



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) was conceived and established in 1988 by the vision and initiative of the late Mr. J.R.D. Tata primarily to nurture a broad base of scholars, managers and leaders to address complex and important challenges faced by society through interdisciplinary approaches. The Institute also engages in advanced multidisciplinary research in the areas of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and engineering, as well as conflict and security studies.

EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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NIAS Policy Brief

Ashram Schools: Challenges and Future Directions

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Introduction:

Residential schools have been part of our education system for a long time. Going back to the 19th century as formal educational institutions developed, residential schools performed three primary functions: an extension of the home-bound learning practices; an alternative to formal schools; and a place to educate the wealthy. While the history of boarding schools tells us the story of travel and educational access, history of residential schools for the disadvantaged is more complex. For the Adivasi communities, separated by distance and social marginalisation, residential schools hold tremendous importance and promise.

Despite their existence for long, Ashram schools have not received the attention they deserve by scholars and educational advocacy groups. Our research at NIAS attempts to fill the gap. As the Right to Education (RTE) Act completes a decade and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declare equitable and quality education as a priority for next decade, it is important to focus on strengthening the school system for everyone.

The Questions:

The education programme at NIAS has for long been involved in questions of social exclusion, social transformation and education policy. . Our recent research, supported by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), focuses on Ashram schools of Maharashtra. Based on our research and advocacy in educational access, equity and quality, we foreground the challenges faced by Ashram schools and suggest interventions.

There are various types of residential schools in India, each different from the other mainly in terms of their purpose, funding and administrative structures. In the last few decades there have been a number of schemes initiated for educational success of students from disadvantaged communities. Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Ekalavya Model Residential School (EMRS), model schools in backward districts are the institutions that have played an important role in widening educational access in rural and Adivasi areas. However, these institutions differ from Ashram schools in many ways



Classroom, Palghar

including their admissions policy, funding structures and vision. Contrary to the selective admission process, which often involves an entrance test, the Ashram schools carry the mandate of inclusion of all children. Given that many of their students are first-generation school-goers, Ashram schools become the places that offer opportunities of equality and social mobility.

The following questions framed our research:

- 1) In the vast and diverse types of residential schools in India, how do we place Ashram schools meant for Adivasi communities? In what ways are the structures and needs of these schools are different?
- 2) How do Ashram schools in Maharashtra function? What factors play a role in teaching, learning, and administration?
- 3) How do Ashram schools provide the sense of safety and community to its students? How can the schooling experience be improved?

Methods:

Our overall methodological orientation has been qualitative, involving field work, surveys, workshops with teachers and interviews with administrators. We began our work by holding teachers' workshops in eight Adivasi districts and requested the teachers to be part of our Learning Experience Survey (LES), which covered 5000 students spread across the state. The survey indicated the elements students enjoyed and the ones they thought could improve. For our field work, we spent 13 months in two Ashram schools, one in Nandurbar district and the other in Gadchiroli. The extended time spent in Ashram schools gave us valuable insights in the everyday social life of schools and hostels. We also became part of several advocacy groups during this time and as a result, became closely connected to interrelated issues including health, nutrition, safety and parental role in Ashram schools.

The Issue:

By design the students of Ashram schools do not stay with their families. At an early age they move to live with others, in school and hostel. In the process and as a way to cope with the change, they form friendships and kinships that sustain

them through their schooling. Of course, the family is not less important; however, the students of Ashram schools have an extended contact with other adults and fellow students.

While the Right to Education (RTE) enables families to make sure children access education, the challenge has been to set up schools in remote, hilly terrains. Further, a number of families migrate a few months every year to secure a livelihood in agriculture, stone quarries, brick kilns and construction sites. For seasonal migrant families, residential schools are essential as they help minimize disruption caused by seasonal migration. In addition to schooling and provisions of hostel, the Ashram school scheme also includes assistance of various kind including scholarships, provision of uniforms and books to students.

Findings:

In the course of our research in diverse Adivasi districts of Maharashtra, we encountered some exceptional success stories in the state—schools that are loved by students and that in turn make them into confident, happy and empathetic individuals. Good teachers, better funding and responsive School Management Committees (SMCs) have been some of the common aspects of these schools. They are, however, not representative of the Ashram schools in the state. The following findings, based on our field engagements highlight the pervading issues faced by Ashram schools.

- 1) **Institutional hierarchy:** The following considerations affect Ashram schools: First, the type of scheme associated with residential school determines the overall funding structure. Institutions such as Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) and Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) that have been established in the last few decades receive better funding and facilities than the Ashram schools that are administered under government.. The government –run Ashram schools, in comparison are under-funded and perform the mission of enabling access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 2) **Health-Nutrition-Safety:** Our research shows that the triad of health, nutrition and safety is essential in order to have a good residential schooling experience.



Classroom in Dhadgaon

A compromise in any of the three components affects students' experience of schooling. In early years it is important for children to receive adequate nutrition as it is closely connected to their cognitive development. While Ashram schools provide meals and snacks it is important to fortify the meals and monitor the conditions in which the food is cooked. In matters of health, our work shows that schools often respond to health concerns after the outbreak of a disease and there are not adequate arrangements in many schools to address the seasonal ailments.



Meals in Ashram School, Raigad

- 3) **Infrastructure:** Most Ashram schools are in need of infrastructural improvements. In a number of schools, classrooms double up as dormitories in the evening. The schools that operate on a rental property do not have classrooms or recreational spaces that are child-friendly. The following issues in particular require urgent attention: (a) In many schools, drinking water supply and sanitation are not organized properly (b) The dormitories and hostel spaces are crowded (c) Compound walls are missing in many schools, which lead to open access to miscreants. (d) Electricity shortage is serious issue in a number of schools.
- 4) **Learning and Teaching:** An analysis of classroom practices and learning assessment draws attention to the fact that students enjoy learning the subjects that they can relate to, often through activities and participation. The cognitive constructivist models that currently inform most of the classroom teaching are useful in this case as it seeks to draw on students' experience and invite their views. Given that a majority of students want to learn and do better academically, it is absolutely crucial to think of teaching and learning practices in Ashram schools and address the obstacles. A number of reasons including family re-location, compromises of safety in schools and learning disengagement have led to students dropping out in the last few years. Another important factor, which we analyse in our research, is the fear of English and Mathematics, leading to less than satisfying performance in the examination.

Interventions:

In a picture quite different from what was intended, the Ashram schools have not been able to create a vibrant leaning and caring community, responding to local needs. A long-term perspective and planning is needed wherein the educational needs of the students of Ashram schools can be met.. The National Education Policy (2020) puts quality and access as important considerations as we move forward. We suggest below a series of interventions that are essential towards making Ashram schools better, purposeful and joyous.

- 1) **Need for a Comprehensive plan focusing exclusively on Residential schools:** National education policy documents in India have rarely engaged with different school types. As a result, there is no clear vision on residential schools while there exists a growing number of schemes and programmes associated with these schools. Taking forward the points articulated in NEP 2020 such as the need to strengthen public education, greater allocation and quality, a clear plan needs to be formulated for the next decade that would focus on improving Ashram schools.
- 2) **Infrastructure of schools and hostels:** The current conditions of infrastructure in Ashram schools need significant improvement. It is imperative that every Ashram school complex needs to have at least the following three distinct components for students: classrooms, hostel and a recreational place. These need to be separate places. Infrastructure for places for teachers and staff also needs to be improved. Regular maintenance of the complex is crucial and it is directly connected to the well-being of students. Adequate measures of sanitation need to be taken in schools in general but especially in washrooms, toilets and cooking areas. Most Ashram schools do not have a well-functioning library or a computer lab. These are essential to run a quality school and should be included in Ashram schools.
- 3) **Funding allocation and Monitoring:** One of the major challenges the Ashram schools are facing is scarcity of resources. We recommend that the Ashram schools need to be considered at par with the schools such as the Ekalavya Model Residential School (EMRS) and Navodaya Vidyalayas in terms of resource allocation, standards of infrastructure and appointment of teachers. The institutional overhaul with greater resources will lead towards significant improvements of Ashram schools within a decade. Regular monitoring mechanisms regarding infrastructure, health, nutrition, safety and sanitation are of extreme importance. As for educational monitoring, a framework for residential schools needs to be emerged.

- 4) **Recruitment of Teachers and Staff:** A number of Ashram schools have been chronically short-staffed. In the state of Maharashtra, teacher vacancies have not been filled for 8 years. According to the Ashram school guidelines, it is essential to have women wardens/superintendents in Ashram schools but this requirement has not been fulfilled in a majority of schools. Vacancies of staff for cooking, cleaning and security also remain inadequately filled. If the Ashram school complex is well-equipped, it will be easier for the teachers to stay on campus
- 5) **Health Nutrition and Safety:** The triad of health-nutrition-safety is absolutely essential to the functioning of Ashram schools. At the outset, all schools need to have first-aid kits available readily along with regular access to good physicians. Access to good clinics need to be made available in cases of medical emergencies. Nutritious and quality meals should be provided to all students. Given the distressing incidents of unsafe school environments, care should be taken to make sure that Ashram schools are emotionally, physically and sexually safe spaces. Strengthening of School Management Committees (SDMC) will be a crucial step in this direction.
- 6) **Pedagogy:** Given that students spend long hours together after school, inclusion of activities, arts, sports and reading is essential. Attention needs to be paid to

languages, reading and Mathematics in early classes so that the drop out in later years can be curtailed. Different methods such as translation and second language teaching need to be incorporated in teaching of English. An assessment needs to be carried out on usages of technology in increasing possibilities of learning in Ashram schools.

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