. We learned a little bit of zoology in this process. And now we are going to invest again. This is the best training we get, training for life.

Kanavu is going through a difficult phase since many seniors have found jobs outside. However, many of them gather annually for a meeting where they plan activities for the year. If one goes away for higher studies, they make it a point to return and stay back for a year so that others can go out and learn. Those who go out return with new knowledge and skills and that is how Kanavu grows.

When confronted with the frequent criticism of such alternative initiatives—that they do not sustain in the long run—K.J Baby, the founder of Kanavu replied,

> We did not start this whole endeavour, it evolved in the process of our theatre activities. But we just channelled the flow. At first we knew they were in no position to handle it all on their own so we registered as Kanavu but now that

the students have grown up and can manage the school, we have left it to them and registered it as Kanavinmakkal hence we no longer manage them. This is not happening in most places. Schools of alternative ideologies are still known by their founders' names and are not managed by the children. Today there might be chaos and tough time in Kanavu but they will overcome it. Structures might not last but ideologies always will. And why should any structure last.

These words shed light on why it is difficult to classify Kanavu today. However, this lack of classification hardly takes away from it being a place where children can be educated. As a school which has resuscitated the tribal culture and has not succumbed to the pressures of walking in two worlds, Kanavu does not die even if the structures don't last, because each student branches out as a new dream—a new 'Kanavu.'

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