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Adivasi Economics and Investment-forced Displacement

Felix Padel

Introduction

The concept of private property, introduced in India, especially through the Permanent Settlement over 200 years ago, has reached a new level with corporate takeovers in the 21st century. India's indigenous communities still maintain communal property traditions and value sharing more than competition. Yet they are still often classed as 'encroachers' on land they have occupied and cared for over generations. What drives the process of their mass displacement is not real 'development' at all but financial investment, which needs to be understood in relation to a system of 'Adivasi economics' that is sustainable in the proper, long-term sense.

The dispossession of the Adivasis, which started in colonial times, has been escalating since Independence. Compounding this intrinsic injustice is the social fact that this dispossession has been promoted through processes that are termed 'development'. Far from raising most people's standards of living, dams, mines, and factory projects,

displacing people from their land and communities, devastate many people's standard of living and livelihoods. The motivating force driving these projects, obviously, is financial investment aimed at profits for corporate entities and small elite groups.

Much of the literature follows the World Bank discourse in referring to this process as 'development-induced displacement' (DID; Fernandes 2006). This term presupposes that the dams, mines, and factories displacing people do constitute 'development'. But do they? Shouldn't real development start by ensuring security and justice (Padel 2015b) for economically poor citizens as well as the wealthy? If these projects do not constitute real development for the majority of people being displaced, doesn't this term add insult to injury?

Social evolutionism is the theory that all societies develop along a monolithic path from 'primitive' to 'advanced'. Modern anthropology dismisses this theory, which became dominant during the 19th and 20th centuries, since the history of how societies have changed is far more complex than that, yet it is still enshrined in much popular as well as official thinking.

For example, the quality of fabrics crafted in India several centuries ago was generally much higher than most modern, machine-produced fabrics today. The Luddite movement in England during the early 1800s was a movement of weavers who broke power looms, which they saw as destroying their skills and jobs. Those Luddites who were caught were severely punished—executed, jailed, or transported for life. Much of history dismisses them as 'anti-development', but the Luddites understood how power looms threatened to *de-develop* their industry, destroying extensive skills that had developed in communities (McLean 2017). Arguably, a similar threat hangs over India's weaving communities right now, from factory commercialization (Jain 2020).

Similarly, the quality of life in many Adivasi communities was generally far higher a couple of generations ago than it is today. There are many reasons for this: Some of them are economic and political, starting with mass dispossession, while others are cultural, involving the erosion of community and associated knowledge systems. For example, many educational projects offer 'skilling' (in tailoring and

industrial work) that, by removing Adivasi youth from their communities, is based on de-skilling them. The Adivasis who go to work in mines count as ‘unskilled labour’, since the modern, industrial economy that has invaded their lands discounts the countless skills they possess in relating to and managing this forest land.

To put this another way, if we feel we understand ways in which the Adivasi society is ‘less developed’ than mainstream society, we also need to understand other dimensions in which tribal societies are (or were) far more highly developed than our mainstream society, for example, in managing a symbiosis with nature, in a sense of community, and also in the knowledge of forest foods (Padel and Gupta 2020; Ramnath and Razal 2019).

This chapter presents key concepts that challenge stereotyped ways of understanding these processes: *Adivasi economics* represents the little-monetized livelihood systems that have been prevalent up to modern times. *Investment-forced displacement* (outlined in Padel 2016) conceptualizes financial investment in what is termed ‘development projects’ as the main driver of displacement rather than colluding in the officially endorsed belief that ‘development’ is taking place. Tribal communities’ own self-guided paths of development are being cut off, with no reversal of learning by which government officials could comprehend the sensitivity with which these communities have managed their environment over generations and learnt from this knowledge. In this sense, what is being imposed on them is a process of *de-development*, a concept we require in order to conceptualize the ugly, yet little-acknowledged reality of changes imposed on communities in the name of ‘development’.

India’s Indigenous Citizens

‘Adivasi’ means ‘first (or original) dwellers’ in Hindi. The term does not seem to be recorded before the 1930s, when Jaipal Singh Munda used it during the Jharkhand Movement as he became a leader of the Adivasi Mahasabha. From this time forward, ‘Adivasi’ gradually became a political identity, just as ‘Dalit’ did for those categorized as ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SCs). It is interesting that the term ‘aboriginals’

or ‘aboriginal tribes’ ceased to be used in India at around the same time as ‘Adivasi’ came into common—yet contested—usage (Roy 1946; one of the last usages). During the Constituent Assembly debates in 1946–1949, Jaipal Singh Munda argued strongly for the term ‘Adibasi’ against a range of opponents. It is significant that the official category ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (STs) was decided on in preference to ‘Adivasis’, against the recommendation of Jaipal, who was the only Adivasi in this Assembly.

Of course, the term ‘Adivasi’ has never been accepted by the Northeasterners, only by descendants of the central Indian tribal people taken during British times to work in the tea plantations. Santals, Mundas, and many others in Assam often call themselves ‘Adivasi’. This is readily understandable, especially since they are denied ST status in Assam. However, they are not ‘original dwellers’ there, which explains the horrific violence of the Bodos towards them that exploded in 2014 (Bhaumik 2015) and the rejection of the Hindi term ‘Adivasi’ by nearly all members of the STs in northeastern India.

When the United Nations was preparing its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007), representatives from India came from two main areas: the Naga area in the Northeast and the Jharkhand area (then southern Bihar), where the term ‘Adivasi’ perhaps originated. While India signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, its official position has been to contest tribal or Adivasi claims to prior indigeneity. Andre Béteille, a leading Indian sociologist and one of my teachers at the Delhi School of Economics, argued against seeing the STs as indigenous (Béteille 1986, 1998), contrasting the different situations throughout the continent of America, for example, where European settlers invaded indigenous lands about 500 years ago. Yet many would argue that the present similarities between the situations of Native Americans and STs in India easily outweigh the differences, especially in the structural violence that severs people’s cultural and economic links with the land. Gladson Dungdung’s (2013) book, *Whose Country Is It Anyway? Untold Stories of the Indigenous Peoples of India*, gives an

Adivasi perspective that argues strongly for this 'indigenous' identity. The term is increasingly used in India, though it obviously remains contentious from several angles. For one, it seems invidious to divide people according to their degree of indigeneity, though it is vital to recognize the degree to which links with the landforms are part of Adivasi identity.

The existing ST status is manifestly a very poor guide. Santals have this in some states but not others. Pardhis in different areas of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra have SC, Other Backward Class (OBC), general, or ST status, and as a 'Denotified Tribe' (DNT) they still carry the horrific stigma of a 'criminal tribe', which is still how the police tend to behave towards them (Gothoskar 2017, Olwe 2018). Even the term 'OBC' gives official status to a concept of 'backwardness' that has no place in a civilized society, just as the term 'Primitive Tribal Groups' hardened the idea of certain Adivasi as 'primitive' even after the term was officially replaced with 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups' in the mid-2000s.

These are major injustices, and it is important to understand that the injustice and prejudice that the Adivasis and members of other northeastern tribal communities experience throughout their lives start with these forms of categorization. From childhood only, often at school, they encounter a *cultural racism* that runs extremely deep: prejudice and humiliating treatment focused on their culture rather than race or skin colour. Huge injustice and prejudice are also faced by the Dalits, but in the Adivasis' case, this is compounded by the supposed 'primitiveness' of their language and culture and the ever-present danger of losing their land. The social evolutionism promoted in the name of 'development' predisposes the police and schoolteachers, among many others, to look at the Adivasi culture as 'primitive', when the reality is that their sense of community and etiquette of social behaviour is often far more highly developed than in mainstream society. This is not in any way to romanticize tribal cultures, which have their own 'shadow side' or internal patterns of cruelty or inequality, but simply to counteract the cultural racism against the Adivasi cultures, so widely prevalent in mainstream society.

Adivasi Economics

Until fairly recently, the Adivasi livelihoods unfolded largely outside the monetary system, in terms of subsistence agriculture and exchanges in kind. Weekly markets (haats) were promoted under British rule, from around the 1830s, drawing remote villages more into the cash economy (Padel 1995/2010, 178–179). During the last two generations, money and private property have started to define relationships in a way they never did before.

‘Adivasi economics’ is a concept that emphasizes the importance of exchange labour and the sense of sacredness, reciprocity, and restraint in relation to natural species and resources among India’s tribal or Adivasi peoples (Padel, Dandekar, and Unni 2013, Chapter 2). The concept derives from anthropologist Marshall Sahlins’ (1973) concept of stone age economics, which argued polemically against the stereotype in the economics of ‘primitive’, tribal, or hunter-gatherer peoples as too busy eking out a living to have much time for leisure activities, a view promoted by classical political economists such as Hobbes. Sahlins shows that this stereotype represents the opposite of the truth in that hunter-gatherer societies have far more leisure time and varied pursuits than we have in ‘modern’ industrial society. The unwritten history of tribal peoples involves economies that are much more finely balanced than our own economic system because they are non-monetary and based on reciprocity and attunement to the local ecology (Padel, Dandekar, and Unni 2013; Wolf 1982/2010).

Yet insights from anthropology have had little or no impact on economic policy. Partly, this is due to anthropologists’ marginal role in economic decision-making and power structures. For example, David Mosse (2007) refers to the World Bank’s increasing employment of anthropologists as ‘Christmas tree decoration’ inasmuch as their work is used basically as intellectual embellishment for the crucial studies and decisions that are invariably made by those with economic training. Mosse shows how anthropologists in the World Bank tend to be excluded from key decision-making bodies altogether and, therefore, cannot help guide the decisions that could bring people out of poverty.

Before coming to the work of Marx and Engels, I would like to draw attention to a number of 'heterodox' economists, whose vital contributions to economics in general seem to have been airbrushed out of economic history, contributions which greatly enrich our understanding of the economic situation of indigenous peoples. Michael Rowbotham (1998) and Frances Hutchinson (2010) have emphasized the extreme marginalization of Henry George and Clifford Hugh Douglas, erasing all memory of the momentous impact of George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879)—considered more 'dangerous' to capitalism than Marx for a while—and Douglas' *Economic Democracy* (1920) and *Social Credit* (1924). Douglas proposed an economic system that was implemented in Alberta for about 20 years starting in 1935, drastically reducing this province's debt burden by taxing financial transactions. His marginalization has partly been affected by portraying him erroneously as anti-Semitic.

From a radical political perspective, I would also cite the work of Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdish leader who has been a key political prisoner in Turkey for the past 20 years and whose prison writings have been extremely influential in outlining *sociology of freedom* (Öcalan 2009/2020), starting with *The Roots of Civilization* (Öcalan 2007). The Kurds make a convincing claim to be one of the largest indigenous peoples of the Middle East who have resisted assimilation into state society, from Sumerian times 5,000 years ago to resistance against cruel domination by the Turkish, Iranian, and other states right now (Padel, Sadik, and Gupta 2018). In Öcalan's vision, today's ultra-capitalism remains far from the proper goal of real development, which he calls democratic civilization.

Indigenous or tribal cultures show us how to return to a more balanced relationship with nature and with each other. Power elites steeped in ancient history (the ruling clique in the UK at the time of writing, as well as British administrators of colonial India) seem to repeat the same formulae laid out by the Roman emperors' wars of conquest and exploitation of colonies, by Machiavelli, and the sordid history of past conquests. This is also why the arms industry plays such a crucial yet little-analysed role at the heart of the world economy. As Andrew Feinstein (2011) has shown, corruption is endemic in the

arms trade. If we are to evolve to the stage of democratic civilization, the pre-eminent place that arms transactions occupy in the world economy, as well as national economies, should be at the forefront of what economics students are presented with as a central problem and at the centre of attempts to reform economics.

Corruption and interpenetration with the black economy are similarly endemic in the mining industry—the ‘defence’ and mining industries are closely linked since the apex customer for most metals is the arms industry. My own study of the aluminium industry with Samarendra Das, from the viewpoint of Adivasi movements against it, demonstrated these points, and the connection in India is exemplified by the placing of a key Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd factory making warplanes right next to Nalco’s bauxite mine and alumina factory in the Koraput district of Odisha, compounding the displacement of the Adivasis there (Padel and Das 2010/2020). Similarly, Gladson Dungdung’s book on the Saranda forest shows how the extreme levels of displacement and corruption in India’s iron and steel industries are accompanied by the militarization of the Adivasi lands (Dungdung 2015).

The measurements that give economics its claim to scientific exactitude are nullified when one takes into consideration the black economies, unmeasurable by definition, that play a key role in motivating arms and mining deals and that tax havens are designed to draw from (Shaxson 2011). The UK, for example, ‘appears to be the money-laundering capital of the world’ (Monbiot 2020), as a country surrounded by tax havens, with money from black transactions and corrupt arms deals playing a key role in the economy, quite as much as in more obviously corrupt countries.

This is to place the present situation of Adivasi India into its proper context of world history and the global economy, offering an overview of societies whose economies were based on reciprocity of ‘equal’ exchanges, conceptualized as gifts—the essence of the influential essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* by Marcel Mauss (1925/2016), a foundational text of sociology/social anthropology—to a situation where money is actually created through unrepayable debt in a manner that puts almost every country and a large proportion of human beings into financial bondage (Rowbotham 1998).

Taking a fresh view of the phenomenon of debt—as the late anthropologist David Graeber (2011) did in his book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*—involves highlighting the centrality of the arms industry/trade and wars to the world economy, as well as the boom-bust cycle and role of inflation bubbles in perpetuating this instability, and the remorseless economic exploitation that traps ‘poor’ countries and people into cycles of unequal exchange that simultaneously involves the devastation of the ecosystems that human life depends on. This being so, why didn’t Marx and Engels analyse the mining industry and give this analysis the central place it deserves? Engels’ classic text, *The Condition of the Working Class of England* (1845/2009), showed how industrialization was lowering, not raising workers’ living standards, and Marx’s *Das Kapital* gave us our best analysis of capitalist exploitation in factories. But why did they take the cloth factory as a norm, instead of mines and metal factories, when coal and steel are at the heart of the industrialization process that defines capitalism? I don’t know the answer to this question, but I think it’s extremely significant, as the Marxian tradition seems poor in analysing or critiquing the mining industry, from the often appalling condition of workers in mines and factories to the extreme complexity of mining finance and interlinkages with the arms industry, including the key role of hedge funds as investors that operate from tax havens and the role of black money.

In relation to indigenous societies, however, Marx and Engels placed a strong emphasis on communal as opposed to private property. This is apparent in Engels’ book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884/2001). Their concept of ‘primitive communism’ derives in large part from their careful reading of Lewis Henry Morgan’s books, including *The League of the Iroquois* (1851/1995). Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks* (1882/1974) contains much that Engels left out (Rosemont 2010), especially in terms of Marx’s admiration for the Iroquois system of democracy.

This is where Marxian analysis needs revitalizing and updating through Öcalan’s prison writings, as well as through awareness of indigenous perspectives generally. The autonomous Rojava enclave

in North Syria is based on Öcalan's thinking to a considerable extent, especially his emphasis on democratic confederalism (a system that questions the nation state), women's revolution, and the ecology of freedom (Bookchin 1982). Marx's emphasis on the degree of women's emancipation in Iroquois society finds new resonance in Öcalan and Rojava.

Structural Violence and Investment-forced Displacement

When the 12 Dongria and Dalit villages in Niyamgiri, selected under orders from the Supreme Court, voted in mid-2013 on whether they wanted Vedanta's proposed bauxite mine and associated 'development', they voted against unanimously. They also refused the private plots of forest land offered under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, stating that the whole Niyamgiri forest is theirs by customary law (Padel 2014). This is a strong affirmation of the principle of common or communal property highlighted by Marx and Engels, which should be understood as associated with the very conception of communism. They understood how the Iroquois and other tribal peoples valued communal property as distinct from private property in the system they referred to as 'primitive communism'.

The FRA was formulated in a way that made applications for common property extremely hard to submit. Less than 2 per cent of applications under the FRA have been for common property of a whole community together, and of course, only a small proportion of applications have been successful anyway (Dungdung 2019). So although the FRA was conceived as correcting the historic injustice towards tribal citizens in denying their intrinsic land rights, it was mostly conceptualized in terms of granting individual, private property rights. This is not surprising considering the oppression the Adivasis have faced over generations since the British Forest Acts in the mid-19th century, which defined most forests as state property. In practice, forestry officials have tended to exact bribes whenever they find the Adivasis clearing forest for cultivation or domestic use. The trouble is, Adivasi economics has involved a social structure of

allowing families free access to clear patches of forest for cultivation in a system of 'shifting cultivation'. As many critics of forest acts have pointed out, it is not shifting cultivation that destroys the forest, it is permanent cultivation, and private property is geared towards fields that are permanently deforested (Ramnath 2008; Savyasaachi 2006). So in practice, when an Adivasi is granted ownership over a couple of hectares of forest land, their tendency is to clear it. This method of parcelling up the forest that is not wanted either for industries or sanctuaries into private plots, therefore, strikes at the heart of the Adivasi social structure, which is based on sharing land rather than owning it, and the forest ecosystem as a whole. In a sense, this brings to fruition the Permanent Settlement outlined in legislation over 200 years ago by the East India Company (Padel, Dandekar, and Unni 2013, 175–179). As W.W. Hunter put this,

It is by what we have implanted in the living people, rather than by what we have built upon the dead earth, that our name will survive. The permanent aspect of British rule in India is the growth of Private Rights.... By a wise limitation of our state ownership we have raised up a permanent Proprietary Body, composed of mutually hostile classes; but each of which, from the great seigneurs down to the Resident Husbandsmen, holds its lands under documents issued by British officials. (Hunter 1872, 201 and 277)

These words illustrate a formula for forcing people towards a system of private property that has come to fruition in India 150 years later, after generations of exploitation by forest officials and economic pressures. The British have left, but the system of private property they started to put in place 250 years ago seems now unassailable, and those in power conceive of property, indeed, as 'dead earth', as in the irony of a 'greenfield' project being one that starts with land covered in greenery that churns it up into a dam, factory, or mine, which transforms productive, living soil into a wasteland within a generation. Obviously, the Adivasi culture does *not* conceive of the earth as dead.

Also implicit in these quoted words is the value placed on competition. One finds this equally in economics (the idea of a free market creating a 'level playing field'), sport (from which the 'level playing

field' metaphor arises), politics (democracy conceived as ceaseless competition between rival political parties), law (equal before the law) and education (competitive exams). Indigenous or tribal cultures do not place this kind of value on competition but rather emphasize sharing and consensus. Adivasi economic exchanges (as in exchange labour) are based on both parties' mutual benefit, not on one side profiting at the other's expense. Rather than sport, the pre-eminent leisure activity in tribal culture is dance, when two or more villages meet, as a radical expression of democracy, highly skilful, but with no winners or losers. Similarly, in politics, as Jaipal Singh always emphasized, tribal people are among the world's most democratic, and their system of democracy is not based on voting but consensus, with everyone allowed to speak freely at meetings. Similarly, with law, the modern legal system is based on Roman law, which assumes competition between contestants that results in one party winning and the other losing, and in practice, those who can afford the fees for the expensive lawyers tend to win, whereas tribal systems of law, as reported from many of India's tribal societies, are aimed at reconciling contestants. As for education, the present system of tribal education follows the reproduction of prevailing inequalities as analysed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Hart 2019).

The British rule involved the invasion of tribal areas and the violent imposition of a new power structure, using extreme levels of structural violence that was invariably masked as 'pacification' campaign that brought 'law and order'. In Odisha, as elsewhere, this invasion was conceived as 'suppressing insurgency', and it involved burning villages and public hangings (Padel 2010).

The exploitation of minerals and other natural resources in tribal areas post-Independence has involved even greater levels of dispossession and structural violence, with around a quarter of India's ST population already displaced and many more threatened with displacement, while many of those able to remain in their villages find their lands drying up or covered in dust from mining. In other words, another invasion has taken place of several hundred tribal areas by mining companies that portray their projects as bringing 'development'. Rather than serving citizens impartially, police forces are used

to suppress protests; the ‘security’ that security forces provide is, above all, to corporate entities offering investment. ‘Equality before the law’ does not extend to bringing corporate or police offenders to justice: double standards are in evidence (Padel 2015b; Padel, Dandekar, and Unni 2013, Chapter 3). Although India has some of the best constitutional safeguards guaranteeing tribal land rights, loopholes have been consistently exploited to undermine these rights. Even the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (2013), which was meant to end the invidious, colonial-era Land Acquisition Act, was full of loopholes in its fine print (Padel 2015a). When the government and industries are constantly encroaching on Adivasi land, the labelling of the Adivasis who have traditional rights to the forest but lack *patta* (land deed) as ‘encroachers on government land’ is an outrage.

It is important to understand the precise nature of the entities behind the new invasion, which is also an invasion of capital. Among the mining companies are Hindalco, Utkal, Nalco, and Vedanta in aluminium; Tata Steel, among many others in the steel sector, as well as Jindal and many others, including public sector companies such as National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC), and Adani, leading a new level of invasion in coal and energy (Choudhury 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Each of these corporate entities buys respectability through schemes of corporate social responsibility, and among the most highlighted of these are educational projects.

‘A Conquest over Their Minds’

It is highly relevant, therefore, to survey the changes in tribal education being brought about by mining company-funded schemes, as new conceptions of property and exchange are promoted in new models of schooling. Overall, the first tribal schools in India were mostly started by missionary organizations, which in effect created ‘educated’ tribal elites (Bara 1997). After Independence, ashram schools were promoted, and from the 1960s to the 1990s, more and more hostels and residential schools were opened, even though Canada, the USA, and Australia were closing residential schools for indigenous children during these

years with national apologies for the policy of assimilation and cultural genocide implicit in such schools (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020).

A new generation of assimilationist schools has been set up directly by mining companies, starting with Tata Steel and continuing recently with 'Education City' in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, funded by the NMDC, and similar initiatives by Adani and Jindal. Moreover, in Odisha, the world's biggest boarding school, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), has dealt with Nalco, NMDC, Vedanta, and Adani to fund the education of tribal children from specific areas where these companies have invested in mining projects. This school has 27,000 ST children who attend for 10 months of the year. These schooling systems alienate children from their families, land, festivals, and the traditional skills they learn from elders in a tradition where play transforms into work and where a child learns hundreds of skills as it grows, in relation to the land systems of knowledge and value that are wiped out by insensitive schooling (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Ramnath 2015).

The next World Anthropology Congress, which happens every five years, was due to take place at KISS in January 2023. A petition by Adivasi and tribal rights supporters managed to get this cancelled. This has been hailed as a considerable victory for Adivasi rights (George 2020). In the wake of this, the Adivasis are starting to share accounts of the brainwashing that has been imposed on them in residential schools (Markam 2020), including the linguistic genocide of tribal languages that have long been marginalized in schools and are given only token inclusion at KISS (Koya 2020; Padel and Gupta 2020). Some Indian anthropologists have complained about this decision, alleging that it shows neo-colonialism in world anthropology, but the situation exposes a nexus between KISS and Indian anthropology that seems to show internal colonialism regarding Indian anthropology's place in the power structure imposed over the Adivasis, as well as considerable distortion (Guha 2020).

The first conquest of tribal people in India was by Augustus Cleveland, of the Paharia people in Bihar, where his policy was referred to as 'a conquest over their minds' (Padel 2010, 23). This encapsulates the idea of education-as-assimilation, as a counterpart to the land grabs. Both continue unabated in India.

Alternative schools still seem only a drop in the ocean in the face of such trends, but they represent the kind of decolonizing initiative that may prove vital for future human existence (Chomsky 2016). Muskaan, in the city of Bhopal (capital of Madhya Pradesh), provides one of the strongest contrasts to the predominant ‘mind conquering’ models. Since 1997, Muskaan gives education to children from the Pardhi and Gond communities, who are mostly second-generation migrants. The Pardhi and Gondi languages are used in the school alongside Hindi and English. Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy is a key inspiration here (Freire 1970/1993, 1992/2014), for example, in emphasizing keywords that emerge from children’s often violent experiences, which they are encouraged to express, unlike in mainstream schools, where controversial subjects tend to be ignored. Political awareness and activism accompany the daily classroom sessions. From being expert hunters, Pardhis have become urban garbage pickers and waste disposers and are continually targeted by the police (Gothoskar 2017). Most Gond children are from families displaced from forest areas to the city, and several girls we interviewed described how they and their brothers were often humiliated and beaten for speaking Gondi at previous schools.

Muskaan is one of a growing network of alternative schools aimed at revitalizing Adivasi epistemologies and even ‘reversing the learning’ (Padel and Gupta 2017), with children teaching their teachers their languages and collaborating creatively on oral history. Far-reaching decolonization of tribal education and studies is long overdue in India, as in countries such as New Zealand (Aotearoa), where the Maori language and culture have had a major revival and influence (Pihama and Southey 2015; Tuhiwai Smith 1999/2012). This process is needed alongside any rollback of the systemic injustice and dispossession faced by India’s tribal citizens. Are we still capable of learning from Adivasi economics?

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