

The school on the hill

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Jayashree and Amit at a protest rally in Kasrawad, Madhya Pradesh, in 1999. Photo: Parthiv Shah

Old students come back to visit their school campus in Sakad village, Madhya Pradesh, and look for the tree they had planted as a child. They sit in the shade of the trees they had tied rakhis to, pledging to protect them. They point out traces of other projects they had been part of. At lunchtime, they join the queue of students to once again taste the meal that had nurtured them in their growing up years.

Every story worth telling is eventually a love story.

“The *Adharshila Learning Centre* is a collaboration in progress,” says Jayashree. It is evolving every day. This school is the result of *sahbhagita*, the collective participation of a community, students and teachers.”

Amit and Jayashree, who are known by their first names, met in the late 1980s in the Narmada valley, when both of them were looking for a meaningful way to work against injustice and oppression. Amit had studied at Modern School, Barakhamba Road, in Delhi and had begun studying architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture when he realized that his quest lay elsewhere. He quit studies and headed to Jhabua, to work with Bhil and Bhilala Adivasis along with senior activists.

Jayashree grew up in Pune and completed her bachelor’s in chemistry from Fergusson College. She first visited the Narmada valley on an exploratory trip, returning later as a volunteer for six months. She never went back to Pune. The undulating brown landscape of the Vindhyas, the river and the song of the people became home. She began to work with Adivasi women on issues of health, dignity, forest rights and education. Along with other like-minded friends, Amit and Jayashree were activists with the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath in Alirajpur, campaigning tirelessly against the exploitation and displacement of tribals.

After they got married in 1989, they spent the first eight years travelling, organizing meetings and mobilizing people to become aware of, and demand, their rights. They lived among the Adivasis, learning to understand their needs and world view. They imbibed life skills that would guide them throughout their life and work.

“To change the exploitative social order and confront injustice, we have to hit at the base and change the education system,” Goothiya Naikda, a tribal activist, once told Amit.

“We learnt our first lessons about the critical need for quality education in those years in Jhabua,” says Amit. “We would meet teenage tribal boys who were studying in the state-run ashram schools and be startled by the fear and lack of confidence in them. Mainstream education reinforced in them the feeling that tribal language, lifestyle and culture was inferior and had to be rejected. They were embarrassed of their own families. Instead of empowering them, their experience of education seemed to have completely disempowered them.”

After their children, Revali and Sarang, were born, Amit and Jayashree moved to Sendhwa in Badwani district in 1997. They began to set up the Adharshila Learning Centre with the support of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, a people’s rights organization.

Jayashree tells the story from this end of the timeline. “At Adharshila, tribal children first learn to read and write in their mother tongue, Bareli. They come from a rich oral culture and are natural storytellers. We don’t want to disrupt their expression by intervening with a new language, grammar or sentence structure. We offer simple teaching aids and minimum intervention in the early years. I will ask eight-year-olds to write the story their grandmother told them, or to write about what they did in the holidays, and each one will hand in three-four pages of creative writing in Bareli. Trust is built. The children become convinced that their teachers are interested in their life and experiences. Their confidence grows.”

Situated on a hill, amid six and a half acres of farm land, Adharshila is a residential school. It is now in its 17th year. This year, they have 125 students from almost 50 villages in Badwani district.

"When we first arrived here, this land was barren and rocky. The soil cover was thin and it was hard to grow anything on these slopes," explains Amit. "When we started to build the classrooms and hostel, everyone from the community contributed what they could. People would gather at dusk after their work in the fields was over and, overnight, we dug foundations and began to build this school."

The same barren land now not only produces grain and pulses but also record levels of vegetables. Over the years, the soil has been nurtured with organic manure from bull dung. Jayashree and her team have learnt about soil and seeds and used drip irrigation to grow enough food to sustain the school kitchen for at least eight months in a year. "All our students are children of farmers," says Jayashree. "Their years in school must enhance and reinforce the traditional knowledge and skills of their community. We don't need to teach them about the dignity of labour. Every child contributes in farming and tending to the animals with innate enthusiasm."

The fields, vegetable patches and trees on the campus are natural classrooms. Students explore the known first—their own immediate environment and community—and then move on to learning about the unknown. The curriculum includes learning and building on the Adivasi students' own culture, history and unique identity.

Professor Sujit Sinha, who teaches the master's in education course at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, regularly sends his students to intern at Adharshila and invites Jayashree and Amit to lecture at his university. "The National Curriculum Framework recommends that children should examine local issues of livelihood, production, health and environment first and then link it to history, geography, science and environmental studies," he says. "Adharshila is one of the best examples in India of this way of learning. It is transformational. It is critical for everyone in education to learn from this initiative by Amit and Jayashree."

"There is a freedom and spontaneity that is intrinsic to the Adivasi way of life," says Jayashree. "We wanted to make sure that the school retains the same ethos. I also learnt a lot about children from my daughter, Revali. As a toddler, she wanted to do everything herself. *Aapi-aapi*, she would repeat. Stay in the corner, watch me, but don't intervene. That's how most children like to explore their abilities and learn."

At Adharshila, "

aapi-aapi

" has become a teaching methodology that has been a win-win. Senior students regularly teach junior classes, and, in the process, discover that their own concepts have become clearer.

"What is unique about our experience is that we were both students and teachers while we were at school," explains Kamal Dudwe, an alumnus. "We studied harder and more carefully when we had to teach a class." Dudwe, who is from the first batch of students of Adharshila, has completed his master's in economics from Banaras Hindu University and is preparing for his Public Service Commission entrance exams while completing his PhD from Allahabad University.

Majali Janu, another student from the first batch, is a dedicated teacher at Adharshila and now also a trainer of new teachers.

The Adharshila theatre group is called Naatak India Company. They travel and perform many original plays and are regularly invited to tribal rights

sammelans

(meetings) and education seminars. Their most popular play is a 90-minute performance titled

Bhanai

, in which the students demonstrate the nexus between corrupt political parties, religious organizations and the market. "The children perform plays that question the privatization of education, media's role in society and patriarchal family structures," says Jayashree.

Students of Adharshila bring out their own newspaper, conduct surveys and review meetings and upload their podcasts on SoundCloud. They have the confidence to ask questions and the rigour to look for answers.

Amit and Jayashree decided early on to steer clear of all institutional funding. About 50% of the school's financial needs are met through fees, and the rest through an informal network of friends, individual donors and community support. Volunteer teachers and artists from India and abroad stay on campus and teach for months on end.

"Living in an Adivasi village breaks my arrogance," says Amit. "Middle-class urban life tends to give us a natural sense of being know-all. We have an opinion on everything, whether we have any information or not. There is a lack of pretension and hierarchy here that feels light. It makes me realize how wasteful the other lifestyle is."

What appears to be a small experimental school at first sight is, in fact, a powerful example of how education systems can be revamped and recharged. Adharshila is a people's institution that sees itself as part of the larger struggle towards a secular, just and egalitarian society. Its pedagogical tools and practices are simple yet powerful. Humility and a constant readiness to learn and reinvent are not the least of them.

"These are meant to be the best years of our students' lives," says Jayashree. "Love, freedom, happiness—you don't need a lot of money to give this to our children. We need ideas. Creativity and will. That's all."

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