

Framing “Always Indigenize” beyond the Settler-Colony: “Indigenizing” in India

Paulomi Chakraborty
University of Alberta

LEN FINDLAY’S “ALWAYS INDIGENIZE” IS AN INSPIRING CALL to open up the academy *in Canada* to the indigenous people and to indigenous scholarship. Findlay’s critique of the Canadian academy for its tacit colonial practices is committed to local politics, and as clearly stated in the title of the essay, attends to the vision and possibility of “The Radical Humanities in the Postcolonial *Canadian University*” (italics mine). Although Findlay’s essay carefully remembers that its politics are contingent on the context in which they are taken up, the maxim “always indigenize” itself makes a broad generalising claim. Clearly, there is an element of universalization in the “always” of always indigenize. Findlay reminds us of Chandler’s caveat that Jameson’s “always historicize,” on which Findlay models his “always indigenize,” is “unclear and general” and lends itself to be “divergently interpreted” by literary scholars, his proposition, nevertheless, imagines a universal model (Findlay 308). This rhetoric of universalization becomes problematic, because Findlay’s critique and anti-hegemonic strategies specifically speak to invader/settler-colonies. My interest here is to assess what the call to indigenize means in non-settler colonies, specifically in India, where the colonial matrix is different than in a settler colony such as Canada. I write specifically with the more than 67.8 million (1991 cen-

PAULOMI CHAKRABORTY

was born and grew up in Calcutta, India, and received her B.A. (Honours) and M.A. in English from Jadavpur University, Calcutta. She is currently a PhD student in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. Her PhD dissertation explores literary and cinematic narratives of partition and displacement in Eastern India and Bangladesh.

sus) “tribal” peoples of India in mind, who form about 8% of the Indian population, and the largest “tribal” population in any single nation-state.¹ I am not a tribal myself, and I do not speak “for” tribal peoples in India (a very large and heterogeneous group in itself): what follows are my considerations as a scholar of Indian writing and as someone familiar with the politics and particularities of the Indian situation. It seems to me that Findlay’s strategies, which are so enabling in the Canadian context, taken up in its universalistic formulation, whatever else good they do, do not allow a liberating politics to the tribal peoples in India. And it also seems to me that if it were possible to translate it to an Indian context, the politics of Findlay’s essay would want to include the “fourth-world” “tribal” peoples, and not eclipse their cause. I am in deepest political sympathy with Findlay’s ideals, but because my concern lies in a non-settler colony, I must tease out his strategy to “always indigenize” from its unspoken and universalising settler-colony context.

Findlay grounds his arguments on the hypotheses that “in the (human) beginning was the indigene” and “all communities live as, or in relation to, the indigene” (Findlay 308). In this context, he explains how he wants the call to indigenize to be heard: “as a strategically indeterminate provocation to thought and action on the grounds that there is no *hors-indigène*, no geo-political and psychic setting, no real or imagined *terra nullis* free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous pre-occupation” (309). Further, the twin strategies of “visibility and conspiracy,” which he explores in Section II of his essay, work very well when the indigenous is a racial minority, visibly identifiable or otherwise. Moreover, the discussion in the last section of a more inclusive English department, committed equally to “Englishes and Others,” becomes possible in Canada because English is the majority-spoken language. In spite of its colonial and hegemonic beginnings, Findlay can hope that English can “become a source of good instrumentality” which will allow “new alliances between English literary Studies and Indigenous Studies” (322, 308). The historio-geography Findlay describes in all these assumptions suggests that that the kind of colonisation he has in mind, and hence his strategies of indigenization, attend to the power structures in the settler-colonies.

It is not possible, however, to generalise these parameters to a non-settler colony. In sharp contrast to the situation in settler colonies such as

1 The term is, of course, highly problematic. I have not put quotation marks around it because the term keeps appearing in the essay; however, I do not intend to neutralize its meaning or usage.

Canada, in non-settler colonies the entire colonised population were, and relationally still are, “the native” as opposed to the “outsider” colonisers. Without some additional qualification, posited every time in relation to the British colony or any other colonial power, *all* Indians and everything homegrown are necessarily “indigenous.” Indeed, in multiple contexts, especially in the “third-world,” one notices the same oppositional use of the term indigenous demarcating the national or the local against the cosmopolitan or the global. This binary of the local and the global is also a binary of the national and the cosmopolitan, as much as the binary of the colonised and the coloniser in the non-settler colonies. The relational use of the indigenous applies to produce, industry, and labour as well, as exemplified in Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement against the British government, which was mainly a call to use indigenous products as opposed to British goods. The word Gandhi used is “swadeshi” which means native, literally “of one’s own country.” Swadeshi is frequently understood and translated as “indigenous,” and that is how most non-tribal Indians would understand indigenous; not just the English *word* indigenous, but the concept of being indigenous.

The binary of the indigenous-cosmopolitan remains important for erstwhile colonised or neo-colonised peoples to maintain in face of increasing globalisation and “opening up” of “third world markets.” However, while such a binary provides a conceptual framework to construct anti-colonial nationalisms against outside forces of colonisation and imperialisms, it simultaneously constructs a nativism which is blind to the divisions and power structures within the now sovereign nation-state. In such a context, the call to “always indigenize” unavoidably bears an uneasy connotation of uncritical nationalisms, which eclipses the issues of the subaltern *within* the non-settler colony. This seems to me the furthest from the kind of politics Findlay’s essay espouses. Such a binary of the indigenous-insider and coloniser-outsider, for example, does not simultaneously accommodate the tribal peoples in India who have claims, disputed of course, and cultural memories, predictably belonging to irrecoverable pasts with insufficient records, of being the first nations of India. In competing for indigeniety in the national arena and under the Western eye, the politics of the tribal peoples get seriously compromised when they are rendered the same as the rest of India.

At this point, it is important to gloss that the tribal peoples in India have at best a complicated relation to indigeniety. G. N. Devy, the editor of *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*, and the founder of The Tribal Academy in Tejgarh, India, writes:

It is impossible to characterise India's tribals in ethnographic or historical terms. In the Indian context, the term "tribal" is too complex to be synonymous for "indigenous." The tribals are not necessarily racially distinct, nor are they necessarily the original inhabitant of the areas they inhabit. Throughout India's long history, communities have migrated, been forcefully displaced, and rehabilitated themselves. (Introduction ix)

The Sanskrit/Hindi word (as in many other regional Indian languages) in use for the tribals is "Adivas," which, literally means "the earliest inhabitants"; although it can also mean "people who inhabit the earliest times."¹ The word "adivasi," as a signifier, evokes certain stereotypical over-determined images of the "tribal" (attending more to the second sense of the term, "people belonging to early times"), but does not refer to indigeneity in the strict sense of the term, especially in the way it is used in Canada, New Zealand or Australia with the attached identitarian politics. The Constitution of India lists these peoples as "Scheduled Tribes," recognising their difference from the rest of the population. However, significantly, the government of India has consistently refused to recognise the adivasis as indigenous peoples, advocating that tribal peoples in India are not indigenous peoples as defined internationally, preferring to retain the colonial term tribal. Thus, the currency of the words "adivasi" does not guarantee a simultaneous recognition of claims to "indigenous rights" by these groups.

If the adivasis have a complicated and, in the context of our discussion, a strained relationship with "indigenous," why must I stretch Findlay's essay and his case for the "indigenous" far enough to speak to their case; and then, as I do here, expose gaps which show in the process? I do so with the conviction that indigenous is a referential word, operating in the twin context of colonisation and disenfranchisement. It should not be an exercise in essentialism, especially keeping in mind Findlay's remark that

Indigenizing today is undertaken in face of the realities and dangers of "aggravated inequality" (Martin), the fact that development's twin continues to be underdevelopment, and the reality that the emergence of the so-called new economy

1 The reference to the "earliest" inhabitants refers back to the ancient Aryan invasion in 1500 BC. Although the word "adivasi" is not altogether innocent as I describe here, I prefer to use it to "tribal." Hence the shift from this point in the essay.

so far altered little the only too predictable global distribution of poison and prosperity. (309)

The tribal peoples have been and are in the face of “aggravated inequality,” exploited by colonialism and neo-colonialism, as also by the “indigenous elites.” If we are to read Findlay’s call politically, in the spirit rather than the letter, in the context of India, we must think of the tribal peoples. While the tribal peoples have a complicated relation to indigeneity, they are not outside the equation of insider/outsider of the colonial power equation. If the word “indigenous” in its present usage works in a framework of colonisation, the tribal peoples have to be taken into account while taking stock of the “indigenous” in relation to colonial impact. Although the history of tribal disenfranchisement goes back to a much older history, British rule in the nineteenth century gives it a determining shape. The single identity of the “tribal” to these varied groups of people can be traced to British legal records. An important defining moment for some tribal communities is legal branding by the British colonial government through the Criminal Tribes of India Act of 1871. By this act, nearly 200 communities were “notified” by the colonial government as “criminal.” The act was born from a suspicion of the nomadic lifestyle by these communities. The colonial racism figured that every person belonging to these communities must possess “criminal tendencies”: the members supposedly inherited their criminal nature and practised traditional professions of stealing and petty crimes. Accordingly, these tribes were kept under surveillance and held accountable for criminal activities in any area they inhabited unless proved otherwise. The present day notion of the tribal, especially the determining stereotype of the erstwhile “notified” tribes, is founded on this branding and immense injustice of colonial legalism. There are specific histories of impoverishment and displacement of the tribal peoples under the British rule, which deprived them of their land and livelihood. The tribal relationship to European colonialism is also borne by the consistent resistance the various tribal communities put up to the colonial intrusion and the many rebellions in face of usurpations of their land and livelihood under the British rule.²

While the tribals are not alone in India to have suffered colonisation, their disenfranchisement continues to date in “independent” India, beyond and above that faced by the rest of the national population. They were,

2 Santhal Hul or Rebellion of 1855, The Mulukui or Sardari Rebellion of 1858, Birsha Munda’s Ulgulan or “The Great Tumult” (Spivak’s translation) between December 1899–January 1900 are important examples.

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more than the urban elites, exploited and colonised by the British, and they are still exploited and “colonised” by the “indigenous elites.” Tribal interests clash, often violently, with material and cultural interests of the nation-state, for example when the Indian government proceeds to construct a dam displacing thousands of tribal peoples.³ Such interest-differences become most pointedly visible in loss of land to the industrialisation of tribal land and other modernising missions of the state. The tribal concerns, many of which relates to “fourth world” ecology, are oppositional to the interests of the nation-state and global capitalism alike. As the writer/activist Mahasweta Devi has so articulately said:

Then there are industrial projects, for example the one in Tatanagar and the one in Bhillai. The entire Singhbhum district is minerally rich. India makes progress, produces steel, the tribals give up their land and receive nothing. They are suffering spectators of the India that is moving towards the twenty-first century. (*Imaginary Maps* xi)

While the tribal peoples have no historically provable claims of indigeneity, and as Devi writes above, not even ethnological or even historical claims necessarily, they are one of the most underprivileged sections of the Indian population. Whether or not ethnologists can find a basis for it, they are also racially profiled and identified as different from the rest of the population.

If this is a colonial legacy, it has not been addressed yet. After independence, for example, the notified communities were “denotified” by the Indian government in 1952 and listed in the Constitution of India in the schedule of tribes, caste and “other backward communities,” who have special reservation in government education institutions and offices. However, that does not do away with the immense injustice these “denotified” communities receive at the hands of the Indian legal system in India.⁴ Nor do

3 For an analysis of the relationship between dam-building, development and the World Bank see Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflict over National Resources in India* (Cited Spivak 208).

4 For more on the current issues of the Denotified Tribes, see “The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India: Appeal for Justice and Struggle for Rights: Report by Denotified and Nomadic Tribal Rights Action Group, October 1998,” presented by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and “Ruling by the Court of Calcutta on the Death in Sustody of Budhan Sabar, 24 June, 1998” in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1.4 (1999) 590–593 and 600–604 respectively. For some insight into the complexity of the issues involved, see “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in Conversation with Nirupama Rao, Columbia

the reservations address the stereotyping of these communities at a cultural level. The official description of these communities still remains “backward.” In context of the modernity marked by the birth of the nation-state, both the English word “tribal” and the Sanskrit word “adivasi” ideologically push a pre-modern character on these peoples. Without any scope of doubt, the tribal peoples are politically marginalized within India. Yet, all Indian nationals, including the national elites, are the indigenous in relation to the outside. Therefore there is very little space for tribal peoples in the representative space of the indigenous. It is then reductive in the Indian context to go with the dichotomy of the indigenous-outsider for the tribal peoples: clearly, the term indigenous does nothing to address the doubly-colonised status of the tribal peoples within the nation-state.

Although this article does not offer enough space for a fuller discussion, I must at least note that the paradigm of the indigenous disallows space to the Dalit (the “untouchable”; literally, the “oppressed”) struggle, whose subalternity cannot be negotiated through indigeneity as Dalit history and Dalit identity are outside any claims to being early inhabitants of India. Dalit history of exploitation is created by the Hindu caste-system. However, their marginalization is just as crucial to remember if the case in point is India. Where the social hierarchy is marked by a caste-system, as in India, it is difficult to describe all communities living as indigenous or in relational to the non-indigenous, as Findlay formulated for Canada. Such a binary would not do justice to the exclusive position the Dalits occupy. It is not enough to think of the Dalits as non-tribals in relation to the tribals, making them same with the rest of India. The Dalits are one of the most exploited and marginalized subaltern groups in India, and their marginality is comparable to the tribals, but there are very important differences between the two identities. Gandhi’s attempted to replace the older name Achhyut (literally, “untouchable”) with Harijan (literally, “children of god”) was arguably to give them some of the dignity that the tribal peoples in India have.⁵ At various points in history, the tribal peoples and

University, 24 May 1999” 594–599 in the same journal. Also see articles by G. N. Devy and Mahasweta Devi in *BUDHAN: The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group Newsletter*, which is available on the world wide web: <http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/pjp/dnt-rag/index_files/budnews.htm>. Mahasweta Devi’s activist writing extensively deals with the political rights and the continued exploitation of the tribal peoples in India. See Ghatak, Maitrya, ed. *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writing of Mahasweta Devi*. Also see Spivak’s “The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India: Appeal for Justice and Struggle for Rights.”

5 The various Dalit groups who have articulated their position regarding their

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the Dalits have formed alliances in their struggles against the common upper class-upper caste enemy.⁶ Mahasweta Devi is a strong advocate of such solidarity, who states, “solidarity is resistance” (“Telling History,” *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* xv). Such an alliance, however, cannot be negotiated under claims of the indigenous; in fact, such subaltern solidarity is increasingly gaining strength under the name “Dalit.” Although Spivak reads in the above-mentioned novel a caution against “the seduction of an identitarianism in the name of the dalit,” which leads to a loss of identity for tribals; like Mahasweta Devi, many adivasi leaders of the community and activists of adivasi rights see a clear political advantage in the political solidarity between the adivasis and the dalits (“Translator’s Afterword” 366). Such subaltern alliances cannot be formed under the rubric of indigeneity.

Lastly, in light of Findlay’s optimism regarding “Englishes and Others,” I face the question if “always indigenize” will enable a more inclusive, genuinely radical, and postcolonial academy in India. It is worth noting that a call to indigenize English departments in India does mean something useful and crucially anti-colonial. Such an argument, which might mean opening the traditional English literature curriculum to texts outside the British canon, to “other Englishes,” to teaching Indian writing in English, and in some cases even texts in other (than English) languages in India,⁷ has been around for a long time now. Many intellectuals and teachers of English in Indian universities took seriously Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s critique of the continuing hegemonic importance of English in newly independent countries and his urgent reminder that the former colonies must realise the importance of the native tongue. This political view and the realisation that the English studies in India have a hegemonic and colonial foundation,⁸ have kept English literary studies in Indian universities under

labelling, prefer the word Dalit to Harijan. For more on Dalit views on Gandhi and the Congress party, see Ram Narayan S. Rawat’s discussion of Dalit politics in the preceding years of the Indian independence in “Partition Politics and Achhut Identity.”

6 Mahasweta Devi’s novel *Chotti Munda And His Arrow* (introduction and translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) addresses the alliance between the tribals and the Dalits and much of what I discuss here.

7 See, for example, Minakshi Mukherjee’s essay “Mapping a Territory: Notes in Framing a New Course,” where she discusses her practice in an English department, of teaching several novels written in other Indian languages than English.

8 Most readily citable is Gauri Viswanathan’s work. She argued in *The Masks of Conquest*, a study of the English studies in India, the first universities were

critical suspicion. Many Indian scholars and teachers of English literature have debated, and are debating, the ethical basis of their very profession in the post-colonial nation; and if they were to accept the inevitability of their situation, how to navigate their post-colonial pedagogy and to move away from the colonial premises of the English departments.⁹ There have been numerous protests against the uncontested supremacy of English over other Indian languages, as well as calls to open the English departments to other Englishes. While the task such arguments set out to do is by no means complete, and the arguments themselves have to be staged again and again, but they traverse a more or less well-rehearsed trajectory. Findlay's vision of a department of English in Section IV that can indigenize to include "Englishes and Others" fits well into this debate.

However, once again, this inclusion seems to be no different than the exercise I described above where "Indian" (as opposed to British/Cosmopolitan) stands in for the indigenous. While this sort of exercise glosses the racial, colonial and historical relationship of India with English studies, this sort of inclusion does not specifically address the tribal concerns, experiences and knowledges. The battle of "redrawing of the academic map and redistribution of cultural legitimacy and territoriality under Indigenous educational leadership" in India has to have more radical strategies than what "going native" entails (Findlay 322). I can cite from the same edition of *Ariel*, in which Findlay's "Always Indigenize" appears, two reviews as examples in which debates of "Indigenism" and "Nativism" stands in for different sorts of Indianisms. Satish C. Aikant's review article "From Colonialism to Indigenism: The Loss and Recovery of Language and Literature" discusses Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, which I already cited, and G. N. Devy's "Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography." The article's indigenism, which is posited as a binary of colonialism, does not automatically consider tribal issues. The concern of the same G. N. Devy, who later became so actively involved in the tribal cause, in this critical issue is to discover "Indian conceptual frameworks" to "ground literary historiography" (Aikant 343). This book, the reviewer informs us, "emerges out of his concern for the already existing alternative approaches that would restore native agency,

founded as instruments of control and forging subjects who supported, instrumented, depended on, and lent themselves to the imperial rule. The English departments were key locations for such a purpose.

9 See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *Lie of the Land*. The seventeen essays in this collection all "address the issue of English literary studies in India, most specifically the Indian University" ("Introduction" 1).

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a task that he had begun with his earlier, provocative and hotly debated Sahitya Academy award-winning, *After Amnesia: [Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism]*(1992)” (Aikant 343). The second example is *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Makarand Paranjape, which is reviewed by Shyamal Bagchee. Going by Bagchee’s review, the essays in Paranjape’s volume take up concerns similar to Devy’s works, and try to assess “native” ways, frameworks and modes of evaluating literature. These essays, as far as the review reveals, are not burdened to attend to the cause of the tribal peoples although the reviewer concludes “that there is ... much in the book that assures a healthy prospect for this indigenous critical effort” (Bagchee 431).

I have no quarrel with indigenism of the above kind when posited against European/British hegemony prevalent in English Literature Studies. However, I must note that taken within India, such indigenism cannot address the overwhelming absence of tribal and Dalit scholars and students in the academy in general, and in the humanities in particular. I cannot share Findlay’s optimism and vision of more inclusive English studies, because a non-settler colony bears a different relationship with the English language and to the study of English than does an English-speaking settler colony. The subaltern has very little or no access to English departments, or to any part of the academy. The weariness of Spivak’s old position that the subaltern cannot speak comes back, especially if we are to hope that the subaltern can aspire to speak English or even “Englishes.” It is no accident that I who participate in this debate in this venue am not a tribal. Nor is Mahasweta Devi, who is a committed activist and often acts as a spokesperson for the adivasis. Nor are G. N. Devy and Gayatri Spivak, who have made tribal cause and tribal writing available through translation to a Western audience and whom I cite as authorities.

In conclusion, let me note that this response is not directed to find faults with Findlay’s important and historical essay; my intention is the very opposite: I want to acknowledge the importance of Findlay’s call in the Canadian context. I also note the politics of Findlay’s article potentially make a rich contribution to the debates about “fourth world” peoples everywhere in the world (or else I would not be writing this article); however, I want to urgently remind the readers of the situatedness of the call in its present formulation. In this context, I am demonstrating that the politics of Findlay’s “always indigenize” gets compromised and loses its focus from “fourth world” peoples, when translated to a non-settler context. In India, “always indigenize,” in spite of its liberating politics, cannot

go far enough to attend to the “fourth world” peoples, which Findlay’s essay aspires to do in the Canadian context.

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