

Developing ‘responsive’ ECCE models in India

Scientific research on early childhood development has informed investments in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) across the global south. Conceptual frameworks of ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ (DAP) guide ECCE policy and practice according to established norms for children’s development. However, DAP frameworks leave the universal and normative core of developmental thinking unaddressed. Based on an ethnographic study of ECCE with Adivasi communities in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, India, we identify how this understanding of development is in conflict with community values and practices of socialisation. Policy implications from this data are drawn out for designing responsive ECCE policies.

Key Findings from the Study

- Expectations by Adivasi communities of formal education systems differ, and are based on local socio-economic contexts and cultural organisation of everyday life.
- Observations of the community show differences in developmental milestones based on local ecologies and socialisation practices around children.
- Formal ECCE and schooling does not attend to these differences, and relations between land, livelihood, language, identities and education, pushing many Adivasi communities to exit the system.

Table 1: Composition and occupations of Adivasi communities in Gudalur

Adivasi communities in Gudalur	Traditional occupation	Current Occupation
Mullu Kurumba	Making bow and arrows	Landowning or agricultural coolies
Betta Kurumba	Making baskets	Anti-poaching watchers and mahouts; agricultural coolies.
Irula	Rat and snake catchers	Plantation and agricultural coolies.
Kattu Nayaka	Honey collectors	Plantation and agricultural coolies.
Paniya	Crab and fish hunting	Plantation and agricultural coolies.

ECCE in the Indian Context

- Within a context of sustained educational inequalities, ECCE is still to be enforced as a right.
- India has the largest state-run ECCE programme (the Integrated Child Development Services - ICDS), providing nutrition, health and preschool education, but this is seen by many as a “feeding centre for the poor”.
- The latest draft National Policy on Education (2019) proposes several changes that include guaranteeing ECCE as a right, extending it up to 8 years, introducing a foundational literacy/numeracy curriculum following DAP, and involving communities and families in ECCE.
- An unregulated market in ECCE, runs in parallel to state provisions, offering varied quality and types of ECCE. This caters to parents with differing purchasing powers, anxious to secure a head-start for their children by investing early in formal learning.

DAP and its Limitations

- DAP underscores the idea that learning must be ordered according to children’s unfolding developmental abilities.
- Despite centering children and contexts in curricular planning, DAP frameworks have remained narrowly tied to ideas of school readiness, drawing on middle class histories and practices of socialization.
- Policy and interventions in ECCE seek to incorporate marginalized communities into these new learning environments and sociocultural systems
- Decontextualised from non-elite children’s development and relations with schooling, DAP is inadequate to ensure equitable participation within education.



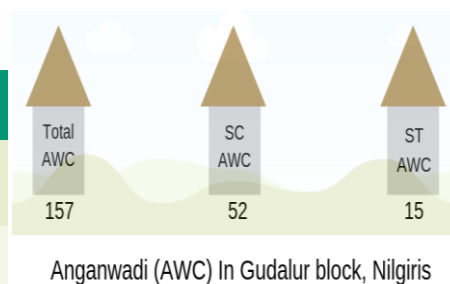
The Present Study: Sites and Contexts

- Six months of ethnographic research was conducted in two villages, Chalikadu and Seervayal, located within the thickly forested and hilly regions of Gudalur, in the Nilgiris, where routine encounters with wildlife and heavy monsoons regularly disrupted everyday life.

Table 2: SC/ST population in Tamil Nadu and Gudalur

Population	ST	SC
Tamil Nadu	1%	20%
Gudalur	13%	26%

Source: Census 2011



Source: Gudalur ICDS block office

Table 3: ST and child population in study sites

Population	ST	Child (0-6 years)
Chalikadu*	23%	6.6%
Seervayal*	98%	12%

Source: Data collected from the anganwadi centre. * Names given are pseudonyms

- The main population of these sites were Adivasi (i.e., indigenous) communities and a smaller proportion of non-tribal, non-dominant caste groups officially recognised as Other Backward Classes (OBCs)
- Daily observations of two state-run centres (i.e., anganwadis), one private school and one NGO school were conducted, and formal interviews and informal discussions were held with parents, teachers, anganwadi staff and state officials.

Key Messages

1. ICDS norms do not address local contexts and needs, and must be further contextualised

Poor participation of Adivasi children in relation to ICDS norms

- Despite adopting norms suited to tribal regions for setting up anganwadis, centres in Gudalur are located outside communities. The terrain makes it difficult for children to traverse even short distances alone while parents are unable to drop children to centres as this entails loss of daily wages.
- Space norms have been set at 600 sqft. per centre by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Communities viewed centres to be constrained in space, and involving long hours of sitting. Community elders preferred that children stay in the community, learn and move around freely.
- Anganwadi staff, according to norms, must be locally recruited, and Adivasi workers must be appointed in regions with high Adivasi populations. This is however not the case in Gudalur, which follows state reservation categories for appointments.



Addressing poor attendance

- A local NGO school attempts to address community needs by adopting Adivasi-friendly practices.
- With high ceilings, open corridors, and large windows, the school infrastructure simulates open spaces.
- Adivasi teachers have been appointed. Pedagogic practices allow children to leave and re-enter classes to avoid boredom.
- Transportation and volunteers have been arranged to pick up children from remote locations and drop them to school or anganwadis.

2. ECCE models must account for social histories and priorities of development among Adivasi communities

Priorities of ECCE policy and programmes in India

- Children’s development within policy and state ECCE institutions are represented (even visually) through references to the white, middle class child.
- Policy guidelines and practices are structured according to DAP, and encourage multiple domains of development, but reflect a narrow understanding of development as seen within urban, middle class settings.
- Parents and ECCE professionals are expected to support children by engaging them in reading and specific forms of play, which require literacy and other resources available in middle class homes (e.g., balls, books, crayons).



Some examples of developmental milestones from a poster displayed in an anganwadi



Growth	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
Physical growth	Catching a ball	Climbs chair/ kicks ball	Holds crayons in finger
Cognitive Development	Interest in picture books	Makes small sentences	Counts numbers
Language	Claps hands	Talk in two sentences	Asks questions

Social History and childcare practices in Gudalur

- Adivasi communities in Gudalur have historically relied on the forests. Field informants reflected on the significance of forests to children’s socialisation, diets and development.
- Traditional diets of Ragi (finger millet), tubers, fish and crab still form important sources of nutrition, compensating for low birth weight or height, according to Yogeshwari*, the block level ICDS official.
- Children learn to source from the forest economy very early. Devi, a Paniya teacher, gave examples of Paniya children hunting crabs and fish, and Kattu Nayaka children sourcing forest tubers and honey. During honey gathering season children accompany parents into the forest, missing school, as this forms an important source of livelihood and economic security for impoverished Adivasi communities. These examples pointed to different learning valued by parents in comparison to formal ECCE.

3. Language, identity and culture of Adivasi communities must find place in ECCE curriculum

Decontextualised state ECCE curriculum, developmentally inappropriate practices in private schools

- Private ECCE providers in Gudalur are excessively focused on reading and writing in English and Tamil
- Anganwadis have a ‘contextualised’ ECCE curriculum, but this is uniformly applied across the state. Curricular material and activities support learning in Tamil, the state language, not familiar to Adivasi children.
- Social-cultural practices of upper-caste Hindu households (e.g., festivals such as ‘Golu’) is represented within the curriculum, but representations of Adivasi cultures and traditions are absent.
- Resources to address variations in development seen among Adivasi children – e.g., advanced motor abilities, seen in their ability to climb trees or traverse difficult terrains at early ages, is absent. Motor development activities in the curriculum only focus on activities such as walking, jumping and crawling.



* Names of persons given in the brief are pseudonyms

Curricular barriers and differences in socialisation practices in Adivasi communities

Language: Children's lack of familiarity with Tamil and English, and teachers' lack of knowledge of Adivasi languages creates fear of school in children, because of which they drop out.

"Mozhi oru prachaneyya irukalam" (Language is an issue) - Sankari, 22 year old Paniya teacher.

"There is not even one photo, or Adivasi culture or values as part of these institutions" - Govindaraj, NGO staff from Mullu Kurumba community.

Representation of Adivasi knowledges: The lack of familiar cultural symbols and differences in values were identified as other factors leading to drop out. Community members like Govindaraj, pointed out that schools individualise students, while interdependence is taught within the community.

Pedagogic practices: Knowledge about the forest and livelihoods gained experientially, through observation and immersion in the community, was contrasted with rote and didactic methods of school.

In schools, children are told to read this/ learn this. But when it is taught in this manner some children aren't interested in learning. At home they learn through touch and experience ("thottu-unarndu kathukarango") - Gopi, NGO staff from Paniya community.

Disciplining: Corporal punishments, use of a stick to put fear in children, starting from the ECCE years, were also pointed out as deterrents to Adivasi children's participation in schools. The community's strong disapproval of corporal punishment, considered detrimental to children's well-being, was evident from instances such as Parimala, a Kattu Nayaka mother, having removed her five-year-old daughter from a private school when her daughter was punished for wetting her clothes.

Policy Implications

The study highlights the need to rethink and redesign formal, institutionalised models of ECCE.

Developing community-centred models

- Community involvement to understand local values, pedagogic practices, understanding of space and development is important to develop responsive models
- Rethinking the uniform spatial structure of models, and locating it within communities in tribal areas can address problems of distance and terrain. Community-located models can use trained personnel (similar to ASHA workers) to work with children and parents within the community, rather than bringing children to centres.
- Periodic visits by health and other staff can address barriers of distance and terrain in participation



Involving community and incorporating community values more fundamentally in ECCE

- Community members must be involved more centrally in curriculum planning, in order to reflect values and practices important to community life, beyond school readiness alone.
- Involving community members as teachers can address problems of language and representation within ECCE classrooms

Researching alternative developments

- Further research to understand alternative developmental trajectories of children and communities is required to inform responsive models.

Project Details

This policy brief was prepared by R.Maithreyi¹ and Arun Viknesh¹. Insights presented are drawn from a British Academy funded study on 'Examining Contexts, Costs and Practices of Early Childhood Care and Education in India', undertaken by CBPS and University of Cambridge.

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