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Research Article

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Renegotiating With Dreams: COVID-19 and Shifting Educational Aspirations in Rural Bastar

Abstract

This paper explores educational marginalisation among Adivasi students in rural Bastar located in Central India and its intensification by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using ethnographic fieldwork from March 2017 to June 2019—supplemented by telephonic conversations thereafter—this research traces the educational journey of an Adivasi student, Sunder, across three phases: village school, residential school, and his return to the village during the pandemic. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical underpinnings of educational aspiration, this paper delves into the layered intricacies of schooling and the evolving agency of Adivasi students in rural Bastar. It suggests that first-generation Adivasi students often grapple with immediate survival in school— a challenge managed through gradual, evolving, and cumulative survival strategies that manifest themselves in progressive meanings of possibilities, embodied in individual aspirations. The pandemic disrupted this process and limited students' evolving agency, resulting in a shift from their aspirations to more realistic expectations.

Keywords: Adivasi, agency, aspiration, Bourdieu, Bastar, expectation, school education, pandemic, COVID-19

Exceptional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to alter and exacerbate pre-existing marginalities. The concept of marginalities has been analysed in detail both in anthropology and the sociology of education, with empirical studies contributing to our understanding of socio-historical aspects that cause educational marginalisation. These aspects shape schooling experiences of students from disadvantaged groups and hinder their ability to fully engage in school processes (Kumar, 1983 & 1989; Pathak, 2013; Nambissan, 1994, 2000, & 2011). However, the intensification of pre-existing marginalities in education due to newer

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challenges has received little attention in the contemporary discourse on pandemics and school education. This paper aims to advance research in this direction.

The Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis in India have been widely recognised as one of the most educationally marginalised communities in India (Ramchandran, 2018). They have been historically denied access to educational opportunities that has resulted in multiple forms of deprivation and marginalisation, as reflected in various development indicators since the time of independence (Velaskar, 1990). Beyond access, Adivasi students have been at the receiving end of other aspects of educational marginality that includes the imposition of official language, domination of the urban-middle class gaze disregarding the Adivasi world in textbooks their depiction as a relic of development (Sundar, 2016) and notion of ineducability (Abbi, 2008; Kumar, 1989; Soudien, 2007). Scholars have also addressed the ways in which the poor educational performance of tribal school children and their high dropout rate can be dealt with, especially through policy (Mohanty, 2017; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013). Though this body of research helps us understand the marginalisation of Adivasi students—especially educational marginalisation—scholars have underlined the need for ethnographic studies which unpack the structures of marginality that shape their everyday life in school, and their subjective engagement with them (Kumar, 1989; Nambissan, 2000 & 2011; Thapan, 2014).

While the negative impact of school closures on the education of disadvantaged students has been touched upon since the pandemic's outbreak in 2020, only a few studies have empirically mapped its consequences on communities such as the Adivasis in India. The Tribal Affairs Ministry in India had indicated in 2021 that only 18 per cent of tribal students in residential schools across the country had access to online education (Sharma, 2021). Another news report underscored irreversible learning loss among tribal students because of the lockdown in Central government-run Eklavya model residential schools located in areas with high tribal population, along with the delay in providing them resources to run online classes (Sharma, 2022). In a seminal study, Shilajit Sengupta (2022) showed how school closures during the pandemic pushed young tribal girls out of school and into the informal labour market in Surat. This intensified their vulnerabilities with low wages and early marriages.

Against this backdrop, this study ethnographically explores the existing framework of educational marginalisation within the larger context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on

ethnographic fieldwork from an Adivasi village in rural Bastar in Central India, this study attempts to understand the intensification of educational marginality due to the pandemic by following the trajectory of an Adivasi student, Sunher (name changed) from 2017 to 2022. The analysis is based on three distinct phases of Sunher's academic life. To begin with, Sunher's education and aspirations in an alternative school in his village amid pre-existing disparities are explored. The second part begins from June 2019 when Sunher joined a residential school, aspiring for better life chances and social mobility. With the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns from March 2020 onwards, the third part of this analysis studies Sunher's struggles to continue his education and his subsequent choices.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical underpinnings that education possesses a dual nature, having the possibility of both empowering individuals to exercise their agency and imposing structures of marginality (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Whitehouse, 2013). Modern school education engenders aspiration and facilitates human agency resulting in better life chances and upward mobility within the framework of equal opportunity (Bourdieu, 1977). However, an individual's aspirations are contingent upon their objective position in the field which is defined in terms of the "forms of capitals specific to the field" that an individual actor possess (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). As such, uneven distribution of forms of capital specific to school education determine a person's chances of success. Consequently, this results in lower levels of aspiration among working class students and consequently, in the social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Expanding on Bourdieu's theories, Jay MacLeod introduced a conceptual distinction between "aspiration" and "expectation" (2008). As per MacLeod, aspirations are unsullied personal preferences engendered by school education that can be achieved through individual effort and perseverance. Expectations involve recognising the limitations imposed by structural constraints and the challenges of surpassing them. The transition from "aspiration" to "expectation" signifies the way in which the structures of marginality limit students' agency.

The present study explores this transition by locating the educational trajectory of Sunher in the almost simultaneous transition of his Adivasi village towards school education. Given the paucity of ethnographies on the transition towards school education in the Adivasi community, the study further draws insights from the Raymond Williams and Lucien Febvre' works. In his

study of educational transition in post-industrial-revolution England, Williams (1965) emphasised that this transition requires a comprehensive shift in the social character of learning which is achieved through a lengthy and progressive process. Febvre (1982) highlighted that during the period of profound intellectual and social change each society imparts a specific type of shared knowledge or mental tools.

The accumulation of this "shared knowledge" or collective mentalities confers a distinct advantage to a community's new members in their pursuit of formal education. As a corollary, students hailing from underprivileged areas—particularly those in the early stages of transitioning to formal education such as those from Adivasi communities—embark on their scholastic pursuits from a position of a lack of this shared knowledge. Without it, these first-generation learners often face significant challenges simply to survive in school. Consequently, in this particular context, "aspiration" signifies a qualitative jump in the educational endeavour of Adivasi students without completely suspending the question of their immediate survival in school, necessitating a negotiation between the two.

By situating Sunher's case study in the ethnographic context, this study attempts to capture the dynamic interplay between aspiration and expectation in a village transitioning towards school education. For that purpose, it analyses individual journeys in the context of history, structures, and institutions pertaining to school education in rural Bastar. The narratives presented in this study were collected through in-person meetings as well as informal interactions with Sunher in diverse settings such as his home, schools' playgrounds, forests, and weekly markets in Iruhnar village (name changed) from March 2017 to June 2019. After that, data was collected over regular phone calls with him. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and *Halbi* and transcribed in English for analysis.

This study begins with presenting the social and educational context of village Iruhnar and the larger context of Bastar region—a Scheduled Area that has lagged in development due to the prolonged conflict between Maoist insurgents and the Indian state (Shah, 2010, 2013; Sunder, 2013). This study also looks at the state's historical ignorance especially towards educational development in the Bastar region. This is followed by a brief biographical sketch of Sunher. Following this, Sunher's educational trajectory—which is divided into three distinct phases: the village school, the *ashramshala* or residential school, and his subsequent return to the village following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020—is explored. Next, the

marginalities that cast a shadow on the education of tribal students and the ways in which the pandemic deepened these repercussions is explored. The paper concludes with remarks derived from the preceding sections.

Iruhnar: An Adivasi Village

Located in South Chhattisgarh, the Indian Constitution recognises Bastar region as a Scheduled Area.[1] Before its successive division into seven districts,[2] Bastar was the largest district in India in terms of area, surpassing entire states such as Kerala (Sunder, 2007). Anthropologists have traditionally viewed Bastar as a pristine refuge for Adivasis. This romanticised perspective has faced criticism from a growing body of literature which situates it within the broader historical dynamics of South Asia (Bates & Carter, 1992; Sunder, 2007). In the last two decades, the persistent conflict between Maoist insurgents and the Indian state in the region has rendered it one of the most heavily militarised zones in the world.[3]

The village under study, Iruhnar, is in the southern part of a protected forest in Kondagaon district. Bearing resemblance to the majority of Adivasi villages in the interior forests of rural Bastar, the confluence of forest, field, and human habitation is a common sight in Iruhnar. Iruhnar comprises 61 households belonging to the Muria ethnic community scattered across five distinct *paras* or hamlets with a total population of 327 individuals, comprising 141 males and 186 females. In age-specific composition, children (up to 14 years) constitute 24.35 per cent (81 children) of the total population. The villagers collectively hold over 145 hectares of land, with average landholdings and agricultural landholdings of 2.37 hectares and 1.35 hectares respectively. Most households consist of small and marginal farmers.

Historically, forest-based foraging and agriculture have been the two most important livelihoods in rural Bastar. The dwindling diversity of forests resulting from monocropping plantations—has led to a gradual reduction in the Adivasis' dependency on forests and a shift towards agriculture. In the absence of surface-based irrigation infrastructure, agriculture

[1] Official notification regarding Bastar's Scheduled Area status can be accessed from the Department of Scheduled Tribes and Castes, Chhattisgarh Government: http://tribal.cg.gov.in/scheduled-areas.
[2] The erstwhile Bastar district—now referred to as the Bastar region—comprises of seven districts in Chhattisgarh: Bastar, Dantewada, Kanker, Bijapur, Narayanpur, Sukma, and Kondagaon.
[3] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bastar-set-to-become-the-most-militarised-zone/articleshow/36318449.cms?from=mdr, accessed June 2023.

remains contingent upon the monsoon and is predominantly subsistent in nature. As such, it has compelled households to diversify their means of subsistence by including activities such as wage labour, agricultural labour, and seasonal migration.

Claude Meillassoux (1981) has emphasised that forest foraging and agriculture represent two distinct forms of the social organisation of labour. In contrast to forest foraging, agriculture requires a more structured and disciplined organisational composition at both the family and community level. Other studies have found that communal practices and cooperative labour are prevalent alongside a growing system of discipline and hierarchy within the family structure (Savyasaachi, 1991; Chaudhuri & Bandopadhyay, 2004). The fusion of these two forms of social labour organisation is apparent in Iruhnar. This has direct implications on children's life-worlds in the village—their involvement in work is not only seen as an economic endeavour but as an intrinsic part of Adivasi social life. School compartmentalises children's everyday lives into the realms of learning, work, and leisure, and has a significant impact on the ways that they navigate their pursuit of education.

Education in Iruhnar

As per the Indian Census 2011, the Bastar region stands out for its low literacy rates as compared to the national and state averages. While Chhattisgarh's overall literacy rate is 70.28 per cent, Bastar's is notably lower at 50.37 per cent. Additionally, the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes in Bastar (44.32 per cent) falls below both the state and national averages (59 per cent). These disparities highlight the significant educational challenges facing the region.

The story of Iruhnar is not different from the rest of rural Bastar. The first primary school in Iruhnar's vicinity was started during the early 1970s at a distance of about five kilometres from the village. Interviews with the elderly people of the village has revealed that at the time, most children from Iruhnar did not attend this school. On the other hand, the village's formal school education history began in 1997 with the establishment of its first single-teacher primary school. The school had no building and instead operated from a *Ghotul*—the youth dormitory of the Muria community—for the next decade, before shifting to its current campus with newly constructed buildings in 2006. Alongside this relocation, the primary school welcomed two

new teachers. In the same year, an upper primary school was inaugurated on the same campus with the addition of two more teachers to accommodate the expansion.[4]

After the enactment of the Right to Education Act, 2009, the Chhattisgarh government implemented two provisions in schools in 2011—the no retention policy and comprehensive and cumulative evaluation (CCE) policy—derived from the Act. During interviews, teachers from the village said that these provisions significantly enabled first-generation Adivasi students from Bastar to remain in schools until the elementary level without worrying about examinations. In 2019, the enrollment rate in schools was nearly universal. From 2006 to 2019, there was a gradual and progressive decrease in the number of students dropping out from elementary schools in the village. However, the dropout rate at the high school level was still high. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, over 35 per cent of students dropped out from high school.

The first students to pass the secondary school examination, the senior secondary examination, and the graduation examination from Iruhnar did so in 2009, 2011, and 2020 respectively. Between 2009 and 2019, 39 students took the Class X Board examination under the Chhattisgarh Board of Secondary Education out of which only 17 passed. Out of these 17 students, nine had passed the exam on their first attempt while the remaining had re-attempted them through the compartmental examination provision. In 2015, for the first time, female students successfully cleared the Class X Board exams through the Chhattisgarh Open School (COS) Board. As of June 2019, 12 students appeared for their Class X Board examination through the COS Board, out of which 6 passed.

In 2008, an educationist from Maharashtra founded an alternative school in Iruhnar and registered it as an elementary school. The school's objective was to follow Gandhi's *Nai Talim* philosophy in an Adivasi community.[5] However, the school gradually moved away from the

[4] In India, primary school implies grades 1–5, upper primary implies grades 6–8, secondary school implies grades 9–10, and higher secondary implies grades 11–12.

[5] *Nai Talim*—Gandhi's vision of education was based on a critique of the modern education system embedded with the needs of industrial society. Nai Talim—a pedagogical concept rooted in the idea of "education through productive work for Swaraj"—sought to nurture the head, heart, and hands, going beyond the conventional focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. It emphasised hands-on learning through productive work for the holistic development of individuals and communities (Patil & Sinha, 2022).

Gandhian model and incorporated aspects of Adivasi culture into its educational approach. In principle, the school prioritised a diverse educational experience beyond the conventional textbook-based pedagogy. The curriculum included training in music, painting, sculpture, and agriculture, in addition to regular academic subjects. Besides routine activities, the school's educational programme and annual calendar included monthly excursions and cycling expeditions within the Bastar region as well as a yearly excursion outside Bastar.

A Biographical Sketch of Sunher

Born and raised in Iruhnar, Sunher was the fourth among his five siblings and lived with his parents and paternal grandmother. At the time of commencement of fieldwork in March 2017, Sunher was 11 years old. Sunher started Class I in 2012 at the local primary school. In 2013, due to an accident, he had to start using a prosthetic leg. He recalled being bullied in the village and in the school for being a child with special needs. This led him to join the alternative school where he studied till 2019 until the completion of Class VII. During the early stages of this study's fieldwork in 2017, Sunher (then in Class VI) spoke of his inability to compete for the most sought-after profession in the village—the armed forces—because of his disability. Hence, he aspired to work in an "office outside the village" and was certain that formal education was necessary to secure this job.

It is important to mention here that the language of instruction in all the schools that Sunher attended was Hindi. However, the spoken language at his home was *Gondi* and *Halbi*, which are the languages spoken by both the Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities in Bastar. *Gondi* is primarily used by the Muria community to which Sunher belonged. This disconnect between the home and school language was one of the primary factors that negatively influenced Sunher's educational journey and will be addressed at multiple stages in this paper.

Sunher's parents did not receive any formal school education. His elder brother had discontinued education following three unsuccessful attempts at the Class X Board examinations. One of his elder sisters cleared the Class X Board examinations on her fourth attempt at the Chhattisgarh Open School. In fact, she was the first in the village to do so, while Sunher's other elder sister left school in 2016 after completing Class VIII to contribute to the household work. Sunher's father had inherited 1.5 hectares of *tikdaveda* or high hilly land, characterised by low fertility for agriculture. The size of this landholding size was inadequate to sustain a family of eight—it was insufficient to produce the amount of paddy they needed on an annual basis. This rendered the family heavily dependant on subsidised rice from the

state's public distribution system. The constraints posed by the landholding's size forced the family to adopt other livelihoods including forest-based foraging and wage labour. Due to his father's deteriorating health, his older siblings had taken on the role of primary breadwinners for the family. Sunher and his younger brother also participated in age-appropriate household activities such as procuring firewood from the community forest, foraging, and assisting with agricultural tasks, along with managing their education.

The Educational Journey of Sunher

Phase I: Life in an Alternative School from March 2017 to June 2019

Sunher joined the village's alternative school in 2013. Without going into the ethnographic details of his everyday life, this study highlights two significant practices within this school—student participation in planning the school's activities and fostering student autonomy.

On the first working day of every month, students and teachers would gather to review the previous month and plan for the upcoming month. While led by teachers, students were encouraged to actively participate in the review, and were entitled to accept, modify, or decline suggested academic activities. The medium of instruction in this school was English and Hindi; however, the students were free to use *Halbi* and *Gondi*. Since written annual exams were not a part of the school's curriculum as per the CCE policy, students felt encouraged to focus on learning and other cocurricular activities.

In terms of student autonomy, students were allowed to begin their studies at an appropriate academic level and choose subjects of their liking as per the appropriate grade. Effectively, this meant that students were empowered to study the subjects they liked at the level of their comfort. After developing a certain level of comfort with written culture and acquiring basic numeracy and literacy skills, students gradually integrated themselves with grade-specific subject-based learning processes. Diverse activities were included in the curriculum for learning beyond the classroom. This led to students being actively involved in their own learning and developing a sense of reflexivity to plan and pursue their academic path.

Towards the end of the academic session of 2016–17, however, annual written examinations were reintroduced at the district level. This led the school to incorporate exam-centric strategies in their pedagogy. Although it was done with the consent of the students during one of the monthly meetings, Sunher recalled that this brought about two changes in their regular school

activities. “One could notice that students were now not inclined to activities other than academics. Student absenteeism also increased because of examination stress” (personal interview, 1 October, 2017). A disciplined approach towards examinations was encouraged by the school. Consequently, the students, including Sunher, gradually withdrew themselves from all other activities. Furthermore, some of his peers decided to quit their education which fuelled doubt and uncertainty in Sunher’s mind and added to the pressure of taking examinations.

Five students who had passed Class VIII from the alternative school had been preparing for the Class X Board examinations at the Chhattisgarh Open School since early 2017. In the beginning of 2018, one of these students quit shortly before the commencement of the Board examinations. These students were a source of inspiration for students like Sunher who aspired to continue their education and find a suitable job. During a conversation in 2018, Sunher recalled the struggles of one such student, Kishor, who had quit his studies before the examination:

> Kishor told us that he found it difficult to answer his assignments and complete projects for open schooling. So, just before the submission of forms to sit for the Board exam, he decided to withdraw. It came out of the blue and all my friends got really worried. It feels like if we want to continue our education, we must start preparing for the examinations starting right now. (personal interview, 8 January 2018)

While the return of examinations in the school had orientated the students towards taking subject-specific examinations, the medium of examinations remained Hindi—a language cut off from the Adivasi students’ lives. Students felt that they were not equipped to write examinations in a language that was not native to them. The burden of writing annual exams in Hindi—something that the CCE policy had eliminated—returned. Scholars have written extensively on the significance of the native language as a medium of school education for tribal students in India (Jhingran, 2009; Nambissan, 1994). Its absence—as seen in the case of Sunher and his peers—creates a generational disadvantage that impinges upon their education.

Interviewed again in the middle of 2018, Sunher revealed that the alternative school had witnessed regular absenteeism from students since written exam-oriented teaching and learning processes were reintroduced:

> Some of my friends have quit already. I want to study and attend all the classes. However, after a few days, it becomes difficult to manage all the subjects. We go to the forest many times just to avoid studying. After one or two days, we return to the school. (personal interview, 25 March 2018)

Sunher deferred to going to the forest or immersing himself in agricultural activities to temporarily avoid the situation. Between July 2018 and January 2019, teachers frequently spoke to students regarding absenteeism from school which had hampered their preparation to take examinations. However, this only added to the students' burden of preparing for examinations and managing their studies.

Language training, engaging with textbooks, and learning to write in examinations were challenges that Sunher found difficult to comprehend. "When *Bhaiya* [the teacher] taught us stories or other subject books, I enjoyed them a lot. However, self-reading is a difficult task for me at home" (personal interview, 30 July 2018). As a result, Sunher turned to rote learning to prepare for examinations but still found himself struggling, especially in mathematics. "I get stuck whenever the teacher asks me to write anything. I find myself blank during writing exercises in school. That is why I prefer to memorise things from the textbook. But this trick does not work in maths" (personal interview, 17 August 2018). Minati Panda (2006) has specifically reflected on tribal students' struggles with mathematics, the pedagogy of which is completely disassociated from their day-to-day lives and cultural experiences, leading to high dropout rates at the middle and secondary school stages (2006). Sunher's struggles reflected some of these concerns.

By October 2018—given his own strong aspirations to continue education—Sunher decided to relocate to the *ashramshala* school:

> If I stay here [at the alternative school], I always have the option to engage myself in many things—household work, forest foraging, etc. These give us an excuse to escape from studying. In the *ashramshala*, I do not have these options, and I can focus on studies and prepare for exams. (personal interview, 8 October 2018)

Phase II: Joining the Ashramshala from July 2019 to March 2020

In Class VIII, Sunher joined an *ashramshala* school located on the Jagdalpur–Raipur highway after being denied admission to many prestigious residential schools in Bastar region. In the collective perception of Bastar residents, *ashramshalas* were synonymous with quality education. This perception can be attributed to the government's education policies that have established model residential schools in Adivasi areas such as Bastar since the Kothari Commission, 1964–66. Since then, these schools have been serving as the primary site for social mobility in Bastar. Several students who have passed from these schools have joined administrative and Class IV positions in the bureaucratic set-up of Bastar region. In this context, students such as Sunher aspire to enroll in *ashramshala* schools.

Meeting fellow students with similar aspirations at the *ashramshala* school opened up several channels of knowledge and led Sunher to consider unexplored possibilities. During a telephonic conversation in 2019, Sunher spoke at length about various employment prospects after completing higher education. He discussed his academic endeavours and their potential implications for his future:

> We hardly bothered about subject-specific learning in the village. In the hostel here, I came to know from my seniors that passing the Class XII Board examination with mathematics and biology has greater career prospects. I am thinking of working on mathematics. (personal interview, 7 September 2019)

Meetings and discussions with seniors gave Sunher the confidence to work on a previously dreaded subject. By November 2019, he had joined a group of fellow students who worked on mathematics after school hours. Towards the end of the year, Sunher revealed that a teacher had discussed with him the possibility of pursuing a teacher training course and had provided all the necessary information to him. This led him to strongly consider pursuing a diploma in education after the completion of his school education:

> I have begun working on mathematics. I am confident now that I can get passing marks in the Board examination. In class, I enjoy reading storybooks. I have also decided to pursue this diploma course as my teacher has suggested and become a Hindi teacher (personal interview, 4 November 2019)

Sunher's renewed determination towards his education can be gauged from the fact that towards the end of 2019, he decided to miss the festival celebrations that many students go home for. In rural Bastar, the festive season as well as the *shaadi naach* (the collective dance during marriage ceremonies) are one of the most important aspects of youth culture. The first marriage in Iruhnar was scheduled in early 2020, but Sunher skipped it. In a personal interview over the telephone he said, "At least for next few years, I do not think I will attend a marriage in the village before annual examinations. So, no *shaadi naach*, no Mahua collection" (8 February 2020).

Soon after this conversation, schools were shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, spending less than a year at the *ashramshala* had opened new possibilities for Sunher to consider. With newfound information and support from his peers and teachers, Sunher was able to come out of the earlier state of perplexity and uncertainty that he had faced in the alternative school. The aspiration for an "office job" took shape as did his determination to become a teacher.

Phase III: Pandemic and its Pitfalls

Sunher returned home on 23 March, 2020 after the declaration of the first COVID-19 lockdown in India. Upon his return, he resumed household work immediately since uncertainty loomed over how long schools would remain closed. In concordance with the national directives for student assessments amid the pandemic, Sunher was promoted to Class IX on the basis of an internal assessment.[6]

As per pandemic regulations, all social gatherings and mobility were forbidden in rural Bastar except for essential everyday work. In contrast to the large number of school-going students across the world, Sunher did not have the opportunity or the means to enroll in any online classes. The *ashramshala* was not equipped to introduce online education to its students as the administration and its staff lacked the required equipment and training. Given the socio-economic background of the students, no one had access to phones or computers for any educational activity. After waiting for a few months, Sunher borrowed Class IX books from

[6] The Central Board of School Education issued its first notification for student assessment in schools during the pandemic on 1 April, 2020. The Chhattisgarh state government issued its own notification after that.

another student in the village and decided to study on his own. With no academic support from home or school, this was a tough ordeal for him. Over a telephonic conversation, he said, "I began reading the textbooks several times, but it appears difficult to understand on my own. I am waiting for the school to reopen so I can resume my studies" (personal interview, 10 May 2020).

By the start of 2021, Sunher's prolonged absence from school started manifesting in self-doubt regarding his ability to manage studies when the school would reopen. While the wait for school reopening would eventually extend into August, he had shifted to a local high school in the village. Over a telephone conversation, he shared:

> I was doing good in the hostel. In the past one year, things have changed. It would be difficult for me to manage my studies in the *ashramshala* now. So, I have decided to study at the local high school near the village. (personal interview, 6 February 2021)

On the prevailing sense of self-doubt among his peers, Sunher said that most of them had taken up jobs temporarily and were hoping to return to school once they reopened. However, several of them eventually abandoned their studies and decided to migrate for work to the southern states of India as casual labourers to support their families in the face of uncertainties brought about by the pandemic and in the absence of other employment opportunities in Bastar and the state. School closures, lack of conversations with teachers and the school administration, and a prevailing confusion over the timeline of the school reopening orchestrated these students' decision to quit education. By June 2021, Sunher's hopes and determination had entirely faltered despite having been promoted to Class X and he shifted his time and attention to his family's agricultural land. In a telephonic conversation, he shared: "I hardly studied Class IX books. Several of my friends gave up and chose to migrate to southern states to support their families. I have doubts regarding my academic capabilities to survive in Class X" (personal interview, 5 June 2021).

The local village high school first opened in August 2021 and Sunher attended Class X for the next four weeks. His return to school was fraught with self-doubt and apprehension. The challenge to understand the subjects being taught in the classroom in the absence of having read the previous class's books resulted in his decision to withdraw from education and return to work entirely. In a telephonic conversation, he shared: "I attended high school for four

weeks. It seems impossible to understand anything now from Class X textbooks. I think agricultural work would be good for me for now, rather than migrating like my friends for temporary jobs" (personal interview, 29 August 2021).

In October 2021, with the guidance of his elder sister who had cleared Class X from Chhattisgarh Open School, Sunher decided to enroll too. Earlier, Sunher had not wanted to enroll in the Chhattisgarh Open School and kept the possibility of returning to the *ashramshala* open. However, his hopes for this had withered away over time. Over a telephonic conversation, he shared, "I am not very optimistic about my future aspirations and have stopped thinking about becoming a Hindi teacher. If I get a job as a peon in any office after completing Class X, that would be great for me" (personal interview, 20 October 2021). This signifies both Sunher's perseverance, agency and subjective hope for education in the form of renegotiation with his aspiration. However, the pandemic caused a massive disruption in the educational life of Sunher and several of his peers, which was already vulnerable to begin with. The brunt of what Fernando Reimers (2022) refers to as "mutually reinforcing challenges" contributed to the shift of the possibility of a better life to its impossibility. In Sunher's context, these challenges were poverty and the lack of resources, a network of teachers and peers, and educational support. These challenges are discussed henceforth.

Tribal Students' Education: A Brief Discussion

The study of the educational life of Adivasi students in Bastar requires a historical mapping of the structures of inequality that have been put in place for them. Sunher's struggles need to be examined through a multidimensional and intersectional lens to gauge the actual blow of the pandemic on him and his peers. The varied contexts which underscore the education of Adivasi or tribal students in Bastar are discussed in the following sections.

Structures of Education Marginality in Iruhnar

The first context when understanding the education of tribal students is the blurred lines between work and school education. Modern school education presupposes either a surplus-generating family structure or welfare measures by the state which can enable families to withdraw children from labour requirements and shift them to school (Qvortrup, 2001). The social reality of Iruhnar suggests that despite such welfare measures, children's labour is still critical to the household economy. In this condition, children attempt to strike a balance

between work and their education by undertaking household chores before and after school hours.

Anthropologists have underlined that in forest-based social formations, children's participation in socially necessary labour is not limited to the division of labour but also entails learning methods that posit the indispensability of knowledge abstraction from practice (Ingold, 2000). In contrast, the school demands a separation of knowledge from practice and prescribes a path that requires exertion and endurance from the learner to derive meaning from the abstract realm of textbooks and writing. Ethnographic fieldwork has underlined children's everyday struggle in navigating and handling these simultaneously, especially in the first three to five years. Often, children have preferred work over school and tended to join women family members in forest foraging.

Another major context implicit in Sunher's educational journey is the historical debate around language imposition and the need for education in the mother tongue, as well as the representation of the Adivasi world in textbooks. School education demands proficiency in academic language, which is distinct from everyday language in both oral expression and writing, and which requires a specific form of training (Cummins, 2000; Simons & Murphy, 2006). For Adivasi students, the non-representation of the Adivasi world hampers their meaning-making process and social engagement with the text that requires comprehension—a necessary condition for writing. These issues become even more pronounced in the case of written examinations in higher classes which require creative imagination and interpretative underpinning (Brandt, 1986).

Often starting their educational journey from a disadvantageous position, the centrality of language in all forms of teaching-learning processes exacerbates the question of Adivasi students' survival within the school environment, one that emphasises linguistic and writing proficiency in higher classes. Coupled with the duality between work and school, children from the community often choose the momentary escapism of work as a means to mediate their community's larger transition towards formal school education. Sunher and his friends adopted this method many times to negotiate with the imposed realm of writing proficiency in school.

Dynamics of Transition and Educational Progress

The dynamics of education in an Adivasi village like Iruhnar are complex and non-linear. Adivasi students often start their journey without the necessary educational environment and cultural capital in their homes and communities. These factors are exacerbated in school due to the linguistic imposition which impedes their acquisition of academic languages and makes them completely dependent on the institutional structure of schools and teachers to progress in their academic pursuit. This situation keeps Adivasi students in a vulnerable position throughout their educational journey and demands a greater level of perseverance and effort from them to finish their schooling. Individual limitations to this perseverance have often led Adivasi students to drop out from schools.

Along with dropping out, ethnographic fieldwork has shown that the Adivasis' evolving subjective engagement with school education has manifested in the changing educational landscape in the village. As discussed in this paper, the educational landscape of Iruhnar has changed significantly in the last 15 years on all educational indicators. Almost 100 per cent children from the village now attend and complete their primary schooling and gradually, the school completion rate has increased up to Class VIII. Many students have acquired Class X and XII Board certifications. Some students have joined the armed forces after the completion of their school education. In the villagers' narratives, all these results are the community's collective achievement accomplished through a long struggle with the state school system, despite many failures.

This change in Iruhnar's educational landscape has been led primarily by the past cohorts of students from the village who showed great perseverance and resilience against the many imposed structures of marginalities. These students discovered and devised several strategies to survive in school such as the mnemonic reproduction of writing and peer collaboration. These survival strategies gradually transformed their initial phase of self-doubt and struggle into educational achievements such as the gradual progression of Iruhnar's school completion rates, passing the Class X Board examinations, and so on.

This change in Iruhnar's educational landscape took considerable time. It took more than a decade after the first school was opened in 1997 for the first student from the village to pass the Class X Board examinations in 2009, and yet even longer for the first student to complete their graduate degree (2020).

Of all the obstacles students face in school, the institutional structure of school life plays the most critical role in these transitions in at least two ways. First, the cumulative effect of schooling—even in the form of small inputs in everyday life—facilitates students' survival and negotiation with the academic demands of schooling. Second, the institutional framework of the school enables the students to negotiate with their own dispositions of everyday village life—a prime site for the reproduction of these practices (Lefèbvre, 1990).

Over the course of time, Adivasi students' perseverance with small pedagogical inputs have laid the foundation for the emergence and gradual progression of their aspirations. Every small achievement in this journey works as a foundation upon which their aspirations evolve. Two factors—the no retention policy and the emergence of new livelihood opportunities in the armed forces—have underlined a positive influence on this process. The first factor relaxed the question of an Adivasi student's immediate survival within the school ecosystem, while the second one opened the door to economic mobility within the village. Once the opportunity structure and its correspondence with social mobility was established in the village, it became generative and led Adivasi students on a quest for new opportunities, which included aspirations such as Sunher's aim to become a teacher. The dynamic character of aspiration that this study has exemplified indicates that individual aspiration in villages like Iruhnar needs to be studied within its socio-historic context. A few years back, surviving in elementary education was a distinct dream. This has now evolved into the search for new livelihood opportunities.

Effectively, the prevailing idea of educational progress does not imply the resolution of all aspects of educational marginality. Rather, it implies a continuous process of negotiation and evolving methods of mediation with the structures of educational marginality. This complex and non-linear process has been led by the ordinary Adivasi students of Iruhnar and is embedded within other cumulative and evolving processes. Individual perseverance and endurance have been the most critical aspects of this transition. This also exhibits the most vulnerable aspect of this transition, since it implies that students may have to take up work in the village as a last resort.

Sunher's Case Study

The educational trajectories of Sunher needs to be situated within this ethnographic context and, as such, his aspirations from school education and his desire for economic and social mobility. His physical limitation did not permit him to join the armed forces, which pushed him to search for an alternative option. Like many of his peers, Sunher found it difficult to manage the new imperative on writing due to the policy shift at the national level. After his initial phase of struggle, Sunher overcame his individual limitations to developing writing proficiency at home. Like many other aspiring Adivasi students, the *ashramshala* in Bastar became his destination to pursue education. It was this brief but eventful stay at the *ashramshala* that shaped his future aspiration to become a Hindi teacher.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns followed by the abrupt closure of school from March 2020 to August 2021 disrupted the dynamics of school education in Iruhnar. Upon his return to the village, Sunher showed great commitment to his education in first few months. However, the absence of the institutional framework of the school limited his ability to negotiate with his own dispositions in everyday village life. As showed in the last section, Sunher embarked upon a slow but gradual process of integration with village life following the imposition of aa long withdrawal and disengagement with the school. Upon rejoining high school in August 2021, the prolonged school closure had hampered his ability to negotiate with the evolving academic demands of secondary school education. This led to his decision to quit education. However, after his elder sister's timely intervention, he decided to opt for open school education at the Chhattisgarh Open School to acquire the Class X Board certification. Eventually, his aspiration to become a Hindi teacher changed into a more realistic goal—to take up an "office-*wala* job".

Aspiration, Marginality, and the Pandemic: Concluding Thoughts

By situating Sunher's case study in the ethnographic context of his village, this study has attempted to capture the dynamics of aspiration and expectation and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study confirms that Adivasi students' educational endeavours primarily start from a disadvantageous position due to their location in a village that is transitioning towards formal school education. This study attributes their multidimensionally disadvantageous position to the lack of cultural capital specific to school education in the family and the community,

children's required participation in household work and its implication on the learning process, and the dispositions of forest social life which cumulatively do not fit with the various imperatives of school education. These disadvantages are compounded by linguistic imposition and the absence of the Adivasi world from the curriculum. This exacerbates their struggle in school specifically with regard to the acquisition of academic languages, meaning-making, and writing, especially in higher classes.

Along with this analysis, this study underlines the dynamics of change in the educational landscape of Iruhnar and the role that ordinary Adivasi students have played in this transformation. This study suggests that it is the efforts of individual students who showed great perseverance and evolved survival strategies which cumulatively facilitated cohorts of students to survive school, thereby enabling a positive shift in the entire village's educational landscape. Students' aspirations have evolved from this dynamic process. By the year 2010, when this educational aspiration met with an emerging opportunity structure in the form of the armed forces, it took Adivasi students on a new trajectory where school education was finally a means for social and economic mobility.

In the context of Sunher and Iruhnar, the institutional framework of the school in everyday village life—apart from imposing structures of marginality—facilitated both (a) the students' educational journey as a primary site for pedagogical inputs which are necessary to meet evolving academic demands, and (b) negotiations with their own dispositions in the forest's social space. The prolonged unavailability of this institutional framework due to the pandemic completely hampered Adivasi students' ability to negotiate evolving academic demands at the secondary school education level, leading them to gradually integrate themselves with prevailing village life. In the absence of an alternative support system, students ended up renegotiating with their dreams, as it happened in Sunher's case.

Returning to the conceptual distinction between aspiration and expectation, this study confirms Bourdieu's formulation that education—due its duality of imposing structures and empowering agencies, in the process of mediation with objective conditions—embodies lower expectations that ensure social reproduction (1977). Locating the shift from aspiration to expectation empirically provides the mechanisms for the embodiment of such objective conditions in individual decisions as seen in Sunher's case. Focusing on the case of Sunher, this study offers

an ethnographic account of the process through which this shift manifested itself in the embodiment of his individual decision. This paper concludes that situations like the pandemic exacerbated this shift and limited individual students' agency to negotiate the structures of marginality.

Postscript: Sunher completed Class XII from the *ashramshala* in 2024. For the past year, he has been working as a shop assistant in Kondagaon district, Chhattisgarh.

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