Widespread closing down of village schools
A policy of rapidly promoting boarding schools for tribal children is undermining some of India’s most ancient, cohesive and sustainable cultures and imposing a harsh, alien discipline onto children, who are often traumatised by removal from their families. Ground realities and alternatives need much wider, deeper attention, including models in line with Gandhi’s revolutionary ‘basic education’ or nai talim.

Throughout India, schools in Adivasi villages are getting closed down at an alarming rate. This is justified through longstanding problems of absentee teachers and high rates of children dropping out - basically a lame excuse, that does not explain the speed of present closures. For example, 2,918 village schools were closed down by order of the Department of Education in Chhattisgarh on 15th June 2015. Incredibly, this policy was supposedly formulated to comply with the Right to Education Act (2009), which specified a student:teacher ratio norm of 30:1.

The Chhattisgarh government has been closing schools where there is a ratio of fewer pupils per teacher, with a state average of 23:1 – even though fewer pupils to teachers should imply better quality education! As a result of this ‘rationalisation’, many children now have to walk much further to school, or enroll in a boarding school far from home. 40 of these village schools are in Lohandiguda block of Bastar district, where Tata Steel wants to build a controversial new steel plant. Closing schools here obviously limits the options of local children whose need for education will increase if the steel plant is built and they are to get worthwhile local jobs (Subramaniam 2015).

Undermining indigenous knowledge systems
Residential schools as a solution to the problem of poorly functioning village schools is proposed for remote tribal areas in Tripura, by a Government official, in a recent edition of Economic and Political Weekly (Jindal 2015), on the grounds that it is not cost effective to set up and maintain schools in ‘difficult areas’/‘remote, hilly areas’. By contrast, the Nagaland
Government’s ‘communitisation of education’ programme, which gives village communities authority over teachers’ salaries, is reported as a vibrant alternative from the Northeast that most reports suggest has been extremely successful (Outlook 2008, Nurumi 2012, Humtsoe 2013). Also, a recent UN report on boarding schools and indigenous peoples spells out the impact of cultural alienation which such schools have for tribal people, by removing children from their communities, drastically reducing their learning from their own cultures and families (UN 2009).

This trend to close down ‘non-cost-effective’ village schools combines right now with an increasing push to collect Adivasi children into large residential schools. The trend began many years ago, before Independence, when the first Ashram schools were set up in Gujarat and Maharashtra, linked with the Freedom Struggle. During the 1960s-80s Ashram schools multiplied, as a means of ‘bringing education/development’ to remote tribal populations. The model offers free education and boarding to tribal children from surrounding villages in standards I-V or beyond. Ashram residential schools increased from 189 in 1961 to 3,500 in 1989 (Ananda 1994, GoI 1989).

Although expanding this model of Ashram schools was advocated by several key committees (especially the Dhebar Committee Report of 1962), it was supposed to be culturally sensitive, with use of tribal languages, and based on respect for tribal traditions. Few if any embody these principles (Nambissan 2000 p.193-4, Sharma and Sujatha 1983, Sarangapani 2003, Kakkoth 2014). Ashram schools offer a standardised education, regimenting the lives of tribal children by removing them from their families and imposing alien values, discipline, uniform, and mainstream norms of food, short hair etc (Furer-Haimendorf 1982 p.130, Ananda 1994, Mishra and Dhir 2005, Jojo 2013). As the Xaxa Committee Report puts this,

‘the guiding principle [of Ashram schools] was that tribal people were savage and wild, who needed to be civilized by the means of education outside the tribal and social life... Such importance assigned to residential school concept led, later on, to the tendency of Ashramization of the whole program of tribal education.’ (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014 p.160)

The phenomenal growth of Ashram schools seems to have been motivated partly towards satisfying bureaucratic convenience, responding to UN ‘Education For All’ goals and associated funding, rather than to needs articulated by Adivasis (Veerbhadranaika et al 2012 pp.39-44).

The new tendency is to promote a private model ('public-
private partnerships”), where the very mining companies who are displacing tribal communities are often among the main funders.

A scheme called the Van Bandhu Kalyana Yojana (‘Forest Friends’ Welfare Plan’), set up in Gujarat from 2007, was adopted by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2014-15, which envisaged funding one of the blocks with lowest tribal literacy rate in each of ten states to improve the Human Development Indices for tribal areas, with particular focus on setting up subsidised residential schools, in partnership with private funders (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2015).

Another example is the Anwesha scheme, announced by the Odisha government in December 2015, in which the government subsidises the education of 5,000 tribal and dalit children a year in private residential schools (New Indian Express 22 December 2015).

A more dramatic example, also in Odisha though promoted in TV networks across India (with the catchy slogan ‘education of tribal children from KG to PG’), is the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) in Bhubaneswar, which offers free education for huge numbers of tribal children, who are to be seen doing yoga and other mass activities in vast open-air gatherings, wearing identical blue or brown uniforms. The KISS model is being copied across tribal areas of Odisha and other states. It has been widely extolled in media coverage (e.g. Arora 2010, Debroy 2015), and one of the writers is on the Niti Ayog, apex advisory body to the Government of India, which replaced the Planning Commission in 2014.

‘Today, there are 25,000 tribal students, from 62 poor tribal communities (13 primitive tribal groups). Most, though not all, are from Odisha. For these students, who are poor and first generation learners, education is free, from kindergarten to post-graduation.’ (Debroy 2015)

Several things are revealing about these words, which echo the KISS website (http://www.kiss.ac.in). First, repetition of ‘poor’ – ‘poorest of the poor’ in the introductory words currently on the KISS website (March 2015) - no hint here of the wealth of tribal cultures in knowledge of forest or cultivation, rich traditions of festivals, dances and social life! Second, the term ‘primitive tribal groups’ [PTGs] is a derogatory classification that was changed several years ago to ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’ [PVTGs]. Is it used here out of ignorance, or to accentuate the ‘primitive’ stereotype? Third, the phrase ‘first generation learners’ (which echoes the KISS website again) discounts extensive
traditional learning systems in tribal cultures, documented by Verrier Elwin for example in his classic monograph *The Muria and their Ghotul* (1947), though little referred to in most educational literature. Many of the tribal kids coming to KISS may represent the first generation in their families to go to school or acquire literacy. But did their parents and grand-parents learn nothing from their elders?

There is a striking lack of recognition in much of the literature on tribal education that these cultures developed their own system of education generations ago, meaning a non-school, and remarkably non-hierarchical system of learning, through which they have passed on a wealth of knowledge and strong values, concerning plants, cultivation, hunting, material culture of making everything from a wide range of utensils to houses, dances, myths, a spirit world embedded in the local environment, and customs supporting a cohesive sense of community based in a shared culture and nature-based economy.

**Assimilationist agenda behind boarding schools**

These traditional education systems pre-dated schools by centuries. The *ghotul* system, where older girls and boys took charge of teaching younger girls and boys, is remembered as enormous fun by those who went through it, and it transmitted a huge wealth of knowledge, in the form of what anthropologists quaintly belittle as folk-tales, myths, riddles, songs, dances; and it was/is by no means unique to the Muria Gonds. Every tribal society has, or had, strong traditional systems of education. For example, in Hunter-Gatherer societies, such as the Nayaka in Kerala, as among most traditional Adivasi communities, teaching… is done in a very subtle way. No formal instruction and memorizing here, no classes, no exams, no cultural sites in which packages of knowledge, abstracted from their context, are transmitted from one person to another. Knowledge is inseparable from social life. …knowledge in this context has to do with learning how to behave within relations, in order to keep these relations going, rather than with knowing things for their own sake, as a known detached from the knower. (Bird-David 2005 p.96)

If the mainstream is so ignorant of these traditions that it does not even recognise their existence, how will they find any space in large residential schools?

Several things are alarming about the tendency to promote boarding schools. For one thing, children are being drawn away from their communities, while the education they are offered is almost completely de-linked from their own culture (Nambissan
The underlying assumption is a need to ‘assimilate’ tribal children into the mainstream. The result is a rapid erosion of the knowledge and value systems at the heart of tribal cultures.

Also, cases of sexual abuse have been uncovered in residential schools for tribal children in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and other states (Zeenews 2010, Seshacharyulu 2014, India Today 2014), and are probably a lot more widespread than reported. And although corporal punishment for children has been clearly illegal in India (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights n.d.), it is still routine in many tribal schools, where physical as well as emotional abuse is widespread, often oriented towards humiliating children away from ‘junglee’ traditional habits or customs, and even use of their own languages (Nambissan 1994 p.2752, Nambissan 2000 p.199), despite the fact that a series of educational policies has advocated use of mother tongue / tribal languages. Most Adivasi societies simply do not use harsh punishment as a way of disciplining children at all – a huge contrast to Ashram school norms, and a major, if often overlooked factor, in explaining high rates of school drop-outs (Kakkoth 2014 pp.236-240).

In many ways, all these boarding schools are reminiscent of the assimilationist policy of forcing children from indigenous families into residential schools throughout the USA, Canada and Australia, where they were systematically detribalised, forbidden to speak their own languages or practice their own religions – the ‘stolen generation’ which forcibly removed over 100,000 indigenous children from their families in each of these three countries, which the Prime Ministers of Canada and Australia have formally apologised for (UN 2009, World Socialist Web Site 2009, Velez 2013, The Guardian 2015, Creative Spirit [2016] and Australians Together [2016]). What was aimed at was Cultural Genocide.

‘The strategy was to separate children from their parents, inculcate Christianity and white cultural values upon them, and encourage or force them to assimilate to the dominant society.’ (UN 2009 pp.4-5)

The similarities with what is happening in India today are many. Adivasi children in Ashram and private residential schools are regimented through discipline, often starting with having their hair cut short, against tradition, just as Native American and Aboriginal children were forced to. In food, religion and festivals, language, knowledge and value systems, traditional culture and community are being undermined, replaced with a hierarchical, competitive,
standardised model.

True, KISS, like Tata Steel in Jharkhand, promotes tribal languages. But where we have seen this model in operation, it seems that it may be largely symbolic, with an eye to appeasing tribal sentiment and collecting funds from UN agencies, with little attempt to promote tribal languages as a medium of instruction and debate. Nevertheless, the Jharkhand Government’s recent move to introduce multi-lingual/tribal language textbooks for Standards 1 and 2 into tribal schools is clearly a step in the right direction.

A useful example to bear in mind is that school children all over New Zealand learn some of the Maori language, and research students at every university in New Zealand have the right to be instructed in Maori and to write their PhDs in Maori.

We need to emphasize this point: residential schools for tribal children being promoted across India right now reproduce the forced assimilation tactics used to subdue indigenous peoples across North America and Australasia. Firstly, in a similar mainstream belief, derived from colonial rule, that sees tribal culture as based on superstition and ignorance, with total non-recognition/denigration of tribal knowledge and value systems. A more sinister purpose, that one can see constitutes a ‘deep agenda’ is also, as in USA, Canada, and Australia, the brain-washing of younger generations to facilitate the takeover and plunder of their ancestral lands, making the youth participate in this plunder, and undermining movements of resistance against these takeovers. The fact that Vedanta and Nalco donate funds to KISS demonstrates this vested interest.

The Maoist issue and abductions or violence perpetrated by Maoists on villagers, with resulting insecurity, are often given as a reason for establishing residential schools. But we need to question whether moving children away from their homes on the pretext of safety is a proper answer to this issue. Wouldn’t having good functional schools running in these areas, despite all odds, be the best solution, where children actually get educated and develop critical thinking to analyse their social and political realities themselves? We also need to bear in mind the repeated use of school buildings by security forces, which have very often been converted into their camp/quarters, before trashing the buildings and their accessories – reported from all the Maoist-affected states and censured by the Supreme Court:

‘The Hon’ble Supreme Court of India has directed the State Governments to vacate the educational institutions from operation by security forces […2007]… Under no circumstances, educational
institutions should be used for housing security forces or bear the signs of threat. (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights 2012, section 3.4.2).

This order has often been ignored. For example, in 2011, Gladson Dungdung found security forces occupying schools in villages in Saranda Forest. They had trashed these schools and destroyed their infrastructure and food supplies on suspicion that the teachers had been Maoist supporters. Instead of the usual educational pictures adorning the walls, kids’ drawings showed accurate depictions of different kinds of guns (Dungdung 2015 pp.143-8).

To conclude this overview, studies on tribal education in India tend to focus on quantitative factors, such as high dropout rates and persisting low levels of literacy, especially among girls and women. Policies such as the recent Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana are aimed at boosting Human Development Index figures, with almost no thought for qualitative inputs. What is needed is for more people to comprehend what is at stake, in terms of losing the knowledge and value systems of India’s most ancient and sustainable cultures, that developed over centuries.

India may be the world’s largest democracy, but its indigenous models of democracy are much more democratic than the model derived from the West that encourages corporate funding for political parties which lock horns in ceaseless competition. In many ways, there is far more for the mainstream to learn from tribal cultures than for them to learn from the ‘mainstream’. Is there any point of confluence between the two streams, so that they can begin to enrich each other?

**Nai Talim**

The residential school model being promoted is also in contradiction to the principles of Gandhi’s *nai talim* or ‘new path’ to ‘basic education’, which he drew up in 1937, and which many institutions have tried to put into practice, with varying results. In essence, these were: free, compulsory education for 7 years; mother tongue as medium of instruction; self-reliance through manual and productive work; and a ‘unity of head, hand and heart’ (*Teacher Plus* 2015, Gaur 2015).

Among other aspects, making gardening part of the curriculum, which has been revived in Anand Niketan, the school Gandhi started at Sewagram, has vast possibilities in general (Coelho 2015, Kumar 2015), and is of particular relevance for tribal cultures, which have such vast expertise in cultivating plants, and
ethnobotanical knowledge of plants and their uses (e.g. Ramnath 2015).

Gandhi saw his *nai talim* as the ‘best gift’ he gave the world.

Yet,

Gandhi has not just been criticized for his system of education, but practically pilloried. It is truly unfortunate that those who were responsible for carrying forward *nai talim* reduced a whole system to a mediocre practice…. It is over 75 years since he launched it and his followers have long abandoned it. (Ramdas and Sastry 2015)

What Gandhi was offering was a radically new path, to inculcate values of equality, justice, non-violence, and holistic thinking.

*Nai talim’s* process of instruction, according to Gandhi, was handicrafts. This meant that the purpose was not production of handicraft products, but to use the natural gifts and curiosity of the child to work with their hands to teach all subjects, including values. The idea was to teach through handicrafts, not teach handicrafts alone…. It was not to make items to cater to the tastes of tourists but rather it was to manually make such items that contribute to the village economy. Unfortunately, it was reduced to “vocational training” for poor village children. In fact, today most people equate *nai talim* with vocational training, divorced of the pedagogical processes that were to be intrinsic to it. (ibid.)

Again, this is of particular relevance to Adivasi societies, which have preserved strong living traditions of making a wide variety of items, from houses to baskets, weapons, tools and ornaments. Gandhi’s emphasis on skills learnt through one’s hands and making things is every bit as radical now as it was in 1937, since it cuts across traditional caste occupations, and counters the prejudice, that schools still instill, even in tribal villages, that working with the hands is ‘dirty’, and ‘below the dignity’ of ‘educated’ boys and girls.

A contradiction is evident in the character of Ashram schools, which drew inspiration from Gandhi’s ashrams and *nai talim*, and were supposed to encourage tribal traditions, yet have ended up promoting an assimilationist mainstream education, with very little cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Their pre-Independence history is linked with Ashrams that Gandhi and some of his prominent followers set up in Gujarat and Maharashtra, which played a prominent role in the Freedom Struggle. After Independence ‘Ashramshalas’ were institutionalised in 1953, and Thakkar Bapa brought the model to Odisha and other states during these early years (Desai 1969 p.57, Anand 1994 pp.65-76).

By contrast, Gandhi’s emphasis was on village schools; and this is where the concentration of Adivasi children into residential schools far from their village communities contradicts the *nai talim*
most fundamentally. It also contradicts the Acharya Ramamurti Report of 1990, that brought a Gandhian perspective to bear on educational trends, for example in its emphasis on decentralisation, use of mother tongue, and productive work. Gandhi’s model of education was intended to support the ‘village republics’ envisaged in the concept of Swaraj.

Basic education was an embodiment of Gandhi’s perception of an ideal society as one consisting of small, self-reliant communities. To him, Indian villages were capable of becoming such communities; indeed, he believed that Indian villages were historically self-reliant, and the great task now was to restore their autonomy and to create the conditions necessary for economic self-sufficiency and political dignity in villages. (Kumar 1993)

The relevance of Gandhi’s model is increasingly recognised by many of India’s most experienced educators. Many believe that his ‘best gift’ was something way ahead of its time, and is much needed right now.

In terms of self-sufficiency, supporting most of their needs from the land with their own skills and labour, tribal villages are among the closest villages to the swadeshi ideal in India today. Gandhi’s nai talim could help revitalise tribal village schools, before they get completely abandoned in the rush to take over Adivasi assets.

Basic Education grew out of a longing to find an alternative to the explicit and hidden violence of normal schooling. A system of schooling that re-enforces inequality and injustice by deliberately rejecting the weak, economically or academically, is a kind of violence. It promotes an attitude of survival of the slickest and marginalization of the poor. A schooling that takes no account of each individual’s gifts and potential, nor the needs of the community is destructive for both the individual and the society. Learning that dries up originality, reflection, imagination, and compassion is deadening. When a child is transplanted to an unfamiliar, artificial and hostile environment that is disconnected from home, family and familiar language, it is a violent uprooting.

Much of what is accepted as normal is in fact very abnormal – to herd young children together and to confine them in a limited space; to learn an alphabet of a language when you have no grasp of basic vocabulary, to spend long hours sitting with very restricted use of hands or feet are all signs of being against nature. (Sahi 2015)

The Need for Alternative Models

Many other, culturally sensitive models are on offer in tribal areas of India, from smallscale multi-lingual and democratic schools to the communitisation programme set up in Nagaland, where village communities exercise control over teachers’ salaries and even
what is taught in schools, and how. We have both seen heart-warming examples of tribal schools, that make use of local languages and motivate children into learning and thinking, through a sense of respect and fun, from West Bengal and North East India, through Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

Some of these schools were originally inspired by Gandhi, such as the Imlee Mahuaa school near Kondagaon in Chhattisgarh, though this has shifted its emphasis towards being a ‘democratic school’, where the kids decide what they want to learn, when and how. As Gandhi suggested, this school makes use of Gondi and Halbi to supplement Hindi, and English as a language some children wish to learn, and emphasizes teaching through handicraft skills (http://www.imleemahuaa.org). This is in the context of South Chhattisgarh, where civil war has disrupted normal life in hundreds of tribal villages, and a large number of village schools have been closed; and where very few schools draw on the rich legacy of Gondi and other tribal languages (Ramnath 2003, 2015).

Several other tribal schools use this model of ‘democratic schools’, that traces back to John Dewey (1915/2004), among others. One is Muskaan, a school for children of slum dwellers in Bhopal, many of whom are tribal families who were displaced or migrated to the city a generation or more ago (http://www.muskaan.org).

One of the most impressive models, that could well be applied to tribal areas in central India too, is the Nagaland Government’s communitisation of education programme, which since 2002-3 has handed over responsibility for management of primary and middle schools, administrative, academic and financial, to village communities. Decisions are managed through Village Education Committees (VECs) in every village: an ultimate decentralisation of power, that has solved the problem of absentee teachers through a ‘no work, no pay’ policy (Outlook 2008, Humtsoe 2013).

This example is very significant for showing the possibility of democratic, decentralised village schools in tribal areas. Throughout central India, the lack of genuinely democratic structures and the failure to decentralize key decision-making processes is generally accepted as a key cause of the Maoist insurgency (Dandekar and Choudhury 2010).

Rather than symbolising the past, in many ways tribal cultures represent immense possibilities for India’s future, since
practices of long-term sustainability are so central to these cultures, which have based their economy and use of resources on ecological principles. The big residential schools being promoted for tribal children represent a kind of ‘factory schools’, promoting a standardised system of ‘McEducation for all’, undermining knowledge and value systems that developed in symbiosis with nature over centuries (Jain 2013).

‘Upliftment’ is a common codeword for assimilation. Increasingly the aim includes a Hindutva agenda, that is closely modelled on Christian missionary programmes. Recently, Santal Adivasis in West Bengal have objected to handing government schools over to the Rama Krishna Mission. With increasing promotion of residential schools on a public-private-partnership model, replacing Adivasi nature and cultivation-based festivals with standard Hindu festivals, and the Hinduizing of Adivasi names are just part of a widespread programme of undermining Adivasi culture (Sundar 2010, Bagchi 2016).

What is needed is clearly a confluence of local and national or global knowledge systems, reversing the hegemony of mainstream epistemologies, so that learning starts to flow both ways, with teachers starting to learn tribal languages, folklore and customs of interaction from children, and a more holistic, culturally sensitive curriculum in schools, which function as an extension of village communities. Rethinking education is becoming an urgent need in many places. In Adivasi areas, this need is acute, since residential schools are at the core of a programme of cultural genocide. Does the future need people programmed by school to compete for corporate jobs, or people in love with learning, who can think for themselves, confident of who they are and where they come from?

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