



THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE ATTACHMENT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE TO FORMAL EDUCATION, AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN FORMAL EDUCATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY FROM WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and cultural practices of Indian tribes are the most significant and integral part of traditional Indian societies. Being endogamous social group, Indian tribes have common trait of their rituals, social norms, values and traditional cultural practices, language as well as religious faith. They are deeply conscious of their community life and collective way of living. Most Indian tribal communities consider their own cultural practices and indigenous knowledge to be relevant for their survival and way of life. This deep attachment to their own culture has not only isolated them from the mainstream but has also left them significantly lagging behind in terms of formal education. This research paper primarily attempts to explore the attitude of tribal communities towards their Indigenous Knowledge and cultural practices and thereafter also examines the degree of impact of their attitude towards their IK and cultural practices upon formal education. Furthermore, it navigates how the integration of tribal communities' indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into formal education can lead to improvements in their educational attainment.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Practices, Tribes, Indian Formal Education, West Bengal*

Introduction

West Bengal as well as India's indigenous population constitutes the most ancient human group, having inhabited this landmass since the distant past. The indigenous peoples of India are the primordial inhabitants of this territory; it is believed that they were the very first settlers of the Indian subcontinent. In India, indigenous peoples are generally referred to as 'Adivasis,' for it is believed that they are the original inhabitants of this land and that, to this day, they continue to preserve their distinct regional and cultural identities (Verma, 1990, p. 1). Tribal communities primarily inhabit isolated terrains such as forests, hilly regions, mountain ranges, and deep valleys. The tribal population of India occupies an area covering approximately 15 percent of the country's total landmass. The tribes of India can be classified based on the following criteria: i) geographical location or distribution, ii) linguistic affiliations, iii) physical and ethnic characteristics, iv) occupation or economic base, v) religious beliefs, and vi) cultural customs. Just as Indian culture is enriched by both its inherent uniqueness and its diversity, so too do the tribes of India possess their own distinct identities and diverse characteristics (Shee, 2023). No matter how isolated and insignificant the life of a community may be, they strive to ensure the most effective utilization of their natural resources, in harmony with their technological tools and social assets. Furthermore—whether through the medium of art or belief—they endeavor to safeguard themselves, both mentally and spiritually, by constructing a distinct world of their own; a world that transcends the boundaries of the sensory realm (Bose, 1971, p. 1). Basically, the main reason of their isolation from the main stream of culture is their excessive possessive attitude towards their cultural practices, indigenous knowledge and beliefs (Shee, 2023). It is undeniable that indigenous culture and traditional knowledge are immensely rich and abundant—potentially sufficient to sustain their livelihoods. India's indigenous culture is immensely rich; however—much like other communities—certain taboo practices, superstitions, magic-centric beliefs, and instances of cultural rigidity do exist among them; nevertheless, India's indigenous populations remain deeply committed to their own distinct cultural identities. At the same time, it cannot be denied that indigenous populations constitute a 'marginalized group'; indeed, in social, economic, political, and educational spheres alike, the majority of indigenous people occupy the position of being among India's most backward classes and most vulnerable sections (Shee, 2023). Fundamentally, the rich culture and indigenous knowledge of tribal communities are practiced within their own spheres; yet, at the same time, they lag significantly behind India's formal education system.

Although the various tribal communities of India are the country's indigenous inhabitants, their participation in the Indian education system remains extremely negligible—this within an educational framework where education itself is regarded as the key to social change, social development, social justice, social equality, and holistic growth and progress. According to India's census data, tribal populations constituted 8.2% of the total population in 2001 and 8.6% in 2011. An analysis of their literacy rates reveals that the rate stood at 74.1% in 2001 and 59.0% in 2011; in terms of gender-based distribution, the literacy rates for males and females were 59.2% and 34.8% in 2001, and 68.5% and 47.1% in 2011, respectively. Similarly, rural and urban literacy rates were 45.0% and 69.1% in 2001, rising to 56.9% and 76.8% in 2011. When compared to the overall literacy rate (which was 64.83% in 2001 and 73.0% in 2011), the educational progress of tribal communities is by no means satisfactory. In the year 2010-11, the enrolment of tribal students in Secondary (ix-x), Higher Secondary (xi-xii) and Higher education level are accordingly 2172, 1094 and 1208, where the total number in all categories is 31779, 19416, 27499 (Educational Statistics at a Glance, 2010-11). This figure represents merely the number of enrolled students; it does not reflect the total number of students who successfully completed the course—as the dropout rate among indigenous students is significantly higher compared to students from other categories. During the 2010–11 academic year, the dropout rate for Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in school education stood at 35.6% at the Class 1–5 level, 55% at the Class 1–8 level, and 70.9% at the Class 1–10 level (Educational Statistics, At a Glance, 2010–11). When reviewing the literacy rate of the tribal communities of West Bengal within the Indian context, it is observed that the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes (ST) in West Bengal stands at 57.90 percent, whereas the corresponding rate across India as a whole is approximately 59.00 percent. In West Bengal, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for Scheduled Tribes across three distinct levels—Classes I–VIII, Classes IX–XII, and Classes I–XII—is 118.2, 46.20, and 94.2, respectively; conversely, for India as a whole, these ratios are 119.7, 41.50, and 94.80. Furthermore, the dropout rate among Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal for the Class I–X level is 74.6 percent, whereas the national average stands at 70.90 percent (Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, 2013). However, broadly speaking, it can be concluded that all tribal communities residing within the state of West Bengal belong to a highly disadvantaged category in terms of their socio-economic and educational status. Within the realm of formal education—particularly at the higher education level—this dropout rate among indigenous students is strikingly pronounced and noteworthy; this implies that they encounter various obstacles in their pursuit of the opportunities and benefits offered by mainstream education. The causes of educational backwardness among indigenous communities are multifaceted; consequently, many researchers and thinkers interpret this phenomenon in diverse ways. “In a right-based education system, a democratic and non-discriminatory environment is essential for ST children. Studies show that the schooling experience of tribal children are characterized by non-comprehension, predominance experience of failure, non-acceptance of one’s self and identity, recurrent feelings of diffidence and inadequacy of own culture and language” (Working Group Report, 12th Five Year Plan, 2012-17). While there may be various underlying factors—socio-economic, political, and otherwise—contributing to the educational backwardness of indigenous communities, it cannot be denied that cultural factors constitute one of the key determinants of this dire state of tribal formal education (Shee, 2023). Much like India as a whole, cultural diversity is strikingly evident among the various tribal communities of West Bengal. This cultural diversity is observed due to variations in local geographical and social environments, differences in material culture, as well as the distinct characteristics of the various ethnic groups. Diverse social rituals, dance forms, music, marriage customs, and festivals are prevalent among the various tribal communities of West Bengal. Although the indigenous people of West Bengal possess a remarkably rich culture and repository of knowledge, their standing—in terms of socio-economic and educational development—still lags significantly behind that of the mainstream population. The paper explores the attitudes of the tribal communities in West Bengal toward their own indigenous knowledge and cultural practices—as well as the integration and impact of these elements within the realm of formal education—while also exploring new avenues for integrating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into the broader Indian educational landscape, in alignment with the perspectives of these tribal communities.

Methods and Sources of Data

From the perspective of research methodology, the present study adopts a qualitative methodological approach. The data collected for the research is primary in nature. The in-depth interview method was used for collecting primary data. The current interview process is semi-structured in nature, designed to facilitate the collection of relevant information by providing flexibility to the interviewer. The questions included in the interview schedule are open-ended and topic-specific; they were self-formulated by the researcher and subsequently standardized by experts. This constitutes a single interview process—meaning that, within this framework, the researcher conducts a face-to-face interview with one individual at a time maintaining the proper procedure.

For the purpose of gathering current data, information was collected through the interview method from the Paschim Medinipur districts of West Bengal; the focused tribe for this data collection was the Santhal. To gather detailed and comprehensive information, an interview schedule was applied as a data-collection tool, targeting stakeholders in the cultural and educational sectors—specifically parents, teachers, and socio-economic and cultural activists—who are members of the indigenous, and more specifically, the Santhal community.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the 'Content Analysis' method, facilitated by systematic coding and categorization. This analytical process was carried out manually in four distinct stages: data organization, data management, data analysis, and synthesis. This study seeks to fulfill the following research objectives –

- ▶ To explore the Santhal community's attitude towards the attachment of their own indigenous knowledge and culture.
- ▶ To explore the impact on formal education of the Santal community's attitudes towards their cultural attachments.
- ▶ To review the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of tribal communities into the formal Indian education system, with the aim of fostering their advancement within formal education.

The Santhal Community's Attitude towards the Attachment of Their Own IK and Culture

Compared to other tribal groups, the presence of the Santhal tribe is most prominent in West Bengal—and specifically in West Medinipur (undivided)—where they account for more than 50 percent of the population. The Santals possess distinct cultural and religious characteristics. Based on information gathered from the interviews, the Santal community perceives its culture as being more distinct than other cultures. To them, both their indigenous knowledge and cultural practices are a source of joy and are sufficient for sustaining their livelihoods. In this context, Respondent No. 1 (a teacher and guardian) expressed the following view:

To the best of my knowledge, our culture is a pristine and authentic, possessing a long and rich history. In every respect, our culture is entirely distinct from others. Our livelihood, our way of life - everything is meticulously structured within the framework of our culture. We do not need to rely on any other culture to sustain our way of life. We cherish our culture deeply and adhere to it with unwavering devotion.

All respondents expressed allegiance to their own culture. They demonstrated a deep affection for their traditional language, cultural customs, values, modes of knowledge acquisition, attire, dietary habits, and so forth. Respondent No. 4—who serves as both a guardian and a teacher—articulated this sentiment as follows:

Look, from birth until death, we are inextricably intertwined with our culture. We speak the 'Santali' language, which boasts a history spanning thousands of years. Currently, the script for this language has been revived by the scholar Raghunath Murmu—a script known to you as 'Ol Chiki.' Wherever we may reside, we feel a profound sense of comfort when conversing amongst ourselves in our own tongue; we cherish and revere this language. For instance, we address our mother as 'Ayo'—a term that, to us, is imbued with immense sweetness and affection.

Compared to other cultures, members of the Santal tribe find the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of cultural traditions within their own community to be far more gratifying. They consistently prioritize speaking in the Santali language with their family members and fellow community members; moreover, they strongly prefer to live within their own community and cultural environment. Respondent No.2 who is a Santal village chief (Maji Baba) contends:

We collectively cherish living within our own community and cultural environment; whenever a member of our community faces a difficulty, everyone stands by their side and offers prayers for them. Our culture and knowledge are highly self-reliant—indeed, in certain respects, many of us are even more advanced than the Bengalis (mainstream culture). No matter where we reside or how highly educated, we may be, we speak our own language with pride.

The member of the Santal community never harbors any sense of hesitation or inferiority—whether in the eyes of other communities or within themselves—regarding their cultural customs, values, and intellectual traditions; rather, they express their distinct cultural identity with pride. Regarding this Respondent No.3(Female) who is a Santal student and research scholar expressed as:

While I received my schooling at this institution in the Jangalmahal region, I had to reside in Kolkata for my college and university education. Although I have come into contact with diverse cultures, I have never felt any hesitation or sense of inferiority regarding my own cultural identity; on the contrary, by uniting and banding together with other students from the Santhal community, we preserve our distinct cultural practices, keeping them both unique and intact.

In the context of the indigenous people's distinct cultural identity and their deep affection for their culture, Respondent No. 5 (a socialist, cultural activist, and writer) expressed the following view:

Our traditional attire, dietary habits, and social customs are remarkably unpretentious and have existed since time immemorial. Our bond with these cultural practices is extremely intimate, and we take immense pride in our unique cultural identity. We cherish living collectively within the confines of our own community or cultural sphere. We harbor absolutely no sense of inferiority or hesitation when it comes to speaking our own language, wearing traditional attire, adhering to our dietary habits, engaging in music and dance, or observing our social customs. There is absolutely no possibility of us being swayed by any other culture or of us ever sacrificing our own cultural identity. We stand firmly united in our resolve to uphold and consolidate our cultural identity.

The Santal community holds a profoundly positive and pronounced attitude toward their own indigenous knowledge and culture. The Santals possess a distinct culture and set of religious characteristics, which they regard as both unique and superior to other cultures. Their indigenous knowledge and cultural practices—encompassing their traditional language, customs, values, methods of acquiring knowledge, attire, dietary habits, and communal way of life—are entirely sufficient for sustaining their livelihoods and navigating the full cycle of life. They demonstrate a deep devotion to their culture, viewing their own lives as inextricably intertwined with it. Consequently, they cannot tolerate any form of disdain or deprivation directed toward their culture. They are uncompromising in their efforts to safeguard the distinctiveness of their culture against the dominance of other cultures. Furthermore, they uphold and carry forward their cultural identity with immense pride and a strong sense of unity.

The Impact on Formal Education of the Santal Community's Attitudes towards Their Cultural Attachments

According to information gathered from interviews, there is absolutely no reflection of the cultural attachments of the Santal tribe within the formal education system. The cultural environment with which Santal students grow up in deep harmony stands in stark contrast to the school environment; consequently, they are unable to adapt to the latter, nor do they feel a sense of belonging within it. As a result, this exerts a negative impact on the academic performance of students from this tribal community within the formal education framework. Respondent No. 6—who serves as both a teacher and a parent—endorsed this view and explained:

The social and cultural environment in which students from our community grow up, as well as their existing cultural engagements, are not reflected within the school environment. In other words, the school's cultural atmosphere and cultural programs are entirely distinct from our own indigenous culture—something with which students from our community feel no connection. Moreover, neither this cultural environment nor these cultural programs at the school prove to be enjoyable for them.

Santal students feel neither comfortable participating in the various cultural programs at school, nor do they find these events enjoyable or engaging. Since these students are accustomed to practicing their own distinct culture and inhabit a separate cultural milieu, they are unable to feel a sense of belonging or connection with the school's various cultural activities, or even with its academic curriculum. Consequently, school education holds no appeal for them. Respondent: No. 7 (Parent, Teacher cum Jila Pargana) identified:

From the school curriculum to the cultural calendar, absolute primacy is accorded to mainstream ideologies and festivities. Our own high-quality indigenous knowledge, cultural customs, and values are consistently suppressed or rejected; consequently, students lose interest in their school education.

Santal students naturally exhibit a degree of hesitation when studying in school in a language other than their mother tongue—or when attempting to articulate various educational concepts. Santal students consistently lag behind in both the learning process and self-expression; moreover, they often fall victim to a sense of frustration, as their deep attachment to their own culture finds no resonance within the framework of the formal school curriculum. As a result, the dropout rate among tribal students is also high. Respondent No. 3 (Parent, Teacher cum Jila Pargana) mentioned that,

From communication to literature, our Santali language is remarkably well-suited for every purpose. Both we and our children are quite fluent in speaking this language; however, acquiring proficiency in other languages is also essential for us. Although opportunities to study Santali exist at the primary level in some instances, Bengali is predominantly utilized as the medium of instruction; moreover, alongside Bengali, Sanskrit and English are also taught. Consequently, having to set aside their own mother tongue, students within our community do not feel particularly at ease when speaking, comprehending, or writing in Bengali. Simultaneously, they fall victim to a sense of frustration, as their deep-seated affinity for their own culture fails to align with the prevailing educational curriculum within their schools. For all these reasons, students from tribal communities lose interest in prolonged schooling and, in many cases, drop out.

In order to preserve the distinctiveness of their own culture, the Santals not only refrain from engaging in mainstream cultural practices but also actively resist the hegemony of mainstream culture. Since school education—or formal education—is entirely influenced and governed by mainstream culture, the Santals, driven by the imperative to safeguard their cultural distinctiveness, consequently create a distance even from formal education itself. Respondent No. 4 mentioned:

It is true that, since students belonging to the mainstream culture constitute the majority, every aspect of the school environment is profoundly influenced by that mainstream culture; however, disregarding the unique culture of indigenous communities such as ours is, by no means, acceptable. While indigenous people may be fewer in number from a demographic standpoint, they nonetheless possess equal rights—to pursue their education within the school, to participate in all school-related activities, and to ensure the inclusion or reflection of their own culture within the school curriculum.

The impact of the Santal community's cultural attachments on their attitude toward formal education is profound. The culture of the Santal community is distinct; their language, attire, dietary habits, music and dance, social customs, values, and even their indigenous knowledge are remarkably rich, and they harbor a strong sense of cultural pride. Conversely, within the realm of formal education—encompassing the school environment, curriculum, textbooks, cultural programs, and even the academic calendar—there is a conspicuous absence of any reflection of the Santal tribe's culture. Furthermore, they feel no sense of connection to the mainstream culture that is predominantly upheld within the educational system. Moreover, they maintain a deliberate distance from this mainstream culture to safeguard their own cultural identity from being diluted or influenced by it. Consequently, due to the failure to accord due importance to the Santal tribe's culture and indigenous knowledge within formal education—and the failure to uphold their cultural rights—tribal students lose their enthusiasm for formal schooling, experience frustration, and, to a significant extent, a high rate of school dropouts is observed.

The Integration of IK and Cultural Practices of Tribal Communities into the Formal Indian Education System

The Indian formal education system is entirely influenced and governed by mainstream culture, wherein the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of tribal communities have been accorded no significance whatsoever. Consequently, there prevails among members of tribal communities a sense of resentment and allegations regarding the infringement of their cultural

rights. The incorporation of various elements of tribal culture into formal education could significantly enrich the participation of tribal communities within the Indian formal education system. Respondent No. 4 states rationally:

There is no doubt that our culture is neglected. The entire education system—including textbooks—is influenced and governed by mainstream culture. I believe that while integrating our culture into subject-specific knowledge may not always be feasible, it can certainly be given special prominence in the teaching of values and ethics through subjects such as literature, history, geography, and environmental studies. Since our culture is inextricably intertwined with our lives, if it were to be reflected in our school education—that is, if our culture were to receive due recognition and appropriate importance—we would be able to feel a deep, spiritual connection to our schooling.

It is essential to meaningfully integrate the indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and cultural history of tribal communities into formal education and textbooks. This will not only foster greater enthusiasm for school education among tribal students but also enable them to feel a sense of belonging. Respondent No. 1 explains:

We find absolutely no trace of our culture or history within the education system or the curriculum. In the textbooks, the 'Santhal Rebellion' is the only subject that has been allotted even a meager amount of space. In the context of the Santhal Rebellion, only the names of Sidhu and Kanu are mentioned; yet, not a single word has been written about those—such as Bir, Ghanta, and Phulmani—who also participated in that uprising. Beyond the Santhal Rebellion, topics such as our indigenous knowledge, way of life, festivals and rituals like 'Karam Parab' and 'Bandhna Parab,' and our core values could have easily been incorporated into the textbooks. Were we ever assigned to write an essay on any of these subjects during our school days? A close examination of the question papers from secondary and other-level examinations reveals that they do not contain a single word regarding our culture.

If indigenous knowledge and culture are incorporated into the formal education system, tribal students will be able to connect their school education with their daily lives and social environment. As a result, tribal students will not become alienated from formal education. Respondent No. 6 noted:

Due to the lack of a connection between our culture and school education, the knowledge acquired through schooling often proves inapplicable to most aspects of our daily and social lives. For instance, the holiday schedule currently in place in schools bears absolutely no relation to our culture or way of life. Consider this: during the monsoon or the farming season, the majority of our children are engaged in agricultural work—consequently, they do not attend school during that time; yet, no provisions for holidays are made to coincide with our various festivals and cultural celebrations. Moreover, if there is absolutely no connection with one's culture, how, then, can any genuine interest in education be fostered?

Students belonging to the Santal tribe grow up immersed in a distinct cultural environment and the Santali language from birth. Consequently, at the very outset of their education, they encounter difficulties in learning or expressing themselves in a different language; in many instances, the process of acquiring an education becomes a complex challenge for them. Therefore, if tribal languages were to be extensively incorporated as the medium of instruction, the spontaneity of tribal students' participation in formal education would be significantly enhanced. Respondent No. 3 mentioned that,

Language is a pivotal factor in the realm of education. While tribal students grow up speaking their native tongues, they typically do not develop a natural affinity for a different language when they encounter it—or a different script—in the context of their formal schooling. Although the Santhali language and the Ol Chiki script serve as the medium of instruction in primary education in certain areas—as well as in a single secondary school—this scenario is not representative of the situation across the entirety of West Bengal. Were the scope for teaching and learning in the Santhali language to be expanded, a marked sense of spontaneity would be observed among tribal students within the sphere of formal education.

The Way Forward

- Acknowledgment and acceptance of tribal culture by mainstream culture along with establishment of tribal cultural rights in formal education will improve tribal attitude towards mainstream culture as well as tribal school education.
- In creating the school environment, priority must be given to tribal culture so that tribal students can perceive the presence of their own culture within the school setting, thereby fostering increased enthusiasm for their formal education.
- Alongside incorporating significant elements of tribal culture into the school's various cultural programs, the participation of tribal students in general cultural activities must be enhanced, thereby enabling them to foster an appreciation for their own culture within the school environment.
- The indigenous knowledge and distinct cultural identities of tribal communities must be preserved and transmitted through school education. Consequently, alongside the advancement of formal education itself, significant progress in the formal education of tribal communities will become possible.
- It is essential to meaningfully integrate the indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and cultural history of tribal communities into curriculum and textbooks.
- If advanced training is applied to the traditional professions of indigenous communities, both productivity and vocational education will improve and tribal students will be able to connect their school education with their daily lives and social environment.

- Tribal languages must be extensively incorporated as a medium of instruction; this would significantly enhance the spontaneity of tribal students' participation in formal education.
- Teachers from tribal communities must be recruited on a large scale in schools situated in tribal-dominated areas, so that students can perceive a sense of integration between formal education and their own language and culture.
- A comprehensive curriculum must be formulated that integrates the finest aspects of tribal culture with the representation of mainstream culture within the school curriculum. Consequently, the cultural rights of tribal communities will be upheld, and the quality of school education will be enhanced.

Conclusion

Every tribal community possesses its own indigenous knowledge and distinct cultural identity. This identity—or these cultural characteristics—accords them recognition as tribal communities under the Indian Constitution. Xaxa (2008:26) speaking about the distinctiveness of tribal society says that a tribe on the other hand, is a whole society like any other society, with their own language, territory, culture, customs, and so on. Indigenous people possess an exceptionally strong attachment and allegiance to their own culture. The cultural environment and social order in which they are raised find no reflection whatsoever within the realm of formal education. Consequently, this fosters a sense of apathy toward formal education among them. The findings of the present study serve to substantiate this very point. While economic, geographical, social, and psychological factors are frequently cited as reasons for the indigenous population's lagging behind in formal education, one of the primary causes is the issue of the importance and inclusion of tribal culture within the formal education system—that is, cultural factors.

The findings of the present study have opened up new horizons for reflection regarding the relationship and impact of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices on various aspects of formal education. Every indigenous society possesses unique forms of knowledge and cultural practices that hold inherent educational value. If these forms of knowledge and culture are appropriately promoted and disseminated within the realm of formal education, it will be possible not only to enhance overall educational excellence but also to improve the quality of formal education for indigenous communities.

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