

CONFRONTING A PEDAGOGY OF ASSIMILATION:  
THE EVOLUTION OF LARGE-SCALE SCHOOLS FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN IN INDIA

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**Abstract.** The policy of assimilating, ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘de-tribalizing’ indigenous communities by placing their children in boarding schools has been increasingly discredited and abandoned, most publicly throughout North America and Australia since the 1980s and 1990s. In India, this history and its dangers are little known, with relatively little awareness of how they are being replicated among many of India’s tribal communities. Education-induced assimilationism has evolved more slowly in India, but has now reached a larger scale than in any other country, with many similar manifestations to the ‘stolen generations’ model that has created outrage in Australia, Canada, the USA and elsewhere. This article traces the evolution and dangers of this history and the present situation in India.

### Introduction

‘Assimilation’ encapsulates a policy aim regarding indigenous peoples that has often appeared to many people as reasonable and humane – certainly in contrast to the policy of extermination alongside which it often grew up. It is also connected with nationalist ideologies. Alexis de Tocqueville’s influential study of American democracy argued that ‘the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish’ in the face of an advancing ‘civilization’ that was inherently democratic and – unlike the example of Spanish imperialism – was managing to annihilate them with ‘respect for the laws of humanity’.<sup>2</sup> De Tocqueville visited America during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, whose anti-Indian policy culminated in the Cherokees’ ‘trail of tears’ expulsion from their homeland, and de Tocqueville’s statement that Indian nations were being allowed to perish ‘without shedding blood’ proved to be far from the truth.

In the words of Richard Henry Pratt, who started the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 as a humane alternative to the policy of extermination, the policy of effecting assimilation through residential schools was intended to ‘Kill the Indian and Save the Man’. Assimilationism became the policy towards native Americans, Aborigines and other indigenous peoples for over a

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<sup>2</sup> *Democracy in America* (Vol. 1, 1835, Ch. 18). Tocqueville’s argument is summarized with quotations in a blog by Jason Pappas in *Liberty and Culture*, June 2008, at <http://libertyandculture.blogspot.co.uk/2008/06/tocqueville-on-american-indians.html>

hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth until the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Gradually, as criticism of residential schools gathered pace throughout North America, Australia and New Zealand – initially because of the evidence of widespread physical and sexual abuse and neglect – assimilationism became discredited as a policy. It came to be felt that the forced assimilation attempted in schools was profoundly misguided, and that there was much of great value in indigenous cultures from which mainstream society could actually learn, with mutual benefit to both sides.

The theory underlying assimilationism could be characterized as one of cultural racism,<sup>4</sup> the idea that some cultures are superior to or more ‘civilized’ than others. Prime ministers of Canada and Australia have issued public apologies for the residential school policy in their respective countries and its abuses. In Canada this included a recognition that the policy involved cultural genocide, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been set up to attempt to make amends (*The Guardian* 2015).

In this article, we summarize the history and present situation of schools for tribal children in India. In the first section, we summarize the colonial-era history, including similarities and differences in comparison with other countries. In the second section, we show how a policy of assimilation underlies present policy in practice, even though it was rejected during the first decades of independence in favour of a policy of ‘integration’. In the final section, we examine a new model of industrial-scale, industry-funded schools, along with their cultural and psychological impacts, and small-scale educational efforts that offer an alternative to the mainstream model, which constitutes, in effect, a pedagogy of assimilation.

### **Colonial models**

In every region exposed to European colonisation and takeover, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Christian missionaries accompanied the colonists, and in most cases, at various periods, set up schools to bring ‘enlightened’ knowledge to native ‘heathens’. From the *reducciones de indios* throughout sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Latin America (Caraman 1976; Hemming 1978) to the ‘stolen generation’ boarding schools of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries that indigenous children were forced into throughout North America and Australasia (Adams 1995; Milloy 1999), policy towards indigenous peoples involved the implementation of a

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<sup>3</sup> *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59. Reprinted in Pratt 1973: 260–271. See <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>

<sup>4</sup> Carol C. Mukhopadhyay and Peter Chua, ‘Cultural Racism’, in *Encyclopaedia of Race and Racism* at [www.encyclopaedia.com](http://www.encyclopaedia.com), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cultural-racism#B>

‘civilizing mission’ through schools. In most cases these schools were residential, involving the removal of children from their families for long periods, and also compulsory, as was conversion to Christianity, accompanied by a ban on pupils practising their own religion at school. Common features involved cutting children’s hair short and giving them a new Christian name at their enrolment. Often tribal languages and many other customs were also forbidden, with severe punishments and humiliation for offending children, in a conscious attempt to ‘detritalize’ the population with the aim of transforming their children into ‘agents of change’ in their communities.

As British rule consolidated a composite whole called ‘India’ during the nineteenth century, certain communities came to be classified as ‘tribal’, and regions where such groups predominated became known as tribal areas. In many of these areas, mission schools were set up for tribal children during the same decades as those in North America, Australia and New Zealand, a practice that gathered pace from the mid-nineteenth century, though the power and influence they exerted were different in India, due to scale of the population, as well as the religious context. The first schools for the children of tribal communities were set up by Christian missionaries of the various denominations that were allowed and encouraged to work in India. These schools were usually established with the approval of government administrators, who in effect allowed tribal regions to be parcelled out among the various missions established: for example, among the Kondhs in Orissa, different areas had Lutherans, Baptists and Roman Catholics, who all established schools by the 1900s (Padel 2010). S.C. Roy’s path-breaking anthropological monograph on the Munda (1912) ends with a chapter extolling the good work, including schools, that missionaries were bringing to the tribals. In India such mission schools did not always insist on conversion to Christianity, though some did, and many of the pupils were orphans, whose lack of an immediate family made them fertile ground for conversion, which gradually gathered pace around such schools. In some areas, such as northeast India, where most people were not Hindu, the greater part of many tribal peoples converted en masse during the early twentieth century.

Awareness of the historical tendency worldwide for mission schools to undermine traditional cultures and promote conversion seems to be why Verrier Elwin (an anthropologist who exerted a unique influence on tribal policy in the first twenty years of independence) published attacks on Roman Catholic schools in Madhya Pradesh in 1944 (Prasad 2003: 94-99; Sundar 2005). This was after he joined the movement to set up ashram schools for tribal children, which were based (or supposed to be based) on Gandhi’s system of ‘Basic Education’. Ashram schools started in

Gujarat from the 1900s, gathered pace during the 1920s and spread soon afterwards to Maharashtra, the Central Provinces and other regions (Joshi 1985).

In North America, from the second half of the nineteenth century, assimilating the natives became established policy, and forcing their children into mission-run boarding schools played a crucial role in this. Gradually the draconian nature of these boarding schools and their underlying policies of assimilation came to be questioned and rejected (Adams 1995; Milloy 1999). In India mission schools did not have such a harsh impact. For a start, children were not ‘stolen’ from their families against the wishes of them both, and schools served only a small proportion of most tribal populations. What is clear, however, is that in many tribal areas mission schools played a major role in the emergence of a new identity and ‘class formation’, in effect creating the nucleus of an ‘educated tribal elite’ (Bara 1997, 2002). This policy was actively encouraged by India’s first Education Commission under F.W. Hunter in 1882, the aim being to create a class of tribal people who could ‘interpret’ the government’s wishes, just as Macaulay’s famous Minute of 1835 had advocated for India in general (Nambissan 2000: 177-8; Veerbhadranaika 2012: 10). This trend, for education to promote class formation among tribal communities, continues today (e.g. Higham and Shah 2013).

As one prominent example of the kind of impact mission schools were having, it is significant that Birsa Munda – India’s best known Adivasi freedom fighter – was mission-educated, having attended a German Lutheran school as a young teenager, for which he had to convert to Christianity in 1886. His movement against British rule emerged out of the ‘Sardar agitation’ (1858-95), which was basically a movement to hold on to traditional tenancy rights at a time of widespread dispossession and exploitation. Several missionaries supported this agitation in the early years, but around 1887 the Lutherans withdrew their support, and many Mundas converted from Lutheran or Anglican Protestantism to Roman Catholicism when the Revd Constant Lievens (among others) supported them. However, Lievens left when he was reprimanded for his support by the Commissioner for Chotanagpur, turning the Sardar agitation more completely anti-European. Some accounts say that Birsa himself, aged 12-15, was expelled from school for criticizing the Lutheran missionaries on the land question and joined the Roman Catholic Church before forming his own syncretic approach to religion (Singh 1983: 34-41; Dhan 2006: 37-40).

There is one area in colonial India where residential schooling seems to have had the same kind of catastrophic impact as in Australia and North America. In the Andaman Islands, the population of Great Andamanese tribes declined drastically: at the time of British settlement in 1858 it was estimated at 5-8,000, divided into ten ‘tribes’, but declined to an estimated 625 in 1901, and is down to about fifty individuals today. Similarly on Little Andaman the Onge have

declined from 2-3,000 at contact to less than a hundred today (Portman 1899; Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Mukerjee 2003; Venkateswar 2004). While hostile encounters killed some, most deaths were caused by diseases brought by settlers and convicts, including influenza, tuberculosis, syphilis and measles (an epidemic of which in 1877 killed a large number). These diseases were understood to have spread through the Andaman Homes, much as residential schools in Canada spread death through disease with an astonishingly high mortality rate. The Andaman Homes were started in 1863, when men implicated in a killing were first incarcerated, in leg irons, with more following as 'hostages'. From the 1860s onwards these Homes, in various guises and locations, served as a collection point for the Great Andamanese, at times under duress, with schooling being offered to most Great Andamanese children. During three months in 1865, all fifteen babies born to Andamanese women in these Homes were still-born or died, a foretaste of the dramatic decline in fertility faced by both the Onge and the Great Andamanese. It is estimated that none of the 150 children born in the Homes survived beyond the age of two. The Andaman Homes were intended to teach children 'good manners, to wear clothes, use a fork and knife, practice cultivation and to learn new trades and handicrafts, along with the English language'.<sup>5</sup> Similar attempts have been made in recent times, including with Jarawa children (*Asia Sentinel* 2010; *Survival International* 2010; Saini 2018), in a context in which the Jarawa were 'pacified' only in about 1996, retaining their language and culture in a situation of fairly chaotic culture contact that has included sexual abuse and prostitution (Mukerjee 2003; Venkateswar 2004; Mukerjee and Giles 2014).

Meanwhile, mission schools that 'educated' tribals in the rest of India did encourage some of them to assimilate into mainstream society as schoolteachers, nurses and gradually in most professions, while those from remoter areas or whose children did not attend school remained 'unassimilated'.

### **The policy of assimilation**

The intention in independent India was to avoid a policy of assimilation. As Indian anthropologists often emphasize, India adopted a middle path of 'integration', avoiding the colonial policy extremes of isolationism and assimilationism (Singh 1982). Yet several of those who were most influential on tribal issues were strongly in favour of assimilation, including the sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1943/1959) and the tribal educationalist A.V. Thakkar, who in 1941 gave a speech on 'The problem of Aborigines in India' at the Gokhale Institute of Economics and

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<sup>5</sup> From an article by T.N. Pandit ('The tribal and the non-tribal in the Andamans Islands', 1985: 111), quoted in Venkateswaran 2004 p.102.

Politics in Pune, which published Ghurye's book two years later. This speech concludes by arguing that “*assimilation*” is the proper policy, so that tribals can become “part of the civilized communities” in the country, on an equal footing with others’ (Thakkar 1941: 26). A key aspect of assimilation, evident in this speech, involves drawing indigenous children into mainstream, non-tribal languages. Thakkar starts by advocating the use of tribal languages in primary schooling, while younger tribal children are taught the mainstream regional language:

The aboriginal children should be taught through the medium of the provincial language pertaining to their area and in the script of that particular language. Generally all tribals are conversant to some extent with the provincial language, besides their various tribal dialects. Only young children may find it difficult to follow the provincial language, in which case they should be taught the provincial language through the medium of the tribal dialect in the lowest classes. For this purpose the teachers must be conversant with tribal dialects. (ibid.: 15)

This directive is contradicted by an exchange that took place in the Constituent Assembly on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1949, when Jaipal Singh Munda confronted Thakkar on the language issue after asking him whether he knew any tribal languages himself:

I am glad he is honest enough to admit he knows not a single Adibasi language.... I would venture to suggest that if his workers were to learn the language of the people...their work would be more valuable. If, for example, his team who are in southern Bihar and the Chota Nagpur Plateau were to learn Santali, Uraon or Mundari – all of which I speak – they would be treated with less suspicion than they are now. (CAD 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1949)

This exchange is revealing, since it shows that Thakkar's ashram schools were generally not using tribal languages, despite his 1941 statement that primary schoolteachers must know them. Since Thakkar did not learn any himself, it is not surprising that few of his teachers did so. The tendency among educationalists to call tribal languages ‘dialects’ is also noteworthy, and persists today, despite linguistic studies that have established the existence of several hundred distinct tribal languages in India, whose present rapid decline seems largely due to this failure to use them in schools (Devy 2004). Also, despite Thakkar acknowledging a need to train tribal teachers, his comment that ‘for some years to come’ it would be necessary to employ ‘people from the plains’ (i.e. non-tribals) shows how the system actually put in place was one where the vast majority of schoolteachers were non-tribals, who did not know tribal languages and were therefore unable to teach in them. It is clear from many sources that this system has basically

persisted ever since, with children in ashram schools often systematically punished for speaking their own languages (Saxena and Mahendroo 1993; Nambissan 1994 and 2000; NCERT 2007).

This disjunction between a policy recommendation for mother-tongue teaching and the reality that schools have hardly ever implemented this recommendation in practice has continued ever since. A prime reason is that recruiting non-tribal teachers in schools for tribal children, whose languages they do not know, has remained the norm from then until now. The Ramamurti Committee report brought out the fact that fewer than ten per cent of teachers in tribal schools were from Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities (1990: 76). Since then, this proportion has increased significantly in some schools, but in most the prejudice that was evident in Thakkar's time, compounded by lower qualifications among STs, has ensured that a majority of teachers are non-tribals. Even when many STs are recruited as para-teachers through a policy of affirmative action or reservation, as in a District Primary Education Programme funded by the World Bank throughout India from the 1990s, they have been poorly trained and under-paid, with minimal job security, and remain at the bottom of the school staff hierarchy (Higham and Shah 2013).

It is clear from his 1941 speech, among many other factors, that Thakkar and his followers did not look on tribal culture as something to be learned from, but as in essence 'backward', which is why he believed that tribal children should assimilate to and learn from the mainstream, using boarding schools to 'mould' them. Shifting cultivation became one symbol of this 'backwardness', with Elwin viewing it in a positive light, as a sophisticated system, not as inherently destructive, while Ghurye and Thakkar followed the Forest Department view that the practice was destructive and 'uneconomic':

The Adivasi is proverbially lazy in addition to being illiterate. Probably that is why he is so much attached or addicted to 'shifting cultivation', which requires much less labour than the more useful plough cultivation. If it is desired to make him a hard-working citizen, it is necessary to tackle the Adivasi child first. Hence the necessity for residential vocational schools, where the child can be moulded into an industrious citizen. Such education must be made absolutely free in most cases. (Thakkar 1941: 16)

The call for assimilation by Thakkar and several others in the Constituent Assembly debate on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1949 is unambiguous:

the more we are able to know of these tribes the better it is for the country as a whole and to assimilate those tribal people as fast as we can in the whole country of the nation as we are now. (CAD 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1949)

As Constituent Assembly Member Shri Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri put this in December 1949:

We want to assimilate the tribal people. We were not given that opportunity so far. The tribal people, however much they liked, have not been given the opportunity of assimilation. (Ibid.)

By the time of India's first two major reports on tribal policy (Elwin 1960; Dhebar 1961), its overall policy is clearly stated as one of integration rather than assimilation, requiring an educational approach that integrated tribal culture and language into mainstream knowledge. The Dhebar report is particularly strong on the need to create 'an ambience of tribal culture in the schools' (Dhebar 1961: 225) in order to reverse the continuous drain of tribal children from village to city, without, however, spelling out many details. It also stressed the requirement for textbooks to be produced in at least 'the major tribal languages', while recording quite strong resistance to this idea from some within state governments (ibid.: 226). It also highlighted a need to adapt school timings so as not to conflict with local agricultural activities and festivals (ibid.: 224). It records a rapid increase in the number of tribal schools – 4,000 in the first five-year plan, including 1,000 ashram and *sevashram* schools, and 3,000 more in the next five years – opining that 'as far as possible the idea of a residential school should be encouraged' in view of tribal populations' exceptionally low literacy levels (ibid.: 225). This was despite the obvious fact that boarding schools remove children from the influence of their communities and from their involvement in seasonal work in the fields.

The Kothari Report of 1964 summarized the findings of the first Commission on independent India's overall education policy. From a focus on ensuring 'equality of educational opportunity' in India, it supported the recommendations of the Dhebar Committee for tribal communities, but advocated a rapid increase in the number of boarding schools, hostels and technical colleges for tribal youth. At the same time, it 'redefined' Gandhi's conception of 'productive work' so as to suit tribal youth for jobs in industry, weaning them from backward economic practices:

To the extent possible, such groups have to be assisted in developing more settled ways of living. This calls for a degree of fundamental reorganization in their economy and their way of life ... firstly, development of communications; secondly, transformation of the present system of



shifting cultivation into a developing agricultural economy ... and thirdly, development of a system of education related to the scheme of economic and social development and responsive to the cultural and economic needs of the people. (Kothari 1966: 225-6)

The introduction spells out what the Commission perceived to be the need for ‘a redefinition of [Gandhi’s] educational thinking in terms of a society on the road to industrialization’ (ibid.: 11). This is one area where the Kothari Commission represents a fundamental break with Gandhi’s legacy, especially his concept of ‘productive work’, now redefined from self-employed work-skills under tribal people’s own control towards training them for jobs in the very industries which were starting to displace them from their villages and fields en masse.

Discourse on tribal education is often characterized by complaints that tribal parents withdraw children from school because they are needed at home for agricultural labour. In many ways, it has not been understood that children in tribal communities learn by doing, and that playing alongside their parents and each other transforms play into work, developing skills that are quite different from those learned in schools and technical institutes (e.g. Ramnath 2015: 199-209). It is also rarely noticed that high drop-out rates reflect the general failure to follow another key recommendation of the Elwin and Dhebar Committees, namely to adapt school timings so as to allow children’s participation in seasonal work and festivals with their communities.

Obviously, a fundamental shift occurs when transiting from an agricultural to an industrial economy (Thompson 1964). ST industrial workers and their children tend to turn their backs on agricultural labour (Parry 1999). Yet, in traditional cultures worldwide, children learn by working, and ‘child labour’ in an industrial context and in the western conception is very different from tribal children who grow up working alongside their families (Lancy 2015). Gandhi’s concept of placing work in the sense of traditional skills at the centre of the curriculum was criticised from the standpoint of promoting ‘child labour’, but was well-suited to the aim of integrating tribal with mainstream knowledge, and was in tune with the continuum between work and play that is characteristic of tribal society:

learning among ST children is usually intimately connected to the work process – children learn the names and medicinal uses of plants and trees while accompanying their parents on foraging trips in the forest... When children are away at school, especially when they are sent to residential schools, they lose their connection with this world of labour and their capacity to learn from it.... (NCERT 2007: 25)

The Kothari report, like the Dhebar report, is strong on the need for tribal children to be schooled in their own languages, at least in Standards I and II. The trouble is, as we have seen, that this was not actually taking place; and the ‘integration’ intended to be achieved through ashram schools never happened. For example, despite repeated recommendations to produce textbooks in tribal languages – reduced to those few tribal languages spoken by over 100,000 in the Programme of Action (MHRD 1992: 108) – very few ashram schools have ever used tribal languages in the curriculum, or if so, only as a way of drawing children into school in Standards I and II. Article 350A of India’s Constitution grants the right of every child to receive education in his or her mother tongue, which is one of the three principles of Gandhi’s Basic Education, and it is advocated by experts in learning and indigenous cultures alike (e.g. Mohanty et al. 2009). In other words, in a majority of tribal schools, tribal languages have been sidelined exactly as happened in the overtly assimilationist ‘stolen generation’ schools in North America.

Punishment needs to be understood as a key element in the pedagogy of tribal schools, and one of the first things that most schools teach is discipline. This ranges from timings to standing or sitting in silence, to doing homework, eating food and hygiene – every aspect of life for children in a boarding school is monitored, regimented and routinized. Moreover, for tribal children, the restrictions are again strikingly similar to what happened in the ‘stolen generation’ schools: children’s hair, even girls’ hair, is cut short – the rationale being that it controls lice – clothes tend towards western-style uniforms, tribal ornaments are forbidden, and on enrolment a child’s own name is officially replaced by a Hindu name, just as native American children were given Christian names. Traditional identity is therefore severely undermined from the moment that children enrol. This may apply in many kinds of day schools too, but when children stay in a boarding school – sometimes on a weekly basis, in other cases for months at a time – a major gap is created between themselves and their families and communities. This is precisely similar to the impact that educators setting out to civilize American Indian children aimed for from the later nineteenth century: when their communities were nearby, children often stayed away from schools and were perceived to be reverting to their native languages, cultures and religions. Mission teachers insisted that, in order to achieve assimilation, children had to be completely removed from the influence of their families. A similar attitude is evident, for example, in a Dongria Kondh Development Agency ashram school we visited for Dongria girls (September 2017), in which teachers spoke about changing these girls as an uphill task requiring constant discipline and removal from their villages.

The Ramamurti Report on education makes clear the wide difference between ashram schools for tribal children and Gandhi’s ashram model:

The kind of community life and production work-based education envisaged in the Gandhian model of Ashramshalas are significantly missing in the Government founded Ashram schools run for the benefit of the scheduled tribes. (Ramamurti 1990: 68)

This is one of the first criticisms of ashram schools. From a more recent study, we read:

Most Ashramshalas are poorly run and managed, and their very establishment as ‘low cost hostels’ for Adivasis is one of the reasons. Reports of starvation, ill-treatment and inadequate teaching-learning have been widespread. Periodically, there are cases of children running away from Ashramshalas, of rape and abuse of young girls and death by food poisoning in the hostels and reports of rampant ill health.

Based on their original objectives, most Ashramshalas remain sites for sanskritisation that begins with changing Adivasi names to Hindu names. (Veerbhadranaika et al. 2012: 40-41, 42)

A ‘heavily Sanskritized syllabus’ and a lack of Adivasi input into the management of ashram schools are further evidence of an assimilationist agenda that largely ignores inputs from local cultures and economies. The latest tribal policy report, chaired by Virginius Xaxa, shows how ‘an ashramization of tribal education’ has taken place as part of an overall, undeclared policy of assimilation (Xaxa 2014: 30, 160).

There is much in the history of ashram schools that needs reconstructing. Although their roots pre-dated Gandhi, it was his initiative that promoted them. Two main Gandhian models of ashram schools for tribal children emerged in Gujarat: one under Jugatram Dave at Swaraj Ashram in Vedchhi village, in Valod *taluk* in Surat district, founded in 1923, which inaugurated an ‘Ashram Udyogshala’ (industrial school) in 1929 (Desai 1969); and the other under A.V. Thakkar (Thakkar Bapa, 1869-1951), Laxmidas Shrikant and others, who started the Bhil Seva Mandal at Dahod in 1923 (Jani 2001), which opened its first schools for Bhil children in 1921-23. Altogether it seems that the Bhil Seva Mandal opened five *ashramshalas* between 1921 and 1939 centred around Dahod (in northeast Gujarat), and another thirty from 1953 to 1969, while the Swaraj Ashram set up 25 *ashramshalas* in Surat District between 1928 and the 1950s, when at least the original one was using the local tribal language.<sup>6</sup> Thakkar’s model in particular began to be replicated from the 1920s on, influencing Elwin, who founded the Gond Seva Mandal in 1932 (renamed the Bhumijan Seva Mandal in 1938). Elwin even followed Ghurye for a while in the

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<sup>6</sup> Recounted to us in December 2017 at Vedchi by Uma Sanghamitra, who went to this school during the 1950s and 1960s.

mid-1940s in referring to tribal religion as a form of Hinduism. 'Elwin boasted that along with Gond Seva Mandal and Arya Dharam Seva Sangh he had been able to close down 25 mission schools in Mandla' (Sundar 2005: 86). The Hindu Mahasabha set up a branch in Mandla in 1945, and E.S. Hyde, Commissioner of Mandla, who corresponded with Elwin, mentioned a threat of arson to the Roman Catholic schools there (which had only started in 1935).

Among other aspects, an increasingly widespread Hindutva orientation is evident in ashram schools, which is also manifested in other organizations. The founding of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in 1952 in effect followed on from Elwin's battle against mission schools (Sundar 2005: 100). The VKA has spawned well over 50,000 RSS-oriented tribal schools, expanding in the 1970s from its original area. The (Akhil Bharatiya) Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was set up in Jashpur, another area in Madhya Pradesh where mission schools had been influential, by Ramakant Keshav (or Balasaheb) Deshpande, who first started tribal schools in this area to counteract mission schools around 1948. This was before he resigned from the government to found the VKA, with support from the state government and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), as well as from Thakkar Bapa,<sup>7</sup> the main founder member of another organization promoting tribal education in 1949, the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.<sup>8</sup> Another influential model associated with the RSS is that enshrined in the Saraswati Shishu Mandir schools, which started in 1952 and were formalized in 1977-8 under the Vidya Bharati organization, the educational wing of the RSS. By the early 1990s there were over 5,000 Vidya Bharati schools, growing to over 14,000, with 1.7 million pupils, by 2003.

Under the influence of these elements, a Committee on Christian Missionary Activities was commissioned by the Madhya Pradesh government, chaired by Bhavani Shankar Niyogi (of the Nagpur High Court), whose Report in 1956 led to the severe curtailment of missionary activities in India. What is all too clear, of course, is that many features of the mission school model were taken over by the VKA and other RSS initiatives. For example, the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKA), set up in 1978, was running 120 tribal schools and hostels by 2012 (Sahoo 2014). These activities received a boost in the National Policy on Education (MHRD 1986), which emphasized the idea of promoting a 'non-formal' stream of education for poor, especially tribal localities, opening the door to private networks of schools, which included Vidya Bharati. The NPE also established a Navodaya Vidyalaya scheme for talented children in about six hundred remote districts of the country at free or highly subsidised rates in standards VI-XII,

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<sup>7</sup> 'The legend called Balasaheb Deshpande' by Virag Pachpore [2013], at <http://organiser.org/Encyc/2013/12/23/The-legend-called-Balasaheb-Deshpande.aspx?NB=&lang=4&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=&PageType=N>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bajss.org>

each school having an intake of about eighty new students per year. Although these were not exclusively tribal schools, they seem to have had a similar effect as mission schools in promoting a tribal 'elite'. Similar again are English-medium 'Eklavya Residential Model Schools' for 'gifted' tribal students in districts with a large ST population, which numbered 72 by 2007; and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) schools, which started in 2004 and now number several hundred for girls from ST and other impoverished backgrounds, where girls are removed from their communities 'through a rationale of seclusion' (Balagopalan 2010: 300; Saxena 2012).

*Ekal vidyalayas* (one-teacher day schools, or EVs) were started in Jharkhand in 1986 by an Indian nuclear physicist, Rakesh Popli, and his wife Rama Popli, 'an expert in child education'.<sup>9</sup> They numbered 1,200 by 1996, after which the idea was promoted in other states, especially after 1999, when it was seen as being responsible for the BJP's election victory.<sup>10</sup> EV schools are funded through organizations in the USA, such as the Friends of Tribal Society (Vanbandhu Parishad) and the Bharat Lok Shiksha Parishad, joined by the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF) in 2007.<sup>11</sup> EV schools were estimated to number 23,000 in 2008 and 65,000 in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, the Hindutva element in many tribal schools exerts a form of assimilationism, based on the view that tribal culture is, or should be, based on Hinduism, which needs to be taught more systematically. For example, Sanskrit is often promoted, even as tribal languages are actively discouraged. In the acclaimed Mata Rukmini Devi tribal residential school in Dantewada District in Chhattisgarh, which we visited in April 2017, tribal children get up for a daily Sanskrit class at 5 am, and sanskritic prayers take place throughout the day.

Several reports during the last decade have revealed high levels of sexual abuse and poorly explained deaths in tribal residential schools, among a host of related problems reminiscent of those in North America and Australia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakesh\\_Popli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakesh_Popli)

<sup>10</sup> A majority of the RVKA are *ekal vidyalayas*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.idrf.org/ekal-vidyalaya/>; <http://www.letindiadevelop.org/thereport/index.shtml>. The latter refers to allegations in 2002-3 that the IDRF had been 'funding hate' in Hindutva schools that had an impact on the anti-Muslim attacks in Gujarat in 2002.

<sup>12</sup> The two organizations apparently fund EV schools in different states; FTS in Assam, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Karnataka; BLSK in Uttar Pradesh, Uttranchal, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir – which leaves the northeastern states, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu unaccounted for. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends\\_of\\_Tribals\\_Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_of_Tribals_Society); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekal\\_Vidyalaya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekal_Vidyalaya); <https://www.ekal.org>; and, on promotion of these schools as an election strategy etc.; also Aarti Dhar's 'Making inroads into the tribal belt', in *The Hindu*, 18 March 2004, at <http://www.thehindu.com/2004/03/18/stories/2004031803181300.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Sexual and other abuses have been widely reported at tribal residential schools and hostels during recent years, e.g. Zeenews 2010; ACHR 2013; *India Today* 2014.

What we have seen so far is a tendency to assimilate tribal children to both a Hindutva nationalist ideology, which has involved the participation of tribal men in anti-minority attacks on minority groups,<sup>14</sup> and an industrial mode of production that contradicts the traditions of ‘Adivasi economics’,<sup>15</sup> as well as egalitarian modes of learning and relating that are characteristic of tribal societies. Day schools affiliated to RSS-linked organizations tend to emphasize a narrow, Hindutva nationalism, while residential schooling has removed thousands of children from tribal communities, alienating them considerably from traditional skills, languages, knowledge and value systems, and replacing them with aspirations to acquire mainstream jobs and identities. Residential schooling has increased steadily since independence, and recent trends induct children into educational institutions that break all records for their size and regimentation. As we have seen, only a small proportion of India’s tribal groups attended missionary schools during the colonial era. The industrial scale and manner of several ‘modern’, 21<sup>st</sup> century schools therefore brings the project of assimilating India’s tribal population to a new level, indoctrinating children into mainstream values and aspirations far removed from those of their own communities.

### **The pedagogy of assimilation in industrial-scale private schools**

The 2005 policy known as the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) advocated a more local and culturally sensitive approach (NCERT 2007), while the Right to Education Act of 2009 required (day) schools to be set up near every hamlet. Yet the opposite trend, currently in the ascendant, is for residential schools to be set up on a larger scale than ever before, being funded to a considerable extent by the very mining companies that are seeking to take over tribal lands for their projects. The largest of these is the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), said to be the world’s largest residential school, located in Bhubaneswar, where it schools 27,000 ST children from all of Odisha’s 62 tribal groups, as well as from Assam and other states, offering them ‘free education from KG [kindergarten] to PG [postgraduate studies]’.<sup>16</sup> An extraordinary range of dignitaries have visited the school, invariably greeted by orchestrated clapping from several thousand children sitting or standing in rows:

Approximately 22,500 students, dressed in uniforms of muted pink tops and light-blue pants, sit patiently but expectantly. They have waited for nearly an hour to welcome the latest entourage of

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<sup>14</sup> Froerer 2007; Sundar 2004 and 2010; Bonar 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Title of Chapter 2 of *Ecology, Economy* (Padel, Dandekar and Unni 2013: 21-46).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kiss.ac.in>

international guests—in this case, dignitaries from 23 countries. As word that the guests have arrived spreads, the students' arms shoot up in unison, and they begin to clap out a thunderous, well-rehearsed welcome. (Finnan 2016)

Children as young as six generally reside in this school without a break for ten months of the year, it being located at least a day's journey by bus or train from most of their villages. KISS started in 1993, and within the first few years it was focusing exclusively on ST children. It is promoted by some of India's top policy-makers, including Bibek Debroy, a founder member of Niti Ayog, the apex policy advisory body to the Indian government since 2015 (Debroy 2015). It is funded through its sister institution, KIIT (the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology), by fundraising abroad and by mining companies, including Nalco, Vedanta and Adani.<sup>17</sup> Its charismatic founder, Achyuta Samanta, was made a Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) member in March 2018 by Odisha's ruling party (*Naxatra News*, March 2018).

'Education City' in Dantewada District, Chhattisgarh, is another mega-school for tribal children, funded by the NMDC (National Mineral Development Corporation), whose huge Bailadila iron-ore mine in south Chhattisgarh has dominated industrial life in the region since the 1960s and is presently expanding further (*India Today* 2012; Das 2018). Education City is promoted in the name of saving children from the Maoists and replacing schools trashed or occupied by the security forces or Maoists, like the 'portacabins' and several other residential schools in south Chhattisgarh, including an Adani Vidya Mandir in Surguja District (Save the Children 2013; *India CSR* 2018). Tribal residential schools are also being promoted in other states, such as Tripura, as more convenient and cost-effective than day schools (Jindal 2015).

How should we understand this? Our argument here is that it needs conceptualizing as an extreme form of assimilationism, a means of inducting children as fast as possible into the mainstream. This is partly to generate labour and 'develop' them, but also with a view to undermining tribal movements against displacement and takeovers of land and resources, which have been active and conspicuous in recent years (Padel 2018), by offering free or subsidised education. KISS and Education City in particular evoke the history of 'industrial schools', especially that of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania (1879 to 1918), which gave education to over 10,000 Native American children. Just as 'industrial schools' in North America flourished during the years of rapid industrial expansion based on mining and factories,

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<sup>17</sup> Vedanta: *Hindu Business Line* 2012; Adani in October 2016: <https://odishalive.tv/news/kiss-inks-mou-with-adani-foundation-for-mayurbhanj-institute/>; and <https://kiss.ac.in/about/collaboration-and-partnerships/> (accessed April 2018).

these industrial-scale schools in India's most mineral-rich states have arisen just as these minerals are being exploited as never before.

These schools are examples of what Judith Walker terms 'extraction education', based on her research in British Columbia (BC), whose government has made LNG (liquefied natural gas) central to the province's economy. The purpose of extractive education is 'to align education with resource extraction industries': 'at the heart of this policy is the idea of education for, through and as extraction' (Walker 2018: 78). A 'Skills for Jobs Blueprint' promoted in BC since 2011 has involved a 'reengineering of education' along neoliberal lines that conforms to what Paolo Freire called a 'banking model of education' oriented towards extraction and destruction, based on relationships of domination and exploitation of the earth, as well as of individuals and their labour (Freire 1970/1993).

The belief in assimilationist education depends on a simple, monolithic idea of development. In the words of Tushar Senapati Kanti,<sup>18</sup>

Education is both an indicator and an instrument of development, and its attainment is a major factor behind the accumulation of human capital. Literacy is a useful indicator of the relative development of a society. It is widely realised that societies with a higher percentage of literates have higher levels of development. (Kanti 2015: 7)

Like most writings on tribal education, the focus here is on literacy rates, with little if any questioning of traditional educational and knowledge systems in what were until recently completely oral traditions, but with instead a 'deficit discourse' emphasizing impoverishment rather than positive features (Aikman et al. 2016). Kanti writes of KISS pupils as 'neglected and deprived tribal children', and Samanta's life work as 'a poor man's journey to opulence...that is not for self-appropriation but for the upliftment of underprivileged tribal populace of Odisha and neighbouring states.' At KISS, children are 'molded [sic] as "*change agents*" of their community', so as 'to emulate adapting to socio-cultural economic sphere, hence contributing to nation building' through a program called "NUA MAN NUA SAPAN" (New Minds, New Dreams)'. This is co-ordinated with various other agencies and programmes – 'Life Skills Education' (LSE) and 'Adolescent Reproductive Sexual Health' (ARSH) with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Odisha government – to make sure that 'the superstitions in the tribal culture relating to health and hygiene are not followed'. Similarly the purpose of an 'English Access Microscholarship Program' from 2009, a flagship program of the US

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<sup>18</sup> Deputy Director for Projects and Research at KISS in 2018.



Department of State, is to make the study of English easier and accessible to ‘economically deprived indigenous students’, Also, in addition to a ‘UNICEF-KIIT University joint initiative for the Centre for Children Studies (CCS)’, since 2013 the Bernard van Leer Foundation has helped set up an ‘Early Childhood Program’ through ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education’. The multilingual lab at KISS is an ‘early learning centre’ geared towards inducting children into Odia, rather than using tribal languages for teaching and dialogue.

Overall the assimilationist agenda is clear, not just for the sake of ‘nation-building’, but also to promote globalization that accommodates itself to and makes use of US and UN funds and agendas. Embedded in the discourse are the same ethnocentric assumptions that are characteristic of colonial power structures and that perpetuate neocolonial hierarchies of power, knowledge and values (Parpart 1995; Robinson-Pant 2001), especially for indigenous peoples, whose fundamentally different values, beliefs and customs demand a ‘decolonization’ of education and methodologies of research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). For example, such decolonization has already taken place in New Zealand, where the Maori language and concepts are now promoted in education up to the PhD level and beyond. The KISS discourse, by contrast, characterizes children working alongside their parents as ‘child labour’, while displacement by industrialization, by contrast, provides an opportunity to ‘develop’:

In order to check their vulnerability due to displacement, KISS has enrolled children of the displaced families and the ones supposed to be displaced by various development projects. Tribal youths from the project-affected areas are given vocational and industrial training so that they are absorbed in the industries coming up in their areas and thus get the fruits of development. (ibid.: 12)

The agenda of promoting industrialization in the face of a multitude of tribal movements against industrial projects is obviously implicit, based on a ‘banal nationalism’ (Benei 2011), alongside the pressure on children to internalize the dominant stereotypes of their own cultures as inherently ‘backward’.<sup>19</sup>

The first case study that Kanti presents highlights the ‘poverty’ of a Dongria boy enabled by the US State Department to become the first from his tribe to visit the USA (Kanti 2015: 9). The US-KISS relationship has been strengthened through the writings of the American anthropologist Christine Finnan, who has brought US anthropology students to KISS and argues that, despite obvious similarities with the notorious residential schools for indigenous children in North

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 3, ‘Learning to be backward’, in Kumar 1989.

America, KISS empowers children, offering them opportunity and hope:

Unlike now-shuttered Indigenous boarding schools in the West, students are not forced to attend KISS, and they are not stripped of their tribal cultures and languages; rather, parents eagerly seek out space for their children at KISS, and the school exhorts students to be proud of their heritage and to keep their languages and cultures alive. In reality, students inevitably lose some of their native language and cultural fluency through lack of use and exposure, and they are likely to assume that the languages used at KISS—and the beliefs, values, and behaviors needed to thrive there—are superior to those learned in their tribal villages.

As an anthropologist, this bothers me, but I also know that families all over the world make similar trade-offs when they relocate from rural villages to cities or immigrate to new countries in hope of a better life. Like these families, tribal parents understand that their children will be changed—in fact, that is their intent. (Finnan 2016)

Finnan's joint article with others, 'Living in the present while imagining the future', starts by quoting a girl at KISS:

'I am an adult. I know how to give respect to others. I also know how to give love and affection to younger kids. For instance, when the small kids behave in the wrong manner, I ask them not to do so' (*Sunita, 14 years old, Kalinga Institute of Social Science, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India*).

By most Western measures of adulthood, Sunita would not be considered an adult. She is only 14 years old and a full-time student. However, her conceptualization of the transition from childhood to adulthood upends most temporal distinctions between childhood and adulthood; she does not use age to mark the transition out of childhood, nor does she associate being a student with being a child. Her statement reflects a fluid conceptualization of self that accommodates future roles, responsibilities, and actions within her present self-identification. (Finnan et al. 2016: 1-2)

Arguably, the statement of this fourteen-year-old reflects above all how she has been taught to think and behave, and to pass this on to younger children. A contrast needs to be made with Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire 1992/2014), which starts by recognizing the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, meaning the implicit power structures replicated in the interaction and knowledge conveyed in mainstream schooling (Freire 1970/1993). Finnan's emphasis is rather on 'the capacity to aspire':

Although looking to the future may be a human trait, the capacity to aspire must be developed,

and schools, with their future orientation, have the responsibility to build this capacity. Appadurai (2013) holds that we are all born with the capacity to aspire, but that it develops through having access to people whose aspirations have been achieved and through having opportunities to succeed.

We suggest that students use their imagined futures as adults to motivate themselves to meet school expectations. This is especially true at KISS because, with a population of 25,000 students, order and control are essential. KISS students live in an environment in which all systems (dining, academics, hostels, medical, and recreational) have to function smoothly. This requires that everyone, adults and children, assume sets of responsibilities and behaviors that support this smooth functioning. (Finnan et al. 2016: 8-9)

A considerable number of culturally sensitive models of tribal education are available in India, though on a small scale compared to KISS. Examples include the Tribal Academy at Tejgadh in Gujarat,<sup>20</sup> Adharshila in Sheopur District, Madhya Pradesh,<sup>21</sup> Muskaan in Bhopal, which provides education to displaced Adivasi children using the Gondi and Pardhi languages,<sup>22</sup> Imlee Mahua near Kondagaon in Chhattisgarh,<sup>23</sup> and the Mitra school in Rayagada District, Odisha.<sup>24</sup> These draw on local knowledge and the tradition of critical pedagogy. A Maori Kaupapa is an especially significant initiative in this direction, reversing assimilation in New Zealand, to allow a resurgence of indigenous language and traditions.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the main result of the trend towards residential schooling for tribal children in India is alienation from their communities and traditional economy, producing individuals ‘suited neither for the home nor for the fields’:

Not only are the knowledge and/or cognitive abilities that ST children possess ignored – for example, the capacity to compose and sing spontaneously, to think in riddles and metaphors, and their intimate knowledge of their environment – but schooling also actively encourages a sense of inferiority about ST culture. (Balagopalan 2003)

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sahapedia.org/short-video-ativasi-academy-tejgadh>

<sup>21</sup> <http://adharshila.org.in>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.muskaan.org>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.imleemahuaa.org>

<sup>24</sup> <https://mitramrsk.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/newsletter2010/>

<sup>25</sup> Tuhiwai Smith 1999/2012; Pihama 2015.

The ‘cultural discontinuity’ between school and home draws attention to the rigidity of school organisation and the emphasis on discipline and punishment in contrast with socialisation practices and the lives of children as reasons for non-attendance....

The school regimen of timing, discipline, and hierarchy is especially alien to tribal children socialised in a world where individuality is respected early on, and where parent–child interactions are relatively egalitarian. (NCERT 2007: 24-5)

This alienation manifests itself in many forms (Froerer 2015). The psychological impacts include so-called ‘boarding school syndrome’ (Schaverien 2015). Among different models of boarding schools worldwide are some that are intended for elites (such as ‘public schools’ in Britain and India) – which is where this syndrome has been attested through psychoanalysis – and others for particularly marginalized groups, from workhouses and orphanages in the West to those for indigenous children under discussion here. One feature reported from many kinds of boarding school is the ubiquity of physical, often sexual, and also various forms of emotional abuse and humiliation. It is interesting that the industrial-scale and industry-funded schools for tribal children being promoted in India today are more geared towards inducting school-leavers as workers in industrial projects than were the industrial schools set up during the nineteenth century. The main argument we have presented here is that these schools express a ‘pedagogy of assimilation’ (Gupta 2016) that has evolved out of, and expanded, models promoted both in colonial times and in India since independence.

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