



## Decolonisation of Education: A call from within

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Mainstream formal education as a development tool to assimilate and civilise India's 104 million indigenous peoples (Adivasis/tribals) has done just the opposite. Instead of having positive outcomes it has even failed to cover the entire indigenous population in terms of access. The 2011 census records India's literacy rate at 73% and the Adivasi/tribal literacy at 59%<sup>1</sup>.

That itself speaks of the gaps in infrastructural preparedness, capability or standards to enable an alphabetic and numerical literacy to all. That's just the tip of the iceberg. We're not yet questioning how and why indigenous life ways need salvaging or civilising and how an imposed alien system of education can be used as the medicine to cure us of our 'backwardness'.

Though India's indigenous peoples constitute 12.5% of India's 1.3 billion population, their linguistic and cultural diversity and habits have not been incorporated in the legal, political and policy structures that cater for general education of Indians. Even among various tribes, what is relatable or comprehensible to one isn't to the other—a 'one for all' system is flawed in its very premise that all citizens can be taught or that they learn in the same ways. The reality of the colonial mind-set—as a foundation of nation building—developed by both the British and the Hindu dominant classes discriminate against us.<sup>2</sup> The conventional system of education is seen as contradictory to indigenous, traditional knowledge systems or simply dismissed as inferior. On that premise we already have evidence of an intellectual bias.

Today, trying to make us fit into the templates of modern education is how colonisation of education—of minds, thought processes, creativity, imagination and individuality—takes places. This new, internal colonisation of education kills diversity by



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attempting to make us clones of one another; the yardsticks of a successful student have to do with grades and examinations. If you do not meet certain minimum grades you're just stupid and if you are Adivasi you're naturally stupid.

Even after India's independence from the British in 1947, mainstream education has served to further uphold and continue this colonial process, with frequent infusions of the *Indianised* standards of progress, achievement and success, isolating us more and making us redundant.

The quality of schooling delivered in tribal communities is often sub-standard, leaving children with low levels of literacy and few skills to enable them to get the 'mainstream' jobs that schooling was set up to do.

Children often get lost in the inaccessible, alien and poorly taught materials, leading to high drop-out rates or they become individuals with no connection to, or skills for, the lives their parents' lead.

This is an intellectual alienation that comes from the inherent design of the curriculum and those who implement it. It rests on a notion of superiority of their knowledge systems and our 'primitive, unscientific' ways. A system of learning where we are continually being measured against a set of doctrines that require submission to an alien, colonial (external and internal) agenda set up to

rewire, re-program and create urban and employment-oriented aspirations for entire tribal populations.

This alienation is complete when it is served in a language that's not our own, often leading to native languages being lost and the domination of another language and vocabulary taking over — leading to an indoctrination by new thought patterns.

This attempt of assimilation (linguistically, economically and culturally) also involves processes of influx of outsiders (physical movement into our traditional territories), dispossession and displacement from one's land for the 'greater good of the country' leaving us more confused, isolated and automatically exploited and subjugated.

Decolonisation is an act and a process of resurgence and identity assertion and it begins with a critical examination, engagement and then a "radical break from state education systems—systems that are primarily designed to produce communities of individuals willing to uphold settler colonialism".<sup>3</sup>

Worldwide, indigenous communities have been reclaiming control of the formal education of their children with our most urgent demands being influence over the curriculum, mother-tongue intervention, at least in primary levels of education and therefore the need of native teachers. While we hear of success stories from pockets in Latin America and Canada, in India many NGOs have tried to incorporate these demands and the ethos in educational mediations, filling in gaps left in the public education system, or setting up alternative mediums, yet this is not and cannot be effective precisely because we work within systems that are skewed in favor of the colonizer legacy, conditioning us to think, act and behave in ways that will make us 'model citizens'.

While Indigenous scholars, students and leaders have made substantial inroads in some disciplines of the academy in terms of curriculum and programing, we have been much less successful in gaining the academy's recognition of Indigenous Knowledge systems and intelligence on their own merits, and far less successful in dismantling systems of domination and oppression, dispossession and erasure advanced by the academy. While there are sites of decolonization within academic institutions, they still remain a colonizing force upholding the values of heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism and capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Decolonization of education has to begin with decolonization of the schooling system. Can our knowledge systems thrive and

be transmitted in establishments that are built, owned and run by non-indigenous peoples and mindsets? Even if we have our own curriculum—how can experiences and learning environments be recreated?

Learning for indigenous peoples happens on the land—on fields we plough and harvest, on fishing and hunting grounds, in forests where roots, tubers, mushrooms are picked, firewood is collected and lands where cattle are grazed. A sustainable life for all is transmitted in those workings of everyday life and survival. One learns to take as much as one needs, learns to cut trees in ways that would facilitate resilience and not cause irreversible destruction and we learn how not to cause imbalance in the society we live in. In other words, indigenous peoples' lineages are attached to the environment they are part of. You acquire a philosophy of life and respect for an eco-system and biodiversity, and help maintain it. This is lived-in wisdom—which only flows through relationships between living entities.

What we have with an indigenous curriculum in textbooks within the confines of a classroom is decontextualized knowledge, which is far from being decolonized.

The land and its lessons are both the context and process of this learning which makes sense only when it lives through us. Decolonization of education means reorienting and re-focusing on the importance and urgency of lived-in teachings and learning of the land and advocating for it as a legitimate knowledge system.

Our curriculum, even if incorporated, is mostly taught by non-indigenous folk who can appropriate and reproduce the content but that's all they do and can do with it. Our people don't have the educational qualifications and degrees to obtain teaching positions. Therein lies the paradox of 'indigenous knowledge'—what paperwork was required for our elders and ancestors to transmit survival skills, harmony, co-existence to the next generation? So for us to formally enter academic and learning spaces as teachers we have to be re-colonized. To bring change we have to work within a system that is operating against us. It is a system which conceives us as non-thinking and unintelligent peoples. How much can we affect decolonization in a prejudiced system?

Our formal education systems have effectively 'de-indigenized' us — taken away everything that makes us indigenous. Not only are our children learning alien lessons and mannerisms but are also



Lining up for lunch at the alternative learning centre, West Bengal, India

indoctrinated in a religion and language that's not ours. We often hear parents say that this education has made their children useless: they have an education but have lost the skills to live an indigenous life. These children don't know how to do anything at home. Our children have an education that will place them in companies and organizations that have left many displaced—businesses our forefathers protested against, resisted, died for, were murdered and jailed for. There is no greater tragedy than this. Decolonization is a process of addressing the key question of how will we recognize we're indigenous when everything that makes us indigenous is taken away from us.

Mainstream Education and the medium of its transmission itself is a tool of dominion and suppression. Being educated in Hindi or any of the regional dominant languages and not standard English has left us more ill-equipped for 'mainstream' jobs. This sub-standard education dished out to us is a ploy to keep us dependant and colonised. If we are educated, where will domestic helpers come

from — how will a continuous supply of cheap, labour class be created? Decolonisation of education also is about demanding which colonial ways we'd like to use as a crutch to further our goals — and language literacy of our choice is one way.

Decolonization of education can only truly happen when we stop our dependence on the structured systems that exist. How feasible is that in these modern times and market economy? Decolonization as an act and process takes immense courage — can we refrain from the temptations of an easier, comfortable life, which a school or college degree has a higher chance of getting us in a technologically devised market economy. Decolonization is also a process of sacrifices — demanding not simply to let go of an imposed mindset but an entire lifestyle.

Yes, we need to create alternatives — that's resurgence, a continuous process of claiming our place in establishments — rebuilding and demanding acknowledgement of our own political, intellectual and cultural traditions.

We need new generations of indigenous knowledge producers, reproducers, carriers and custodians, who'll be committed to the regeneration and preservation of our traditional knowledge systems, making the established educational set ups recognize and respect a land-based philosophy, worldviews and an organic pedagogy that has survived millennia.

Decolonisation of education is not a takeover — why would we want to control such a system that aims to make machines of humans — either we dismantle it or eliminate it or transform it into something useful and valuable for us. We choose resurgence of our lived-in wisdom and intellect to fortify our indigenous framework of knowledge empowerment to assert our rights as peoples.

## Notes

1. "Literacy rates of Scheduled Tribes far below national average, says parliamentary panel", *Firstpost*, March 15, 2015 <<http://www.firstpost.com/india/literacy-rates-scheduled-tribes-far-national-average-says-parliamentary-panel-2154745.html>>.
2. The British Empire's conquest and colonisation of India lasted from 1612 to 1947 while the Hindus, as a Supreme Court report acknowledged, colonised this territory around four thousand years ago: "India is largely a country of old immigrants and that pre-Dravidian aborigines, ancestors of the present Adivasis ... were the original inhabitants of India" (January 5, 2011 by a Supreme Court of India Bench comprising Justice Markandey Katju and Justice Gyan Sudha Misra, in Criminal Appeal No. 11 of 2011, arising out of Special Leave Petition No. 10367

- of 2010 in Kailas & Others versus State of Maharashtra TR. Taluka P.S.).
3. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2014. "Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation". *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 3 No. 3. pp. 1–25. <<http://www.decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/22170/17985>>, Accessed January 15, 2018.
  4. Ibid.



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She's the writer of *adivaani*'s Santal Creation Stories for children and *Disaibon Hul*, on the Santal Rebellion of 1855-57.