Thinking differently: An education for the Anthropocene from Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract

Theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of education and activism in the Anthropocene will be enriched by an embrace of non-hegemonic thinking. Lakshmi Ashram, a small girls' school in the Himalayan mountains of Uttarakhand, India, provides an object lesson in thinking differently: in an imbrication of education/research/activism. This article acknowledges a continuing lack of attention in the literature to local, cultural and place-based diversity in transformative learning for sustainable community. However, the central story in this article is not one of critique, but rather one of a Himalayan approach to creating the pedagogical conditions for transformation in thinking and behaviour, in a connected *socio-ecological* community. Writing across an intercultural space, the two authors describe their ethnographic methodologies, exploring the long-term impact of a Lakshmi Ashram education on students and inhabiting the pedagogical experience of the school. A seamless flow of socio-material practice between pedagogy, research and activism in the school's educational approach speaks to a Gandhian philosophy-in-action that is worth considering as a contribution to global educational praxis in the Anthropocene. In telling this tale of one small school's pedagogical philosophy, the authors aim not towards ideological posturing, but towards creating further openings in thinking differently in education.

Albert Einstein once famously said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.' Thinking with Einstein, inclusion of divergent thinking is critical in reconsidering the praxis of education and activism in addressing the Anthropocene. A small girls' school in the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand provides an object lesson in thinking differently: a braided education/research/activism towards socio-ecological community.

This article combines the researched observations of the school secretary and leader who was born in Uttarakhand and schooled at Lakshmi Ashram[1] (Vaishnava, 2016), and of an Australian who situates her doctoral research at the school (Germein, in preparation). In the shared intercultural space of this article we include our voices, singly and together, as well as the voices of girls and teachers.

A leitmotif within this article is the cultural hybridity and negotiation of difference that characterises both our shared writing and the history, present (and future) of Lakshmi Ashram. Lakshmi Ashram is a residential girls' school, founded in 1946 by Englishwoman Catherine Heilemann (taking the name Sarala Behen in India), a follower of Mahatma Gandhi — whose own education and thinking were informed by his time in England and South Africa (Gandhi,

1927/2004; Guha, n.d.). The school welcomes a regular stream of visitors from India and abroad who come to learn, to support and to share their own culture.

The challenge of writing together across cultures within the overall context of a Western academic discourse reflects a broader challenge of making space for voices from the 'periphery' (Canagarajah, 2002) in 'global' discourse.[2] How do we attend to the critical expectations of Western academia while respecting different cultural contexts? How do we write together, wary of the risks of 'linguistic and cultural "translation"' (Goulimari, 2017, p. 2)? How do we productively inhabit difference? These are the same challenges that educators face in considering diverse cultural and philosophical approaches to the Anthropocene.

Philosophies and practices from different cultural contexts

The environmental movement since the 1960's, and within the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), spawned a variety of 'educations' — peace, climate, citizenship and other responses to specific substantive problems (Greenwood, 2014; Jackson, 2016); however, it has been acknowledged that many of these did not adequately embody culturally inclusive and local place-based approaches (Jackson, 2017; Selby & Kagawa, 2015; Somerville, 2016). Also acknowledged was the need for development of skills, attitudes and values for dealing with unforeseen futures (Gadotti, 2008; Jackson, 2016).

Education for Sustainability[3] (EfS) was notable among the 'educations' in focusing specifically on values, thinking and process skills (Bedi & Germein, 2016; Smith & Watson, 2019; Tilbury & Cooke, 2009). EfS incorporated the work of E.F. Schumacher, Fritjof Capra and Gregory Bateson on complex systems thinking and ecological worldviews. This educational approach embodied educational philosophies-in-action that change the way we think; changing conditions 'in here' rather than 'out there' for ecological and connected thinking (Code, 2006; Jackson, 2016).

This special issue asks what educational philosophies might prepare children for the uncertainties of the Anthropocene. While we are searching for answers, Stratford (2019) (who thinks the wider educational community is still struggling to work out EfS!), raises the need for 'new ways of thinking and new forms of education in the Anthropocene' (p. 149), and for 'situated, ecological or rhizomic understandings of knowledge, education and ethics'(p. 150; see also Smith, Fraser, & Corbett, 2017; Somerville, 2017).

The majority world — regions such as South Asia, South America and Africa — have, *historically*, been least responsible for Anthropogenic climate change (Gadotti, 2008). Many communities in these regions have for many years lived well on less, as place and nature-connected communities (Selby & Kagawa, 2015). Including educational philosophies and practices from these diverse contexts forms part of a genuinely collaborative global response to the Anthropocene.

While we are still largely working with the fraying ends of tired hegemonic 'business as usual' educational stories (Huckle & Wals, 2015; Selby, 2015), Lakshmi Ashram offers a different story — one that has been writing itself for 70 years.

Education for socio-ecological community

In using the term *socio-ecological* we express a concept of community in which the human and more-than-human elements of nature co-exist in a lively, connected and interdependent assemblage. This idea references Haraway's (2003, p. 6) conception of *natureculture* as a 'refusal of . . . binary dualisms' and Guattari's (1989/2000) ecosophy, which theorises the natureculture assemblage as one of emergent subjectivities — of becoming-other (see also Tinnell, 2011). The term *socio-ecological* makes explicit the inseparability of humans and nature within such an ecological assemblage.

What then might an education for socio-ecological community look like in diverse cultures and places, with the understanding of place as a messy and dynamic site of local and global influences, constraints and drivers (Greenwood, 2013); and where the 'development of connection and the capacity to make change underlies the cultivation of the kind of people needed to support or create socially healthy and ecologically sustainable communities' (Smith, 2013, p. 215)?

Education at Lakshmi Ashram

Snuggled into a mountainside in rural Uttarakhand, Lakshmi Ashram provides an education for girls from regional families, many of whom would not otherwise be able to afford schooling for their daughters. The school is guided by Gandhi's Basic Education (also called Nai Talim) with a 'head, heart and hands' approach to education. A Gandhian pedagogy is a social, lifelong and holistic process. It is based on values such as truthfulness, cooperation and equality. Work and knowledge are intertwined: teachers and students working together in community is instrumental to the development of self-confidence, independence, responsibility and courage. 'By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in the child ... body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning' (Gandhi, 1937, p. 197; see also Devi, n.d.).

Lakshmi Ashram enacts a pedagogy of shared work, learning and activism, with porous boundaries between school and surrounding communities. The school has a strong commitment to social and environmental action: senior students participate alongside teachers and community activists to work with villages on sanitation, river health, forest resources and social issues. Over many years the school has built trust with villagers in the region, based on listening, working alongside and empowering rural women, in particular, to address their own community problems (Basanti Behen, personal interview, 29 November 2018).

> ... last year we had a padyatra[4] for 6 days. We went up to Someshwar by crossing the old villages of this area ... more than 16 kilometres — a mountainous region. It is enjoyable to meet the villagers. We talk about many things like the environment and anti-liquor movement. We do many things for the village, like cleaning the road ... villagers are throwing garbage into the rivers and making it dirty. (Student group interview, April 15, 2017, Germein, trans. Sunita Das)

Developing personalities with full grace

Alongside this activism-as-learning, and more foundational, is the inner development of girls as individuals, responsible leaders and connected members of, first, the school, and then the broader community, embodying a personal *Swarāj* — a Sanskrit term meaning literally self-rule, and in a personal sense, self-reliance, independence and wholeness.[5]

> There are so many institutions that are preparing children's minds to earn money only. That is already going on in this world. But we have to develop their spiritual part also. Because without developing this spiritual part nothing else is worth anything. We have children, they are still small, they need all the good activities, everything, but how they will develop their consciousness, their conscious mind? (Vaishnava, personal interview, May 18, 2017)

Girls and teachers work together to grow food and other crops, tend to cows, gather hay, cook, clean, practice craft and attend subject lessons. There are also eclectic and vibrant celebrations of cultural and religious festivals, and a shared inner life. Long-time school leader Radha Bhatt comments on the development of the girls:

I think the main thing is to develop the personalities with full grace. All the abilities should get the time to grow. Here in Kausani there is a Central School, run by the government. . . . Once the principal and two teachers came here, in this room, and talked to me. They said 'How do you develop your girls in such a way that they are so free to express their feelings and they are not meek, not shy. They have full confidence. The other day I saw one of your small girls standing up in front of a poetry reading group and conducting everyone. She was saying, "Thank you very much, you have recited a very nice poem, and now I am going to invite someone else." And she was a small girl in 5th class. How could she be like this?' (Radha Bhatt, personal interview, May 19, 2017)

Learning through doing

When the girls first come to the Ashram many of them seem lost. However, within a few days they are totally different, being accepted very kindly and lovingly by the girls and teachers. Everyone is given the opportunity to develop. Once they start learning through doing, they gain confidence and feel able to do many more things in life. They develop life values such as empathy, love and equality. In this community they experience and appreciate interdependency and interconnection.

Here in Lakshmi Ashram we learn to work together in the kitchen garden and cook food together. All should learn to work together. I feel happy to learn all the work. This is very important in my life. What work I am doing here will help me in my future life. (Sonu, personal communication, May 11, 2017, trans. Kanchan Shukla)

 Along with confidence, the girls develop sensitivity to the needs of others. Within the microcosm of school life, the girls learn values of kindness and responsibility that transfer into thoughtful leadership in their engagement with the world.

This time our 10th and 12th class girls . . . had to appear in the examinations, so they were staying in one of the village houses and every morning going to the [village] school and appearing in the exams. Sometimes there was no exam so they were going into the village and talking to the people, and helping the women, cutting the leaves or something like this. And people were saying, please sing a song and they did. So when they were leaving the village at the end, people were in tears. (Radha Bhatt, personal interview, April 21, 2017)

Visitors are invariably impressed to see how happy and busy the girls are in a schedule full of shared work, lessons and other activities. Girls confidently show them around the campus, telling them about the school. Usually the visitors find themselves with a job to do, the closeness of students and teachers creating a welcoming space that envelops the outsider.

We are peeling and cutting alu (potato). Manju tells me my peelings are too thick. 'Patla, patla [thin]', she says softly. She's worried about wasting food. The girls transfer me to cutting duties. Pooja and I get into a rhythm. If she slices into a big potato, she gives me half to cut. The mutual novelty — the visitor helping with kitchen work — is quickly replaced with a mutual desire to get the job done. Kala comes out to inspect the job, swirling her hands slowly through the water to lift out the cut alu. She transfers the cut vegetables into a cooking pot and Pooja takes the washed peelings up to the cows. (Germein, personal journal, May 2017)

Gandhi's educational thinking in action

Gandhi wanted to create change towards Swaraj at every level and inspired many people as social reformers. He said that women, through non-violent means, could be more effective change

makers than men (Patel, n.d.). Consequently, Sarala Behen's aim in coming to Uttarakhand was to support women's empowerment via body, heart and mind. She set about teaching local girls, many of whom became Gandhian social workers (Behen, 2010; see also Guha, 2013).

While Gandhi did not specifically write about the environment, he is described as a profoundly ecological thinker (Godrej, 2012; Lal, 2000), influencing Schumacher and others in the ecology movement (Hoda, 1997). Gandhi's Basic Education can be seen as an early initiative in a social and environmental place-conscious education (Chhokar & Chandrasekaran, 2006). His philosophy-in-action remains relevant to contemporary global problems of consumerism, conflict and lack of community connection (Chaudhury, 2018; Guha, 2019).

Gandhi advocated for a simple life. He felt that human life should be designed according to the laws of a non-dual natureculture, taking from the natural world only what one needs, and with care for other beings, human and more-than-human. He encouraged people to see themselves as part of nature (Kumaria, 2003). Life at Lakshmi Ashram animates his ideas, reified in principles such as *satya* (truthfulness), *ahimsā* (non-violence), *brahmacharya* (inner discipline, control of senses), *sharīr shram* (bread [physical] labour), *aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness, taking only what you need) and *sarvatra bhayawarjanam* (fearlessness).

Rather than a proscriptive set of rules, these principles are embodied in an organic way, nurtured through guidance of teachers and other students. Ahimsā — an attitude of empathy — surfaces as care for human and nonhuman, whether cows, dogs, gardening tools or vegetables. Sarvatra bhayawarjanam is evident in the confident and enthusiastic way of the girls performing in plays, trekking to glaciers in freezing conditions, or climbing banj (Himalayan oak) trees to collect fodder for the cows. Sharīr shram is animated through participation in growing vegetables, tending the cows, and cooking.

A socio-material[6] pedagogical practice

However, a focus on specific Gandhian principles would provide too instrumentalist an understanding of Gandhian thinking as it applies to education at Lakshmi Ashram. Gandhi saw the all-round development of physical, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, spiritual and cultural capabilities as the job of education. A traditional Gandhian Basic Education centred around a craft — spinning — as an experiential and rhizomatic practice from which holistic development and learning could be drawn. With the building of character as a primary aim of a Gandhian education, values and dispositions such as self-sufficiency, inner discipline, upliftment of others, the social and environmental good, responsibility, kindness, compassion, tolerance and a strong work ethic emerge out of the entire package of learning in a socio-material pedagogical practice, where learning, doing and making, school, play, work and responsibility are mutually entangled.

> Our classes are fun, but very noisy. I've brought along materials for drawing, skits or games, and everyone seizes on them. But as soon as the bell goes the little girls suddenly revert to being efficient and business-like, working as a team to stack up the low desks and take the carpets outside for beating. The class/bedroom housekeeping needs to be done before they head off to afternoon seva [community work], whether in the kitchen, garden, forest or cowshed. (Germein, personal journal, April–May 2017).

At Lakshmi Ashram, the pedagogical approach is reflected in the assessments made of students: not a narrow summative assessment of literacy, numeracy and traditional disciplines, but rather a comprehensive and formative observation of intellectual, conceptual, physical, emotional and social development, skills, values, leadership and teamwork. The teachers observe all aspects of the child's everyday life. Does the child have the habit of completing work? How does she speak to others? Is she confident in performances and public expression? Does she know the names of all the cows? Is there a sense of service to others? Is she well organised and punctual? Does she have

an attitude of *svadyay* — self-education or self-development? The teachers can then guide a child in strengthening all areas.

   The girls put Gandhian educational philosophy into practice in their everyday school lives and also, as senior girls, working with teachers, social workers and rural women in carrying out research and social/environmental practice in local villages — an imbrication of pedagogy/research/activism.

> *Susan: Recently Nirmala and Suman [Class 12] went to a village for a few days and were doing a survey. Is that part of a village project?*
> *Neema: Yes, we are planning to do some work for the adolescents. We were thinking . . . how do we reach, how do we approach them? . . . they are more involved in technology than the real world . . . . We decided to open a library. We thought we should do a survey first to find out about the place — girls, boys, education, age, and other conditions, for example, widows. We thought this would be a very good experience for Nirmala and Suman. This is good for them to learn this technique. They have to go and ask people, interact. If they have to do something in future, they will know what to do. So now one of our workers is at the village and has found a place where we can start the library. (Neema, personal interview, May 18, 2017)*

Through this educational experience, Nirmala and Suman gain experience with organisational skills, communication, literacy, leadership and community, constructing their own identity as actors in the world.

Knotty entanglements — local and global

Lakshmi Ashram has its challenges. Within the school community there is robust and open discussion at school meetings about everyday matters. The school also navigates its own ongoing complex and at times knotty entanglements of societal and family expectations, national educational policies, and other aspects of modernity and globalisation such as use of mobiles and internet (Chakrabarty, 2015). Over many years the school has responded to shifting expectations of families and society about the role of education for their daughters. Traditional rural families might want their daughter prepared for marriage and a life of farm labour, conflicting with their daughter's desire for higher education, a career or social activism. Some girls would rather wear jeans — emblematic of modernity — than the traditional Khadi clothing worn at the school, and at least one girl has left the school to do this (personal interview, Radha Behen, April 21, 2017).

   Global relationalities also have an impact on the school. The school used to purchase Tibetan wool from Bhotiya traders[7] for spinning and weaving. This wool is coarse and strong, ideal for the task; however, it became unavailable with the Chinese closure of trade routes. Fine Australian wool was sourced but found unsuitable and with importation, mired in red tape. Spinning was put on hold and commercial coloured wool was used for knitting (Hopkins, personal interview, May 16, 2017). Recently, an arrangement has been reached with a Pahari (hill-dwelling) sheep farmer for sourcing raw wool. Although the local wool industry is shrinking, this solution will do for now. Negotiating tensions is an ongoing and productive process.

   This unusual school has been the subject of various studies; for example, Klenk (2010) focusing on the gendered dynamics of development, and Groff (2018) on language, education and empowerment. Neema and Susan share a perhaps more intimate material and affective focus: for Susan a focus on experience within the school, and for Neema, exploring the experience of graduates.

Neema speaks about her research

Education can provide the means to develop the whole personality of a student. This is the aim of Nai Talim. Lakshmi Ashram provided this education in its original form up to 1970. Then the school made the compromise of sending girls to the government school, in order to get the government certificate. Since then the school has incorporated Gandhian and conventional approaches so that the girls have both life skills and the formal qualifications needed to get a job. Once girls receive their education here, some stay to work in the Ashram or engage in social work in surrounding communities. Others return to their villages to perhaps get married and get a job. Either way, they become change-makers in their family and community.

My research aimed at understanding more deeply the nature of Nai Talim and then finding out to what extent the graduates have attained a personal Swaraj. An unplanned benefit was simply making contact with these girls. They enjoyed the interviews because they could see what an opportunity they had got from their education, with development of all aspects of life. The research contact had a flow-on effect in terms of identity-making for these women.

The case study research was based on semistructured interviews and observation, with home visits to observe first-hand the graduates' personal, family, work and social life. A challenging task was to achieve objectivity between researcher and interviewee. Both had been students of Lakshmi Ashram; thus, it was a challenge to avoid bias. The interviewees were reassured that having distanced themselves from Lakshmi Ashram, they could chat easily. Slowly the interviewee would begin to reveal her true experiences and her understanding, but this took a long time.

> I had to spend a lot of time with each respondent. For 95% of the interviewees, on meeting me it seemed as if in doing so they had rediscovered something much loved. Meeting me meant bringing back memories of their childhood and adolescence spent in Lakshmi Ashram. They were very happy in recounting their experiences. Some girls were constantly asking about the present activities and atmosphere of Lakshmi Ashram. They were happy that they had found a means of reconnecting with Lakshmi Ashram. Being conscious of how they were feeling, I too felt lost for words. Then my respondent and I had slowly to withdraw ourselves from these deep sentimental feelings so that we might continue our work normally. Even so, it seemed as if some respondents did not reveal all that they wanted to say of their experiences, but visiting their home, family and area of work, and observing at first hand, I got a better idea of how much and in which ways their education in Lakshmi Ashram had impacted on their lives. (Vaishnava, 2017)

Out of the 100 interviewees with formal education, 31 were now in government jobs such as nurse, teacher or kindergarten supervisor, 36 were doing social work for various NGOs and Gandhian organisations, 15 were in other NGO jobs, others were self-employed with home-based cottage industry activities such as knitting, and 9 were farmers. Whatever they were doing, there was a special recognition by others that they stood out as responsible, kind, well-organised and strong leaders; and an acknowledgement of them as 'Lakshmi Ashram girls'.

Most of the girls were married, with many of them being the main decision-maker in the family. Whatever role they played in the family, they did it well. They cared for the family and in many cases acted as mediator to unite their husband's fractured family. Many of them were fulfilling the aspiration of a personal autonomy, as well as contributing to community resilience. They used their leadership influence to make people aware of their rights and duties, and to encourage others to have a voice in local or governmental policy areas.

One interviewee, Gita, was now a nurse with three children. Gita also had livestock and a farm and was self-sufficient in many aspects of life. In her home there were three men, but she was the main decision-maker in the family. The ability to earn one's own money and enjoy economic

stability is special for these mountain girls. Producing all the grains and milk she needed, she said confidently:

> *I have Swarāj because I am not depending on the market for our food. And since I am living in a faraway village from the small city, I am also working for Village Swarāj. My husband told me that we should go to settle in the nearby city as most of the villagers do these days, in order to get a good education for their children. But I said no, I will not go there. I will live with our in-laws because they are getting old. If you want to move you can go alone. (Personal interview, Vaishnava, 2015)*

These comments speak to Gita's commitment to community and connectedness, as well as to her sense of agency in life choices and in making decisions for the wellbeing of the wider family.

Susan speaks about her research

> *We sit in their ground floor classroom, bathed in sunlight and with the breeze coming in through the open bay window. People walk past and stick their heads in the window to listen: some offer suggestions when the girls are stuck with a question. Shobha, the class teacher who shares this room with the girls, sits for a while looking at our photo-voice PowerPoint and listening to our discussion. Here everyone's life is an open book. (Germein, personal journal, April 2017)*

Posthuman and new materialist theory informs my auto/ethnographic approach to research at Lakshmi Ashram. This means relinquishing a humanist attachment to binaries of nature-culture and researcher-researched; and an inclusion of the researcher as part of a 'research assemblage' — along with girls, teachers, cows, gardens, monkeys, songs, happenings — indeed all the matterings of life within and around the school (Lather, 2016; Mazzei, 2013). I am interested in the embodied, affective and performative: what happens and what is created, as much as what is said.

This account is more interested in 'practices/doings/actions' than in 'correspondence between descriptions and reality' (Barad, 2003, p. 802). Like Barad, I find a focus on socio-materiality more useful than a critical interpretivism. With Latour (2004) and Barad (as cited in Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2012) I question critique that 'closes down rather than opens up what is to come' and relish instead a thinking-with as a 'matter of care' (Barad, as cited in Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2012, p. 14).

Methods include photo-voice and video-voice alongside more traditional ethnographic tools of interviewing, participant observation, archival work and journaling. Our entangled and embodied doing/making together energises and animates us. Somehow the performative process — doing together — seems far more significant in the delicate making of our selves than the textual arte-facts (photos, captions, recordings, transcripts) created. A material and performative autoethno-graphic practice is about us, not me (Spry, 2018).

> *Tonight, for the first time I attempt to follow the Devanāgarī script in one of the heavy, cloth-bound Ramayana books. I look sideways to Seema and Chaddu, seated across the room, to try and work out where we are up to. Chaddu sees my confusion, and keeping her finger on the page, traces the words so that I know where to follow. My heart swells even now, immersed in the memory of this quiet space of kindness. de Freitas and Paton (2009, p. 495) speak of the feelings that 'erupt unbidden in our stories', and 'those moments of testimony' we sometimes catch on the periphery of experience. This is one such moment. (Germein, personal journal, April–May 2017)*

This material and relational methodology tests out Barad's *agential separability*: the delicate balance of maintaining enough exteriority for objective observation while remaining within the phenomena. '"We" are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at places in the world. Rather we are part of the world, in its ongoing intra-activity' (Barad, 2003, p. 829). It turns out to be far easier to be part of this world rather than struggling to be not.

Material methodologies together

Our methodological approaches, although nested in quite different intellectual traditions and cultures, share commonalities. Both attend to materialities: for Neema, an awareness of the graduates' lived experience and a sensitivity to the small but telling details of their lives; and for Susan, an immersion in place. Both of us are open to destabilising conventional interview practices (Honan, 2014), balancing the exteriority of an interpretive realism with the effect of being inextricably entangled with the field. The researcher in the frame, as part of the research assemblage, brings for both an acceptance of subjectivity and an ethical enactment of research.

We both take seriously a responsibility to the girls and a relational ethics of care with people and place (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), along with responsiveness to the other, who is 'not entirely separate from what we call the self' (Barad, 2012, p. 69). We feel keenly an awareness of what our research *does* to the girls and graduates who collaborate with us.

Our research approaches are rightly secondary to the materiality, performativity and affect that wilfully well up in and around our practice. Methods become like roti dough, kneaded and given shape through the many hands of community and place. We go into research with some idea about how it is going to happen, but then the assemblage of girls, teachers, rooms, mountainsides, gardening and weather has its own ideas. The unexpected emerges, perhaps more important than the expected.

In this experience of socio-ecological community, there is a seamless flow between educational philosophy and practice, and research methodology. That is, the same attributes and practices of a research methodology that pays attention to ethical doing and making together are already there in pedagogical praxis. Researchers and research subjects become together collaborators, learners, teachers and activists absorbed into the ongoing socio-material discursive practice of place. This flow of interwoven doing/learning, we believe, provides a cohering basis for learning, research and change-making, in a pedagogy for the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

The time calls for action. In this discussion about a small school, we give an example of a philosophy-in-action and pedagogy in the spirit of Gandhi, who considered himself as a lifelong learner, with his own philosophical action learning project never 'finished'. He did not hesitate to engage in ongoing activism for personal and community Swaraj, refining and correcting his own practice as he went along. His famous aphorism 'My life is my message' speaks to a deep affinity with material practice.

> After all, you have to have some philosophy in your life. If life is only for material things, it's OK, then you go and learn and earn. If you see life in a broad way, the ultimate goal, you know, finally to understand why we are here, what is the purpose of being a human being? With this understanding, people are searching, and want to get that kind of education. And then in this way I feel that Lakshmi Ashram is much more relevant than it ever was. (Vaishnava, personal interview, 2017)

Educational philosophy and practice at Lakshmi Ashram provide a vibrant stimulus for thinking differently through education, activism and community-building: not to replace other situated and cultural practices but to provoke, invigorate, hybridise, and renew or confirm educational approaches to the global challenges we face.

Endnotes

1. 'Ashram' generally conjures 'spiritual retreat' in a Western imaginary. Lakshmi Ashram, however, is very much 'in-the-world' as a school run along Gandhian lines. See Klenk (2010), p. 7.

2. Canagarajah (2002) describes the gatekeeping of Western academic journals, and the often 'insurmountable challenges for periphery scholars in representing their knowledge in scholarly fora' (p. 254). And further, 'As we conduct knowledge world-wide largely in terms of enlightenment values, even local scholars (often trained in Western academic institutions) have to use the dominant tools in their field for celebrating the local' (p. 250).

3. Education for Sustainability (EfS) is a term often used in Australia. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is used in many other jurisdictions and within the United Nations (Bedi & Germein, 2016). See also http://aries.mq.edu.au/publications/aries/efs_brochure/pdf/efs_brochure.pdf

4. *Padyatra* refers to a walking tour, often for a social or environmental purpose.

5. 'The word Swaraj is a sacred word, A Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which "independence" often means' (Gandhi, 1931, p. 38). Although the term is most often associated with Hind Swaraj or self-rule for India, it can also be applied at various levels of life and in different contexts; for example, taken up as 'bio-Swaraj' to encompass biodiversity and seed sovereignty (Shiva, in Handa, 2018); and a personal or village/community Swaraj to describe resilience, self-reliance, independence and wholeness at local levels. It is at these local and personal levels that the idea of Swaraj is in general discussed and embodied at Lakshmi Ashram.

6. The term 'socio-material' references both posthuman and new materialist theorising. The compound adjective is a reminder that nothing is outside the frame of learning or research. Barad (2007) tells us that 'words and things are intra-actively co-articulated' and references Vicki Kirby describing 'word and flesh' as 'utterly implicated' (note 32, pp. 430–431).

7. Bhotiya people are linguistically and ethnically Tibetan related groups who live high in the Himalay.

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