Affective experiences and expressions in institutional context: the case of a boarding school for Indigenous students in India

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ABSTRACT

The 22,500 Indigenous students attending an Indian boarding school sacrifice living with family to essentially grow up in an institutional setting, in part to receive free education but also because they believe in the school's promise of a bright future. In this context, students' affective expressions and experiences are moulded by an all-enveloping institutional environment. The article relies on two concepts, 'institutions of hope' and 'total institutions' to examine the institutional context in which students shape their aspirations and weigh the balance of sacrifice and opportunity. Ethnographic data were collected through on campus observation, visits to students' villages, and interviews with former and current students, parents, teachers, administrators, and visitors. Additionally, institutional messaging on social media and the school's website was analysed. The data paint a picture of how, within this institutional context, sacrifice is justified in pursuit of aspirations, and hope for a better future through education is internalised.

KEYWORDS

Sacrifice, affect, boarding schools, Indigenous students, India, total institutions

Introduction

The following reflection is taken from research notes written in March 2015. I was nearing the end of a six-month ethnographic study at the Kalinga Institute for Social Sciences (KISS), a boarding school in Bhubaneswar, India, that, at that time, served 22,500 Indigenous[1] students.

I have been able to watch a daily stream of young boys congregate on a playing field outside my office window. By late afternoon, the field filled with boys playing rugby, chasing each other, and hanging out with friends. It now strikes me that in the months I have been there I have never seen a fight, even though adult supervision is minimal. This makes me think about behaviour I have seen across the campus. Students change classes without pushing or shouting, sit calmly and generally attentively shoulder-to-shoulder along long benches in classrooms, eat meals quietly in two shifts, and wait in mass (all 22,500 students) at whole school gatherings. In all of these cases, adults are barely visible or audible; there are no whistles, bullhorns, or raised voices. Adults do not forcibly remove or intimidate students. There is nothing in the students' behaviour that registered fear, anger, or resignation; they seem to know what to do and accept the school's behavioural expectations.[2]

These observations grew out of my interest in understanding how and why students accommodate to the expectations of this very large, complex, and all-encompassing institution. What I saw on the playing field and across campus are illustrations of students' affective expressions and experiences of living in this institution. While I did not initially set out to examine affect, aspiration, and sacrifice in this context, my initial research objectives were consistent with this focus. Initially, I set out to determine what students and their families lost and gained by attending the school and to examine how the school's organisation and culture shaped students' experiences. In other words, I wanted to see if they framed the experience of living

in a boarding school as a sacrifice worth making. The act of conducting the ethnography and analysing the data resulted in blending these research objectives to focus on tangible and intangible institutional characteristics that provide the context for students' affective expressions and experiences of aspiration and sacrifice.

KISS is essentially a self-contained small city of Indigenous students. As such, it has been compared to the oppressive, destructive, and harsh institutions established in the nineteenth century for North American Indigenous students (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Survival International 2019). However, the affective expressions that I saw deployed on the playing fields, in classrooms, and in public spaces suggest a very different experience. Rather than instilling fear and shame in students and alienating them from their Indigenous communities, as was the case in the North American schools (Adams 1995; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2019), I experienced KISS as an institution in which engaged students moved calmly, freely, and respectfully through their days. In conversations and interviews, they expressed pride and gratitude for the opportunity to study at the school, optimism and hope for their futures, and a sense of belonging and pride in the institution. They focused on what their futures may hold and seemed unconcerned about the sacrifices they and their families were making for them to study far from home.[3]

In my time at KISS, I was struck by the outsized influence KISS, as an institution, had on students' affective experiences and expressions. KISS intentionally projected a collective mood and experience which, by relying on ethnographic methods, I was able to compare to expressed and observed opinions, actions and interactions of a wide range of people affiliated with the institution. In analysing my data, I identified two conceptualisations of institutions that provide useful frames for understanding students' experience of this institution. The first is Braithwaite's (2004) concept of 'institutions of hope.' This concept highlights an institution's imperative to project hopefulness, and it provides criteria to distinguish between institutions that use hope as a mere slogan and those that actually provide room to aspire, opportunities to realise aspirations, and that demonstrate a commitment to fight back against defeatist narratives. The second is Goffman's (1961) concept of 'total institutions' which highlights features of organisational structure that shape students' experience, in particular, separation from outside influences and a formally administered order.

In summary, I argue that KISS students' affective experiences and expressions are heavily influenced by institutional characteristics of a boarding school that functions as both an institution of hope and a total institution. In this context, KISS envelops students in an environment in which they perceive the sacrifices they make to attend the school as opportunities to pursue and realise their aspirations, and they see the formal order regulating their daily lives as an opportunity to belong to something big and important.

Conceptual framework

Framing student experience: affect, aspiration, and sacrifice

Below, I argue that KISS students' school experience is best understood by considering three interrelated concepts: affect, aspiration, and sacrifice. Affect broadly describes how students, individually and collective, experience the present and anticipate the future. It reflects moods and experiences that shift as students balance aspirations and sacrifice. Within this context, aspiration is future oriented, focused on hopes and dreams. Sacrifice is more rooted in the present, focused on the costs that are incurred for the potential of future gains. The affective experience reflects a dance of the complimentary and competing states of aspiration and sacrifice.

Affect

As described above, schools, especially boarding schools, envelop students in a social and cultural context that is pregnant with affect. Affect describes the individual and collective moods, feelings, and sensations that are embodied in lived experience (Skoggard and Waterston 2015). Lutz (2017, 182 emphasis in original) succinctly describes affect as 'what *moves* and *matters* in human life' and elaborates that 'affective qualities or frames … shape the tones, the political possibilities, or the harms of everyday life.' When affect is valorised in school settings, we attend to the kaleidoscope of experience, thought, emotion, and sensation that comprise students' daily lives. In this context, students display both the capacity to be affected and to affect (Beatty 2019; Lutz 2017; Skoggard and Waterston 2015). In addition, affect is deeply interior and also collective; it exists in the 'collective unconscious and conscious and the body writ large – the body politic, the social and the cultural' (Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 112).

Ethnography is well suited to examinations of affect because such study requires being, doing, and participating in daily life (Huijsmans 2018), but capturing affect can be problematic. Questions related to whose affect, the researcher's own or that of those living the experience, arise. For example, Beatty (2019), while praising Navaro-Yashin's (2012) 'affective geography' of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, questions whether the affect she attributes to objects and the war-scarred environment are those she experienced or those experienced by her informants. Jakimow (2020) acknowledges that, had a key informant not vividly described a contrary view of their encounters, she would have assumed a shared affective experience. These concerns are cautionary, but ethnography can still serve to capture and conceptualise theoretically what otherwise is 'only felt and sensed' (Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 109). With extended time in the field, close engagement with the community, and openness to contradiction and ambiguity, affect can come to life in ethnography (Lutz 2017).

Aspiration

Aspirations are future possibilities that are 'shot through with affect and sensation' (Appadurai 2013, 287). Aspirations are articulated broadly in terms such as 'getting ahead' (Dost and Froerer 2021) or 'becoming someone in life' (KISS 2019) and are often tied closely with being educated. For disadvantaged populations, being educated provides only a slim chance to get ahead economically and socially (Balagopalan 2003; Kumar 2015; Vasavi 2003), but it allows the educated person to stand out in relation to the less educated (Dost and Froerer 2021; Frye 2012). Schools are central to both the possibilities and problems of aspiration. They are intentional in promoting themselves as avenues for aspirational attainment, even though too often they do not make good on their promises (Frye 2012; Zipin et al. 2015). Aspirations for many marginalised youths are cruel and unattainable (Berlant 2011), but young people hold on to them because without aspirations the future seems hopeless (Jakimow 2016). As such, aspirations and thoughts of the future are often contradictory, ambiguous, and fraught. Although schools have been complicit in promoting false dreams, they have the opportunity to help students develop a 'capacity to aspire' by providing road maps and role models for a desired future (Appadurai 2013).

Sacrifice

Sacrifice describes intentional forfeitures made in the present for uncertain future benefits. Like aspiration, it is 'shot through with affect and sensation' because it describes the experience of forgoing something prized or desirable (e.g. money, labour, time together, traditional livelihoods, marriage, sense of self) for the sake of something deemed more worthy (e.g. social and economic opportunity, career aspirations, familial duty, moral imperatives) (Carbonell 2015; Shohet 2013). Depending on the context, sacrifice may be experienced in multiple, often conflicting, ways – as sadness, suffering, anger, and resignation over what is lost or forgone (Carbonell 2015; Horowski 2020) and pride, acceptance, anxiety, and hope over what may be. Although sacrifice is often seen as a necessary loss for an expected opportunity, it frequently carries a sense

of obligation to family, nation, and the moral good (Carbonell 2015; Horowski 2020; Shohet 2013). In the context of education, sacrifice is often part of a complex of familial obligations (Shohet 2013; Yuang and Yeoh 2005). Children may stay in school to please their parents, and parents may pay fees, forgo their children's labour, or uproot family members in hope of promised rewards (Jakimow 2016; Yuang and Yeoh 2005). In some cases, a parent, typically the mother, foregoes career and family connections to move great distances from home for a child's educational advancement (Yuang and Yeoh 2005). In other cases, parents pay fees they cannot afford and forego children's contributions to the family. Jakimow (2016) describes the great sacrifices low-income Indian labourers make to send their children to school even though they know the chance that promised opportunities will materialise is remote. These parents fear that discontinuing school could be seen as a death sentence for their children. In these cases, keeping children in school or sending them away to distant schools can be viewed as akin to sacrificing to the 'god of aspiration.'

Framing institutions: institutions of hope and total institutions

Schools, as social institutions, provide an affective context that helps frame students' conception of aspiration and sacrifice. Institutional leaders intentionally promote desired affective expressions in vision and mission statements and through interfaces with the general public (e.g. websites, social media posts), but these official channels provide only a surface, and often skewed, understanding of the actual affective experience in the school, especially for marginalised students who may find the environment repressive, oppressive, or dismissive (e.g. Balagopalan 2003; Kumar 2015; Vasavi 2003). Examining schools from the inside provides an opportunity to see how closely the affect that is expressed and experienced by students reflects the official narratives.

Institutions of hope

'Institutions of hope' (Braithwaite 2004) do not merely promote themselves as hopeful. Rather, they maintain a context that encourages people to see the future as filled with possibility and hope; they provide actual support for aspirations, and they serve as antidotes to societal inequities. Key features of institutions of hope are that they (1) provide 'sets of rules, norms, and practices that ensure that we have some room … to dream of the extraordinary,' (2) ensure that people have the opportunity to 'do the extraordinary,' and (3) stand up against defeatist messages that 'makes engagement in shaping our futures seem futile toward one in which we are expected to be active and responsible participants contributing to a vibrant civil society' (2004, 7). Unlike institutions that provide only 'hokey hope' (Duncan-Andrade 2009) or 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), institutions of hope provide role models and road maps that further individual and collective aspirations (Appadurai 2013; Scott 2011).

Total institutions

'Total institutions' (Goffman 1961) have an outsized effect on individual and collective affect because they encompass all aspects of human life. They serve as 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman 1961: viii). Although all total institutions share these structural characteristics, they differ in terms of purpose (e.g. incarceration, education, rehabilitation), population (e.g. prisoners, students, drug addicts, monks), degree of closure (e.g. voluntariness, degree of containment), and modes of compliance (e.g. punishment, loyalty) (Davies 1989). Even within a type of total institution (e.g. within mental hospitals or boarding schools) or within an individual institution, the affective experiences may differ markedly.

All boarding schools exemplify total institutions because they separate students from the wider society and follow a formally administered round of life. It is unsurprising that critics of KISS turn to the notorious settler schools established in North America and Australia as a cautionary tale (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Survival International 2019) because they explicitly sought to erase students' cultures and languages and traumatised generations of students (Adams 1995; Fear-Segal 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2019). The sacrifices students made to attend these schools were rarely warranted. As the data presented below illustrate, total institutions need not be oppressive, restrictive, and cruel; they can actually exemplify institutions of hope, minimising sacrifice and maximising reward.

Boarding schools elicit strong opinions in part because separating children from their families requires sacrifice. Opinions are negative when the focus is directed toward what is given up (e.g. family bonds, cultural and linguistic fluency, money) (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Adams 1995) and positive when the focus is on what is gained (e.g. aspirational opportunities, social networks, safety from violence) (Scott 2011; Peshkin 2001). Depending on the degree to which students believe their sacrifices are justified, they may exhibit a range of affective expressions from excitement, joy, and engagement to dread, despair, and resignation.

A similar range of opinion exists concerning the effect of 'a structured round of life.' These routines and structures can be seen as oppressive and cruel, robbing students of their identities (Adams 1995; Fear-Segal 2007; Schaverien 2015), but they can also be seen as opportunities to belong and take pride in a valued institution. The routines and rituals associated with elite boarding schools are part of an experience sought after by families across generations (Peshkin 2001), while those associated with schools serving Indigenous and other marginalised populations have been associated with lasting mental health issues, alcoholism, and family disfunction (Adams 1995; Fear-Segal 2007; Schaverien 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

Key conceptual features

Key features of 'institutions of hope' and 'total institutions' are used in this ethnography to provide a frame for understanding students' affective orientation toward aspiration and sacrifice. A focus on KISS's ability to provide room to dream and aspire, opportunities to act on those aspirations, and its struggle to fight back against defeatist narratives derive from the conceptualisation of 'institutions of hope' (Braithwaite 2004). Two features of 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961), separation from the larger society and an administratively ordered round of life, provide a way of framing students' sacrifice as opportunities rather than liabilities. Within these frames, we see students as enveloped in messages that education is critical to a bright future, that aspirations are achievable, and that school can prepare students to stand up to defeatist narratives. The frames also present a complex institution that simultaneously encourages students to focus, not on what they sacrifice, but rather on what they can aspire for and to see the institutional order and structure, not as a sacrifice of individual identity, but as part of belonging to something big and important.

Situating KISS in the Indian education landscape

Indians of all castes, classes, and ethnic groups believe in the power of education, even when it fails to bring about promised changes (Dréze and Sen 2002; Jakimow 2016). For many reasons (e.g. colonial legacy, corruption, lack of commitment to educating the poor, limited resources), most government schools are inadequate, particularly those accessible to marginalised communities. Facilities do not meet minimal standards; teachers are poorly prepared; teacher absenteeism and student dropout rates are high, and motivation is low (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2019; Sedwal and Kamet 2011).

Schools serving Indigenous students are especially problematic (Balagopalan 2003; Vasavi 2003). In many Indigenous communities[4], access to any school is a recent phenomenon, and those that are available

are often staffed by poorly prepared, frequently absent, and culturally insensitive teachers. They are housed in inadequate facilities and use curriculum disconnected from children's lives (Jojo 2013; Sedwal and Kamet 2011). Student achievement rates are well below those for the general population and dropout rates are high (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013).

While children are guaranteed walking-distance access to primary school (Ministry of Education 2009), boarding schools are the only option for many Indigenous upper primary and secondary school students. Boarding schools provide lodging, food, and a basic curriculum at a small cost. Recent evaluations of these schools are highly critical of the facilities, learning experience, adequacy of staff, food quality, safety, health, and hygiene, and reports of physical and sexual abuse are frequent (Jojo 2013). Many families choose to discontinue schooling after primary school because of secondary schools' inadequacies and parents' lack of confidence in the benefit of further education (Froerer 2012; Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2019), while others make great sacrifices on the slim chance that schooling will help their children 'get ahead' (Dost and Froerer 2021).

KISS was founded in 1993 in this context. KISS serves as the philanthropic arm of the Kalinga Institute for Industrial Technology (KIIT), a well-respected for-profit university. KISS uses its founder's rags-to-riches story to emphasise how anyone can rise out of poverty through education and hard work. Growing up in the state of Odisha,[5] he worked in districts with large Indigenous populations and was appalled by how they were mistreated by local government officials who took advantage of their illiteracy. He established KISS to provide access to educational opportunities largely unavailable in Indigenous districts.

At the time of my research (2014–2015), KISS served 22,500 students drawn primarily from Odisha's 62 Indigenous groups[6] (KISS 2020). Students as young as six years old enter KISS in Class 1, and they can continue their education through tertiary education at KISS College and University or by qualifying for one of the seats set aside at KIIT.[7] Families pay nothing for the academic and vocational education, room, board, medical care, and access to artistic and athletic training their children receive. KISS selects students based on the family's need, prioritising female children of the poorest families. KISS receives many more applications than it can serve. For example, in 2014 it had to select 2,000 students from 50,000 applicants.[8] KISS is located over 100 kilometres from most Indigenous communities, so students rarely see their families during the 10 months they reside at KISS. They return home for two months in the summer.

The KISS campus is located on 100 acres on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, adjacent to KIIT. A modern facility of primarily two and three storey buildings, it includes single-gender hostels, classroom buildings, vocational training facilities, a library, medical clinic[9], large cafeteria/multipurpose room in which approximately 8,000 students can eat meals at one time[10], athletic fields, and open fields where boys[11] are free to roam when they are finished with class. The campus is partially powered by solar panels and biofuel that is generated from food waste; clean filtered water and electricity are available.

Students live in hostels (approximately 50 students to a room) that are organised by age and sex, but not by Indigenous group, encouraging students to mingle across different groups and form a pan-Indigenous identity as 'KISSians.' Hostel wardens oversee the hostels, and some teachers live in the hostels providing help with homework and a connection to the academic program. Students are responsible for keeping their clothing and hostel room clean. They follow a schedule set by the school that ensures that order is maintained; students receive the required hours of instruction, eat three meals a day, get sufficient sleep, have opportunities for play and extra-curricular activities, and remain healthy. KISS is proud of its students' achievements (KISS 2020). For example, students' pass-rate on the high school exit exam between 2014–2015 and 2019–2020 averages 97% passing, and individuals and teams perform well in national and international competitions. KISS does not collect data on post-graduation employment.

Methodology

Through four decades of conducting ethnographic research in United States schools, I have had multiple opportunities to engage in participant observation, interview diverse actors, work as a part of ethnographic research teams, and reflect on my positionality (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). This project called upon these experiences and added a new context, as it was my first significant experience conducting research outside of the United States.[12] I realised that I had to approach this project differently to adjust to cultural and language differences and to a compressed six-month onsite data collection period. Although I was confident in my ability to observe social interactions, ask probing and appropriate questions, and reflect on my influence on the data collection process, I knew that I would benefit from including Indian research partners who could contribute different cultural perspectives and use their Odia language fluency in observations and interviews. I also realised that my status as an older White woman from the United States would shape not only how I interpreted what I saw and heard, but also how I was treated.

The research took place in 2014–2015. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval[13], I began data collection in the United States with a document analysis of official online and print media. Through this process, I categorised how KISS officially projected an image of its affective environment. This process helped to shape my initial observations and informal interactions once I was onsite because I was able to compare what was projected online to what I saw and heard on site.

I arrived at KISS in September 2014 and was welcomed by KISS's founder. At a meeting with administrators, he publicly supported the research project and told them to provide me free access to the entire campus and any documents and data I requested. This support allowed me to observe and interact informally with staff, teachers, and students in classrooms, at assemblies, in student hostels, on playing fields, in teacher and staff meetings, and at whole school celebrations. I also guest lectured occasionally in English classes and helped with some administrative projects to gain a deeper understanding of KISS's operation. These observations and interactions allowed me to better understand the daily flow of events.

After about one month onsite, I hired three Indian research partners, all sociologists who were unaffiliated with KISS, to engage in participant observation, conduct interviews in Odia, and to help with translations. As recommended by LeCompte and Schensul (2010), we worked as a team to determine where and when to observe and what to ask in formal interviews. We met daily to debrief, and we maintained research logs that included observation notes, records of interviews completed, and reflections on the research process. We also visited several Indigenous villages to observe and interview parents and Indigenous leaders.

Formal interviews focused on the interviewee's experience of the school, beliefs about what students gain and lose from studying at KISS, beliefs about KISS's effect on students' futures, and the organisation's effect on their lives. Interviews ranged from 20 min to several hours over a number of sessions. Collectively, we conducted 160 interviews (33 administrators, 38 students[14] (grades 5–10), 15 former students, 24 teachers, 10 support staff, 28 parents, six Indigenous leaders, and 12 visitors). Student, teacher, and parent interviewees were identified by research team members, not KISS administrators. We sought to balance the student and teacher sample by gender and length of time at KISS. Interviews with administrators, visitors, and some students and teachers were conducted in English, and all others were conducted in Odia. Most interviews were audio recorded. The research partners translated and transcribed the Odia interviews, and I transcribed interviews conducted in English.

Data analysis was on-going and comparative (Corbin and Strauss 2008). As a research team, we engaged in daily discussions about preliminary findings, introduced possible analytic categories, and identified additional data collection needs. On return to the US, I read through all of the observation notes and interview transcripts several times, returned to my document analysis and fine-tuned themes and patterns. Using my initial research questions and emerging themes, I entered the data into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, which served as a platform to store and code data. Once key categories emerged, I asked

KISS colleagues and my research partners to confirm their applicability and centrality to the institutional experience. I further confirmed the categories on a two-week visit in July 2017, and I continue to track postings on the website and social media outlets.

Once I began to write about my research, I grappled with two issues. The first involves how to portray aspects of KISS that have changed since my data collection. As an everchanging institution, it is unfair to describe it as it no longer is. This is especially evident in its official messaging. The messages on today's website are very different than they were in 2015 and, based on conversations with KISS staff and the founder, these changes appear to represent institutional reflexivity and growth, an assumption I confirmed with KISS's founder. The second resides squarely in the affective domain. I formed close friendships and deep commitment to everyone at KISS. I protect individual identities by not using their names, and I am cautious about what I write for fear that critiques will be taken out of context by the institution or its critics. This has not prevented me from providing constructive criticism or highlighting aspects of the institution that do not align with official positions.

Findings

As described in the conceptual framework, this examination of student affect, aspiration, and sacrifice occurs within the context of a complex institution that has characteristics of an 'institution of hope' and a 'total institution.' As an 'institution of hope,' KISS provides them room to dream and aspire and gives them opportunities to gain skills and knowledge relevant to their aspirations. All the while, it struggles to counteract defeatist narratives about Indigenous people. As a 'total institution,' KISS serves as the primary influence on students' individual and collective affective experiences and expressions because it separates students from outside interactions and encloses them in a formally administered round of life.

KISS as an 'institution of hope:' aspiring to a bright future

KISS holds itself up as a hopeful institution, even referring to itself as a 'castle of hope' (KISS 2019). According to Braithwaite (2004), 'institutions of hope' cannot just declare themselves as such; they need to provide room to dream, offer avenues to move toward dreams, and publicly stand up against defeatist narratives that prevent groups of people from dreaming and achieving their dreams. As such, they provide the context for young people to develop the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013).

Aspirations: room to dream and avenues to achieve dreams through education

KISS encourages dreams and aspirations that require an education. It surrounds students in messages that education is empowerment, the path to a bright future, and worthy of hard work and sacrifice. For example, an administrator said that they advise students to:

> … just try to stick to your study and whatever difficulties you are facing … you may not get all the things at one time, so slowly, slowly things are happening. But don't think that will be a hindrance for you in life, be educated. After that you will see your own path … Education, good behaviour, peaceful coexistence, how to speak…. Education is the top priority. Be educated by any means. Education will empower you. Our slogan is 'educate, enable, empower' you must have seen it?

KISS students walk past posters reminding them of the power of education, such as one quoting the founder saying, 'Besides teaching facts education should teach how to live extraordinary lives.' They meet visiting dignitaries who repeatedly encourage them to make the most of their educational experience, and they discuss the importance of education during classroom lessons, as illustrated by the following exchange in a Class 9 English classroom in which the teacher chose to relate a reading to education:

The teacher asked her class of 24 young women and 30 young men to open their books to page 105 to begin a lesson on The First Step. She asked the students if they knew what 'first step' means. When they did not respond, she said that [the founder] 'took the first step to empower tribal children through education.' She opened a discussion about the importance of education. One student said that a country, state, and community cannot develop without education. She then asked why some children are not able to be educated.

> Male student 1: 'Parents are not aware about education, and due to poverty, they are not able to educate.'

> Male student 2: 'If girls are not educated, then they live in darkness and are not able to know about education, health, sanitation, which is useful for their future.'

These messages about the importance of education are intended to motivate students to dream of bright futures and to avoid 'living in darkness.' In interviews, students were steadfast in their plans to continue in school to avoid futures without an education. For example, a female former student now studying at KIIT, described how pursuit of higher education allowed her to avoid early marriage. She said that without attending KISS, 'Probably I would not have been able to do higher studies. I would have married and spoiled my life.' She went on to say, 'marrying at an early age for a girl is like losing her own identity in the society, building a low self-confidence.' For her, being educated is more than a career necessity; it positively affects her identity.

Another former student (male) now studying at KIIT, focused on the limited employment opportunities for those without an education:

> Most of my friends are laborers and some friends are migrant laborers working in other states of the country under difficult conditions. If I had not come to KISS, I might as well be like my friends; I would still be continuing as a labourer, too.

He recognised that he has a chance to escape the dire poverty many of his village peers experience. Given that KISS can admit so few applicants (only 4% of applicants were admitted in 2014), his comment is especially poignant; he was granted an opportunity that many were denied.

A younger student (Class 9) described how his aspirations for higher education are shaped by family and community expectations. To him, education is a way to demonstrate to the non-Indigenous community that 'we [Indigenous people] can also do something.' He said:

> There is a great expectation of my family and villagers on me, and they tell me that there is no one who has gone to Bhubaneswar [where KISS is located] for education, and so you have got the opportunity to showcase your talent. That keeps my hopes alive to pursue my education. My villagers will feel proud of me. Because, in our locality, we the tribal people [Santal tribe] are not treated well by the general castes. The Odia people don't mix with us, and they offend us with calling different names.

These students aspire to the life of an educated person, a life that does not involve early marriage, unskilled labour, and disrespect from non-Indigenous neighbours. Their career aspirations are influenced by role models and opportunities provided on the KISS campus. By living in a school that provides primary, secondary, and tertiary education, students are surrounded by educated people, specifically, teachers, administrators, and elder students enrolled in KISS University and KIIT. They have few encounters with uneducated adults while they are at KISS.

KISS students also envision a future in which they give back to society, their village, and/or KISS. KISS students are surrounded by messages of philanthropy; they know that they are at KISS because of the founder's generosity, and they are encouraged to give back as a token of gratitude. Some students said that they want to be doctors, nurses, and teachers for this reason. For example, one student said, 'If I get through

and become a doctor, I will serve mankind through my job being a doctor … I have seen people being so poor and suffering in my village. My parents have also suffered a lot.' Many of the parents we interviewed equate being educated with being a good citizen. For example, one father said, 'An educated person will make positive change to society. If my son becomes educated and gets a good job, then other members of our society are inspired and send their children to school.' Another said, 'He can help change the society. He can help the village in overcoming the problems we face in day-to-day life, like water crisis, unemployment etc. If he becomes an engineer, he will be an asset for the society.'

Standing up to defeatist narratives about Indigenous people

KISS's role in publicly standing up against defeatist narratives is complex. KISS has always encouraged students to be proud of their Indigenous heritage, but until recently KISS, like much of Indian society, promoted a deprivation narrative of Indigenous people. KISS held that while Indigenous cultures have many strengths, young people growing up in their communities lead a life of deprivation. For example, for several years the founder's words, 'Giving education to the *deprived* is like giving sight to the blind' (emphasis added) was prominently displayed on campus and on the webpage. An examination of KISS's website in 2020[15] reflects a move away from an explicit deficit narrative; the slogan about providing education to the deprived has been replaced with 'Education is the Third Eye of the child.'

While I was at KISS in 2014-2015, students reiterated the deprivation narrative about themselves and their communities. One example stands out. On a Saturday afternoon, one of my research partners and I visited several mentoring sessions.[16] These sessions provide an opportunity for a group of about 50 students to gather informally with a designated faculty member. Gathering in shady spots around campus, the general mood is one of camaraderie, playfulness, and support. In this context, a young man stood before two assembled groups (about 100 students and two teachers) and sang a song he wrote honouring the founder. This song illustrates the depth to which students simultaneously accepted the deprivation narrative and appreciated the opportunity KISS provided them. After describing KISS students as members of 'one family' and praising KISS for providing the opportunity to become educated, he sang:

> He [the founder] *loved the poor*, cared for them, [repeat] and *pitied on them*.
>
> There is no other place in this world like KISS.
>
> The *poor tribals* are now able to identify themselves as *complete human being*.
>
> [The founder] made them completely different from others [repeat].
>
> What all he did for these tribals [repeat] is beyond imagination.
>
> Whoever comes to KISS to *bring themselves up* over here, they can get all the happiness (emphasis added).

The audience greeted the song with enthusiastic applause, seemingly unconcerned that the young man had internalised a view of unschooled Indigenous people as poor and in need pity and transformation to become 'complete human beings.'

KISS is changing its deficit language on its website and in social media, but it is unclear if these changes have made their way into the collective affective experience given how prevalent deficit narratives are in the wider Indian community (see endnote 16). KISS walks a fine line in relation to these narratives. On the one hand, the deficit narrative serves to justify KISS's existence as a boarding school that removes young people from their Indigenous communities. On the other hand, KISS pledges that, 'It is our lifelong mission to ensure that indigenous heritage is accorded due respect and indigenous communities are empowered through spreading of awareness about tribal rights' (KISS 2020).

KISS as a 'total institution:'

KISS has structural and organisational features of a 'total institution' that influence students' affective expressions and experience. One feature, separation from the wider world for appreciable periods of time, highlights the sacrifice students and their families make to pursue aspirations. Another feature, an 'enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman 1961, viii) restricts students' individual expressions but also provides students the opportunity to be part of something big and important. As described below, students and their families determine that leaving home for the opportunities afforded by a KISS education outweighs the sacrifices they make, and they determine that living in an institution that formally organises their lives is not oppressive; rather, it provides an opportunity to belong to something big and important.

Separation as opportunity rather than sacrifice

KISS students are separated from the wider world, especially their Indigenous communities, for 10 months a year. While at KISS they sleep, work, eat, and play on the KISS campus. They rarely see their families outside of the two-month summer break, and they have limited access to the internet, social media, television, and mobile phones. While this level of separation has been criticised because it restricts their opportunities to learn their Indigenous cultures and languages and separates them from their families (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Survival International 2019), KISS's founder is firm that KISS must function as a boarding school. He explained that he chose the boarding school model to protect, not control; he wants children to grow up away from the negative effects of poverty (e.g. food scarcity, poor schools, alcoholism, child labour, and the threat of Maoist rebels[17] in Indigenous areas) to learn in what he sees as a safe and supportive environment.

Unlike critics, students and parents framed the separation in terms of opportunity rather than sacrifice. For example, one father said the following about educational opportunities in his village:

> In my village, primary school teachers are not coming regularly; they attend school only two or three days in a month. Students attend school not to learn anything but only for midday meal. KISS is much better than our local school.

Another father described KISS as his daughter's only chance at a better future. He said, 'They should stay away, as it's not good to stay in the village. They will not improve their position if they stayed in the village.' A student described how coming to KISS allowed him to get away from bad influences and habits:

> Earlier I used to smoke and drink a lot. Nobody loved me. But while I came here and learnt all the behaviours and etiquettes, I stopped all those addictions and my nature got changed. I got a lot of affection and appreciation from my community and family. So, I am indebted to KISS for this.

None of the parents or students interviewed expressed regret about coming to KISS, although several students described being homesick at first. A Class 9 boy said, 'Initially in Class 5 when I went to village and come back after summer vacation, I remember my parents and cried several times in hostel. But now when I come back after summer vacation, I feel better in here than my village.'

Separation from the wider society contributes to students' devotion to the institution and its founder. Students described the founder as 'like a god,' and they frequently named him as their primary role model. The song presented above was the young man's tribute to KISS and the founder. After visiting KISS, an American scholar described this devotion as pervasive and nearly "religious' in its affect.' In an email received following his visit, he wrote:

> As with many educational institutions in developing or newly industrialized contexts, the belief in the unlimited transformational power of education permeated the campus. The values and beliefs permeating KISS were

clearly those transferred from, and imputed to, the founder. More than in any other school setting I have experienced in my long career, I would describe the culture as 'religious' in affect. Even explicitly religious institutions have not created this type of impression for me, perhaps because the 'religious fervor' of religious schools is explicit and canonized, while the fervor at KISS is more implicit and non-canonical. Nonetheless, there is a strict orthodoxy and orthopraxy at KISS, as well as a 'worshipfulness' that is unavoidable.

As he implies, this sense of 'worshipfulness' along with a belief that a bright future is impossible outside of KISS, becomes the air everyone associated with KISS breathes.

While life within the boundaries of KISS provides many opportunities, it also raises concern among some scholars and Indigenous rights activists that separation from home and community sacrifices cultural and linguistic fluency and disrupts identity development (Gupta and Padel 2018, 2020; Survival International 2019). For example, a visiting U.S. scholar expressed concern about potential long term negative effects. She wrote:

> I think a large concern is how living away from one's community and family might disrupt the formation of familial and communal relationships to the extent that the child is harmed in other dimensions of their life. While poverty and illiteracy are terrible, it is also terrible to not be able to communicate or connect with one's family and community. What are the trade-offs for children? For families?

In contrast, parents and current and former students did not express concerns about language and cultural loss. Parents said that KISS students speak 'our language' at home when they visit in the summer. All students interviewed said that they have no problem speaking their Indigenous languages. Some KISS students proudly pointed to learning other Indigenous languages from their friends. For example, one young man reported:

> We communicate with each other in our own languages. And when we communicate with other tribal children, it's in Odia. There is a great scope to learn many languages here, while communicating with others. I have learnt Kui Kandha [his mother tongue] in the beginning, but at present, I know Kui, Sambalpuri, Odia, Hindi, and English. I can't speak, but I can understand Santali.

Disruptions in cultural learning are more complex. While KISS extols students to be proud of their Indigenous heritage and to not distance themselves from their culture, they also envelop them in a set of beliefs, values, and behavioural expectations specific to KISS. Two months of exposure to their home cultures is not nearly as deep. Parents were more apt to appreciate than abhor the behavioural changes they saw when their children returned from KISS. Like the father below, they point proudly to their children's changed behaviour and assume that KISS graduates will retain a respect for village life:

> They are leading an urban life, which is very different than the life we have in the typical rural set up. They may not adjust [to life at home], but at the same time, this is their native land. So, they will respect the village and the elders of the village.

He added that when the KISS students come home, 'They behave properly when they come and guide other children to study.' Another father said of his son:

> He is not behaving like a villager now; he behaves like an educated person. He is not interested to stay here more days because people of village are always drinking and quarrelling with each other, so he doesn't like this environment.

Current and former students' perspectives are similar. They said that they love their families and villages, but they are glad to be at KISS. They credit KISS teachers and mentors for encouraging them to be proud of their Indigenous heritage and their villages. As one young woman described, 'I can get accommodated in

village life too, as I still like my village. Everybody teaches me here that we should not forget our caste, language and culture.'

Order as belonging

As the research reflection that began this article describes, KISS has a pervasive climate of calm and order. Students pass smoothly in the halls, sit together quietly in crowded classrooms, eat shoulder-to-shoulder on the dining hall floor, and play with minimal supervision. With the exception of a few students trying to skip classes or avoid chores, there was little evidence of students rebelling against the structure and routine; in fact, students expressed gratitude for the structure. One young woman said she likes life at KISS better than in her village because, 'I like the study atmosphere here … All facilities are available here with more discipline and study atmosphere.' A former student studying at KIIT recounted people's reactions when he describes KISS:

> I tell everybody the strength [number of students] of my school, and they get surprised to know that. They get astonished how the school is run, how we eat and live in such a great number. I tell them the way it's maintained in proper discipline and smoothly. The dining place is very systematic; the roles are well defined amongst the students and the staffs.

As in other total institutions, order emanates from the administration, but at KISS, staff and students take on responsibilities that extend beyond those routinely assumed in Western schools. Female students sweep the classrooms before class, and older students are required to spend one day a month on tasks such as grounds maintenance and food preparation and serving; the staff is expected to be available, either on site or on call 24*7. Students and staff take on these responsibilities in part because it is an institutional expectation, but also because they feel like they are contributing to something large and important. Teacher interviews support this administrator's explanation:

> The manpower is very dedicated, and they have a social bent of mind. And 24*7 some of them are working. So, with that kind of dedication, we are able to run this kind of organization. With the dedication, the diligence of the people, their interest in doing some kind of social service, combines together for the people to work with that kind of vigour and zeal for the children.

On a daily basis, students keep their classrooms and hostels clean, cut each other's hair, wash their own clothes, and help with food preparation. The hostel windows and fences are usually draped with clothing drying in the sun; boys stand by the side of hostel buildings and cut each other's hair, and older students meet with young students to help with homework or to practice dances for upcoming performances. Older students play an important role in accommodating new students. In October 2014, I witnessed the intake of over 900 new Class 1 students and saw that older students were actively involved in the process. The following from my research notes describes their involvement on one day:

> When I arrived at KISS this morning I was met with a crowd of parents and young children waiting to be admitted into KISS. Many teachers and older students were involved in the intake process. Quite a few of the students, mostly girls, were wearing a military-style uniform. There were also students in scout outfits, and others wore kerchiefs for Junior Red Cross. It looked like these students worked most of the day. They talked to students in their mother tongue, gently guided them from table to table, took them to the dispensary and back, and led them to the hostels as parents left. In the late afternoon, another set of students came to talk to parents, I assume to reassure them that their child will be fine. (Research notes. October 27, 2014)

Much of the order that exists at KISS is due to a sense of pride in being part of something big. Students experience the sheer size of the institution as they patiently wait in a sea of 27,000 fellow students for celebrations and to greet visitors as varied as the Dali Lama and Bollywood stars. At these events, they are

reminded by visitors how special they are, and they are able to perform or see their peers perform before a massive crowd. They also have a daily reminder of being part of something big and enveloping when they meet each morning in the cafeteria for morning prayer. At these daily gatherings (7:00 AM for primary students and 10:30 AM for secondary students), the cafeteria resonates with the sound of over 10,000 students joining together to chant, cheer, and sing the national anthem. Following a morning prayer session, a foreign visitor commented that:

> There is certainly a great sense of ownership and pride among all in the school – the children, the teachers, and the administrators. The school assembly is an important ritual that reinforces that sense of identity, pride, duty and ethics among children. Children and adults in the school understand how unique their institution is. Children understand they are part of some important social experiment.

Conclusions

I began this article with a description of an epiphany related to students' affective experience at KISS. Within a school the size of a small city, thousands of young people interacted peacefully and respectfully with each other and the school employees. This realisation occurred in part because it was so unlike my experience of schools serving marginalised populations in the United States where student order is maintained by bells, whistles, bullhorns, metal detectors, and vigilant adults, including armed uniformed police. It also occurred because I was at KISS as an ethnographer; I spent months on site before the importance of this feature of ordinary life on students' affective experience became clear to me. Had I only visited briefly, I would not have noticed this, or I may have assumed the calm I saw was staged for my visit. Examples like this point to the importance of 'evocative ethnography,' research that is able to identify and describe the feeling tone of daily life (Skoggard and Waterston 2015).

Interest in young people's affective orientation related to aspiration and sacrifice has to account for the influence of the institutions in which they spend the bulk of their time. As I describe above, KISS is a social institution that is created and maintained by a collective affect that 'moves and motivates' (Lutz 2017) students. It does so intentionally through its self-portrayal as a hopeful institution, but it also happens as part of the collective affective orientation toward aspiration and sacrifice that exists within the institution. In this context, students accept and embrace aspirations requiring formal education. They come to see separation from home as an opportunity for a brighter future, rather than a sacrifice of family and Indigenous identity.

To truly be an 'institution of hope,' though, KISS needs to continually work to counter societal systems and beliefs that oppress, demean, and dash hope in Indigenous communities. KISS exists within the wider Indian society that perpetuates these inequities, but by providing educational opportunities and working with Indigenous communities, its graduates will potentially counteract the deficit narrative that stifles hope for Indigenous communities. KISS has given them the experience of being part of something large and important, and they have grown to see themselves as not only part of a specific Indigenous community but as members of a pan-Indigenous community that collectively can make its voice heard.

Notes

1. 22,500 students were enrolled when I conducted research in 2014–2015. By 2019, the population rose to 27,000. I use the term 'Indigenous' rather than tribal to avoid negative connotations the term 'tribal' with with 'savage' in the West (Lowe 2001). I use 'tribal' only when interviewees used it. I do not use 'Adivasi,' a term used in India for indigenous people, because Indigenous is more widely understood outside of India.
2. It was not until I had been at the school for months that I began to draw connections between behaviours across multiple sites within the school. I did ask about discipline policies and learned that KISS follows Indian regulations laid out in the 2009 Right to Education Act (Ministry of Education 2009) and does not use corporal punishment.

Behavioural issues were typically addressed by teachers, mentors, or hostel wardens. According to administrators, serious offenses were rare and resulted in expulsion from the school.

3. KISS is located in Bhubaneswar, the capital of the Indian state. It is several hundred kilometres from most of the Indigenous communities. Families rarely visit the school because of the distance, cost of travel, and poor roads. Students return to their communities for two months every summer.

4. Indigenous groups are among the poorest segments of Indian society. Most rely on subsistence agriculture, sale of forest products, and daily wage labour. Illiteracy rates remain high despite fairly recent enactment of compulsory education (Census of India 2011).

5. Odisha is one of India's poorest states in large part because its large Indigenous population (22.8% in the 2011 census) has historically lived without access to jobs, education, and infrastructure (e.g., roads, clean water, electricity) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013).

6. In 2020 KISS's student population reached 27,000 making it the largest boarding school for Indigenous students in the world (KISS 2020). KISS students were sent home in spring 2020 because of the COVID pandemic and began to return to campus in late 2021.

7. Five percent of KISS graduates are offered seats at KIIT university at no charge. Access to a KIIT education is a major incentive for parents because of its reputation for high quality education.

8. KISS employs district representatives who meet with families interested in KISS, and they provide the first review of family eligibility. Children are selected on the basis of need and girls are given priority. Despite favouring girls in admissions, girls remain a minority because many families are reluctant to send their daughters so far away for school. No reports are available on the status of students not selected to attend KISS.

9. The medical clinic is staffed by the Kalinga Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS), one of several KIIT institutions. If students become seriously ill, they are taken to the KIMS hospital.

10. Students receive three meals a day. Lunch and dinner consist of rice and dahl (with protein several times a week). Older students work one day a month helping to prepare and serve meals. Students bring a plate to the dining hall and wash it after the meal. For more information on the logistics of feeding 27,000 students three times a day, see National Geographic Mega Kitchen (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = wypm9BqRgy0&t = 28s.)

11. As is common throughout India, girls are expected to remain close to their classrooms and hostels. They are provided opportunities to participate on sports, yoga, and dance teams.

12. This research was funded by a Fulbright/Nehru research grant and a Faculty Research grant from my institution.

13. For IRB approval, I outlined the overarching research questions, developed more specific observation guides and possible interview questions, and detailed human subjects protections. I emphasized that, characteristic of ethnographic research, the data collection focus was likely to change while I was in the field. IRB approval was granted in 2014.

14. The 38 students interviewed represent 18 Indigenous groups; 64% were male, consistent with KISS's student population. Of the 24 teachers interviewed, 58% taught in the primary grades, and 24% were Indigenous. Nearly all of the former students were enrolled at the Kalinga Institute for Industrial Technology (KIIT). The administrators were selected for their knowledge of various institutional functions (e.g., academics, athletics, hostels, medical care, food service, finance, community outreach); two of the administrators are Indigenous. The visitors quoted were Fulbright researchers who attended a conference at KISS.

15. All teachers are required to serve as mentors to a group of approximately 50 students; mentoring classes meet as a group every Saturday afternoon. Teachers are given considerable leeway on how to use the mentoring time.

16. To provide a clearer picture of KISS's development, I draw some more recent data from the KISS webpage or from KISS representatives. Although I do not have in-depth data on how KISS's promotion of a deficit narrative is changing, I believe including changes to the website paints a more accurate picture of an institution willing to change in the face of criticism.

17. For several decades, groups of Maoist rebels (also referred to as Naxilites) have recruited members among Indigenous groups, who, because of poverty and estrangement from the government, often find these groups attractive (Singh 2006).

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