

Ethnographic Study of a Single Teacher School in Kerala

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Abstract

A single teacher school or Multi-grade Learning Centre (MGLC) occurs in primary education when a teacher has to teach two or more primary school student grades in the same class. MGLC plays an active role in giving primary education to marginalised society. MGLC schools clearly keep their motto “if the child cannot reach the school, take the school to the child”. Here, the teacher creates a home atmosphere, so students are fearless and treat the school as a place like their ‘kudi’ (home). Apart from being a school, MGLC becomes a part of entire village activities. All needs of the village, be it social, cultural or health related matters are fulfilled by MGLC. The teacher demands direct involvement of every student in class activities. Here, traditional teaching methods like lecture method, etc. are not effective since, at a time, students belonging to four grades are involved in learning activities. In spite of the sincere efforts of the teacher, the study reveals that the students of MGLC have low aspirations and achievement levels and are bound by their social and cultural settings.

INTRODUCTION

Alternative schools have been established since about the 1970s to meet the needs of the children and adolescents who cannot learn

effectively in traditional school environment due to learning disabilities, social and cultural conditions, psychological and behavioural issues. An alternative

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education programme is defined as “an instructional programme approved by the school/board that utilises successful alternative or adaptive school structures and teaching techniques and that is incorporated into existing traditional classrooms or regularly scheduled curricular programmes. Alternative education programme does not include a private school or a home-based private educational programme. Multi-grade schools are considered as the part of alternative education. Multi-grade schools occur in primary education when a teacher has to teach two or more primary school student grades in the same class.

In the context of Kerala, single teacher schools are also known as “Ekaadhyapaka School” or “Alternative and Innovative Center” (AIEC) or Multi-grade Learning Centres (MGLC). It is where a teacher has to teach two or more primary school student grades in the same class. The single teacher school was an initiative launched as part of the DPEP Programme in 1997. It was later brought under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) with funds from the Department of Education as well as grants to tribal students from the Scheduled Tribes Development Department of the Kerala Government. The project was a direct response to the high rate of dropout of tribal children from main stream schools as learners felt disconnected with classroom environment, teaching style and medium of education.

These mainstream schools are often also located far away from the forest interiors. Presently, there are 354 MGLCs running in Kerala. A total of 11,888 children are getting education in these 354 MGLCs. In Kerala, MGLC concentrates more in most tribal populated areas, like Palakad, Malappuram, Thrissur, Kannur, Idukki and Pathanamthitta districts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study about the nature of single teacher school with special focus on curriculum, teaching learning practices and school community interaction.
- To study the classroom structure and the student-teacher interaction in the single teacher school context.

TOOLS EMPLOYED FOR THE STUDY

In the present study, the investigator used the following tools for the required data collection:

1. Semi-structured interview schedule
2. Observation schedule
3. Achievement test
4. Focus group discussion

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The present study entitled attempts to find out the nature and structure of single teacher school in Kollankadavu at Attappadi tribal region in Kerala. Being an ethnographic study, the researcher used qualitative techniques which include data source triangulation method for data collection. Data source triangulation

method uses evidence from different types of data sources, such as primary and secondary research or interviews, documents, public records, photographs and observations. The researchers selected 15 students and one teacher of the single teacher school at Kollankadavu Oore (parish) of Attappadi region in Palakkad district of Kerala. The location of the school is geographically remote; the universe of the study is culturally isolated from the township and the schooling procedures are unique to the locality. The nature and character of education designed for marginalised societies like the tribes are almost one and the same in India. What is reported in this study may be seen in schools existing in such tribal and other isolated areas as well.

METHOD

As the school is situated in the forest area, the researchers at first obtained the necessary permission from the District Forest Office, Palakkad. Then the researchers contacted the teacher of the single teacher school through Block Resource Centre in Agali, Palakkad. Before that, the researchers were assured the necessary cooperation and assistance from the *Ooru Moopan* (Chieftain) of Kollankadavu and prominent community members were done through telephonic conversations.

The researcher spent three weeks in the school along with the inhabitants, including the teacher, students and other related

personalities, collecting the required data. During this period, the researcher deployed various research tools, such as interview schedule, observation schedule, Focus Group Discussion and interviewed the teacher, observed the students and their classroom activities and interacted with the parents. The researcher recorded the available data using various electronic devices, such as tape recorder and video camera. The researcher prepared a diary which provides a detailed description of the daily interventions with respect to her/his research.

BACKDROP OF THE SCHOOL

One can reach Kollankadavu by walk from Pakulam town in Palakkad district in Kerala. The Pakulam town can be reached travelling approximately 30 kilometres by bus through the Ghat roads from Mannarkad town in the Kozhikkode- Palakkad national highway. From here, one can reach the Kollankadavu Oore walking four kilometres through the mountain paths. Kollankadavu Ooru is situated in a serene atmosphere. It is a beautiful place covered by fog the whole day. Kollankadavu is in a valley beneath the "Malishwara" Peak. This is a place surrounded by mountain ranges.

Kollankadavu Ooru is important among the 170 parishes in Attappadi village. 'Ooru' means a place where tribal people live together. Its old name was "Kollankad". These people made their living from agriculture

alone. In earlier days, many people came from different parishes in Attapadi to Kollankadavu. They used to stay there and work and lived by the grains got from there. “*Ooru Moopan*” (Chieftain) is the important power in the “*Ooru*”. He is known by the names like “*Karuthala*”, “*Bandari*” and “*Mannakaran*”, etc. A total of 78 Scheduled Tribe families live in Kollankadavu. They belong to “*Irula*” community. 300 people comprising 153 men and 129 women. *Irula* is their language. *Irula* is a mixture of Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil languages. The researcher communicated with them with the help of teacher. Their language is rich with folk songs and stories. These

are orally communicated from one generation to the other.

Kollankadavu has turned to be the liquor free village in Attapadi. It was result of a joint attempt of social activists and the MGLC teacher. Even though these people have their own agriculture fields; they work in others’ fields. The increase in the cost cultivation and low price for their products force them to go for work outside. Increase in the cost of living has made these aboriginals’ life miserable.

Now, changes have occurred in dress, language, culture, and food style of Kollankadavu. But road to Kollankadavu is still far away from reality. Materials are carried to



Fig. 1: View from Kollankadavu valley



Fig. 2: MGLC- The “school” at Kollankadavu

Kollankadavu on head. These people depend on narrow mountain passes to travel to outside world. It affects the educational activities badly. Formal schools for giving general education to tribal people living in mountains away from inhabited lands are not practical and it is also impossible for the tribal children to come to formal school travelling kilometres through forests and hills daily.

Kollankadavu MGLC started to function in June 2003. MGLC was set up here taking the lack of transportation into consideration. In the beginning, the school was run in a house in the ooru. But in 2007, ADHADS built the school with the help of forest department. In the

beginning there were 39 children and the number fluctuated each year. Now, 16 children are studying in this MGLC. At present, about 15 students who passed out from this MGLC, continue their study in mainstream schools.

Through teacher’s words about Kollankadavu MGLC:-

“When this MGLC was started in Kollankadavu in June 2003, doubts were more than hopes. Though started with 39 students, now it continues with 16 children. We could send 23 children for higher studies. In the society, number of drunkards decreased, much change occurred in health matters, sanitation and agriculture. In the beginning, mid-

day meal was a problem. Today, we get rice and peas regularly from government machinery”.

Apart from a school, MGLC becomes a part of entire village activities. All needs of the village, be it social, cultural or the health related matters are fulfilled by MGLC. Thus, MGLC becomes the symbol of expectation and love of the village.

CURRICULUM OF THE SCHOOL

MGLCs had their own curriculum up to 2009. The curriculum that MGLC followed from its beginning to 2009 was entirely different from normal school curriculum. It was tailored to the nature and function of MGLC. Its important speciality was that it used card method instead of textbooks. Learning activities were conducted according to this card method. From Standard I to Standard IV, teacher used to conduct learning activities

with the help of different cards. Card system used pictures of various animals, birds and insects printed on it to assist learning. For example, elephant card was used in language learning. Picture of birds were used in learning of mathematics. Picture of insects were used in environmental studies. Promotion to the next class was given after learning 12 cards. Its advantages were that students never felt any burden in learning process. Card system was used in evaluation process also. But subsequent revisions that happened in the state syllabus left out revising the MGLC curriculum. At present, MGLC follows the curriculum of SCERT, that is the curriculum of mainstream schools. It causes many problems in MGLC classroom. A culturally and socially different student at MGLC faces many problems when she/he is introduced to textbooks in normal schools.

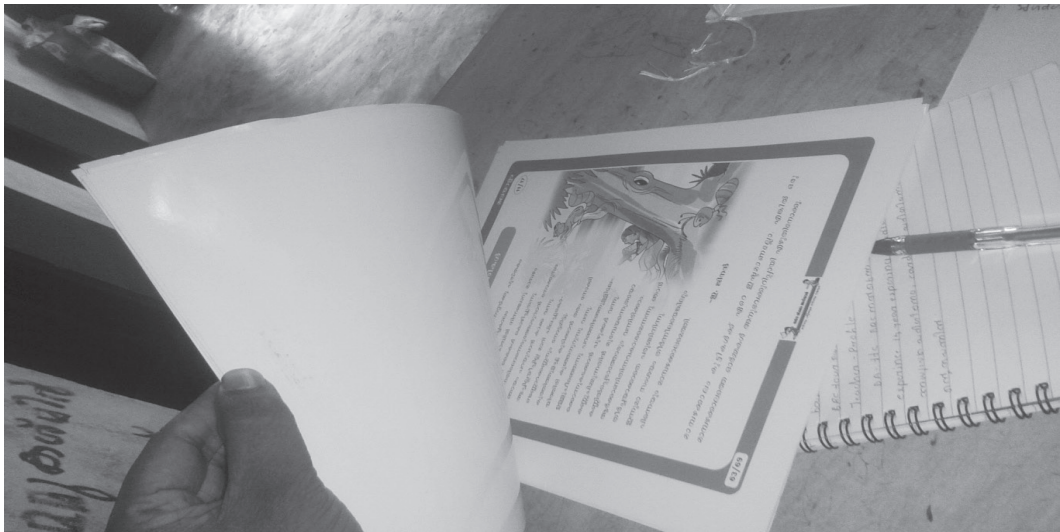


Fig. 3 (a): Card system

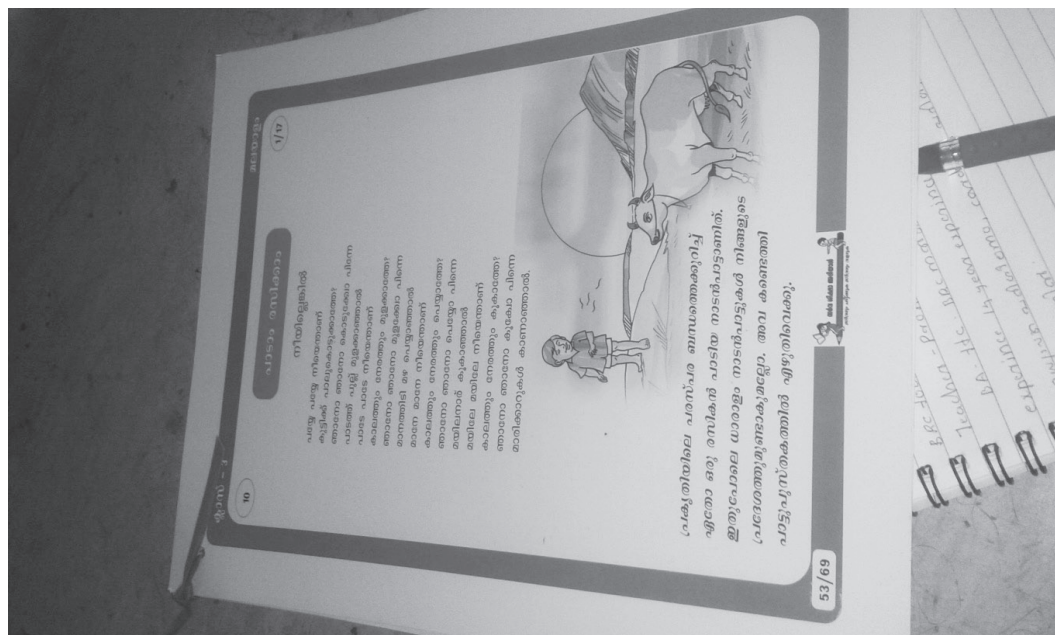


Fig. 3 (b): Card system

TEACHER’S WORDS

“Card system was helpful for MGLC student to study according to her/his interest and brilliance. But since the textbook system is different from students’ social and cultural surroundings she/he faces many problems in learning activities”.

Different from normal schools, in MGLC there is no bell to remind timing. There is no attendance. Students come here in a free atmosphere and indulge in learning activities. Here, the teacher creates a home atmosphere, so students are fearless and treat the school as a place like their ‘kudi’ (home). That is why the number of dropouts in MGLC is very less.

Co-curricular activities like sports and arts meets, including all MGLC schools in Attpadi region are conducted each year. In “Bal Sabha”, students perform various programmes, like speech, song and dance, etc. Tour programmes for students and teachers are conducted every year. On special occasions, like August 15, various programmes are conducted. Many such co-curricular activities are organised in MGLC study centres. It provides the students in MGLC with same experiences that the normal school students get. All special services given in normal schools like mid-day meal, egg and milk programme, etc. are given in MGLC also. In MGLC



Figure 4 Students playing near MGLC building



Figure 5 Simple but neat kitchen

classroom, teacher uses Malayalam and *Irula*, the native language of students, as medium of instruction.

But since the teacher is not a tribal, uses Malayalam more. Students most often use their tribal language.

It creates challenges in classroom activities. Many Malayalam words are unfamiliar to them. But the ignorance of native language is a challenge for the teacher.

TEACHING METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Here, traditional teaching methods, like Lecture method, etc. are not effective. Because of student, belonging to four grades are involved in learning activities.

For effective teaching, the teacher uses heuristic method in MGLC classroom. It aims at the self-learning of students; that is the teacher gives assignments to each grade. For example, fourth grade are asked to find out the causes of environment pollution. They sit together and try

to find out its answer simultaneously while third standard students are given some other assignments. They too try to do it. The same is practised in first grade and second grade and the teacher guides them all. In MGLC classroom, teacher uses strategies appropriate for students' social and cultural surroundings. Common teaching strategies used in MGLC classroom are tribal riddles, drama based on native language, mono act, Song, *Kummikali* (local game), *Ellomkaradi* (tribal game), Proverbs, and tribal riddles. Riddles are common strategy used in MGLC classroom. Mainly they are used in their native languages.

Example: *Jill Jill Marathil Pathayiram Kakkakal* (thousands crows in a tree)



Fig.6: Learning aids

Teacher uses drama for some socially relevant studies. Dialogues of this drama are in their language. All students participate in such strategies. Teacher uses tribal song as an important strategy in classroom activity. There are many tribal songs which arouse social and scientific awareness. Teacher used them in this part of learning activity.

Example: “*Attapady Deva mallishera*

Nine kannan vandhu ne eshara” (The God of Attapadi is Mallishwran, I worship him every time). Sometimes, teacher uses traditional tribal art form, such as *Kummikali/Ellomkaradi*, etc., in classroom. These help students develop an awareness of their cultural and social surroundings. These kinds of art forms have been passed through generations.

MGLC keeps all records that are found in normal schools. All records except the attendance register are kept here. The teacher handles and keeps all records, like PTA report, mid-day meals record, admission register, TC book, TC copies, noon meal programme register, cash book, programme card records, Integrated Tribal Development Programme grant records, Health records of students, etc.

DAILY SCHEDULE

School assembly is conducted each day before the class starts. Assembly is conducted in classroom itself. Assembly starts with prayer. After prayer, a fourth standard student

reads the pledge. Other students repeat it. Then the teacher reads important news-items from the newspaper taken from her this home. After that, the teacher gives some stories or songs with a normal lesson. After that, students’ practice drill, the assembly is dismissed. All students take part in assembly with interest.

Following is the class schedule in MGLC School.

09.30 to 10.45	- Environmental studies
11.00 to 11.45	- Mathematics
12.00 to 01.00	- Language
01.00 to 02.00	- Break
02.00 to 02.45	- Story/poem/drama, etc
03.00 to 04.00	- Self-learning

The atmosphere in MGLC is different from normal schools. Here the teacher provides a calm atmosphere in both classroom and school. This atmosphere is much interesting and joyful for the students.

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

Classroom structure in MGLC is quite different from that of normal classrooms. Here, pupils sit according to their grade. First grade students take the first row of seats. Other students occupy seats according to their grades. Thus, learning activities are done properly.

The main feature of a MGLC classroom is its diversity of the students. The pupil varies in IQ, emotional abilities, interests, etc.

Such factors make a MGLC classroom a great challenge to the teacher. In the case of classroom instruction, the teacher must be able to meet the requirements of every student in the class. The teacher demands direct involvement of every student in activities. Everyone takes part in this. A teacher can thus overcome the issue of individual difference in a MGLC classroom. And because of this reason the classroom is very active.

While observing the peer group interaction, we understand the affection and concern of fourth grade student and the naughtiness of the first grade students alike. The relationship between the students is generally very healthy. The students

are not at all hesitant to share their matters. According to the teacher, uniform is their favourite dress code. They are proud to wear uniform. Because by wearing uniform they think they have grown up. Teacher is very vigilant in students' personal hygiene. If they come to school with their nails uncut, the teacher herself/himself, does it at school. Teacher details to them the importance of neatness and good habits. As MGLC School provides a home environment, each student is fearless in classroom. The nature is so beautiful and green and students indulge in learning activities freely. Here, the student makes the school a home. School becomes joyful for them.



Fig. 7: Homely classroom

THE TEACHER IN THE MGLC

Teacher has to take up many roles at a time. Those of a mother, a friend, so on and so forth. In short, a teacher is the soul of an MGLC, by whom a whole village gets transformed.

The desirable basic educational qualification for an MGLC teacher is graduation. Still some of them pass TTC also. With a meagre salary of Rs. 3000, the teachers in each MGLC have to suffer a lot. They have to overcome the bad weather and to cross deep forests to reach the respective schools. They overcome all these difficulties with the strength of their passion for teaching. They improve themselves through the training BRC gives in each six months. There is an organisation of MGLC teachers in Kerala called All Kerala Teachers Association. The MGLC teachers are commonly known as education volunteers. Joji, the teacher *Kollankadavu* MGLC, says-

“We work for a salary of Rs 3000 which is really meagre these days. To add to our woes, we haven’t got remuneration for the last 6 months. Still we cannot think of giving up this job with these children since they are our soul mates.”

They don’t have any complaint that they work for just Rs 3000 because they love students they teach very much. This very relation makes them adhere to this job. A teacher in a normal school may wind up her/his job after teaching her/his students. But things are really different in an MGLC. The duties are:

- To teach the students.
- To handle office duties relating to school.
- To deal with the day-to-day life of the students and to discuss it with their parents.
- To bring the children from remote areas who do not come to school by themselves.
- To handle the extension works related to the school.
- To handle office duties pertaining to BRC, DD office, etc.

If the teacher is on leave for a day then the whole school activities get blocked having no other teacher to substitute. So, MGLC teachers care for such a situation very much and even if one is on leave, she/he finds a suitable substitute there to get on with the school activities. Thus, an MGLC teacher deals with many things single handedly, though a helper is provided to support the daily meals programme.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP

Community and school depend upon each other for development and consistency. The effective involvement of MGLC has made *Kollankadavu* an alcohol-free *ooru*. MGLC also involves in the sanitary and health matters of *Kollankadavu ooruu*. Water and fire wood for cooking at MGLC is brought by the *ooru* people. The people take part actively in all activities of MGLC. The people treat the programmes of MGLC as the programme of *ooru*. Cleaning of MGLC is done by the local people. For people in *ooru*, MGLC is

not a mere school; instead it is their social and cultural centre. As all parents actively participate in PTA and MTA meetings, the teacher can give clear directions to parent about their children. It is an important factor for the growth of school. MGLC conducts many extension activities in *ooru* like old age education, tailoring classes, agricultural awareness Classes, etc. *Rooni*, Chieftain of the *Ooru*, opines that MGLC has really made their *ooru* life full, which was earlier in darkness.

ASPIRATION LEVEL AND ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS

The aspiration of a normal school student may be to become a doctor or engineer. But the aspiration level

of tribal children in an MGLC is bound by their social and cultural surroundings. For example, a fourth grade student named Manikandan wishes to become a honey collector. Mallika's aspiration is to become a farmer. Students of second or third grades have no aspirations. They come to school just to get the mid-day meal.

As part of the study, the researcher conducted an achievement test in *Kollankadavu* MGLC. The question paper contained 10 questions from General Knowledge (G.K.), Malayalam and English. A test using this question paper was conducted in third and fourth grade students. The same test was given to third and fourth grade students in normal schools also. When the result was



Fig. 8: A standard I student drawing

compared, it was found that, MGLC students have scored very low marks. MGLC students did not even attempt some questions. It means that MGLC students' achievement level is very low. If the syllabus of normal school is retained in MGLC, this achievement level will continue to be low. So, the teacher suggests bringing the old card system back.

CONCLUSION

MGLC schools play an active role in giving primary education to marginalised society. MGLC schools clearly keep their motto "if the child cannot reach the school, take the school to the child". Government has to formulate a curriculum based on their cultural settings, like the card system of teaching-learning which they earlier had. If textbooks are re-designed, including more elements of

their culture, their own games and folk art forms, the students learning may get improved. Though heuristic methods are followed in MGLC classrooms, it can be hoped that the introduction of new technologies, like IT enabled classrooms will better the output. It would be better to appoint two teachers in one MGLC instead of one. And if one teacher is from the tribal community, it would be much better. With proper learning experiences, IT enabled lessons and first-hand experiences, including exposures to the life of the main land, we can hope that we could increase the aspiration levels of these tribal children and instill in them a national outlook and a global vision. Whatever be the academic achievement they make, MGLCs would continue to remain as a centre to discover oneself and the world outside for the marginalised child.

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