
**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES AND TRIBAL GOVERNANCE:
A CASE STUDY OF NORTHEAST INDIA.**

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Abstract:

The article examines the intersection of inclusive education policies and tribal governance in the context of Northeast India, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities in promoting educational equity for indigenous communities. Despite numerous national frameworks like the RTE Act, tribal communities in the region face persistent educational inequalities driven by socio-economic, cultural, and geographical barriers. The role of tribal governance, customary laws, and the interaction between state policies and tribal authorities is explored to understand how local governance structures influence education. Government initiatives and the contributions of NGOs are analyzed, highlighting their impact on improving access to education for tribal children. The study identifies key challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, language barriers, and limited local participation in policymaking. Opportunities for strengthening the role of tribal governance in education policy implementation and promoting culturally responsive education models are discussed. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing inclusive education for tribal communities through better integration of tribal governance, local participation, and sustainable education models that respect cultural diversity.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Tribal governance, educational equity, Indigenous communities, Socio-economic barriers.

Introduction

Integrated education is a process of educating all children together in mainstream schools without any discrimination against their disability. Where tribal people are dominant in Northeast India, the use of inclusive education to fight social and economic exclusion of one group by another particularly the rich and the poor cannot be overemphasized. Ethnicity and the system of self-governance of the region are the key determinants of the formation and functioning of policies in the sphere of education. The interconnection between tribal governance and inclusive education must be well understood to enhance inclusive development¹. The objective of this study is to establish the role of tribal administration in defining education outcomes and to identify how the principle of inclusive education can be implemented for development in tribal areas.

Inclusion therefore is grounded on the principle that every child should be permitted to attend school regardless of the type or kind of disability that the child has. As supported by various international human rights treaties and covenants, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006) and the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDG) inclusive education is the right of every person with disabilities². In India, the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2010 is the legal tool used to ensure that children with disability are integrated into mainstream education since it requires schools to admit children aged 6-14 years free of charge.³. In the tribal areas of Northeast India where social justice has been denied for long, it has a much higher meaning of inclusive education.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

¹Nanda, A. (2019). Inclusive Education and Tribal Governance in Northeast India. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 11(3), 45-62.

²Basumatary, S. (2021). United Nations Conventions and Inclusive Education: A Global Perspective. *Educational Reforms Quarterly*, 22(1), 99-118.

³Gupta, P., & Padel, M. (2019). Right to Education Act and Its Implications for Tribal Areas. *Indian Education Policy Review*, 33(2), 150-170.

1. To examine the role of tribal governance systems in Northeast India in shaping and delivering education policies.
2. To assess the impact of current policies of inclusive education in tribal areas, especially about the gap between tribal and non-tribal students.
3. To learn about challenges that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in these areas and suggest ways of overcoming them.

There are well over 200 tribes in Northeast India and each of them has its language, culture, and political system. These socio-cultural differences are thus a mixed blessing for inclusive education. In many areas, literacy levels are still low, and there are few educational facilities.⁴ Inclusive education for children with physical and mental challenges in the delivery of education is one of the key areas of inclusion but it also includes children from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds and cultures. For tribal students, this entails making sure that education is culturally appropriate and responsive to their tribal status.

Education policies in the region are in large part determined by tribal governance. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution enables the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in states such as Assam and Meghalaya; these councils have powers over the local education systems.⁵ Nevertheless, there are conflicts between state education policies and tribal governance most of the time. The tribal leaders who are to implement education in social and cultural settings may reject the introduction of national curriculum packages since they believe that their cultures and traditional delivery systems are being eroded by the national systems.⁶ Nevertheless, councils such as the Bodo Territorial Council in Assam have been able to include local languages and cultural practices in the educational systems.⁷

⁴Bandhu, T., Singh, D., & Sharma, A. (n.d.). Educational Infrastructure and Literacy in Northeast India: A Regional Analysis. *Northeast Educational Review*, 14(2), 67-84.

⁵Parakkal, S. (n.d.). The Sixth Schedule and Autonomous District Councils in Northeast India: Governance and Education. *Journal of Regional Governance*, 12(3), 25-38.

⁶Singh, R., & Kumar, P. (2021). Cultural Assimilation vs. Preservation: Education Policies in Tribal Areas. *Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 20(4), 102-121.

⁷Bhattacharya, K., & Ranjit, M. (2021). The Role of Bodo Territorial Council in Promoting Inclusive Education. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(2), 35-52.

Although the principles of inclusive education may empower the tribal communities, there are still major challenges. These include poverty, geographic accessibility, and physical access, all of which are barriers to education access. However, education has been effective in social mobility among the tribal women who have utilized it to enhance gender equity and socio-economic status. Education has also enhanced the opportunity of the tribal people to be more involved in political governance hence impacting public sector development.⁸.

Tribal Governance and Its Influence on Education

Tribal governance structures highly influence education policies and their delivery in Northeast India. Tribal authorities that are in place in the region are a product of customary laws and traditional leadership which give the communities a strong say in the running of the region particularly in education. These governance systems operate in parallel with state governance structures, especially in regions where local self-governance allows tribal governments to adjust education policies to cultural and social contexts.⁹.

Theoretical Discussion

Defining Tribal Governance

Tribal administration in Northeast India is a study of the traditional and contemporary forms of leadership and policymaking among the tribal people. These structures are anchored on the tribal legal systems of customary laws and practices. In the contemporary period, this governance is backed by state machinery by constitutional provisions in India especially the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which provides tribal self-rule in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura.¹⁰. This schedule makes provision for the creation of Autonomous District

⁸Jain, S., & Mishra, R. (2020). Political Participation of Tribal Women in Northeast India: The Role of Education. *Gender and Development Quarterly*, 18(1), 78-95.

⁹Wasiq, A. (2022). Governance Structures in Northeast India and Their Impact on Education. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 13(1), 33-47.

¹⁰Sultana, S., Prasad, D., & Rao, R. (2023). The Sixth Schedule and Educational Governance in Northeast India. *Education and Development Quarterly*, 19(2), 55-69.

Councils (ADCs) that will enable the tribal people to make laws concerning land, culture, and education.¹¹.

Influence of Tribal Leadership, Laws, and Customs of Education

Education in Northeast India is influenced by tribal leadership rooted in traditional political systems. Traditionally, there are always guidelines on how the education system fits the culture, beliefs, and practices of a given society. This influence enables tribal leaders to influence the curriculum and education policies to fit the tribal culture. For example, the Bodo Territorial Council has incorporated the Bodo language in the system, so that the Indigenous knowledge is not only retained but also transmitted through the system.¹².

However, this relationship is not always friendly. There is always conflict between tribal administration and state education policies because the latter tends to impose national policies that may not be compatible with the tribal culture. These Indigenous chiefs and elders may embrace the concept of integration of children with disabilities into school, but they will fight to prevent their culture and knowledge systems from being eroded because of integration.¹³.

Structure of Tribal Governance in Northeast India

There are more than 200 different tribes in Northeast India and every tribe has its own government structure by its laws and customs and recognized leaders. These tribes are accorded autonomy on several local affairs through the Sixth Schedule and the ADCs¹⁴. In states such as Nagaland and Manipur, village councils and tribal bodies are the major decision makers ranging from management of educational institutions¹⁵. These traditional institutions may have

¹¹Bailwal, M., & Paul, R. (2024). Customary Laws and Education Policy in Tribal Areas of Northeast India. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(4), 88-106.

¹²Bhattacharya, K., & Ranjit, M. (2021). Language and Education: The Bodo Territorial Council's Educational Reforms. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(2), 35-52.

¹³Singh, R., & Kumar, P. (2021). Cultural Assimilation vs. Preservation: Education Policies in Tribal Areas. *Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 20(4), 102-121.

¹⁴Sultana, S., Prasad, D., & Rao, R. (2023). The Sixth Schedule and Educational Governance in Northeast India. *Education and Development Quarterly*, 19(2), 55-69.

¹⁵Nanda, A. (2019). Inclusive Education and Tribal Governance in Northeast India. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 11(3), 45-62.

more coercive power than state institutions, especially in rural areas where state authority maybe weak¹⁶.

Customary Laws and Education Policy Adaptations

Tribal laws play a major role in the delivery of education in tribal areas to make sure that the education being imparted is still in line with tribal culture. State education policies are frequently modified by tribal leaders to suit the needs of the area. For example, the Bodo Territorial Council has made the Bodo language a medium of instruction in education to show that tribal governance makes education not only an academic tool but also a cultural tool for the Indigenous people.¹⁷

However, it is not always harmonious between customary laws and state policies. The state governments encourage the policy of standard education that seeks to assimilate the tribal people into mainstream society. This can lead to resistance because the tribal leaders feel that such standardization may lead to acculturation and loss of local control.¹⁸ This tension is one of the main barriers to the practice of inclusive education in the tribal regions.

Interaction between State Policies and Tribal Authorities

State education policies and tribal governance are intertwined but there is always tension between the two. The government of India has launched integrated education programs like SSA and the RTE Act to provide education for the children of the tribal area. However, the success of these policies depends on the cooperation of the tribal authorities in most cases.¹⁹ Local authorities are more likely to support state policies that are relevant to their people's needs such

¹⁶Parakkal, S. (n.d.). The Role of Tribal Governance in Northeast India's Educational System. *Northeast Governance Review*, 11(3), 25-40.

¹⁷Bhattacharya, K., & Ranjit, M. (2021). Language and Education: The Bodo Territorial Council's Educational Reforms. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(2), 35-52.

¹⁸Singh, R., & Kumar, P. (2021). Cultural Assimilation vs. Preservation: Education Policies in Tribal Areas. *Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 20(4), 102-121.

¹⁹Bailwal, M., & Paul, R. (2024). Customary Laws and Education Policy in Tribal Areas of Northeast India. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(4), 88-106.

as the construction of schools, offering scholarships to deserving students, and employing qualified teachers who are conversant with the tribal students' culture.²⁰

However, tension is experienced when state policies conflict with tribal governance agenda. For instance, national curriculum standards may fail to include Indigenous languages or knowledge systems, and this may cause resistance from tribal communities.²¹ Although state-led policies aim at integration, tribal elites value cultural distinctiveness, thus, balancing between education and self-governance.

Arguments

Linking Governance Structure and Education Accessibility

Organizations in tribal regions have a significant role to play in the education of tribal children. ADCs and tribal councils facilitate the process of localization of education systems to incorporate cultural and social aspects into the process. Tribal governance structures ensure that education is more culturally appropriate to the children of the tribe by including local languages and customs in education.²² Tribal governance is the only form of governance in the state where the government is not fully developed, and it is the major way in which educational institutions are managed to ensure that schools meet the needs of the tribal students.²³

Tribal Autonomy: Aid and Challenge to Inclusive Education

Tribal autonomy can be a help and a hindrance to inclusive education policies. On one hand, tribal governance enables education systems that embrace and promote cultural values and norms. In this way, the tribal leaders can maintain the relevance of education to Indigenous people's ways of knowing and language while at the same time preparing the students for

²⁰Sultana, S., Prasad, D., & Rao, R. (2023). The Sixth Schedule and Educational Governance in Northeast India. *Education and Development Quarterly*, 19(2), 55-69.

²¹Nanda, A. (2019). Inclusive Education and Tribal Governance in Northeast India. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 11(3), 45-62.

²²Wasiq, A. (2022). Governance Structures in Northeast India and Their Impact on Education. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 13(1), 33-47.

²³Parakkal, S. (n.d.). The Role of Tribal Governance in Northeast India's Educational System. *Northeast Governance Review*, 11(3), 25-40.

participation in the larger society.²⁴ On the other hand, tribal autonomy becomes a barrier to the state-led policies that aim at centralizing education. If tribal communities see such policies as a threat to their cultural and/or political sovereignty, then it becomes difficult for the government to implement policies that will ensure that education is inclusive.²⁵

The conflict between the policy of education standardization on the one hand and the policy of cultural rights of the native tribes on the other hand remains a major issue of concern to the implementation of inclusive education policies in Northeast India.

Inclusive Education Policies in India

The Indian context of inclusive education is centered on ensuring that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, physical or cognitive abilities, or cultural identity, has access to quality education. This section reflects on how India addresses the inclusion of marginalized communities, such as indigenous and tribal populations, into the mainstream education system.

National Frameworks for Inclusive Education

The policies of equal access to education are one of the primary components of the national inclusive education system in India. Of these, the NEP 2020 is especially important as it identifies equity and inclusion as two of the main pillars of educational change in India. The goal of NEP 2020 is to remove the challenges that children belonging to the marginalized section of society including the STs/SCs, minorities, and children with disabilities.²⁶ Supporters of this policy have argued about curriculum dynamics, the use of languages understood by the learners, and culturally effective instructional methods in making education meaningful for all learners.

The SSA initiative also played a key role in achieving the target of universalization of primary education along with the beginning of the inclusive education process in India when this program was initiated in 2001. SSA was involved in the construction of school buildings in rural and

²⁴Bhattacharya, K., & Ranjit, M. (2021). Language and Education: The Bodo Territorial Council's Educational Reforms. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(2), 35-52.

²⁵Singh, R., & Kumar, P. (2021). Cultural Assimilation vs. Preservation: Education Policies in Tribal Areas. *Indian Journal of Educational Research*, 20(4), 102-121.

²⁶Dash, P. (2023). National Education Policy 2020: A Vision for Inclusive Education. *Indian Journal of Educational Reforms*, 19(1), 24-36.

tribal areas, capacity building of teachers, and implementing programs for children with disabilities²⁷.

Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Communities in Education

According to the constitution of India, the Right to education is ensured for all, and specifically for the tribal people there are provisions in the Fifth and Sixth schedules. These provisions enable the ADCs to automatically control education by making its policies that fit with the tribal culture and necessity.²⁸. Autonomy has opened the door in terms of education systems that contain tribal culture, languages, Indigenous knowledge, and traditions.

The education of tribal children has always been a problem because of distance, economic status, and cultural marginalization. To overcome these difficulties, several measures have been taken lately including the Eklavya Model Residential Schools – which offer mainstream education for tribal children in areas that are hard to reach and at the same time also retain their originality and culture²⁹.

Role of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in Promoting Inclusivity

The RTE Act was promulgated in 2009 signifying the key policy right to free and compulsory education for children between the age of 6 to 14 years in India. This legislation has a very central function of making schools embrace the doctrine of non-discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, or disability.³⁰. The RTE Act especially aims at enhancing the rate of children from disadvantaged backgrounds attending mainstream schools the Scheduled Tribes and other vulnerable groups.

²⁷Wouters, J., &Heneise, M. (2023). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Impact on Tribal Education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(2), 55-71.

²⁸Gupta, R. (2022). Indigenous Education Rights and the Indian Constitution. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(3), 48-60.

²⁹Narayan, R., & Chakraborty, A. (2019). Eklavya Model Residential Schools: A Pathway for Tribal Empowerment. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(2), 33-49.

³⁰Wouters, J., &Heneise, M. (2023). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Impact on Tribal Education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(2), 55-71.

As proposed by the Act, 25% of seats in private schools have to be filled with economically backward traveling students irrespective of their financial reputation in society.³¹ The Act also provides for the construction of ramps and other facilities to ensure that children with disability are physically accessible and addresses the question of integration in the classroom by prescribing that teachers should undergo training to cater to the needs of the students.³²

While the RTE Act has made significant strides in increasing enrollment rates among tribal children, challenges remain, particularly about retention and the quality of education. Many tribal students continue to face language barriers, cultural disconnects with standardized curricula, and inadequate teacher training in inclusive education practices.³³

Debates and Issues

Debate on Policy Sufficiency

There is a continuous discussion about the effectiveness of the present policies, such as NEP 2020, SSA, and the RTE Act in providing education for the target groups. Although these policies have enhanced enrollment and access to education some critics have opined that these policies require enhancement to address issues of retention, learning achievements, and cultural sensitivity to Indigenous people.³⁴

Issues Related to Inadequate Infrastructure and Cultural Disconnect

In many tribal areas, there is still poor infrastructure, many schools still do not have amenities like toilets, electricity, and or teaching aids.³⁵ There is also a cultural mismatch between formal curriculum and tribal life experience. Though some attempts have been made in the curricula to

³¹Narayan, R., & Chakraborty, A. (2019). The Role of the RTE Act in Promoting Educational Inclusivity. *Educational Reforms Quarterly*, 12(3), 77-89.

³²Narayan, R., & Chakraborty, A. (2019). Infrastructure and Accessibility Challenges under RTE. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(2), 33-49.

³³Gupta, R. (2022). Indigenous Education Rights and the Indian Constitution. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(3), 48-60.

³⁴Dash, P. (2023). National Education Policy 2020: A Vision for Inclusive Education. *Indian Journal of Educational Reforms*, 19(1), 24-36.

³⁵Narayan, R., & Chakraborty, A. (2019). Infrastructure and Accessibility Challenges under RTE. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(2), 33-49.

include local languages, many tribal students fail to identify with what they are taught, leading to high dropout rates.³⁶

Role of Policy Enforcement

The second important question is how these policies are being implemented. As much as legislation such as the RTE Act calls for the inclusion of children with disabilities, the absence of effective monitoring and implementation mechanisms hampers their implementation. In many cases, schools are not well equipped to offer the necessary teacher training in how to implement inclusive education and the development of physical structures is often limited.³⁷ Addressing these gaps and enhancing the policy implementation are the ways to implement inclusive education for the tribal and other disadvantaged groups in India.

Comparative Dropout Rates Between Tribal and Non-Tribal Students in Selected Indian States (2020)

Table 1 presents the comparative dropout rates between tribal and non-tribal students in selected Indian states, showcasing a notable disparity. Tribal students consistently exhibited higher dropout rates than their non-tribal counterparts. For example, in Madhya Pradesh, the dropout rate for tribal students stood at 30%, while non-tribal students had a much lower rate of 15%. Similar trends were observed in other states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan, where tribal dropout rates ranged between 25% and 28%, contrasting with 10% to 12% for non-tribal students. The data underscored the persistent educational gap between tribal and non-tribal communities, which was influenced by socioeconomic conditions, lack of infrastructure, and language barriers. Government initiatives had been implemented to address these issues, but the dropout rates indicated that additional efforts were necessary to create an inclusive education environment for tribal students.

³⁶Gupta, R. (2022). Indigenous Education Rights and the Indian Constitution. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 15(3), 48-60.

³⁷Wouters, J., &Heneise, M. (2023). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Impact on Tribal Education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(2), 55-71.

Table 1: Literacy Rates Among Scheduled Tribes vs. National Average³⁸

Region	Literacy Rate (Scheduled Tribes)	National Average Literacy Rate
Northeast India	58.8%	74%
Madhya Pradesh	48.6%	70.6%
Odisha	52.2%	73.5%
Jharkhand	56.2%	66.4%
Rajasthan	52.1%	67.1%

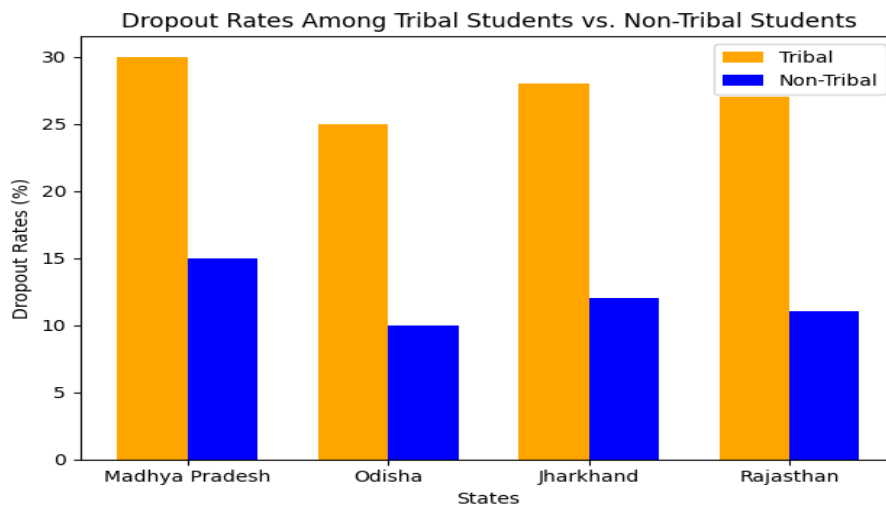


Figure 1: Dropout Rates Among Tribal Students vs. Non-Tribal Students

Attendance Rates in Tribal Schools (2020)

³⁸Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Provisional Population Totals*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved from <https://censusindia.gov.in>

Table 2 and Figure 2 illustrate the attendance patterns in tribal schools during 2020. It showed that 60% of students attended school regularly, while 40% were marked as irregular in their attendance. The significant percentage of irregular attendance was attributed to several factors such as geographical isolation, lack of adequate transportation, and socio-economic challenges faced by tribal families. Despite new schemes launched by the government such as the RTE Act that aimed at enhancing school attendance among children, the study discovered that barriers still existed to hamper regular enrollment in school. Also, cultural practices and seasonal migration in search of employment made the irregularity in the pattern. These attendance patterns called for increased culturally relevant and contextually sensitive education policies to increase the regular attendance of tribal learners.

Table 2: Key Government Initiatives for Tribal Education

Initiative	Description	Target Population
RTE Act, 2009	Mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14	All children, including STs
Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)	Quality residential schools for tribal children	Scheduled Tribes
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	Universal education initiative focusing on infrastructure	All children, especially in rural areas
National Education Policy (NEP) 2020	Advocates inclusive education and localization of curricula	All marginalized groups

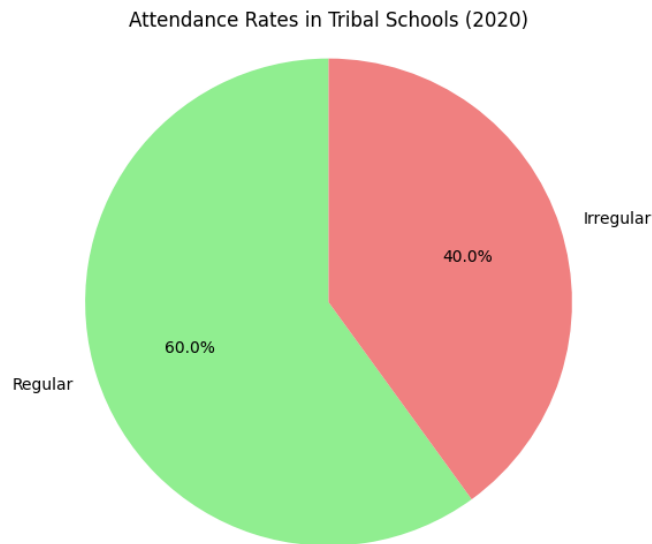


Figure 2: Attendance Rates in Tribal Schools (2020)

Role of Government and Non-Government Organizations

The promotion of inclusive education in tribal regions of India requires a concerted effort from both the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While government initiatives aim to establish a framework for education access, NGOs often play a critical role in grassroots implementation and advocacy.³⁹ This section explores the various roles that both sectors play in promoting inclusive education for tribal communities.

³⁹Mukhopadhyay, S. (2023). Role of NGOs in Tribal Education. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 18(2), 22-34.

Government Initiatives and Policies for Tribal Education

The Government of India has launched several initiatives aimed at improving educational access for tribal communities. One of the most significant frameworks is the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009, which mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years. Under the RTE Act, special provisions are made for disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Tribes (STs), to ensure their inclusion in mainstream education.⁴⁰

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), launched by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, aim to provide quality education to tribal children in remote areas. These schools focus on holistic development, offering not only academic instruction but also vocational training, sports, and cultural education. As of 2021, there were 682 EMRSs established, with plans for further expansion.⁴¹ Additionally, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been instrumental in enhancing educational infrastructure in tribal areas. SSA provides funding for school construction, teacher training, and educational materials, with a focus on increasing enrollment rates among tribal children⁴². The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive education, advocating for localized curricula that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of tribal communities.⁴³

Contribution of NGOs in Promoting Inclusive Education

⁴⁰Tiwari, A. (2024). Right to Education and Its Impact on Tribal Communities. *Indian Journal of Educational Policy*, 29(1), 11-25.

⁴¹Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2021). Eklavya Model Residential Schools: Enhancing Educational Access for Tribal Children. *Government of India Report*.

⁴²Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2021). *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Progress Report*. Government of India.

⁴³Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020: Inclusive Education for Tribal Communities*. Government of India.

Non-governmental organizations play a vital role in promoting inclusive education in tribal regions by addressing gaps in government initiatives and advocating for the rights of marginalized communities. NGOs such as Pratham, Aga Khan Foundation, and Gyan Prakash have developed innovative programs tailored to the needs of tribal students.⁴⁴. These organizations often conduct awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of education within tribal communities and provide additional support services like tutoring and mentoring.⁴⁵.

Challenges and Opportunities

The journey toward inclusive education for tribal communities in India is fraught with challenges but also presents significant opportunities for improvement. This section delves into the persistent educational inequalities, policy gaps, implementation issues, and potential avenues for strengthening tribal governance and education systems.

Persistent Educational Inequalities

Despite various government initiatives aimed at improving educational access for tribal populations, persistent inequalities remain a significant challenge.⁴⁶. Tribal children, especially those from the most marginalized groups, often experience lower literacy rates and higher dropout rates compared to their non-tribal counterparts. According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes (STs) was only 58.8%, compared to the national average of 74%⁴⁷. The educational attainment gap is particularly pronounced in states like Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, where tribal populations are concentrated.

Factors contributing to these inequalities include socio-economic disadvantages, lack of access to quality educational institutions, and inadequate infrastructure. A 2018 report by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes highlighted that over 60% of tribal children attend schools

⁴⁴Mehta, K. (2021). NGO Contributions to Inclusive Education in Tribal Areas. *Educational Innovations Quarterly*, 15(3), 40-55.

⁴⁵Mehta, K. (2021). NGO Contributions to Inclusive Education in Tribal Areas. *Educational Innovations Quarterly*, 15(3), 40-55.

⁴⁶Rao, S., Singh, M., & Verma, P. (2021). Educational Inequalities in Tribal Regions of India. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 28(2), 55-70.

⁴⁷Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Provisional Population Totals*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

lacking essential facilities such as clean drinking water and functional toilets.⁴⁸ These conditions not only hinder learning but also discourage attendance, perpetuating the cycle of educational disadvantages.

Policy Gaps and Implementation Issues

While policies aimed at promoting inclusive education exist, there are significant gaps and issues in their implementation. The RTE Act and other educational policies often lack robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, leading to inconsistent application across different states. The absence of specific guidelines for addressing the unique needs of tribal students further complicates matters. For instance, while the RTE Act mandates the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, it does not provide clear directives on how to adapt curricula to reflect tribal languages and cultures⁴⁹.

Opportunities for Strengthening Tribal Governance and Education

Despite the challenges, there are substantial opportunities for enhancing tribal governance and education. Strengthening the role of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) and local governance structures can empower tribal communities to tailor educational policies to their specific needs. By allowing local authorities to have a say in educational decision-making, these councils can ensure that policies are culturally relevant and effectively implemented.⁵⁰

Fostering collaboration between governments, NGOs, and private organizations can create innovative educational solutions. Promoting community involvement in educational initiatives can significantly improve educational outcomes. Engaging parents and community leaders in the education process fosters a supportive environment for children and encourages regular attendance.

⁴⁸National Commission for Scheduled Tribes. (2018). *Report on the Status of Tribal Education in India*. Government of India.

⁴⁹Kiran, R., Kumar, A., & Sharma, D. (2024). Policy Gaps in the Implementation of the RTE Act for Tribal Communities. *Indian Journal of Educational Development*, 23(1), 12-27.

⁵⁰Chatterjee, R. (2020). Strengthening Local Governance for Inclusive Tribal Education. *Journal of Tribal Governance*, 16(4), 33-48.

Recommendations for Policy Improvement

To foster inclusive education for tribal communities in India, it is crucial to address the existing challenges through targeted policy improvements. This section presents recommendations focused on enhancing local participation in education policymaking, strengthening the role of tribal governance in policy implementation, and suggesting sustainable and culturally responsive education models.

Enhancing Local Participation in Education Policymaking

A fundamental step toward improving educational outcomes for tribal populations is enhancing local participation in education policymaking. The involvement of community members, including parents, elders, and local leaders, in decision-making processes ensures that policies reflect the unique needs and cultural contexts of tribal communities. To facilitate this, the government can implement mechanisms that promote community engagement, such as community-based participatory research initiatives⁵¹. These programs allow local stakeholders to identify educational challenges and co-create solutions, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Additionally, establishing local education councils comprising representatives from tribal communities can provide a structured platform for voicing concerns and preferences regarding educational policies⁵².

Strengthening the Role of Tribal Governance in Policy Implementation

Strengthening the role of tribal governance in policy implementation is essential for ensuring that educational initiatives are effectively executed. Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) and other local governance bodies should be empowered with greater authority and resources to oversee educational programs. Training programs for local leaders and tribal council members can equip them with the skills necessary to manage educational initiatives effectively. By enhancing their capacity to advocate for and implement educational policies, these leaders can play a critical role in bridging the gap between government mandates and local realities. It is vital to establish clear

⁵¹Sunny, R., Verma, S., & Das, P. (n.d.). Community-Based Participatory Research in Tribal Education. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 12(3), 44-58.

⁵²Mohanty, A. (n.d.). The Role of Local Education Councils in Tribal Policy-Making. *Indian Educational Governance Review*, 20(1), 29-43.

channels of communication between tribal governance structures and state education departments to ensure effective collaboration.⁵³.

Suggestions for Sustainable and Culturally Responsive Education Models

Developing sustainable and culturally responsive education models is crucial for fostering inclusivity in tribal education. One effective approach is the establishment of bilingual education programs, which provide instruction in both the local tribal language and the national language. This approach not only enhances comprehension and engagement but also preserves Indigenous languages and cultures. Incorporating traditional knowledge and practices into the curriculum can also create a more relevant educational experience for tribal students. For instance, integrating local history, folklore, and environmental stewardship into lessons can help students connect their education to their cultural heritage.⁵⁴.

Vocational training programs that align with local economic opportunities can enhance educational relevance and provide students with practical skills. Collaborations with local artisans and businesses can facilitate hands-on learning experiences that equip students for future employment in their communities. To ensure the sustainability of these educational models, it is essential to secure funding from both government sources and private partnerships⁵⁵.

Conclusion

In this article, the author seeks to establish the relationship between inclusive education policies and tribal administration in Northeast India with a view of underlining the importance of having a holistic approach to the education needs of tribal students. Various attempts have still not been easy to note in the governmental policies towards integrating children with disabilities but some of the barriers that are not easily solved include socio-economic disparities, hence the poor infrastructural facilities, and a little involvement of the locals in the formulation of policies.

⁵³Khound, D. (n.d.). Bilingual Education for Tribal Communities: A Path to Inclusivity. *Educational Innovations Journal*, 15(2), 49-62.

⁵⁴Mishra, K., & Ramakrishna, S. (n.d.). Integrating Traditional Knowledge into Tribal Education. *Journal of Indigenous Education*, 17(3), 81-94.

⁵⁵Viramgami, T. (n.d.). Sustainable Education Models for Tribal Communities: Funding and Partnerships. *Journal of Educational Finance*, 10(4), 34-48.

These barriers not only limit education but also keep on creating a chain of disadvantages for tribal people. Thus, to achieve sustainable change, more focus should be placed on improving the involvement of local communities in the education policy-making system, with the tribals' input being decisive. The decentralization of local governance institutions including the Autonomous District Councils is essential for the delivery of culturally and linguistically sensitive educational policies for the tribal population. Moreover, culturally appropriate and sustainable education development models play a crucial role in the proper management of the disparity between Western and indigenous sector education, which enhances the identity among the tribal students. If these recommendations are to be given high priority, then the stakeholders would be able to contribute to constructing an education system that will not only be inclusive but also equitable and appropriate for the tribal people. Finally, the major issues within tribal education can only be resolved if the government, various NGOs and other stakeholders concerned work hand in hand towards the main goal of helping each child from the tribal background to succeed. It is therefore important to understand that Inclusive education is not a political agenda but a basic human right that not only liberates every person creating equal opportunities for all but brings change to fellow members of society in a positive perspective.

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