



Development and Functioning of Alternative Schools in Kerala: A Case Study of Sarang Alternative School, Attappadi

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ABSTRACT

Alternative schools have emerged as essential educational institutions that offer an integrated, learner-centered approach, challenging traditional types of schooling. Kerala's alternative schools are known now for their inclusive, creative, community-based education. This article examines the operation and development of alternative school approaches in Kerala. Sarang in Attappadi, Kerala's tribal area, an alternative school, gives an example to explore them. This inquiry examined Sarang's pedagogical beliefs and also its assumptions, organizational structure, community involvement, and its impact upon students' moral, social, and psychological development. The article will use a qualitative methodology that draws on data collected from interviews and observations, plus argues that Sarang's integration and nature-based education model provides a sustainable, context-based alternative for mainstream schooling. The paper will also outline challenges to alternative school approaches, including national policy, funding, and community perceptions, as they emerge. The results from this inquiry suggest that alternative schools such as Sarang can address educational inequities within marginalized populations and within particular communities. The paper will close by making the case for



improved recognition, documentation, also policy support for alternative schooling. This support is important for Kerala and also beyond

Introduction

The mainstream education system in India has long been critiqued for its rigid curriculum, exam-oriented approach, and lack of sensitivity to the diverse socio-cultural contexts of learners. In response to these limitations, alternative schools have emerged as innovative educational spaces that prioritize holistic development, experiential learning, and community integration. These schools often function outside the framework of conventional pedagogies and challenge the standardized notions of schooling by adopting learner-centered, flexible, and inclusive methods.

In Kerala, a state known for its high literacy rate and progressive social indicators, alternative schooling has gained attention as a meaningful response to the educational needs of marginalized and underrepresented communities. Despite their limited numbers, such schools reflect a conscious effort to redefine education by aligning it with the local environment, culture, and values. Among them, Sarang, an alternative school situated in the tribal region of Attappadi, stands out as a unique model of sustainable, nature-based, and child-friendly education.

This article explores the functioning and development of alternative schools in Kerala with a specific focus on Sarang. Through a qualitative case study approach, it examines the school's educational philosophy, operational structure, community engagement, and its impact on learners. The study aims to shed light on the broader significance of alternative education in fostering equity, creativity, and social transformation, while also discussing the challenges these schools face in gaining recognition and institutional support.

Need and Significance of the Study

In the current educational landscape, there is growing concern over the limitations of conventional schooling systems, particularly in addressing the diverse needs of children from marginalized and indigenous communities. The rigid structure, standardized curriculum, and exam-centric approach often fail to foster creativity, critical thinking, and socio-emotional growth. This calls for alternative models of education that prioritize holistic development, cultural relevance, and learner autonomy.



Alternative schools offer innovative pedagogies that are grounded in experiential learning, ecological consciousness, and community participation. In Kerala, while mainstream education has made commendable progress in terms of literacy and access, there remains a gap in inclusivity and adaptability, especially in tribal and rural regions. Exploring how alternative schools function in this context is vital to understanding their potential as transformative educational spaces.

The significance of this study lies in its focused examination of Sarang, an alternative school in Attappadi that exemplifies a sustainable, child-centric model rooted in local realities. By analyzing Sarang's functioning and development, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the effectiveness, challenges, and replicability of alternative education practices. This research not only documents an underrepresented educational initiative but also advocates for broader policy recognition and support for such models. It holds particular relevance for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in inclusive, equitable, and innovative approaches to education in India.

Objective of the study

- To know the functioning and development of Sarang Alternative School in Kerala

Methodology

In the present study, considering the nature of the problem, the investigator adopted the case study method. The case study is a descriptive qualitative methodology that is used as a tool to study something specific in a complex phenomenon. It was adopted for this study because this was explanatory in nature. In the present study, it was intended to study the various aspects of functioning and development of Sarang Alternative School, Attappadi.

Tool used for the study

- Interview Schedule

In the present study, the investigator conducted an open-ended interview. Before asking the question to the respondent, the investigator established a good rapport with them and engaged in an informal conversation with the respondents.

Discussion and Analysis

The data was collected by interviewing with Gopalakrishnan, founder of Sarang Alternative School, Attappadi. To elaborate more about Sarang, it is most important to start with the life and love of



Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi. In 1977, both of them met while studying at T.T.C. Even at that time, both felt that there were problems in the education system. They were in the same class. After a few months, they realised that there was something in common between them. It is not just love but their perspectives, their opinions, and also their urge for something new. But they didn't know exactly what the problem was or where to change it. It was at that time that both of them fell in love

When they were working at Mupainad Government L.P. School at Wayanad, they came across a lot of students who belonged to Adivasi/tribal groups, who didn't know the alphabet in Malayalam and English. The most shocking part was that they were studying in high school classes. Thus, they, Vijayalakshmi and Gopalakrishnan, understood that formal education is not everyone's cup of tea. So, they tried to bring their classroom out of the four walls to the outside. But unfortunately, there were some issues that popped up from the part of their colleagues. They started living together, and at that time, they listened to various speeches and read books about the injustice in society. They firmly believe that all these injustice and violence in society is the byproduct of improper education.

Gopalakrishnan opines that while Kerala ranks first across India in terms of literacy and education, the reality is different when it comes to government schools. In their vision, schools are not for rote learning but for learning by knowing. The founders of Sarang Alternative School firmly believe that studying or learning within the four walls does not provide any good to students, rather than making them a product manufactured by an industry, where all of them look alike in their features, characteristics, and even in their way of thinking.

They realized that education is becoming a business. The education students get does not help them in any way in their lives. They believe that education is not only about getting jobs but also about how it helps one to live harmoniously with others.

Tired of seeing such things, they decided to start remedial classes in the veranda of their small living room. They decided to find out what the students do not know and start right from there. They had to start with letters, and they made teaching aids to make the teaching and learning easier and enjoyable. They also called the parents of the children and made them understand what they were doing there. This act of theirs caused a lot of dislikes from other teachers. This was the beginning of their educational experiment.

During this time, Vijayalakshmi became pregnant. They discussed the child's education and future. They never wanted their children to become government officials. Both of them wanted to bring up their children without being affected by caste fanaticism, religious fanaticism, party fanaticism, money



fanaticism, and lust fanaticism. But how and where their education will be conducted was the question that bothered. They can't even think of a government school. At that time, they thought that private schools were very good. But the situation is no better there as well. They did not want to send their child to a school where they were tortured mentally and physically. Another problem was that sending their child to a private school while teaching them in a government school. That's how the idea of having their school came about. It was just a personal need to improve their child's education and secure their future.

The govt. school had a shift system. It was convenient for them and the children of their remedial class. The class started at eight in the morning and continued till six in the evening. Their educational experiments have grown and developed with their son, Gautham. The remedial class had started even before Gautham was born. Even before that, they were involved in cultural and social programs in the country. At school, Science fair, sports fair, and children's arts fair were all conducted with their initiative, with the help of parents and communities. Thus, people started to realize that school work is not only about learning letters but also parents have to do many things in it. Even the activities done with their limited knowledge and skills yielded promising results. It boosted their confidence.

Meanwhile, Vijayalakshmi gets a permanent appointment at the Agali Government. L.P. School, Attappadi in Palakkad district. With this, they confirmed that they can set up their dream school in Attappadi. Their next problem was what to name their school. For them, it should not only be a school name but also an initial for their children. When both requirements came together, the search for the name was intensified. The name should be soft in sound, should be short, and should be able to be attached to the name of the children; this was their concern. After much thought, they came up with the name Sarang. The name of the school is Sarang Basic School. The name of their son is Gautham Sarang. Besides him, they have two more daughters, Kannaki Sarang and Unniyarcha Sarang. Their goal is to develop Sarang into a rural university. They firmly believe that some of the good people needed by this country should continue to come and study there.

“Sarang is an educational experiment centre, and our experiments were ways to overcome the educational problems faced by the children and us. Our goal is to help children who are struggling with reading and writing, to make children who are drowsy when they hear the word math smart in math, and to help those who do not know how to speak English. Some of the experiments that were conducted failed, and some were successful. Success has been found by failing in many of the early experiments. We had no other model to look up to or follow. Therefore, there has been a lot of time loss and financial loss! More than half of the last forty-one years have been lost to failed experiments. That's the way it is. Trial and error



can never be avoided in experimental ways. Sarang should grow as a rural university. Agriculture, health, education, technology, trade, arts, and sports, etc., should be studied and learned by good people. If we want to meet the needs of the country, there should be people here who have the knowledge, ability, sincerity, honesty, social consciousness and willingness to do so. They should lead tomorrow's society with full responsibility. That is our only dream”, he said when he was asked by the investigator about their dream.

The emblem of Sarang is the footprints of a baby. “Karapuzha River was near the isolated house where we lived. We used to sit on the sand beside that stream. During that time, we would make soft footprints on the sand with our fingers and look at them for a long time. For us, it was the footprints of our unborn baby. Even after Gautham was born, we used to take him as a baby to the Karapuzha River. We would have enjoyed leaving his footprints on the sand. We were feeling the joy of achieving one of our many dreams. This was the first thing that came to our mind when we thought of wanting an emblem along with the name Sarang.” This is what Gopalakrishnan said when asked how he chose the Sarang Emblem.

Major Findings

Sarang Alternative School, Attappadi, was established by Vijayalakshmi and Gopalakrishnan in 1982 as a revolt against the formal education system.

- It was first started as a remedial class for the tribal students of Mupainad Government School at Wayanad.
- The idea of alternative education was adopted after realising the fact that formal education does not apply to everyone.
- Sarang School is located in a 12-acre forest at Attappadi.
- Sarang gives importance to the concept of ‘learning by knowing’ rather than rote learning.
- Gopalakrishnan’s and Vijayalakshmi’s goal is to raise Sarang into a rural University
- Sarang’s form of education is the cheapest, simplest, free of cost, and most human method.
- Sarang follows its curriculum, aiming to find solutions for the learning problems of children instead of following the curriculum of formal education.
- According to Sarang, complete education is the combination of culture, knowledge, and realisation; those who have achieved those can be called educated persons.
- Character formation is an important aspect of Sarang school.



Educational Implications

The workings and evolution of Sarang Alternative School raise many significant educational implications with respect to re-thinking schooling in India. First, Sarang's genesis from the personal dissatisfaction, as well as the local needs of its founders stands as a strong indicator of the possibilities of community-based educational ventures (for sustainability, reach, influence, and impact), it also indicates similar policy needs underpinning developments in the area of community engagement with school models which are grounded in some degree of grass roots, context-based principles rather than predominantly dictated from the top! The journey of Sarang as a school over the last forty years (based on research into their methods of trial-and-error) raises challenges to traditional school bureaucracies in terms of standardization and, therefore, traditionally, accountability to educational progress. Sarang's rationale for learning as part of everyday life activities, including practices around agriculture and the arts, and social engagement, helps broaden conventional academic learning and demonstrate the value of whole-child learning. The founders at Sarang demonstrated an ethical commitment and a long-term vision, amounting to something of a new pedagogy, showing that even school-type transformation rests heavily upon value-leadership and not bureaucratic management orientation.

Additionally, Sarang disrupts the neat border between the home and school as a visible, relatable place of learning for students, in a nurturing, more intimate learning environment, where learners develop a strong enough sense of belonging alongside emotional security. If Sarang's evolution from remedial education to their desire to be a rural university is to be strictly seen as an alternative school, our research suggests, that, as is evident in the research literature arguing for alternative schools, 1) they need freedom over curriculum, and 2) freedom over institutional evolution and growth that reflects the evolving needs of their learners, and their communities.

Conclusion

The example of Sarang Alternative School shows how educational innovation can emerge from personal conviction, social commitment, and contextual understanding. The organic development of Sarang makes an argument against conventional notions of schooling, as it demonstrates learning that can be meaningful, inclusive, and transformative when it is embedded in local contexts and human values. Sarang demonstrates that alternative models can address the limitations of standard education, especially for marginalized and tribal communities. The evolution, pedagogy, and leading practices of the school provide an example of rethinking education in India, not only as an avenue to employment, but also as a



pathway for equity, sustainability, and social justice. Sarang continues to develop with the aspiration of becoming a rural university; a living example of schools becoming spaces that nurture not just knowledge, but the character, conscience, and collective responsibilities of educational learning. Considering this, it is important for policy-makers, educators, and researchers to seriously consider the contribution of alternative schools, such as Sarang, in terms of knowledge contribution, and as part of school sector improvement, policy reform and broader educational discourse.

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