

# Adivasi Academy, Gujarat: Rescuing cultures of India, one word at a time

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India boasts of a huge variety of languages and dialects. Many of these languages do not have scripts of their own. In fact many of them are on the brink of fading away into oblivion owing to the trend of people migrating to modern cities and hence newer cultures. However, a small academy in Gujarat is standing tall to save these languages from dying. Anand Giridharadas writes in this article on how the Adivasi Academy, based in Tejgadh, Gujarat, is working towards chronicling



elements of rural culture.

Back to roots: Folklorist Bhagwandas Patel (right) has a discussion with students at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh. The aim of the academy is to impress upon Adivasis that their culture is worthy of preservation.

**Tejgadh, Gujarat:** In an academy deep in the agrarian countryside of western India, five students were writing briskly in ruled notebooks. They were in their early 20s and newly enrolled, but there was no discounting the gravity of their assignment: When they are finished, the world will have five more documented languages.

One word at a time, they are producing dictionaries of languages with which they grew up, but which scarcely exist in the rest of the world. These are oral languages, whose sounds have perhaps never before been reproduced in ink.



"If we make this, those who come after us will profit from it," said

Kantilal Mahala, 21, taking a brief respite from his work on the Kunkna language. "In my village, people who move ahead speak only Gujarati. They feel ashamed of our language." It is not only obscure languages that these students are trying to chronicle and preserve, but also cuisines, sartorial habits and other significant elements of rural culture. Like drivers heading downtown at rush hour, the students see everyone else going the other way. A swelling class of Indian aspirants from small towns and villages such as Tejgadh sees urban life and the English language as pathways to affluence, security and respect. Had it not been for Ganesh Devy, a former professor of English literature who founded the academy more than a decade ago, the young people in this rural community might have gone down that path. He created the school, known as the Adivasi Academy, with a burning question on his mind: Why do we wait for cultures to die to memorialize them?

"There is a continent of culture getting submerged, and that's why I wanted to take the plunge," Devy said. With financing from the Ford Foundation and other philanthropic groups, the Adivasi Academy tries to preserve a culture by steeping a new generation of villagers in their own quickly disappearing traditions. Tejgadh is home to one branch of India's vast population of Adivasis, or "original people". The Adivasis are highly fragmented, with nearly as many languages and cultures as there are clans. But there are common threads. The clans traditionally inhabited hilly or forested areas, where they lived nomadically, hunting and foraging. They are known for a respect for nature, for their bone-setters and shamans, for their worship of elephants and trees instead of abstract gods, for a love of art and for a lack of interest in material accumulation. Tejgadh is home to the Rathwa clan, famed for wall paintings. When a person falls ill, the Rathwas often invite a painter to come along with a shaman. As the painter decorates the walls, the shaman enters a trance and guides his brush strokes. In recent years some people in Tejgadh have become professional artists, one example of a deeper transformation. Modernity has been creeping into the villages, and young people have been pouring out. But they are unprepared. They grew up speaking a language no one recognizes beyond their village, and they are inexpert in Gujarati, Hindi and English, the languages of urban employment. In the cities, they find it difficult to escape the most menial jobs. Devy wanted to combat this gravitational force. Could Adivasis be persuaded to study their culture rather than shed it, and to stay in the villages rather than flee? In the academy's museum, Adivasi culture is depicted as if it no longer existed. The exhibits feature kitchen implements, jars of Adivasi foods, hand-tossed pottery, jugs for home made liquor. If the idea was to explain Adivasis to outsiders, the museum might be in New Delhi. But the goal, instead, is to impress upon Adivasis that their culture is worthy of preservation.

"If a community has a strong sense of identity and a sense of pride in that identity, it wants to survive and thrive," Devy said. "The new economy is important. The old culture is equally important." The students making dictionaries were working in the academy's principal course, called tribal studies. Students are generally taught in both Gujarati and Hindi, given the absence of books in their own languages. Vikesh Rathwa, 27, graduated two years ago and, like most of the academy's alumni, chose to stay in the village and work for Bhasha, the academy's parent organization.

"Before, I thought I would get a BA and MA and make a film," he said.

Immersion in his heritage changed his mind.

"Coming here made me see my household life in a new way," Rathwa said. Now, he is writing a book on Adivasi art and science. "We need to walk in step with our traditions," he said, quickly adding, "and with technology, too."

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[Also known as](#) : Bhasha Tribal Academy **Website:** <http://www.adivasiacademy.org.in> Links from the web on Adivasi Academy: **Silent No More** by Supriya Kumar on [indiatgether.org](http://indiatgether.org) *Adivasi Academy, Tejgadh, Gujarat, India*, video (5min)