

In the Land of Dying Voices

Every 14 days another language dies; one Indian school attempts to save their own

Kristen V Brown

Just outside of Tejgadh, a small village in rural Gujarat, the skyline is dominated by Koraj Hill, a desolate, grey formation entirely unpopulated and full of craggy rocks. Thousands of years ago, in 10,000 BC, the prehistoric occupants of this area made rock paintings, an archaeological finding that has drawn anthropologists and archaeologists to the site to study and deliberate on the lifestyles of the area's primeval inhabitants.

But at the foot of the same hill, two twenty-something young women in sparkling pink *kurtas* were huddled up in a dimly lit library, huddled over computer screens and engrossed in the study of a society they considered with much more urgency – their own. Urvashi Chaudhry and her classmate Chandrakala Valvi were just beginning work they would present to over 50,000 people, on the languages of adivasi (tribal) people in Gujarat, at an upcoming seminar in the state's Tapi district.

Chaudhry, 23, who speaks seven Indian languages and Valvi, 27, who speaks six, are linguistics students at the *Adivasi Academy*, an unconventional learning institution among the sprawling agricultural landscapes, wide horizons, and smog-free skies deep in the heart of agrarian Gujarat, over a two-hour drive from the nearest big city, Vadodara.

After achieving Masters degrees in linguistics, instead of getting PhDs and becoming professors, as many language students do, they decided to come here, to focus on a subject a little closer to home: their own mother

tongues, Chaudhry and Dehwali.

"In the current system, people study and move towards the urbanised system," said Chaudhry, taking a short break from her research in the school's library. "They learn Gujarati, Hindi and English, but they forget their own language. We need to preserve our own language."

Many students like Chaudhry and Valvi seek education as a way out, learning more widely spoken tongues as a means to better paying jobs and a higher standard of living. Like Gaelic-speaking Irishmen in English-speaking Ireland, more and more people abandon their mother tongue to fit in, often even ashamed of speaking in a language that no one else understands in schools they attend and offices where they work. They leave behind small villages like Tejgadh, and, in the process, abandon many of the age-old practices native to their people's legacy. But at the academy, students are instead persuaded to study their own heritage, the next generation of villagers steeped in their own quickly disappearing traditions.

As part of their diploma course, Chaudhry and Valvi are now undertaking learning each others' languages, and while they normally converse in Gujarati, the common tongue of most at the school, the two move back and forth between their shared catalogue of languages with ease. At the academy they devote time to learning new tribal languages as well as documenting their own. Additionally, they are a part of one of the most crucial projects of the centre:

documenting the oral languages of their people. Thus far, the academy has completed six dictionaries – some of rare local languages previously never been written down – and plans to publish these later this year.

When the girls graduate, they hope to continue the work they've started in their studies here, taking part in government surveys of Indian languages, continuing to learn more languages, and helping other people to understand their irrevocable importance.

Students at the centre earn various diplomas in tribal studies, in programs such as one on linguistics, which has 12 students, and another one devoted to developing a Green Economic Zone (GEZ) in Gujarat's tribal belt, which has 15 students. Sumir Gamit, 26, is in the second year of the GEZ diploma course, which aims, instead of simply preserving culture that already exists, to help *adivasis* continue in the agrarian lifestyle by implementing a cost-effective, organic method of farming that would allow local villages to be self-sustainable by relying exclusively on local knowledge and resources. Eventually, Gamit, whose family was displaced when a hydro-electric plant was built in their village, hopes to organise the youth in his village to fight for *adivasi* rights, and help document the dying faiths of local *adivasi* communities.

The academy also boasts a health program, which selects 12 students each year to come to the academy and learn about rural health care, and an informal school

for the younger dropout students from local nomadic people. The younger and the female diploma students reside at the school, the male students in nearby Tejgadh. The students pay a nominal course fee of 500 rupees, and then receive housing, meals, and an expense stipend, making the program affordable. But for those who are interested, getting in isn't all that easy – last year the school selected about 25 percent of its applicants.

The school has advanced far beyond its modest beginnings over a decade ago, when founder Dr Ganesh Devy, a former English professor at Baroda University, would make the two-hour drive from Vadodara (formerly Baroda) to Tejgadh everyday and sit with his first 15 students on the rock under the famous Mahuda tree at the Academy. They would discuss the problems in their community, eventually conceptualising the academy as what they hoped would be a solution to many of them.

Ganesh noticed that in India, the languages that are considered "non-citizens" by the government had no place in society. Universities can be established in Gujarati, Marathi, and Punjabi, but in none of the native languages widely spoken in India's central tribal belt. Speakers of these "non-citizen" languages were (and still are) prevented from doing things like getting an education or a decent job.

"I found that there was no space for communities that honour old traditions, in literature anywhere in the world," said Devy, seated cross-legged in his Vadodara office, bare-walled except for a portrait of Gandhi, one of the school's inspirations, and a shelf full of trophies awarded to him and his wife. He continued: "And there was no place in India for people who spoke these 'non-citizen' languages."

In 1999, Ganesh and his first 15 students created the school with one pivotal question in mind: Why does society wait until its culture disintegrates to try to preserve them?

Tejgadh, situated on the borders



A young student of the academy takes in the campus museum

of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, was identified as the right place for their purpose. Today, the academy aims to preserve these cultures, as well as building self-reliance, self-confidence and new development infrastructure for local communities.

Since its inception, the academy has come a long way from the rock under the tree at the foot of Koraj Hill. It boasts a beautiful library with over 35,000 volumes, a health clinic where the surrounding rural population can receive care on the weekends, a museum displaying local tribal art and artefacts, and an artist's workshop, where local artists can visit and hone their skills. Future plans include guesthouses, a maternity clinic, and a second school in the Himalayas. In addition, the school's parent organisation Bhasha (meaning language) has started schools in 18 other villages and 30 Development Service Centres, which serves to offer over 100 villages programs like micro-credit. Not to mention, they have published books in 23 different languages not recognised by the Indian government, and publish a bi-monthly children's magazine in 11 different languages that has a circulation of around 10,000.

The school plays host to a

constantly revolving array of international scholars, as well as adivasi and nomadic communities of India, who have come to regard the school as a forum for study, analysis, policy intervention and advocacy. Internationally recognised personalities, such as Romila Thapar, Rajmohan Gandhi, Mahasweta Devi, and Justice MN Venkatachaliah, have lectured to students, sitting under the same tree where the idea for the school was first conceived. The academy now has high-profile donors like the Ford Foundation.

But for a school that has attracted such international acclaim, the sight of the campus on an average school day might puzzle the uninformed visitor: there are no classes, and students mill about in a seemingly indolent and idle manner, flipping through books in the library, mulling over objects at the museum, chatting in the grassy open spaces between red brick buildings, and even pulling weeds on the front lawn.

Diploma students at the school don't have formal classes (though the younger students do). In fact, there is only one actual classroom on the entire campus. Instead, the school has continued to embrace its informal roots: students sit under a tree and listen to lectures, research in the

library when they need to, and talk with their teachers and colleagues for ideas and inspirations. The 13 faculty members don't actually teach classes, they are just there for when the students need them. And students don't have a class schedule or term limits for their courses. Rather, they study and learn at their own pace. Apart from tribal studies, there are no set courses either – each year they change and adapt to reflect the needs from the community.

Students also partake in the upkeep of the campus (the main reason its always so tidy), the academy having evolved into, as Dr Devy describes it, a sort of “learning commune.”

“We believe in physical work, too,” explained Jagdish Choudhury, a teacher who joined the school in September. “Man should learn with two things. In one hand there is pen, in the other hand there is *karo*.” The *karo*, perhaps fittingly, is an agricultural tool used by many of the people in the surrounding agricultural areas to weed out bad grass.

“What is good for a city is not necessarily good for a village,” Dr Devy said of the school's less-than-traditional operating procedures. “Knowledge is not the same as literacy, and literacy is not the most important. All this sounds very curious, but it has worked in our case.”



Students play during lunch hour

The main goals of the academy have evolved over the years, and now the school mainly functions to promote the preservation of arts and culture, and facilitate advocacy for the rural community. Most of the students from the school – which boasts a somewhat unbelievable 0 percent dropout rate and 100 percent employment rate – graduate and work for NGOs concerned with India's tribal communities. Many end up working for the academy itself, like Nangin J Rathva, 30, who is one of the 14 (out of 15) students from Devy's first batch who ended up employed by Bhasha.

Rathva, a member of the most populous tribal group in the region surrounding Tejgadh, the Rathwas, is now the president of Bhasha's Chaitinya Trust, which oversees all of the organisations' Development Service Centres.

Reflecting on the organisation's achievements since his days sitting under the Mahuda tree, Rathva said that while their efforts to provide micro-credit and introduce ideas like saving money to the community have been hugely significant, he is most proud of their accomplishments in documenting culture.

“We established the documentation of art and culture of the *adivasi* at a time when I thought it was going to disappear from the community,” he

said, reminiscing under one of the campus' shady covered walkways on the life he might have led had it not been for Devy. “Bhasha's efforts have preserved these things. Now everything is well documented. There are art and songs, all documented and preserved forever.” As a student, Rathva worked on compiling the songs of his village, Nagenbi, a project that 10 years later he is still most proud of.

“This is the only organisation not working for a particular party,” said Choudhury, “but working wholly for the tribals, right from the grassroots to policy levels.”

The school, heavily influenced by the philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore, Shri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi, is anti-consumerism, anti-communal, and fosters no alignments with any political parties.

“Caste India does not understand tribal India,” explained Dr Devy, citing the two Indias imagined by the British and the Portuguese, respectively. “We do not want a separate state, we want a different society.”

Walking the grassy path from the medical clinic to the library, a twenty-something student walked up to Jagdish Choudhury and handed him a festively-wrapped, orange-flavoured candy. The reason, she explained, was that it was her birthday, wandering off to distribute the candies to everyone else at the school. Choudhury shook his head and explained that birthdays are a new concept in the community, and something he still can't get a grip on. When Choudhury was young, most parents would just say their child was born on June 1 when enrolling them in school, as had Choudhury's parents. No one bothered to keep track of trivial things like the exact day you were born, and consequently he wasn't exactly sure how old he was. “This is sort of a symbol of outside culture,” he said, unwrapping the candy.

Some things are bound to change. □

Sounds of Assimilation

Two Indians use hip-hop to adjust to an American life

Daniel Muessig



Gotham Green

Julian Krishnamurti

Julian Krishnamurti has a very organised mind. This flies in the face of his behaviour, which at times can range from boorish (he spent New Year's Eve 2004 in a stranger's bathtub covered in his own vomit) to purposely eccentric (he used to walk around Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, in an oversized kurta and a Mexican sombrero). His delight in crudity, entendres, and in general raising the hackles of all those around him fall away when he closes the doors to the front room of the apartment he shares with his wife Lauren, a

Carnegie Mellon graduate student, and their cat, Tumble. Here, in the converted first floor of a mansion surrounded by dark wood walls and shelves of records, he punches sequences on a grey MPC 2000 sampling machine that resembles an enormous Nintendo controller. Placing different records on a turntable, he draws a second of trumpet from one, a kick snare from another. Each is sequenced into the machine and elongated or truncated according to his desire. A pile of used records lies on a huge oak table just to the right of a dusty bottle of

Suntori whiskey he occasionally takes pulls from.

The usual gregarious nature of a future professor has been subsumed in his obsessive activity. Headphones fall off his hooded sweatshirt as he presses one side to his ear while his other hand moves in a triecta – adjusting the knobs on the machine, bringing back the record to precise points, and smacking a hard flat rhythm on his thigh. This has been his mode of operation on hundreds of nights, pouring over thousands of hours of sound to remould them into his own original compositions. When