

## **TUDI- A SAGA OF EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT**

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*Education is one of the most important means of upward mobility for the tribals. This is a research narrative on how an NGO, named TUDI (Tribal Unity for Development Initiative) achieved phenomenal results in a period of two decades among the group of tribals called the Paniyars in the Wayanad district of Kerala, India. The systematic and consistent efforts of TUDI at the integral development of the tribals, with great emphasis on empowering them through education, have born rich dividends. This study explores how TUDI was instrumental in bringing out many graduates, post graduates and government and other employees in just 20 years from a community whose children hardly progressed beyond the primary school level two decades ago.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tribals, TUDI, Paniyars, Education, Empowerment, Integral development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tribals are the indigenous people of India. They have their unique personality, life style, culture, and ethnic knowledge systems handed down the generations over many centuries. Paniyars are a typical tribal group in Kerala who are mostly found in the northern district of Wayanad. They normally stay in colonies and keep their customs and practices among themselves. The fact that they used to live in colonies and in a joint family system could be inferred from the statistics presented in the Logan's Manual. Logan (2000) states that according to the 1881 census, the average number of people living in a family was the highest in Wayanad (10.1). They are a community that is extremely rich in terms of their culture, traditions, art and music forms. They also have their age-old herbal ways of medicine and cure. They are a community that moved

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about freely on the lap of the mother earth and possess a rhythm of life that is slow and serene. In a strict sense of the term, they are a community that possessed a lifestyle that can truly be called in the spirit of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (Universal Family).

### **TRIBAL SITUATION IN WAYANAD**

As per the official statistics (2011) there are 36 tribal communities in Kerala which constitute about 4,84,839 people which is 1.45% of the population. Among the 14 districts in the state, Wayanad has got the highest tribal concentration. Of the total population (8,17,420) of the district 18.69% (152808) is scheduled tribes, the Adivasis. This accounts for 31.51% of the total tribal population of Kerala. They practiced shifting cultivation and gathered food by hunting and fishing in their earlier times (Baby, 2008).

Wayanad was ruled by Kudumbiyil Vedar Dynasty (Tribal kingdom) until the 14th Century. They were very benign towards the people. In the 14th century, the Kottayam-Kurumbanad dynasty of Thalassery conquered the Kudumbiyil Veda Dynasty and took over the rule of Wayanad. They divided the small kingdom to 10 Nadis (local kingdoms) and eventually brought in the Feudal Hegemony (Gopalan, 2008). The feudal establishment entailed the class division. There were the land owners and workers. The working class became bonded labourers. People started migrating from the conquering kingdom. The Migration aggravated the bonded situation further. They did not own land and considered the whole land to be for everybody and moved about freely. Paniyars have been the greatest victims of the situation as they lost all the land which they considered a common property to a few land lords and they had to work for the latter to earn their living.

In the 20th century, another bout of migration took place to Wayanad from the erstwhile kingdom of Travancore, the present day central Kerala (Gopalan, 2006). This was the result of the severe famine that the kingdom experienced, and they looked for greener pastures in Wayanad which was lush green and fertile. Many of them bought land from the land lords. The local land lords who benefited greatly from the hard labour of the tribals cared the least for the security of the tribals when they were chased away from the land that they sold to the migrants. They were excellent farmers and started clearing the land for agriculture. They too needed work force and the Paniya and other tribes became their work force. This second migration further aggravated the bonded labour situation of the tribals. The settlers and Adivasis lived poles apart culturally and economically and even socially. The settlers eventually thrived with organized religion and educational institutions. But the tribals continued

to internalize the “bonded-psyche” (State Institute of Languages, 2016).

Paniyars were never been and are yet to be part of the main stream of the society. The Paniyars are a tribe that lives in the present. They are not into the habit of storage and savings and are used to spend whatever they earn on their day to day needs. This habit of non-saving inevitably brought in a lot of poverty and starvation on days and seasons where they did not find work. They never bothered about rights or powers of the civilized world.

On a larger canvas, Paniyars are perhaps the most backward of the tribal communities in the state of Kerala (TUDI Kala Kendra, 2015). Just like any other typical tribal community, they too are a group that has not received the traditional and established formal education. They have been very backward educationally, socially and economically. They are even to this day, considered low class in the society.

### **JESUITS AND TUDI**

The Society of Jesus (A Catholic Men's Religious Order, popularly known as the Jesuits) bought Sarvodaya High school in the village of Eachome in Panamaram Panchayath of Wayanad district in Kerala in the year 1991. A few years into working in the locality, they experienced first-hand the plight of the Paniya tribe. After prolonged discussions and discernment, they started socio-cultural movement for the Paniya tribe with the name, TUDI (an acronym for Tribal Unity for Development Initiatives).

TUDI is a musical instrument of the tribals in Kerala. The melodies and rhythmic resonance of TUDI finds reverberation in the heartbeats of the tribes; a people dancing in the lap of mother nature in an oblivious trance. TUDI works with a vision that “A sustainably developed tribal society where indigenous culture and participatory living are promoted.” Similarly, the mission of TUDI is to work for the integral and sustainable development of tribal communities promoting their art culture education and folklore and thus empowering them to claim their identity and affirm their space.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study are:

1. To promote and preserve the culture, language, folklore, especially triballore.
2. Facilitate tribal fellowship and societal empowerment movements.
3. Enable the tribal communities to interact creatively with other cultures

4. Ensure opportunities for quality education among tribals.
5. Promote research and documentation on tribal life.
6. Disseminate folk knowledge to other culture through mass and folk media.

### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In its last 21 years of work here at TUDI, the Jesuits and their collaborators have managed to bring in substantial and tangible results with regard to the socio-cultural development of the Paniya tribal in the locality. This is not just a tall claim. The statistics speak for themselves. From 1996, where the paniya children hardly progressed beyond the lower primary school, to 2016, where they are (Table 1).

**Table 1: Current State of Paniya Children with regards to their Socio-Cultural Development.**

S.No.	Educational/ Employment Status	No. of Tribals
1.	Standard X passed	156
2.	Standard XII Passed	103
3.	TTC (Teachers Training) Passed	05
4.	B. Ed (Bachelor of Education)	03
5.	ITC (Industrial Training)	02
6.	Graduates (BA/B Sc - 07) + BFA - 01	08
7.	Masters (MA/MSW)	04
8.	Upper Primary Teacher	01
9.	High School Teacher (Arts)	01
10.	School Clark	02
11.	PSC (Public Service Commission Exam Passed and Employed)	02
12.	Bank Employee	01
13.	Water Authority	01
14.	Field Animators of TUDI	06

This is a phenomenal example of what education can do to empower an otherwise downtrodden section of the society.

### ACTIVITIES OF TUDI

In this narrative we would like to present what was the course of action that TUDI adopted to achieve their goals.

1. **Tribal Folk School (Thudikkootam):** Tribal folk school is a network of cultural study centres. They are constituted to impart tribal culture and folklore through various programs of studies, seminars, village meetings and entertainment involving the whole tribal communities. These centres are managed by a committee headed by the chieftain (moopan) of the village and specially trained animators.
2. **Nursery School (Kurinjippokkal):** Paniya children, who speak their mother tongue (paniya language) at home found it extremely tough in understanding the formal Malayalam language of the state that was taught in the school. This resulted in their dropping off from the school in the early years itself. Following the directions of UNO, (UNDRIP) pre-primary education is given to the paniya tribal children in their mother tongue using folk method. This helped in addressing the main challenge of dropping off from school. This was a very creative initiative by TUDI.
3. **Saturday Gatherings:** On Saturdays when people are relatively free after work, the animators go to the colonies to organize Paniya kids. Here they impart non-formal and formal education. Training in music both vocal and instrumental and various art forms are provided. The elders and senior members are brought together to create awareness about their subaltern identity. They are provided with sessions that will help them identify the factors that inhibit their growth and potential and ways and means to embrace modernity with the reiteration and sustenance of their Cultural rootedness. Positive affirmation of their culture is a highlight of these gatherings. Overcoming stage-fear and involvement in the mainstream society is facilitated. Development of self-esteem is emphasized too.
4. **Tribal Boarding and Learning Center (Arivuda):** Through this new initiative TUDI aims to impact quality education to selected tribal and marginalized students hailing from different parts of Wayanad district. This enables the students to cope with the educational challenges of the modern formal education and come interact with the mainstream society creatively. This leaning center, Arivuda (abode of learning) is designed in tune with the tribal cultural ambience.

5. **Folk Arts Groups (TUDI Kalasangam):** The objective of this troupe is to encourage indigenous art forms and culture richness of the adivasis. Training is given in music, theatre, dance forms, tribal instruments and modern musical instruments. This group gives stage performances at TUDI Kalakendra and outside stages.
6. **Research Library and Ethno-Folk Museum (Keni):** Keni means well-spring of knowledge. A well-furnished library and documentation centre is functioning at TUDI campus. TUDI team gives research guidance and training to students, teachers and NGOs in the field of tribal culture, language, folklore, education and community development. An ethno-folk museum is set up at TUDI to preserve and promote tribal folklore and folk life.
7. **Tribal Festival (Adivasi Gramotsavam):** This is a communion of different tribal sects to encourage their culture, art and folklore. It is conducted at TUDI village during the month of May. In this get-together, the tribal communes from Wayanad and other regions of Kerala share their own experiences and wisdom and perform their art forms.
8. **Cultural Research and Language Studies:** Culture and language determines the identity of a society. By the emergence of modern consumerist culture, we have ignored indigenous cultures and their languages. To safeguard indigenous culture and their identity TUDI promotes research in the areas of culture, education and community development.
9. **Herbarium (Pachamarunnukootam):** The herbarium is envisaged for the advancement of an alternative health care system. The tribal are rich in their traditional medicinal practice and invaluable medicinal collection. The herbarium is an endeavour to preserve and promote their indigenous knowledge of medicines and to make this available to the people.
10. **Group Farming (Panikkootam):** This is co-operative enterprise to inculcate scientific and technical knowledge among the tribes and to encourage eco-farming. Through this venture they become partners than mere coolie workers.
11. **Educational Empowerment Programmes:** TUDI accompanies the adivasi children in their formal education programmes by giving guidance and support. It is a tribal friendly educational initiative.
12. **Social Empowerment Programmes:** In order to interact creatively with other cultures and societies TUDI gives scientific training to tribal youth and children. Some of the areas of training are: socio-cultural analysis,

personality development, folk art workshops, folk theatre, cultural dialogue, media workshop and social work.

**13. Children's Library (Kurinjipookkal):** It is meant for developing reading habit among the children especially the tribals and inculcates an awareness of the world around. A mobile library is functioning as part of this endeavour.

**14. Career Guidance Cell:** A career guidance cell is set up at TUDI to give training and direction to tribal youth in the field of job reservation and other job opportunities.

### THE WAY FORWARD

According to the Director of TUDI, Fr. Baby Chalil, S. J. who has been associated with this movement for over 17 years, what the Paniya tribe needs is a Tradition and Modernity Cultural Symbiosis. They have a very profoundly rich cultural hegemony. However, they also need to adapt a few things from the modernity of the mainstream society. They need to forego a few baggage's of the old that are hindering their growth. The many days and even money spend on life cycle ceremonies like the Puberty rituals, marriage rituals, death rituals etc. need to be more organized and codified. Can they or should they spend so much of time on these ceremonies is a matter of grave concern. Similarly, an open attitude towards the benefits of modernity like formal education and employment opportunities is needed as well. This has been the attempt of TUDI from its inception. TUDI has always tried to inculcate in the tribals a sense of pride in their subaltern identity and hegemony, but at the same time inspired them to embrace the positive aspects of modernity without jeopardizing their basic tribal identity. The initiative tries to resist the vulgarities of the modernity taking its effect on the new generation of tribals when they are getting themselves enculturated into modernity.

### CONCLUSION

According to Bourdieu (1986), any society will have a lot of cultural and social capital. The tribals have a lot of cultural capital. What they lack is the social capital. Governments and other agencies need to develop an integral policy of development, enabling the Paniya and other tribes to achieve the socio-cultural symbiosis. This will result in the growth and development of the social capital resulting in their legitimate integration into the main stream society, fully maintaining their identity. TUDI has taken giant leaps in this regard and have achieved phenomenal success in empowering the tribal youth under their care. Sarvodaya Higher Secondary school, the Jesuit Institution adjacent to TUDI

joins hands with TUDI in this great saga of empowerment, putting forward a model to be replicated and even emulated.

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