Adivasi Academy
Acknowledging Adivasi Knowledge        80
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Rethinking Universities for Development: Intermediaries Innovation & Inclusion

**Rethinking Universities
for Development
Intermediaries
Innovation &
Inclusion**

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# Adivasi Academy: Acknowledging Adivasi Knowledge
## Rajni Bakshi

*"All my life I have searched for the 'genuine'; that sentiment of selfless service which manifests itself in only a handful of us. In Ganesh [Devy] and the people at the Adivasi Academy, I stand vindicated. We are at a crossroads in space and time — there is anticipation in the air; it is as if we know that something big is either about to happen or give way disastrously."*
 – Mahasweta Devi[1]

*"The Adivasi Academy is not a place for any cutting-edge theoretical knowledge. It is meant for forging out strategies for improving the lives and the economic condition of the Adivasis, for building durable and sustainable assets for the community, for bringing respect to their cultural heritage and to provide a forum and a space for voicing the Adivasi concerns in an idiom of their own."* – Ganesh Devy[2]

## Introduction: Why this exploration

It is important to locate and understand endeavors like Adivasi Academy in a wider context. Even as terms like 'Inclusive development' and 'Inclusive innovation' have become buzz words, there is now much interest in 'skilling' those Indians who are left out of the development process  Much of this work is aimed just at increasing the number of people with vocational skills and enhancing the quality of those skills. While this is important, it is equally if not more important to ask what kinds of skills are valued? What kinds of capabilities are even acknowledged as a 'skill'?  Then the deeper question is inclusion into what?   These questions cannot be addressed without first exploring just what 'development' is.

Many have been looking to institutions like the Adivasi Academy, Tejgadh (Gujarat), to help create spaces in which the dominant paradigm can be challenged by the creation of an alternative template. In what ways does the Adivasi Academy succeed in giving space and/or shape to concerns about development? What are some of the more fundamental questions and challenges it raises and in what ways does it do so? In what ways does this endeavor resonate with the strivings of other efforts like the Kala Ashram at Adilabad?

To raise these questions, this case study/profile briefly explores some of the following questions:
• Can an institution like Adivasi Academy provide an alternative vision which draws on the traditional skills and knowledge systems of tribal communities while also creating avenues for them to engage with the contemporary realities, primarily the prevailing market system?
• How and why did the Adivasi Academy set out to do this?
• To what extent, in their own assessment, have they succeeded?
• One of the goals of the Adivasi Academy is to translate its studies and research into interventions for empowerment of marginalized communities. To what extent has it been able to do so?

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[1] The Green World Order by Harmony Singaporia, *Tehelka Magazine,* Vol 6, Issue 25, Dated Jun 27, 2009. www.tehelka.com/story_main42.asp?filename=cr270609the_green
[2] Language, Culture and Development: An Experiment with Tribal Empowerment in Western India by Ganesh Devy. Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara.

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- Another objective has been to nurture a community of adivasi thinkers and new thought processes so as to facilitate social transformation. What has been the development on this front?
- The Academy also aims to become a national institution for research, reference and the study of social dynamics. How is this journey proceeding?
- How do the staff and students at Adivasi Academy relate to or work with the concept of "inclusive innovation"?
- What can formal universities learn from the ideas and experiments of Adivasi Academy?

*"Every language is a unique world view. When a language disappears, the world-view held within it also disappears. Most of the languages that face the threat of extinction belong to indigenous people who have intimate knowledge of nature. And with their disappearance, the world's stock of ecological wisdom is increasingly getting wiped out.... Sadly, about 20 of the nearly 52 mother tongues recorded in the 1961 Census in Gujarat cannot be traced today. I would say that, on an average, Gujarat has been losing one language every five years."* – Ganesh Devy in an interview with Vineet Kaul, 2011

## Brief History

It was Ganesh Devy's (see box on page 90) interest in Sri Aurobindo that first took him to Dabhoi, a small town of Gujarat, where Aurobindo had practiced meditation and is said to have had a major spiritual experience. This brought Devy in touch with adivasi communities in that area, particularly in the village of Tejgadh which is about two hours drive from Vadodara.

From the outset Devy knew that "culture is at the very heart of the process of empowerment and social development"[3] Towards this he founded the Basha Research Centre in 1996. One of Bhasha's purposes was to establish a national level institute for tribal art, culture, knowledge. Tejgadh was chosen as the location for this institution which came to be known as Adivasi Academy. According to its website, "The Adivasi Academy is established to create a unique educational environment for the study of tribal communities. The academy is aimed to become an institute for the study of tribal history, folklore, cultural geography, social dynamics, economy, development studies, medicine, music, arts and theatre. With its multidisciplinary approach and related interventional measures, the academy is striving to create a new approach of academic activism."

*"The Adivasi Academy is not there to condemn anyone" "But oppressed and exploited communities need to be brought to par with those who are not oppressed."*
*"Adivasi Academy is not so much about being adivasi as it is about being experimental. And as adivasis write adivasi ethnography they have gained self-confidence and can also be self-critical."* -Ganesh Devy

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[3] [Source: 'Language, Culture and Development: An experiment with tribal empowerment in Western India' by Ganesh Devy]

Source of Box above: 'Gujarat loses one language every 5 years' by Vineet Kaul, DNA, Feb 21, 2011. http://www.dnaindia.com/india/interview_gujarat-loses-one-language-every-5-years-linguist_1510996]

The Adivasi Academy's vision is based on three key values: "Awakening, Participation and Empowerment". The Academy aims to redefine development by underlining tribal values such as: self-reliance, self-confidence and hard work. It also aims to build the capabilities of adivasis by "rescuing their dignity and respecting their cultural heritage through festivals, organizing cultural performances, theatre, songs, dances, rituals, documenting folklore and promoting modernizing tools in their languages." This is done partly by creating training programs that merge the aesthetic and socio-economic dimensions of tribal life.

Tejgadh's geographical location, either by accident or design, has proved to be providential for its vision and mission. The village is located about 100 km from the Rajasthan border, about 40 km from the Madhya Pradesh border and about 150 km from Maharashtra. It is also located at the heart of a tribal belt that overlaps across all four states. According to Dr. Arvind Pratap, who is in charge of the medical centre at the Academy, there was little or no cash economy in this area till about 50 years ago. Both cash based market economy and migration in order to seek work are relatively new phenomena.

Devy began by holding intensive conversations with about 15 young adivasi members of the local community, under a *Mahua* tree that stands at the entrance of what is now the academy's campus at Tejgadh. These conversations seem to have engaged these young people in exploring what such an academy should be and what kind of work it should undertake.
That team of 15, who later became the first students of the academy, decided to go on a study tour of the surrounding adivasi villages to identify what local communities want and need. They found the people in these villages longing for five kinds of freedom:
- Freedom from Indebtedness
- Freedom from Illiteracy
- Freedom from Illness
- Freedom from Migration
- Freedom from Hunger

These young people went on to become students in the first Tribal Studies course at the academy and many also got involved in addressing these issues through Development Service Centres or Gram Vikas Kendras which were set up in 50 villages. They have been working since then to help set up micro-credit schemes, health camps, micro-enterprises for income generation and grain banks. According to the Academy staff there are now 2200 self-help groups in 1200 villages in five districts – Baroda, Panchmahal, Narmada, Tapi and Surat.

In 1998 the Tejgadh Panchayat had given the Academy one room from which to start work. Later, in the year 2000, the Panchayat allocated 20 acres of land for the Academy. Today the academy is located on a ten acre plot of land at the foot of the Korja Hill which is the site of pre-historic rock paintings dating back to about 10,000 BC. The academy is housed in a network of red brick buildings with ample courtyards and green spaces. The academy's website says that buildings, designed by the architect Karan Grover, combine features of local architecture and historical monuments found in the area. There are now about 60 staff members on campus, including non-formal schools in villages.

As a study[5] by AID India has noted: "One of the goals of the academy is to create a community of thinkers and activists, especially from within tribal communities to create new thought processes and

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[5] Bhasha Adivasi Academy - a unique university; http://publications.aidindia.org/content/view/750/130/

forces of action to facilitate social and cultural change. Over the years, we have seen academy graduates return to their villages and start initiatives promoting, protecting, and documenting their own culture.  They established several Vikas Sewa Kendras (Development Services Centres) for community work in adivasi villages. By 2003,  these centers were overseeing 64 water bank collectives, food grain bank with 2800 women members, 54 non-formal education centers, and 260 micro-credit self help groups.  Another unique accomplishment is the creation of the Budhan Theatre Group in Chharanagar, Ahmedabad that performs street plays to raise awareness about the condition of nomadic and denotified tribes. The group is led by Dakshin Bajrange and Roxy Gagdekar, both from the Chhara community.

"In the tribal villages, a large number of children get left out of the formal schooling activity. Regular teacher training sessions are held at the Adivasi Academy in which traditional cultural tools as well as IT based learning are combined. Teaching through oral means is invariably emphasized in these sessions. The San Diego and Boston chapters of AID supported Bhasha's nonformal education efforts through the innovative 'radio school' program. The radio school involves audio recording of study materials to be transmitted via community radio and used by teachers in the adivasi villages. Oral education is supplemented with books. Pictorial dictionaries as well as relevant study materials are published in adivasi languages to accommodate children and non-adivasi teachers in adivasi areas. Bhasha's *Purva Para* and *Bol* magazines act as educational resources both for the children and teachers. The schools combine formal education with knowledge of the local songs, stories, ecology, science and technology".

## Courses at the Academy

Over the last ten years the Academy has offered various Post Graduate diploma courses, such as:
- Diploma in Rural Journalism
- Diploma in Adivasi studies
- Diploma in Indigenous Knowledge
- Diploma in Tribal Art and Culture
- Diploma in Culture and Development
- Diploma in Rural Health Care

The academy has also worked with teachers of schools for adivasi children to make innovations in the local school curriculum. Since 2009 the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has recognized three of the courses run by the academy, namely: a certificate in rural health awareness; a diploma in tribal art and culture; a diploma in culture and development.

### Festivals initiated
The academy's work has also given birth to various cultural festivals that are now said to have taken root among local people. For instance, there are two or three '*Tur Mela*' every year. *Tur* is a musical instrument. This mela brings together many different kinds of craftsmen, as well as 'oral artists' that is singers and story tellers. The *Tur Mela* attracts people from across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

Kaleshvari is another festival initiated by Bhasha, in 2004, which is held in Panchmahal district on every Mahashivratri. Now the festival happens on its own, without any effort from Bhasha or Adivasi Academy – artists and craftsmen and people in general assemble on their own. Another mela has

been happening in Satpura, in Dang District, since 2002 where about two to three thousand people assemble every year.

Adivasi Academy has produced a CD of the adivasi songs sung at these and other melas, festivals, weddings and other social gatherings. The Academy has distributed 9000 copies of these CDs free. The project was funded by the Tribal Affairs Ministry.

Medical Work

Along with its one-year course on Rural Health Care, the Academy also runs a primary health centre, which serves 20,000 people and a sub-centre which serves 3000 people. According to Dr. Arvind Pratap, who runs both the course and heads the medical work at the Academy, the curriculum includes both allopathic and ayurvedic approaches to medicine. There are also some lectures on local herbal medicines. This course involves five months of theory classes followed by three to four months practical experience in a hospital, followed by an exam. The minimum qualification for this course is a pass in class12. For the last three years this course has had the recognition of IGNOU.  This course has produced 102 graduates so far, of which 80 are adivasis. Out of these graduates 91 have got placement and others have gone for further studies.

Among the students who join the course many know about the trees of the area and their uses for humans and animals, at least for common ailments like fever, cold etc.  But as older people are dying, this knowledge is on the decline. More and more people depend mostly on allopathic medicines.

There is still some dependence on the local 'badwa' or traditional healer. " I often ask my students if they go to the 'badwa' and they say they do for small ailments. But many of the patients who come to me for treatment are cases that have gone bad after treatment by the 'badwa'" says Dr. Pratap.

Traditionally, the 'badwa' takes payment in the form of liquor or chicken, but a few now take payment in cash. There is need for research on how much 'badwas' of the earlier generation knew –not only about various ailments but about the medicinal properties of local plants.

For example, Govindbhai Rathva, who is 45 years old, is a traditional healer of the Bhil community but not a 'badwa'. He had studied up to class 7 and was in the first batch of students who took the Academy's health course. He is now a health supervisor at the Academy's medical centre and works mostly with allopathic medicines.

"Today the tribal wants quick solutions, wants to get well fast. Therefore allopathy has grown in tribal areas" says Dr. Pratap. But he adds that the difference in some cases is more of labeling and description than actual course of action. "As an allopath when I see an anemic patient I guide them on nutrition by scientific principles. The *Badwa* will tell them to eat *pallak* and *channa* because it helps to make blood…though he won't be able to name the vitamins or minerals that these foods contain. …At the Adivasi Academy our main challenge was to find ways of bringing adivasis into mainstream but many of them who join mainstream lose their own culture. So our first focus was on finding ways to preserve and nurture adivasi culture."

Publications and Documentation

One of Bhasha's major achievements has been the publication of Dhol, a magazine in various adivasi languages, from 1998 till 2005. Though Dhol is no longer published the Academy has its own publications program.

Sanjay Rathwa and Bavsingh Rathwa are in charge of the publications department at the Academy. Both of them studied at the village school and then did a BA in Sanskrit at a college in Pavijetpur. There were only three subjects to chose from at this college – engineering, gujarati and sanskrit. They chose sanskrit because it was easier to get a good score. They both did the post-graduate diploma in

social sciences and development at the academy. Sanjay and Bavsingh have taught themselves how to do cover design, format the material and coordinate the production with a printing press in Baroda. One of their publications is a magazine called "*Bol*" which is brought out once every two months and is sent to about 10,000 schools in Gujarat. The purpose of '*Bol*' is to publish stories, songs and reports by adivasis about their own experiences. Sanjay and Bavsingh have also created a 'Pictoglossary' in 14 adivasi languages. This has pictures to illustrate words and the word is given in gujarati, english and an adivasi language. "We designed it for children but adults are using it" says Sanjay.

Museum

At the heart of the Academy's network of buildings and courtyards is a partly covered and partly open-air space which houses a museum of adivasi artifacts. This space was originally called 'Vacha' or voice and was not really intended to be a museum in the conventional sense. But, says Devy, it has ironically become 'Vacha Museum'.

As Sonal Baxi of the Academy says, it is a space of, for and by adivasis – for them to perform and hold workshops and create new work. For example, adivasi songs are recorded and documented here. Narayan Rathwa, who is the curator of the museum, attended the village school at Tejgadh and then did a BA in Gujarati at the college in Pavijetpur, which is seven kilometers away from Tejgadh.

All through that education, says Narayan, he never learnt a single thing about adivasi history, culture or language. It was only when he began working with Devy in 1998 and later became a student in the first Tribal Studies Diploma course that he gained knowledge about his adivasi heritage. This two year diploma course required a dissertation to be written, so Narayan chose to do his dissertation on the oral literature of seven adivasi villages near Tejgadh.

During that course he got interested in adivasi art. In particular he studied the Baba Pithora songs and paintings – many of which are about the origin of the earth. One such story tells of how there was a small pond in which a lotus shoot appeared and out of that lotus shoot a woman and two men emerged. They created plants, trees and grains and also established places of worship (*devasthal*).

"I had heard these stories from my grandfather but did not remember much" says Narayan. "I only found these stories when I went searching for oral literature in the villages. I got about seven stories and wrote the dissertation on them in both Gujarati and Rathwi language. The songs were written in Rathwi alone, for that is the language of the songs."

Vikesh Rathwa grew up in Koraj Phalliya near Tejgadh and studied at the school in Tejgadh. He did a BA in Gujarati at the college in Pavijetpur and then an MA from the college in Dhaboi. But he left the MA mid-stream to join the museum-studies diploma course at the Academy. After this course Vikesh roamed about in many villages collecting discarded objects from the everyday life of adivasis including domestic utensils and artifacts used in worship.

Vikesh is also closely involved in the *Tur Mela*. His connection with adivasi artists goes back to 1996, though the *Tur Mela* was first held in 2005. He is also involved in the Kaleshvari festival.

Nita Rathwa is another member of the Museum team. She grew up in Domali village near Tejgadh and attended the school at Tejgadh. She did a BA in Gujarati from the college in Pavijethpur. She had observed her parents and grand-parents worship at various '*devasthals*' (sacred places) and practice other rituals but only understood these practices after doing the diploma course at the Academy.

"Museum is more of a learning centre not a storehouse of what is ending" says Vasanth Rathwa, a staff member of the Academy who works on education.

Language studies

Amrutha Vadu, Rajesh Rathwa, Manish Varia are working on an anthropology project which studies ten adivasi communities – their language, history, customs, songs, drama, dance, *kathas*, grammar. They delve into details like who makes the drums and how, when the drums are used and what forms of worship involve the use of drums.

This team is also making a comparative study of various languages.  For example what is '*hal*' (plough) called in various adivasi languages? What are the different names for various months? While this team coordinates the project and does a part of the data collection, other staff members of the Academy are also collecting data for this study on the side along with their other responsibilities. So can an institution like Adivasi Academy provide an alternative vision which draws on the traditional skills and knowledge systems of tribal communities while also creating avenues for them to engage with the contemporary realities?

Clearly the Academy's varied activities are creating avenues for its students and staff to acquire skills and knowledge that empower them to engage with the contemporary realities. Let us now examine to what extent this also fosters an alternative vision which may draw on the traditional skills and knowledge systems of adivasi communities.


## The Adivasi View of Inclusive innovation

How do the staff and students at Adivasi Academy relate to or work with the concept of "inclusive innovation"? This question cannot be explored without first asking how 'development' is understood and defined.  But before exploring that it is first important to ask: what does it mean to be an adivasi. Here are some the answers to this question from the staff of the Academy:

- Our dance, language, music and customs are different.
- Many adivasis feel they are '*neech*' (lowly) unless they have some money.
- Being a *Rathwa* means having our own distinct songs, dances, cloths, jewelry and *devsthals* (places of worship).
- We have a special connection with rivers, mountains, trees, land.
- Being 'adivasi' does not mean living in the jungle.

Only one member of the Academy staff spoke about the increasing violence against adivasis by 'development' projects in other parts of India. Vasant Rathwa said: "Across the country there are now many movements of adivasis because adivasis are being pushed out of where they live….just as we have been pushed to the back of the bus for years.  So there is accumulated 'aakrosh' (anger and resentment). So today adivasis are at a do or die crossroad….*aage khai aur peeche khai* (a ditch in front of us and a ditch behind us).

"Adivasi is not an accumulating type of person. Adivasi likes to live with the essentials of life. Now if Adivasi is to live, adivasis themselves will have to come forward our leaders should emerge from within our communities. But those who are in touch with mainstream change, their priorities change and become more wants based rather than needs based."

Here is a quick review of what many of the Academy's staff said when asked: 'what is development?'

- Development is self-reliance.
- Development is roads, buses, electricity.

- Roads and electricity are not enough, development means changing the education system, so children can learn in their own local language. And they must also have computer education and access.
- Development is good health, a house, adequate food, education, medical care, water, fertile fields, good quality agricultural inputs and marketing avenues.

What about television and other modern gadgets? According to one staffer, Nagin Rathwa, most adivasis do not have time for television, since their cattle, agriculture and children take up too much time. Nagin attended the school at Tejgadh school and then did BA in Sanskrit and MA in Sociology at a college in Udaipur. He taught the course on Indigenous environmental knowledge at the Academy, which is currently not being taught. Nagin plans to revamp the course and reintroduce it.

There seems to be no immediate answer to the question: Is there an Adivasi definition of development? Nagin spoke about the widespread awareness that chemical agriculture has destroyed the soil and the environment. Therefore farmers, both adivasi and non-adivasi, are now more keen on organic farming. Consequently, the Academy has organized trainings in vermicompost – with some support from government agencies. The Academy's role is primarily to raise awareness about the dangers of industrial agriculture.

Vikesh Rathwa said: "There was a time when all farming was organic and good. Then companies came and they first distributed free seeds and pesticide and fertilizers. Production increased with these things so people became dependent on them. People were not aware that the chemicals made food toxic and spoil the land. But then new illnesses started. Now people know this but are caught in a bind, because now they cannot grow anything without the chemical fertilizers. Some people are now trying out vermi-compost. We have called resource persons for inputs on use of neem and vermi-compost."

At present, the Government of Gujarat is subsidizing sale of seeds by the US multinational corporation Monsanto. But, says Nagin: "We know that this kind of agriculture has destroyed land and agriculture in the USA. So people are opposing these seeds. Even earlier government and chemical input companies pushed chemical inputs and hybrid seeds at cheaper rates for five or six years and then raised prices. By then the local seeds were almost gone and soil had been diminished. Around Tejgadh about 25 percent people have taken Monsanto's seeds, others are refusing. Many people are also resisting because these seeds cannot be replanted and they remember past experience of inputs being cheap at the beginning and then becoming very expensive.

So we have an idea of starting a Green Economic Zone in our 1200 villages – as a counter to the concept of Special Economic Zone. We took this idea to 120 villages to raise awareness in a 15 day *yatra* cum *shibir* (camp). Reasoning behind this idea is – we have ecological resource, we have land, so how can we find ways to progress while putting least burden on the earth? In all the villages where we went, people said they wanted organic farming because they are suffering from the effects of chemical agriculture. One village has initiated some aspects of Green Economic Zone (GEZ) by starting drip irrigation and a marketing experiment which allows self-help groups to buy *toor dal* from local farmers. GEZ idea will grow because people are aware and keen to move in this direction"

This is a merely a fleeting glimpse of the many dimensions which need to be explored before we can answer the question: How do the staff and students at Adivasi Academy relate to or work with the concept of "inclusive innovation"? It seems that for many people who come in contact with the Academy 'inclusion' into a better quality of life is the paramount concern. At the same time ground realities are themselves fostering a critique of certain policies and technologies. This critique is partly

translating into a search for alternative technologies and resistance to some policies. The concept of a GEZ is therefore very significant, even if it does not immediately get translated into any large-scale action.

## Adivasi Thinking and Social Transformation

Another objective has been to nurture a community of adivasi thinkers and new thought processes so as to facilitate social transformation. What has been the development on this front? Self-confidence is the first condition for new thinking, particularly if it is aimed at social transformation. In that context the Academy has clearly transformed the lives of its staff and the few students one could meet.

Some accounts of this:
Vasant Rathwa: "I used to think of myself as small because I am an adivasi. Many of my friends were non-adivasis and they were good with me but in their homes I still felt inferior. From childhood I saw how adivasis are treated in buses – as inferior and to be shunned. I knew that I'm treated differently only because I'm educated and dressed in modern clothes. The course on Tribal Studies taught me about adivasi culture in ways I had never thought about or knew before. Devy personally taught this course along with Ajay Dandekar and Sonal Baxi and other visiting faculty. In those days there was no building, some of us lived in the panchayat ghar and there was just a hut here….where the Academy's buildings stand now."

"Devy said because you don't know and value your own culture others don't respect it also. I got more respect from Rathwas after this work with Academy. As part of the course I did field work for one month. Now I am recognized and appreciated. I am happy to speak in my mother language. In the last census I gave my language as 'Rathwi'. Academy as an innovation in education is giving a good example to the rest of the country. The Madhya Pradesh government and Rajasthan government have also started Adivasi Academies – being copied is a success."

Naginbhai: "I am more proud to be an adivasi. I have been able to meet other adivasis from surrounding area and formed a network. We are learning more about each other's culture, rituals, customs relating to marriage and other aspects of life. We have understood our rights much better. For example, what we are entitled to under the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), particularly rights over forests. Many of us have learnt management skills, computer skills and Hindi. We have met big leaders and travelled to different places."
Sanjay Rathwa: "People in our community and village now seek our advice on their problems because we are connected to a sanstha and have more knowledge, more information."
Manish Varia: "Courses have been designed as per needs of adivasi communities. This was done when there was no 'recognition' – now the Academy's work is recognized by the Tribal Ministry and IGNOU. Our work on health has created pressure on government to deliver better services. Our grain bank has helped many people. Our design of a course for adivasi school children builds on adivasi traditions and practices – such as, what did our ancestors eat and how they grew corps, what did their songs say about the fields."

Devy's dream is that the Academy should be an enabling space for adivasis to "think from your location but also gain ability to rise above your location…that is, look at your own worldview critically." This opens up a large number of questions and dilemmas. As Devy himself asks: "is adivasi an ethnic category or a worldview?"

The Academy is clearly a comfort zone for the culture and language of 'adivasi' as an ethnic category. Therefore, 'inclusion' means both access to modern skills and facilities as well as inclusion of their cultural heritage. But it is not yet clear whether the Academy can become a place for exploring and nurturing an 'adivasi worldview' that is distinct from the dominant modern paradigm.

Devy's finding is that while adivasis aspire to modern gadgets their relationship to the land does not change. For example, says Devy: "There is an annual mela at Padamdonri. We asked the educated members of the Choudhary community what should be at the heart of the mela…they said let everyone bring their seeds to plant and exchange. This shows that the adivasi worldview is strongly alive."

Among the staff aspirations for the future include the following:

Manish Varia: Academy should be an international level research centre where people come to do PhD and M Phil. Then we would like to give training to adivasis from other parts of country. No university has done this….this is very important work so we must do it with dedication.

Rajesh: We should do detailed studies of all adivasi languages of Gujarat.

If 'adivasi' is to be considered more a worldview than an ethnic category then these varied testimonials do not quite answer the question whether 'adivasi' thinkers are being nurtured.

What is clear is that a social transformation is beginning to unfold. Where it will lead, what 'new' forms of thinking and innovation it might give birth to – is not clear. That would require a much more in depth study some years from now when the Academy's work has matured further.

## Adivasi Research & Knowledge

One of the goals of the Adivasi Academy is to translate its studies and research into interventions for empowerment of marginalized communities. To what extent has it been able to do so? The Academy's various courses and research interventions by design lend themselves to a process of self-discovery by adivasis who otherwise lacked confidence in their own cultural heritage. Thus for the staff and students of the Academy the studies and research have clearly led to a sense of empowerment. How far and wide this effect spreads in the surrounding communities would be the topic of a more in-depth enquiry.

*The Academy also aims to become a national institution for research, reference and the study of social dynamics. How is this journey proceeding?*

Seeking answers to this question may require us to consider these terms 'research', 'reference' and 'study of social dynamic' in a more open and innovative way than we are accustomed to doing. We need not look for or expect essays and papers of a conventional kind. The Academy's existence opens up far more alive possibilities.

For example, Rita Kothari a scholar who has done substantial work on the dynamics of translation has brought teams of her students from the Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad (MICA) to visit the Academy and interact with the staff and students.

Kothari has written about an encounter between Nita, a student of the course in Tribal Studies, and Nithya Pillai, a management student at MICA, one of India's most elite and prestigious institutes.

"Nithya's parents are English speaking educated and urban people living in Delhi. Nithya is now working in a multinational company and earning more than Nitaben can ever imagine in a lifetime. Nitaben was attempting to explain her fieldwork among tribal sex workers who face multifold forms of

physical abuse in their profession, stigmatised doubly by being both tribal and sex-worker. Her experiences come to us through English, although she expresses herself in Hindi. Her own language Rathwa is nowhere in the picture, because as a tribal language it has been unnoticed or at best written off as a primitive dialect. The two women here represent two different Indias, divergent experiences of gender, class and community and represent thereby different versions of the (same?) nation.

"....What is the relevance apart from the fact that Nithya volunteered to 'understand' what Nisha was explaining in Hindi, and Nithya was translating that into English for the rest of her group who come from a socio-economic class similar to hers, raring to taste the fruit of a post-globalized India. Making Nithya and her peers meet this tribal woman and 'understand' her world required a migration out of the resort like precincts of a management school, and make an empathetic entry into another world, a world remains unknown to most except those who live in it. It also required working out a language (in terms of a speech act and abstraction) that could somehow make this comprehension and communication possible. In another instance, a seminar on *The Tribal Languages of South Gujarat*, focused on the four tribal languages of South Gujarat: Gamit, Vasavi, Chaudhari and Konkani. Students belonging to such tribal communities were made to bring stories and storytellers from their own communities and explain to non-tribal students what imaginative worlds they come from and what forms of alienation they undergo in big cities."[6]

By now the Academy has been a ground for many such encounters. It would be vital to document the experience of such encounters among the various participants – not just at a personal level but more importantly as a way of understanding if and how worldviews shifted or became more nuanced. Such an exercise might be vital to the Academy's objective to 'become a national institution for research, reference and the study of social dynamics.' This objective need not be fulfilled by merely replicating established forms of 'research' and 'reference'. Entirely new forms of knowledge – based on experience and conversation across class-caste-ethnic divides might be possible.

## Learnings from the Academy

What can formal universities learn from the ideas and experiments of Adivasi Academy? Most experiments in different approaches to education and 'inclusion', seem to have had little or no impact on formal educational system of schools and universities.

One notable example of a radically different approach is not far from Tejgadh – the Gandhi Vidyapith in Vedchi, Surat district. This institution was created over four decades ago to serve the adivasis of that area. It was financed by contributes from the cooperative societies of forest labourers who were mostly adivasis. In 1967 each member of the cooperative society contributed a day's wages to pay for the construction of the buildings of Gandhi Vidyapeeth, which at that time cost about Rs. 3 lakhs. There were approximately three lakh labours and they earned an average daily wage of 12 annas at that time.

As a part of this case study I had a conversation with Jyotibhai Desai, who taught the B.Ed course at Gandhi Vidyapeeth, and still lives in Vedchi. According to Jyotibhai, these are some of the key gains of Nai Talim schools which were never absorbed into the 'mainstream' education.

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[6] 'The Role of Social Transformation through Translation : The Case of a Research Centre' by Rita Kothari. (Unpublished)

Rajni Bakshi

1. Creating self-confidence in children rather than providing any rote learning
2. Learning good ways of family life
3. Learning traditional family skills and also enhancing/advancing them eg. making jaggery in school.

While there would be universal agreement on the first and second point, it has rarely translated into action in most mainstream schools. Nai Talim schools finally fizzled out because they felt compelled to get recognition from the State education Board – which refused to recognize much of what the Nai Talim School did, eg. actual craft skills as a valid element of school work and curriculum.

Similarly, the B.Ed. course at the Vidyapeeth did not conform to the mainstream view on 'standards'. "We had no lectures. Our aim was to learn through actual living. We also admitted some borderline students, who had barely passed at the graduation level" says Jyotibhai. The focus of the course was on growing the students' self-confidence. This inevitably enabled many students who did not have good 'scores' in the conventional sense, to discover their skills and develop them. UNESCO later included this Teacher Training course in a study of good innovative teaching methods across the world. [7]

Nevertheless, such successful experiments have not infused the mainstream approach to education. The challenge before the Academy has to be seen in this context. As Shambu Prasad, Joseph Satish and K. V. G. Krishnamurty write in their paper on the Developmental University – at present the reward structures in universities are not designed to encourage innovative programmes, pedagogy, partnerships that could serve the local area:

'If knowledge generation and dissemination are to adequately address the developmental challenges of the nation, the university needs to be geared not to merely responding to the preferences of the industry, but, "at the level of integration of purpose, all those activities which can help develop the competencies of all its citizens (peasants, artisans, rural labour, small businesses, patients and ordinary people)" (Abrol, 2011). Hence, it is imperative that we start exploring the role of universities in socially inclusive innovations and examining the nature of experiments in India on making universities as engaged centres of learning closely linked to social groups, broadly the 'informal sector'. [8]

It is possible that some of the institutions or informal endeavors outside the formal university system – be it Adivasi Academy, Gandhi Vidyapeeth or Kala Ashram – best play their role by simply living out their 'differentness'. Kala Ashram in Adilabad exemplifies this.

## Kala Ashram, Adilabad

Kala Ashram is the life's work of Ravindra Sharma, fondly known as "Guruji". He grew up in a north-Indian family that settled in Adilabad soon after Independence. From his childhood Guruji had a keen interest in the work, life and worldview of the many artisan communities that still existed in that area. Guruji grew up to take formal training in Art at a college in Baroda, and returned to Adilabad to found the Kala Ashram and work with local artisans. In the process Guruji has articulated a worldview that

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[7] Preparing Teachers for Life Long Education by Len Goad, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, Germany, 1984.

[8] Conceptualizing the Developmental University in India: a preliminary mapping exercise by Dr. C. Shambu Prasad, Joseph Satish, KVG Krishnamurty, 2012. (Unpublished)

encapsulates many dimensions of life – science, technology, art, aesthetics and religion. His work has been based on the understanding that: "this is a period between two civilizations, the old has died and nothing new has yet replaced it. If we can just hold on to the 'saundarya drishti' (aesthetic vision) of the old, save it in parts, may be this can help to build the new."

Over a period of two decades Guruji's endeavor attracted the support and interest of diverse people – including a few government officials. This led to Kala Ashram being leased land by the government to build a structure – it had earlier been housed in the ramshackle remains of an old cotton ginning unit.

In the first week of December 2012 Kala Ashram organized a three day festival to celebrate two decades of its work – and Guruji's sixtieth birthday. Artisans who gathered for this occasion spoke about how the Ashram has been a sanctuary and a place to come and recharge themselves.
Those of Guruji's friends and supporters, who were trained in various disciplines by the formal university structure, spoke passionately about how he introduced them to a worldview and a cultural legacy of which they got no knowledge through all the years they spent in school and college.

Uzramma, founder of Dastakar Andhra, has written that: "Learning from Ravindra Sharma is an antidote to the misunderstanding of the 'samaaj' which the Eurocentric education of the urban elites induces, which saps one's sense of belonging, leaves one tentative and unsure of one's identity, 'strangers in our own land' as Ananda Coomaraswamy says. It is thanks to Guruji that I have the confidence to be my real self, a single strand in a vast, vividly multicultural society."[9]

Guruji has firmly refused to turn Kala Ashram into an NGO or any institution that is obliged to show 'impact' in a measured or measurable manner. "Kala Ashram is just here with an open welcome to artists who want to come and work, to learn or to teach" says Guruji. He therefore runs no regular 'trainings' or workshops. Instead the Kala Ashram serves an 'ashram' in the truest sense – a space into which people from diverse backgrounds can withdraw for quiet reflection and renewal.

Such an organizational framework may be inappropriate for large 'mainstream' institutions but is quite conducive for the ethos that Kala Ashram seeks to nurture and foster. There may be no simple and direct answer to the question: what can mainstream educational institutions learn from Kala Ashram? The Ashram's importance lies in being an independent space anchored in traditional worldviews and knowledge systems – emphatically outside the dominant mainstream. Individuals and groups within mainstream institutions can and do gain sustenance and reaffirmation from this space. And this will have an unpredictable impact on research within the formal universities – however marginal that possibility may seem at present.

One clear manifestation of this was the fact that the International Institute of Information Technology, Hyderabad, was one of the co-sponsors of the celebration at Kala Ashram in December 2012. This was largely due to the long standing association of Prof. Navjyoti Singh with Guruji and the Kala Ashram. Consequently, several of Prof. Singh's students are working on topics and issues which draw on the worldview that the Ashram nurtures.[10]

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[9] 'A Grounded Past, A Single Strand' by Uzramma, in Smriti-Jagran ke Harkare ed. Ashish Gupta and Pavan Gupta, Published by Jeevika (Jabalpur) and SIDH (Mussoorie), 2012

[10] For more information on Kala Ashram and Ravindra Sharma's journey see: *Smriti-Jagran ke Harkare* ed. Ashish Gupta and Pavan Gupta, Published by Jeevika Livelihoods Support Organisation and Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas, 2012.

## Potential & Challenges

In this context, what is the potential of the Adivasi Academy and what are some of its challenges?

1.   As the first group of students at the Academy found in their survey of local villages 'development' is equated with basic amenities which will facilitate basic well-being. So 'inclusion' is clearly far more important than 'innovation' that challenges the existing paradigm.

2.   If, as Devy says, 'adivasi' is not so much an ethnic category as it is a worldview – then the challenges to the dominant unsustainable paradigm of development need not come from people who are born into an adivasi community but from those who have a worldview steeped in values that are more conducive to ecological sustainability and social justice. This is even more important because there are social gradations even within the adivasi world – for example, the 'Bhilala' adivasis in the Alirajpur area of Madhya Pradesh consider themselves superior to the 'Bhil' adivasis.

3.   Clarity about the core values, upon which social transformation can be built, may be more important than whether or not they can be located in or derived from the actual historical experience of the local community.

4.   On the basis of my very brief visit to the Academy there was no evidence of a distinctly adivasi view of development. Most of the adivasi staff members of the Academy seem to experience 'adivasi-ness' as a cultural distinction rather than a worldview which would form the basis of defining (or redefining) 'progress' and 'development'.

5.   The Academy's decision to engage with actual welfare related development work in the area is an inspiring departure from conventional educational institutions which remain completely aloof from the reality of human suffering in their vicinity.  The challenge before the Academy lies in doing this work and also being true to its mandate to foster spaces for adivasi *knowledge*.  In the absence of equal emphasis on both dimensions the Academy could easily become just one more NGO dedicated to running welfare programs for adivasis.

6.   It is vital to note that Devy says with emphasis that: "Adivasi Academy is not so much about being adivasi as it is about being experimental. …I have a cold blooded view of revolution. Our method is slow and boring, based on knowledge not political action."

7.   This allows the Academy much greater freedom in how it designs and conducts courses. There is merit in not routinely running the same course year after year. This is particularly so since the Academy's purpose is to encourage adivasis to decide for themselves.  But it will be vital for the Academy to monitor itself and observe how many of its decisions are based on exigencies – lack of staff, money, levels of interest – as opposed to decisions based on a rigorous internal conversation on its purpose, direction and desired outcomes.

As Devy says the Academy may not have much of show – "…but we have a  thought there but I have never been aggressive about that thought. I don't speak about a struggle. It's not about becoming but about being."

Ganesh Devy

He was educated at Shivaji University, Kolhapur and the University of Leeds, UK. He has been professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, a renowned literary critic, an activist, as well as founder and director of the Tribal Academy at Tejgadh, Gujarat, and director of the Sahitya Akademi's Project on Literature in Tribal Languages and Oral Traditions.

Among his many academic assignments, he has held fellowships at Leeds and Yale Universities and has been a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow (1994-96). He is an active participant in the functioning of Bhasha Academy, which was founded in 1996 for study, documentation and conservation of Adivasi languages, arts and culture.

He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for 'After Amnesia', and the SAARC Writers' Foundation Award for his work with denotified tribals. He has also won the reputed Prince Claus Award (2003) awarded by the Prince Claus Fund for his work for the conservation of the history, languages and views of oppressed communities in the Indian state of Gujarat. Along with Laxman Gaikwadand Mahashweta Devi, he is one of the founders of The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG).

His Marathi book *Vanaprasth* has received six awards including the Durga Bhagwat memorial Award and the Maharashtra Foundation Award. Currently, he is a Professor at the Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology Gandhinagar. Source: http://www.indialogues.in/speakers_GaneshDevy.htm

## Discussion

Rajni: There is a very wide recognition for rethinking of education as we are in a "disruptive age". In the sphere that I am working in which is business and society, the university in the formal sense has failed, and the answers are really being crafted by networks or sanctuaries that are outside the formal structures. To me the most dramatic development of this kind is the formation of the Institute of New Economic Thinking after the crash of 2008. By definition, its very purpose is to challenge the knowledge that is coming out of the universities and its premise is that the world is in the mess that it is in today, economically and financially, because the formal systems of knowledge have been held captive by very narrow viewpoints and that research funding, patronage, importance in terms of who gets promoted, to tenure positions etc, has all been governed by a very rigid and exclusionary kind of criteria and so they are now deliberately funding the kind of research that doesn't get funded by the formal system.

In the economic sphere at one level this looks easy to do, but even in those circles as yet the language doesn't exist so as to ask what are the criteria of success? We need to re-think the basis of value (and I don't mean moral and social value), what is an object worth. At the moment the only way we understand value is money. That is why it is much more profitable to cut down a tree than to let it stand and give you the odd fruit every season. The reason why stories of traditional practices is nothing more than poetry, or a feel-good glimpse, is because we are so convinced that everything is money and success is power. So to me, the key challenge of development, inclusion and innovation is how to re-think the basis of value. But I don't think the people at Tejgard see it that way. They see

their practices as merely ancestral artifacts like their songs. Or musical instruments. How could it be otherwise, because the entire reality around them is giving a different message?

Sujit: You said that these tribal identify themselves culturally, but as far as world view or a vision of what kind of economy or politics they can represent they have nothing different to say. An anthropologist doing research in the late 80s when the Jharkhand formation was on the cards met with Ram Dayal Munda to see what kind of an alternative world view he could provide. He felt that Adivasis generally seem to have a cultural worldview. But in terms of economics, politics, etc. they are not able to offer an alternate vision for formally established systems?

Rajni: In terms of these alternative worldviews and knowledge systems, we need to come out of existing conceptualizations and grasp the ground realities. To process, unravel and explore how they can coexist we may have to exercise caution while using existing concepts which we may have imbibed from our formal education systems.

Chair's remarks: Gandhi quoted the Upanishad to say that truth is to be found in food, then knowledge and then in joy. From my exotic lens of the Adivasi, they had broken this linearity and that there was joy. So the sobering thought is that there is break in that chain of memory. It says something about inclusion. If you are in more proximate places of development, perhaps your notion of development are also going to be influenced by how marginal you are in that discourse itself.

Rajni: This also is not true. For instance the adivasi in Alirajpur in the late 80s did interact with mainstream, as they would migrate for six months for work to places like Surat. Yet they would come back to their way of living for the other part of the year, so it was not that they did not have the skills sets to build modern artifacts like roads canals etc.

Chair: Perhaps there are certain spaces which need to be outside the university. Is Kala Ashram an example of that?

Rajni: Spaces like temples, ashrams, bazaars need to retain their own distinct identities. The question is to identify new spaces which promote mutual creativity. For instance, students of IIIT Hyderabad work closely with Kala Ashram which suggests that formal and informal spaces can indeed collaborate.

Anup: On the one hand we have tribal epistemologies; on the other we have organized ways of thinking about livelihood, debt, nutrition, etc. and the point of the three S's (standardization, speed, scale), which can mess up a good idea. In that sense, what will be the balance, between a "tribal view" and our kind of world of developmental regimes? Can these spaces, the formal University space, and then the extra-university space and now the third kind of space which is completely outside like the ashram, co-exist? In which case how would the systems unfold and how would we enable reflexive dialogue and co-learning between formal and informal spaces?

Harish: While these spaces which are thought to be separate from the temporal and ritual world or from the socio religious moral landscape may be kept separate, they can be appropriated into the mainstream. For example in Germany there is a hospital which has used the concept of the ashram and its social value to treat patients suffering from psycho-social disorders. It is perhaps possible therefore that knowledge from informal spaces can finding new value elsewhere and not necessarily remain independent of each other.

Shambu: In contrast with the concept of the ashram as a place for retreat, Gandhi said the Satyagraha ashram is a scientific and prayerful experiment. It is not seen as a retreat, but a place for experimentation, for some kind of scientific enquiry.

Rajni: Ravi Sharma or Guruji as we would call him would also say they also see it as that, except that he doesn't seem to have an active political agenda.

Joseph: Do we sometimes glorify the knowledge systems of the past and then promote them in their entirety, along with the evils that they may carry?

Sakshi: While we glorify a certain adivasi lifestyle, we seem to freeze adivasis in time and space. Conceptually they are still fossilized as in tribal museums. In reality things are different. My work is on Ninja Saura tribes in odisha and when I went looking for them, I could not set them apart from the others, as they have adapted to the changing times. But how do we factor this in rethinking our own worldviews?

Rajni:  There is no question of suggesting that there is a perfect past or that there is an ideal past. All stories have their dark side. The significance of Devy's endeavour may well be that he is saying that whatever future we have to build, will be a new endeavour. We need to keep looking for glimpses of history which offer clues for a recipe to rebuild our future. There is no readymade recipe for the complex conundrums that our species faces. However formal systems of education seem to have blinkered us and limited our capacities to pick up these clues spread across history.  For example there is a dominant notion that human beings are fundamentally selfish, and this may well be received knowledge of the last 200 years. Steven Marglin spoke of how the idea of insurance was created by actively delegitimising community based system of support.