

Kanavu – Where Learning Happens

An Ethnographic Account of a Learning Space

A discussion of the ethnography of an alternative school/commune, Kanavu in Wayanadu district of Kerala. It explores the diverse learning spaces and methodologies that have been incorporated into its system, where learning happens for children who participate.

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Many alternative visions of schooling have emerged in our country. Kanavu in the Cheengode village of Wayanadu district of Kerala is one such exploration. More than a school it is a commune – a way of collective living, where learning happens at its natural phase. Many writers/philosophers as Tolstoy, Tagore and Krishnamurthi have pondered on and experimented with the school system, but what makes Kanavu different?

Kanavu is a bold initiative of K J Baby, a dramatist and writer. His play *Nattugadhika* tells the story of resistance by tribal groups against the dominance of colonial masters and feudal lords. 'Nattugadhika' in itself is the ritual of cleansing a village of evil spirits; in its dramatic form it demonstrates the need for tribal social/cultural lives to be purified of evil spirits/influence of the colonial mas-

ters and lords. His novel *Mavelimantram* deconstructs the folklores of a tribal group, along with a court judgment on the sale of tribal youth, by one feudal master to another, to tell the story of how tribes have been colonised in every possible manner.

Kanavu at present has nearly 40 children of all age groups up to 17. One could probably summarise an ordinary day as one that begins with the recital of classical ragas and ends with a dance to the beat of the 'thudi' (a tribal drum). It is probably this blend of folk with classical that makes the atmosphere at Kanavu different.

Every night before children go to sleep, they evaluate the day's activities. These would include the following items: (i) performance at the kalari (ground in which the traditional martial art of Kerala is performed) with different weapons including the sword; (ii) at the kitchen where the day's 'kanji' or tapiocais cooked; (iii) with cows in the forest or cleaning its

stable; (iv) in the fields to harvest the rice; (v) theatre activities; (vi) retelling stories; (vii) colours they have played with on paper; (viii) butterflies that were observed; (ix) working at the tailoring machine; (x) pushing up the jeep in the early morning; (xi) plants they cared for; (xii) younger ones to look after.

Kanavu began when the writer K J Baby, and members of his drama group felt disenchanted with the schooling system. Most of the senior students themselves are children of the drama group members. Children saw their parents involved in theatre and music. This writer himself had become disenchanted with the competitive nature of social-school life.

One remarkable dialogue in the drama *Nadugadhika* is about schooling – the 'Gadhikakaran' (sutradar) tells the tribal chieftain:

There, there in the streets, his school days over, he is trying to impress upon himself all the pseudo characters, all those sham versions of history. Already it has been revealed unto him that all his miseries arise from the existence of his tribe, his people, if he remains there, he is sure to absorb those renderings of history depicting his people as useless, as traitors, and as unworthy of existence. Come, let us get him away. Let us bring him home. Let him realise miseries don't end by running away from them [Baby 1996].

While dreaming of an alternative, Baby recognised that it was amongst the tribals that collective living still seemed to endure. Modern schooling and society has destroyed elements of fraternity amongst human beings. He felt, probably the best way to enter into the lives of children could be through 'thudi' and 'kuzhal' (flute like musical instruments). Thus from the very beginning music and other art forms were given great importance.

A couple who live in the commune – the 'kalari gurukkal' (traditional martial art form of Kerala) and 'Mohiniyattam' (a dance form of Kerala) teacher have instructed the senior children for nearly six years. At the kalari, few have also picked up the ayurvedic massaging techniques. Kanavu has given great importance to the learning of music, dance, theatre, martial arts, painting, etc. Every child in the group has mastered a musical instrument. Most of them also practise pottery. The senior group of students at Kanavu has gone outside the campus to be trained in learning terracotta and sculpture. Few of them are also learning auto mechanics, etc. Even as

they stay outside the Kanavu campus, they continue to practise activities learnt there.

These skills have also become a major source of income for the group. Children demonstrate their skills across the state during religious festivals, school or college campus festivals, or at the anniversaries of various arts and sports clubs across the state. The collective is thus able to partially sustain itself to a large extent. Apart from its stage performances, they produce almost 70 per cent of their food requirements in their own organic farm and sustain themselves by other voluntary contributions or services.

There are many ways of looking at this institution. Many see it as having adopted a gurukul education pattern. Few others see it as part of the home schooling movement that is critical of mainstream education system. As an institution, they have adopted the philosophy of education as a liberative principle. One really feels these children moving towards developing a holistic personality that is sensitive to the issues of wider social life.

Where Does Learning Take Place?

Looking out for a specific classroom in the campus seems to be a difficult task because children appear to learn from every space – the paddy field, the pottery shed, the library, the kitchen, the cow shed, the kalari hall. Campus/learning space extends to the neighbourhood, for example the stream – where they learn to swim, understand how the working of a turbine can light a 40watt bulb, and how to make bamboo bridges. The forest also teaches the immense knowledge of green earth, their own histories, wildlife. Learning space further extends to far-off and distant places, to Edakkal – the oldest cave dwelling evidence in Kerala with carved geometrical figures chipped in by the Jainmunis who stayed there in ancient times. Learning also includes studying the relics of Jain temple that tells the growth of agriculture in the region. The Mavoor movement, tells them of the perils of industrialisation. The state capital Thiruvananthapuram, where the adivasis had placed their demand for alienated land, teaches a way to recognise the power and authority of the state.

Imbibing philosophy in every activity, that they have shared helps learning to take place; curricular and extra-curricular knowledge is not demarcated. Life skills are also part of the learning process. Yet, specifically for those of us who still look

to the school as its ability to transact the three 'R' a brief description of the learning process at Kanavu could be helpful.

Introduction in the three 'R's are imparted in small groups. They spent four hours of a day learning it. Children form groups based on their language skills and the older children take classes. Older children guide the younger ones in picking up alphabets, rhymes, folktales, etc. Children at Kanavu are also mostly dropouts from the mainstream education. Most of them belong to tribal families; their own mother tongues ignored by mainstream schools. The language used in reading and writing is Malayalam. However, during the day or within the learning process they converse in the 'new language' that has emerged within the collective due to their living together. Great importance is given to awareness of their tribal past and knowledge.

Methods of Learning

Peer Group: One incident that could describe where peer-group learning occurred is near the pond, on the steps to leading it. The pond has many water lilies. Very few people even in Kerala are actually able to distinguish between water lilies and lotus. Even fewer people would actually know of its mode of reproduction. A group of four children had come to clean the library close to the pond. One of the younger children started counting the flowers – suddenly he noted that there were two different colours, pink and blue. An older child explained that a few years ago there had even been white ones among them. "Actually, the white ones start showing up only after the water level has gone further down. It is difficult for white water lilies to survive." The younger student naturally asked how the white ones grew. The older student explained, "We just implanted the leaves. Once the leaves rot away, it gives way to a sapling."

Another young student pointed to those small saplings just in the middle of a leaf, almost rotten. Then they recollected that the previous year they had eaten water lily seeds. The older child explained that unless they were weeded out every year it would be difficult for the plants to grow.

Folk ways: Myths, tales and folklores find a place in the curriculum. Children are proud of them. Their folksong collection is derived not merely from their own tribal past – even kabir bhajans and pahadi songs are part of their repertoire. One folk tale is about 'Pakkom Kotta' (the fort/prison

of Pakkom). The story is about the escape of their ancestor from Pakkom Kotta, where they were treated as slaves. They escaped from their feudal masters and wandered into the forest, where they believed that their gods and goddesses would protect them. But the feudal master was able to send his god against their gods and they were threatened. The ancestors were thus caught again and enslaved, even the existence of their gods were threatened by the feudal masters.

Any boy from the paniya tribe is expected to be a master of 'thudi', other tribes master the skill of playing kuzhal. But if you ask the elders as to who taught them to play these instruments, they would just look blank. Or they would simply say that they had heard the ancestors play them. On many days you would find many children at Kanavu making their own pipes with a hay strip or a thudi out of bamboo to practise on their own.

Myths and folk tales are not always accepted as given facts or truth, there are events where children unlearn them. One prominent myth is about a rock ('Kozhipara') in the campus. It was believed that any person who went near it at midnight would hear the cock crow. As a film depicts, the children stayed there overnight to prove no such thing happened.

Classical mode: Kalaripayattu, is a very significant martial art that has existed in Kerala for centuries. During the feudal times, rulers maintained martial warriors who often had to give up their lives in honour of their masters. Besides self-defence, it preaches that the student should be capable of winning over the enemy without weapons. More than a martial art it has been able to incorporate various forms of orthopaedic practices too.

Students at Kanavu take training in both (orthopaedic practices as well as self-defence). This is very rigorous – unlike other martial arts, one can become a master of it, only after many years of training. The present guru at Kanavu said one of their students had become a master after almost 12 years of training. As the martial art has its origin in the feudal times the system of learning too has a classical touch. While practising the student has to remember the sequence. The fighter is expected to move her body and weapons in a specific order. The traditional caste groups, which once practised this martial art form, do not show any interest in sustaining them any more. However, today the modern-day guru is well aware that as an art form, it has really broken

caste barriers and skills are being provided to the later generations of Eklavyans. There are other classical forms, which children learn. Mohiniyattam is dance form. Just as kalaripayattu, this too has its own specific terminologies to be remembered.

The guru-shishya relationship: One thing that radically education is redefines the guru-shishya relationship that prevails at Kanavu. Many senior most children remember how they had been cared for by the guru when they had just joined Kanavu. The guru takes the initiative in most activities. Unlike the gurus of the ancient past who had to be provided with all necessities by the shishya, gurus at Kanavu are treated at almost an equal level. One would naturally expect children to learn from the guru's example.

In certain ways the guru can be a hard task master. He expects each and every child to be active and participate in all activities with vigour. The following description could elaborate upon this.

Reading Maxim Gorky's book *The Mother* was an experience in itself. The senior most children participated in this reading session. The book begins by narrating the monotonous life in a labour colony near a factory.

Everyday the factory whistle shrieked tremulously in the grim, greasy air above the workers' settlement. And in obedience to its summons sullen people, roused before sleep had refreshed their muscles, came scuttling out of their little grey house like frightened cockroaches. They walked through the cold darkness, down the unpaved street to the high stone cells of the factory, which awaited them with cold complacency, its dozens of oily eyes lighting up the road.... [Gorky 1988] (p 17).

The description elaborates how those colony dwellers were controlled by the routine of factory siren. The guru wanted children to reflect how their own society had become a simile to this. For three evenings children were expected to reuse various words in Gorky's written passages to narrate how some elements of their collective life either at Kanavu or outside tended to move in a similar direction.

Modern Knowledge Film Making

I was moving around the campus as most students were eagerly watching the process of film shooting on the fourth day in progress. A group of four younger students were waiting for their turn to walk in front of the camera in the coffee garden. Suddenly

one of them decided to take up the role of cameraman, another the director, and third the light boy. The call came, "Silence"! "Camera"! "Rolling"! "Action"! "Cut"! These students did not recognise these English words. But to them that was the beginning of it all.

Obsession for the 'imaginary' fantastic world amongst the adivasis of Kerala, as portrayed in motion pictures of Malayalam is an observed feature. Children are in great excitement when movies are discussed. At Kanavu, film itself is part of the curriculum. Children have watched world classics such as 'Seven Samurai', and 'Bicycle Thief' with rapt attention.

During the same period, Kanavu itself became a subject for documentary movie-makers. There were already three documentary movies made before my stay with them. A UGC production, which focuses and describes the education process at Kanavu. A production by Third Eye Communication which describes a day in the campus. The national award winner for the best documentary in the year 2001 was 'Kanavumalayilekku'. All these interactions provided some opportunity for children to become familiar with films. More than any other modern art form, films turned out to be acts of collective learning.

At the end of re-learning films, children under the guidance of the guru ventured into the making of a feature film. It is the first feature film of its kind where a tribal dialect is used to a great extent to narrate the conflicts of adivasi lives with modernity. Every theme that affects modern-day lives of adivasis is dealt with in this film, ranging from – their struggle for alienated land to the Afghan war; the sad tale of many unwedded mothers in adivasi society to teenage liquor poachers; the evangelist who tried to convert them to the Hindu religious heads who sidelined their gods; are all viewed through the eyes of girl who undergoes the menstruation ceremony in her 'guda' (the basket home).¹ The making of this film was not merely an exercise to portray tribal life – it was also an unlearning of the film making grammar.

Visitors and visits: Occasionally visitors travel in order to participate and learn but very often, visitors too provide several opportunities. The visitors to the campus belong to different categories. All the visitors are addressed as 'maman/mami' (uncle/aunt). During my first trip (a year before my stay in Kanavu) I was unsure as to how I would introduce the state I work

in and the type of work I do. The hall in which students do most of the activities had many different paintings and writings by students. In the middle of them was Medha Patkar. Soon I realised children did follow the events at Narmada valley. They had heard of land alienation from the tribal groups in the name of 'development'.

They are also well aware of issues that affect their own society and culture. It is in this context that they participated in the struggle organised by the Adivasi Gotra Sabha demanding the return of alienated land. Children did participate in the month-long struggle at the state capital. This is a struggle that they identify as their own. Their own life in the forest had been one of coexistence. However, the forest has since been alienated by the law of the land. The present owners of the land respect neither the forest nor the lives within it. Different political organisations of the left and centre have always promised to provide land for them, however, adivasis were never numerically significant as a vote bank and thus political promises are never fulfilled.

Few years ago, students visited and saw for themselves the living conditions of factory workers at Mavoor. Here they learnt about the violence of modern technology. The Mavoor Rayons factory on the banks of river Chaliyar posed a threat to the people on its banks. The factory also consumed forest products in large quantity, especially bamboo, the favourite food item of the elephants.

The campus also provides an 'unlearning' space for many visitors. Two instances were narrated to me. One group of visitors was from the most prestigious social work institute in the country. After a long discussion between both the groups, students at Kanavu asked the students of social work, "what would you do after your degree? Where would they work?" The need for professional help in development was the main concern put across by the MSW students. Nevertheless, all of them accepted the need to look for a professional career. No one evinced a desire to work with communities.

My stay with Kanavu was not in the form of a researcher. But to me Kanavu provided the opportunity to reflect upon diverse philosophies of education. There were two ways in which I wish to engage with the critique. The first critique of the programme came from many of the middle class visi-

tors to the campus – often teachers and others who may be engaged in education in some or other forms. Very often I had to engage with this group in defending the Kanavu innovation against their own middle class biases/anxieties. These discussions were of the following nature.

Occasionally one thinks of the Kanavu dream as a hard and challenging one. For one reason the collective model has become alien to the cultures of mainstream society. The education system that provides a hierarchy or decides successes and failures – demands and promotes the individual to be competitive. This all pervading presence of competitive, individualistic ideals would continuously evaluate the success of an institution like Kanavu through their own value systems. To the mainstream society, the specialised knowledge or skills of individuals are rated more valuable; the hierarchy of skills tend to be slanted in favour of textbook knowledge rather than the life skills.

The resistance to knowledge from textbooks was equally puzzling. Kanavu has an excellent library. However, in their philosophy, knowledge creation is more important than knowledge acquisition. Partly the numerous numbers of the educated

unemployed (with formal university degrees) are pointed out to challenge the belief that the formal education has any positive value. Also one finds that many have gained employment by bribing the management with huge sums of two to three lakhs for the job of a higher secondary teacher.

Secondly I reflected upon the experience against my own schooling. This made me wonder if holistic education is possible. In such systems, the child is expected to master a variety of skills. The performance of the child on the stage, through textbooks, at the playground and classroom are all evaluated. Would it be justified to expect from every child an ability to recite the classical raga and dribble the football with equal mastery? Can a child decide to read books all the time? Can the child resist the visions of the educators to provide holistic education? Does the child who makes a choice of either reading all the time or playing football acquire this habit from her social upbringing? Has it been imposed upon her by society as a more valuable activity than another? And then in the long run is it justified to say the child has been denied various opportunities?

To me the second experience of schooling emerges from the work that I undertook

with Eklavya, where the attempt was to reform the mainstream education system. That experience is intimate in bringing forth the need to re-skill the role of teacher and curriculum material. Often it brought forth the barriers/limits of school as an institution; the limited engagement that the teacher makes with the children; mediation of the state in this engagement in the form of textbooks, exams and timetable. On the whole the role of teacher is defined as a professional talking machine and the school as a factory producing literate societies. But would these professionals be able to replace the guru of Kanavu? **EW**

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Note

[This paper grew out my learning/unlearning experiences at Kanavu from September to December 2002. I was enriched by the interactions with everyone in that campus. The usual disclaimers apply.]

1 During the year 2003 it won a special mention in the Kerala State Film Awards.

References

- Baby K J (1996): *Nattugadhika*, Visthar Publications, Bangalore.
Gorky, Maxim (1988): *The Mother*, Radurga Publishers, Moscow, reprint.