
REPORT

Pallikoodam: A Vision for a New Age Schooling

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The Indian Education System has encountered many criticisms regarding how learning is measured by marks/scores rather than skills as learning is examination-oriented and completely relies on the students' memory-retaining capacity (Jain, 2020). NEP (2020) has clearly acknowledged this problem and suggested measures to replace rote learning with skill training in mainstream education. In such contexts, alternative schools gain importance.

In the past, alternative schooling methods like Montessori and Waldorf have endorsed unconventional methods to educate students, and such methods have also been adopted by some schools in India (Aljabreen, 2020). Such alternative schooling methods facilitate learning in a constructivist way rather than mere memorization and rote learning. Pallikoodam, a school in Kottayam, Kerala, was developed by the social activist Mary Roy foreseeing the problems of Indian education as highlighted by NEP 2020. Mary Roy's recent death has brought attention back to her distinctive ideology and teaching approach.

The History of Pallikoodam

Pallikoodam was established in 1969 in the name 'Corpus Christi School' by Mary Roy to redefine education. She started the school in a Rotary club with less than ten students and eventually, the experiment's wide success led to the school's expansion. Being a social activist, Roy envisioned creating a school transcending the boundaries of the rigid education system when she realized Indian education completely relies on rote memorization from textbooks rather than preparing students with human values and lifelong skills. Her son's education in elite residential schools in Ooty gave her insights into the Indian education

system and she realized it is firmly rooted in colonialism, and her son is being moulded as a 'Britisher' rather than an Indian (Skaria, 2014). Likewise, she realized that education in India, especially Kerala, was gender-biased and purely academic-oriented. Mary Roy dreamt of a school where students were treated equally above social discrimination. She used Pallikoodam as the starting point for all the modifications she planned to make to the current educational establishment.

Pallikoodam follows a distinct schooling system, which includes many unconventional rules, including the no exam policy till seventh grade and primary education only through the mother tongue (Skaria, 2014). Inclusivity is practised in classrooms by educating peers to treat them equally without segregating differently-abled students. In the event of any special needs, a qualified special needs teacher will aid them.

In Pallikkoodam, skill development and extracurricular activities are prioritized equally with academics. The school provides the students with opportunities to learn music, arts, dance, drama, clay modelling, painting, yoga, cooking and sports (Athi, 2018). The school's considerable alumni base, which includes Mary Roy's daughter and the Booker Prize winning author and social activist Arundhati Roy, and Abu George IFS, validates the effectiveness of both the philosophy and its teaching strategies (Skaria, 2014). Furthermore, by keeping the student population at 450, teachers give each student their undivided attention.

The Pallikoodam Educational Model

When Roy started Pallikoodam fifty years ago, she wished to create a learner-centred environment. In Pallikoodam, teachers become mentors who grow to be competent to lead the students amid freedom. Teachers are trained through different workshops to ensure they are well-equipped for this role change. Teachers are given control over the curriculum, enhancing their responsibility because they can improvise, try new things, and choose effective techniques (Skaria, 2014).

Pallikoodam's unconventional pedagogy emphasized independent learning and critical thinking among its students. The group system was one tool to ensure individual attention and self-learning (Skaria, 2014). In this method, the students segregate themselves into separate groups and each group will be given the same set of activities. A

classroom was segregated into 4 or 5 areas, and each area was allotted for certain activity like reading or arithmetic. So, the learners can complete the tasks individually by moving to different areas with a sense of responsibility and creativity. Another innovative step was the implementation of Malayalam (the mother tongue) as the medium of instruction in the junior school. English was implemented gradually after junior school; so students would be more relaxed and accustomed to learning.

Flexible syllabus and no textbook policy were other methods employed to ensure the freedom to innovate (Skaria, 2014). This enabled teachers to implement various activities and autonomy to decide how students should learn creatively (Skaria, 2014). Storytelling is another valuable tool used for teaching and learning. Teachers and students indulge in storytelling and narrating personal stories associated with the syllabus, improving interaction (Skaria, 2014). Such pedagogies are used in the classroom to help students feel burdenless, thereby preparing learners for real-life challenges.

The assessment model in the school is also equally inspired by the school's learning model. Though Pallikoodam follows the ICSE syllabus, the school decides on assessments until board examinations. **Teachers assess students according to their performance in the classroom and there are no assessments other than class tests till the 7th grade (Athi, 2018). This gives teachers the freedom to devise and implement their own assessment methods. At the end of the academic calendar, students' extracurricular and academic achievements are assessed to identify progress and set goals.**

The Learning Environment of Pallikoodam

Pallikoodam's educational setting encourages learning creatively by involving students in dramas, debates, and other hands-on activities that foster students' critical thinking (Athi, 2018). The school's physical environment equally impacts and motivates the students to learn. The architecture of Pallikoodam was designed by the famous Laurie Baker, known for his unique designs with bricks that allow cross ventilation and light. Learning is not constrained to the walls of a classroom; the teacher takes the liberty to conduct classes outside (Athi, 2018). The Baker-style design provides students with a calming atmosphere and

encourages students to stay in touch with nature and nurture their imagination (Varghese & Kant, 2021). The absence of labels in the classrooms and other formal areas give students a sense of security, allowing them to learn and think autonomously without feeling intimidated (Varghese & Kant, 2021).

Pallikoodam as an Ideal Alternative Model

The coexistence of alternative schools like Pallikoodam to foster educational and vocational success is a reminder of what is lacking in mainstream education and can serve as an ideal model (Sliwka, 2008). Particularly in the post-pandemic period, where the online mode of learning and social-emotional learning have become meaningful, alternative schooling can also become a considerable option.

Although the practices of Pallikoodam set an example for future education, some practical issues of the school need to be discussed. The Pallikoodam model is based on the ideals of Mary Roy, and it had undergone changes since her retirement, and more changes are yet to happen as she died recently. Evolutionary changes imposed more stringent rules and altered the secular nature of education by providing weekly Bible classes to Christian students. Such changes can have a larger impact on the students' learning environment, thereby undermining the whole model.

Challenges in Adapting Alternative Model Schooling

The teacher-student ratio, which enables teachers to provide individualized attention to every student, is the main obstacle to the implementation of this alternative model for mass education. Pallikoodam maintains the student population to 450 to maintain the teacher-student ratio. Since the primary goal of most Indian institutions is to impart education to more people, this is not practical. Furthermore, Pallikoodam charges a higher tuition rate because it offers all services, including teaching extracurricular activities, which is not affordable for middle-class Indians. For individuals to benefit, alternative education must be made accessible and affordable. NEP (2020) has highlighted the importance of critical thinking and implementation of holistic education, which aligns with the aim of alternative schooling. Further research should be initiated to understand the potential of alternative educational models in Indian society.

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