

# Indigenising Curriculum: questions posed by Baiga *vidya*

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**ABSTRACT** *The Baiga are a small tribe inhabiting the forested regions of Central India. They are known for their extensive knowledge of forests and healing. A local pedagogic tradition supports the transmission of this knowledge from expert practitioner-gurus to their chelas or novices. The knowledge system is local and oral. The pedagogic tradition and socialisation which supports its transmission is marked by these qualities as also the subsistence level of production and the lack of centralised authority in the organisation of the tribe, and in children's lives. This paper explores the disjunction between this and formal schooling whose pedagogic practices and curriculum presume a literate tradition: where knowledge is decontextually presented in texts and children are already socialised to accept pedagogic/adult authority. In the present Indian context where there is a growing emphasis on incorporating indigenous knowledges into the school curriculum, the paper raises questions on the epistemological feasibility of such an inclusion.*

The Baiga are a small tribe inhabiting the forested regions of Central India. This paper examines the relationship between the formal school curriculum and the local/indigenous knowledge and pedagogic tradition of the Baiga. My interest is in the significance and potential of the continuities and discontinuities between Baiga knowledge traditions and the traditions and practices of the institution of formal school. The paper engages with two issues of contemporary interest: the school vs. home dichotomy in curriculum studies and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in current Indian school curriculum policy.

The relationship between the school and the world in which it is located, the world of the child's home and community, is an object of curriculum theorising and empirical study of the curriculum. Following the publication of Michael Young's book (Young, 1971), in which the curriculum was problematised, researchers have been sensitive to this aspect of schooling in reproducing social stratification and inequality in non-homogenous societies. Whether with reference to indigenous groups under colonial educational systems or marginal and socially underprivileged groups vis-à-vis the mainstream (c.f. Bishop, this issue), attention has been drawn to the less than satisfactory relationship between the world of the school and the child's world (home and community, both cultural and linguistic). Terms such as 'gap', 'polarity', 'contradiction', 'distance', and 'discontinuity' are usually used for this. 'Alienation' from one's parents' community as a consequence of schooling was commonly noted during colonial time all over India (see Walsh, 1983). It continues to be noted in studies of education in tribal areas (Toppo, 1985, Heredia; 1996).

In India, one of the policy responses to the perceived gap in the case of children of tribal or socially underprivileged communities [1], is derived from the concept of 'educability'. It interprets difference as disadvantage, and the 'gap' is to be bridged by minimising the

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influence of the home through structures such as residential schools for these children. In several states, the tribal welfare department runs residential schools called *ashram shalas*. The converse approach, of making the school closer to the child's world, has also been explored in some initiatives, particularly by non-government organisations (NGOs). The suggestion to include 'traditional games, jokes, riddles, tales, songs and dances in the curriculum of the school to make the child feel at home' (Nanda, 1989, p. 11) arises from this second way of 'bridging the gap'. But in either case, this group of words, 'gap', 'polarity', etc., is metaphorical. Apart from communicating a value judgement, they do not indicate what constitutes the difference. For this we need conceptual tools that will enable us to understand the composition of the curriculum in terms of whose knowledge is selected for inclusion and how it is represented, or its consequences for learners using concepts such as Bernstein's 'linguistic codes' and 'framing' (Bernstein, 1977), or Bourdieu's habitus (1977) (see for example, Kumar, 1989; Kundu, 1994; Singh, 1995). In this paper I will examine differences in the knowledge-related practices and learning traditions between the Baiga indigenous knowledge called *vidya* and formal school knowledge.

The second contemporary concern that forms a backdrop to this paper is the growing official interest in incorporating 'indigenous knowledge' into curriculum at the school level as is evident in the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2000). In India there is a variety of indigenous knowledges, from theological and philosophical studies to the performing arts and crafts. Astrology has already been accepted as a subject of study at university level. Sundar (2002) argues that gaining legitimacy and patronage for some kinds of indigenous knowledge is a reflection of the status and power of the group involved. Astrology has the backing of the Hindu right which is closely associated with the political party currently in power at the national level, and has gained official recognition, but the indigenous knowledge of tribal groups without political clout is unlikely to be included in the formal education system. The dimension which I wish to add to this debate, through the issues raised in this paper, is to do with the epistemological compatibility of indigenous knowledges, especially oral knowledges, with the practices and structures of the modern formal school which derives from the literate tradition.

The next section introduces the Baiga tribe and is followed by a section on current formal schooling in the area. The knowledge tradition of magic and medicine called *vidya*, for which the tribe is renowned, is then described with a discussion of how *vidya* is learnt, including aspects of childhood socialisation which are relevant to the learning of *vidya*. In the final section the school which derives from a literate tradition is compared with the tradition of learning *vidya*.

### **The Baiga of Northern Kawardha**

The Baiga are a small tribe living in and near the forested regions of Central India, in the Maikal hills around up-stream Narmada. Other tribes such as the Gond, Agaria and Pardhan and other castes such as the Ahir (Yadav) and Panka also live in the area, but the Baiga are believed to be the autochthons of the area. They speak a language which may be called '*Baiga-boli*' which is recognised to be a form of Chhatisgarhi, the common language spoken in the region.

The earliest systematic anthropological account of the Baiga is to be found in Russell and Hiralal's *Tribes and Castes of Central India* (Russell & Hiralal, 1916/1975), but the most important anthropological work describing in detail their nomadic lifestyle, the practice of shifting cultivation, magic and medicine is by Verrier Elwin (Elwin, 1938/1986). British colonial forest policies forced the Baiga to settle and begin cultivation with the plough

(Rangarajan, 1996). Their current land holdings are small and typically not irrigated; agriculture is at a subsistence level. They are dependent on the forests for a number of their needs: fuel and bamboo for construction and basket weaving, minor forest produce which they sell, tubers, fruits and prey with which they supplement their diet, for medicinal plants and for recreation (Nag, 1958; Bose *et al.*, 1987). The Baiga are categorised by the government of India as a 'primitive tribe' (living in very remote areas and with very low levels of literacy, in this case about 5%). They are targeted by the State with many special development and welfare programmes [2].

Between 1999 and 2001, I spent about six months spread over three visits in two remote villages located in the Daldali reserved forest region of Kawardha District of Chhatisgarh State. The villages of Baghmara and Kasaikunda, with a total of about 52 families, are located in the northernmost part of the district, in the valley of a small river, about one kilometre away from each other. The Kanha reserved forest is nearby. Daldali, the largest village on the plateau, is about seven kilometres from Baghmara. It has a residential school, a small weekly market, and an outlet of the Public Distribution System. The school—actually two schools: a girls' school and a boys' school in the same building—is an *ashram shala* run by the Tribal Welfare Department, and it was recently upgraded to a middle school (up to grade eight).

The castes and tribes of the region typically live in mixed villages. Baghmara and Kasaikunda, being more remote villages, are both predominantly Baiga, with a few Gond and Yadav (Ahir) families. In contrast to areas that have more access to roads and government-sponsored development programmes, the Baiga of this region have retained their traditional appearance and attire. Women have distinctive tattoos on their forehead and bodies, and their distinctive red and white checked *saree* is worn knee-length. Men usually grow their hair which they knot into a bun on the side of their head. Older men still wear only a loin cloth. All men always carry an axe, when they move away from their homes toward the forests. Women carry a sickle when they go into the forest.

The social and economic conditions of the various tribe and caste groups living in this area are similar in many respects. There are traditional occupational interdependencies, e.g. the Ahir family is given responsibility for looking after cattle, for a payment in kind, or a skilled Baiga may be requested to make a bamboo winnow, or a Baiga *gunia* called in to treat an illness. All people in this region depend on the forest, but the Baigas claim to have a special relationship with, and fearlessness of, the forest. They have the reputation of having extensive knowledge of the forests, herbal medicines and magical treatment of illness and disease. Both Baghmara and Kasaikunda had several medicine men, both '*vaidi*' (herbalist) and '*gunia*' (diviner), who have learnt this craft-knowledge from teachers and now practise it. Families are also networked, through relationships, or friendships (they may be formal 'ritual' friendships or the more loose and inclusive notion of the *sanghvani*, or peer group). The reasons are both social and labour/economic.

Culturally, there are aspects that are distinctive to each of these groups, but there are also aspects that are shared. The Baiga dance and songs differ from those of other groups in the area, and they pride themselves on their superiority in this matter. In every new generation, the creation myth of the Baiga is learnt by some men, and it is recounted at the important yearly rituals of '*bidri*', making of seed, and '*devli*', to ensure a good harvest. The myth continues to be an important source of their understanding of themselves in relation to the other communities inhabiting the area, their relationship with the world and their sense of destiny. On one of my visits, as the time for the annual *bidri* making drew near, several older Baiga spoke of the importance of this ritual and the role of Baiga people in performing it. All communities in the area collect mahua flowers in April and brew alcohol from it. The liquor is considered sacred, and is offered and drunk at the time of all worship. Baiga men

and women remember the original Baiga man and woman every time they drink by sprinkling a few drops on the earth. Occasions such as *bidri* and *bida*, the biannual prophylactic rite, and festivals, such as *cherta*, for children, involve families of all castes and tribes living in the village.

### Formal School

The village of Daldali has two residential *ashram* schools, one for boys and one for girls, set up by the Tribal Welfare Department. Although such *ashram shalas* were supposed to be based on different curricula more suited to the language and ethos of tribal children (National Policy on Education, 1986), most run like mainstream government schools (Ananda, 1994). The *ashram* schools at Daldali are no exception. The medium of instruction is Hindi, which is quite different from both Chhatisgarhi and *Baiga-Boli*, and which is unfamiliar to the children. The teachers, all of whom come from the plains, are not only unaware of, but also do not think very highly of, the culture of tribal peoples in this interior area. Many of them feel that the primary lessons that the children need to be taught are regarding cleanliness and proper ways of eating and dressing. The school runs quite irregularly and when it does, the teaching-learning approach is based on endless repetition of texts. There is no attempt made either by teachers or by children to seek meaning in what they are memorising. A Baiga, Hare Singh, preferred to send his children to *ashram* schools that were located further away. In these places the classes are more regular, but the pedagogy is identical.

In the last five years, more government schools have come into the area. Kasaikunda has a school which runs in the front porch of the village headman, and has two teachers, at least one of whom spends a fair proportion of his time in the village and conducts his classes every day. The school in Baghmara is an 'Education Guarantee Scheme' (EGS) school of the government. The teacher is around for only about two to three weeks of the month. Very few Baiga children come to either school. Parents are distinctly uninterested and do not compel their children to go. For their part, children often run away, preferring to roam the jungle or hunt for crabs in the river rather than endure the monotony and the harsh comments of teachers that marks schooling. Several children at Baghmara admitted that this was the reason they did not like to come to school. The EGS schools are supposed to have a more 'child-friendly' curriculum. But the books, which are in Hindi, are still inaccessible. Both the mainstream books and the EGS use a language and present objects, scenarios and values that are completely alien to the Baiga and their children. The headman of the Daldali area was of the opinion that the new techniques of singing songs and reciting poems were 'backward' and would not help children who were already 'backward'.

### A Knowledge Repository

Saraswathi's 1972 paper 'Traditional modes of learning' is an important study of traditional knowledge systems in India. Based on a spectrum of indigenous knowledge traditions, which includes theology, logic, grammar, architecture, medicine and crafts such as pottery and weaving, he proposed that a conceptual distinction be made between *sastric* knowledge and *laukic* knowledge. The former includes theoretical study and applied areas such as architecture and medicine for which there are treatises and recognised instructional procedures and courses of study—they are well systematised and form a part of the literate traditions. The crafts, including pottery and weaving, are classified as *laukic*; they are learnt experientially and through practice, trial and error, and are of a non-literate character. Following the distinction made by anthropologists, the former also belong to the 'great tradition' while the

latter belong to the 'little tradition' (Sinha, 1957). However, in this scheme there is no provision for including the kind of knowledge the Baigas have and use, of medicinal plants, diagnosis and healing, which is transmitted, learnt and remembered in an oral, non-literate tradition, and which is also 'local' in the sense of being culturally and ecologically integrated. The diversity, complexity and specialisation of the information involved, and its application makes this knowledge comparable to other indigenous *sastric* systems such as *ayurveda* (a holistic system of medicine) or architecture. Yet, like the crafts, it is oral and is a product of the non-literate world of the 'little traditions'. The sociocultural and particularly the ecological context in which it is learnt and practised are important features of the knowledge. Furthermore, this knowledge system is realised, practised and transmitted in a 'habitus' constituted by the subsistence economy lifestyle [3].

Baiga villages can be regarded as epistemic communities (Holzner, 1968) engaged with the application and the transmission of medicinal knowledge. There is a distribution of this knowledge among various members of the community. In Baghmara village, for instance, virtually all the adults have a fairly extensive knowledge of the trees and plants in the forest, and varying degrees of knowledge about the medicinal properties of various plants. Children, both boys and girls, from the age of about five or six years can identify several of the more common medicinal plants around the village. On a few occasions they mentioned what it was used to treat; typically stomach ailments. By the age of about eight or nine years, the scope of the child's environment and knowledge both widen quite dramatically. On some of our visits together to the forest, they named over 60 plants with medicinal properties, and many more that bore fruits that could be eaten or were useful. They stopped their list out of consideration for me because I could no longer keep track. The Baigas themselves appear to take their knowledge of the plant life of the forests for granted, although they do recognise that there are a few men in every village whose knowledge is far more extensive and specialised.

Regarding medicinal knowledge, they are of the opinion that this is more specialised and has to be learnt from a *guru*, a teacher. They refer to this knowledge as *vidya* and believe that it is of divine origin: the first Baiga, Nanga Baiga, was also the first medicine man and received his knowledge from god *mahadev*. Many of the incantations include mention of a series of gurus through whom *vidya* has been transmitted and whose names are now also powerful. (The present incumbents regard themselves a part of this lineage although they rarely know who their *guru's guru* was.) Included in the knowledge is a wide range of herbal and root preparations, and also divine beings, both godlike and evil, that cause illness and who need to be propitiated. Some of the healers are more knowledgeable about medicinal preparations and are called *vaidi*. Others are more knowledgeable in magic and the ways of the divine and are called *gunia*. In addition to divination, both *gunia* and *vaidi* also read the pulse and use physical examination and enquiries about bowel and urinary movements to arrive at a diagnosis. *Vidya* is considered a male preserve. Women who know *vidya* are regarded as witches. The specialised knowledge about pregnancy and childbirth which is known by women who perform the function of a *sunai mai* or midwife, is not regarded as *vidya*.

This description of the specialised knowledge of the Baigas conforms well with references to 'indigenous knowledges' in international discourse. Most of these are references to non-western, oral knowledge about biodiversity and medicinal plants and ecology, of autochthonous groups who have become marginalised and dispossessed typically as a consequence of colonisation (Burger, in Aikman, 1999). Anthropologists such as Beteille (1986, 1998) have argued persuasively against the use of this term in the Indian context as not only is the segregation it proposes invalid, but it is also dangerous. On account of the moral force inherent in the term, it lends itself to chauvinistic and communal identity politics.

My own use of the term as a generic description of Baiga *vidya* is not to stake any claim to a privileged status. It is to emphasise its non-western origin and also to ensure that it is included in current discussion on indigenous knowledge systems. As Saraswathi (1972) reminds us, 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems' in India includes a variety of epistemologies and epistemic practices: from text-based to oral systematised knowledge, to performing arts and crafts, from both the great and the little traditions.

### Learning *Vidya*

The ethical code of *gunias* and *vaidis* does not permit the Baiga to charge or accept any payment for their services. By virtue of possessing *vidya*, they are obliged to use it when requested. The belief is that refusal is dangerous. The motivation to learn therefore does not seem to come from the prospect of monetary gain. When asked, many of the children said they had learnt the uses of various plants and trees from their fathers, mothers or older siblings. They recalled occasions when a particular plant had been pointed out to them, or they had been present when it was collected for use. But this knowledge did not include details on how the medicine is to be made or when and to whom it is to be administered. The *mantra* (sacred chants) and ritual aspects of diagnosis or treatment too were not a part of common and informal knowledge, but known only to those who had formally learnt it. Some of the men seem to have decided to learn a little *vidya* formally when they were married and had children—they spoke of it as useful knowledge, akin to 'first aid', to handle the frequent ailments and illnesses of childhood. 'After a boy is married and he has children, then he feels he too needs to know and he begins to learn' (Hare Singh). For this they had either gone to a guru for a short period of time, or had acquired it by what they called '*susangati*' which literally means 'good company', i.e. by spending time in the company of a knowledgeable person.

The pursuit of more specialised knowledge was restricted to a few. Baghmara had only three people, out of which only two were recognised in other villages also as healers. Hare Singh was very highly reputed but said he had given up his practice after he took a job in the *ashram* school at Daldali village nearby. Kasaikunda had three who had more formidable reputations. All these men had learnt their *vidya* from gurus. Only in two cases was the guru a close relative—in one case his father and in another case his grandfather. Most of them were young men when they began learning. They had to take the initiative to seek out their guru. The *mukkaddams* (village chief) of Kasaikunda and of Baghmara and Hare Singh, all of whom knew *vidya*, said that *vidya* is a hard taskmaster. It requires sacrifices and hard work.

Learning *vidya* is also an expensive matter for the student as it involves providing *daru*, alcohol made from mahua flowers, to the guru. It also calls for a great deal of perseverance. Most of the teachers did not teach willingly or readily but had to be cajoled over several bottles of *daru* and several visits. From the descriptions given, it seems that the process of instruction required a lot of patience and waiting. It was also fairly leisurely. Typically, it was to be had at the end of the day, when the day's labour was over. Sitting around, drinking *daru* brought by one or more of his *chelas*, the guru would teach incantations, repeating until they were learnt by heart. A few mantras I heard seemed to be in the local dialect and not some unknown, specialised language. Some were very long and there were sections that were in a dialogic form [4]. It seemed important that the incantations should be remembered well—heard and spoken without break. The men I spoke with were firm that their *vidya* is not to be written. Knowledge that required to be mediated by the eye was believed to be less direct and therefore not as pure as that which is remembered and spoken—'*sumiran*'. When asked

about it they also mentioned that their guru had taken them on one trip to the forest where the names of plants and their uses were shared.

The period between the festivals of *hareli* and *dewali* (roughly July to October) was believed to be particularly auspicious for learning. A *chela* would ‘enter’ on *hareli* and if his guru so decreed, would ‘emerge’ on *dewali*. The whole process of apprenticeship seemed to be cloaked with secrecy. Who is learning from whom was always referred to as being rumoured. There was a notion of being tested by your guru at different times during the apprenticeship—two of them claimed they had been given tests in divining. They also referred to being ‘tested’ at the end of the course, before being declared ‘pass’, when their guru patted them on the back and gave them some *daru* to drink. There did not seem to be any period of practising with the guru. But it seemed that both during and after the period of this formal learning, there were occasions to witness, and participate in the diagnosis and treatment.

A *chela* could learn from several gurus—it was recognised that different gurus could have different specialties to offer. For example, curing snake-bite was a recognised specialisation. But excessive *vidya* was regarded as being dangerous. There was a strong belief that if you possessed *vidya* but did not use it, it could harm you. So also, if it was not properly respected every year during the festival of *dewali*, it could make the knower go mad. Although *vaidis* and *gumias* did not receive any payments, they were known by their reputation and were important people. Miraculous cures wrought by these specialists using plant and root extracts, were often related and savoured. But the men themselves were required to be modest and self-effacing about their knowledge. Indeed, with the exception of Hare Singh, they never directly admitted to me that they knew anything above the ordinary. They were quite secretive but they seemed to take a little pleasure in my curiosity regarding their learning.

Many of the features of ‘learning *vidya*’ are anticipated in childhood socialisation. Perhaps the most important feature is the learner’s autonomy and initiative-taking. This aspect of initiative-taking by the learner is a common feature throughout childhood where the child is almost never coerced into doing anything, but is given ample opportunity to take initiative and participate in ongoing activity. Equally important is the fact that the pace of learning is set by the learner, depending on his own judgement regarding his readiness. In most situations, children could opt out of an ongoing activity at any point when they wished, without fear of any stigma or teasing. The same level of proficiency or interest was not expected of everyone. It was also acceptable that different people would learn to different degrees, and accordingly practice differently. Most learning took place in the course of, or alongside, productive work. Thus the boundaries between work and play, leisure and labour are quite fluid. In the learning environments, whether in the family or among the peer group, there were niches for several levels of proficiency and learning by participating and direct engagement with the task.

In two cases, *vaidis* had learnt *vidya* when they were still boys, from their relatives for whom they had been working at that time. In these cases it seems that their older relatives had wanted to teach them. There had been mutual respect; i.e. not only of the child for the older relative, but also vice versa. On the whole, Baiga society is marked by non-hierarchical relationships between children and adults, and amongst adults themselves. The volition of children was respected from the time they were young, and their abilities were noticed and appreciated. Age was respected; *siyaan* and *siyaanin*, i.e. older men and women, were all given a special place in meetings, functions and rituals in the community. But neither deferential nor authoritarian attitudes marked these relationships. Many courses of action and decisions were arrived at by the process of consultation, *salahi*; the opinions of older men

were sought, but younger people also spoke. Everyone spoke equally sparingly and with as much thought, hesitation and gentle humour.

The students visited the forest in the company of their guru perhaps only once or twice. This brief visit to the forest seemed to presume a level of familiarity with the plant world around, which perhaps was not unreasonable. From a very young age children exhibited an awareness of the forest landscape in its details. It was first and foremost a landscape of edible things and full of objects of human interest—useful plants and trees, plant roots and fruit and animals to eat, plants, insects and animal activity to be noticed and perhaps to be careful and wary of. Names of many plants and insects were known to a high degree of specificity; e.g. *koilad* and *kachnar* were names for two kinds of trees which were identical in every respect save that the former had leaves that were edible and the other did not, and while most Baiga could distinguish between two types of bamboo, some could distinguish between five types.

### Out of School and School

Many of the features I have described are similar to descriptions of knowledge-related activities in oral cultures as described by Ong (1982) and Goody (1968), and from an educationalist's perspective by Teasdale (1990) and Aikman (1999). This includes features such as context embeddedness of thought and activity, aggregative and cumulative organisation of thought rather than analytical categorisation, and learning through performance of real tasks rather than abstract learning tasks. It is significant that the Baiga recognise a period of learning for more formalised knowledge, that is for learning *mantras*. (Studies such as Aikman (1999) or Rogoff (1990) are about informal learning.) In marked contrast to the observation of 'conservativeness' of oral communities, there is a conscious flexibility regarding the actual content and form of the orally transmitted and remembered sacred knowledge. More than one *gunia* observed that the '*charcha*' (i.e. sacred knowledge and *mantras*) known by different people is essentially the same, but there may be differences because after all it is '*bath-kaha*', that which is told and said, and therefore apt to change. This is a contrast to the conservatism found in other Indian traditions of oral transmission of literate forms of knowledge, *sastric* knowledge, where elaborate devices are imposed to ensure that there is no distortion (see Mookerji, 1988 and Narasimhan, 1992 for details relating to Vedic learning traditions). The ease with silence, either being on one's own or of companionable silence even between two *gunia* who have come together to treat a patient, is an essential feature of the Baiga attitude of being at ease with not having or needing to speak.

Along with this, one must also recognise features that are linked to the subsistence economy. One is that childhood (after infancy) is not clearly differentiated from adulthood, so that while children are integrated into productive work at an early age, adults retain a childish playfulness. Another is the non-hierarchical structure of society and non-authoritarian structure of the family. The acceptance of children's volition and initiative is linked to a production process where children's labour is valuable and valued.

The institution of the modern school is based on different premises regarding the nature of knowledge, learning and childhood. The literate tradition which is foundational to the modern school necessarily presents knowledge 'out of context', not directly experienced. Schools teach how to act on a modelled world—not the real world. This necessitates explicit characterisation of details and interconnections. All aspects of things, even the obvious, must be talked about in order to render them comprehensible, to analyse and reflect on them. Narasimhan (1987) suggests that this is also the primary strength of knowledge obtained from school, that it is articulated and has a wide scope of applicability as it is analytical, precise and abstract. Cole and Scribner (1981), in their study of forms of literacy in Liberia

noted that the most visible and indisputable consequence of schooling was that it fostered abilities in expository talk in contrived situations. Syllogistic reasoning was also followed by those who were schooled rather than non-schooled.

Sting (1998) points out that literacy also alters the relationship of the subject and society and generates a shift in subjectivity. Although the framework of literacy is contingent on social rules and cultural traditions, these do not completely determine the individual who preserves a critical detachment and autonomy. '[H]is social and cultural integration [is] dependent on processing and mediation of his own' (Sting, 1998, p. 49). Although writing permits the social repertoire of knowledge to be permanently fixed, distanced from particular situations and individuals, abstract, systematised and in principle generally accessible, it also opens up a gap between the individual subject/knower and the written cumulative knowledge. The social and cultural horizon of the literate world, constituted by overlapping subjectivities, is thus fragmentary and pluralistic.

In his study of the Bondo Highlander tribals, Bikram Nanda observed that the school presumes not only a material surplus, but also a symbolic surplus: 'the school curriculum willy nilly presupposes a certain concept of childhood for those who have to consume it. But childhood as a distinct phase in a biography may be unknown in a society based on a subsistence production system' (Nanda, 1989, p. 4). Furthermore there is also an authority inherent in the pedagogic device of the formal school. Learning is also privatised and competitive.

The purpose of presenting these two contrasting pictures is not to mount an attack on formal education. The 'decontextualised' nature of learning or of pedagogic authority are features to be noted along with the realisation that this is not a 'problem' of the institution of formal school, but this is both a part of its foundational character and what makes it an institution of modernisation and suited to the modern world, both in terms of the conception of knowledge from which it draws, its perceived relationship to the world of production, and to the nature of childhood which it presumes and upon which it is conditional. Both Bernstein's (1977) observations regarding the linguistic requirement of elaborated code and the weak framing in promoting 'active' learning in which the learner is cognitively situated, are to do with this modern institution. We are obliged to recognise the deep disjunction in the habitus of children in the oral subsistence Baiga community vis-à-vis the school.

My purpose in presenting this contrast is to suggest that the Baiga knowledge tradition, at least in its present form, cannot survive in the modern school institutional structure. It is not to identify the contour points of a rapprochement. One could consider generating from Baiga knowledge learning tasks that could be carried out in the school; for example, taxonomic and herbarium-like tasks. But turning each plant into an object to be observed and talked about may amount to simplifying or trivialising the way in which the plant is known in a living dynamic culture, or accord it with properties and dimensions that are of no interest and perhaps even distracting in the Baiga system. Chants and *mantras* rendered into writing may not be able to survive and retain their sanctity when subject to the decontextualised scrutiny which the technology of writing makes possible. The consequences of being turned into an object of study could be even more disastrous. Consider, for example, having to answer comprehension types of question based on text whose content is derived from magic.

It is far from obvious that the flexibility, initiative-taking, and peer group interaction that the knowledge of *vidya* is built upon and which is in the Baiga child's habitus, can be rediscovered in an institution in which pedagogic authority is central. On the other hand, the discipline which learning *vidya* requires places a far greater responsibility on the learner as a practitioner, which formal schools do not engender. Clearly reinventing this indigenous

knowledge to suit the literate culture of the school would require that a lot more be known about its content, form and practice [5].

I say this not only of the indigenous knowledge possessed by tribal communities, but also of the more literate *sastric* knowledge systems. Including astrology as a university course may be a disaster for astrological knowledge as it now lays itself open to a new level of awareness of the knowledge itself, made possible by the epistemic practices of modern institutions. This includes new types of objectification of knowledge in the form of texts, comprehension and questions to answers, and also examinations [6]. The survival of indigenous knowledge systems is probably better assured by being kept out of the purview of the formal modern educational system.

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### NOTES

- [1] The Constitution of India recognises some communities as requiring special provisions and privileges to counteract the extreme forms of deprivation they suffered through traditional social organisation. These specific castes and tribes that are beneficiaries are listed in a Schedule of the Constitution.
- [2] Savyasachi (1991) feels that as a consequence of this constitutional provision, the identity of 'tribal' has acquired a definiteness it lacked in the past. The borderline between 'tribal' and 'non tribal' is no longer permeable. Beteille also points out that '[u]ntil recently tribe was a part of a regional system, and tribes from different regions had little to do with each other. Now there is not only a definite tribal identity enjoying legal sanction, but a political interest in maintaining and strengthening that identity' (Beteille, 1986, p. 318).
- [3] Nanda (1989) notes the importance of the economic basis of life and productive activities in understanding the ethos of tribal communities. Reducing subsistence economy uni-dimensionally to poverty desensitises one to this dimension. See Antweiler (1998) for an analysis of characteristics of 'local' knowledge and a review of the various senses of the term.
- [4] The dialogic form has been noted and commented upon as a feature of oral thought and compositions of oral cultures. The chanting also had a rhythmic quality and a 'somatic component' i.e. hand activity to manipulate rice on a winnow or short sticks held in the hand. Other features such as 'ritual language use' and 'copiousness' seemed to be absent (Ong, 1982).
- [5] The perception of the requirements of formal learning, also leads to indigenous cultures inventing new products that they feel are more suitable or worthy of the 'modern' contexts. Krishna Kumar (1991) argues that the form of the 'essay' came into existence in the Hindi literary tradition in response to the need created by including Hindi as a subject of school study, in the British colonial educational system. A friend involved with the literacy movement in Tamil Nadu noted that when they had organised a competition for neo-literate women to demonstrate their traditional '*kolam*' drawing skills, the women made drawings of motifs associated with the literacy slogans rather than their own traditional patterns.
- [6] Krishna Kumar recently observed to me that the recent heated debates on the inclusion of astrology as a subject of study in Indian Universities has not included this epistemological dimension.

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