

# Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Knowledge in the Era of (Re)colonization, Insights from a Rural Indigenous Santal Community

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how various of contested sites of the internationally recognized state encapsulated in the ethos of the West perpetuate colonial legacy, marginalize indigenous wisdom, and disregard ecological awareness and actions that go against the well-being of humans and the planet itself. These contested sites have been occurring due to ongoing imperialist-colonialist practices and policies imposed on indigenous peoples in the name of progress, development, and homogenization. This paper highlights the urgency and agency of restoring indigenous ecological consciousnesses and alternative ways of knowing so that they can re-emerge in our private and public lives to rebuild nations, peoples, and communities. The knowledge and acknowledgment of these issues drawing from a rural indigenous context in Bangladesh will help generate a broader understanding to formulate appropriate education policies, pedagogy, and practices that address, educate, and enlighten the world about the colonialist-capitalist agenda of exploitation and eradication of the indigenous way of life. More specifically, this paper reflects on the possibilities of an ecologically, economically, and culturally sustainable world, and it recommends ideas and concepts for sustainable education policies and practices for various stakeholders to transform damaging attitudes towards indigenous culture as well as the ecology of our planet.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Wisdom, Ecological Consciousness, Nation, state, Colonial legacy, Sustainable World, Western Education Policy

The fast disappearance of the rural Santal community in *Palashpur*<sup>1</sup> is a microcosm of disappearing indigenous peoples' diverse worlds, ways of life, languages, lands, religions, culture, traditions, and invaluable knowledge systems from the face of the planet. This paper

critically reflects on the damaging influences of modernity that mask insidious consumerist and capitalist core values of the West and becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Palashpur, the site of this research, has metaphorical and real implications.

a handmaiden in bringing about the demise of the indigenous way of living in harmony with nature and people in oneness. These damaging influences warrant immediate awareness and action for the indigenous peoples' survival and the planet itself. Therefore, the premise of this paper is not only a revelation of the overwhelming issues of injustice, oppression, and dehumanization against the indigenous peoples in local and global contexts but also points at the urgency of ecological education for the survival of planet Earth and its inhabitants. In writing this paper, the author primarily relies on the voice and understanding of the indigenous Santals in the rural setting and draws on instances from other contexts as well where the imperialist West and its agents are engaged in plundering natural resources from indigenous regions, destroying the serenity and biodiversity of flora and fauna, homogenizing linguistic and religious diversity, and demeaning local knowledge, wisdom, and deep appreciation of the holistic nature of the cosmos. This paper attempts to provide a critical understating of how, with the demise of indigenous cultures, the world is losing indispensable knowledge and wisdom to safeguard the planet from the damaging influence of unbridled industrialization in the name of so-called modernity.

### **Indigenous Perspectives in Research**

In this study, the Author make every effort to be in tune with the methodology employed in indigenous research to ensure the research is conducted respectfully, ethically, empathetically, and a beneficial fashion from the perspective of the research participants. The Author gave

much thought to the process of decolonization in the method of knowledge production and emphasized “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices.”<sup>2</sup> In the process, this research is not only “a means of creating knowledge; it is simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action”<sup>3</sup>. In order to create an epistemology compatible with the lived experiences of the research participants, the Author reflected on the research processes and outcomes, bearing in mind the interests of the Santals, their experiences, and knowledge that are at the center of the research. This study is based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and participant comments and observations. To this end, the Author employs a qualitative case study methodology.<sup>4</sup> Based on real-life situations, this case study is a rich and holistic account of the lived experiences of the Santals in the backdrop of losing their footholds in Bangladesh. This paper explores the subject perspectives in the struggle for survival and their experiences of marginalization and dehumanization on their terms and in their own words. The Author listened to their experience of losing lands, religion, education, language, and unique ways of life and living, and critically reflected on what I heard and what it meant, to the speakers and the researcher. Finally, the Author presented here the echoes of their voice and understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Gaventa, 1991, pp. 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> Berg, 2001.

For the protection of the community and its participant members, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants are protected by concealing their names with pseudonyms. The names of places and communities where the participants were recruited have also been concealed with pseudonyms. The Author was forthright about the purpose of this study and explained it to the potential participants, as simply as possible, with the help of community activists. The research findings have been shared with the research participants. They provided feedback for clarification.

The primary data of this case study was collected through in-depth audio-taped individual and focused group interviews, field-notes recorded through personal observations, experiences, and reflections. The secondary data was collected from extensive library research on various world indigenous communities living on the edge of disappearance due to so-call development policies of the state across the globe.

The sampling procedure involves two stages: purposive sampling procedure<sup>5</sup> and snowball techniques. A few leaders and grass-root level activists were personally approached in the first stage. Following the recruitment of these individuals, the rest of the participants were recruited through snowball techniques; the Author spent a substantial amount of time with the indigenous Santal community in Palashpur village and the adjoining villages of Kestapur Union, in the Rajshahi District of Bangladesh. All participants were interviewed in Bengali according to their choice of language. Additionally, the interviews and informal chat

before and after the interviews were also audio-taped and documented through self-guided shorthand. The audio tapes were transcribed, translated into English from Bengali, edited, and immediate reflections were recorded. Audio-taped interviews were played back to the participants for verification after each interview session. Following the interviews, there were informal discussions, which were also recorded. These discussions offered valuable insights and understandings that tapped into the inner voices of Santals.

The author used NVivo7 and later Nvivo 8 for data analysis. Using Nvivo7-8 as a repository, the Author streamlined data management and created cases from the interviews. The cases were combined with extensive coding and then queried to uncover the central themes across the transcribed interviews and secondary data. Those cases generated central themes and insights into the participants' personal and collective experiences. Some research themes emerged inductively from the data through the initial coding, while others emerged from coding queries. Data-driven nodes were inductively applied in coding. Codes were transformed into categorical labels or themes. In this manner, the transcribed data, and data from other sources, namely, transcribed interviews, cases from individual and focus groups, field notes, and data from secondary sources, were also imported into Nvivo 8 for coding. After coding, The Author used the 'Search' to find coincidences in the coding structures across cases. Tree nodes and

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<sup>5</sup> Patton, 2002.

free nodes were also consulted for the analysis and interpretation of the data, and later, created interpretations for reporting the data. This article was produced by combining the frequencies of the nodes coded and qualitative examples of cases to show the occurrences of education and language issues, devaluation of indigenous religion and culture, disputes, and dispossession of land and its aftermath. Besides, identified nodes and coded queries drawn from the participants' experiences have been used to portray the negotiated challenges of the community in the rural setting.

### **Hidden Narratives of Colonial-neocolonialism of the State**

In Palashpur, the insidious civilizing project is based on the ongoing colonial-like condition, in which the various sites such as the indigenous Santal language and education system, land ownership and religious beliefs, culture, traditions, and rituals are being contested and thus in the process of being eliminated. The exclusionary and assimilationist policies and practices of the modern state of Bangladesh bear the legacy of the Western neocolonial and homegrown neo-nationalist agenda that amply demonstrates the powerful presence of the West. The West replaces every aspect of indigeneity, both ideologically and materially. As Ashis Nandy states, "The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the presence of the West in the remote corner of planet Earth, Palashpur, is active through its development agenda and its notion of modernity-contesting indigenous Santal tradition, its missiological projects of Christianization-

diminishing indigenous ways of life and religious beliefs, its act of commodifying the land-dispossessing the Santals of land ownership and belonging, and its formula for education generating a xenophilic infatuation with the West and driving new generations to "ignore village-based education, culture, economy, and the profession of farming."<sup>7</sup> These are accomplished by the external intervention and vested interests of outsiders with the consent of the state that acts as an extension of the West.

The issues further affirm that the structure of nationalism and imperialism sustain each other as part of the ongoing neo-colonial project. Ideologically, the nation, as well as nationalism, has Western roots that, in the name of modernity and progress, undermine, devalue, oppress and dehumanize tradition-bound indigenous communities. Under these oppressive circumstances, the Santals in Palashpur, as elsewhere, are rapidly losing their lands, language, traditions, knowledge systems, rituals, and religion that sustains their sense of spirituality. This phenomenon of destruction is not an isolated event nor without widespread adverse consequences. Indeed, this phenomenon goes back to the emergence of nations as empires in Europe that replaced feudalism after the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment. This emergence initiated a paradigm shift in the world order, creating a sense of superiority and the capacity of the European empires to control, civilize, and rule the rest of the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Nandi, A.

<sup>7</sup> Barua, 2005.

They believed that the rest of the world was anachronistic and inhabited by barbaric, uncivilized, and prehistoric peoples. In this regard, “Enlightenment” was, in fact, a significant catalyst in the construction of systemic and institutionalized racism that shaped notions of supremacy, domination, “difference,” and “race,”<sup>8</sup> which eventually gave birth to colonization in the modern world. States intending to accumulate wealth and expand territorial control, the Europeans began to push the boundaries of their empires. Therefore, state and empire became synonymous with dominating and domesticating the rest of the world. The concept and global spread of the states in the 20th century was born out of the same dynamics of domination and domestication, and the process continues to destroy indigenous communities, such as the Santals, around the world.

The newly emerged states, such as Bangladesh, are a mutated and *extended* version of colonial and imperial history in terms of exerting domination and control. Many previous practices and policies receive new garbs as they retain the core systemic foundation of colonial and imperial oppression and domination, spreading a new version of colonization known as the state. In fact, “nationalism begets a sentiment of intolerance and ‘Othering’; that it is a potent site for power discourse, and there is a recurrent hierarchy and hegemony within its structure.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the everyday lives of the Santals have become increasingly “colonized” by a managerial and oppressive ethos of nationalism which is fundamentally at odds with the core values of indigeneity.



Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh

The emergence of the state of Bangladesh<sup>10</sup> retains colonial education and language policy in line with the previous colonial rules that exert the toxic influence of the “factory model”<sup>11</sup> of modern education on the tradition-bound indigenous peoples. Driven by the rationale of the market and colonial economic growth and exploitative imperatives, a centralized system of educational control has been established to affect cultural imposition, domestication, and domination of the “cultural other.” The education system has damaged the Santal traditional institutions<sup>12</sup> through which community members once became acquainted with their cultural heritage, acquired

<sup>8</sup> Better, 2002; Foley, 2000; Hokowhitu, cited in Hippolyte, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Quayum, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Formerly under the colonial rule of British India, it was partitioned in 1947 and referred to as East Pakistan. Demands for greater autonomy by the primarily Muslim population (in the millennium A.D., Muslim conversions and settlement in the region began in the 10th century), the independence movement supported by India resulted in Bangladesh as a state in 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ray, Das, & Basu, 1982.

life skills, and learned to appreciate close bonds with nature and the universe. The Western European mode of education indoctrinates these nature-loving individuals to be unmindful of the environment and ecology and thus become materialistic, self-centered, disconnected, ambitious, restless, and discontent. Other than the state-based education policy, an extreme example of linguistic hegemony in place of linguistic integration<sup>13</sup> is evident in Palashpur. Through the imposition of an alien language instead of the home language Santali, a covert indoctrination of ruling ideologies<sup>14</sup> continues to afflict the indigenous Santal community in Palashpur.

In addition, the Adivasi<sup>15</sup> land is also a neocolonial site of contestation. Land relates to forming indigenous identity and religious practices and is the material base for indigenous cultural and spiritual activities that nourish and sustain indigenous life and knowledge. Land grabbing in Palashpur by the rich and powerful with state support reveals the autocratic nature of the exertion of state power over marginalized peoples and their landscapes that nourish their distinctive culture and associated rituals. This issue of power contestation regarding land ownership indicates a colonial relationship in which the majority Bengali land mafias, the colonizers perpetrate territorial, cultural, material, and physical domination over the colonized, namely the indigenous Santals.

As nature is an inseparable part of the Santal tradition, various Santal rituals and festivities are celebrated according to the cycle of nature, in which the land or the village is at center stage.

Once the land sustained the rituals and the Santal community, the rituals, helped promote and revitalize the Santals' culture, history, and tradition. However, the colonial land policy adopted by Bangladesh has given rise to a situation in which deliberate and forced eviction reminds them of a version of *terra nullius*.<sup>16</sup> Under the circumstances, the Santals are losing not only their material foothold but their cultural, spiritual, and social existence and identity as well.

The other aspect of the hidden narratives of the Santals in Palashpur is faith-based colonization, which involves converting the indigenous Santal people to Christianity and the impact of Christianization on their social and family structures. The civilizing mission, wrapped in modernity and Western values, is an integral part of evangelization and has put the tradition-bound Santal community in Palashpur under seizure. As a result, there is an overwhelming sense of erosion in traditional values, disintegration, and a rise of materialism and consumerism. The indigenous worldview, which once nurtured and nourished a life of simplicity and contentment that nature provides, is apparently absent in the community. Instead, an alien concept of life pervades, a yearning for material success and competition rather than collectivist cooperation.

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<sup>13</sup> Dei, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Dei, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Adivasi is a term used in India and Bangladesh to refer to the region's indigenous peoples. The term comes from the Sanskrit word "adi", which means "original" or "first", and "vasi", which means "inhabitant". Adivasi communities are believed to be the region's original inhabitants, with a distinct culture, language, and way of life shaped by their relationship with the land and natural environment.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzmaurice, 2007.



Evangelization, which masks Western values and development for material success at the cost of spiritual emancipation, distances the Santals from their roots ingrained in the rural milieu; it positions them in the competitiveness and restlessness of the artificial life of urban contexts. The once-unified Santal society, which was sustained and nourished by the treasure trove of bounteous nature, blessed by the *Bongas*<sup>17</sup> and spirits of the ancestors, and undisturbed by modernity and external invasion, is now polarized, fragmented, and disintegrated. Christianization, built on colonial policies of domination, Westernization, the civilizing mission, and supremacist and expansionist ideologies, lacks a true understanding and tolerance of the irreplaceable value of the indigenous worldviews and ways of life. On the contrary, by solely focusing on their development agenda, the Christian missionaries justify their acts of conversion, aggression, and intrusion. Thus, like other indigenous contexts, evangelization, and the state, as legacies of the colonial past, have set a shocking example in Palashpur.

### Whose Development is It?

I hear a lot about development projects, but I don't see any real development in our community. There are many NGOs working here for our wellbeing. But I only see poverty, hunger, diseases, and death. The number of landlessness is increasing and with landlessness we are losing our material base. You cannot develop us by empty promises and exploiting us. They don't give us what we need; rather they give

us what they want us to have. For example: they give us cell phones, colour TVs, or a new religion, but we need our land, our language.<sup>18</sup>

Nidhiram Tudu, an 80-year-old Santal elder, provides a compelling observation and understanding of the harsh reality of the indigenous Santal community in Palashpur. His perspective, articulated in the above interview excerpt, corresponds with the voices of other indigenous communities enmeshed and devastated by institutionalized development ideologies.<sup>19</sup> These ideologies, rooted in the civilizing mission of the former colonial era and now recast as development,<sup>20</sup> promote the globalization of cultural, political, and economic systems. This version of globalization results in the degradation of "Earth's ecology and resources, but enhances indigenous peoples' social dislocation, alienation, furthering the dominance of technological rationality."<sup>21</sup> In this manner, the once autonomous, eco-friendly, content, and humble lives of the tradition-bound Santals become materially, physically, psychologically, and spiritually bankrupt.

Contrary to the benchmark of progress imposed by the regime of development, which is based solely on the modern Western knowledge

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<sup>17</sup> Bongaus, the spirits both good and bad according to Santal worldview.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the author, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Bodley's *Victims of Progress*, and Davis's *Victims of the Miracle*, cited in Little, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Dossa, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Chatterjee, 2001, p. 2.

system,<sup>22</sup> the once vibrant Santal community in Palashpur had its economic system, in which they knew neither profit-making nor stockpiling. Instead, the Santals shared their resources with one another instead of preying on one another. This encapsulated, vibrant community enjoyed a sense of connectedness, well-being, and self-sufficiency that bonded the people with a common goal of material and spiritual interests. However, with the influence of the Western, liberal-Christian “development” model that Washington, London, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank have been pushing on the South,<sup>23</sup> money and materialism have become controlling factors in defining the identities of individuals and the community.

In Palashpur, the mechanism of this development agenda is implemented by the NGOs representing the West and the state. Instead of having shared interests of the community and its collective survival in the spirit of self-respect and connected living “in harmony with nature,”<sup>24</sup> the Santals in Palashpur are now positioned in a competitive consumerist and capitalist mode of living. In addition, the sense of modernization and civilization fabricated and imposed through institutions—such as Western education, the money economy, land policies, and missionization that flourished hand in hand with colonization—has alienated the Santals from their roots and traditional ways of life. These institutions are engaged in asserting processes that systematically de-legitimize traditional modes of livelihood by impoverishing the natural resource base upon which the lives of communities depend.<sup>25</sup>

Evidently, in Palashpur, dozens of aid agencies

are ostensibly active in improving the socio-economic conditions of the Santals and other marginalized communities. These agencies are funded by Western dollars and dictated by the Western worldview that “created the notion of poverty based on capitalist indicators”<sup>26</sup> rather than the felt needs, knowledge, and worldview of the Santal community; they “operate on the assumption that economic progress ultimately leads to social progress, and that development can solve poverty and social problems on a global scale”<sup>27</sup>.

The imposed indicator of development has not assisted the Santals in achieving a sustainable way of life. Instead, “the strategy,” as Banerjee<sup>28</sup> asserts. Nidhiram Tudu, the Santal elder echoes, has “produced the opposite effect: underdevelopment, debt, crises, and exploitation.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed existing development programs lack the earnestness and wisdom of “ethno-development—the autonomous capacity of a culturally differentiated society to guide its own development.”<sup>30</sup> The welfare of the Santals is on the line. As the developmental regime separates the Santals from their natural resources, the community becomes materially, culturally, and spiritually vulnerable.

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<sup>22</sup> Banerjee, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Dossa, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, 1938, p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Escobar, cited in Chatterjee, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Escobar, cited in Banerjee, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Banerjee, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Banerjee, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Shiva, Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1987; Mies & Shiva, 1993 cited in Banerjee, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Batalla, cited in Little, 2005, p. 14.



The notion of development that set the benchmark of progress views the Santals, “low consuming, and environment-friendly lifestyles as poor and unfit for modern folks.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, “never neutral, politically or racially, development is quintessentially developmental imperialism”<sup>32</sup>; it is wrecking devastation not only on the lives of the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh but on the lives of other marginalized communities across the globe as well. In the name of developing communities, there is an enthusiasm for urbanization, which is separating people from one another, from nature and their traditional ways of life; this ultimately leads to the rejection of the natural world and the indigenous ecological wisdom.

The aggression of urbanization, which is leveled as the primary cause of pollution due to the high concentration of population and industrial production<sup>33</sup> has detrimental effects beyond economic and environmental concerns. Kozlov, Vershubsky, and Kozlova<sup>34</sup> demonstrate that modernization and urbanization have a serious stressing influence on the aborigines of Khanty<sup>35</sup> and the *Mansi* in North Siberia. They conclude that there is a significant link between modernization and urbanization, individual and socio-psychological characteristics, and the health and well-being of Aboriginal communities. These effects correspond with the Royal Commission report on Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Context.<sup>36</sup> This report outlines the onslaught of Western diseases among the indigenous peoples in Canada due to modernization and urbanization. It states:

Chronic conditions are sometimes called the diseases of modernization, or Western diseases, because they attend to lifestyles typical of Western industrial nations: reduced physical exercise; diets overloaded with fat and sugar; high levels of stress; and increased exposure to a wide range of pollutants in the air, water, and food supply. These risk factors set the stage for a wide range of diseases, including cancer, heart disease, obesity, gall bladder disease, and diabetes.<sup>37</sup>

The bleak future of *Santali*, the language of the heart of the indigenous Santals in Palashpur, exemplifies the condition of “linguistic genocide”<sup>38</sup> or language death, which is at the core of the perpetuation of modernity’s colonialist and imperialist project. Linguistic genocide echoes that of the American context, where according to Skutnabb-Kangas, the native people are at the receiving end of ‘linguistic genocide’ in our society and schools. UNESCO expresses similar concern in its assertion that “half of the world’s 6,700 languages and dialects could vanish by the end of the century if governments don’t take action now.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nandy, cited in Dossa, 2007, p. 890.

<sup>32</sup> Dossa, 2007, p. 891.

<sup>33</sup> Calvert, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Kozlov, Vershubsky, and Kozlova, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Khanti and Mansi.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Ship, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Royal Commission Report, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> CTV report, 2009.

A Statistics Canada report published two years ago states that in Canada, irreversible damage has already been done to ten once flourishing Aboriginal languages that have become extinct over the past 100 years<sup>40</sup>. Francis & Reyhner<sup>41</sup> affirm a similar trend in the United States, where only two million people speak their indigenous language, and less than 1% of the current population identifies themselves as possessing a native language ancestry, including Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Alaskans. Of the 154 indigenous languages still spoken in the United States, only about 20 are being transmitted to children by their families. In other words, most languages will not be maintained or used after a generation or two. Indigenous peoples elsewhere are experiencing similar situations.

The indigenous languages, such as *Quechua*, *Aymara*, *Nahuatl*, and *Maya*, primarily spoken in Central and Latin American countries, face erosion. Similar situations exist in the continents of Australia and Africa. In Australia alone, some 500 languages have been lost since the arrival of Europeans. The indigenous people in Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru prefer to speak Spanish to their indigenous languages. Of the recorded 10,000 or more languages that have existed worldwide over time, only about 6,000 are now spoken, 3000 of which are not spoken by the younger generation. As a result of an ongoing assimilationist agenda and pressures from the dominant languages, the number of languages is projected to drop by 50-90% over the next 100 years.<sup>41</sup> In the African context, the issue of “language death” is more pressing, as Nigel Crawhall documents:

Of the scores of *San and Khoe* languages spoken by indigenous peoples when Europeans first arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, only a handful survives today. The surviving languages are all at risk of dying out in the next generation.<sup>43</sup>

The above instances demonstrate the seriousness of the issue of “language death” among indigenous languages in the global context. They further corroborate that education and language policy legitimizes the accumulated knowledge and authority of conquest and colonization<sup>44</sup> as they continue to be imposed on marginal communities around the globe. Colonization is achieved “through linguistic racism and the symbolic capital of language that serves to discriminate and disadvantage the colonized”<sup>45</sup> such as the indigenous peoples. Discriminatory language policies, evident in indigenous communities, such as the Santals in Palashpur, are responsible for the demise of many minority languages, nationally and globally.

Many minority languages are on the brink of extinction because of state-crafted linguistic imperialism, as in the case of the indigenous Santals in Bangladesh. This “linguistic imperialism” that controls and dominates

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<sup>40</sup> CTV report, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Francis & Reyhner, 2002,

<sup>42</sup> UNDP report, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Crawhall, 1999, p.1

<sup>44</sup> Willinsky, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> Dei, 2006, p. 16.

the languages of others is one of the principal mechanisms of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. The powerful forces of assimilation create adverse situations that destroy the survival of minority languages, oral or written. In this respect, media plays a devastating role.<sup>46</sup> Many states, such as Bangladesh, do not recognize indigenous languages; they view linguistic diversity as a threat to the state's sovereign integrity. These oppressive states are ready to eliminate the languages and, with them, the rights of their speakers. Thus, instead of linguistic integration, linguistic hegemony is a covert indoctrination of ruling ideologies that continues to afflict indigenous communities worldwide.

The consequences of language loss are devastating not only for the linguistic communities but for the world at large, as valuable knowledge resources embedded in the languages are lost with them. When even one language falls silent, the world loses an irredeemable repository of human knowledge. Nettle and Romaine<sup>48</sup> observe that,

Every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been a vehicle too. It is a loss to every one of us if a fraction of that diversity disappears, when there is something that can have been done to prevent it<sup>49</sup>.

Thiongo asserts, "Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history"<sup>50</sup>. Therefore, by denying these diverse languages, the diversity of culture is being denied, and, in the process, the collective history and

tradition are being removed from the lives of the communities. With language loss, the community loses its collective identity and its wisdom. Thus, language loss is irreparable. From the perspective of equity and justice, language death and recovery are human rights issues. A child comes to know, represent, name, and act upon the world through the mother tongue. As such, to speak one's mother tongue is a birthright.

No one can naturally or easily renounce this fundamental birthright. In various indigenous contexts, the loss of a language reflects the exercise of power by the dominant group over the disenfranchised indigenous peoples. Accordingly, to Fishman, it manifests "in the concomitant destruction of intimacy, family, and community via national and international involvement and intrusions<sup>51</sup>. Thus, linguistic imperialism not only destroys languages but marginalizes communities as well.

For indigenous children, the loss of their mother tongue has adverse effects on their academic success. Cummins<sup>52</sup> argues that a positive identity is vital for academic achievement, and children can suffer from the disregard of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. He states:

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<sup>46</sup> Fourie, 2007; Tomlinson, 1991.

<sup>47</sup> Dei, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> Nettle and Romaine, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in McCarty, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Thiongo, 1986, p.15.

<sup>51</sup> Fishman, 1997.

<sup>52</sup> Cummins, 1996, pp. 2-3.

When students' language, culture, and experience are ignored or eradicated in classroom interactions; students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning; there are few points of connection to curriculum materials or instruction and so students are expected to learn in an experiential vacuum. Students' silence and nonparticipation under these conditions have frequently been interpreted as lack of academic ability or effort, and teachers' interactions with students have reflected a pattern of low expectations, which become self-fulfilling.

Furthermore, language loss leads to the irreversible loss of vital knowledge accumulated for centuries by different races of humankind. With the death of indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge, many aspects of biological diversity and the wisdom of sustainable management of different ecological systems will also be at severe risk. By adopting measures to prevent linguistic genocide and maintaining linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge can be saved to ensure a linguistically, culturally, and ecologically sustainable society for all.

### **Global Crises through the Lens of Local Issues**

Modernity's capitalist-colonialist operations are pervasive; therefore, the act of ethnocide and its insidious mechanisms affecting the indigenous Santal community are not isolated events. They are integral to the broader narratives of the

endangered Indians living in the lush landscape and mineral-rich Sierra Nevada. To keep the world in harmony, these Indians, known as big brothers, believe in spiritual practices to maintain the balance of the universe.<sup>53</sup> A similar situation continues to exist among various indigenous nations across continents that are struggling for their land, language, culture, religion, and wisdom. The brutality is experienced by the persecuted Tibetan monks in inaccessible terrains of Tibet. For generations, they have been engaged in a nonviolent struggle. So is the case among the embattled tribespeople of the Ecuadorian or Brazilian Amazon<sup>54</sup>. To safeguard their unique way of living, they have been constantly retreating into the wilderness to be left alone. A parallel destiny has befallen the indigenous peoples in Kerala, India, who picketed for more than a thousand days in front of a *Coca-Cola* factory that is drying up their water sources and polluting their land<sup>55</sup>.

The global blueprint of numerous local maladies brings a further indictment against the Western model of civilization, for example, the risk of extinction or death of the *San* and *Khoe* languages, spoken by indigenous peoples in South Africa<sup>56</sup> the political, cultural, and existential erosion of the *Sami* of Arctic Europe<sup>57</sup> and the vulnerable *Mirrar* people, an aboriginal community around the *Jabiluka* Uranium mine

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<sup>53</sup> Wade, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Borg, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> IWGIA, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Crawhall, 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Conrad, 1999.

field in Australia, who are bearing the brunt of state-sponsored economic terrorism, and social and territorial encroachment in the name of national development<sup>58</sup> and the policy of industrialization of the globe.

The oppressive phenomenon in Palashpur further offers a critical gaze at ethnocidal development projects in Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Malaysia, where indigenous peoples, such as the *Orang Asli*, the original aborigines of peninsular Malaysia, are on the brink of extinction due to governmental schemes to promote a uniform national culture.<sup>59</sup> Again, this situation is evident in the “shared cultural and community traumatization” and “cultural decomposition”<sup>60</sup> of the Aborigines in the continent of Australia and the indigenous peoples of North and South America.

The instances exemplify pervasive and invasive, covert, or overt imperialist-colonialist projects manufactured and initiated in the West, resulting in millions of oppressed victims around the globe. However, no nations, not even the oppressive and materially powerful West, are immune to the consequential devastation this barely three hundred years old civilization<sup>61</sup> is about to cause. Unfortunately, with the loss of indigenous peoples and their sustainable ways of life, there exists a potential threat like “*a fire burning over the earth, taking with it not only plants and animals,*” but the legacy of humanity’s brilliance.”<sup>62</sup> As such, there is a pressing need to nurture and nourish the spirit of “Conscientization”<sup>63</sup> and ecological wisdom, which can be found in indigenous ways of life for the planet’s survival.

Mother Nature is ceaselessly ravaged by the Western, imperialist-colonialist agenda masked in various forms of the civilizing mission, education, and the economy built on the rituals of consumption<sup>64</sup> and exploitation. In Palashpur and elsewhere, Western hegemonic and deceptive policies and development agenda cannot be overlooked or masked. These policies and agenda are a disguised form of colonialism,<sup>65</sup> which operates under the guise of a powerful rhetoric that justifies the destruction of traditional ways of life, causing the ethnocide of distinct groups of people and the destruction of nature.<sup>66</sup>

In the process of ethnocide, with the loss of indigenous peoples’ invaluable knowledge systems and wisdom, flora, fauna, and human diversity face unprecedented disastrous ends. These knowledge systems, which are empirical and experiential, could be or could have been powerful resources for sustainable development and cross-cultural environmental scholarship.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the indigenous voices and knowledge systems can be assumed to be a wake-up call to redress how our so-called civilization—through its expansionist, consumerist, supremacist, and capitalist core values—is destroying this

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<sup>58</sup> Banerjee, 2000.

<sup>59</sup> Culture, Clarke, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Adelson, 2000, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Wade, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Wade, 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Friere, 1970.

<sup>64</sup> Suzuki, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> Moffatt, cited in Dei, 2006.

<sup>66</sup> Venkateswar, 2004, for details on the Andaman context.

<sup>67</sup> Raj & Madhok, 2007.

planet. Our planet is increasingly becoming a dumping ground for large quantities of hazardous industrial waste. This so-called malevolent civilization, in the name of modernity, is thus destroying the biodiversity and ecological balance of the Earth and threatening to wipe out our very existence.

### **Sustainable Education Policy, Pedagogy, and Practice**

Historically education, in its formal and informal modes, served as a colonialist-imperialist tool; it was implemented by monolithic prescription<sup>68</sup> and, for the most part, imposed from above. Education, as such, has played a central role in the promotion of colonialist-imperialist, epistemological, axiological, and ontological paradigms around the world. As a result of this education, the world has become unidimensional, where the West is privileged and exerts material, ideological, cultural, and linguistic dominations. The Supremacist ideology in education continues unabated despite the political decolonization that brought the emergence of various states on both hemispheres of the globe. Furthermore, under the influence of globalization / neo-liberalism,<sup>69</sup> yet another mutated version of the modernist, colonial-imperial project, these states have become puppet states controlled by local elites and transnational, hegemonic corporations. In addition, “under neo-liberalism everything,” including the worldwide, dominant, public education system, “either is for sale or is plundered for profit”.<sup>70</sup>

Under the influence of such a “factory model” of education,<sup>71</sup> which acts as an engine for consumerist job seekers, the states have thus far failed to address the genuine interests of the indigenous communities as well as the wellbeing of the planet. On the contrary, indigenous languages, wisdom, knowledge, and cultures were and continue to be exclusively proscribed, demeaned, and diminished by the state through its various sites, including the education system. The education system, at the helm, is a system that came into being hand in hand with the flourishing and expansion of colonialism and imperialism; it continues to exist as their inherent legacy years after political decolonization. As a direct consequence of the colonialist education policy, the indigenous languages, knowledge, and cultures have been construed and treated as antediluvian and unnecessary in the modern world. In contrast, national languages and cultures, or more specifically, the languages and cultures of the dominant ethnic groups, have been viewed as the pinnacle of modernity and progress.

There is a nexus between the colonialist-imperialist mode of education, modernity, and the Western version of progress. Indeed, the education system that has propagated this myopic and racist vision lacks respect for and understanding the importance of local knowledge,

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<sup>68</sup> Dei & Kempf, 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Giroux, 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Giroux, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Miller, 1996.



collective experiences, “Conscientization,” and action. This “educational project that was originally intended to profit and delight some at the expense of others” is further devoid of the essential elements of “spirituality, which is manifested in our search for wholeness, meaning, and interconnectedness and values” Devoid of inclusiveness, service ethics, and ecological awareness, this version of education, embedded in “market-driven values” has “not only facilitated the normalization of Western education, but actively left deep spiritual and mental scars, causing mental and physical enslavement” in the process, it has been perpetuating ecological, cultural, and economic degradation.

There is a nexus between the colonialist–imperialist mode of education, modernity, and the Western version of progress. Indeed, the education system that has propagated this myopic and racist vision lacks respect for and understanding the importance of local knowledge, collective experiences, “Conscientization,”<sup>72</sup> and action. This “educational project that was originally intended to profit and delight some at the expense of others”<sup>73</sup> is further devoid of the essential elements of “spirituality, which is manifested in our search for wholeness, meaning, and interconnectedness and values”<sup>74</sup> Devoid of inclusiveness, service ethics, and ecological awareness, this version of education, embedded in “market-driven values”<sup>75</sup> has “not only facilitated the normalization of Western education, but actively left deep spiritual and mental scars, causing mental and physical enslavement”<sup>76</sup> in the process, it has been perpetuating ecological, cultural, and economic degradation.

Another pressing issue is how Western education affects the biological diversity and environment of sustainable life on the planet. The devastating consequence of this mode of education is that “by its all-pervasive influence, the knowledge of the environment is being lost in communities around the world, and there is an urgent need to conserve this knowledge to help develop mechanisms to protect the earth’s biological diversity.”<sup>77</sup> To ensure an ecological sense and help create a holistic and integrated world for generations to come, we cannot afford to evade the responsibility of rethinking and reformulating curricula; curricula should incorporate inclusive visions and rhythms of life and languages and pedagogical praxis’s that encompass “multiple lived experience and alternative knowledges (sic).”<sup>78</sup> Community-based education<sup>79</sup> offers a good example of a pedagogy that “enable[s] learners to become active participants in the shaping of their education.” This education will help liberate us from the colonially tainted understanding that we carry<sup>80</sup> and offer opportunities to unlearn and relearn, thus initiating engaged learning. Rethinking the curriculum in this direction, and a “social pedagogy” that engages ecological literacy derived

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<sup>72</sup> Friere, 1970.

<sup>73</sup> Willinsky, 1998, p. 264.

<sup>74</sup> Wane, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>75</sup> Giroux, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Wane, 2006, p. 81.

<sup>77</sup> Battiste, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Dei & Calliste, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Corson, 1998 p. 240.

<sup>80</sup> Willinsky, 1998.

from indigenous wisdom, will enable learners “to see the connections that are inherent in the environment.”<sup>81</sup> The consciousness that emerges from the holistic nature of such education will lead our understanding of words towards a broader understanding of the world.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, according to Miller:<sup>83</sup>

... this will offer opportunities to reeducate ourselves about “the basic laws of ecology and how these impact on our day-to-day lives. It would also involve a study of how we got ourselves into the present mess. This would involve: a critical look at history and how industrialization and consumerism contributed to the destruction of the planet.

In this manner, education with ecological wisdom can be essential in healing and renewal. Efforts must be made to implement such a paradigm shift in education, incorporating

indigenous knowledge—guided by an “anti-colonial discursive framework”<sup>84</sup> that contains ecological sense, spirituality, empirical, and experiential learning—into the curricula as well as the instructional and pedagogical practices of educators and learners. This shift would not only be empowering from the perspective of the indigenous peoples but also crucial for the soulful existence of our planet. Indeed, the future of our planet largely depends on how we come to terms with the application, dedication, and public investment in such education policies and practices, which have long been overlooked, demeaned, and destroyed.

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<sup>81</sup> Miller, 1996, p. 155.

<sup>82</sup> Friere, 1972.

<sup>83</sup> Miller, 1996: p. 155.

<sup>84</sup> Dei, 2002.

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