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The Future Direction of Education for Adivasis in Gudalur

1. Background

The adivasis of the Gudalur valley in 1986 decided to finally respond to the years of exploitation and marginalisation that had reduced them to agricultural wage earners on land which was theirs. Through ACCORD, the adivasis formed village sangams which federated to become the ADIVASI MUNNETRA SANGAM and launched a hugely successful land rights campaign.

With this the AMS then started a number of institutions – ASHWINI to take care of their health needs; the Adivasi Tea leaf Marketing Society to market their tea leaves; the Madhuvana Plantation as a common property resource and now more recently the Adivasi Development Bank. Vishwa Bharathi Vidyodaya Trust is the institution that is responsible for the education of the community.

During the last 20 years huge changes have taken place and the adivasi community has come a long way.

We are now at a stage of our history where we need to be proactive rather than reactive. We need to look to the future and lay the foundations to ensure that the ground gained so far is not lost.

This document is prepared in this light. What is our future? What is the kind of society we want to be? And so what needs to be done to ensure that we are able to achieve this.

2. The Vision

When we launched the current education strategy of VBVT, we had set ourselves a very specific objective of ensuring that all adivasi children go to school and stay in school at least till the primary level. We thought that we would need at least 10 years to achieve this but now in just seven years we have witnessed a sea change in the attitude of the community towards the education of their children. Of their own accord parents now ensure that their children are enrolled in school and take them to school everyday. Not only that, we find that in spite of rather meagre earnings they are willing to spend whatever it costs to purchase all the necessary stationery, clothes and other school going paraphernalia for their children. Even a savings scheme for the children is becoming a great success.

With this radical change in attitude it is clear to us that along with the community we need to raise the bar. In repeated meetings the leaders of the AMS, the parents and the children themselves have expressed that now we should ensure that every adivasi child should complete High School.

However, their vision is certainly not to just get to get their children to Class X level. They are clear that this is just a minimum target in keeping with mainstream society. Their vision is to develop an educational programme that is both meaningful and

relevant to the adivasi community. In realising this vision they understand that we will have to break with existing systems which are purely examination oriented. We therefore envisage a curriculum, which goes beyond achieving just the academic standards as set out in mainstream education programmes. We envisage that along with this the curriculum should also ensure that traditional adivasi knowledge, vocational skills, abilities, self-confidence and the cultural mores that will give them a sense of identity and pride when dealing with the outside world are passed on to their children.

Dr. Krishnakumar, Director, NCERT, in his book '**What is worth Teaching**' sums this up beautifully – *“The problem of curriculum is related to our perception of what kind of society and people we are, and to our vision of the kind of society we want to be. By taking shelter in the ‘received’ perspective and the ‘principles of curriculum development’ that it offers, we merely shun our responsibility and allow ourselves to be governed by choices made long ago or elsewhere under very different circumstances.”*

What is set down here is the perception of the adivasis of today’s society, its impact on their culture, identity and livelihoods; their vision of the society they want to be and finally the choices they have to make to ensure that this vision is fulfilled.

In the words of the adivasis: *“Today we have moved from a forest based collective economy to a money based individual economy. For us to continue on the path determined by our dominant neighbours will mean that within one generation there will be nothing by which we can call ourselves adivasis. From being a cohesive community we would have become a number of individuals lost in a struggle for survival. But we cannot turn away from the reality. Our children must learn to read and write. Our children must be seen to be educated by mainstream society. But our children must also learn to be proud of who they are and participate in mainstream society not as unidentifiable individuals but as active members of a community. For this they must learn both ways of our community as well the ways of the modern world. They need both!”*

The vision stated above is drawn from numerous discussions and meetings at various levels.

VBVT’s future direction is defined by this vision and its role is clearly to support the community in achieving this in the long run.

3. The problem statement

While this vision is inspiring the reality is that most of the adivasi children attend government schools where unfortunately, the quality of education leaves much to be desired. This is manifested in the number of children dropping out of school at higher levels. The present curriculum prescribed by the government has little to offer the adivasi community and what makes this worse is the fact that it is delivered so badly. The very urban-industrial orientation of the curriculum has little attraction for the adivasis who see no future in it, particularly as they are most of them are first generation learners. In addition, the curriculum appears to erode the cultural mores and values of the community. This is the biggest fear of the community – that the children will lose

their adivasi identity. So not only is the standard of education in these schools abysmal, there is no scope for bringing in the adivasi perspective.

This is not to say that the government schools are to be ignored altogether. That is not possible given the numbers that attend them. The 2678 school-going adivasi children are dispersed across 235 villages in two hilly taluks. There are 66 government schools where 2361 (88%) of these children are enrolled. These schools, in general, have given little or nothing of any quality to the children except in rare cases. To continue to leave the children in the hands of such schools is likely to result in negating the hopes of the community and the efforts that they have put in for their children's education over the last seven years.

Over the years numerous efforts have been made to work with these schools both officially and unofficially, but the local teachers have seen VBVT's intervention as a threat and so there has been little progress. Recently, however, recognition of alternative methods and the need to ensure some quality in education has become an agenda of the government and so for the first time VBVT has been approached by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to assist with training of government school teachers. While this is definitely an opportunity which we must and have taken up, it cannot be seen as a solution. Given the numbers and scattered nature of these schools the impact of such training is likely to be limited. At best we may marginally improve the skills of the teachers and to some extent their attitude to and understanding of adivasi culture. Further in a situation where the adivasis are a minority (less than 1% of the population) it is not likely that we will see changes in the curriculum that will bring in the adivasi perspective and vision.

The community and VBVT are therefore compelled to create an alternative curriculum that will help our children enter mainstream society with the knowledge, skills needed to thrive in a modern economy but with their identity and dignity intact. It is also necessary that simultaneously intervention be made at the government schools in order to make whatever changes are possible even if they are with a few individuals.

Therefore the challenge now falls on us - VBVT and the community – to take more control of the education of our children. This will involve strategic planned interventions at various levels – the village, area and taluk. It will also mean finding and training members of the community who will take the responsibility to fulfil this vision of a truly relevant and meaningful education rooted in our culture and values.

This document describes broadly how we propose to respond to this challenge.

4. Our proposed Intervention:

If the problem described above has to be addressed we have to be bold and innovative in our response. We should be prepared to invest whatever it takes to make this possible. What is at stake is not just the education of our children but the entire future of the community. All the other developmental interventions of the last 20 years by this community will be defined by the kind of education our children receive.

Against this backdrop we set out below a comprehensive intervention which has three core elements:

- a) Interventions at different stages of child's life – early childhood, primary education, high school, post high school.
- b) Developing the capacity of the community to control and manage their education system – this will include training numerous people on the various aspects of education
- c) Developing a curriculum that is culturally relevant and appropriate
- d) A research component to track the changes and the overall impact

4.1 The different stages of a Child's life

4.1.1 Early Childhood:

Right from the beginning we were clear that this was not an area where we could/should intervene, because our approach was that everything should be managed by the community. At that point of time we did not have the resources to ensure that the community would, even in the long run be able to manage balwadis, given the cost of providing nutritious food. Further the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme seemed to perfectly suited to taking care of early childhood needs. Hence we campaigned strongly with government and were directly responsible for bringing this programme to the Nilgiris. But this got hijacked by non-tribals and it was many years before we were able to ensure that tribal villages were also covered. Today about 60 villages are covered either by ICDS or by the Church of South India's Balwadi programme or other NGOs.

While these institutions have the advantage of long term financial support, there are certain drawbacks and dangers. The main drawback is that these are mainly feeding centres and so nothing in terms of educational inputs is given to the children. Further with the CSI intervention there is the danger that these institutions may be used to proselytise and influence the parents of these children.

While we do not intend to start early childhood centres on our own we need to intervene in these two institutions to ensure that the dangers are minimised and that the quality is improved.

Hence our intervention has to be closely monitor these institutions and ensure that they are functioning within the gambit of the community's needs and that the community has some say in the manner in which the centres are functioning. The second area of intervention would be to train the teachers of these centres in the pedagogical aspects so that certain amount of educational inputs can be provided to the children. Thirdly, as many of these centres are ill-equipped, providing for learning materials is another possibility.

4.1.2 Primary Education:

It is very clear that without a consistent intervention at the primary level nothing will be achieved academically. This is the foundation and wherever this has been strong, as in Vidyodaya School, one can see the effects as children are able to proceed to higher levels without any difficulty. However, we have set ourselves the task of having to deal with 1724 children just at the primary level, dispersed in over 235 villages and 55 primary schools. Thus any intervention cannot be easy or the impact all that effective or immediate. With a long term plan and systematic approach we should be able to make the necessary impact.

We therefore visualise three-pronged strategy of intervention at the primary level: a) intervening in government schools, b) intervening at the village and c) running our own primary school.

i) Government Schools

As 88% of the adivasi children study in government schools there is no doubt that we have to intervene in these schools in order to improve the standard of education. The government schools in which adivasi children study are of two types:

- α) Government Tribal Residential Schools (GTRS) which are meant exclusively for tribal children. But only 29% (775) of them study in these 11 schools. In some of the Tribal schools there is a concentration while in others they are by far the minority.
- β) Panchayat Union Schools (PUS): There are 66 PUS in the two taluk and the remaining 71% attend these schools, with each school having an average of about 20 adivasi children.

Therefore the approach to the Government Tribal Residential schools where there is concentration of children would have to be different from the Panchayat Union schools.

Government Tribal Residential schools:

In the Government Tribal Residential schools the attempt would be to have a volunteer from the adivasi community in each of the schools. These persons are considered as volunteers by the schools but would be paid by VBVT. This was a scheme that was attempted at the very early stage our intervention 15 years back. At that time it did not make the necessary impact because the volunteers were not trained to teach or were not educated – mostly dropouts themselves. Today some of our Area Education coordinators and teachers are better qualified academically than the Headmasters of the Tribal schools and have a different level of confidence to handle children and their subjects. These volunteers would be trained wherever necessary to teach up to the primary level. They should work towards running of the school, interface with the community and the government to ensure teachers attend regularly and teach well. Official approval for this would have to be obtained for these 11 schools.

Apart from this we will also attempt to form active parent-teacher associations in these schools. By working with the parents and giving them the necessary support we visualise that they should be able to have an impact on the functioning of these schools – not just in ensuring standards but also in making the curriculum more relevant.

Strategically however, in the short term we will attempt to form these associations and ensure active participation by the parents. In the medium term we will attempt to influence the functioning of the school by getting the parents to monitor more closely what happens in the school. In the long term using our other interventions described below we will attempt to influence the curriculum in these schools so that they are more appropriate and in keeping with our vision.

Panchayat Union schools

In the Panchayat Union schools where the adivasi children are in minority, intervention would have to be:

- α) Through the teachers of the respective classes to ensure that special attention is given to the adivasi children. Although official sanction can be obtained for this, our effort would be to win over the teachers to undertake this on a voluntary basis. What this attention entails will have to be school specific.
- β) Through training of teachers in these schools, officially or unofficially, and providing them with support to be more effective.
- χ) Like in the GTR Schools, through intervention in the parent-teacher association, where all parents – tribal and non-tribal - are made to insist on quality of education.

We strongly believe that we need not replicate the Government system. We feel that we should put the infrastructure and resources being spent by Government to the best possible use and so will continue to focus our attention on the Government schools in which most of our adivasi children are studying. However, there are many constraints and shortfalls with the Government schools, especially when they are catering to children in remote villages like ours or when our children are such a small number as in the PU Schools.

VBVT has been approached by the local SSA Cluster Coordinators to assist with the training of the teachers as all the primary school teachers have been given learning materials and asked to teach through Activity Based methods. We realise that there is tremendous resistance to try out anything new particularly by the older generation and so our approach so far has been to win over the local teachers before we attempt to get formal approval. Teachers from the Tribal Welfare dept. have also been attending the trainings but the department itself has been very unresponsive even to the attempts by the District Collectors to make changes and hand over at least one of the schools to NGOs. This invitation from SSA is seen as an opportunity to make an entry into the formal system.

We will look at other organisations that have managed to work more closely with the government and see what lessons can be learned and implemented here. 🗺️

ii) Village level Interventions:

Realistically speaking, no matter what the intervention, it will be along time before any impact can be felt in the government schools. But we are at a very crucial stage of our history. If we do not intervene in the education of the current generation learners, it might be too late. An entire generation would be lost and it might then be impossible to turn the clock back. Hence it is vital that a very focussed intervention is needed at the village level to supplement what happens in the government schools.

We visualise a three-pronged strategy for this purpose:

- a) Study Centres
- b) Village Libraries
- c) Monitoring through conducting independent tests for the primary level to assess their level of learning. This has already been tried out and found effective.
- d) Children's Bank

Study Centres:

It is obvious that given the work load of the current curriculum unless children are able to spend a certain amount of time every day working at home they will be at unable to cope with the demands of the curriculum. However, given the reality of their home situation such this is very difficult to do. Most of them have only one-room houses making it difficult for the children to concentrate on their work. There is usually no light facility too and children arrive home late in the evenings. Besides, as it rains for at least half of the year round they are unable to use even their verandas which are the main workspaces for the family. This has become a major factor hindering the progress of children. To add to their difficulties they have no one to refer to in case of doubts arising in the studies.

Hence we feel it is essential to put up simple buildings, which will act as Study Centres, where around 20 children can sit around to study.

These Study Centres would be run by a person, called the Study Centre Guide, who can assist or supervise them. Already 10 such centres have been established and wherever required solar lights have been provided. This programme will have to continue until it covers every village in the project area.

The key to the success of the Study Centre is the ability and commitment of the Study Centre Guide. Thus the first task at hand is to identify these guides and train them. As they grow in stature and capability the children in the village too will grow. These Guides should function in the village on a purely voluntary basis. They must form the new knowledge assets of the village.

The present plan is to take 25 of the Village Librarians every year and begin training. They will have to undergo two years of training (details in the Teacher Education section). From Year 3 onwards we should have 25 fully trained personnel in the field. After the second year of training we could consider whether the training could be further stepped up by taking on two batches to hasten the process. In this way we could cover the entire project area in 8 to 10 years without difficulty. In the first three years we could target 50 such trained Guides running Study Centres with or without buildings.

While we are confident that we can successfully train these Guides we need to ensure that proper physical environment is provided for them to be effective. Putting up such buildings, even if they are very basic and simple, will involve a large financial outlay and hence will be dependant on our ability to raise these funds. But we see this as crucial to our village level intervention and will remain a resource for the village.

Village Libraries:

This is seen as an integral part of the Study Centre.

Most of the adivasi homes have little or no reading material and so the children have only their text books to read. The need to have books and materials for learning other than their school books is a very important aspect especially for first generation learners. The village library consists of a steel trunk of books, story cards and indoor games materials and puzzles. This is kept in one of houses which can accommodate it. One of the villagers is chosen by the community to be the librarian. These librarians are purely volunteers. This is usually one of the older children who are attending school, if there is no Village Education Worker (VEW's are usually elderly persons in the village whose tasks so far have been to take children to school. Most of them are illiterate.) or Study Centre Guide capable of handling it. This person is given training by VBVT to conduct the library. The library is usually conducted over the weekend and on holidays, unless the children demand it on other days. A lot depends on the weather and the availability of space to even put out the books or to conduct indoor games. Often the children are asked to take the books home to read as it is difficult to find one place where they can gather. Study centres are the best places to conduct these and so every study centre also has library as part of it.

The process of development is usually to begin with a library and then over time to get the village to build a study centre. So far 76 such village libraries exist although not all of them run with the same level of effectiveness. This programme will have to continue till every village has its library. In some of the villages the adults have also begun to take an interest and learn to read.

There is also a need to have a cadre of persons in the villages which can take care of the Study centres and the Libraries, to help children in their academics and generally function as the Guide. Already as many 50 such young people are taking care of libraries and ensuring children go to school by taking the

attendance. These volunteers need to be trained to perform in more specific areas in a systematic manner. The Study Centre Guide and Village Librarian will be the same person and it is these persons whose skills will be upgraded to take on more responsibility.

Monitoring Through Tests:

We have found that children can get up to class 10 and still be barely literate. We have already spoken about the fact that the government schools do not meet even basic academic standards. This lacunae is hidden by false reports from the school and hence parents have no idea how their children are actually faring. They have to blindly believe that their children are getting an education and that therefore the sacrifices they make as parents is worth the effort. We feel it is important that the parents understand exactly how well or badly their children are faring. Without this understanding they will not be able to make the Parent teacher association an effective body aimed at improving standards in these schools.

The objective of conducting these tests are:

- To have an independent system of monitoring the child progress which is easily accessible to parents.
- Schools can be given a feedback as to the level of the children and hopefully corrective measures can be taken. Good practice can also be identified and shared across schools
- To see what corrective step can be taken by the Study Centre
- Specific areas of difficulty faced by the children can be identified where the children have specific difficulty and these can be informed to the teachers including how they can be overcome.

Over the last 2 years we have been conducting Tests for the children in Classes 3, 4 and 5 in Tamil and Maths. Almost 50 % of the adivasi children in these three classes have been tested. There were a number of teething troubles with this programme. The question papers had to be tried out, the staff correcting them was found not capable of correcting them and it was difficult to gather children to conduct the tests. It took almost three years to streamline this. Though we have not covered as many children as planned (75%), since January 2007 there has been a huge improvement in the way we conduct these tests. For the first time the parents are able to see the level of performance of their children. It has not been easy for them to address this problem with the teachers. However with the intervention of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangham this is beginning to happen. Teachers have become aware that these tests are being conducted and that the results are being made public. It has been welcomed in some schools and led to discussions in others. This feedback to the community as well as to the school we feel is an important role that VBVT can play.

Children's Bank

This may appear to be incongruent here where we are talking about improving the education of children. However, this programme, begun only in January of this 2007, has already brought in as much as Rs. 53,386/=. This is phenomenal as it shows the interest that parents are taking in their children's education and in their future. We see this as an important indicator. So far only 245 families have been covered. We have been proceeding with this very slowly as we had to develop a system of collection and accounting. Each of the children have a pass book in which their savings amount is entered every month when their box is opened. There are still some teething problems in some of the Areas while others are doing relatively well.

This is a programme that we should spread to every child in the project area as it ensures the commitment of the parents. Targets are to fixed for the coming years.

iii) Vidyodaya – our own primary school

We have been running this school since 1992 and for adivasi children since 1996 and though it caters only to very small group of children, it has been the foundation from which all the changes have taken place. Not only has this become an institution the adivasis proudly claim as their own, it has served to be a huge resource in terms of training and demonstrating what children are capable of given the chance.

The School has been recognised by the Tamil Nadu Govt. up to the Primary level. After the primary level the children have the option of continuing with the school and completing Class VIII as private candidates by appearing for the Elementary School Leaving Certificate Examination. This part of the school is referred to as the Learning Centre and these children have the opportunity of being exposed to vocations and also to get involved in many activities other than academics. This has been a very successful model and most parents prefer their children continue with Vidyodaya school rather than admit them in any other school. On completing this examination they join the local schools. Vidyodaya has now applied to the National Institute of Open Schooling for recognition and is awaiting final acceptance. The NIOS has the option of formulating curriculum which is suitable to the local community and also that evaluation of students can be conducted up to the class 8 level by the institution.

We intend to continue with this school as a) it will be difficult to intervene in government schools without being able to show how alternate ways of working can be beneficial and hence Vidyodaya can be a model and b) we need such a base to ensure that we are able to train teachers from within the community on a regular basis.

4.1.3 High School Level

This is a very crucial stage in a child's life. Early influences are cemented, and life choices are made. What we see now is that while a few opt to pursue formal education, most drop out to work. The possibility of doing well enough at the high school level to pursue even further higher education leading to suitable jobs still remains remote for most of our people. This is why the community has set the next immediate target as ensuring everyone completes Class 10. However, those who have passed Class 10, as many from the Mullukurumba tribe have done, by and large they remain unemployed. They then become vulnerable to external influences, which are more often than not socially disruptive.

While this is a new area for us, the importance of intervening at this stage of a child's life is very clear to us. We need to not only intervene in ensuring academic excellence but also in providing skills that lead to livelihood options. More than this our challenge is to ensure that during this phase of the child's life their adivasi identity is strongly and positively re-enforced so that they progress into adulthood with confidence and pride.

The Residential Programme:

In order to have direct impact on the children and to ensure that they do not find themselves at a loss in terms of either skills or knowledge or cultural moorings a residential programme for children from the age of 13 or from class 7 / 8 to high school appears to be the most appropriate. In all our community meetings there is a clamouring for such a programme. There are already 409 children in the Class VII to X category and of these 100 of them are already in a hostel attached to the High school of the Church of South India. One can see from the numbers dwindling from Class VII onwards (Class VII- 176, VIII – 96, XI – 83, X – 54) that the remedial programme possible is to have a residential one that can give them not just the academics but also many other life skills.

The residential programme will have 3 components: a) ensure academic excellence for those wishing to pursue this route, b) vocational and skills training for those opting to enter the world of work, c) rooting this within the adivasi cultural context, and d) life-skills programme.

We visualise a fulltime programme for those pursuing their studies till Class 10. However, we plan to link this to the National Open School System as this will give us more freedom and flexibility as far as curriculum and other matters are concerned. We also visualise the possibility of students studying in other schools coming here for short refresher courses in particular subjects. For those pursuing vocational skills, we visualise running short specific courses.

As for rooting this within the adivasi cultural context we need to develop an appropriate curriculum. This is an important aspect of our intervention and has been dealt with separately below.

A major hurdle that we would definitely face is finding teachers who will be willing to stay on campus and to also take responsibility for all the children. Another problem is how will we deal with the demand – we feel that most parents would opt for this possibility rather than put their children into the regular government high schools.

We are aware of these problems and challenges but if this is the way forward to ensure that our children receive the best education, then we have no option but to find solutions to overcome these hurdles. Clearly, this is an intervention that requires far more discussion, analysis and thought before we can launch into it. However, in the short term we intend to use the facilities of the Madhuvana Plantation to run a number of short courses and programmes.

4.1.4 The Post High School Programme

Higher Education

All encouragement needs to be provided to children who wish to continue their studies to whatever level they choose both for academic or vocational courses. Scholarship support for this would have to be arranged. Unless this possibility is provided the incentive to study further will dissipate over a period of time.

All those who have passed out of Vidyodaya school in particular are going on to complete their Higher Secondary course. Children from other schools have also been encouraged to do so and some financial support has been provided by VBVT to purchase clothes, books, to pay for tuition fees and so on. However, there have been difficulties as a few of those who have attempted to complete university could not last out due to financial difficulties. A new college has been started in Gudalur three years back making it possible for those who finish school to continue their education. VBVT is not able to support beyond a certain point and so there are other costs like travel, food, lodging and so on which amount to more than the fees that they have to meet. At this juncture VBVT does not have the means to support these and we are not considering any active intervention beyond high school. But we do visualise the setting up of a scholarship fund or its equivalent to support those who wish to pursue university education. So far only two persons had joined college and both dropped out. However, we are encouraging others to join.

Vocational Placement

The present vocational placement programme is to be continued as this is proving to be very hugely successful. This was not envisaged and so one can see that there is a new urge in the society today to reach out for skills that they had never. Under this programme we identify local training institutions or apprenticeship possibilities and arrange for students from that area to be placed in these institutions. Staff of VBVT regularly monitor the training given to ensure

quality. Regular meetings are held to counsel the students and ensure their continued attendance and completion of the course.

As on date 289 persons have enrolled in 19 trades and 92 have completed training. Although 30 of them have dropped out, 167 are still undergoing training. The trainings that have been completed are driving, tea planting, tea nursery management, book binding, masonry, soap-making and 10 of the tailoring trainees. Other trainings in progress are nursing, lab technician, accounts, trading, carpentry, soap-making, cycle repair, veterinary, tailoring, painting, computers, Pharmacy and ITI.

The effort in all these is to establish those trained into work units. As and when they complete their training they are encouraged to see how they can employ themselves or with some one. Any additional assistance or training required is also given. Already the soap-making unit with five women, a cycle repair unit employing four youth, book-binding, carpentry where two persons are working are all in progress. The masonry trainees are also working with senior masons. Those who completed driving are also working in some vehicle.

The residential programme need not replace the Vocational placement programme which is being promoted but can supplement it. The present skill training programme needs to be more curriculum oriented, although rather difficult with some of the trainers, but wherever possible this is to be attempted. Certification can also be envisaged along the lines of the Barefoot college, Tilonia.

4.2 Developing Community Educationists

It is imperative that we train people from the community who will take responsibility for the education of the children – community educationists who can engage with both teaching and guiding. This is needed at the village level and for the institutions. In every village there should be someone who is sufficiently knowledgeable to whom a child can refer to when doubts arise. There is a requirement for village librarians and Study centre guides who can teach up to class 5 at least. As the plan is to have at least one person in every village, as many as 250 persons need to be trained. This means upgrading their knowledge levels as well as training them to teach these subjects.

In the past finding personnel both to train and to be trained was very difficult. This was because the insistence was to have educated adivasi youth. This is still a problem but we have now got around this problem to some extent by drawing in children who are going to school as the trainees. As regards trainers, considering the load we will need a full time training team. A number of the adivasis from our existing team have the necessary skills and commitment and so would make very good trainers. However, their current responsibilities will make it difficult for them to take on this additional load. We need to look at how they can be freed from other duties in order to give this the priority it needs.

The objective of the programme would be:

- To train personnel who can teach in the Government Tribal schools and in the Govt.'s Primary school
- To train youth to conduct Study Centres and village Libraries who can handle upto the primary level,
- To give life-skills to the trainees which they can in turn impart to the children
- To give exposure to vocational skills that will be able to guide youth in the village.
- To give inputs on the history and culture of the adivasis
- To train teachers for the High School of VBVT that is being planned.

4.2.1 Trainees

Training of educated adivasi youth to run educational programme in the village has been nearly impossible in the past as there were hardly any one available. Eventually in a few of the Study Centres non-tribal teachers have been taken on. This has not been a satisfactory option nor does it go with the ethos of the organisation. Now the approach is not to look for youth but to take the children who are going to school and train them. They will be from classes 6 and above, but should have enough maturity to handle the affairs at the centres. As mentioned above the Village libraries are being run by such children already and if they can be given the inputs over a period of two to three years then this will have a lasting impact. Secondly this input would be greatly beneficial to them for their academics too. It will, however, have to be a long term programme as most of the persons whom we have in mind are attending school already and so will be free only during weekends and vacations.

4.2.2 Trainers

This will definitely mean that a team of trainers will have to be working on this on a fulltime basis both training and following up at the village. This again was not incorporated into the project in the past although based on earlier evaluations we had identified the need to do so. This was because the staff for this could not be spared. Now provision will have to be made and this will have to be prioritised. This, therefore, means that the Community Educationist programme will be cornerstone of our entire intervention in education.

4.2.3 Training Centre

This training, which is planned for 100 days in a year, calls for a place to hold the sessions on the one hand and an institution where they can have hands-on experience. So far all the training that has been conducted was done from the Vidyodaya School but it will be difficult to have such a large number for such long periods in the school. Therefore one would have to find a place that is suitable for such training while still using Vidyodaya for practical hands on work.

The Vidyodaya School is an ideal institution where they can have this hands-on experience especially at the primary level. Teachers from the govt. schools who have undergone training are already visiting the school to witness first hand various activity based methods in operation. Further, using the school as a training base will give the trainees tremendous confidence to handle children. Besides, working in the school gives an additional credibility to the trainee. When leaders from the villages see the trainees are actually conducting classes just like any other teacher their standing in the village also goes up. This is essential as there is always the danger that these persons are just children and not capable of “teaching”.

4.3 Developing the Curriculum

Key to the success of this intervention will be our ability to develop an appropriate curriculum. This will have to be done for various levels: curriculum for village centres, for Vidyodaya, for teachers training, and for the residential programmes. The curriculum will have to cover both the academic requirements as well as the cultural context. Developing such a curriculum is in itself a major intervention requiring a dedicated team working on it. While we have already done some work on the academic side of the curriculum bringing in the cultural context is the challenge. The cultural context of the adivasi has changed considerably over the last few years. It is not our intention to freeze our culture for all time. We see culture as a growing and evolving phenomena and hence we need to not develop a curriculum that is culturally relevant but it has to be one that can adapt to changing circumstances.

The challenge as we see it is to ensure that the community are conscious of what they perceive as their core values; are aware of the changes that are taking place around and thus to make informed choices on what is the society they want to be. This will determine what they want to teach their children.

Hence the starting point will be to document what has always been of value to the adivasis that they will want to continue to hold on to; what are the skills from the mainstream world that they will need to thrive in a changing economy. Based on this understanding we will then have to design a curriculum for the different levels of intervention.

We are currently discussing this with people who are keen to take on this challenge and to work with us on this exciting proposition. Our success in being able to do this will be the foundation on which we will seek to achieve our vision.

5.0 Research Component

While there have been major changes in the life of the adivasi community over the last ten years particularly in the area of education, it would be useful to know what the impact of the changes have been and to what extent this has been due to the

intervention of VBVT. Secondly, it would be useful to see whether the kind of educational intervention VBVT has made has gone along with the ethos of the people or not and what knowledge systems do we need to conserve. This is an area that requires further thought and acceptance by the entire adivasi team and so will be undertaken only after general acceptance.

6.0 Plans for the next six months

This entire document being a concept paper which will impact of the lives of a generation to come needs to be discussed threadbare by the entire community at various levels.

- To draw up the curriculum in greater detail
- To decide on the training team
- To list the first set of trainees
- To redraw the functions of the Area Coordinators in the light of the new thrust of the work
- A further listing of skills that can be imparted under the Vocational Training programme
- A list of the number of post-high school students who may require assistance.
- The need for the research component and the details of it if it is accepted will be spelled out.
- Plans for the implementation of the programmes with time-lines.

7.0 Conclusion

We are aware that we are setting ourselves a huge challenge. The overarching vision with which the work with the adivasis of Gudalur was begun was that “*they should enter mainstream society on their own terms with dignity and pride*”. The 20 years of work in various aspects of the community’s life, of which education has been a part, has ensured that they enter mainstream society. However, this has been at a fairly rapid pace and now it is critical that we pause and reflect on how the community can ensure that this always remains on their own terms and that their dignity and pride, the hallmarks of adivasi society, are preserved even as they become a part of the modern world.

It is in this context that we see the importance of education. What the children of today are taught will determine what the society of tomorrow will be. And so, if our vision is to be a reality we have to make conscious choices of what we want our society to be, and hence what we want to teach our children. VBVT, as an adivasi institution responsible for education, has no option but to respond to this challenge, however ambitious and unattainable it may seem. The steps have to be taken, the challenge has to be met.

We are confident that with the ownership of the community, the involvement of all the adivasi institutions, the support of all our friends and well wishers, we can rise to the challenge and blaze a path that will make this vision a reality.