"Indigenise, nationalise and spiritualise" – an agenda for education?

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This paper explores the relation between "indigenous knowledge" and "formal education" through the juxtaposition of two somewhat different projects, both connected, however, with the current right wing Indian government's agenda to "indigenise, nationalise and spiritualise" education.[1] The first involves the introduction of "Vedic" rituals and astrology into the university curriculum as forms of "indigenous knowledge". The second relates to the typically assimilationist project of educating adivasis or "indigenous people" in ways that highlight cultural "deprivation", and educational "deficiency" and deny them a distinct identity.[2] In both cases, the valorisation of a certain body of knowledge as "indigenous" and its incorporation into a formal system (which then certifies it as "legitimate knowledge") depends on the status and power of the social group claiming "indigenous" status, rather than the substantive content of the knowledge. Indeed, the distinction between "indigenous" and "non-indigenous" is particularly invidious when it comes to knowledge, masking the imbrication of all forms of knowledge in particular regimes of truth and power.

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Indigenous knowledge and formal education

Some argue that indigenous knowledge (IK) is by definition non-formal, intuitive, holistic, local and contextual knowledge, unique to a particular culture, passed down orally or through practical demonstration, and largely empirical or technical as against theoretical. As such, it exists in opposition to – or outside – a system of formal education that aims to transmit "modern knowledge" which is universalistic, codified, standardised knowledge, often compartmentalised into different subjects, and without any particular moral or normative end (see Agrawal 1995 and Ellen and Harris 2000: 4–5 for a summary of characteristics).

This distinction between "indigenous" and "western" knowledge has been shown to be untenable for a variety of reasons (Agrawal 1995, Ellen and Harris 2000). To begin with, both "IK" and "Western" knowledge are heterogeneous, and the circulation of knowledge within a world system often makes precise identification of origins difficult.

Second, since few societies in the world today exist outside the penumbra of a formal educational or developmental system (which transmits knowledge through extension agents, NGOs, etc.), "indigenous knowledge" is

inevitably influenced by contact with "formal school knowledge". In countries like India, especially, a *literate* "great" tradition has always served as a reference for "little" traditions, including, as I show later, scientific practices of astronomy which passed into "common sense" in attenuated form. Third, as Kuhn and others have shown, like indigenous knowledge, much "scientific" knowledge gained within laboratories or universities is contextual and practice-based. Finally, critical educational theorists have long laid to rest the idea that curriculum involves an innocent transmission of "knowledge" that is not at the same time inflected by race, class, or gendered assumptions, or that pedagogy does not involve moral projects of transformation. Questions of schooling – funding, organisation, curriculum – are so contested, precisely because they are at heart debates over national identity, and over who will define and control what is worth knowing (McCarthy and Crichlow 1993).

The politics of indigeneity

The claim to indigeneity or the possession of a specific kind of knowledge, however, in today's context of globally circulating discourses on indigenous peoples (Li 2000) is arguably an attempt to validate the knowledge of certain kinds of people who were previously characterised as ignorant or backward, thereby allowing them some agency in determining their own development. To the extent, then, that claims to "indigenous knowledge" as a distinct category are "political" rather than "knowledge" claims, it would be useful to focus on the political implications and outcomes of such claims. They may not always be enabling.[3] As Li argues, albeit in an environmental context, "the distinctive feature of "indigenous environmental knowledge" is not its content but rather its location in particular agendas . . . The diversity of agendas surrounding the concept of indigenous environmental knowledge forms a field of power within which alliances may be formed, struggles waged, claims made and rights asserted (or denied)" (Li 2000: 121).

This paper is a reading of the political possibilities thrown up by claims regarding indigenous knowledge and its relation to edu-

cation, within a national arena where the definition of who and what is "indigenous" is essentially contested. In the current political context in India, although adivasi groups (officially referred to as "Scheduled Tribes") are increasingly turning to international alliances of "indigenous peoples" they have to contend with the much stronger political formation of the Hindu Right, which is buttressed by a well-developed organisational machinery, funds and above all, control over the national government. In many ways, it is the latter's definition of "indigenous", which has become hegemonic.

The Hindu Right represented by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its associates – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is currently the ruling party in a coalition government, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, and others (collectively known as the Sangh Parivar) – define "indigenous" to mean all those whose religions were born on Indian soil. Muslims and Christians are thus excluded, but Buddhists, Jains, and adivasis included (see Panikkar 1999: xv).[4] Sanghis greet the idea that adivasis (lit. first settler) are any more indigenous than Hindus with consternation and indignation, viewing them merely as "backward" Hindus. Indeed, their preferred term for adivasi is "vanvasi" or forest dweller, to distinguish them from gaonvasis (village dweller) and shahrvasis (urban dwellers). Never mind that many "vanvasis" themselves find the term objectionable with its connotation of savagery or wildness.

"Indigenous knowledge", for the Sangh Parivar, is "Hindu knowledge" or more specifically, "Vedic knowledge". Paradoxically, however, the Sangh sees no contradiction between this and the extensive use of modern technology (e.g., email networks of NRI Hindus to raise funds) or support for nuclear bombs. Presumably, these are equally indigenous since they can be used to bolster "Hindu pride" (against Muslim Pakistan) or make "Hindu" money. No doubt, there are real contradictions within different branches of the Sangh – between supporters of economic autarky like the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, and BJP proponents of globalisation – that reflect in part different social bases (Hansen 1998). Yet, part of the undoubted strength of the Sangh, as of fascist organisations

more broadly, is its ability to reconcile opposites and paper over contradictions in the service of creating a culturally homogeneous identity.

Education, under such regimes, inevitably becomes a key site of struggle. Whereas, in advanced capitalist countries, sociological and educational debates over the politics of identity and difference came temporally after questions of access and equality of opportunity (Brown *et al.* 1997: 13), in contemporary India, the two are closely related. One consequence of the failure of state provision is the increase in the number of private schools. While many of these are purely commercial, two major players in the educational scene are the Catholic Church and the RSS. Thus the promise of a more meaningful common citizenship held out by higher literacy levels, is diminished by increasing class and sectarian differences.
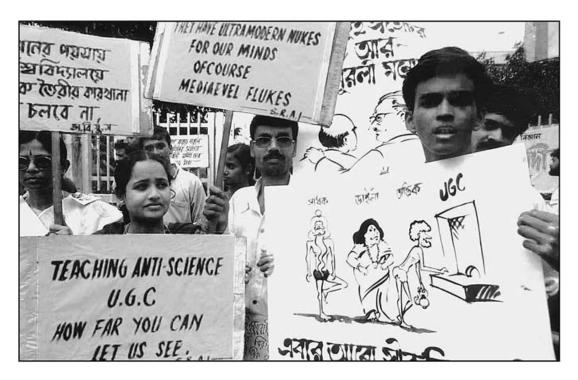
Quite apart from the Sangh's views, in countries like India where colonial education encountered and displaced strong pre-colonial systems of learning, "indigenous knowledge" is almost invariably taken to connote the "great traditions" of Sanskritic and Islamic learning. The Orientalist–Anglicist controversy over the future of Indian education – the policy of grafting Western education on indigenous learning versus displacing the latter entirely – had mostly to do with higher education in these "great traditions". Questions of vernacular school education came much later (Zastoupil and Moir 1999). Zastoupil and Moir (1999) argue that Indian agency contributed to both sides of the debate and the evolution of colonial policy was considerably more complex than is suggested simply by the notion of an Anglicist victory. Yet there is little doubt that the policies engendered by Macaulay's infamous memo of 1835, in which he derided Indian vernaculars as "poor and rude", described Sanskrit and Arabic as "fruitful of monstrous superstitions", and declared that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Zastoupil and Moir 1999: 161–173) had a momentous impact on the Indian psyche. While newly independent India under Nehru consciously adopted a policy of secular, "modernizing" education (whose relation to colonial education is still being unpacked), elsewhere, decolonisation was met

with what Said calls a "revaluation of the native particularity . . . the denied or repressed native essence emerged as the focus of, and even the basis for, nationalist recovery" (Said 1993: 309). Regardless, then, of whether one views the current Hindu Right assertion as a "backlash" or as an offshoot of colonial policy (in its essentialised reading of Hinduism), the current debate on astrology in higher education must be seen in the light of the colonial past to understand the support for it. The Indological assumption that India's greatest contribution to the world has been spiritual (an assumption on which both the NCERT (2000) curriculum and Vedic astrology are based) finds wide resonance among sections of the educated elite.

Vedic astrology

In February 2001, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex body for higher education in India, decided to introduce courses in "Vedic astrology" and "Karmakand" (Hindu ritual) at the "graduate, post-graduate, and research levels". The UGC claimed this would "rejuvenate the science of Vedic astrology in India, to allow this scientific knowledge to reach to the society at large and to provide opportunities to get this important science even exported to the world".[5] The guidelines circulated to universities further stated that:

Vedic astrology is not only one of the main subjects of our traditional and classical knowledge but this is the discipline which lets us know the events happening in human life and in universe on time scale. The distinguishing feature of this subject is that it makes us familiar with time, its nature and feature and its effect on human life and other events and that way it helps us to manage and make optimal utilisation of time. It is a common feature that despite best methods adapted for estimation, the events happen in different way and add to worries, tensions and frustrations in life. *Here Vedic Astrology can help to see the unforeseen, it being the subject dealing with time.* Starting of the courses in Vedic Astrology in universities will not only impart the knowledge of this subject to the people but will also add a new dimension for research in the fields of Hindu-Mathematics, Vastushastra, Meteorological Studies, Agriculture Science, Space Science etc.
(emphasis added).

The UGC promised 1.5 million rupees to each university wishing to start courses in Vedic

Members of the Science and Rationalists' Association of India demonstrate against the creation of a University Honours Degree in Vedic Astrology, Calcutta, India, June 2001. D. Chowdhury/AFP

Astrology. Faculties are to consist of one Professor, two Associate Professors and one Assistant Professor, as well as a library, observatory, computer lab and "horoscope bank". Thirty-five universities have apparently applied for the honour of running this course (Bhargava 2001: page C).

While it is impossible not to blush at the illiteracy displayed by the UGC and its "committee of experts",[6] several letters appeared in the national press supporting the decision. They claimed that "Vedic astrology" had not been studied enough to be conclusively disproved. Like other indigenous traditions (e.g., Ayurveda) it had suffered gross neglect by English-oriented educators, and devoting official resources to it would help to restore the wrongs of the past (see e.g., Ganeshaiah 2001: 719–720). Comparing Vedic astrology to other forms of indigenous knowledge like Ayurveda, is an adept move, especially given the revival of interest in alternative medical systems across the world, and the location of much sought-after indigenous ethno-botanical knowledge within seemingly pointless shamanistic healing practices. The global commodification of Ayurveda through chains like the Body Shop or natural health stores in the West and the only dimly understood but hugely feared and fantasised profits from patenting indigenous knowledge have also fuelled the arguments that such forms of indigenous knowledge should be supported. This market driven and technicist orientation to education fits well with the demands of an economy disadvantageously articulated to global capitalism. Making education job-oriented is ostensibly democratic, even though when accompanied by higher university fees, it is ultimately limited by parental ability to pay.[7]

What makes pro-indigenous knowledge arguments even more persuasive is the long historical process through which astrology has come to be part of "common sense", understood in Gramsci's terms as something which is "continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions

which have entered ordinary life. "Common sense" is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists" (Gramsci 1971: 326). Astrology shares a core with astronomy which was a well-developed science spanning different regions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India. Astronomical centres like the five observatories set up by Maharaja Jai Singh represented the best of Indo-Islamic astronomy in the eighteenth century and Indian and Western astronomers adopted and adapted each other's astronomical principles. For example, a group of Sehore pandits enlisted by Wilkinson, Assistant Resident in Bhopal State, taught "Newtonian science using Siddhantic principles" (Bayly 1999: 257). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Indian astronomy and medicine became a subject of revivalist national pride – among other things, Indian astronomy had a much longer notion of time in contrast to the short time-span of Biblical creation, and fitted better with Darwin's theory of evolution. As the Indian astronomical tradition gained legitimacy and importance, its popular application – astrology – expanded into the countryside, using new astronomical techniques, and was used to dictate sowing times, festivals, etc. This was assisted by the development of a print culture represented by *panchangs* or almanacs (Bayly 1999: 264).

In the process of translation into local knowledge then, astronomy was mediated by a variety of rituals and interpretations that had little scientific import but were part of an everyday regulatory system for life. "Vedic astrology" would fit many of the other criteria proposed for "indigenous knowledge" – it is often intuitive, depends on the performance of particular practitioners, is a system by which many people regulate their everyday lives, e.g., marriages, travel, new constructions, etc.; and has meaning in a particular social context. In short, the popular support for "Vedic astrology" as a university course lies in the combination afforded by the quite legitimate pride in the scientific achievements of pre-colonial Indian astronomy – especially in the face of colonial disdain – and the imbrication of astrology in everyday ritual and culture. No doubt, in the absence of a fundamentalist force creating a

"demand" for astrology, public belief in astrology would not translate into support for university-level courses (Jayaraman 2001). Yet, as Gramsci (1971) shows us, hegemony lies precisely in articulating "common sense" to one's own political agenda and making it stick.

The UGC's decision was fiercely denounced by several leading members of the country's scientific and social science community. Three scientists filed a case against the UGC in the Andhra Pradesh High Court pleading that teaching astrology was "unconstitutional, illegal, malafide, illogical, irrational and against the public interest". They pointed particularly to the ridiculous claim that astrology helps to "see the unforeseen". While the High Court's dismissal of the plea was ostensibly founded on an unwillingness to interfere with a policy decision made by a UGC "Committee of Experts", the judges also cited a nineteenth century edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (!) averring that astrology was a science requiring further study. The scientists then filed an appeal against this decision in the Supreme Court, where it is currently pending.

Among other things, the petitioners argue that introducing astrology into the university is contrary to the Constitution (Article 51 A), which enjoins citizens to "develop a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of enquiry and reform" (Bhargava 2001: 11). If the state becomes a purveyor of organised ignorance, there is little hope for citizens. The plea also notes the wastefulness of expenditure on an untried subject when regular departments are facing a shortage of funds (p. 12), and points to the potential harm faced by astrology students whose degree would have no validity in a future, presumably more scientific, world.

However, the main burden of the plaint (supported by a number of articles by scientists) is that astrology is not a "science" or "*vigyan*" in terms of "verifiability", "falsifiability", and "repeatability". Some articles refute astrological principles – e.g., by pointing out that astral bodies are too far away for gravitational pull to have any impact on human lives. Others rely on statistical data. For instance, Carlson (1985: 425) concludes on the basis of a detailed test that "astrology failed to perform at a level better than chance. Their predicted connection between the positions of the planets and other

astronomical objects as the time of birth and the personalities of test subjects did not exist."

"Vedic" astrology has further demonstrable absurdities such as the demonisation of Saturn as a maleficent spirit when scientists have proved that it is merely a ring of gases, or the astrological explanation of eclipses as due to the activities of Rahu and Ketu (two mythical serpents) swallowing the sun and moon (Puniyani 2001; Shetty 2001). Narlikar also notes that the astrology being touted is not "Vedic", that the notion of occult influence of planets is of later European origin, and that ancient Indian astronomers like Aryabhatta had denounced astrology, as had religious leaders like Buddha and Vivekanand (Narlikar 2001: 2214).

While scientists are justifiably unwilling to call astrology a "science", what is worrying is that none of them have pointed out that astrology is equally bad "social science". In its emphasis on individual fate as determined by the stars or planets, astrologers allow no room for the Durkheimian determination of "social facts" as properties of social collectives, or for the idea that especially, but not only, in sharply stratified societies, individual fates are affected not by their stars but by their caste, class, or gender identities. Indian astrologers claim that they prevent marital disharmony by ensuring that horoscopes match (Vasudev 1989: 3). Yet, no social science journal would accept a comparative study of divorce rates across countries or over time which relied on astrological explanations of compatibility as against changes in family structure, gender expectations, etc.; or a study which argued that societies which regulate their lives on the basis of auspicious times and horoscopes do better at marriages than societies which don't.

The issue, as Parthasarathy and Robinson (2001) point out, is not the carrying over of private faith into public life as some scientists suggest. Indeed, many of them see no problems with suggesting that astrological horoscopes be replaced with genetic horoscopes (e.g., Shetty 2001). In fact, however, Indian astrology is intermeshed with hierarchical structures, e.g., matching horoscopes for marriages is "part of the idea of inter-generational continuity of privilege, status and ritually defined purity" (Parthasarathy and Robinson 2001: 3186). The

implications for women particularly can be deeply problematic – girls born under the "wrong" or "inauspicious" star are held to be dangerous to their husbands' well-being, and thus vulnerable to in-law abuse.

In many ways, the controversy over Vedic astrology parallels the longstanding debate over evolutionism and creation science in the USA. Although legal arguments in the USA on creation science have centred mainly on the separation of church and state, and not on the question of "scientific temper" as in India, there are several similarities in both debates over what counts as science. Differences within a field, e.g., evolution or astronomy, are highlighted by conservatives as casting doubt on the field itself; the lack of proof for astrology or creation science is argued to mean that it can't be *disproved* either. In both countries, the support for creationism comes from conservative forces, seeking to certify religious belief as knowledge. Webb argues that the breeding ground for "pseudo-science" in the USA is the widespread lack of scientific literacy (Webb 1994: xi, 254). In countries like India, the lack of good primary education is compounded by the lack of basic health care and social security support. Where doctors and medicines are difficult to access, one may as well rely on the local astrologer for a charm or a ritual to avoid the evil portent of the stars. Yet this can scarcely be an argument for institutionalising rituals and charms as subjects within a school or university curriculum.

To summarise, astrology has become a part of "common sense" for a large number of people in India. Yet, that a form of knowledge is valued by its practitioners in their daily life or has been historically marginalised by "scientific" knowledge does not necessarily make it worth preserving. Nor can knowledge systems be valued on the basis of the social categorisation (indigenous/non-indigenous) of those who profess that knowledge. What we need to examine is the social context in which a knowledge system is embedded – its contribution to reproducing particular hierarchies of power and privilege or perpetuating particular cultural and ideological practices. In the next section, I look at how the Hindu Right reads the notion of "indigeneity" in the context of adivasi schooling, and the manner in which their schooling,

while claiming to "uplift" adivasis, reproduces traditional hierarchies between upper caste Hindus and others. But this must be read against the wider canvas of state schooling for adivasis, which performs similar functions.

"Indigenous" education for "indigenous people"

The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), the RSS wing devoted to adivasis, was set up in the 1950s to counter Christian missionary organisations working in adivasi areas and prevent conversions. The VKA, which now has branches all over the country, runs play-schools, primary and middle schools, hostels, and health centres, mainly because these are activities that Christian missions are well known for. VKA ideologues note that unlike the Ramakrishna Mission, another Hindu mission working among adivasis, or the Jesuits, many of whose graduates go on to well-paying jobs, their emphasis is not on education per se. As one VKA ideologue said, "Our real and ultimate objective is *Dharm Jagran* (religious awakening). Schools are merely an easy way to draw people into our fold." Indeed, some of them are clear that even teaching Hinduism is not the goal, "our main aim is to keep the Christians out."[8] For the RSS, as for the Nazis, "education is never for its own sake; its content is never confined to training, culture, knowledge, the furtherance of human advancement through instruction. Instead it has sole reference, often enough with implication of violence, to the fixed idea of national preeminence and warlike preparedness." (Mann 1938: 6).

Intrinsic to the RSS notion of *Dharm Jagran* is that adivasis are basically Hindus, and that Christianity destroys their indigenous identity. Hostel students are exposed to a rigorous discipline of morning and evening hymns to Hindu gods, as well as martial exercises (ostensibly for "self defence", but equally handy when it comes to provoking communal riots). All this ensures that the version of "indigenous identity" students graduate with is a deeply Hindu one. The VKA, working through so-called "holy men" has organised *"Ghar Vapsi"* (home-coming) ceremonies in several areas, to bring back Christian converts into the "indigen-

ous" (i.e., Hindu) fold. Several educated adivasi leaders, however, dispute the idea that adivasis are Hindu, and argue for a distinctive indigenous religious status defined by animism and a reverence for nature. Establishing a distinct identity, however, is often difficult for educated adivasis, since everyday state school practice, implemented mostly by caste Hindu teachers, is subtly Hindu. For instance, it is common for adivasi children, who traditionally have no surnames, to have the names of Hindu gods like Ram suffixed in school records.

In terms of language too, RSS ideologues regard Sanskrit as the only indigenous knowledge worth knowing. Unlike Jesuits, who learn indigenous adivasi languages, if only to spread the Gospel better, VKA rituals begin and end with Sanskrit hymns and adivasi languages are treated with contempt. However, RSS attitudes are merely an enhanced version of state practices regarding adivasi languages.

Despite several policy documents and a constitutional provision (350A) recognising that linguistic minorities should be educated in their mother tongue at primary level, there is practically no education in adivasi languages, even those like Santhali, Bhili, Gondi, or Oraon which are spoken by over a million people (Nambissan 2000).[9] Despite the re-organisation of Indian states on a linguistic basis, none of the major adivasi groups managed to claim states for themselves. Consequently, these groups are distributed across state boundaries and learn the official language of the state they happen to live in. Coupled with the fact that only 6% of primary teachers are from adivasi communities, and few of the others bother to learn adivasi languages – the general picture at primary level in adivasi areas is often one of mutual incomprehension for students and teacher. On occasion, adivasi children have been punished for talking in their own languages (Kundu 1994: 31). Even outside the confines of school, educated youth often speak to each other in "school language", perhaps also to mark themselves off from their "uneducated peers". Quite apart from the pedagogic problems this creates, the denigration of adivasi languages amounts to a denigration of adivasi world views and knowledge. Even where adivasis value their own language, given the lack of state recognition and job prospects for subaltern linguistic

groups, they do not necessarily want schools to teach in them. Indeed, for many adivasi parents, the main advantage of schooling is that it gives access to the regional languages, and enables people to deal with the bureaucracy and non-adivasis. One young girl working for the VKA was keen on learning Hindi and Sanskrit as these were "national languages".[10] RSS pedagogy, in the name of promoting indigenous culture, imposes upper caste (and Victorian) expectations on adivasi social relations. Although adivasi gender relations are comparatively egalitarian and women's contribution to the household economy is valued, RSS schools teach girls that their main contribution is as good mothers. However, the regular state curriculum is equally based on the experiences of urban middle class children. Kundu gives the example of children being trained in the art of letter writing through mock missives to the police asking them to take action on disturbance by loudspeakers during exams (Kundu 1994: 61). Where the police are usually feared oppressors and electricity is erratic if at all available, enlisting police support in keeping noise decibels down is a most unlikely situation.

Adivasis rarely feature in textbooks and when they do, it is usually in servile positions to upper caste characters; or as "strange" and "backward" exotica (Kumar 1989: 71; Kundu 1994). A second-grade textbook that Bonda children are made to learn has this to say: "Bonda life is very strange indeed. They live in tiny huts built of mud. The entrance to these huts is rather narrow. They enter the huts by bending forward . . . For the upliftment of the Bondas, the government has planned develop-ment programmes. Cash loans are being extended to the Bondas for the purpose of improved agriculture and animal husbandry. There is now a steady improvement in their condition. Hunting in the forest is no more their primary occupation. There are changes in their disposition and diet. Now they know how to count cash." (State Board textbook quoted in Nanda 1994: 173). As Krishna Kumar points out, such texts place adivasi children in a cleft position. If children fail to answer questions about adivasi backwardness based on readings from the text, they are judged educationally backward. If they acknowledge that the texts are correct, they accept an external judgement

about their cultural backwardness. Either way, "(t)here is no escaping the label of backward-ness. As a social institution, the school has set up a situation in which the tribal will acquire responses that match his description in society as a member of a "backward" community." (Kumar 1989: 68).

Learning among adivasi children is usually intimately connected to the work process – chil-dren learn the names and medicinal uses of many plants and trees while accompanying their parents on foraging trips in the forest (Sarangapani 2001: 44). When children are away at school, especially when they are sent to residential schools (which are seen as especially appropriate for adivasi areas because they ensure food, clothing, and books and prevent corruption by "culturally degenerate" parents), they lose connection with this world of labour and their capacity to learn from it. Nanda describes a walk in the forest with Bonda chil-dren in eastern India. While some children wandered off to explore the forest and collect edible items, those who had been to the residen-tial school, kept to the path and were indifferent to their surroundings (Nanda 1994: 177). Par-ents are often reluctant to send their children to school because they lose the capacity to engage in agriculture (Nanda 1994: 173).

Given such a "demeaning educational experience" in a set up which privileges the "visions and meanings" of dominant groups in society and teaches adivasis subservience (Kumar 1989: 76), it is hardly surprising that school attendance is much lower and drop-out rates much higher among adivasi students com-pared with others (Nambissan 2000). This is coupled with a basic lack of educational access – the absence of conveniently located primary schools, teacher absenteeism, abysmal infrastructure manifested in leaking roofs, non-existent toilets, single classrooms for multiple grades, lack of furniture, blackboards and edu-cational materials such as textbooks, maps, etc. (PROBE 1999).

But dismal as this picture sounds in terms of adivasi identity and indigenous knowledge, the consequences of schooling are often con-siderably complex. Even as residential schooling creates a certain educated adivasi identity that makes it difficult for alumni to relate to the occupations of their parents (agriculture or the

gathering of forest produce), the interaction with children of other castes and villages that residential schools make possible, allow new networks or "new epistemic communities" (Bayly 1999) to develop (see also Bartels and Bartels 1995 for the development of a "Northern Identity" in the former USSR). It is interesting, for example, that many of the male youth activists of the Communist Party in Central India came to know each other in the residential schools, and it is these networks that have helped them to organise for land rights and in defence of a particular adivasi identity. Christian missionary education, especially in the colonial period, resulted in a loss of adivasi identity, culture, and religion. Yet it is often in the areas where such education has had a long history that we now see the strongest movements for tribal autonomy and identity (e.g., in the North East or Jharkhand). Educated adivasis take the lead in such movements, which in turn lead to a demand for the institutionalisation of tribal languages in schools (Devalle 1992: 175–176; Nambissan 2000: 212–213). Inevitably, however, the language they seek to preserve may not be the language as it is actually spoken, but a more "civilised" version that follows the structures and written codes of the dominant languages (Devalle 1992: 177). In short, formal education may both destroy and weaken particular "indigenous" identities and forms of knowledge as well as consolidate such identities on a larger pan-indigenous platform. The manner in which such "indigenous" identities are understood and the kind of knowledge they avow (including the choice of language) depends on the politics and aspirations of this platform.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show that the valorisation and formal institutionalisation of a body of knowledge as "indigenous knowledge" depends on the power of the social group claiming indigenous status, rather than on any substantive content. Vedic astrology finds a place in the Indian university curriculum because the group backing it, the Hindu Right, has been successful in claiming indigeneity, and they have the political power to transmute their beliefs into certified knowledge. On the other hand, adivasis have not been able to assert themselves politically as distinctly indigenous people, and therefore their languages and systems of knowledge remain marginal and in danger of obliteration from the formal education system. While claims to indigeneity are usually also claims to authenticity, in practice, the content of indigenous knowledge keeps changing. A period of formal schooling often equips adivasis with a wider reach to larger alliances of indigenous people and the means to preserve, in however transformed a manner, indigenous languages and cultural forms. The issue is not so much what or how authentic "indigenous knowledge" is, but the political or social agenda in which particular knowledges are imbricated. Ultimately then, "indigenous knowledge" is a political and contextual category rather than one with substantive content.

Notes

1. The terms are taken from NCERT (2000).

2. Terms like legitimate knowledge, educational deficiency and cultural deprivation are standard in the literature on schooling among race and ethnic minorities. I have put them in quotes because of discomfort with these evidently derogatory terms as explanations. "Indigenous" remains in quotes only where it is the central term being unpacked.

3. See for example, the discussion by Agrawal (1995: 432) of the dangers of *ex situ* preservation of indigenous peoples' biotechnical knowledge.

4. To counter the argument that the Aryans themselves displaced adivasis and that Vedic Hinduism is as much a foreign import as any other religion, much recent RSS effort has been directed at trying to prove that the Aryans originated in India, and then migrated westwards, and that the indigenous Harappan language was a form of pre-Vedic Sanskrit.

5. Dr Pankaj Mittal, Deputy Secretary UGC to the Vice Chancellors of all Universities receiving financial assistance, 23.2.2001.

6. On coming to power, the BJP has systematically packed all educational bodies (e.g., the UGC, Indian Council for Historical Research,

Indian Council for Social Science Research) with RSS supporters, destroying much of their credibility.

7. A less obvious advantage for the ruling regime, is, of course, that it discourages critical thinking, and

reproduces the class structure (see Gramsci 1971: 40).

8. Fieldnotes, October 2001.

9. Since there are about 400 adivasi languages in India, clearly

education in each one of these is not possible. However, there is little attention even to preserving them in other forms.

10. Fieldnotes, October 2001.

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