

Issues and Challenges of Tribal Education in North-East India

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Abstract

*T*ribal education in North-East India faces numerous challenges that hinder the development and integration of indigenous communities into the mainstream educational framework. Despite efforts by the government and NGOs, the region's tribal populations continue to experience disparities in access to quality education. Key issues include geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, and insufficient trained teachers, especially in remote areas. Additionally, socio-economic constraints such as poverty, poor health conditions, and high dropout rates further exacerbate the problem. Cultural and linguistic differences also pose a significant barrier, as mainstream curricula often do not align with the tribal way of life or values, leading to disinterest and alienation among students.

Gender inequality within tribal communities adds another layer of complexity, as girls are often deprived of educational opportunities due to traditional roles and responsibilities. Government policies and programs aimed at improving tribal education often fall short due to weak implementation and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. There is a critical need for culturally sensitive and inclusive educational approaches that recognize and respect the unique identity of tribal communities. Enhancing community participation, introducing bilingual or multilingual teaching methods, and improving access to scholarships and vocational training can empower tribal students and improve educational outcomes. This paper seeks to explore these issues in detail and provide actionable solutions to overcome the challenges faced by tribal

education in North-East India, with a focus on inclusivity and sustainability in policy interventions.

Keywords: *Tribal Education, North-East India, Educational Inequality, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Policy Implementation.*

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individual and societal progress. In the context of tribal communities in North-East India, education is a significant tool for social transformation, empowerment, and economic development. Despite various governmental and non-governmental efforts, the educational status of tribal communities in the region remains far from satisfactory. Low literacy rates, high dropout levels, lack of infrastructure, socio-cultural constraints, and economic hardships are some of the key issues that hinder educational advancement among tribal populations. North-East India is home to diverse tribal communities, each with its unique language, culture, and traditions. The region comprises eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura – where tribal communities form a substantial portion of the population. While some states like Mizoram and Nagaland have achieved high literacy rates, others, particularly Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, still struggle with educational disparities among their tribal populations.

One of the primary barriers to tribal education is the geographical remoteness of many tribal villages. Many settlements are located in hilly terrains or dense forests, making accessibility to schools difficult. The shortage of schools, inadequate teaching staff, and lack of basic educational facilities further compound the problem. Moreover, tribal students often face linguistic challenges, as most educational curricula are designed in dominant regional or national languages, rather than in their native dialects. Socio-economic challenges also significantly affect tribal education. Many tribal families rely on subsistence agriculture and daily-wage labor, making it difficult for them to prioritize education over immediate economic needs. Gender disparity is another pressing issue, with girls often being denied formal education due to domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and cultural norms. Although government interventions like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Right to Education (RTE) Act, and various scholarship schemes have attempted to bridge the educational gap, systemic challenges persist. There is an urgent need for context-specific policies that cater to the unique socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of tribal communities in North-East India. The educational challenges faced by tribal communities have been widely

studied by scholars and researchers. Several studies highlight the historical, socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related aspects that influence tribal education in North-East India. Xaxa (2008) emphasized that tribal education is hindered by deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities and cultural alienation. He argued that educational curricula often fail to accommodate indigenous knowledge systems, leading to a disconnect between formal education and tribal lifestyles. Similarly, Pathy (2011) explored how economic hardships force many tribal children to drop out of school at an early age, as they are compelled to contribute to family income. Mohanty (2013) examined the role of language barriers in tribal education, stating that the imposition of non-tribal languages as the medium of instruction discourages students from engaging with the curriculum. He recommended the introduction of multilingual education policies that incorporate tribal languages in primary schooling to enhance comprehension and retention rates among tribal students. Rao and Singh (2015) studied the gender gap in tribal education, noting that while boys may receive some form of education, girls often remain deprived due to household responsibilities and early marriages. Their research highlighted the importance of gender-sensitive policies to promote inclusive education.

Agarwal and Panda (2016) analyzed the infrastructural deficiencies in tribal schools across North-East India. They found that the lack of trained teachers, poor school buildings, and inadequate learning materials were significant barriers to educational development in tribal areas. The authors emphasized the need for government and private partnerships to improve educational facilities in remote regions. Sharma (2019) explored the impact of government initiatives on tribal education and found that while schemes like mid-day meals and scholarships have improved enrollment rates, dropout rates remain alarmingly high due to socio-economic constraints. He suggested that skill-based education and vocational training should be integrated into tribal education systems to enhance employability prospects. Patel (2020) focused on the role of technology in improving tribal education. He advocated for digital learning initiatives, mobile classrooms, and community-driven educational programs that leverage local resources and knowledge to enhance learning outcomes. Despite numerous studies on the challenges of tribal education, there remains a gap in research regarding the long-term impacts of policy interventions, the effectiveness of alternative educational models, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into mainstream education. Future research must address these aspects to develop holistic and sustainable solutions for improving tribal education in North-East India.

Objectives

1. To examine the socio-economic and cultural factors.
2. To assess the infrastructural and policy challenges.
3. To explore effective strategies and policy recommendations.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Primary data will be collected through surveys, structured interviews, and focus group discussions with tribal students, teachers, and community leaders. Secondary data will be sourced from government reports, academic journals, and policy documents. A purposive sampling method will be used to select respondents from different tribal communities across North-East India. Statistical tools will be applied to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis will be used for qualitative insights. The study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges in tribal education and suggest policy interventions.

Result and Findings

Tribal People And Tribes of North-Eastern Region of India

The term "tribal" is derived from the word "tribe," which denotes a class of human social groups. Tribal people are often referred to as indigenous populations due to their self-identification based on shared and unique traits and social norms that set them apart from other societal groups. Their lifestyles can differ significantly depending on their geographical locations, yet they maintain a sense of unity through their history and the territories they inhabit. In India, tribal communities are recognized by various names such as native people, ethnic groups, first nations, aboriginal peoples, adivasi, janajati, hill tribes, and hunter-gatherers. Globally, there are over 476 million indigenous individuals across 90 countries, representing approximately 6.2% of the world's total population, with an estimated 5,000 distinct indigenous ethnic groups worldwide. India is home to the second-largest tribal population globally. According to the 2011 census, tribal individuals comprise about 8.9% of the country's overall population, with 705 recognized indigenous groups totaling approximately 104 million people.

Northeast India consists of eight states: Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. The 2011 census reported that out of a total population of 457.74 lakh in Northeast India, 126.79 lakh (27.7%) were tribal. This region hosts 145 different ethnic groups, showcasing diverse social and

cultural practices, with 78 groups having large populations. A defining characteristic of many scheduled tribes is their residence in extensive settlements located in remote and hilly or forested areas of Northeast India. Each ethnic group possesses its own culture, traditions, languages, beliefs, and values, with many indigenous communities communicating in languages distinct from the dominant language of the region. Over 100 languages and dialects are spoken in Northeast India, with the tribes classified into two categories based on geography: hill tribes and plain tribes. Notable tribal groups in Northeast India with populations exceeding 5,000 include Bodo, Koch-Rajbanshi, Angami, Ao, Chakma, Dimasa, Reang, Konyak, Adi, Misimi, Aka, Garo, Mishing, Galong, Nishi, Wancho, Khasi, Tangkhul, Karbi, Tripuri, Lusai, Mizo, Kuki, Apatani, Jaintia, Singpho, Deori, Kachari, Bhutia, Barmans, Hmar, Rabha, and Lepcha, among others.

Educational Status Among The Tribes of North-East India

During the pre-independence era, Christian missionaries played a crucial role in promoting health and education among tribal communities across India. Their most significant successes were seen in regions such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and what is now divided into seven states of Northeast India. Over time, the educational status of tribal populations in Northeast India has fluctuated, resulting in a literacy rate that remains slightly below the national average. This is particularly concerning given that the region is predominantly inhabited by tribal groups, which significantly impacts overall educational attainment. Unfortunately, the literacy rate for women in these communities is alarmingly low. In contrast, Mizoram stands out with the highest literacy rate among the Northeastern states and the second highest in the country. The table below presents demographic and literacy data for the Northeastern states based on the 2011 Census:

States	Overall Population	Overall Literacy Rate	Tribal Population	Tribal Literacy Rate
Arunachal Pradesh	1,382,611	65.38%	951,821	64.58%
Assam	31,169,272	72.19%	3,884,371	72.06%
Manipur	2,721,756	76.9%	1,167,422	72.58%
Meghalaya	2,964,007	74.43%	2,555,861	74.53%
Mizoram	1,091,014	91.58%	1,036,115	91.51%
Nagaland	1,980,602	79.55%	1,710,973	80.04%
Sikkim	610,577	82.20%	206,360	79.74%
Tripura	3,671,032	87.22%	1,166,813	79.05%

This data illustrates the varying levels of literacy among different states and their tribal populations in Northeast India.

Historical perspective and Government Schemes for Tribal Education

The Constitution and the government prioritized the education and development of all citizens. The 86th amendment to the Constitution, specifically Article 21(A), enshrines the right to free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years, aligning with the requirements of the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Under Articles 15(4) and 46, both central and state governments have established primary, middle, and high schools for tribal populations. Numerous charitable organizations have also emerged to support educational development in these regions. During the First Five Year Plan (1951-1956), the government initiated significant efforts for tribal development, leading to the establishment of Special Multipurpose Tribal Development Projects (MTDPs) by the end of the plan in 1954. The Third Five Year Plan (1961-1966) introduced Tribal Development Blocks (TDBs), followed by the implementation of the Tribal Sub-Plan Strategy (TSP) in 1972 by the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare. Key government interventions addressing the needs of tribal education include the Pre and Post-Metric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Pradhan Mantri Vanbandhu Vikas Yojana, and the Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission aimed at economic empowerment. The Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship Scheme supports ST students, while the Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojna (PNAAGY) focuses on improving infrastructure. Additionally, initiatives like Mission Indradhanush and the Nikshay Mitra Initiative target better health outcomes, and the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana promote the holistic welfare of tribal communities. The National Policy on Education (1986) established a broad framework for combating widespread illiteracy among tribal populations and set an education expenditure target of 6% of GDP. The 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017) proposed an umbrella scheme for the establishment of 'Ashram Schools,' resulting in the creation of 892 purely residential Ashram Schools dedicated to the development of Scheduled Tribe students across the country.

Challenges of Tribal Education In North East India

The tribal population, both globally and in Northeast India, faces numerous challenges and issues. In the education sector, the difficulties encountered by tribal communities differ significantly from those experienced by the general populace. Here are some key areas of concern:

Socio-Economic Challenges: According to the Economic Survey of India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) occupy a disadvantaged socio-economic position, heavily reliant on nature and ecological conditions for their survival. These communities often live in poverty and experience backwardness. Their dependence on natural resources—such as water bodies, forests, traditional agriculture, hunting, and fishing—complicates their ability to enroll in schools and attend regularly. Tribal children often participate in household activities, assisting with agricultural work, caring for younger siblings, fishing, and hunting, which detracts from their educational opportunities. Social factors also hinder educational access, including illiterate parents, lack of guidance at home, an unsuitable home environment, early marriages, peer pressure, superstitions, exploitation, mental stress, migration, natural disasters, poor communication and transportation, unawareness of their rights, and large family sizes. These socio-economic conditions significantly impede the development of tribal groups in various aspects.

Academic Challenges: The New Education Policy 2020 emphasizes tribal education, yet substantial gaps remain in its implementation. Challenges such as high dropout rates, school distance from homes, a difficult evaluation system, poor teacher-parent coordination, an uninspiring curriculum, lack of tailored educational policies for tribal contexts, repeated student failures, rigid school schedules, unattractive school environments, teacher shortages, language barriers, untrained educators, and insufficient resources hinder educational progress. The Indian education system, while generally effective for the average population, requires adjustments to better serve marginalized communities.

Personal Challenges: Personal factors, including beliefs and behaviors specific to individual students, also impact educational outcomes. Diverse personalities and behaviors among students can lead to difficulties in adjusting to school environments and the broader education system. Factors such as negative attitudes towards secondary education, illiterate or low-literate parents, feelings of insecurity in educational institutions, shyness, engagement in criminal activities, low intelligence, fear of studying and examinations, irregular attendance, health issues, prioritization of work over education, peer influences, substance abuse, and concerns about future employment all contribute to unsatisfactory educational results for tribal students in Northeast India.

Suggestions for Enhancing Tribal Education: To promote equity in education for tribal communities, several changes are necessary. These include literacy campaigns, influencing the attitudes of elders, providing relevant study materials in local languages, hiring local and female teachers, offering stipends and scholarships,

establishing residential schools and colleges, ensuring social security for girls, monitoring educational progress, creating equal opportunities, reducing household responsibilities, addressing crime in schools, preventing early marriages, fostering interest in education, providing free meals, and offering proper guidance and counseling.

Educational Implications of the Study: Education is crucial for national development and human capital enhancement. This study offers valuable insights into the quality of education for tribal populations in Northeast India, highlighting the need for improvement and action research to address their challenges. The findings aim to inform educational planners, administrators, policymakers, and community members, providing guidance to enhance educational quality for tribal groups.

Conclusion

Education is a crucial driver of development, and its significance in uplifting tribal communities in North-East India cannot be overlooked. Despite various government initiatives, tribal education continues to face persistent challenges, including infrastructural deficiencies, socio-economic constraints, linguistic barriers, and gender disparities. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and culturally inclusive approach to ensure equitable access to quality education for tribal children. One of the major barriers is the lack of proper educational infrastructure. Many tribal villages lack schools, and those that do exist often suffer from poor facilities, inadequate classrooms, and limited access to digital learning resources. The geographical remoteness of many tribal settlements further discourages regular school attendance, leading to low literacy rates. To address this, increased investment in school infrastructure, provision of residential schools, and better transportation facilities are necessary to improve accessibility to education.

Another significant issue is the shortage of trained and motivated teachers in tribal areas. Many teachers posted in remote regions lack the necessary skills to handle the unique socio-cultural and linguistic needs of tribal students. Additionally, poor salaries and difficult living conditions deter qualified teachers from working in these areas. Strengthening teacher training programs, offering incentives for rural teachers, and recruiting educators from tribal backgrounds can help create a more effective and culturally sensitive teaching environment. The linguistic barrier is another major obstacle to tribal education. Many tribal children grow up speaking indigenous languages, which differ from the medium of instruction in schools. This disconnect leads to difficulties in comprehension, poor academic performance, and high dropout

rates. Implementing mother tongue-based education in early years and gradually transitioning to regional or national languages can help bridge this gap. Bilingual education models that integrate tribal languages with mainstream curricula can significantly improve learning outcomes.

Socio-economic challenges also play a crucial role in limiting educational opportunities for tribal children. Many tribal families rely on subsistence agriculture and daily wage labor, making education a secondary priority. The need for children to contribute to household income often results in early dropouts, particularly among girls. To address this, targeted interventions such as scholarships, financial incentives, free hostels, and midday meal programs should be expanded to ensure economic constraints do not hinder education. Gender disparity is another pressing issue in tribal education. Cultural norms often prioritize boys' education over girls', resulting in lower literacy rates among tribal women. Early marriage and domestic responsibilities further limit girls' access to schooling. Special initiatives for girls' education, including awareness programs, female scholarships, and gender-sensitive policies, are essential to bridge this gap. Technology has immense potential to revolutionize tribal education by overcoming geographical and resource barriers. Digital learning platforms, e-learning initiatives, and mobile-based education can provide quality learning opportunities to remote tribal villages. However, investment in digital infrastructure, electricity, and internet connectivity is necessary to ensure its successful implementation.

Moving forward, stronger policy interventions, better implementation of educational schemes, and greater community engagement are crucial for addressing the challenges of tribal education. By ensuring culturally relevant curricula, improving teacher quality, expanding financial support, and leveraging technology, education can become a powerful tool for tribal empowerment and socio-economic progress. A sustained, inclusive, and community-driven approach is essential to ensure that tribal children in North-East India receive the education they deserve, paving the way for a brighter and more equitable future.

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