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Education as an Engine of Human Development: Evidence from the Tribal Areas of Tripura, India

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Abstract

Tripura, a small hill-and-plain state in India's North-East, has a Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of 11,66,813, which is 31.8 per cent of its people, spread over 19 recognised tribes. Two-thirds of the state's area falls under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). This paper examines how education contributes to social, economic and political development in these tribal areas. Using secondary data (Census 2011, state statistical publications and departmental records) and four illustrative case studies, it argues that education works at three levels: it builds human capital, widens the freedoms people can exercise, and strengthens self-governance and cultural continuity. Tripura's ST literacy (79.05 per cent) is close to the national average of the general population but still trails the state average (87.22 per cent). The paper concludes that residential schooling, mother-tongue instruction and decentralised school governance are promising, while language-of-instruction conflicts, higher dropout among tribal children and weak transitions to higher education need sustained attention.

Keywords: tribal education, human capital, Tripura, TTAADC, Sixth Schedule, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, mother-tongue instruction, inclusive development

1. Introduction

Development is no longer measured by income alone. Sen (1999) treats it as the expansion of people's real freedoms, and education is among the most important of these because it enlarges what a person can choose to be and do. For tribal communities, whose historical disadvantage lies in geographical remoteness, shifting cultivation (*jhum*), limited infrastructure and loss of land to migration, schooling is both a route out of deprivation and a means of asserting identity.

Tripura offers an instructive setting. Tribal rulers governed the region for centuries until the princely state's merger with India in 1949. After Partition and later migration from East Bengal, tribal communities became a minority in their own homeland, a demographic shift that made land, language and political representation contested questions (Government of Tripura, n.d.). The constitutional response was the TTAADC, set up in 1982 and brought under the Sixth Schedule from 1 April 1985 (Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura, n.d.-a). Education has since been central to the state's tribal policy.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although Tripura records high overall literacy, the benefits are unevenly distributed. Tribal children live in dispersed hamlets, often in hilly terrain; many study in a language different from the one spoken at home; and tribal dropout has been reported to exceed the state average (India Together, n.d.-a). Literacy alone also does

not ensure secondary completion, higher education or secure livelihoods. The central problem is therefore how to convert basic access into educational quality, progression and development outcomes for tribal communities.

3. Objectives

1. To examine the conceptual link between education and development with reference to tribal communities.
2. To describe the demographic and educational profile of Scheduled Tribes in Tripura.
3. To review the institutional and policy framework for tribal education (TTAADC, Tribal Welfare Department, TTWREIS, central schemes).
4. To analyse selected case studies of educational interventions in tribal Tripura.
5. To identify challenges and recommend policy measures.

4. Research Questions

- How does education contribute to social, economic and political development in tribal areas?
- How wide is the educational gap between tribal and non-tribal populations in Tripura?
- Which interventions have expanded access and quality, and what limits them?

5. Methodology

This is a descriptive-analytical study based entirely on secondary sources: Census of India 2011 data as reproduced in Government of Tripura's *Tripura at a Glance* and *Economic Review*, Tribal Welfare Department publications, parliamentary replies, and published journalism and scholarship. Case studies were selected purposively to represent access (residential schools), outcomes (competitive examinations), language (mother-tongue instruction) and governance (decentralisation). Because the paper does not use primary survey data, its findings are indicative rather than causal. Figures from Census 2011 should be updated with UDISE+ and PLFS data when available.

6. Conceptual Framework and Literature

Human capital. Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) argued that education is investment that raises productivity and lifetime earnings. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018), reviewing evidence from many countries, report positive private returns to schooling at all levels.

Capability approach. Sen (1999) shows that education improves health choices, participation and agency, benefits that extend beyond income.

Education and identity. For indigenous communities, schooling in the mother tongue improves early learning and strengthens cultural continuity, a principle reflected in India's National Education Policy 2020, which encourages home-language instruction in the early years (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Legal framework. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 guarantees elementary schooling, while the Sixth Schedule gives the TTAADC powers over matters including primary education in its jurisdiction.

Together these strands suggest a framework in which education raises incomes (economic channel), expands capabilities (social channel) and strengthens self-rule and cultural confidence (political and cultural channel).

7. Tripura's Tribal Profile

According to Census 2011, Tripura's population was 36,73,917, of whom 11,66,813 (31.8 per cent) were Scheduled Tribes (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2023). The state's tribes include the Tripuri (Debbarma), Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Chakma, Halam, Mog, Noatia and others; eight of the 19 speak Kokborok (India Together, n.d.-b).

Table 1. Literacy in Tripura, Census 2011

Group	Literacy rate (%)
All persons	87.2
Males	91.5
Females	82.7
Scheduled Castes	89.45
Scheduled Tribes	79.05

Source: Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Tripura (2023).

The ST literacy rate trails the state average by about eight percentage points. District figures also vary: West Tripura records 91.07 per cent overall literacy, while Dhalai and North Tripura, with large tribal populations, have lower figures (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2023). Tripura also reports high functional literacy in its own surveys, for example 95.16 per cent in 2013 under the state's measurement (Government of Tripura, 2014), which differs from Census methodology and should not be compared directly.

8. Institutional Framework for Tribal Education

- **TTAADC:** Covers about two-thirds of the state's area. Responsibility for primary education in tribal areas was transferred to the council to improve accountability (India Together, n.d.-b).
- **Tribal Welfare Department:** Runs coaching for Madhyamik dropouts, scholarships, ashram schools and residential schools (Tribal Welfare Department, n.d.-b).
- **TTWREIS:** Established on 2 May 1997 to run Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), residential and ashram schools in tribal sub-plan areas, giving English-medium education with free tuition and lodging. EMRS are fully funded by the Government of India (TTWREIS, 2024).
- **Central support:** Special central assistance and Article 275(1) grants support tribal education infrastructure (Lok Sabha, 2003).

9. Case Studies

Case Study 1: Residential schooling for children of *jhum* cultivators (Khumpui Academy and Ashram Schools)

Khumpui Academy, established in 1996, was the first of a series of model residential schools aimed at children of *jhum* cultivators and other tribal families (India Together, n.d.-a). Officials decided on residential schooling because tribal students lagged behind other communities despite earlier efforts. A chain of ashram schools covers classes II to V, and EMRS cover classes VI to XII with 100 per cent central funding. The model addresses distance and household poverty by providing food, lodging and teaching in one place. Its lesson is that access barriers in hill villages are best tackled by bringing the school environment to the child.

Case Study 2: Eklavya Model Residential Schools and competitive examinations

The EMRS follow the CBSE curriculum with English as the medium (Tribal Welfare Department, n.d.-b). A measurable sign of impact came in 2021, when six tribal students from Tripura qualified in the NERIST entrance examination (NEE-1:2021), five of them from EMRS or the department's residential schools (Directorate of Information and Cultural Affairs, 2021). While the numbers are small, they show that well-resourced tribal schools can send students into technical higher education. The challenge is scaling this beyond a few schools and ensuring that graduates have a pathway into professional courses.

Case Study 3: Kokborok as a medium of instruction

Tripura introduced Kokborok in about 1,200 junior basic schools in 1981, and in 2005 the Education Department renewed its push for mother-tongue instruction in classes I to V in tribal areas (India Together, n.d.-b). The TTAADC established a Language Cell to develop terminology. Mother-tongue instruction can improve early comprehension and reduce first-generation learners' alienation from school. Yet the policy faces practical difficulties: textbook production, trained teachers and the long-running debate over which script (Bengali or Roman) should be used for Kokborok. The case shows that language policy is as much about community consensus as pedagogy.

Case Study 4: Education and the resettlement of Bru-Reang families

The Reang (Bru) community was displaced from Mizoram in the late 1990s and lived for more than two decades in relief camps in North Tripura. A quadripartite agreement signed in January 2020 provided for their permanent settlement in Tripura. For displaced children, interrupted schooling is a major cost of displacement; resettlement allows enrolment in regular schools, anganwadis and residential institutions. This case illustrates that education policy for tribal groups cannot be separated from land, housing and livelihood security. (The agreement details are drawn from the author's knowledge of public reporting and should be verified against the Ministry of Home Affairs release before submission.)

10. Discussion: How Education Drives Development

Economic. Education moves households from subsistence *jhum* towards diversified livelihoods, including government service, teaching, skilled trades and enterprise. Tripura's own skill-development programmes for unemployed tribal youth complement school education (Tribal Welfare Department, n.d.-b).

Social. Higher female literacy (82.7 per cent statewide) supports better health and nutrition choices, later marriage and stronger intergenerational schooling. Tribal women's educational advancement remains an area for deeper study.

Political. An educated tribal citizenry can use the Sixth Schedule institutions effectively, whether in village committees, council administration or planning.

Cultural. Mother-tongue teaching, the Tripura State Academy of Tribal Culture and the State Tribal Museum show that education can preserve identity while enabling mobility (Tribal Welfare Department, n.d.-c).

11. Challenges

1. **Dropout and transition:** Tribal dropout has been higher than the state average, especially after elementary level (India Together, n.d.-a).
2. **Language mismatch:** Home language, school language and the language of examinations often differ.
3. **Remoteness and quality:** Teacher absenteeism, multi-grade classrooms and limited digital connectivity in hill areas.
4. **Limited higher-education pathways:** Few ST students reach professional courses.
5. **Livelihood gap:** Education that is not matched with jobs or enterprise opportunities produces frustration.
6. **Data gaps:** Recent ST-specific enrolment and learning-outcome data are not readily available publicly.

12. Recommendations

1. Expand EMRS and day-boarding capacity in under-served blocks, with a focus on girls' hostels.
2. Support bilingual, multi-script Kokborok materials developed with community input, plus teacher training.
3. Strengthen the TTAADC's capacity for school supervision and teacher management.
4. Offer bridge courses, coaching and scholarships at the Class X to XII and undergraduate transitions.
5. Link schooling with vocational training, rubber, horticulture and bamboo-based enterprise.
6. Publish disaggregated ST data (enrolment, dropout, learning outcomes) annually for evidence-based planning.

13. Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The study relies on secondary data, some of it from 2011. Future work should use primary household surveys in the TTAADC area, compare tribes (for example Tripuri, Reang, Chakma), and apply quasi-experimental methods to evaluate residential schools.

14. Conclusion

Education is central to development in tribal Tripura. The state's investments in residential schooling, mother-tongue instruction and decentralised governance have raised access, and ST literacy of 79.05 per cent reflects real progress. The remaining gap, however, lies in quality, continuity and the link between schooling and livelihoods. A policy that treats tribal education as both a right and an instrument of self-governance, respecting language and culture while opening doors to the wider economy, offers the strongest path to inclusive development.

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