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Can a Total Institution be a *Castle of Hope*? The Case of an Indian Residential School for 27,000 Indigenous Students

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Abstract

Residential schools for indigenous students are rarely conceptualised as *castles of hope*, but because of the difficulty of providing quality education in rural areas, they remain an option, or a necessity, for many indigenous students. Although most contemporary residential schools differ from those that purposefully sought to annihilate indigenous cultures and languages, their existence remains problematic because students grow up in institutional environments that typically favour integration into mainstream culture over maintenance of indigenous cultures. This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2014-15 in a large residential school for indigenous students in Odisha, India. Erving Goffman's (1961) *total institution*, provides a useful frame to examine data collected on students' experience because it focuses on institutions that separate groups of people from their communities for an expressed purpose. This case illustrates how a total institution 1) shapes students' identities and aspirations toward institutional goals, 2) separates them from the wider world, 3) encourages sacrifice and loyalty by promising hope for a better future, and 4) establishes institutional systems that maintain order through shared responsibility and commitment to the institution. Although students at this school are separated from their families and communities and learn a set of behaviours critical to the smooth functioning of the institution, the data indicate that they and their families accept the sacrifices associated with institutional schooling because of the promise of becoming societal change agents, comfortable in both indigenous and mainstream India.

Keywords: *Indigenous students, residential schools, India, total institutions, school culture, hope.*

Introduction

At first glance, most readers familiar with Erving Goffman's (1961) concept of total institutions would respond with a resounding *no* to the question posed in the title of this article. Total institutions are commonly perceived as oppressive institutions where residents are cut off from the outside world and possibly intimidated, abused, or belittled (e.g., Davies, 1989; McEwen, 1980; Peshkin, 2001; Scott, 2011). They are certainly not seen as bastions of hope. When the total institution is a residential school for indigenous students, additional concerns arise. Is it just another school that fails to make good on its promises to a marginalized population (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Frye, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)? Does it attempt to prevent the loss of indigenous cultural and linguistic fluency if it is designed and overseen by administrators from the mainstream society (Mohanty, 2006; Survival International, 2019)? Does it differ significantly from schools established a century ago that left generations of indigenous students alienated and traumatized (e.g., Adams, 1995; Fear-Segal, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)? These readers may find it impossible to envision a residential

school serving 27,000 indigenous students as a *Castle of Hope* (KISS, 2019a). However, the school in question routinely receives 50,000 applications for 2,000 openings; parents appear to be willing to sacrifice for the promise of hope.

This article provides a critical unpacking of the total institution concept as it applies to residential schools in general and to one school in particular, the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), to address these concerns. Relying primarily on ethnographic research conducted in 2014-15 at KISS, I examine four institutional features common to residential schools, focusing on how they are reflected in the school's culture and absorbed and accepted by students and their families and communities.

KISS is located in central India in the state capital of Odisha, one of India's poorest states. It is the largest residential school for indigenous students in the world, serving students from 62 indigenous groups (KISS, 2019a). As a *Castle of Hope*, it promises, "*a fully free, fully residential home for 27,000 poorest of the poor indigenous children who are provided holistic education from Kindergarten to Post Graduation along with lodging, boarding, health care facilities besides vocational, life skills empowerment*" (KISS, 2019a, para. 1). It provides an alternative for families dissatisfied with the poor quality of local government schools (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Jojo, 2013).

Although KISS is unusual for many reasons,¹ it is one of many residential schools that currently serve rural indigenous students around the world (e.g., Benveniste, Guenther, Dawson & King, 2019; Bloch, 2005; Corbett, 2007; Jojo, 2013; Mander, Cohen & Pooley, 2015; Peshkin, 1997). These schools are a response to an international commitment to formally educate all children, even those living in remote communities (Dréze & Sen, 2002; United Nations, 2019), but most exist within a post-colonial or expansionist legacy of racism and false promises (Frye, 2012; Jakimow, 2016).

Residential Schools as Total Institutions

Features of Total Institutions

Erving Goffman (1961) popularized the concept of total institution to highlight how institutions can affect a resident's identity and social relationships. According to Goffman (1961),

A total institution may be defined 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. (p. xiii)

He included a wide range of institutions under the total institution label, from the relatively benign (e.g., convents and monasteries) to highly restrictive and potentially oppressive (e.g., mental asylums, concentration camps, and prisons). Because the concept has most frequently been applied to the highly restrictive, bureaucratized, and "*menacing*" (Peshkin, 1986, p. 275) institutions, it is common to assume that life in total institutions entails coercion, abuse, isolation, and forced institutional assimilation (Davies, 1989; McEwen, 1980; Peshkin, 1986; Scott, 2011) rather than support, mutual respect, and hope.

Subsequent scholars (e.g., Davies, 1989; McEwen, 1980; Scott, 2011) have clarified the total institution concept and link it to related concepts, such as Coser's (1974) *greedy institutions*. McEwen (1980) focuses on organisational variation within total institutions (e.g., organisational scope, voluntariness, bureaucratic management, organisational surveillance, social distance, degree of staff consensus, and hierarchical decision-making). Davies (1989) further unpacks the

¹ Along with its size, KISS's funding sources and origins are also unusual. Funding derives almost completely from the profits of its sister institution the Kalinga Institute for Industrial Technology (KIIT), a highly regarded for-profit university. It was founded in 1992 as KIIT's philanthropic arm. The top five percent of KISS students can enrol at KIIT free of charge.

concept and that of greedy institutions to distinguish institutions by differences in their purpose, degree of closure, and mode of compliance. Scott (2011) narrows the focus to what she labels as *reinventive institutions*, including boarding schools, that explicitly set out a transformational path. These scholars provide opportunities to see positive possibilities in total institutions.

Four Features of Residential Schools as Total Institutions

Building on these refinements of Goffman's total institution concept, four institutional features emerge that frame students' experience of residential schools. The first feature involves the school's purpose, more specifically, its role in shaping **student identity and aspirations**. Residential schools have near complete control over students' identity development and aspirations. Students are immersed in a school culture that informs the behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, and values that are expected of them as students and that are projected into their future selves (Peshkin, 2001; Scott, 2011). These schools provide an atmosphere and experiences that potentially build students' *capacity to aspire* toward institutionally established goals (Appadurai, 2013) and to hope for a bright future. Some schools, such as elite boarding schools, assume that students arrive at school with compatible identities and aspirations; they see their job as finetuning and polishing the students in the school's image (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). The transformational process in residential schools for indigenous or other vulnerable populations is more complex. A century ago, schools in North America explicitly sought to erase students' indigenous cultures and languages and to *civilize* them to be English-speaking, Christian citizens (Adams, 1995; Fear-Segal, 2007). Residential schools today, are more nuanced; they may build on indigenous culture, revitalize dying languages, or build pan-indigenous identity (Bahr, 2014; Peshkin, 1997); nonetheless, most are heavily influenced by neoliberal narratives that perpetuate historic inequities and ignore or denigrate indigenous cultures and languages (Benveniste et al., 2019; Survival International, 2019).

The second feature, **separation from the wider society**, is central to the residential school experience. Students sleep, attend class, participate in extracurricular activities, and relax within the confines of school facilities. Isolation from the wider world allows residential school authorities to have near total influence over students' activities and education, as well as an outsized effect on the school culture. Away from external influences, the beliefs, values, and assumptions promoted by the school become the air that students breathe. In residential schools serving the sons and daughters of the elite, students may be physically separated from home, but home and school share similar cultural beliefs (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). In contrast, in schools established and maintained by mainstream authorities to serve rural indigenous students, the separation becomes more jarring and problematic because, not only do students risk losing their indigenous culture and language, they may grow to see themselves as deficient and defective (Mander et al., 2015; Survival International, 2019; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The third feature, **choice and loyalty**, focuses on the voluntariness of the decision to attend and remain at the school. Typically, families determine that a residential school is the best educational option for their children. These schools promise what Freire (1994) describes as an ontological need – hope. Families make great sacrifices (Jakimow, 2016) because of the promise of hope for a better future. In the case of highly selective elite boarding schools, families vie for limited openings, willingly absorb the great monetary cost, and identify with the school's reputation and legacy (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Peshkin, 2001; Scott, 2011) in the hope of perpetuating or improving their social standing. For many rural indigenous students today, the decision to attend residential school is a “*choice-less choice*” (Mander et al., 2015, p. 26); residential schools are their only avenue to achieve the promises of post-primary schooling (Bloch, 2005; Jojo, 2013). Historical accounts of residential schools for North American indigenous students describe these schools as involuntary and coercive, designed to prepare students for a future they did not seek (Adams, 1995; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Students often felt hopeless because they were forced to attend these schools and were more apt to feel resentful rather than loyal to the schools.

The fourth feature involves **systems to maintain order** that are needed in day and residential schools. These systems differ greatly depending on the type of school, student population served, and relationship between school authorities, students, and their families. In too many schools serving marginalised students, power is wielded by mainstream administrators and teachers with little recognition of racialized assumptions underlying structures and decisions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In residential schools these systems not only structure the academic hours, but all aspects of students' lives. Students are under the influence of the school at all times and have limited outlets to push against the school's behavioural expectations, beliefs, values, and assumptions. How residential schools maintain order differs greatly. Some control through humiliation and mortification (Fear-Segal, 2007; Survival International, 2019; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), others rely on students' desire to be a part of the school and its legacy, while others project institutional transformational goals and pathways (Cox, 2016; Scott, 2011), whether realistic or not.

The Indian Education Landscape

The Indian education system has its roots in British colonial occupation. The British established schools to educate a class of subalterns who would carry out colonial goals, and this model remains in place today (Kumar, 2008). Like most post-colonial nations, Indians of all castes, classes, and ethnic groups believe in the power of education, even when it fails to bring about promised changes (Dréze & Sen, 2002). Schooling has been available to all Indians since independence in 1947; in fact, Article 45 of the Indian Constitution guarantees free compulsory education for all children (age six-14) (Singh & Nagpal, 2010). Rather than create parity across social groups, however, schools have created a deep divide between Indians who can afford to pay for public or private schools (about 40 percent of the population) and those who must send their children to government schools (Kingdon, 2007). For many reasons (e.g., colonial legacy, corruption, lack of commitment to educating the poor, limited resources), most government schools are inadequate. Facilities do not meet minimum standards; teachers are poorly prepared; teacher absenteeism and student drop-out rates are high, and motivation is low (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Jojo, 2013; Sedwal and Kamat, 2011).

Schools serving indigenous students are especially problematic. Most children attend primary school in their villages and since 2009 are guaranteed a primary school within walking distance (Singh & Nagpal, 2010). However, proximity does not equal quality; these schools are often staffed by poorly prepared, frequently absent, and culturally insensitive teachers; they are housed in inadequate facilities, and they use curriculum disconnected from children's lives (Mohanty, 2006; Sedwal & Kamer, 2011). Secondary age students must either drop out of school, travel long distances, or attend a residential school. Since the 1920s, Indian states have provided government residential schools in tribal district centres (Jojo, 2013). Referred to as Ashram Schools, these upper primary and secondary schools provide lodging, food, and a basic curriculum at little or no cost to students living in remote areas. Recent evaluations of Ashram Schools are highly critical of the facilities, learning experience, adequacy of staff, food quality, safety, and health and hygiene. Reports of physical and sexual abuse are frequent (Jojo, 2013). Many families choose to discontinue their children's education after primary school rather than send them to the Ashram Schools because of the schools' inadequacies and parents' lack of confidence in the benefit of further education (Froerer, 2012; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013).

Methodology

I have visited KISS multiple times between 2011 and 2017, but data presented here are primarily from an ethnographic research project conducted in 2014-15.² For six months, I embedded myself as much as possible in the daily life of the school, knowing that as an older white English-speaking female from the United States I would never “disappear into the woodwork” and would carry assumptions and values from my culture and personal experience. Like Goffman (1961), I sought to learn how people at KISS made sense of their everyday social interactions. I was primarily interested in understanding what students and their families gain and lose by attending KISS, how the KISS school culture shapes students’ and staff members’ experience, and how KISS was organised to serve over 20,000³ students. In compliance with my university’s Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) requirements, I outlined a detailed plan for data collection, storage, and analysis that would guarantee the study subjects’ privacy and voluntary participation, with special considerations for vulnerable populations. I use KISS’s name in all articles and reports at its founder’s suggestion, but individuals’ identities are protected.

I began data collection in the United States with a document analysis of official online and print media. Sources include: the KISS website, popular press articles about KISS, videos commissioned by KISS, and copies of several annual reports. Once on-site, I employed three Indian sociologists who were unaffiliated with KISS and fluent in the state language, Odia. KISS also identified a staff member to help me contact people and obtain documents, records, and other data. As a team, we developed culturally appropriate interview questions tailored to different groups of respondents. Questions were designed to understand each respondent’s experience of the school, their beliefs about what students gain and lose from studying at KISS, how students’ futures are affected by attending this residential school, and how KISS’s organization affects them. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to several hours over a number of sessions.⁴ Having a set of common interview questions provided consistency across the research team, but team members were encouraged to prompt interviewees to go deeper into their stories as appropriate. Because the institution is so large, I chose to focus on KISS school (grades 1-10) and not on KISS university. The boarding school experience of pre-university students was more relevant to my research questions.

Collectively, we conducted 160 interviews (33 administrators, 38 students (grades 5-10), 15 former students, 24 teachers, 10 support staff, 28 parents, six tribal leaders, and 12 visitors). Student, teacher, and parent interviewees were identified via convenience and snowball sampling; research team members, not KISS administrators, identified students and teachers for interviews. We sought to balance samples by gender, and length of time at KISS.⁵ Most interviews were audio recorded. Interviews with administrators, visitors, and some students and teachers were conducted in English, and all others were conducted in Odia. The research partners translated and transcribed the Odia interviews, and I transcribed interviews conducted

² This research was funded by a Fulbright/Nehru grant and an institutional Faculty Research grant. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board in spring 2014.

³ The student population was 22,500 in 2014; it has grown to 30,000 in 2020.

⁴ Interviews with students ranged from 20 minutes to approximately one hour depending on their availability and interest in sharing their experiences. Teacher and parent interviews typically lasted 30 minutes. Some administrators, especially the founder, were interviewed several times over the course of the data collection period.

⁵ The 38 students interviewed represented 18 tribal groups; 64% were male, consistent with KISS’s student population. Fifty-eight percent of the 24 teachers interviewed taught in the primary grades, and 24 percent are indigenous. Nearly all of the former students were currently 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 tribal leaders and parents were interviewed during visits to tribal villages. The visitors were primary from the United States; two were from Sweden, and two from India.

in English. We also observed in classrooms, at assemblies, in student hostels, on playing fields, in teacher meetings, and at whole school celebrations, and I taught classes and helped with some administrative projects. The observations allowed us to better understand the daily flow of events and to engage in informal interactions with students, teachers, and staff. We also visited tribal villages in three districts to interview parents, children, and local tribal leaders and to gain deeper insights into students' lives outside of KISS.

Data analysis was ongoing and comparative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As a research team, we engaged in daily discussions about preliminary findings, introduced possible analytic categories, and identified additional data collection needs. The cross-cultural discussions enriched the data collection and analysis; we brought different cultural and life experiences to the research. For example, I brought years of experience studying schools in the United States but was learning about the Indian educational landscape. I had limited linguistic fluency and was clearly an outsider. The team members were natives of Odisha, had worked previously in tribal districts but were upper caste Hindus and had limited research experience. We met daily as a team and talked about what we learned, adjusted interview questions and schedules, and identified activities to observe. I asked many questions of the team to ground my initial understandings in their cultural experience.

On completion of this phase of data collection, 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 10, a qualitative data analysis software, which served as a platform to store and further analyze data. The research questions served as overarching coding categories and allowed for sub-codes to emerge from the data. Once key elements emerged, I asked KISS colleagues and my research partners to confirm their applicability and centrality to the institutional experience. I further confirmed the elements on a subsequent visit in July 2017 when I returned to supervise research conducted by U.S. university students, and I continue to track postings on the website and social media outlets.

KISS as a Total Institution

As described below, KISS exists at a scale unlike any other residential school serving indigenous students. The mere existence of a residential school serving 27,000 children raises many issues concerning the general state of education for the poor, the sacrifices families believe they must make to pursue education's promise, and the potential ill effects of growing up in an institutional setting. These issues are explored in relation to the four features of residential schools.

Identity and Aspiration: "Becoming Someone in Life"

A clip from a KISS promotional video (KISS, 2017) illustrates the school's dilemma as a transformative institution for indigenous children. The video begins in a village in a lush western Odisha forest with children happily engaged in traditional pursuits; it then darkens and shifts to a group of forlorn-looking children gazing absently into the distance. The narrator intones, "*They want to be someone in life, but they are deprived of a most important, fundamental right: access, to even basic education*" (2017, 0:39). The screen brightens and the narrator describes how KISS provides this opportunity. The video implies that to *be someone* requires leaving tribal communities, taking on new identities, and pursuing mainstream aspirations. It also illustrates the tightrope KISS walks as it seeks to define its purpose as a transformative institution that celebrates indigenous culture. As described below, the KISS experience is weighed heavily toward transformation.

As students acculturate to living at KISS, they gain the cultural knowledge needed to be KISSians, and they identify primarily as such. As a staff member describes, "*They bring in their own factors from their tribal culture, but here is a system that they have to fit in. They do create a new tribe. If you go outside, all the KISS students will say 'I'm a KISS student'*" (interview conducted in English). According to teachers and staff, being a KISSian involves taking responsibility for themselves and

each other, being disciplined, treating elders with respect, taking care of the campus, and speaking proudly about the school to friends, family, and visitors. One teacher described KISSians as, “obedient, simple, having lots of hidden talents, affectionate, hardworking, disciplined, punctual, having clean habits, and well organized. They give respect to the elders, caring towards younger” (translated from Odia).

KISS provides pathways and goals for students to achieve institutionally endorsed aspirations. KISS encourages all students to excel academically, and nearly all pass end-of-year exams given in 10th and 12th grade (pass rates are consistently higher than those for Odisha government schools). It also allows those who truly excel academically to continue their education either at KISS University or at its sister institution, the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT). These students envision themselves entering professions like medicine, nursing, teaching, and engineering. Less academically inclined students can learn vocations that may be useful in their districts (e.g., tailoring, electrician, pipe fitting), and others develop athletic and artistic talents.

Students’ aspirations are also influenced by the school’s mission, which pledges in part “to prepare underprivileged children and youth as ‘change agents’ for their community” (KISS 2019c). As change agents, students are encouraged to take what they have learned at KISS and improve lives in their communities. This change agency begins during their summer breaks. Some students describe tutoring village peers and talking to women about hygiene. One boy proudly described sharing what he learned about climate change with elders in his village. He said, “While I was doing a science project on hardening of soil, climate change, I went to my village and made people aware of this and told them to switch over to organic fertilizer instead of using chemicals” (translated from Odia). Most parents and students support the goal of being change agents for their communities. As 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” (translated from Odia). 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. If he becomes an engineer, he will be an asset for the society” (translated from Odia). Others are more fatalistic, trusting the future to the gods.

Becoming change agents is not a mere slogan at KISS because many graduates are now employed as teachers, administrators, and nurses by KISS, either at the main campus or in the satellite centres that KISS is establishing in the indigenous districts.⁶ In this way, students can give back to their communities and the school while remaining under the institutional umbrella. In 2015, the founder described how this plan goes beyond the empty calls for change agency characteristic of many government schemes:

You will see how I have planned. These KISS students will be change agents to run the rest of KISS in their own districts in Odisha. ... No policy maker provides the avenues, only speaking, “Make them change agent,” If we start the thirty branches in thirty districts, we will make them change agents. They will run the show as teachers, managers, supervisors. They will really act as change agents in their community. They imbibe everything here. (interview conducted in English)

KISS students become different from their village peers, but they do not necessarily completely lose their indigenous identity in the process. Several parents proudly described their children “walking taller” and being respected when they visit in the summer. Village peers also see a difference in how KISS students speak and behave. One village girl said, “There is a difference in the way of speaking and in their behaviour. They are more sharper than me” (translated from Odia). Most KISS students reported that they are comfortable at home and at KISS and that they have no problem communicating in their indigenous languages. KISS students are repeatedly told

⁶ KISS plans to establish a satellite centre in each of the 30 indigenous districts in the state of Odisha. These schools will serve primary and upper primary students and allow them to study closer to home. The satellite campuses are also residential. Once established, they will allow the current campus to serve secondary and tertiary students.

to be proud of their heritage, and they are encouraged to use their indigenous languages around campus and reconnect with their culture during home visits. As one administrator said about maintaining their indigenous language and culture:

It's a give and take situation. We are trying to give them empowerment through education. We say, "don't lose your culture. You are here to study, so study." But we try our best that their roots are intact. That's why they go home for two-three months. We are in contact, and I say, "Be sure to talk to your grandfathers." "Make sure you talk to your mothers" I give them a task, like to do a write up on one of the most important festivals in the village. You know why? Not because I want them to do a write up but because they need to talk.
(Interview conducted in English)

KISS is becoming more systematic and programmatic in supporting indigenous languages and cultures, but the efforts remain secondary to preparing students for success in the wider world. KISS is developing a multilingual interactive language approach to integrate young children into the school (KISS, 2019b), and they provide older students multiple opportunities to learn and share indigenous arts and dances from diverse groups. However, there are few efforts to meaningfully incorporate indigenous languages and cultural knowledge in the curriculum for older students. The school relies on the curriculum used in all government schools in Odisha and instruction is in Odia or English.⁷

Although KISS encourages students to be proud of their heritage, the institution exists in a broader social and economic context in which indigenous groups are at the bottom of a rigid social hierarchy. This effects life within and beyond KISS. For example, one young man described how members of his tribe are treated by the general population, *"My villagers will feel proud of me because, in our locality, we, the tribal people [Santali], are not treated well by the general castes. The Odia people don't mix with us, and they offend us with calling different names"* (translated from Odia). When asked if such treatment is hurtful, he continued, *"Yeah, very much. Earlier we could not understand, but it hurts more these days. We are aware of everything, so it hurts. So, I want to learn a lot and show them that we can also do something"* (translated from Odia). KISS students are frequently referred to in speeches, conversation, and in writing as being *deprived*. Although these are typically in reference to economic deprivation, the repeated use of deficit terminology stands in contrast to KISS's stated commitment to valuing indigenous heritage.

Separation from the Wider Society: At What Cost?

KISS definitely meets Goffman's designation of a total institution *"as a place of residence and work ... cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time"* (1961, p. xiii). Students are removed from their local communities geographically (hundreds of kilometres from most indigenous communities) and technologically (mobile phones are banned). Children as young as six live at KISS ten months a year, going home to their villages for only two months during the summer. Parents' visits are rare, and phone calls, made on teachers' and administrators' phones, are short and infrequent. Students are further cut off from the wider society because they rarely leave campus and have little access to social media, television, and the internet. However, KISS does provide students experiences that would be unavailable in their villages, such as frequent interaction with foreign visitors and Indian dignitaries and opportunities to attend and participate in sporting and artistic events in the city.

⁷ Recently KISS University was designated *Deemed-to-be-University* status by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India in 2019, and its mission statement highlights a commitment to sustaining indigenous language and culture: *"To be a model for global education reform and to promote indigenous sustainability by empowering students through accessible, quality education and vocational training while simultaneously documenting, preserving and disseminating local tribal knowledge through innovative research and strategic resource pooling and collaboration"*. This commitment is likely to filter down to the secondary education curriculum.

KISS's founder chose the residential school model to separate children from what he describes as the negative effects of poverty, more specifically food scarcity, poor schools, alcoholism, and child labour. KISS justifies enveloping students in an institutional context by characterising indigenous communities as *deprived*, incapable of providing basic needs. Many parents and students accept this characterisation of their communities. Several parents describe concerns that they are unable to feed their families. As one father said, "*If they stayed in the village, it is not possible for me to give two-time proper meal to them; it is not possible to educate them*" (translated from Odia). Parents and students also describe the limitations of their village schools. For example, one young man said:

The education system in my village is not that good; the teachers are just concerned about food. They hardly focus on education. They are not serious about education... they close the school very early and go home... The teachers don't come regularly, and the student-teacher ratio is very low. ... The shortage of classrooms is another issue. There are two classes in the same room, so the students get disturbed in their learning. (translated from Odia)

Some students also speculate that had they not come to KISS, they, like their peers, would be engaged in manual labour rather than studying. For example, a former KISS student studying at KIIT said:

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, would still be continuing as a labourer, too. (translated from Odia)

Most parents are attracted to KISS's narrative of hope and want to remove their children from the dangers and hopelessness of grinding poverty. They are concerned that their children will go hungry, that education and livelihood options at home are limited, that their children may be pawns in the rivalry between government and Maoist forces, and that their children will develop bad habits. They also like the changes they see in their children (e.g., confidence, Odia and English fluency, academic success, vocational skills, good health). No parents expressed concern that their children are losing their indigenous culture or language or are poorly treated at KISS, but this could have been the result of discomfort of a formal interview, fear that interviewers were sent by KISS, or the resignation of a subaltern group.

Although few of the students, parents, or teachers interviewed expressed concern about removing students from their communities, several foreign and Indian visitors questioned this decision. For example, an educator from the United States responded to a question about what children gain and lose by attending boarding school saying:

Poor children are not homogenous and residential schools are not all the same, so I think it is hard to make a generalization. However, 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?

Choosing to Attend and Developing Loyalty to the Institution

KISS presents itself as an educational alternative for families that have few viable choices, but for many parents, it is a "choice-less choice" (Mander et al., 2015, p. 26); parents know that their children are unlikely to receive an adequate education in local schools (Froerer, 2012). KISS has cultivated a status in tribal communities as a good school and a *Castle of Hope*; members of tribal councils are on advisory boards, and parents of current students spread the word. Parents choose it for its promise of bright futures for their children but also because it is free. They are relieved that their children can receive free education, room and board, medical care, vocational training, and athletic and artistic training from Grade 1 through post-graduate studies at KISS University or KIIT. For this reason, it receives about 25 applications for every available opening.

No families are forced to send their children to KISS. If they felt that they were coerced, students would drop out or run away, or parents would choose to keep children home after the summer break. Analysis of sixth through tenth grade student enrolments across three terms (2014, 2015, 2016 school years) indicates that most students who are enrolled at KISS in sixth grade remain through tenth grade (the Indian equivalent of United States high school graduation).⁸ An average of 81.43 percent of students who attended in sixth grade remained at KISS through tenth grade and sat for the end-of-year exam. This is high compared government school retention rates estimated at 14.4 percent for indigenous students in Odisha (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013) and 46 percent of all students nationally (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2019). Students do report early bouts of homesickness, but over time grow increasingly comfortable at KISS. As one young man described:

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 came back after summer vacation, I feel better in here than my village. In summer vacation, I live with my parents for two month and during that period always interested to come back to hostel. (translated from Odia)

KISS students and their families are proud and appreciative of the opportunity to attend KISS and are loyal to the institution and its founder. The founder is frequently described as “like a god”,⁹ and the school as a “bit of heaven.” As one young woman said, “KISS is the best school in the world, so many staffs and students are staying inside campus. All type of facilities available here for students. All round development of students taken care in school” (translated from Odia).

A level of extreme devotion and loyalty is especially evident in teachers, administrators, and staff, many of whom live and work at KISS. As described by an administrator, even those living off campus are expected to be physically, emotionally, and socially available 24/7:

For KISS, you can't say, “this is my job, and I do it and go away.” That kind of attitude won't work. Some dedication is needed. This is a different kind of organization that requires dedication. This is not a 10:00 to 5:00 job. If you see 10:00 to 5:00 that won't work. (interview conducted in English)

This level of loyalty is evident to campus visitors. Some find it disturbingly cult-like, but others see it as authentic affection. For example, a visiting Fulbright fellow describes it as worshipful. In an email he sent me 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.

⁸ Data are based on yearly enrolment and new admissions into each class. The analysis is based on the assumption that 100 percent retention (zero dropouts) exists if the number of students completing the previous class (e.g. Class 5 students entering Class 6) plus new enrollees equals the reported number of students in the class.

⁹ KISS emphasizes the founder's ‘rags to riches story.’ According to KISS legend, his father died when he was young, plummeting the family into poverty but through hard work and education he could have amassed a fortune. Rather than keep the profits, he chooses to live very simply and channel them into KISS. He is held up as a model for KISS students of sacrifice and giving back. He explains that he focuses on educating indigenous children because he saw how the general Indian community abused and disrespected when he taught in a tribal district.

As he implies, this sense of *worshipfulness*, along with a belief that a bright future is possible because of KISS, permeates the school culture.

Systems to Maintain Order

At the institutional level, power and authority reside within a group of primarily upper caste, educated Hindu men who control the public face of KISS and tell the institutional story. They are responsible for the “*formally administered round of life*” (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii) found in total institutions. Their position at the top of the administrative hierarchy exemplifies the power imbalances that shape lives for marginalized people around the world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Foucault, 1975). However, a deeper examination of students’ actual day-to-day life shows that students exert considerable agency in shaping their experience of the school. This is partially due to several factors, including a high student-to-adult ratio of about 40:1, necessitating that students take responsibility for themselves and each other, a desire among students to stay at KISS as long as possible, and an institutional commitment to creating a family-like atmosphere. During my fieldwork, I saw no signs of student denigration and humiliation.¹⁰ Students reported developing close relationships with teachers and staff who live with them in the hostels and teach their classes. As one young man said, “*The teachers are treating us like their own children*” (translated from Odia). Young students see older students helping in the hostels and returning to teach in the primary grades. They turn to each other, especially to older students, to learn how to live at KISS. Older students are seen as “*elder brothers and sisters*,” especially those who are members of the same culture or language group. Students are key to maintaining an orderly campus; they pass peacefully in the halls without whistles, bells, or yelling, and corporal punishment is not used.¹¹ In the six months I worked at the school, I did not see a fight in the halls or on the playing fields despite limited adult supervision.

KISS expects students to behave in a manner consistent with future ambitions to work in mainstream professions. While they are at school, students learn to become *good KISSians* (e.g., display discipline, participate in classes and activities, help each other, respect their elders, stay clean). These behaviours are ones they associate with their future selves. As one former student, currently studying at KIIT, describes:

The teachers and hostel-in-charge were staying with us in the hostel, and they helped us to do all the works in KISS properly. It was a great participatory learning. When I came here, I knew not much about what are the dining hall, tray, kitchen, and bathroom and how to use them in the right manners. All these things and environment were very new to me. The senior students and teachers most willingly facilitated my understandings, and I was able to quickly adopt and adapt. (translated from Odia)

Conclusion

This article illustrates the extreme measures families take in pursuit of education’s promise. KISS parents willingly send their children to a large institution far from home, trusting strangers to provide care and support. They hope that their children will emerge from the experience equipped to live lives parents think are unavailable at home. This is a sacrifice parents do not make lightly, but KISS parents make it for one reason: hope. Hope is, as Freire (1994) describes, as necessary as clean water to drink. KISS families are not alone in making great sacrifices to hold onto the thin thread of hope. Parents around the world pay fees they cannot afford, endure long separations, and see their traditional ways of life disappear. They make these sacrifices because they hope that their children will actually reap the promised rewards of education (Frye, 2012; Jakimow, 2016). Although many schools fail to make good on these promises (Duncan-Andrade,

¹⁰ Several complaints by former students are reported in a report by Survival International (<https://www.survivalinternational.org/factoryschools>). These complaints are counter to the school climate and culture I witnessed.

¹¹ Corporal punishment is officially banned in all Indian schools.

2009; Frye, 2012), parents continue to sacrifice to send their children to school because, as Jakimow (2016) states, “*Hope may only be a salve, but hopelessness is brutal*” (p. 27).

KISS is built on the promise of hope, but to differentiate itself from schools that offer only false hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), it must provide a safe and nurturing environment and appropriate aspirational role models and pathways (Appadurai, 2013). As a total institution, KISS has an oversized influence on students’ present and future lives, and the way it manifests the four features of residential schools serves as an example of the benefits and potential pitfalls of residential schools for indigenous students.

Schools are sites of transformation, especially that of **identity and aspirations**, but they must be cautious about the transformational direction they promote. KISS bills itself as the only way for children to *become someone in life*, assuming that those who remain in their communities will lead lives of deprivation. Given evidence of governmental and corporate encroachment into indigenous lands and humiliating encounters with members of the Indian general population, it is understandable that many in the indigenous communities agree with KISS. In this context, it is KISS’s responsibility to value and respect who children are when they arrive and support students’ development of realistic, attainable, and culturally sensitive visions of a future self. It is difficult in a school of this size to ensure that this process meets the needs of all students. KISS must be attuned to those students who might fall through the cracks and leave the school ill-equipped for life in either the mainstream or the village. Needless to say, this is a difficult tightrope for KISS to walk, especially with few indigenous people in positions of power. Ideally, KISS students learn to be border crossers (Carter, 2006), comfortable in multiple worlds, confident to be advocates and change agents for their communities, and willing to take on leadership positions within KISS. In schools like KISS that bring multiple indigenous groups together, they may also form a pan-indigenous identity that facilitates advocacy and community enhancement (Bahr, 2014; Treuer, 2019).

The **separation** of indigenous children from their homes and communities is also potentially problematic. This practice leads to students growing up in an institutional context in which they learn to accommodate to the institution’s beliefs, values, and expected behaviours. The institution essentially provides the air students breathe and the culture they accept; by its nature, it is very different from students’ homes and villages. KISS officials are confident that the residential model is the only way to ensure that students are protected from the ill effects of grinding poverty and are exposed to increased learning opportunities available only at KISS. However, separating students from their community sends a message that the community’s strengths cannot overcome its deficiencies. Few boarding schools for indigenous students have been able to strike the right balance between honouring indigenous culture and preparing for life in the wider society (Bahr, 2014). KISS’s plans to set up satellite centres in indigenous districts reduces, but does not eliminate, the separation. If these centres are staffed by KISS graduates, as planned, indigenous people will affect the culture and curriculum of the centres, potentially reducing negative effects of separation.

Parents **choose** to send their children to residential schools because they assume that education is mandatory for life success and that local schools are inadequate. Often this is a reluctant choice (Froerer, 2012; Mander et al., 2015) because formal schooling undercuts the value of traditional learning within the community (Lave & Wegner, 1991; Levinson, 2000). Given encroachments into indigenous communities, traditional learning opportunities are being disrupted and formal schooling appears to be children’s best option. Although KISS families are choosing between residential schools for upper primary and secondary school (e.g., Ashram Schools in their districts or KISS) they need to be reassured that the quality of KISS’s academic and vocational programs, opportunities for post-secondary education, and safety support their choice.

All schools need **systems to maintain order** to ensure that students are safe and learning. These systems are typically created by school authorities who may bring racialized assumptions about indigenous students to their positions. As the KISS case illustrates, even when these systems are

created by mainstream administrators, students' experience of the school can be positive if they share responsibility for maintaining smooth operation. In well run schools, students want to be there and do not require heavy-handed, culturally insensitive discipline to maintain order.

Returning to the question posed in this paper's title, I maintain that, under the right conditions, a total institution can be a *Castle of Hope*. KISS exists because the educational options in tribal districts are poor and the integrity of many of the tribal communities has been violated by corporate and governmental land encroachment. While critics of KISS suggest that it would be preferable to channel resources into the indigenous communities rather than maintain and promote a separate school system (Survival International, 2019), KISS and its supporters take a longer view. They maintain that the cadres of *change agents* coming out of KISS will have a profoundly positive effect on indigenous communities and will help make education's promise viable for more children.

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